Irregular Metronome

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Summary

Whatever Naruto was expecting after the longest bender of his life, waking up squealing with red hair as he was being born wasn’t it. As for Sasuke, there’s only one way to describe biting into an onigiri and ending up in a different world: "God damn."
Chapter 1

Warmth.

Safety.

Comfort.

Naruto's mind drifted in a sluggish haze of satisfaction and sloth. Rocked gently back and forth, Konoha's Number One Most Surprising Shinobi decided he was never ever going drinking with Kiba again. There was a point where drunken shenanigans moved from 'boys will be boys' to a wild blurred shitshow, and Naruto was pretty damn sure they'd moved far past that milestone.

Contrary to what he might tell others when asked, Naruto never forgot a thing that happened when alcohol was running through his veins. So he had very clear memories of being egged into providing a guffawing pole dance at several of Konoha's less-than-classy 'institutions', having Shikamaru puke in his lap, and getting into a fist fight with Lee that had caused enough public property damage for the village to dock his pay for the next decade.

Ah fuck.

Well until Sakura came barging into his room to beat the shit out of him, Naruto was quite content to laze around like a half-formed puddle of goo. A man had to take his jollies where he could get them, and if Naruto had to guess the previous evening would be the last night before a very long dry spell. Once Tsunade and Sakura got their hands on him Naruto wouldn't be seeing a drop of sake or a tasty pair of boobs in a long time, war hero or not.

If he wasn't feeling so damned lazy, Naruto might even make an effort to shed a dramatic tear or two. As it was, he wouldn't be moving an inch until someone made him.

The shaking began with a faint tremor, building slowly and jostling Naruto back and forth. Grumbling to himself, Naruto turned over. The discomfort was too gentle to be Sakura. Hinata maybe? It seemed more her style. Well it wasn't Tsunade or Sakura for damn sure, so it wasn't quite time yet for him to face the music.

Cold hit Naruto like an arctic blast, and he frowned. That was more like Sakura. Bitch. No wonder she was the eternal twenty year old virgin. He steadfastly denied Sasuke's absence had anything to do with it. Even the bastard had probably managed to pop his cherry at one point, and the whole 'waiting for Sasuke' thing his female teammate had going on had gotten old a few years ago. There wasn't a guarantee that Sasuke would be interested at all when he came back, so the medic was giving up quite a lot of fun for something that might not even happen.

Watery blue eyes opened at the hardest jolt yet to be greeted by the blurred sight of fleshy pink walls. Well that was odd.

He certainly didn't remember summoning any of his toads and asking them to let him sleep it off in their stomachs. Gamakichi better not have gotten any fucking funny ideas, but knowing the little shit Naruto wouldn't put it past him.

The pinks walls gave a great roll, squeezing Naruto like a vice and shoving him towards a faint circle of light. Another squeeze and another shove, and then there were gigantic hands swooping in to catch him by the head and help Naruto's passage along.
Giving a grunt of annoyance, Naruto rolled his eyes. Everyone in on the party were they? Naruto was more than capable of getting out of a toad's stomach without Chouji's help, thank you very much.

He could almost hear Hinata's quiet voice in his ear admonishing him for his rude thoughts. Well fuck, everyone was entitled to a bad day weren't they?

A final push, and Naruto was out into the world. A world full of giant people and the most ridiculously glitzy decorating Naruto had ever seen in his twenty years. Giant people in a giant room. When did he become a midget? How did he become a midget?

There was a red-haired giant reaching out for him and Naruto brought up his hands to try to defend himself. This had to be the most fucked up dream he'd had since that one about Sasuke being a ridiculous flirt - as if that bastard had that much game.

Naruto didn't give a shit if this huge guy was a titan. No one beat Uzumaki Naruto - in the waking world or the dreaming one. Even if he had to use the pudgiest fists he'd ever had attached to his body to do it. Back off big man! Nobody was allowed to eat Konoha's Number One Prankster!

Enormous hands gently took hold of Naruto's squirming body, bringing him close to what was a ridiculously pretty face for giant. It was a ridiculously pretty face for a man too, with blue-green eyes and aristocratic lines that spoke of perfect breeding.

A kind smile split the billboard sized face as the giant forced Naruto into the crook of a muscled arm. "Well aren't you just a little spitfire? Daddy's here, my little fishcake." Rumbled into Naruto's ear, and the shinobi's mouth dropped open.

"What the literal fuck." Was what Naruto had been aiming for.

A scream of "Whaaagaa!" was what his toothless gums actually produced.

"Just give me whatever you've got." Sasuke ordered quietly, staring at the barkeep with a dull black orb. The lavender Rinnegan was hidden behind the fall of his bangs, a streak of purple colour peering out here and there to intimidate anyone that had heard anything about the Fourth Shinobi World War.

The barkeep – a middle aged bald man with a ropy red scar cutting down his cheek – stared at Sasuke for long pause before shrugging. "All we've got round here this time of the afternoon is some rice balls and leftovers. You can have 'em if you want. Was just gonna throw em out anyway."

Giving the man a slow nod, Sasuke accepted the plate with three slightly stale onigiri. Life as a vagabond didn't pay, and unless he wanted to resort to theft the Uchiha had to take what he was offered. So while Sasuke had grown up in the lap of relative luxury, his years as a wanderer had familiarized him with poverty.

"Thanks." The Uchiha offered in a parting shot before scanning the room for a free seat. It was the middle of the day, so the inn's tavern was mostly empty. And it was Kaze no Kuni, so few people had the wealth to spend their days indoors rather than scrabbling out whatever living they could get from the dunes. Picking one on the far side of the room where he could sit with his back to the wall, Sasuke drifted over.

Guard the back and watch the exits. Even if Sasuke was the strongest warrior this side of Konoha – and perhaps the strongest in the world if Naruto hadn't kept training – old habits died hard. He was a shinobi through and through.
Sasuke sunk down, scowling slightly at the faint shake the stool gave beneath him before scooping up one of the onigiri. Pickled plum wasn’t a good as tomato by any means, but it was sufficient. Skipping the idatakimasu, the Uchiha sunk his teeth into the sour and salty snack.

The world *wobbled*.

Chewing slowly, the Uchiha brought up his new left arm and wiped his mouth off the back of a bony hand. It didn’t do much good considering his entire body was covered in rags and filth - and about fifteen years too young for that matter.

Sasuke swallowed, tongue swirling along his gums in search of a final grain of rice to try and satisfy the sudden ravenous hunger eating away at his stomach. A swollen moon, wisps of clouds, and a dark forest had replaced the smoky Suna parlour he’d been sitting in.

This was one trippy genjutsu. Sasuke brought up his right hand into a half seal, knowing full well that using the left was just participating in the illusion. "Kai!" he barked, reaching inward for the steady presence of the Rinnegan.

Nothing.

Uchiha Sasuke didn’t consider himself a scholar. He hadn’t spent years or decades studying the intricacies of space-time ninjutsu. Strange things sometimes happened. It was a fact of life. With enough chakra, or enough sacrifice, transport across the world or even the creation of a pocket dimension could be achieved.

However, when Sasuke sunk his teeth into a onigiri and found himself in a place and state of being quite different between one crunch of pickled plum and the next, he had to admit something was weird.

The Uchiha blinked.

"God damn".

*What the hell.*

Over and over that phrase rocked through Naruto’s head. There was no other way to react to *what the fuck was happening* besides complete and total shock.

Sure, in his time Naruto had been put into some pretty loopy genjutsu. Shinobi he had to fight on missions seemed to like throwing up some pretty bloody stuff. The ‘gorier the better’ seemed to be their mission statement. But after a while Naruto had gotten used to the horror, and it became a game of ’oh, it’s this again’. Then Naruto had become friends with Kurama, and no illusion could hold him.

Being born and carried around by a bunch of giant redheaded weirdos took the cake on the utterly bizarre genjutsu scale though. It sounded like the kind of scenario that Ino would have thought up if the blond Yamanaka was strung out on crack. After the whole being squeezed through a vagina enterprise, Naruto could have even appreciated the absurd hilarity of it.

But he couldn’t feel Kurama. No matter how Naruto scrapped and screamed through the corners of his mind, he couldn’t find the damn giant furball. There was just an aching emptiness in the holes of his awareness, torn even deeper by the total absence of chakra. There was *something* slithering through him, just on the corner of what Naruto could feel. A sensation that was raw and dark and violent. But there was no bijuu touching his senses nor any of the chakra he’d carried with him from the day he was conceived.
Naruto was alone. Three days caged up in a strange little body in a strange big world filled by strange people. And if the Uzumaki was entirely honest with himself, he was a little terrified too. Naruto had no idea how or why the fuck he'd been swept away from everything he knew and loved, but there were limits to what genjutsu could do.

And Naruto was starting to think that this might be real.

Sasuke was familiar with hunger. He'd spent years wandering the shinobi world, wanting to take everything in with eyes unclouded by the need for revenge. Drifting from place to place didn't pay, and while he had gotten by on charity and performing odd jobs for food and shelter, there had been times when he'd gone without anything to eat.

The utter gnawing emptiness of four days without food in his strange little body was something different. Never before had Sasuke been so utterly consumed by the pang of his empty stomach that his whole focus was narrowed down to the single goal of filling it. It wasn't that the Uchiha hadn't gone such a length of time without nourishment before, since he was a trained shinobi; but it was like his new flesh burnt calories at a rate an order of magnitude greater than his old body.

Hence why he was crouched in the hedges, hungry black eyes taking in the sight of succulent red apples swaying in the breeze. The orchard was finally emptied after hours of watching, the farmer who tended it along with his other crops tottering off to bed. Sparing one last sweep for other people, Sasuke launched himself forward.

He couldn't detect any form of security, but based on the city he had seen on the horizon that belch black smoke, the new world was a queer mixture of agrarian and industrial. Sasuke had no guarantee that there weren't invisible alarm systems or hidden cameras watching his every move. Truthfully, he had no idea what anyone in this new world was capable of. He hadn't spoken to any of its denizens yet.

The only thing Sasuke knew was that it was genuine. There was no genjutsu in existence that could overpower his Rinnegan, so if he was in a strange new place with a body that looked to be five years old and nothing resembling chakra anywhere, there was a high probability that it was real. He still desperately wanted to know how the fuck he'd apparently been randomly reborn into a different world by eating a goddamn rice ball, but there were no helpful signposts to offer answers. All the Uchiha could do was continue to survive and hope that things became clearer in time.

Scurrying up the nearest apple tree, Sasuke plucked one and immediately sunk his teeth into it. Sweetness burst over his tongue, and the taste combined with the satisfaction of finally having something in his gullet was almost enough to make Sasuke forget how he'd been reduced to thievery just to live.

"Come on, I'm sure mommy's little fishcake is hungry. It's time to fill that tiny tummy." Popping her nipple into Naruto's mouth, Grayfia briefly reflected that if anyone had walked in to see her cooing and making funny faces at her infant she'd die from the embarrassment. The silver haired woman had a bit of a reputation to uphold, and baby talk didn't exactly fit her public image.

Not to mention that Sirzechs would never let her live it down. Her husband would probably consider it a green light for more fooling around.

After a long beat, her son began to slowly suckle, and Grayfia let out a sigh of relief. Her son always seemed reluctant to begin feeding. It concerned Grayfia, since the silver eyed mother knew just how important it was for babies to get all the nutrients they needed. And although Naruto did always
eventually drink his fill of breast milk, the hesitance before he'd start to feed made her worry about his future development. Her baby wouldn't grow up healthy and strong if he started to go off his food in infancy.

Cradling the back of Naruto's head, Grayfia ran a gentle thumb over the red fuzz crowning his head. It was too early to tell what he'd look like when he was grown, but in colouring her boy took entirely after his father. Naruto and Sirzechs shared their crimson hair and pale skin, though when the cloudy blue of infancy faded away Naruto might end up with her silver eyes.

With a final swallow, Naruto released her pink nipple and gave a quiet burp.

Grayfia huffed a low chuckle, moving down to tickle the infant's cheek with a soft fingertip. "There, that wasn't so bad was it? I bet you feel better at least." Tiny lips opened up and closed around her finger, toothless gums gnawing away. Naruto might be only three months old, but her boy had an attitude. It was almost like babying him irritated the child, and his go-to response for tickling was to squeal and try to bite. The force of the little jaw wasn't nearly enough to hurt, but it did amuse her.

A knock sounded on the door of the nursery, giving Grayfia a few moments to tug up the front of her shift before her father-in-law cracked the door open. "I'm coming in." Zeoticus Gremory warned, slowly pushing the slab of wood inward and stepping through. A hand covered the man's eyes for a few heartbeats before he shrugged and slowly lowered it.

The middle aged man grinned, red ponytail bobbing as he strode across the room to hover above the seated mother. "How the little tyke doing today?" The Head of the Gremory family questioned, light blue eyes unerringly fixated on the form of his grandson. Pregnancies were rare enough in their family, making every child all the more precious. "Is he eating well?"

"Yes, he's eating his fill today." Grayfia sighed, nudging at an unoccupied rocking chair with her slipper clad foot. "You don't need to loom over me, Father. Take a seat. We're not going to bite."

"Are you sure?" A teasing lilt filled Zeoticus' voice, the crow's feet around his eyes crinkling with mirth as he sunk into the nearest seat. "Because I have personal experience with Naruto's gnawing habit, and I can see that he takes after his mother in the chomping department."

"Do you want to die?"

Clenching his hand over his heart, Zeoticus gave an exaggerated pout. "Why are you so cold, my dearest daughter-in-law? This old man's heart can't take such cruelty. Quick! I need someone to record my last will and testament before I am slain by my broken heart. Woe is me!"

"Idiot."

"Ah, my eyes are going dark! I'm lost in a tunnel, and I can't stay away from the light! Oh, won't someone save me?"

Grayfia rolled her silver eyes, the movement accompanied by a sudden giggle from her son. "Please don't corrupt my son with your foolishness. His father is already a bad enough influence. I don't need your special brand of idiocy compounding it."

"Bah, the boy has a good sense of humor already. I can feel these things." Zeoticus smirked, running a sagely hand over his crimson stubble before becoming serious once more. "I'm sure you've heard enough of it from Sirzechs already, but don't wear yourself out. We have more than enough wealth to hire a few wet nurses. We don't want you to burn out."

Curling her arms, Grayfia territorially brought Naruto closer to her generous chest. "It is no chore to
I care for my son." She muttered defensively, smoothing back the infant's cap of red hair. "I wish you would all stop harping on about it."

Zeoticus brought his hands up in a pacifying gesture. "We're only trying to look out for both of you." he explained cautiously. "There's no shame in reaching out if you feel overwhelmed. I know Venelana needed help with both Sirzechs and Rias."

"And if I needed help, I would ask for it."

"Fair enough."

Quiet filled the air, both adults falling silent and watching Naruto instead of continuing their contentious conversation. The baby wriggled in his mother's arms, cloudy blue orbs shifting from one face to another as his pudgy fists sought out Grayfia's silver braids. "Whuuu." Naruto drooled, pink tongue licking at his lips.

"Would you mind if I held him?" Zeoticus smiled reassuringly, hands coming up to accept his grandson when Grayfia gave a short nod. The Duke Gremory had not held many children in his life, with Naruto being the third after his now-grown son and his five year old daughter, but he knew what to do. Careful to support the infant's head, Zeoticus cradled Naruto in the crook of his left arm. "There's a good lad."

Naruto frowned, tugging ineffectually at the white sleeves of his grandfather's blazer before subsiding with a grumble. "I still think that Millicas would have been a great name." the redhaired men smiled, poking at the baby's stomach with a gentle finger. "Not that there's anything wrong with Naruto, but it's certainly not traditional, if you catch my meaning."

"That was kind of the point." Grayfia pointed out dryly. "Sirzechs and I - we felt that after everything that had happened between his Gremory house and my Lucifuge family, not to mention the whole mess with the Lucifer clan, that we wanted something new. Our son won't inherit the mistakes and grudges of his ancestors. We're cutting away the past for him."

A pensive look filled Zeoticus' cerulean gaze. "Are you sure that you can do that?" he pointed out doubtfully. "Even if we try to escape it, we are all shaped by the shadows of those that have come before. His name might be a gift of hope, but I'm unfortunately pessimistic."

"Perhaps you're right." Grayfia agreed with just a touch of despair. "But what else can we do besides search for a better future? If we don't even try to move forward, we will definitely be defined by the past. We would rather have made the effort and failed than never have bothered at all."

Sock clad feet pounded on the pavement, Sasuke's short legs working overtime to propel the young boy's body through the night. Rain fell in sheets, soaking the Uchiha to the bone and covering the asphalt in puddles. It was cold, wet, and miserable, but none of that mattered as much as getting away from his pursuers to Sasuke.

The small city was a modern urban center, towers of steel and glass clawing up at the sky. But even though it was vastly different than the more agricultural settlements he'd known in the elemental nations, some things remained the same. Street vendors still hawked their wares, and at the end of a tiring day their stock was just as ripe for the picking as it would be back home.

Ignoring the dirt on his hands, Sasuke rounded a corner and hurriedly began to peel away the lush skin of an orange. His pockets verily bulged with assorted fruits and vegetables, and while he had a start on his pursuers their long legs were eating away at the distance. The faster he ate, the lighter his
pockets would get, and the faster he could run. Or if worst came to worst and Sasuke was caught, at least he'd be caught with a full stomach.

Sasuke sunk his teeth into the orange, barely tasting the citrus flavor as he swallowed it down. Stealing to survive was something that his parents and ancestors running back a dozen generations would frown on. Uchiha were proud shinobi, and the only stealing they ever did was for the sake of the mission. If they couldn't earn their keep by the sweat of their brow, they were a shame to the clan.

Unfortunately, there was no clan to care for his young body in this world. Or perhaps it was fortunate, if simply because the only member of his clan alive was him, and he wasn't disappointing himself when he stole. Sasuke had discarded most of his scruples on his adolescent road to revenge, and when the pressure was on it was easy to ignore Naruto's idealism and fall back into old habits.

Silently cursing the burning in his lungs, Sasuke yanked a carrot from a pocket and crunched down on it. He'd have preferred to have peeled the thing, but he was running out of time. He could hear the thud of boots closing in behind him, and unless he managed to find an obstacle to scurry behind the chase was going to come to a very sudden and very painful end.

Damn his weak body!

At least his pursuers weren't throwing around the odd form of jutsu they seemed to have in this world.

There! Just in the corner of his eye, Sasuke could see a mesh fence barring the distance between two buildings. The Uchiha turned down the alley, forcing his tired body into a dead spread before he leapt.

Twisting his fingers into the holes between the metal wire, Sasuke climbed up the barricade like a hairless little monkey. The cool thick bar that marked the top of the barrier settling in his palms, and the Uchiha grinned with triumph. He could practically taste freedom on his tongue. Very few were the people that would consider a few fruits worth the effort of running a bonafide obstacle course.

Then a hand hooked the back of Sasuke's shorts, tearing the boy down and throwing him to the ground with a sharp cry of pain. His vision swam as a heavy weight settled over his chest, and the Uchiha threw up his arms to cover his face.

"Little scamp!"

Stars exploded as a fist plowed right through his pitiful guard and slammed right into Sasuke's forehead.

Rias grinned, all the sunny happiness Naruto had come to expect from his five year old 'aunt' shining from those white teeth - even if one of her child's chompers had fallen out and left the redhaired girl with a gap in her smile. She was just another crimson haired person in the Gremory family, which Naruto could almost pretend was an alternate world version of his first mother's Uzumaki clan.

There was a difference in shade to be sure. The Uzumaki were notorious for red hair, but from what he'd seen of his mother when she'd appeared in his mindscape all those years ago, it was the deep red of thick real blood, which he remembered seeing in transfusion bags in Konoha's hospital. Their eyes were a truer blue as well, running from the clean azure of the sky to the sapphire of the deep sea. The Gremory family had hair the colour of 'blood' in stage plays, but which was closer to the crimson Naruto would expect from a rose in the real world. Their blue eyes carried a strong green
tint, running from teal to turquoise.

But though they had obvious differences, the resemblance was close enough to make Naruto's heart hurt and his mind wander. He couldn't help but conjure up scenarios in his head about the extended family he'd never had. He wondered if Uzumaki Kushina would have been both proud and kind like Grayfia. He wondered if his father would have been an attentive goof like Sirzechs. He wondered what his grandparents would have been like, and if those people he didn't even have a name to label them with would resemble Zeoticus and Venelana.

His wandering fantasies were why he suffered the embarrassment of being shuffled from his 'grandmother's' arms and into his 'aunt's'. These people were not Naruto's real family, but for the moment he was willing to put that behind him and admit that at the least they shared genes with the body he was currently inhabiting.

That didn't make it any less fucking awkward. Some of the guys back home might be ecstatic about being breastfed every day by a beautiful woman with hair the color of titanium, but Naruto didn't have an incest fetish. Or a mommy roleplay fetish for that matter. It was weird as all hell if he was honest, and even though Naruto had to swallow the milk to survive, he wasn't any happier for it. Not only because the novelty of it wore off real damn quick, but being a grown ass man in a baby's body who a decent woman was unknowingly showing her body off to made the whole situation more than a little rapey.

Naruto might be a bit of a pervert, but he'd never in his life knowingly sexually assaulted a woman. And now it felt like he was doing it every day. That guilt was probably why he didn't put up much of a fuss when Rias peered down into his face and whispered in her child's lisp 'Hello, Naru.' If she wanted to see a baby, by all the kami in heaven he'd show her a baby.

Gathering up as much of the girl's crimson strands as his tiny fists could hold, Naruto promptly shoved the hair in his mouth and gave the performance of a lifetime. He gurgled and laughed, grabbing at Rias' fingers when she went to yank the ends of her tresses out of his pie hole. Girls seemed to love the whole 'infant grasping at their finger' thing, so Naruto took hold and held on for dear life, smirking smugly when the five year old visibly turned into a puddle of girly goo.

Score one for the future Hokage.

He'd picked up that little number from watching Sakura and Hinata putter about the village. Contrary to popular belief, Naruto wasn't blind, and he was pretty damn sure that the way those two had gone all googly eyed and giggly after encountering an infant was what the lads called 'going baby crazy'. Sakura had still been pining her years away after Sasuke - which was pretty unhealthy - but Naruto would have had to have been deaf and dumb to miss the way Hinata had always looked in his direction after an infant episode.

Just the thought of it was enough to make Naruto shiver. Not that Hinata was ugly by any means, what with the great big juicy jugs and perfect white skin and delicate features, but Naruto was nowhere near ready for children of his own. He was only twenty-one years old, and had been just breaking into his stride with the ladies. Ino did wonderful things with her tongue, and was always down for a no-strings-attached roll in the hay. But he had the strong impression that Hinata would have been a different case. Tapping that ass was surely a one way trip to marital hell with two-point-five kids and a nine-to-five salaryman job.

Naruto had been so careful to wrap it up and avoid kids, and now he got to be one.

Fucking hilarious. Jiraiya would be laughing his wrinkled old ass off in the afterlife.
"Here sweetie." Naruto heard more than saw his 'grandmother' Venelana come up behind him. Soft gentle hands came down to shift his little body around, readjusting Naruto's position and getting rid of the annoying crick in his neck. "He doesn't like to complain, but that should be a little more comfortable for him."

"Okay gramma."

A soft pair of lips brushed against the crown of Naruto's head, filling his tiny nose with the sweet smell of Venelana Gremory's perfume before the brunette woman withdrew.

Ahh, shit. Naruto turned his face into the soft silk of Rias' shirt to hide the sudden wetness of his eyes. He needed to get the fuck outta here, before he got too attached to want to leave. Konoha was waiting for him to go back and become its Hokage. He had precious people to protect there. Naruto didn't need the complication of precious people to protect over here too.
"I like cookies. Chocolate chip ones are the best."

"I can tell." Sasuke deadpanned, child's voice just starting to crack.

Five years in what was literally Hell, and the once-human shinobi was beginning to experience the wonderful phenomena of puberty all over again. Going through the hormone cocktail and sudden bodily changes had been awkward enough the first time around. Suffering it a second time as a devil wasn't exactly at the top of Sasuke's list of things he had always dreamt of doing.

Wasn't this whole 'second life' just fucking spectacular? Setting aside the fact that he'd been shoved into the body of a child by some yet unknown meddling deity - because what else but a god could steal him from his own body and stick him in another? - the species of that body was apparently some kind of youkai that called themselves 'devils'.

It was like Sasuke's life had literally become some kind of absurd fairy tale. In his first life, 'demons' had been little more than murky legends. The bijuu might have been called such, but few if any had sincerely believed in the existence of little gremlins that would steal children from the crib to eat them.

In his second life, those demons, along with holy spirits like angels, and even gods, were very real.

Lightning sparked between the Uchiha's fingertips, white blue and just barely singing. A chirp here and there echoed as Sasuke strained his tired flesh to squeeze just a little more of the energy the devils referred to as 'magic'. It felt like scraping the inside of an empty barrel, painful and desperate as he searched for that last dreg of sustenance that would make the difference between success and failure.

Swallowing the last crumb of her chocolate chip cookie, Ophis peered at the fragile electric star with vague interest. "Too little power." The gothic Lolita advised dryly as the spell backfired, burning yet another path of blisters on Sasuke's hand. Some of the older swollen sores popped, oozing hot and wet as the Uchiha's flesh was ruined just a little bit more.

Swearing violently under his breath, Sasuke gave it up for a lost cause. There would be no more attempts to recreate a Chidori with magical energy as its base this day. Just another failure in a long line of failures. "Any other brilliant advice for me to keep in mind for the next time?" the Uchiha growled at Ophis, knowing he sounded rude and ill tempered but so frustrated he didn't care.

Ophis slowly blinked, tilting her head in a vaguely considering manner as she took in the dark haired boy. "No." Then she disappeared in a puff of oily black smoke, leaving Sasuke alone once more.

"Tch." Looking up at Gehenna's artificially created magical sun, Sasuke clenched his aching fists. It seemed that his second childhood was a repeat of the first – one in which the Uchiha was too weak. In the new world he had nothing. No family. No chakra. No status. No power. No Sharingan. Everything he'd ever achieved had been wiped away. All Sasuke's triumphs and defeats were reduced to nothing.

He wasn't Uchiha Sasuke – the former international criminal that struck fear into the hearts of thousands with a gesture.

He was just Uchiha Sasuke - the low class peasant devil with nothing to his name.
But if Naruto could climb to the top of the shinobi world despite having no natural talent, Sasuke could do the same in the Underworld realm devils called Gehenna.

The vagabond's lip curved wryly as he made an oath to the empty air. "I'm not giving up yet, dobe." Tomorrow would be a new day and a new chance to force his rebellious and weak magic into something useful. Sooner or later, Sasuke would succeed in recreating the Chidori.

Hopefully Ophis returned soon. She was the only form of instructor Sasuke had in this second life. If he had to take a stab at her motives, Sasuke would assume that she was just a bored ojousama looking for a thrill. Even her name, 'Ophis', sounded like the kind of moniker some queer foreign nobleman would give his daughter.

If not for the odd girl popping in and out of his life for the past half a decade, the Uchiha was sure he'd have died. From starvation if nothing else. Accepting charity rankled his pride, but if some spoiled rich little devil kid wanted to follow him around to pay for his meals and give him snippets of advice on magecraft, Sasuke didn't have the luxury to refuse.

The nearly limitless lifespan devils were supposed to have wasn't making Sasuke feel any more patient. He wanted the power and the status of a highly ranked devil, and he wanted it soon. Sasuke was more than willing to sweat and bleed to get ahead in the world, so it followed he'd at least be pragmatic enough to take advantage of the opportunities Ophis offered.

The future of the Uchiha Clan was depending on him, and Sasuke fully intended to resurrect his name, even if it was in a new world as a clan of devils.

Himejima Akeno was being hunted.

A black ponytail bobbed as the half-human half fallen angel girl threw herself over the hood of a car stuck in traffic. The enraged owner of the red Toyota honked at her, furious about the dents left behind by her boots, but the ten year old didn't really give a hoot. Her mother had raised her to be polite and courteous, but Akeno doubted that Shuri would nitpick when her daughter's life was on the line.

Every quick glance over her shoulder revealed the forms of her human clansmen, finally closing in to kill the 'monster' and wipe away the stain on the Himejima family honour.

Well stain or not, Akeno didn't intend to go down without a fight.

Swinging down a side street, Akeno scanned the buildings with sharp violet eyes. Her great uncle and his cronies had far more experience killing things, but unlike Akeno they hadn't survived a year and a half on the streets after their mothers were murdered. Lay the common rules for secrecy and shielding the mundane shared by all magicians on top of that, and the ten year old had a pretty good chance of getting away.

Cities were Akeno's turf, and if they couldn't throw fireballs at her they'd find it very difficult to tie her down.

Akeno smirked as she rounded a corner and found herself running towards a slowly filling city bus. The expense would eat into her savings a bit, but she'd built up a good nest egg selling exorcisms and making charms. Her priestess magic was a bit shoddy, since her mother had died before Shuri could teach Akeno everything, but at least her spells worked. Quality paid and all that.

Shoving a hand into the pocket of her faded jeans, Akeno dropped a handful of coins into the waiting palm of the bus operator and climbed aboard. It didn't really matter where it took her,
because anywhere was better than the city center with her murdering kin on her heels, and they
wouldn't dare break the rules by trying to kill her in the middle of a crowded bus.

Breathing a long sigh of relief, the half-breed took a seat and leaned her forehead against the cool
glass of the window. She was safe for long enough to catch her breath. Perhaps it would be best if
Akeno left Hokkaido for a while. The Himejima clan had their domain in the Kansai region, so the
northern island was the furthest the ten year old could get unless she left Japan entirely. Or ran off to
some distant Pacific backwater like Yonaguni she supposed, but going to some rural community
wouldn't be wise. It was easier to survive when there were people to blend in with.

Part of her wished her father were here, if only so the useless lump could demonstrate some of the
power that made him a high ranking officer in the fallen angel government. Baraqiel had failed to
keep her mother safe from his enemies, and if the bastard couldn't stick around to look after Shuri, he
shouldn't have been in their lives in the first place. But Akeno's mother was dead, and she could
really use some of that strength to chase off her uncle right about now.

Akeno rode the bus as long as she could, watching the sun slowly turn red and begin to sink into
behind the mountains to the west. Eventually, a last quiet electrical beep filled the air, and the girl had
to shuffle out of the vehicle with the other remaining stragglers. Faint yellow electric lamps lit up the
early evening, throwing sinister shadows over the pavement, and Akeno turned and began speed-
walking back towards the city center. She'd avoided her pursuers, but she needed to double back.
She needed to get back to where there were so many people her clan couldn't magically erase all
memories of a clash.

"Just as I thought."

Himejima Shou stepped out of the darkness, wrinkles drawn taught in a ferocious frown. Her great
uncle's midnight strands had greyed in old age, but the cold amethyst of his eyes were just as sharp as
they'd ever been. "You may know this city better than most of the clan, abomination, but I've been
hunting since before your mother was a sparkle in my brother's eye. Once you got on that bus, I
knew you would ride it as long as you could. You're not as smart as you think you are."

Palming an ofuda, Akeno clenched her jaw and took a cautious step back. She needed to leave. She
needed to be gone right now because half fallen angel or not, a few years of tips from her mother
wouldn't be worth a damn thing weighed against the most skilled onmyouji in Kyoto. If she could
just stun him for a second, she might be able to run and hide. Perhaps an explosion of pure light?

"It's useless." Another voice cut in, deep and hard, drawing Akeno to spin to face the newcomer.
More men and women moved out of the shadows, clad in a mixture of casual clothes but all bearing
the hallmark spark to their auras of trained magicians. "You're surrounded kiddo. It is time to end
this. Go quietly, and it will be relatively painless." a plain-faced man told her, purple eyes dull.

Akeno grit her teeth, ignoring the rising tide of panic. Every nerve in her brain was burning in
tandem with the frantic beat of her heart. There was some way out of this. She refused to die here, a
forgotten stain in the oh-so-pure annals of the Himejima clan's history. Once upon a time her human
mother had dared to fall in love with a fallen angel, and Akeno would not be swept under the rug as
a shame.

Dropping her other hand into her pocket. Akeno grabbed every ofuda she could lay her ten year old
hands on. With her mother's clan pressing in at every corner, she wouldn't be able to get out without a
fight. But if she could at least distract them all with a pulse of blinding light, she might live another
day.

The half-fallen-angel shoved the majority of her power into a large yellow runic circle, streamlined
for the light magic angels and fallen angels were known for. Every line in the circle grew brighter with every heartbeat, drawing on the power of fallen angels until each glowing character shone bright as the sun.

"I'm not going to let you kill me!" Akeno declared, relying on her half-trained sorcery to summon destruction along with the light show. For a few seconds, Akeno hoped. She hoped the wild surge of desperation and intent would be enough to make up for the difference in skill between her and her clansmen.

The sound of a sharp clap broke the standoff, and a pair of strangers stepped out onto the street. "I think that's quite enough." A blond foreigner smiled, blue eyes harsh. The heavy weight of that gaze considered Akeno before swiveling to stare at Shou. "This girl did a good turn for one of my contractors, so I think that deserves a little something in return."

Bright crimson hair shone ethereally under the electric street lamps as the blond man's companion studied Akeno. The girl looked no older than the runaway, but behind that elfin face Akeno could practically taste the spark of black power.

"This business is of no interest to you, devil." Shou clenched his jaw, visibly displeased by the interruption. Cloth rustled as the half dozen members of the Himejima clan standing in the thoroughfare stepped into defensive positions. Akeno was still their target, but she was a half trained girl. No experienced onmyouji would turn their back on a devil leaking so much magical presence.

The blond sighed, shoving one hand in a pocket while the other came up to stroke over the wiry strands of his goatee. "Now my old, wrinkly, liver spotted friend, that just isn't so. You see, this city is Gremory clan territory. And anything you humans get up to on my master's territory is my business, you feel me?" Bloodthirsty intent filled the night, making a cold sweat break out on more than one mortal's skin. "You lot don't even get to take a shit without my knowledge."

"Now, I consider myself a fair sort, mister Twenty-Eighth Head of the Himejima clan. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa doesn't start spilling guts right off the bat. I'll give you, say, five minutes to get out of dodge. After that, I'll see if I can still scalp an exorcist."

"Heinrich, enough." the redhaired girl gave Heinrich a pat to the hip. "It's no wonder my father never sends you to negotiate anything." Ignoring the way the older devil made an exaggerated pout, the little mistress turned her attention towards the fuming Shou. "I am Rias Gremory, daughter of the lord of the clan. I'll settle things with you on its behalf."

Lightning began to spark from the ofuda clenched between Shou's fingers. "I don't make deals with your kind."

"Then consider this an ultimatum." Rias shot back irritably, shaking her head. Onmyouji and their pride. "This girl has your look, but I can sense the fallen angel magic in her. I'm going to guess she's a half breed stain on the family honor or some such nonsense, and you intend to get rid of her."

Akeno snorted softly. "I see someone likes playing detective in her spare time."

"I'll get to you in a minute." Turquoise eyes narrowed at the rude girl before Rias switched her focus back to Shou. "So what I will do is take this girl with me. She won't set foot in your clan lands on pain of death, and she will stay by my side. In exchange, my father's Bishop here won't liquefy the lot of you right here and trigger a clan war that you humans would lose badly."

Shou looked nearly apoplectic as he gave a jerky nod. He dearly wanted to wipe the smug grin off the blond demon. He wanted to eradicate the little genius Gremory heiress before she became an
even bigger threat to the human world in the future. He wanted to finally wipe away the stain on clan pride that was his grand niece. But Shou wasn't stupid, and decades of experience in demon slaying all warned off the same result. Even if they all moved at their best, Agrippa would annihilate them. Ofuda were hardly the holy weapons of legend that were needed to close the gap in power between humans and devils.

Watching as her grand uncle and his men left in a cloud of wounded outrage, Akeno warily focused on the pair of devil nobles. While murderous, at least her clansmen were a known quantity. These strangers were total unknowns, and the only thing she could say about them was that they seemed interested in preserving her life.

"Whoo, glad that's over." Agrippa whistled, stretching his arms over his head. "For a while there I thought things were going to get a little messy."

"That would be no thanks to you. How anyone could consider you a nerd scholar is beyond me."

Akeno twitched.

These were the bloodthirsty demons her mother had always warned her about?

A bloody streamer lazily coiled between his fingers, and with a sigh Naruto extinguished the sinister crimson aura. The Bael clan's Power of Destruction that he inherited from his new father had a dark sort of beauty to it. Bright as an evil star orbiting a void, a single strike with the demonic energy could reduce almost anything to ash and ruin.

It seemed like Naruto was fated to have access to some form of unholy power in every life. Being born a literal devil made it practically guaranteed. But compared to devil magic at least Kurama had been self-aware and good at heart. The red light swirling in Naruto's veins and spilling out with twitch of the finger was a mass of raw unfiltered malevolence. The thrill Naruto got every time he summoned it made him feel just a touch guilty.

Fighting had never been so easy.

Five years old and the devil society Naruto had been reborn in was already calling him a genius. Even by the standards of the aristocrat families that made up the 72 Pillars of the Underworld, Naruto was an uncommonly powerful child. Part of it was probably being twenty five years old in a kid's body, but the rest of it was the skilled flesh he'd been lucky enough to be born in.

Five years had a way of making his 'new' body feel less odd. Naruto had the time to adjust to the smaller limbs and the deep red hair he inherited from his second father. His appearance wasn't ridiculously different compared to the foggy memories of his first blonde body. Besides the colour change and the lack of whisker birthmarks, Naruto had actually come out looking pretty close compared to his previous body.

It wasn't the appearance that got him.

It was the family that did.

New body in a new world? Sure, it was strange as fuck. But compared to the Kaguya clusterfuck, it wasn't as bad as it could have been. What kept Naruto up at night was trying to reconcile his new family with his old one.

The Gremory clan weren't bad people. Dad – the demon lord Sirzechs Lucifer, not the Hokage Namikaze Minato – was kind and brave and everything Naruto had ever wanted for a father growing
up. Grandpa Zo was a jolly pervert after his own heart. Granny Lana and Mom were a far cry away from Uzumaki Kushina – strict and proper where his first mom had been loud and crude, but all three women had a deep well of affection and willingness to nurture. Rias was less his aunt and more like his twin, loyal and generous to a fault.

Naruto could freely admit he loved them. Every member of his strange new family had captured his heart in its own way. Even his cousin Sairaorg Bael – that battle loving maniac – was too humble and compassionate not to admire. It was almost like a dream to have so many precious people who loved him simply because he existed, rather than because he'd managed to earn their affection.

But was that really okay? Sirzechs Lucifer might have patiently taught Naruto how to tap into the well of demonic power inside of him, but Namikaze Minato had died for him and Konoha. Grayfia Lucifuge might betray her strict manner to sneak him cookies, but Uzumaki Kushina had taken an enormous nine month risk just to carry Naruto to term as a jinchuuriki.

In his head Naruto knew neither of his original parents would hold a grudge against him for such simple happiness as having a good second childhood. But that didn't stop his heart from nagging at him every time he called his new parents Mom and Dad and forgot for a few hours the sacrifices Minato and Kushina had made for his future.

Isaiah was struggling through the Book of Daniel when Esther yanked the Bible out of his hands and hid it behind her back. "Give that back!" the blond boy grunted, leaping up off his stool and lunging for the corner of the book.

"Nope." Esther sing-songed, twisting back and forth to keep it out of her fellow orphan's hands. Brown braids bounced as the mocha skinned girl danced around Isaiah, sticking her tongue out at him. "Only losers hide up in the school room when Sister Judith is baking up biscuits?"

Abruptly coming to a stop, Isaiah narrowed grey eyes suspiciously. "You're not having me on, are you?"

Esther shrugged, tossing the worn black tome back at the younger child. "That's for me to know and you to find out." the seven year old winked a brown eye before spinning on her heel and dashing out of the small classroom.

Biting his lip, Isaiah looked between the Bible and empty doorway before giving a groan. "This better not be a prank." Then he carefully placed the dog-eared religious text back on the shelf before following after the older girl at a slower pace. It wouldn't be the first time Esther had pulled the wool over his eyes, and it probably wouldn't be the last. She called Isaiah a total nerd for studying so hard all the time.

Frankly, Isaiah didn't know why all the other kids didn't study as much as he did. He might be only five years old, but he wasn't dumb. The blond knew there was no reason for the Church to have to pick up random orphans from the street like him. Sister Judith and Father Roland had chosen to do it, even though money was always tight in the group home. Between life on the streets as 'the kid' scrounging for food in the trash and the orphanage where they took care of him and even gave him a name, Isaiah would choose the orphanage every time.

The least he could do is keep his nose clean, not start fights with the other kids, and work hard. One day Isaiah was going to be a priest just like Father Roland, and help the other street rats. Or maybe he'd defend mankind against devils and fallen angels, even though just thinking about having to fight such horrible creatures made Isaiah's blood run cold.
Wafting in the air was the heady smell of ginger, and reluctantly Isaiah began to smile. So, Esther hadn't been taking the mickey after all. Ginger snaps were the blond's favourite, and every time Sister Judith baked them he remembered that one cold night six months ago when the nun had taken him in from the wet streets of Glasgow.

"Hello little scholar." The elderly nun greeted when Isaiah stepped into the kitchen. Most of the children had already come and gone, but Judith had set aside a plate for the five year old. Isaiah was still struggling to connect with the other children in a way that didn't deal with just surviving, and it saddened her to see one so young be so scarred. "I saved some for you."

"Thanks, Sister." Scooping up one of the light brown biscuits, Isaiah crammed it in his mouth. The ginger snap was still warm and soft from the oven, gently giving way beneath his teeth, and the blond closed his eyes at the taste. So perfect and delicious.

"There's a cup of milk here for you too. After you're done, I'd like it if you would go outside and play with the other children for a few hours."

"Okay, okay."

Judith hummed in satisfaction, moving back over to the oven and flipping a burner on. The nun filled a beaten iron cast kettle with tap water before settling it over the open flame. "I'm making tea for Father Roland and his guest, but I can set you out a cup too if you'd like."

"No thanks, I'm good." Isaiah frowned in thought, chewing at another biscuit. "Who's here to see Father Roland? I didn't hear anything from the other kids about it."

"It's just Father Valper." Judith replied as the kettle begin to hiss steam. "Nothing to worry about."

Isaiah watched as the old woman poured two cups of black tea. It might be 'nothing to worry about', but the blond could see the displeased tightness in the corners of her mouth. He hadn't managed to survive so long on the streets without learning to read a face, and Isaiah came to a snap decision.

"I'll give you a hand before I go outside."

"You're such a kind boy." Fondness colored Judith's voice, and Isaiah could feel a pleased flush come to his cheeks.

"It's nothing."

Following Judith across the group home, he balanced a small milk jug in one hand and their beat up sugar jar in the other. The orphanage didn't have anything as fancy as a real tea set, but they could make do with what they had. No British family went without their afternoon tea, or so Father Roland joked, and their household was no different.

They were a real family; lacking blood ties didn't matter.

The nun knocked on the door of the priest's study, giving three sharp raps before pushing inward.

"Ahh, thank you sister." Unlike Judith, Father Roland was young. Bright ginger curls shone under the sunlight slanting in from the window. The square planes of Roland's jaw were unshaven and smooth. No wrinkles surrounded the blazing green eyes behind his wire framed round spectacles. Beneath the crisp lines of his suit was a body lined with muscle. He looked less like the director of a group home and more like a bookish martial artist.

Considering the priest was an actual exorcist, it was probably to be expected. Killing demons
required a little bit of heavy lifting.

"And I see you brought little Isaiah with you."

"I'm not little."

Letting the rest of the small talk fly over his head, the blond five year old crossed the room to set the milk and sugar down on the coffee table. Grey eyes boldly swept over the visitor, bringing a small smirk to the stranger's lips.

Roland's guest was everything Isaiah would have expected from a stereotypical priest. The man's body was short and round, the curve of his gut pressing against the cloth of his vestments. A round white zucchetto held down a wiry spring of greyed ringlets. Sunken black eyes nestled in the wrinkled folds of the elderly man's face.

"Please don't stare at Father Valper, child." Judith warned, prompting the older priest to wave off her light scolding.

"I don't mind. It's not every day that you get to meet strangers, and children are so curious."

Valper shifted his attention back to Roland, sipping at his tea in thought. "But back to the matter at hand. I understand you have some reluctance, but this is not something you can refuse. The orders have come down from the Conclave, and while I can only take volunteers, you don't have the right to prevent me from asking the children directly."

A tense muscle jumped in Roland's cheek as his jaw clenched. "Isaiah, go out and play." the young priest ordered, green orbs burning like fire and never wavering from their guest. "Judith, make sure none of the children are hiding around inside today. They should be out in the sunlight."

"Don't be like that." Valper shook his head, lips peeling back into a sleazy smirk. "He's already here, so why don't I see what he thinks?"

"Isaiah is too young to participate in your little project."

"There is hardly an age requirement, my friend, and it's not my project. It's the Church's."

"I want to know." Shaking off Judith's hand when the elderly nun grabbed at his shoulder, the blond boy stepped into the fat priest's line of view. "What do you want with me?"

Valper's dark gaze grew heavy with intent, and the wrinkled man gulped down the rest of his unsweetened tea before settling the cup firmly on the table. "My boy, have you ever heard of the Holy Swords?"

"Of course." the blond may be new to the Church, but he'd been living under its roof for half a year. Isaiah wouldn't have missed something as important in the fight against evil as the various Holy Swords created by God. Famous blades like Collbrande and Excalibur were fueled by the power of Heaven, and could easily cause lethal damage to devils and other demons. Even the mass produced inferior swords made out of hardened light could cut such creatures to the bone.

Roland glowered with impotent anger, but the young priest had no authority over the older one.

"Yes, well. While there is little difficulty in having almost anyone wield one of the common blades, it is difficult to find someone with enough of God's light inside of them to use the true Holy Swords. The Church is in the difficult position of having more Holy Swords than wielders, so it has decided to see if we can find a way to artificially add light element to humans and allow them to use the
legendary weapons to defend the Church."

"And you want me to become part of this?"

"Isaiah, no."

Satisfaction light up Valper's face despite Judith's outburst. "Exactly. Of course, it's not going to be all fun and games. Not every child would be willing to give up so much for the Church. So it's alright if you're afraid and would rather not."

"I am not afraid!" Isaiah bit out, face flaming. The Church had taken him in from the streets, clothed and fed him, and given him a name. What was a little work compared to all that? "I will go with you."

Porcelain shattered in Roland's fist, hot tea scalding over the young priest's hand.

Valper Galilei chuckled with amusement. "I knew you had it in you, my boy."
Chapter 3

Red light shattered, power bucking against her will and extinguishing with an explosion that blew Rias off her feet. Hitting the opulent tile of her private ballroom in a pained heap, the Crimson Haired Ruin Princess gave a huff of frustration.

"Giving up so soon, hime-sama?" Akeno peered down at her mistress and closest friend with violet eyes. It had been five years since Rias and Zeoticus' Bishop stepped out of the cool Hokkaido night and chased off her murderous relatives. She'd been suspicious and surly for a long time, staying only because of the 'deal' she'd been strong-armed into. But slowly she'd found affection growing like a weed, watered by Rias' generosity and lack of expectations.

The black-haired reincarnated devil nudged at the red haired girl with her sock clad foot. "I thought you had a little more stamina, but I guess a little rough play tuckers you right out."

"I'll show you rough play." Rias muttered darkly, calling up a swirl of her Power of Destruction and directing the wild flow at her Queen. Akeno lazily broke the crimson tide with a crackle of yellow lightning before plopping down beside the Gremory princess. Three years ago Akeno had accepted the Queen piece from Rias and joined her friend's peerage. She'd been reincarnated from half human and half fallen angel into a devil, and never regretted it for a single moment.

Silence hung in the air as each young woman pondered their own thoughts.

It was no secret that within her immediate family, Rias was by far the weakest. Her parents had centuries of experience and had honed their magic to an art form. Sirzechs was not merely her elder, but had attained the exalted title of Satan. When her own brother had taken both the position of demon lord and the Lucifer name from the original Satan Lucifer's clan, it was pretty difficult to measure up. Her sister-in-law Grayfia was an ultimate class devil on the level of a Satan and widely acknowledged as the strongest devil holding one of the Queen pieces. Even her nephew Naruto was hailed as a young genius with the Bael Clan's Power of Destruction.

Compared to them, Rias felt weak and clumsy. Her use of the power she'd inherited from her mother was heavy handed. She was proficient with the spells common to all devils, but Rias was no prodigy sorceress. The only thing that made her stand out was her towering intellect, which still paled in comparison to the battle experience of her elders who'd lived hundreds or thousands of years.

Rias Gremory was not a battle obsessed maniac. She didn't hunger to be the strongest on the field and obliterate her foes. She wasn't driven to seek out war to prove herself and her dominance.

When her dream was to be loved for who she was as a person rather than because of her family name or social status, being a skilled combatant didn't even really enter into her considerations.

But Rias had her pride. Even if she wasn't a warrior, she refused to be a failure.

She'd seen how the Bael Clan had treated Sairaorg with utter contempt for years when it was discovered he hadn't inherited the Power of Destruction. Devils from the highest echelons of their society to the lowest had sneered behind their hands at her cousin's weakness and lack of fortune.

Sairaorg had proved them all wrong, and was seen as the strongest devil in their generation, but it was a hollow victory. As powerful as he was, his own clan still rejected him for lacking their ancestral magic. Devils were hardly perfect. They held onto their prejudices just as much as any human. Even if he proved to be strong, Sairaorg was probably still a source of shame in his parents'
hearts. Especially in the heart of the notoriously cold Lord Bael.

Rias' family wouldn't throw her out or disinherit her for her lack of skill. But if she didn't blossom into a splendid ultimate class devil, would they secretly be ashamed of her? Would they – even if they weren't aware of it – love her a little less for it? The servants had certainly swelled up with subtle disrespect over the years as Naruto passed milestones in his magical training years younger than Rias had. Why would her family be any different?

Her unofficial claim to being heir to the clan was based around being the default choice. Sirzechs had given up the Gremory name to become the warlord Satan Lucifer, and the other branches of the family had far less direct blood relation to the current Duke Gremory than she did. For years she'd known her place in the world, preparing every day to succeed her father and rule the clan fairly and with foresight. Then Naruto had started throwing magic around and suddenly all of her expectations about her future were thrown out the window.

Maybe her nephew was just an early bloomer and would hit a wall in his growth, but that hadn't stopped the constant whispers. Secret discussions among the maids about how the little prince would surely be named heir despite convention regarding the children of the Satans. Snide barbs about her weakness from her distant cousins at family functions just barely cloaked in courtesy. And most painfully, thoughtless comments by her own parents when they congratulated Naruto for figuring out something 'quicker than Rias had'.

"Bouncy, bouncy, bouncy!" Akeno purred as she begin to poke her manicured fingers into the swell of her mistress' chest. The generous flesh jiggled beneath the perverse sadist's ministrations. "One bounce, two bounce, three bounce…" she chanted, alternating pokes so the Rias' breasts wobbled in opposition.

Turqoise eyes narrowed. "What are you doing?"

"You shouldn't think too deeply sometimes, hime-sama. It doesn't help. It'll only make you sad." Arching a fine brow, the priestess gave a generous squeeze. "If you're unsatisfied with your performance, you only need to work harder."

"Are you having a moment?" Naruto's voice cut in as he entered the room, drawing the attention of the two girls. "Is this a moment? Because it sounds like a moment. Doesn't really look like one though…" The son of the Crimson Satan folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the door frame.

"Naruto-sama, if you can't recognize a moment between two fine and upstanding ladies like the mistress and myself, I weep." Akeno gave an exaggerated pout. "Only a lout would show such disregard for the delicate heart of a woman."

Laying a hand over his heart, Naruto marshaled his chubby child's face into the haughtiest expression he could muster. "Show me a woman, Himejima-san, and I will show you just how well I can take care of her delicate heart."

"Ara, ara Naruto-sama. If I didn't know better, I'd say that was an insult. And I know it wasn't an insult, because if it was one, someone would have to be punished." Smiling beatifically, Akeno winked. "Do you think someone wants to be punished, Na-ru-to-sa-ma?"

Naruto just offered an throaty hum in reply.

"You can stop playing with my breasts any time, you know? Just going to put it out there."
"Yes, I know."

A drawn-out silence.

"Oi stop that. There's only so long a brother can let his sister be molested in front of him before it gets awkward."

His feet were bleeding, red seeping through the cracked skin of Sasuke's heels.

Heartbeat thundering in his ears, Sasuke threw himself over a boulder and pushed deeper into the thicket. Towering trees rose up around him, casting thick shadows that hid the Uchiha from the blazing pale artificial moonlight. Every step was an agony, but Sasuke had no choice. He forced his aching muscles to propel him further into the underbrush, ignoring the slowly building fire in his lungs.

It was run or die.

The years had not been kind to Sasuke. The underworld they called Gehenna was a land of plenty, but only for those with means, and the only way to attain that fabulous wealth was to be born into it or to become a servant for those with it.

Sasuke was no man's servant. Even if hunger had carved him down to lean muscle, and even if he wore a mixture of stolen clothes and what he could scavenge from the corpses of the stray criminals he'd killed, the Uchiha had been too proud to grovel to some blue-blooded stranger for the chance to serve. He was the last of his clan, and no Uchiha had ever gone begging for handouts from other families.

That arrogance had come back to bite him in the ass, sinking gleeful teeth into his flank and tearing away until Sasuke had to acknowledge his own folly. It would have been better to bend his neck for a time than get put down like a dog.

"Run little devil!" Howled out through the night, punctuated with streaks of blue. Spears of light crashed through the canopy, their random trajectory only adding to the destruction. The fallen angel was interested in one thing only – the hunt, and Sasuke was the prey. It was an old story. Angels, created by the God of the Bible to slay demons and protect mankind grew corrupted with lust and greed over time. They then fell to Gehenna, white wings turned black with sin, and continued to kill and torment their ancient enemies.

The Uchiha was merely one more devil in a long line of bloody conflict, and he would either survive or join the thousands of corpses fallen angels had made of his kind.

If Sasuke had been part of some noble devil's peerage, he'd be able to call his master for reinforcements. There would be at least one of those Evil Pieces inside of him. While he had no need to reincarnate from a human to a devil, the enchanted chess pieces also each bestowed a different type of power on the servant they'd been given to. Sasuke would be stronger and more likely to survive with an Evil Piece, even if he had to swallow his pride to get one.

As it was, the fallen angel who introduced himself as Dohnaseek was just playing with him. The war between the three biblical factions might be considered over by most, but no peace treaty had ever been signed. Sasuke was a devil that had unknowingly wandered too close to the territory of the fallen angels, and thus was still the prime target for a bit of sport.

Launching himself into a thick cluster of brambles, the Uchiha ignored the bite of thorns into his flesh and curled as close to the ground as he could. When his enemy was stronger than him with
powers that were deadly to his kind, and he was ill-rested and starving, there was only one option left to Sasuke.

Hide and hope that whatever greater deity looked after the devils would ensure that he lived past the night.

Sasuke covered his mouth with a bloody hand, smothering the desperate sound of his panting. Dark eyes peered into the gloom while his ears strained to catch any sound over the trembling heartbeat in his ears.

Wind rustled through the trees, disturbing the silence with the creak of branches and the brush of leaves. It was too quiet, the sudden lack of noise suffocating after the rending panic of the chase. The feeling of wrongness pervaded Sasuke's hyper-aware senses. It whispered in the black reaches of his mind.

You are about to die.

Sasuke was fifteen years old, or thirty years old, depending on how he looked at it. He'd lived a long time as a shinobi in one world, staining his hands with murder and breathing death. He lived a decade in the next world, training his devil flesh with single minded intensity. In both worlds, his body had been his to command – a finely tuned instrument of violence that Sasuke controlled with a steel grip. It did not move without his command. It didn't feel without his command.

But some things were intrinsic. No matter how many years were spent conditioning, his body still had its natural reactions. Not even a shinobi was the total master of his own flesh. When the body is in danger of extinction, it reacts, and no training can beat that response out.

Sasuke was about to die, and despite decades living as a shinobi, he was afraid.

"Eh? I haven't heard anything today. Why?"

Koneko blinked, a slow and steady fluttering of white lashes over gold eyes. "No reason."

Scratching a nail over the wiry tangles of his blond beard, Agrippa peered down at the tiny white haired reincarnated devil before shrugging. "I don't mind telling you if I hear of anything odd happening out in Gehenna, but if you told me what you were looking for I might have better luck."

"I am not looking for anything in particular." she denied, tilting her head in wordless thanks before walking away from Zeoticus Gremory's Bishop. For another devil lying to a fellow servant they'd known for years might sting at their conscience, but Koneko had breathed falsehood and silence for so long that it was practically second nature.

Openly fishing for information about her sister was risky. Kuroka was a highly classed criminal and a traitor, and Koneko didn't want to give people ideas about her loyalty. She was Toujou Koneko, faithful Rook to Rias Gremory and one of the last nekomata in any world. She wasn't kin to Kuroka anymore. She wasn't Shirone anymore. No amount of dreaming about the blood and screams as Kuroka slaughtered their first master and their household would change that resolve.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Ice.
Draining out her emotions was getting harder and harder over time. Koneko could still bleed away all her feelings until nothing was left but cool stillness like rime over a lake, but much of the time a random image of the Gremory family would pop into her head.

The nekomata stepped out onto one of the many terraces in the manor. Amber orbs peeked out under heavy eyelids as she considered Rias and Akeno. Both young women were silently sipping at steaming cups of tea and staring off into the horizon past the well-groomed lawn. Koneko didn't bother to greet them, simply moving over to stiffly sit in one of the many steel framed patio chairs.

"Hello, Koneko-chan. What are you up to today?" Rias shifted her attention from the distant yard to the white haired devil at her side. A slow friendly smile curved the redhead's lips, and ignoring propriety she poured a cup of tea for the Rook. Large helpings of sugar and milk sweetened the brew to suit Koneko's feline tastes before Rias pushed the cup and saucer over with a single pale finger.

Accepting the tea without a twitch, the ten year old nekomata lifted it to her lips and took a small sip. The cool sugary sweetness would have turned the stomach of another devil, but it was just perfect for Koneko. "Nothing."

Akeno hummed, listening to the short exchange with one ear. "That is part of the charm around here. Quiet lazy days stretching on forever."

Huffing a small laugh, Rias gave her Queen a wry look. "They hardly stretch on forever. Just next week Father intends on paying a visit to the Kyoto youkai, and he wants us to come along. That would be neither quiet nor lazy."

Crystal chimed as Akeno set her porcelain cup down on the glass table firmly. "That would be... unwise." she grimaced, turning to look at her mistress. "The youkai of Japan essentially have free run of the city, and because of that all the onmyouji clans tend to hold territory in the surrounding countryside. It's a rather delicate cold war they have going on. If your father pays them a visit, the clans may think that there is some movement towards alliance and attack out of desperation."

"That will not happen as long as Yasaka is in the city. The onmyouji will not move first. They fear the nine tails too much." Koneko offered dully, watching the play of sunlight reflect off a particularly vivid cluster of daylilies. While Shirone and Kuroka had been among the last surviving members of the nekoshou subspecies, but they had still been nekomata youkai. Even after being reincarnated into devils, the doings of youkai had remained topics of interest.

"There is also the fact that my uncle may consider it a violation of your 'deal' with him."

Rias digested that for a few moments, shrugging one pale shoulder and letting the strap of her pale camisole slip down. "That is always a possibility I suppose. Shall we simply not go then?"

"That will hurt your standing in the clan."

A thick silence curled between them, Naruto's name floating unspoken between them. Considering the sheer speed Naruto seemed to grasp magic and the way he excelled at all of his studies, Koneko knew that the perception of Rias as heiress was not strong.

When the civil war between devils had ended, the new Satans had to give up their own clan names and use the name of the old Satans. While the title of Satan wasn't hereditary, it was assumed that the Satans would raise their children to succeed them. Naruto was a Gremory by legality only, and no one would have been shocked if he became Naruto *Lucifer* in the future.

A Satan could not also be a clan leader. It was a concentration of too much power in the hands of
one devil, and their government had explicitly banned it. But that hadn't stopped the gossip. Naruto was just as much a genius as his father. He was much wiser and more learned than a child his age had the right to be. He had a certain charisma about him. The only thing Rias had going for her was her genius, and most devils would rather follow a general with a sword than a bookish woman.

"I don't care." Rias declared, settling a hand over Akeno's hand and giving a reassuring squeeze. "I'd rather protect my friends. Let them whisper."

Koneko sighed, turning her teacup in her hands and watching the last drops of biege roll around. That emotional weakness was exactly why Rias' expectations of clan leadership were going up in smoke, even if it was also why the Ruin Princess had managed to wriggle into Koneko's and Akeno's scarred hearts.

Shivering just barely in the cold, Vali rolled the spark wheel of his cheap lighter. It took a few times for a flame to spark, but eventually the eighteen year old half devil managed to get a tiny flicker shining long enough to ignite the end of his cigarette. Drawing in a lungful of the toxic fumes, Vali held it and let the smoke burn in his lungs.

" Fucking Russians." Vali cursed, blowing out a mouthful of white and settling accusing blue eyes on the Kremlin. " Fucking Grigori. Fucking Azazel." It felt good to let the crude words roll off his tongue, even if it made some of the passerby give him odd looks. Still, maybe it was unfair of him to be mad about Azazel sending him to freeze his balls off in the Russian winter.

The Governor-General of the Grigori was only doing what Vali had asked him to.

Eight years ago Vali had fled the abuse of his cowardly father. He'd been willing to put up with it for years, because doing so let him stay by his human mother. But when his devil grandfather had told him to go leave and toughen himself up, and that if he refused that his mother would die, Vali left within the hour. His mother was a kind and gentle woman, and Vali knew that his father's family had surely never given a damn about her. If he didn't protect her, no one would.

Fine. Fuck them. Vali had done more than survive. He'd **thrived.** The streets had made him even harder than the abuse had, and Azazel had reworked him into a true steel. He was the White Dragon Emperor. He possessed Divine Dividing, one of the thirteen god-slaying Longinus Sacred Gears. He wasn't a weak little boy that could be pushed around by the likes of his father and grandfather anymore.

Eight years ago those two had taken Vali's mother from him. Now he was going to take her back.

Dropping the half-finished cigarette to the cobblestone, Vali ground it in with a boot and cast a sharp glare about for his contact. Azazel's reach was long, and his information gathering ability was second to none. But Vali's devil family was the Lucifer Clan, and the descendants of the original Satans hadn't survived after the civil war by lurking about out in the open. Before he'd been sent away from home, Vali had lived in too many different human cities to count, always on the move and hiding from the new government in Gehenna.

" Where the fuck are you?" Vali growled beneath his breath impatiently, darting his gaze over the pressing crowds that moved along Moscow's sidewalks.

" Are you lost, my foreign friend?" A red faced short Russian man stopped beside Vali, peering up at the taller man with curious brown orbs. While he was only a half devil, his inborn magic still rendered the rolling foreign tongue intelligible for Vali, and when he spoke back the words were transformed into the human's native tongue.
"How did you know I was foreign?"

The Russian gave Vali a look that suggested he was being particularly stupid. "If you were not a foreigner, you would not be standing in the street looking like a lost American puppy."

"Is that what it looks like to you?"

"You do not have the slavic look, and a Russian wouldn't walk around Moscow with an American flag patch on their back."

Irritation flared in Vali's chest. No wonder everyone had been giving him strange glances. "I suppose I am the victim of an unfunny joke." It was just like Azazel to secretly alter his clothes and make him look like a fool.

"Ahh. If you say so. But I'll ask again, are you lost?"

"No." Vali denied, attention already wandering away.

"Fair enough. Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are many strange mysteries in Moscow for foreigners."

Burning blue eyes snapped back. "And I suppose you know how exactly I should solve those puzzles?" Vali challenged, prompting a sly smirk to cross the other man's face.

"It never hurts to ask for a little guidance. Otherwise we'll all end up below the ground."

"Being below the ground might not be as unpleasant as you expect."

"Too true! But if it were all fun and games, that wouldn't be where we end up after falling."

Vali ran a hand over his nose, frowning at the numbness the cold winter wind had given his face. "Well you've given all the right responses, so either you're the man I need or you're a very good spy. What do you have for me, Nikolai?"

"Today, I am Grisha."

"Fine, Grisha, what do you have for me?"

The brown eyed man sighed, shoving his hands under his armpits and turning away. The scruff of his medium length dark beard worked as the man swallowed, a frown drawing his thick brows tight. "Well, I was told that you might be interested in picking up a very rare breed of poodle. A one of a kind companion, to be honest, since I've heard enough about you to know that she'd be the perfect old girl for you. Every man has that special one."

"Exactly. I'm quite interested."

Grisha drew in a sharp breath. "Unfortunately my friend, it won't be possible for me to help her find a new home. Her previous owners were so awful that she couldn't live like that. I'm sorry. She's in a better place now."

What?

What?

It was like the whole world had gone soundless and grey. He could still see the annoyed pushing of passerby, the faint midwinter sunlight glinting off snow, and the wet gleam of slush covered
cobblestone. But there was no color or life anywhere in it.

Vali didn't know what he said to Grisha to dismiss Azazel's middleman.

He just knew that after the man left, he stood alone in the Russian capital and let hot salty streams run down his cheeks.

Mother.

Naruto supposed he should have expected the sudden challenge. Years of whispers about his apparent superiority had a way of taking their toll, and despite the friendly smile curving Rias' lips, Naruto could easily feel the bite from her gaze.

"Alright." the redhead boy exhaled slowly, unbuttoning the collar of his white dress shirt. "Let's rock." Naruto could either accept the mock duel and have to raise his hand to the girl he'd come to view as his sister, or he'd refuse and leave everyone with the suspicion he'd done it out of arrogance. That was no choice at all. The only thing left to do was fight.

"Where do you want it?"

A slight flash of hesitation crossed Rias' face before it hardened into determination. She might feel a little guilty about fighting her nephew, and when she beat him, she'd likely feel even worse. But she needed to silence the constant mutters among the servants that she was going to end up being a poor choice for heir.

"I think the dueling arena should suffice? It's nothing so formal, but we wouldn't want to break any furniture."

Shrugging one shoulder, Naruto stepped past his much taller pseudo-sister. "Let's hurry it up then, Rias. I don't want to make a scene or anything." Under the facade of nonchalance, the younger devil really didn't. Either he'd beat Rias and end up shaming her in front of a bunch of witnesses, or she'd beat him, and then his mother would kick both their asses for such 'uncouth behaviour'. So it was best to go without others watching altogether.

The pair of devils quickly moved to the small dueling arena that squatted in the corner of the estate the Gremory main house currently resided in. The building itself was squat and rectangular, simple lines and pure utility. There were no grand seats set aside for huge crowds or overhanging balconies for a decadent emperor. No statue of a pagan god or an ancient statesman marred the stone walls. The sand of the arena itself was bounded by a simple fence that divided the fighting stage from a single file walkway where observers could stand.

Rias strode to one corner of the sandy square, turquoise eyes watching as Naruto took the other. His child's form looked even smaller when set against the tall posts of the fence, and sudden shame filled the Ruin Princess' gut. Was she so afraid of rumors and snide comments that she'd stoop to committing violence against her own nephew? "Nothing lethal." she stated, voice small with the weight of guilt.

"Of course." Naruto agreed instantly, squatting slightly and taking in the sight of his aunt. The teen devil stood straight backed with her arms folded under her chest. A poor stance for a shinobi, but to be fair typical magicians rarely worried about agility or what would happen if they were suddenly tackled. "On three?"

"On three."
"Three... Two... One... Go!"

Naruto instantly barreled to the side, short legs working furiously to propel his tiny body across the pale sand. Dirt bounced off his back as Rias’ enormous balls of Bael clan sorcery bit into the ground behind him. Her spells were powerful, and if she managed to catch him she might even knock him out of the fight with a single hit. But they were slow, and easy enough to avoid if he kept moving along.

Summoning up his own red spell in response, Naruto spun on his heel and swiftly elongated the sphere into the sharp shape of an arrow. The redhaired boy launched the projectile, piercing through Rias’ larger swell of magic and causing an explosive detonation. Almost reluctantly, a smile of excitement split his lips. It might be only ‘practice’, but it had been so long since Naruto had experienced anything like a real fight.

Rias bit her lip as her hair was thrown into disarray. Wind and dirt blown about by the force of clashing magic made the teen devil reconsider her strikes. The larger spheres were certainly powerful, even after she’d hollowed them out from the distinctive Bael destruction and left only crimson coloured concussive force, but Naruto was blowing them away with ease. Each arrow split her spells before they could even cross half the arena.

Well, if they weren’t moving fast enough, then she would simply decrease the size and increase the spread. Rias began to split her larger balls of sorcery into smaller spheres, multiplying the number of her strikes and increasing the pace at which they moved. The arcs of vermilion magic began to corral her nephew, chasing his agile movements into a corner and forcing him to summon up a shield.

Peering through the glowing runic circle of his conjured shield, Naruto began to count the volleys. They came vicious and strong, but they came in a pattern, and the redhaired boy could see it. Three swift hammerings, and then a pause for Rias to ‘reload’.

Naruto moved foward, ducking under a spray of fist sized balls and lashing out with a long punishing whip. The bright saffron curve swung in a cruel horizontal arc, bifurcating the entire arena and causing Rias to throw herself to the dirt to roll under it.

"Not bad." the Ruin Princess admitted, climbing back to her feet with a frown. That sort of elongating strike wasn’t something she’d have thought of herself, but it put her in mind of her brother. Sirzechs had a way of cutting everyone and everything down to size. Maybe she should start doing the same.

Calling a glowing handful of the Power of Destruction to her palms, Rias pulled the bright red sparkles out into the shape of a whip. A little concentration of might enflamed the ghostly construct, adding force and power to its transparent form. The fight might be just a little rougher than she’d originally expected, but Rias wasn’t going to lose.

Naruto was always the genius. He always managed to pull off a feat and leave the whole clan cooing around him. Rias had been ten years old when she’d managed to stumble through teleportation. While the spell looked easy enough, moving through time and space required more than a little power and skill, otherwise every peasant would have been using it.

Her nephew had been five. Half Rias' age and managing to make the exact same achievements as a devil she was. It was like Sirzechs' son had been some kind of genius from the cradle, fighting with instinct and skill years ahead of his time.

"I'm not going to lose to you." she promised, watching as Naruto began to call on his own power.
The gathering cloud of blood red energy was a mirror to her own, focusing around the skin of Naruto's forearms and hands.

Where Rias had converted her magic into the harsh form of a cutting whip, Naruto forced his into thick gauntlets. Bloody red mist encased the boy's fists, coating Naruto's limbs up to the elbow. The rolling surface of Naruto's magic was still transparent, and Rias wondered with a touch of amusement what he'd look like if his whole body was covered with it. He'd probably look like some tiny shounen protagonist out of one of the many Japanese manga she'd read.

Shaking away the absurd image, the teen devil steeled herself for the struggle to come. She didn't want to hurt Naruto, but she wasn't going to let him defeat her either. "Ready or not," she breathed more to herself than to him. "Here I come."
Chapter 4

Naruto's blue eyes tracked his aunt's movements as she leaned into the clash of sorcery. A blood red whip of conjured demonic energy swished through the air in vicious little cracks, smashing through the rolling spheres of his magic. Rias was closing the distance slowly, stepping carefully forward towards him while wielding her makeshift magical weapon as both sword and shield.

It was in its own way proof of Rias' natural genius. Naruto was pretty damned sure no one had ever trained her to use a whip as a weapon, yet after a few short swings she was managing to make it work. Her movements were those of a clumsy amateur, and more than once Naruto saw the Ruin Princess flinch back when the loose movements of the ghostly strap twisted too roughly for her, but she was managing to cut down his lazy volleys of spellcraft. A dumber devil wouldn't have been able to even figure out how to make the thing move with any amount of accuracy.

But if Rias was a genius, Naruto was a genius among geniuses. Or at least had fifteen years or so of experience on the battlefield over her.

Matching his aunt's steady creeping strides step for step, the redhaired boy started to move to close the distance. Deep blue eyes crossed with Rias' turquoise gaze more than once as their trading arcs of magical power intensified.

Saffron orbs collided and cracked, splintering into a dizzying show of brightness and power, but that display was still nothing but a sideshow compared to the real avenue of their conflict.

Naruto clenched his fists inside his shifting gauntlets of diabolical light, carefully measuring the shortening gap between them with his eyes. Despite the blinding clash of magic, the younger devil could still see his aunt's taller form, and he knew when to move. Perhaps it was a bit unfair, considering he'd lived a life as a shinobi and Rias had never been anything but a somewhat pampered noble girl.

While Rias was powerful for her age, she was no war hardened combatant, and it showed in the way she reluctantly struck out at him. She second guessed herself too much, only giving half an effort because she was afraid of hurting him. When she came at him the whip cut too slow and too low, coming in around Naruto's hip, and it was easy pickings for the former ninja.

Stepping into the incoming lash, Naruto grinned at the look of sudden astonishment on Rias' face. Then he swiftly sliced into the length of it with a sorcery enhanced chop. The slithering string of energy broke easily beneath Naruto's hands, denying his aunt's her chosen form of attack.

It had really been a bad strategic choice to rely on a weapon she had little experience with to try and take him on. Cutting up a whip like this was pretty basic training for a Konoha shinobi, though he would have generally used a kunai to do it in his previous life. She would have done better to keep relying on her typical methods of casting rather than gambling on something brand new.

Of course, to give Rias her dues, Naruto hardly expected that she'd have known anything about Konoha and what it taught him.

Naruto clenched a fist, splitting a fraction of the rolling force shrouding his hands off. A thought rolled the wavering magical energy into tight balls, which he launched at Rias' feet. The sudden bombardment forced Rias to take a handful of stumbling steps as she hopped to avoid the volley.

There was no point in dragging it out. She'd underestimated him from the beginning, and he wasn't
about to let her get away with it. If she'd been in a real fight, not taking her opponent seriously might be enough to get her killed. He'd rather see her feel a little humiliated in the present than watch her get killed in the future. The quicker he could take her down, the better it would be for both of them.

"Sorry." Naruto apologized, dodging ahead and slipping under Rias' guard with a punishing punch. Wreathed in concussive sorcery and with all the weight of his small body behind it, the sheer force of his fist to her gut was enough to fold his aunt in half.

A trail of spittle escaped Rias' mouth as she groaned, losing control over her magic and letting the last remnants of her conjured weapon fade away into a spray of motes. Stars exploded in her eyes as Naruto followed up his gut punch with an elbow to the back of the head.

Rias collapsed to the sand, landing on her hands and knees with a painful crunch. Red strands of hair dragged through the dirt as Naruto leapt on her back and drove her face to the ground with a dull thump. Thin arms wrapped around her throat, and the voice of her nephew growled in her ear.

"You give?"

Pure indignation flared through her, and Rias defiantly grabbed at Naruto's grip around her throat. Clear coated nails scratched fruitlessly at the boy's skin, digging pink furrows that had Naruto wincing and tightening his chokehold.

"Come on already!"

"No!" Rias shrieked, digging the fingers of one hand furiously in the sand and shake intensified her efforts to buck Naruto off her back. She would not be beaten by a child. That would simply prove the stupid whispers that she wasn't good enough right. The dull ringing in her ears disturbed her angry attempts to grab hold of her core of magical energy. "I'm not losing to you!"

Nearly thrown off by the sudden fierce struggle of the older devil beneath him, Naruto grunted and heaved his weight back down. "Stop being stubborn!" A bead of sweat dripped down from Naruto's temples, carving a glistening line of stress, and he squeezed in an effort to get Rias to submit. "Just give up already, I don't want to hurt you!"

"Fuck you!"

Surprised at the uncharacteristic curse, Naruto nearly missed the sudden vermilion spark as Rias found her magic once more. What had been planned to be a friendly duel was becoming something far more violent, and if he didn't get a leash on Rias soon, things might escalate too far. Rushing to his own reservoir of power, the boy fumbled and attacked in a preemptive blast.

Naruto struck too hard, slamming both of them down in a dizzied heap with a smoky halo of crimson energy.

Rias crashed face-first in the dirt for the second time. A faint crack echoed through her ears as her face filled with hot pain. Wetness ran freely from her nostrils, soaking the sand maroon.

Spitting out a wad of blood that had trickled down from her broken nose, the Ruin Princess reached back and tore at her dazed nephew's hair with a taloned hand. A yelp broke through the heavy air before she finally tossed him away.

Rolling to a crouch, Naruto twisted at the hips before stopping with a sudden rush of guilt and horror. "Shit, Rias, I didn't mean to..." he choked off, watching as his aunt took a hand to her sand and blood covered face. Ichor smeared across the white skin of Rias' palms as she futilely attempted to stem the tide of blood dripping from her nares.
Sea-green eyes glared at the younger devil accusingly, twitching from time to time with unfamiliar pain when Rias prodded at the swelling skin of her face. Naruto was used to Rias looking a little jealous whenever he managed to cross a milestone in training at a younger age than she had, but he was shocked by the sudden boiling venom in his pseudo-sister's gaze.

"What is going on here?" Grayfia's voice cut through the tense silence with all the force of a drill sergeant. Both young devils flinched, turning their attention to the approaching form of Naruto's mother. A pair of servants trailed at the Queen's heels, the three of them forming a matching trio of maid outfits. Typically, Naruto's mother was an ocean of calm amidst the more energetic storms in their family, her silver hair and silver eyes a gentle break in the crowd of red hair and blue-green eyes.

If Naruto had to describe the harsh expression of his mother's face now, he certainly wouldn't have used 'calm'.

"Ahh, shit."

A feather dropped, ash grey with each filament thrown into sharp relief before Sasuke's straining vision.

"Found you."

Lightning exploded from Sasuke's skin, the cold white light illuminating the forest canopy even as the Uchiha scrambled to his feet. Familiar chirping filled the air, and in that moment, it was the most beautiful sound Sasuke had ever heard.

Baring his teeth in a beastly snarl, Sasuke threw himself into the fight. Anxiety and the shame at his own weakness fell away and everything he had in him was united in one purpose: survival. With his heart hammering like a jackrabbit, the Uchiha lunged.

"Chidori!"

Dohnaseek sighed and held his hand out. Cool blue light exploded from the middle aged fallen angel's palm. The spear of light stretched and solidified into an elegant half-pike. A lighter baby blue seemed to shimmer along the bladed edge, trailing faint streamers through the air as Dohnaseek twirled the conjured weapon and brought it up to parry away Sasuke's desperate attack.

"Come on boy. Show me how much you want to live."

Sasuke struck again, fist covered in wild screeching electricity.

Swaying away from the blow, the fallen angel clicked his tongue and brought his boot up in a half-hearted kick. A crack echoed through the clearing as the right side of Sasuke's chest caved in beneath the blow.

Wrinkles deepened on the fallen angel's face as Sasuke dropped to a knee, coughing blood and struggling to breathe. "Too much force." Dohnaseek mused, delivering a burning slap to the young devil with a lazy swing of his spear. The fallen angel hardly considered himself a member of the Grigori's top echelons, but just because he'd never risen high in the fallen angel military government didn't make him weak. He'd survived the Great War against the devils and angels after all. Sometimes he forgot his own strength.

Pain flared with every breath as Sasuke heaved back to his feet. Blood coated the back of the Uchiha's tongue, and his Chidori flickered weakly as he leapt backwards to open some distance
between his wounded form and the predator frowning at him.

"No." The fallen angel reversed his opinion after a moment filled with Sasuke's quiet coughs. "It's not a matter of using too much force. You're simply too weak."

Dohnaseek moved faster than Sasuke's eyes could perceive. One moment the fallen angel was across the clearing, and the next stars were exploding in Sasuke's vision as the hilt of Dohnaseek's spear clobbered into his temple.

The Chidori died entirely as Sasuke was swept off his feet. Rolling desperately, Sasuke spit out a wad of blood and crawled painfully back upright. Cold blue eyes pierced the Uchiha's shaking form, disapproval written in the contemptuous curve of the fallen angel's lips.

"Will you run away like a frightened rabbit again?" Dark feathers swirled as the fallen angel began to slowly move forward, each step triggering Sasuke to move back. "You've seen the difference in our strength – you know that distance is useless, but still you're cowering back?"

Leather gloves creaked as Dohnaseek's fist tightened around his spear of hardened light. "This is why you low level creatures are such a nuisance. You have no pride. You can't even give a good fight."

Each word needled in Sasuke like hot brands, stinging his pride and stoking his anger. But the fallen angel wasn't wrong. Ten years a devil and Sasuke was still too weak. All the quiet pride in his successes seemed self-aggrandizing. Those years spent beating taijutsu into his unconditioned body seemed a waste. Every painful hour given up to force his weak magical reserves into reproducing the Chidori were worthless.

Closing the distance in a blur of dark feathers, Dohnaseek delivered more bruising strikes from the flat of his blade to the wounded Uchiha. Every slap was a humiliation that seared metaphorically and literally.

"What are you doing, brat?"

A whistling hammer to Sasuke's kneecap.

"This is pathetic."

A burning slice along the meat of his forearm.

"How many years have you spent as a devil, only managing to achieve this?"

A bone crushing slam to the Uchiha's bleeding foot.

"Why are you so weak?"

Lightning sparked weakly in Sasuke's palm as he made a desperate claw at Dohnaseek's eyes. The fallen angel backhanded the Chidori away with a snort before giving Sasuke a punishing axe kick to the torso.

The broken bones of Sasuke's ribcage ground sickeningly together as the young devil dropped back to his knees with a groan of pain. There was a queer sensation of ripping inside of him, and with a final gasp Sasuke began vomiting blood into the cradle of his lap.

Dohnaseek gave an annoyed click of the tongue at the display.
Bringing his spear of light up against the devil's cheek, the fallen angel pressed the sharp edge of the blade in just enough for it to open the skin over Sasuke's cheekbone. Blood ran unnoticed in a thin rivulet down the pale skin of Sasuke's face to mingle with the bruises and smeared blood over the rest of his body.

It was a bubbling and burning of his flesh reacting to angel light magic that made Sasuke drag his weary black orbs up to meet Dohnaseek's pitiless blue glare. Even in the face of death there was steel resignation in the Uchiha's eyes – the resignation of a man with a duty but very little actual passion.

"You know the answer as well as I do boy." Dohnaseek declared, pulling the spear just enough to open more of Sasuke's cheek without decapitating him. "You've just been fooled into refusing to see it. Perhaps some idealist got to you and encouraged you to abandon some hard won truth. An empty vessel like you are now – how could you be anything but a failure?"

"Open your eyes. You are weak. Why are you weak?" A cruel sneer worked its way onto the craggy planes of the fallen angel's face. "Because you lack hatred."

The change between one heartbeat and the next made Dohnaseek's heart begin to truly feel a thrill for the first time since the night began. Dull resignation was burnt up in an instant, eaten away by instinctive black rage. "Shut up!" exploded from the teenaged devil, droplets of blood spewing out with each denying roar. "Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!"

A Chidori shrieked back into existence, chirping brighter and burning fiercer than anything Dohnaseek had seen from the boy since the chase began.

Sasuke slammed his lightning coated hand into the fallen angel's spear, light and electricity screaming for dominance and mingling into a hot blue radiance. Vibrations trembled up the length of the half-pike, twitching the conjured weapon violently until Dohnaseek pulled back with a breathless chuckle.

"That's it boy. Show me!" the fallen angel taunted, spurring the devil into a frothing rage as he bobbed and wove just out of reach. The blue spear of light hammered against Sasuke's Chidori again and again, each collision forcing spiderweb cracks through the conjuration's glassy surface. "What kind of power is your anger giving you? How much stronger are you when fueled by hatred?"

This fallen angel was saying all the things Itachi had once said to goad Sasuke down the path of revenge. Just where did Dohnaseek get off sounding like a B-tier villain version of his brother? What kind of divine mockery was this supposed to be? Just a last 'fuck you' for Sasuke in his last hour in this fucked up second life?

"Shut up!" Burst from Sasuke's lips with a spray of blood, and the Chidori coating his hand surged even brighter. "I'll kill you!" he vowed in the midst of bloodlust and rage before slamming the lightning magic against Dohnaseek's spear in a blow that destroyed the conjured weapon with the tinkle of shattering crystal.

Dohnaseek leapt back, leaving Sasuke standing alone for a moment. Sweat mingled with blood along the contours of his bony limbs. Tremors wracked the Uchiha's beaten form, and the Chidori gave one final squeal and died.

"Better." The fallen angel appraised, voice gone entirely neutral. The was no mocking in that face. No emotion. Just pure efficiency. The battle loving maniac was gone. The arrogance had all drained away. There was no contrived hunt any longer. "Now it's time to end this."

If Sasuke had thought Dohnaseek was swift before, that speed was nothing compared to their true
difference in ability. The Uchiha didn't even have time to register anything but the sudden explosion of pain that shredded his heart. There was no dramatic conjuration. No flow of dark feathers and movement. Just the sensation of pain when a spear of enchanted light suddenly appeared in his flesh.

Sasuke hadn't even been able to comprehend it until the conjured weapon was fully lodged inside of him and cooking his internal organs away with holy light.

"Goodbye boy."

Crumbling to the ground in a splatter of mud, Sasuke tried to draw in a breath. He tried to reach an arm up to pull the deadly spear from his flesh. He tried to curse at the futility of it all. All he achieved was a tiny scrabble of his nails in the forest loam as darkness rapidly rushed in from the corners of his vision.

There was no frantic hammering of the heart or slowly stuttering beat. There was nothing at all, because Sasuke's heart was gone.

*I'm dying.*

Shit.

Dark streamers strangled all the colours out of his vision. The last thing he felt before his senses failed was a slick lukewarm sensation of sinking slightly into a patch of mud created from the mingling of soil and his own blood.

"Do you want to live?"

Her haughty tone was familiar. It was almost fitting, that the only companion he'd made in the new world would be the last thing conjured up by his dying brain. She might as well be asking for cookies.

"Do you want... power?"

The void yawned, endless oblivion hungered.

Yes.

"I have never been so ashamed - of either of you."

In a way, the quiet disappointment in his mother's voice was worse than if she'd had a loud screaming fit. Naruto chewed the inside of his cheek, sneaking a glance at his aunt out of the corner of his eye.

Magic had healed her broken nose and chased away the swelling and bruising, but the memories of those injuries was still there. Injuries that he'd given her, because he'd come at her too roughly and treated her as more skilled than she was. He could still summon the image of her toxic teal stare when he closed his eyes, and combined with the heavy steel glare Grayfia was giving the pair of them, Naruto felt sick to his stomach.

"I thought I'd raised you both better than that." Grayfia sighed, folding her arms over her chest. She'd dismissed the crowd of servants and healed Rias' nose herself, but that wouldn't stop the talk that was going to come out of the little scuffle. "I did my best to teach you to think before you acted. But instead of taking whatever dispute you had to Sirzechs or Zeoticus to solve, you scrabbled it out like a pair of lowborn commoners in the dirt."
"We weren't brawling." Rias disputed, a rebellious fey look in her eyes. The angry clench of her jaw worried Naruto. "We were having an informal duel. It was nothing to disturb the household over."

Grayfia's brows drew sharply together as Naruto's mother pressed her lips together. "That doesn't make it any better. A duel is not a game. What if one of you had managed to do serious damage to the other? You're much older than he is, and Naruto is..."

"Much stronger than I am?" Ice filled Rias' voice, making Naruto wince and look for someone to say to diffuse all the tension. The nails of Rias' clenched fists bit into her palms. "Is that what you mean to say?"

The Strongest Queen hesitated, spurring Rias to roll her eyes spitefully. "Whatever then, I'm done with this." The redhaired girl shoved on past her sister-in-law, ignoring the woman's demands for her to come back.

"Just leave it mom." Naruto sighed, rubbing a hand over his forehead. What a fucking mess. "This is more my fault than hers. I'm the one you should be mad at." Most of the time Naruto was willing to take the heat for people he cared about. That he'd broken Rias' face half an hour ago only made him more determined to take the punishment. It was his way of making amends.

Bitterness twisted Grayfia's lips as the silver haired devil stared down the corridor her sister-in-law had stomped through. "You're not as good a liar as you think you are, Naruto."

Naruto frowned at his mother's back, stepping up beside her and shoving his hands in his pockets. "I don't see how it's not my fault. the ten year old grunted, looking up with steely blue eyes. "I was the one that decided it was best to get it out of the way now, without anyone knowing about it. Neither of us was gonna seriously hurt the other, but Rias needed that fight. It's not easy growing up with someone younger than you that everyone loves to call a genius."

A queer expression crossed the taller devil's face as she finally turned to stare down at her son. "Sometimes I wonder about you. When your father is around you can act like quite the fool, but when he's not you can act surprisingly mature. if I didn't know better I'd think you were much older than you actually are."

"I can act the fool all the time if you like. How do you feel about mud under the sheets at the foot of your bed?"

"Do you want to die?"

"Ouch, mom. You're gonna make me cry."

A unladylike snort escaped her, lips twitching in reluctant amusement. "Haven't you heard? I take sustenance from the sorrow and tears of others." Grayfia settled a hand over Naruto's shoulder, humor falling away. "While I understand what you tried to do, you may have actually made it worse."

Wincing, Naruto scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, I know." An 'official duel' presided over by one of his parents or grandparents would have been recorded in public record, and they'd need a a few witnesses on hand to make sure things didn't get out of control. But they could have controlled the narrative a little better. Instead, his effort to keep it all secret meant then when his mother and maids walked in, it was to the sight of him beating the stuffing out of Rias. What would have been called a mere victory instead would get called an utter massacre.

"Your grandfather may not have any choice in the matter after this."

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The news spread like wildfire. Leaping from mouth to mouth, household to household, clan to clan. Naruto Gremory had viciously beaten Rias Gremory in a duel, and because of that victory, he was to be named the heir to the clan. The ten year old himself denied that the victory was as one-sided and violent as they implied, but his protests were lost in the wind of gossip.

As for Akeno, she was a little busy packing away a pair of socks to listen to the latest burbles of speculation. A grim frown pulled at the Queen's lips when she followed the black knee socks with a pair of red lace panties. At a different time she might have been a little amused at the outright sexuality of her underwear - she came by it honestly through her mother - but Akeno was a little too consumed with worry.

With Naruto confirmed as heir a few days ago, Rias' tiny peerage had kept their heads down. While devil society was more gender equal than medieval human ones considering that women could attain equal magical power, it was still to a degree patriarchal. The gender imbalance after the Great War that left pureblood nobles on the verge of extinction only further decreased their independence. Without the protection of the heir position, the Ruin Princess was suddenly much more vulnerable to politics within the aristocracy.

A clan would refuse to sell their heir's hand cheaply, but Rias was just a spare now. Her only remaining political value was in her bloodline and the womb that would pass it on. It was probably too early to be worried about threats of engagement, and the Gremory clan was a little more soft hearted than most, but they were still a clan. Rias, Akeno, and even Koneko hadn't wanted to cause too much fuss and give anyone any ideas about getting rid of a troublesome former heir presumptive.

So they'd leave. Out of sight and out of mind.

Centuries ago the previous Duke Gremory had an arranged marriage with a noblewoman from the Balam clan. Rather than do something as politically unwise as elope with his lover, the devil had simply taken many concubines. For his favourite concubine, he'd built Starling Hall. It was a relatively remote estate, constructed for a single woman and her children, and perfect for Rias' peerage. Like any other home made for the nobility, it sprawled, but it lacked the sheer vastness the aristocrats traditionally favoured.

Rias was partial to it because of the exquisitely constructed observatory it housed. A single vacation there as a girl and the Ruin Princess was hooked on what she called her 'star chamber'.

Akeno would just be happy to get out of the estate the rest of Rias' immediate family was currently living in. She was hardly a therapist, but she hoped the distance from the hovering servants and visiting clansmen would take some of the conflict out of her friend's heart. It was difficult to watch Rias alternatively mope around and seethe with envy. It was not a good look for someone she knew was usually tender hearted.

Stuffing a box of earrings into one of her suitcases, Akeno gave her room a last cursory look over. There were a few potted plants and old books she'd collected over the years scattered over the shelves, but nothing really stuck out at her. While Akeno might look like a high maintenance woman that needed to be spoiled, she wasn't attached to material things. Living on the streets for a year and a half made her more focused on utility than luxury. A few pieces of her mother's jewelry were probably the only things she owned that she considered irreplaceable, and those were carefully tucked away already.

"Seems fine to me." she decided, waving a hand over her luggage and casting a levitation spell with a swirl of yellow runes. The suitcases rose into the air and floated along after her as Akeno left her bedroom and stalked through the corridors. Koneko was likely already waiting in Rias' bedroom, and once Akeno got there they could teleport away like thieves in the night.
The image made her chuckle grimly.

Stopping three doors down from her own room, Akeno knocked and let herself in.

"Slow." Koneko greeted from the bed, the nekomata curled up with her knees to her chest.

Pulling down an eyelid, Akeno stuck her tongue out at the younger girl. "Bleh. Not everyone lives out of a cat basket. Some people actually have to pack some of their favourite bed sheets. Behave, or I won't get you any more wind up mice."

The nekomata just shot back an irritated glare.

"Where's Rias?"

"Saying goodbye."

Akeno made a wordless noise of sympathy. They weren't 'moving out' really. For powerful devils like Rias' family, teleporting over to see her any time they wanted was child's play, and they'd just be lodging in another one of the Gremory clan's many properties. But even Sirzechs still lived under the same roof, despite being a centuries old Satan and lord of the slowly rebuilding Lucifer clan territory.

For such a close knit family, a teleportation circle away was both right next door and another country.

She wondered if her human Himejima cousins were just as tightly bound, or if they could cut ties with each other just like they'd cut ties with her.

"Good, you're here." Rias muttered as she slipped into the room. Faint dark circles lined under her turquoise eyes, and not for the first time Akeno wished that her friend wasn't hiding away from the family that wanted to help her.

The half-breed wasn't enough of a hypocrite to nag at Rias considering she abandoned her concerned absentee father, but up and leaving might not be the best choice. It wasn't like her parents weren't willing to understand their daughter's emotional turmoil. They'd certainly let her leave to 'find herself' and 'have her own space' with little enough protest after extracting promises to visit and tell them if she ever needed to talk.

Instead of leaning on her family, Rias was retreating from everything that had purposefully or accidentally caused her pain. Almost all staff at Starling Hall had been let go prior to Rias deciding to move there, so besides the odd visiting cleaner it would be practically empty. A mistress and two members of a peerage did not a village make, and there would be no clansmen nosing into their training progress or servants gushing over little master Naruto.

But Rias was not built for solitude, and Akeno worried about the long term impact of her self-imposed isolation.

"Are you ready to go?" Rias prodded tiredly, waving a hand and creating a small teleportation circle in the corner of the bedroom. The Ruin Princess' luggage floated over to linger by the red runes. "If not, now's the time to speak up."

"Of course."

"Yes."

"Then let's not waste any more time."
Chapter 5

Watching the tail end of one of Ophis' thick black snakes slither down the dying Uchiha's throat with vague interest, Dohnaseek turned and doffed his fedora in welcome. "Your script was excellent, ojou-sama."

The Ouroboros Dragon stared at the fallen angel with dull grey eyes before giving a minuscule nod. Cupping her dainty hands, the Gothic lolita reached through the fabric of reality and into the Dimensional Gap that lurked between worlds with a sparkle of blinding lurid rainbow light.

Dohnaseek blinked away the watery stinging in his eyes, only to have a blue gauntlet shoved into his gloved hands with all the fanfare of a bag of human fast food.

"As agreed." Ophis intoned, swiveling back to face Sasuke's twitching body. Destroying the spear of light pinning the devil to the ground with a thought, the dragon god stretched out her hand and healed every wound marking Sasuke's flesh.

Hovering uncertainly, the fallen angel slid the azure Twice Critical over his left hand. "Even if you heal his wounds Lady Ophis, the boy may not survive the infusion of your power." Dohnaseek clenched his fist to test the fit of the Sacred Gear.

The magical artifacts constructed by the God of The Bible were typically hidden in the souls of humans at birth, but enterprising non-humans had ways of extracting them from their original owners. Twice Critical might be one of the more common Sacred Gears, but the ability to double his strength was nothing to sneeze at. Getting his hands on the artifact was why he'd taken part in Ophis' little performance in the first place.

Dohnaseek looked back up at the dragon god and frowned. "While it's not truly any of my business, why did you not simply nurture the boy with drops of power? Why contract me to take part in this charade?"

For a long beat, the Ouroboros Dragon appeared to ignore the query. Dohnaseek was not wrong. Waiting ten years only to end the decade with a traumatizing lie appeared needlessly complex and pointless. Especially when Ophis could have merely given Sasuke power during their first meeting.

But the concern was not merely ability. "A tool with no spirit, remaining apathetically inside his boundaries and growing only when forced to suckle from the teat of power - an existence like that is of no use to me."

Sasuke needed to suffer. He needed to experience a long run of futility to teach him the weakness of the purpose Uzumaki Naruto had tried to give him. When compounded on the last years of his first life, Uchiha Sasuke had spent fifteen years as an ascetic wanderer who wanted nothing for himself. There was no passion in a man like that. He was content to waste away achieving little and justifying it with half-hearted idealistic rationalizations and bleating about duty.

A weak man like that could never become the soldier Ophis needed him to be. Great Red was not something that could be destroyed with lackadaisical effort. If Sasuke was going to help her destroy the Dragon of Dragons that had taken over the Dimensional Gap, he needed to be more than he was. Ophis shared the title of 'The Strongest Existence' with Great Red, and only a truly powerful warrior would be able to do damage to the Apocalypse Dragon.

"I see." Dohnaseek murmured, brushing a thumb over his new Sacred Gear. "You intend to break
him into pieces and reforge him into a devil with desires of his own. I wish you the best of luck in your endeavor then, Ouroboros Dragon. Business has been a pleasure. You know how to contact me if you wish to work together in the future."

Dark wings unfurled from the fallen angel's back, slipping out of the dimensional pocket they were typically concealed in and hoisting the middle-aged man into the air with a lazy sweep. The baby blue Twice Critical disappeared beneath the sleeves of Dohnaseek's trench coat, and he turned to leave. "A word of advice, Lady Ophis. This boy may be a pure-blooded devil, but there is more similarity between humans and devils than either would like to admit. Do not make the mistake of thinking a single defeat will be enough to crush his heart and make him into something else. He will bounce back."

Watching the fallen angel float away in a swirl of ash grey feathers with a blank expression, Ophis began to change. The façade of innocent prepubescent black-haired girl fell away, and the Dragon God grew taller by the breath, bosom swelling and hips widening until she stood in the body of an adult woman. "You underestimate me, Dohnaseek of the Grigori. I understand how you mortal beings behave better than you think."

Ophis knelt beside Sasuke's pale face, brushing a hand over his emaciated chest. The ghostly snake inside the Uchiha twitched, letting out just a little more power and driving Sasuke to inflate his newly healed lungs with a stuttering gasp. His regenerated heart contracted weakly, forcing blood through Sasuke's veins even as his flesh began to crumble away once more.

The Ouroboros Dragon had the ability to distill her own essence. Conjured in the form of shimmering black snakes, the creatures would then sink their fangs into whatever being had gained her attention. Ophis' venom was a double-edged sword, unlocking some of the potential of the one bitten even as it risked killing them outright.

What Ophis had given Sasuke was more than a single bite. It was a constant link between her and him, sinking more and more venom into his veins when she desired it. Yet even that first bite from the snake she'd given him seemed to be too much. Sasuke was dying beneath the weight of a fraction of his own potential.

Blackened veins bruised the Uchiha's skin like a curse, splitting open the pale surface and leaking dark ichor. Sweat beaded along Sasuke's brow as he took another shaky breath, mind lost to nightmares of a distant chill void.

Perhaps Ophis had made his body too weak when she summoned him across dimensions. Even with her healing and the carefully cultivated beginning of a will to power, Sasuke would die.

How unfortunate.

It had been a gamble in the end, to hope that Uchiha Sasuke and Uzumaki Naruto would be fitting weapons. At least the Khaos Brigade plan was moving forward. Smoothing the black satin of her dress over her knees, Ophis rose and tore a hole between worlds with a snap of her fingers. Events were not moving quickly enough in the Adho Loka for her liking. Words would need to be had with the descendant of Sun Wukong, otherwise Bikou would just continue to procrastinate.

'I like cookies.'

'Then take them.'

Ophis stopped on the threshold, giving Sasuke a last look. Midnight liquid seeped from the corners of his closed eyelids, ran from his aristocratic nose, dribbled out of the corner of his lips, and dripped
from his ears. The Uchiha's skin split even more beneath the force of the venom in his veins, driving him to cry out in agony.

Sentiment.

Driving her fang through her pink tongue, Ophis stood in silence as her mouth filled with the copper taste of her own blood. A droplet of crimson slipped between her pale lips, tracing an obscene red line down the ivory skin of the dragon god's chin.

Ophis dropped back to her knees, grass rustling as she reached out to cradle the young devil's face. Ignoring the clammy sensation of sweat and ichor beneath her fingertips, the Ouroboros Dragon pressed her lips to his, decision made.

Blood ran hot and slick from her mouth into his, sliding down Sasuke's throat like streaks of fire. If the Uchiha was too weak to survive the night, Ophis would simply repaint him in her own colours.

The King Piece twirled between Sirzechs' fingers idly, clear as glass and glowing with a sinister red light. One of only nine King Pieces in existence, the banned Evil Piece seemed to beckon like a seductress. It was almost like a whisper just out of range of hearing, begging the Great Satan to bond with it and attain godlike might.

Sirzechs' wondered how the original champions of the Rating Games had been able to give them up considering how addictive they were. Only once had the crimson haired Satan Lucifer used the King Piece. In the closing days of the civil war that would determine the future of their kind, Sirzechs had consumed the crimson chess piece and used its power to obliterate 3 of the 72 Pillars of the Underworld and then almost died himself. Sometimes he still missed that rush.

Yet Roygun Bephelgor had given hers up with nary a complaint. She'd taken her peerage almost to the top of the gladiatorial Rating Games, riding high on the power of a full set of Evil Pieces. And then as soon as the government had banned them, she'd handed over the overwhelmingly powerful chess piece. That kind of fortitude was strength Sirzechs could admire, especially when Roygun had managed to remain in second place in the Rating Games even after losing her King Piece.

Ajuka had done his work well when he'd created the Evil Pieces. Too well, if Sirzechs were honest. The ability to exponentially increase a devil's strength a hundred times over was something thousands of devils would and did kill for.

The chaos and blood created by the mere existence of the King Pieces had triggered another military campaign in a realm tired of war to force their owners to give them up to the government. They were too dangerous to leave in the hands of the public, and were seized and then assigned to trustworthy custodians. The four Satans, The Great King Bael, Archduke Agares, Mephisto Pheles, and the Rating Game Champion Diehauser Belial.

Only the ninth King Piece remained at large – within the hands of the Old Satan Faction if the situation remained unchanged since Grayfia's defection. It worried Sirzechs' to have such a catalyst for conflict unaccounted for, especially with a peace treaty between the angels, fallen angels, and devils creeping slowly towards finally being signed.

"Turn that frown upside down, Sirzechs-chan!" Serafall Leviathan glomped the redhaired Satan, gently bonking his nose with her mahou shoujo wand. "Why the looooong face?"

The corners of Sirzechs lips curved up, easing the expression of worry that had been marring his features into something more genial. "Just thinking about old times, Levia-tan. Nothing to worry
Ajuka Beelzebub made a disbelieving scoff, pulling the King Piece from Sirzechs' limp fingers as he breezed past. The Satan and scientist watched the blue shine the piece took as it changed hands with an expression of faint contempt before tossing it back to its custodian. "If I had known the trouble that would come from it, I wouldn't have bothered creating them."

"Don't lie." Falbium Asmodeus muttered, stretching lethargically over the arm of his ottoman. The slightly worn bench looked more than a touch out of place compared to the gaudy opulence of the Glasya-Labolas family's study, but none in the family had the real guts to go against the preferences of their wayward scion. Being appointed Satan had a way of encouraging people to do whatever they could to kiss ass. "You love tinkering too much. You'd make them just to look at them, even if they're not useful for anything."

"Tch."

"Please don't fight! Fighting makes Levia-tan sad." A stifling aura filled the air as a sinister light began to glow in the female Satan's eyes. "And you don't want to make Levia-tan sad, ne?"

"Urk!"

Sirzechs ruffled Serafall's hair, smiling beatifically at the pout she gave when her hat was knocked askew. "We can play whack-a-devil another time. Some developments have come up."

"Azazel." Folding her arms over her chest, the Leviathan perched on the nearest desk with a frown. All geniality fell from the faces in the room, and the Crimson Satan dropped into the chair beside Ajuka with a sigh.

"Michael wants us to meet with him again." Sirzechs announced wearily. "He's hoping that if he comes along as well with his own entourage, that the united front will inspire Azazel to stop prevaricating. If he won't listen to us, then things could get... messy."

Falbium cursed beneath his breath, running a hand over the shaved surface of his skull. "The fuck are the Grigori doing? Letting Kokabiel run wild in the human world – do they want another war?"

"We could take care of it ourselves." Ajuka murmured into the worried silence. "We could put that mad dog down if Azazel can't be bothered to put a leash on him. Even if we were discovered, I'm sure Michael would back us. The diplomatic repercussions would be serious, but not even the stupidest warmonger in the Grigori is going to declare war on both us and Heaven."

Sirzechs actually considered it for a moment. What was a single life compared to the continuation of peace? Kokabiel was clinging to the old ways, and would continue to be a thorn in the side of any treaty effort. And if needed for the peace, Ajuka was right – the Archangel would back them.

Contrary to human expectation, the angels and the devils had a better relationship than either had with the fallen angels. The fallen angels represented the threat of corruption to the former and a competitor for resources to the latter.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Sirzechs sighed in frustration. "It's an option. We need to rely on diplomacy first, otherwise we could end up in a cold war with the fallen angels. There's also the possibility that they might take revenge by leaking the thing to other factions."

'The thing' was such a quaint name for the horrifying truth: that the God of the Bible was dead and their three peoples were near to the edge of extinction.
"Are the Grigori that crazy?" Serafall worried her lip. "It wouldn't be any better for them than it would be for us."

"Never underestimate how far a man will go for revenge." Ajuka interjected drily, threading his fingers in his lap. "If pushed to it, yes, I could see the Grigori spilling the beans. They're the weakest faction, and against a union of hell and heaven they'd be facing swift annihilation otherwise."

Falbium eyed the clock with a vague expression of impatience. Despite being a Satan, he had a temperament ill suited to the long boring hours required for effective governing. "So we're agreed then? Diplomacy first."

"Diplomacy first." The Crimson Satan agreed, favouring his friends with a reassuring smile. "I'll speak to Michael. Things are not lost yet."

"Get out! Get out, get out and stay out!" Ravel Phenex shrieked, calling up fireball after fireball and aiming for Leo Purson's back. The twelve year old boy squealed as he fled the force of her fury, the bald patch she'd seared into the back of his head throbbing red.

Panting as yet another would-be suitor got out of her hair, the blonde girl swiped at her forehead with the back of her hand. "Idiots, the lot of them." Ravel grumbled, straightening the pink folds of her dress before turning back to her books.

On the one hand, Ravel couldn't say she was surprised she had so many suitors. She was the only granddaughter of the Marquis Phenex, and her clan was the only one that could produce the fabled Phoenix tears. Selling the cure for almost any wound or severed limb in a bottle had a way of lining their pockets with gold.

But was it too much to ask that any of the dozens of noble devil boys sent to try and win her heart when she was still young have something in their veins? They were all the same. Boring, stuffy, and average in any way that mattered. Ravel deserved better than a trail of suitors so forgettable she eventually was reduced to remembering them as 'the brunette one' or 'the one who wore makeup'.

The eight year old genius gave a final huff, tugging at one of her drill shaped pigtails before cracking open the nearest book. 'Imbuement is the art of infusing magical energy into an already extant object. It is short lived and thus has few applications beyond combat, however...'

"Another one bites the dust, hmm?"

Riser Phenex strode into the small library, smirking roguishly as his younger sister instantly set aside the tome she'd just opened. The blonde girl might enjoy studying, but she adored her older brother. The playboy was the only one in their family that really understood her, letting her try out spells that her parents would fret were too complex for a girl her age.

"Of course." Ravel turned her nose up, folding her arms over her chest. "What did momma and poppa expect? He was exactly like the one who wore gloves, always talking about money. He's lucky I didn't do worse."

Running a hand through his blond straw, Riser chuckled and pulled out a cigarette. Lighting the human cancer stick with a flash of fire from his fingertip, Riser took a long drag. "By the time you're twenty you're going to have a mile long list of brats you put the boot to. We're just lucky the Purson kid was from a branch of the family rather than in the main house, otherwise we'd have to listen to some bitching for a few days."

Ravel wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, I guess. I still remember how they wouldn't stop harping on for a
"I don't know how you expect people to believe that your greatest dream is to fall in love. I'm thinking you're less love kitten and more black widow." Riser teased lightly, blowing a ring of smoke at his younger sister. Though they were both devils and thus immune to the toxins that would harm humans, it still annoyed the hell out of Ravel.

"That's a disgusting habit."

"Nah, the girls love it."

"Sure they do, you turkey."

Isaiah howled. Generally the ten year old bit down on the pain to not give that sadistic bastard Valper the satisfaction of hearing him scream. But sometimes the agony got to him, and it obliterated every thought behind his grey eyes that wasn't related to his suffering. Liquefied light element clouded the IV solution suspended over him, dripping through a plastic tube and through a needle to sear through the blond's veins.

"Fucking Galilei!" the boy roared, thrashing against his restraints as the grey haired sadist chuckled. The 'priest' seemed to get off on causing pain to all the Church orphans that had been placed under his tender 'care', and never made any effort to reduce their suffering even when he could do so without impacting the experiment. That cruelty was what had gotten him named the Archbishop of Genocide, and what had driven the Church to excommunicate him and cut him off from their support.

Unfortunately for the captive children, there were many factions in the world that were able and willing to pay Valper to play around with their insides in exchange for his discoveries.

If Isaiah had to guess based on the savannah he managed to catch rare glimpses of, the latest laboratory they'd been shifted to was somewhere in Africa. Every few months, Galilei drugged them all and moved his experiment to a new country. The Holy Sword Project had become so gruesome and inhumane that the various Churches moved to shut it down by force when they caught wind of it, but the fat bastard was always one step ahead, and it was getting easier to move every time one of the children died under the scalpel. Valper had less 'chattel' to move.


There were so many names and faces that Isaiah had met ever since Galilei had made him a prisoner. Names of fellow orphans and kidnapped children that died horrifically before being distilled into more light element. Every human had a tiny bit of it inside them, but only a few could tolerate higher levels of the substance in their bodies, and even fewer naturally had high levels of light element inside of them. Isaiah had originally had very little of it, but he tolerated the infusions better than a lot of the other kids.

The less fortunate kids just ended up recycled.

He wondered if it had something to do with his Sacred Gear that Galilei had tortured into showing itself. Sword Birth was at the opposite end of the spectrum, creating demonic swords out of Isaiah's pure energy rather than holy swords. But the excommunicated priest theorized if he was compatible with demonic sword creation that Isaiah could be artificially prepared to wield holy swords.

Fuck the Holy Swords. Fuck the project. Fuck Galilei and fuck dying. Isaiah didn't care how long it took. One day he was going to escape from the experiment. Isaiah wasn't going to die in the dark,
another unwilling contributor to Galilei's personal amusement. He would survive.

And one day, he would have revenge.

Rias knew she was being childish.

Carefully pruning her rose bushes was technically servant's work, but technically Rias didn't really give a damn. It gave her an excuse to keep her hands busy and not look at her hovering nephew. The boy had given her a few days of space before hopping on over for a visit, and she couldn't fuss about it since she had said her family could stop by Starling Hall whenever they wanted. Naruto was still family, and she wasn't petty enough to try and ban him from the estate.

Just petty enough to avoid eye contact and give him a touch of the cold shoulder.

"You've got a lot of different coloured ones. I thought the blue ones didn't actually exist?" Naruto questioned awkwardly, folding his hands behind his back and examining the bright blue roses with too much interest to be genuine. "Or did you just magic them to look like that?"

"Yes and no." Rias smiled politely, snipping at a few dead stems with a pair of clippers. "You're correct in that this colour doesn't appear in nature. Typically in the human world, if you wanted blue roses you would dye them after collecting your bouquet. However, some humans are in the process of genetically modifying rose plants to show this colour without needing dye. With magic, we've already managed to complete that process."

"Hmm." Naruto reached out to run a thumb over one of the sky blue petals. "It's the same with the black plants I guess."

"Exactly. Though the process of engineering black roses was actually slightly easier than the blue ones."

Snorting, Naruto swept a gaze over the rest of the garden. "The more you know." It was a rather dizzying combination of colours that proceeded all across the rainbow. In fact, there even were a few rainbow rose plants scattered about. "I'm pretty sure you can't get all the colors in one though, even with gene splicing."

"They are white rose plants that are enchanted to soak up dye. They don't live for long."

"I see."

The stilted conversation trailed off, leaving unpleasant silence in its wake. Rias was content to let it stretch on. The gap between them had been slowly growing over the years, hollowing out beneath a film of normalcy. The duel had only torn through the veneer, letting all the underlying rot come to light.

Naruto was better than her.

So much better that looking back she could see the calculation in his movements. When they'd fought, it wasn't a struggle of near equals. He had in some nebulous way outclassed her, reducing it to a subtle lesson from one superior to one significantly inferior. Despite his youth, Naruto was better. He'd always been.

It cut the Ruin Princess to the core.

If Naruto had always been better than her, than he was always going to end up as heir to their family.
And if Naruto was always going to be the heir, then Rias was never going to be.

If she was never going to succeed the clan, for what reason did she exist? Was she born simply because her parents frequently had intercourse; nothing more than a symbol of 'love'? Was Rias' entire existence merely reduced to being a reflection of the actions of those around her? A child born simply 'because', to provide a convenient backdrop for Naruto's greatness, and then to fade away in the shadow reduced to a convenient political prop-slash-broodmare?

Every strand of Rias' being revolted against the idea. She was more than a background piece. She was a person that was not solely defined by circumstances. Being the sister of a Satan had nothing to do with the way she wore glasses when she read to improve concentration. Her parents had nothing to do with her fascination with East Asian culture. Her nephew had nothing to do with how Rias enjoyed playing in the snow.

Rias wondered if that was why she attached so much meaning to being the heiress and one day becoming the Duchess Gremory. Perhaps it had less to do with pride and more to do with utility. If she couldn't escape the clan, she would simply subsume it instead and become the greatest part of the whole. It was certainly an easier road to being valued for more than merely existing. It wasn't exactly easy to find a lover in Gehenna who didn't give a flying hoot what the context that had created her was.

Or maybe she was just that arrogant.

"Dad's inviting some of the Belial clan over for a 'private' dinner in a few days. You know, the whole rubbing shoulders 'we're not friends but we'll pretend we're the bestest buds' sort of thing." Naruto's voice cut through her musing, changing the direction of her thoughts.

To say the Belial clan were not friends was true, but it implied more animosity and false amity than there was. Diehauser Belial was similar to Sairaorg, despite being much older and much more powerful. He had a sense of chivalry that made her parents well disposed towards him. If he had children, they would be higher than most on the list of potential spouses for the clan heir.

Which had nothing to do with her, since Rias no longer had that position.

A placid smile crossed her face as she moved to another rose bush to continue her gardening. "I see. I'll hope that everything goes just as planned for them then."

She could just imagine the way her nephew was bashfully scratching the back of his head. "Mom and Dad said you don't have to come or anything since it's more of a Satan Lucifer thing than anything to do with the Gremory clan, but they'd like it if you would come."

"I'm sorry, but I have prior plans." Rias lied through her teeth, cupping a handful of green leaves to examine their health. "I have already arranged an outing with Sona." Her friend was a pretty convenient excuse for backing out of things she didn't want to do. Years ago they'd come to the agreement to provide alibis for each other, so even if Naruto asked about it Sona would confirm they would be spending the evening together.

The hiss that escaped Naruto's mouth was annoyed, the redhead finally moving past his niggling of guilt in favour of irritation. He knew she was lying, even if he couldn't outright prove it, and her avoiding him and their family was starting to get on his nerves. Naruto generally didn't do delicate, and his response to disappointment was to get back up and try over and over again until he succeeded.

Rias’ bowing out and hiding struck him as weak.
"So that's how things are going to play out huh?"

For the first time since he'd walked into her garden, Rias paused.

Then she straightened, foliage slipping through her fingers as she set her clippers down into an empty clay pot. When she turned to look down at the shorter redhead, her brows were drawn into an artful expression of befuddlement. "Pardon? If you mean that I'll be spending the evening with Sona, then yes. Otherwise, I'm confused about what you're referring to."

Naruto threw his hands up, making a rough encompassing gesture as he frowned irritably. "I mean this. The whole ice princess thing you have going on." He could see the way frigidity was slowly working across Rias' face, but he was too invested to stop halfway. "Like, I understand that you're mad. I'd be too. No one likes to lose. But it's not that big a deal, hellfire and ashes! I'll fight you any time if you want to keep training to win. I'll even help you train if you want. So can we just skip the whole dramatic silences and go back to how things used to be?"

'How things used to be'. Rias almost felt like laughing. How did things used to be? Because what Rias remembered was happiness that slowly dimmed, consumed by being shunted to the side over the years in everyone's opinions. Her father was available less often to train her personally in sorcery, though she managed to catch glimpses of him mussing Naruto's hair after teaching the boy a tricky bit of magic. Her brother had less and less time to discuss politics or history with her, though he was always available for his son. Grayfia had always been on the peripheral to begin with, consumed with her self-appointed maid duties.

The only ones who really had the time for her had been her mother - who didn't like battle or politics in the first place - and her nephew that had been slowly outshining her like the sun outshone the moon.

But she refused to show any of that poison on her face, because the fault wasn't really with Naruto for being strong. It was with Rias for being too weak to be worth anything to her own family.

Value in Gehenna always came down to power anyway.

Rias lifted an eyebrow. "I don't really know what you're talking about."

"Sure, whatever you say Rias."
Smiling faintly at the slow moving current of the small stream that cut through Starling Hall's estate, Koneko plopped down on the river bank and peeled her shoes off. The water was pleasantly cool when the white haired nekomata slid her feet into the water, and closing her eyes Koneko drew in a slow inhale.

She'd originally started coming down to the river just to enjoy the peace and quiet. Koneko struggled with Rias' emotions, and she didn't really understand how she was supposed to help her mistress.

Ever since Kuroka had murdered their entire household, she'd adopted a policy of 'live and let live'. The locus of control in her existence wasn't in her hands, so the only thing Koneko would ever be able to do was stay still and bear whatever life threw at her. The concept of being able to choose what to do was alien.

Koneko couldn't help Rias when it came to deciding whether to try and build bridges with her family or seek comfort in isolation. While her mistress wasn't truly free, given that she was imprisoned by the expectations of her position, she had an order of magnitude more liberty than Koneko. If it was the nekomata, she couldn't solve her issues by running away or choosing to stay. Others made the choice in how they'd interact with her, and Koneko simply had to accept it.

A small part of her wondered if she was really content with that.

There was a certain freedom of its own in giving up control. By giving up her choices, Koneko was freed of so much uncertainty and conflict about the future. It ceased to be her concern save in the vaguest sense, and she was able to live totally in the present. Yet that comfort hadn't prevented her from choosing the river and the smell of nature.

The deep earthy scent of soil mingled with the fragrance of flowers and just the faintest tang of fish swimming downstream. As a nekomata, Koneko had sharper senses than other devils, who in turn had better sense than humans. Her nose didn't simply filter clues about her surroundings in, it painted a world when she let it.

Her ability to take in everything as part of a greater symphony was probably why she was so rattled by the sudden metallic smell of blood and the reek of old sweat.

Gold orbs shot open and swiveled upstream in search of the disturbance.

The bend in the river prevented her from immediately witnessing the source, but soon enough a dark blob rounded the curve and continued to float down the current towards her. Hazy lines quickly sharpened, and the nekomata found herself raising one snowy brow in curiosity.

Bobbing along was a teenager perched on top of a mossy log. The dark haired boy was unconscious, arms and legs dragging freely in the cool stream while his cheek pressed against the wet wood. He'd be devastatingly handsome, if not for the stringy filth of his hair and the way that starvation had hollowed him to skin and bone.

"Wake up." she ordered as the stranger drew near, prompting a flicker of unconscious eyelids and a groan. The young man failed to rise though, and eventually drifted right past the ten year old.

Unwillingly, her heart lurched.

She didn't know what to do.

Chapter 6
There was no one to tell her what she should do. On the one hand, Koneko could simply ignore him. Whatever unfortunate circumstances that had sent him bobbing on past were ultimately not her concern. Live and let live. On the other hand, she could pull him out of the river. It would be a conscious choice to assume some measure of control and give up that peace that came with surrender.

It truly wasn't any of her business.

But one day a few years ago a family of kind redheads had saved her from execution when they didn't have to.

Cursing under her breath, Koneko whipped out her pair of leathery bat wings and threw herself into the air.

Sasuke woke with a gasp, eyes rolling frantically to take in the surroundings. White sheets, gold inlaid lamps, a vast empty fireplace, pale blue ceramic floor tile, and huge windows that let in the artificial sunlight of the Underworld.

Cycling steady breaths to calm his racing pulse, the Uchiha slipped a cautious hand into the cool blue robes that had been wrapped around him. There was only the unmarked skin of his abdomen; wiry half-starved muscles absent wounds or scarring. "Alive." Sasuke breathed in a wondering tone.

_Do you want to live?_

"Ophis."

Casting another considering look about the bedroom, the Uchiha weighed the tasteful opulence. Obviously wealthy, but without the gaudy preferences of the nouveau rich. Had she pulled him off the battlefield and healed him then?

Sasuke tossed the blankets to the side and clambered out of bed. Ignoring the cool sensation of the tiles on his bare feet, the devil tightened the ties of his robe before crossing the room and peeking his head out into the hallway.

If he thought 'wealthy' had adequately described the room he had just left, Sasuke was wrong. The hallway seemed to stretch on endlessly in both directions. Plush crimson carpet lined the floor and the walls were covered with paintings and shelves holding jeweled vases. The display of lavishness was broken only by doors every ten meters or so, marked by crystal chandeliers hanging overhead.

"Ridiculous." He muttered before picking the rightwards corridor and striding down it. Twenty pairs of doors passed by quickly with no end in sight. The only notable change being the different paintings he'd passed. At least the owner of the manse had enough sense to not buy repetitive mass produced decoration.

Should he return to the sickroom he'd woken up in? Should he keep walking and hope that the corridor ended soon? Should he just begin trying doors at random?

Settling his hands in his pockets, Sasuke sighed before returning the way he'd come. Bursting into rooms arbitrarily seemed like the kind of foolishness Naruto would have done. As for just wandering the halls – Sasuke would probably come to a wall or a staircase eventually, but then what? Just try to escape and run through the wildness clad in nothing but a breezy housecoat?

It seemed like a ridiculous flight of fancy, especially if the manor belonged to Ophis and she'd decided to take a more vested interest in his welfare. Which itself was almost absurd. He hadn't seen
the little girl in two years. Sasuke had assumed she'd simply grown bored of lurking around him, but if she'd saved his life that rather implied she was stalking him without actually interacting with him.

The Uchiha wasn't sure which prospect disturbed him more. Ophis the stalker or some unknown benefactor with unknown motives.

"You're awake." Greeted him as Sasuke re-crossed the threshold into 'his' room. Waiting patiently by the bed was a child that couldn't be more than ten years old. The white-haired girl blinked her hazel orbs, folding petite hands behind her back. Combined with the crisp three-piece suit adorning her, the girl looked like some form of absurd prepubescent butler.

But then again, appearance did not always match true age in a devil. As far as Sasuke knew, she might actually be a three-century old maidservant for some perverse lolicon ultimate class devil... which wasn't a topic Sasuke wanted to dwell on too deeply.

"Who are you?" The Uchiha belted out, discreetly centering his balance and clearing all emotion from his face to project strength. The manse might yet be Ophis' home, but Sasuke felt like the gothic lolita would have greeted him herself. And if the home wasn't Ophis', there was no saying whose or what's hands he'd ended up in.

Given the way the white-haired girl eyed his feet, Sasuke hadn't been discrete enough. The girl coolly weighed his question before deciding that it did no harm to answer it. "Toujou Koneko."

Padding back across the room, Koneko peered up at Sasuke's face for a moment. "Follow." Then she pushed passed him, turning left without a backward glance.

A faint frown of a thought creased Sasuke's brows, but quickly moved aside in favor of cultivated apathy.

Trailing a meter behind the girl, the Uchiha kept wary eyes on both Koneko and the surrounding walls. Their journey passed in silence, both not given to idle chatter.

It turned out the left corridor was far shorter than the right, twisting a corner after fifteen pairs of doors and revealing another scattering of rooms along with a spiraling marble staircase.

Koneko led Sasuke up two floors, the tail of her blood red tie swaying as the pair twisted up and around to come face to face with a great pair of double doors. Pausing with a hand on the door handle, the white-haired girl warned Sasuke to "Be polite." before ushering him inside.

Stepping through the cherry frame, Sasuke was instantly assaulted by a kaleidoscope of color and light. The ceiling was domed, glittering with the glow of a thousand individually covered stars. A mingling rainbow faintly reflected back off the shining black marble of the floor and walls.

Combined with the absolute absence of any kind of furniture or decoration, it was almost like stepping into a cradle of infinity.

The only disturbance in the simulated void was a fluffy bearskin spread out on the floor slightly off center. Spread-eagled haphazardly on it and staring absently at the constructed stars in thought was a crimson haired princess. It was the only way the Uchiha could describe her.

Turquoise eyes perched under sculpted blood red eyebrows, gleaming faintly in a face made up of pale planes and gentle slopes that would make a sculptor weep. The verdant silk of her dress swept over her shoulders, crossing the generous curves of her breasts and the fertile swell of her hips before settling just above the knees. Peeking out of the ruffling edge of her dress were two knee-sock clad calves, and the only ornament on her form was a single ruby crowned in a sun of gold that nestled...
just below the collarbone.

Sasuke supposed the inhuman beauty was part of a devil's charms when it came to bargaining with humans. The girl looked just as he would have pictured a fairy queen if asked to. She was the vision of an innocent unspoiled Titania.

Feeling absurdly underdressed in a pair of plain blue-grey pajama bottoms and a robe, Sasuke nonetheless carefully moved towards the girl and settled cross-legged on the very edge of the bearskin rug. Silence hung in the air between them, tense wariness on his part and musing thought on hers.

"Do you like my Star Chamber?"

Her voice cut through the air, blue-green regard refocusing away from the abyss of the ceiling to peer through the messy locks of her red bangs at him. Seeming content to wait on his answer, the crimson haired girl watched Sasuke with a heavy gaze until he nodded with affirmation.

The heavy gaze grew even weightier, and Sasuke wondered if he'd failed some test. But the only thing he could do was meet her eyes with a coal dark stare of his own. Some instinct warned him that trying to bullhead through things like Naruto would be – not dangerous perhaps - but very ill received.

"What do you think of it?"

"The Star Chamber?" Sasuke clarified, craning back slightly to catch the edge of the domed ceiling in his field of view.

"Yes."

Savagely repressing the urge to scoff, the Uchiha forced himself to consider the question. Was he supposed to answer honestly? Was he supposed to try and please her? But how could he? A few short minutes in company without introduction was hardly enough to accurately guess her preferences. Unless it was a trap?

There was nothing for it but to answer honestly, Sasuke supposed. If they were going to kill him off for the arbitrary answer to some pseudo-philosophical question, it wasn't like he had the power to stop them.

You are weak.

Enough.

"Solitude. It reminds me of walking through this world's darkness… and that so long as you don't shut your eyes, even the tiniest ray of light will reach you."

"I see." Airy tones reached Sasuke's ears as she rolled onto her side and propped her head on her arm to better consider him.

"Did you know I've asked that question many times ever since I saw this room? I've asked my parents. I've asked my brother, my nephew, my servants, and my friends. Every time, they've given me platitudes. 'It's beautiful'. 'It reminds me of the pure night sky'. 'It's like a shower of fireworks'. Every time, I get answers like those. You're the first person to suggest a different type of perception. Something beyond the obvious and the material."

"I see." Sasuke muttered in reply, slightly unnerved by the sharp intensity of her regard. Switching
topics, the Uchiha tugged at the collar of his robe and fired the question that had been niggling him since he woke up. "How did I get here?"

The girl offered a wordless hum of acknowledgement before shrugging one shoulder. "Who could say? You washed up on the river dividing my estate. Koneko-chan found you, so we took you in. Beyond that, you know more than I do."

So, she knew just a little as Sasuke did. Damn. The shift from bleeding out in a forest to sleeping in a luxury suite was just a great black emptiness. The only clue was Ophis' voice in his ears as Sasuke bled everywhere, but even that might be a fever dream.

_Do you want power?_

The Uchiha was pulled out of his thoughts be a soft poke at his knee. "Well if you don't know, I don't know. But what I do know is that I want to know who you are, stranger."

"Uchiha Sasuke." He grunted, watching a thoughtful look cross her face as the girl touched a graceful finger to her full pink lips.


Denying her instantly, Sasuke glared "I have no master."

Which was probably a poor response given how the friendly light slipped right off her face and the muscles of her arms tensed. "Are you telling me you're a stray devil, Uchiha Sasuke-san?" A red spark flared into existence before swiftly extinguishing. There was nothing overt, but the threat was clear.

Cold sweat broke out across Sasuke's back. "No." Sasuke rushed to deny, squashing back the sudden lurch of his pulse. "I've never had a master. I was just born in this underworld one day, and I've survived."

"I see." The girl mused, all hints of violence fleeing her taut form as she flopped to her back. Stray devils were those who had abandoned their masters after swearing loyalty and accepting Evil Pieces to join a peerage. Gehenna in general expected devils to at least adhere to the letter of their agreement, but the real concern with stray devils came from them running wild with the enchanted chess pieces still inside of them. It was a threat to the social order.

While most devils, even those of the lowest classes, had masters because of the feudal nature of their society and the bona-fide servitude of the peasantry, it wasn't unheard of for the odd devil to slip through the cracks. There was no technical _law_ against moving from one clan's territory to another, so long as the devil in question accepted the rulings of the governing family, upheld their duty to them by paying taxes, and supported them during times of crisis. The crimson haired girl likely assumed Sasuke was just another vagabond.

"And you?"

"Hmm?"

With a rush of irritation at her wandering attention, Sasuke clarified. "Who are you?"

"Rias Gremory."

Rias _Gremory._
Moistening his suddenly dry lips, Sasuke swallowed. "Rias Gremory of the Gremory family? The Gremory family of the 72 Pillars?"

The expression of annoyance the crossed Rias' features passed so quickly Sasuke half wondered if he imagined it. But he didn't imagine the peeved hum of confirmation.

Shit.

Shit.

Sasuke had spent the last decade in almost complete isolation. Thieving and relying on Ophis' alms for survival, the only person the Uchiha had truly spoken with more than a couple of random times was the lolita, and after she'd vanished two years past he'd been basically a hermit.

Despite all that, Sasuke was aware of the 33 clans that remained of the original 72 Pillars.

Gremory, just like Stolas or Astaroth or Bael was a name of power. A clan of such absurd blue blood and wealth that it would make any human king green with envy. The entire government of Gehenna only functioned by the leave of those 33 clans, to the mingled bitterness and awe of commoner devils. They also elicited disgust from the Extra Demons that had sided with the Old Satan Faction in the civil war and been excluded from government after peace was made.

For the second time since being born into his second life, Sasuke was acutely aware of his own fragile mortality. The girl sprawled before him could obliterate the Uchiha with a single order, assuming Rias didn't just do it herself with the barely hidden vast well of magical power Sasuke could feel skirting on the edge of his senses.

"I see." Sasuke offered for lack of a better comment. Well, if he was about to die, at least he would die comfortable. Loosening the belt of his borrowed robe for breathability, Sasuke twisted and flopped down on his back. The fur of the bearskin rug cradled his head even as the lower half of his body stretched out over the cool black marble.

Magnificent artificial stars weren't what Sasuke would have chosen for the last thing to see in his life, but there were worse visions.

Suffocating silence gave way to a more amicable quiet as the minutes ticked by without Sasuke getting blown to pieces or threatened into some form of servitude. The Gremory princess didn't even offer to pay him to do some form of dirty work. It kind of violated his expectations of hedonistic nobility.

It was almost nice. The stillness was companionable enough. No pointless chatter filled the air. There was only the soft sound of breathing as the two young devils weighed their own thoughts. If not for the exaggerated fear of death and need for survival engendered by his recent fight, Sasuke would admit he even enjoyed it.

"Do you have any friends, Uchiha Sasuke-san?"

Sasuke barely had to think about it. Kakashi, Sakura, Team Taka – they weren't friends really. They were friendly allies, but Sasuke had never considered the former three his confidants. And Ophis - if she'd truly saved his life, she didn't consider it worth enough to stay around until he woke up.

Someone like that wasn't someone Sasuke would easily label with the coveted title of friend. Naruto was his friend though, his brother even; and the Uchiha opened his mouth to answer affirmatively.

But Naruto was living his life in the other world.
Whatever fucked up process it was that summoned Sasuke to a new life and a new body, he was alone. There were no friendships this side of the void, and his jaw clicked shut.

"No. Not anymore."

Blinking back the faint hot sting in the corners of his eyes, Sasuke glared determinedly at the ceiling. It didn't matter. He'd survived almost his entire life without relying on bonds with others. Even when he acknowledged those bonds, they were so distant that they had no impact on his life most of the time.

"That sounds lonely, Uchiha Sasuke."

"It sounds like none of your business, Rias Gremory." He bit out with instinctive defensive rudeness, only to tense up once more.

Sasuke's nervousness was unfounded, as the blueblood devil only huffed a laugh at the Uchiha's snark. Cloth and fur rustled as Rias rolled onto her stomach, shimmying across the rug until she hovered within arm's reach of the dark-haired devil.

Tracing an errant hand boldly across the weaker devil's face, Rias paused with her pale hand cupped the curve of Sasuke's jaw. "Solitude." The Ruin Princess pondered absently, brushing a thumb over the Uchiha's slightly open mouth and ignoring the reluctant enthralment in his dark eyes. "Are you lost in darkness, Uchiha Sasuke?"

Sea-green eyes grew hot and intent as Rias brought her other hand forward. There was a certain desperate brittleness in her gaze that made all of Sasuke's instincts scream in suspicion, but he was too absorbed already.

Cradled within her elegant fingertips was a clear crystal chess piece. The Pawn began to glow with crimson light, dominating over the soft rainbow that was twinkling away in the midnight dome.

"Shall I show you a light?"

"Hey gramps."

Zeoticus gave a lazy wave at his grandson’s greeting, flipping to the next page of Prince Sitri's proposed legislation. He could see Serafall's hand in it as clear as day. The Satans were not as subtle as they thought they were.

In principle, the Duke didn't really oppose the idea of a central army. He'd lived long enough to see human civilizations rise and fall, and knew that centralization was an essential part of the formation of the nation-state. If Gehenna was going to become a unified country rather than a confederation of practically independent clan fiefdoms, power would have to be yielded to the Diabolical Senate.

Yet Zeoticus was wary. As inefficient as the Senate was, since any motion in it depended on clan alliances and every legislator except the four Satans inherited their position by right of blood, was it worse than the alternative? The entire reason Sheol had proceeded from an absolute monarchy under the Great King Bael to a junta dictatorship under the Old Satans, and then the loose collection of clan warlords it was at the present was because revolutions against the previous abuses of authority.

A lot of blood had been spilled because the Great King or the Satans had hungered for more power and more glory. Would giving more power to the Senate bring back those dark days? Or would it finally move Gehenna along the road to a more efficient and more stable form of government?
Huffing a sigh, Zeoticus beckoned Naruto over and shoved the thin booklet into his hands. "What do you think, kiddo?" His grandson was a bit of a genius oddball, and while the Duke would make the final decision, maybe he could turn the whole thing into an intellectual exercise with his heir.

Naruto gave his grandfather an odd look, but did as he was asked and began to skim over the pages. "I don't really get it. What's the problem?" The ten year old prodded. If his grandfather was so deep in thought about it, maybe there was something Naruto wasn't seeing. But other than that, he kind of supported the whole idea. It reminded him of the Allied Shinobi Forces, minus the whole 'Madara is going to destroy everything' vibe. "Do you just not want to give up your own power or something?"

The question might offend other more high strung nobles, but Zeoticus was much more mild.

Ignoring the thoughtless implication that it might just be lust for power, the Duke tugged the proposed law out of Naruto's hands and tossed it on the desk. "The question isn't really about personal power, since the Prince isn't suggesting the clans need to abolish their own armies. There is an increase in taxes of course, which might affect the more greedy, but every clan could offset that by cutting their military spending or trimming back on conspicuous consumption."

"Well it's not like we're hurting for cash or anything." Naruto shrugged, blue eyes growing a touch impatient. As interesting as the impromptu lesson was, he had other reasons for bothering his grandfather. "So if the reason you're questioning it isn't because you don't want to reduce your own power or wealth, it must be because you don't want to give more authority or money to the Senate."

Smiling slowly, Zeoticus propped his chin in his hand and ran a thumb over the scruff of his stubble. "You're getting there. Finish the thought."

"But if it was that simple, you would just vote against it?"

"Go on."

Naruto's brow furrowed, the ten year old deep in thought as he struggled to see it from his grandfather's point of view. "I got nothin'. Y'all like to call me a genius, but I'm no mind reader."

Ruffling the boy's hair, Zeoticus gave a wink. "Are you sure? Take a guess. What am I thinking of right now?"

"Breasts."

"How did you know?"

"Well you are the harem king." Naruto grunted, hoisting himself up on the desk and glaring down at his grandfather. "But enough bullshitting, just tell me already so we can move on."

A crimson brow slowly inched up as Zeoticus stared at the impudent ten year old. "Careful brat, I might tell your mother about how you talk to me. I'm starting to think you like the taste of soap, given how much you seem to go looking for excuses to have her wash your mouth out."

"Aww, come on gramps, it's all in good fun. If you can't handle the banter just tell me. You don't have to go crying to mom about it."

"Touche. To get to the point - yes, there are benefits to voting for and against. When your tutors begin to discuss more modern parts of history and politics, you'll learn that centralizing authority is part of stabilizing a country and making ruling it more efficient. But centralization also makes rebelling against corrupt authority more difficult, and I think that Gehenna has seen enough rule by power hungry dictators. Preserving local rule and clan power make it much harder for a small cabal
to drag the whole realm into another war."

Naruto chewed the inside of his cheek and ran an absent thumb over the collar of his white button up shirt. "Fair enough. Maybe what you should do is vote against this, but suggest something else instead that makes the government more efficient without giving it power? What does it need an army for anyway? If some clan rebelled, you'd all dogpile it, and if someone invaded, you'd all dogpile him."

Zeoticus reached up and gave his grandson's nose a rough tweak. "Are you sure you're not a mind reader? That was my exact train of thought. There are better avenues to pursue than the military one. Why not propose a law that limits what sort of laws clans can make locally, or one that requires an equality in criminal justice? But if the end goal is to abolish clan armies down the line and replace them with one controlled by the central state, then this would be a good place to start."

"Dude, stop, you're making my head hurt. I didn't come here for a lecture."

A fond chuckle bubbled up from Zeoticus' chest. "If you say so, Naru-chan. I believe you had something to ask me?"

"I'm not a 'chan'." The Heir to the Gremory clan grumbled before giving a long sigh. "I just - how do I fix this whole 'I hate you' thing Rias has going on right now? Because let me tell you, it's getting pretty old pretty quick. Used to be that I had a partner in crime when it came to putting fish in dad's pillowcases. Now she won't even talk to me without being a hundred different kinds of awkward."

A mixture of nostalgia and pain lit up Zeoticus' mind. At the end of the day, such childhood conflicts were eventually forgotten. Something that would seem like the end of the world when one was a child became an amusing memory decades later.

The Duke had no doubt that Rias' tiff with Naruto over being ousted as heir presumptive seemed like the end of the world for his daughter, yet deep down Rias didn't want to truly lead the clan in the first place. It had been just a convenient distraction for the girl, since it was easier to seek power than love in Gehenna. Devils were often lost to their lusts, making the explicitly romantic love Rias wanted very difficult to find.

His daughter hadn't clued in yet that the validating love she wanted she already got from her friends. Which wasn't unusual as far as Zeoticus was concerned. The young seemed to think that romance was the be all and end all of love.

He blamed Hollywood.

It wasn't in his nature to spill all those revelations to Naruto, since they were Rias' feelings and not his to share. However, no parent liked to see their child in pain. Or their grandchild for that matter.

So Zeoticus decided to throw Naruto a bone rather than let them flounder through their adolescent conflict. "Just keep trying." the redhaired man advised, carefully weighing his words. He wanted to send Naruto down the right path without giving up too many of Rias' personal thoughts. "Rias does love you, even if she's jealous right now."

"Well I told her that if she wanted I'd help her train and give her a duel any time."

Zeoticus winced at his grandson's fumble. "That... wasn't a smart choice. If I can be honest, you came across as a pretty big arrogant asshole there. And your 'power' isn't what Rias is really jealous about in the first place."

"Well then what the hell is it?"
"Your mother is going to skin us alive. You, me, and your father. We'll be three flayed men in a row." Zeoticus lamented, pinching the bridge of his nose at his grandson's reflexive dirty mouth. "What Rias is jealous of is less your power and more your assurance. Compared to her, you've always had a purpose in your life. You've always seemed to know what you want, regardless of other people's opinions. However, in Gehenna a devil is valued less by who they are and more by what they're achieve. Despite my best efforts, she's internalized that view, but she rejects it too. It's created a bit of an odd situation where she values herself based on what she can do but wants to be valued by other people based on who she is."

Naruto mulled that over. "Sounds psychotic." he muttered, yelping when his grandfather gave him a smack around the head.

"Don't be a little smart ass." his grandfather warned, giving of an air of amused long-suffering. "I know it'll probably be hard. Brats have a way of holding grudges forever. I wasn't any better when I was your age. But I know that you'll manage to patch things up eventually. Just accept her overtures when she makes them, and don't push around too hard. Rias will have to figure out her purpose on her own. Considering you were the one that pulled the rug out from under her, any attempt you make to help is just going to have her clam right up."

"I get it, I get it. Jeez. Any other advice, oh wise and powerful sage of family relationships?"

"When it's that time of the month for a woman, either do your best to appease her or get the hell out of there."

"...I knew that already ya geezer!"
Chapter 7

Naruto rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with a long-suffering sigh. It was too damn early to be getting out of bed on a weekend. Anything before noon just killed the redheaded devil boy. "This is some bullshit." He groused, rolling up the sleeves of his white button-up shirt and summoning a blazing crimson teleportation circle.

"Why's she gotta pick up even more pet projects on a Saturday?"

Sinking into the glowing runic designs, Naruto dissolved with a shower of sparks and reassembled near instantaneously in a gold gilded foyer.

Deep blue eyes tiredly scanned the empty room, and he gave another dejected moan. "Can't even be here to greet me? She's so mean…" Despite his complaining, Naruto was actually a little glad he'd been dragged out of his bed. He hadn't expected Rias to give him a call and invite him over, but the redhead wasn't going to refuse.

If a sudden invite out of the blue was her reaching out past her envy, he'd take it. Naruto just wanted things to go back to normal already. His mind was thirty years old. He'd long ago passed his tolerance point for adolescent drama.

"Naruto-sama."

"Ah, I didn't see you there, Koneko-chan."

An irritated tick disturbed one of the nekomata's snowy brows. The face she gave the Gremory heir was distinctly unimpressed as Naruto twisted to offer a sunny smile, her mouth drawn in a bland line.

"You're so small, sometimes I can't help but miss seein' ya, ya know?"

"I resent that coming from you."

"Eh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come." Koneko sighed, straightening the cuff of her butler uniform before leading the way deeper into the manse.

"Was it something I said?" Making a face at the cold shoulder vibes he was getting, Naruto fell into step behind his aunt-slash-psuedosister's Rook. Empty halls yawned lifelessly as they moved about the Baroque style manse, pristine and clean but without the milling presence of servants.

Rias' palace always gave him the chills. And it was a palace, even if the complex was on the smaller side for a member of the Gremory family. Outside of Rias herself, only her budding peerage lived there, and a population of three – well, four now - hardly made a village.

The way Rias had up and left to have her 'space' with servants loyal only to her still stung. His aunt still visited the main house for meals nearly daily, and continued to show her affection for everyone there, but Naruto knew he wasn't imagining the slight reluctance in her manner when he tried to joke with her as he had before their 'duel'.

Naruto couldn't even really pretend to convincingly sympathize with her new mindset. Living with all his precious people in one place had been a dream come true compared to his first childhood.
It wasn't like they didn't have space at the main house if Rias needed some quiet time away from Naruto specifically, and turning her back on her family bonds reminded him uncomfortably of Sasuke at his worst. Naruto didn't want to see another one of his precious people walk down the dark road of isolation.

Even if Rias was ashamed at having handily lost the 'friendly duel' she challenged him to that led to him being chosen as heir over her, did that really justify her cool resentment and newfound desire for independence? The natural talent of his body was just as much a part of Naruto as the red of his hair. It wasn't his fault that Grandpa Zeo had chosen him to succeed the clan, and nor was it Naruto's fault that he was years younger than Rias but a better fighter than she was.

Maybe it was just devil puberty.

"Ara ara, you're looking very handsome if I do say so myself." Akeno's teasing lilt echoed through the air, and Naruto knew they were close by. An indistinct murmur replied to her, along with Rias' bubbling giggles.

"Um." His danger senses were tingling. Offering a sickly grin to the miniature butler, Naruto stopped and began to slowly step backwards. "You know, I'm not feeling so well Koneko-chan. Maybe I'll just go back home and rest, ya know?"

Koneko's small hand shot forward to wrap around the redhead's hand in a steel crushing grip.

"Rebellion is not to be tolerated." The nekomata deadpanned, amusement tugging the corner of her mouth up by a mere fraction.

The relentless pulling at the ten-year-old devil's arm had him praying and squeezing his eyes shut. "Please don't let it be what I think it is. Please, please, please! My body isn't ready for this! I still have scars from the last time!"

Snorting at the childish wail, Koneko gave a final yank and forced the reluctant Naruto into an enormous dressing room. The space into a large central area hemmed in by armoires and dressing screens.

Akeno was twirling a lock of her unbound ebony locks around a finger as she tugged at the hem of her French maid uniform. Smirking at the new arrival, she gave a wave.

"There you are." Rias greeted nonchalantly as she stepped out from behind a screen. The Ruin Princess was considering her nephew with a distant teal stare, but Naruto could see a little more warmth there than there had been during his previous visit, so he counted it as a victory. A rumpled pair of slacks was thrown over one arm while the other settled a white cap over her thick crimson mane. "What do you think of my sailor fuku?"

Dropping his face into his hands, Naruto began to dramatically weep. "Not the cosplay! Momma please!" Outside of being the daughter of one of the richest devils in existence, Rias Gremory was also an unapologetic weeaboo. It was Serafall Leviathan at fault for corrupting his aunt; he just knew it.

"At least it's not mahou shoujo." The Gremory heir consoled himself, only to have a lurid pink outfit shoved into his hands.

"We had that saved for you, Naru-sama." Akeno winked, setting a plastic wand on the pile with a flourish. "Don't be shy, it's nothing you haven't done before with us."

Exhaling with despair, Naruto teared up. "Why am I not comforted?"
"Probably because you're a veteran of this form of torture." A new, vaguely familiar male voice interrupted gloomily. There was the faint sound of a zipper being done up. "At least you can comfort yourself knowing you're prepared for psychological warfare after this."

"Mou, Sasu-chi. Why are you so cruel?" Akeno whined, accepting Rias' exaggerated pat of consolation. "We worked so hard on your outfits. As Rias Gremory's newest Pawn you need to look the part, and because of our tireless efforts you will. All those sleepless nights and bandaged fingers to create your uniform, and then you go and say something like that. I'm really going to cry, you know?"

"Kill me."

Hammering a fist over his heart, Naruto sniffled. "I feel your pain, my brother in arms. Know you're not suffering alone, and that you will be rewarded for your trials in the next world!"

A dejected sigh filled the air as the sound of footsteps rose behind the dressing screen. "Dumbass."

"You were rejected, Naru-sama."

"Ahh! Tsuntsun Koneko strikes again. My heart, ack!"

"Enough of this idiocy—" The devil behind the screen interjected as he stepped out, only to cut off at the sight of the gathered devils in the dressing room. He looked absolutely miserable, clad in a black soldier's uniform with gold buttons. Black gloves and a black tie contrasted with his white undershirt. Topping it all off was a black service cap that crowned a very familiar face.

It might have been more than a decade, but Naruto wasn't liable to forget the sight of a sixteen year old Sasuke. The Uchiha had tried to kill him too many times for that, and even wan and half-starved while dressed in cosplay, it was unmistakably him.

Twin expressions of shock crossed both faces, and Naruto struggled to find something to say. The hot sting of tears was just beginning to prickle at the corner of Naruto's eyes.

Damn it, he didn't want to go crying like some girl. But after so many years a bond he'd thought was gone might not be after all. Naruto had never been isolated in his second life, but there were secrets he'd never shared. How could he tell his family something like 'Oh by the way, I've been reincarnated or something and I'm actually thirty-ish years old'?

It wasn't realistically an option. Some secrets needed to be kept. But Sasuke shared those secrets. Fate must be fucking with him, but who else would join Naruto in the new world except his brother through time?

"Oh, it really is an idiot."

Moment ruined.

"Bastard!" Naruto roared, stomping ride up to Sasuke and poking the much taller boys side with a tormenting finger. "Haven't seen you in years and the first thing you call me is an idiot!"

"Stop poking me, chibi."

"Fuck you, I'm not that short!"

"Midget."
"Do you want me to strangle you or something? Because I can I can do it ya know?"

"Wouldn't you need a stool first?"

"Not if I break your kneecaps, arsehole."

"Bring it on. I'm not scared of dwarves."

Naruto's cheeked puffed up in dramatic frustration as the pale Uchiha stared down at him with a smug expression. He should have known the bastard wouldn't want to have a moment. Sasuke wasn't much of a moment kind of guy. Neither was Naruto for that matter. They had always communicated with their fists. That was their way.

So Naruto communicated with a punch to the taller boy's nuts.

"Oooh." Akeno winced sympathetically as Rias' Pawn crumpled to the floor in a wheezing ball. "That's cold Naruto-sama. Isn't that against your man code?"

"Maybe, but just ask this bastard - I'm not a man am I? I'm just a little boy, so the rules don't apply to me."

"That's dirty." Sasuke gasped, clutching a protective hand over his family jewels. "But what else can you expect from a midget? He stunted everywhere that counts."

The vulgar exchange going on before her eyes baffled Rias. "You two know each other already?" The Ruin Princess clarified, focusing on that juicy tidbit. Their posturing ease with each other was also noteworthy.

Scratching the back of his head, Naruto chuckled nervously. "Yeah I guess. We met, uh…"

"A long time ago." Sasuke finished vaguely, shoving his hands in his pockets and watching the redhaired boy stutter warily. "We wouldn't want to bore you with the tale of something so thoroughly unremarkable."

Catching on with relief, the Gremory heir nodded empathetically. "Yeah. Just a chance meeting years ago… I didn't expect you to be so tall though." Naruto added with a sullen pout.

"Yeah, well I totally expected you to end up as the scion of a rich and powerful ancient noble clan." Sasuke rebuffed sarcastically with just a touch of visible envy. "Let me guess, next you'll tell me something like 'By the way, my daddy's a Great Satan. Just thought you'd want to know'?"

"Well, actually…"

"Are you seriously fucking kidding me?"

Cutting off the building argument with a clap and a frown, Rias sighed. "Alright children, enough of that." The easy camaraderie the two boys shared prickled her pride. She was tired of Naruto always managing to be better at everything and rising higher in the esteem of practically everyone they both knew. Not even her own Pawn seemed to be exempt. It was like some ridiculous law of the universe.

"I had thought to introduce you to my new Pawn, but it seems you already know one another. Shall we dine for lunch instead then? Akeno, Koneko – you know what to do."

A faint line between her eyebrows was the only sign of Akeno's concern as the pair of girls bowed and left. Teasing aside, the half-breed knew Rias better than anyone else. So Akeno knew that her
mistress harbored an inferiority complex and would not take too kindly to the thought of her Peerage rubbing elbows with the young nephew that had always outperformed her.

Naruto watched the swaying of Akeno's hips with lecherous interest that was slightly out of place on the face of a ten year old boy, but quickly refocused on his aunt once the buxom priestess left. Jerking a thumb towards Sasuke, Naruto grinned. "So how many Pawns did you decide to give this bum? Two?"

"Eight."

Red eyebrows shot up in surprise as Naruto snapped about to stare at Sasuke. "Eight?" That was absurd. Naruto didn't consider himself a snob who would discriminate based on power, but the Uchiha's magical presence was very weak. He couldn't have had more raw power than the average low class devil. There was no way Sasuke should be walking around with eight Pawns with how weak his presence was. He ought to have exploded into gory pieces, unable to contain the sudden infusion of magical artifacts. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, Naruto." Rias shot back irritably, glaring at his dubious tone. "I can count to eight."

"Hmm, odd." Concluding with a shrug, Naruto burst into another grin. "Wanna go for lunch then?"

Sasuke rolled his eyes at the predictability. Naruto always thought with his stomach. "Fine."

Biting the inside of her cheek, Rias eyed her nephew and Pawn with an indescribable look before turning and sweeping wordlessly from the dressing room.

Sasuke moved to follow, only to be jerked to a halt by Naruto's sudden grip of his elbow.

"It might have been more than ten years, but I still know you, and I know you don't want to play second fiddle to anyone. So I don't know what the hell you're playing at joining Rias' peerage. But if you hurt her – even if it's you – they'll never find the body."

Black eyes delivered a cutting gaze as Sasuke roughly shook Naruto's grip away. "You're right. It's been more than ten years. You know less than you think." He delivered caustically before trudging off after the mistress of the house.

Sasuke scarfed down the katsudon with a mixture of hunger and anger. What the fuck was this life supposed to be? While he had been off in the wilderness on the edge of starvation for a decade struggling to survive without having to swear himself to servitude, Naruto was living the high life as the son of a Satan and a bonafide prodigy with demon magic?

If this was some god's ridiculous attempt at karma, they would have words. Whatever crimes Sasuke had committed – actually committed, rather than merely intended to commit – paled in comparison to the suffering of his first childhood. Suffering that was deliberately inflicted by his own brother and permitted by the village.

Had he not already struggled and paid enough?

Apparently not, since he had literally nothing to his name besides more trials while Naruto belonged to one of the most powerful families in the entire dimension. Sasuke was glad to see his friend, but the Uchiha couldn't help resenting him.

Swallowing down the broth, Sasuke barely had time to consider asking for seconds before Rias was leaning over the switch his empty bowl out for another helping. "Thanks." He grunted, slightly
discomforted by the gesture before digging his chopsticks into another piece of pork.

His 'mistress' was rather different than what Sasuke had expected. Eccentricity was to be expected in the nobility – it was practically a cardinal rule of the upper class in any world. But the Uchiha had been anticipating libertine degeneracy or bathing in the blood of children rather than being forced to dress in cosplay and the obsession with a human country called 'Japan'.

Akeno switched out his half empty glass of water without prompting, and at that point Sasuke decided they were trying too hard to win him over.

It was obvious Rias Gremory harbored some form of inferiority complex regarding Naruto, and that her peerage was more a 'friends club' than a noble institution.

Later he'd make it clear to them that they should stop worrying their heads over it. The constant attempts at keeping him satisfied vaguely pleased his ego, but it also made Sasuke feel faintly guilty for taking advantage of the crimson haired princess' self-esteem issues. It would be better if he made it clear he had no intent on leaving in the short term.

The eight Evil Pieces had more than doubled his strength when Sasuke had absorbed them. Even if he was willing to give them up – and he wasn't – there was no guarantee he wouldn't be killed as a stray devil. Unless Sasuke swore himself to another 'master' anyway.

But the only other noble devil Sasuke had even met was Naruto - Ophis was too flighty to count - and the sun would freeze over before Sasuke went begging to Naruto for alms. He was willing to give up some pride and work under someone else to obtain power, but bowing and scraping to his childhood rival would be too much.

He could go looking for another master entirely, but Sasuke felt it was too much of a gamble. Rias Gremory was well connected, and she was powerful, even if that power was poorly tamed. Most importantly, despite her mature body the girl was innocent and naïve. Toujou and Himejima seemed barely any worldlier. How had they never been taken advantage of before?

Do you like my Star Chamber?

Sasuke grimaced.

Even if he wanted to become more powerful and accrue glory for the Uchiha name, he wasn't so far gone as to break a bunch of young girls in the quest for power. The sentiment may come back to bite him in the ass if he ever went up against an overwhelming enemy again. But until then Sasuke would at least hold up his end of the 'bargain'. Using her didn't mean he had to ruin her.

"So I had thought to begin your training immediately." Rias declared softly, eyes staring off into the distance thoughtfully as she sipped her tea. "If you can contain eight Pawns, you must have a large hidden potential. Akeno and I can provide you tutoring in sorcery, and Koneko can help you train physically. I may be able to arrange for other instructors on a more irregular basis as well…" she trailed off.

Grunting in agreement, Sasuke finished his second serving and waived off Akeno's questing hands when the devil priestess came to offer a third bowl.

An enormous lingering belch cracked through the air as Naruto finished his fifth dish. The redhaired devil lounged back in his seat to pat his swollen belly with an air of self-satisfaction. "Thanks for the food, Nee-chan."

Rias hummed in wordless acknowledgement, daintily covering her bowl with a napkin to signify that
she too was finished. "I could release you, if you wished." She quietly declared in a tone of resignation and vulnerability. "I'm sure he would accept you into his peerage. He may even offer you the Queen piece. Naruto has never given his pieces out before, but you're friends. And I suppose you'd enjoy it more as well."

"I refuse." Sasuke rejected stiffly, tightening his tie with a sniff. "I'd rather die than start taking orders from that midget. We'd have killed one another before the first week was over."

Refilling her green tea in a practiced gesture, Rias beamed.

As the day wore on, Naruto found himself getting more and more antsy. Every time he reflected on the fact that Sasuke was alive and in the same world as he was, Naruto's stomach unwillingly swooped. He was no longer the sole shinobi in a world of devils and other fantastic creatures. There was someone else who remembered Sakura and Kakashi-sensei and Konoha.

All he needed was to get his best friend alone for a few minutes, which was surprisingly difficult. Rias and Akeno were never outright rude, and never asked Naruto to leave, but they stuck to the Uchiha's side for hours like particularly nosy burrs. Koneko popped in and out, adding yet another headache for the Gremory heir to worry about.

Naruto wanted to talk to Sasuke. Macho warning in the dressing room aside, they actually had things they needed to discuss. Sasuke's quick thinking had provided them a vague alibi, but they needed to hammer out a real backstory for how they knew each other. Naruto wanted to try to ferret out Sasuke's new motives and know where his friend wanted to go with his life, just in case he needed a dose of what Sakura had once amusingly labelled 'talk no jutsu'.

And all that aside, the redhead also craved someone to lean on just a little. Konoha might be ten years gone, but Naruto had never forgotten it. He'd buried it by deliberately not thinking about it, but that no longer worked when his past was staring him right in the face.

"Check."

Sprawling over the armrest of Rias' leather couch, Naruto eyed the chessboard with an impatient glare. While he didn't want to just up and blurt out that he needed to talk to Sasuke, he was starting to think he might have to. It was one thing for Rias and her peerage to simply hang around him since Naruto was a visitor. It was quite another for Rias to be so jealously possessive of her new Pawn that she'd randomly challenge Sasuke to a chess match rather than leave the two reincarnated shinobi alone in a room together.

Of course, Sasuke was no help at all either. Sasuke knew Naruto wanted to talk to him, and Naruto knew that Sasuke knew, and Sasuke knew that Naruto knew that, and so on into infinity. But instead of throwing Naruto a lifeline so they could get their shit straightened out, the bastard just kept his smug little smirk on and continued making life difficult for the Gremory heir.

Naruto was half tempted to start blurting out their shared secrets just to get back at the Uchiha.

"Check."

"This is taking for fucking ever." Naruto whined as Sasuke escaped Rias' latest trap and backed her King into corner. The two of them were such fucking nerds it was ridiculous. He'd always known Rias was a geek based on how much she liked to read and play strategy games with Sona, but he hadn't known Sasuke was just as bad. Sasuke's tactical skill had always seemed to be something confined only to the battlefield, not to be used for board games.
Instead of finally cornering Sasuke after lunch, a walk in the gardens, afternoon tea, more cosplay, and then supper, Naruto had been stuck for hours watching their little grudge match. In another lifetime maybe Sasuke would have ended up being shoji buddies with Shikamaru, wasting his days after returning to Konoha by pushing little pieces of wood around.

"Some of us are actually good at this game." Sasuke muttered back as Rias massacred his latest offensive. Dark eyes darting between the board and Rias' face, seconds ticking by as he considered his next move. Chess was just as much about observing an opponent as it was about observing the board, and the Uchiha was reluctantly impressed. Rias might be young and naive, but she was in no way stupid. She reminded him a bit of Kakashi and the way his former sensei would work his way across the board with a combination of unorthodox strategies and elaborate systems of defense. It was a different style compared to Sasuke's preference for quick surgical aggression, but it was no less valid.

Rias shifted her remaining rook three spaces across in response to Sasuke's advancing bishop. "The nobility have a more than passing fondness for chess. It's considered very sophisticated, to the point that the Evil Piece system and the Rating Games purposefully mimic it. Naruto has never had much of a taste or skill for it." Her voice was light and conversational, a small smirk quirking up pink lips as they talked over her sulking nephew.

"Oh don't mind me, I'll just lurk around while my two best friends insult me. It's no biggie. These tears streaming down my face don't mean anything at all. They're just there, trickling down at every mean word. Nothing to see here." Naruto spun the nearest chair to the board about and plopped down in it in reverse. The redhead propped his chin on the back of it, making blubbering sounds and giving loud dramatic sniffs.

Sasuke and Rias stared as Naruto's face grew more red and more scrunched up as his fake depression intensified.

"That's..." Rias started.

"...Disturbing." Sasuke finished.

"Ohhhh. Ohhh!" High pitched whines begin to escape from Naruto's puckered mouth, filling the air with the sound of a barking seal.

A slow twitch began to build in one of Rias' vermilion brows, spasming more and more erratically until the Ruin Princess rolled her eyes and shot to her feet. "Fine, fine. I'm going. Just stop that before you give yourself an aneuyrism."

"Ooo-kay."

Watching as his new 'mistress' glided out of the room in a swirl of crimson hair and blue cotton, Sasuke let out a drawn out sigh. Then he slapped the back of Naruto's head. "I'm not sure whether to be amused at your stupidity or appalled at it."

Naruto glared mutinously, rubbing the aching spot on his crown. "Well I wouldn't have to resort to that if you would stop being such a bastard and fucking talk to me. Fuck. You're such a sadistic prick."

"Do you really think I would do that? You really think I'd just take advantage of your latest relationship problem for my own twisted amusement?"

"No, not at all." the Gremory heir drawled sarcastically, blue eyes popping. "You've always been the
sort to cuddle fluffy bunnies and rescue kittens from trees."

"Thank you for acknowledging it. Maybe one day you'll come to acknowledge the fact that I'm your better too."

"Don't hold your breath on that. You just might die."

"So uncouth."

Kicking at the leg of the table, Naruto smirked in satisfaction as the vibrations traveled up and sent all the chess pieces wobbling away. "Whoops. Guess that match is gonna be a draw. Feel like having a bit of a chat now?"

"Why not?" Sasuke mumbled, catching an ivory pawn before it could drop to the floor. "Seems like you're just *raring* to go. Astound me, oh Great Lord of the House of Gremory."

"Well *excuse* me for thinking that we needed to get our shit straightened out."

Warily looking at the open library door, Sasuke frowned and leaned in slightly to murmur in a low tone. "Well since you're no good with the plans, dobe, here's the story. You were just being your typical spoiled rich boy self and sneaking around some village close to your estate. We ran into each other there and became acquaintances. A few months later I moved on. There's no need to be overly dramatic with it."

"Good enough." Naruto agreed, lowering his voice to match. "But what are we supposed to say about your family? Do you *have* a family in this world?"

"No. For some reason, I was just dropped into Gehenna in a five year old orphan body." Sasuke's lips twisted with a touch of bitterness. "We'll just say that I was raised for the first few years by some older street rat and then abandoned. It'll have to have happened after I moved on, otherwise people would ask why you didn't look after me."

Rocking back in his seat, Naruto's brow furrowed in thought. "That'll probably work. But it brings up the other problem we've got. How and why the hell are we in this world in the first place?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, but I'll give you a bit of advice. Forget about Konoha."

Naruto went utterly still. "You gonna tell me what you mean by that?" The former jinchuuriki growled, eyes narrowing dangerously.

Unperturbed by the angry threat of violence, Sasuke moved to his feet. "Remember what the Shodaime said to Madara. Sometimes, we have to come to terms with the fact that there are things we won't be able to achieve. You managed to leave behind people who believed in you, Like our graduating class and Kakashi. Entrust Konoha and its future to them, and focus on the life you *have*, not the one you *used* to have. That's what the Hi no Ishi is about in the first place, right?"

Was it really that simple? Naruto pondered as he lazily watched Sasuke stride towards the open entrance. It went without saying that they'd keep their eyes and ears open for the explanation about why they were in Gehenna in new bodies. But even if they found out the why and *how*, would they be able to go back to their old lives? Would they even *want* to? Did Konoha really need Uzumaki Naruto more than Gehenna needed Naruto Gremory?

The redhead was so caught up in his own thoughts he almost forgot to ask Sasuke what his long term plans were as the Uchiha left the room. "Oi, Sasuke!" he barked, catching the older devil just before he crossed the threshold.
Sasuke turned on the spot, giving Naruto an exhausted glance. "What do you want, Naruto?" For the devil that had spent the previous two years entirely alone and the eight before that alone except for Ophis, the forced socialization he'd experienced all day was draining. He was in no mood to be nagged at by Naruto on top of all that.

"Don't think I forgot about you not playing second fiddle! What's your end game here? Why'd you join Rias' peerage?"

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Sasuke scowled darkly. "How the hell should I know?" the dark haired teen grunted, more to himself than to his friend. Then he departed, leaving even more questions in his wake.
Chapter 8

"Show me."

Sasuke's lips thinned at the command from the Princess of Destruction. It was exactly what he'd agreed to, but that didn't make the sting of taking orders any less needling to his pride. Huffing slightly through his nostrils, the Uchiha held up his hand and dug deep into his reserves of power.

Lightning flickered, at first silently but building to a dull cacophony of chirping as Sasuke poured more magical energy into the Chidori. Reproducing his signature jutsu was easier with the extra strength the Evil Pieces gave him, but the drain was still noticeable.

Red light began to seep from Rias' skin, curling like mist around her arm as she clicked her tongue in thought. Seizing Sasuke's Chidori shrouded hand despite her Pawn's instinctive jerk away, she ran a considering thumb across the skin of Sasuke's palm.

"It is not terrible, for someone that was self-taught." Rias declared after a moment, loosening her grip and crossing her arms under her chest. There was not a spot of singing on a single finger; her Power of Destruction easily shielding her against the weaker crackling of Sasuke's magic.

"What else can you do?"

"I can shape it." Sasuke forced the Chidori tighter, bounding the lighting until a cold white beam shot out and gouged a shallow trench in the turf of Rias' lawn. "Some." He added grudgingly. The attempts at recreating the Chidori Eisou were too unstable to be used in combat.

Red brows dipped as Rias considered the rent in the soil. "No other spells? What sort of emotions are you feeling? How are you casting your spells?"

Gritting his teeth in a mixture of annoyance and self-disgust, Sasuke extinguished the Chidori. "That's the only spell." Without a formal instructor in magic Sasuke had no idea how to begin even the most basic spell of devil magic. Ophis had given him a few pointers about feeling the energy inside him and moving it about, but she hadn't fed him much in the way of theory.

The Chidori was instinctive – even if magical energy was not precisely like chakra, it was close enough that he could muddle through generating the lightning and shaping it without any information outside of Ophis' vague clues. Anything else he had no idea how to even approach. "I'm not feeling emotion. I'm calm. I just summon the right amount of energy, convert it, and release it."

A brief expression of shock crossed his mistress' face before Rias barked a short laugh and smiled. "A true beginner I see. You are casting magic like you're a human. Devil magic – or angel magic for that matter – is not about calculation. It's more than just theoretically moving energy around with a calm state of mind. It requires a certain passion."

Calling forth a crimson whip of power, Rias languidly flicked it and dug a trench wider and deeper in the ground than Sasuke's Chidori Eisou. "We are creatures of emotion, and to make your magic truly respond to you, you need to feel. Look inside yourself and decide what you want in your life. Admit it, and refuse to be ashamed of it. Your magic is nothing but a tool to achieve your goals. As long as you don't suppress your ambition, it will respond to you. The greater the strength of your desires, the greater your spells will become."

Desire. Sasuke chewed the inside of his cheek, dark eyes dropping to stare at the gouges their spells had torn. What did he desire for himself? The endless chase of his youth for revenge and power, had
that been what Sasuke had wanted or what he felt was his duty to accomplish?

After Naruto had overcome him during the Mugen Tsukuyomi, Sasuke had wandered the world for years in search of peace and atonement. Yet had that search come from sincere recognition that he was at fault, or was it just masochism cultivated by the recognition of his defeat? And then he'd come to the new world and decided that he was going to establish the Uchiha Clan as a name worthy of respect – did he actually want to rebuild the clan, or was it just a lingering sense of filial obligation?

"Take your time, Sasuke-kun". Rias reached out to squeeze the Uchiha's shoulder. "It's not an answer you can find in a moment. It may even take years. The only one who can decide is you. In the meantime, we'll start with some basic invocations." With a final pat, the crimson haired princess left Sasuke standing alone in the artificial sunlight.

Perspiration ran down Naruto's flanks as he gasped for breath. The blunted bastard sword slipped from his sweat slicked cramping fingers to clatter to the dirt with a puff of dust.

Okita Souji stared down at the Gremory heir with a blank expression. The keen eyes of one of the best swordsmen in the Underworld took in the exhaustion trembling through Naruto's muscles. "That's enough." Souji declared, sheathing the tourney sword and setting it back on one of the weapon racks that hung from the walls.

As soon as the weapon was put away, the Knight's expression rippled. Stern sensei was replaced with grinning uncle, and Souji ruffled Naruto's red strands mockingly. "Better luck next time kiddo."

"You bet your ass." Naruto huffed, watching as his father's Knight swaggered out of the Gremory Family main house's dueling arena.

Groaning at the twinge in his back, Naruto painfully bent down to reclaim his weapon. Every muscle practically screamed with discomfort. Another day, another beat down.

The beatings were worth it though. Naruto had never considered himself much of a swordsman, and the chaotic fighting style of his first life was useless without all the Kage Bunshin to plug the holes in his defences or make up for his weaker offense.

Even if Naruto was a magical prodigy with the Bael family Power of Destruction, he'd had to rebuild his entire taijutsu arsenal from scratch. It wasn't easy to retrain his instincts – even half a decade after he'd convinced his parents to focus on nurture his physical skills rather than magical ones, the redhead still found himself slipping into old forms. It didn't happen nearly as often as it had when Naruto had started taking instruction from his father's Knight, but once in a blue moon he faltered. Old habits died hard, and shinobi habits died harder than most.

Stumbling like that was unacceptable. In the Underworld, the 72 Pillars had so much wealth that gathering more of it was irrelevant. The only way to move upward in society was through strength and through connections. As the son of a Satan and the cousin of the heir to the King of Hell, Naruto had connections galore. But connections alone wouldn't make him part of the next generation of Satans.

Naruto had to be strong – stronger than natural talent with the Power of Destruction would make him. Being the Duke Gremory would give him equal voting power in the Senate as a Satan, but the buck stopped there. The four Satans formed the military command of any war effort in Gehenna, and despite having less voting power than the Princes, the Archduke, or the Great King, the Satan title itself had prestige that was only second to the Great King.
The Satans all ruled over the clan territories that had once belonged to the old Satans' clans, so it wasn't like he was going to have to give up lording over a domain if he become a Satan either. Naruto needed the authority that came with the prestigious office.

He wouldn't be able to support Sairaorg otherwise.

At first it had been strange to willingly follow someone else. All through his first life Naruto had been a trailblazer. He'd had to make his own path, and motivate others to follow him down that road. It was the only way for him to survive without falling into despair, and the only way to achieve the dreams he'd inherited from Jiraiya-sensei and his original parents. Even after he'd been pulled into a new life, Naruto had faith in those he'd inspired to keep moving forward. Sasuke could be almost profound once in a blue moon, and he'd been right about leaving Konoha and its future in his comrades' hands.

Gehenna was both more evil but more idealistic than the Elemental Nations had been. There was a much larger group of people revolting against the system than there had been back home. But the sins of the people in Sheol were far more egregious. People may have murdered each other for money and revenge in his first life, but at least outright slavery and tyranny wasn't part of the social fabric.

The Elemental Nations had no counterpart to someone like Diodora Astaroth, who corrupted and raped maidens to the laughter of his peers. Such perversion may have existed, but it wasn't understood to be part of high society.

Luckily he'd been raised in a household that didn't tolerate such things. Sirzechs had been instrumental in overthrowing the old Satans and reforming the government of Sheol. If the current Underworld Naruto lived in was corrupt, at the least it was no longer downright evil. Consumption of human souls was illegal, and the commoners were free of serfdom.

Perhaps it was the human in him showing through, but Naruto couldn't be satisfied with that. And he wouldn't have to be. Change was coming. There were devils – old and young – that wouldn't tolerate the current system. It wasn't Naruto against the world once more.

How had his cousin put it? 'An Underworld where any Devil regardless of background can make their dream come true?'

A world like that was a world worth fighting for. A world like that might even be worth dying for.

Azazel couldn't suppress the cold chill that rolled down his spine as Michael stepped into his office. The leader of the Grigori was powerful to be sure – if he hadn't been, God never would have charged him with watching over humanity all those years ago. The darkness of his wings was testament to the power that filled him despite his fall from grace.

But even if Azazel's wings were dark as the void, Michael's were golden and bright as the sun. The War in Heaven had been thousands of years ago, but the memory of the Archangel's great and terrible power lingered.

Michael might be the genial statesman that could be credited more than anyone else with the movement towards peace between their factions, but that didn't mean Azazel could forget that utterly fearsome wrath.

"Yo." The leader of the Grigori grinned, shoving back the irrational desire to fight or take flight. "You caught me at a bad time, any chance I could convince you to come back later?" Azazel was
clad in nothing more than a rumpled sleeping robe. Dark bags hung beneath his eyes, and his mingled blonde and ebony strands were so messy a bird could nest in them.

Michael smiled back, green eyes softened. "Hard at work again I see." Stepping over the pizza boxes that littered the floor, the leader of Heaven threw back the drapes and opened a window.

Sirzechs' expression was a touch less welcoming. The rank smell of unwashed body odor and old food made the Crimson Satan wrinkle his nose. "How is it coming along?" the devil asked, sweeping the room with a swirl of red light to dissolve the piled garbage. Combined with the breeze from the open window, it made Azazel's office almost instantly smell fresher.

"Ahh, well it's coming. Take a seat." Scratching at the unshaven scruff of his beard, Azazel threw himself into the chair behind his desk. "I have to hand it to the Old Man, creating Sacred Gears is a lot more difficult than I expected it to be. I wonder if they depend on the System for stability too? Or maybe He just used it to distribute them to humans? You got any advice for me?" he prodded the Archangel, getting a bland smile in return.

Go figure. Azazel might have been a fallen angel, but even when he was a regular angel he wasn't privy to the secrets of how God's System functioned. No one really knew how God had been able to harness the power of prayer with his 'system'. All gods drew power from human belief, but the God of the Bible had taken it a hundred steps further than that. No one really even understood what the System actually was; whether it was spell or machine or artificial life form. Michael was even more tight lipped about it than the old man had been. If Azazel had thought he'd get away with it, he would've demanded access to study the thing during peace negotiations.

Michael eyed Azazel's couches with a vaguely dubious expression, but the Supreme Commander of Heaven eventually dropped onto one of them. Sirzechs' was far less polite, openly prodding a finger into the fabric in search of filth before caving and sitting across from the Archangel.

Ah well, Azazel couldn't blame them. It was probably his fault for smelling like a rank sewer. When he felt close to a breakthrough, the Governor-General had a tendency to focus obsessively on his experiments. Sleep and bathing were forgotten, and the only reason he even ate was because his Vice Governor-General stopped in from time to time with some kind of food.

"Shemhazai said you'd been holed up for three weeks this time." Sirzechs sighed, tugging at the crisp collar of his fancy noble clothes. The Satan was probably jealous that Azazel got to slum it up while he was stuffed into freshly starched outfits multiple times a day. Ah well, it was the kid's own fault for tying the knot with the old ball and chain. Grayfia might be one of the most beautiful women Azazel had ever seen with lovely teats and a sweet ass, but that didn't make her any less uptight.

Still, three weeks? "That must be some kind of record." Summoning a cigar with a green sparkle of magic, the fallen angel lit it and sucked in the heady mix of smoke and spices. The cherry red of the burning end glowed, and Azazel exhaled slowly. "Now then, while I don't mind you two dropping by, I doubt this is a social call."

Threading his fingers, Sirzechs settled his elbows over his knees and gave Azazel a steady gaze. "Unfortunately, you're right. We've had further… issues with moving towards the peace treaty."

Azazel thinned his lips in annoyance, leaning back to prop his feet up on his desk. "There's no need to be diplomatic about it Sirzechs, I think we're beyond formality and other nonsense. Let me guess, Kokabiels is stirring up trouble again? What's he doing this time?" The fallen angel may have gone three weeks without a wink of sleep, but he was still a genius, and it wasn't that hard to guess that there would be more complaints about that particular troublemaker.
"He is interfering with the humans again." Michael interjected, a faint frown making its way onto the gentle archangel's face. "He is stealing souls, assassinating key figures in several organizations of interest, and leading his cadre in deliberate assaults on our allies as well as hunting angels and devils he can catch on his own in the human world."

Pinching his nose at the building headache, Azazel summoned a glass of brandy and took a fortifying sip. "Fine, fine. I'll rein him in. Maybe I'll order him to train the younglings or something to keep him busy. It's not my fault he still thinks it's the middle of the war or something."

"Azazel." All kindness slid away from Michael's expression, leaving cool unyielding austerity. It wasn't the humble angel, but the General of Heaven's armies speaking now. "These are assurances you've made to us before. We can no longer accept simple promises. We are walking the path to peace, but peace with Heaven requires certain sacrifices on the part of the Underworld. It is not in the nature of angels to accept the abuse of mortals. Our Father did not design us to tolerate evil, and if you are enabling it you will become our enemy again."

Eying the blank faced archangel, the Crimson Satan sighed. "Kokabiel's actions are more serious than you know Azazel. One rogue fallen angel couldn't endanger the peace, even if he was wandering around publicly assaulting people. But a fallen angel with followers at his back and acting without retribution from his government can. As more and more devils hear about the way Kokobiel is enriching himself and gaining power without censure, it becomes more difficult for the Satans to quell the dissent. It appears as though we are holding them to a double standard, and the demands that we too begin abusing the human world once again grow."

"It's not as easy as you're making it out to be." Azazel pointed out defensively. "As you say, Kokabiel has people backing him. What can I do? Imprison him? Kill him? I don't want to start another civil war within the Grigori – the last one when we decided to write up a peace treaty was bad enough. It's not like I've got blood to spare around here you know. I've warned him plenty of times, but he just keeps acting out."

Shaking his head, Michael pressed further "This peace is important to all of us – angels, fallen angels, and devils alike. I understand that you don't want to ignite another conflict within your faction, but you must act." The archangel urged, not unkindly. "Spilling blood or ordering violence is never an easy choice, but we no longer have the luxury of easy choices. Will you allow your reluctance of conflict to reignite the Great War?"

"We can provide aid if you need it." Sirzechs rushed to offer, not liking the darkening of the Governor-General's expression. "Overt or covert. Whatever you need, we'll be there. We don't want you to think that this is some roundabout method of weakening your people further. If conflict comes we're ready to stand on the battlefield beside you."

Azazel's wine-red eyes shifted coldly from Satan to archangel before he snorted. Tipping back the glass clenched between his fingers, the fallen angel slammed down the rest of brandy in a gulp. He dismissed the glass with a brighter glimmer of magic than was necessary. "Fine then." Azazel declared in a bitter tone. "I'll deal with him. But I swear to God if I need you then you better be there."

"Of course." Both rushed to reassure him.

"Che." Azazel's gaze moved from the two faction leaders sitting on his couches to stare with dark consideration at the messy notes spread over his desk. "I'll let you know when he's handled. Don't be surprised if he suddenly disappears."

And for the sake of their own stomachs, they'd better not ask what became of Azazel's soon-to-be-
"Sona-chan!"

Her left eyelid twitched. Fingers clenched at the pages of her book in aggravation before the devil was forced to set it aside lest she damage it. "Naruto-dono." Sona emphasized the different formal suffix compared to his overly familiar 'chan'. "Is there some business I can help you with?"

"Sure." Naruto chirped, grabbing at her hand and dragging the taller devil out of her seat. "I'm feeling a bit interested in the business of a spot of fun."

The Sitri heiress glowered and almost yanked her hand back, but the shine of cunning within the Gremory heir's blue eyes stayed her. Naruto was cheery and forceful with no regard for personal space or the upholding the formal dignity of their station, but he wasn't stupid. If he was looking at her with sly expectation while covertly inscribing a teleportation circle, there was more underfoot than his unique brand of 'fun'.

A red runic circle spun out beneath the pair of devils, shooting up to disperse them into globules of light as it swept them through space. Again and again Naruto called up teleportation glyphs, sweeping them around the Underworld at a dizzying pace. Some of the places Sona recognized, and some she did not.


Naruto wasn't simply jumping about for fun. He was jumping at random, scattering his magical signature all over the Underworld. As if he was currently being followed, or was at least taking precautions not to be.

"Enough." She declared as they shifted away from the building site of her Rating Game school in Auros to a barren plateau. Sona jerked her hand out of the redhaired boy's grip, swallowing harshly as Naruto turned to offer her a shrug.

"It's alright, we're here anyway."

"What is here supposed to be?"

"Yo." A deep voice interjected, punctuated by heavy steps as the owner moved out from behind them into Sona's field of view. "You made it here in one piece I see, Sona Sitri." The midnight dark hair and rugged planes of his face were as familiar to her as Naruto's.

"Sairaorg Bael." Sona stepped back and readjusted her glasses with an icy expression. "What do you want?" Typically, she would have offered far greater respect to the devil currently next in line for the throne of the Underworld, but her temper was running a little short. She didn't appreciate being grabbed out of her studies without warning and dragged on a wild goose chase. That was more her sister's area of expertise.

Humming in vague amusement at her feistiness, Sairaorg settled his fist on his hips. The slow action had all the muscles of his arms and stomach rippling, and Sona was suddenly aware that while Sairaorg looked like a good-natured seventeen year old human he was actually more than twice her age and viewed as the strongest of their generation.

Naruto punched his cousin in the gut, hurting his hand more than he hurt the Bael heir. "Don't tease
Sona-chan so much." The Gremory boy grumbled, shaking out the ache in his fingers.

"Fine, fine." Sairaorg waved the younger devil off, violet eyes never shifting from the Sitri heiress. "I hear you're interested in building a Rating Game school. Naruto here's already told me about it, but I want to hear it from your own mouth."

What exactly was the purpose of this meeting? Her aspirations were hardly a secret. Sona frowned with confusion, but answered nonetheless. "Yes. I believe that the real potential of our kind is not bound in bloodlines. It is important for the advancement of our species that all devils, regardless of background, be given the opportunity to grow and reach their potential."

"Oh? But how is our society supposed to deal with that? Raising commoners up to the level of the 72 Pillars – don't you see something wrong with that?" Sairaorg countered, setting an idle hand over Naruto's head and ruffling the crimson strands without regard for his cousin's indignant squawks.

The expression that crossed Sona's face was long-suffering. She'd heard all such arguments dozens of times before. Smoothing a hand over her knee-length skirt, the dark haired girl boldly met Sairaorg's gaze. "If commoners were meant to be commoners only, why does the Rating Game exist in the first place? Bloodline and history cannot be a concern for the state if they're willing to welcome the strongest commoners into the upper classes. Further, the 72 Pillars have always derived their nobility and governing authority from the simple axiom that 'might makes right'. By their own philosophy, if they are so easily overthrown by the masses when those commoners are offered the same education opportunities, then are they not too weak to rule in the first place?"

Sairaorg tilted his head with consideration, taking in the undaunted heiress. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "Ahh, good answer. Very nice. Well then," the Bael clan heir smirked at her. "Want to join me in committing treason?"

Sona's brain drew a blank and her jaw dropped. "Huh?"

"Minor treason." Naruto clarified unhelpfully, finally throwing off his cousin's hand with a glare.

"Call it major treason, makes it sound more dramatic."

"But wouldn't that be like false advertising or something?"

"Treason." Sona uttered weakly. What kind of absurd conspiracy were these fools up to?

"Well it's not really treason." Sairaorg shrugged, shifting his eyes to scan the horizon. "There's nothing actually illegal about it. I suppose it's more of a philosophical revolution? What else do you call it when you're a traitor to the governing ideology though?"

Recovering her composure, Sona adjusted her glasses before dryly commenting "How about 'philosophical revolution'? Or maybe literally anything else - something that isn't a capital crime? Even calling it 'that thing' would be better."

Whining, Naruto gave Sona his best pout. "Ah, but where's the fun in that?"

"Listen." The Bael clan heir turned serious. "I like that explanation of yours. As far as I'm concerned, you just haven't taken it all the way. If you can admit that the authority of the 72 Pillars could be flawed because they may not be the strongest, try taking it a step further. Why are we governing this Underworld by strength in the first place? What does pure power have to do with good government?"

"Nothing." In for a penny, in for a pound as it were, the Sitri heiress supposed. "Successful
governance arises from efficient and just administration concerned with the welfare of a nation as a whole rather than a collection of oligarchs. Not something so plebian as democracy; which is easily corrupted by the power of money, but something that's hardly a hereditary aristocracy either."

"Which is exactly the system we have now." Sairaorg seized on her last point. "But we don't have to maintain such a system. We three here were born into power under the aristocracy. Further, the two of you are related to current Satans. Under the current system, we could legally attain power over it. And having taken that power, we reform the system itself. We can do something bigger than increasing the opportunities of the lower class – we can make a world where everyone can achieve their dreams!"

The Bael clan heir held out his hand.

Huffing in exasperation, Sona shook her head before taking Sairaorg's hand. "This whole charade was unnecessary, fools. I would have agreed from the start."

"Ah." Rubbing the back of his head, Naruto grinned nervously. "Well that has more to do with keeping you off Lord Bael's kill list, ya know?"

"Exactly, so I understand if you want to back out. Lord Bael is not someone that offers mercy to anyone that opposes him. Not even his own son." Projecting an aura of reassurance and understanding, the dark haired devil looked down at the younger nobles. "The real risk is that while we're not doing anything against the law itself, there's always the possibility that those opposed to us could catch wind of things and decide to take us out. A young fool here and there spouting idealism is nothing. An organization is something that needs to be crushed."

"Organization? Just how big is this conspiracy?"


"… What kind of idiot plans to take over the Underworld with three people?"

A small puff of dust sprayed through the air as Sasuke collapsed wheezing to the dirt.

Koneko propped his chin in her hand and considered the Pawn with a hawkish gaze. The dark haired teen was an odd contradiction. She could easily see how his movements were tailored to killing perfection, yet every strike was too slow and too weak. It didn't make sense. No devil attained the level of skill in taijutsu without instruction, but if Sasuke had been instructed he shouldn't be hitting with all the force of a child and moving at the speed of a drunken lout.

That was not to say that all devils were created equal. Koneko herself certainly hit harder than her size and age would suggest. Yet Sasuke's lack of strength and agility were outside the norm, even for weaker untrained devils. It was almost like he was a human.

"Take a break." she ordered the puffing Uchiha needlessly. Sasuke was too wrung out to continue even if she ordered. Weighing the thinness of the Pawn's face and the pallor of his skin, the nekomata was suddenly struck by a flash of inspiration.

Kneeling in the dirt, Koneko reached out and latched onto Sasuke's bicep with a fist. She ignored his jolt of surprise in favour of prodding at the muscle with a thumb. It gave easily under her questing digit, and when she switched to poking at a tricep and one of his quads she got the same result.

"Just as I thought."
"What is as you thought?" Sasuke growled irritably, climbing back to his feet after he caught his breath. He hardly appreciated being groped all over by a child, but he'd bear through it if she'd done it for a reason that wasn't getting her jollies.

"Your muscles are giving too much. Eat more."

"What?" Coal dark brows rose in confusion. While he'd starved in the wilderness, he was certainly eating his fill now that food was being supplied on a regular basis. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"You are not eating enough."

"I'm eating until I'm full just fine."

Koneko shook her head, chewing at the inside of a lip before coming to a reluctant decision. "Pick me up."

"No."

"Do it or I won't train you any further."

Making an irritated face, Sasuke shook his head but bowed to the command. It was still far too early to be alienating his instructors. The Uchiha at least needed to put some weight back on.

Hooking his hands under the ivory haired girl's armpits, Sasuke ignored the dark look the nekomata gave his arms in favour of lifting up.

Nothing.

Sasuke struggled harder.

Still nothing.

Huffing a frustrated breath, the Uchiha braced his legs and heaved with all his might. Finally they had lift off, Koneko dangling in Sasuke's grip while his face began to flush pink.

"That's enough." Koneko wriggled out of the Pawn's grip, landing lightly back on the ground and watching with a sense of vague amusement as the color left Sasuke's cheeks. "Do you understand now?"

"You're big for your age?"

"No, fool." Rolling her eyes, the nekomata punched Sasuke in the shoulder. It looked like he wouldn't get it without a full lecture. "You do not eat enough, Uchiha Sasuke. You're eating like a human. Being hungry for so long shrunk your stomach. Consider the difference in appetite between you and Naruto-sama."

"He eats like a pig." Sasuke muttered. It had nothing to do with being a devil. Naruto had always stuffed his face, regardless of the life he was living. It was a shocker that he'd never turned ballooned up like an Akimichi back in Konoha.

"No, he eats like a devil. Akeno isn't a martial artist, and even she eats more than you do. We're all devils. We don't move faster and hit harder than humans for no reason. Our muscles are not only more efficient, they're denser. You need to eat much more than you're eating now. That's why your flesh gives so easily when I push at it."
"Fair enough." In a way, it made sense. Sasuke had only eaten a few meals with Rias' peerage so far, and during all of them he'd noticed their larger portions. He hadn't thought too much of it, considering that both Rias and Akeno had rather large... features that would require a little more food to sustain. But if devils in general needed to eat so much, that explained why he'd been so weak against Dohnaseek despite a lifetime of skill in taijutsu as a shinobi. He simply hadn't been eating enough to attain strength despite his training.

"Then maybe we should stop here so I can go stuff my face." Sasuke snorted sarcastically.

"That would be ideal."

"You're a real riot, you know that?"
Chapter 9

In through the nose, out through the mouth. Breathe in, breathe out. Cycle the air through his lungs, across the heart and along the veins. Settling firm fingers over his pounding temples, Sirzechs massaged soothing circles. Keep calm and carry on.

Nope.

Kicking out a leather clad boot, Sirzechs smashed his father's three hundred year old armchair. The crackling of snapping wood couldn't quite cover the sound of his ringing shout. "Fuck." The Satan cursed, grinding the heel of his thigh boot into the splinters. "Fuck!"

Grayfia tilted her head, considering the wooden ruin before dismissing the other servants with a look. While the silver haired maid and Queen might usually scold her husband for the lack of control, sometimes it was just better to let him rage. Bottling up emotions rarely did anyone any good, and it did Sirzechs in particular even less good.

Despite his overall laid-back approach to life, Sirzechs was rather hot blooded. It might be because there were so many other things that Sirzechs was willing to let roll off his back, but he was unable to cope so calmly with the problems that struck near to his heart. A bad investment that ended up costing him a dozen tons of gold? Such was life. Having to bargain his son's marriage off for politics? If only heads could roll.

It wasn't that conceptually Sirzechs hadn't been aware of the possibility. His own marriage for love was an oddity in the Underworld, even if it had managed to become somewhat of a folk tale for the commoners. But his parents had married for political alliance, and so had their parents. Even concubinage was often motivated by potential political benefit. It was the norm for the nobility, and the Satan Lucifer was aware that it probably would have been in his son's future too.

But he hadn't expected to have to engage Naruto so soon. The boy was only thirteen! If someone had told Sirzechs' he'd be bartering off his son's hand when the boy was still young, he would have at the earliest expected to be doing it when Naruto was sixty. Thirteen, and getting married by the age of twenty; was scandalously young. Devils aged the same as humans for the first fifteen years, but after that they only gained about a year in appearance for every fifteen they lived until they were sixty. Anything earlier than that resembled feudal human traditions of child weddings.

If not for the implicit blackmail, Sirzechs' wouldn't have agreed come Heaven or high water. But ensuring that peace continued was more important than the happiness of any one boy – even if that boy was Sirzechs' son.

Azazel had come through and managed to deal with Kokabiel. The total disappearance of the fallen angel made Sirzechs suspect the Governor-General of the Grigori had assassinated him. Kokabiel's disappearance hadn't disbanded his adherents though – it had emboldened them, and even three years later Gehenna was still suffering the price.

Fallen angels continuing to quietly plunder the human world had blown back and left a steaming pile of shit in Sirzechs' lap politically speaking. While the other Satans backed him to the hilt and relentlessly supported his peace efforts, that didn't make the Crimson Satan an unassailable dictator. He was merely one of four generals of the devils' armies, and only had a vote equal to that of any other Duke-ranked lord in the Diabolical Senate. Like the four Dukes in the Senate, the Satans had some voting power, but having three votes per Satan out of the total pool of eighty four in the Senate didn't exactly make their power bloc the majority.
The Great King Bael alone had equal power to the Satans or the Dukes with twelve votes. The single Archduke had six votes, and three Princes with four votes each could form a bloc to equal the four Satans. The six Marquises had two votes per elector and eighteen Counts who were each given a single vote and tended to attach to the larger political blocs.

This original draft for the Senate that was creation after the rebellion against the Old Satans had thirty-three electors for the thirty-three remaining clans, but seventy-two total votes in honor of the 72 Pillars that were assigned based on title. Sirzechs and his friends had been riding high on their victory when they'd proposed it, drunk on dreams of a more egalitarian future. It had been a bit of a shock when the Senate expanded the voting pool and gave them equal voting power as the Dukes.

At the time, Sirzechs had thought it a gesture of camaraderie. Years later and much more jaded, the Crimson Satan knew the truth. By giving them votes, the Senate had managed to integrate them into the system. Doing so staved off any potential Satan revolt aimed at restoring the original power associated with their rank, because they knew the New Satans would prefer schmoozing to warfare, and by opening the avenue to politicking, they closed the avenue of armed conflict.

Sirzechs' had needed votes to quell the motion that would have legalized covert control of human governments once more and demanded an amendment to the working peace treaty with the fallen angels and Heaven. The Satans had been backed by their clans, Sirzechs' uncle Lord Bael, and Marquis Belial, but they'd only managed to reach five votes short of the majority.

They'd needed more support. Support that Marquis Phenex was willing to provide as soon as Sirzechs agreed as Naruto's father to betroth him to the man's daughter, along with the consent of Zeoticus as head of the Gremory clan.

It was a deal with a devil, as the humans were inclined to say. Lord Phenex had brought his collection of small lordlings into the fold. Archduke Agrares' motion had failed, but now Sirzechs – and Naruto by proxy – were bound into a strangling compact.

Ravel Phenex was an unknown quantity. Rumors painted her as a slightly spoiled if good natured girl, and a pretty child that would grow into a beautiful woman one day. The bloodline she brought to the Gremory family and the potential power of immortality were legendary. She was by traditional expectations a good match.

But Naruto hadn't chosen her, and that made Sirzechs feel less like a triumphant statesman and more like a failure as a father.

"He is not going to blame you." Grayfia offered as her husband's ire slowly began to wind down. The Queen of Annihilation was not any more pleased at the prospect of her son's engagement, but she was more pragmatic, and had been prepared for it long ago. "Naruto is a good boy. He will be shocked. He may even be angry for a time. But he will not refuse. Not when the future of the clan and the peace you've worked so hard for hangs in the balance."

Sirzechs breathed heavily, tortured syllables winding up from his throat. "I know. That's what makes it even worse."

Drawing her white fur coat tighter around her shoulders, Rias exhaled and watched the mist of her breath sweep away in the cold night breeze. Winter in the human world was striking with all the fury nature could muster, and the frost seeped so deeply into her bones that the Ruin Princess wondered if there might be a Yuki-onna nearby.

"Put your hat on before you freeze, ahou." Sasuke groused, shoving Rias' pale bear skin ushanka
down over the crown of her crimson head. The frowning crinkle around the Uchiha's lips told a tale of annoyance, but the careful way Sasuke adjusted her cap and coat divulged a warmer truth.

Her Pawn was... odd. It was difficult for Rias to put one label on the young man. Cruel words came easily to Sasuke's mouth, but his actions were generally far more considerate. He seemed to swing between treating her like a naïve child to be looked after and a more mature but distant colleague. Emotions were held at arms' length, except when Naruto was involved.

It was frustrating beyond measure that Rias had him in her household for three years but still felt like she was only just scratching the surface of whatever secrets he kept locked up behind his coal dark eyes. Secrets that he seemed to freely share with her nephew, for whatever reason. The only real comfort was that Sasuke rebuffed every offer she'd made to trade him to Naruto's peerage. For whatever reason, the Uchiha seemed to prefer to serve under her rather than serve under his friend.

A final tug of fur below Rias' chin, and Sasuke backed off with a vaguely satisfied look. It was little more than the easing of the tightness in Sasuke's face and a quiet softness to the Uchiha's eyebrows, but Rias was learning to read those expressions.

Her reading was still less than Naruto's apparent ability to translate the most minute changes in her Pawn's voice or face into prose, but it was miles ahead of what Rias had been able to do when she first met him.

Eying Sasuke as he closed up the button of his own fur-lined overcoat, Rias gave him a breezy thanks.

The Uchiha just grunted in reply, wordless syllables escaping his tight jaw.

Rias shrugged and turned away to scan the tree line.

The territory of the Gremory family in the human world was far more fractured than their unified enormous domain in Sheol. Enclaves here and there all across the world required far more effort to monitor, but her clan ensured it was done. Disturbances were relayed nearly instantly, which was why Rias had bestirred herself from her private estate and crossed into the human world.

Any sign of aggression from Heaven or the Church needed to be thoroughly investigated. The trilateral peace treaty may be inching ever closer to being signed, but it was not signed yet, and a large discharge of holy power on Gremory lands was a cause for concern.

Snow crunched beneath their boots as Rias stepped forward. Sasuke's footfalls were heavier, breaking louder under the pressure of his military thigh-highs. Touching the wellspring of destructive power running through her veins, Rias briefly debated summoning a light before dismissing it as unsound. They didn't truly need it, especially with the moonlight, and if there were humans from the Church stumbling around Rias didn't want to give them warning of their approach. The howling wind would cover their footsteps, but only a blind man would miss it if she lit up her fingers with sorcery.

Silence hung heavy as the pair of devils moved through the trees. Wind howled through the Hokkaido night, biting at the exposed skin of their faces, but neither gave into the urge to conjure a warming flame.

"There." Sasuke directed, settling a gloved hand over the hilt of the katana she'd gifted him and motioning with a chin through the tortured twisting of the leafless trees. It took her a moment to catch sight of what her pawn was talking about, but there it was.
Breaking up the smooth white carpet of midwinter snow was a flash of cream and blue-black. Rias turned towards it, cautiously moving past bare trunks and over the rolling banks of snow creating by the shifting winds. The blur slowly resolved itself as she came closer, Sasuke on her heels when she crested over the last bank.

It was a young human boy that couldn't be any older than Naruto was. Snowflakes piled up over his form, almost completely burying the blonde in an icy grave. Rias didn't consider herself a leading authority in the biology of humankind, but even she could tell the boy was dying.

The stink of holy energy over the young body was thick, but dissipating by the second. If she had to guess, Rias would assume the dying child was the source of the disturbance in her family's wards.

Less of a dramatic discovery than Naruto might have wished for, but it was what it was. As soon as the blonde expired, Rias was confident the wailing of the clan wards would cease.

Such a sad world though. Children were supposed to be cared for, not sacrificed on the altar of power or sent out to die on the battlefield for the sakes of their ideologue caretakers.

Rias decided bearing witness to his quiet passing in the sleet was the least she could do, Sasuke's looming impatience behind her be damned. Was that man's heart made of steel? He could use a spot more compassion, especially considering it had been kindness that motivated Koneko to pull him out of the river in the first place.

The creak of joints in the quiet air seemed absurdly loud as the boy begin to move. Achingly slowly at first as the bone and cartilage in his neck ground, but painfully gaining hard-won speed. Clenched eyelids beneath thin wheat-yellow brows trembled and crept open.

Grey eyes that burned met her sea-green gaze. The hunger in the boy's light steel orb was breathtaking. It was the craving for life and power and vengeance all wrapped together in painful determined tangle. The blonde child was only able to hold the stare for a heartbeat before the strength left him and his young body surrendered to death.

Such aching resolve shouldn't be wasted, Rias decided, lips quirking in a bitter smirk.

Sasuke settled his elbows over his knees, silently dismissing Akeno as he took up his turn watching the boy. The blonde had yet to awaken. Apparently, the process of being transformed from human to devil and resurrected with an Evil Piece was a good deal more traumatizing than Sasuke's own admission to Rias' peerage had been.

The newly made Knight had managed to sleep all through the night without a single twitch, to Sasuke's displeasure. Apparently, the process of being transformed from human to devil and resurrected with an Evil Piece was a good deal more traumatizing than Sasuke's own admission to Rias' peerage had been.

"Che." Sasuke scoffed, pulling off his service cap and tossing the headgear onto the milk white sheets of the boy's bed. What a pain in his ass. The Uchiha wanted to sleep. He wanted to train. He wanted to eat. Anything productive would be better than babysitting.

The last few years had been kinder to Sasuke than his first decade in the new world. Three years under the mixed tutelage of Rias and Akeno had made him into a middling mage, and the rich bounty of the Gremory family had packed hard muscle onto his previously wasted frame. The sheer appetite of his devil body was a bit of a shocker considering even in his past life Sasuke hadn't
gorged much and his human body had always been on the lithe side, but he took it in stride.

So long as he didn't become a complete meathead, Sasuke could deal with the added bulk. It had required some effort to retrain from the chokuto to the katana better suited to his larger and taller form, but it had been worth it in the end. He was relatively deadly, at least for skilled humans or middle class fallen angels.

Casting an impatient glare at the grandfather clock ticking away in the corner of the room, Sasuke scowled. Half an hour past, and an hour and a half to go. Not that taking his turn off would really help him achieve anything. There was only so much a man could eat and sleep before it would all run to fat, and the breaks between his watch shifts were too short for any sort of serious studying or training.

A low moan caught Sasuke's ears, drawing his focus away from the slowly passing time and to the blonde preteen coming alive in the bed. "Tosca..." escaped the boy's mouth in a painful whimper before the blonde's pale lips peeled back in a snarl "Galilei!"

Sasuke watched dispassionately as the blonde shot up in bed, red rimmed grey eyes snapping open as the newly reincarnated devil sucked rasping gasps into his lungs. The boy carried on for a few minutes under Sasuke's regard, pale and shaking and sweating as the new devil struggled to escape the memory of recent death and suffering.

Calling up a tiny circle of magic in his palm, the Uchiha concealed the faint violent light and moved it close to his mouth. "Rias." Sasuke murmured, cutting off the recording after a single word and sending the message off as a miniscule mote of purple.

"Where am I?" the blonde child demanded crudely, fixing a veneer of arrogance over the weary fear that Sasuke could easily see in the slumped carry of the boy's shoulder.

Cocking an eyebrow at the query, Sasuke shrugged nonchalantly and leaned back in his armchair. The Uchiha folded his arms across his chest, closing his eyes and lazily tilting his head back in obvious dismissal. Regardless of how worked up the kid got, it wasn't Sasuke's responsibility from here out. Rias had wanted him, and it was the responsibility of his 'mistress' to look after her own 'pets'.

"Hey! Answer me asshole!"

"Please refrain from treating my servants rudely, child." Rias greeted in a pleasant but firm tone as she swept into the room. "I understand that this might be a little confusing and scary, but no one is here to hurt you."

Sasuke cracked his eye open as the loud scoff the blonde gave. Adolescent fingers fisted in the grey of his sick robe as the boy glared mutinously up at the Ruin Princess, ignoring the Uchiha now that there was a responsive target for his sulking ire.

"Who the hell are you?"

The tightening of the skin around Rias' eyes spoke of her displeasure to Sasuke's experienced eyes, but the young woman still managed to force a welcoming smile. "My name is Rias Gremory. It's a pleasure to meet you. And what's your name, child?"

"Don't call me a child!" the blonde exploded back, all loose wound anger and sharp edges. "You're not that much older than me!"

Silence hung in the room as Rias blinked but gave no other response to the outburst.
Eventually the blonde averted his eyes with an expression of reluctant guilt. "…Isaiah." Mumbled past the blonde's lips. "My name's Isaiah."

"It's nice to meet you, Isaiah-kun." Rias responded instantly, drawing on all her training in social grace and taking a seat beside Sasuke. "I'm sure that you're wondering where you are and why you're here. If I could ask for your silence for a time, I'll explain everything." The Ruin Princess forestalled, holding up her hand to halt the boy as Isaiah opened his mouth to ask more.

Grumbling beneath his breath, Isaiah subsided warily. Sasuke didn't miss the way the blonde youth's eyes flitted about the room, quickly identifying all escapes with the experience of someone long in prison.

"As I said, my name is Rias Gremory. I am a member of the Gremory family, who are noble devils within the Underworld." She began bluntly, watching the surprise that was not disbelief spread across Isaiah's face. "As I'm sure you've realized, you are now in the Underworld. As for why you're here, Sasuke and I," Rias paused to motion vaguely at her Pawn. "Discovered you as you lay dying in the human world. I saw your potential, and decided to take you with me."

"My... potential?" An ugly tone coloured the blonde's voice, twisting his face into a barely restrained rictus of fury. "Maybe you missed the memo, but I failed the Holy Sword Project. I'm tired of being a guinea pig for every curious asshole that walks by, including you!"

Ignoring the insult without even batting an eyelash, Rias denied the boy out of hand. "I'm not interested in that." The Ruin Princess nonetheless filed the 'Holy Sword Project' into the back of her mind as a topic to consider later. "I was interested in the look in your eyes when we found you in the snow. That look is why I resurrected you after you died and made you a devil. Not a desire to experiment on you and find out more about this so-called project."

What little colour was in Isaiah's face drained away, leaving the boy's skin milk pale. "I died?" he breathed in shocked wonder. Looking down at his bony fingers, the blonde struggled to get past the sudden bombshell. He'd died – just like that. No chance for revenge or dying with purpose? Just giving out as he escaped from the hell hole where he'd been experimented on?

Sasuke snorted, rolling to his feet in a rustle of cloth. There was no reason for him to stick around anymore. The kid was awake, and Rias was perfectly able to explain where Isaiah was and how the Evil Piece nested in the blonde's heart would determine the course of his life.

It wasn't like the kid had it in him to do any damage to anyone at the moment, and even if he tried Sasuke knew Rias was so overwhelmingly powerful that she could vaporize the brat with a thought. "I'm going to bed." He declared, hesitating slightly before giving the red-haired girl a pat to the shoulder.

Forging bonds with others wasn't easy for Sasuke. He could at least admit to himself that he was damaged, and that damage constantly urged him to seek solace in a remote world consisting solely of himself. Solitude was comfortable, but it also fed an inconsolable ache in his heart.

Naruto had managed to push on past all the pain and create bonds with many, many people. Those bonds had made Naruto strong – not weak, as Sasuke had thought they would when he was young. And without the excuse of cutting all bonds for strength, Sasuke could afford to be honest.

He was tired of the pain of isolation. The last battle he'd had with Naruto after the Fourth Shinobi World War had shown him that.

The desire for connection might be a feeble desire, but it was a desire, and it helped drive his magic.
It alone was not *enough* desire for true devil magic perhaps, but it was something.

"Behave." Sasuke ordered roughly, unable to muster a more honest farewell as he let go of Rias' shoulder and turned away.

Let the Ruin Princess look after Isaiah for now. Sasuke couldn't bear to remain in a room with a boy who had such lonely desolate eyes thirsting endlessly for vengeance. It reminded him too much of himself.

"Would you like a hug, Naruto-sama?"

"You know the answer to that already, Akeno-chan!"

Giggling perversely as his face was buried into the dark haired young woman's midriff, Naruto basked in the slight weight of Akeno's heavy breasts resting on his forehead. If only he were a little older and a little taller, the real fun might begin.

The twin expressions of exasperation mingled with disgust writ across both Rias' and Sasuke's faces made it all worth it. The new kid wasn't half bad either, lurching back with a greenish tinge that clashed beautifully with Yuuto's blonde hair. Koneko was just as unruffled as ever.

"Naruto-sama."

"Akeno-chan."

"Naruto-sama."

"Akeno-chan!"

Crooning back and forth, the mismatched pair swayed with abandon. It was a farcical display, the much taller woman swinging the much shorter boy about like doll.

"God help us all." Sasuke sighed beneath his breath, only to wince as he was nipped by the attentions of the Biblical God. Rubbing his stinging forehead, the Uchiha continued to mutter mutinously under his breath while Rias' new Knight nodded empathetically along. Rias had decided to give the boy a new name so he could escape his past or some such nonsense. Sasuke hadn't complained, since it was none of his business, but he knew the effort was doomed to failure.

People were defined by their pasts. Even he couldn't cut his away, no matter how much Sasuke wanted to.

Rias coughed into her fist at her Pawn's muttered prayer, covering up the amused tilt of her lips.

"Right." Souji decided, watching the display with something like fond exasperation. "As much as I enjoy watching the byplay – bonus points for the borderline shotacon by the way, Naruto – you kids actually have work to do."

Detaching from his aunt's Queen with a mutinous grumble, the Gremory heir turned to pout at his father's Knight. "Seriously?"

"Yep." Souji grinned, popping the 'p' with a smack of the lips. "As it turns out, Zeoticus-sama has made a special request for all of you to take up patrol duties for the next week. He wants to see how you can perform as a completely military unit, rather than just as nobles."

The look on Rias' face quickly crossed from curious to deadpan. "What."
"Are you kidding me?" Naruto rolled his eyes, before an idea popped up that made him grin mischievously. "Nah, Souji-san are you seriously kidding me? Like are we fucking serious right now? When you tell us to wander around the borderlands with our dicks and-slash-or tits in our hands, is that an actual order? Like, do you actually want us to try and find our own assholes with both hands while looking for trouble? What happens in a military unit anyway? Do we get to have naked showers together and whip each other with towels? I hope this isn't some roundabout method to convince me to catch the gay by the way – I know that sometimes when you're in the army and you get the itch you gotta scratch, but I don't swing that way man. And I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that, but it's just not my style, you catch my drift?"

"Uhh."

"By the way, did I ever tell you that you have the best teeth? Like, I see those pearly whites and go 'damn son, I want me some of those'. What's the secret? Please don't tell me it's something like bleach. Bleach is for getting rid of the racy brown streaks in your underwear, not keeping your teeth clean. And I gotta insist on that. You gotta do things right. Too many people in this life are making it by cutting corners, and that's wrong. You can't just do things half assed and expect them to work out alright. But you already knew that didn't you?"

"What the literal fuck, Naruto?" Sasuke cut off the totally pointless ramble, eying the younger devil with a wary glance. It wasn't that utterly random and totally ridiculous rants were out of the question for Naruto, but even that one was a little off the wall.

Throwing a wink at his thoroughly befuddled aunt, Naruto shrugged. "Just thought I'd give him a bit of a twist, ya know?" Holding up his hands, he outlined a rough box. "Like, this is all you guys. You're all just farting away inside the box, living your in-the-box lives doing your in-the-box things. Me? I'm outside the box. None of you have a chance to outbox me. But once in a while one of you box people decide to try to box me in, and that's just not gonna work. Like Souji-san here. He thought he could box me in with a box people joke about how Grandpa Zeo would send us off to do something dumb as fuck like patrolling in the Underworld. So I just had to show him how someone that really lives outside the box fucks with people who really live in the box."

"...Are you retarded?" It was a legitimate question as far as Sasuke was concerned.

"Yes."

Souji blinked, slowly and deliberately before settling his dark eyes on each devil minus Naruto. "We are all going to pretend that never happened. As far as any of you remember, I decided to call you here to let you know that there's going to be a big fancy ball soon. There was no mind bending or disturbing speeches. Right?"

"Right." Akeno agreed, smirking slightly at her mistress' slightly ill look. "There's going to be a ball soon. We'll be ready for it, won't we hime-sama?"

Coming alive slowly, Rias nodded weakly. Most of the time, Naruto's brand of oddity was generally endearing. But sometimes, her nephew just went beyond the reasonably insane.

Souji shook off the last part of Naruto's confounding rant before grinning wickedly and clapping his hands. "Right. Right. You're all invited of course. It's a big to-do, so make sure to dress nicely. Attendance is mandatory, and you are all to be on your best behavior. It's to celebrate an engagement, so be sure to congratulate the future groom. The politics of the match are important."

"Yeah, yeah." Naruto waved the swordsman off dismissively. "We'll be there, say the right things, and look all pretty for all the old fogeys that are looking to tear a strip off Dad. No biggie." Turning
to face Akeno again, the Gremory heir leered and held his hands up to squeeze at the air in mock
demonstration.

A hand snagged the back of Naruto's collar, dragging the thirteen year old demon away from the
seductive priestess. Gagging and choking loudly, Naruto allowed Rias to pull him to a more socially
appropriate distance. "Who's the unlucky bastard anyway?"

"Ah." Souji grinned like the cat that go the canary. "Well it's a bit of a scandal you know. But
sometimes these things happen. Just make sure that when you're there you say hi to the bride. Ravel
Phenex doesn't have a lot of friends yet, but I'm sure the groom will help her out. Naruto Gremory is
just the kind of husband a girl like that would want to have."

Naruto's brain short-circuited.

"Haa?"

"Don't give me that look kid."

Frowning fiercely, Naruto crossed his arms over his chest. "I thought I told you to avoid stupid jokes,
Souji."

Sirzechs' Knight shook his head, stepping forward to settle a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder.
He squeezed reassuringly, killing his desire to wince after all the humor was sucked right out of the
air. "It's not a joke, Naruto. It's real."

Silence hung in the air as Naruto's face went white. The Gremory heir was subject to more than one
pitying look. A surge of relief swirled in Rias' stomach at the realization that her loss in that duel all
those years ago had spared her the fate of an arranged marriage, only to curdle into guilt at the
knowledge that her luck was Naruto's misfortune.

Sasuke had no such compunctions, sadistic fuck that he was in Naruto's opinion. The Uchiha neatly
sidestepped the stricken girls to peer down at his best friend and rival. "Allow me to just say
something: good job." he blandly congratulated, offering a thumbs up.

"Fuck you!"
Chapter 10

The blue eyes that peeked back at Naruto through the mirror were tired, ringed with shadows and perched over sallow cheeks.

Licking the tip of his fingers, Naruto made one last effort to tame his flyaway red strands before giving it up as a lost cause. He'd managed to force his shaggy mane into some semblance of neat order, but Naruto was beginning to doubt anyone could ever force the last bit of spiky wildness out of his locks. No matter the life, polite just wasn't in his follicles.

He hadn't even made it to the ball and Naruto was already choking in his stiff formal clothes. The black silk waistcoat and trousers were comfortable enough, but the heavy ruby pendant hanging from his teenaged neck was a constant heavy reminder of the duties he'd inherited. The duties of marriage and fathering the next generation of clan leadership.

Marriage contracting wasn't something that had ever really hit Naruto before. The fact that he'd likely be arranged off and married to some stranger had never seemed real until the moment he realized Souji wasn't taking the piss. And after Naruto had discovered it was no joke, he'd spent the next month in a hurricane of emotion.

There was anger at his parents and grandparents for agreeing to it in the first place. There was guilt as Naruto couldn't make himself accept it even after finding out that his marriage had held off a national crisis. There was despair at the loss of the freely chosen future he'd been taking for granted. There was even self-hatred as he couldn't stop himself from wishing the Phenex girl had never been born, or that it had been Rias sold off like a broodmare instead.

Forcing himself to keep his head on straight and not lash out at everyone had been a monumental effort for Naruto, but he'd powered through. When the going got tough, and he was needed, Naruto still felt he willing to sacrifice his own safety and-slash-or happiness for the good of the many. It was a trait Naruto had managed to hold onto through both lifetimes, and something that put guilty pride in his parents' faces.

Blood and ashes though. No amount of moralizing and rationalizing and telling himself he was hanging the fucking moon was making it easier. He wasn't ready. Naruto would never be ready. A month of preparing hadn't made Naruto any more willing to meet his betrothed and speak to her.

Naruto's deep red cotton topcoat was shoved into his hands, dragging the Gremory heir out of his depressed musings as Sasuke grounded him back in the real world.

"Enough with the preening." Sasuke sneered. The rough tone would be brutal to anyone else, but Naruto knew Sasuke well enough to recognize the concern in his friend. He appreciated the effort to give him some of their confrontational banter to hang onto.

Scoffing back, the redhead shoved his arms through the sleeves and left the coat hanging open. Ruby cufflinks found their place in short order, further emphasizing the Gremory family colouring. Red hair, red magic, and red clothes – if they'd had red eyes, it would have completed the set.

"No need to be rude, servant." Naruto mocked, giving himself a final once over in the giant mirror. "Keep that act up and I'll never promote you being to my personal ass kisser."

"As if anyone would want to put their mouth near that filthy unwashed crack of yours."

"I'll have you know that lots of women are ardent admirers of these beautiful cheeks."
The cuff Sasuke gave Naruto about the ears had little force behind it, and Rias' Pawn rolled his eyes. "We done here, Lord Shitty Arse?"

Giving the Uchiha a considering glance, Naruto wondered if the black tuxedo was appropriate. Yes, the fashions of the human world bled over into the Underworld very easily, but they were more popular among the young devils and the nouveau nobility. The stubbornness of the old nobility was why Naruto dressed like someone out of Victorian Britain.

But as a servant, Sasuke was probably given more leeway. It might even look better to the other families if Naruto's friend looked noticeably less done up than the household which was at least nominally lording over him.

"Yeah, we're done here. You better get back to Rias. Wouldn't want her to cry that I'm stealing you from her." Naruto dismissed.

Sasuke snorted, rolling his eyes again before summoning a teleportation circle. "You're assuming you could steal me from anyone." Purple underglow the same colour as the Uchiha's Susanoo had been in another life sinisterly lit up the older teens' features. Opening his mouth, the raven seeming to struggle to find something to say before Sasuke's jaw clicked shut again and he vanished in a shower of radiant motes.

As much as Naruto wanted his friend at his side, the right observances had to be made. Sasuke was in Rias' peerage, not Naruto's, and would have to at least enter the room by her side.

Naruto had no peerage, and he was old enough not to be tagging along with his parents' entourage. For now, he was alone.

The champagne that cloyed over his tongue was lighter and more bubbly than anything Sasuke had tasted before. His family might have been considered of high breeding in Konoha, but the utter extravaganza surrounding him seemed like fairytale nonsense compared to the few formal gatherings Sasuke had attended before the massacre of the clan.

If there was a point where displays of wealth ceased to be tasteful and became ridiculously gaudy, the Phenex clan had long since passed it. Rias had warned him before they'd entered to expect the riches of Naruto's betrothed's house to be on display, but even that wasn't enough to prevent the initial shock.

Faded frescos filled every inch of the marble ceiling, inlaid with precious metals and gems. Two dozen chandeliers hung overhead, heavy multicolored crystal suspended with thick red gold arms. Not an inch of the original ivory colour of the marble was visible beneath all the decoration and jewelry. The walls were no better, festooned with jewel encrusted candelabras lit up with deep red magical flames. The combined effect was somewhere between Italian Renaissance, nouveau rich, and modern mosh pit, and the winding staircase that led up to a landing looked remarkably out of place.

Marquis Phenex seemed a base man, Sasuke scorned inwardly, keeping his polite mask screwed on tight.

The family was the third richest in Gehenna, but far from the third highest ranked. That the Lord of the house felt due a princely title was no great secret, and all the bribering of lesser houses for their votes the Marquis did was just an attempt to make up for the lack of recognition. For Naruto's sake, Sasuke hoped the granddaughter was less grasping, and that the father-in-law was more humble than
the current lord of the clan.

Turning with the gentle pull of Rias' left hand in the crook of his arm, Sasuke twisted to face yet another pair of minor nobles. There might be only 33 old families, but the extended branches of those produced dozens if not hundreds of scrabbling leeches that had no semblance and nothing to them beyond their name. Combined with the new nobility made up from commoners and reincarnated devils that had crawled up through the Rating Games, there seemed to be no end to the well-wishers and arse kissers that wanted an in with the Ruin Princess. Rias might no longer be the heir, but she was still connected.

Sasuke kept a discreet eye on his mistress, watching as she navigated the arena with a practiced tongue and a falsely friendly disposition. Offering the required niceties when greeted and false prompts about needing to go see old acquaintances when the frown between Rias' brows grew too obvious, the Uchiha felt more like a gravure idol's manager and less like a date.

Not that Sasuke was burning with romantic urges for the young woman, but he was at least nominally her plus one. Himejima, Toujou, and Kiba had all been sidelined into the shadows along with most of the other servants, leaving the Uchiha in the hot seat to handle all the shit that popped up.

Look like pretty arm candy. Chat with all the meddling geezers that liked to offer wistful commentary about youth romance. Offer the appropriate lies to escape when Rias seemed to be worn out. Scare off horny teen devils that couldn't take one of her hints with black glares.

"Next time, don't wear something so eye-catching." Sasuke criticized, confused by the sunny smile she responded with.

Whatever. If she hadn't wanted to be accosted by so many people, Rias shouldn't have worn the sweeping emerald charmeuse gown. While it covered her very modestly to the neck and to her wrists, even the long wrapping scarf failed to conceal the tight strain of her woman's curves against the fabric.

Naruto was… somewhere. Sasuke had heard him announced almost an hour past and had caught distant glimpses, but the Uchiha wasn't about to ditch Rias and go shoving through the crowd to find him.

For one, Sasuke had suffered enough of Naruto's moping for the month-long period between the invitation and the party itself. While Sasuke wasn't unsympathetic, there was a limit to the Uchiha's ability to play counsellor. Rias might have practically lent him to Naruto for the month, but that didn't make Sasuke any better at being touchy feely.

Second, even if Rias had freely chosen to nag Sasuke into playing babysitter, the crimson haired girl was no shinobi. Her mask was good, but not that good, and the Uchiha knew that her own act of kindness had made her desperately unhappy. The inferiority complex was borderline ridiculous, and if Sasuke hadn't suffered one of his own for practically all his life, he'd be less willing to tolerate her insecurities.

As it was, Sasuke did know how it felt to consider himself constantly inferior to a sibling or rival. So he couldn't quite kill the prick in his heart that told him to hang around and look after her for the first time in weeks instead of her nephew.

A flash of red drew Sasuke's dark eye, and there Naruto was. The younger devil still looked slightly pale, but at least Naruto was functioning. Keeping the Gremory heir in his line of sight, Sasuke bent down to murmur in his mistress' ear. "Time to go play backup?"
Rias laughed off another comment from a wrinkled old crone, waving her away with exaggerated amusement and fondness even as her sea-green eyes tracked along the ground to find Naruto as well. Pink lips curved back up in a false smile, portraying the image of beautiful young socialite as she weighed the idea.

"Yes." Rias decided, reaffirming her grip on Sasuke's arm as they began to meander forward. "I know you've been looking after him for the last month, but I think he'll still need the support. The wife-to-be is still somewhere about after all, and we might need to run damage control."

Grunting in agreement, the Uchiha took the lead and with his greater bulk pressed through the crowd. Sasuke heard her faint "Sorry, we're just going to greet my nephew" repeated several times along the way.

As the redhead brushed off yet another puffed up noble, a whirl of blonde and pink broke through the crowd near Naruto. Sasuke didn't need to know who she was to recognize the sharp-eyed expression of expectation.

Sasuke cursed beneath his breath, changing their course from polite wandering to a rude beeline directly through the crowd. The welcoming expression on the Gremory heir's face froze as Ravel politely curtsied with a child's exuberance. They were too distant for the Uchiha to make out the words, but Sasuke knew that there was limited time before Naruto managed to put his foot in his mouth.

"They're already together." He informed Rias after a particularly rough push from the crowd drove an annoyed huff out her lungs.

Rias made a noise of comprehension, leaning against him to add her weight to their shoving. The crowd parted like the Red Sea before Moses, and the pair burst through the press of bodies just quick enough to catch the tail end of Naruto's nervous chuckle.

"Aha, well it was really nice to meet you. I'm gonna have to step out for a bit though, I'm not feeling too good. I'll see you later." With that, the Gremory heir turned and fled back into the crowd.

Untangling her arm from Sasuke's, Rias gave her Pawn a push to the small of his back. "You go, I'll handle this." The Ruin Princess watched as the Uchiha wordlessly nodded and broke away before spinning to give a smiling curtsy.

"Good evening, Lady Phenex."

Ingrained courtesy derailed Ravel's progression from confused to offended, and the blond girl curtsied back. "Good evening to you too, but Lady Phenex is my grandmother. I'm just Ravel." For an eleven year old girl her motions were well-practiced and elegant, but Ravel hadn't quite mastered the 'mask', and blazing anger created by being spurned shone in her blue eyes.

Rias decided she felt sorry for the poor thing.

"Nonsense." Rias winked one turquoise eye as the redhaired young woman straightened. "Stuffy old rules are for stuffy old men, and I think you look more like a real lady than everyone else in the room."

Watching the way the little girl's cheeks pimked with pleased embarrassment, Rias stepped closer and bent down to whisper conspiratorially "Just between you and me, I'm bored to death of all the puffed up fossils here. Want to walk with me a bit?"

Biting her lip in indecision, Ravel scanned the mingling crowd and smoothed down her pink gown.
The blonde eventually gave a small but real grin, tugging at the drill-like curl of a pigtail. "Okay, nee-san."

Rias grinned back, taking the child's hand and gently leading her away from the center of the ballroom. The areas near to the walls and corners were where the servants milled, but were more private and would be less likely to overwhelm the girl than the constant press of strangers. "Silly me, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Rias Gremory."

"I know that, Miss Rias," Ravel puffed with a smile. "I've never seen anyone with hair like yours. Except Lord Gremory and Lord Lucifer. And Naruto," The last name trailed out with a hint of irritation, and Rias capitalized on it.

Wagging a well-manicured finger at the younger girl, Rias cut right to the root of it. "Turn that frown upside down, missy. No girl should be sad at her own engagement party. Especially a beautiful young lady like you."

Ravel's lips thinned with displeasure, and as the little girl fisted the pink silk of her dress Rias reflected that leading her to the shadowed corner had been the right thing to do. "It's a little bit difficult to be full of joy when my own betrothed hates me. I simply tried to say hello and he ran away."

"Well of course he ran away." Rias chuckled lightly, beckoning the girl closer with a finger. "But it's not because he hates you. It's because he's scared."

The look the Phenex girl offered was confused, but at least the boiling resentment had stopped. "What? Why would he be scared?" Annoyance shifted Ravel's mouth into a pout. "Did one of my brothers go and tell him they were going to beat him up? Seems like the kind of thing Riser would do."

If only they had. It would be such a convenient little white lie.

"Nothing like that." Lowering her voice to a whisper, Rias made a show of casting an eye out for eavesdroppers. "The truth is – ah, I shouldn't tell you. Naruto wouldn't like it if I spilled his secrets."

All traces of anger fled the blonde's face, and Ravel transformed into something very familiar to Rias – a child eager to hear gossip. "I can keep secrets." Ravel promised instantly, staring up at the redhaired girl with spellbound excitement. "I'm the best at keeping secrets."

Pretending to consider it, Rias held off until Ravel looked fit to burst before caving. "Okay, I'll tell you, but you have to promise you won't say anything to anyone. Especially Naruto."

"I swear!"

"Pinky swear?"

Ravel held up a dainty little finger, which Rias shook with her own with all the solemnity of a priest conducting a funeral.

"Okay, so the secret is that Naruto is a romantic. He's a huge one." Rias emphasized when Ravel only looked confused. "When we were younger, he used to beg me to read him love stories. And now that he's older he spends his time watching romcoms and reading girly romance novels."

Building on the lie with a sense of sadistic humor, Rias only smirked when Ravel's face filled with shock.
Ravel cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "No way!"

"Yes way! That's why he ran away. Naruto's been dreaming all his life about meeting a wonderful girl, getting married, and having lots of babies. But now that he actually met you, he's so afraid he'll muck it up that he wanted to run away. I was surprised he did because he spent the whole month talking about meeting you tonight, but Naruto can be really shy."

Ravel clasped her hands together, barely able to contain her amusement at Naruto's supposed sappiness. "That's so cute! I don't think any of my other suitors were like that. Most of them were boring and loved to talk about money. Why didn't I think of it before? It's so simple."

Satisfied that engagement had been repaired for the night on her end, Rias wished Sasuke luck in straightening out her nephew. She held her pinky up again. "I know! That's why I want you to promise me that you'll remember – no matter how much he runs away or how shy he is, Naruto is really just a softy that wants to be loved. So you hang in there, and never give up."

"Alright. I'll pinky swear!"

Sasuke burst into the restroom like a bat out of hell. Taking one look at the pale faced Naruto staring into the mirror like a zombie, the Uchiha flipped the taps. Then he scooped up a handful of water and splashed it directly into the redhead's eyes.

"What the hell was that?" Sasuke bit out, watching as his friend spluttered and rubbed the wetness away with a sleeve.

"Fuck off, Sasuke."

Waiting until the redhead had scrubbed his face dry, Sasuke threw another handful of water into Naruto's eyes. "Want to tell me what the hell that was, dobe? Because that sure looked to me like you forgot your balls at home."

Blue eyes glared balefully at the Uchiha for a breath before Naruto shook his head and fled into the toilet stall.

Sasuke stood alone in the rich ebony and silver accented washroom, thankful that they were alone and that he'd thought to lock the door. Then he raised a leg and kicked the stall open with a crash.

"What the hell Sasuke? Can't you just piss off and leave me be for a bit?" Naruto growled, rising from his seat on the toilet and glowering. "I'd have thought you understood the idea of needing a little fucking space, fuck!"

Taking in the younger devil's defensive stance, guarded face, and clenched jaw with a considering glance, Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Nope. Fuck this. I'm not your fucking psychologist."

Then Sasuke fled, leaving Naruto momentarily befuddled until the Uchiha returned with an armful of blue glass bottles. Watching as Sasuke popped the corks on a pair of the bottles, Naruto accepted one and held it up to his nose.

"The fuck you giving me booze for?"

"Drink it." Sasuke ordered, taking a swig and grimacing faintly at the sweet bubbling champagne. "I'm not dealing with your delicate girly feelings sober, and we have until the end of the next hour to get your shit straightened out. If you're not on the floor when old man Phenex decides to give his
"speech, this whole night will be a clusterfuck."

Swirling the bottle but not lifting it his lips, Naruto dubiously watched Sasuke pound back the thousand-dollar wine like it was illicit moonshine. "Not that I'm going to judge if you decide you need to live a little, but I'm pretty sure this is illegal. I am a minor."

"As if you care." Sasuke snorted, setting aside the empty bottle with a quiet burp and stepping forward.

"Wait, what are you-"

"Hold still, dumbass."

And that was how Naruto found himself pressed to the bathroom wall by another man at his own engagement party, alcohol being poured down his throat despite his protests. If they didn't reek like a pair of boozehounds by the end of Sasuke's escapade, Naruto would eat his own boxers.

"Fuck!" Shouting and spluttering, Naruto shoved the other boy away. "I should kick your ass for that you bastard!"

"Oooh, I'm so scared." Sasuke mocked, opening another pair of bottles and passing one to Naruto. "I might start taking you seriously if you get enough liquid courage into you. Otherwise, I don't think you've got enough spine left."

Nursing his bottle with a mutinous frown but more cooperation, the Gremory heir kicked at the Uchiha's knee. "I've got more spine in my pinky than you've got in your whole body, shitbird."

Sasuke rolled his eyes but subsided, waiting for the alcohol to take its toll. Long minutes passed in silence, broken only by the popping of corks and Sasuke's impatient urging for Naruto to drink faster.

Judging the other devil intoxicated enough after the fourth bottle, Sasuke passed Naruto a fifth with a repeat of his earlier demand. "Feel like telling me what the fuck that was out there?"

"What the hell are you talkin' about?"

The sweetness of the champagne became more pleasant the drunker Sasuke got, and he barely remembered to grimace at the taste. "I mean the whole 'haha excuse me while I run away and hide in the bathroom like a little bitch'?"

"Fuck you." Naruto rejoined with little heat, peering through the open end of his bottle at the emptiness inside. The alcohol burned pleasantly in his bloodstream. "I wasn't ready for it."

"Ready for what?"

Throwing up a hand, Naruto whipped his arm in a vague circle. "I wasn't ready for this. All of this! I'm thirteen years old! I'm not supposed to be getting engaged and married off for at least another three decades at the earliest."

"Don't bullshit me." Sasuke snorted, loosening his green bowtie with one hand and leaning back against the counter. "You're thirty-three or thirty-four, you grown-ass man. Back home you'd be married with a few brats on the way, if not comfortably middle aged given how long shinobi typically lived. Why is the Hero of the Hidden Leaf hiding in some rich snob's bathroom?"

Seizing Sasuke's coat by the lapels, Naruto shook the older devil. "That's not who I am anymore!"
the denial was full of such anguish that Sasuke's mouth dropped slightly open. "Don't you get it? This is the life we've got now! All the suffering, everything we fought for, all the sacrifices our friends made, it's nothing!"

Naruto's hands dropped away, and the redhead rubbed his eyes with a sleeve. "Uzumaki Naruto doesn't exist anymore. Only Naruto Gremory does, and he's still a kid. A kid that wants to hold onto his family. A kid that doesn't want to have to bury his friends. A kid that wants to grow up properly, and make all the stupid little memories everyone takes for granted. He wants to meet a nice girl and fall in love with her, and get married and start a family of his own when he chooses it – not because he had to do it for the sake of the world!"

"Stop whining, it's pathetic!" Sasuke ordered sharply.

Running his thumb over the lip of his bottle, Sasuke set it aside. "You're wrong." He declared after a beat, carefully observing the play of emotions across Naruto's face with dark eyes. "Uzumaki Naruto is not dead. He still exists, and he always will. Naruto Gremory wouldn't have known to treasure those bonds. He'd take them, and the future he wanted for granted. But you value those things, and that's how I know that Uzumaki Naruto will always be alive in you. So dispense with your excuses you big baby. I have nothing else to say to a loser that forgot everything we learned from our hardships."

In a way, Naruto had it more difficult in the new world than Sasuke had. Sure, the Uchiha had suffered poverty with a body that had little natural talent. He'd been alone and weak, threatened with death many times over. But he hadn't had to give up dozens of bonds. He hadn't had to leave the Konoha he wanted to build behind. The sacrifices his family had made for him were for him to live, which Sasuke was doing in any world. The sacrifices Naruto's friends had made were for a Konoha he'd promised them but would never be able to see.

"That was almost profound, bastard." Chuckling thickly, Naruto opened another blue bottle and took a sip. "Careful now, I might think you're growing soft."

Sasuke's lip curled with contempt. "Think what you want. I just can't help but feel like it's fucking sad that Uzumaki Naruto is scared of a little arranged marriage. Get your shit together. I didn't lose the Hokage's hat to a pansy."

"Yeah, yeah, you're as bad as a woman. Everything is about you and your emotional clusterfuck."

"I'm telling your mother you said that."

"Fuck you!"

Rias glanced up at the enormous staircase with a worried expression. Her Pawn and nephew were cutting it pretty close. There were scant few minutes until the elderly Marquis Phenex would appear at the top of the stairs leading down into the ballroom to give a speech, and if the husband-to-be was not in the room, there would be unfortunate talk.

Smoothing over everything with Ravel had been easy enough. The eleven year old girl was sweet and pretty – and even intelligent – but she hadn't yet grown perceptive. Ravel hadn't really considered that all of Rias' friendliness and informality was a deliberate attempt to repair the bad impression Naruto's poor behavior had created.

It was good to see that some youth even in the Underworld were still that innocent.

Sasuke reappeared like a whirlwind, stepping closer than was strictly polite as her formal 'plus one'
and giving one of her admirers such a filthy glare that it was a wonder the boy didn't wet himself as he fled.

Rias could smell the faint woodsmoke aroma he always had clinging to his skin, along with the familiar smell of the champagne the servers had been offering. "Are you drunk?" she hissed, growing more incensed when he only smirked roguishly.

"I can't believe you! Did you get Naruto drunk too?" Grabbing the crook of her Pawn's elbow with far more force than necessary, Rias screwed on a polite look of interest as Marquis Phenex appeared at the top of the marble steps.

Sasuke's face took on a mask of its own, one friendlier than the face he'd been wearing before he'd disappeared with her nephew. "There's no need to get so jealous, Rias. I'll get drunk with you any time you want."

Heat flared in her cheeks, and the Ruin Princess discreetly stepped on Sasuke's toes. "That's not the point! He's thirteen years old – he's an underage minor that has no business getting mixed up with such things."

"I think you might be expecting a little more innocence from him than he actually has, especially for a devil." Sasuke commented wryly. "He's an old hand at this. See him over at the front there? Looks perfectly sober."

She was appalled and indignant, and maybe just a teensy bit jealous. "An old hand? Are you telling me he's some kind of alcoholic? Even if that's correct, that doesn't mean I want you enabling him. Besides, aren't you also underage? Who's enabling you?"

"That's enough, mom. It's starting."

"Fine, but don't think I'm forgetting this."

Marquis Phenex was a dignified looking man. Silver blended seamlessly with the blonde hairs at his temples and peppered through his goatee. Blood red robes clung to a body more muscular than was to be expected from a middle-aged man, and a single thing gold chain hung from his neck. It was in all far less gaudy and grotesque than what was to be expected from the kind of man that had designed the ballroom they were standing in.

Settling a hand over the banister, the Marquis smiled generously down at his milling guests and servants and waited for the low buzz of chatter to subside. It was a testament to their breeding and training that the crowd quieted within the minute.

"Welcome, my friends." Lord Phenex boomed, settling a hand over his heat in a dramatic display of approachability. "Thank you for coming to take part in this momentous celebration. Truly, it is an honor to have so many familiar faces here – and even unfamiliar ones!"

The Marquis might be given to lavish and crass displays, but he wasn't stupid. He knew he wasn't the so-called 'star' of the evening, even if the real victory belonged to him, and the crowd wouldn't stand for him to self-aggrandize. "It warms my heart to see so much support for my granddaughter and her betrothed. To Ravel Phenex and Naruto of the Gremory family. This night is for them, and for the bright future!"

Hoisting a flute full of pink champagne, Lord Phenex assumed a mantle of false magnanimity. "A toast, to the future!"

"The future." The crowd echoed back dutifully, a smattering of glasses raised here and there. Dozens
of faces turned towards Naruto and Ravel, who stood side-by-side at the foot of the staircase. Both young devils were the picture of regality, their finery without a single crease and their faces welcoming but formal.

Smirking with self-satisfaction, the Marquis snapped his fingers with a glow of scarlet magic. "Now, let the dance begin!"

Music filled the air, and Rias turned to offer her other hand to Sasuke. "Well, at least you managed to get him here. Let's just hope the two of you don't end up making drunken fools of yourselves. I'm going to take revenge for every smushed toe you give me."
Chapter 11

Koneko's stomach rumbled irritably, rich sausage settling uneasily. The hors d'oeuvre mingled unpleasantly with the airy champagne Lord Phenex plied onto his guests. If not for courtesy's sake, the nekomata would not have eaten any of it. But she hardly had the social standing to go around insulting the head of the Phenex family, so like all the other servants Koneko had smiled politely and partaken of the bounty of their host.

Hazel eyes glittered as Koneko frowned and turned to mingle back into the shadows. The darkness that clung to the walls was surely artificial - to a nekomata's sensitive nose, the air was rife with the scent of ozone and devil magic. But even if she hadn't been able to smell it, Koneko would have been able to tell. With the Marquis' thick flaming multicolor torches bolted to the wall, twenty solid feet of shade stretching out from the wall was violating the laws of physics just a little bit.

The whole atmosphere was the dim sorcery and the intoxicated hedonism that the nobility loved. Rias and Naruto disdained it as the aberrant perverse taste of a garish man. They were wrong. Koneko may have been younger than Rias, but the Gremory family were not her first masters, and the nekomata recognized the Marquis' preferences as the rule rather than the exception.

It was the Gremory clan that was unusual in the Underworld. Not Marquis Phenex and not any of the other libertine bluebloods.

Stepping around a much taller and much older butler, Koneko eyed the wrinkled devil with a touch of asperity. There went yet another servant of the Vassago, still reeking of the blood and sexual fluids of some young girl. The treaty negotiations with Heaven may have criminalized further predation in the human world, but almost every clan had enough humans in their slave pens to breed for service and sport indefinitely.

Naruto was a kind hearted noble fool if he believed he could change such a world bloodlessly. No 'secret' conspiracy or fragile legislature could change the very nature of a people overnight, and that Naruto even thought he could succeed made him dizzyingly naïve as far as Koneko was concerned.

Oh, Koneko was sure that he and Sairaorg thought they were sneaky, but few details made it past Koneko's watch. The nekomata was quiet and sneaky and observant, and more than once she'd overheard servants in the Gremory house painting her as Rias' little spy. And if Koneko knew, others no doubt did as well.

Koneko might be good, but she wasn't the best. Not that it would stop her from soaking up anything she could catch. It was what Koneko was at the ball in the first place to do, and what she did at any social gathering.

Observe Naruto and any conversation that looked more than formal. Trail Yuuto around and make sure the new Knight didn't flounder in the journey from prisoner to genteel companion. Confer with Akeno periodically about what she'd seen. Keep an eye on Rias and anyone that might be watching her. And check on Sasuke, whose loyalty was always unfortunately in question.

Three years a Pawn and Koneko was still unable to be sure which side he'd fall on in a conflict. Sasuke was more agreeable than the nekomata had expected. The determination to succeed he displayed when training, the dry wit, and sparks of kindness buried beneath a cool façade were all traits the Koneko could appreciate. But none of that made him loyal.

Koneko liked Sasuke, but she didn't trust him. There was too much uncertain hunger in the Uchiha's
voice. Too much control over the aristocratic features of his face. Too much distance in the way he rendered leal service.

Rias occasionally got worked up over worries that one day Sasuke would cut ties and jump ship to Naruto, but that was a result of Rias' own insecurities. Koneko knew better.

The same gelid light shone in Sasuke's eyes that had bloomed in Kuroka's before Koneko's sister had rent blood and bone in a capricious battle for freedom. It spoke of dissatisfaction and a need for purpose, and as long as Sasuke held that fell shine, Koneko would never put faith in him. A man like that was a double edged hiltless blade for any master.

She just hoped that Rias managed to gentle Sasuke with bonds of affection before the Uchiha grew strong enough to do harm to them. Otherwise Koneko might have to take a blade and mangle her mistress' heart. Rias' ideas of friendship were not worth the Ruin Princess' life, and Koneko was cold enough to put a mad dog down.

Through the haze of alcohol and the trumpeting tempo of the Wienar Blut, Naruto was forced to admit that he'd fucked up. The mere thought of being married off was still enough to send the Gremory heir's stomach into a nervous swoop, but his fiancé was not at fault.

It was hard to maintain anger and distance at a eleven year old girl. Ravel Phenex was no schemer. She was only very small and very pink, and not at all evil.

The lack of intimidation didn't make Naruto's thick tongue any less stilted though. Harmless she might seem, but Ravel was still a ball and chain. "I have to say, I admire your dress. Was it commissioned in-house?" Stupid, stupid small talk.

Sasuke would have chuckled his fucking ass off, the prick.

Ravel pinked, shaking her head slightly as Naruto led her through a tight spin. "No. It's a Focalor piece. Viazhal, not Matilde."

They grimaced in shared sympathy. Viazhal was a sour old crone with a tongue sharp as her needles and little care where or how she poked. If not for her status as the mother of the Lord, few indeed would share space with her.

Alas, Viazhal Focalor was the mother of the Duke Focalor, and she'd been a fixture in Underworld fashion for half a millennium. Any noble with the means to buy them had at least a dozen dresses or suits designed by her, even if her great granddaughter Matilde was almost as skilled and a hundred times more personable.

"Did you cry?" Naruto teased, drawing on every ounce of his geniality and managing a wide smirk. "I know that dusty wrinkled biddy gets her kicks from it. Fond memories to warm her icy cold heart at night. God knows that's the most she could hope for."

Ravel giggled under her breath, blue eyes briefly scanning the crowd before returning to her betrothed. "I didn't. Riser did though. Ruval told me that when he was little, he used to hide in the bathroom for hours crying when momma told him that Viazhal would be coming to design him a suit."

Cocking a scarlet brow, Naruto pulled the girl through another twist. "Are you sure?" he wondered dubiously. Naruto had actually met Riser Phenex before. Delicate and emotional were not the first, or even the tenth words the redhead would have used to describe him. "He seems like a yakuza. I'd have thought tears were too girly for such a big manly man."
"Riser's a weirdo." The Phenex girl offered bluntly, grinning and curtsying as the first dance came to an end on a long haunting violin note. "He's a perverted older brother. He keeps bugging me to join his peerage because he wants a 'little sister type'."

What.

That was just – the implications of that.

Incest wasn't strictly frowned on by the Underworld, but it was hardly like they were all Nero either. And Naruto was the furthest thing from that, because beneath the devil flesh he'd still lived twenty odd years as a human.

"Absolutely not." Escaped Naruto's mouth as the pair turned to step off the central floor and to the side with much of the crowd. Regardless of if Ravel was his fiancé, that didn't mean Naruto was going to tolerate some incestuous pedophile deviant sniffing around. He'd thought better of Riser, but apparently, the blond bastard was a pervert – and probably a panty sniffer to boot!

Ravel grinned mischievously, looking less like the daughter of the gallant house of hellbirds and more like a scamp. "Why not? Are you jealous?" The informality wasn't what she'd been educated to do, but bringing people to a less rigid mood was one of Naruto's skills.

"Sure, whatever. I'm just not okay with some pervert siscon hovering around any underage girl."

Naruto rolled his eyes.

Amusement crossed Ravel's elfin face, and the blonde rolled her eyes right back. "Yeah okay, ojisan. Relax, Riser's a perv but he's not that kind of perv. He just wants to collect them all, like Pokémon or postage stamps or something."

The absurd image of Riser Phenex dressed to the nines in Ash Ketchum's gear, running about the Underworld throwing pokeballs at young women flashed behind Naruto's eyes, and he broke. A wild howl of laughter rippled out of his throat, drawing a disgusted look from a middle-aged demoness.

"You're just a little spitfire aren't you?"

The rolling sound of Naruto's braying laugh just barely broke over the music and chatter, and the look Rias gave Sasuke was outright mutinous. Evidently, it was Sasuke's fault if Naruto couldn't handle his liquor and made a fucking fool of himself. Then she stepped sharply on his toes with a harsh heel, but his sense of pain numbed by the alcohol burning through his bloodstream.

"That was not so polite." Sasuke scolded, swaying the redhead in his arms with pure grace and no evidence of his drunken state.

Rias hummed, baring her white throat as her Pawn dipped her. "You know what else is not so polite? Stealing the wine of our host and getting drunk with my thirteen-year-old nephew in the bathroom."

"You're still on about that?"

The verdant green of her dress leeched the blue from Rias' eyes, letting the orbs shimmer like burnished emeralds. If not for the nauseating mingled orange and yellow that pulsed over the ballroom with yet another rotation of the colours of Phenex's magical flames, Sasuke could have appreciated it.
"You make it sound so nefarious." Sasuke chuckled, low baritone vocal cords rumbling. The bowtie around his neck was not quite tightened properly, and when the cloth rustled once more against the skin of his neck, the Uchiha had to violently repress the urge to tear it off. "But I forgive you. Jealousy can be fetching at times."

Fucking alcohol. It was supposed to make him mellow and lethargic, not hypersensitive to every little fucking thing. The violently rainbow lights annoyed Sasuke. The way Sasuke and Rias followed Naruto and Ravel surreptitiously around the dance floor like lost puppies annoyed Sasuke. Koneko's eyes digging into the back of his skull from time to time annoyed Sasuke. And most of all, the way Rias' soft form was teasingly pressed against him when the music picked up annoyed him.

Contrary to popular belief, Sasuke was not asexual. His trouser snake worked, and in times like this, it worked too damn well.

*Down boy.*

Red flamed Rias' cheeks, and she hissed under her breath as they drew close once more. "I am *not* jealous." The denial was steady with just the right amount of heat behind it, and anyone else might have immediately believed it. But Sasuke hadn't been her Pawn for three years for nothing, and the way her gaze instantly shifted to just above his eyes was a familiar tell.

"Liar." Stifling the low prickle of amusement as the girl responded with a pout, Sasuke allowed Rias to subtly lead them around the very edges of the dance floor.

There was something *very wrong* with him. He was acting more like the flirt he might have ended up as in another life than his usual self. Mustering up the effort to worry about it was beyond Sasuke at the moment.

Marshaling up the effort to do *anything* but surrender to the heated warmth of intoxication seemed like too much trouble. The long years were unwinding in him, and Sasuke was *tired* of building walls and cultivated isolation.

"You're going to have an awful hangover in the morning." Rias informed him primly, turquoise eyes tracking Naruto and Ravel as the older pair waltzed on by. The glimpse seemed enough to satisfy her, especially with Akeno lurking just beyond the ring of illumination.

"So are you."

"Excuse me?"

"I told you didn't I? There's no need to be jealous. I'll drink with you any time. In fact, I say we should beg off from here as soon as possible and head back home. I'm sure you've got something decent to drink tucked away there."

"You are impossible."

"That wasn't a *no.*"

Yuuto hadn't meant to see it. But then, Yuuto hadn't meant a lot of things in his life. He hadn't meant to be a nameless orphan. He hadn't meant to be picked up by the Church and called 'Isaiah'. He hadn't meant to fail his friends and be killed by the Holy Sword Project, and he certainly hadn't meant to be resurrected and given a new name by his so-called mistress.

Fetching another tray of topped up champagne from the kitchens seemed like the simplest thing in
the world. It wouldn't have even been his first trip down there on his little 'servant duty' that night, though it was Yuuto's first trip alone, and things not going how he'd meant them to seemed for once impossible.

But then, if Yuuto had to guess, very few people meant to turn a corner and encounter two men engaged in exhibitionist homosexual acts. There's a certain sensation of riveted horror and mortification that rages through the body when one walks in on intercourse. When that intercourse involves one green haired pretty boy pressed up against the wall moaning with his pants around the ankles while a burly blue haired man pounds away at him, the shock was that much worse.

The Church would have had a fit, thundering about the will of God, casting hellfire and damnation on all sodomites.

The blonde Knight could only stare open mouthed in disbelief, unable to help noticing the slow flex of the taller man's muscular buttocks as he thrust into his smaller lover. It was like the front row seat to Yuuto's very own private freak show. The air he breathed was full of the smack of flesh-on-flesh and the faintest trace of something fishy he could only call 'the sex smell'.

Taking a shuddering breath, Yuuto forced his legs to move. Five steps back and soundlessly around the corner once more.

What the fuck kind of world was this? The Church had always taught him that devils were base creatures lost to lust, but Yuuto hadn't actually seen any of that in Rias or her family. If the Gremory family was having sex, they weren't doing it in public where anyone could just walk right into them.

Yuuto returned to the ballroom in a daze, numbly handing off the plate of flutes he'd fetched to the first servant with empty hands before leaning against the wall to take a trembling breath. Whatever body he had, Yuuto was still human. He had limits. There was only so much culture shock he could take in a short time before he began to unravel.

And Kiba Yuuto was unravelling. The screams of his friends hung in his ears every night he went to sleep. When he woke, the phantom taste of blood boiled in the back of his throat. Some nights, the reincarnated devil couldn't even force himself to slumber. The only thing that made the wallowing despair gnawing at his insides stop was when Sasuke would beat him so hard that the only thing on Yuuto's mind was the physical pain.

Everyone else in their little posse seemed to need to sympathize with Yuuto. Akeno would look upset when she found out that he'd passed another night sleeplessly, and try to ply him with sweets and teasing hugs to take his mind off the past. Koneko seemed to think that if she hung around him like a silent ghost offering quiet companionship that his mind would be settled. Rias always wanted to talk – as if explaining what had happened to him and raging about his need for blazing vengeance would bring Yuuto some closure. Naruto was prone to pseudo-wisdom and dropping pacifistic philosophy about the uselessness of revenge like a self-righteous prick.

Sasuke was different. He'd been different from the moment Yuuto saw him through bleary eyes in the snow. The brittle darkness in Sasuke's black gaze was familiar as kin, and like called to like. Perhaps Sasuke was no longer looking for revenge, but once upon a time Sasuke had, and the Uchiha didn't judge Yuuto for wanting it. He just beat the shit out of him over and over in the most brutal training Yuuto had ever received in his life.

Sometimes, pain could only be driven out with pain. Just like how some evil could only be driven out with a different kind of evil.

"What'd I miss?" Yuuto belted out at Akeno as the tall girl came into view. Violet eyes blinked down
at him, and the blonde couldn't help but quail inwardly at the cold calculation in the Queen's face. The Thunder Priestess was on the prowl, and Yuuto's flirty 'senpai' was nowhere to be seen.

"Not much." Akeno replied, turning away to watch her mistress continue to be spun about by an oddly cheery Sasuke. "There were a few jokes passed around about Rias getting beaten by Naruto, but that's typical for any place we go. You think they'd get tired of it. Sona Sitri and her peerage have already left, but that was expected. She wouldn't care for a party like this, and leaving as soon as is polite isn't a shocker."

"So when are we going to leave?"

"We won't be leaving until Rias decides we will, and she won't leave until Naruto leaves."

"Fantastic."

Watching dispassionately as Yuuto's suit clad form meandered off into the crowd, Akeno weighed the wisdom of having brought the child at all. While invitations had been extended to dozens of devils that explicitly included their peerages, the half-fallen angel doubted anyone would even be aware that Rias had a Knight, much less that the boy hadn't come.

Yuuto was floundering. The blonde needed stability and time, not the constant whirlwind of politics that the Gremory clan demanded from him. Watching the boy struggle day to day cut deep, but Akeno couldn't afford to surrender to emotion right now. Rias needed her Queen, not her friend.

Akeno loathed the duty the Underworld demanded of her and her impromptu replacement family at the best of times. When that duty was setting back the healing of one of her comrades, she hated it all the more.

If not for the ridiculous expectation of duty, Rias and her peerage would be at home gently passing day to day and bonding all the closer. If not for the ridiculous expectation of duty, Naruto wouldn't be murdering his future happiness for the sake of millions of people he'd never even met. If not for the ridiculous expectation of duty, her father would have been home that night and her mother would never have died.

What a disgusting sort of world.

Smoothing a hand over the silk of her yukata, Akeno ensured the purple silk and black flower print was absent a single wrinkle. Then donning a blazing smile, the fallen angel began to mingle through the crowd of servants like a hungry predator. A predator that feasts on gossip and secrets.

Rias' peerage functioned like a well-oiled machine, despite how immature and innocent they appeared to outsiders. Even Sirzechs-sama probably underestimated them. Everyone knew their role, and they followed it.

Rias was the bait. Because of her birth and loveliness, the Ruin Princess was expected to remain within sight and a visible part of any function. Tonight was no different. Clad in magnificent green with tumbledown crimson strands and white perfect features, the young woman effortlessly drew dozens of eyes and tongues with every breath.

Sasuke was the companion. Dark to Rias' light, cold austere handsomeness to Rias' warm hospitable beauty, the Uchiha cut a striking figure next to the Gremory, and they were no doubt viewed as passionate lovers by the more salacious in the crowd.

In reality, Akeno had no idea what the relationship between mistress and Pawn would turn out to be.
Sasuke had high expectations of himself and of others, but that coldness was blunted by reliable crumbs of considerate kindness, and the rough fondness he offered was charming in an amusing way.

Koneko was the spy. Silent and small and just a vicious as any viper, the Nekomata had the talent for moving unseen and unheard to gather up the quiet comments and plotting that always took place when the nobility gathered in numbers.

Akeno was the seductress. Sensual sexuality and the eye catching womanly curves of her body made it impossible for the half-breed to pass anywhere unnoted. But what Akeno lacked in stealth, she more than made up with her singular talent of convincing almost anyone – man or woman – to cave to her wiles and spill their secrets.

Yuuto was too inexperienced and too raw to have any responsibility beyond looking after himself and learning from his elders, but Akeno was already shaping a role for him in her mind. They needed a paragon. Not everyone was willing to trust a young woman, no matter how lovely. But many – especially children or the elderly – craved the presence of a shining white knight to confide in.

Information was power, and the more of it they could gain, the better off they would be. So many devils seemed to feel that politics was some great game. It wasn't. It was blood and steel and suffering. There were no redos, and the consequences of loss were very real and very severe. Even if Rias would like nothing more than to retire to her estate and live happily with her servants, the world was not content to leave them be.

Especially now that Rias was no longer the heir to the clan and thus infinitely more expendable.

"Hello there handsome." Akeno purred, breaking into a quiet conference of three older men and hugging the arm of the tallest man in the group. Hazel eyes blinked with confusion and lust as her breasts pressed into the flesh of the devil's elbow, and when Akeno smiled her teeth were very white.

"What are you boys talking about?"

"Well, you see…"

It was when Ravel's eyes began to droop low with exhaustion that Naruto felt it was safe to call it a day. "Well, little spitfire, I think it might be time for us to bow out. I don't know about you, but I'm not fond of this whole stuffy setup to begin with."

"Mmm." The blonde hummed, slowly swaying back and forth to the slow tempo of the current song. They had hardly danced to every number, but the pair had danced to enough of them to wear the eleven year old out, and it was well past late enough for them to be able to politely leave. Many of the younger devils had already left, and the older ones that remained were well into their cups.

"I have to thank you though. It was fun." To the redhead's surprise, it actually had been.

Naruto was no more comfortable with the idea of arranged marriage, and he was even less comfortable at the thought that he'd be married to the eleven year old in his arms one day. In no world was Naruto a pedophile. But Ravel would grow far older by the time they were supposed to be married, and when he forced himself to see past the heavy weight of their engagement, Naruto was uncannily reminded of Konohamaru.

Ravel was a similar combination of spoiled arrogance, awe at her elder, and naughty prankster as his young friend had been. While the way the blonde sometimes looked at him like he'd hung the moon scared the piss out of Naruto, it wasn't often enough to make things awkward as fuck.
"Of course it was." Ravel agreed, blasé prissy haughtiness filling her voice. "You were dancing with me after all." Stifling a yawn, the Phenex girl allowed Naruto to subtly dance right off the floor and into the shadows where the servants were all quietly at work.

If Naruto were the chivalric type, or infatuated with her, he would have attempted to press a kiss to the back of her knuckles in farewell. As it was, he managed to grin and bow courteously. "I'll see you another time."

Shrugging her shoulders tiredly, Ravel agreed with a laze wave of the hand and curtsied back. "Okay. But next time, don't be drunk."

"I'm not drunk." Well maybe a little. After the little episode in the bathroom with Sasuke, not a drop had passed the Gremory heir's lips, and he was borderline sober with a slight headache at this point.

Ravel snorted, her elegance and carefully pruned manners had been falling away from her all night long, and what was left was no tolerance for bullshit. "I'm not dumb Naruto. I know what booze smells like. I'm not going to rat on you. If you need something to help you get passed the nervousness I get it, just don't do it every time."

With that, she tossed one drill-like curl behind her shoulder and left. "Give me a call in a couple of days, hmm?"

Watching the girl leave with the poise of a woman much older and the expectation that her demands would be followed, Naruto chuckled lowly. "Fucking fuck. I know this is gonna come back to bite me in the ass."

Sasuke would have a fucking field day, Naruto could see it now. 'Not even married yet and she already has his balls in her purse'.

Then again, maybe not. Sasuke was old enough to be offered champagne from unfamiliar servants, and Naruto could just barely see him waltzing away with Rias through the crowd.

If Naruto was nearly sober, Sasuke was still roaring drunk. Even Rias had acquired the flush of alcohol sometime through the night.

To cut in or not to cut in. It was a question that any protective brother would be familiar with.

On the one hand, Naruto easily interpreted the expression on Sasuke's face. Drunk and enthralled was one of the rarest looks the Uchiha had ever sported, and Naruto wanted to nurture that look like it was a little baby bird from an endangered species.

On the other hand, Sasuke needed to be castrated for even thinking about his innocent aunt like that. It was just the way of the world. Sasuke would understand – he might even approve. Sometimes, a man just had to take one for the team.

But on the other other hand, Rias was just as bad. The smile she wore had too much teeth to be a courtesy. If Naruto had to guess, he'd say that the Ruin Princess was in a genuinely good mood. Naruto might not be the sharpest kunai in the drawer but he'd picked up on the tension that had built during the month Sasuke had been 'lent' to him, and nothing repaired friendships like a good old drunken time.

The other other hand had to weigh in too though. Naruto might be just willing to let it pass, but there was no promise his parents or grandparents would. Breaking it up might save Sasuke's life from the wrath of a Satan, and as a friend he probably owed Sasuke that.
No decision was complete without the other other other other other hand though. Naruto had always been worried about Sasuke's ability to form bonds with others. So maybe letting things proceed naturally would yield out positive results? The clan might not be pleased if scandalous things occurred, but Naruto was the heir, not Rias, and he was pretty sure he could put out any fires.

Still, the other other other other other other hand needed to be considered…

It was late. Naruto had left more than an hour past, and the minutes were ticking past midnight, but Rias wasn't tired at all. She was heady and energized. Her pulse thundered through her ears as they swung, Sasuke's feet stomping out a staccato beat with hers as the magical spell perched over the hall shook out another tune.

Marquis Phenex's lurid torches had dimmed to a steady low red, casting the half-emptied ballroom into crimson hot overtones. Sirzechs had no doubt left shortly after his son, though Rias wouldn't put it past her protective brother to still be lurking about.

When any noble party was so far into swing, the children were packaged off home along with the elderly and those with little stamina. All that was left was the young and strong, bodies pressing closer and closer under the influence of alcohol and lust and any other drug that had been smuggled in.

Rias herself would have usually chosen to leave long ago, except she no longer could. She was afraid. She was thrilled. She hated it. She loved it. Everything was so muddled together in a frission of kaleidoscope emotion and the only things that were steady were the racing burn of alcohol in her veins and the flash of Sasuke's eyes beneath the red light.

The way those eyes held the bloody light was more than human – as if some primordial deity had stretched bony talons across the ages to fill Sasuke's coal orbs with scarlet malevolence. Rias shivered beneath that gaze, acutely aware of the tiny prickles of sweat at her temple from the exertion of the dance.

In another world perhaps Rias would have run away from those eyes. A different world where she held all the power to her name and would brook no one to leer so darkly. But that was a different world, and Rias lived in the world that she was in.

So instead Rias reveled in the way that Sasuke drunk her in. She was not so ignorant that she didn't recognize the root of lust in that dark intent, but Rias couldn't bring herself to give more than half a damn about it. She was intoxicated in more ways than one, and the Ruin Princess fed the fire of that desire.

Every close turn was ever closer, flesh pressed to flesh until Rias could smell the woodsmoke on Sasuke's skin and she knew he could smell the sweet vanilla on hers. Sirzechs would no doubt be shocked and appalled to see his sister deliberately pushing the generous flesh of a breast into the arm of her own servant.

There was no Sirzechs here though. There was no Mother or Father or sister-in-law to govern over them. There was no fucking Naruto to fill her heart with shameful resentment and fear. There was no clan to encourage people to wear false faces with her to bargain favours with and curry alliances.

Sasuke's focus was entirely on her. For the first time in years, there was no frost rimmed distance or diverted attention. Rias needed it. She had hungered emptily for something she'd held only once, in that distant hour once upon a time in a Star Chamber. The ever-elusive flavor of ownership and victory, where for a stolen breath her Pawn had been hers and not a pitying loan from her nephew.
Yanked closer in a tight spin, Rias offered a breathy laugh at the pale flesh of Sasuke's chest she could just barely see. The green bowtie was lost somewhere along the way, and the collar of the dress shirt had managed to come undone. They were all coming undone.

"Excuse me. Do you mind if I cut in?"

The spell broke like waves on a beach, coming apart with the cold sensation of a crash of water along her spine. Biting the inside of her lip until she tasted the copper tang of her own blood, Rias turned to offer her brother a weary smile.

Apparently, Sirzechs was not so gone as she'd thought. The cool judgement in the older devil's eyes sparked a current of rage that Rias crushed back behind her practiced expression. "I think it's time we headed home."

Damn him for looking down on her with such disappointed judgement. As if Sirzechs had never wanted anything or done anything foolish in his life. Rias had never even managed to steal a kiss from a man with the proprietary way the clan breathed down her neck, and yet here was her brother condemning her as if she'd been caught in an orgy rather than a slightly naughty dance.

If Rias were a commoner, she would surely be more free than this.

"That's an excellent idea." Sirzechs agreed, affable tone at odds with the firm grip he'd settled of her Pawn's shoulder. No doubt those fingers were digging into Sasuke's flesh like steel, but not a hint of discomfort crossed Sasuke's features.

Good, good. Let Sirzechs stew on that frustration for a while.

In short order they were handed off to Akeno, her brother sternly informing her Queen that it was time for them to depart. Rias was glad of the loyal thinning of lips the half fallen angel gave Sirzechs' back. Even if her own family was against her, at least her peerage stood with her.

Koneko appeared after a moment, worry cracked the stoic lines of her young face as she took Rias' hands in her own.

Ahh, Koneko. Shirone, Shirone, don't be so lonely. Yuuto's vaguely disturbed look made her giggle all the more. It seemed that things she hadn't meant to slip out were starting to wiggle their way past her lips.

"Let's go home, Rias." Akeno's voice centered her floating attention, and swirling motes of yellow sorcery rose up to blot out the world.

The familiar walls and décor of her dressing room thundered back into being, jolting Rias in a way that made her stomach roll uncomfortably.

Pressing a hand over her mouth, the Ruin Princess sucked a steadying breath in as concerned murmurs rose all around her. The sound rolled and rolled until even a whisper was intolerable, and the last frayed remnants of her temper snapped.

"Enough." Blessed silence conquered all, soothing the edges of her raw nerves until Rias managed to force back the dizzy twisting with sheer willpower. She'd undoubtedly be sick later, but she didn't need to last that long. She just needed to hold everything off for another few minutes at most.

"Leave."

Ragged tension tore at her voice, reducing Rias' harmonious tones to gravel. The shocked and concerned expressions that her friends gave her pricked at Rias' conscience. She'd have to apologize
for her behavior later. But not right now. Right now she needed, she needed...

The hovering presences trickled away, leaving only Sasuke who she’d grabbed silently by the sleeve and held back. Dark cotton threads rubbed against the soft pads of her fingers, and it struck Rias how much she was feeling. It was too much. Everything was running together in a hypersensitive marathon.

Turquoise eyes sought out coal orbs, and Rias inwardly recoiled at the frosty distance that once more bridged between her and her pawn. How could everything have run down to nothing so quickly? Those walls had been broken – shattered away for such a sweet short time. But they had returned, and now they were killing her.

Agony tore through her chest, and Rias wanted. She wanted to rage and cry and stopper up the heartache of rejection and inadequacy. If she were paying for some forgotten sin in another lifetime, Rias was paying very dearly.

*Embers in the dark. Just the faintest flicker of heat beneath the ashes.*

It was enough.

Rias crashed into Sasuke like a freight train, spurred by the tiniest spark of life in his cool gaze. The clash of mouth and mouth was sloppy and inexperienced. Teeth clicked uncomfortably and the rush of her racing heart drove her dizzy and overheated every pore, but she was alive.

There was no pain, no hunger, no emptiness – only the singing in her spirit that cried victory. Rias was whole, fingernails scrabbling along Sasuke's scalp as his tongue dove in her mouth to tangle her own. Fists were tangled through her hair, pulling crimson strands and sending faint tingles of pain through her skull. But that pain was nothing compared to the heady sensation swooping through her stomach that sighed at last, at last.

Then it was over, Sasuke tearing himself away to stare wide eyed and pale and trembling at her.
Chapter 12

Warmth soaked into Sasuke's bones, slipping into exhausted muscles the longer he submerged in the absurdly large marble bath. Truthfully, the marble bowl was less of a tub and more of a pool. It was enormous and tastefully opulent in the way almost everything the Gremory family owned was.

It was also empty of anyone save him, which given his hangover and humiliation was exactly was Sasuke wanted.

The heat had a way of quickening the pulse in the Uchiha's arteries, dilated veins allowing the blood to rush quicker and quicker. The pounding in his head had grown worse for a short while, but the influx to his dehydrated brain swept away the lethargy and ache.

Sasuke almost wanted it back, because at least when his thoughts were consumed with how entirely awful his body felt, the question of how entirely awful his mind felt was nonexistent. The clarity brought awareness of his shame.

That kiss might have been initiated by Rias, but Sasuke had let it happen. In fact, he'd not only allowed it to happen, he'd responded to it. And it wasn't as if that little mistake existed in isolation, the Uchiha had yielded to the alcohol and demands of his flesh and spent the entire night flirting with the redhead.

Lines had been crossed that Sasuke had never thought would be crossed. Lines that Sasuke had never wanted to cross before. Whatever Rias had done, it was only at Sasuke's instigation, and the fault lay with him. And like many of the other mistakes Sasuke had made in his life, there was no going back from here.

Expecting that both of them would just up and forget was ridiculous. Rias was insecure and needy; all soft heart beneath a brittle shell. Even if she tried to pretend that nothing had happened, Sasuke suspected she wouldn't succeed. The girl was too emotionally invested in her one-sided war to win his loyalty.

And even if he was a shinobi and decades removed from his short childhood by time and violence, Sasuke remembered well the lessons his parents had given him. The whole mess could be laid at his feet. It was Sasuke's lack of self-control that enabled him to take advantage of a lost young woman. If Sasuke turned his back without accepting responsibility and making amends, it would be dishonorable, and Sasuke did not want to give his mother any more reasons to be ashamed of him in the afterlife.

Surfacing with a gasp, Sasuke wiped the water from his face with a harsh palm and leaned back against the lip of the bath. Whatever sort of penance he'd decide to make would have to be subtle, since Sasuke had no doubt Rias would try to assume all responsibility if she realized his efforts. That was just the kind of 'mistress' she was.

"Fuck." Sasuke huffed empathetically, rolling over to kneel in the water and rest his forehead on his crossed arms. "Fuck." He hadn't been so wound up with his own libido since he was fourteen and under Orochimaru's tutelage. At least back then a quick wank or screw had been enough to take the edge off and let him get back to training. The years after had been so full of vengeance and atonement that lewd thoughts were few and far in between.

Now though, it was like that forgotten old door was creaking open. Suppressed tendencies bloomed noxious and lurid, rotting his mind from the inside and filling everything with slick want. The heady
remembered scent of vanilla sent an electric thrill sparkling down his nerves, and with slow exhale, Sasuke's fingers curled around the half-turgid flesh of his shaft.

A single conjured image of emerald fire in turquoise eyes was enough to stiffen Sasuke to painfully hard. Rias was still young for a devil, but that hadn't stopped her body from maturing. Those hips were wide and fertile, those breasts were heavy and full, that bottom was curved in a mouthwatering heart shape.

Sasuke doubted anyone back in Konoha would have guessed his tastes ran towards such 'vulgar' and 'oversexualized' proportions rather than the more traditional delicate beauty expected from a scion of the Uchiha. The village had only ever made one right assumption about his taste in women – that he preferred long hair.

He imagined wrapping his hands in those blood red strands again. Rias' hair had been soft and untangled when Sasuke had run his fingers through it. No doubt her crimson mane was as gently fragrant as her skin, and as gently sweet as the taste of her mouth when she'd kissed him. That kiss had been too long to forget, but too short to satisfy the wild new desire running through his veins.

The shock and mortification at losing control had shocked him into backing away then. But what if he hadn't? Sasuke stroked faster, pleasure sparking as he wondered what it would have been like to do more. To run his tongue over the hollow of that ivory neck. To boldly feel the heft of those generous breasts in his palms. To experience more the shy questing of her own innocent mouth on his skin. For the first time in years, Sasuke gave in to a more than passing longing.

Scrabbling the nails of his free hand against the polished marble, Sasuke rode out the roiling orgasm with a clenched jaw. The muscles of his abdomen contracted as the Uchiha spent himself in the bath, pearly white seed spilling into liquid warmth and floating away.

As the tide of lust receded, frustration and shame bubbled up in Sasuke's gut. Unbelievable. *Unbelievable*. Who was this pathetic man hunched over in the male communal bath squeezing out an ejaculation to the thought of a woman? It surely couldn't be Uchiha Sasuke, who hadn't been a callow virgin boy in decades.

Except it *was*.

Lurching to his feet with an expression of rage, Sasuke spun about and cast an angry flame out into the water. Steam hissed with every crash of his spells until the Uchiha stood panting, entirely wreathed in hazy clouds of vaporized water. The remaining liquid lapped at his thighs with scalding heat, but Sasuke paid it no mind.

Never, in all his thirteen years in Gehenna, had Sasuke's magic responded so. The energy that poured into that little tantrum was smoother and shallower than it had ever been. Less energy for more power, cast with supple ease.

Choked up with rage and lust, the sorcery had flown from Sasuke's fingertips like a master. A bitter smile curved his lips.

What base fucking creatures of desire these devils be.

And it seemed Sasuke was becoming one of them.

Naruto watched his father stare out the window with a frown. The choice to leave Sasuke and Rias to get up to trouble on their own had been a good idea as far as he was concerned, but he hadn't anticipated it going to shit so quickly.
Damage control was something the Gremory heir had imagined he'd have to do in months or years – after many hours of teasing and match making. Not the very next day. Sirzechs Lucifer might be a great Satan and a better father, but sometimes he got hung up over the silliest things.

Ah well, no use crying over spilt milk. "What's got your boxers in a bunch, dad?"

"Don't talk to your father like that, you scamp." Sirzechs sighed, spinning around in his chair to peer at Naruto over his desk. The Satan's son was perched cross legged on that desk, clad in pajamas with his hair uncombed. "Or rather, don't let your mother hear you talk to your father like that, you scamp."

Waving off the warning, Naruto propped his chin in his palm. "I think she's given up after all these years. There's only so many times you can beat a dead horse. But that's just dodging the question. What's got your boxers in a bunch, ya old geezer?"

"Wow, I am just shivering at all that respect. Do you think it would help morale if I ordered all the troops to call me that too?"

"Yeah I guess. Mom would beat them all black and blue for it, so they'd have first-hand experience with the kind of punishment they'd be getting for failure."

"You know, I have the feeling that this is the kind of conversation that would end up with us being beaten black and blue by your mother."

"Ah, caught on to that did ya? Well don't let me stop you. S&M roleplay usually starts somewhere."

"You're right, an Oedipus complex usually has a root cause in frequent conflict with a boy's maternal figure."

"Ouch. That's cold."

"I try." Smirking at the disgruntled look on Naruto's face, Sirzechs leaned back in the leather armchair. Sirzechs 1567 – Naruto 452. But jokes aside, the underlying question had been serious, and the Satan tended to trust his son's opinion. "What do you think of Uchiha Sasuke?"

Now there were two ways to resolve his father's conundrum as far as Naruto was concerned. He could either take the grave approach, and put on a mature act for his father. Or he could just bullshit it.

"Seriously?" Naruto rolled his eyes, tone echoing disbelief. "That's what you're worried about? Not the treaty, not how things are going to be going with the Phenex clan, but that Sasuke and Rias were getting a little freaky on the dance floor?"

"Naruto, it's a serious clan matter. You know how social expectations are for the nobility. No one would care if you were visiting brothels every other day, but if Rias has taken a lover that would have negative impact on any marriage arrangement our father tried to make for her."

"Are you serious?" Ah, the old duty argument. Well Naruto had done the duty for the clan. At the least he should be able to expect that his friends and family were bought a little more freedom with his sacrifice. "Look, Sasuke is about as sexually liberated as Mother Theresa. Nothing happened, and knowing him nothing is going to happen for years if ever without me prodding things along. And even if it did," Naruto rushed to add when Sirzechs looked displeased. "What does it matter?"

That wasn't to say Naruto had decided to nudge things along, since he was still weighing the long-term effects any relationship he tried to encourage on both of them, but he wasn't firmly opposed to
it. And if they'd be good for each other, then there was no reason why it shouldn't happen.

Though if Sasuke was going to expect Naruto to call him 'uncle', that bastard was in for a rude surprise.

"Dad." Hopping in before the Crimson Haired Satan had a chance to reply, Naruto decided to cut right to the guilty coup de grace. "I never, not once since Souji spilled the beans before we could talk about it, complained to you about my arranged marriage. I'm doing my duty to the clan and to the Underworld, even though I could have up and run at any time. Don't you think that buys me a little goodwill?"

Sirzechs looked like Naruto had slipped a knife between his ribs.

The poleaxed expression on his father's face sent sympathetic guilty twisting through Naruto's own guts, but he couldn't stop now. "Well I'm asking for that now. I'm not blaming you for thinking like a politician – millions of lives in many different worlds are depending on it. But I'm asking you to think like a brother rather than like a Satan. Rias is your sister, don't you think that we should be trying to make her happy rather than dragging her into our little chain of martyrs? If we need another marriage alliance, there are other ways we can deal with it. Rias isn't the only other member of other clan out there. Like, come on, it's Rias."

Heavy silence hung in the air as Sirzechs visibly struggled with the appeal. Naruto knew that he was ultimately to the emotional side of his father – the side that was unfortunately typically weaker than the logical side his statesmanship depended on.

A rueful smile pulled at Sirzechs' lips, and the Satan closed his eyes with a fond sigh. "Alright, I can agree to that… Now I'm sitting here wondering when my itty bitty fishcake grew up to be so wise."

"Well ya know, I eat all my veggies and never skip breakfast. That was bound to do something."

"If only that something included 'escape from midgethood'!"

"Why is it always the short jokes? I am not that short. In fact, I'm tall for my age!"

"That's what they all say, my boy. That's what they all say."

"I think someone is looking for shit in his sock drawer."

"Just for that, you're going to be taking Ravel to Disneyworld. In fact, you could even say it's the price of my cooperation for leaving Rias alone goes."

"Wait, what?"

Sairaorg Bael did not consider himself a particularly cruel person. He made the conscious effort to ensure credit was given where credit was due. Everyone that approached him was given their fair chance to speak their minds regardless of rank or birth. The Bael heir firmly believed in the right of everyone to work towards achieving their own potential.

But Sairaorg was a devil, so a little blood and bone didn't bother him.

The crack of the assassin's ninth finger beneath his lazy grip was accompanied by a sob.

Kuisha's blood was speckled across Sairaorg's cheek, and the fact that his Queen lay unconscious on the floor while Coriana sewed the hole in her gut closed with sorcery made him just a little less
patient than he normally was.

"I would greatly appreciate it if we could skip all the begging and crying and get to the part where you tell me who you work for." The snap of the woman's last finger left the blue haired assassin curled in a piteous ball, fragments of white peaking out from the torn skin of her knuckles.

"I don't, I don't…"

Frowning, Sairaorg pulled the hired killer's foot in his palms and snapped the first of ten toes. It was a good thing that Naruto wasn't lurking about. The Bael heir had a strong suspicion that if Naruto had seen him torture a girl for information that his cousin would be shocked and appalled.

Oh well, Naruto was still young. In a way, it was refreshing that the boy was still so innocent. He hadn't yet learnt the lessons Sairaorg had discovered over his thirty-five years of life. They may not yet be in open conflict with the ruling ideologues in their world, but they were at war with them. And if there was any truth Sairaorg could swear by, it was that there were only two kinds of people in a war. Victims, and men of violence.

One day, Naruto would be forced to experience that truth. Sairaorg just hoped it didn't come too soon.

Sairaorg snapped the last toe, peering down at the bloodied woman before shrugging and crushing the bones of both feet in his meaty fists. "I guess it doesn't really matter, you know? Going out by magic. Getting done up with a blade. Being crushed into pieces. Fast or slow. Either way, you die at the end."

"So how about it missy?" Snatching up one of the assassin's discarded stilettos, Sairaorg forced a malevolent smirk at her teary look of pain and fear. "How do you want to do this, quickly – or should I take my time?" The devil pressed the tip of the knife to the bruised skin of the woman's calf, and begun to painstakingly flay.

"Okay!" the pained shriek filled the air, halting the progress of Sairaorg's torture, though the Bael heir didn't remove the blade. "Okay, okay! I'll tell you, just please don't hurt me anymore."

Cocking his head at the flood of sobbing, Sairaorg shrugged and let the bloody leg slip from his grip. "Sure. Tell me what I want and I won't hurt you anymore."

"I wasn't in charge." The assassin clarified in a pleading tone. "I didn't choose the job. I just took orders from the boss. No one said anything about it outright, just rumors."

Rising to his feet, Sairaorg cocked a bushy brow as his strode around the woman's bleeding form. The faint light of Coriana's magic winked out in the corner of his eye as Kuisha's healing finished. "Go on."

"Nina told me that it was the Great King that paid for the hit. That's all I know! Please believe me!"

"Alright." The Bael heir stopped by her head, eying the blood matted into blue strands with a vague look of interest. "I believe you."

Then he stepped forward, pressing a heel down into the assassin's neck. Cartilage and flesh gave way with a pop and a squish, merciful death visiting the tortured woman from the sole of Sairaorg's boot.

Ignoring the smell of feces and urine that filled the air as the corpse nervelessly voided in death, Sairaorg absently ran a hand over the blood streaked surface of his face. Gore from his palms further
smeared into his skin, making the young man wrinkle his nose in disgust.

"I know you must be a little tired, but do you think you and Misteeta would be able to clear this mess up?"

Coriana blankly considered the mess of bodies and blood that covered the floor and walls of Sairaorg's bedroom. "Yes, I suppose. Your pajamas are ruined though."

"Eh, you win some, you lose some."

Peeling the gore soaked nightclothes off his body, Sairaorg tossed them in a heap and plodded past his Bishop with no concern for his nudity. He needed a shower, and he doubted that his father had a hired knife waiting in the bathroom for him.

That the current Great King Bael had decided to send assassins after his son was no great shocker. To be honest, Sairaorg had expected it before now. It was easy to dismiss a powerless son as a shame, but when that shameful son came back and become the heir by strength, boats were rocked.

Plus there was the whole plotting a revolution against the governing ideology concern.

The only real question was if the assassination attempt was motivated by trying to get rid of an heir without the Bael clan Power of Destruction, or was it an attempt to stifle Sairaorg's infant political movement? If it was the second, Naruto and Sona may be in danger as well.

Or perhaps not. His father might be legally speaking the highest ranking devil in the Underworld, but even the Great King would hesitate before starting a clan war against at least one other clan and at least one of the Satans.

In the end, it likely didn't matter what his father's motive was, since for the foreseeable future the only viable target in either scenario was Sairaorg himself.

Still, Sona and Naruto would want to know.

Preferably without the mention of grisly interrogation.

The pads of her fingers were starting to wrinkle as the bath continued to leech the oils from her skin, but Rias couldn't force herself to be concerned. It was just a silly little temporary imperfection, and nothing to flee her haven over.

Akeno's hands moved gently through her hair, working the shampoo into a lather before rinsing the suds away. The silent steady companionship was a comfort, and the Ruin Princess knew that while Akeno normally loved to tease, her Queen also knew when such silliness would be ill received.

Rias didn't want to be teased right now. She didn't even want to think. Waking up with her mouth dry and head pounding would be enough to put her in a bad mood on a usual day. Remembering her utterly shameless and scandalous conduct was enough to make her want to melt into the cracks between the tiles of the floor.

Alcohol was no excuse for what she'd done. She'd caved to the offer of champagne with fond exasperation and no expectation that doing so would lead to her acting so brazenly. What must her friends think, having seen her hanging all over a man and flirting like a harlot? What must her brother think after she'd been so rude to him and more petulant than a child half her age? What would Sasuke think, as the victim of her unashamed behaviour?
And as far as Rias was concerned, Sasuke was a victim. How else could her Pawn respond with the way she'd thrown herself at him like a whore? If he put on a face of lust and need, it was just that – a face. An act he'd assumed because she treated his friendly teasing as deliberate sexual overtures for the sake of her own ego.

Rias wondered if Sasuke felt a little violated. Whatever façade of strength and apathy he'd managed to craft, Sasuke was her servant and weaker than her.

She'd heard from Naruto after she reunited them that Sasuke had short childhood in the custody of a negligent step-parent before being abandoned to a life on the streets. His only refuge had been the few short months of their chance meetings when Naruto had been able to sneak out to the village, which had ended after Souji's discovery of his excursions. Five years living hand to mouth in fear from of his life from stronger demons and fallen angels – her Pawn was surely afraid to go back to a life like that.

What if out of fear of returning to that life – or being punished by a member of the 33 clans that ruled the Underworld – Sasuke had decided it was best to simply bow to Rias' whims? He'd certainly run off quickly enough after she'd kissed him, probably exhausted and unable to keep up the act.

Rias settled her forehead on her knees, swallowing back the taste of bile in her throat. Perhaps it might be better to release Sasuke from her service. The combined force of his coarse generosity and pride might be enough to convince Sasuke to feel responsible for her personal troubles, but that self-imposed obligation was not in his best interest.

If Rias bypassed Sasuke's consent and appealed to Naruto directly, that would make sure that Sasuke was going to be looked after while freeing him from any duty he felt that he owed her. Her nephew would most likely want to have Sasuke's explicit agreement before trading her Pawn for his pawn pieces, but Rias was confident that if she just honestly explained things to him that he'd see things from her perspective, and agree. And not talk about the details of her disgrace after the fact.

Naruto was kind in that way, no matter what unjustified resentment she harbored for him.

"It'll be okay, Rias." Akeno soothed helplessly, moving from washing the curls of Rias' blood red hair to lathering gentle hands over the pale planes of her mistress' back. The sensation was familiar and comforting. How many times over the years had she shared a bath with her best friend? It was beyond count; their common ritual of relief and absolution.

Rias still remembered the first time she'd followed Akeno into the bath, caring for her broken little Queen after finding her fleeing her own clan. The desolate glimmer in those purple eyes had broken her heart at the time – it nearly broke her heart at the mere memory of it.

Grayfia had quietly wondered if the half fallen angel would be able to overcome the trauma of her mother's death and the loss of her family. But Akeno had, beating all the expectations of 'wiser' and 'more learned' devils. It was a reminder to Rias that no matter how deep the heartache or how sharp the suffering, that eventually all wounds began to heal in time.

"Yes." Sliding tired lids down over her turquoise eyes, Rias let the silent tears run. "I think you're right."

Ookay.

This was awkward. Supremely, magnificently awkward.

Naruto watched Rias morosely push around the last morsel on her plate, the potato sliding through
leftover gravy with a barely audible squish. Sasuke was no better, what with the way he'd never once spoken to anyone and remained in his little loner corner at the edge of the table staring constantly down at his meal.

When he'd allowed them – yes, allowed, because no one got frisky around Naruto's relatives without his permission – to get drunk Naruto had pictured them playing around a bit and blowing off some steam. He hadn't pictured a depressed version of the Cold War being re-enacted at the dinner table.

Gulping the last cut of hearty beef, Naruto washed it down with a cup of water and waited. And waited. And then waited some more, until finally Sasuke rose to his feet with a screech of chair-leg-on-wood floor and left the dining room.

Naruto threw a nod at Akeno, acknowledging the Thunder Priestess' grim countenance. If Rias hadn't been in the room, he'd have planned out exactly how they were going to go about things. But no words were really needed. Naruto had known Akeno for eight years, and the silent divide-and-conquer tactic was expected. She would continue to work on Rias, and Naruto would handle the Sasuke side of the shitshow.

Jumping to his feet, Naruto scurried out of the room. To his annoyance, Sasuke was already at the end of the hall and turning the corner. Cursing their height different and his shorter legs, the Gremory heir broke into a silent jog, striving to keep the Uchiha in his line of sight without spurring the other devil to actually start evading him.

The chase paid off when Sasuke ducked into the library, Naruto hot on his heels. "Nowhere to run now!" The redhead crowed victoriously, locking the door with a click and quiet sparkle of power. The only way out now if Sasuke took it in his head to run was teleportation, and Naruto was more than skilled enough to track the raven's signature all across the Underworld.

"What do you want?" Sasuke growled sourly, refusing to give Naruto the satisfaction of his attention and scanning the bookshelves instead. It was the typical sort of bullshit Naruto would have expected from him, minus the implicit running away to hide like a little kid, which was exactly what Naruto accused him of doing.

"I'm not running away!"

Drawling out a "Really?" The younger devil cocked a mocking crimson brow and shoved his hands in the pockets of his black slacks. "Because it sure looked to me like you were shaking that ass all the way home."

"Don't be so crass."

"Sure thing, mom, want me to go rinse my mouth out with soap?"

"Eat shit and die."

"So if this is the tsun tsun, when do I get the dere dere?"

Sasuke just glared venomously, plucking a book from the shelves and cracking it open. Bloodshot dark eyes began to pointedly scan the pages, and when the Uchiha flipped a page it was clear this was a pathetic attempt at dismissal.

"Why are you reading The Mammals of Canada?"

Catching the book when Sasuke chucked it at him, Naruto peered down at an illustration of a dissected vole before shrugging and setting the text aside. "Can we cut to the chase here? Because..."
seeing that stick shoved so far up your fucking ass is giving me hemorrhoids of sympathy."

"I'm surprised you even know what hemorrhoids are."

"Haha, keep joking wise guy. While you're at it, feel like telling me if you popped her cherry?"

"What?"

"You know." Rotating his left hand in a vague circle, Naruto smirked mischievously. "Pressing dangly parts. Sinking the pink. Corking the onion. 'Aggressive cuddling'. Wiggling the toothpick. Taming the strange…"

"Fuck, you're vulgar. No, I didn't." A shallow flush lit up Sasuke's pale cheeks, and the Uchiha glared steadfastly at a point several feet above Naruto's head.

"Did she pop your cherry?"

"No! Nothing happened, and even if it did, I certainly wouldn't be the one getting popped."

"Sasuke, you sly old dog, you dirty old man you. I knew you had it in you." Hopping closer, Naruto dug an elbow into the taller devil's rib and reveled in the grunt of irritation. "So who had the pleasure of making virgin boy Uchiha lie back and think of Konoha?"

"I'm not taking that from you, you socially retarded reject. I beat you by years. How old were you before you figured out where babies come from, dobe?"

"Was it Sakura? It was, wasn't it? Sweet heaven, I'm not sure if I should be disgusted with you for getting down and dirty with a fangirl before you had hair on your balls or pity you for getting some good old medic-on-cripple action."

"I'm going to kill you. I swear to fucking God, I'm going to end your life."

"So not Sakura. Hmm. Did Orochimaru have a taste that ran towards young boy bungholes?"

Sasuke gave a choking sound of inarticulate rage, lunging for Naruto and cursing as the redhead jumped over him.

"It was Karin, wasn't it?"

Utter silence.

"Man, what's with you and sticking the wick in my relatives? First Karin and now Rias? Don't tell me that it's some kind of homoerotic substitute for not being able to give me the old salami." Naruto grinned widely at his friend's fit of sputtering.

"I told you nothing happened you fucking fool!"

"If nothing happened, you wouldn't be so worked up over it." Shrugging, the Gremory heir boxed in the recalcitrant Pawn with a spate of reasoning. "But you are, and dinner was quieter than a necrophiliac undertaker opening a cold one, so something did happen. And if you didn't do the dirty, then you're probably getting your panties in a knot over kissing her?"

Frowning, Sasuke turned away and gritted icily "I am not going to stand around here and listen to this bullshit." The Uchiha stomped over to the door, trying to unlock it only to have a red zap nip at his fingers.
"I didn't say you could run off buddy boy." Scratching the top of his head, Naruto sighed and wondered how to deal with Sasuke's wrought up emotional state. Jokes and needling aside, the rage and whatever justifications Sasuke could clobber together were just to cover up his personal intimacy. Making friends was hard enough for the emotionally damaged Uchiha, getting sexually involved with anyone in a way that wasn't strictly about scratching the itch was probably enough to send Sasuke into mental spasms.

Fucking Itachi's mind games and fucking Danzo's policies had managed to break a little boy into so many pieces that even when put back together again the pieces didn't fit quite right.

Best to be short and sweet and then let the increasingly wild eyed raven run off to lick his inner wounds.

"Look, I'm not going to beat around the bush and talk outta my ass here. You kissed her, or maybe she kissed you. So fucking what? If you don't have any romantic attraction for her at all, then just acknowledge that and move the fuck on. If you are even the littlest bit curious, acknowledge that and fucking do something about it. You've lived a long time for a human Sasuke, and you have ten thousand more years to go. How fucking long are you going to let the past rule you?"

Tough love, but that was their way.

Without waiting around to watch the impact and imminent emotional collapse, Naruto teleported himself away from Rias' estate with a swirl of red light.
Chapter 13

Wood creaked under Koneko's heels, bending low before springing back to propel the nekomata through the air like a rocket. A wry grin split her lips, and the white-haired girl exulted in the clean, crisp air of the forest.

The Gremory territory may be as vast as Honshu in the human world, but almost a full quarter of it was devoted to Azmarin alone. The industrial megalopolis was the backbone of the clan's wealth, providing factories to bring the technological designs of the Astaroth clan to life. No other single clan in Gehenna had the production capacity or the abnormally skilled magicians that would be needed to end the Gremory's market dominance in magical technology.

Luxury air cruisers, single-day manors, self-proliferating blowing bubbles, conjuration cannons – any product that could be manufactured was a product Lord Gremory had his hands in. It didn't matter if they were children's toys or military hardware; if there was a profit to be made, the clan made it.

In a manufacturing city metro the size of Croatia, it was difficult to escape the constant smell of urbanization. Enormous spells to clear the skies of smog and pollution were group-cast every day in Azmarin, but blue skies couldn't hide the stench. Which was why Koneko hated visiting it, and why she imagined Zeoticus and his descendants lived on the very opposite edge of the clan's territory.

Skyscrapers and the fearful respect of commoners couldn't compete with the beauty of nature. Rias' estate was so far from civilization that chakra of the world was quiet, without the blemish of hatred and violence that had ultimately driven Kuroka mad.

Nestled in the calm bosom of nature, Koneko felt like all the worries of her life were sliding away. There was no murderous older sister that could waltz back into her life. No great political conspiracies that could end in blood. No getting caught in the stifling silence that had been building since last night's ball between Sasuke and Rias. There was only the wind in the ivory strands of her hair and the pull of sinew launching her from branch to branch.

Koneko's 'patrols' were essential for her to ground herself, and the nekomata was so lost in the feeling of pure freedom that she almost missed the pale webbing thrown up in front of her.

Almost.

Diving between the crisscrossing sticky strands, Koneko hit the ground in a roll, coming to her feet fists ready. "Who's there?" Koneko demanded sharply, amber eyes scanning the afternoon underbrush. The white threads did not form a true spider's web, instead stretching from trunk to trunk seemingly randomly.

Beyond the faint sound of the wind rustling the leaves, there was no sound. Silence hung unbroken by birdsong or the buzzing of insects, and with a flash of snow white sorcery Koneko summoned the shining gauntlets Sirzechs-sama had commissioned for her on her last birthday.

Talons tipped the silvery gloves, polished metal gleaming bright and deadly. The cold iron was demon wrought, stronger than steel, fatal to the fae and resilient to all other kinds of magic. With the deadly covering over her already deadly fists, Koneko slowly stepped forward.

Nothing. Winding cautiously around the trees, peering into the canopy, suspiciously sniffing the air for hidden enemies yielded nothing. Something was there, otherwise the creatures of the forest wouldn't be so silent.
Koneko clenched her jaw. There was nothing for it.

Senjutsu was hazardous to the skilled, and outright lethal for the unpracticed. Koneko hated it with the burning passion of the pits of Tartarus, but that hadn't made it any less a part of her. Not using it didn't make the instinctive senjutsu of her species vanish. Everywhere she went, the nekomata was at least peripherally aware of the general feel of chakra in the area. Sensing anything more specific required... a little bit more.

Painstakingly opening herself to the world, Koneko grit her teeth and let the chakra trickle in. Too much would drive her madder than Kuroka, and whatever else Koneko could say about her once beloved sister, Kuroka had been mentally stronger. Stronger than Shirone.

There.

Thick rolling black chakra clashed with the world.

Slamming the gates shut on her miniscule use of senjutsu, Koneko leapt to the left and backhanded her fist through the gnarled trunk of an oak. Wood splintered with a mighty crack, giving way to the weight of the tree.

Koneko circled back, gaze harsh and alert as lumber hit soil with an echoing crash. Chirps filled the air as previously silent birds fled for their lives, but the young devil only had ears for the faint clacking of chitin.

Emerging out of the fall of leaves and branch was a great swollen body. Pale skin mingled with pale bone, forming a bleached carapace of interlocking joints and ivory flesh. And it was bone, or else something that looked like a grinning skull with eight blood red eyes and sharp mandibles.

Thinning her lips, Koneko eyed the giant spider's curling legs warily. No devil native to Sheol appeared so. Was it an ōgumo? Shapeshifter? Some manner of constructed conjuration? There was some intelligence in its myriad gaze. "What manner of creature are you?" she demanded frostily. "Speak!"

The coarse white pincers of the spider's mouth shifted, head tilting with consideration. Then it spat an arc of boiling purple venom that Koneko deftly dodged. Splashing into the bark of a birch, the toxic ichor hissed and spat, melting away the wood in seconds beneath Koneko's wide eyed stare.

Whatever manner of creature it was, the spider was not friendly.

"I hope you've made peace with death." Crouching low, Koneko sprang. The nekomata's form blurred into a pale streak as she circled, carefully noting the frantic way the spider's crimson eyes attempted to track her.

Chitin legs trembled as the creature lumbered its bulk about in an effort to keep facing the Rook. Spitting out its' acid projectile again and again, the enormous spider milked its venom sacs trying to vaporize the tiny demoness.

Large, and maybe even dangerous if she was fool enough to stand still and let the thing douse her in its secretions, Koneko decided. But as a foe it was too slow for her, and besides the novice Yuuto, Koneko was the slowest devil in Rias' entire household. Whatever sort of beast or servant the spider was, it likely posed no real threat to any half-trained devil.

Koneko cracked her knuckles and moved in. Lazily ducking a last squirt of venom, the nekomata drove her metal claws directly into the creature's eyes. Liquid burst as the soft orbs gave way instantly, Koneko's talons driving deeper into the spider and sending it into a frenzied chattering death throes.
One last shove shredded the brain, and the corpse-white spider collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. Sneering at the colorless ooze seeping from its' wounds in death, Koneko yanked her hand back and shook the clinging slime from her gauntlet.

"What manner of creature are you?" she pondered again more softly, backing away from the dead beast's fangs and decapitating the thing for good measure. Maybe there was some strength in that bite, but it would be too weak to stand up to anything more than a peasant.

Still, Rias would want to see it. Either her mistress would know what species the foreign arachnid was, or Rias would pass the discovery along to Sirzechs and the clan.

Grasping onto the severed head of the spider, Koneko grimaced with faint disgust before summoning a teleportation circle in a spark of white light.

Naruto settled a hand over his glowing crimson pawn. The Evil Piece shone with inner fire, brightening at its' owner's touch as the Gremory heir moved it across the chessboard. He took one of Sitri's pawns, only for her to remove his last bishop with one of her rooks.

"Aww, come on." He groaned, propping his head on his fist. Naruto was a half decent hand at the strategy game, but he wasn't a fucking whiz kid at it like Sona. Every single time they played, she kicked his ass. If not for his stunning good looks, Naruto might have been sad.

Sona made no response, only looking up at the redhead with violet eyes. But Naruto didn't need words to understand the quiet mockery and smugness. He could almost imagine her voice in his head telling him that if he didn't like losing pieces, he should get better at the game.

Bitch. It was payback for using his Evil Pieces instead of her proper black pieces, insisting on a peanut to substitute for the king piece, he just knew it!

Scooping up his peanut king, Naruto popped the nut in his mouth and crunched it to nothing. "Bah, I give up."

"Another round then?"

"I'm not playing another round of that, you bookworm. It's midnight! It's time for sleeping or wild parties, not for fuckin' chess."

"If that's your decision." Sona shrugged, dumping the rest of Naruto's Evil Pieces off the board and setting it aside. "Though they sound like the words of a poor loser to me."

"I'll show you poor loser! You and me, right here, right now. Mud wrestling. Bring it."

"My parents did not raise me to be a pedophile."

Naruto stuck his tongue out at the Sitri heiress, letting an enormous trail of slobber hang from the tip of the pink muscle. Chuckling in the back of his throat at the utterly revolted expression Sona gave back, Naruto strained to get the last wet centimeter between his lips. Then he began to lean across the table.

"That is not a good look for you."

Pulling his tongue back in his mouth, Naruto hurriedly wiped the drool of his chin before turning to face his cousin. "Yeah well that's not a good look for you. Shit twice warmed over comes across as more appealing."
Insults aside, Sairaorg did look awful. Shambling between the bookcases with all the grace of a ghoul, Naruto could tell the older devil was exhausted. One violet eye was swollen shut, and the other was so bloodshot the Gremory heir half expected him to start dramatically crying tears of blood a la the Uchiha clan.

Sona lurched to her feet, summoning a glimmer of blue to her fingertips and hovering uncertainly as the leader of their little rebellion shuffled across the library. "When you said the meeting was urgent, I hadn't thought it was this urgent."

Thinking better of offering assistance to walk, Sona let Sairaorg keep some measure of pride until he'd managed to drag his beaten body into the muslin armchair she'd just vacated. Then she gingerly pressed an enchantment clad finger into the swollen bruise of his left eye, easing away the mottled color of it.

The redhead chewed the edge of a nail, observing the slapdash healing session before frowning. "You know, when I said you looked awful, I meant it. Who the hell beat the shit out of you?"

Sairaorg was widely acknowledged as the strongest devil in their generation, and with six wings to Naruto's four, he could believe it.

Which begged the question as to who had managed to surprise his cousin enough to do some damage. It was either that, or there was someone casually walking around that was willing to be openly hostile to them with the power to back it up.

Sairaorg scowled, muttering a quiet thanks as Sona pulled her hands away and summoned another chair for her to lounge in. "I'd like to see how you look after three assassination attempts in one day, chuckles." The Bael heir sniped.

"Three?" the other two uttered in shock, Sona's eyes going wide behind her glasses and Naruto shooting upright in his chair.

"And it didn't occur to you to reach out to us before now? If we'd known things were so dire, we would have been more than willing to meet with you earlier."

"I wasn't going to show up on your doorstep with knives at my back, Sona."

"Fuck that! You mess with one of us, you mess with all us. Next time pull your head out of your ass! I've got no problem laying a beat down on a couple of skulkers."

Slapping his palm over the top of the mahogany table, Sairaorg glared at Naruto with surprising ferocity. "Keep it in your pants brats. I'm older than both of you put together, and while some risk can't be avoided simply because we do what we do, I'm hardly going to let a couple of kids fight when they don't have to!"

Naruto growled, subsiding with a clenched jaw. There were times when he hated being as physically young as he was in a world that saw him as underaged. And then there were times when he absolutely fucking loathed it. Naruto had lived just as long in total years as his cousin, and yet it would be a big fucking scandal if he decided to go push some bastard's shit in.

Sairaorg pinched his nose, huffing a calming breath. Tension slowly bled away from his muscled frame as the devil fortified himself. "Let's just drop it. There are more important things to discuss. Do either of you know who might be interested in doing away with me?"

"You mean with us? Or you specifically?" Sona sought clarification. "Because there are a lot of people that might want you done away with. Naruto and I have a far shorter list of enemies, and all
three of us together would have an even shorter one."

"Could be your old man."

Shifting his attention between his co-conspirators, the Bael heir gave Naruto a sharp nod. "That's what I thought too. In fact, every time we questioned them, the assassins all said the same thing. That the hit was paid for by my father to warn me off. I believed it the first time. I don't believe it now."

"Why not?"

"Naruto, you've met my father. Do you think he's that much of a fool to send three different assassination teams in one day? It wouldn't be enough to convict him of anything, but if word ever got out all his allies would suspect it was true and never trust him again."

Yes, that sounded right. Lord Bael was nearly an identical image of his son, being taller by a few inches with the odd grey strand in his midnight dark hair. Beyond those differences, their features were the same. But where Sairaorg had an air about him that made people want to trust him, the Lord Bael's eyes were like nothing more than chips of purple ice.

If Lord Bael really wanted his offspring dead, the man would do the deed himself.

"I think that makes this easier but more difficult at the same time." Sona concluded, folding her arms under her chest. Naruto didn't bother to conceal his leer at the way the act pushed her breasts up and against the cloth of her black cardigan, prompting the Sitri girl to roll her eyes. "As you say, your father is not that much of a fool that he would order three hits in a day. But neither is anyone else."

Sairaorg's eyebrows furrowed in thought, and with a roll of his hand he motioned her on.

"Anyone that would have access to assassins skilled enough to break into any of the Bael manors without triggering any alarms cannot be an idiot novice. And sending team after team – rather than one very good assassin, or at least sending them all in force – is on the surface the move of an idiot novice."

"So it was never about killing him." Naruto interjected, rubbing at his eyes with tired annoyance. "It was about sending a message. Well what the fuck was the message? 'Don't trust daddy'? I think he had that one already."

"It was 'fear me', I assume. Whoever sent them after me wasn't interested in success. He just wanted me to know that I had an enemy. An enemy that knows enough about me to know that I'd at least initially believe my father sent those killers. And whoever it was, they covered their tracks well. The first squad was devils. The second squad was fallen angels. The third was harpies."

"So whomever it was has access to wealth and several different realms in the Underworld at least. Someone like that is a noble, or a commander in the Grigori, or high in rank in another realm. Any of those would start a war."

"Sona, I don't think it's about starting a war. If they wanted to do that, they would've just come right out and declared one. Starting a war by trying to assassinate Sairaorg isn't exactly top secret, ya know? You're going to look just as bad, if not worse than you would if you just invaded without cause."

Sairaorg dropped his head into his arms, sighing tiredly. This was all just going in circles, and they had very little hard evidence. "This is all just theory. If we assume this was a message and not a failure of a murder. If we assume that message was what I think it is. If we assume my father wasn't involved at all. We're still no closer to who exactly it is – who it roughly is even – that is out there
that wants me to fear him. We don't even know if I'm specifically the target or if he's going to come after both of you."

"...shit."

"Quite."

Despite having to take a trip out to the forest to retrieve the slimy cold corpse of a monster spider, Sasuke was relieved. The prospect of some form of danger was steady ground. Politics was a prologue, and - if he dare to say it – romance was a confusing interlude. But violence was the most familiar of acts for the Uchiha.

In a way, Sasuke had to thank Koneko. Without her sudden arrival with a severed head in hand, he'd been facing the unwelcome possibility that the awkward silence with Rias would not end. A dragging quiet that would have stretched on forever until something irreparable gave way in him or her.

Instead of that troubling future, the nekomata had brought Sasuke a different one. A future where Rias was at least talking to him without either one of them having to become vulnerable. Burying emotions and fears wasn't healthy, but god damn if it wasn't far easier and more comfortable than any of the alternatives.

Scanning the shadowed horizon, Sasuke kept one hand close to the hilt of his katana and settled the other over the headless cadaver. Koneko had been insistent there was only one of the things, but forewarned was forearmed. Venom that could melt trees in seconds was something to watch out for.

A violet circle of magic slowly unfurled, runic characters slowly twisting as Sasuke called up his magic. Teleportation was nearly instantaneous, but that didn't prevent it from being slightly unsettling. Boring through the dimensional gap for even that short a time tended to do that.

Sasuke appeared back in Rias' mansion in the blink of an eye, pulling his hand away from the spider's body with a grimace. "Where's the head?" he asked the Ruin Princess, meeting those turquoise eyes for a split second before shifting his gaze up at the low thrill of heat in his stomach.

Levitating the head with a crimson sparkle of her own, the redhead crossed the room and gently set it in the juncture of two of the spider's curled legs. Just the sight of the several hour old corpse made Rias want to clean the stinking filth away with a flash of fire, but Ajuka would need the thing whole. Or as whole as it could be.

"We're going." Rias informed her assembled servants, making eye contact with Akeno. "You don't need to wait up for us. I don't believe it will take very long at all, and this thing is most likely something Lord Beelzebub himself created in an experiment."

The half fallen angel nodded in understanding, smiling softly and bidding the two devils goodbye. Whatever the spider turned out to be, Akeno would find out once her mistress returned. Until then, responsibility for household was in her hands and it was up to her to make sure the younger devils shuffled off to bed.

Waiting until after the flash of bloody light dissipated, the Priestess of Thunder turned to her charges and smiled mischievously. "Well now that Doom and Gloom are out for a few hours, what do you say about watching a movie?"

Yuuto blinked with confusion, thrown off by the sudden change in atmosphere from heavy to light. "Uh, okay? The last movie I watched was The Passion of the Christ, but if you prefer to watch some
other kind of movie, that's fine too? I don't really care."

"Kiba was only permitted to watch 'wholesome religious films' when he lived with the Church." Koneko deadpanned, turning away to begin the long trek to Rias' private theatre. "Thus I would strongly suggest you avoid anything too 'mature'."

"It wasn't like I intended to make him watch anything racy… yet." Complaining with an aggrieved tone, Akeno pointed at the smooth cloth of her business skirt. "Doesn't this just say 'you can trust me, I'm a responsible adult' to you?"

"No."

"I've learned not to trust 'responsible adults'."

"Just for that, you're going to be watching 'The Neverending Story'."

"The what?"

"I didn't realize that you were so nostalgic, granny."

Picking up a smirking Koneko, Akeno began to shake the smaller girl and dramatically cry. "Do you hear that, Kiba-kun? This little gremlin is always saying such awful things to me! Just because I'm mature and beautiful and smart and talented doesn't mean that I deserve to be talked down to!"

"How very modest of you." Yuuto deadpanned, rolling his eyes and stepping into the home theater with curious eyes. The enormous screen stretched across one wall and the various couches were worlds of luxury away from what he remembered being allowed as an orphan ward of the Church. And it was universes away from what he'd been allowed as a prisoner of the Holy Sword Project.

Throwing himself into a slightly worn chintz loveseat, the blonde propped his feet up on the armrest to make sure neither of the girls would squeeze in next to him. Yuuto was learning to tolerate them, but any sort of real camaraderie brought painful pangs to his heart and made him remember all the friends who'd died during the project.

The way that he'd survived, clinging to life and running like a coward, made Yuuto unworthy of the sort of closeness Rias and her peerage kept trying to offer him. 'Kiba Yuuto' and 'Isaiah' were merely words that failed to convey what he really was. An empty vessel living for nothing but vengeance.

Akeno prodded at Koneko until the nekomata laid her head in the Queen's lap. With a modicum of searching, the half fallen angel had remained true to her word and popped in 'The Neverending Story'.

The movie rolled slowly on, drawing the eyes of the younger devils while Akeno watched over them. Hopefully the film combined with bellies full of salted popcorn would encourage them to rest. While Akeno was fond of the both of them, she'd been too wound up all day to want to keep forcing the facade of geniality.

Akeno was not strong. Pretending that she wasn't suffering when she felt like a form of torture. Rias' fears, her envies and her sorrows weighed heavy on the fallen angel's heart. Grief shared did not seem halved, but divided and multiplied – parcelled out to the listeners like poisonous baggage.

Akeno was not strong, but for Rias' sake she'd carry it all.

Chilled flesh parted beneath hungry steel. Wielding his scalpel like a macabre artist, Ajuka separated
bone carapace from the soft muscle beneath it. Freezing spells had preserved the freshness of the sample, but the scientist-slash-Satan only had so many cadavers to work with.

"Lord Beelzebub."

What curious little creatures these spiders were. The exoskeleton was not pale chitin, but rather a bone-chitin composite. It was odd. While calcium was indeed harder than the glucose polymer that formed pure chitin, it was brittle. And while chitin was flexible, it was much softer than bone. The composite combined the strengths of both to eliminate the weaknesses and occurred in nature, but it was something Ajuka would have expected to see in a mollusk. Not a spider.

"Lord Beelzebub."

Still, it seemed highly likely to be some form of unintelligent demon spider. They didn't really follow the same biological classifications as human world species. The Underworld was full of fantastical creatures, from the youkai of Yomi to the Sidhe of Tech Duinn. The spider was by all reports a brute of a species, but it could easily be a native underworld denizen. It may even be a new species.

"Lord Beelzebub."

New species were rare, but they did come into being every now and then. Evil gods would create servants, or mankind would find a way to attain power at the cost of their humanity. The devils themselves were merely the descendants of a formerly human cult led by Lilith that had discovered the incredible power gained from consuming human souls.

It would be a good month if a new species of demon had managed to form in Gehenna. The research opportunities were mouthwatering. Ajuka had figured out how to reincarnate humans into devils – what if he could figure out how to create new species with such little cost?

"Lord Beelzebub!"

"What?" Ajuka roared, turning on Falak and leveling a glare on his servant. The impudent snake demon glared right back, setting a hand on his hip and baring his teeth.

"If you want to play it that way, we'll play it that way, Ajuka. Otherwise, get your head out of your ass! You have visitors. In fact, I think you'll even like these ones. They've got another sample for you to play with."

Peeling off his latex gloves with a scowl, the Satan tossed them in the trash and squirted some sanitizer into his palms. Falak left with a last sneer, leaving Ajuka to disinfect himself on his own. A small ball of guilt curled in his stomach, which the green haired man swiftly repressed. His servant should have enough sense to know that he wasn't to be disturbed in the lab.

Although Ajuka had to admit, the possibility of another sample was interesting. He'd only had two of the bone spiders delivered into his hands, and had to utterly break down the first to discover the various elemental compositions of its organs. The second was a work of in-depth anatomical discovery, but a third would certainly be useful. He still needed to experiment and find out the magical properties of the creatures.

Satisfied as the last bit of alcohol wicked away into the air, Ajuka left his laboratory. Stalking through the halls of his modest mansion, the Satan allowed himself to feel a touch of smug pride at the tasteful but rich Arabian décor. No nouveau rich gaudiness for him, thank you very much.

Stepping into the waiting room of his manse, Ajuka rocked back on his heels. Then he blinked light blue eyes, giving the giant gold wall clock a significant glance. "Well, little Rias. What brings you
and your servant to my house at half-past midnight."

Rias sighed, brushing a red strand out of her face. "Don't call me 'little Rias', Ajuka. I'm not little anymore. We're here to deliver the remains of some spider creature that assaulted my Rook on the boundary of my country estate."

"You'll always be little Rias to me. I'm almost a thousand years older than you, and I pretty clearly remember carrying you around when you were just a toothless little tyke." Ajuka stepped closer, smirking inwardly at the wary glance Rias' Pawn gave him. Good boy. Fear the mighty Satan and whatnot.

The third sample was in far worse condition than the first two. Ajuka's first samples had been relatively pristine, the only mark of death being a small incision of a magical blade between the eyes. Rias' sample had its eyes literally carved out, the barely visible brain clearly mangled, and the entire head torn clear off the spine.

"Think you might be able to have a little more fun with the next one?" Ajuka muttered sarcastically, casting a levitation spell. "Just grind it right up. Turn the whole thing to a slurry. For the sake of science, of course."

"The next one?"

Snorting at the dark eyed boy's sluggish thinking, Ajuka sent the corpse carefully floating down the hallways in search of his lab. "Have you got rocks in your ear boy? Yes, the next one. That's the third giant dead spider someone's brought to me to have a look at in two weeks. And for the record, when I said grind it right up, that was sarcasm. In case you hadn't figured it out."

Cutting off Sasuke from offering a sharp insult, Rias moved in front of her Pawn. "We will try to deliver the next one to you in a less... violent condition, though we cannot promise anything. It attacked my Rook, and she was forced to defend herself with deadly force."

"Fair enough. Still, that is odd." Ajuka mused, rubbing at his chin and staring into the distance. "None of the other reports have the creatures behaving aggressively. Sure, they're strange, which is enough for some to be killed and brought in for examination. But this is the first report of violence I've heard of. And by appearances, it's certainly the same species."

Laying into Sirzechs' sister with all the interest of a mad scientist, Ajuka went about peeling every piece of information about the encounter that he could out of her tired little brain. That the venom that spider spat melted a tree was no surprise, since the first time Ajuka had tried to collect a sample it had melted his regular glass beakers.

Putting out a rudimentary trap was new though. It suggested not simply vague instinctive intelligence, but a low sort of cunning. Were they evolving so quickly? Or had they always had that ability and just never displayed it before? Were they always so outright aggressive, or had the nekomata unwittingly provoked it to violence? More and more questions, and not enough data!

"Go home little Rias, and Boy. I wouldn't think too much about these creatures yet. All the other reports describe them as dumb and easily dispatched by trained devils. You know where to find me if you obtain more specimens."

"Do we have a better name to go on than 'specimens'? Rias' Pawn bristled, eying him with the sort of hostility born of long experience. Had the boy had some unfortunate encounters with scientists before? Well he had best get over it then.
"Falak has been calling them 'Bonespiders', if you need to use something so lowbrow."
Chapter 14

Accepting the warm white saucer from Akeno with a soft smile, Rias lifted the cup of tea to her lips. It was a strong orange pekoe with a generous dollop of cream and no sugar; just how she liked it. The redhead gave the seat beside her a gentle pat, and then moved her focus out over the gardens of her estate.

Three deep red balls of her magic floated unsteadily behind the hedges, marking out Sasuke and Yuuto as they team sparred against Souji. Idly conjuring her power of destruction, preventing it from actually destroying anything, and then having it follow the three males around was taxing her more than Rias had thought it would.

Maintaining and manipulating the make-shift markers for a few minutes was easy. Doing it for an hour and counting was making her temples pound with the backlash.

Rias sighed at the chuckle of amusement Akeno gave as Yuuto was blasted through the hedge. Her Queen was such a sadist – when she wasn't being a masochist anyway. She had half a mind to send Akeno down to see how she would fare against the swordsman. What kind of mistress would she be if she ignored the masochist side of Akeno's thirst for pain? And if Akeno got her share of mocking from time to time, it was all the better.

Alas, the half fallen angel was needed at the Ruin Princess' side, sending floating balls of her own elemental magic to shakily accompany Rias' crimson markers.

It shouldn't be a surprise that Yuuto was being knocked on his ass, or that Sasuke was thrown after in short order.

Her blonde Knight might be a magnificent swordsman for a human due to his conditioning for the Holy Sword Project. Her dark-haired Pawn might have picked up some shockingly deadly skills from whatever guardian he'd been in the care of as a child – and really, what kind of guardian was more interested in teaching a young boy how to kill rather than feeding him? - but neither boy was a match for Souji.

Okita Souji was a peerless warrior with decades more experience than both boys put together, and was renowned as one of the best swordsmen in the entire Underworld. They'd really had no chance from the beginning.

Every member of her peerage was training in their own way, sharpening their specialized skills and working to cover their weaknesses. Akeno and Rias worked to finely tune their control over their sizeable magical reservoirs. Koneko ran obstacle courses from dawn to dusk, making up for lost ground in speed. Sasuke and Yuuto beat each other bloody with kenjutsu and training blades wreathed in elemental magic.

The days ended when they collapsed into bed bone tired, and began when they could drag their fatigued bodies out for another round of conditioning. It was the most intensive regime Rias had ever constructed for herself and her servants, with no time for socializing or leisure or awkward feelings. All of that fell away when the concern was survival.

A fearful hush hung over Gehenna. It began with whispers of knives in the dark and of hungry clicking mouths, and exploded when Meena Vapula had been discovered one morning impaled on a spear before the Diabolical Senate Chambers. Accusations had flown hot and thick as blood after that, detailing months-long paranoid conspiracy theories and attempted murders.
Lord Bael was trying to assassinate his own son. Sirzechs Lucifer had put a series of hits out on Diehauser Belial. Marquis Phenex and Duke Agrares were attempting to kill each other every other day. Prince Sitri had a grudge against the House of Amon and the purse to pay for their heads.

In a way, the fact that suddenly so much had come to light was a relief. No clan war had been declared, and the government had cautiously stated that a single actor was responsible for the killings and attempted killings in an attempt to sow disorder. Once it was discovered who was responsible and they were done away with, order would be restored. Or so the Senate had informed the public.

What went unsaid was the frenzied speculation that the enemy might be one of their own.

Not that the public cared all that much at the moment. It was hard to care about the goings on of bluebloods when one’s children were being eaten by bonespiders after all. In fact, if it hadn't been for the campaign of extermination that the Great King Bael had undertaken in his territory and the mimick campaigns in other territories, the commoners might have even enjoyed watching the nobility get their comeuppance.

Instead, it was every devil for themselves and no one had the time to devote to gloating over the misfortunes of others. The fear had slithered into every corner of public and private life, grinding activity in Sheol to a halt. If an atmosphere of paranoia and a steadily building economic recession were the goals of the man behind the assassinations and the bonespiders, he was succeeding.

Or perhaps the end goal was war. In which case, the puppet master was still succeeding. All treaty negotiations with Heaven and with the Grigori were suspended, because despite the protests of both powers they were the targets of most suspicion. Old wounds opened more easily, and old grudges were never long forgotten. Militant rhetoric was mounting, and sooner or later things would explode.

Personally, Rias had never suspected either Heaven nor the Grigori. Azazel had waged his own bloody civil war in tandem with the devils, driving out the most militant fallen angels and collaring the rest at the same time that the Old Satan Faction and the New Satan Faction had been struggling for control of their people's future.

As for the angels, Michael could easily have swept in at the head of Heaven's armies to obliterate the fractured Underworld. Instead he'd offered initially covert and then increasingly public support of both Azazel and the New Satans.

It made no strategic sense for the Grigori or Heaven to have turned around and started striking against the devils so suddenly. Not after investing so many resources into building bonds of peace with them, or giving them time to restore stable government.

But logos often failed in the face of pathos. Emotion appealed to people much easier than rationality, and Rias was afraid that everything was sliding irrevocably back to bloody conflict with their uneasy allies.

Rias was no wide-eyed naïve young patriot. War was a dirty business, and she hoped to never see it in her lifetime.

Unfortunately, reality seemed to enjoy crushing hope.

Azmarin reminded Naruto in a very roundabout sort of way of Konoha. It was far more industrialized than Konoha ever had been, the first blooming of capitalist industry had just been on the horizon for Konoha when Naruto had been shoved into his second life. It was hundreds of times larger too. But beneath all the superficiality, there were some common elements.
Being in a city reminded him of the strange contradictory feeling of being totally surrounded by living beings yet utterly alone. The country was green and open, where all attempts at naturalism in a city felt like an artificial charade. Always everywhere was the stink of the teeming masses pressed together like sardines in a can.

Yet cities were not all bad. They were civilization in miniature. For every leering thug Naruto saw, there was a salaryman boarding the subway and holding his daughter's hand. The beauty may be artificial, but that almost made it more lovely, because it was the result of someone's effort rather than chance. Murderers lived mere streets away from saints, participating in the great good and evil mosaic of people.

The feeling that thrummed in Naruto's chest was indescribable. It was admiration and envy. Disgust and longing. Connection and disconnection. Love and hate. There were too many mingled emotions running through his veins, but Naruto at least knew he wanted to protect the perfect imperfection that he could see in Azmarin.

Hence why Naruto had taken it upon himself to lead his own bonespider extermination squad. Several months had passed since the engagement ball – *months of Sasuke and Rias being fucking fools and pretending nothing had happened* – and he was closer to fourteen than thirteen. Gehenna was a strange mixture of coddling young devils for decades in some ways, yet caving to medieval standards of behavior in other ways.

At nearly fourteen, Naruto was scandalously young to be engaged. Yet he was old enough to start taking up other duties – *governing* duties – for the sake of the clan. The contradiction was absurd, in the same way that Gehenna itself was a mixture of mishmashed expectations. If he wanted to partake of alcohol, he was up shit creek. But if the Gremory heir pressured his parents and grandparents to allow him to begin acting like a feudal-lord-to-be, they had no socially acceptable recourse to deny him.

Old enough to kill, but not old enough to drink. It was fucked.

Sweeping his cool blue gaze over the flickering shadows of the abandoned warehouse, Naruto frowned. "Are you sure this is the right place, Nergal? Cause I'm not seeing shit." There were lots of dusty crates and rusty old steel girders, but no bonespider nest or half eaten corpses.

"This was the address given in the report." The constable confirmed, sharp displeasure coloring his tone as the middle-aged devil stepped up beside the young lordling. The deep cobalt of the law enforcement officer's uniform was in stark contrast to the military crimson of the noble's, but none of that clash of color showed in their mannerisms.

Naruto and Nergal worked *well* together. Or as well as could be expected when Naruto was technically a member of an entirely different public service branch that was intruding on Nergal's official jurisdiction.

Nobility had a way of making all the rules disappear though, and Naruto would much rather be helping his people than sitting on his ass playing soldier with a practically made-up position he only held by right of blood.

It might be custom for almost every member of the 72 Pillars to have all sorts of honorary positions within the government of their clan demesne, but Naruto intended to *make* something of his.

A string of starch webbing dribbled down, snatching the cap from Naruto's head and making the redhead sigh. Cocking his gloved fingers into the shape of a pistol, Naruto pointed his hands straight in the air and fired off a fat column of scarlet energy. 'Pow, pow, pow.'
Obliterating the single bonespider was distinctly unsatisfying, but at least the burst of energy had carved a hole in the roof. Silver moonlight shone, painting a white circle about the two devils and chasing back the depressing darkness. Naruto might be a devil, but he had yet to become fond of darkness.

"Was that really necessary?" Nergal exhaled, dragging a hand over the cropped salt and pepper strands of his beard. As the grandson of the feudal lord, Naruto could basically get away with murder. But public destruction of property had a way of coming back to bite the police officer in the ass with paperwork.

Naruto snorted, drawing his short sword from its sheath at his side. "You should know by now that it's always necessary." The boy charged the blade with a wreath of red destruction, wordlessly swirling his magic into recreated Rasengan in the other, and began to move through the shadows.

Quick swipes of the glowing red saber cut through half rotted crates. Some of them were empty, some were full of trash, and some were full of the fat white clusters of eggs laid by a bonespider after a meal of flesh. "Where the fuck are you?" Naruto bellowed, blasting away another clutch of eggs with a fist full of violently rotating sorcery. "I didn't come to play fucking hide and seek!"

An electric green spell flashed in the corner of his eye, and just as Naruto turned back to look at his partner, the fat corpse of a bonespider dropped from the ceiling to land beside him in a crash. The smoking hole in its abdomen and the smug look the older devil wore while holstering his service pistol told Naruto all he needed to know.

"That was my kill!" Naruto whined, returning to destroying the last few crates with a pout. "You should have let me go at him with my sword and do a bit of en garde rather than just sniping him with one of your wimpy little spellguns."

"Sir, if you'd like to take credit for these things you need to be a little quicker on the draw. I can hardly be at fault if you have performance issues, sir."

"Don't care me a fuckin' sir, I'm like a tenth your age. It's just creepy."

"As you wish, my lord."

"That's even worse!"

Smiling bitterly, Azazel turned over the newly completed artificial Sacred Gear in his palms. Uplifted Star was to date the fallen angel's greatest accomplishment in creating artificial Sacred Gears. Downfall Dragon Spear would undoubtedly surpass it in time, but that particular piece was still very much on the drawing board.

It was morbidly amusing how much could be accomplished when he was willing to build progress on a bed of blood and sacrifice. Azazel's creation appeared almost like an overlarge Christmas decoration. The six-sided star was crafted out of burnished red gold, thick arms with a peach sized onyx glittering malevolently in the center.

If not for that jewel glittering with malice, the Sacred Gear would look almost cheery.

Not that even an innocent appearance could make up for the incessant cursing of Kokabiel's voice in the back of Azazel's mind. His old comrade was understandably a little peeved about being imprisoned, experimented on, and turned into a weapon, but it was what it was. That was the future Kokabiel had chosen every time the fallen angel had rebelled against the Governor General of the Grigori.
"You done fondling it yet, old man?" Vali mocked, stepping into Azazel's office with a swagger. The young half devil's lip was split and there was a faint crust of blood around a nostril, but that didn't stop the Satan's descendent from gloating inwardly.

Huffing with disapproval, Azazel stepped around his desk and hung a lazy arm in the fold of his yukata. "Fighting again, Vali?" The boy's recurrent conflicts with the young fallen angels under his command had lessened over the years, but there was still the odd time Vali would strut about like a peacock after asserting his dominance.

"If they didn't want to fight me, they should have been keeping their mouths shut." And as far as Vali was concerned, that was the end of it. Most people inwardly acknowledged some responsibility for any sort of fight with their peers, but Vali actually believed that he had no contribution to it. It was like an inevitable formula in Vali's mind. Insult Azazel and get punched. A law of the universe just like gravity.

Azazel was both concerned and touched. The Governor General was no fool and understood that making peace with the devils and angels hadn't been popular within the Grigori. Generations of violence weren't so easily forgotten, and if the younger fallen angels wanted to call Azazel an old fool while they followed his orders, it was at least an outlet for steam. Vali playing enforcer only made Azazel look like a dictator afraid of criticism.

Yet at the same time, Vali's anger came from the heart. It was a safe expression of the affection inside the boy that built and built, seeking Azazel like a flower sought the sun. It was so odd that a chance meeting and awkward paternal offerings had yielded such fruit, but they had.

Azazel became the father that a broken and lost boy had always wanted, and despite all the bastards Azazel had surely sired over the years, it was the child with no shared blood and who wore the face of his enemy that became his son.

There were very few things that boiled Azazel's blood, but if he ever ran across Rizevim Lucifer he'd make that bastard scream for death before giving it to him. Imaging that he'd have the chance to strangle Vali's biological grandfather with his own intestines always brought a smile to Azazel's face.

Smirking, the fallen angel tossed Uplifted Star at Vali.

"What's this now?" Vali caught the Sacred Gear, a disturbed expression crossing his face when Kokabiel's voice filled his head. "Thanks, but no thanks." Vali already had a Sacred Gear. He neither needed nor wanted another, and he hardly wanted to have to listen to Kokabiel shriek all day long.

"Ah, you don't have to keep it. I just want to see how things work out, and you're the perfect test subject."

Vali rolled his eyes, reluctantly agreeing to yet another one of his foster father's crazy ideas. Shoving the annoying voice of the once living fallen angel out of his mind, Vali roughly poured his magic into the Sacred Gear.

A faint gold orb shrouded the half devil's hand, pooling together in a tight ball nearly instantly before firing of a spear of light that rocketed through the window with a tinkle of shattered glass.

"So it gives me the power of a fallen angel, does it?" Vali examined the thing with a little more interest, turning it over in his palms before shrugging.

"Careful now-"
"Balance Break."

Light as bright as the sun filled the room, making Azazel squint and step back. Trust a Sacred Gear built out of Kokabiel's spirit to be as gaudy and self-aggrandizing as the man himself.

After a few moments, the yellow glow drained away to reveal Vali standing before him with an irritated expression. The young half devil's six wings were unfurled, black leathery texture replaced with downy feathers as dark as a crow's wing. Clenched in one fist was a black steel longsword, glowing yellow runes stretching the length of the blade down to the six-pointed red gold cross-guard. The dark gem had migrated to crown the pommel.

"Well, that's not so bad is it?"

"Considering he **never shuts up** I think it might be **that** bad."

"Aww, don't be a spoil sport." Azazel pouted, watching as Vali deactivated the Balance Breaker and threw the golden star at him with a sneer. "It seems to me like you're pretty **compatible** with him."

Vali looked mildly ill. "Don't **ever** suggest that again. I might just throw up a little in my mouth."

"Fine, fine. You sure you don't want to take it though? It might be useful, and I'd say I'm done with this one. Fafnir needs more attention than this one ever did."

Utter arrogance filled Vali's form, and the silver haired devil waved the fallen angel off with a shooing motion. "I don't need something like that. I'm the Hakuryuuko and the descendent of a Satan. Might do **you** some good though, old man."

"You know, sometimes I think all this aggression and disrespect comes from you not having a lady friend in your life."

"This is coming from the five thousand year old eternal bachelor?"

"I'm a bachelor by choice. Unlike someone in this room, I'm not involuntarily celibate."

"There's nothing **involuntary** about it, you dirty geezer!"

"You know, I didn't think he was **serious**."

Ravel gave Naruto a commiserating pat to the shoulder, blue eyes watching as a tiny model train chugged on by. "You should know by now never to underestimate Lord Sirzechs' particular brand of insanity." she suggested to her bemoaning companion, voice cutting through the low hum of hundreds of humans.

"Yeah, but Disneyland? I'm not five, and I don't think you wanted to come either."

Shrugging lazily, the eleven year old girl readjusted the strap of her small purse over her shoulder. "I don't know, it's kind of cute isn't it?" Ravel didn't see what all the fuss was about. Sure, Naruto might be in macho puberty and she was a bit too much of a precocious genius to want to constantly wander around theme park, but once in a while wasn't bad. "You should just live a little."

Naruto shoved his hands in his pockets, glumly looking over the dark logs and dirt of Frontierland. "Yeah, I guess. But still, wouldn't the ones back home be better? It's not like the humans have magic. Riding a rollercoaster along a track has **nothing** on riding a wild dragon. This is all a little too safe to get the blood pumpin', ya know?"
"You could always sabotage a few of the rides." Ravel suggested morbidly, grabbing her fiancé's hand and tugging the taller devil along through the park. "Wasn't there that one incident where some man got decapitated? That would liven a few things up here. Blood and brains all over. It'd be a party."

A disturbed expression crossed the Gremory heir's face as he stared down at the blonde girl. "Why's it always the gore with you? Disneyland is for kids, so why not add a few pinches of death to it? I need to get back and add Grandpa Zeo, so let's put a horse's head in his bed? Riser's getting uppity, so let's kidnap him and pretend to make him a pagan sacrifice?"

"It's all part of my plan."

"What plan?"

"That's for me to know, and for you to never find out."

"Well now you're just making me curious." Naruto complained, slowing until they stopped in front of a gift shop. Ravel peered through the windows with vague interest, prompting Naruto to wonder if he should offer to buy her something from it.

"Be curious all you like." the blonde shot back airily, dismissing the display and pulling at the redhead again. "Hey, want to go to Fantasyland? This place is kind of boring."

A mocking lilt filled Naruto's voice, and poking at Ravel's side with his free hand, he began to tickle mercilessly. "Yeah, it's so boring to see how they used to live in the olden times. Churning butter? That's servants' work that is."

Ravel yanked her hand out of his grip with a growl, turning in place to pin the taller devil with freezing blue eyes. "You think you'll get away with that? No one tickles me and survives. I hope you're ready to make amends with your life."

"Umm..."

A dark smirk pulled at the Phenex girl's pink lips, hands coming up in manicured claws. "It's time..." she breathed slowly, stepping closer to Naruto with an evil cackle. "For the purple nurple." Her hands shot forward, pinching at the redhead's nipples and giving them a painful twist.

"Stop!" Naruto squealed. He did it in a manly way of course, voice echoing baritone with pain. He would deny it to his grave that he shrieked like a little girl, leaping back with his palms coming up to shield his aching nipples.

Their little byplay drew more than one shocked gaze from disapproving parents of young children. "Kids these days, no sense of shame or modesty." an older grandfather wheezed, hobbling away on his cane. "Back in my day, a young lad like that would be dead before he let a girl put his balls in her purse."

"Say that to my face you shitty greezer! And stop laughing Ravel!"

Koneko splashed a handful of cold water over her face. Clenching at the sides of the sink, the white-haired girl gave a gusting sigh and closed her aching eyes. The sticky grit of sleep deprivation made even closing her eyes hurt, but it was a sacrifice Koneko was willing to make.

Few things in life came easy, and strength was not one of them. Koneko moved faster and hit harder
than she ever had before, but she was not satisfied with that. The increasingly difficult obstacle courses Rias thought up for her were helping, but she needed more.

Yuuto's growth had been practically exponential. Moving from the strength of a human to a low ranking devil in half a year was no easy feat. Yet the blonde was doing it, moving leaps and bounds ahead on the fuel of single minded vengeance. The empty hunger in his eyes was disturbingly similar to the hunger that Koneko caught from time to time in Sasuke's, and that just made her tired and frustrated.

What was with Rias collecting all the basket cases? It was like she was trying to get her throat cut in her sleep by one of her mentally disturbed servants.

As a recipient of that generosity, Koneko hardly had any right to complain, but it was almost amusingly absurd. The nekomata didn't think there was a single member of their peerage that wasn't utterly fucked up. Even more absurdly, for some reason it was working. All their sharp broken edges seemed to fit together and function when by all logic they shouldn't.

Rias was supposed to be an insecure ojousama suckling down attention like a thirsty man would swallow water in the desert. She was supposed to be relentlessly selfish in her quest to satisfy the empty hole of her inferiority complex. She wasn't supposed to offer her heart up on the altar of sacrifice and stretch herself beyond endurance for their sake.

Akeno was supposed to hate and hate and hate, until the whole world burned from the heat of her anguish. The girl that lost her mother to bloody murder was never supposed to become the girl who loved so fiercely that she would do anything or become anything to protect a makeshift family that could never replace the original.

Sasuke was supposed to be a block of ice given form, waking only to wrap his hands about their throats and gleefully strangle the life from them. He was meant to be a traitor, proving her mistrust right with the same crazed burn in his eyes as Kuroka. He wasn't supposed to come alive at every threat like a feral wolf guarding his pack, baring his fangs with protective intent.

Yuuto was supposed to be the hungry black void, consuming everyone and everything in the eternal quest for justice and revenge. The blonde boy who gave shy laughs at their jokes and bent to every overture was anything but a void, and every day that boy was just a little more visible.

Koneko was supposed to be broken beyond all repair, emotions shattered until all that was left was a soulless automaton following orders. Instead, she burned inside like the first sparks becoming a bonfire, passion building until she wanted to weep.

One day she might have to kill Sasuke or Yuuto, but Koneko was beginning to wonder if she'd have the strength to kill people she was starting to call 'friends'.

Grabbing a fluffy orange hand towel, Kokeno quickly patted her face dry before giving the mirror a rare exhausted smile.

She was fourteen going on forty it felt like sometimes. But in a lifetime of ten thousand years, that was nothing. It was in the nature of a devil to endure the flowing years, so that was exactly what Koneko would do.

Sasuke bared his teeth at his reflection in the glass of the window. The young man glaring back at him was the most visible representation of the stress winding its way into a tight ball at the base of his spine. The Uchiha had spent months riding close to the cliff, and every day seemed to bring him
closer to tumbling over.

In his first life, Sasuke had forged himself into a splendid weapon that could kill with as little effort as breathing.

Weapons had no need for soft weaknesses or sentimental longing. They only had the need for sharp edges, a cold shine, and the accuracy to open up a throat on the first stroke.

Feeding everything he had in him into his need for vengeance had made Sasuke hard, but it had made him brittle, and he wondered just how much more change he could take before he broke and became something unrecognizable.

When Sasuke had decided to accept Rias Gremory's offer to join her peerage, he'd done so with the expectation that it would be a repeat of his experiences under Orochimaru. Less bloody and less cruel for certain, since Rias was hardly an international criminal and mad scientist, but the essentially underlying axiom of transaction he'd taken as a given. Sasuke would render service for however long it took him to grow into the power of a high class devil, and then terminate that servitude on ideally amicable terms.

He hadn't expected them to start to worm their way into the rusty steel trap that Sasuke had for a heart. Only Naruto had done that before, and only by being stubborn enough to ignore the pain the Uchiha caused when he snapped.

Perhaps when Naruto had defeated him, he'd made Sasuke weak and replaced the warrior's blood in his veins with fucking water. Sasuke couldn't see any other reason for why he continued to let Rias' peerage keep doing what they were doing to him, because what they were doing to him was agony.

Taking Yuuto under his wing and thrashing some skill and sense into the boy was meant to just be something Sasuke was doing to pass the time and keep a lid on the blonde's instability. He had never wanted to experience that quiet warm pride in his chest when the Knight succeeded at a lesson or broke a record in training.

Once he'd idly wondered if that feeling was the same sort of feeling Itachi had when he'd managed to teach Sasuke something, and the thought was like a knife to the chest. Itachi and Naruto were the only brothers he'd ever had, and the notion that someone else was intruding on that sacred space was alarming.

Sasuke had refused to call Akeno anything but Himejima for years. Refused until he couldn't bear the weight any longer and let her name pass his lips like an oath, like the poison drawn from a wound; because with smooth dark strands and a soft face she looked so much like his mother. She appeared so much like Uchiha Mikoto that it chafed him fucking raw, dredging up faint memories of gentle warm hands on his face and an annoying stupid little boy asking over and over again for a sister. That boy had never known how good he'd had it until it was gone.

Disliking Koneko for her suspicion would have been perfect. Paying back distrust with rejection would have been a sign that all was right in the world and that Sasuke wasn't rusting at the seams. Instead he wanted to ruffle the girl's hair and reassure her that he had his honor, and that even if they took different paths Koneko could trust Sasuke at her back and stop looking at him with such worried broken eyes.

All of the little things were so painful that he wondered if they might kill him one day. Or perhaps Sasuke was just becoming a masochist, because the pain was a good pain. It was like warming frostbitten hands in the bath after an icy day, or opening an infected wound to let it drain in the open air.
The hurt inside him shifted and swelled with every breath, prickling needles of light and life that grew ever more bewildering until Sasuke wasn't sure it was pain anymore at all.

Once, months after Sasuke had become a wanderer, he'd chanced upon an old bunker that had belonged to his family during the clan wars. The uchiwa fan had been washed of color, broken by cracks in the wall where things new and green were sprouting. Sasuke had thought nothing of it at the time, save that it was just another example of his family fading into history.

Looking back, Sasuke knew that wall was him.

Rias and everything she'd brought with her had grown through the tiny cracks of him, thickening and breaking apart a shaped sculpture that anyone in Konoha could have recognized as 'Uchiha Sasuke, the feared S-ranked Shinobi'.

The old Sasuke was crumbling down, being reforged into something strange and alive, new and yet older than the avenger he'd become. The boy that had once allowed himself to feel was crawling out of the grave Sasuke had put him in all those years ago.

It scared him, and Sasuke hated that fear. Hated the way it made him choke up and want to wheeze. Hated the way it made him wake up in the middle of the night from fresh dreams of loss and an uncertain future.

Yet he couldn't bring himself to tear out those determined and incredibly fragile crimson blooms.

It would be so easy to destroy it all. Sasuke could simply turn around to where he could hear her quietly speaking with Akeno and release the poisonous barb of his tongue. Tear everything out by root and stem and reclaim the cold galvanized steel he'd once been.

But any time he considered it, Sasuke's body seized up like a rusty gear. The frailty already held sway over him, and Sasuke was too weak to bear the devastation that would follow.

If he turned about, Sasuke would see Rias there. See the perfect curves of her body and the passionate red of her hair. He'd have the see the way that dark bags were carving their way into her face, a physical testament to the way she was running on fumes just to protect the broken little family she'd made.

Sasuke didn't know what he'd do if he saw that, so he continued to stare through the glass at the moonless night. Continued to marinate in his own self-anger and confusion, wishing for not the first time that he had something to take out his feelings on, something to break.

The universe, for once; obliged him.

Glass shattered with a crackle, sharp shards spraying over Sasuke's face and bouncing off his instinctively closed eyelids. One tiny lance of crystal laid open the skin of his cheek, letting out a trickle of blood to run down the pale skin of his jaw.

In between one blink and the next, Sasuke found himself tackled to the floor with a pair of taloned hands wrapped about his throat. Through the ringing in his ears, the Uchiha could faintly hear the sound of Akeno's surprised shriek.

Black feathers filled the air as intruders poured in through the broken garden window, and with his heart hammering in his chest Sasuke pieced together the feathered face and the great beaked mouth.

_Tengu._
The Japanese demon was a foreigner with no legitimate business in Gehenna, considering the realm-wide shutdown on visitors. There was really only *one* reason for a squad of tengu to burst into Rias' library with violence in their hands.

Quite frankly, Sasuke was surprised it had taken them so long to send someone after her. She was the sister of a Satan, and second in line to lead one of the 72 Pillars. Given the way the so-called 'puppet master' had been targeting the great and small, Sasuke had expected an assassination attempt months ago.

Electricity shrilled in his palm, and Sasuke only had the time to smirk malevolently at the shocked look in the youkai's eyes before he was shoving the Chidori up and through the assassin's chest. A split second after he'd felt the slippery hot slickness of blood between his fingers, the head of the corpse still perched on his chest exploded with a panicked lash of Rias' Power of Destruction.

Blood and brain matter splattered over his face, dousing the dark strands of his hair in crimson. There was a chunk of grey flesh sticking to one of his cheeks, and the Uchiha swiped the rapidly cooling gore off.

Then slowly, Sasuke began to laugh.
Chapter 15

Rias has killed before.

The execution of stray devils was a duty laid on every law-abiding noble of Gehenna. Calling up a flicker of enchantment and vaporizing a criminal hardly made her break a sweat. Even if the stray devil fought back, they were never a match for Rias' power, and death was quick and clean.

An orderly execution was nothing compared to the chaotic carnage of a battle. It was her first true skirmish, and so many worlds away from her training it bewildered her.

The redhead's pulse raced with adrenaline, and with a snap of her fingers she sent a thick coil of ruby light out that decapitated one of the screeching tengu.

Gold lightning cracked through the air, colliding with a kusarigama and shattering it before another of the assassins could try to cut into Rias.

Akeno and the Ruin Princess moved together like a well-oiled machine. They stood back to back, flashes of Bael sorcery and elemental conjuration scything down hired knives like wheat.

Over the crackle of magic and steel, Rias could just hear the shrill sound of chirping and Sasuke's mocking laughter. It... concerned her to hear her Pawn shouting and cursing so cruelly, because she would never have pegged her stoic servant as a berserker, and the only other reason for him to behave like that made her quail.

There was so much she didn't know about Sasuke. She knew that he preferred bitter flavors over sweet ones. Rias knew that nagging him into cosplay irritated him less than he let on. Given the choice of sleeping patterns, he slept late and woke late. Pride ruled him, but Sasuke would bend his neck out of pragmatic necessity.

What Rias didn't know was the name of his mother. She didn't know where his family came from, or if he'd never had one. She didn't know what dreams he had that would jolt him sweating and gasping from an afternoon nap. When Sasuke shoved an electricity coated katana through the stomach of an enemy, she couldn't say if his bared teeth spoke of pleasure or pain, madness or sadism.

In many ways, Sasuke was a familiar stranger.

"Rias!"

Koneko blew the doors of her study off the hinges, entering the library with a smashing of oak and silver clad fists. Water still clung in beads to the white of Koneko's hair, suggesting she'd been called away from washing her face or an outright bath.

As glad as she was to see her Rook, the distraction of the nekomata's entrance was costly. Agony flared sharp and deep as one of the would-be killers took advantage of Rias' redirected attention. A sharp katana laid the muscle of her left shoulder open to the bone, cutting so deeply it made her vision white out. Rias cried out in shock and pain, hand coming up to clutch at the wound.

Blood poured between her fingers, scalding and sticky. Gritting her teeth and shaking at the pain, Rias pulled up a tide of magic and thrust it out in a wild wave of destruction. The swell of disintegrating energy vaporized every enemy within a three meter radius before protectively pulling back and hovering about her.
Beneath her palm, Rias could feel the torn open flesh, and with a roiling stomach she realized that it was too wide and deep to simply be a cut. The wrinkled sensation was that of her own open muscle, and the sharp splinter was broken bone, burning with a white-hot ache and leaking life giving fluids by the spurt.

There was no more of her Pawn's frozen mirth ringing through the air.

There was just the sight of Sasuke and Koneko circling like hungry wolves and tearing through bodies with bare claw and electric magecraft. Yuuto's face was there too, full of grey pallor but strong as the young Knight clenched a silver demonic longsword in his fists.

The sound of her name drew Rias' attention, turquoise eyes moving slowly to stare at Akeno. The Queen's lips were moving, but the redhead could hear no sound over the ringing in her ears, and she'd never learnt to read lips.

Rias smiled softly. There was no reason to look so concerned. Truly, the cut didn't even hurt so badly any more. She felt a little light headed, but sometimes the shock of battle could do that. It was unnecessary and a little bit alarmist.

Rias blinked.

Kneeling on the blood splattered floor wasn't something she'd remembered doing.

At least it helped with the creeping weakness in her knees. Honestly, a little rest wasn't something for her peerage to be so worked up about. The pressing faces that filled her field of view were distracted by a scratch when there was a battle going on. The only one still fighting was Sasuke, stepping about so quickly it would have filled her with pride if she wasn't catching glimpses the tormented expression on his face.

She'd have to do something about that later. Sasuke was her servant, and she was the master. If anything, the duty was on her to protect him. His guilt was unnecessary.

Another warm surge soaked through her clenched fingers, and Rias was paradoxically glad for it. The sensation was a bit gross, but it was warm, and she was more than a little cold. Icy tendrils had wound themselves through her chest, and every bit of heat was appreciated.

Akeno's mouth moved with more urgency, repeating a single word over and over to the point it irritated Rias.

*Artery.*

Rias looked down.

Her left arm hung from her shoulder by only a thin strip of flesh. There was quite a lot of blood pooled on the floor.

Someone would have to do something about that.

A yellow runic circle rotated slowly, her wounded shoulder centered in its light. Akeno was so thoughtful sometimes, it made Rias want to smile.

So she did.

A little bit of blood was still leaking from the gash – which was really much deeper than she'd thought it would be – but it was her friend's thought that counted.
Still, there was no reason for them to be getting sentimental in a clash. More than half of the tengu had been cut down, but they were emboldened and hemming Sasuke in closer and closer. Someone should really step up and give him a hand.

A flash of red zipped across the room, red saber glowing blood red and parting flesh with sharp slices.

Rias dreamily smiled.

Naruto had shown up. How nice of him to stop by and give Sasuke a hand. Really, Sasuke had been so down lately that she should have asked him to stop by earlier. Their closeness made her burn with jealousy, but it was better for her to be jealous than her Pawn to be sad.

Then a heavy sensation of burning rage and deep power filled the air, weighing down on everyone so profoundly that even Rias could feel it through the cotton filling her head.

Oh, her brother was here too.

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‘You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.’

Ravel turned the yellowed page. *Meditations* was one of her father's favorites, and the blonde girl was beginning to agree. The dog-eared volume might be dusty and old, but the words of Marcus Aurelius were timeless.

Naruto's head twisted in her lap, and Ravel gave into the urge to run a hand through the sleeping boy's hair. *Everyone* in the Gremory household was exhausted and withdrawn.

It reminded her of the paranoid suspicion of outsiders that had filled the air of her home after the most recent assassination attempt. She still remembered the way Riser had limped about with a scowl for days, since not even the usually immortal Phenex clan was immune to the deep bite of a well-forged holy sword.

Luckily, Ravel was not counted as an outsider. Lord Sirzechs had strengthened the wards against teleportation months ago, but she was one of the few people that didn't actually live in the house that was still keyed into the warding scheme.

It was probably at Naruto's urging, but the Lord Gremory had still allowed it.

All the better for them, since it had let her respond right away when Ravel had gotten the panicked message from Naruto about Rias' nearly severed arm. Providing an armful of phoenix tears at no cost was against clan policy, but the grateful looks the Gremory family had given her made it worth it.

One vial of her clan's miracle cure had gone towards reattaching Rias' nearly severed arm. The other nine had been passed to a grim-faced Lord Sirzechs.

The Satan had disappeared for an hour while they all crowded tensely around Rias' sick room, and then reappeared looking even angrier with both arms soaked in blood up to the elbows. It made Ravel shudder in remembered horror.

She just hoped her geezer of a grandfather never found out. The old man might be willing to spend tears for the sake of an alliance or with the promise of future payment, but it wasn't *Rias* Ravel was marrying, and she neither asked for or expected the Gremory clan to be in her debt.

Rias was important to Naruto, and Ravel liked her too. That was all that really mattered.
"Whaz going on?" Naruto slurred, peering up in confusion before his eyes went wide.

The clan heir made it three inches off her stocking clad thighs before Ravel was shoving Naruto's head back down with a palm to the brow. "Go back to sleep, you idiot." She ordered sternly, turning another page. The entire effect was spoiled by the amused quirk of her lips, but at least she'd tried.

"Uh, okay? Wait, that's not okay! Why are you in my bed? Why's my head in your lap?"

"Maybe someone put it there." Ravel snarked, pinching at the redhead's nose without moving her eyes from the inked sentences of Meditations. He was acting like she'd just snuck into his room while he was sleeping, plonked his head in her lap, and starting reading.

…well she had, but they weren't strangers, so it was okay!

Rolling his eyes, Naruto subsided with a grumble. Ravel's nonchalance made the whole situation significantly less awkward, even if it was still odd. They were friends of a sort, but Naruto hadn't thought they were such close friends that it was lap pillow time.

"Whatcha readin'?" Blue eyes skimmed over the upside-down font, deciphering the title but not recognizing it. Maybe his father or aunt had read it before. It seemed more up their alley, seeing as how it was plain and stuffy looking.

"It's philosophy. Might be too highbrow for you, Mr. 'Common Touch'." There was no point in trying to keep reading over the interruptions, and Naruto was more interesting to her than a book she'd read several times already anyway.

"I'm plenty high-brow." The redhead denied, cracking open the tome to a random page. "What is this? Ye Olde Anglo-Saxon?" All devils could understand any spoken tongue through their passive 'language' ability, but that didn't prevent Naruto's brain from rendering some works in positively atrocious spelling.

"Only someone who was utterly lowbrow would fail to appreciate the classics." She sniffed.

"Keep insulting me and I might drool all over your skirt. After all, you can't expect civilized behavior out of an uncultured rube."

Ravel twisted Naruto's ears, giggling sadistically at her fiance's pained squawk. "Just because I rushed over here in striped stockings and a miniskirt doesn't mean that I'll put up with your perverted ideas."

"I didn't mean it like that, you grilled chicken."

"Whatever you say, pervert boy."

Naruto gave the blonde a sharp rebellious poke to the side before turning his attention to the window across his bedroom.

The artificial sunlight of Gehenna shafted in, and if the Gremory heir had to guess, he'd peg the time around noon. He hoped Ravel had left a message for her family, otherwise he could picture the Phenex clan running about like chickens with their heads cut off looking for their missing daughter.

So much for the clan of gallant hellbirds.

"You know… I never actually thanked you for just dropping everything and rushing on over here in
the middle of the night. Can't imagine it was the easiest thing in the world to do" Chewing the inside
of his cheek, Naruto tugged reflexively at the undone collar of his white button up shirt.

"Don't." Ravel snorted, running a manicured thumb over the slowly building dark pouches under her
eyes. She'd been awake all through the night and through half the day. Counting the previous day, it
was the longest she'd been allowed up, if 'allowed' was interpreted very loosely. "One day you'll be
my husband, and then it'll be my duty to do whatever I can to be useful to you. I'm just getting an
early start."

Cringing at the reminder of their distant marriage – Naruto thought Ravel was fun, but he was hardly
in love with her – the redhead floundered for a response. "Well I guess? Though won't your parents
be pretty pissed off about you stealing some phoenix tears? Like, I don't want to be rude, but your
grandad doesn't really seem the type to be giving out of the goodness of his heart."

Frowning at the haphazard buttoning of her blouse, Ravel briefly regretted not having taken a little
more effort when she'd been pulling on clothes last night. There was no point in crying over spilt
milk though. "I really doubt they'll ever figure it out, since I didn't steal anything. They're more likely
to be upset over the scandal of their daughter running away to spend the night with an older boy."

"I really wish you wouldn't say it like that. I'm starting to think it's you and not Riser who's the perv."

"I didn't mean to scar your innocent virginal little heart." Ravel mocked.

"Ugh, that's not – I'm not even…" Shaking his head and thinking better of bragging about his
conquests in another lifetime, Naruto refocused on the other half of her denial. "So did you just have
some lying about then?"

"No, dear husband-to-be, I made them." Arrogant superiority shone from the blonde girl's face,
expression entirely at odds with her messy dress and single tied up pig tail. "Go ahead, let me bask in
your awe."

"…did you really cry like a gallon of tears in the few minutes it took you to get here?"

"You really must like being punished." Ravel sighed, pushing Naruto's head off her lap so she could
flop down tiredly on her back. "Creating the tears isn't that simple. You need the proper ritual, a cup
filled with purified prepared water, and a completely empty mind. If you forget or fail at getting any
of those, you're not crying 'a phoenix's tear', you're just dripping your own all over the place. It's
difficult and complex and not something I should be doing before I'm thirty years old!"

Naruto's heart compressed with a hot fissure of concern. Sure, they'd needed those tears and the
Phenex clan monopoly on them made them expensive, but they could have paid for them through
proper channels. If the ritual was in any way dangerous, he wished she hadn't have done it. "You
alright? It doesn't hurt you, or anything?"

Ravel grinned smugly, throwing her legs over Naruto's chest and sprawling even more. "Is that
worry I'm hearing from you? You don't need to be afraid darling, it's takes a while to learn to do
because it's hard, not because it's risky. I'm just so amazing that I skipped a lot of years."

Glaring down at the pink and white clad thigh draped over his chest, Naruto fumbled down with one
hand to tickle viciously at Ravel's foot. "I think I'll not feed your ego, little miss prodigy." He
managed to get out before she was reaching down to twist his ear again.

"People have to know about it for you to be a prodigy." She muttered, giving his ear a final yank
before letting the fleshy lobe go. "The only one that knows besides you is Riser. Everyone else is
always 'take your time, Ravel' and 'that's too advanced for you, young mistress' and 'don't blow up the drawing room Ravel'. It's so annoying."

"I know!" Naruto commiserated, abandoned his second quest to tickle the blonde girl's feet. "Even once they figure out that you're pretty damn amazing for your age, they still always hover around. 'Don't grow up too fast, my boy' and 'you better be home by dinner time young man' and blah blah blah."

"Old people suck."

Venelana Gremory was not, generally speaking; an easily angered woman. Growing up in the House of Bael had a way of hammering the importance of tradition and stoic nobility into one's head. Even as the daughter of a concubine, Venelana had inherited the name of the clan and their power, and thus was not exempt from its precepts.

So instead of raging at her scatty husband to do something, Venelana knit. The Brunette Madame of Extinction skillfully interwove the wool for a deep purple wooly scarf, all the while simmering to an angry boil. She resentfully imagined the satisfaction of finding out just who exactly had decided to mark her daughter for the grave and driving the steel points of her knitting needles into his eyes.

The only other sounds in the room besides the click-click of her needles were the slow steady breathing of her unconscious child and the harsher inhales of her daughter's pawn.

Uchiha Sasuke was starting to offend her sensibilities. Though the boy at least bathed and changed his clothes, he was three days unshaved and sleepless nights had carved purple bruises into his eye sockets. Whatever irrational chauvinistic guilt he was feeling for 'letting' Rias be injured was no excuse for such a strung-out appearance. Or maybe the boy was just struck by a strong case of puppy love, and not sleeping for three days was a measure of his affection. It was difficult to tell with the stoic types.

Waking up the see the negative impact that her unconsciousness had on her friends would just make Rias feel guiltier. Though in a buried little corner of her heart, it would make Rias glad too.

Venelana's daughter always craved just a little bit more affection, and the way most of her previous 'friends' and would-be suitors had vanished after she'd lost the right to be clan heir only deepened that tendency.

The dry burn in Sasuke's eyes reminded him of a different time in his life. Training under conditions of extreme sleep deprivation had been one of Orochimaru's many careful attempts to carve Sasuke's body into a proper house for the old snake's soul. Tiredness was a familiar enemy that was much easier to defeat than a guilty conscience.

Peeking between the folds of Rias' nightgown was a streak of angry red, and Sasuke once more caved to the urge to run a finger over it. The ropey texture of scar tissue would only be temporary, since the Phenex clan's miracle cure could remove any blemish if administered in time, and devils as a whole were not given to scarring. But until it was gone, it was a visible mark of his failures.

If Sasuke hadn't been so eager to finally cut loose and exercise his violent frustration on soft flesh, he would have protected them better. Not just Rias, who had nearly died from an amateur mistake, but the entire peerage.

In his adrenaline rush, he'd forgotten that despite all their natural talent and training, they were green as grass. Even though they had young appearances, Sasuke and Naruto were both veterans of the
battlefield, and the Uchiha should have had more sense than to hare off on his own. He wasn't a lone avenger anymore.

Venelana's heavy violet gaze weighed on Sasuke until he'd pulled back his questing hand. It wasn't the first time she'd witnessed the strange little ritual, and it likely wouldn't be the last. But not once had she spoken up to protest it. In the grand scheme of things, such displays of affectionate were typical in her husband's clan, and the Pawn was only giving a touch barely more scandalous than holding hands would be.

If Akeno wasn't in the bath, Venelana wouldn't have been surprised to see the Queen crawl in and cuddle Rias. Zeoticus had a similar lack of concern for personal space, but the nearly constant Senate meetings that were occurring lately prevented her husband from demonstrating his exuberant fatherly love.

All to the better really, since Rias was mortified by such things. Though if her daughter didn't wake up soon, she might have to suffer her father's peculiarities after all. Every passing hour made Zeoticus' appearance more likely.

Phoenix tears could reattach severed limbs and save someone from the brink of death, but they were just as useless at treating an embarrassed heart as they were at treating blood loss. No doubt her eccentric husband would insist on taking 'selfies' to show Rias how he cuddled her in the sick bed.

Finishing the last loop of yarn, Venelana cast off the scarf with a flourish and considered the thing. It was perfectly crafted, without a single lump to give evidence of the brunette's inner turmoil. That was almost a shame. She wondered if it might have been cathartic to make the scarf as ugly as possible.

Then Venelana balled the purple neck-wrap up and threw it at Sasuke's face.

A thin curl of amusement licked over her nerves as Sasuke jerked back in his chair with an offended expression. Cautious defiance burned through dark eyes, and Venelana quirked the corner of her mouth up in a smirk. "Alright."

"… What?"

"If she decides to reciprocate, I'll approve of you as a suitor." If the boy cared enough to forgo sleeping to watch over Rias, he probably cared enough to try to win her heart, and it wasn't like Venelana cared about lineage in the end. Life was too fragile to obsess over politics. Whatever made her daughter happy was good enough for her.

Sasuke turned red and began to sputter.

Sneaking Ravel back home after her little escapade unnoticed had required three things. Caution, a little bit of illusion magic, and the cooperation of one Riser Phenex.

Which was why instead of being home waiting for his aunt to wake up any minute now, Naruto found himself standing at attention as his fiancé's brother circled around him like a hungry shark.

"So." Riser drawled, hands shoved in his pockets as he glared down at the much younger devil. "You actually decided to show up? I'll admit, that's a little more in the nuts department than I expected from you."

Everything about the blonde man was carefully cultivated to project a certain image. The messed spikes of Riser's hair were meant to convey a rough sort of freedom. The burgundy blazer and black dress shoes told a story of wealth. The way that Riser had left the top of his button up open to show
the muscles of his chest were a silent message of confidence and aggression. Riser called the ensemble 'rich young lord'.

Naruto just called it 'wannabe yakuza delinquent' and struggled not to roll his eyes at the older devil's posturing. Perhaps some people would be intimidated by the machismo, but Naruto had fought serial killers and wannabe gods. Showing up to meet his fiancé's brother a couple of days after sneaking her back into her house didn't really make Naruto's shit list.

So instead of bursting out with a bellow of laughter and offending the man, the redhead decided to just let Riser's words float in one ear and out the other. The purple haired Bomb Queen was a much better target for his attention, what with her provocative clothes and lovely cleavage.

Fuck, fourteen years was a hell of a dry spell.

An arm was slung over his shoulders, making Naruto blink as Riser bent at the waist to bring them eye to eye. "You like that one, do you?" the blonde murmured conspiratorially, as if they were speaking of cattle rather than a woman. "I can't say I blame you. She's got a lovely quim."

The look in Riser's eye was hot and ugly, and only the distinct impression that he was being tested made Naruto hold off from punching the other devil in the mouth. So instead the redhead turned to offer a cool stare.

Tense silence hung in the air for a heartbeat before Riser smirked more genuinely and straightened. "You can go, Yubelluna." he ordered in a much kinder voice, prompting a bow from the Queen before she left the sitting room.

Riser might be a perverse harem king, but he wasn't an outright bastard. It required a certain soft touch to get adoration from his all-female peerage rather than nightshade in his wine.

Throwing himself into a chesterfield, Riser poured himself a generous helping of brandy and took a sip. Dark blue eyes peered over the lip of the glass, silently judging Naruto as the younger devil reluctantly took a seat of his own.

"Ravel likes you." The sour comment was accompanied by a clench of the jaw. Terse and to the point, with a barely hidden threat of violence.

Oh joy, it was a big brother talk.

Huffing through his nose, Naruto shuffled down the leather couch he was perched on and poured himself a heavy glass of liquor. It wasn't like the Phenex clan couldn't afford it with their golden stranglehold on the medicinal market, and the vaguely amused chuckle Riser gave off helped break the ice.

"I had a feeling." The brandy slid down Naruto's throat, hot and thick and sweet to the point that he wanted to cough it back up. But he persevered, sipping in silence until the faintest tingle of intoxication began to buzz in his fingertips.

"And how do you feel about it?" Riser glared down into his drink like it held all the answers of the universe. He was more than a little uncomfortable talking about his sister with another male, but need trumped want. Riser wouldn't be her favorite brother if he wasn't willing to go to bat for time to time.

Normally, Naruto would have tried to bullshit through a question like that. When older devils asked him about his engagement, they weren't looking for his actual feelings. They were looking for indications about the state of relations between their clans, or they were looking to see if he could be convinced to break that alliance. But Riser was likely looking for honesty, so Naruto gave it to him.
"I don't… hate it. The arrangement wasn't my choice by any means, but it could be a lot worse."

"I see." Letting a cube of ice slip into his mouth, Riser crunched the ice between his teeth. Uncouthness be damned, it was a habit he'd had since he was a boy, and it was hard to break. "I suppose that'll have to be good enough."

"Good enough for what?"

"I want you to give Ravel a place in your peerage."

Naruto choked, burning brandy slipping down the wrong hole and sending him into a hacking fit. Thumping at his chest with a clenched fist, Naruto fought back the streaming in his eyes as he cleared his airway. "The fuck?"

"You heard me kid."

"Yeah, I heard you. Not sure what your motive is though. Why don't you just do it yourself? Or rather don't, you damn siscon."

"I am not a siscon!"

"That's not what I heard."

Riser's fist clenched, strong tendons standing out over the back of his hand as the blonde squeezed. The crack of glass was loud, and with a profane grumble Riser set the cracked snifter down with a thunk. "Look, I'm sure you know, but being in someone's peerage gives them power over you. Ravel's fiancé has very little control over what happens to her. Ravel's King though – well he'd have a little more of a say."

"Yeah, I know. Why?"

The cut of Riser's eyes was sharp and unyielding as they pierced the redhead. There was no perverse cockiness in that gaze, just grim determination. "What would you do if I told you that my grandfather is considering ending your engagement with my sister?"

Alarm tensed the muscles in Naruto's shoulders, and the Gremory heir found himself leaning forward earnestly. "Is he? Or are you just bullshitting me?"

"I don't bullshit, kid."

Fuck. Fuck. Naruto hadn't ever wanted the marriage. He hadn't chosen to have it. But he knew how important it was. Militancy had been growing in the Senate for years, especially with the recent spate of murders, and only the power bloc arranged around the Satans was standing in the way of a more hawkish foreign policy. Marquis Phenex was for good or ill a major player in that bloc. If he crossed the floor now with his supporters, things could get pretty damn dicey.

"Why?" Naruto demanded again, wondering when he'd become such a broken record. Ending engagements wasn't unheard of. In fact, it was almost expected for a devil to have at least one fall through because of the lengthy years between engagement and marriage. The shifting nature of clan alliances also played a pretty big role in breakups.

"The usual reason, I expect." Riser sounded bored and just a touch wistful as he leaned back in his chair. With all the cards laid out, it was damn likely Naruto would cave and take Ravel on. It wasn't like the kid didn't have the Evil Pieces for it.
Truthfully, Naruto's ass was against the wall if he wanted to adhere to any sort of duty to his father and clan. But still, he needed to know. "Why me? I know this is the first time Ravel's been engaged, but it's not like you're my friend. Why throw this down and give me a heads up about it? What's your play?"

Sneering, Riser lurched to his feet and turned to leave. "Don't be such a dumbass. You're the first fiancé, not her first suitor. And let me tell you kid, out of the dozens that came crawling through here looking for her hand, you're the only one she ever liked. I don't give a damn about the old man's political asskissing, but I sure as hell give a damn about what makes my sister happy."

"Fine!" Naruto shouted at Riser's back as the blonde stepped out of the room. "I'll do it!"

Ravel was just stealthily reviewing her supplies to create more phoenix tears when Naruto burst into the library.

Shrieking, she threw a book at him. Then another, and another, cursing below her breath as the redhead agilely dodged and deprived her of revenge for the fright. "What is wrong with you?"

Honestly, it was like he wanted to escape engagement via death, and heart attack was his weapon of choice.

Naruto was panting just a touch as he drew close, scanning their surroundings warily for intruders. Satisfied they were alone for at least a little while, he grabbed hold of Ravel's pink sleeve and dragged her closer. "You! Become mine right here!"

Ravel blanked, mouth dropping open for a long second. Then slowly, her face began to suffuse with red. Seeing her reaction, Naruto reviewed back over his demand and blanched.

"Wait, that's not what I meant!"

"O-okay, if you're ready to take responsibility I guess I don't mind."

"No, I meant with the pieces."

"P-pieces? I mean, I don't mind… but for the first time isn't that a little wild?"

"That's not – look, I need a bishop."

"You want to elope? That's more romantic than I expected."

"No!"
Chapter 16

Jolting back into the world of the living with a sharp gasp, Rias rocketed upright. Harsh burning pain tore through her left shoulder, driving the redhead to grope shakily at it with her right hand. Whole flesh met her questing fingers, and if not for the thick wobbly scar tissue she could trace over the round of her deltoid, Rias would have assumed it was all a dream.

Foggy impressions of combat lashed at her mind, filling her brain with a memory of blood and pain that curdled unpleasantly in her stomach.

After a heartbeat, the burning phantom pain began to subside.

"Rias."

"Akeno." She smiled tremulously back, not in the least surprised that her friend was curled up in the bed with her. At the best of times, Akeno had a tendency to express her affection physically. In the worst of times, the half fallen angel's need for contact was even more pronounced.

The worst of times, like Rias almost bleeding out on the floor with her arm nearly sliced off.

Suddenly, preventing the smile from slipping off her face required herculean effort. The mere memory of it seemed to summon back the brand of agony in the muscles of her shoulder, twisting painfully beneath the red band of scar tissue.

Rias distracted herself from the slow building up of phantom pain by turning to see who the rest of her visitors were.

Perched cross legged on the floor were Yuuto and Koneko, both looking drained but pleased to see her. They had offered up the only chair on that side of the room to her mother, who winked and continued to knit what looked to be a pair of pink mittens.

Then she looked over at Sasuke.

Her Pawn's bloodshot stare and dark shaven scruff hit her like a punch to the gut. Rias struggled to reconcile the image of overstressed observer with the fractured memory of sadistic taunts, and found it slowly piecing together.

Evidently, the Uchiha was even more strained than she'd thought he was if he was shifting back and forth so easily between violence and sleepless depression.

Rias had hoped distance and silence would allow rifts to be buried and everything to be forgotten. After Naruto had rejected her offer of trading Sasuke months ago with annoyance and then refused to listen to her attempts at explaining, Rias had held her Pawn at arm's length and thought it would be the best for both of them.

But if the end result was Sasuke cracking under some pressure she hadn't even acknowledged, Rias was failing as a master. The distance was meant to help Sasuke and protect him from her neediness, not hurt him.

"I'm sorry." She apologized to the room at large, bowing her head with a sense of shame. The way they'd crowded in for what must have been days waiting for her to wake up from blood loss warmed Rias, but she also knew she was unworthy of that concern. It would have been better to wake up alone than to all those exhausted eyes. They didn't deserve to suffer because of the misplaced
concern they had for her.

A warm hand slipped into her own, Akeno's slender fingers threading through Rias'. "There's nothing to apologize for." The Queen reassured her mistress, kind tones just barely hinting at the tension underneath. "Let's just not have an encore shall we?"

Yuuto gave a rusty chuckle of bitter amusement, lurching to his feet as Venelana silently slipped out of the room to give the adolescent devils a touch of privacy. "I agree with Akeno-san. That was a show that I don't think I'd be happy to see again."

Blinking in fond exasperation, Rias closed her eyes and gave a huff. It was just like her servants to bumble through emotional problems with morbid humor and talking around the issue. "Fine, I suppose that little number will have to be a one-time performance."

The nekomata crawled into the bed, nestling between Rias' knees and giving her mistress a very unimpressed hazel stare. "I rate it a zero. If I see it again, expect rotten tomatoes."

"Alright, alright. I get it. No repeats."

There was a faint shine of wetness in Akeno's eyes that everyone in the room ignored. "Rias-tan is so mean, sleeping away like that. I haven't had my daily cuddle intake in three days." The Queen pouted, covering up very real tears with very fake sorrow.

"No one's stopping you." Sasuke prodded, voice rough like sandpaper over gravel. The tired hang of his shoulders firmed as he joined the others in patching up the holes in their emotional armor. "In fact, I'd say this is the best time to strike. You have her right where you need her."

Shooting Sasuke an aggravated look as Akeno promptly threw her arms around Rias' waist and began to squeeze, the Ruin Princess reciprocated with a grumble of "Traitor."

"That's not a very nice thing to say." Akeno scolded, voice muffled as her mouth pressed against Rias' chest. "It makes me think this might have to be a group effort." Snaking one hand down without letting up on her grip with the other, Akeno looped a grip under Koneko's armpit and dragged the younger girl up.

The end result was a tangle of female flesh, clashing hair colours, and mingled grunts of discomfort.

"How is this my life?" Rias sighed, shifting slightly under the combined weight. Giving Sasuke another dirty look as the Uchiha smirked mockingly, the redhead turned and offered her Knight a pleading pout. "Isn't there anyone here that will help a troubled young woman out?"

"Don't you dare." Akeno ordered, slapping a hand over Koneko's mouth to prevent a snide comment. "This is a very important part of our daily rituals. Terrible things will happen if you interfere. The world as we know it may even end."

Shrugging, Yuuto gave his mistress a teasing bow. "I'm sorry, Rias-sama. But you heard her. As much as I'd like to help, the world might end if I do. My hands are tied."

Sasuke found himself nodding along with Koneko as a shit-eating grin twisted Akeno's lips. Quiet utterances about 'the world' filled the air, justifying the continued dogpile through threats of Armageddon.

Snuggling even closer as Rias began appear distinctly put out, Akeno pressed a sloppy kiss to her best friend's cheek. "See? This is very important of the future of the world. In fact, it might even be helpful if the cuddle pile got even bigger. Yuuto-kun, there's a little more space here for you too."
The half fallen angel drawled.

"Ah, I really couldn't."

"If I need to be here, you need to be here." Rolling to the edge of the bed, Koneko grabbed a fistful of Yuuto's black cotton turtleneck and yanked the blonde boy into the fray. Wood creaked alarmingly under the weight of four people, but held as the peerage shuffled around for space.

Rubbing the pads of his fingers over the tender flesh of his eyelids, Sasuke cracked the first real smile in days. Such affectionate silliness was just like them. No doubt they'd all be waking up for weeks or months to come with nightmares about seeing Rias die, but in the light of the day they seemed innocent and untouchable.

A hand pulled at Sasuke's pocket, and he looked down. White fingers were hooked into the fold of cloth, leading back to red hair and turquoise eyes. Rias' expression was caught between chagrin and fondness, while her other hand absently smoothed back the silver-white strands of the Rook's tresses.

Sasuke wanted to pull away. He didn't mind the teasing and egging on, but getting close up and personal was not really what he was comfortable with. Too many isolated years had hardened him, and he still remembered the sting of betrayal when Itachi had turned on their family, lying and telling him he was not worth killing.

But he remembered another voice too.

'Shall I show you a light?'

Letting himself cave to the pressure of her grip was as easy as breathing. It was almost a relief, Sasuke mused, taking Rias' hand in his own and joining the jangle of limbs and flesh. The pressure behind his eyes finally, finally relaxed.

The bed creaked even louder beneath the weight of another body, mattress sinking in the middle and giving the whole thing an inward skew. But in the end the bed held on, just like they did, and if there was a creak of rib beneath a too-tight arm or a silent salty tear running down someone's face, nothing was said.

Standing outside the door, Naruto watched as his grandmother chuckled through her fingers. "What a bunch of emotionally constipated retards." He groused, rolling his eyes before twisting to leave. For fuck's sake, no wonder they never managed to figure anything out.

There was still a little blood caked beneath his fingernails. No one else in the Senate chamber could see or smell it, but Sirzechs knew it was there, marking him as a man of violence.

It had been many years since the Satan had personally conducted an interrogation, but it wasn't a skill that ever completely left. Nine vials of phoenix tears later, and none of the damn tengu had given him anything at all.

If Sirzechs had managed to tear some information out one of the vile little criminals, at least the blood on his hands wouldn't bother him. With nothing gained by the torture though, he was acutely aware of what he'd done, and his hands remained soaked in gore.

Even if it was all in his mind, it reminded him strongly of bygone days of war and conflict.

Sirzechs chewed the inside of his lip as Archduke Agares began to pontificate from behind his desk. The speaking roll was slowly working its way around the room, and while the Satan wasn't truthfully
all that eager to be in the legislature rather than at home with his sister, he had things that needed to be said.

Things that *could* be said because of the innocent gambling of his son. Sirzechs couldn't even begin to guess why Naruto would just suddenly take it upon himself to make Ravel Phenex his Bishop. His son had grown to like the blonde girl, but his son was still too caught up over the whole 'it was arranged' hurdle for any romantic interest to have developed on Naruto's side.

It was almost like Naruto had known that the Marquis was thinking of ending the engagement. Political alliances in the Underworld were bound by blood, not paper. Until the marriage was consummated, there was no absolute certainty Marquis Phenex would continue to be Sirzechs' ally. And with the recent months long campaign of terror and assassination by an unknown actor, Sirzechs' political standing had taken a hit.

The duty of the Satans, more than any other lord in Gehenna, was to uphold the law and ensure the safety of its people. When some faceless enemy could strike in the dark at will, it undermined the whole position. And since the cause of alliance and peace was so closely intertwined with Sirzechs' own efforts, that cause had waned along with his star.

Then in a single clumsy masterstroke, Naruto had managed to reverse the decline of his political faction. While the other Satans and a few other clans would back him to the hilt, Lord Phenex and his cadre were much less loyal. The entire alliance with the Marquis was based around an engagement Naruto had inadvertently saved when he'd offered his fiancé a place in his peerage.

Marquis Phenex could hardly announce that he was willing to have his granddaughter serve Sirzechs' son and the Gremory heir – and it *was* serve, because a Bishop was far less than a Queen – one day, and then end the engagement the next. Devils were a touch capricious, but flopping back and forth between strengthening an alliance and then ending it wouldn't look good for any future bargains the Marquis tried to strike.

There was always the option of avoiding the perception of turncloak by admitting his granddaughter had moved without his knowledge or consent, but even looking like an inconstant ally was better than a fool. What kind of devil lord couldn't even control his own children and grandchildren? Accusing the Gremory clan of coercing Ravel wouldn't work since the whole ceremony had been performed before witnesses with all the proper legalities observed, and while young there was no law against Ravel becoming Naruto's servant.

The only move left to the Marquis was to stew in silence, pretending that he'd known all along. Which had consequences of its own in the eyes of others, because what did the Phenex clan know about the Gremory clan and the Lord Lucifer that made them willing to make one of their scions a servant rather than demanding at least the Queen piece?

An enormous part of politics was perception, and the perception in the Senate room at the moment was that Sirzechs was resurgent.

The Satan wondered if any of the other bluebloods had ever considered the phenomena of self-fulfilling prophecy. If they made a lion out of him in their minds, then a lion he would become.

Another speaker sunk down into his seat, signaling the last mark on the roll before it was Sirzechs' turn. Eying an utterly zoned out Serafall across the chamber with amusement, the redhead rose.

"Great King," Sirzechs acknowledged his uncle with a slight bow as was custom, sparking a light of cool humor in those violet eyes. Then he swept his focus out to the room at large, voice moving from humble to strong. "My lords and ladies, I've come here today to ask you a question. The question of
"How long will we continue to be ruled by fear? And not fear of a great and terrible foe, I will emphasize, but a nameless fear. The fear of the slinking darkness under the bed or of the empty shapes in a hushed corridor. We are the devils of Gehenna! When did we become so meek that the machinations of a single coward in the night was enough to undo us?"

Sirzechs could practically feel the thrum of shocked offence filling the air of the Senate. Perhaps it was not so politically correct to outright state to the face of the nobility that they had grown cowardly, but shame was an essential tool in driving others to do what he wished.

"I know what it is to be afraid." He admitted, raising a hand to clench over his heart. "I tell you now, I know what it means to lay awake at night and wonder if my family is to be next. Four days ago I was called from my sleep to destroy a group of infiltrators, and on that night my young sister was nearly murdered. That night fear became real to me, but I stand before you today and proclaim to anyone who will listen that I will not be ruled by it!"

The end of Sirzechs' sentence rose to a ringing shout, startling Serafall awake. The Satan Leviathan sleepily rubbed at her eyes with the back of a sleeve, offering her redhaired friend a thumbs up.

"And when I broke the minds of those would be assassins with my own fists," Here the Satan brought up his clawed hands – as if just by doing so the other nobles could see the phantom stains of blood on his skin. "Do you know what they said to me? I was informed that the attempt was a betrayal by my own kinsman, the Great King! As if I would believe such filth!" Sirzechs added, cutting blue-green eyes to offer a side glance at Lord Bael.

"No, this is merely the latest in a long line of slander. Baseless accusations and rumor mongering that tries to dirty the names of the upstanding statesmen in this very room. This faceless killer wishes to tell me a falsehood that my own mother's brother would attempt to murder his own sister's daughter. Very well, I have heard this untruth. Now you will have my answer." Stopping for a breath, Sirzechs dipped just barely into the presence of his immense magical power and brought killing intent down on the entire Senate.

"Come out and face me, you worthless son of a whore! I tell you, you creeping little eunuch, that you have made an enemy of me. I will not cower before your knives and poison, and I undo every one of your works. I will not be manipulated into abandoning our newfound allies, weakening our nation. I will not continue to allow you to send you crawling spiders out to prey on our people. And one day, I will be the death of you!"

"Friends and kinsmen, I ask all true men here today to display to me their mettle. Let us show this so-called 'puppet master' who truly rules this Underworld!"

Naruto strapped on his saber, patting the gold inlaid scabbard fondly. Initially, he hadn't been too hot and bothered to take up swordsmanship. Unlike hitting a bullseye with a kunai, hacking away at his opponents with a sword wasn't a skill he'd had as a shinobi. Fists and shadow clones had been the order of the day.

But the Gremory family was 'western oriented'. Rias' Japanophile tendencies were the exception, not the rule, and in Europe the sword was the sign of nobility. Every lord back to the founding of the clan had used western swords, and Naruto had been strongly encouraged to take them up too.

In the end, it paid off. Though longswords were generally too large for his still growing body, Naruto had learnt to use demonic sabers as his athames. Coating only the razor of the blade with his
Power of Destruction gave the Gremory heir a very low maintenance, very deadly weapon.

One of the most amateur mistakes a sorcerer could make was to assume that the more magical energy there was in a weapon, the more powerful it was. Effective use depended on how the energy was used, not how much of it there was.

Conjuring a sword made of pure hardened lightning looked impressive, but it was better to use an already forged blade and condense all that magic on the cutting edge. A truly impressive enchanter like his father could achieve that slicing ability with a conjured whip and not rely on an athame at all, but Naruto wasn't quite there yet.

Quite stupidly, in Naruto's opinion, most devils found using tools as a focus to be barbaric. A 'true noble only needed the pure force of his spells' and other such farts in the wind. It was bullshit, because if they survived long enough they'd get the same result either way, but using enchanted tools made the learning process much shorter and much easier.

Rias' peerage was finally starting to realize that. Or perhaps Sasuke had become that much of a dictator in the weeks since the faceless fucker had tried to kill Naruto's aunt. Well, for one reason or another, everyone in that peerage had their 'chosen' weapons.

Tugging his tie close to his throat, Naruto gave his appearance a once over in the mirror. Crimson overcoat, white undershirt, sabre at his hip, red tie at the throat, and well-polished boots rounded out the ensemble. "I think I'm ready to go, mom."

Grayfia gave her son a brief once over, giving a satisfied nod at his efforts before making the last touches on her own appearance. The Strongest Queen had abandoned her typical maid outfit for a smart set of dark trousers and white blouse, crowning it with her silver ponytail and the green scarf wrapped around her throat.

It was uncomfortable and she longed for her old clothes already. Her son was still too young to really understand, and her husband tolerated her peculiarity with good humor, but her longing for that mark of servitude was deep in her bones. Before Grayfia had been Sirzechs' wife, she'd been Grayfia Lucifuge.

From the very teat she'd been raised to obey and protect the Lucifer clan, and while she might have betrayed the Old Satans and given her heart and womb to Sirzechs, that couldn't change her underlying nature. The House of Lucifuge existed to submit to the Satan Lucifer, and their blood ran in her veins.

Grayfia just supposed she was lucky that her husband had proven himself the most worthy claimant to the title, and her inborn loyalty could run true to her heart.

Satisfied with the woman in the mirror, Grayfia gave Naruto a slight pat on the head before leading him towards the portal. Children seemed to grow up so fast. Even devil longevity couldn't keep her son by her side any longer than a short span of infant years. It made her long for another child to nurture.

"Remember, we are not there to be heard. We are only there to be seen." She reminded Naruto, going to hold his hand before fighting back the urge. Her son was too old to want to suffer his mother's affections in public. Then Grayfia stepped into the teleportation ring, accepting the swirl of fallen angel sorcery and letting it sweep her through time and space.

Naruto shook off the strands of fallen angel magic with a grimace as he landed on the other side of the portal. Call it superstition, but the very touch of that energy made him leery. Even if they had
fallen, angels were still angels, and they were practically designed to kill devilkind.

Wrinkling his nose at the heavy smell of cigarette smoke, Naruto glared up that the offender. The fallen angel was tall, with middle aged lines of stress and laughter in his face. A mixture of black and blonde messy tumbleweed perched on the man's head, and Naruto could just tell the sight of the mess was irritating his mother.

"So, this is the brat?" Azazel chuckled, planting his hands on his knees as he bent down to get a closer look at Sirzechs' son. "He takes after you, old boy. Though that 'don't smoke in front of me' is all his mother."

"Azazel, please." Shaking his head at the other man, Sirzechs stepped out of the shadows. The starched clothes of a nobleman had given way to the gold and grey armor of a devil general, but the look in the Satan's eyes was just as soft as ever as he took in his wife and son. "You're going to end up offending someone, and while it would be amusing to see you try and smooth it over, I'd rather not waste the time."

Blowing a puff of smoke through his nostril, the Governor General of the Grigori spat out the cigarette with a groan. "Alright, alright. Let's just get this thing started shall we? Can't let all that political capital go to waste and all that. I hope you've gotten all the players lined up."

"We were just waiting on you. Now that you're here, we can proceed."

"Whatever, let's just hope Michael doesn't twist our balls off for this."

Grayfia covered Naruto's ears with her hands.

"Mom, I think you might be too late if you're worried about my dirty mouth."

Sucking a bead of blood from the tip of her index finger, Akeno shot Sasuke a truly foul glare. The brute seemed totally unmoved by it, only folding his arms over his chest and cocking a mocking eyebrow. One day, the tyrant would fall, and then she would have her revenge. Painful, agonizing vengeance.

"Hurry up and heal it, Himejima."

"Kiss my ass you puffed up self-appointed despot."

Sasuke rolled his eyes, stepping closer and grabbing both of the Queen's throbbing hands. The Uchiha was no healer, but he had enough skill to at least soothe blisters and stitch together minor injuries. "Again." He ordered as the last sparks of purple magecraft faded.

A frustrated growl rolled past Akeno's lips, but after stomping her foot she fell in line. Notching an arrow to the curve of her bow, the half fallen angel drew back and squinted at the mark in the distance. A slow breath later and she released the projectile with an accompanying yellow glow.

Citrine lightning cracked through the air, centered tightly around the moving missile until it struck true in the center of the bullseye. A split second after collision, the entire target exploded from the release of contained magic.

"Better."

"I'll show you better, you..." Akeno grumbled mutinously, falling back into her routine of swiftly drawing, centering her chosen element in the steel tips of the arrows, and then letting them fly at the
collection of targets scattered across the field.

It wasn't that she didn't understand Sasuke's motivation, since Rias' near fatal wound had scared the hell out of all of them, but the Pawn seemed to derive some form of sadistic pleasure from it all. She suddenly had a fleeting sensation of empathy for all those she'd victimized over the years.

Ah well, Akeno won some and lost some. Next time, it would be Sasuke moaning and complaining about whatever she put him through, and Akeno would just laugh.

Bastard.

"You're doing much better than you were when we started, Akeno-san." Yuuto chimed in, shading his blue eyes as he watched her smash target after target. The Knight was worlds ahead of her in the realm of pure weaponry skills.

Spawn of the bastard.

At least she had it easy in comparison to Rias. While Akeno's body was relatively unconditioned for the sudden shift towards using a bow to focus her sorcery, she'd had some skill at archery in her younger years. Himejima Shuri had been a trained miko, and she'd trained her daughter in the art before her murder.

Rias was still flailing about with the basket-hilt rapier Sasuke had nagged her into taking up. Before Sasuke's sudden shift from complete loner to autocrat, her red-haired friend had been a firm believer in the school of 'weapons are so much more uncouth and gorier than magical vaporizer'.

Honestly, everything would be so much easier if they could just use firearms instead. But while bullets could be imbued like her arrows, they required careful smithing with demonic steel. The whole process was too costly to be economic. Akeno supposed they could store their spells in capacitors beforehand or feed their energy directly through a spellgun, but a spellgun couldn't shape sorcery with the same skill as a living practitioner. Too much power in casting would be lost, and they'd be better off to just cast the spells unaided.

There was a reason unskilled commoners used magical technology and relied on enchanted capacitors while the trained devils avoided them.

"Keep at it." Sasuke ordered the devil priestess, shifting his heavy stare to Yuuto and then motioning at the Knight's sword. "You too." He could feel twin glares of annoyance digging into him as he walked off, no doubt they'd have forgotten all about it by suppertime.

"You're doing good." Forcing out the compliment at both of them, Sasuke ignored the surprised stares at his back and left. He was trying to keep everything verbal and avoid the strange new tactile urges he had.

It wasn't sexual at all. Sasuke had the irrational desire to ruffle Yuuto's hair or pat Akeno's back instead of just giving words. It was as if he could reassure himself they were real and alive by doing so.

Three weeks after the assassination attempt, none of them had raised the issue of moving back to Rias' estate. Sasuke knew that Gremory clan servants had gone over to clean and repair the grounds, but it was still stained with blood in the peerage's minds, and for the time being they were content to live in the same manor as Rias' parents.

Sirzechs and Naruto had finally moved out of the Gremory clan main house, taking up residence in the Lucifer Satan territory. Repairing lands that had been devastated in the rebellion against the Old
Satans had taken many years and much in the way of Gremory gold, but it had eventually been finished.

Just as well. Sirzechs Lucifer was playing with fire lately. Riding high on a tide of public sympathy about Rias' attempted murder and the sudden reassertion of bonds with the Phenex clan, the Satan had hammered through the first official treaty between devils and fallen angels. They would have free trade, a common currency, and establish a tribunal to push towards harmonization of laws between the Grigori and the 72 Pillars.

If Sasuke had to guess, it might even be the first baby steps on the road to a biracial state that governed all of Gehenna. Peace and good feelings abound, except for the tiny detail that Heaven had not in the least bit involved in the hasty bilateral treaty.

So if the puppet master was an angel or a resident of Gehenna with a grudge against peace or either government, excellent work. Sirzechs had just managed to piss him off and paint a giant target on his back.

As bitter as it made him, Sasuke knew he wasn't strong enough to defeat the faceless manipulator. A mere squad of the mastermind's toadies had nearly managed to kill his mistress. The closeness of that passing still rattled the Uchiha. He didn't want to die, and he didn't want to see anyone else around him die either.

"Ahh, Sasuke-kun."

Zeoticus appeared between one breath and the next, moving so fast Sasuke couldn't even react before the man's arm was thrown over his shoulder. "Come here for a moment."

Colours blurred by faster than any shunshin, wind drying out Sasuke's eyes before he was unceremoniously deposited in another part of the Gremory family's gardens. In the distance he could just barely see Rias swinging away with her jeweled rapier under Souji's careful watch.

"I'd like your opinion on something as my daughter's Pawn."

The arm still hadn't been removed from his shoulders.

Sharply shaking his head, Sasuke brutally murdered the urge to growl and managed to grit out a moderately polite "Lord Zeoticus?"

The man seemed all-in-all too airheaded to take offense at anything, but that didn't mean that the Gremory Lord lacked the power to turn Sasuke into dustmotes. He was reminded of a much older Naruto, and Zeoticus' brand of strange humor and lack of respect for personal space was exactly why the Uchiha had taken pains to avoid him over the years.

"It's almost Rias' birthday, you know." Zeoticus commented, thoughtfully stroking his beard and staring at his little girl with starry eyes. "Which means presents! Many, many presents of course, because my darling daughter deserves the best. But it must be quantity of quality!"

"...Rias' birthday is almost a year away."

"It is never too early for a doting father to begin planning for his child's next celebration!"

Goggling at the older man, Sasuke very briefly wondered what his childhood would have been like if Fugaku had possessed a similar personality. The Uchiha held the image in his mind for a breath.

"Kill me."
"Pardon me, my boy?"

"Nothing. I said nothing, Lord Zeoticus."

The redhaired devil tightened the curl of his arm, dragging Sasuke's face closer until the raven haired devil was practically buried in the man's chest. "There's no need to be so formal, Sasuke-kun. Just call me Zeo-kun."

"I'm not entirely comfortable with that."

Zeoticus looked so utterly put out that Sasuke felt like he'd kicked a puppy. Then a lightbulb seemed to go off in the nobleman's brain, and he smiled magnanimously. "Well, if you're not going to call me Zeo-kun, how about tou-chan? Any member of Rias' family is a member of my family!"

Sasuke began to choke.

"No!"

"Why not? Everyone else in Rias' peerage already does. Except that Yuuto boy, I suppose. But I'll wear him down one day."

What the hell was wrong with this family?
Ravel was quite frankly surprised.

She'd never really spent a lot of time with her grandfather, but the genius had always known what sort of man he was. That it took so long for him to snap and lash out was a bit of a marvel for the blonde. She'd been expecting it since the moment she submitted the paperwork and became Naruto's Bishop.

"You stupid little fucking *whore*!"

Fire raced over her face at the backhand, and Ravel could taste the copper burn of blood in the back of her throat. As a member of the Phenex clan, her wounds usually healed too quickly to tell, but she was pretty sure her grandfather had split the inside of her cheek with the sudden strike.

"Why couldn't you just sit quietly and do what you're told?" the Marquis roared, spittle flying from his wrinkled lips as he drew back and gave another stinging slap. Pain rocketed through Ravel's face as she was rocked right off her feet. Tears stung azure eyes as a boot found her soft stomach, driving the vomit from her belly with a gasp.

"Who do you think you are to try and make a fool out of me? Out of *me*! I was the one who clothed you. I was the one who put a roof over your head. I was the one that gave you the privilege of my name, and this is how you repay me? By backstabbing me like your treacherous *slut* of a mother?"

It was almost sad how Gehenna looked at their clan as the epitome of chivalry. The people even called the Phenex clan 'the family of gallant hellbirds'. Every moment spent in the public gaze was a practiced gesture of courtly perfection and dignified airs, but it all concealed an ugly reality.

Behind all the flowery lies and the noble façade, hard training and punishment lurked. The Marquis ruled the clan with an iron fist, just like his father had ruled, translating violence through the generations that could be easily masked by the Phenex clan healing factor. Bruises and broken bones didn't matter when they were healed within minutes.

Pain was just another form of discipline. It had been no different for her brothers and her father.

Except her brothers and her father hadn't had *Riser* as their sibling.

"You wrinkled old *fuck*!" belted through the room, splitting the routine like a sword cut through flesh. Marquis Phenex was old and rich. He'd spend millennium carefully controlling the sale of Phoenix tears and enriching the clan. Alliances had been built through decades and he had dozens upon dozens of political favours to call in at any moment.

None of that mattered compared to the thundering crack of Riser's fist against the Marquis' jaw, age and 'wisdom' caving before youth and martial power. Ravel actually *heard* the shatter of bone beneath her brother's strike as her grandfather was literally blasted through a bookcase. There was even a smoky circle dissipating through the air, left over from the mixture of Riser's rage and magic.

"Brrr-" escaped Ravel's swollen mouth. She wasn't entirely sure if she wanted to ask her brother to stop or continue, but between the throbbing of her jaw and the sloppy wetness of her tongue, Ravel was only able to get a dragging cry out instead of 'brother'.

Blue eyes darkened to a hate filled indigo. There were many things Riser was willing to endure. Despite being an unapologetic playboy, he didn't like to rock the boat. He trained because it was
expected of him as a member of the clan. He obeyed his grandfather's orders and fought for the glory of the Phenex family when asked. Even though he was content to enjoy the sweet pleasures of flesh with his peerage, Riser accepted that he'd need to fight in the Rating Games. The only times he'd ever lost had been out of 'respect' to an allied house.

Riser Phenex was arrogant, but he was also easily satisfied. He didn't care for much. When he'd been crying beneath the pain of his grandfather's violence, his brother and father had told him that it was their way. The Phenex clan could heal from any wound, so there was no limit to the pain they could endure. When they suffered, it was both to discipline them and to toughen them up for war. Riser had accepted those justifications easily enough, especially given that the cruelty had made him strong.

He didn't accept them so easily when Ravel was on the line. Let those modern humans call him a 'chauvinist', Riser didn't give a fuck. No man, whether it was her husband or a Satan or his own grandfather had the right to make Ravel cry and fill her mouth with blood.

"You, you..." Riser couldn't even muster the words to describe his anger. It burned, searing through his nerves and filling his gullet with fire. No amount of demonic healing could satiate it. Yubelluna had once warned him that his emotions could lead to his downfall, but the blond devil didn't care. He was so far beyond caring. He could die in the moment, and his only regret would be not taking that fucker with him.

Death was the only thing that could cool that hate.

Wood and paper curled beneath Riser's boots, burning away beneath the pressure of the blond's flame magic. Ravel could only watch spellbound as her brother stepped through the mingled paper and splinters with confusion. *This* man surely couldn't be her brother. Riser was teasing and perverted and not in the least bit violent.

But her eyes didn't lie. It *was* her brother. Ravel knew it was her brother from the first gravelly shout of his voice to the inarticulate raspy heaving he gave off as he knelt over their grandfather.

Strong hands wrapped around the Marquis' throat, squeezing tight and ruthless beneath Riser's towering rage. Blue orbs bulged as their grandfather began thrashing for air. Their clan trait might let them heal from any wound, but they still needed to breathe.

Ravel stared in mute fascination as her brother began the process of murdering their grandfather. Kinslaying was hardly unheard of among their kind, but to witness it herself was a bit of a shock. Such deeds were conducted in the dead of night, when the perpetrator could never be caught.

It was that thought that forced Ravel to shout to her feet and screech through "Enough!" into the thick library atmosphere with her newly healed jaw. "Please Riser! Don't do anything stupid and get executed for his sake!"

Riser's rage didn't cool a degree as he choked out his own grandfather, reveling in the man's pale face and thrashing desperation. But his sister had begged. Not for the Marquis' life, but rather for her brother's freedom. So Riser lightened his stranglehold, allowing air to reach the Marquis. Everyone would live, *for now.*

But his sister's plea was no barrier to threats.

Leaning close to his gasping grandfather's ear, Riser summoned his voice through blazing hate and produced a gravelly threat. "If you *ever* fucking touch my sister again, I will make you *beg* for death you pathetic *fuck*. You're just lucky she doesn't want your wrinkled *fucking* corpse right now."
Purple mottled over the Marquis' face, forming a rapidly healing bruise that proceeded from deep violet to sickly yellow and then to unmarked skin beneath their eyes as their grandfather lurched to his feet. The blue eyes they had inherited from him burned as the greying devil limped out of the library, leaving the siblings behind to suffocating silence and a mess of destroyed furniture.

"That wasn't... smart." Ravel sighed, dusting off her pink dress before casting a spell that levitated all the scattered tomes into an orderly pile. "It's been a while, but it's not like that was the first time. There was no need to get so worked up over it, Riser."

Dragging a hand over the stubble of his beard, Riser stared at the open door before shaking his head ruefully. "Just don't, alright? I don't need the lecture about me being stupid or reckless. I know it was. But I couldn't just walk on by when I heard him in here beating on you."

Satisfied when the books where shuffled to a distant corner of the room, Ravel snapped her fingers. A white-hot spark of flame magic floated from her hand and settled over one of the largest pieces of the broken bookshelf. It took a little more sorcery to funnel the smoke out the open window and keep the blaze under control, but it was simple enough for the prodigy. "Well too bad, cause you're gonna get one. You know all about our immortality and ability to heal from any wound. That's why the clan prefers using corporal punishment in the first place. It's not like he would have done any permanent damage. All you did was make our grandfather angry."

"Bah." Riser waved off her concern, sparking a tight ball of irritation in the eleven-year-old blonde. "The old man hated me anyway. Too much playing around with the girls and not enough brownnosing for his taste. What's he gonna do anyway? Kick me out? I make enough money off the Rating Games to live decently. Kill me? He might be a prick but he's not stupid enough to waste someone who 'brings honor' to the clan and all that rot."

"That doesn't mean that he won't find a way to get back at you."

A large hand descended onto Ravel's hair, ruffling the honey strands while her brother gave a long-suffering sigh. "*Enough* already. I told you, I don't want to hear it. Ruval wouldn't have done any differently, even if our father forgot his balls a few centuries ago. I'm not interested in laying down and letting him run over us. Things are going to change around here."

"Bold last words." Ravel grumbled, slapping the taller devil's hand away with a scowl. "Are you still going to be talking like that if he decides to punish you by getting rid of Yubelluna?"

"If he hurts a single hair on any of my girls' heads, or on yours, he's dead."

"Let's be a little more realistic."

"Ravel." The cocky confidence drained away from Riser's face, killing all joviality until the only thing left in her brother's face was a hard jaw and the blue steel of his gaze. "He's dead."

"Hello."

"Hello," Sasuke tilted his head to the side, unsure how to deal with the sudden appearance of Naruto's fiancé. He'd just been sitting quietly, sharpening his demonic steel katana over a whetstone when the girl had just popped into existence. Lost in thought, the Uchiha had been carefully planning the training regimen for the peerage for the next week. It was something he really should get back to.

"So, are you just going to ignore me, or...?" Raval prodded Rias' Pawn, watching the dark-haired
devil return to caring for his blade. It wasn't the first time they'd met, but they didn't generally come in contact in their very different routines. That wouldn't stop her from getting a touch of amusement out of teasing him. Naruto had told her all about how easy it was to wind him up.

"You know, my older brother collects swords. Ruval says they're beautiful works of art, and that a well-made one carries the spirit of its smith. Riser says it's all garbage though. What do you think, Sasuke-san? Is your sword full of the beautiful soul of a hairy middle aged man?"

"Toujou, deal with this."

Rolling over on the bench she was sprawled over lazily, Koneko looked between one devil and the other with a single amber orb. "No."

A sigh.

"Yuuto?"

"Sorry, no can do."

"Akeno?"

"Oh, but revenge is sweet, isn't it, Sasu-chi?"

"Rias."

The Ruin Princess roused from her book, peering out of the comfort of her hammock through a pair of gold rimmed spectacles. "I'm sorry Sasuke. I can't hear you over the sound of my sore fingers screaming in pain. It seems someone thought it would be a good idea to train them until they cramped up."

Ravel snorted and rolled her eyes. "It seems you're unpopular in these parts, my broody friend. We'll just have to wait until Naruto comes back to take me off your hands, since you can't handle an innocent little girl."

"Hn."

"What was that, boy? Timmy's down the well?"

"There is a difference between capability and desire, you fool."

When Naruto walked back into the garden, his brain short circuited. There was no way for his mind to process the sight of Yuuto standing uncertainly with a katana in his hand, hovering by as Ravel beat Sasuke over the head with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Akeno leant over the back of a bench, guffawing so hard her face turned red while Koneko struggled like a wet cat in the groping circle of her arms. Rias was just lazing about in her hammock, throwing her slippers at the cursing Uchiha and scolding him for his dirty language.

So he didn't process it.

"Hey guys. What's up?"

"Oh hey." Ravel greeted him cheerily, carelessly dropping the partially demolished novel into the tub of water Sasuke had been using to sharpen his blade. "What took you so long?"

"I just had to clear a few things up with dad about the patrols first. You know how he gets with the whole bonespider thing. Thinks it's a waste of my time. Anyway – so I see you're all getting along
out here?"

"Yep, me and Huck Finn here are the best of friends now."

Naruto cracked a smirk. "Well I guess it fits. Sasuke was always the kind to break all the rules. Even had the hobo thing going on for a while."

"I don't want to hear that from you, you fucking dumpster diver."

More than one set of eyebrows began to climb as the two reincarnated shinobi descended into increasingly obscure inside jokes and bizarre insults.

"At least I never chose to become a dirty homeless vagrant."

"No, you were too busy bigshotting it up and enjoying the fruits of talk no justu."

"Hey man, don't hate the playa. It's not my fault your one-man power trip couldn't make it to the finish line."

"At least I wasn't getting by with the power of friendship."

"Better than the power of crazy eyes."

"-relying on a dozen blond clones-"

"-Blood tears of drama and relentless wangst-"

"-and the world's most underrated fox pest problem-"

"Mommy, mommy, I take hickies from strangers!"

"Hey look at me beat this guy with a fucking fart!"

A sudden shriek cut off the argument, drawing all eyes to a horrified looking Ravel. The expression on her face as she stared at Naruto was utterly betrayed, and pressing a hand over her heart she gulped. "Naruto. Are you..."

"Ravel, what-"

"...Into men?"

"Huh? Wait a minute. Where did you get that from?"

"Well, you see." The blonde repressed a laugh, the effort at seriousness ruined by Akeno's howl of mirth. "I can't see any other reason you two would fight so often but have all these nicknames and personal jokes. The unresolved sexual tension is thicker than molasses. Sasuke's a real looker too."

"Who the hell said that?!"

"Quit joking around." Sasuke muttered, backing away from Naruto with a pale face. "You're making my skin crawl." The Uchiha violently repressed memories of a certain classroom incident, and based on the green tinge to Naruto's cheeks, the redhead was doing the same.

Naruto grabbed Ravel's hand with a scowl. "We're going now. You heard nothing. You saw nothing. Or else." With that final threat, the Gremory heir and his fiancé left. He led Ravel out of the garden and back into his grandfather's mansion, muttering under his breath all the way.
"Not that I mind, but are you going to keep holding my hand the whole time?"

Releasing his grip with burning cheeks, Naruto shoved his fists into his pockets. The constant weight of his saber bounced against him hip, reminding the boy that he'd had other plans before the blonde had popped up out of the blue. "So, you never told me why you were coming over today."

"Ah, well I was hoping I could move in with you."

"What, really?"

"No." Ravel huffed. "Are you always this dense?" The eleven-year-old wondered, throwing herself into a spontaneous twirl. A few of the maids gave her scandalized looks at the break in propriety, but she didn't really care too much. "Maybe I just wanted to see you, did that ever occur to you?"

"No, not really."

"Jeez, you're just all sugar and ice, aren't you?"

Falling into their back and forth typical banter brought a smile to Naruto's face. He still wasn't too hot on the whole engagement side of things, but despite the political headaches and her brother looming around sometimes, Naruto was enjoying their time together. Ravel was becoming a good friend.

"So." He began conversationally as they took a winding aimless tour through the mansion. "I don't think I ever actually asked before, but when's your birthday? I'm not the greatest with presents, especially since your family seems to have the 'I'm super rich and buy everything I want' angle going on. I need a lot of time to prepare."

"Today."

"What?"

"Today is my birthday."

Naruto ground to a screeching halt, head snapping back to offer an incredulous gaze. "Are you taking the piss right now or are you serious?"

"I'm serious." Ravel sighed, picking at the threads of her dress. "Today's my birthday. I am actually twelve."

What? But where was the party? Shouldn't she be holed up somewhere with her parents having a little celebration, if not throwing an extravagant birthday bash for the extended Phenex clan and its allies. They certainly had money to burn. "So... why are you here and not at home right now?"

The hesitation that twisted his friend's mouth drew Naruto's attention like a fox to a hen. Even before Ravel opened her lips and carelessly writ off his concern, Naruto was suspicious. "There's nothing big going on. I just felt like getting out of the house for a while. Eventually, you get bored with the way your parents want to make every little milestone the world's biggest achievement."

Lying.

She was lying to his face, but why?

"I see." Naruto responded slowly, running a thoughtful hand over his chin. He supposed he'd have to be patient and keep his ears open. "Alright, since you went and decided to make things difficult by not giving me fair warning to pick out a gift, I'll just have to prove no one gets one over on me. How
do you feel about going out somewhere?"

"Like, a date?"

"…Depends how you feel about doing a little pest control, I suppose."

Blue eyes lit on the saber at Naruto's side, and a slow predatory grin curved over the blonde's face. "I thought you'd never ask."

"Heeeeey, Mike." Azazel greeted, feeling his armpits begin to instinctively prickle with sweat. He was in huge danger. Super huge danger. Oh God, he wasn't ready to go out quite yet. He had so many experiments to do, and so many women to tumble.

"Hello Azazel." The archangel beamed back. Standing in the garden against the backdrop of a Roman villa, Michael looked entirely innocent and not at all like an avenging angel about to skin him alive for cutting him out of a treaty deal.

The tableau held, a smiling gentle angel standing across from a visibly perspiring fallen angel.

"So, am I going to die right now?"

Michael threw back his head and laughed. "I'm not sure whether to be amused or a little bit hurt by the assumption, old friend."

"Yeah, well it's been a few thousand years." The leader of the Grigori justified, running a relieved hand through the tangles of his flyaway mane. "You'll have to forgive me if I remember less 'Garden of Eden' and more 'Repent or Burn in Hell.'"

Pouting at the exaggeration, Michael conjured up a table and pair of chairs. Coffee poofed into existence a moment later, and taking a mug the leader of Heaven took a seat. "Goodness, is that really how you all saw me?"

"You were kind of a badass back in the day."

"And I'm not now, is that what you mean to suggest?"

"Shutting up now."

Azazel took a seat opposite to the archangel, summoning a small bottle of brandy and adding a generous dollop to his mug of coffee. "So, how's the lady friend?"

"Well."

"Aww, come on." The fallen angel needled, swirling his drink with a stir stick. "You have to give me a little more than that. I haven't seen Gabriel in years. She still hungering for a few brats?"

Michael smiled with just a touch of sorrow. "Yes, she is. You know how difficult it is for our kind to reproduce. Without God, it has become practically impossible. I am sure the System can eventually be configured to substitute for His Touch, but until then Heaven is barren."

"Ouch. I didn't mean to bring up bad vibes. I don't think Gabriel would want to be friends if I accidentally went and tainted the big cheese."

"Azazel, I have lived for thousands of years and been married to Gabriel for hundreds. I wouldn't Fall so easily."
"Tough crowd, tough crowd." Smiling into his mug, Azazel swallowed the mix of piping hot caffeine and sweet alcohol. "So, to cut to the chase, I'm a bit surprised that you're not pulling my guts out through my nose right about now."

A pale blonde eyebrow crept slowly up as Michael savored another sip of his carafe. "I'm not sure whether to find the way you assume I'm given to such violence humorous or disturbing. But to answer what you're really getting at – no, I'm actually rather pleased that you went and signed that treaty with the devils."

Azazel snorted, lounging back in his chair and pointing a lazy accusing finger at the other man. "Don't bullshit me old man. I know that the angels were all up in arms about it. That's why we're sitting in Tuscany and not in my office. I was hoping having humans around might keep you from taking your pound of flesh."

The golden halo above the archangel's head brightened with the swell of Michael's mirth. "Again with the accusations of aggression and old age. Are you sure you're not projecting? Nevertheless, despite the headache from all the complaining, I was pleased. Unity is better than division since you share Gehenna, and I wasn't swayed by the political hot air."

Which was easy for Michael to say. The devils were governed by a feudal aristocracy, and the Grigori were a pseudo-military organization with ranks and units. Heaven by contrast was an absolute monarchy, ruled first by God and then by Michael after the vacancy on the Throne of Heaven. If Michael didn't care about something, that was the end of it. No one could make him do anything, especially when the archangel was backed by the System.

"Man, have I ever told you how jealous I am of you?"

"Once or twice."

When Ophis descended into Naraka, it was amidst a kaleidoscope of lurid colours and blazing light. Mahatmapraba was the lowest realm of the Adho Loka, full of dense darkness and a crushing sense of weight and despair. For an instant, even the Infinity Dragon bowed under the immense psychological pressure of it.

Then her power flexed, running deep and old as time, and with godlike might the strongest being in existence crushed the atmosphere. The ancient spell unraveled, shadows and sorrow peeling back until the gothic lolita stood straight backed on a carpet of black soil.

"About time you made it here."

"Bikou." Turning her attention to the descendent of Sun Wukong, Ophis took in the utterly exhausted slump of the youkai's shoulders. A thick wiry beard grew from Bikou's handsome face in a wild tangle, just touching his chest. Red armor was coated in dried flecks of demigod blood and the slime of slain Naraki.

"I was really starting to think that we were just fighting down here in the dark for nothing, ya know?" the monkey youkai sighed, dragging the back of his hand over his aching eyes. "I signed up for a bit of excitement, not to be your war hound."

"Did you not find the battles to your liking?" A hand settled over Bikou's abdomen, linking youkai to dragon god and enabling her to flood his flesh with cool refreshing strength. Watching as the fatigue fell away, color returning to her underling's cheeks and brightening his gaze, Ophis cut the connection between them.
"Well, I did, but it kind of got boring down here after a while." Bikou chuckled, scratching at the back of his head and setting his Nyoi-Bo against his shoulder. "You gave me some troops to work with, but they're not the most interesting people to talk to, and don't getting me started on all the baddies."

Turning away from Bikou, Ophis scanned the horizon with cutting grey orbs. Once the darkness had been lifted, the results of her war effort were easy to see. What had once been a stretching plain full of opulent mansions presided over by cruel demigods was a flat featureless wasteland. Plumes of smoke rose into the dull red sky from half a hundred bonfires lit by her Khaos Brigade.

"What is the disposition of our forces?"

"We took some hits. Nothing too bad though. I'd say maybe ten percent at most dead? Not to say that it's not bad for those guys, but it was less than what we were projecting in the first place."

"You have not run out of supplies yet?"

"Nah."

Casualty rates didn't really concern Ophis. It wouldn't have mattered if there was a single death or everyone but Bikou had died. If they were too weak to survive and complete the conquest of Mahatmapraba, those soldiers would be too weak to slay Great Red.

A battle between the Infinity Dragon and the Apocalypse Dragon would be a struggle of titans. If her allies were merely to survive during the struggle, they would need to be mighty. If they were to actually be useful, they would need to be practically godlings themselves. Hence why she'd lowered herself to conquest in the first place.

War had a way of sharpening the mortals and reforging them into warriors much more skilled, assuming they managed to survive to the end of the conflict. How many died along that road didn't matter to her, because those that survived would have grown stronger for it, and they were all in the end expendable anyway.

"How many did you manage to turn?"

"A few hundred of them. The demigods down here are pretty sadistic fucks, but when the boot is on their throat they're not dumb. Genociding ninety-five percent of them brought the rest of them to heel. And the less said about the Naraki, the better."

Fair enough. Ophis hadn't expected to recruit any of them in the first place. The Naraki were former human souls, cast into the depths of Naraka and tormented with all kinds of agonies by the demigods that lived there. The end result was a shapeless blob, full only of the instinct to obey their masters for the ten thousand years of their pitiful existence.

"Prepare for reinforcements beginning next week." Ophis ordered. While she'd committed the entirety of the Khaos Brigade's Old Satan faction to the invasion of the Adho Loka, the dragon god had held off on deploying any of her other factions. The command had chafed at the Hero faction especially, but she'd held firm. She had no idea about how well the war would go, and only a fool threw all their eggs in one basket.

But now that she'd conquered a realm and destroyed all its former inhabitants or recruited them, it was time to start pulling the fractured parts of her Army of Disaster together. Dozens of scattered enclaves formed out of a handful of soldiers each made it difficult for anyone to discover the Khaos Brigade, but it was less efficient and reduced her ability to project power. Having a base of
operations would solve those issues.

A wry smirk pulled at Ophis' lips. She was becoming a regular little – what had been that human's name? – Caesar, yes. It had been so long since the Ouroboros Dragon had tasted the blessed silence and peace that she'd once known in the Dimensional Gap. Great Red made enjoying it impossible, and even for an ancient existence like herself time could take its toll.

She wondered if after Great Red was dead if she'd be able to so easily resume a way of living she hadn't followed for thousands of years.

Almost unbidden, a memory of dark ichor and blood flashed behind Ophis' eyes. It had been a few short years since she'd last seen Uchiha Sasuke, but with just the slightest bit of focus she could feel the connection between them sawing away relentlessly in the back of her mind.

Creating the bond with her little recruit had been a gamble. She'd shared her snakes with hundreds of other mortals before, but never had she created such a connection. Binding him to her by blood and magic and a little bit of soul had been nothing more than a theoretical exercise, until she'd actually done it. After that, the link was 'permanent', and for the next ten thousand years the Uchiha would always be on the very periphery of her awareness.

Well, that was assuming she didn't decide to tear it out, which she would at least hold off on doing until after the battle with Great Red.

There was no point in arbitrarily killing one's own soldiers.
Chapter 18

Naruto watched as the ivory carapaces of three dead bonespiders sloughed away into ash. There was a queer burnt smell in the air that made him want to wrinkle his nose as he turned to stare at Ravel. He hadn't even had to draw his blade or conjure up a bit of magic.

"Well, that was anticlimactic." He deadpanned, hand dropping away from the hilt of his saber. To think he'd gotten all suited up for nothing.

Smirking insolently at him, Ravel sketched a goofy salute.

The deep red of the uniform he'd stolen out of storage was a little baggy for her, but it was the principle of the thing. It wouldn't feel like a proper adventure if they didn't get all dressed up to play soldier.

Plus she was his Bishop anyway, and by the rules of the Gremory clan that technically made her a commissioned officer in their private army. The fact that she could be twelve years old and commanding a platoon was a bit ridiculous, but that was the way of the aristocracy. Nepotism ran deep.

At least she was just a member on paper. Twelve was too young for the military life. It was an element of the shinobi system Naruto hoped Kakashi had managed to reform. There was no need for kids to be out killing and being killed.

"Good job Second Lieutenant Phenex." Naruto mocked, eyeing the way her too-tall knee-high boots actually came halfway up her thighs. "Medal of honor right there for that particular combat action. You get to be a certified patriot now."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Settling his hands over his hips, Naruto cracked his neck and gave the dirty slum another look over. Azmarin might be a city under the Gremory clan, and the Gremory clan was kinder than most, but they were still nobles. If the bonespider pest problem wasn't such an issue, he doubted any member of law enforcement would have bothered to patrol the place.

Ravel curiously stomped the heel of her crisp leather boot into a soggy looking sheet of pressboard that had been abandoned on the asphalt. "How… quaint. Makes me feel like one of those human kids that like to burn ants with their magnifying glass. It was a bit of fun to blow them up, but is that all? Seems like it would get pretty boring pretty quickly."

"That's usually it." Naruto answered, taking a few steps to peer in through the broken windows of a partially boarded up shop. There were a few wrappers from prepackaged food strewn about, but it didn't seem like anyone was home. Whatever slumdogs there had been living in the district had long since cleared out; nobody wanted to be the one eaten alive by a giant spider. "Sometimes we find survivors that were wrapped up and lucky enough not to get chomped on, but usually it's just clean up."

"Bleh." Wrinkling her nose as a plastic shopping bag blew along to land on her boot, Ravel made a valiant effort to shake off the clinging piece of trash. "Where do they even come from? They just kind of up and appeared a few months back, breeding all over the place like lemmings."

Naruto jerked his head back when a dusty rat scampered over the rotting windowpane. "Officially?
The big wigs are just treating it like any other pest problem; just a little bit more dangerous than most. *Unofficially,* most people think it's they're being bred by the same guy that was sending hitmen after everyone before the treaty was signed. Or so Dad says anyway." And Sona and Sairaorg, but Ravel didn't need to know about what his co-conspirators thought.

"Kind of makes you wonder if that was his end goal in the first place - creating false flags all over the place to push the government into allying with the fallen angels. Wouldn't that make your father the biggest suspect?"

Sirzechs would never do something like that. While Naruto could see how all the pieces fit in their own twisted little way, it didn't fit his father's brand of ruthlessness. The Crimson Satan would kill at the drop of a dime if he had to. But doing it just to push a law through the Senate wasn't his father's style, plus there was no certainty that creating an atmosphere of fear would lead to peace in the first place rather than some form of war.

"I can see the logic, but we both know that's not how dad would go about it. Even if he did, he'd target *himself* rather than going Rias. Dad can be pretty cold when he has to be, but he's not an utter bastard."

"I suppose."

Satisfied that there were no more bonespiders lurking about, Naruto turned to Ravel and opened his mouth to ask her if she wanted to leave yet.

Then the world *exploded.*

Naruto's vision went white as the sensation of heat and light rolled over him, brushing close but never *quite* reaching out to touch the Gremory heir. The conflagration shuddered, swelling for a heartbeat before rushing away in a dwindling wall of fire.

"Aren't you lucky you have me here?" Ravel panted, lowering her arm. The carmine cotton sleeve of her uniform was burnt away below the elbow, revealing unmarked cream skin. As a member of the Phenex clan, Ravel had the power of pyrokinesis along with immortality, and bending away an explosion was more than possible.

"Heh." Naruto chuckled breathlessly, still reeling as he yanked his sabre from its sheathe.

"Definitely." The steel vibrated as the redhead stuffed a great knot of power down the length of his athame, rippling metal beginning to glow vermilion.

*Awooooooo!*

*Awooooooo!*

The sudden wail of a dozen sirens drew two shocked gazes. Plumes of smoke curled up over the urban horizon, wreathing steel and glass towers in clouds of ash. Here and there the new cracks of detonation sparked bright lances of orange flames that reached for the sky, and with a particularly loud rumble a pair of skyscrapers began to crumble.

"What the hell?" Slipped from Naruto's numb lips. They'd just narrowly escaped death via bombing themselves, but the pair could only stare in mute horror as chaos began to spread across the greatest industrial city in Gehenna.

It wasn't an assassination attempt.

It was something else.
"Help!" Broke their reverie, drawing the Gremory heir's attention. The plea was sobbed out again, just barely cutting through the cacophony of alarms and distant screams from other districts.

Cursing under his breath, Naruto threw himself forward. "Hello?" he bellowed, trading shouts with the desperate stranger as their boots pounded over cracked pavement. The calls for aid led the pair to a partially collapsed apartment building, the arch of the door caved in and windows broken from long neglect.

"Stay here." Naruto ordered before smashing through one of the ground floor patio doors. Ravel's insulting protests fell off behind him as the redhead navigated through the dim maze of half rotted staircases and broken shards of concrete. "Hello?"

"In here!"

He barreled into the last room on the second floor, a bit surprised that he'd been able to hear her from the street. Devils had more powerful senses than humans, Naruto supposed, and they could probably yell louder too. "Are you okay?"

"No." The filthy matted woman gasped, curled against a misshapen chunk of cement. "My leg's trapped under here. It tipped over when the shaking started. Please help me! I don't want to die!"

"Just relax, okay? I'll get you out of there." Naruto reassured her, crossing the room with hurried steps. "Deep breaths. Keep your heart rate low and don't panic." It didn't look like she was injured, but he couldn't be sure, and broken bones could hemorrhage internally. If she was bleeding, he didn't want her to pass out and die from the blood loss before he could get her to a healer. Naruto might have many talents, but medical magic wasn't one of them.

"I'm gonna..." he trailed off. The Gremory heir was stricken mute by the woman's beauty. Beneath the dirt of poverty was sun-kissed dusky skin, taut with youth. Elegant striking features shaped her face, glowing ochre orbs peeking up shyly at the teen devil. The woman looked like a thirty-year-old human, mature and sensual, except for the thick black lips that shone with flickers of light like stars caught in sticky tar.

So enthralled was he that Naruto was only saved by instinct, leaning back at the sudden rake of triple-jointed fingers. The spell of seduction had been so heavy it almost smothered his training, and the Gremory heir wasn't fast enough to prevent the sudden red-hot slash of agony cutting over the muscles of his abdomen.

"Fuck!" Naruto growled, leaping back with his free hand coming up to cover his bleeding stomach. Wetness soaked through his fingers, seeping warm and slick between the cracks of his fingers. Tightening his grip on the hilt of his sabre, Naruto brought the demonic steel weapon up and forced a fresh infusion of his energy into it.

"Not bad." The woman complimented wryly, swiftly rising to her feet. The dirt and weakness shimmered away, an abandoned illusion now that Naruto had been lured, leaving a much different creature.

The pure sexuality of her form remained as the dust faded. A thick faded green leather tunic had replaced the brown rags of the illusion, but they did little to conceal the heavy swell of her breasts. In fact, based on the pink jewels hanging over the area where her nipples would be, Naruto assumed the armor was intended to showcase the woman's body. It was certainly effective, and against his will he could feel his cock stiffening in his pants.

Tanned muscles flexed as the woman summoned a spear from the ether. Ivory gleamed in the
dimness of the building, bright with an inner corpse light that made any living creature involuntarily shiver. "Too bad you didn't want to go gently, little one. Now we have to do this the hard way."

Crossing the space between them in an eyeblink, the dusky woman thrust the pale point of her lance between Naruto's brows. She moved so quickly that a commoner of Gehenna would have been impaled before he realized what was happening; dead in the blink of an eye.

Naruto was faster.

Parrying the bone spear away with gritted teeth and a shower of sparks, Naruto slammed a blazing red Rasengan into the woman's stomach. The spiraling ball of energy bored through the stiff surface of her green leather armor, revealing a tanned tone stomach before blasting his attacker back across the room.

Naruto shuffled until he had one of the many holes in the wall as his rear. "You almost got me. I wasn't expecting mind control." The Gremory heir admitted before he leapt straight back and out into the open sky.

When God had created the angels, he'd created them with special biological 'nodes'. Once magic flowed through those nodes, temporary physical wings with the power of flight were created, the number of nodes corresponding to the power of the angel. Lilith had led her cult into becoming demons in explicit rebellion against the God of the Bible, granting her followers and their descendants similar nodes in mockery of the angels of God.

Naruto relied on those nodes to give him leathery wings and the power of flight as he fell through the empty air, catching a curling breeze and bringing his body up to a hover. "Unluckily for you, I'm better than that!"

Crimson swelled between Naruto's hands. At its most basic, the Bael clan's Power of Destruction was an organic expression of magic with the property of 'disintegration'. All bonds down to the molecular were destroyed with explosive force, so when Naruto brought the sphere of his grandmother's magic down on the empty apartment building, concrete and steel were vaporized to ash with shafts of bloody light in the space of a few heartbeats.

"You're so dramatic." Ravel coughed through the ash, floating up beside Naruto on two wings of pure flame. "Did you really have to blow it all up? Especially when I was down there?"

"Well, uh…"

"You forgot about me, didn't you? I can just tell you're going to be the most awful husband any woman ever had. The neglect is going to kill me."

"No!" Naruto denied, frantically waving his hands. "I didn't think about how large it was gonna be, but I knew you'd survive it if worse came to worst and the whole place collapsed!"

Eyeing her fiancé suspiciously, Ravel folded her arms over her chest. "Why don't I believe you?" the blonde complained, one drill-like curl remaining bound up in tight order while the other half of her hair had come loose to cascade roughly down her back. There was a thin coating of grey dust darkening the surface of her borrowed uniform to a shade of burgundy.

A black beam of energy crackled through the air, prompting the pair of devils to scatter before they paired back up with annoyed expressions.

"Don't you dare ignore me!" Rubble and plaster parted, revealing the proud form of the bomber. The last of her glamours had shattered, tanned fingers replaced with the scaly grasping claws of an eagle.
Instead of beautiful exotic features, the plump lips and lively cheeks of the woman had been substituted with the hungry leer of a skeletal face. "I'm just the beginning!"

"Enough out of you." Ravel muttered, calling up a great lance of fire and directing down at the swaying intruder with a lazy gesture. Dark magic and phoenix flame struggled back and forth, drawing more and more of Ravel's attention as the Bishop was forced to direct an increasingly large amount of energy into her grandiose spell to attempt to blast away the surprisingly resilient witch.

Sweat beaded over the twelve-year old's brow as she struggled to crush her adversary, prompting Naruto to huff a fond chuckle. "I'll just give you a bit of a hand here, yeah?" he muttered rhetorically, reinforcing his fiancé's spell with a curl of red enchantment. Black energy swelled one final time before their opponent was unceremoniously crushed and reduced to ash under the combined force of their sorcery.

"Probably as strong as Sasuke." Naruto commented to himself, switching his attention from the corpse swiftly turning into cinders to the horizon. "Dumber than the bastard is, but probably that level of power." Which meant nothing good.

It was pretty fucking obvious that she was only one out of an organization. Given the way they'd all gone off at the same time, then all the bombs were probably connected, and Naruto wasn't nearly vain enough to think he was the target.

Which meant dozens of more explosives that could destroy even him - based on the detonation Ravel had redirected – were scattered around the city. Plus however many more of the black lipped woman's comrades there were out there causing mayhem.

Thrusting his sabre into the concrete, Naruto sucked in a stressed breath. Then he slapped harsh palms over the hollows of his eyes. "Fucking fuck!" the Gremory heir screeched, forcing down all his stress and worry. While conflict was inevitable based on his intention of reforming Gehenna, Naruto hadn't expected it so fucking early. Nor had he ever intended the targets to be innocent bystanders.

"So, is this the part where you beg desperately for my help and I graciously offer it?"

Rias was just forming a careful block against Sasuke's slow demonstrative strike when her father rushed down the garden path. A pair of maids threw themselves out of the Duke's way when the redhaired noble roared "Get the hell out of the way!"

Demonic steel bounced off demonic steel as her Pawn pulled his blow, katana retreating in tandem with her rapier. "Maybe we should go see what that was?" Rias suggested tentatively, turquoise gaze meeting the coal dark orbs of the Uchiha before instinctively pulling away.

She was not in any way scared of Sasuke.

When she'd woken from the near severance of her arm, Rias had been prepared to swallow the injury and stuff it down with the rest of her emotional concerns. It didn't matter if she'd wake up in cold sweats dreaming about being dismembered as long as her peerage was happy. Instead, no one outright talked about the injury, preferring to talk around it, and at the heart of it was Sasuke.

Sasuke was the one that had pulled Yuuto and Koneko together to form a training plan for the less martial members of their peerage. Sasuke was the one that had a private conversation with Naruto that had led to the sudden appearance of a bow for Akeno and a rapier for Rias. Sasuke was the one that relentlessly wandered back and forth between the devil princess and the half-breed, prodding at
their novice stances and challenging them to improve.

Rias was not afraid of Sasuke. But meeting the hungry black fire of his eyes did strange things to her body. She already experienced the hot surge of worry whenever she thought of how vulnerable her peerage was to any further attempts at assassination. She didn't need the hard leap of her heart and the faint tingle in her nethers on top of all that. Lust was a dozen worlds less important than love, and as broken as they were Rias loved her peerage. She had no time for pondering over her lack of a love life.

"Fine." Sasuke agreed, sheathing his katana and leaving Rias momentarily irritated. She was the mistress who gave orders, not him, and later she'd have to remind him about that.

But the chafing at her Pawn's newfound authority was quickly forgotten as Rias tracked her father through the paths of the Gremory family estate. Typically, the whole thing was a bit of a maze, but Zeoticus' beeline trail straight to the front foyer was easy enough to follow.

"Let's just keep it quiet, shall we?" Rias suggested to her Pawn, accepting the Uchiha's impatient nod of agreement as they moved through the final set of doors. Whatever drama had summoned her father in such a hurry was probably interesting, but also probably none of their business, and they shouldn't outright interfere. It would be hard to eavesdrop if they were kicked out of the room by an irate Father.

A flurry of sounds greeted the pair, Zeoticus' deep tones mingling with Sirzech's sharp echo and Grayfia's stern voice. There were several dozen crowding strangers Rias wasn't familiar with, creating an atmosphere of utter confusion and heavy panic.

"The fire in the forty-fourth district is out of control! Please give us orders to evacuate!"

"It's similar in the Agrares territory, Auros is burning and there's going to be no help from them!"

"A unified national response? Should we convene an emergency meeting of the Senate? What about the fallen angels? What's the news from them?"

"There are hundreds of commoners dead already and no one has any idea what's happening out there!"

Zeoticus took all the desperate reports and questions in stride, drinking in multiple scenarios at a time with the harshest glare Rias had ever seen in her typically affable father's face.

Souji's hands moved expressively, emphasizing his argument while Agrippa scowled at a brown-haired crimson-uniformed Knight, their debate catching more and more of the Duke's attention.

Grey and gold armor shrouded her brother's body as the Crimson Satan weighed in suggestions from his father on one hand and advice from his wife on the other. The entire nebulous of frantic activity seemed centered on the Duke Gremory, but all final decisions passed through Sirzechs and his wife before being given out to the desperate masses.

It had only been a few hours since she'd seen Naruto and Ravel, but both the younger devils were there too, lurking anxiously in a side corner as they soaked up the chaos. Oddly clad in singed military dress, the young couple looked strung out and splattered with a mixture of dirt and blood.

Blue eyes meet her turquoise across the crowded hall, and after firmly tangling his fingers through Ravel's Naruto lurched through the crowd. The warm press of bodies reluctantly parted as Rias waited for her nephew to come let his best friend in on the gossip.
In honesty, Rias was jealous of Naruto. Sasuke was her Pawn. Her servant, first, last, and above all else by every law and all the customs of the aristocracy. But the possessive jealousy running through her was irrational, and it wouldn't keep her from hearing the latest news.

"What's going on?" Rias demanded as soon as Naruto and Ravel were in earshot, only to be ignored as her nephew went right to her Pawn.

"Fucking fuck, Sasuke." Naruto grumbled, futilely dusting at the grime coating his clothes. "It's time to crack a few skulls and take some names."

"What are you on about, dobe?"

Thinning her lips at the insult, Rias folded her arms under her generous chest and resolved to listen. It was all she was ever good for in the first place apparently.

'Dobe'. What a strange little nickname her Pawn had for her nephew. Naruto had never been dead last in anything as far as Rias knew. Was it supposed to be ironic?

"Some prick decided to bomb the hell out of a dozen cities in Gehenna. This isn't some clan-on-clan bullshit, we're at war! I hope you're ready to kick some ass!"

"Are you sure about that?" Rias cut in, meeting Ravel's eyes and silently prodding the girl to speak up. She would not be third wheel in some long running 'bromance', and as manipulative as it was the Ruin Princess was more than prepared to distract Naruto away with his own fiancée. As long as her nephew was wrapped up in his engagement, he wasn't tempting her Pawn away from her.

Ravel shrugged, nudging Naruto with a bony shoulder before settling her hands over her thin hips. "Well it sure wasn't a one off. If it was just Azmarin or a few other cities we'd be looking at someone trying to get a one up in a clan war. But every single clan territory has been attacked, some more than others, and it's not angels – fallen or otherwise."

The utter shock that Ravel's statement engendered cut through Rias like an icy sword. Never in all the history of Gehenna had they ever been invaded. The angels and fallen angels didn't count, since those species belonged in the same Biblical pantheon. They may have killed one another to the point of extinction, but God surely wouldn't stand for an outright invasion of Sheol by an external faction. At least in the long run anyway, since even if they were devils God had a proprietary interest in Hell. It was entirely possible He intended to bleed the devils so He had an easier time conquering them later, and would permit a short running war to be waged.

"Who?" Rias forced through her dazed lips, ignoring the indulgent looks Sasuke and Naruto gave her. Maybe whatever stupid little secret those two shared made them immune to the real world, but war was a very real threat to her family and friends. More than one of her relatives would end up on the battlefield if combat dragged on.

"It's too early to say." Naruto admitted, running an agitated hand through thick red stands. "We've had a few runs in them, but they've never outright said 'I'm doing this for Lord so-so, feel my wrath', or that sort of bullshit."

"So why the panic?" Sasuke cut in coldly, shifting his obsidian focus from his best friend to his mistress, and then to his best friend's fiancé. "The Satans will get it all under control. Why are you making such a big deal out of it?"

"Because, because!" Naruto sputtered, deep red uniform crinkling as he gestured energetically. "I'm not big on the whole nobility thing, but I'm definitely into the whole serving our country thing!
Maybe this whole thing will die down in a couple of days after they catch whatever terrorist arsensegget or wannabe warlord it is that's causing all the explosions, but that's no promise! We gotta find this bastard before he does anything else!"

Sasuke stared at Ravel for a long beat, considering her tiny flesh. The girl was twelve years old. More than old enough to be a shinobi by Konoha's standards, and based on Naruto's dragging her all over the battlefield, his brother through time felt the Phenex girl was old enough to fight for Gehenna.

Well maybe Naruto forgot the toll of blood and suffering Sasuke had paid in his youth, but the Uchiha certainly hadn't. Children didn't belong in a warzone.

Part of Sasuke yearned desperately for the conflict Naruto was implicitly promising. Steel on steel, blood on blood, magic on magic – there was no room for personal feeling in such a tightly wound spiral of action and need.

But Sasuke was more than a soldier. Sasuke's clan had been destroyed for the sake of Konoha, Sasuke himself being broken into the little pieces Itachi had hoped would reunite and form a strong and loyal son of the village. He'd already given up more than his fair share for 'patriotism' in his lives, and he had no intention of running off when he had people depending on him. Rias, Akeno, Koneko, Yuuto – they needed him more than the country did.

"That has nothing to do with me." Sasuke informed Naruto icily, newfound resolution filling his chest like a ball of steel. "The clan has an army, and the other clans have their armies too. It's none of my business." Conflict was hard-edged and damaging and not something he wanted to subject Rias' peerage to. Those kids thought they knew violence, but they knew nothing of war, and the Uchiha fully intended to sit on them and make sure they didn't get involved like young hotheads always wanted to.

Naruto looked like he'd been knifed in the back, surprise twisting his mouth that slowly gave way to agonized betrayal. "So, that's how it's gonna be?" the Gremory heir breathed to himself, the sapphire of his eyes narrowing. "You're just going to leave me – me and everyone else that you could help – hanging high and dry so you can sit around here?"

Sasuke hesitated.

On the one hand, he could cave to Naruto's brash neediness. In a way, the Uchiha was surprised it had taken so long to rear its head. Naruto was generous, but not eternally selfless. No doubt the knowledge that Sasuke's first loyalty was legally to Rias had chafed through the years, and beneath all the duty and kindness, Naruto was still the little boy that clung desperately to his bonds, and when Sasuke had been lost in darkness Naruto's holding tight to their brotherhood was what had saved him.

But on the other hand, Naruto was not Sasuke's only bond any more. Ten years of never seeing his friend's face and numbing himself to the loss had rotted at their friendship, and the four years since reuniting had been spent not only with Naruto but also in the company of Rias' peerage. They'd wriggled under his skin, touching at his shrunken heart in different ways to become precious to him, and they cared for him with the same wounded intensity he cared for them.

Hanging in the air was a Sword of Damocles, and the all the years Sasuke had spent in Gehenna had been running towards this moment. All he had to do was reach out and take that sword, and then decide. Would he point the blade at his new bonds, or his old one?

Sasuke chose the third option, and pointed the blade at himself.
The closed fist that hovered in front of his eyes confused the hell out of Naruto. It was a sudden random gesture, only further fanning the flames of his irritation. Sasuke could piss him off at the best of times, and violence pressing in on innocent people was certainly not that best of times. The Gremory heir ached with the desire to smash his knuckles into his stupid traitor best friend's face, because Naruto wanted Sasuke by his side god damn it.

Coal dark eyes glittered solemnly, and with a jolt Naruto realized exactly what was behind the silent sign.

*Can you read my heart?*

Naruto brought his own hand up, a slow rueful smile twisting his mouth as he responded with a fist bump. It was a throwback to another time, when two lost young shinobi circled each other like twin suns spun in the emptiness of space. The relentless pull of gravity and kept them together despite all the pain and loss of that first life, and it still pulled now.

It had been said that high level shinobi could peer into one another's souls through the instinctive choreograph of a battle. Every thrown kunai and every hammering kick translated into a silent message, conveying feelings and dreams.

For Naruto and Sasuke, there was no need for an elaborate dance of steel and pain. In one poignant movement, they could just bare it all to each other.

There had once been two boys, isolated from all of humanity, and in that shared isolation they'd instinctively bonded. The unbearable solitude had become bearable, made lighter by the tentative but inexorable link that had grown between them. It had become their crutch, supporting the pair of lost children as they walked their lonely roads.

But they were not children any more. They weren't boxed in by immature neediness and the inability to walk a mile in the other's shoes. Perhaps it was past time to begin cutting away the past, and start to stand on their own two feet.

"Fine." Naruto smiled faintly, letting go of the last dregs of anger and feeling all the lighter for it. "I should have known that you'd be a little girl about it all. Mother hen away all you want, you sad bastard. Don't take too long, or I'll have to revoke your man card."

Narrowing his eyes when Ravel giggled and mouthed 'bromance moment' at his mistress, Sasuke snorted. "Pretty sure you have to be a man to go around deducting man points. Let me know when your balls drop, and maybe I'll start to worry."

"What's with your fascination about my balls?"

"The state of my nephew's balls is not a polite topic of conversation."

"I think as his fiancé I have the right to be a little interested in them."
Chapter 19

Sasuke left Naruto to his war.

Neither of them craved conflict, but while the Uchiha was able to keep his hands off things his best friend had never been able to leave a situation to develop on its own. The desire to be useful was one of Naruto's more generous traits. Being right in the thick of things was what would make the Gremory heir the happiest – at least until one of his well-meaning helicopter parents decided it was too much for such an 'innocent' child.

The urge to turn around and join his 'brother' intensified the further he led Rias from the foyer, but Sasuke would hold strong. There would be other battles to fight by his oldest friend's side. At the moment, Sasuke had other priorities.

Like finally lancing the boil of nascent resentment between aunt and nephew.

In a way, the thought still jangled through Sasuke's stomach like a heavy ball of skepticism. *Naruto* was the visionary, not Sasuke. It was like the boy that had wanted to become Hokage had a golden touch, cutting through darkness and hatred to redeem souls. The notion that there was a heart Naruto couldn't touch but Sasuke could beggared belief.

Yet that was the situation they were all in right now, with Naruto unable to patch-up his bond with Rias.

Naruto hadn't been able to repair his bond with Sasuke on his own either. It had required Sasuke baring himself and hoping that the fist bump of another lifetime would be enough to reassure his friend that he wasn't cutting any of his bonds. That Naruto would understand just because he had something to protect didn't mean he was giving up on their friendship.

This second life had changed Sasuke, and it seemed like it was changing Naruto too. Maybe those ten years apart had a bigger impact than either liked to admit.

"Shall we return to training?" Rias' voice was quiet, drained and defeated in a way that made Sasuke's jaw clench. She'd made a valiant effort to be noticed, but in the end she'd been brushed to the side once again, unable to be more than a third wheel in the 'great drama' of Naruto and Sasuke. No doubt it had just validated all her self-esteem issues and started another spiral of questions about trading Sasuke off.

He shouldn't have let it be for so long. "No." If he were honest with himself, Sasuke had been hoping all along that it would just go away. Let Naruto deal with it. Let Akeno deal with it. Let Rias get over it on her own. The Uchiha wouldn't deliberately do anything that he knew would make her suffer, but being her friend didn't mean being her therapist.

Those justifications were all weak little lies to cover up the shameful truth. Sasuke had been afraid. He'd been afraid of making himself vulnerable, either through letting others in his heart or going into the hearts of others. He'd been afraid of more pain. Afraid of the possibility of another Itachi, another Mikoto, another Fugaku, another family to lose in a flurry of blood and violence.

But Sasuke was *already* vulnerable. Unwillingly, the Uchiha had opened himself up to the possibility of further loss. The only thing that his silence and distance was buying now was the suffering of those he'd come to care about, building pressure until the whole house of cards had threatened to tumble down.
So rather than lose what he gained through his own cowardice, Sasuke took the only road left to him. If one party had to visit old wounds, then that party would be him. Let Naruto be comforted by the guarantee that their brotherhood still held strong, and let Rias know that just because he’d chosen Naruto didn’t mean he wasn’t choosing her too.

The past was just the past. It only held the power over him Sasuke was willing to give it.

Leading an increasingly confused Rias along, Sasuke chose one of the more private second floor balconies to begin spilling his guts out on. He briefly considered calling up the rest of the peerage to let them all satisfy their curiosity at once, but the Uchiha knew if he tried that his courage would fail him.

One step at a time.

"Sit." He rasped, picking a straight backed wooden chair of his own to sink down into.

Crimson eyebrows drew together at the command, but Rias obeyed. Perhaps at another time she'd have pushed back at him ordering her about, but Sasuke looked too resolute for that. Whatever was on his mind was serious, and casting back to the makeshift war room they’d just left, the Ruin Princess wondered if this was finally the moment he asked to be released.

"Sasuke, you don't have to beat around the bush." she began, crushing back the tide of rejection that was already beginning to seize her chest. Rias could afford to wallow in her own negativity later. The least she could do for Sasuke was not subconsciously guilt trip him when parting way.

"Shut up." Sasuke chuckled roughly at the look of utter offense that crossed her features. A faint sense of nostalgia for a certain pink-haired teammate buzzed along his nerves. "You're annoying. You don't know anything at all. You just keep making stupid assumptions."

"How dare-"

"My mother's name was Mikoto." He cut her off, taking advantage of the stunned silence to swallow painfully and begin again. "My mother's name was Mikoto. She was the kindest, most gentle person I ever knew. She was strict when she had to be, but no matter how badly I misbehaved she never stayed mad at me. I still remember the way she smelled; just like those garden tomatoes she loved to grow... I never told her, but that's why tomatoes were my favourite food. Even as a child, they reminded me of her. And now I'll never have the chance to tell her."

There was a faint wet sheen to Rias' gaze that Sasuke absolutely didn't want to see. That empathy would make him lose his nerve, so he softly closed his dark eyes. "Fugaku was my father's name. We were never as close as I wanted to be. He was a very... stoic and dutiful sort of man, always focused on his work and his duties. I felt like he didn't even love me, but my mother told me that when they were alone I was all he wanted to talk about. The last thing he ever asked for before he died was for my brother to take care of me."

"I was seven years old when my older brother murdered our entire family."

Rias choked, jolted back from Sasuke's tender musing so roughly that the top of her knee slammed into the underside of the deck table.

"Itachi was complex." A bitterly amused smirk twisted Sasuke's mouth at her reaction. "I adored my big brother. I could never get enough of his attention, and he always indulged me. When I was born, he promised me that no matter what he would protect me. And then he betrayed me, killing our parents and the rest of our family before torturing me with illusion magic. I spent a long time hating
him, eventually hunting him down and killing him. I later found out that it was all a great lie; that my brother had bowed to blackmail and murdered everyone to preserve my life. Every moment of his existence became a charade centered on making me hate him so I would grow strong and one day have revenge, and when he finally died, he was smiling."

"Why are you telling me this?" Rias stared at her Pawn aghast, cheeks gone pale with horror.

Later, there was the possibility she'd ask for more details, but Sasuke could always lie about them. Tailoring his story to fit Gehenna rather than Konoha wouldn't be too difficult, though the government conspiracy angle would have to be gotten rid of entirely.

But that wasn't important right now.

Reaching across the table, Sasuke took his mistress' hands in his own and squeezed empathetically. "Because I trust you. Because I want you to know that this isn't some zero-sum game; just because I value Naruto doesn't mean I don't value you too. Because you have a family that cares about you. Learn from my mistakes, and don't end up all alone with the last of your family's blood on your hands."

Bile burned in the back of Sasuke's throat, and his heart felt like it had been mangled into weeping gory bits. But it was a necessarily sacrifice for the road he was walking, having chosen to point that blade at himself rather than any of the people he cared about.

Despite the rigid social hierarchy of Gehenna, in more than one clan territory there existed a blossoming modern middle class. The nobility might take the largest share of the pie for itself, but Sheol was so bountiful that even the smaller share that was left allowed law abiding loyal citizens to live comfortably.

In more than one home, rowdy young devils would turn on the TV and screech in delight at seeing another episode of 'Miracle Levia-tan'. The Satan had her own cult following of devoted children, eager to witness the adventures of the beautiful bubbly woman.

Serafall doubted they'd be so eager to watch her show if they could see her now.

Spinning a wet eyeball between dainty fingers, the Satan gave a delicate squeeze only to pout when the orb squished into mush. There was a slimy coating of blood and ichor up to her left elbow, but she'd be washing it off soon enough. She'd gotten what she needed out of the dusky skinned invader anyway.

"This is unfortunate." Ajuka sighed blandly, ignoring the way his colleague flicked a few drops of maroon liquid his way. Gehenna had been caught with its pants down, invaded from the outside by vengeful gods.

They shouldn't have been so surprised, it was inevitable that some faction would eventually try to get back at the Biblical faction for their long-running dominance and conquests.

"I think it's a little more than unfortunate, Aju-chan. We could've blown a handful of rebels out of the water. All-out war with Mictlan? Not so much."

It had been a very long time since anyone in Gehenna had seen one of the Cihuateteo. In Aztec mythology, women who died in childbirth gave their souls to the fertility goddess Cihuacoatl to be reborn into fearsome demon-spirits. They would haunt crossroads at night, causing disease in children and seducing men to death or madness.
When not lurking in the human world, they resided in the Aztec Underworld of Mictlan. They served as God-King Mictlantecuhtli's soldiers and envoys, holding the strength of a middle-class devil. The demon women were hardly a threat to someone of Ajuka's power, but could be a deadly enemy for one of the many untrained commoners they ruled over.

Ajuka was more than a little upset.

Mictlantecuhtli’s connection to arachnids notwithstanding, he should have considered the very obvious possibility that the bonespiders weren't agents of chaos for a lone actor but the prelude to an invasion proper. Their defences had been tested and found lacking.

That kind of stupidity was unacceptable in a scientist of his caliber.

"She didn't give you any information about the Thirteen Heavens?"

"Nope." Serafall denied, lips popping around the 'p' as she summoned a tiny stream of water magic and began to rinse her hands. "Could just be Mictlan, or their Overworld could be involved in this too. She's not high enough in the ranks to know any more I guess."

"Michael will need to know." Hopefully, it was solely an invasion from one realm of the Underworld into another. There were only four gods in Mictlan, and they'd been weakened after Cortez put the vast majority of their believers to the sword. Without a dedicated following, the gods wouldn't pose as much of a threat as they could have. If the four Satans could get into Mictlan themselves and force combat, they could possibly defeat them.

But if the invasion was a full-on assault by one pantheon on another, things could get a lot more complicated. The Aztec Overworld realms could be hammering on the gates of the Seven Heavens at the moment for all Ajuka knew. It would be a sweet revenge for the Aztec gods to be able to take their pound of flesh for all the worshippers they'd lost.

"You head on over to Sirzechs. I'm sure they could use you in the war room. I'm going over to Azazel. We need to know if we're standing united with the fallen angels on this or not."

"Fine, fine. Don't get bitten by any of the Seewahs while you're running about."

"Seewahs?"

"Well it's a war isn't it? Might as well get an early start on the tribal hatred and ethnic slurs."

Sirzechs accepted a ceramic mug from his wife, slamming back the mixture of coffee and cream without any regard for its warmth. The heat scalded his mouth, but at least it woke him up. Thirteen hours in and their ragtag war effort had finally begun to approach some semblance of order.

The Senate might be able to overrule individual clans, but every one the thirty-three clans represented in it had their pride. Bashing the necessity of submitting their feudal armies to central command had taken longer than it should. Opposition at his 'power grab' only collapsed when news had rolled in that half of the Agrares territory farmland was burning.

"If I hold half of my forces in my own lands, I can devote the other half to restoring order in Agrares and rebuilding infrastructure." The Great King Bael leaned down over the detailed map table. Frozen purple eyes darted over the map, considering the most vital points in their country to hold.

"That was my thought as well, Uncle." Sirzechs agreed, pushing the empty mug back into Grayfia's hands. As cold as it was, some clan territories mattered more than others. They knew it, and the
enemy knew it. Hence why Sirzechs had given up on the recently rebuilt Lucifer territory and committed the entirety of his troops to defending his father's lands.

Holding onto his own seat was a matter of prestige. Preserving the largest industrial center in their realm was a matter of survival. Just like how it was important for Falbium to be leading a force to defend the Phenex clan and their groves of rare medicinal herbs instead of reconquering his territory, or how his Uncle had just proposed marching straight past three beleaguered allies to preserve the largest agricultural sector in Gehenna.

Food, medicine, and weapons mattered more than the entertainment industry or luxury silks, no matter how many noble clans raged about being forgotten.

Sirzechs massaged his pounding temples, looking over the map once more. Everything was shifting too fluidly, and the battle lines likely wouldn't crystallize for a few more hours when their reeling defences stabilized. The Aztecs had really gotten the edge over them.

When Mictlan had slammed through the barrier between their dimensions, they'd done it at a run. There was only a single point where armies could easily cross, and by using the initial chaos of coordinated bombs all across Sheol, the King of Mictlan had been able to totally seize control of the Limbo Strip, relying on sleeper cells and suddenly vicious creatures to wreak havoc on the devils while his main force marched over.

"What's the latest from Michael?" Sirzechs demanded into the tense silence, spurring Ajuka to cross arms over his chest and scowl.

"There's nothing he can do for us. He had an emergency meeting with Quetzalcoatl. As long as the angels don't interfere, the Thirteen Heavens won't move. It's just us against Mictlan. For now anyway."

"What about Azazel?"

"There we do have some good news." The Satan Beelzebub grinned, stepping up to the table and motioning at a darkened cleft. "He'll move with us. They've pulled back to the Malebolge, so no one is getting in or out of Cocytus without a fight."

"Good." Lord Bael grunted, running an agitated hand through his salt and pepper mane. "The last thing we need is one of those degenerates breaking out of prison while our hands are full with the Mictlanese."

The doors to the war room were unceremoniously thrown open, Zeoticus striding in with a scowl and his carmine military uniform covered in blood and ash. "Azmarin is secure." The Duke grunted shortly, moving up to stand beside his brother-in-law and glare ferociously down at the map spread over the enormous table.

It hurt Sirzechs just a little bit to see the cold burn in his father's blue eyes. The Duke may have survived many years under the hand of a brutal warmongering dictatorship, becoming so fearsome on the battlefield his enemies nicknamed him the 'Warlock of Extinction', but he loathed conflict. That war had come again in his lifetime no doubt cut Zeoticus deep.

Skipping any pleasantries of his own, the Great King nodded sharply and turned back to the map.

"You've left orders to begin retrofitting the factories for munitions production I assume?"

"Of course." Zeoticus growled, leaning down and scooping up a handful of figurines. He left a handful to show the reserves he'd left to hold his city, dropping the rest on the Agrares territory. With
the way the two clan armies were arranged, they'd catch the invading regiment between them and sweep them away.

"I wish you would reconsider the sanction against letting the purebloods enter combat." Sirzechs cut in as the two older men weighed the outlay of the combat theatre. "It seems that we're just unnecessarily hamstringing our offensive ability to horde the 72 Pillars for a battle that may never come."

"Wipe the snot from your nose, boy." The Great King sighed, purple gaze shooting up to offer an irritated glance. "You know exactly why we've instituted the ban."

Truthfully, Sirzechs did. The reason that commoners and reincarnated devils were discriminated against even if they gained power all came down to ancestry. The thirty-three families that remained of the original 72 Pillars were the only certifiably pure devil bloodlines in Gehenna. The commoners were all either former humans, or the bastard descendants of purebloods who had mixed with other species.

That purity mattered, because clan traits like the Bael Power of Destruction or the Phenex family immortality were not learned. They were genetic, inherited from the first-generation purebloods their ancestors had been. And since Lilith's Ritual had been lost to time, they no longer had the ability to create new pureblood lines via the consumption of human souls. Once those powers were bred out by miscegenation, they were gone.

Ajuka's Evil Pieces could create new 'devils', but they were bereft of any sort of genetic inheritance.Comparatively, the blood of nobles was precious for the future of their species, while the commoners and reincarnated devils were expendable.

It didn't mean Sirzechs agreed with the notion that the lives of their subjects could be spent cheaply, but he could see the pragmatic reasoning behind it.

If only it didn't taste like ash in his mouth.

Watching Naruto rage after their ban from combat had come down would have tickled Sairaorg pink with sadistic amusement if he hadn't been shut out as well.

Two days into the sudden war and the battle lines were finally beginning to stabilize, which was good as far as reducing the loss of life and infrastructure went. And not so good because now that some semblance of order had been given to all the chaos, it was becoming impossible for the two purebloods to sneak back out to help their people.

It was no wonder the commoners had a hate-love relationship with their overlords.

"You done yet?" the Bael heir prodded when his cousin finally wound down and went silent.

Red suffused Naruto's cheeks, giving sign of the profanity filled rant he'd just run through. "I'm not gonna be done until they pull their heads out of their asses." The redhead denied heatedly, throwing himself onto Sairaorg's bed and glaring at the ceiling.

Sairaorg propped his elbows over his knees, leaning ahead on his chair to poke at the fourteen-year-old's feet. "You're going about this all wrong." Tickling at the redhead's soles, Sairaorg smirked when Naruto kicked at his hands and glared. "If we can't get involved one way, we'll just get involved the other."

"Wow, feel like being any more cryptic, you asshole?"
Violet eyes rolled with fond exasperation. "Think, Naruto. What is a war about? Is it about winning a few battles here and there? Saving a few lives now and again? No. It's about achieving strategic objectives. Who are we fighting? Why are we fighting them? What conditions do we have for victory?"

A thoughtful frown pulled at Naruto's eyebrows, the Gremory heir slowly rolling up onto his stomach to consider his co-conspirator with more interest. "It's a defensive war, so we don't need to go into his house and blow his head off. We just have to reclaim our territory and hold our ground."

"Exactly. We obviously want to avoid a prolonged 'in the trenches' sort of war of attrition. If you're focused too much on open battle, you can miss the opportunity to bleed him elsewhere. We obviously can't cross into Mictlan and start playing commando – the only gate is pretty smack dab in the center of their army, and creating one would be very difficult and very loud. But there are other targets. **Softer targets.**"

Naruto swung his legs out of the bed, mirroring his cousin's position and staring with intense blue orbs. "Other targets like what?" he asked suspiciously, biting the inside of his cheek when Sairaorg hesitated.

"Like their worshippers in the human world. The whole cabal of them might be weaker than their prime because they have limited followers, but every devotee cult counts. If we can cut those supports out from under them, they'll be weaker. And since their creatures and soldiers are strengthened by their power too, their armies will also weaken."

Instantly, Naruto shied away from the prospect. Even if they were devils, Naruto himself had been human once. Regardless of what they believed, people were people, and didn't deserve to be slaughtered like animals simply for following a particular god.

And yet, could Naruto really let his personal scruples get in the way of ending the war quicker? At the end of the day he wasn't just 'some guy'. He was a member of the aristocracy. He might not agree with the system but he was still part of it, and he had his duties. If he let hundreds or thousands of peasants die just to try and play at morality, wouldn't his hands be covered in just as much blood, if not more?

Maybe he didn't have the luxury anymore to try and be that idealistic prophesized hero he'd been for Konoha.

"I'm in." he gritted out, steeling his determination. "Let's do this. How are we gonna get to the human world though? And how are we gonna find these guys?"

"Hard work and more than a little luck." Sairaorg chuckled, giving his cousin a steadying grip to the shoulder. "While we're at war conventional roads are going to be shut down, but the Bael clan has a backdoor or two. And it's not like my father's going to raise a fuss if I go haring off. The ban was meant for other purebloods in his mind, not for me. He'll just hope I get killed trying to be a big damn hero."

"Have I ever told you that your dad is a huge fucking asshole?"

"Yeah, a few times."

It had been three days, fifteen hours, and ten minutes since things had gotten weird. Yuuto knew how long it'd been, because he could count back to the moment where everyone started acting totally odd.
Some strangeness was to be expected. Gehenna was at war. If Lord Zeoticus was wound tighter than a virgin on her wedding night and prone to snapping at everyone, that was excusable. Naruto had gone from nearly constant presence to total ghost, locked up with his cousin when he wasn't ranting at Sasuke about the pureblood combat ban. Lady Venelana and Lady Grayfia hovered around their husbands even more than usual, providing convenient calming influences when Zeoticus or Sirzechs seemed particularly strung out.

Yuuto expected that once the shock of sudden open conflict after decades of peace settled in that they'd all regain some measure of their former composure.

No, the real oddities were Sasuke and Rias. Before the Mictlan invasion, the Uchiha had been generally standoffish but available for training regularly. The Ruin Princess was practiced and unflappable, a firm leader that kept her steady hand on everyone's shoulders to offer support.

Then apparently, they'd talked and gone 'round the bend.

Sasuke went from helpful senpai to crazed mother hen. He was fucking everywhere. Turn one way and there he was, debating magical theory with Akeno and suggesting spell concepts for them all to try. Turn the other and there he was again, running obstacle courses with Koneko and urging the irate nekomata to move faster.

To think he'd thought Sasuke invasive after a little assassination attempt. He'd had no idea how good he had it back then.

"Yuuto."

Think of the devil, and he shall appear.

"Sasuke." The blond Knight forced a polite smile, coming out of his stance and lowering his demonic sword. Polite. Going from uncouth youth to genteel servant was proving to be a pretty difficult road, but maybe it was worthwhile. At least if he could control his own face and emotions, he'd have a clearer head on the battlefield when it came to killing Galilei.

"I've been wondering about your Sacred Gear. What are the limits of Sword Birth in terms of the properties you can give the demon swords?" Unreadable dark orbs weighed Yuuto, Sasuke voice steady with just a tint of curiosity.

Yuuto shrugged. If the Pawn was interested in talking Sacred Gear lore he could afford to indulge him for a minute. It was better than the monotony of the manic training regimen they were suffering under. "Theoretically? The limits of a Sacred Gear depend on the strength and willpower of the user. If someone like, say, a Satan had Sword Birth, I suppose they could begin generating swords with almost any property. Provided they have experience with it."

"I see. You've developed Flame Delete and Replenish Calm, right?"

"Umm, yes?" The Flame-Freezing Swords and the Wind-Calming Swords were a step up from the regular demonic swords Yuuto could create, but what interest would Sasuke have in them? It wasn't like they were legendary by any means.

"Have you ever considered trying to produce a Lightning-Grounding Sword? I don't know what name it would have, but I'm sure it's been done before. It's not conceptually unusual considering Sword Birth seems to be about property negation."

Ah, more training.
Cocking an eyebrow, Yuuto stabbed his conjured demonic sword into the soil and settled one hand over his hip. The blond stroked at his chin with the other, musing over the idea with more earnest. 
"You do have a point there. Blade Blacksmith is the Holy Sword counterpart to Sword Birth, so you'd think that it would do the opposite and let you create swords around a basic property. Flame generation to Flame Delete's fire negation. But I'm not sure it's that simple. Why, beyond some idea of universal balance, would Sword Birth not also be able to create a sword that emits fire?"

"Then do you want to try to evolve a Lightning-Creating Sword?"

"Even if that's possible, I think you're underestimating how difficult it is to actually evolve a Sacred Gear, Sasuke."

"Sasuke, there you are!" If Sasuke was one oddity, Rias was the other. Wherever the Uchiha appeared, the redhead was not far behind. If the dark-haired devil had taken to mother henning the peerage, Rias had taken to mother henning Sasuke.

Whatever Sasuke had told their mistress must have had quite the impact, because she stuck to him like a burr. And her face cycled through the queerest expressions while she did so. First she'd look pleased that the Uchiha was interacting with the peerage, before getting all contemplative. Then she'd look utterly alarmed and worried, before finally proceeding to a strange blushing pink.

The woman was mad.

No, perhaps that was unfair of him. Who knew what sort of strange horrors she'd discovered lurking in Sasuke's mind?

"Rias." Sasuke greeting, voice rolling baritone. "You're forgetting your training again. Or have you become so skilled with the rapier that you'll be able to pass my test?"

"I think it's you that's forgetting your training. Or did you become a master magician when I wasn't looking?"

"Ara, ara, why didn't anyone invite me to the party?" Cut in, Akeno floating down to land softly beside the blond. Rias' Queen was just a bit ruffled, empty quiver in one hand and a finely crafted bow in the other. Yuuto idly wondered what sort of magical material the bowstring was made off to withstand the halfbreed's greater-than-human devil strength.

Dust flew when Koneko suddenly appeared, grinding to a halt beside the gathered peerage. The pale skin of the nekomata's face was flushed with exertion, strands of white hair practically dripping with sweat. "What are you doing here?" the Rook demanded, sucking in air before shaking her head.

Pointing an angry finger at Sasuke, Koneko narrowed hard gold eyes at him. "You. If I'm running, you're running. Three seconds, slacker. Then something is getting broken."

"Koneko-chan, maybe you should take a break?"

"Three."

"You do seem a little worked up."

"Two."

"I don't recall giving you permission to quit your marathon."

"Die."
Chapter 20

There was a certain hush that hung over the Phenex clan's family manor. It was subtle, that strangling quiet; but it was there. Ravel could almost be forgiven if she forgot Gehenna was at war. Except for the stony faced presence of dozens of guards ringing the estate, life was much the same as it had ever been.

Ravel hated it.

There was no excitement in a life silently tucked away, carefully parceled up so that nothing could ever penetrate the bubble of safety and ignorance. Ruval was away, spending late nights and early morning laying out combat tactics for Sheol's government with all the experience he had gained in the Rating Games. Riser was simply elsewhere, probably doing his best to get the various members of his peerage pregnant before the Senate caved and began to send second sons to the battlefield.

Ravel hated that too.

Without the presence of either of her living brothers, the blond twelve-year-old was shut up in an opulent country house with only the company of her parents and grandfather. The former were generally easy going and airheaded, but Ravel had to walk on eggshells around the latter. Riser was no longer around to defend her, and she doubted her grandfather forgot the humiliation that his own grandson had given him.

So Ravel kept her head down, avoiding her usual library haunts and spending the days cooped up in odd nooks and quiet corners. Part of her wanted to resent Naruto for putting her in the position of outcast in her own home, but the rest of her couldn't muster up the outrage to care. Out of all her suitors, Naruto was the only one that tried to give a spark to her life or pull her out of the boring nobility comfort zone.

If only he was a tenth as intrigued by her as she was by him, they might be getting somewhere.

"Little Mistress?" echoed tentatively through the air, and Ravel silently cursed before carefully opening the window of the sitting room she was hiding in. The blonde girl floated out with the smallest tingle of magic she could use and still fly, levitating up two floors to crawl into a grimy dressing room.

From time to time, her grandfather would send servants out to look for her. It was never on the man's priority list, since he apparently forgot after a few hours and she could keep away from meeting him if she just avoided the handful of searchers, but sooner or later she wouldn't be surprised if he cornered her.

Ravel had gotten away from her punishment because of her brother, and then she'd spent several chaotic days during the invasion by Naruto's side or at the Gremory clan estate. No doubt her grandfather felt she owed him a pound of flesh for the shame Riser inflicted and the discipline she'd avoided for being rebellious.

She could take a beating, but Ravel knew that if she did Riser would come back raging and actually kill their grandfather. The Marquis had lost her affection over the years, but that didn't mean she wanted him dead. Plus it would create too many complications.

Coughing at the dusty air, Ravel waved a dainty hand in front of her face to try and shoo the dust motes away. "Would it have been too much to ask to let me move in?" she wondered sourly for the
umpteenth time. As Naruto's Bishop Ravel technically had the right to live with him despite being a minor. Peerage trumped guardianship under the law, and while it had been written with the intent of letting the aristocracy override the few rights of commoner parents, it still applied to her.

Better to lurk around the Gremory heir's house alone if she had to rather than continue to live within the luxurious coffin her clan's home had turned into.

**Ping.**

The sudden jingle beside the blonde's head made her jerk back in surprise.

Unlike humans, devils didn't need phones to call one another. They could do it with an aural spell over the distance, provided they'd cast the reciprocal auditory-visual spell on each other. Another ping impatiently rattled next to her ear, and with a scowl Ravel reached up to tap at the tiny hovering scarlet runic circle that had appeared.

"Hello?" Ravel greeted cautiously. The arrangement of runes had implied the incoming call was from Naruto, but she could never be too careful. She didn't know what sort of strange magic the so-called 'Cihuateteo' had.

"Oi, spitfire. You got a sec?" her fiance's voice crackled slightly, making Ravel roll blue eyes. The spell wasn't overly complex, so she thought he'd take a little bit of time to cast it right and avoid the static on the line.

Carefully poking her head out into the hallway, Ravel made sure that there wasn't anyone lurking about that might overhear them before humming "Fire away, mouthbreather."

"Mouthbreather? I thought I was Egghead?"

"Mouthbreather, Egghead, Dumbnuts, Fool. It's all the same really. You have a face that's easy to insult."

"That's not what my mother says."

"It's a face that only a mother could love." Ravel mocked, running a bored finger through the dirt coating one of the forgotten mirrors propped about the dressing room. "But enough potshots at the mentally disabled. What are you looking for?"

Silence reigned as Naruto hesitated on the other side of the line. Eventually, the redhead decided to take the plunge. "I was wondering how good you are with research. There are some things I need to find, but I'm not the best at cracking the books."

"So you want me to come play librarian for you, is that it?"

"…Yeah, pretty much I guess."

"No." she denied instantly, forming a reckless plan in her mind. It was really quite stupid, and if she went ahead with it Ravel would be putting all her eggs in one basket. But then again, did she really have any bridges left to burn with her grandfather? "You're on your own… unless you do me a favour first."

"What?" Naruto's voice went vaguely amused, no doubt expecting another silly joke out of her. Unfortunately for him, she was dead serious. "You let me move in with you."
"Don't you ever get tired of the same joke blondie?"

"It isn't a joke." Ravel cut in, stunning her King into silence. "I'm going stir crazy around here with nothing to do, and I really doubt whatever you're trying to get into is daddy approved if you catch my drift. I want in, and it's inconvenient as hell to have to cross back and forth between here and there every day."

Maybe it was running away, but Ravel needed to do something. Moving out would probably alienate her grandfather beyond reconciliation, but maybe she shouldn't be letting the old man rule her life anyway. Her brothers sure didn't, and with both of them gone there wasn't really anything left in the family home for her anyway.

"Bring it on!"

With the thick taste of copper and gunmetal in the air, Vali grinned and pulled himself up and into no man's land. The white plates of Divine Dividing shone like pale bone under the light of the artificial moon, so the only option he had was to fly low to the broken soil and hope he didn't get spotted before he reached enemy lines.

Dirt and fire exploded around him as the Grigori traded fire with the Mictlanese, Azazel's underlings providing a chaotic cover for the half-devil's sortie. Vali weaved through the multicolored bursts of light and flame, rolling through a thick cloud of purple smoke and over the last line of barbed demonic steel wire.

Then he was in the trenches, Seewahs screeching in surprise at the sudden intrusion.

"Divide!" the automated voice of his Sacred Gear boomed, biting a chunk out of Vali's stamina so it could halve the power of the combatants in his field of view. Strange oily stolen magic burst through his chest, flowing out his glowing wings of blue glass in green sparkles. "Come on!"

Picking the nearest Seewah out of the crowd, the White Dragon Emperor rushed right at her and drove his armoured fist into her gullet. Spells began to crash against the shielding arc of his artificial wings, slicing through the pool of energy Divine Dividing had stolen from the Mictlanese when it had halved their power.

Vali growled, following his punch with a blazing chop to the neck that decapitated the Cihuātēotl. Glossy dark strands of hair and sticky blood scattered, and with a steady breath the half devil picked another dusky skinned woman out and went at her.

White claws and the prodigious strength of his body bore him through three more clashes before Vali had to retreat with flagging reserves. "This is taking too long." The Hakuryuukou complained, turning to fly back.

Enchanted mortar fire still resounded along the Mictlanese line, but the Grigori didn't have the supplies to fire forever. Sooner or later his cover would end, and then the enemy combatants would all converge on him. Vali might be able to take a handful of them on, but not the entire army.

Pain speared through Vali's brain as the air resounded with an eldritch screech. The sound seemed to go on and on forever, drilling into his skull until he wanted to stab his own eardrums. But even that wouldn't help, because the cry of the omen owl was psychic rather than auditory.

Biting out a sharp "Fucker!" the half devil spun in place and launched a wild flurry of azure spheres. Blue fire crashed down on the rapidly organizing Mictlanese, forcing the horde to scatter with curses of rage and making the omen owl go silent.
Not wasting any more time, Vali leapt up out of the ditch and began to rush back across no man's land in a streak of white and cyan. The trading volleys of fire had declined during his time in the enemy trench, but they viciously intensified as the fallen angel lines caught sight of his retreat.

A ball of purple sorcery nearly took his head off as Vali entered the home stretch, missing by a few feet as the White Dragon Emperor dove back into the hollowed channel the Grigori had carved out of the flat landscape.

"Atta boy!"

"Thanks for getting back at a few of those bastards."

"Take a break kid, you earned it."

Half a dozen hands slapped around Vali's shoulders, uncaring of the grime and gore coating the white plates as he dragged his tired body to safety. Every time he went over the top was a life or death risk, though his continued to survival was making him numb to the fear of dying. The only thing left was the rush of joy and adrenaline and purpose fighting gave him, which made the entire monotony of huddling in the trenches worth it.

Magical warfare was oddly archaic by human standards.

One of the very first inventions in large scale magical combat had been that of the spelldome. By summoning a large field of semi-permeable invisible enchantment, an army could blockade their foes. Travel via teleportation became impossible for the enemy, and without tokens made by the spellcrafter no one could enter or leave the field without punching a hole through it that would alert the casting military to their location.

Which didn't matter when it came to reinforcing troops from the rear or bringing supplies, but it made the fighter jets the humans seemed to love utterly useless. They could either crash into the spelldome at hundreds of kilometers an hour and get turned to scrap, or they could shoot through it and reveal themselves for mass fired anti-air spells.

And of course, no military was going to accept a one-sided handicap. If one army cast a spelldome, the other would just layer a second under it. In the end no one could teleport, and industrialized air power had no use. Nor could they simply fly the old-fashioned way with their own wings – unless they wanted to get brought down in a second by a united volley of sorcery.

The lack of teleportation and swift air travel combined with anti-tank weaponry produced a situation where enormous firepower was paired with lack of mobility. And out of that unfortunate pairing came the hated war of blood and attrition the humans feared, where each army had to dig creeping trenches and try to bleed the other force out.

Dismissing Divine Dividing with a thought, Vali patted over his dirt-stained uniform before locating his carton of cigarettes. The half-devil swiftly lit one of the death sticks, drawing smoke into his lungs with the assurance of a supernatural being that knew he was immune to human diseases like cancer and heart disease.

It would be at least a day or two before he was sent out over the top again. So he may as well find a place to relax. Though 'relaxation' in a time of trench warfare was more like waiting around with both eyes open. There was no telling when the enemy would decide to mimic Vali's mad rush over the top or try to sneak in saboteurs, which they did less often but with more lethality.

The Mictlanese were generally speaking more powerful than the Gehennans, so when they managed
strike out at the fallen angels and devils, the death toll was in the dozens. It was only Sheol's superior technology that kept the battle lines static and the Mictlanese in their foxholes, leaving it up to the rare 'champion' like Vali to make frequent raids in an effort to whittle down the enemy.

"What a shitshow." Vali sighed, keeping his head down as he moved through the maze of connecting trenches that linked the front to the rear reserves. Things would be so much simpler if that bigshots could all roll out and just lay waste to Mictlan, but that would just encourage the Aztec gods to show up. Battle would escalate until it looked like a nuclear bomb had roasted half the planet.

As much as Vali hated the utter sausage fest he had to be part of, even he wasn't fond of the idea of turning half of Hell into a wasteland. When everything was said and done, the half devil still needed someplace to live.

Still, would it have killed them to not ban female combatants? Sperm was cheap and wombs were expensive and all that, but there was only so much testosterone a man could take. Vali had no intention of perving it up during wartime, but women were much more fun to look at for unending weeks than the dirty faces of his fellow men.

It might have even boosted morale.

"Vali! Get back up here! The duskies are coming on over!"

"Ah, shit."

Ravel blinked. "There's more of you in on this than I thought."

When she'd collected the few things she couldn't replace and packed her bags, the blonde had whisked over to Naruto's home. Eventually her clan would start asking questions, and she'd have to tell them she was done, but until then she had a bit of leeway.

The only face she'd expected to see in Naruto's library when the Gremory heir had hustled her in was her fiancé himself. Sairaorg Bael hadn't been on her mind. The beautiful leggy blonde woman with a ponytail certainly hadn't. And was that a knight in polished medieval armor?

There were a few other devils crowding in the room, but Ravel had no time for them. And the less said about the enormous golden lion sprawled over the floor the better. One of her downy blonde eyebrows slowly began to creep up as she gave her fiancé a deadpan look.

"Uh, hey." Naruto chuckled, blue eyes darting about as he nervously scratched the back of his head. "So I guess we'll just get everyone introduced before we get going. I'm sure you all figured out she's Ravel Phenex by now. My Bishop, in case anyone was wondering."

A meaty hand clapped over the fourteen-year-old redhead's shoulder. "Yo kiddo." The Bael heir grinned, poking at his own chest with a thumb. "Sairaorg Bael here. And that's my Queen, Kuisha Abbadon."

Ravel considered the ponytailed woman with a bit more interest. The House of Abaddon was technically pureblooded, though they weren't part of the 72 Pillars formed from Lilith's original followers. They were also Old Satan loyalists, who like Grayfia's Lucifuge clan had been exiled to the fringes of society with the rest of the Extra Demons. That the woman had become Sairaorg's Queen meant she'd cut ties with her own house.

"That's my Bishop, Coriana Andrealphus." Sairaorg introduced another blonde woman, except this one had long wavy hair and wore a business suit.
Apparently, the Bael heir had a soft spot for outcasts. A Queen from the Extra Demons, and a mixed-blood Bishop descendent of one of the 72 Pillars. The Andrealphus clan had sided with the Old Satans and been annihilated by Sirzechs. Which made the blonde one to watch, though she didn't seem to be agitated standing next to the son of the man who'd killed all her pureblood relatives.

"My other Bishop, Misteeta Sabnock." Again with a mixed-blood heir to an extinct Pillar clan. The nondescript young man practically radiated loyalty for his King. Ravel hoped that loyalty was enough to keep the Bishop's hands off Naruto's throat.

The Andrealphus and Sabnock clans had both been personally massacred by Sirzechs during the Civil War when the genetic freak 'Super Devil' had used a King Piece to turn the tide of a battle. She just hoped more mixed blood devils with reasons to hold a grudge against Naruto weren't standing in the Gremory heir's library.

A young blond man with light leather armor stepped forward and grinned at the Phenex girl. "I'm Sairaorg's Knight, Liban Crocell. Nice to meet you."

Sure, why not. Go for the whole set. Sairaorg was three for three, having recruited a descendent of the third clan the Crimson Satan had annihilated. "The same to you." Ravel curtsied back, face frozen into a polite smile. Maybe Naruto just didn't know his own father's history. Or maybe her fiancé had a death wish considering how easily he trusted his back to a handful of devil's who all had good cause for revenge.

Metal jingled as Sairaorg motioned the armor-clad knight forward. Sunlight shafted in from one of the windows, blindingly reflecting off the well-polished gleaming plates. "This here is my other knight, Beruka Furcas."

"Well met." Ravel almost sighed with relief. At least there was an end to the line of possible traitors. The Furcas clan might be seen as a bit empty headed with the way they obsessed over horses, but they were one of the living Pillar clans in good standing with the Senate of Gehenna.

"Thud."

A giant crept out from behind a bookcase. Three meters tall and bulging with muscle, the hulking brute peered down at the short blonde Bishop through a monster's face. "I'm a Rook. Gandoma Balam." Well, that explained the height at least. The Balam clan was a Pillar clan in good standing notorious for their size and strength.

"The beanpole here is my other Rook, Ladora Bune." Waving lazily at Ravel, the lanky man folded bony arms over his chest and leaned back against the polished oak of the walls.

Now wasn't that interesting. Just like other members of Sairaorg's peerage, the Bune clan was one of the now-extinct Pillar clans. But unlike the other three, the dragon taming clan had actually sided with Sirzechs and been destroyed for it by an alliance of the Crocell and Sabnock clans. So not only was Sairaorg's peerage full of people that might want to kill Naruto, it was full of people that might want to kill each other.

It was a black comedy in the making.

"And last but not least, this big fellow is Regulus, my only Pawn." The giant lion cracked open an amber eye to peer at Ravel, rumbling faintly before dozing back off. Unlike the rest of the peerage, Ravel could have guess that. The way Sairaorg had tamed the materialized Longinus Sacred Gear Regulus Nemea and convinced it to join his peerage was a famous story in Sheol. The Nemean Lion had been fierce and murderous back in the day, but right now he didn't look any more threatening.
"Nice to meet you all." Ravel greeted faintly, resisting the urge to glare at Naruto for springing so many names and faces on her all at once. Speaking of her fiancé “-so do you feel like telling me what exactly you want me to do?"

"Right." Naruto huffed sheepishly, looking conflicted until Sairaorg rolled violet eyes and nudged at the Gremory heir with an elbow.

"While little red here is trying to remember how to nut up, I'll cut you in. Everyone in this room is aware of the ban on direct combat between certified pureblood devils and the Mictlanese invaders. Everyone is also aware of the longstanding general policy against female soldiers in the military. So we're going to obey the letter of the law and keep things indirect."

Growling faintly, Naruto drove the point of his elbow into his blabby cousin's stomach. "Well since the big shot decided to just lay it all out, I cut right to the point." Naruto talked over Sairaorg's hacking cough. "Until the wimps in government decide to give us the all clear, we're gonna put all our effort into sabotage. Whatever we can do to weaken Mictlan's war effort, we'll do it."

"I see." Tugging at one of her drill-like blonde curls, Ravel scanned the expectant faces in the library before shrugging nonchalantly. "I'm in. Where do you want to start?"

"Assassination." The rumbling voice of a lion filled the air as Regulus opened blazing gold eyes. The jewel imbedded in the feline's forehead glimmered with an inner light. "Because gods draw power from the beliefs of human, they intend to cull the followers of the Aztec gods."

"Are you crazy?" More than one pair of eyes widened at the sudden explosive shout that echoed from Ravel's lungs. "The Thirteen Heavens might be willing to let things lie now, but they're not going to keep siding on the sidelines if you start killing their believers. Any followers of the gods of Mictlan are going to follow all the Aztec gods."

"We know." Kuisha nodded, voice soft and musical. "If we're caught, Gehenna will be forced to disavow us, in which case we will be likely killed instantly in revenge. Even if we live, we may be exiled. That's a risk we're willing to take for this country."

Slapping the palm of her hand against her forehead, Ravel sighed. "I can't believe I'm going to get involved with something so monumentally stupid." The pink satins of the Bishop's dress shifted as she took a steadying breath. "Fine, I'm still in. But if we're doing this, we're doing it my way. No stupid heroics."

"Fine." Naruto agreed instantly, looking more than a little relieved.

"Whipped." Sairaorg coughed into his fist.

"Whipped". Echoed the male members of the Bael heir's peerage.

"I am not whipped!"

"What was that, mister whipped-a-lot?"

Casting her annoyed gaze up to the ceiling, Ravel shook her head in exasperation. "Well, whenever you boys are done having your dick measuring contest, let me know, and I'll let you know where you should be aiming for your first target."

Silence.
"Your woman is better than I expected, kiddo. How do you already know that anyway?"

"Please. Know thine enemy. I was researching things like this the moment they invaded. It's not my fault you two are more interested in machismo."

Naruto blinked. "You know Ravel, sometimes you scare me."

Rias felt useless. That in itself was not something new. Ever since she'd been divested of the position as heir-presumption, the Ruin Princess had drifted without purpose. Combined with the inferiority complex she'd developed, it was the loss of reason to exist that had led to her resenting Naruto for so long.

That resentment had burdened her for years, yet now when she woke every day felt just a little brighter. The tight knot of anger in her chest she'd directed at Naruto loosened day by day, flooding the redhead with a heady sense of freedom.

Sasuke had chosen her.

Sasuke had chosen her.

Sasuke had chosen her.

Rias couldn't help but dwell on that, drunk with a certain giddy joy.

Which was just awful, because her happiness was coming from the way Sasuke bleeding himself over and over to let her in. It made her a terrible person to be taking such contentment from the way her Pawn chose to suffer in order to give up his secrets. But the knowledge of how outright cruel that probably made her couldn't dampen her spirits.

When Sasuke had first told her the bare details of his family, she'd been shocked into horror and sorrow. Yet now when Sasuke offered up a tidbit here or there about his past, she gobbled it up like a greedy magpie and stored it away.

And what a collection of treasures she was building.

Uchiha Mikoto had been a housewife with a fondness for baking sweets, which Sasuke avoided now like the plague because they reminded him of her cooking. Uchiha Fugaku had been a soldier with an unyielding sense of honor, which was why Sasuke struggled with guilt when he felt he was disappointing the man's shade. Uchiha Itachi had been a pacifist that loved his brother so much he'd do anything or become anything to protect him, which was why Sasuke was willing to power through suffering for the sake of others.

There were other stories too. The tale of the mischievous Shisui and the prank they'd played on Itachi. The quiet romance of Izumi and Itachi that had never quite managed to bloom. Fond memories of the elderly bakers Uruchi and Teyaki. And on and on.

Every one of Sasuke's anecdotes passed into her hands like sharp-edged glittering crystals. Rias accepted them all, tucking them carefully into the back of her mind like the fragile baubles they were. One day the intoxication of being chosen – even if Sasuke asserted he'd chosen them both, he'd still stayed with her – would wear off. And on that day those recollections she now shared with Sasuke would ache like the infinitely precious things they were.

Understanding Sasuke came in spurts, the familiar stranger becoming defined in her mind like a slowly approaching mountain. Every day she came to understand better the sheer damage Sasuke
had sustained when everything had been taken from him, and the strength he'd had to show to keep moving forward and learn to open his heart again.

Naruto had been the first one to penetrate Sasuke's defences, which inflated the magnitude of what he'd done for her peerage's sake in her mind. Her nephew had been a new brother for a broken child, and had helped put Sasuke back together. The depth of that bond must have been staggering, but yet he'd still chosen them.

Trying to find a way to repay that sacrifice kept her dogging at his heels all hours of the day. Which fed back into making her feel useless, because Rias wasn't sure that she was actually making a difference. Sasuke hadn't complained, but he hadn't thanked her either for the constant companionship. She wasn't sure what she should be doing for him, she just knew that leaving him to putter about alone felt wrong.

"I think you should try it." Rias cut off the building debate between Sasuke and Yuuto, earning herself a pair of twin irate gazes. She doubted anyone had ever told them, but oddly enough they both flared their nostrils the same way when annoyed. It was just another little similarity between the two young men.

In fact, in a fashion Sasuke was a microcosm of her peerage as a whole. He'd walked the whole length of the road of revenge Yuuto was on. He'd wiped the murder of his mother away to try and stumble forward like Akeno had. He'd swum up from the early childhood ocean of blood Koneko was drowning in. Even his jealousy of Itachi as a boy might have grown into a ball of resentment like the one she'd carried for so long.

Perhaps those similarities were why they found themselves subconsciously trusting him so easily. They could all see themselves in him.

"Either it will work or it won't. If it does, you've gained a new type of ability. If not, you haven't really lost anything." She added, focusing on her blond Knight. Sasuke had been urging the younger male for a few days to try and develop a new attribute for the demonic swords he could summon with Sword Birth.

"Except time." Yuuto muttered mutinously, thinning his lips with aggravation.

Which was fair, Rias admitted to herself. It had almost been a year since they'd found the blond dying in the snow and the Knight still had a way to go. Yuuto may have been trained in some sword techniques as part of the Holy Sword Project, but he'd still been human. While Ajuka's Evil Pieces could resurrect him into a devil, Yuuto still needed time to build up the density in his muscles from the mortal level to that of a devil. And that meant lots of time devoted to eating and exercising.

There was no telling how long it would take for her Knight to evolve his Sacred Gear. It was a matter of will, and the less Yuuto desperately wanted it the more difficult it would be. "Give it a week." The Ruin Princess suggested, before moving her attention back to Sasuke. "And if he can't do it within the week, then you stop badgering him about it. Fair?"

Both of them agreed, Yuuto sighing and rolling his eyes while Sasuke smirked arrogantly.

"I hope you're ready to act like my personal generator, because I'm going to need to study lightning magic for a while before trying for a Lightning-Grounding Sword." Yuuto called over his shoulder as he crossed into the center of the Gremory estate's lawn.

"Fine." Sasuke barked back, the corner of his lip pulling up. Then the dark-haired devil glanced over at Rias, lips curving into a small but real smile. "I've been nagging at him to do this for a while."
Thanks."
"Y-you too?" Rias sputtered inelegantly at the sight of that grin.

The Uchiha laughed.
Sweat beaded across Naruto's forehead, shining wet and slick under the California sun. The Gremory heir was dressed in cargo shorts, sneakers, and a thin blue t-shirt, but it did little to mitigate the sheer heat of Los Angeles in the height of summer. The clan lands back in Gehenna were much more temperate, and the sudden warmth was making his armpits all gross and sticky.

"You sure this is the right place?" the redhead asked for the third time, blue eyes tracking over the urban landscape to stare at Sairaorg. Against the wishes of their peerages, the two had decided that the first outing would be conducted by just the two of them. If things went poorly, at least it would only be the two of them getting raked over hot coals for it.

"We're just where we need to be Cuz, good ol' Boyle Heights. Unless you mean to tell me you don't trust your girlfriend." Sairaorg grinned, the older devil never taking his gaze away from the midday weekend crowd. The Bael heir waved at a few young staring Hispanic girls, sending the middle schoolers into giggling blushes.

Naruto couldn't blame them. Sairaorg was over six feet tall, all rippling muscles with a jaw that could cut steel. Standing next to his older cousin made the redhead feel much shorter and uglier than he was, if only because his second body hadn't outgrown puberty yet.

It was almost enough to give a man a complex.

"She's not my girlfriend."

"True. She's your fiancé and you luuuve her." Sairaorg mocked, handsome features twisting into a kissy face. "Ohh Ravel, ohh you've given me a tiny stiffy!"

"Eat shit, ya bastard." Rolling azure eyes as the taller devil wrapped his arms around himself and began to make kissing noises, Naruto shoved on by and began trekking down the street.

He left Sairaorg to get it back together and stop fucking around while he kept his ears pricked for information. The devil's 'language' ability instantly translated the rolling Spanish chatter into more recognizable syllables in Naruto's brain. Ninety-nine percent of what he'd pick up was going to be useless, but if he could just catch the first crumb of a lead, he'd have something to go on.

Ravel had been able to pinpoint a dozen urban and suburban neighbourhoods all across the United States that were densely populated by Mexican immigrants. Considering they were the modern-day descendants of the original Aztec peoples, if anyone was likely to have returned to the worship of the Mictlanese; it was them.

Latin America as a whole may be generally Roman Catholic, but the nationalist movements that had formed during decolonization had their interest in the traditional religions of their ancestors. The faith brought by European settlers was being rejected as alien, and they hoped to reclaim the traditional mythologies of their people.

The Mexicayotl movement was one such attempt, having formed during the 1950s and slowly growing since. In a way Naruto could respect their spirit, but he also recognized that it was… inconvenient, to say the least.

Perhaps in a better world the Gremory heir could have taken the time to learn more about them.

But Naruto wasn't in a better world. He was in this one, and he didn't want to humanize them. The
more he humanized them, the more difficult it would be to kill them all.

A hand wrapped around Naruto's wrist, jerking the fourteen-year-old to a halt and forcing him to look up. Sairaorg's steel grip tightened in conjunction with the hardening of Sairaorg's gaze. "You're shaking, kid." The Bael heir noted, sharp frown tugging at his lips.

He was.

Tremors twitched through Naruto's limbs. They began in his fingers, shaking like a rattlesnake and intensifying as they slowly built up along his arms and into the muscles of his chest. It was almost like the world was greying on him a little bit, peeling away color by color as the sensation of imbalance rushed through his skull. Naruto was a child of violence, he was a fighter and a killer, but he had never been a butcher, and he –

"You should head home. I'll carry this burden, Naruto."

And he bit down on his lip. The taste of copper exploded over Naruto's taste buds, running hot and wet and bringing the whole world crashing back in. "No." the redhead denied, frantically throwing his mind back to forgotten childhood lessons in another world.

Breath slowly, relax all the muscles, and crush back the anxiety.

The pulse of his heart hammered in Naruto's chest, slowly pacing back down to normal levels. "I said I was ready to do this. I wasn't bullshtting you. Just need to psyche myself up a little bit is all."

"If you say so." Sairaorg murmured, releasing his hold and stepping back. A concerned light still shone in the dark-haired devil's eyes. Despite all the good-natured teasing, Sairiaorg had wanted to go the mission alone. Naruto might be old enough by the standards of Gehenna to fight and kill for their country, but Sairaorg had a soft spot for the young. He didn't have the right to stand in Naruto's way, but he still wanted to.

"Let's just get this done with." Naruto growled harshly, the sound tearing over his vocal chords. "There'll be time to get all emotional like a sissy when we're back home." Turning his back to his cousin, Naruto glared back out over the streets of Los Angeles.

"Don't let yourself get too hard, short stuff. I've seen some hard men in my day, and let me tell you it might make them strong, but it makes them brittle. You have to remember to bend."

Pretty words, but they were said by someone who didn't know Uzumaki Naruto. He hadn't changed the shinobi world by twisting around when things got tough. He hadn't saved Sasuke from an eternity of loneliness in the shadows by being easy to bend. He'd done it by being the most stubborn bastard around.

Naruto had sworn to change Gehenna, and he'd make himself as hard as he needed to be to do it.

Cool blue lightning arced wildly, forking in a dozen separate streams that flew in a dozen separate directions. The electrical storm widened before seeming to come to a sudden straining halt. A moment later, the sound of chirping birds quieted, and then the whole thundershower rapidly converged on a single point.

Thick bolts of electricity hammered into an elongated needle. The current travelled down the length of the spike in a split second, dissuaded by a thick pommel of rubber before it turned to rush across the length of a chain and into through a second steel barb into the dirt.
"Told you."

Yuuto flipped Sasuke the bird. "I hate you. So much." The blond Knight complained, unable to entirely repress the grin of exultation pulling at his mouth.

A week had been what Rias had convinced him to give up, and while it had taken nearly to the end of that time frame, that week was all Yuuto had to spend. In exchange, his Sacred Gear had evolved.

"What do you suppose I should name it?" Yuuto admired the specialized demonic sword for a moment. His Lightning-Grounding Sword looked like a giant knitting needle. There was no blade on the thing. It just came to an enormous shining point that acted like a lightning rod. Protecting his hands were a thick rubber hilt and round rubber crossguard. A chain dangled from about a quarter of the way up the spike, trailing down to a second much smaller needle that would ground any current he caught with the sword.

"Don't care."

Rias sighed, eying her Pawn with a scolding teal gaze. "And you were making such progress too." The Ruin Princess teased. "I'd almost thought we would be able to rehabilitate you with society at large."

Huffing through his nostrils, Sasuke eyed the other two devils before considering the newly created 'sword'. "Volt Redirect?" the Uchiha hazarded. It seemed to fit Yuuto's naming scheme. Keep everything short and to the point.

"Fair enough." Yuuto shrugged, dismissing his Sacred Gear with a thought and making the various conjured demonic swords scattered over the field vanish. "So, can I take a breather? Or do you have more wise ideas for me, oh great sensei?"

Rias waved her Knight off before Sasuke could offer an opinion. "It's fine. Go and rest, Yuuto. Sasuke has some training of his own to get up to."

Sasuke watched Yuuto rapidly vanish into the manor house. Then he turned coal dark orbs on his unflinching mistress. "What?" he cocked an eyebrow as the redhead silently stared back. "Do you have something on your mind?"

"I had a thought." Rias hummed distantly, dropping her focus to consider Sasuke's strong pale fingers. "You consider your Chidori to be something of a signature don't you? The Chidori itself, the Chidori Eisou, Chidori Nagashi, Chidori Senbon, Chidorigatana – outside of the common magic shared by all devils, all of your attacks are derived from it."

"What of it?" Sasuke demanded, forcing back the urge of defensiveness. Unlike Naruto he hadn't been gifted with nearly unending wells of magical energy, and he'd spent many years fumbling through the arts of sorcery. There had been a lot to unlearn.

As far as he was concerned, recreating his favourite jutsu from his shinobi days was a bit of an achievement. Training until he could omit the crutch of casting through glyphs and form all the magic internally was just the cherry on top.

"It's a strong technique, and very versatile." Rias reassured her Pawn, bringing her hands palm up to waist level. "But don't you think it's time to diversify?" To emphasize, she summoned up a small ball of mingled red and black Power of Destruction in one hand. In the other, she cradled an orb of lurid blood red fire. "Relying on only one element is a weakness."

Sasuke had to admit she had a point.
When he'd been a shinobi he'd never allowed himself to grow overly dependent on a single type of technique. While he'd used Chidori frequently, he trained in various Katon jutsu as well. And once he'd attained the Mangekyou Sharingan, he'd never allowed himself to grow rusty with any other jutsu despite relying on his doujutsu powers much of the time.

"That's easier to say than actually do," The dark-haired devil pointed out.

Crushing both conjured spheres of enchantment by clenching her fists, Rias lifted her chin and smirked. "I will teach you, so you have no excuse to avoid this. Learn to take your medicine like a good boy." While the stance was imperious, the whole effect was a bit ruined by the fact that Rias was about half a foot shorter than Sasuke.

Against his will, the Uchiha found himself smirking back. "Fine then, since you're so eager about it."

Naruto hit the church doors like a bullet train, crashing through cheap spruce gates and into the chapel in a flurry of splinters. The sound of Sairaorg's concerned shout just barely passed through the wind whistling by his ears, but the Gremory heir couldn't stop.

He wouldn't stop.

If he stopped, he might have a chance to reconsider.

The fact that there was no holy sting raging through his body confirmed his suspicions even before he saw the tiny sigils etched into the marble skin of the church's Christ statue. If the building had been consecrated once in the name of the God of the Bible, it was no longer. And the only thing that could de-consecrate land was to re-consecrate it to a different god.

The tiny chantry was under new management, which meant everyone inside was fair game.

Cries of surprise echoed through the air as half a dozen men lurched to their feet. Five of them looked like normal everyday salarymen, wearing simple slacks and button up shirts.

Only the last looked like the stereotypical nationalist thug, tribal tattoos winding up the thick curls of his arms.

Naruto went after him first.

Blurring across the room in a streak of blue and crimson, Naruto yanked the pocket knife he'd bought from a street vendor from his pocket. They'd all agreed that when the deed was done, no magic would be involved. Murders that looked like they were done by simple humans were more likely to be overlooked than those that had the stink of magic in the air.

In the end, it probably wouldn't make much of a difference. Sooner or later, they'd get caught, and then Gehenna would disavow them. The Thirteen Heavens would pretend to believe it hadn't been a government sanctioned suicide squad to avoid the conflict of open war with the entire Biblical faction, Naruto and his comrades would be probably executed, and the Aztecs would keep a closer eye on their flock.

All being careful did was make sure the death toll would be higher in the end. It made Naruto feel like a fucking serial killer, and when hot sticky blood splashed over his hand as he sliced through the throat of the tattooed middle aged biker, he felt even more like a disgusting murderer.

"I'm sorry." He ineffectually apologized to the dying man as red life spurted from the ruins of the man's throat.
Then he was moving again, a flash of steel in the flickering candlelight of the chapel. Again and again he cut short their innocent lives, whispering 'sorry' after each body hit the ground.

The pocketknife broke in the throat of the last man, leaving the wrinkled grandfather to choke to death instead of being granted the peace of a quick death. "I'm sorry, but I have to do this." Naruto almost begged those accusing brown eyes before they glazed over with death.

"Fuck."

Sairaorg's curse shattered the morbid silence like a gunshot. The Bael heir took one look at his younger cousin's gore splattered appearance and felt his stomach turn to lead.

He knew he should have made the kid stay behind.

Snapping his fingers in front of dazed blue eyes, Sairaorg roused the redhead with a sharp bark of his name. "Naruto!"

"You're slow." Snickering under his breath, Naruto refocused his attention on his cousin with such intensity that Sairaorg had to recoil from the mingled ice and desolation in the fourteen-year-old's face. "That's six-to-nil for me." The taunt fell flat in the heavy air.

"Sure." Sairaorg muttered guardedly, settling a heavy hand over Naruto's shoulder and carefully steering the younger man out of the mess of bodies.

They were lucky it was evening, or they'd never get away with Naruto looking like he personally bathed in the blood of innocents.

There was no telling how long it would take humans to stumble on the murder scene, and they needed to get out and get home quick. Both so he could try to figure out what to do with his rattled cousin, and to make sure they avoided any attention - supernatural or otherwise.

"Let's just head on back and get cleaned up, yeah?"

Naruto hummed his wordless agreement.

Ravel was just about to snap at Kuisha for fretting for the billionth time when Sairaorg poked his head through the library doors.

"Sairaorg!" the older blonde instantly brightened, rushing across the library and hovering around her King like an orbiting moon. The Queen was so obviously in love with the man that it reminded Ravel of her own distinct lack of a love life.

Slamming her book shut with a grumble, the Phenex girl shoved it back into one of the bookshelves before stalking on over to the Bael heir. "About time you got back." Ravel complained stridently.

The rest of Sairaorg's peerage had been sent elsewhere hours ago – it wasn't good to have a bunch of them gathered around if they didn't want the attention.

Which had left Ravel with the increasingly worried Abbadon girl. The Queen was smart enough, but she'd become increasingly intolerable the more worked up she got.

"I was just about to tie this one up and..." Trailing off at the utterly serious expression on the dark-haired devil's face, Ravel swallowed back a sudden frisson of fear. "Where's Naruto? She demanded, mind racing. Had he been captured? Did someone or something give him away? Had the redhead
"Well, he's... it's probably best if you come see for yourself." Sairaorg muttered, opening the door wider and standing stiffly. "Kuisha, you head on home. I'll just be here for a bit."

"But-"

"Now."

The two nobles watched as Kuisha glumly teleported away.

Tension thick enough to be cut with a knife built as Sairaorg grimly led Ravel through the maze of corridors in the Gremory estate. The mansion seemed deserted, what with most of the older devils gone out to direct the war effort, and the isolation did nothing to calm Ravel's worry.

"Can you just tell me?" Ravel growled when the stress became unbearable.

Sairaorg shook his head slowly. "It's best if you just see it for yourself. We succeeded, but he did all the killing himself. And it got to him."

Exhaling slowly, Ravel considered the implications of that revelation. Digging back through her memories, she tried to piece together the few snippets of psychology she had bothered to study. The study of the human mind had some similarities, but they were a different species from devils.

Like all of their kind, Naruto had been raised to kill. But the Gremory clan seemed closer to humans than many other devil clans, so her fiancé was likely strangling himself with guilt over what he'd done. She just hoped she wouldn't be walking in to see him having a psychotic break.

"This is where I leave you." Sairaorg stopped in front of a door halfway down one of the hallways. "I couldn't get through to him, but maybe you'll have a better shot at it." He offered uncertainly, moving aside. "Good luck."

Ravel straightened her back and nodded before plodding on into the room. It was one of many bedrooms scattered about the enormous mansion, clean and kept in order by a legion of maids. Swiftly she scanned the room, only to find it empty.

Hiss.

The blonde gazed nervously at a small door in the opposite corner of the room. She could hear the faint sound of running water, which meant Naruto was in the shower. Her fiancé was in the shower, steam wreathing his naked form. Maybe he was even running a bar of soap over the young but muscled planes of his stomach.

Heat suffused the Bishop's face. Bad Ravel.

It was not the time to be exploring perverse thoughts. The Gremory heir wasn't in the shower wet and ready for a romp. He was depressed at having murdered a handful of humans. It was more likely he was drowning himself in the tub.

Her face went pale, and Ravel lurched across the bedroom to hover anxiously in front of the white painted door. Pressing a hand against the surface, the blonde gently pushed at it and let the slab of wood swing inward a few inches. "Naruto?"

After a long beat, her fiancé's voice echoed through the marble washroom. "Hey, spitfire." The was so much agonized defeat in his tone that before she could stop herself she was slipping into the fog...
filled bathroom.

Ignoring the wet heat, she cautiously crossed over until she was standing next to the shower stall. Carefully facing away from the curtain, the Bishop mustered up her courage before stuttering out a greeting. "H-hey. I heard you weren't doing the greatest."

The blood rushing into her head was going to make her faint. She knew it. Ravel was going to hit the ground and end up making a complete and utter fool of herself like a ditzy bimbo out of one of Rias' anime.

Naruto's drew in a long breath before giving a bitter chuckle. "So they tell me."

Ravel folded her arms over her chest, gripping so tightly to her biceps that her nails began to dig through the pink satin of her dress. "I won't pretend to know how you feel." she chewed the inside of her cheek. "But I do know you did the right thing."

"Bullshit."

Clenching her jaw so tightly she was surprised she didn't crack a tooth, Ravel steeled herself. Then she spun around on her heel, one manicured hand coming out to catch the shower curtain and tear the sheet of cloth right off its bar.

Well, he wasn't naked.

Droplets of water began to almost instantly sprinkle over her face and chest, but Ravel ignored it.

Naruto was sitting with his knees up to his chest on the bottom of the tub. The shower rained down on the redhead, soaking his red strands until they were as dark as the blood she could see slowly rinsing out of his blue t-shirt and running down the drain.

Brushing off the way Naruto gave her a wide-eyed look of shock, Ravel stepped into the spray and knelt in front of him so she could meet him eye to eye. Her airy prepared curls quickly came undone as her blonde hair was soaked through, pouring down her back in a tumbled mess.

At least her dress was pink and thick rather than white or thin. She hadn't come to give Naruto a show. This time anyway.

"Listen to me." She ordered, bringing her hands up to cup over Naruto's pale cheeks. The sharp points of her thumbnails were scant millimeters away from prodding into the redhead's eyelids, but neither devil paid any mind to them. "There are millions of lives depending on you. Will you have to do things that you don't want to do? Things that you hate? Yes. And I know you'll do them, because I know you, Naruto. You're a good man, and you'd never turn your back on this country when it needs you."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Hmm, let's see." The Bishop decided to sprinkle her example with the truth. "Did you know that because of our healing ability, the Phenex clan prefers corporal punishment? Ever since I was a little girl, if I misbehave my grandfather would beat me until he broke a bone or two."

"What?" Naruto roared, shooting to his feet like a rocket, dragging the blonde up with him. "That fucking bastard! I'll pull his brain out through his fucking asshole! I'll break every god damn bone in his body and see how he likes it!"

Soft laughter burst from Ravel's mouth, and she let her hands drop from her fiance's face to rest on
his shoulders. "It's because of that. I know you're a good man, because if I say something like that you instantly forget about your own problems in favour of mine. You are always putting other people before yourself. How could someone like that ever be a bad person?"

Naruto's jaw dropped open as he took in Ravel's impish smile. "But that – but you – huh?" Shaking the frazzled shock from his brain, he glared at the 'trick' before letting his expression soften into a tired grin. "You're a real bitch, you know that?"

"Are you just figuring this out now? Come on, boy. Keep up."

"That was a pretty dirty thing to lie about, you have to admit."

"Well, it wasn't that much of a lie. Whoopsie…"

"Excuse me?"

"When exactly did I agree to this?"

"Probably around the time you told Koneko-chan the quickest way to improve was fear of pain, and began to throw your Chidori Senbon at her to get her to move quicker?"

"…Shit."

Akeno winked with sense of sadistic amusement. Then she called up twin glowing yellow runic circles and began to launch volleys of golden lightning at Sasuke. "Less dodging and more casting, Sasu-chi." The Queen sing-songed, floating after the Uchiha's dodging figure and throwing more bolts of electricity at him.

Ducking under a zigzagging crackle of sorcery, Sasuke gave a huff of annoyance and glared at Rias. Truthfully he wasn't enough of a hypocrite to get upset of her dishing out the same tactics he'd used during the few kenjutsu lessons he'd been able to give her before their styles had to diverge, but that didn't make it any more enjoyable.

Rias only favoured her Pawn with an apologetic shrug. "Don't make me come over there. Dodge less or I'll have to help Akeno throw more at you."

Grunting at the warning, Sasuke skid to a stop in the dirt and turned to face Akeno. Dark eyes glittered with resolve as the Uchiha's focus went inward. Deeper, to the flow of supernatural energy running through his demonic flesh. Deeper, to the creative emotional sea that he had unwillingly nurtured since being reborn in Gehenna.

It was not, in the end, that he was incapable of wielding fire. There were very general spells that were commonly taught to all devils, and the ability to throw up a circle glyph and use it to convert magic to a burst of flame or water wasn't overly difficult. The hard part came in converting that very basic foundation into something more powerful and unique. The Chidori itself was powerful because it omitted the constraints of runes and relied only on raw electrical magic folded on itself over and over.

Akeno's elemental magic was so ferocious because she'd bred the devil enchantment with the Shinto hexes that her mother had passed down to her. When the half-fallen-angel was in earnest – rather than just trying to give Sasuke a bit of a sting – her attacks were ten times more forceful than the weak empty flames Sasuke was able to throw back by relying on 'common magic'.

Amber lightning flashed by Sasuke's cheek, almost caressing the skin as it left a stinging welt along
the pale flesh of the Uchiha's face. He paid it no mind, circling round and round the course of his thoughts. As long as he stayed still, Akeno's aim would be more than good enough to keep the spells painful but nondamaging.

"Why did you stop?" the Queen questioned, letting a careful lash of her magic flow into the muscle of Sasuke's thigh. Under her stare her friend's leg twitched at the current, but stayed strong and unmoving. "Did you give up? Or maybe…” she lifted a hand to her cheek and gave a slow sigh. "Maybe you decided you're a good little masochist?"

No reply.

Sasuke's black orbs remained silent and sharp as a viper as he weighed the Thunder Priestess. Every pulse of his heart seemed slower, expression going colder and more focused. "Don't stop." he ordered dully, making the faces of the girls grow tighter with concern.

When Sasuke had trained under Orochimaru, one lesson that had been hammered into him time and again was the importance of meditation. The rebel scientist had waxed on and on about the importance of clearing the mind to devote all energy to the pursuit of knowledge. If the mind was as still and sharp edged as a shard of ice, it would pierce the fog of ignorance through the power of reasoning.

The Uchiha had never taken to it like his instructor had. Orochimaru could fall into meditation anywhere at anytime. The sennin could look into the heartbeat of a candle, fall into the wash of chatter in a crowd, give up himself to the flow of the wind. Compared to the scientist, Sasuke had been a fidgeting child, unable to stop focusing on the thirst for vengeance in the quiet moments when left alone with his thoughts.

There were only two ways to meditate Sasuke had ever mastered. The first was standing beneath the crash of a waterfall. Beauty and force combined were able to beat some sensation of serenity into the Uchiha's mind.

The second was what a sadistically amused Orochimaru had called 'the obliterator'. Unrelenting, unadulterated pain. The gleaming edge of agony sliced through the fog of extraneous thought, forcing the body to release a cocktail of hormones in the instinct to fight or flee. Everything was forced back to one purpose, the mind seeking truth like an unerring compass.

It was the second method of meditation Sasuke turned to now, letting the strikes of an increasingly frazzled Akeno roll across the flesh of his body. Lightning was much flashier compared to the venom Orochimaru had preferred, but it did the job. "Don't stop." He demanded again, sinking into the pain.

Everything coalesced into a single crystal purpose: fire.

The electricity of the Chidori was in a way a cold flame. When he had been a shinobi, that similarity between the Katon of his youth and the Raiton of his adolescence had seemed to almost mimic Sasuke himself. Hot fire and cold lightning both twisted unceasingly, looking for outlets to flow through and into the universe.

That was the way of energy.

When lightning magic moved, it did so with relentless icy intent. It ran from his heart to his hand, and out into the air in a flickering storm that sought the way of least resistance. Shaping the Chidori was all about introducing resistance, providing walls shaped of magic that would either contain the electricity outright or direct it.
Fire didn't seek the shortest and most efficient route. Fire *burned*. It fed on itself and everything around it, raging as it required a constant stream of fuel to survive. The mere existence of a path to travel along was not enough, that path had to be littered with a trail of sacrifices to destroy.

If strong lightning magic required leashing all passions into a common purpose and driving on unerringly towards the end, strong fire magic required freeing all passions and letting them seek what they would. Lightning was a sorcery of the mind. Fire was an enchantment of the heart.

Devils were creatures of passion.

*Give in.*

Sasuke drew a deep breath, riding the slow inflation of his lungs. Dark eyes fell half lidded, tracking from one devil girl to the other. "Stop worrying." He told them, stepping forward as the last feeble trickle of Akeno's spells cut out entirely.

"I know what I'm doing." The Uchiha informed Rias before turning to a frowning Akeno and letting off a nostalgic chuckle. "You look like my mother."

"What?" the Thunder Priestess blinked in confusion as Sasuke drew nearer.

"She had a similar look when she was worried." Sasuke stopped in front of the befuddled Queen, lifting up his hand to poke her between the eyebrows. "Just like you, she'd get all scrunched up right there. But she never wore her hair like you."

Silence hung as the two women gaped at his sudden flight of fancy.

Shrugging, Sasuke reached up and snapped the hair tie that bound Akeno's midnight tresses up into a ponytail. "The hair is longer, but otherwise you could be her twin." He sighed wistfully, drawing back.

"You don't need to get so worked up." He smirked at Rias when the Ruin Princess made an abortive motion to reach for his forehead. "It didn't scatter my brain. I'm just following the advice you gave me."

"What advice?"

"'Devils are creatures of emotion'. That's what you told me. Anger, hate, love, lust – 'the greater the strength of your desires, the greater your spells with become'." Dropping his gaze to give a contemplative stare to the empty palm of his hand, Sasuke *reached*.

He reached for the quiet happiness he gained from teasing Koneko and Yuuto. He reached for the utter rage he'd felt when the tengu struck Rias down. He reached for the despair he'd acknowledged when he had decided he couldn't stand by Naruto's side *this* time. He reached for the shame and desire he'd had, all those months ago in the bath.

Sasuke reached for his magic.

And his magic reached back.

"*Koujin*".

Fire crackled into existence, filling the cup of his right hand and glowing a mingled yellow and red. Sasuke needed no runic structure to rely on or tool as a crutch.
The only thing he needed was passion.
Vali crashed into the ground, chunks of soil and rock filling the air as one of the seewahs landed on his armoured stomach with a double heel strike. Divine Dividing broke a little bit more, white plates cracking beneath the force.

Bright beams of multicolored light impacted the triumphant dusky skinned woman, peeling burning furrows along the skin of her arms and back. The seewah snarled, ochre eyes feral and midnight hair flowing as she lit up her fingers in preparation for a spell.

The moment of distraction cost the cihuateotl, letting Vali reach up with a hand to dig the claws of his Sacred Gear into her thigh. Muscle gave way as the half-devil rent right through her flesh, bringing the screaming woman toppling down on top of him. His other hand came up as she stumbled, peeling right through the enchanted green leather covering her chest.

"Get it together!" Vali roared at his fellow soldiers. A sudden rumble was his answer, the familiar smell of crystallized wyvern's blood being burnt for magical energy filling the air.

Another heartbeat passed, sheer panic flooding the face of his assailant as she scrambled to get out of the way.

Then the entire upper half of the seewah's body was gone, vaporized as she was struck point blank with a shot from one of their conjuration cannons. The lower half of her body dropped down on Vali, innards burnt to a stinking crisp. Vali grimaced in disgust and shoved the corpse away.

Pulling his battered body out of the hole he'd created while being beaten down, Vali turned exhausted eyes over the battlefield. He hadn't slept in three fucking days, and hadn't eaten in half that time. There wasn't any time to do anything but fight and fight and fight.

If the Grigori was full of decent warriors Vali could afford to take some time off. But there were only a handful of combatants that were strong enough to beat the Mictlanese in a fight without being too strong. Most of the living fallen angels were either too weak or they were those who'd survived the Great War and become ultimate class fighters.

Part of him wanted to say fuck it, and let the most powerful warriors take the field. If half of Gehenna was turned to glass, it was what it was. They might even be lucky enough to press back through the gate to Mictlan and wreck things over there instead.

The rest of him accepted that he was being just a little sour about it. Escalation might be inevitable, but no one wanted it to happen on or near their territory simply because of how world destroying it was. Given the choice between an extinction level event and having to skip sleep for a few days, Vali had to pick the latter.

It would be nice if the devils got their heads out of their asses though. Their two armies had formed an encirclement around the entire Limbo Strip, but they weren't integrated. It was a weakness in the chain of command that was going to bite them all in the asses one day.

Plus, what the hell was with the whole 'no women and purebloods on the lines' thing? The Diabolical Senate hadn't even started conscripting reincarnated devils and commoners yet. Their entire army was being run on a volunteer basis. If they wouldn't send out their strongest pureblood fighters, they had to at least begin conscript the commoners; holding the lines would rely on lot of bodies.
The sound of spellfire and enchanted mortars died off as the Mictlanese sounded their retreat.

Watching as the cloud of bats that had blotted out Gehenna's moon to cover the Mictlan advance peeled back, Vali dismissed his Sacred Gear and ran a hand over the silver-blond stubble of several days. "God damn."

"Captain Vali!"

"I've told you a million times, you don't need to bother with the formalities." The half devil reminded the bearded fallen angel who'd skidded to a stop in front of him to offer a salute. "What do you want?"

"Half our men are out and wounded, sir. What are your orders?"

"Fuck off with your sir." Vali grunted, pinching at his nose and shutting the tired grit of his eyes. "Call back to the reserve trench for extra hands to transport the wounded. Now that the assault's over we're pulling back to the support trench. Keep a handful of eyes up here to see if the Mictlans come back on over."

"What about the dead?"

"Do you even have to ask? Get them moved to the rear lines and leave orders to have them cremated. We're not leaving them lying around here for the seewahs to come play with or germinate some superdisease for us all."

"Right away, sir."

"And I'm not your sir." Vali complained halfheartedly to the corporal's back as the fallen angel turned and rushed away. "I'm not getting paid enough for this shit. In fact, I'm not even getting paid at all. Where's the union when you need it?"

Sweeping the matted unwashed strands of his silver hair out of his face, Vali crept up to the bank of the trench and peered over the lip of soil across no man's land. Call him paranoid, but something just wasn't sitting right in his gut.

The Mictlanese had been planning the invasion for months. They'd done all the necessarily scouting. They'd identified the ideal places for sabotage and crippled several of their smaller industrial centers. They'd been waging a shadow war via the bonespiders and culling the commoner population.

Even taking and fortifying the Limbo Strip was a stroke of pure genius. There were a few much smaller and much less convenient ways in and out of Gehenna, but the vast majority of the easy ways to travel to and from Hell passed through the barren streak at the southern pole of Sheol. It gave them a foothold the size of a small country and prevented any army they didn't permit from travelling into or out of the realm.

Until now, everything had been done with cold cunning and forethought. So why were the gods of Mictlan suddenly doubling down for a grueling and costly war of attrition? Maybe he was just too paranoid after a month on the front line, but it didn't feel right.

Sudden pain shocked through Vali's next, making the White Dragon Emperor reflexively slap his palm against the skin on his nape. The sting cut off, and with a tired glare Vali brought his hand away. Smeared across the surface of his palm was a thick clear liquid, mingled in with tiny legs and swollen body.

Spiders.
"Pull back to the support trench! Get out now!" Vali shouted, words already beginning to slur off his too thick tongue. "It waz a wuze!" he mumbled as the world went dark.

"How about you fuck right off, Sairaorg?" Naruto growled, clenching his fists at his side. "You're not my fucking father. You invited me into this, so pick up your god damn balls and get with the program."

Folding his arms over his chest, the Bael heir narrowed violet eyes and stood his ground. "No means no. I understand that you want to help, but the last time we went out you ended up in a mess. Look, just sit this one out."

Sairaorg's voice dropped to a more conciliatory tone. "Take some time to really get your head in the game. The next time we're going out for a raid, I know you'll be fighting fit. So just take a break, okay?"

"No, not okay!"

Ravel watched the argument between the two nobles build up steam and wondered if she should have bothered picking out another possible target when Sairaorg asked. If the end result was going to be a grudge match in the Gremory family's library, it probably wasn't worth it in the end anyway.

A week had passed since the last assault on the Aztec gods' human believers, and Naruto was better than he'd been, but Ravel had to silently agree with Sairaorg. There was still a certain reckless brittle shine in her fiancé's eyes, and some more time to come to terms would definitely help the redhead.

Ping.

The auditory spell that popped up next to Kuisha's ear was almost drowned out by the rising shouts of the two cousins, but it was loud enough to make Ravel shift her focus to the leggy blonde.

Most of Sairaorg's peerage tended to stay out of the way unless they were strictly needed, but the Abaddon woman stuck to her King's side like an extra limb. The Bael heir responded to her affection much more subtly, doing nothing more than letting his hand linger on Kuisha's back a little too long or giving the woman a soulful stare when he thought no one was looking.

It made Ravel a little bit jealous that she didn't have something like that yet.

Kuisha's face shifted from detached to disbelieving, and then settled on utterly horrified. Trouble in paradise? Ravel couldn't help but wonder a little maliciously what sort of news would make the ponytailed blonde look so worried.

Unless somehow they'd all been caught.

Suddenly, the Bishop began to fret herself.

"Sairaorg?" Kuisha began a little meekly, her soft voice easily smothered by the back and forth yelling between the Bael heir and the Gremory heir. "Sairaorg." The Queen tried again, failing to cut through the machismo. "Sairaorg!"

The high-pitched screech of the Queen cut through the rowdy argument like a knife, shocking both young men to silence.

"What is it, Kuisha?" Sairaorg instantly wheeled about to give all his attention to the mixed blooded girl. The aggression totally drained out of his body and voice, leaving only focused softness. Behind
the dark-haired devil Naruto subsided into irritated silence.

It was a bit fascinating to watch, Ravel decided.

Wringing her hands, Kuisha bit her lip nervously. "I don't think you're going to be going anywhere today, so fighting about it is kind of pointless."

"And why, exactly-" Sairaorg began slowly, filling each word with building strength. "Would I not be going to the human world today?"

The cloud of suspicion laid heavy on three of the devils in the room, all of them waiting eagerly on the beautiful woman's answer.

"Because Coriana just called and told me that the fallen angel line has collapsed. There was some kind of sabotage that hit the whole front at once, and the Grigori are pulling back to Shamond."

Naruto drew his hands to his temples, massaging the sudden ache of stress that had bloomed there. "Fuck," he grunted succulently, giving voice to the common thought that rocketing through their brains.

When the Great War had raged on, the Limbo Strip had served as a demarcation between the fallen angels and devils. Since it was the only simple way in and out of their contested realm, the 72 Pillars and the Grigori had grudgingly agreed to designate it as neutral territory. Each species had a single city built near the edge of the strip to process any immigrants to the realm or emigrants from it.

The devils had built Trand and turned the settlement into a bustling trade city. The Grigori, true to their origin as a military institution, had preferred to build Shamond as a bare-bones forward outpost.

However, Shamond hadn't stayed a military outpost, spreading out into a haphazard chaotic metropolis as various outcasts from different species settled there.

The end result was a ridiculously indefensible city, filled with half a million souls that had little desire to listen to a strong central government like the ones they'd fled from. In times of prosperity it was a libertarian's wet dream, and in times of war it was a death trap. There were no common procedures to evacuate Shamond, no central figure all the people would obey unflinchingly.

If not for the fact that it was the only city near to that side of the Limbo Strip, Naruto doubted the Grigori would have ever taken the risk of making the fucking kill box their main point of supply.

"I think..." Kuisha began, taking a steady breath before clenching her jaw. "I think it's going to be pretty bad."

Slamming fist so hard into one of the wooden tables that the thing collapsed, Sairaorg shook his head before focusing on his Queen with fire lighting his purple orbs. "Well, what are we waiting for then? Get over here, and let's go."

"The legality-"

"Fuck the legality!" Naruto barked, stepping up to grab his cousin's belt in a death grip. Ignoring the annoyed glare Sairaorg sent down at him, the redhead grinned with resolve. "The Senate banned us from being deployed. They didn't ban us from visiting a free city and just 'happening' to be there when something goes on."

Huffing a laugh at Naruto's ballsy determination, Sairaorg gave up on keeping him out of the fight. Maybe going after some real enemies might even straighten the kid out. Who knew? "Let's get a
move on then."

Naruto watched the taller devil wrap his arm around Kuisha's thin shoulders before turning to Ravel. Struggling with the outward hypocrisy of his decision – because inwardly he was more than thirty years old – Naruto slowly shook his head at his Bishop in denial. It was one thing to take her along to what was basically disaster relief. It was another to take her to the open battlefield.

"Stay here."

"I don't think so!" the blonde girl grit out as she shot to her feet and rushed across the room.

"Sorry." Naruto apologized as his body began to break down in motes of light. "But I need to know you're going to be safe." Then they were gone in a whirl of runes and teleportation magic.

"Fucking asshole!" Ravel shrieked, picking up a book and throwing it through the library window.

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Shamond was burning.

"This is worse than I expected." Naruto marveled to himself as he took in the black smoke filling the sky. They'd had to drop in a dozen miles away from the city to escape the mingled spelldomes that arced over the entire Limbo Strip and the cities surrounding it.

Hoisting himself in the air on his four leathery wings, he glanced down at Sairaorg. "I'm going on ahead." Shrugging off the furious shouts of the Bael heir, he left the older two devils to wait for the rest of Sairaorg's peerage to show up.

Magic began to build in Naruto's veins as he streaked over lush grasslands and the enormous highway that ran unerringly towards the blazing city in the distance. The weight of his shortsword bounced at his hip like a relentless hammer, but the redhead paid it no mind.

Naruto might have taken well enough to the blade and worked it into his fighting style, but he'd never relied on tools in his life as a shinobi. He'd saved the world with his two hands, and it might be time to get back to that.

Letting the wind break over his face as he ate up the miles in a blur of color, Naruto slowly began to draw out the Power of Destruction he'd inherited from his father. Generally, he held back on it and just used raw magical force to avoid killing the people he was sparring against, but the Gremory heir wasn't going to a spar.

He was going to war.

Black magic as dim as the void curled in Naruto's hands, lined by a bright border of crimson. It only took a nostalgic thought to spur the sorcery into a rotation, spinning tighter and ever more violently. Once he cleared the last mile, Naruto dodged around a skyscraper with an adrenaline wracked grin.

It took a moment of searching to pick out the battle lines in the distance, the clash of spellfire and enchanted technology carving out a blazing line right through the city. On his side were the fallen angels and the reinforcements the devils had scrambled to give them. On the other, the teeming mass of bonespiders, omen owls, and cihuateteo.

"Eat this!" he shouted, rushing closer to the front line until he caught the notice of more than one of the Mictlanese. Dodging around the sudden hail of sorcery, Naruto concentrated on the spinning orbs in his hand. Another push, and they began to elongate and hum like buzzsaws. Four spiraling arms arced out of each orb, and then Naruto tossed them.
"Rasenshuriken!"

Sasuke wasn't the only one that could recreate jutsu.

The explosion of black and red that utterly vaporized the two buildings where the seewahs had been stationed on to provide anti-air support was rather beautiful in Naruto's humble opinion. When he’d fed wind into the technique, the end result was pretty impressive. But it wasn't quite as inspiring as the end result he got when bonds at the molecular level were detonated.

More than one horrified gaze stabbed into Naruto's hovering form, and then the spells began to come. Every Mictlan spellcaster that could see him began launching volleys of spellfire.

"Whoops." The redhead chuckled to himself, slamming his hands together before throwing them apart. The motion summoned a shockwave of his power of destruction, pushing back the massed curses and giving him time to descend.

"Who the hell are you?" a fallen angel barked as Naruto dropped to street level and landed behind the Gehennan fortifications. Based on the mix of symbols that adorned the patch on the middle-aged man's shoulders, Naruto guess him to be a major. Though maybe the Grigori denoted their officers differently.

"Naruto Gremory." The redhead shot back, thumping a fist over his chest. The motion drew the major's eye to the green cord that dangled from the shoulder of Naruto's uniform, prompting the man to take a closer look at the fourteen-year old's outfit.

"Clan army, is it?" Shrugging at the insignias on Naruto's shoulders that denoted the young devil as technically holding the same rank, the major refocused on the Gremory heir's face. "Well I'm not going to turn my nose up at a few extra bodies. How many did you bring with you?"

Naruto chuckled awkwardly, reaching up to rub a hand over the back of his head. "It's just me, myself, and I right now. I'm not here in an official capacity. Just wearing the uniform so everyone knows which side I'm on."

"Right." The major rolled his brown eyes after a beat. "Whatever. I'm so far beyond giving a damn right now. Let the brass sort it all out once we stop getting our asses handed to us. I need someone to reinforce the east flank while Vali's out of commission. Think you can follow those orders, soldier?"

"Definitely." Naruto agreed instantly, making to rise back into the air only to have the officer yank him back down.

"Listen kid, this isn't a suicide mission. That light show you gave us was hot shit, but I doubt you can keep it up all day long. There's no telling how long it'll be before we get more reinforcements and drive these fuckers outta here. Stay low and don't get yourself killed."

Grunting in agreement, the redhead yanked his sword from its scabbard and began to run.

By the time Sairaorg assembled his peerage and made it to Shamond, he was officially pissed off. Naruto had been flying half-cocked since that bloody night in the chapel, which was understandable; but the kid was getting reckless. Coriana had once told him some humans couldn't handle the guilt of murder and took themselves out, and Naruto was closer to human than most of their kind.

Hopefully, his cousin's wild need to be doing something wasn't meant to be some form of subtle suicide.
"Liban, Gandoma, Beruka, Ladora." The Bael heir called out, motioning loosely at the darkened skyscrapers towering over them. "I want you evacuating as many people as you can. I know Dad wouldn't promise them anything, but do whatever you can do to get the people out of here."

"Sure."

"Misteeta, Coriana." Turning to face his two Bishops, Sairaorg pointed off to the West. "If I can remember the maps right, that's where some of the hospitals here should be. Shake on over there and get to healing. Try to prioritize getting soldiers back up and on the field."

"You got it."

"Kuisha, Regulus – you're with me."

"Of course." Kuisha smiled.

Regulus flicked his tail with tight agitation, amber eyes flickering over the smoky urban skyline. "You should wear me." The materialized Sacred Gear spirit rumbled. Ever since the Nemean Lion had been tamed by Sairaorg, not a fight went by when the creature didn't ask his wielder to use him.

The power of Regulus Nemea as a Sacred Gear was vast. As one of the thirteen Longinus artifacts, Regulus theoretically had the power to kill gods. When he was being used, Regulus took the form of a great axe – one so strong it was said full mastery of him would let his wielder cut the earth in half. Additionally, he gave his wielder the ability of being immune to all projectiles.

Yet the only weapons Sairaorg used were his own two fists. He refused to take up his Pawn as an armament. The only time Sairaorg would wield Regulus Nemea was when he used the Sacred Gear's Balance Breaker. The so-called 'forbidden move' was the ultimate state of a Sacred Gear, and turned Regulus from an axe into golden armour. When merged with the Iron Skin of the Lion King, Sairaorg had the strength to break a world.

"That would definitely count as escalation." The dark-haired devil commented wryly. There was a pretty low probability that the gods of Mictlan would consider him enough of a threat to assume Gehenna was escalating, but the possibility of it was enough to make Sairaorg wave off the suggestion. Better to get hurt than to end up spurring enemy gods to show up.

"Very well." Regulus' head dipped slightly, golden strands of his mane flowing at the motion. "But don't hesitate to wear me if your life is in danger."

"Fine." Sairaorg agreed, rolling his eyes before turning back to the war-torn metropolis. "Let's just get moving and get in on the action. And keep an eye out for Naruto. Who knows where that dumbass ran off to."

Nodding at the chorus of agreement his two friends gave, Sairaorg crouched low. With a mighty heave from the thick muscles of his thighs, the 'Strongest Youth' launched himself up and forward in a great arc. He leapt from rooftop to rooftop, purple gaze warily scanning for enemy contact.

The slowly shifting explosions a couple of miles in front of him let Sairaorg know exactly where the battle was. But just because the real fight was a hop and a skip away didn't mean the shocks of it weren't far reaching. The roads below him were full of utter chaos.

People shoved and screamed at one another, all worked into a desperate frenzy by the need to survive. Broken windows signaled rioters who had taken advantage of the conflict to enrich themselves. It was sheer lawlessness that made the Bael heir faintly resent the Grigori. If they'd been more focused on ruling and less focused on conquest Shamond would never have become such a
ramshackle hyper-capitalist dystopia.

Sairaorg sincerely believed in the right of all men and women to succeed or fall on merit. Everyone should have the chance to struggle to reach their dreams without unnecessary obstacles in the way. But without a central authority whom people accepted as a governor and arbitrator, that freedom was doomed to destruction by the first common threat to their society.

If he'd ever considered himself an anarchist, the sight passing by below him would have convinced him otherwise.

Sasuke blinked.

Shiro blinked back.

"And now, in its natural habit, we observe the assertion of dominance by the Uchiha." Akeno stage whispered, prompting Yuuto to crack up and start snickering into his fist. "Upon encountering the strange creature, the Uchiha promptly makes eye contact, hoping to scare the feline into submission."

Giving the black-haired girl a filthy glare, Sasuke reluctantly scooped up the white cat. Koneko's familiar purred, instantly sinking his claws into the blue cotton of Sasuke's hoodie as the Uchiha brought him close.

"Satisfied by the recognition of his authority, the Uchiha permits the new creature to snuggle up to his warmth. Having made a new friend, he thereby expands the size of his pack and is better able to take on the dangers of his environment."

"Kill yourself." Sasuke ordered irritably, scowling as Rias broke out into a fit of giggles. When he'd decided to accept the bonds he'd formed and start letting the peerage know more about his past, he hadn't anticipated their new comfort with him to lead to making him the butt end of all their jokes.

Maybe he should begin another reign of terror and sentence them all to training from the most depraved pits of his mind. "Stop that." Sasuke was someone to be feared and respected, not made fun of!

Koneko just watched their antics, chewing slowly on a plate of cookies that had been baked by Venelana herself. Silence was golden at times, and this was definitely one of those times. If only she had a camera to commemorate the sight of Sasuke utterly swamped by their familiars.

Three tiny different coloured oni perched over his shoulders and the top of his head, waving cheerily at the devils in the room. Her own familiar Shiro was curled right up against Sasuke's stomach, greedily drinking in the heat of his body. Rias' bat familiar Kurenai was clenched at the collar of Sasuke's hoodie, squished into the space just under his chin.

"Quick, quick, get the camera!" Yuuto caved, breaking out into a howl of laughter and briefly wishing he had a familiar of his own to add to the ridiculous display. If Sasuke had one, it would have been even better.

To think one day that the stoic Uchiha Sasuke would be covered in fluffy critters.

"I'm a step ahead of you." Rias winked at her blond Knight, hoisting the digital camera she'd summoned from her room with a flicker of crimson magic. Snap, snap, went the device; electronically clicking with every picture taken. "I wonder how much Naruto would pay to see this?"

"Don't you dare." Growled Sasuke, picking up a pillow off the couch and throwing it at her. If
Naruto ever got record of this, Sasuke would never hear the end of it. The dobe would still be snickering about it in ten thousand years. "I know where you sleep."

"Bold words, Cuddly Wuddly." Koneko taunted, getting in on the fun.

"You're all dead to me."

"Did you hear that, Rias?" Akeno reared back, turning on the waterworks. "We're dead to him! My heart is so broken. Come here and comfort me." The Thunder Priestess wrapped her arms around the Ruin Princess and began to grope. "Give momma Akeno a kiss."

When the door suddenly burst inward, three things happened. One, everyone went silent and the sound of Akeno sloppily laying a raspberry on Rias' cheek became very loud. Two, more than one pair of tiny claws dug into Sasuke's flesh, making the Uchiha wince.

And three, Ravel stood in the doorway momentarily boggled by the odd sight of it all. "What." The Bishop began, blue eyes darting between the Akeno's roving hands and the fluffy creatures perched on Sasuke. Then she shook it all off, pointing a demanding finger right at the Uchiha. "You!"

Gently pushing Shiro off his lap, Sasuke cocked a midnight dark eyebrow. "Me?"

"Akeno!" the Queen beamed, finally pulling away from Rias and drinking in the confuddled looks she garnered.

"Right." Ravel blinked, looking lost before her features hardened again. "No wait, you!"

"Me?"

"Akeno!"

"You stop that!" The blonde girl made an abortive motion, as if she was considering lobbing a fireball at the Thunder Priestess. "I'm trying to be serious. And don't just go 'Me' again, you! Why are you still here?"

Sasuke almost asked her where else he would be, but considering the various little beasts using him as a nest and the death by embarrassment he'd just been subjected to, he thought better of it. "Is there somewhere I should be?"

"You guys don't really know anything, do you?" Ravel slapped a hand against her forehead, growing even more frazzled. "Hello? War going on? The entire fallen angel line collapsed? Everyone is falling back to Shamond? Any of that ring a bell?"

"We haven't paid much attention to it." Rias admitted, drawing the wound-up girl's gaze. "So this is the first we're hearing of it. That news is unfortunate. Thank you for letting us know."

"I didn't just come on by to play messenger bird." Ravel shot back, settling her hands over her hips and staring expectantly up at the taller girl. "Naruto decided to go play soldier and ran off to fight. I came looking for him, because if Naruto's been telling the truth about him then he's not going to sit around. I need someone to come with me to Shamond and keep Naruto from getting killed."

Climbing to his feet, Sasuke nudged away Kurenai while Akeno's three oni leapt off his shoulders. The little bat flapped anxiously in the air before winging back over to her mistress. "Rias." He began heavily.

"No, Sasuke." The Ruin Princess cut him off, her voice rougher than he'd ever heard from her
before. The steel in her turquoise eyes cut as she turned to face her Pawn. "I'm not going to let you run off to get yourself maimed or slaughtered out of some stupid self-sacrificing duty you think you have."

Rias drew a slow breath, back straightening as her face grew ever more commanding and imperious. "We will all go together."
Chapter 23

Naruto brought his sword up to catch the downswing of a murderously glittering jade battleaxe. The seewah pushed all her weight into the lock of blades, making the redhead grimace and force her back with shaking arms.

A sharp twist, and Naruto was spinning one way while the green axe whistled down the other.

Concrete split as the viridian half-moon blade sunk into it, trapping the weapon just long enough for Naruto to sweep in with a fierce backswing that cut the dusky woman right in half at the waist.

"Fucking hell." The Gremory heir cursed, wiping the back of his hand against his sweat slicked forehead before rushing to cut a flaming projectile in half. Blood red fire and smoke swirled with the electric scent of ozone, and shaking his head with frustration Naruto retreated back around the edge of a concrete apartment building.

"They're pushing us back." Nelchael stuttered, fumbling to load another magic charged crystal into his rifle. Along with Haroth and Chasan, the young fallen angel was one of the few surviving members of the fireteam that had been retreating along the avenue when Naruto found them.

The lanky soldier looked too young to be out fighting in Naruto's opinion, but then, where did he get off complaining about age in a fight? "I know." The redhead agreed, leaning just slightly ahead to toss another rolling red ball of sorcery at the approaching Mictlanese. "Let's just hope to fuck it's not this bad all down the line."

Naruto weighed the benefit of running out another sortie. He was sure he could annihilate four seewahs, ten bonespiders, and a couple of omen owls. But he couldn't do it every time. War wasn't a sprint, it was an endurance run, and after three hours of constant fighting he was starting to feel the strain.

"Fuck it." The redhead decided, turning to the commoner soldiers who'd been glad to start taking orders from someone with some kind of authority. "I'm gonna toss a big one, and then we'll pull back to the next intersection. Keep an eye out for radios or some of our guys."

"Yes, sir!"

Rolling his eyes at the formality, Naruto swiftly pulled together another Rasenshuriken. The spell bit another chunk out of his reserves, making the Gremory heir wince before he stuck his head out in the open and quickly threw the magic bomb at the nearest cluster of enemies.

"Go, go, go!" Naruto shouted as the Rasenshurken exploded in a conflagration of noise and vermillion light. Shoving Nelchael ahead of him, he forced the three fallen angels to hotfoot it over the cracked pavement.

They easily made it to the next line of cover, hearts thumping from the constant back and forth between fighting and running.

If only they could call in and get a better idea of the current layout of the battle. Unfortunately, the Mictlanese had already thrown up a spelldome over the city. Teleportation, auditory spells, and scrying were all impossible. Without some kind of radio or phone, they were basically running blind.

The only real choice Naruto had was to move north and west block by block until he encountered more enemies or Gehennan reinforcements. Either they'd been forced back by an overeager
Mictlanese flank, and they could lead the enemy into being surrounded by Gehennan troops, or the Gehennans had fallen back and Naruto was currently behind enemy lines.

"Mom's gonna ground me for a month." Naruto muttered to himself, prompting a slightly hysterical laugh from Haroth.

"A month?" the bespectacled trooper snorted, brushing inky strands out of his face. "Your mum sounds like a softie. My mum is gonna skin me alive for signing up in the first place. Ever since dad was done in by one of the whites, she's been crazy overprotective."

"Great War?" Naruto clarified as he pulled out a spellgun of his own and began to fire. Some fallen angel slang had passed on to the devils, which notably included the way the fallen angels referred to themselves as 'blacks' and the angels of Heaven as 'whites'.

Still, just because Haroth's father had been killed by an angel didn't mean that he'd had to die in the war.

"Nah." Haroth shook his head, fumbling for a grenade and hissing when his hands came up with nothing. "He was always kind of a dumbass. Decided that since the war was over nobody'd come down too hard on him for trying to steal some old church relics. The whites proved him wrong."

"Rough." Burning through his clip in a matter of seconds, the redhead swore violently as two more Mictlanese squads rounded a street corner and joined in.

The beaten-up car they were crouched behind wasn't going to last much longer. "This is taking too long. I'm going to blast in and push their shit in. You guys take advantage of the distraction and get moving as fast as you can. Fly low and keep your eyes peeled for friendlies."

Chasan instantly made a noise of protest, drawing Naruto's blazing eyes. "Listen here, I don't mind fighting beside you lot, but you're holding me back while I try to keep you alive. Just follow my orders. Things will work out." He told the bearded blond. "Got it?"

"Okay."

Nodding with satisfaction, Naruto threw down the spellgun he'd nicked from a fallen angel corpse and began to rummage around in his pockets.

The search brought up two more magic charged crystals. They served as batteries for spellguns, conjurations cannons, and all different kinds of enchanted tech. Two crystals wouldn't take them very far, but it was better than nothing.

"Take em and get the hell outta here." The Gremory heir ordered, shoving them in Chasan's hands. Given a final lookover of the dirty and exhausted Grigori soldiers, Naruto nodded one last time before leaping up and out of cover.

"You want some of this?" Naruto roared, soaring through the air. Reaching his hands over his head, he stuffed a thick knot of sorcery through his hands and into a compact ball. "Come get some of this!" He slammed his arms forward, locking his elbows in place before letting it all go.

Energy seared with the glow of Mars, raging tight and bright like a miniature sun before rushing forward. The tiny orb split into an enormous column, forging a destructive beam that pierced down and through everything in its path. Cihuateteo, bonespiders, and omen owls all vaporized, along with lamp posts, cars, and most of the road.

Gazing down at the huge trench his strike had dug into the earth, Naruto panted with a sense of
Clenching his hand into a tight fist, Sairaorg swung forward and slammed it right through the painted dusky face of one of the Cihuateteo. Blood and brain matter squelched sickeningly, but the Bael heir didn't really give a damn.

It was hard to care about some little squishy bits when he was coated in the stuff up to the elbows and his homeland was being invaded. And Sairaorg did consider Shamond part of his homeland. Perhaps the city had been built by foreigners under the watch of fallen angels, but it was part of Gehenna just the same.

Besides, making distinctions between fallen angels and devils seemed less and less important as time went on. They were allies forged in the heat of battle, and that bond of comradery was one of the strongest he'd ever heard of. Few men wanted to be enemies with the guy who'd nearly died to save their lives the day before.

The roar of a lion raged over the thick clash of magic and might, Regulus tearing through the clattering ranks of bonespiders with abandon. Their poison glanced off the proud feline's coat here and there, smoking as they burnt at the golden hairs but failed to penetrate the skin.

"Lord Bael." Crackled into Sairaorg's ear. "We need you and your peerage to move back a hundred meters and hold. It'll funnel them into a kill box for us."

"Fine." The muscled devil agreed, pulling a swooping omen owl out of the air and breaking the screeching beast's neck. Sairaorg wanted to snort at being called 'Lord Bael', but it wasn't the time or the place to point out that his father was the Lord, and certainly not him. "Regulus, Kuisha! We're pulling back a bit."

His two servants shouted in agreement, and as one the peerage cleared the distance in a single speedy bound. The Mictlanese eyed their sudden retreat suspiciously, slowly creeping up the freeway and taking more Gehennan land.

The sight made Sairaorg's fists itch. Despite all the good they were doing, they were still losing. The only difference Sairaorg and his friends' presence was making is that the Mictlanese had to bleed a little more for every inch of ground.

Reports had started making it to the frontlines and destroying morale when the soldiers realized how bad the situation actually was.

Some twenty percent of the entire combined volunteer army of Gehenna had been stationed in trenches sieging the Limbo Strip. It was a sound strategy that contained their enemy while leaving the rest of the army free to rebuild infrastructure, keep the law, and provide fresh bodies for the front while weary bodies were rotated off.

Of that twenty percent, a full fifth had been struck down by the sudden biological warfare and widespread poisoning all along the trenches. Neither devil nor fallen angel were spared from the bites of tiny venomous spiders. In some places, the army had been able to retreat in good order, and in others it had been annihilated. The death count would be significant, but that wasn't the real problem.

With the collapse of the encirclement, both Trand and Shamond were under fire. The Gehennans may be able to hold the cities, but the catastrophic collapse of their lines had yielded more than a hundred miles over to Mictlan.
Even if they held the cities, it was their loss.

"Come on, come on, come on!" Sairaorg, cupped his balls in one hand and flipped them the bird with the other. "I haven't got all day you chickenshits!"

Kuisha shot him a distinctly unimpressed look, but the taunt did its job. Despite the demands of the seewahs, the omen owls screeched in outrage and dove forward. Their man-sized feathery bodies shot directly at him, crossing the distance in a handful of seconds.

"Boom."

Concussive force rocked the very earth, sound deafening everyone in the radius of several city blocks. Sairaorg could barely think past the pain in his ears and the way his entire field of vision filled with pure white light. If not for the persistent smell of ozone and the lack of pain, he'd have thought he'd died and gone to wherever devils go to after they pass on.

Pressing his hands to his ears, Sairaorg winced at the warm trickle of liquid mingling with the filth already coating his palms. The trap had gone and destroyed both his ear drums, and he'd need to pull back and get some battlefield healing before he'd be useful again.

When the round of mortars finally died off, Sairaorg blinked away the stinging in his eyes and watched as light gave way to dark smoke and ashes. The entire street was a wreck, broken bodies scattered into dozens of pieces over the shattered tarmac. Deep pits burrowed right to the soil underneath the asphalt, letting anyone with eyes know just how destructive the volley of Gehennan artillery had been.

Regulus was laying on the ground moaning while a pale faced Kuisha tried to help the Sacred Gear despite the ringing in her own ears. As a lion, Regulus' hearing was much more sensitive than both of them put together and he would be by far suffering the most.

Clenching his jaw at his Pawn's pain, Sairaorg reached down and connected with Regulus. Fur and flesh morphed into a great golden battleaxe, which the Bael heir hoisted on his shoulder. Then he and Kuisha began to stumble drunkenly for the Gehennan line.

As their forms drew closer to friendly faces, the grey clouds in the sky parted, and it began to rain.

He was burning.

_I envy the infinite…_

Agony rose up from his very insides, scorching over his heart and nerves until all he knew was pain.

_I pursue the dream…_

Slowly, achingly slowly, something began to beat back the blazing suffering.

_The White Dragon…_

Vali lurched back into the waking world with his heart slamming what felt like a thousand miles an hour and perspiration pouring down the naked skin of his back. It was in him, it was in him, _IT WAS IN HIM._

Vision blurring, the half devil scrabbled at the faint biting in his arm and tore the irritant right out. Shrill whining rang through the air, but he needed to get out _he needed to get out—_
Clarity slammed through the White Dragon Emperor like a bucket of ice water, panic and confusion forcibly resolved until Vali easily perceived the crowded hospital ward he was laid up in. The gnawing he'd torn out of his skin wasn't another spider, but a needle, and the shrill beep was nothing more than an infusion pump rebelling against the sudden interruption of its medicine delivery.

Albion drew back from the forefront of Vali's mind; the spirit of the Saxon Dragon having done his work in forcing his wielder to calm down. The Sacred Gear rarely slept, almost always aware of what was occurring with his host; so strong was their bond.

Directing a rush of thankfulness towards the dragon that fueled Divine Dividing, Vali peeled the white sweat soaked sheets from his form before rising to his feet. His legs felt shaky underneath him, but the half devil was strong enough.

"Um?"

Vali's head snapped back so quickly it was a wonder he didn't give himself whiplash. Standing uncertainly on the other side of 'his' bed, hands still glowing with healing magic was a woman with long wavy blonde hair. The crest on the chest of her violet uniform was that of the Bael clan, so she obviously wasn't an enemy.

But the way her gaze was unerringly moving to his waist was a bit unnerving, so Vali glanced down.

"Ah."

He was naked. "Where's my clothes?" the half devil demanded, snapping his fingers at the blonde woman.

It took her some effort to drag her eyes back up to his, which irritated Vali. Sure, he had an impressive 'package', but so did every devil descended from the nobility. Their species was optimized to seduce, so it was a trait that had been selected for. Even the few devils that didn't measure up could turn to flesh shaping magic to close the gap and become just as impressive.

Vali might be half human, but he was all devil down below. "Not that I don't enjoy the appreciation, but I've got things to do. Where's my uniform?"

"You're not cleared to leave." The woman told him, red spots colouring in high on her cheeks. "While the poison you were dosed with was optimized for fallen angels, and you're not one of those, it still did a number on you. Another injection might kill you, especially if it's the anti-devil strand of the poison."

"Don't care." Vali shot back, scanning over the ward and settling his eyes on the first set of clothes he could find. The uniform was a dull green and the crest stitched into it belonged to the Sitri clan, but he really didn't give a damn. There was a war going on and he was owed more than one pound of flesh for his suffering.

Ignoring the woman's protests, Vali snatched up the uniform and stuffed his legs into the pants. They were a little too short, but they'd have to do. "What's your name, woman?" the silver-blond inquired to distract her insistent hands.

"Coriana?"

"Is that an answer or a question?" he wondered rhetorically, crushing the faint tremors in his hands as he did up the last of the buttons. Vali stuffed his feet into the pilfered boots, tying them tight before waving at the pretty blonde over his shoulder. "Maybe I'll see you around, sweetness."
"Get your ass back here pretty boy!"

Damp weight plastered the long length of Akeno's ponytail to her back. Huddled with the rest of Rias' peerage and Ravel on top of a towering skyscraper, she scanned over the horizon for the distinct black and crimson light of the Power of Destruction.

Caution, caution, caution. Rias had drilled the specific command into every one of them over and over before they even entered the city limits of Shamond. They were entering a warzone, so they all needed to change into the rarely used clan military uniforms they owned to dissuade friendly fire. They weren't there to play hero, so keep quiet and crafty until they could locate Naruto and extract the dumbass.

Relatively simple in theory.

In practice, she could see the jitters in almost everyone crouched on the rooftop. Rias' mouth was drawn tight in what Akeno knew was concern. Yuuto kept relaxing and tightening his grip over the hilt of his demonic sword. Koneko stretched and re-stretched the joints of her knuckles. Ravel pulled anxiously at the drill-like curl of one of her ponytails. The Thunder Priestess herself slowly thumbed through a stack of sutras.

Like he was in many other things, Sasuke was apparently the exception. The Uchiha had no nervous twitch. The pale skin of his face was smooth and uncaring as a sheet of ice. He radiated such calm confidence that it dampened the fear of everyone else.

Beneath the relief she had at his presence, Akeno was a little annoyed. Everyone had on the rooftop had their share of experience with violence, but only Sasuke seemed to approach war with the aplomb of a veteran. It reminded her as little of her father, which just irritated the halfbreed more.

But it wasn't Sasuke's fault if he bore some passing similarity with her rigid, stoic, warrior of a father. So Akeno took the odd feeling it invoked and stuffed it back down. A warzone was no place for daddy issues.

"We need to move closer." Sasuke broke the tense silence, dark eyes moving from the horizon to stare at them expectantly. One of his hands came up to settle over the hilt of his katana, but didn't draw the blade.

"Fine." Rias agreed before anyone else could voice their opinion. There seemed to be a silent exchange that passed back and forth between the Ruin Princess and the Uchiha. Something like impatience coloured Sasuke's expression, but he bowed to the imploring glance his mistress gave and nodded.

The Thunder Priestess was already rising and crossing to the edge of the building when the redhaired young woman started explaining the plan to the younger devils. Akeno didn't need to bother listening, she knew well enough how Rias thought and since Sasuke obviously caved there was only one course of action.

Cross from building to building, coming closer to the shifting lines of battle they could see cutting through the city, while avoiding any unnecessary confrontation.

"You ready?" Akeno prodded Sasuke as he came to stand beside her. The question was more for her peace of mind than his, and when the young man offered her nothing but a cocky smirk Akeno felt her nerves settle a little bit more.

Wiping the rain from her face, Akeno waited until Rias gave the go ahead before picking out the
nearest skyscraper and leaping out into the open air. Leathery devil wings hoisted her the distance until she landed, disappearing and never giving sign of her fallen angel heritage.

Boots scraped over wet concrete as devil after devil crossed over. First came Ravel, and then Sasuke. Koneko and Yuuto followed after until finally Rias made the crossing. The alternation of younger and older made Akeno want to smile.

It was just like Rias to try to protect the younger ones.

A turquoise eye winked at the devil priestess, prompting Akeno to begin the train all once again. Over and over their party quietly moved from building to building. The battle drew nearer, explosions sounding louder and shining brighter with every leap. Strain ratcheted higher the closer they came, stifling the last embers of joviality.

Koneko twitched, and that was all the warning they needed.

A slight squeal of surprise escaped Ravel's lips as Yuuto suddenly wrapped his hand around her bicep and yanked her back. It was not a moment too soon, as a bright green spear stabbed into the rooftop where she'd just been standing.

Sasuke was moving before the seewah even completed her landing, katana cutting a bright arc and colliding with the dusky skinned woman's hastily raised spear. Steel and enchanted jade rattled as the two combatants matched sinew against sinew in a struggle for supremacy.

"I'm not done yet." The Cihuateotl grit out, voice tinged with a foreign accent. The haft of her spear began to glow with sickly vermilion magic, a strange sweet scent filling the air.

"Yes." Akeno sighed, fixing one bored eye on the lone Mictlan soldier. "You are."

A tiny lance of mingled black and red sorcery speared out of the woman's breast. Blood ran from the corner of her mouth as the seewah had enough time to make an expression of surprise. Then she dropped like a puppet with its strings cut, revealing Rias' vaguely irritated countenance.

"Sooner or later, I suppose." The Gremory woman mused, teal gaze moving up from the corpse to meet Sasuke's dark orbs. Panic filled her voice as she stepped forward at the sight, hands coming up to hover over the Uchiha's flustered looking face. "What's wrong?"

The red color began rapidly draining away from Sasuke's skin as quickly as it had come, and glancing down at the invader the Uchiha grimaced. "Yuuto."

"Yeah, I felt it too."

"Felt what?" Rias demanded.

"Arousal." The bland interjection from their resident nekomata was accompanied by the expression of disgust she offered the Mictlanese woman. Koneko could probably smell the hormone change.

"They have some kind of arousal magic." Sasuke confirmed, eyes very obviously straying down to the generous swell of Rias' breasts before he forced his gaze away to the battle on the horizon. Color rushed back into his cheeks for a very different reason.

Pink filled Rias' cheeks, but to Akeno's eyes the Ruin Princess didn't look all that displeased at the wandering regard. "Fair enough." Rias coughed into her fist, turning to look helplessly at Akeno. "So, next time we'll just... be prepared for it?"
"Yeah whatever." Ravel cut in dismissively, wringing out the cloth over her stomach with an impatient huff. "Let's just get a move on, will we?"

Everyone was more than glad to obey the Bishop's suggestion, and moving as a unit they drew closer to the front lines.

Sairaorg breathed a sigh in relief as the second of his eardrums were repaired and he could finally hear perfectly again. "Thanks." He told the combat medic, accepting the bottle of warm water the middle-aged man offered him.

Pressing the lip to his mouth, the Bael heir took a swallow. The wetness soothed the dry inside of his throat, and despite the damp air and slowly intensifying rain he appreciated the relief.

He was just finishing the last mouthful when he turned around and spat it back out.

"Rias!" he spluttered at the familiar sight of long crimson hair. Sairiaorg furiously wiped the string of drool hanging out away before calling out again in a much more strident tone. "Rias!"

The look he got when she turned his way was not pleased.

Making a beeline for her rebellious cousin, the Ruin Princess crossed right through the crowd of soldiers that were milling about the hastily constructed forward camp. "You." She began in a tone that promised a fortune of a thousand deaths. "Where is my nephew?"

The cold dark eyes her Pawn gave Sairaorg were just as full of killing intent as Rias'. In another situation, the 'Strongest Youth' might have appreciated that level of 'guard dog' in his little cousin's peerage, but at the moment Sairaorg wasn't in the right spot to enjoy it. The fact that the rest of her peerage and Ravel were looking at him a similar way didn't help.

Who would have thought that the alternatively foul and timid little Akeno he'd once teased when she was ten years old would be able to muster up that level of venom?

"Ah, well you see…"

The sound of Rias' outraged shout was enough to draw more than one pair of eyes.

"What you mean you lost him?"

"Just what I said. He took off on his own."

"He's fourteen years old Sairaorg! Are you not capable of holding onto him for a few hours? Fire and ashes, he's not an S-ranked criminal! Strongest Youth my ass!"

"No, just a stubborn tyke from the very pits of Tartarus." Sairaoorg muttered glumly, wilting beneath the tirade. He might be the strongest in their generation, but Rias was just like his aunt in miniature. And nobody fucked with aunt Venelana.

The inarticulate growl she gave combined with her throttling gesture was the last straw. Putting on his most pitiful expression, Sairaorg turned to give Sasuke a hangdog look. Maybe those dark eyes were the dark eyes of a killer, but there were certain things that transcended murderous intent.

The Bro Code.

Every man, regardless of species or circumstance, understood the obligations of the Bro Code. Rule fourteen – 'No man shall willingly leave another man to be skinned by an enraged woman'. Sasuke
was obligated to help him out, or else give up his man card.

But based on the increasingly amused emotions filling the Uchiha’s face, Sairaorg might really be on his own.

"Rias."

Or maybe not.

The murmur unfortunately didn't manage to distract his cousin's building fury.

One of Sasuke's pale hands came up to slip in behind the soaked crimson mane of Rias' hair. Maybe it was the sudden warmth of flesh contact on the back of her neck, but it was probably something else that made the Ruin Princess cut off suddenly and subside with little more than Sasuke's quiet "It's pointless. Let's go."

A favour for a favour, Sairaorg decided as he watched his baby cousin deflate. Just this once, for the boon Sasuke had given him, the Bael heir would waive the usual punishment and not twist the Uchiha's balls off for getting handsy with Rias.

"But where are we even supposed to begin looking for Naruto?" Rias complained in a tone of despair, making no movement to brush off her Pawn's hand.

"Excuse me, did you say Naruto?" A fallen angel stepped out of the watching crowd, glasses perched over a red nose. "Naruto Gremory?"

The sudden shift of more than a half dozen pairs of eyes made the private step back with a nervous warding gesture.

"Yes." Akeno bit out, violet eyes glittering coolly as she took in the fallen angel soldier. "What do you know about him?"

"Well he saved a me and a few of my friends a couple hours back."

"Where?" Rias stepped forward eagerly, Sasuke's hand falling away as she approached the bespectacled soldier. "Where did you see him?"

"Over on the east flank, though I dunno if he's still there."

"Doesn't matter." Rias decided stubbornly, turning back to her party. "Let's get moving. Maybe we can still find him there."

Watching as the group of young devils began to file after their leader, Sairaorg switched his focus to a befuddled looking Sasuke. He decided to take pity on the kid, since if the way the Uchiha was staring flabbergasted at his own hand meant anything, the other devil needed it.

"Stop overthinking it bud. The dick wants what the dick wants. If the heart wants it too, you're all good to go. So figure it out."

Setting his back against a pile of rubble, Naruto sucked in a fortifying breath and tried to get a spot of rest.

He'd been out for so long the artificial sun of Gehenna had slipped behind the clouds of a rainstorm, and then crept to the edge of the horizon to signal day's end. How many hours of fighting on the ever-shrinking east flank was that? Six? Seven?
Fuck.

His 'genius' talent and typical effortless defeats of his opponents had made him soft. Naruto hadn't bothered to train as obsessively as he had back in Konoha. At first he'd been too young to move about, and then the habit was broken after years of inactivity and he'd left himself get lazy. A few lessons here and there weren't the same as the dawn to dusk regimen he'd had as a shinobi.

When Naruto made it out of this shitshow, he was definitely going to step it up.

Ravel was gonna snip his balls right off. He had been a bit conflicted about leaving her behind, but he was sure as hell glad he'd done it now. His Bishop might have survived following him around the war zone, but it wasn't something he'd wanted her to be exposed to so young.

Forget Ravel, his mother was going to snip his balls right off!

"Ahh, shit." Naruto huffed a chuckle, pulling at the soaked front of his uniform in an effort to get some relief from the sticking sensation. "Mom's gonna kill me. Dad's gonna kill. Grandma's gonna kill me. Grandpa's gonna kill me. I'm fuckin' dead."

"Perhaps you should be less worried about what your guardians will do to you, child, and be more worried about what I may do to you." A musical voice cut in matter-of-factly, vowels rolling in a foreign manner.

Throwing himself ahead, Naruto spun in midair and landed in a ready stance, sword held up in front of him. His heart had leapt from calm to racing, adrenaline spiking back through his tired flesh.

Lounging lazily on top of the rubble he'd just been ducking behind was a woman. She was obviously with the Mictlanese army, since she looked too much like one of the seewahs for it to be coincidental. But where the Cihuateteo wore forest green leather, the tanned stranger was clad in bone white plate. A fearsome skull helm shrouded her face, and the midnight dark sword she had strapped to her hip practically radiated magic.

Ochre eyes peered at the redhead through the eyeholes of the skull helm, slitted and glowing with otherworldly light.

Whoever the hell she was, the woman was dangerous.

"Run along." She broke the strained silence in a bored voice, making a shooing motion. "Children should not be on the battlefield, and while all will be devoured in the end, you should enjoy the borrowed time you have left."

Ashamed as he was to admit it, part of Naruto quailed back at the heavy weight of her voice. It was a primal instinct that screamed predator. The smart choice to make would be to run away, either to regroup; or to call it a day.

But then, Naruto had never been good at doing the sensible thing. "Sorry." The Gremory heir grinned, predatory bravado filling his throat just as surely as flickers of crimson magic filled his sword. "I don't think I can do that."
Chapter 24

Cool regard drilled into Naruto, amber eyes measuring his worth. They considered the fatigued tremble of his knees, the slowly building imbue in the demonic steel of his sword, and the fatalistic resolution that shone from the pale oval of his face.

Then a gauntlet-clad hand settled over the hilt of a sword, drawing so slowly that the scrape of metal seemed endless. Black tendrils poured from every inch of the onyx blade, thin as smoke and waving like questing feelers.

"What is your name, reckless little devil?" Glossy red lips moved, black painted lines stretching over the tan skin of the woman's chin. They disappeared up under the ivory of her skeletal half-helm, covered by the fearsome visage of her armor.

Naruto reluctantly swallowed. The ciuateteo were feral and violent, but they felt alive in the fertile way of the earth. Their magic had been green seduction, begging him to come spend his seed between their thighs and then die blissfully.

This woman was different, no less beautiful than the seewahs were, but with the feel of unrelenting hunger. The endless thirst of the black void left behind by dead stars, drinking the whole universe in and never feeling satisfied.

"Naruto Gremory."

"I see." She pointed the tip of her meter-long sword at him. "I will remember it. There is no proper way to convey the song of starlight that is my name to your ears, Naruto Gremory. But for the rest of your short existence, you may remember me as Jaguar-Behind-Heaven, a tzitzimitl in service to the King of Mictlan and our lady Itzpapalotl."

"Umm, okay? Well met I guess?"

"Good." Jaguar-Behind-Heaven seemed satisfied, tilting her head towards the much younger demon. "Now, we fight."

The streak of black and white that shot at Naruto crossed the gulf in half a second, wind protesting in the wake of the tzitzimitl's movements. The redhead just barely managed to put his sword between himself and the oncoming swirl of ferocity.

Meteor iron and demonic steel clashed, the blades of two swords locked and grinding out sparks with every blow. Naruto grit his teeth, forcing his tired muscles to push back against the unyielding strength of his opponent.

Red lips smiled, and then the force Jaguar-Behind-Heaven was exerting multiplied so suddenly she blasted Naruto right off his feet and into a battered convenience store.

Naruto's back smashed through glass, wood, and concrete, finally coming to a stop when he shot right out the other side of the store and into the ruins of the next street over. "Fuck." He growled out, spitting a wad of pink saliva before painfully lurching back to his feet.

Plate boots clunked over concrete, slowly drawing closer as Jaguar-Behind-Heaven followed the Gremory heir through the hole his body had created. Every movement of her body was relaxed and almost lazy, giving the impression of supreme confidence.
"This is some bullshit." Naruto muttered, wrapping both hands around the hilt of his sword and charging it full of the power of the Bael clan. Red and black streamers trailed from the rippled surface of the blade, burning with the scent of ozone. "Why'd I have to get jumped after I've been fighting all day."

"I did offer you the chance to run away."

"Yeah, but everyone knows that Naruto Gremory doesn't run away! Or one day, they will…"

"Such is the process of forging a legend I suppose?" The tzitzimitl prodded at him, a tint of amusement colouring her airy tone. Grinning ferally, Naruto bunched his legs beneath him. "Yep." Then he rushed forward, colors blurring past his bright blue eyes. A dash and a hop, and then he was bringing down his imbued athame with a roar.

Jaguar-Behind-Heaven caught Naruto's blade in a lazy high block, ochre eyes widening in the holes of her helmet when crimson magic exploded. The shockwave drove the Mictlanese soldier's feet into the concrete, the sound of an enchanted shockwave booming deafeningly.

"Better than I thought." She complimented as Naruto rolled away to the side, letting go of his sword with one hand as he fell towards the ground. That hand went right at her midsection, clenching a swirling orb that carved a small furrow in the white plate guarding her abdomen. Her steel-clad knee shot up instantly, impacting Naruto right in the gut so hard he wanted to vomit. Then he was launched away, once more crashing though the wall of a building.

"I'm getting tired of this shit." He groaned, pulling his aching body out of the crumbling concrete. "You sure we can't talk this over?"

"Not unless that is an offer to surrender yourself to summary execution, no."

"Why's it always straight to the death?" the redhead muttered to himself, scraping at his rapidly dwindling reserves. Slowly, another Rasengan formed in his hand. "Why can't we just fight until someone cries uncle? It's always gotta be the dramatic 'lay down your life if you want to win!' I think fate might be fucking with me, the old bitch."

"Do you always complain so much on the battlefield?"

"Only when I need to stall for time." Naruto smiled, forcing the spinning sphere in his hand to violently churn. "Rasenshuriken!"

He launched the spell at his foe with all the strength he could squeeze out of his arm. The high pitched harsh whine of a buzz saw split through the rainy night, burning across the distance until its vicious light reflected off the slick plates of the tzitzimitl's armor. Midnight dark strands of pure shadow seeped into existence, tearing at the fabric of reality with a sense of pure hungry wrongness. Then Jaguar-Behind-Heaven stepped towards the volatile ball of Naruto's magic, stabbing her black blade forward like a lance.

The Rasenshuriken detonated, wind gusting from the sheer force of the explosion. Red and black light twisted up and out, forming a bright spear of violent sorcery that sought the clouded sky. It towered higher than any of the buildings still standing in the city, thrown up by every last dreg of magic Naruto could scrap together on short notice.
Jaguar-Behind-Heaven marched out of the conflagration, plate cracked over her right side but otherwise unscathed as her sword and sorcery cut her way right through the sudden magestorm. Ochre eyes blinked coolly, and then the tzitzimitl vanished.

Sudden pain spiked through the redhead's gut, and blue eyes trailed down to stare at the foot of black iron that had been shoved right into him. The hot taste of blood filled the back of Naruto's throat, but he wasn't done yet.

Screaming with strain, the Gremory heir seized hold of the woman's forearm with one hand. Then with all his might, he brought up his short sword and pierced forward with the last of his magic, forcing the tip of his demonic blade through the cracks of the tzitzimitl's armor and into the soft flesh of her shoulder.

Blood coated the white surface of Naruto's teeth as he bared them like a wild beast. "Fuck you and fuck your king."

A slight touch of frustration burned in those inhuman yellow eyes, and then she was gone, launched away by the sudden strike of a white clad fist to her face.

When a sudden spire of towering enchantment roared for the sky in the distance, Sasuke didn't even need to think about it. He knew in his bones that the enormous spell was Naruto's, cast in an effort to destroy a strong enemy or wipe out a teeming horde of weaker ones.

As one, their group changed the meandering course of the search and struck out in the direction of the explosion. Leather boots slapped over rain slicked tarmac, plodding out a steady beat that nearly drowned out Yuuto's sardonic grumble.

"That doesn't look good."

"Enough with the bitching." Ravel cut him off, working her shorter legs faster than any of them. The vitality of her clan gave her nearly unending endurance as long as she had demonic energy to burn through, Phenex immortality instantly healing the fatigue in her muscles with a thought.

It was only the Bishop's impatience combined with her ancestral healing factor that prevented death from visiting them in that moment.

Between one breath and the next, a pair of armour clad women appeared. Midnight black swords speared out, each one piercing through one of Ravel's lungs with unerring accuracy.

Blood spurt from her mouth, but the blonde grinned mockingly at the pair of Mictlanese soldiers. "Too bad." She gurgled, sparks beginning to run from her wounds in an ever-increasing torrent of flame. The two women hurriedly withdrew, but not before Naruto's Bishop was able to deliver a stinging slap of fire to their eyes.

Ochre orbs blinked, painfully washing the ash as the one of the tanned women growled. "Silly child." But there was no more time for words as Yuuto dashed forward, a demonic sword clenched in each hand.

The blond Knight brought his blades down in parallel, locking one of the women in brief combat.

Sasuke met the other, katana trading slashes in a shower of sparks. Every blow made his heart sink a little more, even though it provided enough of a distraction for Akeno to unsling her bow and fire a lightning charged arrow at the dusky skinned soldier.
Their only hope was to win with strategy, because whoever they were, these women were stronger than he was. It had taken only a moment of assessment, long maintained shinobi instincts bellowing threat and flee through the animal recesses of his brain.

"Are you tzitzimimeh?" Rias wondered, digging back through her memories of the snippets of research she'd done since the war began. They were certainly not cihuateteo, who had an entirely different feel to her senses.

"Look, sister! She knows of us." The one on the right called out, throwing Yuuto back with a heave and spinning on her heel to drive a fist into the lunging Koneko's face.

Cursing inwardly, Rias summoned up a rough torrent of the Power of Destruction and directed it at the tzitzimimeh. The spell was enough to force the two women to break away, giving her peerage time to regroup along with ensuring Ravel had the last few seconds needed to regenerate.

In Aztec mythology, a tzitzimitl was a spirit associated with the stars. The Biblical faction had better understood them as demons of discord, who devoured mankind and grew fatter and ever more powerful from their gluttony. They were also known to gain strength from cosmic discord, becoming more fearsome enemies in times of strife between pantheons.

Times like now.

Casting a worried glance towards where she'd seen the spike of her nephew's magic, Rias motioned her party back. "Stay cautious and work together." she ordered, forcing back the sheer tide of panic. "They're stronger than us and the only way we're going to win is by working together."

"Have you finished your planning?" Came from right behind her, voice sarcastic and a touch bored.

Tearing her rapier from her hip, Rias bitterly regretted not having studied the art of the blade for years as she was just barely able to keep from being decapitated. Black iron gleamed darkly inches from her face, held back only by the thin length of foil and the rough imburement of her energy.

Koneko moved in, face twisted into something utterly ferocious as she took aim with her gauntlet clad fists. Red cloth and the chirping of electricity danced around her as Sasuke stepped in to cut off the attempt by the other tzitzimitl to intercept the fourteen-year-old girl.

Faced with the prospect of taking Koneko's blow full on, the woman pushing at Rias leapt back and cocked an unwilling eyebrow when the nekomata's strike drove right through the tarmac. Eying the spreading cracks, she mockingly saluted the Rook before shifting her focus to the Thunder Priestess.

Yuuto did his best to fend her off, pushing his recently-human body to the limits of its strength and speed to defend his newfound friends. The sound that escaped the blond's throat was frustrated and inhuman, conveying nothing but anger and determination as he was pushed back.

Fire struck out again in glowing spears, Ravel breaking the dance of blades and giving Rias' party just a few seconds of reprieve.

Eying Naruto's panting fiancée, Sasuke wondered if it had taken more energy than the girl would want to admit to heal two fatal wounds. She might be a genius, but she was still young and probably not trained stringently for battle. It seemed like something that pig of a Marquis might do. 'Why train a broodmare?' or some such garbage.

Whatever the reason, it just made Sasuke's struggle that much harder. They were holding the Mictlanese women off for now, but all it would take would be one mistake and they'd all be overwhelmed. They might be devils, but the tzitzimitl moved faster and hit harder than any of Rias'
Not to mention whatever magic they had but hadn't bothered to pull out yet.

Sparking a Chidori in his left hand, Sasuke brought his katana back up and drew in a fortifying breath. "I'll take on one. You all mass fire the other." He told them, ignoring Rias' noise of protest and rushing ahead.

It was the only real option; to hope they could take out the other and come to his aid before he got himself killed.

A hungry smile curved the cherry red lips of his target, the woman readying her own sword and obliging his reckless charge. "Now there's a good lad." She teased, nettling the Uchiha in a haze of anger as she lazily dodged around the glittering arcs his katana cut through the night.

The Chidori chirped hungrily, following behind Sasuke's strikes in an effort to catch the woman off guard. It was all for naught, as she easily slapped away his lightning clad hand with strikes to the forearm every time the spell drew near.

Sasuke was peripherally aware of the crash of steel and magic off to the side, growing smaller and more distant as he baited the woman away from his friends. The separation was more deadly for both sides, since it left him without support but tied up the woman he was fighting to prevent her from helping her beleaguered ally.

Coal dark orbs peered through the soaked fringe of his bangs, tracking his enemy on one hand and frantically searching for some kind of terrain advantage on the other. There was nothing but wet pavement and bits of rubble.

Perfect.

His realization came not a moment too soon, as the tzitzimitl seemed to tire of playing with him. Dark meteor iron swept up, slamming Sasuke's katana away in a frightening show of strength. Staggering back from the blow, the Uchiha took the opportunity to spin low. The Chidori fizzled out, letting Sasuke's bare hand scoop up a handful of dirt and rocks.

Then he twisted back up, launching the handful of grit right into the Mictlanese soldier's eyes. "That's cheap!" she screeched, hunching down to guard her vulnerable points. Left with no choice but to hope on breaking through her ivory plate Sasuke charged his katana with electricity and began to wail on the woman with two handed strikes.

Steel screamed in protest at the clumsy attack, but with adrenaline running through his veins Sasuke didn't really give a damn about finesse. He needed to win. He needed to live. He had too much riding on victory to lose now. Those bonds he'd accepted, the desires he'd begun to nurture – Sasuke wanted to walk that road to the end!

"Enough!" the tzitzimitl roared, pure sorcery and pressure blasting out in all directions with such force Sasuke was thrown backwards. The black shadows twisted in, centering on the tan woman's blade and swirling over her armor malignantly as the Uchiha scrambled back to his feet.

"We're done playing, boy."

"You looked like you could use a hand."

The cocky sound of that voice might be the most beautiful thing Naruto had ever head. Well, not the
most beautiful thing he’d heard, since it sure wasn’t as good as the low moan Ino gave in orgasm. It wasn’t as satisfying as the explosion of a Rasenshuriken either. Or the growl of rage Sasuke gave when Naruto got one over on him once again, or – well it didn’t matter.

That statement was definitely in the top ten list of things Naruto wanted to hear.

"Maybe a little." The redhead gasped, pressing a hand over the hole in his stomach and painfully moving back to his feet. Blue eyes fought the urge to pass out, and instead settled on the white plates and glowing blue wings of his savior. "Or maybe I just wanted to indulge your hero complex. You know, give you a bit of a chance to save the damsel."

Amber lens gleamed in the night as the stranger shot a glance over his armoured shoulder. "If I wanted to save a damsel, I could do much better." The man snorted, turning away dismissively. "Today I'm in the saving kids business."

Limping forward, Naruto came up beside the taller man and glared at Jaguar-Behind-Heaven. The tzitzimitl was climbing back to a standing position under their watch, right arm dangling uselessly. "So, what do I call my illustrious messiah? Or do you prefer 'hey you'?"

"Vali."

"I'm Naruto,"

"I don't recall asking."

"Yeah, fuck you too."

A slow laugh bubbled up from the White Dragon Emperor's throat, blue sorcery coalescing in his hands. "You're got balls, brat. Stay out of my way and I'll make sure you make it home to your mommy tonight."

"Not sure that would lengthen my lifespan."

"The only one going home tonight is me." Jaguar-Behind-Heaven cut into their banter, displaying her first true sign of anger that evening. Dark magic began to seep from her sword once more, fortifying the meteor iron and the strength of her arms.

Then the tzitzimitl and the half-devil rushed at each other, locking in ferocious combat. White plate clanged against white plate, black magic crashed into blue magic, and fist met blade. A boom of concussive force signaled the end of the exchange, both combatants pulling back to carefully assess the other.

Impressed with Vali's strength despite his own slightly injured pride, Naruto considered his newfound ally with a weighing gaze. The man was strong – stronger than him at full strength, maybe. But pure skill wasn't enough, and with more than a little alarm the Gremory heir noted that Vali's chest was already rising swiftly with exertion.

Had the other soldier been injured beforehand? Well it was either that, or Vali didn't have much in the way of endurance. In either case, it meant Naruto couldn't leave him to fight alone.

Watching as the two armor clad warriors met again in flurry of blows, Naruto tightened his fist around the hilt of his short sword. Then he began to limp in a wide circle, slowly moving around the center of the action; calculating blue gaze never moving from the fight.

Vali was good, matching the tzitzimitl strike for strike after Naruto had mangled the hell out of one of
her shoulders. The exhaustion was obviously getting to him, since he moved slower as time went on, but his skill remained undulled. If there was just one opening, the White Dragon Emperor would be able to take advantage of it.

Well, Naruto was more than willing to provide that opening.

Waiting until they'd sealed themselves into another round of combat, Naruto fought back against the burning in his stomach and drew his arm back. Then he fired, launching his short sword like a throwing knife with all the momentum his dense devil muscles could offer.

Jaguar-Behind-Heaven was too skilled not to notice the incoming missile, and with the instinct of a thousand battles she brought her ebony sword up and shattered Naruto's blade with a single blow. But that distraction cost her, leaving her open to a single unrestrained strike on Vali's part.

A white clad fist hammered into the tzitzimitl's abdomen like a freight train, and then the blue wings sprouting from Vali's back began to glow.

"Divide!"

The air pulsed, rippling with the sudden launch of a dozen sequential Sacred Gear activations. Every shudder halved Jaguar-Under-Heaven's power, adding it to Vali's own until the excess had to be discarded from his light wings in a shower of onyx sparks.

Divine Dividing began to crack, breaking apart under the strain of days of battle, poisoning, and the sudden infusion of foreign magic. But it was too late for the tzitzimitl, who died when Vali wrapped his arm around her exhausted neck and squeezed until he heard a sickly snap.

"God damn." Vali huffed, standing straight as his body was instantly soaked by the downpouring of rain. He took three breaths as his Sacred Gear shattered into pieces and vanished into smoke, travelling back inside of his soul to be healed.

Then Vali collapsed, bonelessly crumpling to the ground and slipping back into unconsciousness.

Naruto felt like sobbing in frustration, but what was done was done. It would be a pain in the ass, but he couldn't leave the other man to die.

Hobbling over to the ally that had appeared out of the night like a wolf and savaged his enemy, he bent low and painfully pulled the much taller devil onto his shoulders with a groan.

Then Naruto began the long trek back north, hoping they would be able to make it behind friendly lines before they were found by more of the Mictlanese soldiers.

In the court of public opinion, Azazel was considered a good governor. He was known to be eccentric, true. But his subordinates felt that he was cunning, that he knew how to show lenience, and that he ruled with the best interests of all his kind at heart.

If anyone asked Azazel how he felt about that, the fallen angel would have to disrespectfully disagree. At the moment, he felt neither smart nor merciful, and the only thing in his heart was self-interest. Somewhere out in the dim night was the young man Azazel considered his son, and his priority was making sure the half-devil was safe.

Vali would be safe, or Mictlan would rue the day when they made an enemy out of him.

Rain slicked the black and gold strands of his hair to his head, and while a spell could have kept him
toasty and dry, Azazel decided to let it soak him through. The chill damp matched his bitter mood anyway.

Casting hot wine-red eyes out over the field, the Governor-General considered the thousands of refugees that had fled Shamond and tied up his troops. Rather than retake the city, the Grigori had been forced to rush to construct tent cities and start offering food and medical treatment.

In a better time, he might have looked at the lost souls under his guardianship and felt something like pity. But with Vali gone and possibly dead, the only emotion there was room for in his heart was contempt.

Azazel raised his open palm to the sky, launching a thin bolt of light magic that reached a distant height before detonating. There was little violence, but the light show revealed a message that every single one of his soldiers would recognize.

Be ready for battle.

Pressing his palm to his throat, the Governor-General of the Grigori cast an amplification spell on his vocal chords. There was no need for fancy speeches or grand gestures. His patience had long ago worn out.

"Greetings." Azazel boomed icily, tones echoing over the vast field and capturing the attention of every soul in the radius of several miles. "For those of you that are unfamiliar with my voice, I am Azazel, Governor-General of the Grigori. And as of this moment, your Governor-General."

"Residents of Shamond". Emphasizing the many refugees and borderline political anarchists that were availing themselves of the generosity of the state, Azazel forged on. "Consider your welcome officially worn out. For too long, the people of your city have taken advantage of the protection of the Grigori and given nothing in return. You have paid no taxes, you have sworn no loyalty, and you have obeyed none of our laws. Those days are hereby at an end."

More than one of the evacuees because to rise up in protest, but Azazel's cold pronouncement shouted them back down. "We go now to reconquer the city. From each of your families you will offer at least one able-bodied male to join us as auxiliary soldiers. Failure to do so will result in execution."

Fear hung heavy over the crowd, and in the corner of his eyes Azazel could see more than one of his fallen angels grip their weapons in preparation. "Either at my hands or at the hands of the army of Mictlan, it makes no difference. Die in which way seems best to you."

Then he cut off his spell, turning to a grim-faced Shamhazai. His closest friend and advisor obviously disapproved, but the man knew enough not to challenge Azazel when his blood was running so hot. "What news have we gotten from the devils?"

It was Baraqiel who answered instead, thick dark beard dripping water from the midnight rain. "Serafall is in command, and they've almost driven the Mictlanese out of Trand entirely. With the infusion of some many reinforcements on their side, they're expecting to begin retrenchment soon." Which was just as expected, considering the devils had an army quite a bit larger than the fallen angels had.

"Would have been nice if they could send some more of those bodies over here." Azazel complained, watching as Baraqiel started to walk away. The muscular body of the middle-aged man was covered from shoulder to toe in heavy black enchanted steel, water pinging as it fell onto the dark metal.
"That's not all." Shemhazai sighed, eyes also following their mutual friend. "I've just had a call from Grayfia. Apparently, her son decided to skip out and join the battle somewhere in Shamond."

"Cocky little brat." Azazel shook his head ruefully. "We'll keep an eye out for the little shit. Grayfia's gonna skin him."

"Rias Gremory and her peerage also went into the city to try to retrieve him."

Baraqiel stumbled in slight shock, and then slowly turned back around. "Would you care to repeat that again?"

Rias cradled her broken hand to her chest, pushing back at the black swell of tzitzimimeh magic with her own formidable power. The form of her blond Knight was balled by her feet, and not for the first time the Ruin Princess bitterly regretted her lack of battle prowess.

Akeno and Ravel continued to fire cautious bolts of magic through the translucent surface of Rias' barrier, taking pot shots at the circling tzitzimitl and her pets. Koneko was busy tearing off strips of her military longcoat, binding the most serious of Yuuto's wounds.

After Sasuke had led off the tanned woman's comrade, they'd assumed that they'd have a much greater chance at victory. Alone, none of them stood a chance over a long period. But between Koneko and Yuuto they'd had enough martial skill to keep the woman from opening their throats. At that point, it had seemed to be just a waiting game until a spell from one of the other three women made it through.

Instead, the tzitzimitl had taken one look at Rias' circling party and gone fishing in her breastplate. After pulling out a jade green whistle, the Mictlanese soldier had blown a silent note none of them could hear, summoning a veritable tide of bonespiders to the fray.

It had become very clear that they, rather than the woman from Mictlan, were the prey. The entire battle had become nothing more than a sadistic game for the tzitzimitl, the dusky skinned woman toying with them and inflicting death by a thousand cuts, all the while taunting them about Sasuke's imminent 'devouring' at the hands of her sister.

And then obsidian sorcery had erupted several streets over, killing all joviality and signing their death notes in earnest. Rather than leave them to be picked away at by bonespiders, the woman had cut back into the fray with magic of her own and quickly beaten Yuuto into unconsciousness.

Unwilling to leave her servant to die, Rias had commanded her friends into tight quarters and conjured up a barrier. Despite the long day, it was their first real battle, and the Ruin Princess had power to burn. Their only real hope was that Sasuke either prevailed or that Gehennan reinforcements would find them in time.

She should have demanded Sairaorg come along, even if he had other responsibilities.

Tears stung at the corner of Rias' eyes as the hammering on her shields began again. Why was she so useless? Stupid and weak and never fit in any way to lead anyone. Now her friends were going to die because she hadn't exercised enough caution and forethought, gambling with their lives and getting them all in way over their hands.

Some 'genius' intellect.

"Having fun over here?" the return of the second tzitzimitl whitened more than one face among the group. The only real relief was that thrown over her shoulder was the bloodied but still breathing
"I thought you'd gotten yourself in serious trouble, to go all out like that." The tide of black magic ebbed away as the two sisters conversed and essentially ignored Rias' party.

"No, the boy here was just more trouble than I expected. Nothing I couldn't handle." In emphasis, the second shorter and bulkier woman threw Sasuke to the ground.

A wet cough escaped the Uchiha's mouth, and he painfully rolled on his stomach to stare at the red barrier encasing his friends. That was good. They were at least safe for the moment.

The distance between them seemed no more than thirty feet, but to Sasuke's aching flesh it seemed like a mile. He was too weak to go the distance.

Too weak to win.

Akeno made a frantic 'come hither' gesture, purple eyes darting between his bruised body and the distracted bantering Mictlanese soldiers. A reluctant smirk pulled at his lips when Rias joined in.

Well, as the ladies commanded.

Scrabbling his fingers over the grimy asphalt, Sasuke dragged himself forward. He made it three feet before a foot roughly rolled him onto his back. The tzitzimitl that had beaten him black and blue sneered down at him, slowly raising her arm blade in hand.

What a way to die.

"Sasuke!" More than one voice screamed, mingling together until it was a unified plea to whatever sad deity it was that looked after devils.

Ah, they were crying. Ravel was there, Naruto's fiancé demanding that he keep fighting. The uncharacteristic loudness of Koneko's voice almost made him chuckle. Thick tears were pouring down Rias' cheeks and filling Akeno's hoarse voice.

He couldn't have that.

Clenched in one bloody palm was the remnants of his katana. Broken a foot down from the hilt, the weapon was utterly useless in open combat. But it was sharp enough. Lunging up from the pavement, Sasuke came high enough to stab the fractured edge of the demonic steel right into the open area below his tormentor's knee joint.

In tandem with his sudden rebellion, desperate spells volleyed forth from behind Rias' barrier. One of the Mictlanese soldiers was forced to focus on batting them away while her sister cursed and nursed her wounded joint.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Sasuke drew on every dreg of his strength and began to crawl on all fours. He made it about halfway to safety before a sudden roar filled the air in tandem with an armoured boot slamming into the middle of his back.

"One more fucking move and pretty boy is dead!"

The tip of a blade pointed at the back of Sasuke's head, pricking the skin and letting blood run into the inky strands of his air. The motion demanded utter stillness, and all of the devils scarcely dared to breath.
"Now then kid, this is goodbye. It was fun." Steel shifted as the tzitzimitl stepped off Sasuke and drew her blade back again, determined to have the perfect execution in retribution for her injured leg.

Warmth wetness splattered over Sasuke, flesh rending, and for a split second he reflected that death was much less painless than he thought it would be.

But no, his whole body still hurt. He just wasn't dead.

Rolling over, Sasuke blanked.

What -

But he –

That –

Koneko smiled down at him, red slipping from the corners of her mouth to run down the pale column of her face. Protruding from her abdomen was a foot and a half of meteor iron, crimson running like a river to the point where it dripped down on Sasuke's face.

The slow slide of the Rook's rapidly cooling blood down his face as it mingled with the cool summer rain went unnoticed. His mind was empty, not comprehending the screams of Rias' pure grief filling the air or the way Koneko grimaced in pain as the sword was pulled back out of her.

That small body collapsed right into his lap, and instinctively Sasuke brought his arms up to cradle the back of her head. White strands of hair dyed vermillion as the Uchiha's gored stained fingers ran through the nekomata's mane.

Sasuke had no need to comprehend it, because the situation was as familiar as breathing. Once more, hot tears were seeping from black eyes. Once more, his heart was filled with the crushing sense of loss. Once more, he lacked the strength to protect the things that mattered to him.

"Why? Why am I still not strong enough?"

"Get a load of this, I think you broke him, haha!"

Do you want power?

Darkness yawned, spreading greedily through Sasuke's veins with every beat of his pulse. A beat that slowly intensified, growing with all-consuming rage until the Uchiha's heart thumped behind his ribcage like it was trying to escape.

Yes.

Venom sparked, midnight power and rot shadowing the veins of Sasuke's hand. Inky tendrils slowly began to spread over the pale surface of his skin, shading in the path of the Uchiha's arteries like a child's colouring book.

Trickles of strength began to fill Sasuke's beaten muscles.

It was not enough.

More. More!

The rush of fortitude redoubled, gave Sasuke the energy to lay Koneko's bleeding body gently to the ground beside him.
It was still not enough.

*Give me more. More. More! Give me more power!*

The sudden bloom of seething black across Sasuke's maddened face was enough to make the tzitzimitl falter back in surprise. He was *strong*, lurching to his feet and panting like a mad dog. But it wasn't enough. He needed more power to win. More power to make them suffer and *beg* for death. More More *MORE*!

Ancient attention suddenly focused on the Uchiha like a knife, cutting through time and space to radiate a sensation of reptilian satisfaction.

*Shh, Uchiha Sasuke.*

*I'll give you as much power as you want.*

*More and more and more…. I'll fill you right to the brim.*

*And in exchange, become my sword!*

The ghostly sensation of fingers prodded Sasuke in the forehead, sparking a blazing white rush of agony that spiked through his brain. The ache became so intense that Sasuke howled, reaching up to cover his face with his blood-soaked hands.

*A gift.*

"Hurry up and put him out of his misery." One unnerved tzitzimitl suggested to the other, prompting the woman to nod and summon up a black spike of magic.

Sasuke's scream tapered off into panting chuckles, hungry and violent and *crazed*. He dragged his hands down the smooth skin of his face, leaving red streaks behind like some foul war paint.

"Alright, let's have another round, tzitzimitl."

Pale eyelids peeled back, scarlet irises dotted with three sickeningly churning tomoe blazing.
Sasuke had no katana, but with the slick oily power filling every pore of his body, he didn't need a katana. His will, his pain and passions, his void of hatred and the fire of his affection. All these things would become his blade.

Flexing his mind, Sasuke conjured a Chidori. The spell came as easy as breathing, flowing from his hand in a wild crackle of dark lightning. It reminded him of years and years ago, when he'd stood in the Valley of the End; drunk on the power of Orochimaru's Ten no Juin.

Sharingan orbs pinned one tzitzimitl and then the other. His eyes drained him, even though they merely had three tomoe. Just like how the blackened Chidori in his hand drained him. But compared to the eldritch wellspring of power Ophis was feeding him, that drain was a mere trickle.

Ophis' magic was foreign. The taste of it was dark as night, deep as the sea, cold as the chill of ice. With every slow pulse of Sasuke could feel himself ever more mighty, and ever more stained.

The fact that the girl he'd once known years ago had secretly turned out to be some cursed witch with a taste for Faustian bargains didn't matter. It didn't matter where the power was coming from, or why it was coming. All that mattered was satisfying the hungry thorns that shredded into his heart. And if to gratify that appetite Sasuke had to drink deep of shadows, he'd swallow them all down to the last dreg.

"I hope you're ready to suffer." The Uchiha grinned, lips peeling back to reveal the whites of his teeth. Then he stepped forward, reveling in the imagined stink of fear when the two women instinctively stepped back. "Ready or not," Sasuke sang. "Here I come."

Leaping forward with Chidori in hand, Sasuke marveled at how quickly the world passed him by. Black electricity crackled as it just barely missed taking the head off the taller tzitzimitl, forks of lightning licking out to sear a dark burn in the white steel of her skull helm.

Ahh, it had been more than a lifetime since Sasuke had been able to move so quickly. This was power, this was strength.

The shorter woman swung at the Uchiha, meteor iron seeming to crawl before the predictive vision of the Sharingan. At last, he truly saw!

Slipping under the curve of the Mictlanese blade, Sasuke gobbled down a little more of Ophis' sorcery and forced his muscles to move even faster. He lashed out with his black Chidori, slamming it right into the center of the woman's helm and shattering the plate entirely.

"Whoops." Sasuke chided himself, hopping backwards and cutting off the spell. He'd almost accidentally killed her there. A quick death was too good for these whores. They deserved to burn and scream and beg before the end.

"What in the name of the butterfly are you?" the one still clad in her helm breathed, stepping up beside her sister and taking a ready stance. All pretense at joviality and sadistic teasing fell away, because they were in earnest and meant to survive his onslaught.

Scarlet eyes brightened like a ruby beneath the sun, crazed flightiness sharpening to murderous focus. "Uchiha Sasuke." The dark-haired devil told them, moving forward with lethal grace. "An avenger."
Fumbling at her pockets, Ravel ignored the murderous spectacle that her fiance's best friend had become. There would be time to gape in horror later, but at the moment Koneko was dying and the nekomata needed healing.

The frantic search continued to turn up empty, holes having been torn through her vermillion uniform during the struggles of the day. "Come on, come on, come on!" she pleaded, patting over her legs and in desperation sticking her fingers in the lips of her boots.

Relief thrilled through the Bishop when one of her fingers encountered a familiar oblong container. "Finally." She muttered to herself, cracking open the casket to reveal its precious cargo - a single vial of phoenix tears.

"Don't just stand there!" she prodded at a transfixed Akeno, forcing the Queen to stir. "Get over here and help me!" Violet eyes brightened when Ravel shook the flask meaningfully at her, and the two girls swiftly took advantage of the distraction Sasuke was providing them.

Koneko's flesh was lukewarm to the touch, blood still trickling slowly from the hole in her gut and her chest faintly rising. Golden eyes fluttered open when Akeno softly slapped at the Rook's cheek, blearily focusing on the bottle held up in her line of vision.

Then Ravel unstopped the vessel and poured it right down Koneko's throat.

It took a moment for the potion to kick in. A moment too long in Akeno's opinion, where Koneko's stomach was a mess of blood and enflamed gore; before pale skin puckered over the wound and smoothed out into unmarked flesh.

Akeno pulled the Rook into a hug, shuddering just slightly before letting Koneko with the shine of unshed tears in her purple eyes. "Come on." The Thunder Priestess whispered, pulling the nekomata up and dragging her over to a weepy Rias and a groggy Yuuto.

As soon as they got within range, Rias was sweeping forward to gather the young girl in a tight squeeze of her own.

Koneko frowned when her mistress whispered how sorry she was into the snowy strands of her hair, reaching up to comfortingly pat at the Ruin Princess' back. "It's not your fault. It was my choice." Truthfully, the Rook's body had seemed to move on its own.

Suspicion of Sasuke had always been the order of the day, even after she'd come to be fond of him. It was only after the assassination attempt on Rias and the confrontation that Uchiha had with Naruto that Koneko had let her caution begin to die. Something in Sasuke was still unsatisfied, but he didn't seem nearly as dangerous as before.

Sasuke's death would have been 'convenient' in a cold-blooded way. There would be no confusion in her life, but it was pointless to pretend at having ice in her veins. Koneko was already emotionally compromised, and when the sword had been hanging over the Pawn, every muscle in her body had screamed at her to move.

So she had, taking a blow that would have slain Sasuke. She'd been prepared to die for him, which meant Koneko knew she could never muster up the resolve to kill him. "I'm fine. He might not be."

Rias' lips thinned as she pulled away from her Rook. Blue-green eyes tracked back over to the battle raging on in the ruins of Shamond. Sasuke was keeping pace with the tzitzimimeh, twisting in and out to either dodge or redirect their strikes with punishing blows of his own. The laughing sadism had passed, but every time he turned their way she could see the cruel intent in his expression.
Ebony lines spiderlined over Sasuke's skin, throbbing like a slowly changing Rorschach blot. The sight worried her, and Rias tried to remember anything in the books she'd read that would be similar. The only thought that came to her mind was a foggy memory of various parasitic curses, which gnawed away at the life force and sanity of the user in exchange for power.

She wanted him to win, but not at the cost of his life and mind. With the way Sasuke was matching the tzitzimimeh and bruising them black and blue, they'd be reluctant to follow if she could just convince him to break off and follow her before any irreparable damage was done. "Sasuke!"

"Stay out of my way, Rias!" Bloodshot scarlet eyes flickered over her in direction as Sasuke viciously backhanded the shorter tzitzimitl. "These two are mine." Rias watched as the Uchiha sprung into the air, feet snapping out to clobber the two women in the face.

Akeno flexed her fingers, wishing she had at least a single arrow left in her quiver. She could always just fire off a streak of lightning, but it had a wider radius. She didn't want to hit the Pawn by accident. She just wanted the fight to end. "Have you seen those eyes before?"

"No." Yuuto grimaced, using one of his conjured swords like a cane as he limped forward. "It could be a spell, or maybe some kind of Sacred Gear we've never heard of before? The Church knows more than I ever did things like that."

Smoothing her hands over the bloodied cloth of her uniform, Ravel frowned and threw her gaze back over the skyline. Naruto was still out there somewhere, and he might have been the only one who knew about the 'curse' and how to deal with it. "Where's Naruto when you need him?"

Rias' lips puckered like she was sucking on a lemon.

"Just give up and let me cut you down!" Sasuke roared, frustration rippling over his expression as he threw one of the tanned women over his head. The double punch he delivered to her armoured stomach cracked both the pale plate and his right index finger.

He was stronger than he'd ever been since coming to this world, but it still wasn't enough. Cold iron laid open the skin of Sasuke's cheek as he pulled back, Sharingan eyes searched hatefully for an opening.

The phantom sensation of Ophis' hand on his shoulder filled him with flows of energy. Sasuke moved faster and hit harder than either of them, but the synergy of the Mictlanese soldiers was enough to prevent him from breaking them into tiny pieces like they deserved. As soon as one was set up for a crippling blow, the other was there frantically driving him back.

If Sasuke couldn't cripple them, he couldn't take his time making them pay for what they did. Koneko might be standing pale and alive in the corner of his vision, but they'd still hurt her, and he'd hurt them right back.

More. Directing his thoughts at the ghostly presence lurking in his heart, Sasuke demanded more power. He needed to be quicker. He needed more force behind his arms. That stream of foreign magic needed to become a mighty river, churning recklessly at the bank and growing ever wider.

No. Ophis' refusal was swift and harsh, the focus of her attention tightening steel bands around Sasuke's ribs. It wasn't enough to truly distract him or harm him, but the warning was received all the same. Your body has limits, and will break before your will does.

Lashing out over the bond in frustration, Sasuke grit his teeth at the effortless parry the witch girl struck back with. Pain lanced into the Uchiha's head, throbbing for a second so sharply it felt like it
was splitting in half.

*You do not need more of my power.* Ophis' voice grew a touch amused, curdling in the back of his mind. *You simply must use your brain.*

A familiar image danced behind the Uchiha's eyelids, making him frown in confusion. He'd developed it in one life and understood the *theory* in this one, but in this world such a conjuration had always seemed beyond his abilities. He'd never had enough power to safely try.

*You are strong enough now.*

A slow malicious smirk pulled at Sasuke's lips.

*Fine.*

Throwing himself back, Sasuke vaulted across the cracked pavement to land a good distance away from the struggling sisters. Red eyes watched malevolently as the two panted and regrouped, and then with a flex of willpower Sasuke summoned up a handful of crackling black lightning.

"This is the end."

More than one incredulous gaze followed the upward arc of his spell, electricity shooting straight for the grey clouds that poured rain down over their heads. Distant thunder boomed. Churning light began to build, spurred on by the chain of lightning connected to the Uchiha's left fist.

A final crackle sounded, and then fog parted.

The distorted roar of the enchanted construct echoed over Shamond, sounding a violent call to war. There was a faint scent of burning, and Sasuke realized it was his own flesh cooking under the awesome infusion of Ophis' power as his casting rushed to completion.

"Kirin."

Lightning crashed down, clearing the space between sky and ground in a fraction of a second. It was a cacophony of sound, black electricity and Sasuke's own blue lightning mingling to throw back a hateful glow that was as bright as an evil star fallen to earth.

"How was that?" Sasuke laughed even as Ophis' attention moved away, the black well of her power leaving him. The sudden loss of strength forced him to a knee, but that didn't matter. He'd *won*. He was the *victor*. He was –

"That was quite a blow."

The storm of Sasuke's magic faded away, revealing a bright red dome. It was cracked and looked near to the edge of breaking, but it had *held*. The tzitzimimeh were huddled on the ground, eyes wide and staring at the red-haired woman that had appeared to save them.

"Lady Eagle-Eye!"

"Be quiet you imbeciles." The red-haired tzitzimitl harshly scolded her two beaten down subordinates, pure venom filling her musical voice. Unlike the more common soldiers, she'd forgone armor entirely. Her lithe body was clad in golden silks, the runes of an enchantment glowing along the hems and keeping her picture-perfect appearance dry. "This is what happens when you play with your food."
"Yes, my Lady."

"Now then." Slowly unfurling a folding fan in her dainty hand, the red-haired tzitzimitl allowed the crimson dome of her magic to dissipate. "I suppose I'll have to deal with you myself, before you grow into something dangerous."

Sasuke watched the falling embers of vermillion magic with a mixture of spite and despair. No. No! Turning inward, he chased the last dregs of Ophis' magic, tearing at the lolita's trail. There was no answer, and furiously he roared her name into the depths of his soul.

There was a folk saying that lightning never struck twice, but that day in Gehenna, it did.

A pillar of pure white-gold electricity hammered down from the heavens, projecting a sense of power that seemed to spiral up and out of the range of Sasuke's comprehension. The nearness of the magic sent a familiar tingle of danger up the column of the Uchiha's spine.

"I think this has gone on for long enough."

Sorcery broke apart at the sound of the deep gruff tones, flowing away in gleaming streamers to reveal steel plates as black as midnight and a bristling beard to match. Ten glossy onyx wings shimmered with the wetness of the rain, arcing menacingly as the fallen angel stepped forward with a spear of holy light clenched in one hand. "I will not permit you to harm these children any longer."

Sasuke already had his suspicions based on the faint similarity in facial features, but Akeno's gasp only confirmed it.

"Otou-san?"

Baraqiel paused slightly at the sound of his daughter's voice, but didn't move his roiling purple gaze away from the three tzitzimitl. The red-haired commander lurched back, jaw clenching at the Girgori commander's approach.

"Do you even understand what could happen because of your presence here?" the Lady demanded, voice slightly hysterical as she opened her fan and began to charge the instrument. "Do you intend to escalate this war?"

"You ask that of a father?" Baraqiel crossed the distance faster than any of their eyes could follow, demonstrating the sheer difference in skill between the upper ranks of the Grigori and the common warrior.

Shoving his spear right through the red-haired tzitzimitl's heart, the fallen angel stared down at her with chips of violet ice. "For the sake of my child, I would do it without hesitation." Holy light flared from the shaft of the spear, vaporizing the Mictlanese woman without fanfare.

Then Baraqiel turned his gaze to the other two cowering foreign soldiers. "Now for you."

As soon as he limped into the Gremory manor, Naruto began to wilt like a flower without sunlight. "Hi mom." He grinned nervously, waving at the woman who had birthed him.

Grayfia folded her arms over her chest, Silver hair spilling messily down the surface of her hastily thrown on maid uniform. The metallic shine of her eyes was a touch wet, but beyond that absolutely no emotion crossed the smooth planes of her beautiful face.

Strained silence hung between them for a few slow heartbeats, and then Grayfia turned away.
The cold lack of acknowledgement cut the Gremory heir deeper than any curse or shout could have. It was an icy rejection that sliced into his heart, flooding Naruto with agony and the deliberately buried memory of an isolated first childhood. Before he could stop himself, the fourteen-year-old devil was lunging forward to catch at the trailing blue cloth of his mother's uniform.

When Grayfia spun back, Naruto recoiled from the expression on her face. Gone was the stern façade, revealing under it eyebrows drawn tight and the slow silent trickle of tears down pale cheeks. "I wonder if your goal is to break your mother's heart." She whispered hoarsely, words dropping weight onto the redhead's shoulders.

This time, when his mother walked away, Naruto let her.

Swallowing past the thick lump in his throat, Naruto shoved his hand in his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the pointed edges of the artificial Sacred Gear Azazel had given him. Pulling out Uplifted Star, he considered the six golden points.

Maybe if he pretended he hadn't just made his mother cry, the hurt would go away for a little bit.

Light reflected dully off the polished surface of the onyx gem in the center. The whole thing seemed overlarge, more of an enormous pendant to wear around his neck rather than something to carry around in his hand. Apparently, it came with a cantankerous spirit inside that never shut up, but Naruto had yet to hear a peep from it.

"What to do with you?" he wondered, slipping the gift back into his pocket. It was too much of a thanks for pulling Vali out of the warzone. As far as Naruto was concerned, he'd just been paying the half-devil back for helping him out. He hadn't been looking for a reward.

Not that Azazel saw it that way when he'd swept into the hospital room. The Governor-General had taken one look at the unconscious White Dragon Emperor, needled the whole story out of Naruto with hard wine-red eyes, thanked Naruto and then thrown Uplifted Star at him before rushing back out.

A little rude, but Naruto couldn't blame the fallen angel. They were in the middle of a war, and their assault on Shamond had finally rolled over the Mictlanese advance and settled new battle lines.

Rows of new trenches stretched for miles back into the Limbo Strip, just barely outside the twin cities. The first few enemy ditches were empty, used for little more than rare scouting to prevent any artillery stationed on rooftops from raining hellfire down on the invaders.

"Naruto."

Sirzcechs' voice cracked like a whip, prompting the redhead to grimace and turn around. Time to face the music.

"Right." Azazel coughed into his fist, straightening his back and forcing on his best 'serious' face. "Lieutenant-General Baraqiel, consider this your very official and utterly important reprimand. You have earned yourself a black mark on my record old man, and you'd better watch yourself."

"Of course." The armoured fallen angel bowed his head in contrition. "I understood what the consequences of my actions would be and am prepared to take any discipline you offer."

Rollin his eyes, Azazel reached forward and flicked the bulky man on the forehead. "How many thousands of years has it been and you still take everything so literally? Good God, man, no wonder Shuri kept you on a tight leash. I bet you never even learned about the concept of stranger danger."
"Yes, she was much wiser than I am." Baraqiel admitted, mood dampening at the reminder of his deceased lover. 'But I have heard of the concept. 'Stranger danger' is a human phrase that refers to-"

"I know what it means, jeez. It was sarcasm." Patting the middle-aged but naïve fallen angel on the shoulder, Azazel summoned up a cigarette with a sparkle of green and lit it.

"I'm sorry."

"Forget about it." Azazel waved him off, turning to consider the war map that had been hastily set up for him in the recently reconquered city. Their current forward base was one of the few skyscrapers that had survived the assault unscathed, and it afforded the Governor-General a decent view of the trenches that stretched away over the horizon.

In truth, they were very lucky. They'd retaken the city despite the initial collapse into anarchy of their troops. None of their children had died despite running off into the battle like a pack of fools. Azazel's harsh policy regarding the Shamond citizens had added several thousand conscripts to their ranks – carefully spread out to prevent rebellion of course.

And there was even a cherry on top; considering the Mictlanese hadn't decided to escalate in response to Baraqiel's brief but flashy appearance on the field. Azazel wasn't upset at his friend's choice, because he would have done the same for Vali, but he couldn't deny that it had been pretty damn risky for all of them.

Now, if only Vali would wake up and stop lazing around in the hospital bed, Azazel would consider himself golden.

"How's your little girl by the way?"

Braqiel visibly flinched.

"Still not talking to you?"

"…Yes."

Zeoticus was tired. He was tired of fighting. He was tired of killing. Tired of violence and blood and conflict. Every night seemed a fresh horror, where he was woken too early with dreams of men who'd followed him to their deaths and those he'd slain.

That sheer exhaustion was probably why he couldn't muster up the energy to get upset with his daughter and grandson. When Naruto had run off, he'd done it with a good heart and the intention of saving people. When Rias had run off, she'd done it with the intention of saving her nephew.

Good intentions might pave the road to perdition, but they were rare enough in Gehenna. Zeoticus didn't feel like they needed to be punished. Let Grayfia and Sirzechs discipline their son. As for Rias, the Duke felt like the fragile horror in her face at having almost lost her friends was punishment enough.

"Come to bed, my love." Venelana's voice was sweet as a siren song, and Zeoticus let himself give into it. Pulling at his clothes, the redhead managed to strip naked before crawling in the sheets. A lazy spell replaced the need for a shower, so when he cuddled up to his wife she didn't complain about the smell of a long day in the tobacco filled war room.

"Will it ever end?" the Duke wondered, leaning in to the soft stroke of his wife's fingers over the stubble on his chin. "Or will we simply see war again and again, without end? Is that the kind of
world we're passing down to our children?"

"All things end, Zeoticus." The brunette sighed, pressing a soft kiss to her husband's brow. They were both utterly naked with the comfort that came from centuries of marriage and love, and perhaps another night they would have tried again for a third child. "Even war. Even death."

"What a world that would be." The Duke mused, voice softening with sleep. "I hope the kids get to see it." The red strands of his mane tickled at the flesh of her breast as the man dozed off against her chest, lulled to rest by her affection.

"My silly brave enchanter, I hope you get to see it."

In time her husband would begin to shake with memories of battles long gone and enemies long buried. The cold sweat and racing pulse would drag him awake, keeping him from sleep for the rest of the evening. But until that time, Venelana would watch over him. "Sleep well."

It was almost strange, Rias mused as she trailed the tips of her fingers over pale flesh. Two days ago the face under her hands was twisted with hate and sadism, and yet asleep Sasuke still looked as innocent as a cherub.

Once whatever fell power there had been holding him up drained away, Sasuke had collapsed into a deep sleep and refused to be roused. Baraqiel had watched the retreat of shivering inked lines with an expression of disquiet, but agreed to keep his silence after Akeno had quietly requested it.

As much as it had frightened her to see Sasuke so lost to mad rage, the thought of the possible reactions frightened her more. What would Naruto think? What would Sirzechs and her parents think? At the least, they'd tell her that her Pawn could be dangerous and needed to be watched. At the worst, they'd demand that she throw him out of her peerage.

Discard anyone who was no longer useful. That was the way of the cruel world.

Maybe Sasuke had been cursed. Maybe he had some strange forgotten Sacred Gear. Maybe the violence had come from some evil sealed inside of him. It didn't matter in the end, since in any case Rias wasn't prepared to give up on him. Even if he was damaged when he woke up, the Ruin Princess didn't want to be separated from him. She didn't think Yuuto, Koneko, or Akeno wanted to be either.

Their silence was a mutual instinctive pact, formed as soon as Sasuke's body hit the ground and Baraqiel frowned with suspicious concern.

Leaning forward, Rias rested her forehead against the warm skin of Sasuke's own. "Don't sleep too long." She whispered, teal eyes fluttering shut. Thanks to Ravel and luck, they'd survived. It was a bitter victory, because in the end they'd all suffered for nothing.

Naruto hadn't needed them at all, and their little adventure had ended with Sasuke's abrupt step into what looked like madness. In the end, three of the tzitzimitl were dead, but at what cost? They hadn't even cared about inflicting casualties. As selfish as it made her, the war had never touched them before, and had been beyond her concern.

Yet it might start touching them now. If Baraqiel spilt the beans, there was no telling what would happen to them. Rias trusted her friends with her life, but she was unsure if she should trust the father Akeno seemed to love and loathe in equal measure. Once the secret was out, would the government decide Sasuke's strange power was an asset and decide to conscript him?
"I won't let them take you." She promised, inhaling the musky smell of woodsmoke that rose from her Pawn's skin. If she had to, she'd hide him. She'd smuggle him out of Gehenna and find a way for him to live comfortably in another Underworld realm or the human world. The thought broke her heart a little bit, because she knew that she wouldn't be allowed to go with him.

The nobility had their chain around her throat. It was a silk leash, but a leash all the same. Yuuto might also need to go, both to avoid a draft and to make sure Sasuke didn't end up all alone. Rias might be building castles in the sky for a day that never came, but safety always trumped comfort. Better to plan and never have to act, than to have act without a plan.

Huffing a soft laugh under her breath, Rias crawled out of her chair and into the wide bed. Sasuke had been placed at the edge for ease of access, but there was more than enough room on the other side. "You're terrible." She muttered, long strands of her hair dragging over the sheets as she laid down on her side. "Look at what you do to me."

Rias settled so close her face was practically buried in Sasuke's shoulder. It might be embarrassing if he woke up, but she was too drained to worry about it at the moment. The scent of him calmed her strained nerves, and she just needed a few minutes to relax and not be wrought up with stress.

Just a few minutes.

The first thing Sasuke's mind registered when he swam back into consciousness was the sweet scent of vanilla. It tickled his nostrils, fluttering with every breath, and slowly the Uchiha forced his dark eyes open.

Then he swiftly crushed the urge to jerk back in surprise.

Rias' face was less than a foot from his, the crimson strands of her bangs just barely brushing against his nose. The Ruin Princess was sleeping soundly, her soft warm breaths blowing over his face. It was… pleasant.

Every muscle in his body was relaxed, a lazy arm thrown over her waist in his unconscious movements. Sasuke was very aware that his upper body was naked, sleeping pants and the bedsheet covering up his lower half. Rias herself was clad in nothing but a thin nightdress. The pale cloth covered her modestly, but couldn't quite cover up the lovely curves of her body.

In another situation, Sasuke imagined he'd be fighting the urge to molest her rather than the urge to snuggle back up and sleep.

The mattress shifted, and the Uchiha peeked over Rias' dozing head to boggle at the rest of the bed's occupants. Akeno was pressed right up against Rias's back, Koneko squished into the space between them. Even Yuuto was spread out, snoozing on the far side of the enormous bed.

Dark eyes narrowed.

Perhaps he should be tearing out of the room to get some privacy so he could shout and cajole through the recesses of his mind in search of Ophis. Maybe he'd ambush Naruto to let his friend in on what the hell had happened to him. At the least, the 'old' Sasuke would have scowled at the invasion of personal space and gone looking for another place to rest.

Whatever.

Sasuke went back to sleep.
"I'll see what I can do." Sirzechs sighed into the phone before snapping it shut.

Redirecting some shipments of supplies and soldiers wouldn't break the back of the devils' war effort, but it would be noticed.

What else could he do though? The Grigori were the weakest sub-group within the Biblical faction. They had less men and less supplies than anyone else. The only reasons they'd held on so long during the Great War was that they could convert the angels of Heaven given time. Well that, and the fact that Azazel was a particularly crafty general.

At least the fallen angels would be sending back some of the Shamondian conscripts. The thought of using what was essentially foreign slave labor for military purposes tasted like ash in Sirzechs' mouth. But if Sirzechs was ruthless enough to become a Satan and stay one, he was ruthless enough to make use of anything at his disposal.

Trenches needed to be dug. Roads need to be repaired. Damaged buildings had to be torn down and new ones built in their place. Trand and Shamond were in ruins after the Mictlanese advance, and it would take a lot of manpower to fix them up. Not to mention the manpower required to account for the significant casualties on the front, and the fact that their encirclement would have to be quite a bit larger.

The King of Mictlan sure knew what he'd been doing, tying up manpower and material while advancing the front at little cost to himself. The little poison spiders wouldn't work again now that Gehenna would soon have an antidote, and would administer small doses of poison cocktails to build up general resistance in their troops. The Mictlanese had shown their hand.

But it was better to use a weapon before the other side discovered it via espionage anyway. Sooner or later Gehenna would have found out about the poison. They were just unlucky enough to be its victims when they did.

"Fuckers."

Their war expenditures had increased in a dozen different ways, and since the Mictlanese advance had been mostly bonespiders and omen owls, they hadn't even paid the invaders back in blood.

If only Ajuka could create dozens of new servant creatures out of thin air by himself every day like Mictlantecuhitli did.

Swearing violently again, the Crimson Satan focused tired eyes on the map that had been hastily set out for him. The wide plains of Gehenna stretched out under his consideration, a world without oceans and full of rich bounty that was inked in by a cartography spell. The ugly shading that showed the occupation of the Limbo Strip had been hastily expanded to represent the new Mictlanese conquest.

His last few days had been an utter shit-show. The total collapse of Gehannan lines, the loss of significant amounts of material to enemy capture, and the reckless rebellion of his son were just the top of a very long list.

When Sirzechs had heard that Baraqiel had taken the field, there had been a period of hours where breaths were held and watchfulness was at its maximum. As time ticked on it had become clear that the four gods of Mictlan and their new ally the goddess of Tamoanchan weren't going to retaliate.
Which begged the question – *why*?

Where they just not comfortable in the distance from the portals to their own realms? Once the Tamoanchanans had joined with the Mictlanese, they had five gods on their side. Considering the general strength of divine beings, it should have been enough to try for victory in Sheol.

…Or were the Aztec gods paper tigers? If that possibility was *right*, the Satans could end the war in the morning by taking the field and invading Mictlan themselves. But if it was *wrong*, then half of Hell would be turned into a glass desert. Global extinction was too risky to gamble on the off chance that his tired theory was correct.

There were three other ways he could test his hypothesis.

They had ground to give, so if they *gave it*, would the gods show their faces? Would feeling comfortable at the distance from their homeland be enough of a reason to go all in? It was simple in execution, but if Mictlantehculti and his allies were strong, Sirzechs would have allowed Armageddon.

Similarly, they could hold their lines and slowly escalate. If the invaders escalated right back, the damage to Sirzechs' country would increase exponentially. At least until one side couldn't sustain the increase, or *everyone* died. Again, high risk, high reward.

The third option was perhaps, the masterstroke. The Limbo Strip didn't only contain the easy portals to Mictlan and Tamoanchan. It contained pathways to many other realms. Perhaps what Gehenna needed wasn't so much soldiers on the *inside* but allies on the *outside*.

Or saboteurs.

Or both.

"Serafall." Sirzechs barked, startling his tired fellow Satan awake.

Wiping at her gritty purple eyes, the Satan Leviathan yawned until her jaw cracked. "What's the trouble, Sirzechs-chan? Are the seewahs invading again? Or is it the seaseas this time? It's so hard to keep all my racist slurs straight…"

"How quickly do you think you'd be able to make it to the human world?" Sirzechs didn't insult her by asking if she *could*.

Black eyebrows trailed up at the question. "I wouldn't take me more than half a day to get there, if I leave now and take the bent roads. Why?"

Sirzechs hesitated, rolling the words around on his tongue before sighing. Best to just tear open the wound. "I was wondering if you were still owed a *favour*.

Confusion flavoured Serafall's face for a moment, abruptly shifting into an emotionless mask. "And why would you ask me about that?" she murmured lowly, chin inching up in an imperious manner.

The Crimson Satan knew the entire façade was little more than a poor cover for an old, deep pain. An agony that was one of the sharpest a living being could ever know.

But while Sirzechs was Serafall's friend, he was also a lord of Sheol, and Sheol was in need. So instead of changing the topic, he plowed on. "The Mictlanese advance is stretching their supply lines. Maybe not as much as ours, but they can't guard the portals as closely as they once did without expending even more huge amounts of manpower. The bonespiders might be essentially infinite, but
"The cihuateteo and the tzitzimimeh are not."

"What about it?"

"It would be vulnerable to an assault from the human world, or another one of the spirit realms. But for that, we need an army."

"And Oberon has one."

Sirzechs' watched as the black-haired woman drew in a slow breath, green uniform shifting over her rising chest. "Fine then. I'll ask him."

Spinning on her heel, Serafall stalked away and out of the map room. The door slammed shut behind her, providing a loud sign of her displeasure. But still she went, because she had sworn oaths as a Satan, and nothing was meant to get between the Satan and her service to her country.

Even if it was the memory of an old lover and a changeling child that would never be hers again.

The redhead drew his lip back between his teeth, worrying at the soft flesh before shaking his head and flipping his phone back open. A Satan's work was never done. "Ajuka, do you have a few minutes? I want to talk about one of your older ideas…"

The second time Sasuke woke, he knew it was time to stop stalling. Drawing a last lungful of Rias' vanilla scent, the Uchiha held it in his lungs and slipped out of the bed. Every face on the mattress looked exhausted to his eyes, and he left them to sleep.

Stepping out of the room, Sasuke cast a wary glance both ways down the halls of the manor before moving off to the left. He didn't intend to go far, and if his memory was right the corridor ended in glass double doors leading to the outside.

Outside turned out to lead to a wide concrete inground pool. Rough stone scraped over the soles of Sasuke's feet as he swiftly padded to the other end, and settling a cautious glance on the doors he'd just stepped out of, Sasuke began.

"Ophis."

There was no strange stir of the wind. No phantom hand settling over his shoulders. No cool whisper into his ears.

Ophis.

Taking hold of the faint bond deep in his heart was like running without eyes. Sasuke's grip slipped and fumbled, never feeling quite right until with an odd feeling of completion, the psychic link came alive. Ophis! He bellowed internally, shaking at the spiritual cord like a tiger rattled at his cage.

Ophis!

Wakefulness came swiftly, along with a distinct impression of irritation. No words passed through Sasuke's mind, only the sensation of her attention. Trying to call her with the syllables formed by his mental voice proved fruitless, and finally Sasuke shoved a heavy knot of frustration and impatience down to her.

Black smoke began to flow from Sasuke's mouth. Curling out of his nostrils like the breath of a jealous dragon. The dark fog tickled at his throat, driving the Uchiha into a mad coughing fit as he expelled more and more of the tainted cloud.
"What took you so long?"

"We do not speak mind-to-mind unless we are joined. What do you want, Uchiha Sasuke?" Ophis's voice was soft; her innocent young appearance belying the real power contained inside the gothic lolita. "Why are you bothering me?"

Anger sparked at the unconcerned nonchalance written into every inch of Ophis' body, and Sasuke's voice went cool as the winter night. "Isn't it obvious? Answers."

The dark-haired girl hummed in comprehension, turning on the spot and moving out over the smooth blue surface of the Gremory clan's pool.

Not a ripple flickering over the glass-like surface, even though every step changed Ophis' semblance, She was a young girl, then a young woman, then hunchbacked old man, then Sasuke himself, before twisting back on her heel and appearing the way the Uchiha had come to expect.

"To what?"

"What do you mean, to what?" Sasuke shot back irritably. "Wouldn't anyone want to know about a random 'soul bond' they have with someone they haven't spoken to in years?"

"You have it because you requested it."

"When the hell-"

"Do you want power? I offered that twice, and twice you accepted it, and then even asked for more."

"Why? Nothing is free. What exactly do you get out of this?"

"I told you that too. I intend for you to become my sword." Faint impatience crossed the girl's elfin face, and Sasuke wondered for the first time why she was so different from the Ophis that had hungered for blood along with him in his own mind.

So he asked.

"Because I am a dragon, and you are a devil." Black hair floated in a nonexistent breeze, giving off an impression of otherness. "In those moments, just as I bleed into you, you bleed into me."

"Is that going to be a recurring theme?" Sasuke seethed quietly, forcing his clenched fists to relax. "Or am I going to live in fear of becoming some insane violent madmen at the drop of a hat?"

"That was not me, Uchiha Sasuke. That was all you."

A large part of Sasuke shied away, from that statement, rejecting the assertion, but in his heart he knew it was the unvarnished truth. The wild avenger inside of him had been part of Sasuke for most of both lives, hungering for carnage and filled with joy at the thought of another sacrifice on the altar of his ego.

"You're a dragon?" the Uchiha switched tracks, swallowing past the dryness of his mouth. He hadn't intended to be 'the avenger' again, yet it seemed all roads wanted to lead him back to it.

Wait.

Ophis the dragon.
Sasuke backpedaled, eyes going wide. "You're a Ophis – the Ouroboros Dragon? That Ophis?"

"Yes."

Shit, shit. What was Sasuke supposed to do? It was one thing to plan to strike back at a manipulative little witch, relying on his friends as a source of strength while he rejected her offers of power. It was entirely another to try to cut down the Dragon God of Infinity.

The gap between his current self and the Strongest Existence was greater than the gap that would have been between Itachi and an infant. It would take hundreds, if not thousands of years to cross that monumental distance, if it could be crossed at all.

"What do you want with me?" It was practically inconceivable what a being like Ophis – a presence so mighty she reputedly didn't even bleed when struck by the strongest Sacred Gear of all – could want with him.

"As I said, I want you to become my sword."

"What does that even mean?"

"I intend for you to fight for me, whenever and wherever I demand it. Whether that opponent is a human, or the Apocalypse Dragon I intend to slay ought to be irrelevant to you."

"I'm not your servant!" Sasuke roared at her, wrath overcoming the fraying bonds he'd been holding on his temper.

"Yes, you are."

Black eyes went wide, unconsciously sputtering into the Sharingan. The drain of his magical reserves went unnoticed as he stared at the Ouroboros Dragon with rage. "Care to say that again?"

Ophis tilted her head at him, considering the building anger she could feel trembling over their bond. Perhaps it was best to deal with that. Reaching out psychically, the dragon squeezed.

Sudden pain rocked through Sasuke's chest, his heart stuttering so slowly that a cold sweat broke out over his pale face. He was dying again, vision turning black and spots running over the field of his view.

And then Ophis released, having successfully derailed Sasuke's ascent to aggression. "As I said, for all intents and purposes you are my slave."

Cocking an eyebrow at her unwilling servant, Ophis pressed on. "Who do you think gave you this life you enjoy? I was the one that pulled your souls from your bodies when Uzumaki Naruto was assassinated. I was the one that gave him a home in the Gremory family, and you a body of my own flesh. It was I that conducted Lilith's forgotten ritual, molding you into a devil."

Sasuke was unable to contain the rising tide of horror that filled the back of his throat like bile.

"Every breath you take is because of me. Your entire existence is sustained by me. When you accepted power from me, you accepted my ownership of you. Refuse to become my sword, and I will end my ties with you. Perhaps you will survive, but it is likely your soul will crumble into nothingness."

"You're a monster." It was perhaps the first time Sasuke had called someone that since he'd seen Itachi murder their parents. The sheer magnitude of her manipulations took his breath away.
Ophis actually had the gall to look annoyed. "I do not think I am so cruel as that. Who do you think arranged for Dohnaseek to push you into accepting your passions? Who do you think set you up to be conveniently 'discovered' by Toujou Koneko and inducted into Rias Gremory's peerage? The life you have now is one you have because I gave it to you. I even made no attempt to interact with your new life after I arranged it until you sought me out. You could have a much worse master."

With that parting shot, the gothic lolita tore a hole through the fabric of reality. Ophis had stepped halfway into the next dimension when Sasuke's hoarse question arrested her movement.

"Did you give me these eyes too?"

"A pureblood devil is made through the consumption of many souls. Is it any wonder you have Sharingan eyes when many dozens of your clansmen chose to abandon the afterlife and offer up their souls to become your power?"

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Green crystal winked under the electric glow of the factory lights. Naruto bit the inside of his lip, pushing just a few dribbles more of his power into the pseudo-battery before tossing it into the basket of finished products. Another gem found its way into the redhead's hands, and the process began all over again.

He could feel Beowulf's gaze digging into the back of his skull. Sirzechs' Pawn was keeping a relentless watch over the Satan's 'rebellious' son. Naruto wasn't sure what was worse – the endless monotony of grunt work or the fact that he could barely take a shit without someone observing him.

The punishment Naruto's father had given him was inspired, to say the least. If Naruto was so determined to support the war effort Sirzechs' had reasoned, he could do it by draining every drop of his magic into the storage crystals that fueled their various kinds of magical technology. If Naruto was too exhausted to even think by the end of the day, he'd be too exhausted to get into more trouble.

It was not the worst sentence Naruto could have gotten, since in a roundabout way he was still doing something, but that didn't make the penalty any more interesting. "You sure you don't want to give me a hand with this?"

Beowulf denied Naruto's request to join him in his misery.

Ravel didn't bother to respond at all.

Naruto clenched his jaw, accepting his fiancé's cold shoulder without complaining. He understood pretty well why Ravel was pissed off at him. The blonde Bishop hadn't come right out and said anything, but only an idiot wouldn't be able to connect him leaving her behind while he went to fight with her refusal to speak to him at all for the past few days.

Sooner or later she'd crack and start talking to him, even if it was just to growl about his protectiveness. Naruto was just waiting for that moment to hurry up and come along. The sooner he could start properly talking to the people in his life, the sooner he'd be able to make everything go back to normal.

Ravel had to understand that he'd only done what he did to keep her safe. He'd have to find a way to convince his parents stop seeing him like a little kid who had no place in the war. Sasuke would eventually wake up, and Naruto needed to tell him that there was no reason for the Uchiha to play hero every time he heard Naruto was in a bind.

Considering the dozens of soldiers he'd saved and the dozens of enemies he'd defeated, Naruto couldn't bring himself to regret going to the frontlines in Shamond. Life might have gotten a little
difficult for him once the dust had settled, but some short-term discomfort was definitely a price he was willing to pay for the greater good.

That didn't mean Naruto enjoyed the cold shoulders he was getting.

Filling up the last storage crystal in the pile, Naruto threw it in the basket with the others and stretched. The joints of his back popped with a sense of relief, and spinning about on his stool the redhead fixed a bored stare on his father's Pawn. "All done with this batch, bucko."

Beowulf sighed, running a hand over his close cropped brown hair before reluctantly nodding. "Fine, I'll go get you some more. You know the rules."

"Yeah, yeah." Naruto muttered, watching the older devil lurch out of his seat and meander over. "Don't go anywhere, don't do anything. Just stay put like a good little boy. No stripper parties."

Smirking when the Pawn gave a short huff of exasperation, Naruto lounged back and waited.

As soon as his father's Pawn stepped out of the side office they'd been crammed in for Naruto's punishment, he sucked in a breath and blew a raspberry. "So are you gonna blow up at me now or are we just gonna dance around it for a few more days?"

Ravel paused, slowly trailing her blue gaze up from her book to glare at the redhead. She seemed to weigh the merits of voicing her displeasure versus extending her silence before shutting her book with a vicious snap. "Sometimes I wonder if I should just go back to my grandfather's house."

"What?" Naruto's blinked in surprise before frowning back. "Why would you even consider that? Is this supposed to be some kind of dramatic temper tantrum?" There were very few people Naruto could name off the top of his head that he had distaste for on a personal level, and the Marquis Phenex was one of them.

As someone that had grown up alone, the idea of treating family so abusively was utterly abhorrent to Naruto. Family was meant to be treasured and protected, not trained with the constant threat of violent punishment. Ravel might not see it as unusual, but the redhead really doubted she wanted to return to that house and all the possible retribution her grandfather had been saving up for her.

"No." Frigid softness filled the blonde's voice as she stared down the Gremory heir. "But if I'm going to be treated like something to be commanded, I might as well be doing it in a familiar environment. Just what do you think I am? Some stupid little doll to keep on your shelf except when you have no other choice?"

"I was trying to keep you safe!"

"I never asked you to do that! I asked you to treat me like your friend. I expected you to trust me as your Bishop, and maybe one day as your wife. If I wanted to be 'safe', I never would have left home."

Naruto swallowed roughly. How could he convey his need to protect that young innocence she had just a little longer? On the outside, they weren't far in age. But on the inside Naruto was a grown adult and he knew too well the toll war took on the young. "I didn't want you to have to get your hands dirty."

"To fight was my choice." Settling her hand over her heart in emphasis, Ravel leaned forward with eyes of blue fire. "When will you learn that I'm not some delicate flower that you have to coddle? I can make my own decisions, Naruto. If I want to fight for this country, I will. If I dirty my hands for your sake or anyone else's is my call. If you can't accept that then just tell me, and I'll go back home."
"You're my fiancé, not my keeper."

"I'm sorry." Was all Naruto could say. He wanted to protest. He wanted to wear her down until she agreed to keeping her distance from the ugliness of the world a little bit longer. But Naruto had been a soldier himself the first time he was twelve, and he wasn't that much of a hypocrite.

"You had better be." Ravel muttered, cracking her book back open and beginning to read. She still seemed quite cool, but a little less thorny than she had been.

Wood creaked as Beowulf stepped back into the cramped office, basket of empty gems in hand. The brunette's eyes tracked from one young devil to the other, too slowly and deliberately to be coincidence. Naruto wondered how long the man had been standing out in the hallway waiting for them to finish.

"Here Naruto." The Pawn's mouth curved into a tiny smile as he settled the basket on the table in front of the redhead. "The foreman said you've given him a good batch – as usual - and has high expectations for this bunch too."

Rolling his eyes, Naruto spared a last glance at his Bishop before getting back to work.

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The water was cold.

Staring at the blue tinted bottom of the pool, Sasuke decided it was such a stupid incongruent thought. He might as well be observing that grass was green, or that a pillow was soft, or that sugar tasted sweet. But the thought was there anyway, sliding gently over the fractured glass shards of his thought processes.

The water was cold. It touched every part of him, making the strands of his black hair float gently because of their natural buoyancy. His lungs faintly burned from the lack of air, but Sasuke didn't want to surface quite yet. Beneath the surface was a different world. A world without confusion. A world without rage at his virtual enslavement and the utter crushing despair of discovering the fate of his family. Even in the afterlife, the Uchiha clan seemed to be given the shitty end of the stick. Dozens of their souls had been sacrificed for the sake of making Sasuke superhuman.

What was the worth of a soul? Were they simply layered on one another, reinforcing the small strength each offering had poured into him? Or did they each give him something in particular? Perhaps his right hand had once been his mother. Maybe the tongue behind his teeth had been Shisui. The image of his body as a cobbled together mishmash of parts almost made Sasuke bitterly laugh under the water.

The only real comfort was Ophis' assertion that they'd chosen to become Sasuke's power. He didn't think he'd be able to live with himself if every breath was driven by the unwilling consumption of his family. If they were willing, then that might be a burden Sasuke would be able to carry. Bearing his clan on his back was at least familiar ground.

Soon, he'd have to summon Ophis back. Somehow, Sasuke would need to find the steel to push past the anger and horror and demand clearer answers. Which clansmen had been used to fuel his strength? Why could he access the Sharingan but ran into a block when he tried to push for the Mangekyou? Naruto had been killed – by who and for what? Why did she take them to this world at all? Could she perhaps, send them back?
But that would have to wait for another time. A time where Sasuke didn't feel so damned shattered. He needed time and peace to try and force his bleeding heart to stutter a more normal beat. The slow building burn in his lungs helped with that.

A hand was suddenly shoved in the waistband of Sasuke's pants, shockingly warm against the small of his back before it began to roughly pull. Up and up they went, until Sasuke's head broke the surface with an unwilling gasp.

The slap that struck his cheek stung. "Are you trying to get yourself killed you fool?" Akeno barked at the Uchiha, anger drawing her brows tight as she tread water. Midnight dark snakes of her hair floated over the top of the water, wiggling back and forth and she shoved Sasuke against the edge of the pool.

"No?" Sasuke blinked in befuddlement, puzzled by her odd surge of fury.

Sarcasm colored the Thunder Priestess' voice as she hoisted herself out of the cool water. "Oh, so I suppose that laying face down in the pool is just an everyday thing with you, is it? Just a good old spot of fun to rejuvenate you after you've been in a coma for a few days."

Ogling as Akeno started to wring out the cotton of her pink pajamas. Sasuke felt the pieces click into place. "I'm not suicidal!" he denied, red flaring high on his cheeks. The thought that she assumed him weak enough to resort to ending his own life was mortifying. The only acceptable excuse for a warrior to end their own life was to prevent secrets from falling into enemy hands.

Akeno's jaw visibly clenched as she wrapped an impatient hand around Sasuke's bicep and hauled him out of the water. "Well how am I supposed to know? You went and got yourself possessed and the next time you're awake you're out here drowning yourself."

"I wasn't drowning myself! I was enjoying a little peace and quiet with my own thoughts."

"Because nothing says peace and quiet like oxygen deprivation, am I right?"

"Haven't you ever head of meditation?"

"Well next time you want to 'mediate', do it with less drowning and more breathing."

Wiping the sting of chlorine out of his eyes, Sasuke watched as the Queen muttered into a ball of yellow magic before sending it flying away into the mansion. "What are you doing now?"

"Letting everyone else know that you haven't gone running off into the wilderness."

"Have you been smoking drugs? Why would that even be considered a possibility?"

Shaking her head, Akeno rose to her feet and glared down at Sasuke. The angle and her unbound reminded him once again of his mother. The mother that might have lost her soul. Driving away the thought, Sasuke scrambled to his feet.

"Sasuke, you..." Akeno drew in a slow breath, violet eyes growing steely. "What are we supposed to think? You almost died, and then you went completely crazy. At this point, I have no idea what's going on in your head. Are you unstable? Are you just going to snap and go wild again? As far as I'm concerned, self-harm is pretty far down the list of strange things you could be doing."

Sasuke shuttered his eyelids, acknowledging the validity of her concerns but not entirely able to prevent the spike of pain her caution gave him. It was a rational response. "I'm not going to hurt you."
"I didn't say you were."

"No, listen to me." The Uchiha demanded, eyes snapping open fierce and scarlet. "I won't hurt any of you. Can I be frightening? Absolutely. But you have nothing to be afraid of. I'd rather end my own life than see any of you die."

Akeno stared at the strange new red and black eyes her friend sported before sighing. More and more bizarre things seemed to happen ever since Sasuke had started letting them all in. "I believe you. So, do you want to put a shirt on before we go talk things over with everyone else?"

"Not a fan of the shirtless look?"

The corner of her lip twitched up. "I didn't say that."
Chapter 27

When the grandfather clock in the corner of the study struck eight o'clock, it did it with a cheery little chime that made Yuuto want to throw something at the timepiece. With the way his life had been, the blond Knight sometimes felt he was fourteen going on thirty.

Life as a child had been simple. Find food to eat, and find a place to sleep. The orphanage had been a little more complex, with his basic needs provided for in exchange for focusing on education and fun. Life under Valper had been much more complex, as the sadistic madman had a dozen different variables running at any given moment Yuuto had to account for if he wanted to live or die.

Joining Rias' peerage had seemed like rolling back the clock. The question of pain or survival was forgotten, and the only thing Yuuto needed to care about was training to kill Galilei and enjoying his time with the friends that forced themselves on him. Yet as time rolled on, it had become clear that his life was even more complex than it had been as an experiment.

Be mindful of the strange political complexities of Sheol. Step carefully around the deep-seated issues everyone had, which included Yuuto himself. Drill himself to the bone to keep the people he lived with safe from sudden dangers. Keep his head down and avoid the notice of the raging warlords that fought for the future of the realm. To have Sasuke's sudden strange descent into madness and just as sudden return to sanity hanging over him was just another change the blond was going to have to adapt to.

Not that the knowing made the doing any simpler. For that, Yuuto needed concrete facts. Facts that Sasuke was supposedly going to provide for him.

Rolling back the sleeves of his black hoodie and resting his elbows on jean-clad knees, Yuuto watched as Akeno finally led Sasuke into the room. Their mere presence added another layer of tension to the already thick atmosphere, which was probably why the blond didn't make a sharp jibe about alcoholism when Sasuke went right for the liquor.

Akeno drifted over to Rias, sitting right next to the tense Ruin Princess and patting the redhead's knee. Some of the stiffness left Rias' shoulders at the gesture, making the Thunder Princess give a small smile of victory and turn to rest her head on the redhead's shoulder. The pair of them were always doing things like that, seeking a silent comfort from each other's presence.

Koneko's positioning was just as deceptively lazy as the two girls. Sprawling sideways in a plush red armchair with her familiar curled up on her stomach, the nekomata slowly rubbed Shiro behind the ears; all the while never moving her intent gold eyes from the Pawn. The Rook wasn't one to worry about pointless things, but Yuuto wondered if she felt like she'd pushed Sasuke over the edge with her attempt at self-sacrifice.

Despite all the barely contained worry and impatience, not one of the devils in the room made an effort to rush the Uchiha as he poured a generous glass of Duke Zeoticus' brandy and practically chugged the amber fluid down. Sasuke was strong, but he was hardly invincible, and if he needed some liquid courage before talking to them, they'd let him have it.

The silence had a certain spellbound quality to it that was only broken when Sasuke set the snifter down firmly on the desk and began.

"Thirty-five years ago I was born as a human. "
Well, Yuuto reflected wryly; let no one accuse Sasuke of being subtle. The tidbit seemed to shock everyone in the room half-to-death. The blond himself was only able to shrug on past it with the nurtured nonchalance he was starting to hold for everything that was odd in Gehenna. Things were difficult enough to adjust to without sweating the small stuff.

A handful of extra years in age in an immortal species didn't even register on the weirdness scale.

"And then the Ouroboros Dragon decided I'd be a great puppet, so she stuffed my soul in the body of a child and conducted Lilith's Ritual."

Scratch that.

"I believe you may be skipping a few pertinent details." Rias sputtered in a strangled tone, teal eyes gone large and round. Truthfully, Yuuto couldn't blame her for the shock. The thought that Ophis was personally involved in Sasuke's life was like God deciding to drop by for a visit. It simply wasn't done.

"Yeah, I suppose." The low bitter chuckle that escaped Sasuke's offered little comfort, especially when combined with the gelid light glittering in his dark eyes as he turned around. "Fine then. I was born the second son of the head of the Uchiha clan, a shinobi clan in service to Konohagakure. Along with the Senju clan, we created the village."

Akeno looked utterly baffled, both at the sudden divergence into life history, and perhaps wondering about if Sasuke was joking or if he really had been part of some hidden village of ninja. But considering her mother had been part of a Shinto onmyouji sect, she didn't really have room to talk.

Things started weird and it was all downhill from there.

"But the other villagers chose to follow the Senju. The Uchiha were ostracized through the generations, until they became so dissatisfied they planned a coup. When I was seven years old my brother had a choice – slaughter our whole clan in exchange for my life on village orders, or permit the coup to proceed and drown the village in civil war. He chose to kill the clan, down to the last child, and told me he'd done it test his own power."

An old deep fury visibly clawed at Sasuke's insides, the Pawn's eyes narrowing and fists clenching as he pressed on in his story. Yuuto himself could feel the first sparks of anger in the cloud of shock and horror that was drowning him. He'd always known Sasuke's family was dead, his friend painfully confiding stories about his parents or cousins. But those tales seemed light as a feather compared to the heavy monstrosity of the truth.

"I won't bother with pointless details, but I swore revenge that night. I spent nine years training to kill my brother, and it was only after I did that I discovered the truth about what had happened to our family. After that I planned to annihilate the village that had been built on the blood of my clan. Before I got that far, I came to understand the choices my brother made for the sake of peace, and with the help of a friend, I let go of that hatred and tried to move on."

"How old were you then?" Rias seemed to have recovered from her pale-faced shock, settling prim hands in her lap. Except for the whole story about being much older than he looked and the bit about having been human, the Ruin Princess hadn't seemed all that shocked about Sasuke's revelations. Perhaps that had been the topic of the little talk the two had a month ago? She'd certainly attempted to mother Sasuke for a while, and if Sasuke's childhood had been such an utter shitshow, Yuuto couldn't say that he disagreed with giving it a try.

"Seventeen." Sasuke seemed to consider it before nodding slowly. "I didn't exactly keep track of the
dates during that period, or during the years after when I wandered the world, but I at least knew what month it was. I was twenty-one when I stopped at a bar for a rice ball, took a bite out of it, and ended up in Gehenna."

"What." Koneko's flat statement brought an amused tilt to Sasuke's mouth. Yuuto had a similar desire to bark out with laughter. Biting into a rice ball and being sent to a different dimension? It seemed less like real life and more like the beginning of some ridiculous comedy anime.

"I thought the same. And you all know the rest, from living in poverty to almost getting killed by that fallen angel and spending the last few years here." Sasuke sighed, running a hand through the midnight strands of his hair. "The only thing you don't know about is Ophis. When I first met her I assumed she was just some bored noble that came by to feed me sometimes. And then when I was nearly dead, I thought I heard her offering me power, but since I never saw her again I dismissed it as a hallucination of my dying brain. At least I did until that night in Shamond."

The gathered peerage digested that, weighing the story over until Akeno cut to the real underlying problem. "What does she want? I really doubt someone like Ophis was playing good Samaritan, so she must have some long-running end game."

"She isn't." Sasuke replied dryly, folding his arms over his chest and stretching the blue t-shirt he'd hastily shoved on. "She told me in no uncertain terms that I'm her slave, and that if I refuse I'll die because my existence is apparently 'sustained' by her."

"When was this?" Yuuto wondered irritably, the Dragon God's proprietary attitude reminding him strongly of a certain Archbishop of Genocide. Valper might have never called the children his servants, but he'd treated them as little more than property. The similarity between Galalei's willingness to reduce his experimental subjects to disposable bags of flesh and Ophis' apparent reduction of Sasuke to nothing but a toy to play around with galled him.

"A couple of hours ago."

Apparently, Sasuke just loved to drop sudden shockers with no preparation. Maybe it tickled his evil little heart with enjoyment, Yuuto reflected with a mixture of annoyance and surprise. "Just came on by for a little chat did she?"

"I called, and she came."

"Like a dog?"

"I wouldn't necessarily talk about her like that." Rias interrupted nervously, flapping her hand and glancing around the room like she expected the Ouroboros Dragon to jump out of the shadows at them. "But now that you're aware of her, you can speak with her?"

"Yes."

Pale fingers dug anxiously into the black cotton of Rias' sweatpants, but when the redhead looked up, her face was strong and determined. "Good. I want to speak with her myself. You're ours, not hers, and hopefully there's a way to make her see that."

A certain scarlet light flickered briefly in Sasuke's eyes, the smile pulling at his mouth full of secrets. "Fine then, if you're that determined. But I need to speak with your nephew first."

Rias stiffened, less out of jealousy and more out of caution as she carefully considered the Pawn's fey smirk. "Why?"
"Because I told you practically everything important tonight. But there's still one thing that you should know, and that's more Naruto's secret to share than mine."

Naruto doubted he'd ever run as fast as he had once getting Sasuke's whispered message. Moving through the dim halls of the manor at a blind run, he forced his aching limbs to keep pumping his body along until he burst in through a darkly stained oak door.

"...Eh?"

When Sasuke had decided to call him over, he'd only offered two details. His location, and the fact that he'd finally discovered exactly why they were living second lives. Nothing had been said about having an audience of his aunt's nearest and dearest.

"If this is supposed to be a joke, it's not a very funny one." The Gremory heir growled at Sasuke, forcing his racing pulse back under control. More than one pair of eyes was pondering him with expectation and a touch of suspicion, and it made Naruto antsy. "I don't exactly appreciate having to run all over the place for nothing, asshole."

"There's no joke, Naruto." Sasuke inhaled slowly through his nose, hands sliding into the pockets of his black sweatpants. "I know most of the story, and I told them most of it. The only thing they don't know is where Konoha is, and how you fit into everything."

Fury banked in Naruto's head like a cloud of angry bees, buzzing louder and louder with the force of his feelings. "So, let me get this straight." The redhead began, slowly and dangerously, ignoring the way his aunt's peerage grew tense and watchful. "You just decided to start a tell-all without even asking me my opinion or at least warning me about it?"

"Do you need a few minutes?" Rias offered, forcing the courtesy despite the fact that she and her peerage all looked fit to explode from their sheer curiosity. It was an offer of privacy Sasuke appreciated, and which reminded him of why he'd come to care about her in the first place, but one he thought was unnecessary.

"No." Sasuke denied, voice slow and careful as he stared back at Naruto's building rage with slightly thinned lips. "I just have to say – Most of what I told them was mine to share anyway, and maybe it makes me an asshole to box you in and make you share too, but sometimes it's best to let everything come to light. How many problems could have been avoided if Itachi had just told me the truth? What good did keeping secrets ever do us back then?"

As quickly as it came, Naruto's vehemence died. Guttering out like a candle in the wind, the tide of emotion left nothing but low smoldering embers. "None." He admitted ruefully, pinching at his nose and fortifying himself. "Just- fuck. Fine. Let's do this then. What did you already tell them?"

Rias watched as sheer relief flashed across Sasuke's face before it faded back into the carefully constructed expression of neutrality he frequently sported. She was dying from the curiosity, and more than a little upset at the thought that the two had been keeping secrets from her. But she didn't dare interrupt their conversation and cut off the flow of revelations.

"How old I actually am. What happened to my family. The fact that we were all shinobi... and about how my friend convinced me to give up on the path of loneliness."

Naruto snorted, a touch of amusement entering his voice as he padded over to Sasuke and pulled himself up to sit on the desk beside the Uchiha's empty brandy snifter. "Couldn't get any more barebones than that, ya bastard?"
"I did tell them the name of the village."

"True, true." The redhead boy mused, projecting an air of false joviality before settling a heavy blue gaze on his aunt. It was best just to be brutally honest and hope the reaction wasn't too bad. "The friend that save Sasuke from solitude was me."

"That's impossible." Akeno denied instantly, violet glare shifting back and forth between the two former-shinobi. "You're not nearly-"

"Old enough?" Sasuke cut her off, grimacing with a faint expression of apology as the Thunder Priestess scowled. "Naruto is as old as I am. Just like how the Ouroboros Dragon gave me a younger body, she put Naruto's soul in that of an unborn infant."

Instant pandemonium broke loose, with Naruto's knee jolting with such surprise that the brandy glass was knocked off the table to shatter on the hardwood. The sound of breaking glass itself was drowned out by the combination of Naruto's sharp "By Ophis? Shouldn't you lead with that sort of shit?" and Rias' "So who the hell are you then?"

Sasuke's attempt to respond affirmatively to his friend went unnoticed as the last remnants of Rias' control frayed away to nothing.

"What do you mean who am I?" Naruto shot back incredulously, red brows climbing as his focus snapped over to his rapidly approaching aunt. The desk he was sitting on minimized the height distance, but she was still just tall enough to loom over him when she got close. "I'm Naruto."

"No. Naruto is my fourteen-year-old nephew, not a thirty-something year old whoever you are!"

"It was me either way, Rias. I'm the same person. Just with a little extra."

Shaking her head in denial again, the Ruin Princess glared down at the Gremory heir with a mixture of something like panic and even a touch of fear. "How can you – it's not that simple. All these years, you're telling me that my nephew never actually existed and it was some stranger all along? How much time did our whole family spend together doing things with you and not realized we didn't know you at all?"

"I'm not a stranger." Naruto frowned, more than a little wounded at the rejection. "It was always me. The only difference is that I'm a little older than you thought I was. It doesn't change anything."

"Unless this is some terrible elaborate joke, this changes everything!"

Then shadows started to fill the air, seeping in from the cracks in the window, up from the spaces between the floorboards, out of the corners of the room and from behind the bookshelves. "Is this summoning going to be a recurring demand, Uchiha Sasuke?"

Serafall did not like the land of Faerie.

Entering it from the human world was a little more difficult than it would have been to enter it from the Limbo Strip in Gehenna, but not unduly so. The realm itself was beautiful, with vibrant red and orange leaves shining beneath an otherworldly sun. A sweet aroma that smelt faintly of apples tickled at her nose, and the sounds of nature were pure in a way that was rare in Gehenna or the human world.

But no amount of physical loveliness could distract her from the fact that her daughter lived there. A changeling daughter, born from a few deluded weeks of passion with the Summer King. Stupid
weeks, where she'd come the closest she had to be infatuated with anyone and even carried the sidhe's babe to term.

Vala had only been in her life for a handful of precious years. A handful of years before Oberon had come looking for his bastard daughter and convinced Vala to choose her sidhe half over her devil half before the girl had been old enough to understand exactly what she was giving up. Oberon may not have had a use for Vala at the time, but he was greedy enough to not want to share his 'toys'.

Once a sidhe, always a sidhe. Changelings did not have to choose so early, but the older they got the more unstable their existence became. They had to eventually settle on one or the other, rejecting the powers and ageless immortality of their fae parent or the soul they'd gained from the non-fairy parent.

The emptiness of never having had a real chance to love her own daughter ate at Serafall. That frustrated maternal yearning was probably why she'd come to smother her younger sister with affection. Sona didn't look at all like Vala, with dark hair and sharp features instead of a mane the color of autumn and a soft face, but a baby was a baby. In her darker moments, she'd almost managed to delude herself that her daughter had never left.

Shoving down the knot of pain, Serafall focused her icy purple gaze on the warm summer forest surrounding her and began to move. Faerie was unlike Gehenna and far more like the Dimensional Gap between worlds was rumoured to be. Distances were affected not by logic, but by the strength of emotion and will. Two people with the same destination could arrive there in vastly different time frames.

Well, let her un-ending abhorrence for the father of her child lead Serafall to where she needed to go.

Leaves and thick forest loam wrinkled under the heels of the Satan's leather boots as she moved forward. Direction didn't truly matter, because the land itself was alive and full of strange magic. A human would likely end up lost in Faerie without a guide, wandering for eternity as the world shaped and reshaped itself in beguiling ways and refused to cower under their weak mortal will.

For someone like Serafall, who had real power and could not be ensorcelled so easily; all bent roads in the enchanted land became straight.

Briefly, she considered moving to the other end of the realm and searching out the Queen of Air and Darkness. Mab surely would have loved to trade a favour for a favour, and the opportunity to own the debt Oberon promised Serafall would have been quite the coup for the Winter Queen. Winter soldiers would be just as deadly as those of Summer, and she'd never have to even glance at that fucker's face again.

But better the foul little trickster she knew. Oberon might be vile, but he at least knew well enough to be cautious of her. Mab likely had all the Summer King's arrogance and none of his wariness, and cowing Mab would be more troubling than it was worth.

Roots creaked as the forest gave way, and then the Satan was moving into an open glade. Sunlight turned into the cool distant twinkling of white stars in an instant, as the world rewove itself to favour the personal tastes of the greenhaired woman rapidly approaching her.

"Titania." Serafall greeted the Summer Queen in a polite distant voice. She didn't resent the pretty sidhe. She didn't even particularly dislike the fae that had become her daughter's stepmother more than any other random fairy, since Titania had little involvement in the Oberon's manipulations.

But it was always best to treat every meeting with the fae as a business meeting. Playing at fondness or being 'different from the other sidhe' was just another ploy for the snakes to wriggle their way into
the heart.

Serafall had learnt that lesson the hard way.

A wide uncanny grin split the Summer Queen's mouth, showing too many teeth for comfort. Despite the fertile shape of her body and the inhuman grace the was inherent to all fae, Titania still raised a few hairs on the back of Serafall's neck. There was too little feeling behind those dead emerald eyes for any being with a soul to relate to.

"Hello dear one." Titania purred, voice low and breathy. Just like everything else about the monarch, it was full of seducing loveliness. "It's been so long since I've had a chance to see you. How have you been?"

"Well."

"You don't need to be so cold." The fairy queen teased, smoothing her elegant hands over the moss-green sheer silk that did little to hide the curves of her milk-pale body. "We're friends, aren't we?"

Serafall said nothing.

Fae did not have friends, just like they didn't have true loyalty or the concept of fidelity – marital or otherwise. They had people who they owed debts to, and people who owed debts to them.

A displeased huff blew out of Titania's pert nose as her air of joviality drained away, leaving only reptilian interest and a businesslike demeanor. "Oberon comes." Titania informed the Satan. Then the Summer Queen moved back, circling to the edge of the glade and considering the interloper with sharp birdlike motions, searching for a weakness like sharks searched for blood.

If Serafall were less powerful, the Summer Queen would probably be hitting at her with the full force of her enticing sorcery. The reason fae were so dangerous wasn't the fact that they bargained incessantly. Once the simple rules of 'offer nothing, accept nothing' were understood it was simple enough to proceed carefully with them.

The real difficulty came from the way they could prod and mesmerize a potential bargainer until the person became convinced that a fae bargain wouldn't be that bad in the first place, or that they would be happy enough to settle for poor terms. A tantalizing flash of the breast here for a male supplicant, and deliberate show over tight pants over a sizeable crotch there for a female one, and a little blast of illusion magic would have the weaker willed falling all over themselves for an excuse to stay in contact with such perfect creatures.

It was only by virtue of the fact that Serafall would shrug off any of Titania's attempts to gently coerce her that she was left alone. The sidhe were greedy and cunning, but not stupid. If someone with the power of a Satan noticed they were being manipulated and reacted poorly to the attempt, the entire land of Faerie might feel the wrath of that violence and run rainbow with fairy blood.

The Kings and Queens of the Summer and Winter fae had power and strange magic. But they didn't have the sheer martial strength needed to defeat someone like Serafall Leviathan without massive collateral damage.

"Serafall." Where Titania's preferences had plunged the world into starry night, the Summer King brought the dawn with him as he entered the glade. Red and pink crested off the fiery strands of his hair, granting him a crown of reflected sunlight.

"Oberon." Serafall wallowed in the thrill of malicious glee that curled over her nerves at the faint unease that narrowed her once-lover's eyes. It was good that he was afraid of her. The last time
they’d ever spoken had been when the fae had promised her an unspecified favour in exchange for her not raging through Faerie and trying to kill him, though it had been disguised as a trade for use of her womb.

And Serafall had dearly wanted to kill him, she still did, but she wasn’t someone that reveled in unnecessary gore. She could put up a show well enough for prisoners or to intimidate foes on the battlefield, but she was no battle loving maniac.

Vala had given up her soul to become one of the sidhe at that point anyway, so all that Oberon's death would achieve would be plunging Faerie into chaos. Everything in the land of the fae was about balance, and disrupting that balance could cost many lives and even spill out into other realms. The human realm especially would be impacted. The last time Oberon had been seriously wounded, it had triggered a miniature ice age on Earth.

So, the Satan had swallowed back her black hatred and accepted the promise. A favour from a faerie king was nothing to scoff at, and no amount of killing could change the past or bring her child back to her.

Even if it would make her feel better, the ability to put rationality over emotion was what made a ruler.

"You didn't bring Vala with you." Spilled from Serafall's mouth before the devil could stop herself, and she inwardly winced. Her daughter wasn't always on her mind, but being surrounded by the land Vala lived in made it impossible for the changeling child to not intrude on her thoughts.

"I felt that it wouldn't be conductive to good relations." Oberon drew slightly closer, caution warring with his natural arrogance. As a being that was used to throwing his weight around to shock and awe the mortals, having to swallow down all his pride to approach someone who was his equal in status no doubt chafed at the fairy monarch.

Against her will, Serafall found herself agreeing with him. Titania had probably waylaid her to give the sidhe time to redirect her daughter elsewhere. Maybe it made Serafall a coward, but she never wanted to see the girl again. To see those once lively purple orbs deadened to dead amethyst. To listen to the voice that had once gleefully shouted 'momma' refer to her coldly as 'mother'. To watch the dull play of false emotions that attempted at humanity but achieved only the uncanny. It would break Serafall's heart.

Serafall didn’t have time for a broken heart. She had a war to win. Lives were depending on her. Lives like Sona’s, who didn’t even know that Serafall had once had a child.

Shoving past the figurative elephant in the clearing, Serafall steel her spine. With her hands fisted behind her back and the crisp lines of her green military uniform cutting sharp angles in the artificial dawn, the Satan projected presence. She was no mere petitioner, and the cold fire that burned in her violet eyes was that of a conqueror.

"Fifty years ago you promised me that in exchange for my… services, you would give me one unspecified favour. I'm here to collect, and I want your army."

Oberon didn't bother to try and look surprised. The war between Gehenna and Mictlan was probably the talk of a dozen realms as all different kinds of supernatural beings waited with baited breath to see who the victor would be. The Biblical faction had been kings of the castle for a very long time, but no empire lasted forever, and they wanted to see if the decay in their power was fatal. So Serafall appearing and demanding military aid was probably if not expected, then at least considered possible.
Holding out his hand, the Summer King spoke a Word. It echoed in the air of Faerie, dimming the ethereal lights as red gold began to pool in Oberon's palm. Up the molten metal curled, beating itself into the elegant shape of a horn. Carved stags pranced over the gleaming surface, and with a flourish the redhaired sidhe presented it to the Satan.

"For one battle only, the full might of the Summer Court will be yours to call on. Sound the clarion, and we will answer. With this, my debt is discharged in full."

"With this your debt is discharged in full." Serafall agreed, clenching her jaw as a weight seemed to fall from the fairy king's shoulders. It was not easy for one of the fae to be bound under a debt for so long. They loved to collect favours, not owe them.

Oberon's relief at being free of their 'bargain' was in his nature.

Just like hating him was in her nature.
The burn of anger was like spice in the blood, searing all through Rias' veins with every beat of her convulsing heart. The Ruin Princess was aware that she felt things too deeply to be convenient for a good politician, but she couldn't help it. When the truth of Naruto's origins came out, the heat of fury scorched in the back of her throat like dragonfire.

Every single moment anyone in her family had ever had with Naruto had suddenly come under question. It was like she'd woken up one day to discover a cuckoo child in the nest. Rias was angry at Sasuke too, but she'd known most of his story already, and the only rending revelation was him being party to Naruto's long-running charade.

For fifteen years she'd assumed that the child of Grayfia and Sirzechs was her junior. She'd helped raise her nephew from the cradle. They'd played together, shared mischievous secrets, traded presents on holidays, taken vacations together, studied side-by-side to learn their lessons, and so on and on. Naruto had been her little brother, even when his genius and her jealously had driven a wedge between them.

But whoever was staring out at her with those deep blue eyes was neither little nor her 'brother'. All those memories felt like a total scam, where Naruto had fooled everyone into believing he was someone he wasn't, without apparent remorse.

Shouting at Naruto felt good, because Rias didn't know how to deal with the enormous pile of shit that had just been dropped into her lap. Maybe between boiling rage and stinging words some measure of stable order would emerge, and the world would finally feel righted.

Unfortunately, it wasn't to be.

Ophis appeared without warning, black fog curling into the study like smoke from an invisible fire. The gothic lolita staring up at Sasuke looked far too young and innocent to be the legendary Ouroboros Dragon, but it must be her, because the sheer presence she exuded felt too similar to the raging darkness she'd seen twisting over Sasuke's skin like black spiderwebs.

"Is this summoning going to be a recurring demand, Uchiha Sasuke?"

"Depends. Are you going to kill me if it is?" Sasuke shot back at the Dragon God, a certain irreverent fatalism sharpening his tongue that Rias hated to see.

Grey eyes narrowed as Ophis tilted her head and kept her cool blooded stare on the devil she'd proclaimed her slave. "No. That would be a waste. But I would stop answering the call, perhaps to your detriment."

The sudden arrival of the Dragon God of Infinity was like a bucket of ice water sliding down Rias' back. The frigid sensation smothered her anger to ashes, because no matter how angry she was at Naruto and Sasuke, she wasn't going to offer them up as sacrifices to a capricious deity. Whatever Sasuke had done, he was still her Pawn and she needed to protect him. And whoever Naruto was, he didn't deserve to die or continue to be manipulated by a shadowed puppet master.

Swallowing past the hard knot in her throat, Rias seized the initiative and stepped forward. Sasuke's eyes flashed with a scarlet warning that she ignored, determined to try to come to some sort of agreement with the intruder before everyone else recovered from their stunned silence and tried to stop her.
"Ophis, I wish to speak with you."

Ophis shifted about on her dainty heels, dismissing her impertinent servant with a lazy wave of the hand. The gaze of a being that had seen a thousand generations settled on the Ruin Princess, daunting with the heaviness of eons. "Rias Gremory. What do you want?"

The tone was nonthreatening and empty of practically all emotion, but it still made every nerve in Rias' body quail with instinctive fear. Her existence was little more than a flicker of light in the night for someone like Ophis, passing by in a split second and barely even noticed. "I want you to release my Pawn from his forced servitude."

"I refuse." The dragon denied out of hand, focus already shifting away as she considered the other faces in the room. Akeno looked back, face firm but pale as milk. Yuuto was little better, jaw clenched with a mixture of strain and distaste. Koneko mirrored Ophis' blank expression, hiding any kind of emotion.

"Why not?" Rias prodded carefully, drawing on all the negotiating skills her parents had ever taught her in order to keep cool and try to win rationally rather than by emotional appeal to a being that might not even have feelings. "We have a sentimental attachment to him, and while he's getting stronger he's hardly an ultimate class devil. Any use you can get out of him can easily be filled by a much stronger devil."

"Okay." Naruto cut in, clapping his hands together and stepping forward with his brow drawn tight in the angriest look Rias had ever seen him sport. "As interesting as watching you two haggle over my friend's freedom like a couple of fishwives is, I have a bone or ten to pick with you."

"Uzumaki Naruto, it is rude to interrupt." Ophis scolded lightly, sparking a rush of incredulity in almost everyone in the room. The notion of the Strongest Existence caring about polite manners was odd enough. That she did it without giving a very painful lesson seemed almost ludicrous.

Nonetheless, Rias filed her so-called nephew's apparent real name away.

Ignoring Naruto's indignant sputters, the Ouroboros Dragon addressed Rias. "You have nothing I want, Rias Gremory, that would convince me to part with a splendid sword like Uchiha Sasuke. It is only because you do not truly know the first life he led that you underestimate his worth to me. Additionally, you are not the only party who has some measure of a sentimental attachment."

It took a moment for Rias to process what Ophis had just implied, but once she did teal orbs went wide in shock. The notion that Ophis felt some sort of affection was so far beyond the pale that it barely computed across the membranes of her brain.

Yet apparently she did, since Ophis stood with a vaguely annoyed expression and rubbed at her chest like her heart actually ached. "Some irrational unforeseen consequences have resulted from the bond, and while they would never factor into my decisions they nonetheless remain. Additionally, I have a passing fondness for cookies."

Something like hurt mixed in with hatred filled Sasuke's eyes, turning black orbs bright red with the intensity of the Uchiha's rejection. "You don't get to pretend at friendship and bring up old jokes after sacrificing the souls of my family for your goals." He growled, raw in a way that made Rias want to cuddle him a little bit.

"Is that such an issue?" Ophis sounded honestly confused, turning back to the young devil she'd forced to be her servant with an impatient twitch. "Very well. I do not typically act in a way the resembles the human profession of psychologist, but if it resolves your ill will…"
A dark spike formed in Ophis' hand in the space of a second, rocketing forward and shoving right through Sasuke's heart so violently that Akeno gave a shout of horror.

Naruto was already charging forward, swirling red Rasengan in hand. It shouldn't have connected, with a being like Ophis as far above the redhead boy as the sun was above the Earth; but it did.

A violently rotating ball of the Power of Destruction collided right with Ophis' face, grinding with a shrill whine as Naruto roared with an unbearable sense of despondent loss.

Then it ended, fading away to reveal Ophis' unmarked, unimpressed face. "The is no need to become violent, Uzumaki Naruto. Not only is it a waste of energy, but your vendetta has no basis." She nodded meaningfully at Sasuke.

Numbly, Rias redirected her focus. Because Sasuke was dead, and if Sasuke was dead she couldn't deal with life right now, she couldn't—

But the Uchiha was alive, standing with a vacant look and breathing normally. A spire of black magic still jutted from his chest, but between dull black eyes and the healthy color of his cheeks, Sasuke looked more like he'd simply zoned out.

"What did you do to him?" Rias whispered, frantically shoving her frenzied thoughts into order. It looked like some kind of enchanted sleep, and while the spell would be strong, it might not be impossible to break. She might have to bargain with some unscrupulous god or dragon to wake her Pawn, but it could be done.

"I have merely sent him to his inner universe." Ophis informed her, raising an eyebrow at the mingled confused and resentment on Naruto's face. "It is nothing to get so worked up about. I believe yours was a sewer, Uzumaki Naruto."

Embarrassment flushed the Gremory heir's cheeks the color of ripe tomato, and the redhead folded his arms over his chest. "Thanks for letting everyone know what my mind is like, but why would you send him there?"

"Uchiha Sasuke resents me because his current body is born from the sacrifice of the souls of his family. In order to do away with that problem and make him a more effective servant, I've simply sent him to speak with those souls himself."

"That's cruel." Akeno told the Dragon God defiantly, stepping up beside Rias with a fierce mien. A second later Koneko and Yuuto were also flanking their mistress.

"If you think it so brutal of me, perhaps you should join him and experience my generosity for yourselves. I tire of these baseless assumptions."

Then ebony spikes filled the air, raining down in a dozen different directions like a hailstorm.

"Do you always have such a stupid look on your face, or is it something you offer especially for me?"

Naruto blinked, then with a flood of pure shock he backpedaled with wide eyes and wheeling arms. "You!"

Uchiha Madara watched as the young man once hailed as the Child of Prophecy stumbled down on his ass like an ignorant drunk. "Yes." The dead man mocked. "It's me. Boo."
"Go fuck yourself." Naruto shot back, climbing to his feet again and shaking his head to clear the last cobwebs from his memory. They'd been in the study, and then Ophis had fucked up Sasuke and shrugged off Naruto's spell like it was nothing. After that, she'd stabbed them all with spikes and sent him wherever the hell he was.

The devil's rushed pace of thought was instantly cut off by the faintest flash of straw yellow in the corner of his eye. "No way." Naruto breathed, staring down at his body with mounting shock. "What the hell? This is my old body!" Then he pulled at the front of his orange striped black sweatpants and looked down. "Hello old friend!

Madara looked disgusted. "You are just as vile and vulgar as Hashirama ever was."

"I think that's the sound of a sore loser."

"I didn't lose to you!" Madara roared back, eyebrow ticking as he slammed his palm over the red armor that protected his chest in life. "I lost to Kaguya. You were just a lucky bystander, you shitty brat!"

"Well I defeated Kaguya." Naruto smirked cockily, settling one hand over his hip and picking his nose with the other in a purposely obnoxious way. "And she beat you, so doesn't that mean by proxy I beat you?"

"Only with Sasuke's assistance, and since Sasuke was in a way my reincarnation, it can be said by proxy with my assistance."

"Ahh, but I defeated Sasuke."

"In an appeal to emotion, not on the battlefield."

"Man, were you always this much of a whiner? Then again, you were kind of a drama queen." The blond man mused, taking sadistic amusement from the sudden depressed look that crossed the face of his one-time enemy. "Your man-crush on the Shodai was the stuff of legends. Girls used to write smut novels about it."

"I did not have homoerotic feelings for Hashirama!"

"He doth protest too much, methinks."

"It seems every generation just ups the oddity factor." A third voice cut in, drawing Naruto's attention to another young man that looked eerily like Sasuke. "Stop letting him bait you, brother. It's unseemly."

"But Izuna, he has such a punchable face."

Uchiha Izuna weighed the Uzumaki with a look of amusement and poorly concealed dislike. "Isn't that the way of all Senju?"

Running a hand over his shaggy blond strands, Naruto let the insulting banter the two brothers exchanged at his expense roll off his shoulders like water ran off a duck. He wasn't one to hold grudges, so his first instinct hadn't been to strike out at Madara. But the man's presence – along with his certainly dead brother – raised questions he needed answered. "Oi, Madara. Where the hell is this place?"

Madara gave Naruto an inscrutable stare. "Didn't you know?" he began slowly. "This is Sasuke's soul. The inner world, or whatever term you liked to use for where you kept the Kyuubi. Surely you
didn't think you were the only one that had one?"

"Well it's not like I ever heard about them from anyone else. And his name is Kurama." Naruto shot back, examining his surroundings with more interest. His inner universe had been a sewer, though it had become much nicer after he'd become friends with the bijuu. Sasuke's by comparison was unfairly pretty, filled with trees and the warm sunlight beaming through the canopy. Soft graze tickled at the toes of his open shoes. "Isn't this all a bit snazzy?"

"How so?"

"Mine was a sewer, and definitely not this big."

Izuna laughed, giving great heaves of sadistic amusement at the muttered confession from the man that had descended from his clan's enemies.

"I can't comment on the surroundings, since they're quite different the further you go and sound much more varied than yours." Madara offered, watching his brother chuckle with a fond air. "But considering how many souls were sacrificed, should it not make sense that the world here is larger and more diverse to match the increased number of occupants?"

Grudgingly, Naruto nodded. "How many souls are here anyway?"

"Seventy-six." Both Uchiha brothers answered, two different tones clashing slightly. Izuna subsided when his brother continued on. "The dragon spriteling seemed surprised so many of us volunteered to be part of her little ritual, but she doesn't know the strength of our clan."

Naruto digested that, scanning over the wild undergrowth with blue eyes before meeting Madara's dark eyes squarely. "Is Obito here?"

"For what reason would he have to come?" Dark abhorrence crossed Izuna's face, drawing a warning glance from his brother. "He felt much closer to the Senju, and had more bonds with you than our descendent. With no loyalty to either clan or Sasuke, he decided to stay behind. Good riddance. You can never trust a Senju or their dogs."

"I see." The slowly budding hope in Naruto's chest died, but it wasn't that off putting. The chance to meet Obito would have been nice, but he'd made peace with never seeing his father's student after the man had died. Wait. "Your descendent? Both of you?"

"Mikoto was descended from my bastard daughter." Madara admitted, looking slightly abashed. As if it was shameful that he'd been human for once in his life. "And Fugaku was a descendent of Izuna. Why do you think I offered him so many chances at mercy? It wasn't just because he was a kinsman. It might have been few generations, but he was my child."

"I think your evil factor just went up another notch." Naruto noted dryly, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Well whatever, why are you here? Shouldn't you guys be, liquefied or something?"

"We would have been, if we'd been unwilling. But more power can be extracted from a willing soul. According to the dragon spriteling, it would totally consume a hundred unwilling souls or fifty willing ones. We exceeded the minimum by enough to have the leftover energy to still exist in some form here."

Kicking at the forest loam, Naruto marveled at the realistic way the grass seemed to spring back up. It really was unfairly pretty in here. "Well as nice as it is to get some information, is there a way out of here? Just being here feels kind of... violating."
Izuna and Madara exchanged a glance and shrugged. "Start walking." The younger Uchiha suggested, jerking his thumb in a random direction. "You certainly won't get anywhere hovering around us."

"Fine." Naruto rolled his eyes at the hostility, playing with the zipper of his orange hoodie as he scanned about. Two paths stretched out from the clearing, and the former shinobi picked the one that seemed to slope slightly upward. "Wish I got to have a bunch of old family members hanging around."

"From what I understand, Ophis had different plans for your soul after you were assassinated."

A beat passed.

"What?"

Wind whistled, rustling gently over long stalks of grass and creating cresting waves of greenery. Rias stared at the grasslands, red eyebrows climbing in befuddlement. What was this? Just a second ago, she'd been standing in her own home, magic cresting up to futilely defend against an attack by one of the strongest beings that existed, and then she was somehow transported to a lush grassland?

"Excuse me miss, are you lost?"

Rias turned at the voice, looking up at a tall and handsome man with one of the gentlest pairs of eyes she'd ever seen. There was a more than passing familiarity in the shape of those eyes and nose, and if she wasn't so off balance she knew she'd put it together immediately as it was, it took about two sentences.

"Yes – I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Uchiha Itachi."

The ferocity of her own slap caught Rias off guard. The sound of her open hand colliding with the man's pale cheek easily cut over the gentle movement of the breeze, and the stunned look on Itachi's face as his skin reddened did little to cool the sudden burst of irritation curling through her. Here at least, was someone she could rage at without worry.

"You!"

"I'm sorry?" Itachi questioned, expression going cool and blank. "Do I know you?"

"Do you have any idea how badly you broke your brother?" Rias raged back, bowling right over the jolt of shock that twitched Itachi's body. The man looked like she'd just knifed him in the gut, but as far as she was concerned, it was the least he deserved. "I don't even know how you're here right now, but I'll gladly take the chance to give you a piece of my mind!"

Itachi bowed his head like a penitent sinner, pain pulling his features into a look of silent misery as Rias' scourging sunk tenterhooks into his guilty heart. It was just a little bit of the suffering he deserved, in his own opinion.

"It took years to convince him to open up to us. That's how afraid of loss and friends you made him!"

A flinch.
"And don't even get me started on the total fear and guilt he shows when someone gets hurt – as if it were all his fault for not being strong enough!"

A wince.

"I won't even talk about what it's like to see the utter misery that fills his eyes when he remembers the family he'll never have again."

A cringe.

Moments paused, filled with nothing but the heavy weight of Rias' teal eyes drilling into the crown of Itachi's lowered head. Then she sighed, pinching her nose and giving the man a much softer slap across the top of the head. "Raise your head, you god damn fool."

Itachi obeyed, smoothing out his tortured features into something more like neutrality. He'd known how badly he'd damaged Sasuke, but that didn't make the pain of his mistakes sting any less. That Sasuke was still suffering so many years later drove into his heart like nails made of ice. "It is one of my greatest regrets."

"It's not all bad." Rias admitted grudgingly, shifting her focus out to the waving stalks of grass. "He certainly speaks his family with fondness, even you. And while he's still hurting, he's slowly healing. He helps us, and we help him."

"Thank you."

"Pardon?"

"We do not get tales of the outside world here." Itachi informed the redhead girl, motioning vaguely at their surroundings. "The inside of Sasuke's soul is a splendid sight, but that doesn't make this inner world any less of a prison. Not that I complain, since even oblivion would be a choice I would make for Sasuke's sake, but it is torture in its way to not know how Sasuke's new life is proceeding. And for being there for him, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

An inner universe? Yes, Rias decided, that sounded queerly right. The concept itself felt absurd, but who knew what sort of strange powers Ophis had? If the dragon god could steal souls and create bodies, creating a private little realm might even be possible. Though she'd said Naruto had one too, so maybe it was something unique to shinobi?

"Would you like to sit and speak for a while?" Itachi offered, nodding over at a lonely tree poking up from the grassland like a sentinel. The growth around its based was much shorter and more orderly, giving the impression of a garden in the middle of a great field. "I'm sure you have many questions that I can answer, and if it would not trouble you, I would like to hear more of Sasuke's life as well."

"Fair enough." Rias agreed after a beat, following the tall Uchiha over a settling down beside the tree a short distance away.

"May I ask what your relationship to my brother is?" Itachi inquired as he lowered into a cross legged position. "Obviously, you have known him for some years, but that simply piques my curiosity."

"I am his mistress."

The Uchiha paused at that, eyebrows climbing as he assessed the girl. She might look a little young, but when he'd spoken to Ophis Itachi had made sure to demand exhaustive details. So she might be one of those 'devils' and be older than she seemed.
Still, the unsure age didn't make the redhead any less beautiful. Her proportions were the opposite of those traditionally favoured by the men of their clan, but Sasuke's preference for long hair was as expected. "I see." Itachi smiled warmly. "How long have you been in love?"

Rias choked on her own spit, wheezing like a dying animal as her face went mottled with sheer embarrassment at the question. There were so many levels of wrong with the thought. The power imbalance. The social status difference. Sasuke's various issues that needed support rather than to be taken advantage of. Whatever irrational personal lust she had was irrelevant.

Even the thought of lusting after Sasuke was enough to make the Ruin Princess swoon with guilty and a violently repressed trickle of *something* else. "We are not in love!" she squeaked, wondered if the heat rushing to her head would make steam start escaping her ears.

"I see." Itachi repeated again, and didn't react. It was not his place to be judgmental about the different social standards of another species. If Sasuke had gone little bit native in his second life, it was his right. "I didn't mean to presume. I simply assumed that your relations were romantic. It was short sighted of me to interpret your interactions by the standards of my own homeland."

"There were no relations!" Rias squeaked, hands fisting in the fabric of her pants as she searched for some measure of stability against the utter awkwardness. "I'm not that kind of mistress! Our relationship as master and servant is purely platonic!"

Letting the mortified girl regain her composure, Itachi pondered over that tidbit of information. So, Sasuke's social status was lower than the young woman's in whatever life they led together, but it wasn't enough of a barrier to prevent friendship. Still, she did protest a little too much. So, either she was extremely innocent, or she carried some level of unacknowledged romantic affection.

Black orbs twinkled with a touch of mischievousness. "My apologies. It seems I completely misinterpreted the nature of your relationship with my brother. Even so, as a brother I have certain prerogatives. Would you like to be?"

"Would I like to be what?" Rias responded warily, fanning at her still flushed face with a hand.

"Would you like to be in love with my brother?"

Again, the air was filled with the sound of desperate gasping.

Akeno plodded cautiously along the riverbank, violet eyes warily scanning the forest on either side of the burbling stream. Everything had gotten so irretrievably fucked up from the moment Sasuke had gone wild in Shamond that the Thunder Priestess truly wished they hadn't bothered to go. Naruto hadn't needed them anyway, and the only thing they gained from the little adventure was more complications. Having the Ouroboros Dragon peeking into their lives whenever the mood struck her was something Akeno could do with never having to worry about.

Unfortunately, life rarely worked out for anyone in Rias' peerage.

When the dragon god had shown up herself in Rias' study, Akeno knew nothing good would come of it. And lo and behold, she'd been proven right. They'd all been ensorcelled and drawn into an 'inner universe' if the bare bones of what Ophis had spoken of were put together.

Who knew how much time was passing in the real world while they were all stuck inside some illusionary reality? Had Sirzechs-sama or Grayfia-sama wandered in to see them all frozen like statues struck by a gorgon?
Akeno needed to find everyone else and then find a way out, because no matter how 'nice' a dream looked underneath it all was bound to be some kind of trap. There was some catch just waiting to swallow them all up.

The young woman was so caught up in her own thoughts she didn't even noticed she was running headlong in the path of someone else until their bodies collided and sent them both tumbling to the ground with soft cries.

"Sorry." Akeno offered reflexively as she caught herself on her hands and quickly pushed back to her feet. The soft ground and crash had done little damage to her, but maybe the other woman hadn't ended up so lucky. The Thunder Priestess looked up and froze.

"It's quite alright, dear."

"Mom?"

The woman's pretty middle aged face paused, dark brows climbing up at the title. "Are you okay, little miss? I'm afraid you must have me confused with someone else."

But no, Akeno realized even before the denial began to calm her lurching heart. There was some similarity, but the differences were noticeable. Black eyes rather than hazel. Hair a little shorter and in a slightly different style. Some facial features that were different but still familiar.

A horrible suspicion began to dawn.

"Uchiha Mikoto?"

Mikoto startled, soft gaze turning sharp as she reassessed the interloper. New faces in this land weren't impossible, if it took Ophis' fancy, but one that knew her by name? There was really only one explanation.

"Am I dead?"

"No!" the Uchiha matriarch laughed gaily, voice turning warm and musical. "You aren't dead dear, you're simply on the inside."

Akeno nodded robotically, shock still stunning her thought processes to the point where she wasn't able to offer anything but a bland "I know your son."

"I thought you knew my little boy. What's your name?"

The notion of Sasuke being a 'little boy' was amusing enough to pull Akeno's lips into a mischievous smirk. "Himejima Akeno." She began, regaining some level of mental balance. "Where exactly are we? I didn't get here by choice."

Dark eyes seemed to look into Akeno for a moment before Mikoto grew visibly curious. "You're on the inside of Sasuke's soul. And since you have no idea about it and you obviously weren't a sacrifice, that awful little girl must have put you in here."

Akeno boggled at someone so boldly calling Ophis a naughty child. "I suppose." She muttered distantly. "But if you were sacrificed, how are you even here? I would have thought your soul was totally consumed. I don't know much about practicing dark magic, but I do know the theory, and the theory is that it destroys souls."

"A willing soul provides more power than an unwilling soul. The extra power gives us a place here,
which was probably something that girl did to try to butter up my son.” Mikoto recited, looking cross. "I didn't want to be here, but I was willing enough. My boys both fought too hard and too long to deserve to suffer even more. But since my absence wouldn't change anything, I could at least give Sasuke a little more strength to stand on.”

Humming in comprehension, Akeno looked up at the distant blue sky. It seemed hours must have passed since she came to the strange little world, but the sun hadn't moved an inch. Was time standing still? "Well Uchiha-san, as lovely as it is to meet you I really should be going. You wouldn't happen to know a way out of here would you?"

"No, I never needed one." A brief frown pulled at the mother's lips before she shrugged. "But perhaps my husband or son might have heard of one. If you follow me, I can lead you to them to ask."

With little better to do, Akeno agreed and began to follow after the woman.

A few silent seconds passed before Mikoto broke it, voice sly and nosy in a way that reminded Akeno of her own mother. "So, since we have some time together, I don't suppose you'd be willing to answer a few questions about my son while you're here?"

"Go ahead." Akeno grinned at the back of the Uchiha's head, already prepared for the first question she just knew the woman would ask.

"Are you Sasuke-chan's girlfriend?"

"Of course, Okaa-san." Akeno chirped brightly, beaming at the sudden stumble the older woman made. "Won't you bless our relationship?"
Chapter 29

The tea in his hands was warm, transmitting relaxing heat into the muscles of his fingers.

Briefly, Sasuke wondered at how a reality on the inside of his heart had tea. It was one thing to wake up in an old-style house with a thatched roof. It was an inner world, and at least compared to Naruto's, his was much classier. But being fed fruit on the vine and sweet tea still came across as slightly surreal.

The oddness of being able to eat and taste food inside his own mind was nothing compared to sharing conversation with its occupants though.

Otsutsuki Indra clutched at his own cup of glorified leaf juice, wrinkled and bony hands curling around the rich burnished silver with surprising strength for his age. The creases around the corner of the man's lips were sunk deep, along with the shadows around the eyes of Sasuke's ancient incarnation.

But despite the deep-rooted sense of electric darkness the Sage's son projected, for the first time since Ophis had waltzed back into his life, Sasuke was experiencing something like real peace.

The knowledge that his parents were wandering around somewhere inside of him filled Sasuke with a bittersweet sensation of hope. He'd wanted to meet them and finally speak to them after so long, but he was afraid of being a disappointment, as well as fearful of the possibility that they were different than his lionized memories of them.

Indra's presence was a steady rock in an ocean of jittery expectation, the man's quiet voice and forceful calm fortifying Sasuke against the rocking tide of his own emotions. There were no preconceptions on his side about a man he'd only ever heard of as being a dusty legend.

"So you see, now that you have become aware of it, you should be able to reach this world again with some measure of effort." Indra pointed out, baritone tones shifting along with his appearance as the afternoon sunlight shafted over his face. The progenitor of the Uchiha clan was middle-aged in one moment, a young child in the next, a strong warrior youth in the third, and then a snowy-haired elder in the fourth.

That conflict of identity fascinated Sasuke, as well as troubling him with its implications. Indra had claimed that appearance in the inner world depended on the perception of the self, along with something like the 'true self'. Indra was always in motion, existing in unity as the holistic whole of his entire lifespan.

Sasuke would have expected that his appearance was the one he'd had before moving to the new world, inconvenient missing left arm and all. Instead, he looked exactly the same as he had in the outside world - sixteen and whole. It strongly suggested he was attached less to his experiences in the old world and more to his life in the new one.

Sasuke didn't know how he felt about that. Was he forgetting everything he'd suffered and bled for, or was he moving forward with his head held high?

"It can't be that hard." Sasuke murmured back. "Naruto was able to do it in a heartbeat at the end, and while I always used my Sharingan to get into his inner world, I don't see him being better than me at anything that requires using his brain."

Indra the child grinned, face flush with youth and a touch of humor. "Be careful with your
overconfidence, descendent. Ashura was able to take me off guard several times because of mine, and I have no doubt his reincarnations all have the same way about them."

Grunting at his ancestor, Sasuke drained the last dregs of his tea and set the cup aside. "I don't understand why so many of you would willingly choose to become part of me." Sasuke admitted, changing tracks. His heart was lightened by the knowledge that despite being partially consumed, his family members still existed in some form and seemed to live in comfort.

"Why does anyone do anything?" Indra asked rhetorically, dropping his cup inside Sasuke's with all the lazy vitality that came with young adulthood. "Motivations vary. Your family did this for love of you. Izumi would rather exist here with your brother than for eternity in the Pure Land without him. Madara wished to see what you'd become and wanted to support you however he could. Izuna and some of the others you've never met wish to see the clan restored in some form, for the sake of our pride. Kagami and Naori want to try to keep you on my brother's road of 'peace' and 'love'. What you bear on your back is not just affection, but the hopes and dreams of many of your kinsmen."

"And you?" Sasuke met his ancestor's dark eyes with a bold gaze. "What interest does the creator of ninjutsu have in my life?" he demanded from the snowy haired elder, sparking an amused smirk to pull at the older man's lips.

"Shouldn't that be obvious? Of all my descendants, you inherited the purest translation of my will. You even came the closest of any of them to achieving what I'd dreamed of – lasting peace and order enforced by strength. Ashura's reincarnation might have appealed to your heart and dispelled the curse of my hatred that you shouldered, but that isn't the same as winning on the question of rational principle."

Indra shrugged one bony shoulder, bearing down with all the weight of his attention on his reincarnation. "You are the one that is most like me. I want to enable you to continue to walk down whatever road you choose, for in a way, as long as you live I do too. And to be able to continue to change the world from beyond the grave is one of the most poignant forms of immortality."

Unease tightened at the skin of Sasuke's face, and with a grimace he rose to his feet. "I'm going to find my parents." He told the Sage's son coolly, mind unwillingly whirling with the greater question of purpose his ancestor had deliberately forced on him.

"Enjoy your reunion." Indra's voice called after him, just a touch mocking at the obvious retreat. "Do come and see me again, won't you?"

Despite the churn of restlessness prickling in his guts, Sasuke realized that yes - sooner or later; he would.

"What the hell do you mean assassinated? By who and for what?" Naruto barked, getting right up in Madara's face. A little spittle flew from the blond's mouth, spraying the Uchiha and making the man grimace with disgust.

Izuna shoved Naruto back, lips drawn in a wild snarl as he stepped forward to try and shield his taller older brother. Or strike down the impertinent Senju. One or the other.

It would almost be cute, except the Uzumaki was too wound up to take any enjoyment out of the sight.

"Izuna, Naruto - enough."

"But brother!"
"Enough." Firm ice entered Madara's voice. The remote expression on his face was as distant and chilly as the top of a barren mountain. Stepping forward, Madara clapped a firm hand over his younger brother's shoulder and gently pushed the man back.

Dark eyes glittered like sharp cut onyx gems, drilling into Naruto in a way that made him feel small. "Your death is obviously news to you, but there's no reason to be so aggressive." the co-founder of Konoha reprimanded. "If you simply asked, I would have told you what you need to know without this unpleasantness."

"Now." Madara slowly sighed, continuing on before either of the other two could speak. "The details Ophis gave us before the ritual were sparse, but the basic gist is that the peace you tried to build wasn't agreeable with everyone. Someone nostalgic for the old order hoped to bring it back by decapitating you while you were in a drunken stupor."

Naruto gaped, slowly bringing his hand up to trace over the front of his throat. He'd been killed? And in such a brutal way? He supposed it made sense, since Kurama could heal almost anything. Only an instant execution would have been able to keep him down. The image of a sword coming down and rending into the flesh of his neck flashed behind the blond's eyes, and he roughly swallowed.

"What happened to the village after?"

"I will answer your questions, Uzumaki Naruto."

Naruto looked to the side, and recoiled.

The few minutes he'd spent in the company of Ophis before being forced into Sasuke's inner world had created a certain expectation. Despite how odd it seemed, the Ouroboros Dragon looked like a cute little gothic lolita. Naruto had accepted it as the way of the world and moved on.

Ophis didn't look like this. She wasn't a faceless and featureless pale shadow. In Sasuke's inner world, she appeared less like a living being and more like a faint hollow outline traced out in the air by black strokes.

The outline raised the rough blob that was its arm and waved, banishing the two Uchiha brothers and leaving dragon and devil standing alone beneath the trees. "Their presence is an unnecessary distraction, and I would prefer to come to terms with you as efficiently as possible."

"Wait a minute!" Naruto growled, stance growing tall and stiff as he stomped right over the figure that had shoved his soul in a new body. "First of all, what the hell is with that look? And secondly," he shoved his finger right in Ophis' face. "Who the hell gave you the right to start pulling my strings, huh?"

Tilting the rough representation of her head to the side, Ophis considered Naruto. Then she shifted, colours and warm filling in the outline of her presence until she was standing in front of the blond as a young woman. "Our appearance in this sort of reality is dictated by self-image. I hold no particular attachment for any of my forms, and as such appear in none of them unless I wish it."

"Uh, right." Naruto faintly shuddered at the dizzying twist of flesh and substance that had just taken place.

"Now, how does the question of rights enter into this situation?" Ophis questioned, newly formed grey eyes drilling intensely into the former shinobi. "You died. And while it would have been simpler to have the both of you in your original bodies to assist me, circumstances forced my hand."

"Are you retarded?" Windmilling his arms emphatically, Naruto's let his jaw clench up with a sense
of building frustration. "I mean why did you think you could just do that? Even if I was dead, I would never have agreed to sudden unexplained reincarnation!"

Ophis folded her hands behind her back, meeting the devil's stare head on from her equal height. "Why does your agreement matter? Do you not like the second life I gave you?"

"Well yes." Naruto grudgingly admitted, pinching his nose. "But the point is I never agreed. And given the choice at the time, I wouldn't have."

"Then it is best I didn't ask, and simply made my own decision." Smirking at the riled expression that crossed Naruto's face, Ophis shrugged nonchalantly. "There is no reason to continue to debate on this matter. What is the human phrase? 'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade'?"

"Or you can take the lemon and squirt the juice back in life's eye." Naruto shot back dryly, folding his hands over his chest. "I'll let this go, for now. Fuck knows I've had fifteen years to get used to it. So do me a fucking favour and tell me what the fuck happened to Konoha?"

"That is not a question I can answer." Eying the way Naruto made an abortive enraged throttling gesture, Ophis added. "Even for me, travelling to that universe is not done so simply. I have little interest in keeping an eye on it, so after I retrieved a pair of suitable champions, I didn't."

Sucking in a steadying breath, Naruto pressed his face into his palms and smothered the urge to scream in frustration. This entire byplay was getting him nowhere. All the answers felt totally unsatisfactory, and the lack of fulfillment was getting to him. "Well, why the new bodies? Can you at least tell me that? Or is just another random flight of fancy like snatching us up in the first place?"

Blinking at the hostility, Ophis frowned and leaned back. A faint flicker of mental power provided an invisible cushion for her to lounge in. "It was not random. I intend to reclaim my home in the Dimensional Gap and destroy Great Red. For that I need strong soldiers, and in your world you and Uchiha Sasuke were by far the strongest."

"Neither was it an arbitrary choice to give you new bodies." Ophis added when Naruto's blond brows began to climb to his hairline. "This world's magic and the chakra of that world are not compatible energies. Any attempt to reunite your soul with that body using my spells would have destroyed your soul. In order to make use of you, it was necessary I give you a new body to live in."

The notion that he was just a thing to make use of boiled Naruto's blood, but he held his temper. He choked down the surge of anger because no matter how badly he wanted to punch her doll-like face, he still needed more answers. "And why do the same thing with Sasuke?" he asked, carefully grasping at the reins of his self-control with an iron grip.

"The cycle of reincarnation."

"What?"

"The brothers Indra and Ashura were reborn together many times over." Ophis clarified. "As their latest incarnations, your souls were linked. To give you a new body, your soul had to be made compatible with the energy of this universe. Since doing so made you incompatible with the energy of that universe, and Uchiha Sasuke was still alive and his soul full of its chakra, then converting only one soul and not the other would have destroyed both souls because of the bond. So I used that link to remove his soul from his body, and then converted both of your souls."

That rocked Naruto backed on his heels, making him smile bitterly and rake his eyes over the bountiful forest that flavoured Sasuke's inner world. Fuck. In a very roundabout way, that made him
responsible for Sasuke's life getting so fucked up. If he hadn't gotten drunk with Kiba, he wouldn't have been assassinated. And if he hadn't been assassinated, Ophis wouldn't have pulled them out of their old bodies and been able to force them into new ones.

They might have even been able to fight against her if she tried to make them.

"You're such an asshole." Naruto pointed out in a pleasant tone, as if he was conversing about nothing more than the weather as opposed to insulting the 'Strongest Existence' to her face. "Just really. By god, you're such an asshole."

Ophis slowly blinked. "So you claim, but you still enjoy the fruits of the life I gave you. From my point of view, that makes you an ingrate."

"Bitch."

"… Neanderthal."

"Psycho."

"Lickspittle."

"Bimbo."

"Gasbag."

Naruto snorted with reluctant laughter, shaking his head at having baited the big bad scary dragon into a little tit-for-tat. "One day, I'm going to get back at you, you know?"

"It is unwise to make promises you can't keep, Uzumakin Naruto." Ophis advised the volatile man. "But since there is no bond between you and I, I will have to convince you to work for me. So I will offer you an exchange. Help me defeat Great Red, and I will provide the opportunity for you to return to Konoha. Either temporarily or permanently."

The ability to just force Naruto to do what she said via telekinetic attack had been something she'd had to give up when she took the risk of placing him in a noble heir's fetal body. It was one thing to sneak a soul into Grayfia Lucifuge's womb. Entirely another to continually hover around and not get caught.

Naruto's heart leapt at the offer. Normally, it wouldn't have mattered how strong the Dragon God of Infinity was. He was no one's slave, and if she tried, he'd resist to the last and die grinning. But she had Sasuke in her hands, so he needed to be much more compromising than he'd like. "I'll help you, but you have to do three things for me. One, I'll take that trip you offered. Two, you don't fuck with anyone I care about. You stay out of our business. And three, you let Sasuke go free."

Ophis agreed instantly. What reason would she have to keep servants after Great Red was dead? Ten thousand years bonded to Uchiha Sasuke might annoy her slightly, but the cooperation would be better than being at odds with the soldiers she'd had to expend some effort to create. "Very well. Your first two conditions I will fulfill at any time. And after Great Red is dead, I will never interfere with Uchiha Sasuke's life again."

"Fine then." Naruto confirmed, rolling the words around like balls of ash in his mouth. "You have a deal, Ouroboros Dragon."

"Aww, but your ears are so cute! I'll just be a second. I promise. Pretty, pretty please?"
"Hands off." Koneko ordered the spiky haired man that circled around her like a child nagging for a treat. Her cat ears flattened at the relentless attention, and the nekomata wrapped her snow-white tail tightly around her waist.

This entire body was uncomfortable. Koneko might not have gotten any taller or 'fuller', but the fluffy ears and tail that were attached to her body reminded her too strongly of Kuroka for Koneko to want to keep them.

If this world made her appear as the true self she felt she was under all her self-illusions, then she resented it, because the feline features she sported belonged to Shirone.

Or rather, she'd resent this world if it wasn't supposed to literally be the inside of Sasuke's soul.

"This is a once in eternity opportunity and she says no! How else am I supposed to meet a cute cat girl? Won't one of the kami have pity on me?" Uchiha Shisui wailed to the sky.

Her self-appointed guide had been prickly and suspicious when she first dropped down on the dusty road in front of him, but a short exchange later and the man was happy to lead her to someone that might help. Shisui was almost like Zeoticus-lite, and Koneko wondered if that meant Sasuke was secretly adopted.

Surely such close kinsmen couldn't be so utterly different?

There must be rules about it.

Somewhere.

"How much longer will it be?" She bowled right over Shisui's dramatic unnecessary pouting. It felt like they'd been walking along the beaten dirt road forever. Assuredly, even the inside of a soul had limits? It might be a 'world', but she doubted that Sasuke's inner universe could stretch on for eternity.

Shisui shrugged, peering ahead and sticking his tongue out. "Not much further at all. I can just see Indra-oji's house up there. He lives the furthest away from everyone, but that's still only a hop and a skip away. He could probably help you out, but he's also super creepy. And trust me, an extra five minutes is more than worth not having to put up with that level of creepy."

The road twisted lazily up the banks of a small hill, bringing the travelling pair closer to a small but well-built ancient Japanese country home. There was a certain presence about it that made Koneko shiver despite her heavy white hoodie and thick pink shorts. Yes, it was definitely not a place to stop by for a visit.

Except for the fact that something caught Shisui's eye, and then he was barreling forward and waving his arms like a madman. "Sasuke! Sasuke-chan! Look over here!"

Sasuke's head craned about at the irritating but faintly familiar voice, and then his dark eyes went wide and round in his pale face. A moment of his open mouth working soundlessly later, and then he was rushing back along the path towards his charging cousin.

They met in the middle in a crash of muscled flesh and limbs, grunting with slight pain but holding on like their existence depended on it. "It's you." One of them muttered thickly, but Koneko couldn't decide which it was as she came up beside the pair.

Shisui pulled back, smiling in a way that showed his white teeth. "Look at you." He marveled, grasping Sasuke's shoulders and shaking the younger Uchiha slightly. "Just look at you. Who'd have
thought little Sasuke would grow up to be *this* big burly beanpole?"

Sasuke's eyes looked just a little wet as he smiled with a mix of joy and pain. "Well look at yourself, you ugly scarecrow. Death didn't make you any better looking, did it?" Then his gaze shifted to Koneko, and he seemed to stop breathing entirely.

"Sasuke?" Koneko prodded uncertainly, unease building when Shisui shot a malicious smirk over his shoulder.

"All you had to do was let me touch them once, Neko-chan." The shinobi told her with an air of sadistic glee. "If you could have just done me that one favour, I'd have done everything in my power to protect you. Instead, you get to face the *real* demon."

No.

"Since you see, the unfortunate truth is…"

No.

"Sasuke loves cats."

No!

Before Koneko could turn to run, Sasuke was already lowering his hand over the crown of her head. And then he began to rub, first one ear and then the other. "Stop that." She demanded weakly, glaring at her blank-faced friend. "This is beyond unacceptable."

Oh.

Ohhhh.

Scratch the base of the ear rightthere. *Just* like that.

"Why don't you look like this on the outside?" Sasuke wondered, taking the corner of the Rook's ear between his thumb and index finger and rubbing gently.

"I hate you." She purred, glaring ferociously at Shisui who broke into a fit of howling laughter. 

"You're the worst. The cat molesting Uchiha. An unforgiveable demon. A true source of evil that must be eradicated at all costs."

"Cats are meant to be petted." Sasuke informed her pleasantly, intensifying his attentions. "If there is one animal in the entire world that is meant to be petted, it's the cat. They're so soft and furry, but at the same time, so independent and intelligent. Not at all like dogs. And that doesn't answer my question."

"It's because senjutsu mastery is part of the life cycle of a nekomata." Koneko scowled, pulling away and feeling a rush of relief when Sasuke's too grabby hands didn't follow. "Because I never use it, I haven't developed the complete physical features of my species."

"I see." Turning to his cousin, Sasuke cocked an eyebrow at the older man's bent over giggling form. "Cease making a fool of yourself and tell me where my parents are."

"Oh man, this is *too good*. Just wait until I tell Itachi about this!"

"I *will* hurt you."
"I'll destroy you both." Koneko promised.

"Right, let's go. The village proper should be just down the road there."

Yuuto wasn't sure how he felt about Uchiha Fugaku. On the one hand, the man had been polite and nothing but helpful. On the other, he was so utterly stern it was just a touch off putting. But then, Sasuke had to get it from somewhere.

"To think I missed most of my son's life." Fugaku sighed, sinking down cross-legged on the engawa with a faint wince that spoke of being well into middle age. "You say you only met my boy a year ago?"

"Yes." The blond Knight confirmed, keeping his gaze moving over the magnificently kept garden. The orderly rows of flowers were truly beautiful, and spoke of such loving care that they projected a soothing aura. "I was a human experiment who died, but was resurrected as a devil and came to share the same blueblood mistress as Sasuke."

"I see." Fugaku mused, a flicker of distaste flowing over his dark pupils. "Your 'death' sounds like something that snake filth would have done."

"The snake filth?"

A fierce frown tugged at the corner of Fugaku's mouth, but Sasuke's father pressed forward in spite of his obvious displeasure. "Orochimaru was a rogue shinobi from our village who was renowned for his snake jutsu. He also enjoyed conducting experiments on humans. Sasuke trained under him for several years for the sake of power, but my boy eventually turned on him and killed him."

"Good." Yuuto muttered, fierce approval curling in his gut. As far as he was concerned, getting rid of Valper or anyone like him would just be taking out the trash. This 'Orochimaru' got what was coming to him.

"My wife agrees with you." Chuckling with fondness, Fugaku began his not-so-subtle interrogation of the young Knight. "What sort of relationship do you have with my son? You're so young, and he must be nearly forty."

"I didn't know how old Sasuke actually is until today. Devils age differently, so he only looks sixteen." Yuuto pointed out, fighting back the instinctive rise of his hackles at the questioning from someone that was basically a stranger. "That said, he's my friend. And my teacher."

"Ahh, a kouhai."

"If that's how you want to describe it, yes."

Eying the just-barely-polite young man with a vaguely disapproving eye, Fugaku resolved to tell Sasuke that he should take more care to ensure the boy properly respected his elders. After quizzing his son on everything he could about the lives he'd led that was about the lives he'd led that was. "Tell me about this mistress the both of you have."

"Rias?" Playing with the fabric of his worn blue jeans, Yuuto idly poked at a hole in the knee before shrugging. "She's great. Too soft, really, for someone that has her bloodline connections. She never tries to lord it over us. So when she tells us to do something, it's more like a nagging older sister. But if she has one fault, it's how she can get jealous. She used to get really worked up when Sasuke would skip out on us to be around Naruto. Not so much now though, since the two of them had a
"moment."

Waiting to see if the boy would elaborate any more, Fugaku let the silence stretch on. Then he prodded again. "What sort of relationship does she have with Sasuke? It sounds a touch contentious."

A thick snort of laughter burst from Yuuto's mouth, the blond boy shaking his head ruefully and giving the retired shinobi an entertained smirk. "Those two? Fighting? Not a chance in hell. Let's just say if there's any little Uchiha running around in the future, I would be shocked if they weren't doing it with her red hair."

"They're in a romantic relationship?"

"Nah, not anything like that yet. For someone that's supposed to be nearly forty, Sasuke is just as bad as one of those teenagers from the Hollywood romcoms. They don't even know it yet, but stick around long enough and it's not hard to catch them mooning after each other."

Fugaku cocked a bushy brow. He didn't know what 'Hollywood romcoms' were, but he got the gist well enough. "Am I supposed to consider a fourteen-year-old boy an expert on the matters of love?"

"Hey, don't believe me. That's your call. But I'm telling you, kissy faces are definitely in the future for those two. I'd bet my Sacred Gear on it."

The faint sound of steps echoing through the house behind him was enough to distract Fugaku from making a reply, and he turned around to greet his wife. Then he did a double take.

Following close behind a slightly overwhelmed Mikoto was a younger woman that looked like she could be the daughter they'd never had. The girl had differently coloured eyes and her hair drawn up in a ponytail, but Fugaku could easily tell that if it was down she'd look like she was Mikoto's twin.

"Hello dear." The Uchiha matriarch greeted warmly, smiling at her husband before turning her attention to the young blond boy perched on her porch. "And who is this young man?"

"Kiba Yuuto." Having introduced himself, Yuuto let his grey eyes slide away from the pretty older woman to Rias' Queen. "Hey, Akeno. See you made it here. Did you catch anyone else on the way in?"

Stepping forward and ruffling the Knight's straw coloured strands, Akeno beamed with satisfaction at Yuuto's disgruntled yelp before shaking her head. "Nope. It was just me and Okaa-san here the whole time."

"Okaa-san?" Yuuto and Fugaku both echoed in baffled tones, staring at the Thunder Priestess.

Mikoto sat in a lady-like seiza beside her husband, settling an affectionate hand over his arm. "Fugaku. This is Himejima Akeno." She hesitated before adding uncertainly. "Sasuke-chan's girlfriend."

Silence hung for a heavy beat in which Fugaku observed the new arrival with inscrutable eyes. Then Yuuto began to chuckle, great heaves of amusement that made his entire body shake. More than one gaze moved to the blond as he laughed so hard he began to cry. "Ah, I don't think I've heard a good one like that in a long while. You're evil, you know that, Akeno?"

Pouting at having been outed, Akeno prodded at her friend with a rough foot before turning and bowing apologetically to Sasuke's mother. "I'm sorry for the deception, Mikoto-sama." She offered
gravely, reveling in the mixture of reluctant humor and annoyance on the woman's face. "To tell you the truth, I'm not Sasuke's girlfriend."

"It's fine Akeno-chan." Mikoto waved off the apology, lips curving up now that she felt she was in on the joke. "It's nothing that Kushina wouldn't have done, given the chance. So I don't mind the little trick. I can see why Sasuke enjoys being friends with you."

"Friends?" Akeno forced a confused note into her voice as she straightened, before fixing a bashful smile on her face and bringing her hand up to cup her cheek with false mortification. "Oh, I'm truly sorry. I didn't mean to mislead you twice in a row. I am indeed not Sasuke's girlfriend."

She smiled.

"I'm the other woman."

Yuuto began to cackle all over again, red mottling his cheeks as Sasuke's parents assumed twin aghast expressions. Ah, it had been too long since he'd had a good laugh. Life was finally starting to look up again.

Robotically, Mikoto folded her hands in her lap and silently turned to stare out over the garden she'd carefully cultivated. "I'd known that not having parents in his life would have consequences." She noted faintly.

Fugaku seemed to suck in a fortifying breath before taking his wife's hand in his own and giving her a comforting squeeze. "You should stay positive, Mikoto. On the bright side, at least he will have more luck in restoring the clan."

"Yes, I suppose he will."

Akeno smirked with sadistic victory.
In the space of one blink and the next, Naruto was suddenly teleported to a carefully cultivated
garden. "Whoa." The blond man noted, shaking away the disorientation and forcing his eyes to see
straight. "Is it that bad every time?"

"The discomfort is just the result of your limited mortal consciousness." Ophis answered blandly.
"Space does not truly exist within a soul. This entire plane is just a construct of mental energy, and
only provides a referential point for interactions between two or more minds."

Rolling his eyes at the dragon's verbosity, Naruto prodded at a vibrant fire lily. "Whatever you say,
Professor Ophis. I bow down to your nerd knowledge."

"What is a 'nerd'?"

"You."

Glancing over her shoulder, Ophis gave the blond a knowing look before striding forward. Every
step shrunk her adult form until she was pushing through the lush garden in a child's body. "Come
along, Uzumaki Naruto. It is time to reunite with some of your compatriots."

Naruto snorted, pulling his hand away from the bright orange flower and stepping after the
dispasionate lolita. "Is there anything special about this place, or is Sasuke's head just full of empty
houses?"

"Uchiha Sasuke's parents 'reside' here, in-so-far as such a thing is possible in what is essentially an
illusionary reality." Grey orbs settled on the modest home that became increasingly visible as they
moved across the courtyard. "Kiba Yuuto and Himejima Akeno have already arrived, and the rest
quickly approach."

Naruto couldn't help the slight stumble of his foot over the mossy pathway. In his first life, Sasuke's
parents had attained a sort of mystique. No one had dared to speak of them around Sasuke, because
their son had basically worshipped them. And as a jinchuuriki Naruto had never been allowed
somewhere as private as the Uchiha compound, so he didn't even have any idea what they looked
like.

The only thing Naruto knew about them were the few quiet details Sasuke had let slip before leaving
Konoha to wander in search of redemption, and the fact that apparently his mother and Sasuke's
mother had wanted the two boys to become friends. He doubted Kakashi would have lied about
something like that, but very soon Naruto would discover the truth of that claim himself.

No pressure.

When they drew close enough, Naruto's ears started to pick up the low hum of conversation. It led
them to the right and around the corner of the house, getting louder and louder until he stood next to
the stained cherry wood of a long engawa. "Yo!" he called out cheerily, waving at Akeno when the
Thunder Priestess turned to look at him.

Purple eyes widened at Naruto's appearance, rolling over the blond man's lithe body from head to
toe. "So, this is what you really look like?" She mused, blinking at the sudden wince that sent ripples
through the whisker marks on Naruto's cheeks. "Are they tattoos?"

"Birthmarks." He answered back, nodding to Yuuto when the blond teen twisted to acknowledge
him. Then his focus shifted to a pretty older woman and a stern looking middle aged man. "So I'm gonna take a wild guess and say you're Sasuke's folks, yeah?"

"It's been a long time, Naruto-chan." Mikoto beamed, surprising Naruto with her outright friendliness.

He recovered quietly enough, grinning toothily back. "Yeah I guess? I don't mean to be rude or anything, but I don't really remember you. Or Fugaku-jii here. All the adults kind of blended together when I was a kid."

Mikoto waved off the implied apology, dark orbs darting over to Ophis' bored face and chilling slightly before focusing back on Naruto. "I can hardly blame you. It was a rough childhood. We would have taken you in, but the politics of it all never let us."

"Really?" The blond had long ago come to terms with his overall shitty childhood, but the notion that someone would have actually liked to look after him still warmed him a little. Iruka and the Sandaime had been great, but it wasn't the same thing as having adoptive guardians would have been.

"Of course." Fugaku grunted, peering over at the blond through half-lidded eyes. With his arms folded over his chest and the steady baritone of his voice, the man didn't exactly radiate 'child-friendly'. "Kushina was Mikoto's best friend, and it was the least we would have owed Minato."

Making a noise of comprehension, Naruto quickly thanked the pair. He was starting to see what Sasuke had gotten from both of them. All the pretty-boy looks came from Mikoto, and all the asshole-with-a-decent-heart came from Fugaku. "So, what's up?"

"If I can make a prediction." Fugaku cleared his throat, turning to Naruto. "Based on the missions Itachi took as a genin, I would not in the least be surprised if you were running errands at some point for one Shijimi-sama. Would that be correct?"

"That damn cat." Naruto groaned, shaking his head ruefully and providing all the confirmation needed.

Despite his initial spate of teasing, Itachi was a quiet sort. He'd been very focused on asking her pointed questions about Sasuke's life. He wanted to know if his brother was healthy, if he'd managed to form positive relationships with others, and if he was happy. Once he was satisfied that Sasuke was doing well, he'd quickly turned his attention to helping Rias find a way back to the outside
world. There was no attempt to spill brotherly stories to her.

Rias was glad for it, because even plodding along after the man she wasn't sure how to deal with him. On the one hand, Sasuke obviously thought well of his brother, to the point that despite all the butchery his eyes still shone warmly at the memory of the man. But on the other, Rias had eyes less blinded by nostalgia, and was better able to assign blame for Itachi's choices, which shouldn't be as lionized as they seemed to be.

In the end, it was said an external observer that could see the clearest.

Too bad she couldn't apply that clarity to her own life. Rias sorely needed a bit of objective perspective right now.

After the comforting haze of anger had blown away, all Rias had been left with was a mixture of betrayal and fear. Naruto had never been her brother or her nephew. He was a complete stranger – a stranger from an entirely different world! - and she had no idea how to handle it. The little boy she'd spent so long resenting didn't even exist at all. Naruto was even more of a mystery than Sasuke, because at least she'd been told some of Sasuke's secrets.

What was she supposed to do? She couldn't ignore the revelation, because it mattered. But how was she actually supposed to move forward now?

Coming to the decision to reject her resentment of her young nephew to avoid the fate of loss Sasuke told her about had been easy. But if that boy never even existed in the first place, hadn't she already lost him? Or was there nothing to lose at all?

The futile spiral of her thoughts made her temples pound. Rias was barely able to make sense of the whole situation. How could she even begin to reconcile fifteen years of lies with reality? Add on top of that the Ouroboros Dragon poking in and around her peerage and Rias had a recipe for disaster.

And how could she pass her newfound information along to her parents? Or along to her brother and his wife? The Ruin Princess at least had the benefit of having emotionally withdrawn from Naruto over the past few years. The rest of her family didn't have that luxury, and the truth might destroy them.

If they even believed her when she told them.

Damned if she did and damned if she didn't.

"We're here." Itachi murmured lowly, dragging Rias up from her musing. Sasuke's brother had led her to a traditionally styled Japanese household, and if she'd been in the better mood the redhead would be ecstatic with the chance to indulge her Japanophile tendencies.

As it was, she just hummed a low acknowledgement and followed Itachi into the home. It was quiet, but as they crossed the house, the rolling buzz of voices began to fill the air. After a moment, Rias realized one was Akeno's and she was pushing forward past the Uchiha.

She needed Akeno. Rias needed that steady cheery presence at her side to draw strength from. If she could just have that, her confusion would be a little more bearable.

But instead of relief, when Rias stepped out onto the rear veranda of the home, the Ruin Princess only found more shards of ice wriggling into her heart.

She was cold, because despite the foreign hair color that man laughing and telling stories to the small crowd gathered around him was obviously Naruto. "So, this is what you really look like?" she
The exuberant joy drained away from that whiskered face, leaving only a kind of sheepish revolve. Naruto scratched at his cheek with one dull fingernail, shifting from one foot to the other like a nervous boy despite the steel in his blue eyes. "Hey Itachi, been a while. Rias, can we talk?"

Naruto's offhand greeting to her escort was familiar and informal, all his attention reserved for the shorter figure that was his 'aunt'.

Silently Rias turned away, teal eyes scanning the garden before settling on the back corner. She nodded at Naruto before fleeing across the plot of greenery. A little privacy was probably in order, even if it came across as rude to their hosts. Rias didn't want to wait any longer to finish their argument, and apparently, neither did Naruto.

The lithe blond clomped after Rias, the muscle of his jaw tensing and untensing as he worked over exactly what he wanted to say to her. His 'aunt' could be volatile, but under the teenage insecurities she was still kind. If she knew the basic gist of his story, Naruto was confident he could appeal to her better nature.

So he didn't was any time once they reached the opposite end of the yard, instantly belting out an apology. "I'm sorry. I know that you feel betrayed, and that you feel like there's no excuse for what I did, keeping a secret like that for so long. But I want you to at least know why I did what I did, even if you still want to hate me after it."

Rias had gone stiff at his initiative, not turning around to meet Naruto's earnest blue eyes. But she did twist her head to the side, revealing a peek at the pale flesh of her ear through the crimson fall of her hair, and Naruto knew that she was listening.

"Look, I won't – all the nitty gritty details aren't that important right now. I'll tell you about them later if you want." The blond prefaced, running an anxious hand through the tangled blond strands he'd inherited from Namikaze Minato. "I'm sure Itachi at least gave you the bare bones about Sasuke and I being from a totally different universe?"

"Yes, he did." Rias' voice was blank and numb, because compared to everything else what did that even matter? If Naruto and Sasuke were humans from her mortal world or from a different one that Ophis went to visit had the same result in the end. Years of secrecy and the feeling she didn't know them at all.

"Good." Nodding with satisfaction, Naruto let his eyes drift away from the stiff hold of Rias' body so he could study a few of Mikoto's plants instead.

The diversion in focus helped calm him a little, because his heart was racing at the thought of how badly he didn't want to fuck this up. Naruto believed that no relationship couldn't repaired with enough effort, but that didn't mean he wanted more pain in the process of healing. "So I'll just be really blunt about it. My childhood there was complete shit. Because of stuff beyond my control, practically all the adults hated me. I was an orphan. I had no friends. If I'd just died in the ditch, I don't think anyone would have even cared about it. That's why I always wore the orange. Just to get people to look at me. Can you imagine what it's like to experience that level of isolation?"

"And this isn't a pity story, or nothing." Naruto clarified, flickering his eyelids lower as he thought about his past. "Eventually, despite the hate I managed to make friends. I had people that were precious to me. Sasuke was one of them. It was a rough life, but I don't angst about it. I came to terms with it a long time ago."
Unconsciously, the blond brought his hand up to grab a fistful of his orange hoodie. "But I'm still a person. Just because I learned to accept it doesn't mean I ever stopped wanting what I never got a chance to have. Parents. Grandparents. Brothers and sisters. A family. I got to meet my dad once in that life, because a jutsu pulled him out of the grave. But that's not the same as being able to come home after a day at school and tell him about the day I had. It's not the same as being able to eat the cookies my mom baked, or climb up on my grandpa's knee and listen to his old war stories."

To his alarm, Naruto found his voice growing a little thick. But he forced his way on, because he needed Rias to understand him. To know who he was in a way she never would have been able to before, because of all the lies and walls of bitterness. If he was able to just show her his heart, he knew that she'd be able to recognize the reasoning behind his choices.

"So when I woke up in a new body and started to grow, yeah, I lied. I pretended to just be some little kid. If I'd had to justify it I'd say it was because I didn't want you guys to think I was crazy, or that the past didn't matter, or whatever else. But the reality is that I didn't want to risk losing what I had. Maybe it was all just a nice dream to be able to wake up with parents and grandparents and a sister that I loved and who loved me back, but I couldn't give it up."

Naruto breathed shakily. "I couldn't give it up. 'Just for a little longer' I'd tell myself every time I thought about my old life, because it was the first time I'd been able to have a family, even if no one else would have called it real, and I –"

Rias' finger on his lips cut him off, shocking Naruto into silence. "That's enough." She told him, blue-green eyes shining under the illusory sunlight with just a touch of damp. The wetness was thicker in her voice. "I forgive you."

Her hand lowered, gaze growing a little unfocused as Rias seemed to look right through the blond. "Not just for this. For everything, even though there wasn't really anything to forgive in the first place. It was never fair of me to be bitter at you simply for being good at magic, or for all the gossip about how much better at things you were than me."

The expression that crossed her pale face was ashamed, and Rias tugged at the collar of her green sweater. "I felt like you'd taken away my reason to exist, when being the heir was something I chose to define myself by. And not once did you ever say anything to imply that I was worth less simply because you beat me. I spent so long stewing in my unjustified anger at you I'm surprised that you still can say you love me."

The relieved bark of Naruto's laughter startled the redhead. "Don't worry about it." He told her, smiling just like he had when he'd forgiven Kurama. If he'd been able to forgive the bijuu for killing his parents and making him an orphan, the blond was pretty sure he'd be able to brush off a couple of years of distance in a ten thousand year lifespan. "A little bit of the cold shoulder is nothing. Sasuke blew my arm off and I still forgave him."

"He blew your arm off?"

"Well I exploded his too, so it was a fair trade. The thing I should be really pissed about is the fist he shoved through my lung, but I didn't stay mad about that for more than a day. Trust me, you're pretty low on the shit list for doing things that pissed me off."

Rias stared.

Naruto grinned. "What?"
"Oh hear ye, hear ye! The prodigal son returns!"

"Shut up." Sasuke ordered irritably, shoving Shisui with a firm hand to the shoulder before stepping into his parent's estate. It wasn't that he didn't understand his cousin's attempt to lighten the mood; it was just that he didn't appreciate it. Koneko was doing much better, staying quiet and leaving him to his thoughts.

Every step into the manor was like a fresh shock over Sasuke's nerves, running hot lightning across his brain as he moved closer and closer to his parents. Maybe Sasuke was nearly forty years old, but that didn't mean he loved his parents any less, and the chance of finally seeing them again was enough to spark his anxiety.

Would they be different than he had remembered them being? Would his father be less cold, or his mother less kind? Would they find Sasuke a disappointment? Or would they look at him and be well pleased with the man their son had become?

There was only one way to find out.

Rias was the first person he saw, standing next to a taller and much blonder Naruto with a small satisfied smile on her face. None of the tension he expected to see crackling in the air around them was there, and in a different time Sasuke would have been glad for it. But he had no time for anyone else's problems right now.

After tracking his dark eyes across Akeno and Yuuto, and over the heart thumping form of Itachi, Sasuke finally saw them. They were sitting and facing away from him, listening as Naruto wildly gesticated another one of his stories, but he knew it was them. The dark blue-black crown of his mother's head looked exactly like it had when he'd been a child riding on her back, and he easily recognized the proud slant of his father's shoulders.

Sasuke crossed the distance in a moment, silent as a cat on his heels until he was looming right behind them. He struggled to find something to say; to find some sort of acknowledgement that would seem appropriate after so many years distant.

Fortunately, Naruto saved him the trouble. "Sasuke!" the blond man greeted, winking one blue eye at him. "'Bout time you got here. Who's the tall one now, bastard?"

Feeling his parents' gazes digging into him, Sasuke forced himself to keep a steady focus on his friend. "Still me." He shot back dryly. Naruto might be taller than he'd been in his devil body, but their first bodies had been the bodies of shinobi. They were bred to be small and light.

Sasuke's devil body was taller and more muscular than his first body had been at the age of sixteen, even though they looked the same otherwise, and he still towered several inches over Naruto's now adult frame.

Then he let his eyes slowly drop, settling on his mother's beautiful face with a thundering heart. How had he never noticed the faint crow's feet around her eyes? "Hey mom." He greeted, offering a small smile for the woman that had given birth to him.

Mikoto stared at Sasuke silently, marveling as if he'd hung the moon. And then she lurched to her feet, wrapping her arms around her second son in a bone crushing grip. "Hello Sasuke-chan." She whispered, voice sounding wet and thick with tears. More than one face awkwardly turned away at the display of emotion, giving the woman a façade of privacy. "You're so tall and handsome."

"That's enough, Mikoto." Fugaku chided in his deep tones. "You're strangling the boy." Waiting
until his wife pulled back with a snuffle, the patriarch reached forward to clasp Sasuke's shoulder in a firm grip. "Son."

"Father."

A second embrace wrapped Sasuke up, smelling of his father's woodsmoke scent and holding Sasuke so tight he thought his ribs would crack at the force. All his fears of his father's coldness withered away to nothing, and Sasuke realized that never before had his father made him feel so loved.

They separated after a moment that felt too long and too short at the same time, Sasuke turning to accept a forehead poke from his brother with a grimace of annoyance. "You never change, do you?"

"And it seems you change all the time, little brother."

Rolling his eyes when Shisui wiped a dramatic tear from his eye, Sasuke forced back all the raging emotions that he felt rushing through his veins. There was a time and a place for long conversations with his parents, and it wasn't now. Indra had given him the method to return when he needed to. Ophis was standing barely half a dozen feet away, watching his family interact with unabashed curiosity, and Sasuke was hardly interested in putting on a show for her. It was one thing to tell his friends about his family, and entirely another to surrender to the needy child inside him clawing in search of a way out when a potential enemy stood by.

"Ophis." Sasuke greeted, wincing at the falling expression that crossed his mother's face when he drew up all the emotional conditioning he'd learned as a shinobi like a cloak. If Itachi had been living with them for years, they would have heard some of the stories already. Hearing them from his own mouth was just indulgence, and it was more important to deal with the dragon god sticking her nose in his life.

"Uchiha Sasuke." Ophis dully acknowledged, grey eyes brightening with focus as he addressed her. "Why did you send me here?" The demand came rough and reckless, prompting his mother to lay a cautioning hand on his arm. Maybe he was being too wild, but Sasuke couldn't force himself to give a damn. He was tired of being jerked around on the chain by the lolita, having all his raw spots torn open and held up to the light.

The Ouroboros Dragon tossed her head back, midnight dark strands flying at the motion. Pert little lips puckered in something like impatience, and Ophis began to flicker at the edges. "To resolve your grudge. You would be an ineffective servant if you constantly resented me for harming your family, so I arranged for you to meet them while I came to an accord with Uzumaki Naruto. Consider this matter settled. I will give you one more hour, and then the spell will end." With that final parting shot, Ophis vanished from Sasuke's soul entirely.

"Fuck." Naruto cursed, prompting a warning glare for Sasuke that he entirely ignored. The blond shivered, bumping shoulders with Rias and winking at her huff. "She gives me the heebie jeebies."

But the joke fell just a little short of its mark, failing to deflect Sasuke's sudden hawk-like focus. "Feel like telling me what this 'accord' is about, dobe?"

Naruto waved the Uchiha off, smirking cockily and projecting an aura of pure reassurance. "Nothing to worry your head about, pretty boy. You just take your time with the folks."

"Naruto."

Cracking his knuckles, the blond huffed at Sasuke's persistence. He should have known the bastard
couldn't leave things be for a bit to enjoy the precious time with his family. It was in Sasuke's nature to grab onto whatever took his fancy and hold on tight like a dog with a bone. "Look, it's just the same shit as you, alright? Fight for a bit so that she'll stay out of our hair and let me check in on Konoha. You should be less worried about me and more worried about what Akeno's been filling your mom's head with."

That successfully derailed him, sending Sasuke's head whipping about so quickly his neck audibly cracked. Intense dark eyes settled on the Thunder Priestess, prompting the purple eyed girl to smirk coquettishly and saunter over. "What did you do," he demanded, voice so flat it came out as a statement.

Akeno just winked, wrapping her arms around Sasuke's left arm and leaning in so close he could feel the warm press of her breasts against his flesh. "Nothing to be worried about, darling. I was just telling Okaa-san here about our relationship. I know you wanted to keep it a secret, but I just couldn't deny our passion!"

Several things happened at once. Mikoto's eyes went dead and glassy in a way Sasuke had never seen them do in any of his lives, and Rias began to sputter like an indignant nun. Naruto and Yuuto both broke out into barely contained snickers of laughter, while Shisui just began to howl out loud with amusement. Itachi seemed to light up from the inside with sadistic fraternal curiosity, and his father visibly steeled himself.

Taking one look down at the smug Thunder Priestess, Sasuke felt compelled to ask. "Why?" Just why?

"Because our burning love can't be contained, even if I'm forced to be the other woman!"

"Sasuke, did we fail you so badly?" his mother whispered, and with a surge of alarm Sasuke realized she looked like she was about to cry. "Oh my little boy. To think he'd grow up to be such a-a-a deviant..." the last word came out like a choked sob.

"What? No!" Shaking his arm in a vain attempt to dislodge the Queen, Sasuke scowled ferociously at Naruto when the blond exploded into cackles. "She's just playing a stupid joke on you!"

"Sasuke." Fugaku declared heavily, staring down at Sasuke with all the stern gravity of that patriarch of the clan. "You're a man now, and the last of our line. In better times I would raise an objection, but I understand your duties to the clan must take precedence. If this is the path you've deemed necessary for the clan's revival, I will approve."

"...Father, I have no idea what to do with that right now."

"Just accept it, my boy."

Ophis' spell popped like a soap bubble, bringing a brief dazzling shimmer of color over their eyes before snapping and vanishing like it had never been.

Naruto bent over, red strands of his hair hanging in his eyes as he gasped for breath. He couldn't tell how much time had actually passed, since the light shafting in through the windows was pale and white from Gehenna's artificial moon. It could either have been a short period or long enough for a full day to pass.

He hadn't actually done anything beyond stand still while the Dragon God's magic had ensnared his senses for a little while, but he felt exhausted. And based on the weary expressions of everyone else in the room, they felt the same way. Ophis might not have been as drained, but she had already
vanished, and Naruto had no way to see how she was affected.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!" Akeno wailed as Rias grabbed hold of her ear and began to twist. "Come on, you have to admit it was a good joke! There's no need to get your panties in a bunch, Rias. Unless that's the way you like it." she purred at the end, prompting Koneko to look slightly disturbed.

"I'll show you a good joke." Rias growled, letting go of her Queen's ear but lifting up her other hand to flick the busty young woman in the forehead. "And you know very well that I don't like it like that."

"Whoa, whoa." Naruto cut in, waving his hands in denial even as he kept a close eye on Sasuke's blank face. "Too much information there, sister. Keep the tales of your exploits PG while I'm in the room, yeah?"

"There are no exploits!"

"You alright?" the Gremory heir quietly prodded his friend, rolling his eyes when the Pawn only shot back a cool stare. "Yeah whatever, let's be all manly and pretend we have no feelings. I get it. Listen, right now I think I'm due a little tit-for-tat."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if I want to spill the beans to some of the people I care about now, I better not hear you bitching, yeah?"

After a beat, Sasuke nodded slowly. "Fair enough. Just be careful."

"Like you've got room to talk, asshole."
Chapter 31

Naruto was jittering like a spastic dog. The seemingly endless cups of coffee he'd swallowed down to get through the day were taking their toll. His leg just wouldn't stop bouncing a hyperactive beat under the table as he charged crystal after crystal with his magic. The redhead knew his quality of work was suffering, but no one had complained about it yet. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing, since even though it was easier on him it sort of implied they were sending substandard materials to the front.

He could practically feel the mixture of Ravel's concern and irritation sear into him when Naruto jostled his knee too hard and a kicked at the table leg, prompting her to look up from her book at him.

But it wasn't like he had much of a choice. The caffeine was running through him and making his nerves bounce around. He'd needed the boost to make it through the day after a long, sleepless, and stressful night.

A deal with the Ouroboros Dragon, going traipsing through Sasuke's soul, and hashing out the built up emotional difficulties of years with Rias weren't exactly conductive to a healthy good night's sleep. The Gremory heir had spent the rest of the evening lying awake and staring at the ceiling, wondering what he should be doing going forward.

Obviously, despite Rias' surprisingly good reaction after everything was explained to her; he couldn't tell his parents. His aunt had been emotionally distant for years, and the shock had still been significant for her. How could he even begin to tell the rest of the family without coming across as crazed?

And once they believed him, everything would change. Even if they forgave him for the deception, they'd stop treating him like their son. He'd become some random guy that had the bad luck of being shoved into an infant's body and given to them, rather than the child they'd hoped to have for decades.

Naruto couldn't tell them. He couldn't. It was greedy of him, but he wanted to protect the family life he'd managed to fall into.

Dealing with Ravel was something he'd have to do immediately, because she already knew some of the story. She'd been there to see Sasuke go all cuckoo for cocoa puffs, and if he didn't let her in on the secret his Bishop would just get more and more worried.

She might even get to the point of caving and looking for answers from someone else. She could react badly to the truth, but he had faith in his blonde friend.

Rias' peerage had handled everything surprisingly well after all, and Naruto hoped Ravel would be just as understanding. And if she wasn't, he'd just have to find a way to get through her shock and rejection like he had with Rias'.

Simple enough in theory.

But the shit on his plate didn't end there. Naruto also had to find a way out of the 'punishment' his parents were inflicting on him. He had no idea how long they planned to have it go on, but he could hardly go back to contributing to the war in a more meaningful way with his father's peerage breathing down his neck. Naruto appreciated the concern, but it wasn't needed, and was actually just
Not to mention the possibility of returning to Konoha. Naruto knew he wouldn't ever be able to go back there forever. The change in his body and his death in the old world made sure of it, not to mention all the bonds he'd forged in his new life. But he still needed to know what had become of all the precious people he'd left behind. The village still mattered.

How were Kakashi-sensei and Sakura doing? What about Team Eight and Team Ten? Was Gaara still suffering from his childhood as a jinchuuriki, or had he managed to start forming closer bonds with other people that weren't his siblings? Perhaps most importantly, had peace endured?

The sudden warmth of a hand on Naruto's shoulder startled the redhead, making him jerk back in his chair and focus bleary blue eyes on his father's brunette Knight. "What?"

Souji tightened his grip around the boy's shoulder. "Are you alright, Naruto? You seem a bit…" he trailed off delicately, searching for the right way to put it. "…under the weather."

Bluntly put, the kid looked like a complete wreck. Dark bags hung from Naruto's eye socket, streaking purple on the otherwise pale skin of his face.

"Yeah?" Naruto frowned up at the reincarnated Japanese man, blinking with vague confusion. "I'm fine, Souji. There's nothing to get your panties in a bunch over."

A gusty sigh flowed from the Knight's lips, and he quickly glanced at the clock before shaking his head with a sense of fond exasperation. "You look like shit, kid. Finish this batch and then we'll head on home, alright?"

It was only halfway through the shift, but after watching Naruto guzzle down cup after cup of coffee, Souji didn't want Naruto to work himself to the bone. The crash later on was going to be bad enough without piling even more exhaustion on top of it. He'd talk to Sirzechs himself and make sure the Satan knew they hadn't gone home early because Naruto was slacking off.

"Oh come on, I can take it. Besides, who's gonna finish off the day's shipment if I don't?"

Ravel shook her head at the exchange, setting her book down and reaching forward to scoop a handful of crystals from Naruto's pile. She was glad their caretaker-slash-warden had finally decided to step in before her fiancé went and blew himself up or something through fatigued error. "Probably whoever would have been doing it before you started working here, you dolt."

Generally she just hung around during his punishment for lack of a better thing to do and to avoid going home to her grandfather, but for the redhead's sake she was glad she'd tagged along. Unlike Naruto, her reserves were fresh, and it only took her a few short minutes to polish off the remainder of the basket.

"Have I ever told you that you're a blessing from God?" Naruto moaned happily, prodding at the gleaming sorcery charged gems with a tired leer.

"Not often enough."

"Alright kids, you can flirt later. Let's just turn this in and head back to the house."

Staring at Naruto's dozing form, Ravel considered the drained air that persisted even into his sleep and sighed. She briefly considered waking him up and telling him that if he was going to nap it was better to do it in a bed than in an armchair, but if she did he'd probably try to force himself to stay
awake.

Honestly, was it any wonder his mother got so worked up at him? Naruto either had no idea how to take care of himself, or he just didn't care. Which was endearing in some ways but annoying as hell in others. Ravel would just be happy if he learned to approach a happy medium.

Trying to train him to moderate himself would have to wait though. Ever since he'd decided to run off to Shamond and leave her behind, Ravel had felt like some unidentified distance yawned between them. Naruto had apologized for his thoughtless chauvinism, but their relationship hadn't regained the equilibrium it had before.

The fact that Ravel had seen Sasuke give into some psychosis and suspected she was the only one not in the know didn't help. Maybe the inner workings of Rias' peerage weren't any of her business, but they'd made it her business by having her around when things hit the fan. And after they'd obviously confided in Naruto and left her fiancé up all night thinking about it, Ravel was just about prepared to start cracking skulls.

Contrary to what everyone seemed to think, she wasn't a stupid naïve child. Her parents and grandparents treated her like an ornament. Rias treated her like a little kid to be indulged and spoiled. Riser and Ruval both acted like Ravel was someone that needed to be protected, even if they gave her more freedom than anyone else. Ravel had thought Naruto was different, which was why she'd taken to him as a suitor so well. But she was starting to wonder if she'd been wrong after all.

No amount of playing games or snarky jokes could make up for a fundamental lack of trust and respect. Ravel wasn't a bitch; so she wasn't going to jump down Naruto's throat when he was so obviously wrung out. But she was getting tired of waiting and something would have to give soon.

Sighing, the blonde Bishop leaned back in her chair and crossed her ankles. Ravel trailed her hand over the rough cover of Montaigne's Essays. Usually she'd be happy to go diving through the book, but she had a feeling if she tried right now all she'd see would be squiggly lines. Her blue eyes kept riveting back to her fiancé, so she might as well give in and keep waiting for him to wake up.

"Whaz goin' on?" Naruto jolted back to awareness with a slurp. Dragging the back of his hand across his mouth to wipe away any traces of drool, the redhead squinted a gummy eye over at the clock. It was a few hours past suppertime, and he was hungry as fuck.

He'd been dreaming of old times and old battles. The memories made Naruto nostalgic for a life fifteen years gone, and for people he'd left behind but never forgotten. His Rasengen spell and what he'd built on top of it was in a way a call back to back then, and with a spark of inspiration he knew he didn't have to end it there. He had other options to consider, like –

Oh, but that meat smelt sweet. The succulent aroma of boiled ham derailed all of Naruto's thoughts, prodding his stomach into a rolling grumble. Leaning forward in his chair, the Gremory heir let his gaze be drawn to the steaming plate of ham and mashed potatoes.

"Well don't just stare at it." Ravel huffed, throwing her legs over the arm of her chair. "Hurry up and eat."

"Don't mind if I do." The redhead grinned, lurching to his feet and plodding over to the small table. Maybe eating in his bedroom wasn't strictly on the list of things his mother had banned him from ever doing, but Naruto doubted she'd approve. Oh well, he was too ravenous to be bothered.

Without bothering to look for a place to sit, Naruto grabbed the plate and began shoveling the meal
into his mouth. He marched from the left side of the plate to the right, swallowing down every bite of the dish and fighting back the urge to lick the plate. A cool glass of water finished it all off, and the devil repressed the impulse to belch or pick through his teeth.

"That hit the spot."

"Are you satisfied?" Ravel quizzed dryly, watching her fiancé rub a hand over his belly.

"Yep." Giving his stomach a final pat, the redhead sauntered back over to slouch into one of the armchairs placed next to the giant garden window that looked out over his family's darkened estate.

"Ah, ah!" he chided when the Bishop opened her mouth, shushing the girl with a wink. "I know exactly what you want to say."

Ravel cocked a thin wheat-coloured eyebrow, giving Naruto an expectant look. "So now you decide to start showing off your so-called genius, do you?" she wondered, curling up her knees to her chest. "Well then lay it on me then, big shot. I'm all ears."

"In a minute, spitfire." Running a hand over his cheeks, Naruto grimaced at the faint sensation of stubble. It seemed like he'd have to start getting back in the habit of shaving, now that his new body was well into puberty. "I just want to lay out a couple of ground rules, first, yeah?"

The Bishop just sighed and rolled her wrist impatiently, silently urging her fiancé on.

"Well first thing's first, try not to freak out. Some of what I'll tell you is gonna be pretty out there, so I'm just giving you a fair warning."

"Have a little faith."

"I'll try." Blue eyes brightened as Naruto considered his young bride-to-be. "Second, this stays between us, alright? Rias and her gang know about it, since Sasuke's involved; but on this end you're the only one I want to tell about it, okay?"

"Fine." Ravel couldn't help but feel a small thrill of pleasure at being invited into Naruto's confidence. Romance obviously wasn't the Gremory heir's motivator, but it still pleased the Phenex girl either way. If she couldn't marry for love, she'd hope to at least be able to trust and like her husband, and keeping secrets from each other didn't exactly contribute to that goal. "Can you just get on with it?"

"Right." Naruto floundered for a bit, searching for the right way to go about telling her. In the end, he just settled for the bald unvarnished truth. "So, it's Ophis. Sasuke's hooked up to her like a battery and that's what makes him go nuts."

"Ophis."

"Okay." Ravel muttered to herself, sucking in so much air her cheeks puffed up. "Okay. Okay."

Naruto just grinned sheepishly.

"Okay."

"Ophis."

Hopping to her feet, Ravel clenched her jaw and began to walk. Around and around the Bishop went, blonde curls bobbing with every step as she circled around the confines of Naruto’s bedroom.

Naruto watched with alarm as his fiancé worked herself up into a silent frenzy, hands curling into tight fists before loosening. "Um, Ravel?"

"Shut up." Forcefully making a halting motion at the redhead, Ravel physically urged him to just stop. "Just - shut up and let me think for a minute." A few more quiet minutes passed as the Gremory heir kept a close eye on the circling devil girl before she meandered back to her armchair. The cushion had gone cool in her absence, providing a steadying chill as she sunk back into her seat. "Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"Just okay." Ravel answered irritably, folding her hands in her lap and resisting the urge to gather up fistfuls of her pink dress in anxiety. "The Dragon God of Infinity is interested in your man crush. Fine, it is what it is. Do you know what she wants, or is this just something utterly random?"

Scratching at the bridge of his nose, the redhead smiled bashfully. "Well." He began, dragging out the ending sound. "She wants him to get strong and then help her kill Great Red."

"Great Red."

"Yeah."

"She wants him to defeat Great Red."

"Yeppers."

"Apocalypse Dragon Great Red? The other 'Strongest Existence of All' Great Red? That Great Red?"

Naruto gave her a thumbs up.

Ravel shut her eyes in despair, dragging her hands down her face with a deep-seated sense of frustration. "How – just how is this your life?" she couldn't help but ask rhetorically, questioning just how the fuck a bunch of know-nothing kids caught the eyes of a being that ought to be as far out of their orbit as a distant star was.

"Well about that." Naruto clapped his hands together in a rough sign of supplication. "We already know that. She's interested in us because Sasuke and I are a little bit older than we look, and she's the one that decided we'd make some useful soldiers."

"A little bit older than you look?" A slightly shrill note of demand entered Ravel's voice, and she pinned Naruto with a ferocious blue glare. "If you're about to tell me that the two of you are time travelers, I have to say you are either bullshitting me or living a real-life science fiction fantasy."

Laughing a little nervously, Naruto shook his head in denial. "That's not quite it." He told the girl, a little bit amused at the fantastical speculation. "We used to be human, and after we died Ophis decided to stick our souls in new bodies."

Ravel closed her eyes, biting the inside of her cheek until the hot copper taste of blood flowed over
her tongue. There was a certain suspension of disbelief her fiancé's little story required if true. It was certainly odd, but if she accepted the Ouroboros Dragon was involved, then it was in the realm of possibility.

So instead of being a fourteen-year-old boy, Naruto was a however-many-years-old man in a child's body.

Simple enough?

_No_.

Rolling a little unsteadily to her feet, Ravel began to circle the room again. Concerned blue eyes dug right between her shoulder blade's as the blonde Bishop moved about.

Assuming the tale was true, all the pieces fit together in an eerily rational way. Naruto certainly _acted_ more mature than she'd expect from a boy his age when he wasn't goofing around. The redhead had no taste for books or theories, so him being a magical genius was odd; but previous battle experience could explain it. In a life filled by demons and gods, the concept of soul hopping between bodies wasn't even unheard of, though it was assumed to be fantasy or the blackest of magic.

Ravel prided herself on rationality. It was the mark of a scholar to be able to adapt to new information, critically examine it, and integrate it with her view of the world. She might only be twelve years old, but Ravel was both a scholar and a genius, so it only took her a few circles around the room to come to a decision.

Gingerly sitting back down in her seat, Ravel gave the Gremory heir the firmest look she could muster. "Tell me everything."

"I will admit, I didn't expect you to work so quickly."

Sirzechs' voice ground like a wrench in the turning cogs of Ajuka's mind, bringing the Satan's thoughts to a screeching halt. The scientist looked up from his sheaf of slightly yellowed notes, raising a green eyebrow with an expression of teasing humor. "I've had a long time to consider this particular project, did you think I never bothered to do independent experiments on my own time?"

"Well, no." Sirzechs smirked faintly, stepping closer with a faint jangle of his grey and gold armor. "I knew that you'd get up to your old tricks. But I thought we were working you hard enough that you wouldn't have had so much free time."

"Bah." Ajuka waved off the Crimson Satan with a peeved look. "Maybe this will teach the lot of you to stop underestimating my genius." Then he turned his focus to the slightly wrinkled black cloak thrown over his desk and ran a considering finger over it.

The bristles that slipped over the pad of his fingertip had no business being as sinfully soft as they were. But a cloak made from the fur of a barghest was probably going to be a little different compared to a typical dog's pelt. Silver runes glittered along the hem and around the collar of the cloak, catching the electric light of the lab's overhead lamps.

"How many do you think you can produce?" Sirzechs prodded, stepping up next to his friend and joining the Satan in his perusal of the piece of cloth. Catching a barghest was both costly and time consuming, since the cursed hellhounds had been almost driven into extinction by the hunts of the Church. "And how long do you think it would take?"

Ajuka hummed in thought, settling a thumb over the dark green gem that made up the cloak's
brooch. "Ten, maybe twenty more. Not many. The barge fur is a limiting factor on its own, but I haven't been able to substitute for the crystals either. They have to be green Agreas bloodstone, and of the purest grade. Finding more will take a lot of time, or a lot of money."

"You'll have it."

Ajuka snorted, releasing his grip and letting the cloak slither out of his hand. "Time or money?" Considering the war effort, the answer was obviously funding, but the Satan Beelzebub couldn't resist the urge to have a jest as Sirzechs' expense.

"Oh, but you're a funny one." Sirzech growled out, sweeping the cloak up and settling it around his shoulders in one smooth motion. The wide pauldrons of his armor keeping him from being about to draw the mantle closed. "Does it need to be entirely wrapped around, or is just wearing it enough?"

Folding his arms over his chest, Ajuka leaned a hip into the corner of his workbench and shook his head. "Do you really think magic would just be that convenient? No, in order for the concealing magic to work, you have to be wrapped right up in it. The hood too, if you were wondering."

Sirzechs gave a low tsk, untangling the hide cape with careful fingers before throwing it in the other Satan's face. "Try it out for me then, will you?" Watching as his friend rolled his eyes, Sirzechs closed his eyes and opened himself to the inner flow of his sorcery, focusing on his intent on the scientist.

Ajuka's presence was like a blazing emerald bonfire before his otherworldly senses, beating strong and steady with the assurance and sheer power that came from being a Satan. The cool flame of life wasn't one that could be missed by those who had the ability to search for such things.

And yet once the Crimson Satan heard the soft rustle of fabric that signaled Ajuka pulling on the cloak, that presence was gone. The green flame that had been burning like an incessant miniature sun suddenly vanished, blown out like it had never been. Sirzechs had to open his eyes to reassure himself that the other man hadn't simply disappeared.

The smug smirk on Ajuka's mouth under the cloak's hood was perfectly visible to his physical eyes, but to Sirzechs' magical ones there was absolutely nothing in front of him. "Astounding." The redhead breathed, prompting a chuckle from the scientist. "And you say it only took you a few days to put this together?"

"Of course not." Ajuka sniffed, pulling the fabric off and letting himself become visible to magical senses once more. "You were simply extremely lucky that this particular project was one that I've already done almost all of the work on. I'll need to straighten out a few kinks in the prototype, but after that it's merely a question of manufacturing rather than of material. Give me a month or so to do it."

"Good. Then I'll make sure that you get whatever you need to put together enough of them for a full squad." It might take redirected funds from various other projects, or for Sirzechs to dip into his own personal wealth, but no matter what, he'd see to it that Ajuka had the resources he needed.

Still deep in thought, the Crimson Satan turned away only to be arrested by the scientist's steel grip on his upper arm. "What is it?"

Light blue eyes darkened in warning as Ajuka frowned up at his closest friend. "I hope you know what you're doing with this, Sirzechs. I trust you, but if this goes foul there's going to be a lot of blood to pay. Are you sure you want to risk escalating it like this?"
"We're paying too much in blood either way, Ajuka. So if things escalate, we'll have to be more creative than ever. And besides, if they do get that bad, Michael will back us."

"What makes you so sure about that?"

Sirzechs made a face of mingled pity and nostalgia. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm the only one that remembers the War, and what made Michael so feared to begin with. As the humans say, 'For the great day of his wrath has come, and who is able to withstand?' Don't let yourself forget who exactly we're dealing with up in Heaven, or how many pagans and heretics he put to the sword personally."

After a few days passed, Ravel realized that contrary to her expectations they were not going to be sent back to the factory for more grunt work. Maybe Naruto's parents just forgot to order him back after he caught up on his sleep, or maybe they figured a few days of draining labor were enough to get the lesson into him.

In either case, she didn't really feel like criticizing their parenting choices. Their lenience was her gain, and she intended to take advantage of the new free time. "Come on, let's go do something already." She poked at Naruto, tickling the redhead's side with sadistic glee.

"Oi, stop that." The Gremory heir demanded, grabbing her hands and holding them away from his ticklish sides. It was just his luck that the one day he actually wanted to spend time indoors and study was the one day the Bishop wanted to go outside and play.

Ravel pouted, sticking her lip out at her fiancé and fluttering her eyelashes so grotesquely that Naruto found himself snorting in laughter. "Alright, alright." He conceded, turning away from his grandmother's grimoire full of loopy scribbles. "What do you want to do?"

"What does anyone with supernatural power at their fingertips and time to burn want to do?" Ravel shot back, waltzing over to the library window and pulling up the corner pane. Climbing up on the windowsill, the blonde turned about to give Naruto a mocking salute. "Throw some magic around, of course."

Then she leaned back, falling out into the open air and staring up at the clear blue sky with a smile.

Rolling his eyes at the girl's antics, Naruto hurried over and threw himself out the window after her. Indulging her would take a few hours out of his day, but truthfully the redhead was glad to do it. It kind of felt like their friendship was finally regaining its sense of equilibrium.

Naruto only had time for a final idle thought about how glad he was that Ravel had reacted so well to his truth before his mouth was suddenly full of the taste of wet soil.

"Eat dirt!" Ravel crowed at the Gremory heir hacked and spat out the grains of dust she'd magically hurled at his face. "I'd have thought at your age you were tired of eating mud pies."

Dragging the back of his hand over his kips, Naruto narrowed his blue eyes at the girl with warning. "Be careful spitfire. Don't dish out anything you're not prepared to take."

Another clod of dirt flew at Naruto's face, and with a feral smirk he accepted the challenge. "You're on." Leaping after his Bishop with sorcery enhanced jumps, the reborn shinobi let her stay one step ahead of his grasping hands as he followed her around the estate.

The entire chase was stupid and silly, being something only children would do; which was why Naruto suspected Ravel had tried to goad him into it. Caving to her taunts was the simplest choice to make, not only because it was what he would have done prior to telling her he was really almost
forty years old, but because he recognized her gesture for what it was.

She was telling him that in her opinion, nothing between them had really changed. Ravel had taken to his revelations like a fish took to water, assimilating them with very little judgement or controversy.

Part of it Naruto knew was simply the nature of a devil; in a ten thousand year lifespan the space of two decades was practically an eyeblink. The real span in years that separated them didn't matter a whit to the girl.

Another part of it was her simple lack of expectations toward him. Unlike his parents or Rias, Ravel had very little preconceived expectations of what Naruto was supposed to be. A suitor was a suitor, to put it crassly, and she was more interested in how he treated her than in the exact circumstances of his birth and early life.

The final part was Ravel's implicit choice to try and repay his trust with faith of her own. Even if she was weirded out by Naruto's circumstances, or quietly terrified at the thought of the Dragon God of Infinity hanging around, the blonde was determined to believe in Naruto and his assertions that he was exactly the same person he'd been before.

Naruto would be lying if he said he wasn't touched. Her friendship was a steady rock at his back compared to the rest of the chaos in his life. He hadn't had such a thing since he'd last seen Sakura. His family might love him, but they didn't truly know him, and Sasuke had always maintained a certain quiet distance.

Sometimes Naruto simply just needed a place to rest his back, and Sasuke would only offer him one when shit really hit the fan. The Uchiha was reliable, but not all that interested in Naruto's daily bitching. Go big or go home, as it were. Whining was for women and all that.

"You're getting slow in your old age." Ravel taunted, tossing another levitating brown ball of loam over her shoulder.

Slapping aside the sphere of dirt with an open hand, Naruto smirked at Ravel's back and accelerated. It only took three leaps to fully close the distance, and with a final roar of triumph the Gremory heir wrapped his arms around Ravel's waist and hoisted the struggling girl in the air.

"Who's getting old, you whippersnapper?" Naruto taunted that back of the Bishop's head, leaning backwards so her feet kicked ineffectually at the air. Abruptly she stopped, going limp in Naruto's grip with such suddenness that the redhead peered around the side of her head with a concerned look.

She was smirking.

Fuck.

Ravel's entire body went up in flames, solid flesh dissipating into shapeless flame that flowed away from Naruto's arms and away over the yard. The magical fire hadn't burned him, but it certainly left him with a mouthful of ash and singed eyebrows.

"I said you are!"
Chapter 32

When Sairaorg had started his covert war against the believers in the Aztec pantheon, he'd done it knowing that he was going to be a lone wolf. Assassinating the followers of Gehenna's enemies was dangerous and provocative, so despite the long term strategic benefits it was something the government would absolutely avoid. Only the lone patriot standing outside the law and willing to die alone was the man for the job.

Or so he'd thought.

"Do you understand what I'm asking you to do?"

"Of course." The Bael heir answered, staring at his cousin with more than a little shock. While he'd always recognized Sirzechs as cunning and heard tales of his ruthlessness on the battlefield, Sairaorg hadn't ever associated the Crimson Satan with low war before. The idea of his famously chivalric cousin harboring utterly amoral brutality for the sake of victory seemed ludicrous.

Yet that sort of callousness was on display for Sairaorg at the very moment.

Sirzechs considered his young cousin with flat reptilian eyes, the teal of his gaze drinking in the light like an ice cold void. Every slow step the Satan took faintly jangled the dark steel of his armor, circling his tall frame around the map table and closer to the Bael heir. "And you understand that if you're caught, we will have to disavow you? The Aztecs will string you up, and we won't be able to ride in and pull you out of the fire."

"Yes." Sairaorg acknowledged, spine stiff as steel. It took a touch of effort to swallow back the 'sir' that seemed to want to pop out of his throat, because no matter how violent the air seeping off Sirzechs was, the man was still his cousin. Formality wasn't something they'd ever had to use with each other, even after Sirzechs had started his visible war and Sairaorg had started his invisible one.

It was a bit absurd that after all his sneaking around, that his self-made crusade would all be pointless in the end anyway. Sairaorg had never needed to rely on piecemeal research and desperate secrecy, because his government would come and ask him to assassinate humans on their own time. He could have just waited a few months and the black op would have just fallen into his lap, without the technical treason and personal risks he'd assumed.

"Yes, I suppose you do." Cutting his eyes away from his young cousin, Sirzechs plucked one of the carved glass figurines off the table. The Satan rolled the piece of blown crystal between his fingers, feeling the engraved whorls that shaped it into the tiny phoenix that represented one of clan Phenex's armies. "After all, you have some experience with it, don't you? And please, don't lie to me. I know all about your little one man war, and now you know that I know about it."

Sairaorg swallowed thickly.

So, he'd been much less subtle than he'd hoped to be.

He just hoped to hell the man didn't know that the first time he'd taken Naruto along.

"I'm sorry." He offered reflexively, violet orbs anxiously considering the stern commanding general of Gehenna's armies. "But I couldn't sit around and do nothing. It would have violated all the duties I have to our people, and you know there's a greater good above the law."

Giving a low chuckle, Sirzechs set down the crystal piece with a faint clunk. "That's bold of you."
"Saying something like that right to the face of one of your Satans. After all, for all you know I was the one that proposed that law."

"Even if it was, I'd stand by what I said."

Sirzechs winked mirthlessly, clasping a hand over Sairaorg's shoulder in a gesture of comradery. "And that's exactly why I chose you for this job, little cousin." Then he withdrew his hand, running it over his chin with a jaw clenched in thought.

A beat passed where Sirzechs looked pained, drawing away to stare out the window over the crisscrossing trenches that stretched off to the horizon. "There are too many devils out there that treat this whole thing like a chance for personal glory or gathering up power. I'd rather not put lives in their hands."

"I won't let you down." Sairaorg promised fervently.

"Of course you won't." Sirzechs demurred, running a hand through his thick mane of crimson hair. "You'd rather die than fail your country. That's just your nature." If not for the sour huff at dragged at the end of his cousin's voice, Sairaorg might have thought that the Satan was mocking him rather than complaining about his so-called self-sacrificing idiocy.

As it was, Sairaorg had no real reply to offer. The assertion was completely true. It always had been, ever since Sairaorg had been a little boy and realized that the strong needed to protect the weak.

Which was why he was prepared to take the concealing cloaks the Satan Beelzebub had created, and use them to avoid the wandering eyes of the Aztec gods as he led a team to kill their believers and weaken them. It was thankless work, but in doing it he'd be protecting the people he had inherited responsibility for.

"Should I select the other members of my squad myself, or will they be assigned to me?"

"You'll pick them yourself. But Sairaorg," Sirzechs paused to give the Bael heir a meaningful frown. "Don't just start inviting your friends. Think carefully about the combat ability of the people you ask, and how discrete they can be. You have full discretion to staff the ranks with any devil willing to help you, pureblood or not; but remember to be reasonable about it. Don't bring along anyone that would be missed."

A bitter twist pulled at Sairaorg's lips as he considered the last statement. He knew his cousin hadn't meant to imply it about Sairaorg himself, but the 'Strongest Youth' knew very well that it applied to him perfectly. If he and his entire peerage vanished overnight, the clan wouldn't care about him. In fact, that disposability probably played some factor in Sirzechs' decision to offer him the mission.

Well that, and the fact that obviously his trips hadn't been as secret as he thought they were. "I'll keep that in mind." Sairaorg smiled, perfect and plastic just like he'd practiced.

Squinting through the low orange glare, Naruto flopped down by the wall and watched. It would be his first time seeing Ravel's phoenix tear making ritual, but he could already tell that it was a different kind of magic. The heavy taste of ozone in the air was thicker and more wild than the atmosphere created by more common forms of sorcery.

Runic lines the color of fire circled through the room, painting intricate strokes and enchanting shapes. At the very center was the pictograph of a proud sun, flaming rays arcing in every direction that were contained by the blazing outline.
Ravel stepped forward, pure gold cup balanced in one hand and a thurible suspended from the other. Pungent clouds of thick smoke curled from the censer, coiling around Ravel's feet and dissipating into the air with dizzying effect. It made Naruto's head spin, and he settled a steadying hand over the cool stones of the floor.

When Ravel had told him that she would be making more of her clan's miracle cure, Naruto hadn't been sure what to expect. He'd been picturing something very refined and elegant, like the impression the Phenex clan itself tried to give outsiders. Not the primeval near-nudity that made him think of extinct pagan cults.

Just as the stones of the Gremory manor basement floor had been cleansed and marked over with magical symbols, Ravel herself had purified her body and painted it with glyphs. Stars and runes inked in her own blood trailed up and down the girl's body, vanishing under her thin white negligee and hiding beneath the unbound waves of her blonde hair.

Bare feet padded as Ravel crossed to the center of her painstakingly crafted sun. Every footfall was slow and heavy, just like the lowering of her eyelids. No emotion disturbed her young face, mind open to the flow of family sorcery and closed to personal feelings. She was an automaton, filled only by serene tranquility and the purpose of crafting.

Setting the golden cup in the very center of the circle, Ravel moved away.

Naruto waited as his Bishop slowly spiraled out from the middle, incense burning thicker and thicker the further she moved. Coughing quietly at the herb that was supposed to 'open the mind' and 'cleanse the heart', the redhead flapped a hand ineffectually at the choking sweet scent and watched Ravel settle her incense burner on the floor outside of the circle.

There wasn't anything really wrong about what they were doing, since she was his fiancé; but the whole thing still felt illicit. It might not matter how many times outsiders saw her clan's ritual, since without Phenex biology they'd never be able to replicate it; but the Gremory heir still felt like he was intruding. The phoenix tear ritual was simply too intimate to feel like he wasn't.

He was beginning to see why her family had tried to prevent her from performing it. Ravel was too young for the sort of sensuality the sacrament exuded, and while she still giving off the impression of innocence, the redhead could see how it might be borderline sexual in an older woman. The near nudity and press of instinct guaranteed it.

Naruto wondered if Ravel had even clued in about it, but he doubted it, since she'd thought it would be fun to invite him along rather than borderline scandalous. Honestly, the Bishop was too wise in some ways and not wise enough in others.

Fuck, she was lucky she hadn't decided to put on a performance in front of some secret kiddy diddlers. Otherwise Naruto might have had a few throats to slit.

The slap of flesh on rock echoed through the air as Ravel drifted back to the center of the circle. The pure gold of her goblet glimmered a warm inner red under the light of her spellcasting. It was like the cup contained the raw crimson elixir of life within its confines, rather than pure spring water.

Instinctively, Ravel's feet sought the space next to the cup that faced east. She sunk down beside the goblet, knees gently settling over the cobblestones. If it had the very beginning of the day and they outside, the red and pink rays of the early morning dawn would be shining from behind her, crowning the girl in a celestial glow. Instead they were underground in the middle of the day, but the symbolism remained.
A final breath moved through Ravel's lungs, bringing a calm and steady rise to her budding chest. Then she leaned forward, gazing down vacantly into the clear water filling her ritual cup like it contained all the mysteries of the universe.

Naruto squashed back the urge to fidget as nothing happened for a few achingly long minutes, observing intently until it began.

Sunlight yellow liquid began to seep from the corner of Ravel's eyes, shining faintly in the dim darkness of the basement. The tears held steady glimmer as they ran forward, gathering at the tip of the blonde's nose and suspending there in a slowly swelling globule of magic-made-fluid. Every tear after the first was a waste, and Ravel wasn't skilled enough to limit herself to just one, even if she could complete the ceremony without supervision.

The drip of the phoenix's tears into the water was silent as the grave and loud as a supernova all at once. Naruto's ears heard nothing, but his heart seized like he'd just taken in the most beautiful symphony there ever was or ever could be. In that moment he saw Ravel not just as she was, but as the woman she would become, and there was a painful thickness in his throat as he swallowed.

Blazing yellow swiftly diluted into nothingness, leaving only colourless water behind. Silence hung heavy and expectant, and then the orange lines of Ravel's prepared magic pulsed.

With a slowly building speed, the sun and runes began to move, twisting up the sides of the goblet and into the elixir.

Another beat, and it was over.

Only clear fluid remained in the cup; no longer mere water but rather the true tears of a phoenix.

Ravel swayed on the spot, drained of energy and falling back. If not for Naruto crossing the room in the blink of an eye to catch her, she'd have collapsed into a boneless heap.

"Thanks." Naruto told her, not really entirely sure what he was thanking her for.

Blue eyes fluttered faintly.

A month after Ophis had waltzed into their life and upended everything, Rias' days had fallen back into a familiar routine. They got up to a relatively empty house, ate breakfast with her nephew and his Bishop, and then parted ways for their daily training. After a full day sharpening their skills, they met again for supper and spent the rest of the evening in quiet companionship.

Despite the war hanging over the collective heads of every devil in Gehenna, it was nice. The Ruin Princess felt like she was finally reconnecting with her nephew after so long, rediscovering an appreciation for his bawdy jokes and easy going manner. It was still a little weird to look into that nearly fifteen year old face and remember that the mind looking back at her was nearly thirty-five.

Naruto didn't generally act like she would have expected an older man to, so there was the occasional jarring disconnect when she remembered the Gremory heir's true age.

But besides that niggling detail, it had been smooth sailing. Old jealousies raised their head from time to time, only to be smothered out by the realization that Naruto was nearly two decades older than her. If he was a better warrior, it wasn't because Rias was worthless, but because of the benefit of his experience. She'd told him she forgave him. Now she just needed to follow his lead and forgive herself.

"Check."
Akeno's violet eyes narrowed slightly as she tried to corner Rias' King with her bishop, only to have the piece slaughtered by her mistress' rook. It was the beginning of the trap, annihilating the Thunder Priestess' entire front line and leaving no doubt in anyone's mind that it would be her third loss in a row. "You're always so vicious." she complained good naturedly, lasting another half dozen turns before tipping over the white king in defeat.

Waiting as her friend flounced up and forced Sasuke into the hot seat, Rias accepted the win with a small nod before returning all the pieces to their starting position with a wave of the hand. "Twenty seconds?" she asked, prodding a silent nod of agreement from the dark eyed Pawn.

Limiting the time for each move to a third of a minute would force a game that normally took hours to pass in mere minutes, which was necessary to prevent Naruto from complaining about another 'nerd out'.

"Go." Koneko ordered dully, fingers moving over the interlocked hoops of a Florentine puzzle ring as she kept time for the match. Solving the puzzle took only a few short minutes of the nekomata's time, during which she steadily called out every twenty second mark. Considering the completed silver band in the palm of her hand, the Rook shook it back out and tossed it at Naruto for the lazing redhead to try.

In the evenings, they were usually all buried in their own choice of leisure. Rias, Akeno, and Sasuke moved from strategy game to strategy game. Naruto and Yuuto mashed the buttons of the lounge's gaming console like there was no tomorrow. Koneko worked at her puzzles, while Ravel rounded out the pack by pouring over book after book. But to the nekomata, it all felt like a carefully constructed facade.

Like a calm before the storm.

During the day, Sasuke brooded when he thought no one was looking, weighing over what he told them was a strange weakness to his eyes compared to what they'd been like as a human. His Sharingan gave him a combat edge in predicting melee movements, but apparently it should be capable of much more than that. Instant learning, hypnosis, breaking and casting illusions, or even perceiving different kinds of magic. Everyone had coined their theory on the matter, but no one suggested consulting the only one who likely had all the answers - Ophis.

Naruto was no better. When the Gremory heir wasn't working himself up into a lather over the new spell he was apparently trying to create, he was playing around with the artificial Sacred Gear that Azazel had given him. Uplifted Star was a little mystery that would have seemed harmless if not for the fact that it was created by the famously eccentric leader of the Grigori. It added an element of danger that had led more than one individual from their little circle to try to persuade the stubborn redhead to drop it.

"Match."

A reluctant smirk crossed Sasuke's lips as he conceded the round of speed chess. They'd always called him a genius back in Konoha, but that didn't make him the smartest man alive. His pride necessitated he qualify his loss as the result of having more battlefield experience than game skill, but Sasuke had to admit the Ruin Princess could be a formidable woman one day. "Anyone else want to get murdered on the board tonight?" he asked the room at large, not at all surprised by the negative responses.

An amused light danced in Rias' teal eyes as Sasuke sighed heavily and began setting up the board once more. Part of the Uchiha screamed relentlessly that every moment spent taking it easy like they were doing right now might be their death one day. They lived in a world of titans, and they were
decades or centuries behind the real players in it. But the other part of him, the newer part; refused to let him give it all up. He'd lived one life as a machine, disdaining all the quiet things in life. Sasuke didn't want to do it again.

"Naruto." the dark haired devil called out, holding off the start of his rematch with Rias. He felt the intent gaze of two blue eyes shift from the television screen to dig into the space between his shoulder blades. "You were right." There was more to life than just the unending pursuit of power at all costs.

Utter bafflement cross Naruto's face as he considered his friend. Honestly, he had no idea what the fuck was supposed to be going through Sasuke's head at the moment. Probably some airheaded nonsense. "I always am, asshole." he rejoined, shrugging and turning back to his game so he could whoop Yuuto's ass once more.

It began with pain.

Naruto was chewing the inside of his lip in thought, turning over Uplifted Star with steady fingers as he considered the play of light over the red gold of its surface. The artificial Sacred Gear Azazel had given him had been utterly silent, dead as the dinosaurs and just as useful. He'd tried speaking to it, charging the thing with magic, even wearing it at all times in an effort to forge some kind of connection with the spirit inside.

The sudden spike of agony that struck between the redhead's eyebrows was so cold and fierce that it drove Naruto to his knees. It was beyond mere pain, shredding every single thought with such force that blood began to run from his nostrils. The only thing that saved Naruto's mind was the struggles he'd once had with Kurama for his sanity.

So instead of collapsing into a gibbering wreck, Naruto struck back with a vengeance.

The physic assault was energetic and vicious, sparing nothing in its attempt to dominate every thought of the Gremory heir. Naruto answered in kind, slicing back at the skilled probe with every ounce of skill he could scrape together. This was no mere battle.

It was a struggle for supremacy.

"Fuck" he grit out audibly, taking strength from the sound of his own voice. Unlike the being sealed in the artificial Sacred Gear, Naruto was alive. His heart beat. The blood that ran through his veins belonged to him. When the swell of magic answered his call, it was his power. It was enough of an edge that he was able to shove back the mental tendrils of his unknown enemy and break the connection by throwing Uplifted Star into the dirt.

Naruto's heart thudded in his chest, squeezing so violently he thought he might puke up his lunch. The cold sweat covering his palms didn't help. Blue eyes dilated to pinpricks with the strength of the adrenaline rushing through the Gremory heir, and he considered the Sacred Gear laying on the ground. It practically exuded false innocence.

There was a cowardly part of him that screamed run. Just like any other living being, Naruto had instincts. They demanded a dozen different things, from what times he stuffed his face to the different fantasies he conjured up when he had a good wank. But every primal urge in Naruto's body at the moment was united in the instinct to flee.

Naruto was not a man who would ruled by instincts.

Shoving down the natural fear, the redhead utterly suffocated his inclination to look for help from
one of his friends. Uplifted Star was much more dangerous than he'd thought, or at least it was much more painful. Either way, Naruto had no intention on letting anyone he cared about bear part of the Sacred Gear's malice.

"Well aren't you just a special kind of fucking prick." Naruto mocked icily, cracking his knuckles as he waited for his frantic pulse to slow. Maybe he was just being stupidly reckless again, because taking on a foreign assailant alone with no information was dumb as fuck. Rias would probably tear a strip off his ass for doing it. But the foolhardiness of it wouldn't stop Naruto.

Perhaps he'd end up hurt. At the absolute fucking worst his mind would end up totally destroyed, and Naruto would rather die than spend centuries sucking nutrients up through a tube. But without taking some risk there was no reward. And while his life had been extremely comfortable after he told some people his truths, Naruto needed something a little greater than mere comfort.

The reward of purpose was a double-edged sword, but Naruto wanted it either way with a hunger that surprised even him.

He loved Rias. He loved every member of his family, and every single member of his aunt's peerage. Regardless of how badly Sasuke would curse him out for self-sacrificing idiocy, Naruto would suffer any torment for any of the people he cared about.

But the willingness to sacrifice was not the same as a purpose to exist.

And Naruto was meant for more than just existing.

Life animated all of his limbs. Every cell in Naruto's body was rife with genetic potential. In what world was he going to waste that and leave the people to suffer? Maybe he'd let himself fall to the wayside, seduced by the gentle call of family. Sasuke was no different, caving under the weight of the bonds he'd formed.

But eventually all that romanticism wore thin. The demand for righteousness waited on no man. Hence why Naruto was unwilling to hand over his Sacred Gear to others for slow study and careful testing. Naruto was willing to take the risk, because if he didn't he would start to question what exactly he was aiming for with his new life.

Scanning for any possible sources of interference, Naruto waited. Sasuke and Rias were trading blows, testing the Uchiha's katana experience against the Ruin Princess' newly learned rapier techniques. Koneko and Yuuto were even more distant, engaged in an all-out spar. Ravel was much closer, juggling blazing balls of fire in her small hands.

It seemed none of people Naruto cared about would be getting in his way. There was no need to demand time alone or delay, so with a final swallow; Naruto picked up Uplifited Star.

This time, when the hateful drill of malevolence struck at his mind, Naruto was ready. He deflected the mental lash and bit deep with this own intent. There was a stale air to the Sacred Gear's thoughts, but Naruto didn't have enough time to consider that oddity before he was forcefully ejected.

"Motherfucker." Naruto swore viciously after checking the time. Barely twenty minutes had passed on his tiny excursion, so hopefully he'd manage to complete it before anyone came digging.

Gathering up his mind and magic, Naruto squeezed the metal star so tightly it began to bite into the skin of his palm.

Then the redhead attacked, taking pain and giving pain in a tit-for-tat exchange. Blue eyes carefully checked the clock over and over, measuring the time he lost each time he went under. Four minutes.
Seven and a half. Thirty seconds. Nine minutes and three quarters of one.

"Give it up you fucker." Warmth began to trickle from his nostrils, and grimly Naruto wiped the nosebleed away on the back of his hand. Every time he went on the offensive, he could feel the Sacred Gear cave a little more. But time was running short, and it was nearly time to break for supper.

He needed to win before one of his friends got curious and decided to see what Naruto was up to.

Naruto hammered again.

Cave.

And again.

Cave!

And again.

CAVE!

Uplifted Star's thoughts gave way like glass shattering under a baseball bat. There was a foreign sensation of defeat and all-consuming rage that brushed over Naruto's senses, along with a flurry of half-formed images. A cool smile of triumph pulled at Naruto's mouth, and he prodded the onyx gem in the center of the red gold star with his thumb.

"Well Kokabiel, let's see what's going on in there, shall we?"

Sirzechs peered through the glass, weighing the slowly rebuilding ruins of Shamond and the deep ditches dug all over the Limbo Strip. He hated the sight of it.

But then, the Satan hated a lot of things lately. Including himself. What kind of comrade pressed his friends into service, ordering them to work around the clock for the sake of the state? What kind of father and husband hadn't seen his own family in more than a week? What sort of kinsman looked at his relatively innocent young cousin and saw someone to be used rather than shielded?

Sirzechs already knew the answer.

A victorious general.

It didn't make swallowing back the bitterness any easier. Once the Crimson Satan had allowed everything else to be eaten up by his need to win, what was left behind? Nothing but an unfeeling machine, doing anything and everything for the sake of victory.

Dipping his hand in his pocket, Sirzechs pulled out a cigarette and lit up. Grayfia hated the smell of tobacco, but she was back trying to rebuild the Lucifer territory rather than looming over his shoulder with a scolding gaze. The redhead was alone with his thoughts, and sometimes giving in to an addicting vice was what he needed to make it through another day.

Another day of blood and violence and mounting stress. There were too many angles and too many players, all clamouring for his attention and energy. The Senate was riding his ass more and more by the day, demanding a quick end to war and a restoration to normal prosperity. The other three Satans were showing why exactly they'd taken their positions in the first place, following Sirzechs like they always had and unknowingly pushing more of the command decisions into his hands.
Maybe the pressure was going to give him an ulcer or early grey hairs. How adorably human that would be.

Sucking down anther lungful of tobacco smoke, Sirzechs held the burning sensation in his lungs. And then released it, trying and failing to exhale the building headache of anxiety behind his eyes. "Fuck it." He muttered, burning up the cigarette with a tiny flare of the Power of Destruction and turning back to the map table.

Things were proceeding, but they were not moving forward quickly enough. Serafall's fae army was a constant in his plans, taking a greater weight than he'd ever wanted it to. It was the last best hope for Gehenna, because Sirzechs was running out of time.

The other pantheons were starting to wonder why the devils and fallen angels hadn't been able to shrug off an assault by a nearly forgotten group of gods and pay them back with prejudice for their impudence. More and more the suggestion of fatal weakness was being asked, and unless he managed to score some sort of decisive victory soon Sirzechs would have to escalate. They didn't have the mightiest god there had ever been to provide them salvation anymore.

Relying on Sairaorg's kill squad was going to be a gamble, just like calling on Oberon for one battle was going to be a gamble. Soon Sirzechs would have to cave to the Senate and gamble with conscription, and pray it didn't spark a rebellion.

But gambles were all Sirzechs had.

The Biblical faction hadn't exactly made a lot of friends through the years, and the perception of weakness might spark an even wider conflict. A conflict Sheol and possibly even Heaven wouldn't survive.

He hoped Serafall's horn was going to provide the victory Gehenna needed, and buy him more time. Because if it didn't, the Crimson Satan was going to have to blow the other trumpet he'd been given. *Michael's* horn.
Chapter 33

The ring of the phone was shockingly loud, shattering every trace of silence so violently that Sirzechs frowned and turned away from the window. He'd been deep in thought, but the vibrating jingle singing away on the map table demanded his attention.

"What now?" The Satan mumbled, pinching his nose in a futile attempt to alleviate the stress headache pounding at his temples. He swore to fuck, if it was Prince Sitri again he'd tear someone a new asshole. The staff knew very well not to waste his limited time by putting through calls from a bunch of politicking old men.

Scooping up the cordless phone, Sirzechs spared a last glance for the carefully arranged pieces scattered over the huge map table. Then he jammed his thumb on the talk button, lifting the device to his ear and growling out a short "What?"

"Dad?"

"Naruto?" Sirzechs blinked in shock, bracing himself with one hand on the table and pressing the phone closer to his ear with the other. "How did you get this number?" Horrific suspicion began to dawn on the Satan. "Wait, what happened? Is your mother okay? Is it Rias?"

His son's voice came over the line in a strange tone, drained and wary in a way that raised every hair on the back of Sirzechs' neck. "Dad, no. Everyone is fine, as far as I know. I needed to get in touch with you because – look, can you come home now? I really need to talk with you."

Once the initial surge of panic subsided, Sirzechs realized that he was furious. Trying his utmost to make sure that none of the irritation reached his words, the Satan sighed into the receiver. "Naruto, now isn't a good time. I have a lot of things I need to do. Whatever it is will have to wait, unless your mother or grandfather gets to it before I do."

"Dad."

"Not now, Naruto." Sirzechs cut over his son's sigh mercilessly, mind already drifting back to plans and his stratagems. The preoccupation with conventional tactics was hampering him, so maybe Gehenna should take a page out of Mictlan's playbook and consider biological or chemical weapons…

"I know all about the big cheese being dead, Dad."

Sirzechs paused, and for the first time in a long time gave his son his undivided attention. There was no absolute guarantee that the connection was always secure, so Naruto had avoided saying specific names. But there was only one being Sirzechs felt they'd both call the 'big cheese', which raised some very concerning questions.

"I'll be there soon." The Crimson Satan murmured lowly, turning the cordless phone off with a beep and slowly settling it on the table. There was no innocent way for Naruto to know that God was dead, if that really was what his son had been referring to. So somewhere along the line someone was leaking information.

First he'd talk with his son and suss out exactly who and what Naruto was talking about. After that, someone would be getting strangled with their own intestines as a personal favour from one of the four Satans.
Summoning up a tiny ball of sorcery, Sirzechs created a quick message to tell his staff that he was stepping out. Then the Satan drew his magic up around him like a cloak, overcharging his teleportation spell until it punched through the spelldome and whisked him away to his father's estate.

The effort was a little draining, but spelldomes weren't infallible. They limited the ability to transport large amounts of material or common troops, but they hardly had the ability to contain a Satan or any other ultimate class devil. Smashing through their barrier might send the Mictlanese into a bit of a tizzy though.

Oh well.

Naruto was waiting on the other side of the spell, fidgeting in the foyer and staring up at his father with an odd expression. "Dad." The clan heir greeted, frowning just a little at the blank mien Sirzechs offered back. "I thought you might find it important."

The clomp of Sirzechs' leather heels on hardwood filled the air as the Satan drew closer, stopping to loom over his son with a tight grimace of his own. "I only came because you might have stumbled into something you really shouldn't have been getting involved with. So why don't you tell me exactly what you found out, and I'll decide where to go from there. Speak freely."

"In the Great War, the previous four Satans died, and so did God."

Clamping a hand over Naruto's shoulder, Sirzechs gave a tight smile. "Well let's not waste any more time then." The Satan ordered, spinning the young devil about and marching him right up into the nearest lounge. A few quick spells prevented anyone from eavesdropping, and Sirzechs crossed his arms over his chest.

"How exactly did you find out about this?"

Naruto sighed, dipping his hand into his pocket and pulling out a towel wrapped bundle. Peeling back the fluffy green cloth, the Gremory heir revealed Uplifted Star in all of its red gold glory. "After the battle in Shamond, Azazel gave me this. It's an artificial Sacred Gear that he made."

After giving his father a few seconds to digest that, the redhead dumped the metal star onto the nearest coffee table with a thunk. Naruto repressed the urge to wipe his hands. The unclean feeling didn't come from physical contact, but rather from the mind inside the artifact. "The spirit sealed inside to power it's a fallen angel by the name of Kokabiel. You've probably heard of him."

Sirzechs massaged his forehead, scowling fiercely as he shifted his attention to the Sacred Gear that seemed to gleam maliciously. Azazel. He should have known.

Questioning what became of Kokabiel after the agitator disappeared hadn't really mattered all that much to the Satan, and it seemed now that was coming back around to bite him in the ass. "Yes, he was a borderline terrorist that wanted to restart the Great War. I never knew that Azazel used him as an experiment, but considering his personality, I'm not surprised."

"I see." Naruto muttered, looking faintly green as his mind conjured up images of horrific gore and suffering that came with the word 'experiment'. Sasuke hadn't said much about his time in Oto, but Orochimaru's cruelty was legendary, and maybe Azazel was more like that man than was comfortable. "That sounds like fun."

A wry smirk pulled at Sirzechs' mouth before he shook away the faint amusement. "That's neither here nor there. I'm guessing Kokabiel told you all about how the war ended did he?" The Satan touched a finger to the red gold metal, prodding at the nearly catatonic mind within. Kokabiel faintly
stirred, but didn't do anything beyond that. It seemed being turned into a Sacred Gear had made the man's mind nearly mush.

At least the leak wasn't in military intelligence. No one would have to die today, though Azazel might be wishing he was dead very soon.

"Yeah."

"Fair enough."

Naruto watched his father poke at the Sacred Gear, shoving his hands in his pockets and repressing the urge to scowl. God being dead was a scandal, and while he understood that the government had hid it to look strong to outsiders, that didn't make the news any better. "I figured that this is the kind of thing we should talk about. Make sure we're both on the same page, ya know?"

"There is no page, Naruto." Sirzechs shot back coolly, turning away from Uplifted Star and favouring his son with a hard stare. "Life will go on the same way it always has. We'll stick to the story, and you'll tell no one about this. Not your aunt or your friends or anyone else. No one. This is a state secret, and I expect you to keep it just like the rest of us who are in the know."

"I would think that's a given." Naruto grit out, scooping up the artificial Sacred Gear and dropping it back into his pocket. The action made his father purse his lips, but the Satan didn't demand Naruto hand it over. "But what I mean is you can't keep shutting me out. Just because something could be dangerous doesn't mean I don't want to be involved or hear anything about it. I found out about this, didn't I?"

Cutting off his father when the man opened his mouth, Naruto continued to build up steam. "And I know that you and mom are just trying to keep me safe and everything else, but I can't live my life like that. I'm the heir to the Gremory clan and the son of a Satan. I have responsibilities, and you're not doing me any favours by treating me like a kid. I'm almost fifteen now. Are you gonna tell me I can go around executing criminals but I have to live in my bubble otherwise?"

"Naruto, you are not a soldier." Teleportation magic began to swirl as the Satan went to leave. "Just because you can fight doesn't make you a warrior. You need experience and discipline, and you have neither. Otherwise you wouldn't have run off to Shamond like a lone wolf."

There was last echo of Sirzechs' voice as the general vanished. "I'm going to think on this, don't call me again today."

"Fucking god damn it." Naruto cursed.

Sairaorg forced back the urge to cough, doing his best to ignore the cloud of cigarette smoke filling the air and irritating his sinuses. Making a big deal out of something so irrelevant didn't appeal to the violet eyed devil, and even if it did he had little desire to irritate his host.

The bright orange embers at the end of his cigarette glowed when Riser Phenex took another breath of burning tobacco. The blond man lounged back on his couch, considering his visitor with narrow blue eyes as he smoked and turned over the proposal in his mind.

"Let's say that I do want to fight rather than just sitting around here." Riser began, stamping out his cigarette in a crystal ashtray. "Even if you have permission to form up a squad from Satan Lucifer himself, that doesn't tell me what you're actually asking me to do. I doubt it'll be front line stuff, otherwise you wouldn't bother with the secrecy."
Spreading his hands in a noncommittal gesture, Sairaorg shrugged. "I've told you all I can right now. If you want to know any more, you've gotta join up and agree to keep everything on the down low."

Riser clucked his tongue, reaching up to scratch at the triangle of flesh revealed by his open collar. All the hush-hush stank of illegality to him, but if it was sanctioned by a Satan whatever was going on was probably more in the line of black ops or secret police and less in the line of treason.

"Fine." He decided. "Let's do this." Maybe it made him arbitrary, but Riser was going a little stir crazy in his manor. There were no Rating Games during wartime, he had no desire to go home, Ravel was off with her boyfriend, and there were only so many times he could have an orgy with his peerage before it started to get routine. There was more to life than pleasing his dick.

Sairaorg fiddled with the zipper of his vest before nodding his acceptance. He couldn't say he knew Riser on a personal level, but the blond was a good fighter with useful family magic. An immortal comrade could give quite the edge if they ran into trouble, and it was even better to essentially have a personal phoenix tear factory.

"It's a wetworks mission." the Bael heir hedged, settling his elbows on his knees and leaning forward. "We're to find people that worship the Aztec gods, and kill them all. The Satans feel like the war is going on too long, and we need to start stepping up our game before other pantheons start sniffing around."

Riser stared, then cursed and shook his head. "Fucking genocide? Are you taking the piss? And let me guess, if we're caught we'll be thrown under the bus so that we don't piss off the Thirteen Heavens and get them involved too?"

"Right in one." Sairaorg confirmed, one corner of his mouth quirking up in a mirthless smirk. "It's not like we're out in the cold though. Beelzebub's put together some special cloaks for us to go around wearing. As long as we've got those on, the gods won't be able to scry us. Which means if we're not physically seen and we don't leave around evidence, we shouldn't get caught."

Pursing his lips, Riser nodded in comprehension. "And who else is coming along for the ride? I doubt that I'm the only one you're gonna ask, especially since you can have me, but I'm not tossing my peerage into this shit."

"You would be the first." Sairaorg flickered his eyes to the digital clock perched above the TV. He had no idea how quickly he needed to work, or when the squad would be given the go ahead to start venturing into the human world. But either way, he didn't want to waste any time. "I haven't asked anyone else yet. Gotta be careful about who's getting an invite, yeah? You never know who might turn out to be some asshole you can't work with."

Or who might turn out to be a spy or a traitor, but Sairaorg didn't think that possibility needed mentioning.

Giving a long and drawn out sigh, Riser stifled his craving for another cigarette. "Sounds fantastic. Let's hurry up and get started then."

The heel of Zeoticus' shoe crunched over a few crystals of broken glass.

"Well isn't this just a sorry mess?" the Duke greeted his son, sky blue eyes taking in the ransacked appearance of Gehennan High Command. Normally there would be half a dozen assistants puttering about the place, placing calls and taking information to pass to the handful of generals debating military strategy and commanding troop movements. At the least, he would have expected to see the
other Satans around.

Instead it was just Sirzechs, who had apparently decided to wreck the place in a fit of anger. Someone would have to come in later and clean up. Broken bottles of whiskey and a few smashed computers didn't exactly exude professionalism. "Have a bad day again, Sirzechs?"

Sirzechs turned away from the window and fumed.

The Satan shrugged off personal insults and failures easily enough, but he had poor control when it came to bad news from other people. The boy had always been a bit tactile when he was angry too, so the fact that the room looked like a miniature hurricane had roared through it gave the Duke a few clues. "What did Naruto do this time? Run off to the trenches? Shave his head and sneak into basic training?"

"No." Sirzechs grunted, rubbing at the red stubble growing from his cheeks. "But he wants to, that's the problem. I have enough to deal with already, I don't need or want to be wondering all the time if he took off again. Can he not just stay quietly put and do what I tell him to do?"

Crimson eyebrows had crept steadily upward during Sirzechs' little rant, and left Zeoticus staring at his son with a faintly flabbergasted expression. "Sirzechs, my son, I love you, but has it ever occurred to you that you're being an idiot?"

"Pardon me?"

"Look." Heaving a great sigh, Zeoticus stuffed down his own irrational fear of conflict and war. He might personally be a borderline pacifist, but he also recognized that he lived in the real world and couldn't try to apply his private morality to everyone. "Just what do you expect from your son? You and Grayfia have worked very hard to instill in him a certain kind of outlook. If you want him to be a good man, how can you complain when he acts like it? Naruto wants to help this country, even when people tell him not to. That's exactly the kind of person you taught him to be."

"Yes, I know." Sirzechs rebutted irritably. "The problem isn't that he wants to one day do his best to protect Gehenna. The problem is that he's still just a wet behind the ears kid. He needs to focus on living life with his friends, not trying to fight a war before he's even hit his second decade."

The Duke shook his head slowly, turning to lean his back against the plaster of the wall. "Part of being a father is realizing that your children grow up much quicker than you want them to. Fifteen is young by modern human standards, but for our kind its not unusual to be fighting at that age. You were no different. How old were you the first time you marched off to war? Eleven? Twelve?"

"That was a different time." The denial carried with it a low heat, Sirzechs glowering faintly at his father. "What did we fight so hard for if it wasn't to avoid sending more kids to die? And why are you even arguing his case for him? I would have thought you would be the one most opposed to his involvement."

"We fought for a lot of things, Sirzechs. Freer government. Peace with Heaven. Personal power. Clan prestige. The survival of our species. Don't focus so much on a single detail and act like it invalidates everything we did. Do I want to send Naruto to fight? No, but there are a lot of things in this world that don't go the way I want them to. We're going to hand down a better world to the younger generations, but it's not going to be a perfect one."

Zeoticus lifted his hands in a pacifying motion, eyes burning. "At the end of the day the choice is yours Sirzechs. He's your son and it's your call as his father and the general. But remember, we don't live in an ideal world where we can do whatever we like. We only have the real one. Even if Naruto
fights, his children may not have to. Or maybe they will. The future is uncertain, and the only thing we can do is make the best choices we can in the present."

Naruto growled again under his breath, sloshing about in the enormous tub as he waded back over the edge. No amount of relaxation in the bath or the fresh smell of his soap could calm the deep seated annoyance swirling in his gut.

Why did his dad have to be such a god damn hypocrite? Naruto had heard the stories more than once growing up. Twelve years old with cheeks still rounded by baby fat and Sirzechs had been sent to the battlefield by the old Satans. Naruto was years older than that and better trained than his father had been at his age, so his dad had no leg to stand on.

It was just a bunch of bullshit helicopter parenting.

Uplifted Star bounced on its chain as the redhead moved, thumping a steady beat against the bare flesh of Naruto's chest. Maybe it was a little reckless to be wearing the thing around considering the whole assault on his mind, but after the Gremory heir had beaten him there wasn't a single peep out of Kokabiel.

It was almost like the fallen angel's mind was zombified. Very little effort was required to poke around and dig up information out of Kokabiel's memories. Either being turned into a Sacred Gear utterly fucked with the fallen angel's mind, or the man just didn't care anymore.

Neither possibility sat well with Naruto, so with more than a little reluctance he sat down in the bath. The water came up to his chin and was little annoying, but he'd rather not take the chance of falling over and cracking his head open.

Taking a deep breath, Naruto dove.

_Yo, you there?_  

There was a faint sensation of stirring, but no more life than that, and a little ember of irritation sparked inside Naruto. He poked at the catatonic consciousness again, a little rougher, and growled a little louder mentally.

_Hello? Anyone home?_  

Still nothing.

_Wake the fuck up!_  

Kokabiel mentally slapped out at the redhead, stupefying the boy and making him physically jerk back.

"The fuck was that for, asshole?"

_I have nothing to say to you, brat._  

"I think that sounds like the attitude of a sore loser." Naruto mocked, smirking at the foreign sensation of indignation that he could feel thrum up from the Sacred Gear spirit. "I suppose I could be wrong, and it might just be your time of the month, Kokabiel-chan."

_What do you want?_ Kokabiel's mental voice was coarse as sandpaper as it reached the redhead, conveying a mixture of pure hatred and malice.
Naruto hummed in thought, lifting one hand up to run over the smooth metal surface and onyx gem of the Sacred Gear. What did he want? He'd seen enough of Kokabiel's memories to know the man was practically the total opposite of good. But then, hadn't Kurama been the same way once?

The parallels between his furry friend and the grouchy fallen angel weren't perfect, but they were close enough that Naruto couldn't help but feel a little pity for the warmongering terrorist. "I don't imagine life inside a Sacred Gear is all that comfortable or interesting."

Kokabiel attacked, screaming with mental rage as Naruto smacked him down with little effort. Their last conflict had drained the both of them, but the redhead had recovered much more quickly. "None of that, you." The Gremory heir scolded. "I wasn't making fun of you. Just thinking. What do you say we team for a little bit? You give me some of that power, and I'll make sure your life is a little more interesting."

Obviously there'd be ground rules and Naruto was going to be the one running the show, but he felt he owed it to all the people he'd known who had been caged up to at least make an offer.

Fuck you, brat.

The sensation of Kokabiel subsiding was a little like the slurp of water going down the drain. It was swift, a little noisy, and left a jarring emptiness in its wake. "Your call, asshole. Just remember that I did ask."

Naruto would work at the man for at least a little longer before giving up the sealed being as a lost cause. What could it hurt anyway?

Ravel turned the last page of the Science of Logic, chewing at her lip as she filed back everything she'd just read for later consideration. The day was drawing near to its end, and if she moved quickly she could take the book back to the library and maybe pick out a new one.

Some days, it felt like her mind was bursting with information. The blonde Bishop devoured texts so quickly it was a wonder she learned anything at all. Maybe it made her a nerd, but she loved it. Books were much simpler than people and didn't try to confuse her.

Naruto was being weird lately. At first, she'd thought it had something to do with showing him her ritual, but he'd seemed to like it well enough. Her fiancé had watched to the end and thanked her for showing him, so she doubted he was weirded out by her clan's magic.

No, it felt more like Naruto was keeping secrets again. Not ones that he wouldn't share on account of age, since he hadn't seemed to tell anyone. But the redhead had taken to disappearing at odd times and turning up looking annoyed and weary. Ravel knew he was working on a new spell he wanted to surprise them with, but surely it wasn't that intensive?

The Bishop was so engrossed in her thoughts that she didn't pay attention to the movement of her feet until she collided face first with a warm stomach. "Sorry." She muttered, rubbing at her nose and looking up.

Oh.

"Hello Lord Sirzechs?" she squeaked, quailing at the weight of the Satan's blue green eyes. "I mean 'Hello Sirzechs." She corrected nervously, remembering that he'd once told her to not be so formal with him.

The Satan blinked.
"Um, 'Hello dad'?"

Amusement rippled over the redhead's handsome features, and a friendly smile pulled up the man's lips in a disarming expression. "Hello Ravel." He greeted, finding a little humor in her obvious shy nervousness. "I don't suppose you've seen my son around?"

"The last time I saw him, he was heading to have a bath."

"I see." Sirzechs mused to himself, stepping around the girl. "Thank you." Then he was off, striding away while Ravel watched with a confused look.

"Weird."

"Naruto."

The jut of Naruto's jaw was familiar and full of rage. If he wasn't mistaken, Sirzechs remembered seeing the exact same expression on Grayfia more than once when she was particularly irritated. It made him smile with faint nostalgia. "You're angry at me."

"Not at all." Naruto mumbled, sarcasm filtering through despite his half-assed effort at a polite tone. "I'm just getting ready for bed."

Sirzechs eyed his son's pajamas, cocking an eyebrow at yet another frog ensemble. The constant demands for toad stamped boxers and sleepwear struck him as odd, but it was one of his son's constant quirks. At least that hadn't changed despite their recent distance. "Yes, you are. I understand." The Satan motioned vaguely at the side of Naruto's bed. "Can I sit?"

"Fill your boots old man."

"Don't let your mother hear that." Sirzechs shot back reflexively, plopping down on the mattress next to his only child and threading his fingers together. "I thought about what you told me today, and after I had an interesting chat with my father, I've decided that you might have a point."

Naruto's jaw dropped, and he gaped at his father. "Well I know that I'm a persuasive guy, but isn't this a little fast?"

Chuckling softly, Sirzechs ruffled the boy's hair and took sadistic joy in the squirming it invoked. "It's something I've been thinking about on and off since Shamond anyway. You're right, you are old enough that in any other clan it wouldn't be a surprise to send you out to do something for our people. The only reason they don't bother right now is because they don't feel the same sense of obligation to the commoners you do. The commoners aren't really people to a lot of the nobles, but you know better, so I know it's been eating at you to do nothing."

"I just..." Trailing off as he searched for the right way to convey his feelings, Sirzechs shrugged and met his son's blue eyes with his own. "I'm your father Naruto. It's just in my nature to try to coddle you like that. One day you'll have children of your own, and then keeping them safe will start to feel like this obsession for you. Even when it's not fair to them, you'll still feel like that."

Naruto rubbed at his eyes, ignoring the burning sensation of wetness. It made him feel like a sissy, but he'd needed the affirmation of fatherly affection. It had already been too long, and the horrific scenarios of rejection he'd been thinking of since Ophis showed up didn't help. Sirzechs' words soothed an ache that had been pounding for the past month. "Yeah, I get it."

Settling a hand over his son's shoulder, Sirzechs gave an affectionate squeeze. "I'm glad you do. But
it's still not fair to you to treat you like you're younger and less able than you actually are. Sometimes you have to learn to just let go a little bit. That's why I've decided that I do have something you can do that will help the war."

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely." Rising to his feet, Sirzechs folded his hands behind his back and began to pace. Maybe it was a bit irrational, but the Satan felt like the circling helped settle his thoughts. "This is all going to be strictly provisional, of course. I wouldn't throw you in the deep end. But prove to me that you've got what it takes and we'll see about handing you over more responsibility. Fair enough?"

"Yeah, sure." Naruto agreed eagerly, trying not to bounce on his bed like an overexcited kid. That would be the exact opposite impression he wanted to make on his father. "What do you want me to do?"

"Police work." Sirzechs brought up his hand when his son rapidly went from eager to borderline mutinous. "This is not the same thing I had you do before. We're at war now, and we've had to commit a significant amount of soldiers to keeping order in our cities and rebuilding infrastructure. Now that things have settled, we can afford to start moving them to the front."

Tilting his head to the side, the Gremory heir began to connect the dots. His father's explanation continued unabated.

"What I want you to do is oversee the transition, and make sure that once Azmarin has been emptied of troops that we don't see a crime wave start up there. It's very important for our war effort that those factories keep pumping at full capacity and we see no disruption in shipments from terrorism or petty crime. Can you do that for me?"

Well it wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind, but Naruto would take what he could get. Working with people that were determined to bubble-wrap his life needed to be done in baby steps. How difficult could playing cop and sort-of governor be? "Yeah, sure. I won't let you down."
Chapter 34

As it turned out, playing governor was more difficult than Naruto had thought it would be. His brain felt like it would explode from the endless streams of regulatory technicalities and the half a dozen things asking for his attention at any given time. It really drove home the first thing rulers learned after experiencing command: delegate, delegate, delegate.

"Look, I don't need to hear about that." Naruto cut off Tansea, waving off the affronted expression the secretary gave him. Maybe her last boss had more patience for rambling, but Colonel Rahron had already shipped out and left the city in Naruto's hands. Which meant the redhead needed to get things straightened out before something fucked up.

Screwing the pooch on his first day wouldn't exactly impress his father. Naruto would have called up the mayor for advice, but apparently the man was just a useless figurehead appointed for political porking. He was waiting for his old buddy Nergal, but it was taking the man forever and a day to make it over from his police station.

"Let's just not worry about the army." The Gremory heir decided, turning away from the window and flipping through the mess of papers on his new desk. There was too much shit hanging over him, and he had no idea where to really begin. "They'll clear out on their own. I'm more interested in keeping order around here."

Tansea pursed her lips, lifting a hand to touch at the fat ruby necklace around her throat before the brunette leaned forward. "If that is the case my lord, you may want to consider scheduling a meeting with the police commissioner." It took the secretary a few seconds to pull out a thick brown book from one of the desk drawers. "All the contact numbers should be here, if you want to place a call."

Naruto rolled his eyes at the formality, but took the book and began thumbing through it. Cramped chicken scratch listed out a hodgepodge of names, from politicians to factory managers to local socialites. It was an exhaustive collection, and spoke of a certain willingness by Colonel Rahron to speak directly to people that the redhead could respect. "Nah. They should already know the city pretty well at this point. I'll pick stuff as we go along, but until then I'm not gonna micromanage."

"Very good, my lord."

"I want you to call him in a bit and pass along the bare bones." Tightening the red tie around his throat, Naruto briefly considered giving his mother a call and asking her for a bit of advice. Running a city would be just like running a territory, only on smaller scale. But no, it was about proving himself, which he couldn't do if he ran crying to mommy. "Tell him that I want the entire force out on double time. Get every beat covered. I don't want anyone to be able to sneeze out there without splattering the snot on some cop."

Tansea accepted the brown contact book with a frown, shaking her head at her new boss' order. "We could do that, but the cost to the city would be significant. All the overtime we'd have to pay would eat into our discretionary funding, and we don't have a large amount of money to spare after all the rebuilding we've done recently."

"Then you don't pay them." Naruto shot back with a surge of irritation. Letting the city go to shit because they were afraid of a little overtime; no wonder urban crime was such a constant problem. "You call them up and you tell the commissioner that we're at war. This country needs a little bit more from each of us if we're going to survive. It shouldn't be such a big god damn deal if an officer needs to put in a couple extra unpaid hours at work."
The tight smile that Tansea gave him before she exited to place some calls told Naruto all he needed to know. She was just another one of the adults that suddenly found themselves working under him and doubted his ability to be anything beyond yet another political appointment. That was fine. Let them doubt, because they were going to find out that Naruto was very different compared to their previous governors.

As soon as he settled in and got his feelers in place, Naruto was going to demonstrate why no one fucked with him. The days of bribery and kickbacks to government officials were over. The police knew where a few dozen known criminals were at any given time, and he intended to string them up. Anyone taking part in a criminal act was going to experience a good sentence of hard labor.

The war with Mictlan was going to take a little more than most people in Gehenna were ready to admit. And it no longer mattered if they were prepared to admit it or not, because Naruto was going to drag them kicking and screaming into total war if he had to.

Azmarin wasn't going to be the only city converted into going above and beyond for the country; just the first. Naruto's father had made that very clear to him. Luxuries would be rationed, criminals would be conscripted, workers would be expected to give an extra half hour or more of labor every day for the war effort. And if they started to grumble and agitate under their new expectations, the Senate would make public some rather shocking information about the real cost of the conflict.

Enough Mictlanese soldiers had been captured and interrogated for their enemies' goals to be unmistakably understood. They were not in a conflict over resources or politics, but in an existential struggle for the future. Mictlantecuhtli didn't intend to conquer the devils and fallen angels, he intended to exterminate them. Genocide was the order of the day. Defeat would only bring extinction.

Kill or be killed.

Once the people understood that the only possible result of loss was complete destruction, they would fight on relentlessly. No amount of unions agitating for overtime pay or young anarchists complaining about exploitation could outweigh the possibility of death. Maybe it made Naruto cruel, but he fully intended to capitalize on the news his father had confided in him last night and would be releasing to the people shortly.

News that would terrify the country into fanatical resistance.

Vali wriggled his fingers into the soil. It crumbled cool and dry beneath his questing digits, smearing into the crevices of his to-long fingernails. The next time he was rotated back from the forward trenches, he'd have himself a good long shower. But first, he had to jump through whatever new hoops high command was setting up for them.

Something was going on. Orders had been trickling in, demanding they cut back on excursions over no man's land and stiffen their positions. If the latest gossip that had trickled up to the front had any truth to it, Serafall Leviathan was prowling all across the Underworld handing out secret orders. Some of his underlings thought there was a troop surge coming. Others thought they'd be switching to some bold new tactic. It was all hearsay and guesswork.

The only thing Vali knew for sure was that there were more faces crowding the trenches every day. The trickle of reinforcements had sped up rotation in the lines, and he only spent one of every three days crouched in the dirt. They'd had to dig deeper and widen the trenches to accommodate the extra soldiers huddled down to avoid Mictlanese fire.
Whatever was going to come, let it come soon.

"Captain, we're catching a bit of movement from the enemy line!"

Clenching his jaw, Vali rolled out of his slouch and into a low crouch. The half-devil kept his head below the lip of the trench, stepping over the rough soil and feeling grateful for the existence of magic. At least it kept them from having to lay in a ditch full of water. "What do you got for me?" he demanded, peering through the dark night at the serious face of one of his subordinates.

Maybe it made him a bit of an asshole to not remember anyone's name, but they all seemed to die so quickly or get rotated out that it didn't really matter.

The silver haired captain accepted the binoculars with a grunt, holding them against his eyes as he carefully peeked the top half of his head over the bank. It was dim, but the faint artificial starlight gave his half-devil eyes enough light to pierce the gloom. There wasn't a great commotion going on in the Mictlanese lines, but he could see faint movement and the tiny gleam of red bonespider eyes.

Running his tongue over his teeth, Vali fished his pocketwatch out and glanced at the time. Part of him wanted to go over and take the fight to those bastards, but he was more than a warrior at the moment. He was also a soldier, and soldiers followed orders. That meant no haring off to assault the enemy on his own - assuming he even made it that far without getting blasted out of the air by massed spellfire.

"Alright, I want you to pass it both ways along the front. Get the conjuration cannons ready for a kilometer in each direction. We've only got a couple of minutes to midnight, and the second we strike twelve I want everyone to fire at once." It wasn't like they'd hit the Mictlanese from this distance, but it would give the arseholes a bit of a fright and let them know that they were being watched. "Give the support trench a ring too and let them know we might be getting a push here soon."

"Yes sir." the scout barked, leaving his commanding officer to watch the front while he scurried along to pass the message.

Vali barely even noticed the formality anymore. Three months fighting as a soldier for the Grigori tended to do that. Complaining about being acknowledged by his rank didn't seem worth the effort anyway. Why bother putting in all the effort training people to speak to him in a more casual way when they'd end up getting cut down by seewahs or seaseas anyway? It made Vali tired, and not in a good way.

He was starting to hope that the war ended soon, or that he at least managed to get some leave. Vali loved to fight, but he was less than fond of the endless grind of poor sleep and constant death all around him. It would be nice if whatever gambit that High Command was cooking up managed to shake things up a bit.

"Everyone is ready, sir."

Nodding his acknowledgement at the returning scount, Vali peered back through the binoculars. There were a little more floating magic orbs over there, but things hadn't changed too much. Spider eyes still glowed, making him repress a shiver of disgust.

He fucking hated spiders. Azazel would blame trauma or some such nonsense, but it was as simple as the fact that Vali didn't appreciate dirty tricks in a fight.

Vali checked the time again.

Ten seconds.
"Let's get this started then, lads."

Five seconds.

"Try not to shit yourselves, newbies."

Zero.

The sudden explosion of spellfire from the Gehennan artillery was deafening. Simultaneous shocks split the air, signalling the mass volley of multicoloured balls of sorcery. Pink here, green there, a little bit of purple - it was almost like a fireworks show, except much more deadly. Vali watched as the cannons fired again and again, five coordinated strikes that hit the dirt a good hundred metres too short to do any more damage than churning up some soil.

Smoke floated over the battlefield, stinking of ozone and burning things as it spiraled up and away into the night. This time, when Vali looked through the binoculars and scanned the Mictlanese lines, he could see no sign of life.

Conflict was averted.

For now.

Dragging a hand over the bristles of his ginger stubble, Roland pulled his round spectacles away and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. The years had worn on the priest, scattering a handful of early grey hairs over his temples and carving faint wrinkles around his eyes. But the Dutchman couldn't afford to rest from his hunt, not as long as Isaiah might still be out there alive.

And if the boy had died under Valper's hands, then the Dutch clergyman intended to put the excommunicated archbishop into the grave. The Bible warned against searching for revenge. 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay' said the Lord, which was fair enough. Roland wasn't out to take retribution.

Strangling Valper Galilei with his own intestines would simply be justice.

Roland forced his focus away from morbid thoughts. There would be time to mull over the crimes that were done to an innocent little blond boy - both by Valper's malice and Roland's failure - at a later time. He hadn't come to Rome to space out and get lost in his own head. It was easy enough to do that on his own time.

"The Holy Father will see you now." One of the Swiss Guards exited the Pope's office, Renaissance uniform bright and luridly coloured. The boy couldn't have been more than twenty, but there was a hardness in his eyes that spoke of knowledge. Perhaps he'd had firsthand experience fighting against the supernatural creatures that prowled their world.

"Dangge." Roland replied, nodding at a fellow soldier of the Church. Then the green-eyed priest stepped forward, slipping through century old doors and into a rather sparse private library. He was sure the few sculptures protected by panes of glass were nearly priceless, but all in all it was less lavish than he would have expected from the Supreme Pontiff.

"Roland." A wheezing voice called, exertion colouring the Pope's voice as he stepped forward. Loose papery skin hung deeply from the man's face, decades haven taken their heavy toll. While the brown eyes glinting out from under bushy white eyebrows were full of vitality, it was likely the Pontiff wasn't long for the world. "We have been waiting for you."
Light throbbed into existence, growing from the tiniest pinprick of a mote into a miniature sun. But despite the brightness of it, the light didn't burn. It just glowed warmly, soothing hearts with the gentle touch of a mother. Another pulse stretched the blazing orb into a human shape, and just beyond the edge of hearing Roland could almost sense the voice of Heaven.

Gabriel stepped into the mortal world, slipper clad feet settling on the marble floor like feathers. The curls of her blond hair gleamed like beaten gold, or spun sunlight. The seraph had the body of Venus, heavy breasts and wide hips under a pure white robe; and yet the first thought she inspired was not sexuality. Gabriel was an ancient mother, holding mankind to her chest and shielding them from outer darkness.

Blinking away the sudden wetness of his green eyes, Roland swallowed thickly and lowered his gaze to the floor in submission. It always displeased angels when he did that, since they were humble and didn't take joy in dominating others, but the priest couldn't help it. He was in the presence of light made flesh, and the eldest of God's creations.

"Please don't." Gabriel sighed softly, words soft and musical. Both human men hesitated before forcing themselves to treat the holy maiden as if they were on equal ground rather than being further apart than the Earth and Moon. "I came to assign a mission to you, Roland."

Roland's heart lurched into a beat of excitement. He might be nearly middle aged now, but a mission from Heaven itself made him feel young again. The faint pride it engendered he tried his best to kill, but the priest couldn't quite achieve that. To think that he had been given an assignment by the Divine King Himself. Considering that one of the Four Great Seraphim had come to speak with him, Roland couldn't think of who else it might have been.

"What can I do for Our Father?" he asked, sheer reverence and willingness to serve thrumming through Roland.

A minuscule twitch pulled at the blond angel's eyebrows, but it smoothed away so quickly Roland wondered if he'd imagined it. Gabriel smiled beatifically, slowly shaking her head. "This doesn't come from the Father, dear one. It comes from Michael."

Ah, well Roland supposed that made more sense. The Archangel was only a step down in the government of Heaven from the Father, so if there was anyone who could have commanded one of the Burning Angels to play messenger it was him. "Either way, how can I be of service to Heaven?"

Gabriel drew tall, gentle manner bleeding away into something more fit for a general on the battlefield. "Roland Hendriks, it is the express request of your Archangel that you serve as a sword for the Church. Heretics and pagans have desecrated our temples, polluting them with foreign liturgies and consecrating them to strange gods. Should you accept, it is Michael's command that you form a tribunal with your fellow clergymen, and conduct an Inquisition. You will use every mean at your disposal, including force to defend the Houses of our God."

This time, Roland couldn't contain the bow. He swept low, muttering an affirmative. What else could he do but obey? Even if he didn't want to, as a servant of the Lord he had a duty to protect Heaven and the Church. And Roland did want to, because heresy was a very serious charge - one that had been laid on a certain Genocide Archbishop.

There was a sudden warm sensation of lips on the crown of the priest's head, along with the whisper "Be mighty in righteousness." The blessing surged golden strength into his limbs.
When Roland looked up he was just able to catch a glimpse of the seraph departing in a crackle of pure white fire.

Koneko sighed, plodding through the corridors of the Gremory manor with Shiro following just at her heels. Her familiar had taken to hanging around her much more often, since apparently Sasuke was a cat person and the feline had figured out exactly where he needed to go to get a good belly rub. If Sasuke was in the room, Shiro would go up to the Uchiha and purr relentlessly. And if her friend wasn't in the room, Shiro would just follow her until she eventually led him to Sasuke for a spoiling.

If not for Sasuke's teases about Koneko's own ears, the white haired nekomata would even find it a bit cute. Instead though, she just found the feline obsession irritating. She hadn't grown cat ears or a tail since wandering around the Pawn's inner world, but that didn't mean Sasuke would let the Rook forget about it.

Cat ears belonged to Shirone, not Koneko, and she had no intention of assuming nekomata form anytime soon.

Raising her gold eyes to the servant she could hear coming down the corridor towards her, Koneko slowed to a stop and waited for the slightly harried man to draw close. There was a crisp white envelop carried delicately in the man's gloved hands, and shrugging one shoulder the Rook decided to intercept.

"What is that?"

The man startled, brown eyes widening in his wrinkled face comically as he looked down and gaped at the petite girl. The obvious shock annoyed the hell out of Koneko, though she wasn't sure if it was because he was wasting her time or because of the implication about her short height.

"Just a letter, young miss."

"I can see that. For who?"

Old eyes tracked over to the square of paper, peering at the bold typeface. Even a devil wasn't immune to time, and for one as old as the butler, it was taking it's toll. Without powerful magic he couldn't repair the slow damage of age either like the nobles did. "It's for Mr. Uchiha. I thought I would deliver it myself, since I'm sure that he'd like to get it in case it's important."

Koneko frowned, eying the letter with more interest. "Give it here." she demanded, plucking it out of the butler's grasp and flipping it over. "I'll deliver it." Stamped in purple on the back was the coat of arms of the Diabolical Senate, but that didn't mean a damn thing. Letters from the government weren't an everyday thing, but they weren't unheard of either. The nekomata herself had gotten one a few months back demanding that certain 'anomalies' in her records be cleared up by filling out a sheaf of expensive forms.

The only certainties in life were death and taxes, as they say.

Ignoring the way the elderly devil bowed his thanks, Koneko spun on her heel and started walking back the opposite way. She was pretty sure she knew exactly where Sasuke was, which was why she'd made a petulant little effort to avoid him.

Shiro pounced at his mistress' heels, trotting along after the girl as she led him back through the maze of hallways and towards a very familiar group of scents. The prospect of a good petting had the cat purring loudly, which made his owner curse lowly as she stepped out into one of the walled gardens.
Bright roses greeted Koneko's amber gaze, standing proudly beneath the midday sun that slanted in through the open roof. The rest of the peerage was there, lounging lazily with the beginnings of a picnic set out.

"There you are." Rias greeted cheerily, lounging with her head in Akeno's lap and giving her Rook a vague wave. "I was just thinking I'd have to send you a message."

"I'm here." The reply was bland and cool, just like how Koneko usually kept her voice. But she wasn't able to entirely smoother the trace amounts of fond happiness, and the fact that she could see a few pieces of fudge set out warmed her gut. That they'd remembered her favourite treat was such a little thing, but it pleased her.

"Well don't just stand there." Yuuto muttered, staring at the plates of food with a ravenous look. The blond Knight had put on quite a bit of dense muscle since becoming a devil, but like all young boys he still loved to eat. The wait was killing him.

Rolling her eyes, Koneko smirked at the mocking face Akeno gave the swordsman before swiftly bee-lining directly towards the sushi. She might long for the fudge, but it was still a dessert and not a proper meal. The nekomata sunk down on the soft grass, the crackle of paper distracting her from the food.

Ah, she'd almost forgotten.

"Sasuke."

The Uchiha grunted, sprawled out on his belly with his face buried in his crossed arms. It was the poise of slothful man, and when Sasuke lifted his head up to offer the Rook a single half lidded look, that only reinforced the impression. "Hn?"

"A letter came for you."

"Once more, the taxman comes a-calling." Akeno sing-songed, running a hand through the brilliant crimson strands of Rias' hair while the Pawn accepted the envelop with a dubious expression. "I hope you're freshly lubed for the great big shaft of the bureaucracy."

Rias reached up and pinched the Queen's cheek. "No more vulgarity out of you for today."

Snorting at the girls, Sasuke broke the seal on the letter and pulled out a triple folded set of sheets. They crinkled as Sasuke opened them, dark eyebrows rising as he poured over the words. There was a faintly sour pucker to his mouth, but after a moment he sighed. "I see."

"What is it?"

Wordlessly, the Uchiha handed over the sheaf to their mistress.

Rias squinted up, the sun behind the pages yellowing the paper and making it a bit difficult to read. Once the Ruin Princess went white as a corpse, Koneko had the sudden inkling that something was very wrong.

Paper slipped from Rias' loose fingers, gliding over as it settled onto the ground like snow fell from heaven. One sheet landed near to Koneko, stark black letters easily visible to her devil eyes.

Uchiha Sasuke

Greetings,
You are hereby summoned for induction into the Armed Forces of the Kingdom of Gehenna...

It was the clop of fresh leather on wood that made Naruto blink the sleep out of his eyes and look up.

Ravel marched right up to his desk, the deep crimson of her great coat swishing as she came to a stop right in front of him and snapped her heels together. Her left arm snapped down to her side while her right came up in a straight parallel line. Her face was unsmiling, but Naruto could easily see the mockery in her blue eyes as she shouted "Sieg Heil!"

Very slowly, Naruto blinked. "I'm not sure if you're just trying to make fun of me or if you're trying to imply something about the way I'm running the show around here." It would be just like her to fuck with him for the kicks, but at the same time she could be doing it as not-so-subtle commentary. He didn't think he was that totalitarian though.

"Can't it be both?" Impishly, Ravel grinned and relaxed into a more natural stance. The Bishop pulled the beret from her head, running a cautious hand over her blonde strands and making sure they remained in some sort of order. "I hear you're thinking of making some big changes around these parts. Please tell me you called me over to give me something to do, rather than it just be you looking to brag."

Chewing the inside of his cheek, Naruto glanced down at the collection of dossiers that were scattered about his desk. "Yeah." the Gremory heir decided. "I could use the help." Truthfully he'd just wanted to see and talk to the blonde for a little, but since she'd offered, he didn't know if he should refuse. As Azmarin's new governor he needed people around that he could trust, and while Nergal passed along real information from the police on the down-low; it wasn't the same as having reliable help at his side.

Plus she had demanded Naruto start treating her like someone who could make her own choices. So maybe he should stop prevaricating over it and start doing so.

"This city needs to be cleaned up." Naruto explained, flipping open a folder and scanning over the criminal profile within. "Rahron ran a clean ship, but he was a lot more concerned with getting those factories rebuilt and restoring public order than he was in gutting the dirty underbelly out of here. And the guys before him weren't exactly the squeaky clean sort, if you catch my drift."

Ravel cocked a straw-yellow eyebrow before shrugging and circling around the desk so she could stand behind her fiance and peer over his shoulder. "I can't say that I expected this to be your first go, since starting a low-scale war with organized crime isn't exactly 'keeping the peace', but I get it. It'll be good in the long run."

Typically speaking, governments tended to form understandings with certain 'unauthorized' elements. It was better to deal with the devil they knew, and as long as the mobs kept their heads somewhat down and didn't let their private violence spill out into the streets, they were tolerated. Police commissioners that tried to eradicate crime entirely came to find that squeezing local mob bosses might look good in the media, but it had a body count, and conflict between the law and crime could spill out into public turf wars that took the lives of bystanders.

However, that sort of maxim could only hold as long as law enforcement itself followed strict protocols and did everything by the book. Trying to follow procedure about how long people could be held and what their rights were appealed to a certain righteous sort of morality. Which fell apart when the police had to wait for approval from officials paid off by the mob, and then trust any criminals caught in the hands of a corrupt legal system. However, a ruthless ruler who was willing to go above and beyond expectation could actually achieve his end goal.
Spying, interrogation, and if necessary summary execution did more to strangle organized crime than relying on a compromised system.

Truthfully, after seeing Naruto break down over the innocent lives he'd taken in the human world, Ravel wouldn't have assumed he had it in him. "Are you sure you want to go this route though?" she questioned cautiously. "You're going to end up having to cut a lot of people down if you want to get rid of the black market and force those people to work for the good of the state."

"Normally? I'd be pretty conflicted over it." Naruto admitted, spinning around in his chair to look up pensively at the blond teen. "And maybe in the long run, I wouldn't choose to be so heavy-handed. But I don't think this country can afford to wait around for me to do this the nice and easy way. We need the taxes we could be getting from legit business, and we need to take our pound of flesh outta these guys that grew fat off hurting Gehenna."

"Is there something you're not telling me?" The whole thing was starting to feel a little desperate to Ravel, and while she could believe Naruto was earnestly just doing it to help the people as quickly as possible, it felt more like there was something else swimming under the surface.

Naruto pursed his lips. "Honestly, there were a few things my dad told me that I think you might want to know."
Chapter 35

Rias' heart had risen to some point in her gorge, throbbing more and more sickeningly the closer she rushed to where her father coordinated economic and military activity over vast swathes of Gehenna. By virtue of his pedigree, his reputation, and his previous experience in war, the Duke had been chosen to supervise a full quarter of their realm.

Zeoticus' responsibility had pulled him out of the Gremory territory and to one of the sprawling stately complexes in Lilith. The former capital of the Lucifer territory had been speedily rebuilt after the civil war as an expression of triumph, and then detached into a self-governing region under the direct auspices of the Senate.

For their kind at large, Lilith served as a glorious nexus for the power of the nobility and the beating heart of their state.

For Rias, the city was just an annoying obstacle she had to cross in order to talk to her father and protest her Pawn's conscription. Sasuke himself might have reacted to the prospect pretty amiably, but Rias wasn't going to accept it just like that. She remembered Shamond and the way her peerage had almost died based on the mere whims of those stronger than them too clearly. If Sasuke went to fight, he might die; and that wasn't an outcome Rias wanted to even imagine. Like any of her servants, Sasuke had become precious to her in a dozen different ways.

The world without him would have much less joy in it.

"We're here, my lady."

Turning her teal eyes to the chauffeur, Rias nodded at the woman. "Circle around the block until I come back."

Like many other important government buildings in Gehenna, the Semiramis Guildhall was covered by a spelldome that prevented teleportation by all but the strongest magical beings. So the Ruin Princess had to teleport as close as she could get and then travel by car the rest of the way. Normally the wait wouldn't have bothered her too much, but she needed to speak to her father before Sasuke went and got deployed.

The fool had already packed his bag and dressed in uniform.

Rias practically flew up the granite steps, pushing through the door and blasting past security with a flash of her noble credentials. Normally even having a pureblood lineage wouldn't be enough to fast track her through a state complex, but everyone practically fell all over themselves trying to suck up to the boss' daughter. Rias just slipped on her polite smile and bore it until the elevator carried her to the top floor.

"Is my father in?" she asked the secretary, barely waiting for confirmation that her sire was in his office and not currently meeting anyone before she slipped through the doors.

The sudden creak of hinges drew Zeoticus' gaze from the report on his desk, and he peered up in surprise at his daughter through square eyeglasses. Even though he had perfect eyesight, the Duke found wearing glasses helped him focus. It was one of the more obvious quirks he shared with his daughter. "Rias?"

She marched right up to the Duke, pulling a rumpled square of paper from the pocket of her skirt and dropped it on her father's desk. "This came in the mail today." Rias swallowed, lowering her gaze. "I
was hoping you'd be able to help me with it.

Zeoticus blinked, picking up the square and unfolding it to reveal the first of conscription orders for one Captain Uchiha. "Ah." the man made a noise of comprehension, mouth tugging down into a frown as he considered how exactly he should proceed. Setting the letter aside, the redhead pulled his glasses off and threw them onto his desk with a quiet clatter.

"Take a seat." Motioning to the armchair across from him, Zeoticus watched as his daughter primly obeyed. It was easy to see the frustration and worry in the girl's face, but she hadn't flown off the handle and started raging at him like a less mature child might. He was proud of Rias for that, which made Zeoticus feel all the more guilty that he couldn't comply with her implicit request.

"Rias, I love you." the Duke began, lifting a hand to rub at the stubble of his beard as he searched for the right way to put it. "But this isn't something I can help you with. I would in an instant if I could, but I'm just one cog in the machine, and my hands are tied right now."

"I don't believe you." Rias disagreed, fisting her hands in her skirt but managing to keep her voice soft and polite. "You're a Duke, your son is a Satan, and right now you're basically ruling over a quarter of the country. Are you telling me that with all that power at your fingertips, you can't countermand the conscription orders for a single soldier?"

Zeoticus tapped absently at his desk, shifting his eyes away in thought and then back to his daughter with a sigh. "It's not a question of ability. Could I theoretically do what you're asking me to do? Yes, I could pick up the phone and place a few calls. It's a question of responsibility. Should I do what you're asking me to do? How could I ask other nobles and the commoners to do something I'm not willing to do myself? Sasuke has unfortunately been called to the lines, along with every of age member of every noble's peerage, provided an individual's deployment wouldn't lead to catastrophic escalation."

Smiling grimly when Rias assumed an expression of shock at that little tidbit, Zeoticus shook his head. "As nobles, we have obligations, and part of those obligations is to make sacrifices for the country when we have to. Otherwise, we're just tyrants abusing the masses. Our peerages are extensions of ourselves, and right now we've been called on. I know it hurts, I know that you're going to worry about him every day until the war ends, but I raised you to be a good person Rias. And you know that you have to let him go. For Gehenna."

Drawing a slow breath, Rias fiddled with the button of her blazer. "I think you see me as a better person than who I actually am." the Ruin Princess commented bitterly. "Maybe I don't care about nobles or commoners or anything else. I just want to keep my friends close to me and keep them safe, no matter how it looks or what it costs other people."

"You might feel like doing that." Zeoticus conceded. "But I also know in the end you're not going to." His daughter's denial had the air of defeat rather than resistance, so he could already tell she wasn't going to try something reckless like smuggling her Pawn out of Gehenna.

Rias clenched her jaw, but didn't deny her father's assertion. After a moment, she rose to her feet and half turned away. "I should go. Sasuke will be leaving soon and I need to see him off."

Without waiting for acknowledgement, the redheaded girl moved to go.

"Wait." The idea had come to Zeoticus in a sudden rush of inspiration. His daughter and her friends were going to go stir crazy as long as the war went on, and they'd do well with something to do. If that something actually contributed to the war effort, it would be even better. "I just thought of something that might be of interest to you."
Blue-green eyes flashed with intent as Rias twisted back to consider her father. The man looked contemplative, but not fit to bursting with some grand proposal or great idea. Truthfully, after being denied so handily she was feeling a little uncharitable, and prepared herself to be underwhelmed. "Yes, father?"

"I can't help you keep your servant off the front lines, but I can tell you that the sooner this conflict ends the quicker he'll be back home and safe. So what do you say about doing something that might help shorten the war?"

Reluctantly intrigued, Rias folded her arms over her chest and turned fully to face the man behind the desk. "Alright, I'm listening. What did you have in mind?" She doubted it would be anything too important, considering that the Senate would rather let almost every male devil die before letting the women in general go off to fight. The old mantra of 'sperm is cheap' was deeply embedded in the Gehennan psyche, and if she wasn't going to the front lines as well Rias didn't see herself doing anything that would contribute much.

Her father would probably propose she start working in a factory doing something similar to what Naruto had done during his brief punishment, and honestly, Rias doubted she'd even deny him. The Ruin Princess had magic to burn, and every little bit helped the war effort.

"One of the greatest issues we have military is the lack of quality soldiers." Zeoticus steepled his fingers together. "We've tried to make up the shortfall with military tech and numbers, but we're only able to stalemate them. We've called up the reserves to replace attrition losses, but our population was never that big to begin with. Soon we'll have to conscript just to keep the flow of manpower steady."

"This is where you come in." Zeoticus winked at his daughter. "There are two things you can do for us. One, join some of your peers like Sona and Seekvaira while they go around playing ambassador and trying to persuade some other factions to lend us a hand. And two, take some of Ajuka's standalone Evil Pieces to convert interested humans into commoners that are willing to fight for us."

Rias felt her eyebrows shoot up in surprise at her father's second idea. Typically speaking, Evil Pieces were registered to a noble devil who would then give them to people they wanted in their peerage. There was a symbiotic link where the greater the power of the noble, the greater the power of the Evil Piece, and the more powerful the being that was being reincarnated into a devil or bonded into service could be.

Standalones weren't linked to any noble, and as such had much less power in them. The only being they could really reincarnate were regular unremarkable humans, who had limited use to a ranking devil.

Still, there were many otherwise unremarkable humans that would be willing to play Gehennan cannon fodder for the chance at a ten thousand year lifespan, and they wouldn't be much weaker than the untrained commoner devils of Gehenna's armies anyway.

It was an interesting idea.

"Alright, I'm in."

Sasuke drew his service katana, Sharingan flickering on as he examined the cut of the blade in greater detail.

It was an ugly thing. The demonic steel was less pure than he would like, but what else could he expect from a sword that had been churned out in mass production by one of Azmarin's many
factories? There was no art or care forged into the weapon, only a blunt intent to kill. It was a pale shadow of the katana Rias had once gifted him, but they'd had no chance during wartime to commission Sasuke a better blade. The only option he had was the backup blade.

It didn't really matter to him all that much. The Uchiha wasn't looking for a sentimental keepsake. He just needed something to hold the charge of a Chidori or Koujin on the front lines as he slashed the Mictlanese invaders to pieces. It wasn't like the pistol they'd given him would be worth a damn. Sasuke was too powerful to rely on charged crystals, and the weak blasts of fire spellguns could produce weren't worth piss in the wind compared to his own sorcery.


The bars denoting his captain's rank and the patch acknowledging his clan loyalty pulled his gaze again and again.

Sasuke wasn't sure how he felt about what was essentially a brand of ownership by the Gremory clan. He'd seen the symbol enough times when Rias summoned her magic circles, and for years it had sat smack dab in the center of his own runic circles as a symbol of his allegiance and the Pawn pieces inside of him. But once he'd awakened his Sharingan, it had been replaced by the six-pointed star of his Eternal Mangekyou. Every time he saw the new symbol, it raised questions he wasn't sure how to answer.

What were his long term goals? What was the Uchiha name going to mean in this Underworld?

"Oh my, aren't you looking snappy?" Akeno greeted as she drifted in, violet eyes darting towards the Uchiha's small trunk of permitted luggage. The forced cheer in her voice did little to cover up her underlying stress, but she was trying. "You know what they say, the ladies love a man in uniform. Rawr."

Turning away from the mirror before the Thunder Priestess could accuse him of vanity, Sasuke shrugged one shoulder and gave the woman a bored glance. "That so?" he deadpanned, all carefully cultivated disengagement and arrogance. It had the desired effect of making Akeno puff up in challenge, worry getting buried a little deeper by their familiar tit-for-tat.

Akeno hummed in mock thought, closing the distance and plucking the service cap off Sasuke's dark strands. "It is so." she drawled, setting the crimson cap on her own midnight hair with a flourish. "Not that I'd expect you to know anything regarding the tastes of cultured women, you uncultured brute."

Very slowly, Sasuke tilted his head to the side and committed to a mocking stare. Then he reached up with hands clad in white gloves and pinched Akeno's cheeks. The stretched out slobby pull of the girl's mouth lasted about four seconds, after which the Queen began to wiggle her tongue and splutter a great spray of saliva at him. "Abugahah!"

"Gross!" Sasuke barked, jerking back and wiping at his face with the crimson sleeve of his uniform. "You're such a vulgar woman." he complained. "You're exactly the kind of girl I was warned about growing up."

A mischievous twinkle sparkled in Akeno's gaze, and she waited until Sasuke turned away to glance at the clock before rushing forward. Wrapping her arms around the Uchiha's neck in a choking grip, the Thunder Priestess purred lewdly. "Yes, I'm a very naughty girl." Then sticking her tongue out, she dragged a wet and sticky lick right up over Sasuke's cheek.
"What are you, four? Heaven above, woman." Sasuke shot back, frowning in disgust. A short push at Akeno's midriff quickly revealed her unwillingness to release him, so Sasuke turned to a more unconventional solution. Grabbing the back of the woman's skull, he forced her head down and proceeded to wipe her cooling slobber off in her hair.

Akeno wailed at the feeling of chill wetness, giving Sasuke enough of an opening to wrap and arm around her waist and hoist her up and over his shoulder like a potato sack. The wind flew out of her stomach with a woosh as she landed, and Sasuke readjusted her to hang more comfortably.

Rolling his eyes when she began to wriggle, Sasuke gave her rear a harsh spank before turning his attention to his gear.

A spark of magic levitated his little bag, and he was able to bundle up his greatcoat over his other shoulder. "Pipe down you," he ordered once the sting of his slap wore off, spanking her a few more times in succession to quiet her struggles before striding out of the room. As fun as it was to tease Akeno, he was running short on time and really should be leaving. After a quick round of goodbyes he'd be out the door.

In a way, perhaps he was betraying his friends' feelings. Despite all their worry, Sasuke was excited. No amount of hand-wringing from the girls or stony silences from Yuuto could change the fact that part of Sasuke was eager for war. Shamond had given him the first taste of fighting in years, and he wanted more. Sasuke wanted the rush of the fight again. He craved for a taste of victory that came with crushing his enemies. It wasn't something he felt like Rias' peerage would have understood, though Naruto probably would have.

Trundling down to the front foyer with his cargo, Sasuke peeked his head into the room before pulling back. Yuuto and Koneko were already waiting, so he was in a bit of a quandary. Just walk in, or set down Akeno first? The former would give him a sense of sadistic amusement, and the latter would give him... nothing really.

Just walk in it was.

Unfortunately, Akeno took the choice out of his hands with a desperate wiggle. She squirmed out of Sasuke's grip, sliding down to plant her feet on the floor and give the Pawn a red-faced pout. She had no problem with a good bit of teasing, but all the spanking was a going little too far. After all, she was both sadist and masochist; and there were certain switches that shouldn't be flipped. "No more spanking, you perverse animal."

"I'll spank you all I want." Sasuke taunted, circling on past her and into the foyer.

"There you are." Yuuto groaned, scuffing at the tiles with one absent heel. "We've been waiting forever for you to make it down here." The blond Knight blinked when Akeno drifted in with pink cheeks that slowly regained their natural pale hue. "Did you preen in front of the mirror long enough, or do you need a little more time?"

"I think I'll survive." After dropping the dry rejoinder, Sasuke turned his attention to Koneko. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Fuck you."

A sharp clap cut off any further insults as Rias stepped into the foyer. "No fighting, children." Her dark business skirt and blazer looked a little rumpled, and the displeased tightness around her mouth already told the peerage exactly what her father's response had been. "No luck." she muttered, more for clarity's sake than any real need. "Do you really need to head out so early?"
Sasuke nodded, prompting the redhead to visibly deflate. Truthfully, he was cutting it a little too close. He should have left hours ago, but he'd indulged Rias' desire to try and get him out of deployment. Even if Sasuke wanted to fight, he would have stayed if he was allowed, because she would have asked him to. The point was moot though, because he wasn't allowed. He just hoped he didn't get too much shit if he showed up a little late.

"Well." Rias began, crossing the room and joining the crowd of young devils. "I guess this is goodbye." The poorly concealed sorrow in her face was enough to put a thick lump of guilt in Sasuke's throat, and when he gave a short affirmation it came out a little strangled.

Holding out his hand, Yuuto went for a forearm clasp. At almost fifteen years old, the Knight was still not legally old enough to be called to the front. It was a good thing, because even though it made him feel like a bit of a coward, the swordsman knew if he was conscripted too Rias would be doubly devastated. "Stay safe." he demanded, drilling the older man with grey eyes as Sasuke met his hand with a firm shake.

"You too."

"I know you'll be looking for ways to impress the women." Akeno began, teasing and a little misty eyed as she stepped forward. "But try not to collect too many scars, hmm? It'll be such a hassle to massage them all away with herbal creams once you get back, and if you want to get a little slippery with me all you need to do is ask. There's no need to get all wounded just to have an excuse."

"I weep." Accepting the Thunder Priestess' hug, Sasuke shoved back the natural masculine enjoyment at squeezing that soft curvy form to acerbically needle her. "I weep for the children you're going to have one day, because their mother will be such an utterly twisted woman."

"Twisted is the way you like it, isn't it?"

"Freak." Sasuke sighed fondly, turning to Koneko only to blink in shock. It wasn't that he disapproved, but he hadn't expected the random decision to satisfy his childhood obsession with felines.

White furry ears twitched at the weight of more than one pair of eyes, and flushing faintly Koneko directed her amber gaze resolutely off to the side. "Just this once." she mumbled, jerking slightly when a smirking Sasuke pet her cat ears. "But you owe me. Don't die."

"Fine, but isn't that the opposite of what you usually ask for?" Agreeing to the so-called trade with an eyeroll, Sasuke dropped his hand and turned to Rias. "Do you have any sage advice for me?" he wondered sarcastically, dark orbs weighing the Ruin Princess with a hint of expectation.

Rias just shook her head, wrapping Sasuke up in a bone crushing hug. She smelled like vanilla again, the Uchiha realized as he gingerly wrapped his arms around her waist and softly squeezed back. There was a depth of feeling in the embrace that didn't need words, and with a swooping sensation in his stomach Sasuke realized he wasn't ready to confront the strange bloom in the back of his mind.

Friendship was one thing.

But not this. He wasn't ready for that yet.

Stepping back, Sasuke looked back over the peerage with new perspective. The broken and reforged people surrounding him weren't merely friends, they were the beginning of something like family. Something like home.
The Uchiha settled his greatcoat around his shoulders, straightening the service cap he'd stolen back from Akeno and picking up his bag. Maybe there was something touching he was supposed to say, but he couldn't make his lead tongue obey him, and settled for a much gruffer goodbye he hoped they understood.

"I'll see you kids in a while."

"My lord, I really have to insist this is a terribly unwise course of action! Will you not reconsider?"

"Denied!" Naruto honked back, making a sound that was more at home on a game show than in the halls of power. Tansea looked mortified, but Ravel looked amused, so it was all good. "I hope you and the boys in blue are ready old Nerg, because there are no breaks on the Naruto train today."

There was a little more silver in the constable's beard than there had been before the war, but other than that the greying officer was much the same as he'd been. "Everyone is already in place, Naruto." Tawny eyes glimmered at Nergal turned his focus back to the villa at the top of the street. Centuries he'd been on the force, and not once had he been allowed to put Ximen in the slammer where the mob boss belonged.

Despite being an officer of the law, there was much less enforcement in 'law enforcement' than Nergal had hoped. There was a certain way of doing things. Favours were traded, order was maintained, bribes were placed, and everyone went home happy except the citizens that ended up suffering under Ximen's criminality. Men like Nergal were the idealists that didn't understand how things operated in the so-called real world.

Well now the 'real world' was under new management, and there was a new way of doing things.

Nergal had heard of Naruto's intent the first day the Gremory heir took over governing Azmarin, and knew that it wasn't something that could be leaked to the force at large. The mobsters had too many dirty cops on payroll, so instead Nergal had shaken up a few officers he knew were clean and rounded them up for the operation. When they went in to bust Ximen and his crew, there would be no escapes and no threats of calling good friends like Judge So-and-So.

There would simply be some long-awaited justice.

"Well good." Naruto grinned, patting at his hip and confirming his spellgun was locked and loaded. He doubted he'd use it if things got rough, since he had another spell in mind, but there was a certain presentation he was worried about. He couldn't exactly be the new sheriff in town without a trusty ol' pistol now could he? "Let's get going then. Tansea, you stay here. Nergs, you coordinate your lads. Ravel and I are off to knock on the front door."

Without waiting for confirmation, Naruto squinted up at the sunny blue skies and began to stalk forward. "Lovely day for a stroll, wouldn't you say my dear?" he commented airily to his fiance, prompting a giggle.

"Oh yes dah-ling. The warm breeze mixed with urban stink is simply sublime."

"See, if you say it like that I might think you're being sarcastic."

"I would never."

"Oi, stop right there!" the shout from one of a pair of beefy bodyguards was enough to cut off their exchange, drawing Naruto's attention like a shark to blood.
Grinning with just a touch of malevolence, Naruto flounced right up to the men and beamed at them. There was an unnerving amount of teeth in that smile. "Hello gents." he greeted merrily, waving Ravel over in good cheer. "Would you two fine upstanding citizens do me the favour of fucking right off?"

"Huh?" the other guard blinked stupidly.

It only took a very light blast of Naruto's magic right to the face to knock what had to be the most overpriced and under-performing pair of guards in Gehenna out of the game. "Really?" the redhead wondered with a bit of disgust as he stared down at the twitching unconscious thugs. "From all the notoriety, I was expecting a little more, ya know?"

Ravel just sighed. One day, hopefully soon, but probably soon too soon, her fiance would clue in about just how much more powerful he was than the common man. It wasn't like the nobility made a habit of educating commoners in magic, and the few sorcerers that didn't directly serve one of their families had patchwork knowledge at best.

But until that day, she just keep quiet and let him throw his weight around a little bit.

"Shall we go on?" she suggested, deliberately stepping her booted heel onto one of the bald bodyguards' hands. "Not that I want to ruin your dramatic entrance, but you might want to keep up some momentum."

"You want to see some momentum?" Naruto winked, lifting one hand and conjuring up three balls of the Power of Destruction. The crimson and black sorcery migrated to float behind his back, pulsing slightly with ferocious intent. "I'll show you some momentum." Then he rocketed forward, churning up the soil of the mob boss' carefully manicured lawn as he went.

It kind of pissed Naruto off that after putting so much work into it, that he was only able to create a spell that only peripherally resembled his Guudodama. There weren't enough of the orbs for one, and while they could move about and change shape based on his intent, they didn't shift to being solid enough to hold. The only thing the new 'Truth Seeking Balls' had managed to really duplicate was the whole 'rotting everything away' thing Madara had just fucking loved.

Oh well, it was a work in progress.

Singsonging in a chipper tone as he blasted the magnificent double front doors of the manse right off their hinges, Naruto lazily floated in and waved mockingly at the milling crowd. "Little pig, little pig, won't you let me in?"

"The fuck do you think you are, shitty brat?" Some tattooed geezer roared, lifting his hand and firing a volley of pink fire right at Naruto's face. Several other devils joined in, determined to drive back the sudden absurd assault on their feared criminal syndicate by what was basically a child.

Crooking his finger, Naruto pulled at one of the pseudo-Guudodama floating behind him and swiftly manipulated it into a glowing sheet of crimson-black annihilation. The magic instantly broke down the attacks his self-appointed enemies had launched at him, leaving Naruto standing unharmed and bored. "My name is Sabaku no Gaara." he droned, folding his arms over his chest and doing his very best to look like a murderer just out of his nappies. "I will kill you all and prove my existence."

What, couldn't a man have a little fun in a while?

Gaara would have appreciated the joke, god damn it!

"That's enough."
Ximon didn't look at all like Naruto had expected. He'd been looking forward to a fat and swarthy little man that would remind him of the fun times he'd had beating Gato. Instead the mobster was tall and trim, barely into middle age for a devil, and on the whole rather distinguished. "I don't know who you are, my boy." the criminal started amiably, waving off one of his sweating attendants as he walked in from the garden doors. "But that doesn't mean we can't do business."

Cocking an eyebrow at the blond man, Naruto couldn't help but wonder incredulously. "Dude, I just blew up half your house and you're talking like I came over for a bit of tea and scones."

"So?" Ximon did a good job of hiding his anger, but Naruto could still see the glint of it in his eyes. "A home can be repaired. The tradeoff would even be worth it considering your obvious skill. Who sent you? Falzar? Lan? Why don't you come and work for me instead? I can easily match what they're paying. As for the damage?" he shrugged nonchalantly. "What are a few mistakes between friends?"

Drawing in a slow breath, Naruto pulled back his strands of power into the three Guudodama. "My name isn't Gaara, and I'm not here to kill you." he admitted before grinning with just a hint of bloodlust and cracking his knuckles. "But I'm definitely here to open a few cans of whoop-ass."
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Naruto threw his hands up, dragging a wave of the Bael Power of Destruction with them. Fire and electricity lashed into his makeshift shield, punching through the cover of the Gremory heir's magic to crash around him. More than one elemental spell almost hit him, and with an adrenaline fuelled laugh he pushed forward. His black and crimson swirling enchantment rolled, cresting over Ximon like an inexorable tide.

"You're better than I thought." the redhead admitted as he leapt to the side, fists and feet spinning in precision strikes as he took advantage of his opponent's distraction to mow down more of the mob boss' followers. The back and forth battle of magic was almost like a turn-based little game. Ximon would attack, Naruto would defend and strike back, and then while Ximon was busy fending Naruto's magic off he'd take the chance to beat up a few more mobsters. Then the cycle would start all over again.

Ravel made the odd appearance here and there, popping in to drag unconscious criminals away and hand them off to the police waiting outside. It was something Naruto appreciated, because while he had no problem cracking a few skulls he didn't intend to kill anyone today. Ximon wasn't prodigiously skilled, but he was skilled enough that someone might end up dead in the crossfire if they weren't gotten out of the way.

"I'll choose to take that as a compliment." Ximon frowned, cutting through the famed Bael family's power with a focused slice of wind and stepping into the gap. The rest of Naruto's magic passed on by harmlessly, and calling up twin runic orange circles; Ximon conjured knives forged out of glittering ice. Mist floated from the cool crystal, giving hint at the real frigidity of Ximon's spellcasting. Then he whipped his hands forward, throwing the blades at the impertinent devil teen.

Twisting around on his heel, Naruto caught one knife out of the air and winced at its chill. The other tore a rent in the fine cotton of his military uniform, creating a small hole where his tan skin peeked through time and again. Naruto flipped the knife point over end, balancing it with the careless ease of a shinobi before launching it back at Ximon. He'd aimed at the blond man's knee, rather than somewhere more vulnerable like the throat.

Not that it would have mattered considering the contemptuous ease that Ximon slapped the projectile away with.

More ice knives followed, flying back and forth between the devils as they struggled for supremacy. Reluctantly, the redhead let Ximon set the pace. There were still a few more bodies lying around, and he couldn't really let loose until Ravel came by and dragged them out. Hot pain struck over Naruto's cheek as one of Ximon's projectiles came too close to home, slicing over his skin and letting a trickle of blood run free.

"Screw this." Naruto decided, crouching low to the ground and re-summoning his Guudodama. The floating balls of Bael sorcery stretched and twisted as they cut the blond mobster's potshots out of the air, giving the Gremory heir a moment to weigh over how he wanted to end their little party.

A flash of red and blond moved through the corner of his vision, and he felt a wave of relief at knowing that Ravel had come through for him. His fiance waved at him, grinning while a trio of unconscious thugs floated by her head.

Finally.
Cracked porcelain tiles dug into his palm as the redhead settled a firm hand on the floor. All the long-range back and forth spellcasting wasn't really his style. It was a way of fighting more suited to a soft handed scholar like Rias, rather than the rough and tumble devil that had once been a Konoha shinobi. Naruto was meant to fight up close and personal.

So he'd just have to *get* up close and personal.

Kicking his heel into the marble so violently he sent out a series of concentric cracks, Naruto rocketed forward in a streak of crimson. He had just enough time to grin at the sudden look of shock that crossed Ximon's face before he slammed a sharp elbow into the man's gut.

Ximon hacked a wet cough before glaring and grabbing two fistfuls of the back of Naruto's coat. A great heave lifted the redhead off the floor, and with a harsh roar of exertion, the mob boss rotated Naruto and threw him to the floor in a powerbomb.

A growl flew from Naruto's lips as he slammed into the ground, pain radiating up his spine. But it wasn't enough to stop him, and before Ximon could pull away Naruto lifted his hips and wrapped his legs around the blond's throat. Slamming his palm into the tiles, Naruto managed to throw enough force into the rotation to yank Ximon right off his feet and down to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

Naruto swiftly pulled away and rolled to his feet in order to dodge a few desperately thrown close range balls of fire. "This just gets better and better." he muttered, dragging the back of his hand over his lip and leaving a bright red streak behind. At some point he must have bitten into his lip and hadn't noticed. It was time to step things up a notch and see if Ximon could keep up.

Blazing red runic circles flared into existence, slowly twisting around his arms like a series of ringlets. He didn't technically have to fall back on the circles to help guide his magic, but the Power of Destruction could be dangerous even to Naruto, and it didn't cost him much to shape the sorcery externally rather than internally. A few seconds of extra casting time wouldn't make much of a difference.

Bloody light shot through with the darkness of the void began to seep out of Naruto's pores, building in a steadily thickening cloud and hugging close to his tan skin and the crimson cotton surrounding his arms. It needed to be tight, and it needed to be thick. One day he'd like to solidify it into proper armor, but until then; Naruto had to make do with sheer liquid density.

Thick gauntlets of rolling magic formed around Naruto's lower arms. It resembled what he'd once done in the duel against Rias all those years ago, but rather than using raw magic he was relying on the much more deadly sorcery of his Bael ancestors. It took care to hold the enchantment right up against his skin and not start to burn himself. His father could apparently actually turn *into* the Power of Destruction, but Naruto hadn't reached that level of 'unity' with the genetic energy; so he had to be a *little* more cautious.

Ximon eyed the sinister enchantment covering the young man's fists with a sensation of dawning horror. The blond had never really managed to quite make the leap from red hair to nobility, but the distinctive sight of the Power of Destruction was well known to anyone who'd ever done a spot of dirty business with one of the Bael clan. Add in the boy's colouring, and it was swiftly becoming clear that he was dealing with no simple hitman.

"You're that Gremory boy, aren't you?" the mob boss questioned with a sense of inevitable resignation, summoning lightning in one hand and fire in the other. No criminal enterprise liked to catch the attention of the nobility, at least in the *wrong* way; and he was suddenly doubting he'd make it out of his mansion alive. Hopefully his lieutenants could manage to maintain some form of order in the organization after he was gone.
"Yep." Naruto grinned, winking mirthlessly and leaning forward. Then the redhead moved, crossing the short distance between the two combatants in the blink of an eye. Ximon put up a valiant effort, dodging back and firing long range spells at the Gremory heir, but Naruto just waved everything aside with a touch of the thick disintegrating energy coating his forearms.

The Guudodama floating at Naruto's back seethed, stabbing forward in dark lances to complement his punches like extra limbs and helped herd Ximon into a corner. It would only take one solid hit to end it all, and once Ximon stumbled over a loosened marble tile, Naruto landed that hit with a flash of blue eyes.

Cloth simply vaporized, revealing the toned muscles of the mob boss' stomach. A second later, Ximon's inherent magical resistance caved, and the man's flesh seared away in a bubble of bloody ashes accompanied by a howl of pain.

"Whoops." Yanking his hand back before he could do too much damage, Naruto watched as Ximon's grey eyes rolled back in his head and the man dropped to the ground in a dead faint.

... There was no need to make such a big deal about it. Naruto was pretty sure he'd done worse to Kabuto when he'd performed his very first Rasengan.

Blue and red electric lights blurred, casting an eerie field of illumination over the ruined front yard of Ximon's mansion.

Ravel held a hand over her eyes to shield them from the glow, staring through the still warm early autumn night at the gaping hole in the front of the mobster's house. She wondered how much of a shitshow was going to bubble up because of their little stunt. Things could work out for them, or they might not.

It really depended on how much support the two of them would get from higher up in the chain of command, and how much they could strike fear into would-be criminals. The Bishop doubted the Satans or Duke Gremory would be all that torn up by the fact that a handful of criminals had been pressed into hard labor with all their assets seized, but they still needed to be sure that any moles in their administration would think twice before cooperating with other crime bosses.

Charging like a bull at a gate might work once or twice, but it wasn't a viable long term strategy. The criminal underground would just move from their old haunts, and unless they had a steady stream of fresh intel from loyal - or at least fearful - cops, Naruto's self-made crusade might be aborted before it ever really began.

"Did you have enough time to fix your makeup?" Ravel called out as Naruto appeared from the bowls of the villa, unconscious Ximon thrown over one shoulder. There was a certain languid relaxation to her fiance's features, and Ravel could tell the little excursion had been good for him. Naruto seemed to do best when he had something to physically do, rather than just talk endlessly.

"I might need a few more minutes for the last touch-ups." After delivering the sarcastic jab to the blonde girl, Naruto shrugged Ximon off his shoulder and dropped the passed out crime boss at the feet of a very satisfied looking Nergal. "All's well that ends well, wouldn't you say Nergie?"

Smirking at the disgruntled expression that crossed the constable's face at the nickname, Ravel moved blue eyes back and forth between the redhead and the middle aged devil. "I'd be careful if I were you, Naruto. I don't mind if you want to give your 'daddy dom' pet names, but I doubt the
public at large is going to think well of him for robbing you out of the cradle."

Naruto and Nergal sported twin greenish faces of pure disgust, looking at each other before very determinedly looking away.

"Gross." Naruto commented, refusing to watch as Nergal rolled his eyes and bent down to cuff the unconscious Ximon. Once the officer dragged the criminal away, the two young devils were left alone.

"So I'd say tonight was a success. What about you?"

Pursing her lips, Ravel considered the devastated property once last time before jerking her chin towards the sleek limo that had dropped them off. "Who knows?" the blonde mused, tugging at one curl as she led the way towards their transport. "We'll just have to keep our ears to the ground for the next few days and see how everyone takes it."

Naruto opened the door for his fiance, letting the Bishop step into the car first before following himself. "I guess." he agreed, reaching a careless hand back to thump at the black glass that separated them from the driver. A moment later, the limo lurched into movement. "We'll have to lean on the press a bit, get them to spin this for us." Like most things in Gehenna, the media had deep ties to the nobility, and getting their first strike lionized would be a piece of cake.

"Just think of all the good PR you're going to get." Ravel pointed out, a strain of sarcasm tainting her voice. She kicked her feet up onto the plush cushions of her seat, not caring about the mess her dirty shoes left in the fabric. "Now all you need to do is kiss a few babies and you'll be good to run for Mayor."

"Fuck that."

"But don't you want to do everything you can to save this city? Just think of all the good you could do as the most esteemed public servant around here. Plus there's the perks - moral crusader by day, debauched hedonist by night. You can put in a good day's work at the office and then go home and snort fairy dust off a prostitute's ass."

Rolling his eyes, Naruto touched a hand to the healing gash on his cheek and repressed a wince at the faint stab of pain there. He was in rougher shape than he'd expected to be, but in hindsight it made sense. They were in Gehenna. Money talked, but strength talked more, and Ximon wouldn't have been able to maintain his position if he couldn't terrorize the small fry. "Sometimes I wonder about you. It's like there's something very wrong in your head, and I question if you happened to be born that way. Then I remember Riser is your brother, and it all starts to make sense."

Ravel snorted, crawling over to her fiance to poke a finger through one of the holes that had been torn in his uniform. Her questing digit met the warm flesh of Naruto's side, making the redhead jerk back at the tickling sensation and glare. "That's not a very nice thing to say or imply about your future wife. What if I decide I need to take revenge? I read about a case in the United States where a woman decided that the best form of vengeance on her father would be to chop off his penis and burn it. Interesting, don't you think?"

A slow, steady pause.

"You know, you are not making me any more comfortable with the arrangement when you say things like that."

"I'm just giving you a fair warning about what some people are capable of. Surely you didn't think I
was implying anything about what I might do?"

"No, not at all."

"By the way, your aunt called. She wanted you to know that Sasuke got himself conscripted."

"Wait, what?"

Rias let her head fall back, resting it against the marble lip of the bath. Her crimson strands floated lazily on top of the water, waving back and forth with every tiny ripple. Drawing a long breath, she shut out the quiet conversation between Akeno and Koneko before letting her tired eyelids flutter shut.

The steady comforting warmth of the water and bath salt went to work on the knotted muscles of her shoulder blades, relaxing the tenseness that had built up over a long and trying day.

If only the stress in her mind would wash away so easily.

It had only been a few short hours since Sasuke had obeyed the orders of their government and shipped out, but each ticking minute almost seemed like a lifetime. Their goodbye had been too short, and Rias wished it had gone on longer than it had. If the worst came to pass she would never see Sasuke again, and even though she’d seared the woodsmoke smell of his skin and the hard angles of his body into her memory it was a poor substitute for the real thing.

There was an ache in her chest, pulsing hollow and refusing to abate no matter how much she rubbed at it or tried to force the track of her thoughts onto other things. It was her steady companion, and the Ruin Princess wondered if that pain of separation was why so many humans tried to cut themselves off and live in isolation. She was almost tempted to give it a go herself, except she was in too deep already for it to matter.

Something brushed against the sole of Rias' foot, and she cracked open her eyes in a lazy teal slit. It was just Akeno moving about. Nothing to be concerned about. She let her eyes drift closed again, not bothering to open them when careful hands began to lather soap over the skin of her shoulders.

"How are you?" Akeno's voice murmured close to her ear, accompanied by the gentle pour of water from cupped hands over the parts of Rias' white flesh that peeked out of the bath. It was a familiar ritual that bespoke of the closeness between them - between all of them Rias mused as she felt the familiar contours of Koneko's lithe body settle against her side. A ritual that gave some measure of steady comfort to the three women who participated in it.

"I survive." Rias smiled thinly, feeling one hand up Koneko's back so she could stroke through the nekomata's wet snowy strands. It seemed all she ever did lately was survive, rolling with the punches of unexpected revelations and sudden complications. "When I spoke to my father today he decided that there were a few tasks we could do for him. Part of our 'duty' to the country, you understand."

The sudden pause of Akeno's washing palms against the skin of Rias' arm wasn't unexpected. The redhead was more than familiar with how much the Thunder Priest disdained the idea of duty, referring to it on more than one occasion as 'self-righteous harping'. The cynical part of Rias felt that Akeno wasn't far off, but the dutiful part that her parents had carefully nurtured in her decided it didn't matter how pretentious it was; she still had her responsibilities.

'No privileges without obligations', as her father always said, and the life of a noble was very privileged. It was supposedly only a fair trade for their clans to give back; not that most of the other clans agreed with Zeoticus. The nobility ruled by strength, not by consent, and were ultimately more
concerned with protecting their power rather than any sense of noblesse oblige.

"Is that so?" Akeno commented neutrally, resuming her self-appointed task with an air of determination. The soft press of her hands boldly passed over the heavy flesh of Rias' breasts, washing without any regard for ideals about propriety or personal space. The redhead didn't comment, because that was just their way. Rias would have no second thoughts about washing Akeno so audaciously either.

There was a faint sound of liquid pattering as Koneko idly playing with the steamy surface of the water. "What assignment do we have?" she wondered, contributing to the low conversation for the first time. It was probably better to just cut to the heart of the matter, and lay everything out for consideration. Sasuke was gone, and hopefully some form of work would busy their minds from that. Yuuto would appreciate the distraction when he found out, at the least.

Rias lifted her leg as Akeno’s hands moved under the surface with a bar of soap and began to scrub at the muscle of her thigh. "He wants us to wander around the human world with some standalone Evil Pieces and find cannon fodder for Gehenna. The more bodies the better, apparently."

"Is that all?" Koneko wrinkled her nose at the idea of having to play recruiter. Meeting a bunch of strangers everyday; having to deal with their ridiculous tendency for small talk and overt friendliness? It was something the nekomata would very much prefer doing without. But if Rias asked, she’d obey.

Dipping her head and letting it hang forward, Rias finally opened her eyes properly and met Akeno's steady violet stare. After some more delicate areas got the finishing touch, her wash would be over and it would be time to return the favour. "No. We're also going to be part of an ambassador party that tries to solicit help from other factions. Our Heaven might be out to avoid escalation, but the Senate doubts that a handful of foreigners here and there fighting for us would aggravate the Thirteen Heavens too much."

"So rubbing elbows with the plebs and kissing up to the bluebloods at a bunch of parties." Akeno summarized, turning about and scooting her bottom between Rias' knees. "Sounds fun."

The Ruin Princess obliged, taking a handful of shampoo and beginning to massage it into the thick dark fall of her Queen's hair. "Won't it just be?" she agreed sarcastically. "Won't it just?"

"This is where you get off, kiddo."

Sasuke jolted awake, lifting a hand to rub at his dry eyes before sparing a sour glance for the train conductor. It had taken him long into the night to manage to fall asleep, and based on the fact that it was still pitch-dark outside the window, he doubted he'd managed to get that much rest.

"Fine." the Uchiha grunted, turning away from the dark-skinned devil and lurching to his feet. After quick search in the overhead compartment, he pulled his bag down and twisted back around only to discover the man had vanished.

Whatever.

It wasn't like he was riding the train for social reasons anyway. It was just the recommended route for any conscripted soldiers in the Gremory clan territory to be shipped to rear command. He'd been expecting some bulky steel cargo train, but apparently the government preferred swiftness over aesthetics and were willing to use extant civilian locomotives.

After strapping his katana to his side, Sasuke stuffed his service gap into one of the pockets of his
greatcoat and went in search for the nearest exit.

Cool air hit Sasuke like a blast as he stepped outside, and after rubbing his gloved hands together in an effort to chase away some of the chill, he turned dark eyes over the train station. It was relatively empty, except for a rapidly swelling cluster of crimson uniformed soldiers pouring off the train. Evidently he hadn't been the only one to get a letter, and that only made him question the sudden conscription more. If the Senate only needed bodies, wouldn't they just tell them to show up on a set date?

Calling a bunch of reinforcements to the front 'as soon as possible' stunk of a desperation that made him just a touch leery and wonder what the hell was actually going on.

A small frown tugged at the dark haired devil's lips, and after shaking his head he wandered over to the crowd. A quick scan as he drew close revealed that he might be the only commissioned officer there, since the highest ranking patch Sasuke could find was that of a sergeant. But his approach hadn't gone unnoticed, and a couple of seconds after he stepped into the press of bodies one baby-faced young man stiffened into a salute and barked out a loud "Sir!"

A swelling tides of salutes followed, crushing conversation until all that was left was a tense silence that made Sasuke roll his eyes in exasperation. "None of that." he told them, pitching his voice to carry. "I'm just as new here as any of you. I don't need the ass-kissing." It took a few minutes for the tension to disperse, but his informality and lack of airs seemed to do the job.

The baby-faced private didn't turn away from him with the rest of the crowd though, and giving in to the surge of irritation Sasuke offered a glare. "What?" he demanded, making the brunette recruit pull back and grin sheepishly.

Green eyes that were almost painfully innocent shifted back and forth with a sense of anxiety. "I was just, uh, wondering how you rank so high if you're just a newbie like the rest of us?"

Sasuke cocked a brow, reconsidering the young devil. The kid was so green Sasuke was surprised grass wasn't growing out of his ass. Was he even legally allowed to enlist? Not that it was any of his business, since it was the brat's funeral. "I'm not a newbie." Sasuke grunted roughly as it became obvious the private was waiting on his answer like the Uchiha's words were manna from Heaven. "It's just my first time deploying in the clan army."

"Oookay?" the brunette recruit drew out the question, staring at the captain before he trailed his eyes down to the name stitched over Sasuke's chest. "But that doesn't really answer my question, Captain, uh, 'Uchiha'?"

"I'm Rias' Gremory's Pawn." Turning his back on the recruit, Sasuke silently signaled that the conversation was over. And after a beat of silence, he thought it had actually worked. If only shutting Naruto up was that simple.

"My name's Phineas, just in case you were wondering."

And apparently shutting up this kid was going to be no easier than putting a sock in Naruto's mouth was.

"I wasn't." Sasuke shot back caustically.

"Oh." For a second the kid looked like Sasuke had kicked a puppy right in front of him. Then he brightened back up like nothing had happened. "So do you think we'll be in the same unit, captain?"

"How the hell should I know?"
"Oh, hahaha. You're new here too. Sorry about that? So what's the Ruin Princess like? If you work for her, you must know the Duke too. And Satan Lucifer! What are they like? Are they nice?"

Shut up.

Puffing the last bit of his cigarette, Vali made an expression of annoyance and dropped the butt to the dew coated grass. It was way-too-fucking-early o'clock, but as the half-devil had quickly learned over his months in the service, the military wasn't an institution where something as mundane as 'sleeping in' was allowed. All uberman all the time. Whoo-fucking-hoo.

Still, once he managed to collect the newest shipment of ducklings, he'd have a few days off at base camp to kick back and listen to all the new gossip drifting. Never in all of his years had the White Dragon Emperor thought he'd be waiting for the next rumor like some stupid fishwife, but whisperings about military movements were a great deal more important than who so-and-so was sucking off. His feeling that something was moving behind the scenes had only intensified more and more as the Gehennan kept shipping in reinforcements. It wasn't cost effective to have so many mouths to feed in one place.

Which made Vali suspect something was in the works that would reduce the number of those mouths by quite a bit.

Shading his tired blue eyes against the morning sun, Vali squinted through the silver strands of his hanging fringe. Plowing up the dirt road was a small convoy, little more than a trio of troop carriers really; but the sight was enough to make him sigh in relief. "Fucking finally." The promotion to major had dumped a slew of annoying little duties in his lap, like redirecting reinforcements, and it only made the grind of the war even more wearing.

"Hullo, Major." One of the drivers hopped out of his truck and cheerily waved as Vali, gap-toothed smile splitting his lips. The man didn't bother to see if the officer waved back, instead quickly moving around to the rear of the vehicle and hollering into the canvas covered flatbed. The other two drivers mimicked the first, herding a swarm of crimson uniformed troops up and towards the half-devil.

Fuck, he was craving another cigarette again. Unfortunately he'd just burnt through his last one. Or maybe it was fortunate, since Vali was probably starting to get addicted to the things - as a way to cope, if nothing else.

"Alright, shitbirds!" He roared, quieting the chattering crowd with the sheer sound of his voice. "Which one of you fuckers is in charge around here?" Vali asked in a lower voice now that he was sure he'd be heard. Contrary to popular belief, ranking officers didn't spend their day shouting at the maggots. It was a bother and a recipe for a sore throat.

A few seconds ticked by in which Vali began to feel a burning itch of impatience build in the back of his skull before finally someone shoved through the crowd and presented himself in front of the major. Proud black eyes drilled into Vali with a familiar fire, and the silver-haired half-devil let his lips twitch up into an ugly grin. Well, well, it seemed that he might have a kindred spirit around after all.

"So," he drawled, running his gaze over the patches on the man's uniform. "Captain, seems to me like you've got a bone or three to pick. Looking forward to smashing a few skulls out here?"

"I don't see how that's your business." Sasuke shot back coolly, ice filling his voice like the chill of winter night.
Vali considered the hunger for a battle he could see in the other soldier. Then he remembered the months of fighting without end. He remembered sleepless night after sleepless night, tiny naps constantly broken up by the crash of spellfire. He remembered the helpless angry feeling of having one of the men he was supposed to look after die under his command. A bitter sigh escaped his mouth.

"It's your funeral, newbie."
Chapter 37

Riser cursed roughly, bending low to dip his hands in the cool stream. The blood had gone sticky as it dried, and it clung to his knuckles like a kind of gory glue. It had been a couple of months since Sairaorg had asked him to join in on their little genocide mission, and every day that passed Riser was regretting that he'd ever agreed.

Not because he felt sorry for the humans or anything, they'd made their bed by picking their gods and had to lay in it; but simply because the whole thing was such a pain in his ass. Riser had been expecting something a little more interesting or difficult, not the glorified pest control he was actually doing. "This is some bullshit," he muttered, scrubbing the last flake of dried blood from his fingernails and rising to his feet.

Tugging the dark cowl of his hood a little tighter around his face, Riser hoped the concealing cloak hadn't malfunctioned at some point. There was no evidence to suggest it would, but that didn't stop him from worrying about it from time to time. Killing so many humans had a way of driving home his own mortality. Life could be snuffed out like a candle, and Riser was no exception.

"You okay?"

Riser blinked, turning to face a slightly concerned looking Sairaorg. "Course." he shrugged off the Bael heir's worry. What the hell was the 'esteemed leader' getting his panties in a bunch for? "You might want to take a shower there though, big shot. You're not looking too hot."

Unlike Riser, who had kept relatively clean during the slaughter, Sairaorg had ended up positively covered in splatters of viscera. It soaked into the ebony cloth of the violet eyed devil's cloak, making it stick to his skin. For someone like Riser it would have been an intolerably gross sensation, but Sairaorg chose to accept it as proof of the violence he'd just taken part in.

A thousand humans dead in a night. It boggled the mind, and Sairaorg just knew that he'd be having nightmares about it for years to come. They'd only done what was necessary for the sake of Gehenna, but the rationalizing seemed to pale next to the concrete evidence of the crime they'd just left behind. Bodies broken and strewn about the little village like little toys, twisted into unnatural shapes.

The humans hadn't even had a chance. Men, women, and children - all gone, never to move again.

Suddenly Sairaorg couldn't take it anymore, and he collapsed to his knees and began to wretch. Bile spilled from his lips to float like pondscum over the small brook that circled around the western side of the village and back into the forest. Heaving until his stomach was empty, Sairaorg ran his tongue around his mouth and spat in an effort to clear out the taste of vomit.

"Shit." the Bael heir muttered, shaking his head from side to side and wiping the back of his hand across his lips. He could feel the hawk-like focus of Riser's eyes on his back, but Sairaorg couldn't bring himself to care about the display of weakness. What the hell was he trying to get at through such murder and mayhem? Seriously, what the fuck was he doing?

Only what he had to do for his country.

Only what was necessary to protect the millions of devil lives riding on his shoulders.

Only what someone needed to do in order to smother the power of a hostile death god.
Steeling himself with his justifications, Sairaorg accepted Riser's hand and climbed back to his feet. "I'm good." he lied, checking reflexively to make sure his cloak hadn't come undone. No matter whatever crimes he'd committed, even if he wanted to slit his own wrists from time to time over them; they couldn't afford to be caught. Otherwise it would defeat the whole purpose of the blood he was secretly spilling in the first place, and escalate the war beyond anything he could even imagine.

Killing a few to save the many. What a disgusting but pragmatic little bit of calculus. It might even be worth it, and one day, Sairaorg might convince himself of that.

Ah, but the blood.

The blood.

It haunted him.

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Naruto stepped into the factory and inhaled. The air was full of the metallic tang of steel and the faint trace of burning things, and it was a good smell. The smell of productive industry and war. The only problem he had was that there should be more of that smell. More steel and more fire, because the more of that smell there was the more material there was making its way to the front.

To where Sasuke was probably risking his ass like a god damn fool.

"You sure this is the right place?"

Flipping open the folder she was carrying underneath her arm, Ravel perfunctorily peered at it before nodding. "Yep." The Bishop ran blue eyes over the figures, tracing back production levels and operating income through the last couple of years. The decline was small and constant, and noticeable because the bottom line should be noticeably larger than it was. Slave labor and an endless government contract would have ensured that.

Someone was embezzling the Gremory clan, and as both the governor of the city and heir to the clan, Naruto had decided he'd best get personally involved.

"The best way to handle this would be to go right to top management." Ravel advised her fiance, snapping the folder back shut and tucking it under her arm. Once they were in the room, she'd have to be quiet to avoid damaging Naruto's authority. The public perception of him would suffer if it became suspected the real power in his administration lay in a younger female devil. "Don't accuse the manager outright. Just lay out that a strange fall in income was noticed, so we intend to get to the bottom of it. Try and imply that the problem is someone lower in the organization, otherwise he'll think you're accusing him and get riled."

Huffing at the blonde who'd decided to appoint herself his handler, Naruto led the way through the factory. There was a constant low hum of voices and a whir of machinery, drowning out any attempts at further quiet conversation. Ahh well, he wasn't that dumb. Sure, Naruto might be a little brash, but he had enough sense not to bungle everything up by insulting people to their faces.

The Gremory heir climbed up a circling staircase to the second floor, keeping his hand on the cool steel guiding rung. It offered the manager a view over the whole factory from his office, great glass windows polished clear so that he could stand behind them and watch the scurrying of laborers below. It was a little creepy to be honest, but apparently it worked.

Without bothering to knock, Naruto jiggled the doorknob and let himself into the manager's office. It was a surprise inspection after all, and it would take the fun out of it if he started acting all formal and polite.
Once the door shut behind them, the noise of the factory was cut off, leaving a sudden disquieting silence. The change was a little jarring, but Naruto got over it as he scanned blue eyes over the desks. Nobody was home apparently, if the small stacks of paper and empty chairs were any indication. There was a light in the back room on, and with a shrug Naruto moved off towards it.

"Osmo Daxter?" the redhead called out as he slipped into the back office, startling the life out of a pale faced obese devil. The man was hunched over his desk, gaping up at the intruder with mingled alarm and defensiveness.

"Who are you? What are you doing in here? This place is authorized access only!"

Sweat was visibly beading over the fat manager's skin, his prematurely balding crown glistening under the electric lamps. The fan whirling away beside the man wasn't doing much to cool him if the perspiration sticking to him was any indication. Beady black eyes glittered suspiciously in the rolls of Osmo's face, but either because of the uniforms the two strangers were wearing or some sense of personal sloth, he didn't rise to his feet.

Naruto wrinkled his nose and suppressed the urge to look for pit stains. There were some things that might be better not to know. "Naruto Gremory, your Governor." he introduced himself, ignoring the shocked expression that filled Osmo's mien. It seemed all the commoners were like that, for some stupid reason. "This is my Bishop, Ravel Phenex."

Black eyes moved to the blonde hovering at Naruto's side before refocusing on the Gremory heir. "What can I do for you, my lord?" the desk jockey asked in a tone of servility, pushing his bulk to a standing position just so he could bow submissively low.

"None of that." Naruto grinned, waving off the formality and letting a friendly note fill his tone. He wasn't here to break skulls or drag someone kicking and screaming off to jail, not yet anyway; and he liked to do what he could to make people's days a little better. "There were just a few irregularities with this facility's financial statements, so I decided maybe I should come down myself and see if we can get it straightened out with as little fuss as possible."

Osmo just barely remembered to swallow back the honorific, and settled for a soft stutter. "O-of course." He looked anxious, but not guilty, which made Naruto think the problem really be coming from lower management after all. That was good, since Osmo had apparently been working for his family for decades and Naruto could appreciate that kind of loyalty.

Even if he didn't appreciate the sweat and odor.

Keeping his cheery face on, Naruto gave Ravel's shoulder a pat and gently pushed her forward. "As you can see, I brought along my assistant here. If you'd be a good man and show her the books, maybe we can get this whole thing settled before someone decides to make a big issue out of it." It was the most efficient way to get things done. Ravel didn't love numbers, but she was a genius; and Naruto himself had no head for all the accounting calculus.

Better for his supersmart fiance to get everything sorted out in an hour than have to call up some of the accountants the clan had on retainer and take a week lining all the accounts up.

The jowls of Osmo's chin wobbled slightly as he nodded his silent agreement. In short order the obese manager was pulling a few binders from the shelves on the wall and handing them to the blonde girl. "Those are the current ones." he explained hurriedly when Naruto curiously glanced at the other dozen binders left on the shelf. "If we can't find the issue by looking through these, then we can break out the older ones."
"Fair enough." Naruto agreed mildly, winking at the vaguely annoyed countenance Ravel sported when she turned away from Osmo. He supposed he'd have to thank her for the favour later, maybe buy her something special for dinner. Chinese? Indian? Or maybe a greasy American cheeseburger?

Ravel wandered back out into the larger office, choosing not to sit in the chair a fat and sweaty man had just vacated. The two men followed her out, Naruto settling against the wall behind the girl while Osmo hovered near the desk and wrung his hands nervously. Was the man honestly that timid in general, or was he dirtier than Naruto had initially assumed?

A few silent minutes passed where Naruto watched Osmo who watched Ravel before something clicked in Naruto's head like a bolt of lightning. The expression the manager wore was familiar. It was something he'd seen on Kiba's face many a time; a mixture of false innocent and lust. When his friend had worn that particular look, Naruto knew that the horny Inuzuka was doing his best to get an eyeful of tits or ass. And sure enough, he could track the direct line from Osmo's beetle black eyes to the gap in Ravel's collar as the man tried to catch a glimpse of the teen devil's breasts.

When Kiba had that air, Naruto had always found it more than a bit funny and had even joined in from time to time.

He was not amused right now, and was not interested in joining in on anything.

Naruto clenched his jaw so tightly that it was a wonder he didn't crack his teeth. "Mr. Daxter," the redhead began, pushing off from the wall and circling around to Ravel's other side. He'd always considered himself a man of hot anger, but instead of raging he felt like he was spitting out splinters of ice. "Do you know what the punishment for embezzlement is in Gehenna?"

"A good few years of hard labor." Naruto offered before the man could reply. Ravel was looking up at him with a silent face that practically screamed 'what the fuck', but he didn't give much of a damn about diplomacy. Right now, Naruto didn't want nice and easy. He wanted to take his knife and peel that fucker's face right off.

Letting his cool blue gaze fall to the desk Ravel was sitting at, Naruto reached out to trace an idle hand over the small globe adorning the corner of it. The sphere was a cheap thing, shoddily made and likely something he'd be able to pick up for a handful of change at some arts and crafts store. His eyes could just pick out the cramped writing that spelt 'Saudi Arabia'. "But that's during regular boring times. We're at war now, so if someone was embezzling us now when that money could and should be going to support the war effort - well that would be treason, now wouldn't it? What's the punishment for treason, Mr. Daxter?"

Osmo swallowed heavily. "D-death, sir." he stuttered. The manager had no clue what had set the lordling off, but the threats were received loud and clear and he didn't want to upset the boy any further. His life might literally be on the line considering how capricious the nobles could be.

A cruel smile pulled at Naruto's mouth. "Exactly." he breathed like he'd just heard the secret of life. Ravel was still staring at him like he'd gone utterly mad. "Exactly. So I suppose that once we discover the person or persons behind this little bit of fraud, well..." Trailing off, Naruto winked and brought his hand up to his throat so he could drag his thumb across it in the classic gesture of execution.

The fat flabs of Osmo's face went pale, and for a beat the only sound in the office was the tick-tock of the clock hanging on the wall.

"I think maybe we should go." Naruto decided breezily, acting like nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. "There were a few things that I remembered Ravel and I desperately need to do. Don't
worry though, I'm sure the clan accountants will be in touch.”

A boot dug into Sasuke's side, sharp enough to annoy but not quite sharp enough to actually cause pain.

"Oi, wake up, you lazy piece of shit. Or did you manage to keel over and die when I wasn't looking?"

Cracking open dark eyes, Sasuke glared up. "Fuck you, fuck the horse you rode in on, and fuck the cesspool that you crawled out of."

Vali just smirked back, dropping to the dirt beside Sasuke and propping his back against the soil embankment of the trench their unit shared. Shortly after Sasuke and the reserves that had been called up from the Gremory territory arrived, orders had come down from up the chain of command. They were to be amalgamated into one formation. Thus Moon Demon Company had been born, and since then the two headstrong young men had been shoved together on a nearly constant basis.

In a unit full of faceless privates and empty headed soldiers, the two couldn't help but gravitate towards one another in a flurry of curses and insults. It was the only way to alleviate the constant tense boredom that hung like a pall over the trench.

The only way besides going over the top, that was.

"You hear anything new?" Sasuke prodded at the half-devil after a few silent minutes passed. It hadn't taken Sasuke long to realize he wasn't the only one with suspicions about the latest moves out of their 'esteemed' leaders.

"Nah." Sighing at the fact that once more there was nothing but silence from high command about why they were massing in the trenches, Vali idly dug the heel of his boot into the soft earth. Another wasted day trying to find answers from a proverbial stone wall.

"Should have known you'd be useless at getting information. You're useless at everything else after all."

"Whatever you need to tell yourself to sleep at night, pinkeye."

Snorting at the White Dragon Emperor, Sasuke turned away and proceeded to let things fall back into comfortable wordless quiet.

Vali was technically his superior, but neither of them really gave all that much of a shit about rank. Being major when Sasuke was only a captain was just a way for Vali to lord it over him during one of their frequent spats. Otherwise, it made little difference, and Vali was able to tolerate disrespect without running home crying and submitting black marks on soldiers' records. Hence why Sasuke was perfectly willing to insult the Vanishing Dragon to his face. At least it made things more interesting.

A quick scan over the nearest bodies in the trench revealed Phineas was nowhere to be seen. The private must be off taking a piss or something. As much as Sasuke hated to admit it, the kid reminded him a bit of Naruto. The recruit was relentlessly cheerful and just as big of a chatterbox as his friend was, and had the same tendency to grow on him like foot rot.

Or maybe he was just going stir crazy in the trenches, since putting up with an asshole like Vali and a dumbass like Phineas wasn't something Sasuke would have expected to be willing to do. Life on the front wasn't at all what Sasuke had expected from war, though to be fair he'd only fought in the
Fourth Shinobi World 'War'; and that particular conflict was more like one constant running battle than an actual war. There was some carry over in experience, but on the whole the feel was much different.

"Ah." Vali made a sudden noise of comprehension, and began to dig in the pockets of his greatcoat. "I almost forgot." After a short search, he pulled out a slightly crumpled envelope and offered it to the Uchiha with a mocking "Tada!"

Snatching the letter out of the major's hand, the captain muttered "Eat shit." before flipping it over. The familiar loopy curves of Rias' writing spelled out his name, rank, and unit assignment, and a knot that had been building inside Sasuke all day long began to ease. He hadn't expected to ache so much at the separation, but the redhead's letters came like clockwork and eased the sense of isolation.

Sasuke got letters from everyone from time to time. Naruto managed to forward along his typical vulgarity and gave updates from time to time about what was going on in Azmarin to keep Sasuke's mind occupied. Yuuto and Koneko weren't frequent writers, but they corresponded faithfully whenever something remotely interesting happened in their lives. Even Ravel had sent him the odd message, inquiring about his health and making sure that Naruto hadn't left anything out.

Akeno didn't usually mail anything at all, and seemed to prefer scratching in her words along the margins of Rias' letters and adding post-scripts upon post-scripts that filled with her usual lurid commentary.

Only Rias wrote every single day without fail. Every morning she mailed him a letter detailing all the occurrences that happened during the previous day, regardless of how repetitive and mundane her time might seem, and Sasuke could almost imagine he'd experienced those hours beside her. It would take a couple of days for the letters to make it through the censors, but eventually it had gotten to the point where Sasuke had something from home to read every day or two. He'd even started to reply back daily, though there was usually little to say beyond 'saw lots of dirt today, and a couple of worms' or 'Phineas is acting like a retard again'.

Not that she ever complained about the terseness of his words.

Vali flipped open a new carton of cigarettes, counting the tobacco sticks before shrugging and offering the end to his fellow soldier. "Want one?" the White Dragon Emperor offered, shaking the pack in emphasis.

Switching his focus from the letter he'd just been given to the man beside him, Sasuke smirked insolently. "That's a filthy habit." he opined. But what the hell? The Uchiha accepted one of the little white sticks and lit up with a tiny burst of flame from one finger.

"Filthy habits for filthy bastards." Vali mused, sparking up his own cigarette and inhaling the smoke. The two young men weren't human, so the habit wouldn't do any long term damage to their bodies, but it was still arguably wasteful and at the least psychologically addictive. Even so, that didn't stop them. It provided just a touch of peaceful normality to days that were marred by random bursts of conjuration cannons and the close-but-not-too-close crash of spellfire.

Sasuke just rolled his eyes before breaking the wax seal on the letter and pulling out the sheets of paper that were filled with his friends' handwriting. He scanned over Rias' careful inked lines and the cramped chickenscratch that Akeno left along the sides, and if Sasuke closed his eyes, he could imagine how they would have looked when writing it.

The letter would have been written at the little table in the corner of Rias' bedroom, under the warm yellow electric light of a lamp. Perched at the very edge of one her chair and hunched over the pages
would have been Rias, long crimson hair hanging in her face and a few of her forelocks pooling on
the polished wood of the table. Akeno would have been there too, leaning over Rias's shoulder and
jabbing her finger at points on the page to add a few words here or there. Eventually Rias would
finish, and sign her name with a flourish, after which Akeno would take over and promptly begin
filling the margins with her crude comments and doodles.

Sometimes he imagined their voices reading the words out to him, and gave him a mingled sense of
sweetness and pain.

In fact, if he concentrated, Sasuke could almost summon the familiar vanilla smell they shared. He
wasn't sure if they just used the same shampoo, or if the smell rubbed off simply because of how
close they usually were. It was a silly, idle thought. But then, his life with them had been that way.
Silly and idle, and more than a bit innocent.

It was too gentle a life for him to belong to, but somehow Sasuke had done the impossible and found
a place there.

"She must be something special." Vali commented, for once not mocking as his sharp blue eyes
watched the poorly concealed play of emotions cross Sasuke's features. The half-devil didn't claim to
be some personal therapist, but that was the look of a man drowning in something he only barely
understood.

Frowning at the intrusion, Sasuke folded the letter back up and slipped it into his breast pocket. "She
is." he confirmed coolly, not in the least interested in spilling his guts out for a man he'd met a few
scarce weeks ago.

A few heartbeats passed.

"So is she the main squeeze, or one of the side ones?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Ravel managed to contain her curiosity for a long time. She held it in the entire time they were in the
factory. She held it in on the drive back to her fiance's posh little office. She even held it in as Naruto
got himself swept up in the hustle and bustle of government and passed a few busy hours that way.
The Bishop could be patient, when she had to be. And once the day had wound down and she was
standing with Naruto alone in his office after most of the workers left, Ravel didn't have to be patient
anymore.

Buffing her nails on her crimson uniform, Ravel briefly considered the fresh shine. Perhaps a bit of
clear polish was in order? She hadn't had a good manicure in a while, at the least. "So, feel like
telling me what all that was about today?"

The leather swivel chair bounced a little as her sudden question startled Naruto, and after a second
the redhead spun away from the window to cock a scarlet brow at the Bishop. "What was what
about today?" he queried, sounding adorably baffled. Or maybe he was just playing dumb, in which
case not so adorably baffled.

Ravel huffed, crossing her arms under her budding chest. "Let me refresh your memory a bit there
then, old timer." she mocked. "So let's travel back in time, all the way to about six hours ago. If you
recall, the two of us were doing a factory inspection for fraud. Everything was going peachy keen
until for some reason you got a bug up your ass and decided to shit all over what's-his-face."

"Ah."
A twitch. "What do you mean 'ah'?' Ravel demanded, circling around the desk to jab her finger into a suddenly blank-faced Naruto's chest. "This is not a moment for 'ah'. This is a moment where you tell me what was going on in that head of yours before I go and assume that you're just randomly bipolar."

Naruto pressed the heel of his hand into an eye, muttering a few low curses before glaring at the wall. "He was looking at you."

"Who was?"

"That fat bastard."

"So?" Blinking when Naruto snapped his head back around to gape at her, the blonde gave a frown of thought and shrugged. "You were too. I don't see why that would bother you. Unless there was - ah."

Let no one say that Ravel was in any way stupid. She might not have personal experience in the realm of all things sexual, but the Bishop could certainly clue in to common parlance. She'd read enough book to understand what 'looking' might entail.

"Okay, first of all; fucking creepy." Remembering where Osmo had been standing in relation to her made Ravel feel all kinds of dirty. Maybe she'd go take a shower as soon as she was done speaking to Naruto. "But that said, I don't see why you got so worked up over it. We could have just left and avoided your whole alpha male display at the end." Not that she didn't appreciate the gesture, but she still wanted to know why.

"My display?" The pure incensed tone of Naruto's voice surprised her, and so did the ice cold venom that glittered in his blue eyes. "That cockmongling little paper pusher is lucky all I did was a 'display'. I should have been pulling his eyes out and shoving them up his fat arsehole, but only after I made him watch as I cut his cock off and force fed it to him."

Ravel stared. "Are you... are you jealous?" she wondered uncertainly, watching as the Gremory heir pulled a full one-eighty from rage to denial. It was almost like watching a train suddenly switch tracks, or seeing a bird violently veer off course. A little fascinating, a little amusing, and a little confusing. Just the thought made her face pink a tiny bit.

"Absolutely not!"

"Wow." Settling her hands on her hips, Ravel straightened her back and filled every letter with biting sarcasm. "Don't hold back now. I might almost think you care if you do. Really, makes me glad that you're right here to set me on the straight and narrow."

Squeezing the bridge of his nose, Naruto flapped a hand in the general direction of his fiance. "That's not what I mean." he defended himself. Truthfully, the more Ravel grew the prettier she got, but he wasn't ready to be a dirty old man quite yet. The age difference might not mean anything to a devil, but Naruto still felt like a human from time to time. But he didn't want to give her the wrong impression and have her go around thinking that he saw her as ugly.

Why did everything have to be so fucking complicated? Why, for once, couldn't it just be simple?

"I'm not trying to say that you're not someone to get jealous over - not that I'm personally that, just... fuck." Running a hand through the crimson strands of his hair, Naruto scowled at the increasingly amused look that Ravel sported. "I'm just trying to say that you deserve better than that. You're not some piece of meat for him to devour with his god damn eyes."

Ravel huffed a rolling laugh. "So you're just trying to defend my honor, is that it?"
"Yeah sure, let's go with that." Deliberately burying the argument, Naruto did his level best to ignore the snorts of laughter from his fiance. Sometimes with Ravel it was just best to cut his losses, otherwise he might end up looking even more like a fool.

"So can I look forward to more of this in the future? Shall I be prepared for the day you duel in my name?"

"Sure, why not?"
Chapter 38

The lurid pulse of multicoloured lights leaking in from the dimensional gap finally subsided, and Rias stepped into the human world. Forcing back the faint sense of nausea with a palm to her forehead, Rias turned to look over her peerage. "Are you alright?"

Yuuto looked a little green, but still offered her a thumbs up. "Give me a minute or two."

"Steady on there." Akeno chuckled, rubbing at the blond's back. Her comforting gesture was at odds with her mocking words. "It's not that bad, you big baby."

Amber eyes turned away to scan their surroundings as the Knight and Queen started to bicker. Romania in autumn was still generally green and warm, but the leaves had turned a mixture of blazing red and yellow. The whole place seemed like pastoral paradise, full of rolling fields and the odd copse of trees here and there. A dirt road cut through the grass a dozen feet away, winding over towards the horizon where Koneko could see a palace in the distance.

Let no one say the Tepes vampires didn't know beauty.

Rias sighed, reaching out to her two servants and seizing them by their ears. A short merciless twist later had both apologizing and begging for mercy, upon which the Ruin Princess promptly released them. "Are we early?" she wondered, ignoring Akeno mutinous pout to go digging into the the pocket of her pale white breeches. Rias pulled out a finely crafted gold pocketwatch, flipping it open to check the time. "We're a few minutes early."

Whatever Yuuto was about to say when he opened his mouth was cut off by the sudden appearance of a bright blue runic circle. Magic hummed, tearing a tiny hole in the fabric of reality and dumping Sona and her peerage out into the Transylvanian countryside.

"Hello, Sona." Rias greeted warmly, smoothing down her dark blue woolen coat before stepping forward to wrap the bespectacled girl in a light hug. A few polite seconds passed during which Sona returned the grasp before they broke apart and Rias stepped back to look over the rest of her friend's peerage.

Just like her own, they were all dressed in a mixture of fine traditional European clothes, and looked perfectly at home in them. The only one that had a slight expression of unease was the blond boy that had just recently become the Sitri heiress' Pawn. Souta? Seiji? No, Rias remembered after some thought, Saji was his name.

For Sona's sake, Rias just hoped he was wise enough to keep quiet. If he ended up offending their hosts, there was no telling what sort of penalty they'd have to pay.

"Is Seekvaira not coming?"

Violet eyes glinted as Sona readjusted her glasses, frowning with a hint of annoyance. "No. At the least minute the Satans decided to hold her back. They didn't want to risk making us look too desperate, and nor did they want to inconvenience our potential allies with more than a handful of diplomats."

Rias herself felt a bit annoyed. Not only because the Agrares heir had left them holding the bag, but also because honestly given the choice she would have preferred to have been the one staying behind. Rias had less experience at diplomacy than Sona and Seekvaira, and she really didn't want to foul up a possible alliance with lack of negotiating skill.
Moving her gaze to the empty dirt road beside them, Sona sighed and began to tap her foot impatiently. They could always fly up to the palatial Tepes residence or even walk, but that was too low class for someone of her or Rias’ noble bloodlines. They were supposed to take a carriage, and the fact that there wasn't one waiting for them suggesting either incompetence on the part of their host or an insult.

Sona wasn't sure which possibility she wished was correct. If the vampires were stupid lumps they'd be easy to convince, but not very useful. The alternative was that the vampires were willing to slight them from the get-go, in which case their negotiations were probably smothered in the cradle.

"Ah, here they come now." Saji muttered too lowly to be heard by anyone else, shielding his eyes from the midday sun. The former human was still getting used to the strange new life he'd been given, but he was determined not to do anything that might shame his mistress.

A pair of wagons made their way down the road towards the assembled devils, pulled by a quartet of chestnut brown draft horses. The men driving them were middle aged and even from the distance Rias could tell they were still human. It made sense after all, since no vampire would willingly risk exposure to sunlight unless it was a matter of life or death. The dhamphir halfbreeds could walk under the sun, but even if they were treated as trash by their purebred kin, they were still superior to outsiders.

The repugnant arrogance made Rias wonder if reaching out to the House of Tepes for allies was such a wise choice to begin with. The House of Carmilla was just as arrogant, and just as powerful. Allying with one of them could be the spark that moved their cold war into open conflict, and that would simply be another front for Gehenna to have to fight on. It might be worth the blood cost if they at least liked their allies and hoped for a long term association, but no one could claim to like the vampires, or be liked by them.

It was a risky business all in all to go about relying on such creatures.

The whinny of an indignant horse filled the air as the two carts ground to a stop in front of Rias and Sona. Slowly, the middle aged man in the first met their eyes and doffed his cap to them. "Hello youngsters, I don't suppose you're the ones with an appointment to see the castle?" He was polite enough, but totally lacked any of the fear that would be expected in a human who was meeting devils.

Rias supposed that was just part and parcel of being a serf for vampire lords. It had a way of beating the complacency of livestock into them.

"Yes," the Ruin Princess smiled up at that weathered face. "We are."

The thirst pounded a steady headache between her ears as she woke, and Valerie Tepes rolled out of bed with a groan. Oh but she was parched, with her mouth utterly dried out and aching for just a drop of sweet ruby nectar. Luckily for her, the blond dhamphir had access to more than a drop, and after fumbling at the top drawer of her nightstand she managed to pull out a thick glass bottle.

Valerie popped the stopper with her thumb, lifting the flask to her lips and taking a small swig of human blood. Pleasure sparked over her tongue as she gulped down more and more of the life-giving fluid, reinvigorating her senses and restoring energy to her aching limbs. She was careful not to drink more than half of it, because while she had access to some blood Gasper did not. Vampires would grow weak from starvation, but they wouldn't die.

But being a dhamphir brought mortal weaknesses, even as it protected one from vampire
weaknesses, and for her and Gasper a lack of food could be deadly. Luckily, Valerie never had to worry about it getting to that point.

There were some perks to being the bastard halfbreed daughter of the Tepes royal claimant that a bastard halfbreed son of the House of Vladi wasn't entitled to. A semi-regular supply of blood from her father or sneering half-brothers was one.

Being allowed to meet the devil visitors that had entered their castle shortly after noon was another. She was a little apprehensive and wondered what they'd be like. Would they behave the same way her kinsmen did? Or would they be a little kinder?

Shoving the cork back in the bottle, Valerie lipped at her lips in a futile effort to find a little more blood before giving it up as a lost cause. "Wake up, Gasper." she called softly, shaking the half-full flask as she stepped closer to the wardrobe in the corner of her cramped room. "I have food for you."

A slight inhaled echoed from inside the piece of furniture, followed by another pair of sniffs before Gasper pushed at the doors of the wardrobe and poked his head out. Anxious pink eyes meet the deeper red of his distant clanswoman before the blond boy let his gaze drop to the bottle in Valerie's bony hand. Part of him wanted to refuse her kindness, but he was just as hollowed out by hunger as her, and Gasper was afraid of dying.

He was afraid to die, even though life didn't really seem worth living. Valerie's friendship was the only thing he'd ever had that was good in a world that seemed totally horrible otherwise.

"Thank you." he whispered, dry notes painfully cracking over his voice box. Taking the proffered meal, Gasper pressed his mouth to the opening and gulped down every single drop he could catch with his greedy tongue. Blood was so tasty, even though part of him was a little grossed out at drinking the blood of humans when he was half-human himself.

"There you go." Valerie commented as she watched the eleven year old, smiling with a soft light in her slitted ruby eyes. "Don't drink too quickly, or you might choke."

The young woman was always looking out for Gasper like that. She made a game out of crossdressing in her old outfits so that he wouldn't feel embarrassed at having next-to-no male clothes, and it had gotten to the point where he was actually more comfortable in Valerie's hand-me-downs than the torn up sacks his own father spared for him. She'd split her meals at the cost of her own health, just to make sure that he would continue to live to see another day. While they were both prisoners in the castle, she had more freedom to roam than he did; not that it stopped her from playing with him everyday and teaching him skills like reading and sewing.

Gasper wondered if this was what it felt like to have a sister, or a mother. Would his own mother have been so nice to him?

He doubted it, since the only thing he knew about her was what little his father told him. And no woman would be kind to a child that had killed her while he was being born.

"Okay." he agreed timidly licking at his lips one last time before passing the bottle back. "What time is it?" Like their pureblood kin, they slept most of the days away and spent their nights awake together, but tonight was different. Tonight the Tepes vampires had visitors, which meant that even a halfbreed like Valerie had a job to do.

Gasper would be left all alone in his little cupboard, swaddled up in ratty blankets just like he'd prefer to be. He was scared of leaving Valerie's room and dealing with the hateful eyes of the world. Scared of being hurt again and again, by cruel humans or cruler vampires. It was much safer to be in his
cupboard, even if it was a bit cramped. "Do you need to leave soon?"

Smoothing a hand over the thin white cotton of her nightgown, Valerie bit her lip and nodded silently. As much as she didn't want to leave her young friend alone without someone to look after him, Valerie could admit she was a bit excited to see outsiders. Maybe even hear tales of the outside world she'd never been able to experience in her nearly twenty years. Her half-brother Marius told her a lot of stories, but he was odd, and not in an entirely good way.

The Vladi boy could visibly see the struggle in his Tepes clanswoman, and decided to just take the problem out of her hands entirely. Forcing on a smile, Gasper lifted his hand and gave her a wink and a small wave of goodbye. "Tell me some stories when you get back, okay?" he requested, before pulling shut the wardrobe door and plunging himself into cramped shadows.

It was warm and small and dark inside the wooden armoire.

Just the way Gasper liked it.

Yuuto hated the Tepes family already. He hated the instinctive human fear of predators they sparked in him, even though the blond Knight was no longer technically a mere man. He hated the deep shadows of their castle and the way the air was silent and heavy. He hated the way that the vampires purposely projected auras that brought the chill of the grave with them, plunging the temperature surrounding them to a freezing point.

Most of all, he hated the sheer arrogance in their faces as they looked down on him and his friends.

None of that hate showed on his face, and without any visible hesitation Yuuto smiled brightly at the pair of bloodsuckers that had come to escort the devil party to meet with a vampire representative. Maybe he wanted to grind their pasty corpse pale faces under his boot, but he couldn't let any of that show. He had a responsibility to act like the white knight of Rias' peerage, and not do anything that might make life difficult for his friends.

Stepping in behind Rias and Akeno, Yuuto smoothed down the cream fabric of his Victorian era suit and carefully followed after the two women. Koneko moved in lockstep at his side, and Sona's group was clustered together further ahead along the corridor.

It felt like they were a bunch of silly actors out of time, but such was his new life. Both devils and vampires seemed to have a taste for the 'classical', though Rias did flaunt convention a touch by going about in breeches and her finely made riding clothes rather than a dress like Akeno. Koneko had also managed to escape sweeping frills by falling back into a more subdued butler's dress.

Heavens, there was so much worry about social rules and dress codes that he was getting tired just thinking about it.

Their escort ended up leading them into a long gallery, where a pair of vampires stood and gazed out the windows over the moonlit estate. Yuuto could see thick curtains tied back out of the way, and had little doubt the room saw little use during the day. Both of the bloodsuckers were blond, golden hair turning near platinum under the pale glow of the moon as they turned to acknowledge their guests.

"Welcome." the male vampire greeted, voice cool and distant. His pink eyes stared right through the devils, as if they were particularly uninteresting pieces of furniture. "I am Gasper, Lord of the House of Vladi in the court of our King. I would also like to introduce our King's daughter, Valerie." The red-eyed young woman standing at the lord's side seemed much friendlier, but she remained
submissively behind the noble and didn't attempt to speak.

Nodding in acknowledgement, Sona stepped forward and allowed the vampire lord to press a dress courtly kiss to the back of her knuckles "Well met. I am Sona, heiress to the Sitri Clan of the Seventy-Two Pillars of the Underworld." She motioned Rias forward, taking charge of the delegation as was expected because of her technically superior status. "I would like you to also meet Rias Gremory, daughter to the Duke Gremory of Gehenna."

Lord Vladi repeated his courtly gesture, and just like Sona before her, Rias didn't shrink back from the deathly cold sensation of his lips on her hand.

"Now."

"Now."

"Now." the vampire lord smiled, all white teeth and freezing courtesy. "It has been such a very long time since we've had visitors from Sheol. Would you like to sit and have some tea while we chat?"

the blond vampire motioned to a table that was already prepared with a tea set and a steaming kettle.

Four chairs circled the table, one for his two noble visitors and two for the vampires.

Guards and servants got to quietly stand away by the wall.

"We would be delighted." the smile Rias offered back was just as white and stiffly polite.

Sona led the quartet in taking their seats, waiting as one of the vampire guards stepped up to pour her a cupful of tea. After they finished, the Sitri heiress took three very deliberate sips of the unsweetened orange pekoe. The flavour was lush and rich; just as she had expected. "We would like to thank you for meeting with us on such short notice."

Waving his hand in false magnanimity, Lord Vladi dismissed Sona's thanks with a wink. "There's no need to thank us for it. A few weeks is more than enough notice to prepare for a few visitors. Think nothing of it."

Rather than haggle over who should be thanked and who shouldn't be, the two devil women decided to avoid the whole pseudo-humble tit-for-tat by nodding in agreement.

Curiously, Rias examined the daughter of the Vampire King. She was pretty enough, but there was an odd thinness to her face that vaguely suggested starvation. It was a definite curiosity considering that her father was rich enough to feed the blonde her weight a dozen times over every day. But then, maybe that was just how the Tepes clan treated their women? It seemed oddly vindictive to take revenge on all female vampires because of the dispute over the throne with the matriarchal Carmilla family, but who knew how vampire minds worked?

"Very well, we'll accept your kindness." Sona agreed blandly, settling her half emptied cup of tea back on the table. "That said, we would hate to waste any more of your time. We're sure that you have other pressing duties to attend to, so I will simply cut to the heart of the matter. Ever since our peace with Heaven, the eyes of our realm have been directed outwards towards the rest of the world, and we've taken note of certain reputable peoples. So the Kingdom of Gehenna has developed an interest in forming a mutually beneficial relationship with the King of the Vampires."

No one in the room was fooled by Sona's diplomatic euphemisms. Perhaps Gehenna really had been eying different factions all around the world and deciding which ones to establish positive ties with, but the real motive behind the meeting obviously wasn't a 'relationship'. It was military support. And everyone knew it. However, politics was a game of pretend, and so they'd all play by the rules and feign belief in the masquerade.

Slitted cyclamen eyes weighed the two girls in silence as Lord Vladi daintily sipped at his tea. As a rule, vampires did not take an interest in the outside world. They cared little for the struggles of one
group or the other, and were an entirely self-interested people. That hands-off approach had earned them few enemies, but even fewer friends. For most vampires, that state of affairs was ideal. But where the others saw stability, Gasper Vladi the Elder saw something far more insidious.

Stagnation.

It should not have taken them so long to heal the division in their kingdom. In other species, when an illegitimate uncle went up against the legitimate daughter of the last uncontested king, it sparked a hot war that would have been solved in a few short years. The vampires however, seemed to prefer cutting their society in half for decades.

An alliance with outsiders might give King Dracula the strength he needed to crush the Carmilla party militarily, rather than prolonging the cautious cold war they were all suffering now.

But then again, it had never ended well for vampires when they decided to interact with the outside world. The first King Dracula and his son Miheana had both had short reigns lasting barely more than a handful of years before they were assassinated by the Church. Their attempt to extend their power over human Wallachia had been a foolhardy venture that cost many vampire lives. It was why King Mircea had instituted the long-running isolation policy in the first place.

Ultimately the decision wasn't up to Lord Vladi though. All he could do is convey the offer to the Vampire King that had once been Morsus Atrum, and hope his ruler had more firm convictions on the matter.

Gehenna's offer had been made, and it was up to the monarch to accept or reject it. "I am glad to hear that you think so well of us, and indeed we too may be interested in such friendship." the vampire lord smiled, elongated canines poking out over his bottom lip as he pressed a hand over his heart. "However, I beg your indulgence, as I must defer our answer. I would hate to presume on the prerogatives of my King, you understand?"

Rias swallowed the last mouthful of her orange pekoe and smiled right back at the nobleman. "Of course." she began generously, voice warm with affected kindness. "We would hate to act in a way that makes things difficult for you."

"Again, my thanks."

"However, I must reluctantly urge you not to take too long. There are many friends Gehenna would like to make in this human world we share, so if your King would prefer to be mere acquaintances with us, we would like to know as soon as possible. Just so that we don't impose on your hospitality overlong. I'm sure there are other parties who would be less inconvenienced by us, you understand?"

Lord Vladi's lips drew tight. "Of course."

Rias' threat was received. If the Tepes party was not interested in an alliance with Gehenna, perhaps the Carmilla party would be.

Once their meeting with Lord Vladi ended, Rias and the others were escorted back to the state apartment they'd been assigned and abandoned once more by their undead hosts. The variance in hours between Romania and the Gremory clan territory hadn't been to their benefit, and the devils had ended up passing twenty odd sleepless hours before they'd managed to finish the first day of the diplomatic mission and were allowed some rest.

Despite the fact that her peerage had tottered off to bed, Rias found she couldn't sleep. Her mind was still relentlessly racing, turning over the events that had passed ever since she'd mailed her warning
letter to Sasuke to let her Pawn know she needed to go to the human world for a time.

In her cautious opinion, their first interaction with the vampire nobility had gone well. Gehenna had maintained some pretense of strength, and they'd shown they still had negotiating power by implicitly threatening to back the rival Carmilla claimant for the vampire throne. They didn't want to alienate the Tepes party or their King, but neither could they be allowed to be seen as weak. Maybe Gehenna was a bit of a paper tiger when it came to meeting other factions on the battlefield in a contest of low-to-mid ranked warriors, but the devils certainly had teeth when it came to threatening the vampires.

After all, Sirzechs could just drop in and annihilate their entire political structure in a few hours. The Tepes faction all lived near one another, and none of them had the raw power necessary to stand up against her brother. There was no super vampire to meet their super devil in the field, so Rias was convinced Gehenna could escalate against the vampires without worry, even if it might cost them some political capital with neutral parties.

Rias was also, the more she wandered through the small area her peerage had been given to roam in; growing convinced that someone was surreptitiously watching her. As the daughter of a Duke and the sister of a Satan, she wasn't unused to the sensation of eyes. In fact, Rias had great practice in brushing off the weight of strange public eyes. However, at the moment she was not in public, and the stare she could feel digging into her was ever more unnerving because of it.

There.

Spinning on her heel, Rias lurched into a shadowed alcove and snatched forward with a merciless grasping hand. "Eep!" went the intruder.

Soft flesh met her fingers as the Ruin Princess grabbed hold of a bare forearm and pulled the little spy into the light, only to recoil. Rias let go of the young blonde woman like she'd been burnt, stepping warily back and letting her hand drop back to her side.

No matter how strange and rude it was for Valerie Tepes to be lurking around and watching her, Rias didn't exactly have the right to go and yank about the daughter of the vampire king. It might cause a little diplomatic 'accident'.

"Sorry." they offered at the same time, consternation sparking on both faces as they tried again. "No, I'm sorry." Both girls swallowed back the embarrassment and tinge of frustration that came with trying to apologize to someone that was also trying to apologize.

Rias prayed for the strength to endure the strange torture her night was beginning to become, and waved past the issue with a flapping hand. Hopefully if the redhead distracted her enough, the blonde girl would entirely forget the rough start to their conversation.

"I have to admit, I wasn't expecting to see another person out so late. But then again, this must still be early for you, Lady Tepes?" Rias offered diplomatically, falling back into polite small talk. What else was she supposed to say? 'Thanks for creeping on me'?

Faint pink spots appeared on Valerie's corpse-pale cheeks, and she struggled between choosing to shake her head or nod. In the end, she went with a strange little spastic wiggle that made Rias' eyebrows faintly rise in confusion. "You're right Lady Gremory, it is still early. But no, I'm not a lady myself, so just call me Valerie. Please."

"Alright, I'll do that. Just as long as you call me Rias." Rias agreed placidly with her host's daughter, turning Valerie's phrase over in her mind. The blonde vampire wasn't a lady? Was she bastard born? But then why be allowed to take the Tepes surname at all? Was that just a policy of the king that had
once been a bastard himself? Perhaps she was technically a lady, but was trying not to stand on the
formality that automatically came with her title? "What can I do for you, Valerie?"

No matter how creepy it was to be stared at, Rias figured she had best take the chance and curry
some favour with Dracula Tepes' daughter. It couldn't hurt her cause, and one never knew when a
good word put in here and there might make the difference between acceptance or rejection.

"Ah, I..." Valerie trailed off, letting her red daze skitter nervously to the side before she steeled
herself and met the devil's eyes straight on. "I was wondering if you could tell me about what it's like
on the outside? I've heard some stories, but the more the better, right?"

"The outside of what?" Rias questioned back, utterly baffled. Was that some strange way that
vampires referred to inhabitants of other planes? In a way, Gehenna was outside of the human world
after all. Or did Valerie mean outside of the 'world' of vampires and in the 'world' of humans? Surely,
she couldn't mean outside of the castle?

As it turned out, that was exactly what Valerie meant.

"The outside of the estate. Sometimes, we're let out to wander the grounds, but we've never been
allowed to leave and go down to the villages or any of the human cities." The earnestness on
Valerie's thin face practically glowed, and Rias found her cool suspicion melting under a wave of
pity. To have never been allowed to leave seemed like a nightmare.

Valerie looked to be nearly Rias' age, which meant she'd have spent at least two decades as a virtual
prisoner, or even more if the blonde's appearance was deceptively young.

Before she could stop herself, Rias found herself asking the vampire girl something that might be too
personal for Valerie to reveal to a foreign stranger. "Why aren't you allowed to go outside?"

Silence hung as as ruby red and blue green stares met.

"I'm a dhampir. So is Gasper. That's why we were kept hidden inside."

So that was why. It clarified almost everything as far as Rias was concerned. Gehenna might be a
little concerned with the purity of blood, but vampires were known to take their discrimination to the
level of obsession. Dhampir might have vampire blood, but they were little more than up-jumped
servants to their pureblood kin. Half vampire might be better than human, but having a dhampir
child was also be seen as a source of shame in certain vampire houses, which explained why Valerie
and this 'Gasper' had spent their lives as little more than inmates.

That name niggled at her though. "Gasper Vladi?" Rias hazarded, eliciting a small nod of
confirmation. So the head of the House of Vladi had a dhampir child? It wasn't leverage over him,
since the vampire lord hadn't attempted to kill his shame, but it gave her a better picture of the man
she was dealing with. It gave her a better picture of King Tepes as well, since they apparently
weren't too highbrow to not going around having sex with human women.

"I see. So what did you want to know?"

Valerie perked right up when it became obvious that Rias wasn't going to reject her based on
impurity of ancestry, and then she was off filling the air with curious queries. What did Gehenna
itself look like? What was the weather there like? Were there many trees? What sort of people lived
there? What were devils themselves like? What did Gehennan society look like? What sort of magic
did devils use?

At no point did Valerie reference the war with Mictlan or ask anything that might be too personal or
too impolitic. She just seemed like an innocent child thirsting for knowledge, so despite her exhausted headache Rias did her best to answer all of the blonde's questions.

She was hardly all powerful, so the Ruin Princess knew that once their visit ended Valerie would be confined back into her sad little life. Rias doubted any amount of prodding at Lord Vladi or King Dracula would yield better treatment for the two dhamphir, so indulging Valerie with a little kindness was realistically all she could do.

But realistically or not, the more Rias spoke with her, the more she grew to pity Valerie and the boy Gasper. And the more she pitied them, the more she wanted to do something.
In retrospect, Naruto supposed he should have expected the backlash. But instead of feeling like he was vindicated, he only had one thing to say when the window shattered under sniper fire and a trio of hollow tipped rounds hammered into his chest.

"They fucking shot me!" He wailed to Ravel, leaping over his desk and crouching behind it. The redhead rubbed a hand over his breast and just knew that come morning there would be fist sized bruising taking up half his torso. "The motherfuckers!"

Ravel gave her fiancé the most deadpan look in her arsenal. It was an expression that managed to combine 'oh really?' along with 'you're a fucking idiot'. "Yes, I can see that. Thank you for the update though. Maybe you'll send me a few texts to make sure that I clued in?"

Alarms blared through the building, which Naruto gamely ignored as he turned up the pout and put on his best puppy eyes. "But it stings." Despite being hit with a series of three-oh-eight rounds, Naruto doubted he'd have any lasting damage. He was a decently powerful devil, and mortal weapons wouldn't hurt him.

Still, 'A' for effort.

Someday a bold and enterprising smith would figure out how to sing spells into the process of forging bullets, and then maybe he'd be worried. But until that day, Gehenna would have to rely on their demonic steel swords, spears, and other assorted so-called outdated weapons, and if he wasn't up against one of those, Naruto was in the clear.

"I pray to God that you don't complain this much to your mother."

Naruto guffawed a laugh as Heaven's System lashed back out at the devil's prayer with a headache, patting Ravel's knee as she scowled and clutched at her head. "What goes around comes around, neh?"

"I will bleed you like a stuck pig."

The grating wail of sirens cut out, and with a final rub of his chest Naruto peeked his head up over the desk.

Nothing.

"All you alright, sir?" Tansea shouted breathlessly as she burst into Naruto's office. Almost instinctively, he found his eyes drawn to the rise and fall of her chest. What could he say? A man had needs, and he was at the age where hormones were starting to kick in.

Shaking his head, Naruto moved his focus upwards and lurched to his feet. "So, I'm going to take a wild guess and say that either Snipy McSniperson got away, or you've got him in custody. Would that be fair to say?"

The brunette secretary blinked as she moved her eyes from the Gremory heir to his fiancé and back again before finding her wits. Snipy McSniperson indeed. "Yes, we've managed to capture the assassin and place him in custody."

Smirking with satisfaction, Naruto hopped back to his feet and dragged Ravel up with him despite the girl's wriggling protests. "Bang up, ace job." He congratulated, running a hand through his thick
tumbledown red strands before grinning expectantly. "So how soon will he be ready for me to ask a few questions?"

"He's ready now if you'd like to start a preliminary examination, sir."

Naruto weighed it. On the one hand, he could run on down and conduct an ad hoc interrogation. He might get a little info out of it, or he might not. And since the Gremory heir preferred to avoid falling back on torture, it was probable he'd get next to nothing out of the first attempt. Honestly, was it even worth the effort?

"Nah." Naruto decided, shrugging at Ravel's approving nudge. "Just make sure he gets into a cell alive. I know you lot will try to get him to confess to everything he ever did like you were a bunch of priests, but try to keep it current will ya? I want to know if he was acting on his own or if he was hired, and if someone hired him, then who did that? I'm not that interested in who he robbed last year right now."

Bowing slightly in acceptance, Tansea turned on her heel and left the bullet-hole smattered office.

"I wasn't expecting you to let it go."

Smirking at Ravel's off-the-cuff comment, Naruto strode over to the broken window and peered out. "Well we all gotta grow up sometime, don't we? Can't just keep running off every time I see something shiny." he shot back, chewing his lip in thought as he scanned the angles of the skyscrapers surrounding his office building.

The time that Naruto had spent during the last month shaking down every corrupt official and member of organized crime he could get his hands on was a decent investment. A lot of the bureaucrats were shaking in their boots and worried if they'd be next, so they were all working twice as hard. Productivity was up, even if it was motivated by terror.

That said, fear wasn't everything. Greed and self-interest seemed to have finally come out on top for some, and people were now willing to try taking shots at him directly. A bit ballsy to be honest, since if he died the clan would come down on Azmarin twice as hard in revenge. Or maybe they just wanted to try and scare Naruto off with a half-assed attempt on his life?

Well good luck with that.

Satisfied there were no more surprises waiting, Naruto circled around and ground a few shards of glass under his boot. "So, I'm thinking we step it up a little bit and show them we're not going to run home with our tails between our legs. What do you say?"

Ravel hummed lowly, ushering her fiancé away from the window and towards the other end of the office. Honestly, if there had been someone still out there they'd have been able to get a free shot in. Did he have a death wish? "There's logistical problems with that. We've already burned through our old information and we need more time to collect good new intel. So, you'd be taking the risk of shooting in the dark, and there's always collateral damage…"

Sighing, Naruto scratched the side of his nose before stepping out into the hallway among the bustle of frantically scurrying bureaucrats. "Steady as she goes then, hmm? Gotta at least show them that we're not rattled. There's no fun in that though."

"I'm not sure law enforcement is supposed to be fun."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard that a million times already, mom. "
"If you keep talking like that, I'll have to tattle to your mother."

Naruto stopped and shuddered.

"So you see, the devils are willing to deal with Carmilla just as easily as they are with us."

Dracula Tepes clicked his tongue in frustration, deciding to give up decorum as a lost cause and gulp down the mixture of blood and brandy in his snifter. It wasn't like Gasper hadn't seen him in a poor mood before anyway. "That damn Sirzechs, he has us right where he needs us."

Thinning his lips at his king and distant clansman, Lord Vladi sighed in agreement before stepping further into the study with the click of his leather boots on stone. The vampire noble accepted the glass of blood and alcohol that the monarch silently offered him with a slight bow of perfunctory gratitude, and then lifted it to his mouth with a melancholy expression.

Truthfully speaking, the interest of Gehenna could not have come at a worse time for their species. Compared to other supernatural beings, the vampires' kingdom was a young one; being only half a millennium old where other species had been united under one banner for four or five times that. Considering how solitary in general vampires were, being so divided wasn't entirely unexpected, but it also meant that they hadn't really had time to grow into their own.

It was impossible to grow to full potential when vampires who were on their own always ended discovered by the Church and slain for preying on humans. As much as it galled the vampire nobles to admit, all they had was tales of pure blood and half-forgotten legends about their ancestors. No modern vampire knew how long a vampire could live before dying of old age, if such a thing was even possible. No vampire knew the maximum strength their kind could reach, because they had always been cut down after a few short centuries. If any vampire had lived longer than that, it was as a hermit in some forgotten cave.

Only after the first Dracula Tepes had welded their individualistic people into a kingdom had they begun to grow into strength. Every king in the Tepes dynasty had tried his best to foster a culture of academia and martial pursuit in the vampire nobility, so that one day they might be able to reach new heights. That had been the dream handed down the line of vampire kings. One day they would be strong. One day, they would rule and no Church or demon or fairy creature would be able to stop them.

But that day had not come yet. King Tepes knew it. Lord Vladi knew it. And perhaps worst of all, the Satans of Gehenna knew it.

If the vampires tried to strike out at Gehenna over the implied threat of interfering in their civil war, the devils would be able to annihilate them. A super devil like Sirzechs Lucifer had no need to worry about escalating in a war with the vampires, because the undead kingdom had no warrior that would be able to match any of the Satans in the field. If they were lucky, the most powerful vampires might be able to face some of the reigning nobles in Sheol.

Unfortunately, the Satans were quite a step above even clan leaders. As much as it galled the vampire king to admit, there was only one choice realistically left to him.

Yield.

"That doesn't mean we have to let them drain us dry." Dracula murmured bitterly, black tails of his coat swishing as he turned away from Lord Vladi to stare out the window. If the devils meant to try and use his people as cannon fodder for their war, he was going to get everything he could get out of
them. Mutual military assistance, financial support, as much local autonomy as possible. The 'partnership' wasn't going to be equal, but the vampire king fully intended to set power parity as his goal.

Lord Vladi considered his king's proud back with his pink eyes. He wasn't stupid either, and understood from the moment he'd met with those two devil girls that the vampires were going to have to cave. It was just a question of when, and for how much. "Should I call them for another meeting tomorrow evening?" the blonde questioned.

The red eyes that his half-human daughter had inherited flared as the man who had once been named Morsus clenched his jaw. His crown might be feeling more hollow by the minute, but that didn't mean he had to go crawling on his belly like a dog to a pair of wet-behind-the-ears girls. "Let them wait a few days. Stonewall them if they try to speak with you and tell them I'm still thinking their offer over, just so they sweat a bit. Creatively lie if you have to."

"In what way?" Lord Vladi wondered, eying the brightening of the horizon with trepidation. Dawn proper likely wouldn't come for another hour or so, but Gasper the Elder was no halfblood daywalker. He preferred to be shut up and sleeping safely long before the sun's rays arrived. "Try to make excuses about you being very busy presiding over a recent spate of judgements, or something else?"

Reaching up to untie his high ponytail, Dracula let his waist length blonde strands fall free before he circled back to grin a touch spitefully at his kinsman. "I'd suggest something else. Gehenna thinks they have us in a bird trap, so let's puff our feathers up and get them to think twice on what they can demand from us. Make veiled suggestions that we've been recently approached by another faction and that we're weighing several possibilities. They won't ask for as much if they think we'll run off and hide under someone else's umbrella just to keep away from them."

"And stay away from the Aztecs, I assume?"

"Obviously. It's one thing to threaten to align with a neutral faction like the Norse. It's entirely different to imply that we're going to side with their enemies. We want to make them cautious, not provoke a preemptive strike."

The next time Valerie accosted Rias, she did it while lugging an enormous burlap sack.

"Umm?" the Ruin Princess stared as the blonde dhampir girl slipped into her state apartment with a wriggling bag thrown over one shoulder. "I'm not quite sure I want to ask."

As sad as it was, Valerie's appearance was the most interesting thing to happen all night. Even though they were guests, the devils weren't at liberty to simply wander around the Tepes domain and explore. King Tepes was supposedly busy mediating a dispute between two vampire houses and would be available immediately after it was settled, but until then the Gehennan diplomatic party had been left spinning in the wind.

There was really nowhere to go and nothing to do but walk around Rias' rooms or Sona's and chat. And while the redhead had taken the opportunity to catch up with her childhood friend, Sona could only take prolonged conversation for so long before she found it tiring. So given the choice between a collection of Romanian fairy tales she'd managed to find in her nightstand and Valerie's absurd spectacle, Rias chose the latter.

"Hello again, Rias." Valerie puffed, lowering her burden to the ground and wiping at her forehead with the back of a hand. "I hope you don't mind, but I thought maybe it would be nice if I brought
him along to meet you."

Eying the wriggling cloth sack with a dubious teal eye, Rias debated whether to prod at it or not. Obviously, something inside was alive, which suggested she ought to avoid irritating it. But on the other hand, if she didn't prod she wouldn't find out what it was. She could always ask Valerie, but the whole occurrence was so strange she wondered if the blonde dhamphir had gone a little crazed since they last spoke.

Shuffling movements arose in the sack when Valerie conspicuously cleared her throat. At first there seemed to be no real direction to the wiggling, but after a few moments the thing inside the bag resolved itself and made its way towards the opening. Pink orbs glittered up at Rias from the dim opening, and then finally after trembling with anxiety a blond head poked out.

"H-Hello!" the blond bag child squeaked.

Rias blinked. "Is it common among your people to transport the young in bags?"

Covering her mouth, Valerie snorted a laugh into her hand at the dry comment. "Not quite. Gasper gets very nervous about meeting new people you see, and small spaces make him feel safer. It's okay Gasper, you can come out."

Gasper seemed to shudder and shrink back, so Rias put on her friendliest face and quietly shifted away to give the boy some room. He'd probably feel more secure if there was a little safe distance between them, and Rias wasn't the kind of woman that got her jollies out of terrorizing an agoraphobic child.

Finally, after another quiet coaxing from the dhamphir woman, Lord Vladi's half-breed son crawled out of the bag and climbed to his feet in a nervous slouch.

Once more, Rias was struck dumb by the pair of dhamphir. It was odd enough that they'd decided to come see her with Gasper in a bag, it was another for the male child to be standing in front of her in a woman's clothes. The white nightie looked a few sizes too big for him, so it probably belonged to Valerie.

Maybe if she ignored it, it would start to make sense.

"Hello, Gasper."

The blonde boy stuttered out another greeting in reply to the Ruin Princess, but seemed no more willing to engage in conversation. So rather than let the awkward silence build, Rias turned her attention over to Valerie and let the child fade into the background like he no doubt wanted to. "So, what can I do for the two of you tonight?"

Grinning back sheepishly, Valerie clapped her hands together and winked one teasing eye. "Well Gasper really enjoyed what I told him about Gehenna last night, but it's not the same as hearing it from the source, so I was hoping you'd be willing to tell him about the outside too."

Rias could see Gasper shrivel up in embarrassment out of the corner of her eye and repressed a sigh. Good grief, she had better things to do than rehash the history of Gehenna two days in a row like she was a tour guide. Still, the redhead didn't have the heart to turn them away. The earnest curiosity shining out of those half-starved faces wore down any resistance she might have mounted to nothing.

Speaking of being half-starved… "I don't mind, but wouldn't you two like something to eat first?" she suggested kindly, moving over to the finely carved china cabinet that was shoved against one of the walls. She'd been wondering if there was a simple way to sneak food to the obviously starved
dhamphir once she'd met Valerie last evening, but if they were already with her then there wasn't a need to sneak anything.

The redhead rummaged about in the cupboard, selecting a gleaming silver goblet triumphantly and turning back to the two dhamphir. Gasper looked adorably confused, while Valerie had clued in and was trying to politely wave Rias off.

"Don't worry about it." Rias chuckled at Valerie, ignoring the blonde girl's protest as she positioned her forearm over the lip of the cup. A quick slash at her wrist with a magic coated finger brought Rias' blood pumping hot and thick, staining the inside of the silver goblet red. Her personal influence in the House of Tepes as a diplomat was nonexistent, but she could at least do this much.

"Who would like to drink first?"

Sona Sitri twisted one last time to consider her black business skirt and blazer before huffing a sigh through her nose and giving it up as a lost cause. There was nothing really wrong with her appearance, but she suspected her ensemble was too modern for vampire tastes. Generally she wouldn't have cared about someone else's preferences, but would it have any impact on their diplomacy?

Doubtful.

Having satisfied herself that no matter how distasteful King Tepes might find her dress code, Sona turned away from the mirror and looked over her scattered peerage. There were too many of them to bring along, into what was supposedly going to be a quick chat with the vampire king but she didn't want to look undignified by going alone either.

"Saji. Shinra." The Sitri heiress called out, drawing the attention of her Pawn and Queen. "We're going. The rest of you can remain behind and relax." Sona doubted that there would be any real relaxing done by her servants, but appearances were important. She didn't want any word getting back to the vampire nobility that suggested her household was anything but strong and unruffled.

Tsubaki Shinra fell in directly behind Sona, knee length black hair swishing with every step. The bespectacled Queen was dressed far more conservatively than her mistress, having chosen to appeal to their host's premodern sensibilities rather than assert the same statement of independence as Sona.

"Lead the way." Sona commanded the vampire guard, staring down the pureblood brunette that was no doubt seething inwardly at being ordered around by a foreigner - and a woman at that. But it didn't matter how pure his blood ran, because Sona was the heiress to the Sitri clan and had more power to her name than he'd ever be able to dream of.

Waiting until the bloodsucker jerkily nodded and turned away, Sona snapped her fingers before a dazed Saji's nose and began to follow behind the guard. Startled into alertness, Saji took his place behind Shinra and trailed after his mistress.

They encountered Rias and her peerage just outside the same long gallery room that they'd first met Lord Vladi in. The redhead looked oddly drained, but there was no chance for Sona to suggest that the other girl stay behind. Not only were they already practically at their destination, but it would make Rias appear weak and subordinate. So instead Sona settled for a faint smile of acknowledgement.

And then the doors swung inward, letting the assembled devil party into the luxurious chamber. Once more, Lord Vladi was standing by the window and offering his fake smile to the visitors. There
was however, no sight of Valerie Tepes.

"Good evening, Lord Vladi." Sona decided to seize the initiative, crossing into the room with her violet eyes sharp and focused behind their glasses.

She couldn't see anyone there that might be King Dracula, but that didn't mean the vampire wasn't around. Their species hadn't attained the strength of devilkind, but they could still be sneaky enough. The monarch might be watching them all from the shadows at that very moment.

"And good evening to you, Lady Sitri and Lady Gremory." Gasper Vladi replied in his easygoing manner. The blond vampire strode over to the two devil girls and repeated his courtly gesture of kissing the back of their knuckles. "I apologize for the inconvenience, but my king has been unexpectedly delayed. I've been tasked to make sure you don't want for anything until he arrives."

Taking her seat with chilly courtesy, Sona swept a quick glance around the room while Rias was sinking down into a chair of her own. No matter how closely Sona looked, she could outright see anyone or anything lurking about. That didn't mean however, that nothing was there. The power play had begun, and Lord Vladi was making the first move by pretending the king had been held up.

"That's quite alright." Rias responded for the pair, airily waving off the vampire noble's faux concern with a lake laugh of her own. "What's a minor inconvenience among friends, after all?"

"Quite right." Lord Vladi's cheery agreement spoke more than he might have intended. Rias' emphasis on the assumption of friendship wouldn't have gone unnoticed, and by responding in the affirmative, the blond vampire was treating it as a statement of fact.

Just as Sona had expected from the moment she'd set foot in Romania and seen the quaint castle that the Tepes king resided in. They already had the vampires from the moment they'd proposed alliance. The only thing left to do was haggle over the details.

Accepting a cup of tea with a murmur of polite thanks, Sona set it back on the table without taking a sip and considered her host's ruffled white poet shirt. The quality of it was good, and the piece was clean and adorned with the proper jeweled brooch. Thin gold bands circled Lord Vladi's pale fingers, well-made but antique. Was it supposed to be a statement about preferring older fashions, or was the vampire clan not actually wealthy enough to justify the enormous expenses required to stay current with the ever-changing modern style?

No, Sona couldn't make an objective conclusion merely from the man's dress either way. The promise of some form of economic aid from Gehenna might be useless, but she couldn't take it off the table if it may turn out to be a useful bargaining concession. The Satans had been very clear about the maximum permitted terms they could offer, and any success Sona and Rias had in haggling the vampires down would be considered a sign of skill.

No pressure.

"I don't suppose you would be willing to give us an idea about your lord's current disposition, would you?" Sona remarked idly, busying her hands by turning the tea cup on its saucer with an air of affected boredom. It was a little rude, but she intended to project nonchalant disinterest. Gehenna wanted the Tepes vampires as their soldiers, but it couldn't afford to look like it needed them.

Maintain strength at all times, because word always got around, and no one could be allowed to think that the iron in Sheol's velvet glove might be growing rusty. The devil realm might have exhausted practically its entire middle tier of soldiers waging war against Heaven, but their upper echelon was as strong as it had ever been, and their lower ranks were eternally faithful and
hardworking. Gehenna was damaged, but still fearsome.

If Sona had been an anxious sort like her Pawn Saji, the weight of upholding that perception would have made her break out into a cold sweat. As it was, Sona only had to fight down the urge to bounce her foot under the table from time to time.

Lord Vladi lifted his tea to his lips, sipping at the piping hot drink that had been sweetened by the addition of just a little human blood. His slitted pink eyes were cool and hard, in contrast to the welcoming curve of his mouth or the warmth in his voice. "Well, I can tell you a little bit." He smirked, playing at a role of gullible socialite that no one in the room would take a risk of believing. "The current king isn't as strictly isolationist as his forebears, so he's inclined to look positively on your proposal. Though of course, he has some reservations."

"Such as?" Rias allowed herself to be drawn into the implied exchange of information. No doubt the vampire king was either watching them himself at that very moment or having someone spy on their conversation to report back to him before he entered the room. No intelligent negotiator would reveal any secret demands to such unsubtle interrogation, but truthfully, the devils had no secrets to hide.

Though of course, they'd pretend to have secrets. Leverage, leverage, leverage.

"Well I'm sure you know that our people have always been very individualistic and proud in our independence. Rightly so, as each family has its own storied history and an unbroken line of pure descent through the centuries." Lord Vladi let his friendly smile thin into a more thoughtful one as he stirred his tea with a gleaming silver spoon. "So, we would hope that all of our friends would respect that there may be different, but equally valid ways to live."

"It would be positively uncouth to go into the home of a comrade and tell them how they should order it." Sona sighed, finally taking a sip of her orange pekoe.

"Indeed." Rias' smile was wide and white as she lied. "However, it would be a terrible friendship indeed where one was unwilling to tell the other if he noticed that his friend might be making a poor choice. Wouldn't you agree, my lord?" Truthfully, Gehenna had no interest in meddling in the internal affairs of the vampire kingdom. They were not looking for a tributary client state so much as they were looking for a reliable supply of soldiers, and that was all they were looking for.

But as Rias and Sona had previously agreed, they would take all steps possible to obtain and maintain leverage. They might only have a certain amount of carrot to offer, but they could inflate the size of their stick with all the hot air and lies they could breathe.

"I see." A new voice cut in, low and rough as it was accompanied by the sound of leather boots on hardwood floor. "We could all use advice from our friends in difficult times, but one should remain cautious about what choice they ultimately make."

Where Lord Vladi looked like a bishounen pirate with his old-fashioned dress, and the smooth androgynous planes of his pretty face, Dracula Tepes projected an aura of much more conventional masculinity.

Dracula's jaw was cut sharp and squared, and besides a faint scar trailing from the corner of one eye his face was unmarked. In stark contrast to Lord Vladi's thin chest and wiry limbs, the monarch had thick arms and a broad chest. Even his waist length blond hair, though silky and clean, looked more like the mane of a lion rather than the tame style of a scholar.

In short, the vampire lord looked like a king. Fierce and proud, with a stern mouth and an intelligent gleam in his slitted red eyes. It wasn't difficult at all to see why he'd been able to inspire half of a
kingdom to follow him, even if he was bastard born.

Suddenly, Rias wondered what Maria Carmilla looked like, if she'd been able to hold onto the other half of her kingdom despite being up against such a man.

Unlike Lord Vladi, the king made no pretense at courtly gestures and instead merely took a seat directly across from Sona with a grunt. "I trust my kinsman here has made you both comfortable?"

"That he has." Sona replied amiably, settling her half-emptied teacup back down and reevaluated her expectations. She'd been prepared for another man like Lord Vladi, who would dance around words and play at being frustratingly difficult to fence into concrete commitments.

Instead, she had a feeling that the vampire king would be much more direct and unyielding. She'd get farther at the table with such a man if her demands were open, and her threats clear. Otherwise he'd just bowl right over their false courtesy and take Gehenna to the cleaners.

As discreetly as possible, Sona poked at Rias' foot under the table with the toe of her shoe. It was unfortunate that she had no mind reading ability, since she had no idea what was going on in the other girl's head. If Rias had come to the same conclusion she had, that was ideal. But if the Ruin Princess hadn't, Sona would just take the lead until her friend clued in.

They couldn't afford any mistakes at that point.
Chapter 40

Namah Urobach was a young devil. Barely more than sixty years old, the young man had grown up in an Azmarin slum. Poverty bred poverty, and after decades of hard luck he was the ideal candidate for a criminal with deep pockets looking for a catspaw. Inevitably, the devil sold himself as hired muscle and was tied to a string of petty thefts and minor assaults. Eventually, that culminated in becoming a bought gun for criminal syndicates who wanted Azmarin's new governor to know that they knew where he worked and had the ability to bring violence down on his head.

Namah's blood was also spread out over the concrete floor of his jail cell, drying cold and sticky as it came in contact with the black leather points of Naruto's boots.

The Gremory heir clicked his tongue in frustration, sweeping the cell from one end to the other with careful blue eyes. There was really nothing out of place, save for the slightly rumpled sheets on the cheap cot set out for prisoners and Namah's corpse itself. For a shinobi, it wouldn't be a strange choice to fall back on suicide after capture. Protecting information for the sake of the village was a number one priority for shinobi after all.

But Namah hadn't been a shinobi. He'd just been an ordinary run-of-the-mill thug without patriotism or gang loyalty to appeal to. The fact that he'd chewed through his tongue after being taken into custody and bled out was unexpected. It was strange and desperate, and if Naruto had to guess; it pointed to some third party with absurdly strong blackmail material.

Frowning in thought, Naruto accepted the file folder a grim-faced police officer held out to him and began to flip through it.

There was little of interest in the first few pages that the redhead studied. Namah was young and poor, and grew up to be stupid and reckless. He had lived alone for years in a run-down apartment near to the slums. There was no immediate family to note after the murder of his parents, and the friends that could be scrounged up were either in prison themselves or just run of the mill gangbangers.

Nothing really stood out, until Naruto reached the last two pages and hummed in thought. Apparently, for the past five years Namah had been linked to a smattering of break-ins on factories and office buildings. Facilities that could in one way or another be linked back to the Gremory clan.

So, was this petty terrorism? Organized subversion? Anarchism? Or just an attempt by corrupt private investors to muscle in on the clan's market power? It was impossible to say.

He needed more intel.

"Clean this up." the redhead ordered, slipping the folder into the inside breast pocket of his great coat before spinning on his heel and striding out of the cell. There was no point in berating the prison guards like they were no doubt expecting. There was little they could have done, since the prisoner had been disarmed and under watch. Namah had just bled to death before the police station's emergency supply of phoenix tears could be administered. Unlucky, but it happened.

The entire crime saga was starting to irritate Naruto. The more filth he cleaned up, the more he found coming to light. Crush the most visible heads of the city's biggest gangs, and the rest had gone to ground and decentralized.

If he had unlimited resources he could hire an army of auditors to come in and review every
corporations' books in search of the inevitable laundering and fraud, but the majority of the clan's wealth was being directed towards winning the war. With unlimited money, he could also afford to turn some informants on the street and start raking in info about his enemies. Instead he was operating on a limited budget and forced to rely on threats rather than incentives to convince people to move for him.

Oh well. If Naruto couldn't get what he wanted one way, he'd have to get it another. It was time to think outside the box.

Calling up a glowing crimson magic circle, he brought it to hover next to his ear and fired off the auditory spell. It jingled obnoxiously for a few seconds before the ringing was cut off.

"Hello."

Grinning, Naruto dodged into a storage room for a touch of quiet and privacy. "Hey Mom, I was wondering if you could do me a teeny, tiny favour." If Naruto had to guess, his mother was probably positively congenial towards him at the moment. A month of daily flowers and written apologies had smoothed over any anger she might have had over him running off to Shamond.

No matter how strict Grayfia Lucifer nee Lucifuge appeared to be, she really was a big softy on the inside.

Amusement coloured Grayfia's voice as she murmured lowly. "That would depend entirely on the nature of what you're requesting. Don't beat around the bush. I don't have time to waste, and I suspect neither do you."

"I was wondering if I could borrow a few guys out of Fourth Section."

It was like Naruto had dumped a bucket of ice cold water on his mother, because the next time Grayfia spoke her voice was positively frigid. "Why would you think that we would permit that? And what need would you have of them?" Truthfully, Naruto couldn't begrudge her the mild hostility. It wasn't every day that she could expect him to ring her up and ask to borrow the Senate's secret police. No doubt she thought he had another reckless scheme underfoot.

Knowing he had to proceed carefully, Naruto licked his lips and settled down on a cardboard box that was probably stuffed full of dusty old files. "Nothing too intense, Mom. I just need them for a few days so I can clean house over here. The clan always delegated to local officials, so now all the dirt has just piled right up. Like, I have no idea if I can rely on ninety-nine percent of the people I work with or meet in the run of a day. I'm not trying to be paranoid, but besides Ravel and Nergal who's here to watch my back?"

Appealing to her protective nature with the implied threats at his back was probably a good choice. A few seconds passed before Naruto heard his mother exhale slowly in defeat. "I will speak to your father and arrange for a handful to be at your disposal. Use them wisely, because they're only going to be a temporary loan."

"That's fine." Naruto waved off the warning, leaning his back against the pale blue painted wall with a sense of relief and victory. "I only need them for a couple of days to ask some questions around here." Conventional tactics weren't getting him far, so why not test the waters with a few mindreaders out of the secret service? He'd just have to be cautious they didn't break anyone.

"Is that all?"

"Yep. See ya Ma. Love you."
There was a pause where Naruto could almost imagine his mother scanning the room to make sure she was alone before she permitted herself to reveal any emotional weaknesses.

"I love you too."

"Let's not beat around the bush." Dracula rumbled, propping his chin up on a fist and staring down Sona with his predatory red gaze. "What does Lucifer want? Don't leave anything out, or I'll make sure to remember who tried to lead me around by the nose."

Threading her fingers together, Rias assumed a cool expression of stately detachment despite the implication that Serafall, Ajuka, and Falbium had no say and the only opinion that mattered was her brother's.

While she was relatively sure Sona had been warning her to deal with Tepes differently than she dealt with Vladi, the redhead would stay cautious and let the Sitri heiress lead. The king was obviously unlike his kinsman, and would require a fresh strategy. Having two proverbial cooks in the kitchen would just clutter everything up.

Sona readjusted her glasses, lens flaring in the candlelit room as she switched gears from polite to blunt. "Gehenna wants the vampires to provide infantry reinforcements for our war with Mictlan. It also expects to have a voice in the affairs of the vampire people in order to protect its interests. Free trade and the right to conduct business with vampires within your territory is an obvious example. Finally, in consideration for the relative strength of our states, we anticipate some form of subsidization of the military cost that comes with defending vampire interests."

The vampire king actually had the gall to look mildly amused. "Oh, is that all? Just blood, treasure, and some puppet strings. Once I sign all that over, I'll get the esteemed protection of Sheol?"

Yawning slightly, Dracula prodded at one of his long white fangs with the pad of his thumb. "I refuse, and I'm going to skip the part where you threaten to go running to Carmilla and I threaten to run to the Norse or the Greeks by making a counteroffer."

Lord Vladi exhaled slowly, not quite managing to hide his irritation.

To be fair, Rias couldn't blame him. He'd spent so long deflecting the devils with false courtesy and then his king simply walked in and starting throwing down the gauntlet right from the start.

"Go on." Sona acquiesced, folding her hands on the table and meeting the vampire king's red eyes without any trace of anxiety over the implied threat of allying with an external faction.

Ticking up a finger as he began to count off his counterpoints, Dracula began. "One, this exchange of soldiers is a mutual military alliance. After the conflict with the Aztecs is settled, we will expect support to bring the Carmilla party to heel immediately. We will provide a reasonable amount of assistance during wartime, given that we must defend our own borders. I have no intent of providing levies en masse like some vassal. I am an independent monarch. Which leads me to the second point."

Here the undead monarch paused, eyes flaring with a hard inner light. "The particulars of any trade agreement can be settled after. I also don't care about accepting an ambassador. If it matters that much to Gehenna, we will accept a constant diplomatic presence consisting of one devil and a peerage of no more than fifteen servants. We will even feed them, provided you accept an ambassador of my own and feed him. That said, I am not going to be a puppet king, and this ambassador will have no authority over vampires whatsoever. Offer advice if you want, but don't be
shocked if I decide to rule my way."

Dracula raised his third finger as he rejected Sona's final point. "Absolutely not. Vampires are not and will never be subject to Gehenna. A military pact is based around mutual defence, regardless of the cost incurred. We are two independent kingdoms with independent armies, and I have no intention of 'renting' defence from Gehenna. You approach us as potential allies, not mercenaries. That said, if the Satans are so bothered about what they assume to be weakness in our kind, then perhaps they ought to be the ones subsidizing us to develop further."

Silence hung in the air as Sona digested those demands. On the face of it, she didn't consider it a bad deal for Gehenna. They'd only come searching for military support, so the trade agreement would be a bonus. Even the creation of an ambassador post with living expenses paid for by the vampires was a plus, since it would be a political appointment that the Senate could reward to some noble in exchange for support; even if it was functionally useless. But were there any other demands she could raise? And while that subsidy was a price the Satans were willing to pay, Sona suspected she could easily get out of it.

Rias nudged Sona's foot under the table, and deliberately Sona scratched at her right cheek.

"I think perhaps it would be best to simply forget this question of subsidization." Rias cut through the silence, drawing two pairs of slitted eyes and she leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table. The pose emphasized her full breasts, but it wasn't the Ruin Princess' intent to use sexuality as a negotiating tactic, and unless she started playing up the flirtatious angle the undead nobles likely would think nothing of it. She was simply a little tired. "As you say, we are sitting here as potential friends and allies. Subsidy or tribute implies that someone intends to rent out military support, and I doubt either of us want to give that impression."

"Fair enough." Dracula dropped his counterpoint easily, choosing not to press too hard on the 'development assistance' angle. He'd much rather push for autonomy rather than wealth, since no doubt any gold would come with strings attached.

"This said, I want to codify something that has largely gone unregulated before." Rias smiled thinly, slipping a hand into one of her blue sleeves and pulling out a faintly glowing red bishop chess piece. She settled it beside her empty teacup with the faint clunk of glass on wood. "I'm sure that you've heard all about our Evil Piece system, so I'll spare you the background details and get to the heart of the matter. It's very important for our kind to be able to reincarnate other species, and while we've typically done it without concern for other governments; we would prefer not to step on the toes of our allies. So, we would like a guarantee that if any of your subjects wish to be reincarnated into devils, they'll be permitted to without interference. Similarly, if any citizen of Gehenna is offered the opportunity to be turned into a vampire, we won't interfere."

For the first time since he'd strode into the long gallery, Dracula Tepes looked faintly baffled. He honestly would never have bothered to consider such a thing as an issue. If any vampire wanted to give up on their pure blood and become some mongrel, their species was better off without them. As for turning other beings, former devil or not they would never be considered pureblood. It was basically a pointless question, but if Gehenna cared that much about it, he'd concede the point. "If it matters that much to you, we'll write it into the treaty."

"We're grateful." Sona slowly ran her left thumb over the edge of her right index fingernail, stealthily indulging her urge to fidget. "But to revisit the trade proposal, it will inevitably bring increased interaction between our people. There are two issues with this I would like to settle. The first being that between Gehenna and territory controlled by the Tepes dynasty there should be no visa requirements to travel. And the second being that any citizen accused of a crime in allied territory
will be given a trial by jury that consists of devils and vampires in equal proportion."

Lord Vladi looked fit to be tied, but with a lazy wave of his hand Dracula silenced any protests the noble might have raised. "All travel will remain restricted to those granted travel visas." the king began slowly, and surprisingly patiently despite his obvious desire to rudely reject the proposal out of hand. "Make no mistake, we are willing to trade goods with Gehenna, and if war comes we'll fight by its side. But it has always been the opinion of our people that it is best for everyone to keep to their own kind. If you would like to unilaterally enact visa free travel, go ahead, but we will not. As for the jury matter, we'll accept that under the assumption that it also applies to vampires in Sheol and not simply devils in our kingdom."

After a beat, Sona nodded, prompting a sigh of relief from Lord Vladi.

"Just to clarify, the treaty will have the following provisions." For the first time in a while, Lord Vladi spoke up. His pink eyes shifted from one diplomat to the other, intent but not quite hostile. "There shall be mutual military assistance between the Kingdom of Gehenna and the Kingdom of the Night, and there will be an exchange of permanent ambassadorships. Our two nations will form a free trade area, and if a crime is committed by a citizen of either kingdom they will be tried by a jury that is half devils and half vampires. Finally, if a citizen of either kingdom wishes to become a citizen of the other, it will be allowed without delay providing they have undergone the appropriate species conversion process. Are these terms agreeable to all parties?"

After a low chorus of agreement, the vampire noble glanced at his king out of his eye before shrugging one thin shoulder. "Very well. Is there anything else anyone would like to add?"

"No." Dracula cut in even as Sona opened her mouth, rising to his feet with a grunt.

After the agreement to treat the vampires as an independent people and the promise of free trade, the undead monarch had quickly determined that permitting further negotiations would simply allow Gehenna to make more requests. Perhaps in the future the devils would try to revisit the treaty if it were signed with the current agreed conditions, but hopefully by then the vampire civil war was over and their people were better able to resist any demands from the Satans. Military assistance and trade were all he could hope for without accepting puppet strings, and beyond that Dracula Tepes had no intention to have dealings with outsiders. "We're done here."

There was just a bit of poison in the way Sona watched the back of the retreating vampire king, but the Sitri heiress didn't bother to try and call him back to the negotiating table. At the end of the day, she'd gotten what Gehenna wanted and more, and if she kept trying to push at the man it might trigger some form of backlash. Overall, she felt her results were satisfactory and didn't want to endanger them.

Rias was bolder and more reckless. "I understand the ink isn't dry on the figurative page, your Majesty." the redhead raised her voice to catch Dracula's ear. The blond king stopped, but didn't bother to turn around. "But since we've agreed that citizens who want to move from one kingdom to the other should be able to, I was wondering if you would consider welcoming the dhampir Valerie Tepes and Gasper Vladi into my peerage."

Pain spiked up Rias' leg when Sona gave her foot an absolutely vicious stomp, while Lord Vladi gaped at the Ruin Princess like she'd just signed her own death warrant. The two were motivated by very different passions of course, concern over the treaty versus fear of the creature that Gasper had been born as, but the combination of censure was enough to make Rias' mouth run dry.

"Do whatever you want with those half-breeds, providing you can stuff those little chess pieces down their throats." King Tepes snorted, stepping into the shadows and melting away without a
Gasper hugged his knees tighter to his chest, watching as Valerie digested the story Rias had just told her. On the one hand, Rias was certainly a stranger. But on the other, Rias had chosen to give two outcast dhampir her blood without caring at all about what other people would think.

So maybe it was just the hunger talking and her promise of food was getting to him, but when Rias had walked into the room and proposed that he and Valerie leave with her, Gasper was ready to go. Eleven years ignored and abused by pureblood vampires made the half-breed just about ready to do anything to get away from it, and the fact that Valerie would be able to come with him made sure that he'd have no regrets.

"Okay." Gasper stuttered out his agreement, tightening his grip around his knees when Valerie and Rias both twisted to look at him. "If it's okay with Valerie, I mean." The blond tacked on hastily, smiling tremulously at his only friend. Gasper's need for small and protected spaces was something he'd look after, even if Rias didn't provide. "I'll do whatever you do."

Valerie resisted the urge to thin her lips, but as she smoothed down the faded white negligee over the bones of her ribs, she knew she wasn't any less displeased. The fact that Gasper wasn't more assertive about his personal desires was just another sign of the way that the purebloods had broken him. Valerie wanted him to make decisions based on what he wished for, rather than what he thought she would like or do.

Still, it wasn't like she intended to refuse Rias' offer. When she'd dared to meet the devil noble and ask her some questions about Gehenna, Valerie had never dreamt that there would be an opportunity to move there and escape the vampire realm. Even though Rias had cautioned her about the social inequalities of Gehenna and the reality of life as a servant, Valerie knew that it would be a hundred times better than the life she and Gasper currently had.

Only an extremely cruel devil would lock up half-breeds to prevent any stain on the family reputation, and every instinct in Valerie's body told her that Rias was not cruel.

Shooting a glance at the closed door of the cramped room that she and Gasper lived in, Valarie lowered her voice despite the technical legality of what she was about to agree to. "Alright. We'd be glad to come live with you. But please do your spell with Gasper first."

Valerie couldn't claim to understand the exact mechanics of the devil's Evil Pieces, but from what she gathered they had a similar function to the vampire ritual of turning. It would probably be somewhat unpleasant, and the new flesh would take a while to get used to, but in the end they'd become devils no worse for wear.

"Okay." Rias smiled softly, deliberately all sweetness and no teeth as she turned to where Gasper was peeking out of his cupboard at her. "Is that alright with you, Gasper?" she asked lowly, taking slow steps as she approached the agoraphobic child. She'd only been in the company of the dhampir for a few days, but she was more than familiar with how nervous the boy was.

Don't speak too loudly. Don't come too close. Don't move too quickly. Don't look at him for too long. Don't touch him without prior warning. There were more rules to dealing with Gasper that Rias had not quite discovered so far, but she felt like she'd learned enough to at least interact with him a little.

Swallowing back the instinctive anxiety that came when someone approached, Gasper raised his chin and forced himself to meet Rias' eyes with a timid gaze. "Okay!" the blond agreed, strangling
his stutter with herculean effort. So what if he was a bit nervous? Gasper was a boy, and that meant he was supposed to be brave.

For some reason, both Valerie and Rias wore expressions of amusement at Gasper's declaration. But he was distracted from questioning them about it when Rias dug into the breast pocket of her blue riding jacket and pulled out a glowing chess piece. Chess wasn't a game that Gasper had played often, considering his life as a virtual prisoner, but he could still recognize what a bishop piece looked like.

"This won't hurt a bit," Rias clarified as a pair of pink eyes unerringly followed her bishop piece while she brought it to bear with a splash of intent and magic. "But it will put you to sleep for a little bit as it changes your body, okay?" Once the blond boy agreed, the Ruin Princess wasted no time in resting the crimson chess piece against his heart.

Red light flared, and Rias swallowed back a curse when the ritual attempt failed and lashed out at her knuckles. The stinging on the back of her hand was nothing, and forcing a reassuring smile at both the confused dhampirs Rias set the bishop piece to the side. "Sorry, this might be a bit touch and go. Not everyone is compatible with every piece, and sometimes it takes more than one to reincarnate them into a devil. So, I'm just going to try over, alright?"

Normally, Rias wouldn't be so hesitant when dealing with people, but she recognized that Valerie and Gasper were both different. They were both broken, and just like the other broken members of her peerage they needed some tender love and care. Once both blond halfbreeds had squeaked out their acceptance, Rias tried the ritual again with her spare rook piece. If Gasper wasn't a fit for bishop, maybe he'd be a fit to be her Rook.

Again, the attempt struck back at Rias with a sizzle of bright red lightning and the sensation of a burn across her hand. Now both of her hands were aching. Winking at Gasper when he gasped and looked fearfully at her singed knuckles, Rias beamed at the boy. "It's no big deal. Third time's the charm, as they say."

Truthfully, Rias very much doubted that Gasper would be a fit for her knight piece after rejecting both bishop and rook. Compatibility with the Evil Pieces was more a matter of power than inclination. Pawns and queens were allrounders and could be given to anyone, but that was irrelevant since Rias had none to spare. A wizard could become a rook, and a swordsman could become a bishop.

Each person's potential did play a tiny role in matching them to a particular piece and could for example make a 'natural' bishop take up only one piece instead of two, but it was hardly an ironclad rule.

So the fact that Gasper had rejected a single bishop and a single rook piece meant he was either a natural knight or that he was bizarrely strong enough despite his life as a prisoner to require two or more Evil Pieces to reincarnate.

Waiting until Gasper swallowed back his visible nervousness, Rias drew out her knight piece and settled it against the dhampir's breastbone under Valerie's careful gaze. Once more, Rias felt the sensation of rejected sorcery and electric enchantment sear across the back of her hand. 'Well that's that.' The redhead sighed, digging around in her pocket.

Rias had four pieces to spare. One knight, one rook, and then a two bishops, and it was looking more and more like she'd have to give Gasper both her bishops to reincarnate him. Unlike Naruto, she had no mutation pieces laying about.
A Mutation Piece would be equal to two or more of their regular counterparts, and were used to add stronger servants to a devil's peerage, so they were highly sought after. Ajuka Beelzebub apparently found the arbitrary assignment of Mutation Pieces amusing and claimed it would spice up the Rating Games.

After Rias had attempted to use only a single regular Evil Pieces to reincarnate Gasper into her peerage, the redhead was left with a choice.

Since the dhampir had rejected all of her pieces, it meant that the blond boy had some level of hidden potential and he might make a good servant. But drawing out that potential would require a lot of patience and effort for an uncertain reward, probably at the cost of both of her bishop pieces. Was giving Gasper the opportunity to be happy worth that?

She didn't even have to look at the downcast expression on Gasper's face to decide that yes, that happiness was worth her two bishop pieces and then some; no matter what traditional Gehennan nobility might expect.

Daringly settling a hand on the agoraphobic boy's blond strands, Rias drew her mouth back in the gentlest smile she could muster as she ruffled his hair. "Don't worry. I'm not going to leave you here," She promised. Then Rias laid both her bishop pieces over Gasper's heart, and watched the boy's anxious pink orbs go dull as the enchanted chess pieces sunk through his skin with an enormous flare of bright crimson.

Valerie held her breath as Gasper's eyes rolled back and her best friend collapsed bonelessly into unconsciousness. Only Rias' quick lunge to scoop Gasper up as he fell out of the cupboard prevented the boy from cracking his head over the stones that made up the floor of their little prison. "Thank you." She told the redhead, even as the devil noble waved off her gratitude with a teasing smirk.

"Don't worry about it."

Ah, but the truth was Valerie did worry about it. She'd only known Rias for a few days, but she had come to have faith in the Ruin Princess' unfailing kindness that held up no matter how annoying the dhampir were or how tired Rias herself was.

What Rias was giving Gasper and Valerie was the chance for a new life, a free life; and that life was precious. No matter what hardships or new challenges that would come with life in Gehenna, Valerie knew it would surely be better than an eternity spent staring at the same four walls.

Waiting until Rias had settled Gasper's unconscious body on her ragged cot, Valerie unconsciously straightened her back when the redhead settled a considering teal gaze on her bony form.

"I'm ready." The blonde woman told Rias, watching as Rias scooped up her two remaining glowing Evil Pieces and restarted the process of reincarnation.

Two failed attempts later, and Valerie began to cry. She didn't want to, but she couldn't help it. She'd been so close to liberty that she could taste the clean skies and warm Gehennan sun that Rias had promised her. Instead she was going to be buried in a grave of loneliness and shadows once more. The only consolation was that at least Gasper would be free.

Feeling a surge of pity at the fat salty tears that tracked down Valerie's white face, Rias wrapped the blonde girl in a hug and began to hum under her breath. It was just a silly little lullaby that her mother had sung to her in the cradle, but it was enough for Rias to settle Valerie's heavy hiccups.

"We're not going to leave you here." Rias swore, running a hand over the back of the dhampir's head.
in a comforting gesture even as her mind raced through possible solutions.

"But you don't have the right pieces for me!"

"I don't." Rias acknowledged, resting her cheek on the crown of Valerie's head as the girl wept. The sheer misery the halfblood was feeling cut into her heart. "But my nephew does. And I'll tell you right now that neither of us will let you stay in a place like this if we have any choice. We'll definitely come back to save you."
Chapter 41

There was only one way that Naruto could describe the secret police:

Creepy as fuck.

A quartet of dark suited women had swept into his office several days after the Gremory heir had dialed up his mother asking for a hand. They hadn't bothered to react to the construction workers who were installing new bulletproof windows, instead just offering Naruto their plastic smiles and herding him out of the room.

Naruto hadn't even needed to explain to them what he wanted. They already knew, and while Naruto very much doubted they'd spent time reading his mind – it would have been noticeably painful - he couldn't quite stomp down the shiver the wracked his spine. They wore the same outfit, had the same expressions, and beyond a few minor differences like hair length looked remarkably alike.

It was like they were aliens or something.

So it was with a strong sense of disquiet that Naruto shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the thin cubicle wall.

Naruto had decided to clean house with beginning with law enforcement, and hope that once the police were spotless that he'd have a lot more luck stomping down on crime in general. The guys that would share info with mob bosses were bad, but even the small fry who took bribes and let people off for little crimes could be a problem.

The air was full of the low chatter of anxious officers as hundreds of members of the force had been called in for an emergency meeting. The questioning would go on for days, since a police force that had to cover a city the size of Croatia had thousands of members, but it would be a start.

The redhead and his questioners had ended up taking over a sports stadium, setting up fake cubicles that would funnel the pale-faced officers into a face to face meeting with one of four secret police agents that the Satans had lent Naruto.

It would be a swift and nearly painless process, since Naruto had demanded the mind scanners go no deeper than detecting lies unless treachery was found, and only ask questions to determine loyalty and any criminal acts.

"Have you ever knowingly leaked information to non-authorized parties?"

"No, ma'am." Sweat trickled down the hollow of a brunette constable's throat, and the look he shot Naruto was full of terror. A wince crossed his face as the blonde woman dug her nails into his scalp before sighing in annoyance.

"You lied. But allow me to rephrase that. Have you ever leaked information to a party which didn't consist of other officers or of your friends and family?"

Once more the officer frantically denied passing intel to outsiders, and this time the blonde agent released him.

"Get out of here, and send in the next."
Under Naruto's slightly guilty gaze, the brunette cop lowered his head and fled.

Despite the remorse Naruto felt, he knew the questions to be necessary. Maybe it would leave his officers feeling a bit dirty for a few days, but the benefits of a clean police force outweighed the inconvenience. If an officer wasn't willing to put up with the questions, then they probably shouldn't be working in law enforcement in the first place.

Another policeman was filed in and subject to a short and invasive interrogation before he was dismissed. Thirty such men had already filed by, just as reluctant but just as willing to swallow pride and obey orders. Nergal once told Naruto that the boys in blue hated traitors even more than criminals, and the ease to which the force in general submitted to questioning had convinced the redhead of that.

"You're a cold one." Naruto mumbled to the air, folding his arms over his chest and watching as the blonde agent swallowed down a bottle of water. Beyond the frequent wetting of her lips, she was inhuman. And Naruto didn't mean in the typically devil way.

Mindreading was a rare art in Gehenna because it required a lot of skill to cast the spell. Even more talent was required if the devil casting the mindreading spell didn't intend to turn the target into a drooling mess.

Add on top of that the real difficulty with mindreading that came from how it would allow the feelings of those subject to the spell to bleed into the mind of the caster, and there was a recipe for emotional freakouts.

So the fact that the Fourth Section agent didn't even twitch at the fear of the men under her spell meant she had to be a very icy woman indeed. Naruto wondered what sort of training would create a person like her, since even Konoha hadn't managed to turn its soldiers into unfeeling tools. Or maybe it was just some form of natural sociopathy?

Perhaps being a psychopath with water instead of blood in the veins was the real secret behind getting skilled at mindreading magic.

"This is your last warning. Tell me who you've given information to and you can still walk out of here unharmed."

"I'm telling you, I didn't tell nobody nothin'!"

Silence hung in the air as Naruto considered the squirming redhead who was now being interrogated with a heavy gaze. Sooner or later, he supposed that it was inevitable that they'd encounter someone dirty. He'd even been counting on it, since otherwise the whole filthy exercise he was a part of would have been pointless.

And Naruto knew the ginger officer was dirty, because the quartet of secret police agents had come with his father's personal recommendation regarding their skill and loyalty. If the woman he was working with claimed that the cop was lying, then he was; and it didn't matter how chillingly cruel she could be.

Swallowing despite the sudden dryness of his throat, Naruto moved his eyes from the condemned to the man's austere accuser. He wasn't sure if he was imagining the sick anticipation in her face, but even if he wasn't, it didn't matter.

Naruto was there to do whatever it took to clean up Azamarin. For the clan, and for Gehenna.

"Do it. Just don't do anything permanent."
The screaming that came from a mind being flayed was enough to turn the Gremory heir's stomach.

Two very different letters had made their way into Sasuke's hands in the past week.

The first was another of Rias', full of warm words and detailing her time in the vampire kingdom. She'd warned him before she left that she was being sent off on a diplomatic mission, and once she'd returned she'd promptly informed him that his friends had all made it back safe and sound.

With a new addition, apparently. The Uchiha supposed he should have expected it as some point, since it was Rias. She was utterly incapable of turning away someone in need, and once the dhampir boy had tugged at her heartstrings the Ruin Princess would have done anything to help him.

Once Sasuke was done fighting on the front lines, he'd have to go back and see the Gasper boy for himself. Rias' words were glowing, but it was with a sense of exasperated fondness that Sasuke knew he couldn't trust her on the matter. She'd write good things about a murderer if the story was pitiable enough, and probably censor her letters to try and give Sasuke a good impression.

The military liked to censor their letters too.

The second missive that had been sent was one coming down from High Command. It was encrypted and full of odd references, but Sasuke understood the message well enough. And once Vali had come back from a conference with a mouth full of curses and secrets, everything had become very clear.

Prepare for the shitshow.

Sasuke was on edge, pacing back and forth and scanning the horizon behind the Mictlanese lines with blazing Sharingan eyes. In order to stymie potential spies, only the bare minimum of information had ended up being shared with the common soldiers. Everyone was on high alert, but only Sasuke and Vali had any idea what they were waiting for.

"Are you sure you don't want to take a bit of a break, Captain? My sister sent me some chocolates, and there's more than enough to go around."

Without moving his gaze away from the horizon, Sasuke rotated his body to give Phineas a smack to the back of the head. "I don't like sweet things, you idiot. And get back to your post, or I'll have you strung up by your nuts."

"You're so mean." Phineas moped, still haunting Sasuke's heels as he whined. "If you had more sweet things, you'd be a lot nicer. You are what you eat, after all."

"Wouldn't that make you a giant chocolate bar?"

"Maybe." A moment passed where the only sound was the crinkle of a paper wrapper being torn. "But that doesn't change my point Captain. Everyone likes chocolate, since it's so sweet and yummy."

"Well I don't- mhhff!" Sasuke's denial was cut off when the private took advantage of the Uchiha's lowered guard to lean over his shoulder and cram a fistful of milk chocolate into Sasuke's mouth.

Laughter rang through the air as the green-eyed devil dashed away, disappearing down front line while Sasuke scowled and began to spit out the cocoa treat that had just been unceremoniously forced on him. "You're dead." He promised the absent recruit, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his uniform.
"Still getting pushed around by the kid I see."

"Still a mouthbreathing retard I see."

Vali rolled his eyes, stepping around the half-chewed ball of chocolate Sasuke had spat into the dirt. "Keeping a lid on things down here?" the major prodded lightly, letting just a touch of bitter tension leech into his tone.

Once Sasuke grunted an affirmative, the half-devil chewed the inside of his cheek in thought as he peered at the horizon.

Things were as ready as they were going to get at the front. The trenches were packed in with extra reinforcements like sardines in a can, and Vali could hardly turn around without encountering some new face. All their munitions were triple stocked, and every conjuration cannon had undergone inspection over the last three days.

More than one soldier had come up to the silver haired halfbreed begging for hints, but all Vali could give them was warnings and repeat his order to prepare for any sort of surprise combat. His hints had only stoked fears of another Mictlanese assault, but Vali's hands were tied. Operational security mattered more than soothing the feelings of his underlings, so the only thing to do was keep silent and wait.

"Are you ready?" Sasuke murmured lowly, caressing the pommel of his katana with the palm of his right hand. The Uchiha's face was drained of all emotion, resembling a pale porcelain mask more than a living mien.

But Vali knew that beneath the façade, Sasuke was jittering with anticipation. He knew that, because he and Sasuke were of a similar kind; and when a man was bred for violence and death the prospect of a battle was enough to get the blood up.

"'Course." The major shot back, rolling up his sleeves and reaching inward to hold onto the sensation of his Sacred Gear. A single mental pull would materialize Divine Dividing. "Don't tell me you want to run on home with your tail between your legs now."

Sasuke opened his mouth, but the reply he offered was drowned out by the sudden world breaking howl of a hunting horn.

Plum-Macaw had been born in the early days of Moctezuma's reign, and even centuries later she still had faint recollections of her human life. A life that had been good and happy, where she'd married a proud young warrior for love and bore him a son. Her second pregnancy had been what had killed her, and like all human women who died in childbirth while their souls were dedicated to the Aztec gods, she'd descended into Mictlan to be reborn as one of the Cichuateteo.

The former human had just barely begun to adjust to her new existence in the service of her gods when the Europeans crossed the Atlantic and laid waste and fire to the Aztec Empire. The Spanish had brought with them a new religion which brooked no competitors, and between the sword and the
Bible Plum-Macaw's people had been forced to submit. No more sacrifices were to be made in the sacred temples of Tenochtitlan, and eventually the NahuaTL forgot their ancestors.

Like most of her supernatural sisterhood, Plum-Macaw seethed with the need for justice and revenge. And like most of her supernatural sisters, Plum-Macaw had bowed to the wisdom of Mictlantehcuhtli and awaited his commands. They waited until the angels and devils wore each other out with their wars and grew weak. They waited until the old Satans and their God would no longer be a problem, and then they'd struck.

It was the hour of the jaguar, and this time the *hunters* would be the hunted. Mictlan would do whatever it took to put every devil and angel to the sword, and once the need for blood and vindication was settled, perhaps there would be a time to reach out to their lost people and gather them home.

Such were the convictions of Plum-Macaw, a cihuateotl in service to the King of Mictlan; one violent afternoon on the front lines.

The day had begun like any other, with cihuateteo patrolling the trenches while the bonespiders rested and the odd tzitzimitl passed out orders. They'd seen the movement in the Gehennan trenches, knew *something* was underfoot, and strengthened their defences accordingly.

They were still waiting for the devils and fallen angels to make a move when the horn sounded. Echoing from the rear of their lines and rolling through the air like a swelling tide, the call went on and on. It was a summons to the hunt, and to war, and more than one Mictlanese soldier felt eerie expectation shiver down their spine.

"What was that?" Eagle-Along-The-Horizon murmured, the tzitzimitl lurching to her feet and settling a hand over the hilt of her meteor iron longsword.

Plum-Macaw shrugged one shoulder at her superior, turning away from the Gehennan lines for a moment to peer at the horizon with her amber gaze. She was at just as much of a loss, because while it could be another brilliant stroke summoned up by their king, it certainly didn't move through the air like anything one of their people might have sounded.

Once more the trumpet blew, ringing hearty with a note of triumphant malice; and then it fell silent. The Mictlanese troops were still marinating in their shocked disquiet and exchanging furtive whispers when *he* appeared.

Red and orange hair mingled in a display that brought to mind the picture of living fire, flowing in the breeze down to the shoulders of what had to be one of the most handsome men in existence. A perfectly chiseled jaw bound the edges of a face so delicately carven in flesh that it would have made Michelangelo weep.

The only thing that detracted from the image was the light of feline cruelty in the man's blazing green eyes, and when he mockingly nodded to them his enormous antler helm projected a silent demand to submit.

A haze of stunned languor descended, and more than one woman found herself smiling dopily at the beautiful man. Even the bonespiders settled with a few quiet chitters, long legs bowing as they lowered their bellies to the dirt and peered at the newcomer with beady red eyes.

*Clop-clop* went the hooves of a horse, the flame haired interloper swaying with each step of the eight-legged equine. In stark contrast to the near divine being perched on its back, the horse was a hideous thing; black coat seeming wet with slime and wicked fangs poking out from its lips.
"Beautiful." Plum-Macaw murmured, unable to stop the compliment from slipping out of her numb mouth. It was like cotton had filled her skull, slowing every thought to a crawl. The sensation was lovely. Too lovely.

The beguiling enchantment snapped like a rubber band, lashing out at everyone in its path as the handsome horseman's spell was forcibly ended.

"Don't just stand there! Attack!" Eagle-Along-The-Horizon shouted hoarsely, one hand lifted up and pulsing waves of shadowy magic. "I want that sidhe dead or alive!"

Which just started a whole slew of questions, Plum-Macaw blinked blearily as she unclipped her jade battleaxe from her hip. How had one of the fae shown up here? Why had he shown up here? The fae took no sides in a conflict, so someone had summoned it.

Curses and shouts mingled like a discordant chorus as more than one Mictlanese soldier rediscovered her balance and moved towards the redhaired sidhe with murderous intent. Whatever purpose the intruder had, he'd missed his chance.

Unless he'd already accomplished his mission, and when a second bugle cried out from the Gehennan lines, Plum-Macaw began to feel the first trickle of fear.

It was not the sidhe who had run out of time. It was the still woozy women and dizzied bonespiders who had. Because although it was her first time hearing it on the field, Plum-Macaw could recognize the aggressive note and interpret the command.

Advance.

Purple smoke filled Sasuke's mouth with the taste of ash and metal, and as the Uchiha threw himself over the last few feet into the Mictlanese trenches the explosive volleys of the Gehennan conjuration cannons continued to rage on. The battle had just barely begun, and it was already shot to hell. Where was Vali? Where was Phineas? What the fuck kind of plan was 'charge' supposed to be?

Drawing his katana with a low curse, Sasuke shoved back any questions that didn't relate to survive. Already the disorganized mass of cihuateteo were wheeling to face the influx of devils that were pouring into their front trench, and the clattering screech of a bonespider signaled Sasuke's first contact.

Dark orbs twisted red as Sasuke summoned up the Sharingan, relying on his improved sight to lead him through the chaotic mess. Silver demonic steel hissed through the air as the Uchiha rushed forward, boots tramping over freshly churned dirt while he slipped under the bloated body of a bonespider and stabbed straight up. A twisting flourish disemboweled the creature before it even realized its death was coming, and Sasuke ignored the fresh corpse as he turned to seek the next target.

Screams of anger and pain rocked the world as more and more Gehennan troops crossed over no-man's-land and into the Mictlanese trenches under the cover of spellfire and the distraction of a sidhe army suddenly appearing behind the Aztec lines.

"It hurts!"

"How many of them are there?"

"Regroup! Regroup!"
"I'll kill you!"

Sasuke twisted to catch the downswing of a blazing jade battleaxe on his katana, bracing his knee as he shoved the seewah's attack back with bared teeth and a burst of pure physical strength. A wordless Koujin ignited the tip of the Uchiha's blade with orange flames, and Sasuke took advantage of the parry to twist low and move. Blood and flesh sizzled as Sasuke opened up the dusky woman's belly with his sword, letting her entrails spill out in steaming slippery grey ropes.

There was no time to gloat over his minor victory, because a pair of cihuateteo rushed at Sasuke from both sides. Steel and jade clashed, spraying sparks through the air again and again as Sasuke stretched his underdeveloped Sharingan to the limit. His katana glittered and shrieked as he forced it to weave from one side to the other and back in gleaming arcs that blocked the stabbing of two green spears.

White and glowing blue streaked in the corner of Sasuke's vision, and then suddenly the White Dragon Emperor was there bowling over one of the Uchiha's assailants with the slap of flesh on armor. Vali didn't bother to say anything as Sasuke huffed and turned to decapitate his only remaining opponent; finding the kill easy now that his focus was no longer split.

The half devil decided to simply wrap a plate covered bicep around the seewah's throat and break her neck in a single jerk. Amber glass shone under the dying light of the sun as Vali tossed a glance over his shoulder at Sasuke before flying off in search of the next fight.

Typical.

Wheeling about, Sasuke settled his focus on the nearest grappling pair of combatants and stepped forward.

Sunflower yellow orbs of magic burst from the barrel of an enchanted assault rifle as a fallen angel corporal tried his best to hold off the forceful swings of a jade club wielding seewah. The firearm successfully narrowed the gap in strength between the two warriors, until with a final click the crystal cartridge fueling the assault rifle ran dry.

Leaping back in a flurry of black feathers, the corporal struggled to yank a new crystal out of his pocket before the seewah could brain him.

Lightning screeched in a flurry of chirps as Sasuke cut in, appearing behind the cihuateotl and shoving a Chidori wreathed fist through her back. "Stay in your group." the captain grunted, black tomoe spinning coldly before he moved off further down the trench with a crackle of fire and lightning.

Again and again Sasuke brought destruction to Gehenna's enemies, taking advantage of the cover the trenches provided to stick low as well as the precognitive ability of his eyes. He was like an angel of death, slipping in and around the flashpoints of the battle to cut down cihuateotl from behind or duck under a bonespider and gut it.

Aiming to strike from the rear while devil or fallen angel troops distracted the Mictlanese soldiers wasn't honourable, but honour had little place on a real battlefield. He needed to butcher as many as possible, because the more he killed the closer the war moved to its conclusion. It also had the result of saving the lives of the enlisted men, who would have struggled to defeat the seewahs without his sudden timely interventions.

Sasuke clenched his jaw as he caught sight of Phineas locked in hand-to-hand combat with a dusky skinned Mictlanese woman, and adjusted his course to move directly towards the pair. "Damn green
"kid." he complained, readying his blood soaked blade. Surprisingly though, the brunette brat was actually holding his own. Could Phineas be the bastard child of some pureblood with clan magic? Or maybe the kid just had natural talent?

It didn't really matter either way, the Uchiha decided as he shoved his katana through the seewah's kidney. A cruel pull severed the woman's spine, and she dropped with a cry into the gory mud. "Get back in formation!" he barked as he cut off the flailing seewah's head for good measure, jerking a chin towards one of the tight knots of Gehennan soldiers.

Green eyes sparkled as Phineas sketched a sloppy salute, and then the kid scooped up a discarded jade club before making his way to the nearest gathering of friendly soldiers.

Despite the seemingly disorganized human wave tactic the Gehennans were using, there was a method to their madness. Artillery would combine with the confusion of the sidhe invasion to provide cover for the devils and fallen angels as they crossed no man's land to assault the forward Mictlanese trenches. Once the Gehennans were in the front trench, they would rely on cooperation to defeat the seewahs and bonespiders. If one of the rarer tzttzimimeh were encountered, they'd fire up a signal flare to mark contact and hope one of the 'paragons' like Vali or Sasuke came along to handle it.

The overarching strategy was to sweep out set segments of the front trench, and then cut those segments off from the rest of the front trench with barricades. After that, the Gehennans would use the support trenches to penetrate the next trench. They would repeat the process until either there were no more trenches to penetrate, or they reached the collection of portals at the center of the Limbo Strip.

If all went well, Gehenna would create pockets of Mictlanese soldiers who would have to try to assault defended positions or die from starvation, while reclaiming a significant amount of territory.

If all went perfectly, the Satans would have succeeded in cutting off all Mictlanese soldiers deployed in Gehenna from supplies. It was a once-in-a-lifetime desperate assault that was only enabled by the sudden appearance of the Summer Court in the center of the Limbo Strip. By being attacked on both sides, the invaders had been caught with their pants down.

"Watch out Captain!"

Phineas' sudden shout was all that saved Sasuke from having the top half of his head removed. Black meteor iron collided with folded demonic steel to the sound of screeching metal as the Uchiha spun on his heel to block the tzitzimtl's slash. The grinning white skull of the Mictlanese captain's helm leered at Sasuke, and unwillingly he remembered the last time he'd been up against one of the star demons. The hunger of black magic was the same, and a tense ball of anticipation curled in Sasuke's gut.

He wasn't weak anymore.

Exhaling a wordless roar, Sasuke pushed back against the armoured woman. Fire flared along the length of his katana, encouraging the tzitzimtl to warily pull back and consider the dark haired devil with topaz gaze. "Come!" Sasuke growled, sliding his feet over the uneven ground and moving his arms into the stance of a master swordsman. This time he would be the victor, and he'd win without having to turn to the wellspring of strength Ophis had given him. He didn't need to rely on anyone else's power.

Don't die.
It was such an incongruent little thought, but it hit Sasuke like a kick to the chest. Koneko had told him not to get himself killed. Yuuto had demanded he stay safe. Akeno had told him not to come home with too many scars. Was being able to win his battles alone worth the risk of death or injury? Rias would probably cry.

No.

"Promotion." Sasuke murmured, feeling the gut twisting queer sensation of one of the Evil Pieces inside of him change. The pawn was the weakest piece alone, but in enemy territory or at the instigation of the king, it could rank up and temporarily become a knight, bishop, rook, or queen piece. The Uchiha was no veteran of the Rating Games, but he knew how to evolve at least one of his eight pawns into a stronger piece, and after swallowing some of his pride, he did so.

The tzitzimtl accepted Sasuke's challenge, rushing back along the length of the cramped front trench as she brought her ebony sword to bear. Again and again their blades met, edges scraping and grinding as the two warriors struggled for supremacy. Although the greater battle still raged around them, the two only had eyes for each other.

Dirt kicked up as the star demon abruptly switched tactics, leaping to the side to launch herself off the soil wall of the trench like a parkour acrobat. Sasuke's eyes followed her movement, but he wasn't quite fast enough to dodge the armoured boot that lashed out at his face.

Stumbling back with the taste of blood in his mouth, Sasuke shoved away the sensation of pain with all the conditioning of a shinobi. If not for the trickle of Rook's magic reinforcing his body, that hit might have broken his jaw. "Cheap." he bit out, swiping his tongue over his teeth to spit out a red flecked wad of saliva. But in the end, he couldn't complain too much. It was war. Kill or be killed.

Sasuke rushed forward, spinning vermillion gaze intent as he forced the tzitzimtl back into the dance of blades. The Uchiha had no more intention on dragging things out, and since she'd so kindly reminded him to think outside the box, Sasuke felt she ought to be the first recipient of his renewed resolve. "Phineas!" the devil shouted over the roar of battle, relying on the stupid and overly friendly kid that he just knew wouldn't have the sense to back off when superior warriors began to fight.

Red balls of fire rocketed through the air in response to Sasuke's call, spurring the Mictlanese captain to growl and remove one hand from the hilt of her sword. She unerringly smacked away projectile after projectile, not getting even a scratch despite Phineas emptying his entire clip.

But for Sasuke, that moment of distraction was enough. With all the accuracy of perfect vision, the Uchiha spat a thick wad of bloody phlegm right in the eye hole of his opponent's helm. And once she jerked back in instinctive disgust, Sasuke yanked one hand away from his katana to strike out like a viper. There was a sensation of hot jelly that burst over Sasuke's thumb when he shoved it right into the woman's other eye slit.

Temporarily blinded, she couldn't even react when Sasuke pulled back and whirled about to the side. Demonic steel glimmered beneath the first light of the moon as Sasuke brought his katana low and sliced into the weak spot on the back of the tzitzimtl's armoured knee. "It's over." Sasuke declared, coldly amputating the limb and ignoring the howls of pain and arterial spray of blood that soaked his boots.

A final stab to the back of his downed foe's head ended her life, and Sasuke raised his gaze to meet the earnest green eyes of the private that had been attached to his side like a leech over the past couple of months.
"We did good, didn't we, Captain?"

A secretive smile pulled at Sasuke's lips, so quick that it was gone almost before anyone could register it. Yes, he supposed they did. With a final glance at the woman he'd just slaughtered like an animal, Sasuke turned away to seek the next fight.
Chapter 42

*Monday's child is fair of face...*

*Come once again and love me...*

*So twice six miles of fertile ground...*

Clutching a hand to her head, Valerie grit her teeth and shoved away yet another insidious whisper that crawled through her mind. A faint trickle of blood dripped from her bloodshot left eye, and with a shaky thumb she swiped away the crimson fluid and licked it up before anyone could notice.

Secrecy was the order of the day, and no matter what it would end up costing her the blonde dhampir intended to soldier on to the end. If someone saw or smelt the gore that sometimes ran from the corners of her eyes or dripped out of her nose, the game would be up. Valerie wouldn't be able to find a believable excuse, and she couldn't afford discovery.

Ah, but the pain...

The voices had started a day after Rias left with Gasper, tormenting Valerie with their nonsensical mutterings and wild shrieking. Sometimes she could imagine a malicious child walking in her shadow, or a sorrowful doctor musing to her the latest prognosis, or a cackling maniac leering in front of her as he planned his next murder. There were so many people crawling through her head, mostly speaking to themselves, but sometimes speaking to her.

It was madness. She didn't know how much longer she could take the pressure and maintain her sense of self.

When Valerie was strong enough, she could cage up the rage of her newly discovered Sacred Gear. It was a queer little thing, three golden goblets popping up when she dug around inside her heart. She'd yet to discover what exactly it did, besides torture her with images and speeches until she could barely breath; much less sleep.

Valerie wondered if the reason it talked so damn much was that it had awakened after she began to drown in loneliness and despair. She couldn't begrudge Gasper his freedom, but she wanted that liberty for herself too. She wanted to be happy too.

*I will make those who stay the envy of those who return...*

*The victory will never be asked if he told the truth...*

*Right action is better than knowledge...*

"Shut up, shut up." Ah, if only she had just a little more blood to drink! Valerie was always half-starved, treading the edge of weakness. But her rations hadn't increased at all, and once Rias left Valerie had no remaining source of constant sustenance. She was half vampire, and unlike her pureblood kin the blood hunger *could* kill her. So the lack of food took its toll, and once Valerie had burnt through all the extra strength the Ruin Princess gave her, she had nothing to hold back her Sacred Gear with.

There was the possibility of going to her father or brothers for aid, but most of them wouldn't give her the time of day. Her father was kind when he could be, but the vast majority of the time he had to play up the role of pompous pureblood to keep the nobility in line. They'd tear him down if they
suspected he had any sympathy for lesser beings, and no matter how he truly felt about his daughter no dhampir was worth a throne.

Marius would probably help her if she asked, but Valerie was reluctant to go to him. Her half-brother was strange, and she didn't like the look in his eyes or the way that his hands seemed to linger too long on her skin when he embraced her. There was also the possibility that the vampires wouldn't let her go if they knew she had some strange little artifact inside of her.

The only recourse Valerie had was to hide in her room, curling up in the beaten old wardrobe Gasper had lived in for years. She needed quiet and safety, because if she ventured out of her self-imposed isolation she felt like she'd fall to pieces. Valerie had to endure, because there was only one road to freedom; one way to escape.

Rias.

Naruto.

Repeating those two names over and over in her head like a mantra reminded the blood woman what exactly she was suffering for. She couldn't afford to roll over because of the pain and insanity, since if she did Valerie might never see the light of the outside world. She'd never be able to see the sun, or smell the fresh waft of a clean breeze, or listen to the cheery bubble.

That didn't mean she wasn't tempted to.

You're beautiful, but you're empty...

Roll on, deep and dark blue ocean...

Unite your total strength...

Valerie could always just give in. Beg for blood and relief, until all that was left was blessed silence. All she'd have to do would be to get up, walk out her door, and sneak into her father's library. It was just a few dozen steps to reach poisonous salvation, and the blonde knew she could voluntarily wear chains until the end of days. It would be easier than to keep fighting.

All she had to do was fall, and let her brain and heart meat away into tepid servility and the broken affection between slave and master. She could forget about Gasper, forget about Rias, forget about the idea of the world outside, and remember only the cramped shadows and hushed corridors.

Drawing her knees up to her chest, Valerie dug clawed fingers into her scalp with an expression of misery. Red orbs blurred with the hot sensation of salty tears, and she scrunched her eyes shut. Breathe in slowly, and breath out everything. There was no struggle, no concept of time or meaning. All that was left was the bleeding edge of her heart and the endless murmur of the dead and the living.

The mouth of the Just shall mediate wisdom...

Furthermore, I consider that Carthage must be destroyed...

Glory is fleeting, but obscurity is forever...

"Someone save me. Please."

Unheeded tears began to fall.
If Sasuke concentrated, he could just barely hear the sound of battle in the distance. The Uchiha wasn't sure when he'd fallen behind, but with the sun beating down on him and his flanks soaked in sweat, he could barely muster the strength to roll to his feet. More than once his boots slipped in the gore soaked mud before he managed to rise.

The skin of his knuckles was torn, having bled long enough to form crusty scabs before he even noticed. He couldn't even feel his right hand at all with the way it was so tightly clenched around the hilt of his katana. "Fuck." he breathed, doing his best to ignore the smell of urine and shit that came when bodies relaxed in death. He couldn't afford to get caught up on delicate scruples like a bit of blood and filth.

As a shinobi of Konoha, Sasuke had learnt that the most important thing to do when trying to outlast battles that stretched for hours or even days on end was careful pacing. Takes break when possible, and always hold a little bit in reserve. But like many of the things he'd learned in his first life, Sasuke wasn't finding an exact one-to-one translation for his experiences. Ever since the horn to advance had sounded, the Gehennan forces were pushing like it was a sprint rather than an endurance run.

At some point in the twenty-second hour, Sasuke had blacked out. He'd only been under the spell of unconsciousness for a short while if the nearness of the battlelines were any indication, but he was concerned. Not to mention utterly exhausted. It felt like every cell in his body was crying out for him to just fall down on his arse and rest a while.

Luckily, Gehennan High Command had anticipated such situations. Stabbing his katana into the slowly sun-baking mud. Sasuke forced his contracted right hand to release the blade. It felt like hot pins and needles were being shoved under his skin as he painfully straightened out each finger. Once his hand was open and slightly throbbing with the newly unrestricted flow of blood, Sasuke reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a tiny tin cylinder.

Popping the cap open, Sasuke grimaced before tipping his head back and emptying the contents into his mouth. Two small capsules slid down his throat as the Uchiha swallowed the stimulants dry. It wouldn't be his first time relying on methamphetamine to complete a mission, and he really doubted it would be the last. Performance enhancing drug use was common as dirt back in the Elemental Nations, and while he suspected the devils took a dimmer view of it they were at least pragmatic to give him something to keep moving.

Maybe it would be for the best if he didn't tell the girls though.

Sasuke scooped his katana back up, deliberately using his left hand and forcing his tired body towards the sound of combat. More than once he had to step over a corpse, dark eyes scanning each bloated face for familiarity. From time to time he encountered a dead man he thought might have fought under him, but without the patch of Moon Demon Company it was impossible to be sure.

"I thought you were dead." Vali's shout was insulting and tinged with just a tiny bit of relief, blue eyes staring through cracked amber lens as the White Dragon Emperor shoved through the clash of steel and sorcery. His progress was unimpeded, since it seemed he'd built up a bit of a reputation in the Mictlanese ranks, and no one wanted to try to take him on.

"Not quite." Sasuke grunted, rotating his right wrist to get the last of the kinks out. He could feel just the faintest trickle of the drugs kicking in, and knew soon enough he'd be bouncing and ready to fight like a berserker. "What's the status of the front?"

"Not quite." Sasuke grunted, rotating his right wrist to get the last of the kinks out. He could feel just the faintest trickle of the drugs kicking in, and knew soon enough he'd be bouncing and ready to fight like a berserker. "What's the status of the front?"

Vali ran a gore covered white gauntlet over the cracked plates that covered his chest, healing the Sacred Gear armor with a touch of will and magic. "Still moving, though they're starting to show signs of stiffening up. Couldn't count on dropping an army in the forward command working
"Fuck." the Uchiha enunciated, heart picking up to a steady pace.

The only reason Gehenna had been able to advance so far so quickly was because of the Satan's bait and switch. They massed troops at the front, encouraging the Mictlanese to strip defences from the interior and reinforce the front. Once that was accomplished, they'd dropped a sidhe army in the middle of the central Mictlanese base and left the fae to burn and pillage as much supplies and kill as many commanding officers as possible. It was the loss of command and the disunity between the troops who wanted to return to defend the supply depots and those that tried to hold the line that was responsible for the crumbling of Mictlanese defences.

If the invaders were stiffening their resistance and slowing the reconquest, it suggested someone on the foreigners' side had managed to straighten out the chain of command and start issuing sensible orders. Which meant for Sasuke and his men, things might start to get a little more dangerous.

"Time to push their shit in while we can." Vali mused, turning back to the combat raging on in the distance.

Sharingan red eyes flared into existence, blooming like a poisonous flower as Sasuke's heart began to hammer from a mixture of anticipation and the drugs. So what if he was running on fumes and stimulants? So what if he had a lot more ground to cover before he could rest? The clarion call to arms was sounding again, and if Sasuke intended to ever make it back home, he had to answer it.

Readying his blade, the Uchiha spared one last side glance for his armoured comrade. Then he was rocketing forward in a streak of crimson, dirt kicking up from the force of his launch.

"So, let me get this right." Naruto tapped a pen against his desk, clicking out a steady beat. He liked the cheeky little sound, even though it tended to drive his visitors wild. "You went topside, had a few 'friends n' family' moments, and decided to promise away a place in my peerage?"

Rias just smiled sheepishly. "Whoops?"

Rolling his eyes, Naruto lazily threw the pen at his aunt like it was a kunai. It sailed over her head and bounced off the wall on the other side of the office to clatter on the floor. "Jeez." He complained. It wasn't that he was mad, per se. Just inconvenienced. Naruto had never really been one to obsess over Evil Pieces and the Rating Games in the first place, so he wouldn't really be handing over anything he cared about.

And riding in on a white horse to go save some random girl kind of appealed to him. It sounded like the kind of thing the old Naruto would have done, since that Naruto had been spent his days being a big damn hero rather than trying to root out criminals and corruption like a copper.

"Fine, fine." Naruto chuckled, looking forward to meeting this 'Valerie Tepes' already. While she had a pretty sad life, the Gremory heir suspected there was more to the blonde dhampir than a good sob story. Rias might be soft, but he didn't think she'd go around promising her help to literally anyone that came crying to her. Rias might be nice, but she wasn't a nun.

"So you'll meet her and have her join your peerage?"

Lurching to his feet, Naruto scratched the bridge of his nose and shrugged. "Sure, why not?" he replied flippantly, circling around his desk and marching right up to his aunt to meet her eye-to-eye. Thank small miracles that he wasn't shorter than her anymore. "But first, I need you to do something for me."
"Pardon?"

Naruto slapped his hands down on the Ruin Princess' shoulders, summoning his most serious countenance before pushing her around the room until she was behind his desk. Another shove had her in his still-warm armchair, the look on her face confused and suspicious. "Well then, have fun kiddo."

"What?"

Skipping back, Naruto winked and swiftly leapt over to the doorway. "I'm off to pick up a package of blonde and bloodsucking. Should be back some time tomorrow. Try not to let anything catch on fire while I'm gone, will ya?"

"Hold it right there!" Rias barked back, slapping her hands on the desk and looking rather like an upset school principle. If Naruto tried, he could almost imagine a walrus moustache above her lip quivering with indignation. "You can't seriously expect me to do your job for you!"

"Why not?"

"Because!" His aunt spluttered, motioning at the messy collection of folders scattered over Naruto's desk. "Where would I even begin? I don't know what you're doing right now, or what the condition of the city is, or how you'd like to handle any emergency that pops up. Plus, I rather doubt that my parents or yours would approve."

A frown pulled at Naruto's mouth as he made a grunt of comprehension. Rias did have a point. Considering that Gehenna was at war, he doubted he'd be allowed to skip up to the human world, and if he was, they'd demand he take some sort of escort with him. So he'd just have to sneak out.

"Ehhh." Naruto mumbled, making an expression that silently conveyed the impression of 'ah well what can ya do'. "We'll just keep this all hush-hush, yeah? I know where to go and how to get there, so it shouldn't take me too long."

"One day, we're both going to end up flayed alive because of your inability to follow the rules. You know that, right?"

"Only if we get caught. So hush hush, shush shush; and let me ninja my way out here."

"You are not a ninja! Not anymore, at least." Rias added after she reconsidered just exactly what Naruto was and wasn't.

"Nin-nin!"

"Ninja do not say 'nin-nin'."

"You would be surprised."

Rias eyed her nephew dubiously, not sure if the boy was serious about what shinobi in his old world did or if he was just pulling her leg. "Regardless, that only kicks one of our issues down the road. If you really want to hold up this little deception, I not only can't be seen running the show here, I have to run things exactly how you would run them."

Waving off the redhead woman's concerns, Naruto laid one hand on the doorknob and slowly began to turn it. "Don't worry about it. Ravel will give you a hand."

Suddenly, Rias looked very amused. And when she spoke, her voice was full of mockery. "I
suppose it would be too much to expect for you to understand the heart of a woman."

Naruto stuck out his tongue. He was hardly a complete dumbass, so he understood that she was implying Ravel would get all jealous that he brought home another woman. But their relationship wasn't like that. At least, the redhead didn't think it was. Ravel was his friend, and he had to admit that the older she got the prettier she got, but his fiance wasn't quite at the age where he'd start thinking of her as jailbait. Even if she was more intelligence and mature than any thirteen year old girl he'd ever met.

So if he got jealous and territorial, it was just the same kind of concern he'd have about any of his female friends.

Honestly.

"Stop being a smartass." Naruto commanded his smug aunt. If she kept that up he'd need to start planning revenge. "Just lock up the office, have all the work sent home, and go over everything with Ravel. Oh, and don't blow up the city. Easy peasy. There's nothing that should come up soon you need to panic over."

"Just get out of here."

"Oi, is that any way to talk to your sweet little nephew after asking him to do you a favour?"

"The way I see it, I'm the one that's going to have to play damage control with your girlfriend. So you're welcome."

"She is not my girlfriend."

"He doth protest too much, methinks."

His heart hammered out a strange fluttering beat in his chest, but with the burn in the back of his throat and the shaking energy in his hands; Sasuke couldn't concentrate on anything that wasn't the next kill. Bloodshot capillaries marred the whites of his eyes as Sasuke stepped over a corpse with his Sharingan twisting violently.

The darkness of the night was complete when the distant moon fell behind swelling clouds, but everything remained clear as glass to the Uchiha's vision. Peeling back his lips in a snarl, Sasuke picked out a bonespider that was scuttling along the bank of the trench and leapt at it.

A quick slice decapitated the thing, and landing on its corpse Sasuke twisted his weight to send it tumbling down into the mass of fighting below. A faint flash of concern came and went in an eyeblink, Sasuke determining that something petty like not making things inconvenient for Gehennan troops was nothing compared to the hungry burn of blood on his tongue.

Sasuke forced a Chidori to spark over the edge of his chipped katana, refusing to think too deeply on the way that his magic felt strange and sickly. Then he hopped, descending from on high like the wrath of a primeval deity and bifurcating a cihuateteo from behind on his downswing.

"Take another dose." He recommended, voice low and gravelly as he eyed the devil he'd just saved. There was a suffocating exhaustion in that tan face, and blood trickled slowly down from a cut on the soldier's forehead.

Not waiting to see if the private followed his advice to dose up, Sasuke spun on his heel and met a battered jade club with a swing of his katana. "Not smart." The Uchiha grinned ferally, ignoring the
tremble of his arms and shoved forward with all his weight.

Amber eyes widened as Sasuke pushed the dusky woman back, her feet sliding in the mud before they caught on a severed arm and sent her toppling down. She didn't even have time to hit the ground before the Pawn lunged ahead and speared her through the chest with his sword.

Wrinkling his nose as the woman hung on his blade like a skewered piece of meat, Sasuke planted a foot on her stomach and kicked the dying soldier away. As soon as she was out of the way, the woman was gone from the Uchiha's thoughts; Sasuke already scanning the crowd for another fight.

Steel and steel clashed with a high ringing note, and underneath it was the slap of flesh on flesh as more than one soldier on both sides resorted to fists to carry them through. There was a certain resigned grimness to all the noise, which was in stark contrast to the high spirit and eager adrenaline that had marked Gehenna's first push.

There were too many dead and there was too much blood soaking into the soil for any sort of joviality.

A familiar face caught Sasuke's eye, and he let his feet swiftly carry him over to Phineas' panting form. "I see you're still alive." He observed, considering the still spasming corpse of the bonespider the brunette had just killed. "I'm surprised."

Phineas looked like death warmed over, green eyes gone bloodshot from drugs and lack of sleep. Mud and gore had long ago dried into the tattered cloth of his uniform, and dark bruises coloured his eye sockets. But despite that, the grin he gave his commanding officer was sunny. "Well I'm just doing what I can, captain. It's really thanks to you and the others I'm still around."

Unsure how to take that sugary sweetness, Sasuke simply glossed past it. "Rotate to the back of the line for twenty minutes and take a breather." The Uchiha ordered, tightening his shaky grip around the blood slicked hilt of his katana. Nothing serious would change if Phineas was out of the way for a little bit, unlike Sasuke whose absence would be noticed.

The sudden widening of Phineas' eyes was all the warning Sasuke needed, and by the time the kid was screaming "Captain!" in his shrill voice the Pawn was already twisting in place.

Sasuke wasn't fast enough.

Hot agony burst over Sasuke's flank as a black sword was shoved through his back, emerging from the skin of his abdomen and slicing through the weathered cloth of his shirt to glisten wetly under faint starlight of Gehenna. Metal twisted, and with a yank the blade was back out of Sasuke's body in a spray of blood.

The discomfort was nothing next to the sudden all-consuming sense of rage.

Barely slowed by the grievous wound, Sasuke completed his turn and lashed out at the tzitzimitl that had ambushed him while he was distracted. The pain mingled with the latest dose of stimulant still running thick through Sasuke's veins as he advanced with a scream, wildly bringing his katana down.

Steel and iron slammed into each other as the Uchiha wielded his katana more like a club than a sword, having abandoned all finesse in his drug addled aggression. The amber eyes that peered out at him from the tzitzimitl's bone-white helm were daunted, but Sasuke was unable to interpret the woman's hesitance as anything but mockery.

The clash was too much for Sasuke's abused katana, and with a final slash it shattered into a dozen
gleaming shards. Without his weapon in hand and with the loss of blood rapidly draining his strength away, Sasuke was left overextended and vulnerable when the Mictlanese captain seized on the opportunity to bring her blade back around.

If not for Phineas, he would have died.

"No!" Someone shouted as a tangle of brown hair and crimson cloth tackled the tzitzimitl, bearing the woman to the mud in a tangle of limbs. "I won't let you!"

With his heart thudding in his ears, Sasuke followed them down. A spark of sorcery brought a Chidori roaring to light over the surface of his right hand, and once he dropped on top of the struggling pair, Sasuke drilled the lightning wreathed fist through chest armor and flesh.

A moment passed as the Chidori fizzled out, Sasuke drawing back his now gore coated hand with a curse. His knuckle was broken, which was just the next unfortunate punchline in an all-around shitty day.

Phineas shook from his spot trapped between the Gehennan captain and the cooling corpse, bursting out in slightly hysterical laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"It's a dogpile!"

Grunting at that particularly absurdity, Sasuke rolled off Phineas' back to splatter supine in the mud. "Idiot." He muttered, sucking in a breath to try to keep his lungs working as exhaustion hit him like a wave.

A blink.

Green orbs hovered worriedly in Sasuke's field of vision. Ignoring the captain's shaking hands that tried to slap him away, Phineas swiftly tore open the front of Sasuke's uniform to reveal the gaping wound carved into his side. "Y-you're not allowed to die, sir!" the boy stuttered, slapping Sasuke's white cheek to keep the rapidly declining Pawn awake.

Another blink.

Fire crashed down around them, and another face had joined Phineas' to loom over Sasuke. This one was unfamiliar to the dazed Uchiha, but based on the little red cross over the man's left breast he would assume that he must be a medic. Movement flickered in the corners of Sasuke's eyes, and he forced his suddenly weak neck to rotate.

The conflict in the trench had passed them by, but they weren't far removed from the front. The furious struggle towards victory was still near, and with a flickering sense of alarm Sasuke realized the battle could turn at any moment and sweep back.

If the tide turned, Sasuke wasn't far enough from the fight not to get caught up. He'd die, and while at one point in time he would have been glad to sacrifice his life for something, Sasuke wasn't that man anymore. He was greedy, and had things to live for.

"Sit me up." Sasuke ordered his subordinate, clearing the blood out of the back of his throat with a wet cough. "How bad is it?"

"You've lost a lot of blood, but no organs were pierced. It just nicked one of the smaller arteries." The combat medic replied, a clinical light shining in his brown eyes as he watched Phineas crawl
around in the mud to kneel by the Uchiha's shoulders. "That said, I wouldn't recommend sitting up."

Growling out "Do it." to Phineas, Sasuke drew in a deep breath and held it. After a moment of hesitation, the private obeyed, pulling Sasuke up to a sitting position while the Pawn did his best to ignore the urge to shout in pain.

"Do you know any healing spells?" he panted at the medic, watching the man shake his head.

"No. I'm just here to administer emergency first aid. If I had healing talent, I wouldn't be at the front."

"Figures." Clenching his jaw, Sasuke glared down at the ragged edges of his wound and steeled himself. If there was no healing to be had, then there was only one choice left to him. Offering a dark glare at the medic, Sasuke bit out a short "Don't get in my way."

Straightening out the fingers of his left hand, Sasuke ignored the twin sounds of confusion and used his right to peel back the blood-soaked cloth of his uniform. All he had to do was seal up the artery and then find a way to close the wound.

Simple enough.

"Wait, don't!"

Sasuke ignored the wide-eyed shout of the medic and plunged his fingers into the hole of his wound. *Fuck it hurt, and it was in no way sanitary.* Swallowing down the need to groan in agony, the Uchiha wiggled his fingers in search of the slippery cord that he knew couldn't be far.

"Are you fucking crazy?"

"Might be." Sasuke huffed a humorless laugh at Phineas' uncharacteristic curse. *There.* Catching the artery between his index and middle finger, Sasuke fruitlessly felt along the length of it before giving it up as a lost cause. If the nick was large enough to feel so easily, he'd already be dead; so there was nothing for it.

Another sputter of magic summoned just the smallest bit of heat to his hand, Koujin doing its work as Sasuke fought the urge to pass out and ran his grip up and down the cord until he was certain it was cauterized enough. "Simple." He coughed, pulling his fingers form the wound and flattening his hand out.

Now for the *fun* part.

Koujin ignited in the night, flaring bright and orange as Sasuke poured energy into his personally developed fire spell. "Direct me." It stung his pride to have to tell another man to move his body around, but Sasuke had no choice. If he passed out, he could end up doing even more damage to his body.

'Sir, I don't think-"

"*Do it!*"

Despite the nightmare battle of the past two days, it seemed the medic still had enough scruples left to go a bit pale at the order. Nevertheless, the blond man jerkily nodded and settled a tight grip around Sasuke's wrist. But he made no actual move to bring burning hand to open flesh.

"Don't you fucking hesitate."
The pain that seared into Sasuke hit him like a horse kick to the chest, whiting out his vision until all that was left was the hot twisting burn along the side of his abdomen. After a few breathless seconds that seemed to last forever, the hand was removed and Sasuke was able to breath freely again.

Sweat poured down his brow, but Sasuke knew it wasn't over. They still needed to do the back. Letting the Koujin on his left hand gutter out, Sasuke summoned one on his throbbing right and hoped the broken knuckle wouldn't fuck him over. "Again."

The stink of burning flesh turned Sasuke's stomach, and was almost enough to take his focus off the fresh assault of suffering that raged over his nerves. It was better than the first time, since he knew what to expect, and over quickly.

Sparing another glance for the shiny red and twisted patch of burnt flesh that had sealed the leaking hole in his abdomen, Sasuke finally let himself groan. "Akeno is going to murder me."

"Sir, I think that might be the least of your problems."
Romania was a giant potato patch.

Or at least, that's all Naruto had encountered since appearing in the Transylvanian countryside. Taters, taters, and more taters as far as the eye could see. He wondered if the vampires had a particular fondness for the tubers. Maybe they just liked to drink the blood of human serfs that had a diet rich in starch?

Who the fuck knew.

"Oh, come on." The Gremory heir moaned, squinting up at the sun. Technically speaking, he was in the country illegally, since he had crossed the border with no desire to leave a paper trail for his parents to catch wind of. Which meant that he had to be fast, and he had to go around unnoticed. Otherwise he'd end up having to fight someone and that would definitely create a diplomatic crisis.

Things would be so much simpler if Rias and Sona had been able to guarantee visa free travel between Gehenna and the Vampire Kingdom. Alas, they didn't always get what they wanted. Hence why Naruto was squatting in the middle of a potato field and waiting for midday to come. The vast majority of vampires would be sleeping, and he hoped he'd be able to get past the low-ranking ones and their human slaves without getting noticed.

Sparing a glance for his watch, Naruto chewed his lip. "Eh, close enough." He decided as the blocky black numerals shifted to display 11:23. He wasn't OCD enough to need to wait for the exact stroke of twelve.

Naruto poked his head up and swiftly took a look around. A little farm house in the distance with faded red paint had a trio of kids running around and playing by it, but other than that, there was no sign of any watchers.

Very carefully, Naruto summoned a pair of tiny runic circles that spun slowly around the muscles of his thighs. He needed just enough to reinforce his legs for speed without alerting anyone in the area that might be sensitive to sorcery.

Glowing red light faded, and then Naruto was off. Wind stung his eyes as the redhead pushed his body to the max, leaping faster than the human eye could see as he passed the farmhouse and sped up the hill towards the foreboding vampire citadel.

More than once he saw a man startle as Naruto flashed by, giving the impression that something had been there without leaving any actual evidence of his existence.

Grinning cockily as he moved right up next to the grey stone of the castle wall, Naruto leapt skyward, fingers catching in the uneven mortaring to throw himself ever higher. After a series of catch and pulls that left his fingers aching, Naruto ascended the battlements and flattened his body on the weathered terrace.

It was lucky he'd moved so quickly and so silently, since Naruto was greeted by the broad back of an oblivious human watchman. Feeling a bit sorry that he'd get the bearded guard in hot water for apparently falling asleep on the job, Naruto stealthily rose up behind the man and knocked him out with a swift fist to the temple.

"Tough luck, buddy." Naruto whispered, catching the unconscious human before he fell and setting him into a sitting position. Anyone that came looking would just assume the guy had decided to have
"Now, let's see."

Peering over the inner edge of the battlement, Naruto scanned the empty castle courtyard before biting his thumbnail in thought. The easy part was done with, and the hard part was just beginning.

According to Rias, Valerie's room-slash-cell was on the second floor of the east wing. Which panned out as far as Naruto could see, since while the west wing and central part of the fortress had barred windows, the east wing only had flat featureless walls.

Naruto considered the layout of the castle for another few minutes. He could hardly go through the front gate, and while busting in through the windows would work, he'd have no idea where he was going to end up and what sort of obstacles he'd have to get through.

If only Naruto could move through walls, everything would be a cinch.

Ah.

A smirk pulled at the redhead's mouth. The solution was pretty obvious after all.

Throwing a last cautionary glance over the battlements, Naruto turned to the right and began to run like the wind. He hopped from tower to tower, quietly knocking out guard after guard as he circled around the southern wall and up the eastern one. As soon as he hit the halfway point, the Gremory heir turned on his heel and launched himself out into the empty sky.

Naruto pushed back the urge to whoop in exhilaration as he flew over the courtyard, hitting the rooftop of the eastern wing in a roll and coming to a soundless stop. For a bunch of paranoid isolationists, the vampires weren't exactly tight on the security. He hadn't even seen one magical ward since he'd started invading their castle.

Such was the arrogance of those who thought they ought to rule the world, Naruto supposed.

Lighting up the palm of his hand with a ball of the Bael clan's Power of Destruction, Naruto lowered it against the beaten gray stones and let it slowly start to melt it away. They'd definitely figure out that someone had broken in once they saw the great big hole in the ceiling, but that wasn't his problem. He'd just steal a few pieces of treasure or something so they'd assume it was theft rather than rescue.

Naruto clenched his jaw as rock slowly turned into ash, molecular bonds breaking down to leave nothing behind but a huge pile of dust. It took a few sweeps of his hand to clear out the dirt and widen the bore, but eventually Naruto managed to dissolve a hole large enough to wiggle through.

Dropping through the opening, Naruto hit carpeted floor with a rustle and quickly scanned the room. A coffin took up a lot of space in the center, and if he concentrated he could just barely smell the icy scent of a sleeping vampire.

Best to be quiet then.

A bead of sweat trickled down Naruto's temple as he once more called up an orb of his genetic power and began to silently drill. There were three floors in the east wing in total, so once he got through this one he'd be searching in earnest.

For the second time, Naruto hollowed out a passage to move through, and as quietly as he could he lowered himself down. Hanging from the ragged edge of the hole, he spared once last wary blue glance for the silent coffin and let go.

Only to have to swallow a violent curse as his foot landed in something cold and wet. Hurriedly
looking down, Naruto made an expression of disgust. For *fuck's* sake.

Naruto pulled his foot out of the toilet and crept over to the bathroom door. The privy opened up into a hall, which made sense the redhead supposed. Castles weren't full of private toilets in general, and the servants needed to shit somewhere.

Determined *not* to think about what exactly might be soaked into his shoe, Naruto pulled down the cowl of his grey hoodie and stepped out into the corridor. Valerie's room would be on the second floor near the southern end, so he just had to keep cool and make it quick.

A foot came up and then went down.

*Squish.*

*No.*

He was so not dealing with that right now. There were other things that he could be thinking of rather than the toilet water slicked in between his toe. Things like nice big tits, or a bowl of ramen. Or the movies he thought were top tier.

Like *Mission Impossible.*

*Dun dun dun, da dada, dun dun dun, da dada, dun dun dun...*

Satisfied with the new direction of his thoughts, Naruto jogged as swiftly as he dared along the crimson carpet that covered up the cold castle stones. Not that he was complaining, but where the fuck were all the guards? Were the vampires just *that* arrogant?

Apparently so, since Naruto eventually hit the end of the hallway without encountering a single soul, living or otherwise. Turning around, Naruto peered back down the corridor and sighed when he saw no one was moving about. It made his job easier, but it was *boring.* Where was the excitement? He wanted to crack a few skulls.

Moving from door to door, Naruto silently twisted their handles and poked his head in.

Another privy.

A storage closet.

An empty bedroom.

A library.

Another empty bedroom.

An occupied bedroom with some crusty vampire lord snoozing away.

Servant's quarters with *awake* servants. Naruto was as quick as lightning as he pulled his head out of that room and shut the door. He even broke the lock with a spark of red magic for good measure. No one would be leaving *there* for a few hours.

A storage closet.

Feeling the frustration bubble in his chest, Naruto practically shoved his head in the next room. Someone awake was in there, but beyond the rumpled bedsheets he couldn't see any sign of life. The air was full an odd smell that seemed to mingle human and vampire, and Naruto chewed the inside of
his cheek as he carefully scanned over the nondescript room. The only thing that was in there beyond
the messy bed was a beaten old cabinet.

Naruto decided to take a gamble, and slipped into the bedroom on silent feet. "Oi." He whispered as
he shut the door behind him, eying the space under the bed suspiciously. He could hear the tiny
squeak that had been stirred up by the sound of his voice.

But the space under the bed was too small, so preparing himself to strike to subdue, Naruto
rushed across the room and threw open the doors to the wardrobe.

"Ahh!"

"Ahh!" Naruto screamed back reflexively, startling at the way the red-eyed blonde girl screeched in
shock. "Don't do that!" he scolded, prompting her to blink in confusion before he remembered that
he was supposed to be knocking her out if she wasn't who he was looking for.

"Who are you?"

The blonde girl shrunk back like Naruto had struck her, making a curdle of guilt twist in the
redhead's gut. "Look, I'm not gonna do nothing to ya, alright?" he tried to reassure her. "I'm just
looking for someone."

A silent moment passed where the blonde continued to tremble, making Naruto feel even more
awful. "Who are you looking for?" she mumbled into her knees, lowering her gaze to somewhere in
the vicinity of his chest. It was like she was afraid to meet his eyes or something.

"Valerie Tepes."

A hard light entered the girl's red orbs when she snapped them back up to him. "What do you want
with me then?" she demanded, fear entirely swallowed by angry resignation. Did she expect him to
have come around to beat her?

"You're Valerie?"

"Yes."

Naruto blinked. "Sweet. Let's go." He wrapped a hand around her wrist, pulling Valerie's thin body
out of the cupboard while she struggled like a wet cat. "It's probably not a good idea to stick around,
since Rias will kill me if I'm caught. Not to mention what Mom and Dad would do."

It was like a lightbulb went on in her head, and Valerie gaped up at Naruto's crimson hair with
mingled hope and suspicion. "Are you Naruto?"

"Yeppers." He answered, tugging Valerie along after him so he could poke his head out the door and
glance around the halls. "The coast is clear, so let's get our sexy butts moving."

Valerie made a strangled noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob, but she stopped struggling
and actually began to try and rush him. "Come on, come on." She breathed, flying down the corridor
in a streak of blonde hair and white cloth. "How are we getting out?"

Digging his heels in before she could pull him right by the bathroom he came down to the second
floor in, Naruto yanked the overeager blonde girl into the cramped privy. "Up you go." He ordered,
stepping back to give her space.

Valerie thinned her lips with anxiety, but obeyed her rescuer by leaping straight up and pulling her
emaciated form through the hole. She could smell the scent of one of her sleeping pureblood kin, and smothered the gasping sounds of her breath with a frantic hand once she was on the third floor.

To the dhampir's chagrin, Rias' nephew wasn't even out of breath when he crossed up to the third floor. Both of them warily spared a glance for the coffin in the center of the room, but soon enough Naruto was frantically jerking his thumb up at the ceiling.

_Sunlight._

The knowledge that freedom was so close was enough to give Valerie a second burst of energy, spurring her up and through the ragged passage into the outside world. Faint pain stung her eyes as the slits of her pupils contracted to the sudden influx of light, but soon enough Valerie was gaping at the tableau that stretched out before her.

_So this_ was the world.

"Hey, catch!"

It was only Naruto's whispered warning that enabled Valerie to lurch to the side and snatch a jewel encrusted necklace before it clattered to the rooftop. To her confusion, more and more pieces of jewelry followed, until her arms were practically full of gold and gems.

"What are you _doing_?" the blonde hissed as her rescuer pulled himself out of the pureblood's bedroom.

"Providing an alibi for the break-in._" Naruto hissed back, taking back some of the jewelry and stuffing it into his pockets. "We don't want them to know that I broke you out, or it'll cause problems down the line for Gehenna. Let them just assume you snuck out at some point in the last few days._"

Valerie mulled that over as Naruto crossed to the edge of the rooftop so he could scan the courtyard. It made sense, so she supposed she'd have to spend a few months in Gehenna hidden away before she could be seen publicly. It was best that no one thought she appeared in Naruto's peerage just after a break-in at her father's castle.

So back to prison for a little while longer it was. How depressing.

"Can you fly?"

Jerking at the sudden question, Valerie frowned in befuddlement. "I suppose I could with training and a full stomach._" Vampires were able to transform into swarms of bats, and as a dhampir she should have the same kind of power.

She watched with a building sense of worry as the redhead rolled his eyes and winked at her.

"Nothing for it then._"

Before she could even protest, Valerie found herself scooped up in a bridal carry. "Hey, wait-_" And then they were launched through the air, the dhampir swallowing back the urge to squeal as the ground grew more distant below.

"Don't clench up._" Naruto teased, relieved to finally be able to use a _normal_ voice. The spires of the Tepes castle grew distant behind them as they flew through the sky. He looked down at the girl in his arms, only to flush when she stared back at him like he'd hung the moon.

"Thank you for saving me. I won't ever forget it._"
That soft little voice was nearly drowned out by the wind, but Naruto still heard it. "Don't mention it." He demurred in a strangled tone.

With a sense of relief, Vali dismissed his cracked Sacred Gear and rested his palms on his knees. Every breath of air tasted as sweet as nectar and soothed his burning lungs, even if in reality Vali knew that he was smelling the stink of blood and dead flesh.

"You okay, major?"

Blue eyes narrowed as the half-devil forced his aching neck to lift his head. "I'm fine." He told Phineas, looking pointedly at the recruit's utterly drained appearance. "I'd worry more about yourself kid. You look like someone ran you down with a truck. Or were you just beaten with the ugly stick?"

Phineas grinned sheepishly, scratching the back of his head as he chuckled. "Well it wasn't quite that. I'm a universal donor, so when he needed it I decided to transfuse the captain some of my blood." Giving blood explained the pale pallor of the brunette's face easily enough, though not the swelled bruising.

"I see." Vali murmured, luxuriating in the relief that came with relaxing his muscles before he forcibly tightened them back up again. Straightening his back took some effort, but the silver haired young man didn't want to look weak in front of anyone. Even the annoying little devil private that followed Sasuke around like a lost puppy. "Speaking of that asshole, where's he at? He didn't get himself offed, did he?"

Jerking his chin in the direction of their new forward trench, Phineas sighed. "He's over having a little chat with the reinforcements." There was a bitter note in Phineas' voice that Vali found himself agreeing with. They'd fought pretty fucking long and pretty fucking hard, doped up on stimulants until it felt like their hearts would explode, only to have High Command roll in the reserves in the eleventh hour.

The pampered fucks who got all of the glory and paid none of the blood.

It wasn't that logically, Vali couldn't appreciate the cold calculus behind when and where reinforcements were sent. Maybe in the long run, less soldiers had died because High Command sent the extra troops where they'd break through rather than distributing them to where there were the most casualties. Maybe they'd just valued strategic positioning over lives preserved, and the day was won only by cool blooded sacrifice.

But he was sure that when all was said and done, the death rate for Moon Demon Company was going to be ridiculously high. They'd fought and died alone, beyond the rational limits of endurance, until High Command thought they deserved a hand. That sort of expendability tasted like ashes on Vali's tongue. Emotionally, he resented Gehenna's tactics.

"One day that stick up his ass is going to cause problems." Vali replied to Phineas' expectant expression. "Let's go get him and make sure he takes a nap before he has a heart attack."

Moving his aching legs, Vali led the bubbly brunette along the support trench and up to their new forward trench. It would take a bit of work to convert the formerly Mictlanese dugout, but he suspected the troops would be more than willing to do it. Every shovelful of dirt they moved would probably feel something like victory. Even Vali felt his spirits lift as he stepped into what had once been the rearmost trench of the enemy army. They'd smashed the fuckers to pieces, isolating huge numbers of enemy troops in pockets while they drove the Mictlanese supply lines out of Gehenna.
Artillery was trained over the central portion of the Limbo Strip, manned by crews with itchy fingers that would be firing on all cylinders the moment a single bonespider, seewah, or anything else came through the weak spot between worlds. The war had changed drastically with the addition of vampire soldiers and the Summer Court's strike.

Vali smirked at one of the gleaming conjuration cannons perched on the edge of the dugout before pushing through a final knot of soldiers and ambushing Sasuke.

Slinging an arm over the captain's shoulders, Vali earned a tired black glare as he smiled toothily at the fresh troops that had been rushed to the front to secure their reconquest. "You'll have to excuse me friend here, lads. The dumbass here has got a cot with his name on it."

"Piss off." Sasuke shot back, but let the major led him away from the crowd of soldiers. He was stubborn and proud, but he wasn't an idiot. Every breath hurt and there was an annoying limp to his right leg whenever he stepped. The last of the drugs in his body were swiftly burning away, leaving a bone tired ache in what felt like must be every damn cell in his body. Even the transfusion of blood from Phineas hadn't been enough to do more than get him off his back.

"Now you're just going to hurt my feelings." Vali clicked his tongue, pushing Sasuke back along the supply trench until he knew the devil would move forward under his own power. "What would you do if I started to weep because of your cruel words?"

"Laugh."

"I'd give you some tissues major. Don't worry." Phineas interjected, close on Vali's heels. The brunette was so friendly and cheery that by tone alone it almost seemed like he was serious rather than mocking. "I'd even do you the favour of not revealing to the world your loss of manliness."

"Damn brat."

Sasuke rolled his bloodshot eyes at their banter, spotting one of the unvarnished modular buildings that had been swiftly constructed in the hours after the Gehennan advance had seized the last trench. It was an ugly thing, but it called to Sasuke's exhausted mind like a relentless siren. "There better be a shower." he growled to Vali, satisfied when the major grunted an affirmative. He smelled totally filthy, and he'd like to take a look at the scar marring his stomach before letting his head hit the pillow.

The trio pushed into the building, considering the half dozen drooling exhausted soldiers that were curled up in the dozens of cots lined up along the walls with military precision. Maybe it was just luck, but beyond the sprinkle of one showerhead on the edge of Sasuke's hearing they had free range of the shared shower room.

Peeling his dirty torn-up uniform off as he stepped into the shower room, Sasuke returned the nod of a weathered blond man before stuffing his uniform in the nearest laundry hamper. No doubt it would end up burnt, but that was no longer his problem. Sasuke ran a finger over his abdomen, scowling at the built up brown filth that quickly accumulated.

"I think I might be in heaven." Phineas moaned as he tore off his clothes, stepping under a showerhead and starting up the spray with a push of the magic crystal that conjured up their shower water. He didn't even care that the first splash was ice cold, since the opportunity to wash off the foul mixture caked on their bodies was too much to resist.
"If you were in heaven, you wouldn't be moaning like a slut. Not a willing one anyway." Vali snidely mocked.

Tuning out the slow build of banter between the two men, Sasuke stepped under the warm pressurized water and let out a sigh of relief as it instantly went to work on relaxing his aching muscles.

Black eyes watched as the water running off his body turned a disgusting shade of brown, spinning around the drain like sludge. It was a good thing none of the girls were around to see the crap crusting his flesh or the stench of several days worth of sweat and blood.

Even Yuuto would probably think twice before breathing the same air.

It took three generous handfuls of shampoo before Sasuke's hair finally began to rinse out clean suds. He gave his dark mane fourth scrubbing just in case, scowling at the faint squeaking feel that came when he rubbed a black strand between his thumb and forefinger. Sasuke gave a similar treatment to the rest of his body, washing every crack and crevice until he was satisfied there was no more dirt clinging to his body.

Only then did he turn his focus to his self-inflicting cauterization.

Wincing at the angry plate sized burn, Sasuke gently prodded at it. It hurt like a bitch under his fingernail, but there was no huge swelling blister to nurse infection at least. Accelerated devil healing was good for something. In the center of the scaly red patch, there was a thick raised line that marked where the sword had come out of him. It could have been deadly, but he'd been able to basically weld the gash shut.

Sasuke groped blindly at the lower right part of his back, biting back a curse when he slapped over the aching sear too roughly. It probably looked much the same, and to his relief there was no blistering.

He'd need to drink a lot of water to stay healthy as the burns slowly healed. Sasuke would also need to see if he could get his hands on a phoenix tear IV drip to treat the scarring of his internal arteries. The whole thing would be annoying and more than a little painful, but he'd live.

Sasuke felt like he'd been doing that a lot recently. Living. More than once since being born in Gehenna the Uchiha had brushed against death. He was well acquainted with the sensation of his own mortality. No doubt this particular incident wasn't going to be the last time he came close to dying. Would the next time be his undoing?

A cold fire seemed to burn in his stomach as Sasuke considered that possibility. If he died, what then? Would he be satisfied with the life he'd had up to that point? He didn't even need to weigh it in his mind to know the answer would be no. Sasuke had enjoyed his new life after meeting Rias and her peerage to be sure, but he hadn't really done anything beyond that. He hadn't made any great achievements. He'd never enjoyed love in any life, or fathered any children to give his name to and raise up.

Sometime during his musing both Phineas and the unfamiliar soldier had wandered off to sleep, leaving Vali and Sasuke to shower alone. "What are you going to do when the war is over?" Sasuke asked the silver haired major, conscious of the queer flutter in his chest.

Humming in thought, Vali lifted one leg so he could scrub in between his toes. Foot rot was no man's friend after all. "Who knows?" the White Dragon Emperor replied airily. "I suppose that I'll keep looking for more strong warriors to fight. Right after? I guess I'll do nothing for a week but eat..."
and sleep. Then I'll head down to the bars for a little love from some grateful ladies who want to thank the brave soldiers that fought for them."

"Dirtbag." Sasuke taunted back, quirking the corner of his lip up in a smirk when Vali cursed at him. Still, despite the vulgarity of his suggestion, Vali had a point. Sasuke had the same desires as any other redblooded male, and it had been a long time since he'd had a woman. With his looks, it wouldn't even be that hard for Sasuke to find a partner for a night.

But the Uchiha had finally started growing in magical strength once he'd stopped lying to himself or willfully misrepresenting his desires. If he turned away from them now, Sasuke would just become weak all over again. That was unacceptable.

He wasn't and would never be Naruto. He didn't need or want to be the one to save the people. He wasn't that altruistic. Sasuke wanted to glorify his name and have people treat him with the awe and respect that he'd always felt was due to a member of the Uchiha clan. Sasuke craved for recognition, for wealth and power. And in a country like Gehenna, there was only one way to get all three. Strength.

Sasuke wasn't Vali either. His mind had long ago passed the point where all it longed for was a good fight and a good fuck. When Sasuke had been younger, those two pleasures had been enough to take the edge off his maddening need for revenge, but he wasn't that boy anymore. He hungered for something cleaner and more enduring. Something that soothed his heart and flowered quiet joy in the back of his mind.

"What about you?"

"Hmm?"

"What are you going to do once we're done here?" Vali prodded, shutting off his shower with a flick of the wrist and wrapping a towel around his waist. A teasing smirk pulled at the half-devil's lips. "Going to have a little play with your mailgirl?" Forming an 'o' with one hand, Vali lewdly started to thrust into the hole with the finger of his other hand. "Nothing wrong with a little hanky panky."

Throwing a savage glare over his shoulder, Sasuke rested his forehead against the cheap tile of the shower room wall. It didn't take a genius to figure out who and what Vali was referring to, but Sasuke had always shied away from that particular possibility. It had felt vulnerable, and in a lot of ways Sasuke was a coward.

But he would only live once, and Sasuke still remembered the drunken press of her lips on his and the way he'd thought nothing had ever felt so good as that moment. Maybe it was reckless, and maybe he'd end up hurt, but maybe it was time to stop sticking his head in the sand. Wake up and smell the flowers.

"Yeah, I guess I will." Rias was special. Whenever Sasuke let the iron control on his nerves slip away the flash of her teal eyes was enough to stutter his heart. She was brilliant and beautiful, kind and intelligent with just the right amount of fire under the cultivated nobility of her face, and Sasuke wanted her. Sasuke wanted to see her smile more, to hear the peal of her voice, to feel the softness of her skin and taste again the sweetness of her mouth.

Even if he had to risk his own ego to win her, because Sasuke had no intention of risking his life again without having been satisfied with it.
Chapter 44

Rias scrawled her best imitation of Naruto's signature on a supply requisition for Azmarin's police force before snapping the thin beige folder shut and handing it to an irritated Ravel. She had to hide her grin behind her hand when the blonde Bishop stomped away and threw it in the internal memo pile.

Maybe it made her somewhat sadistic, but the last two days had been tickling her pink with amusement. Rias didn't make any effort to rile Ravel up, but she'd bowed out of trying to calm the girl down too. There were limits to futility, and after Ravel had angrily rebuffed Rias' attempts to soothe her, Rias figured the only thing to do was observe. Now all she was waiting for was Naruto to walk through the door and start off all the fireworks.

Akeno was lazing around on the home office couch, just as caught up with her schadenfreude as her mistress. Neither young woman considered themselves gossiping hens, but every girl liked a theatrical romance story, and they had front row seats to a real-life drama.

And of course, unlike Rias, Akeno had never known how to leave well enough alone and keep quiet. "Wasn't Naruto due back an hour ago?" the Thunder Priestess commented airily, fanning herself with a manicured hand.

Observing Ravel's stiff spine, Rias cocked a warning crimson eyebrow at her friend but conceded enough to answer. "Indeed. He called once he crossed back into Gehenna and was very clear about what time he expected to arrive."

Bowling right through Rias' silent cautioning gesture, Akeno pulled herself up into a sitting position. "Oh dear. What could be holding him up? I hope it's nothing too serious. The clan doesn't need a scandal right now after all."

Two sets of eyes watched as Ravel clenched her fists and glared at the wall so heatedly that she could have burned a hole through it.

Whoops.

Whistling innocently, Akeno folded her hands in her lap and steadfastly stared with her violet eyes at the door like it was the most interesting thing in the world. Nothing to see here, just an innocent but very sexy young devil minding her own business.

When the doorknob turned, the click of the lock being undone sounded through the tense room like a gunshot. Naruto pushed the slab of wood inward, looking rather self-satisfied until he noticed the edgy atmosphere. "Oi, who died?"

"If someone had actually died, don't you think that would be quite the insensitive question?" Rias responded, fiddling with the bateau neckline of her blue sweater. "I take it your mission was a success?"

"Well of course." The Gremory heir grinned cockily. "It's me. What did you expect?" Then he stepped into the room properly, one hand in his pocket while the other was firmly interlaced with Valerie's.

Even Akeno winced at that. No doubt he'd just thought he was being a gentleman by leading Valerie around, but it was a bad move. The flushed colour on Valerie's pale cheeks didn't exactly help, and neither did the utterly worshipful expression that crossed her face every time she looked at Naruto or
Almost unconsciously, Rias pressed two fingers to her left temple and gave a longsuffering sigh.
"Naruto, do you intend to die?"

"What?" Naruto shot back in a baffled tone, red eyebrows climbing to his hairline as he gaped at his aunt's seemingly random comment. "What are you on about?" he demanded, turning a questioning gaze to Akeno and then to Ravel.

As soon as he met his Bishop's cold blue eyes, Naruto swallowed thickly. 'Hey, Ravel." He waved weakly with his free hand, dropping it back to his side once it became clear she had no intention of greeting him back. "What's up?"

Very slowly, the Phenex girl folded her arms over her chest and lifted her chin with a challenging mien. "I don't know, Naruto." Ravel responded ever so pleasantly, in the most polite tone Naruto had heard from her since they'd met. It was eerie. "Why don't you tell me 'what's up'?"

"Ehh, not too much." Naruto chuckled, scratching the back of his head and grinning winsomely. "I'm sure you heard about it all from Rias already, so there's not much to say. What did you guys get up to while I was gone?"

"There's not much to say." Tilting her head, Ravel examined the pair standing by the door like a bird of prey. Her pink lips thinned even more when Valerie huddled behind Naruto like a human shield to get away from the ice in her face and voice. "Did you have fun?"

"Uh, yes?"

The smack of Akeno's hand to her forehead echoed through the room, drawing three pairs of eyes before Naruto and Ravel resumed their staredown.

"I'm glad." Ravel smiled, showing her teeth malevolently as she moved her focus back and forth between Naruto and the red-eyed dhampir. "Rias told me that you'd decided to add our new friend to your peerage. I supposed you've already gotten around to it? What piece did you give her?"

"Oh, I gave her my mutation bishop piece. I was surprised it took so well, but it is what it is?" The Gremory heir offered his aunt a reassuring grin.

To Naruto's pleased surprise, Rias didn't even twitch at the reminder that he'd been lucky enough to get a few mutation pieces where she only had the standard set of Evil Pieces. It seemed that she really had let go of her kneejerk jealousy, which was something Naruto would have thought was a habit that would take a lot of effort to break.

Cupping her chin in a dainty hand, Ravel made a show of humming in thought. "I see." The blonde girl mused, drill-like curls bouncing as she stepped forward and examined Valerie like the woman was a bug under a microscope. "That's interesting. Oh well, I suppose that I need to go take a bath. It's been a long day."

No one interrupted when Ravel strode out of the room, the atmosphere lightening every second that passed in her absence.

Naruto wiped a hand across his forehead and was shocked to find a little bit of sweat there. "What was that about?" he fired at Rias, voice pitching high with anxiety.

"Threading her fingers together, Rias gave Naruto the look. It was an utterly deadpan expression that she must have learned from his mother, and wordlessly conveyed to him that he was a god damned
fool. "Think really hard. I'm sure it will come to you soon."

Akeno gave a rolling cackle, smirking at the Gremory heir insolently. "I see you've already started to gather a few blonde cuties. Do you intend to branch out, or do you have a fetish for lovely golden hair Mister Harem King?"

Cheeks colouring bright tomato red, Naruto let go of Valerie's hand for the first time since entering the room to point wildly at the smug Queen. "I am not a harem king!"

Sasuke clawed his way back up from unconsciousness, head pounding and mouth feeling as dry as a desert. As his eyelids fluttered open, a fierce ache stabbed his eyes so viciously that Sasuke squeezed them shut again. Everywhere ached, and he only felt marginally better than he had when he'd fallen into bed.

Forcing his eyes open despite the pain, Sasuke fought through the agony until they finally adjusted and he could peer about the room. Things were not as he'd left them. Sasuke had fallen asleep in a cheap little prefab housing unit and woken up in a hospital. An IV drip hung by his right arm, dribbling nutrients into his veins droplet by droplet.

"Oh, you're awake." Vali snapped a folding clipboard shut, throwing it on Sasuke's bedside table and leaning ahead with a serious light in his blue orbs. "You with me this time, or are you still nuttier than a fruitcake?"

Rasping out a "Fuck you." Sasuke groped for the water glass perched on his bedside table. It was lukewarm and had an odd lemon flavour to it, but the fluid did its job at wetting his mouth and soothing the dryness of his throat.

He still felt weak as a kitten, but ever-so-slowly Sasuke could feel little tingles of strength filling his muscles as he moved them about. The inactivity must have taken its toll. "How long have I been out?" he questioned, wrapping a hand around the bed rail and forcing himself up into a sitting position. His back practically screamed with the motion, but it was almost a good pain, and he felt stronger for it.

"Five days." Snowy eyebrows drew together in a tight frown, and frustration leaked into the half-devil's voice as he continued. "The fever took you after you crashed. I guess that's what happens when you're stupid enough to overdose on meth and perform unsanitary battlefield surgery on yourself. We thought you were going to die, you god damn dumb shit. But apparently some god somewhere is watching over your ass, since you pulled through. We even managed to fix your crummed up organs and arteries for you with some tear drips. Once you put some cream on your sissy ass the scars should fade too."

Smiling mockingly at the older man, Sasuke smoothed down the front of his hospital gown before responding. "Don't tell me you were worried, you big baby. I did what I had to do to keep on fighting, because if I didn't no doubt Phineas and the rest of our company would be in the ground right now. So whatever. What's done is done. Tell me what's been happening."

Vali glared and squeezed his hand into a violent fist, but he allowed the Uchiha to redirect the conversation without verbal protest. "High Command managed to keep it together long enough to hold on to our gains. We boxed in more than we actually killed, but now that they've got no food they're going to start starving to death. Once we've got enough new blood to replace our losses, we've got marching orders to help contain one of the pockets. And as soon as they're weak enough, no doubt they'll throw us into an annihilation battle."
"I see." Sasuke sighed, slipping one hand under his gown to feel at the burn scar over his abdomen. It still felt rough and leathery, but at least it didn't hurt anymore.

Satisfied that he knew what the immediate future held, he turned his focus to the other issue pressing on his mind. Motioning at rank patch that perched on the shoulder of Vali's uniform, the Pawn cocked a dark eyebrow. "Killing your way up the chain of command are you?"

The newly minted lieutenant colonel rolled his eyes, kicking his feet up on Sasuke's bed as he lazily leaned back. He ignored the disgruntled glare Sasuke gave his dirty boots. "I don't want to hear that from you, Major Uchiha. You're benefiting from nepotism and untimely demises too. Must be nice to have all those sweet, sweet connections to the nobility that the common man can only drool over."

"Get fucked." Making a rude gesture with his hand, Sasuke flopped back down. He didn't really feel like he deserved the battlefield promotion, but he couldn't say he was surprised by it either. Gehenna catered to the whims of the nobility, and even though they were under a unified central command Moon Demon Company was still technically been part of the Gremory clan's private army. No doubt his status as Rias' Pawn was in his files and had caught the notice of some enterprising bureaucrat.

Suddenly the curtain was thrown back, revealing Phineas blubbering and staring at Sasuke with watery green eyes. "Captain!" he burbled, rushing forward to wrap his arms around Sasuke's neck. Ignoring the way the Uchiha cursed and struggled, the brunette rubbed his cheek against Sasuke's hair like an over-affectionate cat. "We thought you were gonna die!"

"Well I'm not, so get the hell off me!"

"But captain!"

Vali snorted with laughter. "Idiots; the both of you."

"Phineas, I'm going to kill you. And then you're next, White Dragon Emperor."

Pulling his arms up to his chest, Vali fluttered his eyelashes and gasped in a high falsetto. "Oh no! Please don't hurt me, Mister Big Bad Uchiha! I promise to be good and eat all my vegetables." The half-devil stuck out his tongue at Sasuke before clapping Phineas over the shoulder and rolling to his feet. "Come on brat. Let's leave sleeping beauty here to get some rest. Oh, and to reply to his sweetheart's correspondence."

Phineas drew away, sniffling and watching with interest as Vali dug around in his inner pocket to come out with a thick sheaf of envelopes. "Wow, I didn't know the captain had a girlfriend." He marveled, smiling innocently when Sasuke shot him a filthy glare. "Do you want to talk about her?" he prodded as Sasuke snatched the letters from Vali with a slight flush.

"No! Now get the fuck out."

"Captain, it's not nice to shout."

Naruto stabbed the tip of his pen through the page, clenching his jaw as he created the third such hole in the paper. Stupid pen. Stupid paper. Stupid Akeno. Harem king this, harem king that; her constant teasing made him want to throttle the girl. Although to be fair, he wouldn't be nearly so angry if Ravel wasn't in one of her moods.

Women were the most baffling, changeable sex. It was like they could never be satisfied. Do this, do that, read their mind and know their needs better than they did, on and on. Naruto supposed he was being a teeny bit uncharitable, but at the moment he couldn't be bothered. The only woman in his life
not making things difficult was his grandmother. Everyone else was either teasing him, lecturing him, mad at him, or just had the misfortune of being the root cause behind all the hubbub.

At least his mom hadn't figured out that he had to sneak away from Gehenna to get Valerie. They'd just spun a tale about the blonde dhampir fleeing on her own and following Rias' instructions in order to cross dimensions. Unless Grayfia decided to sic Fourth Section on them, Naruto figured he was safe. She was just giving him the typical warnings about being careful not to trust strangers too much.

Speaking of Fourth Section, his time with the eerie women was coming to an end. The entire police force had been purged, and in the Naruto had discovered that ten percent of the cops were dirty. He sentenced them all to hard labor to support the war effort. Once he worked through the bureaucracy, he'd finally have a clean organization to work with to start enforcing real order in the city.

"Send this down to HR." Naruto growled, brandishing his abused page.

Ravel snatched it away, spitting back just as acidically "Fine."

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

Heat seemed to boil in the air as the blonde Bishop stomped across the room and out into the hallway, leaving Naruto in peace for a few blessed seconds. The reprieve didn't last more than a minute before Ravel was back, sourness twisting her mouth when she shut the door more firmly then necessary.

Grumbling below his breath about PMSing women, Naruto took a swig of his soda before returning to work. If she was just going to ignore him, then fine, he'd ignore her right back. As far as he was concerned, he'd done nothing wrong saving an innocent abused young woman and taking her into his peerage. Whatever jealously issues Ravel had she'd just have to get over them herself.

Gulp.

"Ahh!"

"Will you stop fucking around?" Naruto snapped, looking up from the boring pages on his desk to drill Ravel with angry blue eyes. He didn't give a damn if she went and had a good sulk, but he drew the line at obnoxious behavior. And no matter how he sliced it, slurping down a glass of milk as noisily as possible was irritating.

Swiping the back of her hand across her mouth to wipe away the little milk moustache that had been left over her upper lip, Ravel narrowed her eyes and set her mug down with a clump on the nearest table. "Yes, I suppose you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

"What?"

"Fucking around." Ravel looked down her nose at the seated redhead, primly brushing off a ball of imaginary dust from her crimson uniform. "I guess that's something you and my brother have in common. No wonder he seems to like you, Harem King."

The slam of Naruto's fist on the wood of his desk went through the air like a crack of lighting. "I am not a harem king." he seethed, shaking out the faint ache in the side of his hand.
Maybe he had the same fantasies as any other man and wanted a bunch of women, but he wasn't motivated by such basic urges. "Why do you all seem to think that I'm incapable of doing anything that isn't related to my dick? I can't just do something nice for somebody for no other reason than to do the right thing?"

Ravel's eyes glittered with all the poisonous anger of a viper. "You could get away with that excuse if you just gave her a lift. But adding her to your peerage? I'm not a fool, Naruto! And you even came home holding hands!"

"So what? Holy shit, she had nowhere to go and I was just showing her around. No need to get your panties in a twist."

Opening her mouth to lash out at the Gremory heir with a cutting remark, Ravel seemed to work her jaw for a moment before shutting it with a click. Then she began to cough, lifting one hand to rub at her throat while her face flushed. "Hey, what's wrong now?"

Another gasp, and suddenly blood started pouring from her nostrils. "Hey!" Naruto shouted, vaulting over the desk with all traces of rage forgotten. He managed to catch her before she hit the floor, wincing as she coughed up a thick globule of gore on the front of his shirt. "Shit, shit. Hello! I need some help in here!" he roared at the top of his lungs, cradling the back of Ravel's head in one hand as he lowered her to the floor. "Don't worry. Everything's gonna be fine."

Then Naruto started to cough too, guts twisting in white hot pain. The copper tang of blood filled the back of his throat, and Naruto collapsed to his hands and knees. Each cough seemed to bring out a little spray of maroon mist. "Fuck." he gargled, sweat running down to hang in a fat bead from his chin.

Forcing himself forward, Naruto began the painful crawl towards the door. If he could just get out and catch the attention of some of his clan's underlings, they would be able to rush them over to one of the hospitals.

Naruto made it halfway to the door before it swung inward, Tansea standing there with a hand over her mouth. Her hazel eyes contracted to pinpricks as she stared mutely at her dying supervisor. "Don't just stand there!" Naruto wheezed. "Get help!"

A silent moment passed, and then Tansea turned to shut the door with a soft click. Her shoulders drew up under the grey cloth of her blazer as she sighed. "If only you'd had more sense."

The sharp points of Tansea's high heels clopped over the hardwood as she strode over to Naruto, shedding with every step the facade of nervous secretary and revealing the cold blooded killer underneath. She pressed the toe of her shoe into Naruto's side, rolling the redhead over on his back so she could consider his pale face with icy regard. "I don't enjoy killing children, but you just couldn't leave well enough alone could you?" the brunette tutted, folding her arms under her heavy breasts.

"Traitor." Naruto wheezed, turning his head to the side so he could spit out a glob of gory phlegm. The poison twisted his insides, and Naruto knew he'd been a fool to trust her. He'd just gone and assumed that she must be trustworthy because she was so close to his predecessor, and she had the demeanor of a nervous mouse.
Rolling her eyes, Tansea crossed the room to slide the office curtains shut. "Don't be so dramatic," she snorted as she wandered back over, hips swaying. "This is just business. I didn't mind if you took out some of my competitors, but once you decided to start your little mind reading scheme, I knew I had to act. Even if it means the clan comes down hard on the city for a while."

"What's your plan, bitch?"

Tansea cocked a brown eyebrow, looking coolly amused at the question. "Life is not an anime, boy. I'm not going to stand here and monologue my life story." Then she fell silent, watching and waiting for the Gremory heir to die.

Trembling with the effort, Naruto forced his lips into a silent taunt.

"Trying to say a few last words?"

Mockingly, Naruto winked a bleary blue orb. "I said, you don't know too much about purebloods, do you?"

Fire exploded, forming blazing lances of red-orange flames that streaked through the air in half a second to utterly obliterate the turncoat secretary. With a final cough, Ravel wiped the blood from her mouth on her sleeve and dizzily rolled to her feet. It had taken a lot of pain and drained more energy than she'd liked, but her body had succeeded in breaking down the poison and healing any damage it left behind. Such was the power of the Phenex clan.

"They always underestimate me." Ravel rasped, shaking slightly as she forced her feet to carry her over to her fiance's prone body. "Don't you think?"

Dropping to her knees beside Naruto, Ravel lifted his head into her lap and began to dig around in the inner pocket of her jacket with one hand. The other smoothed back the sweat soaked strands of the boy's crimson hair, wiping clean the ash of Tansea's annihilated corpse with no trace of Ravel's previously barely contained violence in the motion.

Ravel pulled out a polished wooden case, twisting the top off to reveal a little vial of phoenix tears. Based on how long it had taken her to work through the poison, the blonde didn't think it would heal him, but it should be enough to keep him alive until he made it to a hospital. "Drink and don't complain." she ordered, popping the top and bringing it to Naruto's lips.

Obediently, he opened his mouth and began to swallow the miracle elixir.

"Good. Let me know if anything changes." Dismissing the auditory spell with a thought, Sirzechs ran a palm across his face and exhaled. The stress headache was slowly building back up again, and soon enough he'd have to take a couple of painkillers to deal with it.

Such was the life of the Crimson Satan. Two steps forward and one step back. Operation Janus had been a smashing success, but his son ended up poisoned by an undercover crime boss and laid up in the hospital. It was like some hateful deity had it out for him, since he couldn't achieve anything without something going wrong elsewhere. But since Sirzechs couldn't do anything about Naruto at the moment, he decided it was for the best to focus on what he could do.

Turning on his heel, Sirzechs met Ajuka's eyes and smiled grimly. "So I see things are working out for us." he began, striding over to the map table and tapping a finger against the dark green shading the represented one of the pockets of Mictlanese troops still in Gehenna. Every day that went by without fresh supplies would make them less dangerous, but half a million foreign soldiers scattered in a dozen encirclements were still nothing to sneeze at. "Do you think using a collaborative barrier
would work?"

Ajuka stroked his chin, blue eyes darkened with thought as he strode up next to his best friend and joined Sirzechs in staring at the map. "I suppose that would depend on how many contributors there were, and even if you had enough, you would need to act very quickly. It's not a tactic that would work more than once, since they'd realize it was the end and sneak around you for a suicide run."

"That was my thought as well." Sirzechs sighed, picking up a tiny carved jet soldier. Light gleamed off its polished surface as the redhead rolled it between his fingers. He had two possibilities to choose from.

The first being that he could scrounge up every ultimate class devil in the realm, have them cast a giant barrier over the central plain of the Limbo Strip, and then personally massacre several hundred thousand foreigners. Gehenna would be swept clean of remaining invaders in the space of a few hours. But that choice would lead to a cold war, where each nation fiercely guarded their weak points and spent an indeterminate number of years cut off from other worlds. Without going through the 'weak space' in a given realm where the dimensional fabric was thin, travel was costly and difficult; and marching armies essentially impossible.

It was why control of the Limbo Strip was so valuable in the first place. If Sirzechs enacted a total lockdown, Mictlan would do the same in whatever part of their world that was near to the Dimensional Gap. High ranking devils like Sirzechs could still take the long way around and force their way through the dimensions to Mictlan, but that would just inspire Mictlantehcuhtli and his allies to do the same. The war would last years as both sides tried to avoid escalation, or they'd both do suicide runs and end up with two destroyed worlds.

But in a way, despite its flaws, that first option was still less risky than the second. Rather than annihilate the Mictlanese divisions in their territory, Sirzechs could bring the other Satans and a few of the most powerful warriors in Gehenna to rampage through Mictlan before their barrier tactic was discovered. If the Aztec gods tried to come around through the Limbo Strip, they'd be trapped by a barrier cast by dozens of ultimate class devils and fallen angels. The battle would be a race against time to see if Sirzechs and his allies could kill a handful of gods before they decided to try to take the long crossing over the dimensions.

If they failed, Sirzechs would have triggered an apocalypse in Gehenna. But if they succeeded, the war would be over. It was weighing risk against reward, and the only question that remained was how much faith did Sirzechs have in his abilities?

Setting the jet figurine back on the table, the Crimson Satan thinned his lips. "How much simpler would things be if we could just instantly evacuate millions of citizens without the enemy cluing in?"

Carefully, Ajuka settled a hand over his friend's plate clad shoulder. "If you want to take the risk, I believe you'll succeed. Especially with us by your side, and that horn if things start to get out of control. This said, I would suggest not looking at this like an inalienable dichotomy."

Sirzechs blinked at that, moving to rest his lower back against the edge of the map table as he folded his arms over his chest. He could see Ajuka's first point. The current generation of Satans had long ago surpassed the old ones, and the old ones had been more than capable of killing pagan gods. Add in the very effective butchering work Sairaorg was doing and the much less covert Inquisition Michael had ordered, and they had the recipe to achieve victory.

But Sirzechs only had half formed suspicions about the second point. "What do you mean about this not being a dichotomy?"
Licking his lips, Ajuka cast a deliberate gaze out over the map table; with all its notations about conflict and sacrifice. "What I mean is that you do not have to save everyone. I created the Evil Piece system to encourage the Rating Games and help us become stronger as a country, but their other function has always been population revival. As cold as it is, only the genetic value of the pureblood lines really matter. Homes, wealth, and even the lives of the commoners can be replaced over time."

"So what you're saying is that they're all expendable."

A pause.

"Yes."

Drawing in a breath, Sirzechs clenched his jaw so tightly that he almost felt like it would break. If only the pureblood clans were evacuated- likely through the unique pathway between Purgatory and the third sphere of Biblical Heaven - the impossible suddenly became very possible. Even if Gehenna was totally ruined, and all the commoners dead, everything could be rebuilt. It was the rational failsafe.

However, Sirzechs had been taught as a child that he was a noble not by right and power, but by privilege and responsibility. The commoners were weaker than him, but they were not lesser beings. They had just as much of a right to live as any noble. So his first instinct was to deny Ajuka's proposal out of hand. Michael would certainly shelter devils for a time because of the peace treaty, and if a few thousands were going to be protected they could be drawn from all walks of life.

That was the easy choice though. Was it the right choice for the long term prosperity of Gehenna? The purebloods didn't rule because they inherited rank based on some arcane notion of divine right. They ruled because they were literally more genetically fit than the commoners, and would always as a class be stronger. The purebloods were just barely above the minimum viable population to prevent inbreeding depression. The loss of more than a few hundred might be enough to destroy any hope of preserving the rare clan powers they'd received from their ancestors.

Being a good ruler was not about making the easy decisions that would let him sleep at night. It was about Sirzechs making the difficult ones that would yield the greatest benefit for the future of his people. Pragmatism needed to trump idealism every time.

"Very well. We'll have to make the arrangements."
Her hands were freezing cold.

Valerie examined the uneven tips of her fingernails, wondering idly if she should peel them off to keep them short and out of the way or just leave them to grow. The choice was in her hands, and she could pick one or the other without having to worry about what someone else might think.

There were a lot of choices in Valerie's hands lately.

Sometimes, she wondered how she was supposed to deal with them. Even if she had to hold off from wandering about publicly, Valerie had so many other new decisions to make she barely noticed. Food, clothes, books, conversation, games, and so on and on. Her life was full of new liberty, and sometimes it felt like she might tumble out into empty space without all the constraints she was used to.

Valerie knew very little about living life without limits, so she just focused on taking things one day at a time. If she tried to look beyond the immediate present, the vast uncertain future would surely daunt her.

"Whazzat?" Naruto mumbled in his sleep, rolling on his side and cuddling his pillow. A thin trickle of drool hung from one corner of his mouth. It was cute, in an odd way.

Smiling at the redhead, Valerie folded her hands in her lap and fidgeted about in her chair until she was comfortable. They'd only been in Gehenna for a few days before Naruto ran afoul of some enemies he'd made and ended up poisoned. He was supposed to make a full recovery very soon, but until then Valerie was content to just sit in his company.

Maybe it was a little unfair of her to leave Gasper alone instead of taking up her old mother hen role, but Valerie knew that Rias would look after the little boy excellently; and Valerie was exactly where she wanted to be. Watching over the young man that had come to save her despite never having met her before.

Naruto's generosity still boggled her mind. He'd swept into her life like a whirlwind, catching her up and carrying her away to a place and a life that she could have only dreamt of before. And he hadn't even asked her for anything in exchange. She'd prodded him as often as she dared about if he expected to be paid back with servitude or other favours, but he'd been very clear that he had no use for such things.

Rias and Naruto both seemed to have a strange kindness that precluded debts. As strange as it was, they honestly didn't seem to want anything from her beyond friendship. It was baffling and humbling at the same time, and just made Valerie all the more fond of them.

If only that fondness was enough to offset the difficulties that her appearance seemed to have caused. Rias had concocted a false story that would explain her presence without getting Naruto in trouble with his parents, but that hadn't prevented issues from cropping up with the Gremory heir's fiancé.


At least her Sacred Gear had finally quieted down. The power Valerie drew from the mutated bishop piece that Naruto had given her was enough to force the artifact to be silent, and the blonde had never been so well fed in her life. She still had very little desire to try and wield the thing, but if Naruto or Rias asked her to, Valerie would do her best.
"Back again I see."

Quiet as it was, the sound of Ravel's voice broke the comfortable silence like the crack of a whip. Valerie could feel her heart lurch into a higher tempo at the sound, and she forced a polite smile on her face as she turned to consider the other blonde. "Good morning."

Ravel stared back at the newcomer, lips thinned as her blue gaze met slitted red eyes. There was no warmth in the younger girl's face, but very little coldness too. It was a cautious sort of expression, conveying very little but watchful tiredness.

Eventually, Ravel exhaled a long sigh and let her shoulders slump. "The same to you." She hailed back, striding into Naruto's sickroom and taking a chair on the opposite side of the bed. She could always act prickly and venomous, but there wasn't really any point to such a thing.

"Stop looking like I'm about to bite your head off." Ravel muttered, shifting her focus from Naruto's sleeping face to Valerie's pale features. The new Bishop was like a frightened little rabbit and looked like she'd keel over and die any second from anxious suspense. "I'm not even mad at you anyway."

Silent minutes passed after Ravel's declaration, where the younger blonde deliberately ignored the older one, and Valerie slowly began to unwind. It was only after Ravel felt like Valerie wouldn't have a nervous breakdown that she allowed herself to meet the dhampir's red orbs straight on once more. "The Vampire in a Box is looking for you again."

Valerie twitched at the dig at Gasper's agoraphobia, but let it go unchallenged. Ravel wouldn't be the first devil in Gehenna to have called her kinsman that, and none of them had done it maliciously. It was just a little friendly teasing, and whatever issue Ravel had with her, Valerie had seen no indication it extended to Gasper.

"Umm, well…" Valerie trailed off, looking to the side as she denied the implied suggestion that she leave as submissively as she could. She didn't want to earn Ravel's anger, but she had no intention of moving from Naruto's side until the redhead woke up again.

Humming at that, Ravel let the denial pass without so much as a twitch. She leaned forward in her chair, propping her elbow on Naruto's bed so she could rest her chin in her palm. The blonde's other hand poked into the unconscious Gremory heir's side with a sense of familiarity and boredom.

"You shouldn't expect too much." Ravel told the other Bishop as she continued to prod her fiance's side. Sooner or later he'd stop being lazy and finally get out of bed, but until then she had a mission to irritate the hell out of him, conscious or not.

Valerie blinked at that, tilting her head to the side in thought. Was she supposed to take that as a conversation starter? Or was it some sort of obscure warning? "I don't know what you mean, like umm?" The dhampir questioned slowly.

Bitter anger crossed Ravel's face, drawing her brows together as she poked Naruto's side harder than was really necessary. "I mean that you shouldn't expect too much from him."

"In what way?"

Huffing at the older blonde, Ravel leaned back in her stiff wooden chair and crossed her arms over her chest. She prodded the inside of her cheek with her thumb, mulling over how exactly she ought to convey her point. "I'm going to go make an educated guess here and assume that right now, you probably feel like Naruto is the best thing since sliced bread."

Pink flushed Valerie's cheeks, and she ducked her head in a wordlessly embarrassed response to the
jibe. She wouldn't quite put it like *that*, but the sentiment was accurate. Rias had arranged for it, but Naruto was the one that had come to save her. She didn't think she'd ever forget to be grateful for that.

"That's why I say you shouldn't expect too much from him." Ravel sagged, looking much older and much more exhausted than her thirteen years warranted. "Naruto is like the sun." she added after a beat, one corner of her lip curling up in reluctant fondness. "He lights the world up, makes everything warm and worthwhile, and you can't help but want to follow him."

Valerie couldn't help but feel like there was a 'but' in there, and she was right.

"But just like the sun, he's never going to be tied down. Sooner or later, he'll disappoint you. I don't know if he's too selfish, or if he just doesn't *think*, but everything Naruto does is in one way or another is based on what he feels like in the moment. If something catches his eye, he'll be off without a second thought or word for you."

Swallowing thickly, Valerie steeled herself and drew her spine straight. She disliked confrontation, and she hated the idea that she might make things worse for Naruto by talking back to his fiancé, but the dhampir didn't want to sit quietly by and let him be badmouthed either. "I understand that you're upset with me." She began hesitantly, words gaining strength as she plowed on. "And while it was never my intention to do anything to cause problems, please don't take the anger you feel towards me out on him. He doesn't deserve it."

The look that Ravel gave Valerie was enough to make the red eyed girl sit back in shock, mouth dry. It was a look that glittered with nostalgia and pity. "I told you, didn't I? I'm not mad at *you*. I'm not even really mad at him. I'm just disappointed."

With another sigh, Ravel turned to stare out the window with a distant detached focus. "That's all I ever seem to be."

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When Naruto woke up, it was with a hypnic jerk. One moment he was dreaming about living in a house made of cotton candy, and the next he was awake and sweating. "Someone's got it out for me." He complained, pinching the front of his pajama top between his thumb and forefinger and peeling it away from his soaked chest.

Gross.

He didn't feel *quite* up to snuff, but he was well enough to roll out of bed and pad into the private bathroom that was attached to the sickroom. Just like the room he'd been recuperating in, it was impersonally decorated and reminded him of a hotel. Not that the décor would stop him from having a decent shower.

Based on the golden light that seeped through the bathroom's frosted glass windows, it must be some point in the middle of the day. Lunchtime hopefully, because he was hungrier than a pig.

Hopping into the shower, Naruto bit back a little girly squeal as he was splashed with the initial rush of cold water. He was a *man* damn it, and he could tough it out until the water warmed up a bit. He'd had to deal with a lot worse as a shinobi, and he'd never live it down if anyone caught him cringing like a sissy over a little cold water.

As soon as the shower spray hit lukewarm, Naruto quickly scrubbed his body clean and leapt back out of the shower. Maybe on a different day he'd spend a little more time relaxing, but he had a lot of questions that needed to be answered. He'd been in and out of it for a few days, and had no idea
what was going on with his friends or with the city his dad had asked him to look over.

Naruto whistled a low tune as he towed dry, padding back out into the room and digging around for something to wear. Someone had been thoughtful enough to leave him some undies, blue sweatpants, and an orange hoodie, but apparently, they'd forgotten the socks.

Oh well, he couldn't win them all.

He was a step away from the door when it swung inward at breakneck, smashing into Naruto's face and making him clench a hand to his nose. "Are you trying to kill me?" the redhead wailed at Rias, making his aunt smile guiltily and wring her hands.

"Sorry!"

"Uh, I think I've broken something. It might be my dignity."

Sighing at the dramatics, Rias reached up to pat the top of Naruto's head in mock comfort. "There, there. It'll be ok. You'll make it through. One day."

Grinning at the shorter redhead, Naruto gave his stinging nose one last massage before letting his hand fall down to his side. "So, what's the latest and greatest?" he questioned, pushing at Rias until she took the hint and led him from the room. "I'm assuming that Ravel's fine too, since no one was in my room crying. What's the news from the office?"

Rias winced.

"That bad huh?" Naruto muttered, shuddering as a new thought suddenly occurred to him. "Please tell me that Mom didn't go on a roaring rampage of revenge and kill everyone there." The Mona Lisa reproduction they passed seemed to look down at the pair with a mocking smile.

Shaking her head with amusement, Rias shot her nephew a deliberately deadpan teal glare over her shoulder. "No, Naruto. Grayfia didn't massacre the entire Azmarin bureaucracy because you got yourself poisoned. She was as elegant and self-controlled as ever. In fact, she even finished vetting the rest of the government employees while you were unconscious."

"Oh." Naruto interjected a tone of false disappointment, moping and frowning at the floor. "Well that's too bad. Here I was, hoping that she would get really upset if something happened to me. But I guess that I'm just not that important."

Rias snorted.

Shrugging, Naruto decided to resume his questions a little more seriously. "But besides that particular drama, everything's fine right? I'm not going to get back to the office and find out that half the city caught on fire or something, am I?"

The Ruin Princess slowed to a stop in front of a familiar door, and Naruto felt a prickling of foreboding that only intensifies when she turned to offer him a vaguely apologetic expression. "Naruto, you won't be going back to the office. Sirzechs says things are changing on the war front and he intends to send you elsewhere. That said..." A certain cool austerity entered Rias' face, and with a jolt Naruto realized she had more similarities with Granny Venelana than just physical looks. "Don't you think you have other problems to deal with right now?"

"I don't really catch your drift." Naruto hedged, blue eyes skating away from his aunt's face to dance across the surface of Ravel's door and then further down the corridor. "Is she still kicking up a fuss?"
Heaving a sigh, Rias reached out and gave Naruto's ear a sharp tug. "She's not making a 'fuss'." The red-haired girl stated dryly when her nephew whipped back around to glare at her offending hand. "I know you don't really understand her, but I've done all I can already. Ravel has real feelings for Naruto."

"Well obviously, I didn't think she was a robot or something."

"Let me finish. She has real feelings, and just like anyone else you're not always going to understand what's going on in her head just by looking at her. You have to talk. She's already made some sort of watchful peace with Valerie on her own, but that doesn't mean that whatever upset her in the first place doesn't matter. In a relationship of any kind you need to be able communicate. Otherwise it's just going to fall to pieces."

Naruto clenched his jaw, stepping back with a sense of frustration. "Look at you playing therapist." he sighed, stepping past Rias to lay his hand on the polished silver doorknob of Ravel's bedroom door. "I'm not going to disagree, since you're right. But maybe you should be looking in the mirror before you get on your high horse. You can't even admit you want to jump Sasuke's bones. So stop trying to be my guidance counselor and sort out your own issues first."

He left Rias gaping after him when he slipped into his fiancé's room.

Listening to the way that Gasper gave a pleased little hum under the explorations of her fingers, Valerie once more combed back the shining golden strands of her kinsman's hair. She'd managed to hold on for a few hours after her strange little conversation with Ravel before caving to the guilt of ignoring her best friend and deciding that she probably should spend more time with him.

Gasper was settling in well in his opinion, but in Valerie's he wasn't doing all that well. There wasn't much of a difference between hiding in her wardrobe all the time in the Tepes castle and being holed up in a cardboard box in the corner of her new bedroom. Coaxing him out required patience and persistence on either her part or Rias', since Gasper wasn't quite ready to trust anyone else.

Valerie nodded when the little blond Bishop punctuated his description of something he'd encountered called a 'computer' with a little gasp. "That sounds lovely, Gasper. I'm sure if you ask Rias she might be willing to get one for you." If there was something she'd learned in the days since moving in with the Gremory clan, it was that they were filthy rich and had no compunction against splurging a little bit. If Gasper wanted a 'computer', Rias would get him one without a second thought.

"Ahh, well..."

Tweaking her friend's nose, Valerie grinned when Gasper gave a soft squawk and tried to push her hand away. "Now, now, what did I say about our new friends here?"

"I need to give them a chance." Gasper recited by rote, face scrunched up as he rebelled against the suggestion. "But they're strange and scary, Val!" The eleven year old dhampir looked like he wanted to crawl right back in his cardboard box and hide at the thought, which only made Valerie sigh in fond exasperation.

"But I thought you were a man?" she teased, prompting Gasper to puff right up and throw out his bony chest.

"I am a man!" With the delicate features of a prepubescent girl and clad in a sundress, Gasper didn't exactly exude masculinity, but Valerie played along. It felt good to be able to fall back into a
comforting familiar routine without having to worry about when the next meal would be, or if her new Sacred Gear would keep trying to drive her mad.

"Well, does a man run away from his friends?"

"No!"

"And is he scared of meeting new people?"

"I don't think so." Gasper mumbled, excitement draining away at what he knew was another lecture.

"And is he afraid of going outside?"

"No." the blond boy admitted sullenly, fiddling with the hem of his green sundress.

A firm knock at the door cut off any further exchange, and Valerie gave up prodding at Gasper for the moment to rise to her feet and crossed the room. "Hello?" she greeted as she opened it a crack, smiling at the person she found on the other side. "Yuuto."

Letting the door swing entirely open, Valerie stepped to the side to make room for Rias' Knight and the delicious lunch tray he was carrying. The mere smell of the beef stew was making her ravenously hungry, and sharpened the appetite she'd discovered when she made the transition from a blood based diet to more varied one.

They hadn't spoken at all during the diplomatic trip Rias' peerage took to her father's castle, and in the few days since arriving in Gehenna they hadn't spent much time together. Neither of those facts stopped Yuuto from smiling like a fairytale knight, grey eyes twinkling as he handed her the lunch tray with a flourish. "We hope the two of you enjoy the meal."

"We will." Valerie reassured him, bowing with thanks.

After accepting her gratitude with a polite nod, Yuuto turned about on his heel and left the two dhampir alone. It wasn't in his nature to push if he wasn't welcome, and just forcing Gasper to be in the same room for a short time was about all he was willing to do.

Blood red eyes glittered as Valerie took in the steaming bowls, and after inhaling another lungful of the scent, she looked over her shoulder for Gasper. The boy's chair was conspicuously empty, and he must have vacated it in the time when her back was turned and before she'd opened the door. Still, the blonde didn't have to look far for him.

He was in that silly little box again.

"Yo."

Ravel twitched at the sound of Naruto's voice, but decided to leave him hanging while she worked her way to the bottom of the page she was on. It wouldn't kill him to wait half a minute, and in general she felt like she was done jumping to satisfy her fiance's fancies.

Finishing off the last paragraph, Ravel groped over the small round table beside her armchair until she grabbed hold of her little green bookmark. In the little piece of paper went, marking where her reading had been halted. It was too bad she had nothing to mark where her life seemed to be halted.

The Bishop settled her hands demurely in her lap, lifting her head to meet her fiance's gaze and smile politely. "What can I do for you?" For days Ravel had raged until all the fire and anger inside her
burned out, and now all she had left was a creeping chill in her heart. There were only so many times
she could be forgotten and shunted to the side before she decided it was best to just stop caring any
longer.

Naruto frowned, shaking his head at the blonde before circling around the room to grab the nearest
empty airchair. He dragged it across the floor with the faint squeal of wood-on-wood until it was
near Ravel, but still out of kicking distance if he accidentally riled her. Then he plopped down and
stared at the girl with an expectant gaze. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing." Ravel lied, reaching for her book and cracking it back open. It was too little, too late, and
she was done trying to talk out the same old dance with him. Only a madwoman would keep trying
the same thing and hope for a different result, and whatever else she was, Ravel certainly wasn't
crazy.

A tan hand slapped over the open pages, carefully but firmly pulling the book out of Ravel's grip.

"I know that's a lie." Naruto sighed, tossing the book onto Ravel's bed before he settled his elbows
on his knees. "And you know that's a lie too. It's not going to help if you just try to pretend like
nothing ever bothered you, so let's just get it all out in the open. Tell me what got you upset so I can
fix it, or at least apologize and explain myself."

The blonde strands of Ravel's hair were laying straight and unbound down over her shoulders, but
that didn't stop her from making a short abortive motion to tug at a drill curl that wasn't there at the
moment. "Naruto, I can't just repeat myself over and over again. If you didn't listen to me before, I
doubt you're going to listen now."

Naruto blinked in confusion, running a thumb over the skin of his knuckles. What did she mean by
that? Digging back through his memories he could really only remember one time Ravel had blown
her stack at him, and that was because of the whole acting like an overprotective knight thing he'd
been doing. "I'm not really seeing how I treated you like a kid?"

"You didn't." Ravel agreed blandly, crossing her legs and causing her pink skirt to ride up slightly.
The alternating stripes of her kneesocks drew Naruto's gaze for a split second before he dismissed
them. "But if you recall, I told you I wanted to be treated as your friend, your Bishop, and your
future wife. How is running off to the human world without so much as a word doing any of that?"

Cocking a slender red eyebrows, as if to question if that was all, Naruto nodded in
acknowledgement. "I didn't think it would be anything to write home about. It's not like I was
leaving forever or anything. I was just popping up to the human world for a day or so."

A swell of irritation sparked in Ravel's gut at the nonchalant mien her fiance assumed. "Well you
thought wrong," she shot back sharper than she intended, before making herself take a steadying
breath and force down the burst of anger. "Look, maybe it doesn't matter to you, but we are
engaged. That makes us partners. What kind of partnership is it when you run off whenever you
like, and make a big important decision like adding someone to your peerage without even doing me
the courtesy of a phone call before doing so?"

"I'll tell you what kind of partnership it is." Ravel mercilessly cut off Naruto when he opened his
mouth to try and get a word in. "It's a partnership of formality. One that exists in name only in order
to provide me with a little fiction that I can't even pretend actually means something. I would never
make such an important appointment or go on such a risky adventure without your input. But you
didn't even make the effort to warn me, much less as for my opinion. I had to find out from Rias
where you were. And I realize that by the standards of Gehenna I don't have any sort of legal
standing beyond glorified property, but I had expected better than that from you. If you're not
capable or willing, at least be honest with me so I stop expecting you to be different."

"Whoa now, hold on there!" Naruto brought his hands up in a slow down gesture, palms open and flat. "Look, I didn't know you felt that way and I'm sorry. I just didn't think it would matter all that much. It's not like I'd get upset if you decided you needed a couple of days off. It'd be one thing if you were moving somewhere else or getting a new job, but I just don't see how it would make you explosively mad."

Very slowly, Ravel let her golden eyebrows climb up to her hairline. "You don't see it, hmm?" Although she'd been trying to keep calm and simply detach from the whole issue, Naruto was unconsciously but very effectively needling her, and her tone was rolling in sarcasm. "Let's put the shoe on the other foot. So you don't think you'd have a few questions if I up and vanished for two days and came back holding hands with some strange man you'd never met before?"

Naruto pictured that image in his head, and felt a few prickles of angry heat buzz in his head. Fair enough, she did have a point there. Certain questions would need to be asked, and he'd be pretty damn suspicious either way.

"We've been engaged for a few years now, Naruto." Ravel continued on when it became clear the Gremory heir was getting lost in his own head. "If you decide you want a harem, fine, whatever. I might not be the biggest fan, but it's your prerogative as a pureblood noble of good standing to do so. But I expect that even if you do that you still treat me with some respect. I'm the one that's supposed to be your wife, and I'd hope you'd consult me before making decisions about your life. At the least, I'd expect that you'd show me a little more affection than some woman you just met a few hours past. If you can't even casually hold my hand after all these years but you're willing to with Valerie Tepes right after meeting her, I'm not exactly holding out hope for this marriage."

"Ravel, I'm thirty-five. Not fifteen."

"So?"

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Naruto leaned back in his armchair and gave a slow sigh. "I'm a thirty-five year old former human, Ravel. I still have some hangups. Maybe someone who was always a devil wouldn't have them, but to me if I tried to do something like that to you I'd feel like I was taking advantage of you like some gross kiddy diddler. Maybe it'll be different when you're a few years older, but I can't promise that. Valerie on the other hand is already well on her way to adulthood. So even if I was getting all hot and bothered over her - and I'm not saying I am - then she'd still be a 'safer' target."

Ravel kicked him, aiming right for the kneecap.

"Hey!"

Slapping a hand against her developing chest, Ravel mustered up a glare full of fire as she stared down her errant fiance. "Naruto, it doesn't matter how old you are or what you once were. You're a devil now. If you have hangups like that, you have to start getting over them. Otherwise the next ten thousand years are going to be very painful for you, and probably for me too."

A pink flush coloured the Bishop's cheeks, and she looked off to the side. "Like, I'm not bothered at all by the age gap. I'd even do some things with you now."

Shutting his eyes, Naruto knuckled at his left temple. Insecurity and jealousy. He should have known. "Look, I can't promise that I can change. It's not a switch that I can just flip on and off whenever I want. But if you can be patient with me, I'll try."
Despite the age difference, Ravel had a point. He couldn't keep obsessing over human cultural scruples and expect to have a happy marriage. And while he still didn't really agree with her need to know where he was at any given time of the day, he could see her point about not calling her up and getting her input on recruiting a new person into his peerage. All relationships were about compromise, and he couldn't keep going around like some free spirit anymore.

"Well I suppose that's the best I can hope for right now."
Chapter 46

Naruto was irritated, to say the least. Standing around with his hands in his pockets wasn't really helping, and more than once one of his former underlings gaped at his lurid orange hoodie as they walked by, but come hell or high water he intended to see his mother.

It been a long time since he'd been able to see Grayfia face-to-face. The war had grown to consume all their lives in different ways, and the time together they'd once shared had been one of the first things to be sacrificed on the altar of the greater good. So despite the faint prickling of anger he felt at having been abruptly shunted away from his post aside, he was glad to have the opportunity to see her.

Now if he could just get his old office back, Naruto might tentatively suggest that he was having a good day.

"She'll see you now."

Freezing just a tiny bit when the new office secretary stepped up to him and interrupted his line of thought, Naruto forced on a sunny smile and nodded at the purple-haired woman.

Maybe it was the leftover impression that Tansea had left, but the Gremory heir had the sudden paranoid urge to watch his back. Even though all the office staff had undergone loyalty testing and been culled to prevent any betrayal, Naruto still had the irrational fight or flight instinct prodded away at him.

Naruto figured it might be a little strange to think that a woman he'd barely known and only trusted because of her long years of service could have such an impression on him, but he couldn't help it. Giving people the benefit of the doubt had always been one of his weak points, and Tansea had seemed too kind and timid to be a double agent of any sort – at least until she'd proven him wrong.

He'd learned his lesson about being wary of strangers.

Knocking on the door frame to announce his presence, Naruto grinned at his mother when she looked up from the pages scattered across his desk with a faintly harried expression. "Hey, having fun today?"

Grayfia snorted, taking a rubber stamp in one hand and pressing it into the inkpad with a quiet thump. "No comment." The silver haired woman slapped a blazing red 'rejected' imprint on the latest requisition to cross her desk and filed it into the mesh desk tray with all the other requests she'd turned down that day.

With her stubborn refusal to change out of her maid outfit during work hours, Grayfia was an odd spectacle in the office. Newcomers would no doubt question what exactly had been going through Lord Lucifer's mind when he'd decided to offer his maid as a governor for the city, and they'd be even more baffled that Duke Gremory had accepted. A business suit or a military uniform would seem more at home in the office setting, but that wouldn't be his mother, Naruto reflected wryly.

"Right. Soooo." Naruto dragged out the ending vowel, clasping his hands behind his back and taking long swinging steps across the office. "I was kind of hoping that you could do me an itty bitty little favour."

"The answer is no."
"Oh come on!" the redhead moaned, sidling around the desk as Grayfia looked on with fond exasperation. "I was going a good job, right? That means I deserve a treat, right? And if you put those both together I should be allowed back on the job, right?"

Rotating the leather swivel chair under her to keep Naruto in her sight, Grayfia reached out to grab her son's collar and pull him closer. Her silver eyes danced over his features for a moment, studying how it had changed subtly in the months since she'd been able to really sit down and look at him. "Your performance was certainly novel." The Queen of Annihilation admitted. "But that's neither here nor there."

Naruto blinked as the soft pads of his mother's fingers traced over the curve of his jaw before she released him. "I'm not really putting it all together here." He pointed out, resisting the urge to scratch at his chin and get rid of the ghostly sensation her hand had left behind. "It seems to me like you're shortchanging me on the details."

"Sit."

Frowning at his mother's short command, Naruto shoved his hands in his pockets and slouched back around the desk so he could flop into the stiff-backed chair that was set up for visitors. Maybe he was being a little petulant but he could already tell that he wasn't getting his job back, and that stung. Naruto was pretty sure he'd done a better job governing the city than anyone else had in decades, so why was he getting shunted to the side?

Grayfia primly folded her hands on top of the dark brown desk, giving just the smallest upward quirk of her mouth to try and take the edge of what her son was probably assuming was some insult. "The reason you're no longer acting governor here has nothing to do with your job performance. It doesn't even have anything to do with your former secretary trying to murder you. In the long run, this is your grandfather's city, and we never meant for you to govern it indefinitely. We just wanted to give you a chance to whet your teeth and gain some experience, while making sure you were doing constructive work rather than recklessly acting out."

"Well I kind of expected that." Naruto agreed easily, bouncing one foot in place with a sense of nervous energy. He'd never done well sitting in one spot without moving when the pressure was on. "But it's not like the war is over, so unless you've got something better for me to do, I don't see why I can't keep at it Mom."

Considering her son's sullen face, Grayfia weighed the merits of trying to cook up some lie for Naruto to believe. It wasn't even really about making up a comfortable fiction to soothe his ego as it was about soothing her own maternal instinct. But Naruto was no longer a little boy, and she couldn't always shelter him from the world.

In fact, if her peers suspected the real amount of manipulations she and her husband did to keep him safe while giving him set boundaries to grow in, they'd probably be accused of coddling. Though how people hadn't quite figured out that she was jerking the strings in the shadows the entire time to keep a lid on some of the discontent Naruto's policies had generated was beyond her.

Perhaps it was time to start treating her son more like a young man than like a child, and be a little more honest. "Your father is going to try something, and if it works, the war will end. If it doesn't, it might backlash on Gehenna. So the Senate has decided that first we're going to be a little cautious and evacuate some of our citizens."

Naruto's mouth opened slightly as he processed that. The war was going to end just like that? It sounded like his father was going to do something stupidly suicidal and hope it worked, which was not really an idea Naruto could get behind - unless he was the one doing it. But there was that other
point that he wanted to question. "Some citizens? I'm going to guess that list has a distinct focus on the big shots and not enough on the little guy. Am I right?"

Grayfia sighed and brought up her hand to cut off what would no doubt be the beginning of one of her son's famous pontificating tirades. Naruto was so idealistic, and while it could be cute now and again sometimes she had neither the energy nor the inclination to put up with a speech. "I'm not going to debate you on this, Naruto. Please just do as we ask with no back talk for once in your life. For me, at least?"

If it were anyone else asking him to swallow back his slowly burgeoning tide of anger, Naruto would have let the spit and fire break loose. But it was his mother, and he still remembered that he hadn't ever really made it up to her for making the famously taciturn Grayfia Lucifuge cry all those months ago. So he bit his tongue until he could taste the familiar copper tang of blood, and kept silent.

Angels were a terrifying existence.

As a devil, Rias found her skin prickling with anxiety and every beat of her heart urging her to run and hide. Perhaps it was generations of instinct, or perhaps it was just the cumulative effect of reading too many stories, but the Ruin Princess found standing next to Heaven's emissary disquieting. Not even the fallen angels could elicit the same level of wariness Rias felt in the presence of her natural enemy. It was like they were two repelling magnetic poles.

Or maybe Rias was just being paranoid, since the rest of her family seemed to have no second thoughts about it. Even Gabriel seemed at ease in Gehenna, despite the long history of warfare and murder between Hell and Heaven.

Warmth briefly settled over Rias' hand as Akeno stepped up behind her mistress to give a quick squeeze. It was over in an instant, before anyone else could really catch sight of the act, but the clasp was enough to make the tense set of the redhead's shoulders fractionally relax.

"We have everything we need." The Thunder Priestess informed Rias as she let go of her best friend's hand and settled her hands over her hips. Violet eyes brightened as Rias fleetingly met Akeno's gaze before dimming again when Rias' focus swept away.

"Are you sure?" Rias questioned distantly, patting idly at the pockets of her purple long coat. It was already settling into winter in the human world, and even the Gremory clan territory was drawing near to the cold season. She had no idea what Heaven's climate would be like, but it would be a poor showing for the clan if they had to immediately start begging for new clothes to wear.

"Yep."

Watching as Yuuto paced back and forth like a caged line, Rias hummed in acknowledgement. Her entire peerage was ready to depart on the little vacation her brother was insisting they take. None of them were stupid enough to think that a trip to Heaven was anything less than a quest for asylum, so they'd all scrambled to pack their necessities as quickly as possible. Koneko had obeyed Rias' orders with more energy than usual, and even Gasper had gathered up his sparse belongings and kept them in his box hideaway.

The only thing they were waiting on now was Naruto.

Koneko nibbled on a stick of pocky, trying and not quite able to shrug off the attentions of The Strongest Woman in Heaven. It was more than a little daunting to have one of the Burning Angels
studying her like she was a particularly interesting animal at the zoo, and Gabriel hadn't been shy with her queries.

"Are you concealing your feline features because you're afraid someone might try to get rid of you and put an end to the Nekoshou once and for all?" Gabriel questioned the petite youkai, pretty face drawing tight in horror at the thought. She might be a terror on the battlefield when she had to be, but Gabriel loathed the thought of someone so young being hunted down for something they had no control over. Children were precious.

"No," the white-haired nekomata denied, crunching down the last bit of her treat and refusing to elaborate. The personal details of Koneko's life and her motivations were not any of Gabriel's business. She had no intention of trying to play the role of gregarious socialite. That was more Naruto's job. Koneko had her small collection of friends and was satisfied with that.

Gabriel smiled at the chilly young girl before letting her focus move away towards the enormous box that the Gremory house had insisted was necessary. She hadn't seen the purpose in bringing a cardboard container to Heaven at first, since the Gremory clan was more than wealthy enough for proper suitcases and bags. But she'd eventually been told a baffling little tidbit; apparently, there was a young dhampir who actually lived in the cardboard box.

What a collection of oddballs the devils Michael had agreed to shelter were turning out to be.

The Seraph was very careful not to look at Rias Gremory's Knight too closely or try to speak with him more than was necessary. It made her heart ache to see one so young twisted up with pain and anger, and unfortunately some of it seemed to be aimed at Heaven. She could tell that the boy wasn't ready to speak to any of her kind about it, so she'd been forced to ignore her own instincts and leave the blond boy to his space. Having to take refuge in a place he viewed negatively was no doubt stressful enough without Gabriel prodding at him.

"Oh good, I guess you guys are all good to go." Naruto huffed out as he appeared on the fields of Purgatory in a glowing circle of crimson magic. Picking at his ear with one finger, he lazily waved the other hand and sent the floating cases of luggage he'd brought with him over to nestle next to the pile of bags made by his aunt's peerage. Valerie and Ravel were barely a step behind him, having squeezed in to travel along as one group on the currents of Naruto's magic.

"We were simply waiting for you." Rias confirmed, hiding a grin as Valerie bounded over to whisper into one of the holes that had been drilled into the side of Gasper's box. Pink flashed in the opening as the young boy pressed his eyes up to the side to better get a look at his friend. The Ruin Princess was glad to see that the two were settling in, perhaps not perfectly, but at least somewhat smoothly - especially after Ravel seemed to have buried the hatchet with the blonde dhampir.

But then, it probably wasn't all that hard for Ravel to make peace with Valerie after the upgrade her relationship with Naruto seemed to have undergone. When Rias had led Naruto to Ravel's room and told him to go make up, she had been hoping for a return to friendly normalcy.

Instead they apparently decided to go beyond that and not a day would go by without Rias seeing at least something happen that hinted at affection. The displays were admittedly mostly Ravel deciding to give Naruto random hugs or demand to hold hands for a time that made her nephew look slightly uncomfortable, but Naruto still accepted them.

It was kind of boggling how one conversation could shift the boundaries of a friendship that visibly. They weren't lovebirds by any means, but it was probably the first time ever that Rias could actually honestly say she could see them as a romantic pair in the future.
One conversation could change everything. Even one sentence, or a single word.

'You can't even admit you want to jump Sasuke's bones!'

Rias' face flushed at the memory of that little comment. There were uncomfortable questions such an assertion raised, from if it was even true; to how she was supposed to react to it if it was. The kind of entanglement Naruto was suggesting wasn't something that could exist in isolation, and Rias had no intent of letting someone else decide to disappear Sasuke for daring.

Some risks were too heavy to accept, regardless of a naughty thought here and there.

"Well if you're all ready to go, shall we?" Gabriel clapped her hands together and beamed at the assorted devils.

A dizzying kaleidoscope of colours swirled tightly, mingling every shade of the rainbow in a vomit inducing display. The Dimensional Gap was a place that challenged sanity, stretching the bounds of what was beyond the bounds of rational imagination.

Yuuto was glad when a last pull of Gabriel's power pulled them free of the space between worlds, even if they ended up in Heaven because of it.

Breathing deeply as the Third Heaven faded into existence around the Gehennan party, Yuuto tried not to choke on the foreign sweetness of the air. He hadn't ever really noticed it before, but Hell smelt just faintly like burning ozone. The sudden absence of the scent made the air in Heaven seem too clean.

Everything was too clean. The sky was deep and cobalt blue without a cloud in sight. The grass under his boots was so green and fresh it practically seemed to ooze life. A small stream wound along a half dozen yards away, clearer than glass and probably without a single tainted molecule. And everywhere there were angels, young and vibrant with faces and bodies so gorgeously molded it made Yuuto feel like an ogre.

Earth was human only, with expected flaws and bittersweet beauty. Gehenna was superhuman, with all the flaws Yuuto had discovered in mankind taken to absurd heights, and all the fragile gifts he'd encountered swollen to just as vast proportions. As fantastical as it was, Hell was relatable.

Heaven was not. It was more than human, in a way that made Yuuto feel like he'd forget his own existence just being there. The world was consuming, softly embracing his mind until all he wanted to do was lay down and bear witness. A quick glance to the side showed that his friends had awestruck expressions, likely similar to the emotions he could feel pulling at his own face.

The soft peal of Gabriel's chuckles broke the spell, and shaking off the last remnants of awe Yuuto stoked his anger instead. He would not so easily forgive the leaders of an organization that had failed him and dozens of other children. If not for their approval of the Holy Sword Project, so many of his comrades would still be alive.

Yuuto was so caught up in his sense of disgruntlement that he almost missed Gabriel calling a four-winged angel out of the air with a sharp whistle.

"Rizoel." Gabriel sighed when the green-haired man landed in front of the group and swept into a low bow. "There is no need for that." Waving off the obeisance with a slight frown, the blonde Seraph waited for Rizoel to lumber back to his feet before she turned to their 'guests'. "Rizoel will lead you to your lodgings. Please take your time to get comfortable, and don't be afraid to ask for anything. We'll help you however we can."
From the way Rizoel's tawny eyes narrowed faintly, Yuuto really doubted that they'd be asking him for anything. It was easy to tell when they weren't wanted, and despite the welcome from Heaven's upper echelons prejudice no doubt lingered.

Which was fine, because Yuuto had no problem being prejudiced right back.

Tuning out the formal thanks Rias and Naruto were mustering up for Gabriel as the angel left, Yuuto turned to Koneko and nudged the petite girl in the side with an insistent elbow. "Come on." He mouthed, prompting his friend to sigh and take up her position on the other end of Gasper's box.

They each shoved their hands into the small cutout handholds that dotted the sides of the cardboard container and lifted. A tiny surprised yelp echoed from within as Gasper was shocked by the sudden shifting of his 'home', but once the two devils comfortably suspended the box between them the dhampir subsided.

Accepting the vaguely amused look Rias gave them with a roguish grin, Yuuto winked one grey eye at his mistress and then moved in tandem with Koneko to trail at the back of the line the devils formed as Rizoel led them over the emerald fields. Safely ensconced in the familiar role of playing follower, Yuuto let his mind drift.

The blond Knight's life had changed in the last few months as Sasuke's absence weighed heavily on the entire peerage. The hole left by the Uchiha wasn't obvious to outsiders, but Yuuto could sense it gnawing at him in everything he said or did. He'd make a snide joke and then look over his shoulder for someone who was no longer there, or work through a complex kata and catch himself wondering what Sasuke's opinion on it would be.

Their routine had plodded forward, unchanged save for the diplomatic trip to the Tepes Kingdom or the odd journey to the human world to offer devil status to enterprising humans, but the feel was different. It was like their day-to-day life had become monotonous, and they were only moving through the motions because they had no idea how to cope without the 'patriarch' to Rias' matriarchal role. The loss of direction was consuming, like how when Gasper had suddenly bowled into Rias' peerage, and Yuuto didn't even know how to begin to deal with the boy beyond falling back into his polite formal training.

Yuuto hoped the war ended soon. Not because he was twisted up by the deaths of thousands of people he'd never met, but because he was spinning in the wind. How was he supposed to react to Rias' sudden silences when something reminded her of Sasuke? How did he handle Akeno's tendency to stare off blankly into the distance or Koneko's random vanishing acts?

He needed Sasuke's guidance.

"I see that you're taking after your senpai."

"Shove it up your ass." Sasuke muttered, lighting his cigarette with a spark from the tip of his thumb and inhaling. The tobacco and ash burned in his lungs, sizzling in a way that ached just so and reminded Sasuke that he was still alive.

Giving a low rumbled of laughter around his own cigarette, Vali reached forward with his free hand to wiggle his fingers into the cool soil of the trench wall. The new uniform still felt too starched and too new as it hung from his shoulders, and the White Dragon Emperor suspected Sasuke's felt the same way, even though the clothes were the exact same as their old ones. Save for the new rank patch of course.
It seemed to reflect their lives at large. From one perspective, things could change drastically, and from another they stayed the same. Their new ranks conferred new privileges and new responsibilities in the wake of the new war front and Gehenna’s new strategy of containment. Yet they still plod the same old trails through a dozen old trenches and fought the same old battles against the same old enemies.

Vali was tired.

Not of life and not of fighting, which were things he doubted he’d ever lose enthusiasm for. But the silver haired half-devil was tired of war. He was tired of death that came so easily and so unremarked to the weak on both sides and destroyed people's futures meaninglessly. What had hundreds of thousands of people died for, except the mad ambitions of a god that didn't know when his days were done?

"Stop thinking so hard." Sasuke sighed, the red embers at the end of his cigarette flaring hot orange as he inhaled. "I can smell your brain frying."

"That's what happens when you have to think for two. Find yourself a brain and I won't have to think so much."

Rolling his eyes at the comment, Sasuke took a final puff and flicked the butt of his cigarette over the lip of the trench and into no man's land. Smoking was such a wasteful and disgusting habit, but that didn't seem to be enough to sway the Uchiha to give it up. Every little bit of safe normalcy was appreciated.

Fire exploded, and the pair of young men hit the dirt with curses. " Fucking assholes." Sasuke growled, Sharingan flaring momentarily as he tossed a glance over his shoulder at the smoking conjuration cannon that had just been fired. The explosion was just a a bit of the posturing the Gehennan troops were supposed to do, but it was still enough to rattle Sasuke's frayed nerves.

And based on the way Vali was muttering under his breath, the other man felt the same way.

Brushing the dust from his uniform, Sasuke crawled back to his feet and peered up over the edge of the trench across to the Mictlanese lines. The little fire test hadn't disturbed the tight knot of soldiers that made up the Theta Pocket, but then, when they had some fifty thousand troops crammed in over the space of a few dozen miles, a single cannon probably wasn't enough to spook them.

Sasuke couldn't be sure how wide their encirclement ran, but he wouldn't be surprised if the Limbo Strip was left as a mishmash of violently churned ditches and barren plateaus by the time the war was won.

Whenever that would be.

He hoped that High Command figured their shit out and brought the conflict to and end soon. It had been months since he'd been called to the front, and the thrill of battle had worn off. Sasuke wanted to go home. He wanted to see Rias and Akeno and all the rest. He even missed Naruto's ugly mug.

"Oh hey! There you are, Chief."

Phineas jumped up and slung an arm over Sasuke's neck, swinging his weight so he could catch Vali's neck under the other arm.

"Colonel" the brunette greeted Vali solemnly, legs dangling freely in the air until Sasuke got fed up and dumped him in the dirt.
"Oww…"

Rubbing at the back of his neck, Sasuke briefly weighed the merit of kicking the brat while he was down. But it would probably feel like kicking a retarded puppy, and he lacked that level of evil in his soul.

Apparently Vali was just that evil though, since the White Dragon Emperor seemed to have no problem walking over the groaning private's back before he fled down the trench and left Sasuke alone with the troublemaker.

"One day you're going to annoy the wrong individual." Sasuke sighed, bending low and grabbing the back of Phineas' collar. Yanking the green eyed devil upright, the Uchiha ignored the faint choking sounds his underling emitted.

"But if I do, you'll be there to save me, won't you, Chief?"

"No."

Phineas begin to blubber at the deadpan denial, eyes going watery for about three quarters of a minute before a thought seemed to strike him. The despair flooding the brunette's face was wiped away so quickly it nearly gave Sasuke whip-lash, and then the private was digging about in his pocket.

Grinning as his hand found what he was looking for, Phineas yanked a little box of fudge from his pocket and shoved it in his commanding officer's face with a triumphant "Tada!"

"If you keep trying to force feed me your sister's baking, I'm going to cut your hands off."

Once more, fat tears behind to shine in the corners of Phineas' green orbs.

"Okay, fine! I'll have one. Just stop crying."

"I knew you cared, Chief!"

"…Someone end my life."

Running a thumb over the slightly crinkled page of one of Sasuke's letters, Akeno sighed and tossed it in the pile with the rest that Sasuke had mailed since deploying. She shouldn't be dwelling on her friend's absence, but there was so little to actually do in Heaven. They were loathe to train seriously in case their so-called hosts would take it badly, and there were only so many times Akeno could soak in the bath or go for a walk.

Not that pouring over old memories was particularly riveting, but at least it helped the Thunder Priestess come to terms with her life and her feelings.

Akeno spared a side glance for Rias' snoozing form on the bed and briefly considered waking her best friend up before dismissing the thought. Even if she did, there was nothing to do, and she might end up annoying Rias for disrupting the redhead's rest for no real reason. And not irritating Rias was at the top of Akeno's priority list.

If Akeno made her friend angry, then the distance that she could feel between them would probably grow, and that would cut the half-angel to the core. Rias was already living half in her own head lately, and Akeno had no desire to drive her away entirely. She wanted the old closeness they used to have back, but Akeno was beginning to suspect that it might never return.
There wasn't a lot of space for Akeno when the only thing that was on Rias' mind was Sasuke. It made Akeno jealous that she'd been practically unconsciously written out of her friend's heart for the sake of a man. It made her guilty too, because that man was also Akeno's friend, and someone that she was more than fond of.

Such was the life of a third wheel, she supposed.

Akeno already knew that once the war was ended, things were going to change. It was said that absence made the heart grow fonder, and she knew the silly little idiom was true. Before Sasuke had left, he'd just been one of many things that Rias focused on in the run of a day. After he left, it seemed the Uchiha consumed the majority of Rias' thoughts. There'd been a brief respite when they were forced to play diplomats to the Tepes Kingdom, but as soon as they came back the obsessive letter writing resumed.

And since Sasuke wrote back just as obsessively, Akeno assumed that he was just as tangled up in yearning. Once the two figured out why they had decided that such frequent correspondence was needed, the Thunder Priestess predicted that drama and feelings would abound.

What joy.

"What are you doing?" Rias slurred sleepily, teal eyes blinking open to peer at the dark-haired woman. The redhead rolled about in the wide bed, glaring at the clock that stated it was half past midnight in glowing green numbers.

Violet eyes scanned back over the messy pile of letters, and Akeno slouched back into the leather couch with a lazy sigh. "Nothing at all, Rias."

Rias stared at the back of her friend's head, considering the unbound waterfall of midnight black tresses and the tired slouch of Akeno's shoulders. "Come on." She decided, flopping down on her back and holding her arms up like a babe looking to be picked up.

Feet pattered over wood as Akeno left her seat and circled around to loom over the lounging Ruin Princess. The invitation was obvious, and she only hesitated a few moments before caving and climbing into bed with her mistress.

Pale arms wrapped around Akeno's back as Rias drew her into a close cuddle, and stayed there with all the familiarity due to someone she'd slept in the same bed with for years. "Go to sleep." She mumbled, waiting until the tense muscles of Akeno's body relaxed. Whatever had the Thunder Priestess so wound up lately didn't matter. Rias was determined that it wouldn't get in between them.

Koneko let her feet dangle over the edge of the windowsill. Ivory moonlight turned the pale skin of her legs as white as snow, and the nekomata idly wondered if Heaven's sun and moon were natural or if they were magical constructs like Gehenna's.

It didn't really matter either way, because the Third Heaven was natural enough that she could feel the faint tickle of chakra with her sixth sense. The Overworld was so full of youth and vitality that she could understand why the old Satans had fought so long and so hard to conquer it. The world was magnificent, and the chakra she could taste was the cleanest she'd ever encountered.

For the first time in a while, Koneko felt something that approached peace.

Glancing over the moon dappled fields for any sign of sentient life, Koneko's tawny gaze failed to note a single angel or other holy being that might take an interest in her. Which was just as well, since she had no intention of showing her secrets off to anyone.
Heat flowed over her flesh, pouring like warm honey down the nerves of her scape and along every bump of her spine. Koneko could feel skin and bone shift in a way that wasn't painful per se, but wasn't entirely comfortable either. A final pulse rocked over her, and the white-haired girl let her ears and tail burst free from their confinement.

The physical sense of release was almost enough to make her smile. If Koneko had to compare the sensation of assuming her true form to anything, it would be to the relief that came after being allowed to stretch a formerly tied up limb. More and more she found herself indulging in her real body, and Koneko knew just where to lay the blame for it.

At the feet of a certain bumbling overly cat-obsessed Uchiha and stupid meddling dragon god. If not for the little trip they'd taken into Sasuke's inner world, Koneko could have happily gone on hiding her nekomata features as much as possible. Except thanks to the two of them, her feline characteristics been exposed to too many people, and Sasuke apparently had taken that as a carte blanche to needle her about them.

But now Sasuke was gone, and there was no guarantee when or even if he'd ever return. The summons hadn't been Sasuke's fault, but that didn't prevent her from getting angry at him. The Uchiha had no right to come into her life like he had and smash all the icy surety she'd once had to pieces. If he was going to wriggle his way into their affections, the least he could do was stay and be responsible for the fallout.

Without Sasuke, there was no one to bond with Yuuto over the way of the sword. Her blond friend would work himself into the ground by himself, silent and grim-faced because he'd come to depend on lazily sparring and trading techniques with Sasuke in order to hold back the hungry memories of the Holy Sword Project. It was a silent bond of brotherhood, but Koneko doubted either of the fools had figured out what it meant to them.

Without Sasuke, who was supposed to be the silent pillar of unchanging fortitude that Akeno put her back to? Rias was Akeno's friend, and they possibly even loved each other a little bit, but Koneko knew that Akeno's personal issues needed a more taciturn touch. He'd made himself indispensable and then left Akeno spinning in the wind in his absence. If there was one thing that Koneko could do, it was observe, and she knew Akeno didn't have the introspection to know what the root cause of her discontent was.

Whatever issues that Akeno and Yuuto had paled in comparison to Rias' though. Koneko was not the best at interpreting feelings, but she'd have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to see the glaring signs of infatuation. Rias forced herself to be the peerage's den mother, and had adapted her role into being the velvet glove over Sasuke's iron. Without him she was empty and directionless.

At least Gasper's problems were just the typical run-of-the-mill insanity that seemed to be required to join Rias' peerage, rather than the result of co-dependency with a tsundere asshole.

It was just as well that Sasuke had promised not to die, because once he came back Koneko was going to kill him herself. But only after satisfying her own needs. The romps she liked to take through nature had been lonely without the Uchiha's silent presence, and the nekomata wanted at least one more lap together for old time's sake.

Someone needed to help her keep Shirone in the grave, and Koneko didn't know who else to turn to that would really understand the need to reject parts of a person's identity.
The soil beneath him was leached and ruined from the constant bombardment of warfare, but when Sirzechs stepped over it, he felt for the first time in months like he was on solid ground. Tilting his head back, the Crimson Satan let his eyes shut and inhaled deeply. The air stunk of the heavy smell of ozone, and as he sensed the swell of sorcery building up around him in dozens upon dozens of bodies, Sirzechs knew the moment of truth was at hand.

"Ajuka."

Forest green cloth ruffled as the scientist turned to his best friend and stepped up next to him. "Yes, Sirzechs?" There was no teasing or flippant curiosity left in the Satan Beelzebub. Just a readiness to do what was necessary and risk everything for the sake of winning.

"When we cross over, I expect that we'll meet our hosts face-to-face very quickly. When we do, I want you to focus on Cihuacoatl. Your Kankara Formula should have the best results with her."

Stroking his chin, Ajuka idly observed the way the crowd of ultimate class devils and fallen angels they'd gathered began to separate by species to prevent the angelic and demonic barriers they'd summon from conflicting. "Fair enough." the green-haired devil agreed easily. There was really no question that of any possible match up, the goddess of the Cihuateteo would be the easiest one for Ajuka. The Kakara Formula magic Ajuka had developed enabled him to theoretically achieve any result with his spells, provided he could calculate for it.

And he'd dissected enough cihuateteo to have a good idea of their leader's defining variables.

"Please don't start cooking up plans before we even get here!" Calling out from a dozen feet away, Serafall hopped up and down while waving energetically at her two comrades. Falbium Asmodeus was close on her heels, bald head gleaming under the light of Gehenna's artificial sun.

Greeting the two other Satans with a half-smile, Sirzechs stepped forward to clasp Asmodeus' forearm in a firm warrior's grip. It had been unbelievably long since he'd seen the other man, but they'd always been in command at two very different places over the course of the war, in order to prevent a single attack from taking out both of the devils' top tacticians.

Serafall was having none of the traditionally masculine distance, opting instead to leap up and wrap her arms around Sirzechs' neck in a choking hug. "It's been so long, Sirzechs-chan! If I didn't know better, I'd assume you were avoiding me."

"I'd never do that." Sirzechs smiled politely, patting the top of the woman's dark head until she let go with a little pout. "You know how things can get. Can you blame me for getting caught up at my post?"

Sticking her tongue out at the redhead, Serafall blew a raspberry before bouncing on over to needle at Ajuka.

Falbium yawned, musing that the dirt looked like a mighty comfy place to lay down and take a nap before waving at the enormous purple dragon he could see a few miles in the distance. Since they had all gathered, there was no point in delaying further, and Tannin would pass on the command to begin casting the barrier.

A few seconds later, the thick scent of ozone intensified exponentially, and an enormous curtain of venomous violet light exploded up and in. Moving like a slowly spreading stain, the demonic barrier

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grew until it covered the entire central field of the Limbo Strip in a giant translucent purple dome. It was almost like being on the inside of an enormous malevolent Easter egg, and Falbium snorted in self-deprecating amusement.

"It begins." Sirzechs murmured, blue eyes wide and staring as the second barrier sprung. Golden glass etched with runes spread in hexagons, wrapping up the demonic barrier with the concentrated sorcery of a choir of fallen angels. Somewhere out there Azazel was hard at work. And so were his wife and parents, he supposed. All of them were draining themselves to give the Satans the opportunity to bring an end to the conflict.

Serafall hummed, folding her hands behind her back as the barriers completed with a final echoing chime. All sensation of the realm at large was cut off to her, and even the Satans would be hard pressed to escape their new confinement. If the Aztec gods came through the weak space between realms in hopes of striking out at Hell, they would quickly find themselves caged in. "Even the wind's stopped."

Licking a finger and holding up his hand, Ajuka smiled the eerie little grin he always got when he discovered a new little tidbit of information. "So it is." the scientist marveled. He wondered if the disruption in air currents was just because of the concentration of magic, or if the seal was so complete that it prevented even oxygen molecules from passing through.

"Enough wasting time." Sirzechs declared sharply, shaking himself out of the last vestiges of melancholy. Everything that made the redhead Sirzechs needed to be shed, in order to reveal the diamond-hard Satan Lucifer underneath. "How long do you believe this barrier can hold up, Ajuka?"

"Based on the traditional reserves of an ultimate class devil and the expected individual energy output for such a weaving? Two days."

"Fine." Assimilating the time limit with aplomb, Sirzechs settled one hand on his hip and turned to face the other three Satans. "Ignore the small fry. They'll probably be massed on the other end, but if we kill enough in one blast it should bring their gods running. Ajuka will fight Cihuacotal. Serafall, you go right at Xolotl. Falbium will engage Mictecacihuatl. Leave Mictlantehcuhtli himself to me."

Blue eyes flared as Sirzechs glanced meaningfully at Serafall. "Don't get caught up on things like one-on-one duels. We are not samurai fighting for honour. We're fighting to win before they slip around us and attack this country. Kill them as quickly as you can, and then go to help each other out."

"Aye, aye captain!"

Cold white light glittered in a sea of black, shining like gems caught in a pool of ink. Deep indigo and a brighter violet crackled through here and there, snaking between the stars and adding a solemn vibrancy to the void. It was a cruelly beautiful sky that reigned over a cruelly beautiful land.

Serafall eyed the circle of pale lavender mountains to the west with proprietary eyes, considering the way snow covered their jagged peaks. "We'll have to take over this place." She shrugged, not sounding the least bit put out by the possibility of violent conquest.

Peace was one of the greatest of goods, but she was still a warrior at the end of the day.

"I don't think this is the time to be shopping for real estate." Sirzechs snorted, spreading his feet to shoulder width and tightening his stance. It was the only concession he made to the hammering spellfire that was crashing into his shield, brightening the deep crimson of the Power of Destruction...
in streaks of scarlet.

As soon as they'd emerged from the Dimensional Gap and settled their feet on Mictlan's black loam, the legions of star demons and cihuateteo had let loose volley after volley of electric green lightning and ebony fire. Such weak spells couldn't have actually hurt the Satans, but Sirzechs' quick barrier enabled them to chat like it was tea time rather than behave like they were on an actual battlefield.

"I don't think Serafall is scouting out the housing market." Falbium cut in to defend the only woman in their group. Running an absent hand over the pate of his shaved head, he kicked the toe of his boot into the rich soil. "It's just that given the optics of the invasion to all the other factions, any terms less than outright conquest would be seen as too lenient."

Sirzechs sighed, scanning over the massed Mictlanese army that was throwing everything it had against his magic with no effect. "And to think that we'd rebelled in the first place to avoid having to wage such a relentless massacre."

"It's no matter." The Crimson Satan decided, shaking his head before any of his friends could continue the impromptu debate. "It's time to do what we came for… Serafall."

Pink lips pursed, but after smoothing down the front of her green uniform Serafall moved to obey. Bringing up her arms to hover horizontally, the violet-eyed woman bent at the elbows until her hands came to a halt at chest level. The right hand settled over the left, and once she poked out her thumbs to point in a peak at the center of her breastbone, Serafall looked she was aping an ancient warrior monk.

Slowly, a small baby blue circle carved through the dust around the four devils. It curved along the inside of Sirzechs' ethereal barrier, providing just enough space for them all to stand together shoulder to shoulder. Runes etched along the edges, as small as the nail of Serafall's thumb. At first there were only a few enchanted characters, but they multiplied exponentially until there were hundreds of symbols marching at Serafall's command.

The smell of black magic and ozone thickened until it would probably choke a mere human, building as a palpable reminder of the power curling inside the black-haired woman. Every time he saw her get serious and submerge into the arctic currents of her sorcery, Sirzechs was reminded why Gehenna had given her the epithet of 'The Ultimate Female Devil'.

Serafall wasn't the wisest woman that had been born in Hell. She wasn't the richest or the most beautiful or even the one that had shaped their history the most. Such descriptions better fit any given dozen of other women better. But of all the female devils there had ever been, she was without a doubt the most powerful.

From edge cardinal point on Serafall's runic circle, a blazing blue spike emerged. Slowly at first, but picking up speed as it went, the lines of magic streaked unerringly outward. Faster and faster they went, flying miles in seconds as they marked out a four-pointed cross over the land.

Nothing was spared the reach of her sorcery, and it cut without distinction through villages and over lakes. Mountains were passed right through by translucent traceries. No doubt more than one ignorant citizen had stopped to scratch their head at the sight of a strange azure border painted over their fields.

A dozen miles were swallowed up. And then the next dozen, and the next, until straining to the edge of her limits, Serafall consumed hundreds of miles with each individual spire of her glyph.

Slowly inhaling, Serafall steeled her nerves and let her eyelids fall into a heavy half-lidded
detachment. Through every cell of her body, her magic swelled like the relentless tides of the sea.

Wave on wave crested, because before she'd become the Satan Leviathan she'd been Serafall Sitri, and the utter mastery of water elemental magic was her birthright.

And then she took that element a step further, dropping her chilled warlord's heart in and freezing it all. The sensation of the warm rich ocean plunged, blackening to the dead pressure of the deep. No light and no heat roamed, and theemptiness hungered for the cessation of all things.

Absolute zero.

When Serafall exhaled, it was in a white curl of snowflakes and frost.

"Celcius Cross Trigger."

Ice surged up from the four corners of Serafall's enormous runic symbol, razor sharp and deadly as they aimed for the sky like the crystal peaks of conjured mountains. A faint chime sounded, almost musical with its sad melancholic note, and then the freezing began.

Outward the frozen masses expanded. They rolled like avalanches as the ivory snow and clear crystals swamped over trenches, buildings, plants, mountains, valleys, and even people. No crevice was left unfilled, no peak went unburied, no stream went uncovered, and no individual went untouched by the potent flash freezing enchantment.

A minute later and it was over, leaving the four Satans standing in the middle of a winter wonderland. Crisp clean snow and ice coated everything, creating a new tableau that was more representative of a polar ice cap than an Underworld realm. The scene was deceptively cheery, giving no hint of the hundreds of thousands of lives that had just been snuffed out.

If Serafall had cast such a spell in the human world, she would have buried Ireland.

Genocide in a moment.

Dropping her hands to her side, Serafall clenched her jaw and kicked the heel of her knee-high boot into the soil so she could steady herself after the sudden drain of energy. Only the tiny circle that stretched several feet around them remained clear of cold crystal and icy fluff, and that only drove home how much she wanted to be alone in that moment.

History would probably know her as a monster that was able to annihilate communities with an easy breath and very little remorse. But necessity knows no morality, and Serafall had long ago made her peace with breathtakingly cruel decisions. Eventually all species would enter the dustbin of history, but so long as she ruled, Gehenna would always triumph.

Just like Sirzechs, Serafall was willing to place constraints like righteousness opposite victory on a scale, and let everything be swallowed up by her need to win. The others who could understand such a cold blooded choice she could count on one hand.

In another time, and another place, perhaps she would have even admitted she loved him a little bit for being just as fucked up as her, even if she'd lost that particular battle to Grayfia a long time ago.

But there was no time left for maudlin musings and airy 'what-if's.

The ice field was cracking.

"They're coming." Serafall murmured, pointing off towards the northeast. She could feel the swift shattering of her enchantment under the approach of the lord of the realm, and within the space of a
few short minutes their faces would be full of very angry gods.

Green light began to shine in just the faintest little sparkles of light. "Well then, shall we wait here or ride out and meet them?" Ajuka chuckled roughly, thin bands of glowing green circling every knuckle of both hands along with the bones of the scientists wrists. The Kankara Formula was one of the deadliest and most potent spells ever created, but it looked so unintimidating compared to its actual potential.

"Do you even have to ask?" Sirzechs smiled wryly, clasping a warm grip over Serafall's shoulder and shaking the woman just slightly. "Let's go."

The Crimson Satan rose into the air with a rustle of cloth and the faint jangle of his armor. Without another word, he began to soar forward over the artificial ice field. Sirzechs didn't even have to look back to know that his friends were hot on his heels, following the lead of their de facto commander with unbreakable loyalty.

If Sirzechs was a weaker devil, the sudden appearance of a gleaming white cleaver swinging down would have been the end of him. The bonesaw would have hammered between the redhead's eyes, carving down in a deadly slice that cut through flesh, blood, and bone. Perhaps the grey matter of his brain would have clung to the sides of the blade after the two halves of his bifurcated body fell away, dotting the pale surface with squishy wet chunks.

But Sirzechs was not a weaker devil. When the cleaver came down, he swung his hips to the right like a ballroom dancer, rolling in a midair pirouette that easily brought Sirzechs safely out of the way of the sudden murder attempt. Just for the sake of appearances, the Satan reached out with his thin fingers and brushed them along the side of the blade as it passed him by, shattering it with a tap of his nails.

"I see that not all the rumors of your prowess are exaggerated." Mictlantecuhtli greeted, tones smoky and low like the sinful indigo curl of cigar smoke in a bar. It was a surprisingly cultured tenor for a deity that demanded blood sacrifice and ritual cannibalism.

As the death god turned he released the hilt of his broken cleaver and let the hilt drop to the distant iced over plains below. Slit red eyes glowed in the sockets of a skull mask, and as the long chains that hung from Mictlantecuhtli's rattled in the breeze, Sirzechs realized that the deity's adornments were carved from real human bone.

Throwing up his hand to stop the other Satans from charging forward as they wheeled through the air about him, Sirzechs narrowed his blue glare on Mictlan's king. "We're not here to chat." Sirzechs informed the monarch coolly, rushing forward in a burst so swift it tunneled his vision. They were long past the point where things could be resolved without blood, and at the end of the day, Sirzechs intended that the blood price wouldn't be paid by devilkind.

"Of course not." The death god sighed airily, the bare tattooed muscles of his chest flexing as he caught Sirzechs' testing punch with a forearm block. Neither man was throwing much in the way of force into their blows, but each cautious exchange was enough to rend with air with sonic booms.

Motion moved around the corners of Sirzechs' field of view, and the redhead knew it was the remaining gods of Mictlan arriving to tangle with the other Satans. But he couldn't spare more than a sliver of focus for any of them, because all of the Crimson Satan's attention was tied up in testing the queerly genial overlord's defenses.

It was like the man wasn't even disturbed that Serafall had just murdered hundreds of thousands of
his subjects. Where they just that expendable to him, or was Mictlantecuhtli hiding a deep-seated sense of rage?

Regardless, playtime was over. Sirzechs had spent enough time prodding the god with hand to hand combat and had already determined the death god was physically durable. Any fight was going to be a real battle, and any real battle always escalated to magic.

No more games.

Sirzechs leapt back through the air, solidifying a small platform of sorcery to stand on as he frowned at his opponent. Curling his hands into claws, Sirzechs dove into the swell of energy in his body and spun out an enchantment. Thick black-red curls of the Power of Destruction erupted from the pores of his arms, swirling tightly over the blue-grey of his vambraces and up over the elbows like a sentient flame.

The bloodshot orbs hovering in the eyeholes of Mictlantecuhtli's bone mask shone with a feverish glint, and the Aztec night god conjured up his own brand of venomous green and thick black magic. Viridian mist swirled like streamers of ash over the muscled planes of the tanned god's body, never quite touching the denser layer of midnight that covered the skin directly.

Then they moved.

Shards of light exploded across the sky as the two clashed. A wobbly ethereal circle of scarlet smoke here, a curling crescent of emerald splinters there, and always the sound of heavy booming. The smell of ozone hung heavy over the glistened winter landscape as the battle of two magicians rushed on.

Sirzechs appeared in a flicker of red and black, hand outstretched and facing directly downwards as a dense ball of magic swirled in his palm. A split second later a hungry column of the Power of Destruction burst forth, only to fragment off Mictlantecuhtli's ebony barrier into half a dozen of smaller beams that arced wildly across Mictlan.

Neither warrior stayed to watch as Sirzechs' deflected spell carved deep furrows through the ice and dirt that stretched for miles, accelerating faster than the untrained eye could follow as they resumed trading enchantment reinforced strikes to the song of percussive shockwaves.

Throwing his palm forward as he rocketed through the air, Micltantecuhtli fired off a throbbing spell of poisonous green and black that the Crimson Satan neatly sidestepped. On and on the dark spear twirled, falling down like a meteor to strike into the side of a distant mountain and vaporize it in a horrific clash of sound and light.

Warily eying the conflagration, Sirzechs let his lips curl back in a vicious snarl before launching his form through a weaving loop. The crimson burn of his magic faded as the Satan threw every ounce of energy he had into sheer speed, piercing through the air like a thunderclap.

In one moment Sirzechs was a hundred meters distant, and in the next he was right up in the god's face with a hand wrapped around the thick column of Mictlantecuhtli's throat. The other drove violently into the soft flesh of the masked man's stomach, bruising skin and organs with the force.

Mictlantecuhtli's made a single choking retch, and then seized the wrist of Sirzechs' strangling hand in a steel grip. The glow of emerald magic escaped between the cracks of the death god's fingers, spreading poison and rot with every second contact lingered.

Cursing lowly, Sirzechs ripped away and put some distance between himself and his enemy. His
entire arm ached, and a quick glance down revealed the impression of a black handprint on his forearm where the flesh had mortified. Here and there the skin split, oozing thick yellow pus and revealing the glimpse of sickly red muscle and wet bone.

Sirzechs shook out his hand, forcing away the pain with a wry smirk. What else could he have expected? Killing a god was no easy task. Even for him.

Thick silent tears crusted the fur around his eye sockets.

To his believers, Xolotl had always been a fearsome god. With the head of a dog, the fur covered body of a man, and reversed feet, he had the body of a deformed monstrosity. But despite his residence in the underworld and his terrifying aspect, the psychopomp was actually the most kind-hearted of his peers.

Not even the patron mother of Cihuateteo had expressed more than passing regret when Serafall Leviathan massacred the masses.

Xolotl had wept, letting loose thin running tears as he worked through his sorrow and anger before attending the battlefield. He had needed to make peace with his emotional turmoil, because if he hadn't he wouldn't be able to fight with his head on straight. And the god of monstrosities needed a clear head to kill the Ultimate Female Devil.

Fire and lightning exploded from the tips of Xolotl's fingers, crashing against a white-blue sheet of conjured ice and drilling holes through the barrier with malevolent hunger. Vengeance and justice would belong to him, both for the recent dead and for the millions of others that had perished under Gehenna's deprivations.

The God of the Bible was dead, and there was no other deity left to shield the Biblical pantheon from righteous rage. They hadn't seen Kokabiel as a particularly trustworthy source, but everything the fallen angel had said all those years ago made sense, so they'd gambled. All that was left to do was see if it all paid off or not.

Violet orbs glittered like chips of ice as Serafall shattered through her own barrier, weaving high and coming down with a punishing axe kick that smashed into the crown of Xolotl's head. Down the god went, trailing little sparks of flames and electricity as he hit the ground.

Dirt and ice blasted outwards, kicking up a cloud of black and white as the force of Xolotl's momentum cracked the earth and created an enormous crater. Perhaps if he was particularly unlucky he might have landed on one of the frozen statues that was left behind by the people Serafall had killed.

But she had no time for such morbid thoughts, because Xototl was suddenly right in her face, fist hammering into Serafall's jaw so hard something cracked and the taste of blood filled her mouth.

Reeling back away with a wary glare, Serafall pressed two fingers into the aching side of her face and instantly chilled the entire area so that it would feel nothing. No doubt she'd caused herself a little more damage doing so, but she'd worry about that later.

Xototl began cursing her out again, but the Satan easily tuned out the god's rants and scanned the horizon for a spot of inspiration. She needed to come up with something that would do away with him quickly, because just slogging it out was going to take too long. She could see the crashing distant signs of Sirzechs struggling with Mictlan's king, but other than that everything was just a featureless expanse of white.
Perhaps she should just pull a Sirzechs and go for broke within the confines of her own power.

Dodging around a dozen blazing orange lances, Serafall drew her hand to her chest before whipping her arm out in a wide arc. Short daggers of ice flowed silkily from the tips of her fingers, cutting across the sky with a hiss.

Serafall didn't bother to wait and see if the strike connected, lowering herself to the ground and settling the heels of her leather boots into the ice and snow with a crunch. She'd once heard it said that victory depended on payment in advance. If someone planned well enough and strategized hard enough, then they could overcome the odds.

That was a lie. Tactics helped, but the real path to winning lay in the ability to die. The warrior that emerged triumphant wasn't the one that wanted to win more, or who had studied enough. The one that was successful was the one that was willing to empty herself of everything. Entrust everything to the fight, and hold nothing back. It was only when one was willing to sacrifice everything that they could attain anything.

Serafall inhaled, violet gaze heavy and tracking as she slapped aside an electric lance and followed Xototl with her eyes. The breath chilled in her lungs, stabbing tiny prickles of cold agony into the tender insides of her chest before the Satan exhaled cold white mist.

Again she inhaled, and again she exhaled. Every breath cycle made her even colder, deepening the arctic winter in her veins until the pale warmth of her cheeks had whitened to the ivory of a frozen corpse. Serafall's lips turned blue, curving mulberry indigo until they faded to a more sinister black.

Still she pressed on, letting her mind and body fall deeper into the cold grip of her magic. Serafall was the deep dark places of the ocean floor, colder than the dark side of the moon and pressurized like the heart of a hateful star.

All of the Satans had a center that defined them; that revealed who and what they truly were beneath all the benevolent facades and the idealism they espoused. Sirzechs was pure and unadulterated destruction, seething mindlessly and consuming everything.

Serafall was not mindless. She was old and hungry, like the monster of ancient tales that humans had once whispered to one another around the campfire during the dawn of days. Gehenna had given her the title of Leviathan, but they hadn't ever really understood how fitting it was.

A final pair of fortifying breaths, and Serafall reached up to touch her cheek with one pale finger. She brushed off the snowflakes that had formed there, marking a faint streaks in the hoarfrost that coated her skin. "Let's end this."

Then Serafall launched up at the speed of a lightning bolt, crossing the air so quickly that the only sign of her passage was the fading white streamers her supercooled skin left on contact with the warmer air.

Xototl and Serafall collided in a tangle of white and black limbs, both shrieking out with pain and hatred as the sheer difference in body temperatures wreaked havoc on both of them.

The furred skin of Xototl's arms took on an icy sheen as he traded punches with the Satan, dark hairs falling out under the unholy chill to reveal wrinkled grey skin that immediately began to darken as frostbite began to sink into him. The dog-headed god roared, headbutting Serafall with a crunch that broke her nose.

Blue blood dripped from Serafall's nostrils, joining the faint trickles of azure fluid that seeped from
the cracks in her skin. Every time they came in contact the chilled flesh of her body was forcibly boiled by fire spells and body heat, splitting open as it absorbed the warmth unevenly. They were in nothing more or less than a war of attrition, struggling to see whose body would give out first and collapse.

Xototl was confident, because even though agony sheared through him every time he struck out at the dark-haired woman, it seemed she was getting the worst of it. Blackened patched marred the dark fur and sickly grey skin of the god's body, but his movements were still smooth and when he breathed it was without pain or difficulty.

Serafall by contrast moved jerkily, face pulled in a grimace of great suffering and something a little like despair. The only thing that seemed at odds with her appearance was the way she hit out at him relentlessly, fists or conjured ice never losing an inch of strength or force despite the way her appearance was so run down.

And Serafall knew that Xototl was confident, because he taunted her and made sure that she knew that her death was coming. But if Serafall had been in a speaking mood, she might have warned him against making such assumptions. Xototl was fire and lightning and life, and despite his occupation as a death god he was like all Aztecs gods, and ruled over a cycle of rebirth.

She was ice and death and all the cold dead things left behind at the end of the universe, and no timebound death god would match her. The march to entropy was the one overhanging constant in all of existence. The darkness yearned to smother everything out, and no matter how long it took, that darkness always, always won.
Chapter 48

"Hold still and fight me like a man, you white-faced coward!"

"No, I don't think that I will."

Ajuka smiled mirthlessly, twisting around on the point of his booted heel as he dodged Cihuacoatl's conjured spear of emerald glass. If he were entirely honest with himself, he wasn't all too keen on having to show up on the battlefield. Despite being a Satan, the green-haired devil could not be considered by any definition of the word a *patriot*.

But whatever was important to Sirzechs was important to him. His redhaired friend had decided to become a Satan, so Ajuka had done the same. Sirzechs took the job seriously, so Ajuka fulfilled his obligations conscientiously. And whoever decided to become Sirzechs' enemy was also choosing to become Ajuka's enemy.

So if the angry wrinkle-faced mother of the Cihuateteo decided to throw her weight in the war and threaten the things Sirzechs cared about, Ajuka would personally slaughter the goddess. He'd butcher her body and scatter the little pieces of flesh to the wind if Sirzechs asked.

Such was the life of a borderline sociopath that really only gave half a damn about the few friends he had.

Meeting Cihuacoatl's amber eyes, Ajuka sighed and brushed off the faint layer of dirt that covered his light green cloak. The joints and planes of his hands were ringed with circles of glowing viridian light, the Kankara Formula eagerly waiting for an input of information so it could calculate a set outcome and enforce that result on the world.

"I don't suppose you would be willing to surrender yourself into my custody?" Ajuka prodded, stepping lightly over the ice coated ground as he circled the aged crone with one eye focused on her. The rest of his attention was scanning the horizon, looking for the telltale flashes that would signal his comrades' in conflict. Cihuacoatl might have cut a long bleeding gash across his brow, but Ajuka was barely winded, and he was more worried about his friends than himself.

Scoffing at the question, Cihuacoatl stretched out a wizened hand and called up another gleaming green lance. She bashed it against her shield in a wordless taunt, reveling in the sound of crystal on turtle shell. The tune reminded her of elder days, before she'd grown aged and tired of waiting for another rebirth. The Europeans had destroyed her believers, stifling the influx of new Cihuateteo and throwing off the cycle of reincarnation that had previously kept her eternally young.

"I don't suppose you would be willing to surrender yourself up? I'm sure we could find a little cave for you to tinker away in." The goddess sneered, the painted red lines that covered her face distorting with the hateful expression. Once upon a time Cihuacoatl had been no crueler than her duties required, but that was before those who loved and followed her were almost utterly extinguished. Ajuka Beelzebub was just the newest face in a long line of murderers, and she was a firm adherent to the school of retributive justice.

Ajuka just shrugged, flexing his hands as he stopped searching for a sign of his friends and focused entirely on his opponent. Sirzechs had asked him to finish her off as soon as he could, so that was just what he'd do.

Rushing forward with the click of his heels over Serafalls' conjured plain of ice, Ajuka wreathed one
hand in a waving ribbon of light and thrust it at Cihuacoatl. A faint flicker of pain shot up his
fingernails has the crone scowled and blocked it with the patterned surface of her turtle shell shield,
but Ajuka didn't let that dissuade him as he attacked with his other hand.

Green sparks flew through the air as they traded blows, striking and blocking in a deadly dance. The
embers hit the ground in varying shades, from bright lime to dark reseda, sizzling as they melted
through the ice and left tiny holes. It was the only visible remnant of their struggle, because unlike his
fellow Satans Ajuka had little preference for grandiose spells and huge explosions.

Adrenaline throbbed through the scientist as his flesh instinctively reacted to the thrill of combat,
releasing hormones in a bid to make him fight harder and fight longer. Ajuka counted the pulse
hammering in his ears at a hundred and sixty beats per minute, tracking every facet of his bodily
functions with an unerring focus on detail, because it mattered for the Kankara Formula.

If Ajuka could calculate for it, he could do anything, which was probably why he was a little more
reckless with his health than a devil of his position should be.

Watching the sharp tip of Cihuacoatl's spear weave in brilliantly skilled but ultimately predictable
patterns, Ajuka waited until it was just there and leaned forward. Agony burned over the nerves of
his stomach as the lance pierced the Satans' abdomen, but Ajuka promptly ignored the sensation and
grinned at the utterly baffled expression that crossed the elderly goddess' face.

"Surprise." He mocked, carefully weighing every note with the intent of enraging her as much as
possible. Cihuacoatl's face spasmed in anger, but she got over the sting of the insult quickly and tried
to yank her spear back out of the Satan's body.

Ajuka followed the tan goddess' pull, one hand reaching out to grab a hank of her hair and give a
sharp yank. The other verily kissed over the wrinkled flesh of the crone's cheek, cutting the flesh to
the bone and letting blood run freely. The Satan collected both physical samples, scooping up a few
beads of crimson on one finger and tearing out a handful of hair with his other hand.

"You sadistic little monster." Cihuacoatl growled, leaping back and tearing out her conjured spear
with enough force to mangle Ajuka's flesh as the lance exited. She put some distance between them,
pressing on hand to the slice mangling her cheek with a wince.

Tuning out her bleating, Ajuka leveled his arms out parallel to the ground, and then slowly turned
them over. As his wrists rotated, a pair of beakers shimmered into existence. The enchanted
constructs caught the blood and hair as the Satan released them, glowing green and clinical as they
burned away the samples and fed the information directly into Ajuka's brain.

Ajuka hopped away as Cihuacoatl struck out, deftly dodging the strike of blazing yellow lightning
that churned up the frost covered ground. The bleeding wound in his abdomen throbbed with pain,
but with a small sparkle of viridian sorcery and a wave of the hand, Ajuka's body was entirely healed
and unruffled.

He wouldn't have been much of a scientist if he didn't know every little crevice of his own body, and
with the Kankara Formula it was child's play to undo any kind of damage he sustained. It may cost a
little bit of energy in the bargain in order to convert the beginning product to the end product, but
Ajuka could do it easily enough.

It was especially worth the investment if it annoyed his enemies, and given the way Cihuacoatl was
seething at him, Ajuka suspected the woman was more than a little irritated.

"There's no need for being so crude." The Satan sighed sarcastically, insulting his foe with mouth
while his brain poured over the chemical composition of her hair and blood and compared it to the samples he'd taken from imprisoned Cihuateteo. They were similar, but different. Was it a matter of age, or a matter of godhood? He needed a little more data before he'd launch a sequence and see how the formula worked out.

Cihuacoatl cursed, bones creaking as she drew back her spindly arm and launched her conjured spear at Ajuka with surprising force given her decrepit appearance. The padded brown leather armor that covered her torso and lower body creaked with the motion, squeaking again and again as she swiftly summoned more projectiles and threw them at the Satan.

The scuffed points of Ajuka's boots tapped and clicked as the devil spun and dodged, grimacing as each missed shot exploded behind him and launched up spires of ice and dust. The woman was putting more energy into each attack, if the way they created little flaming mushroom clouds was any indication, and if he got hit with one it would be inconvenient.

Catching one spear out of the air, Ajuka winced at the sensation of acid that burned at the skin of his palm before he swung the green crystal in a whirling arc that deflected a whistling trio of missiles with a spray of jade sparks.

"Such destructive magic." He marveled to himself, admitting that Cihuacoatl must be a sorceress of some caliber if the mere aftershock of her enchantments could practically melt away the flesh of his hands.

Ajuka snapped the spear in half, tossing the shorter upper end at his opponent like a throwing dagger while he summoned up another alembic with a thought. It took a little longer than he'd have liked to grind down the remnants of the goddess' magic, and his distraction cost him a handful of small scratches that cut over the flesh of his chest and ached fiercely.

A faint trickle of blood dripped from the corner of Ajuka's left nostril as his brain rushed to cope with the influx of information, throbbing heatedly and half blinding him with the pain. But relentlessly he pushed through it, because Ajuka was experienced enough with the costs and difficulties that came with using the Kankara Formula as a weapon.

"Are you sure you don't wish to surrender? It is probably your best hope for clemency." the Satan gasped hoarsely, taking a bony fist to the throat with a wheeze. A new cut was slashed across his forehead, running hot red blood into the corners of Ajuka's eyes, and when he blinked through the liquid it was to reveal the sight of an offended death goddess.

Warriors, Ajuka mused to himself as he accepted a jaw shattering punch with aplomb. They were always obsessed with concepts like 'honor' or 'a warrior's pride'. There was nothing shameful in being defeated and learning from one's mistakes.

Ajuka would know, since he'd done it often enough in his younger days.

"Is it not enough that you enjoy luxuries built on the blood of my children?" Cihuacoatl grit out, snapping the leather bands that held her turtle shield to her left forearm and gripping the disc with both hands. "Must you insult me as well?"

The buckler was ancient and enchanted with thick runes of protection, showcasing all the careful magnificence of a divine forge. But at that moment, the storied history of the armament didn't matter, because she was content enough to treat it as a bludgeon and smash it over and over into Beelzebub's face.

Bone and cartilage cracked, but Ajuka pushed through the pain with the patience of a trained
masochist. He could feel his face practically turning to mush, but that didn't stop the green-haired Satan from reaching forward and slashing deep into Cihuacoatl's belly with enchanted talons.

Snatching up a thick hunk of flesh, Ajuka spat out a mouthful of blood and circled back on surprisingly steady legs. Another burst of magic recalled his conjured tumbler, and with no presence of mind for his injuries Ajuka sneered through his broken mouth and dropped the flap of gore. It vaporized in a flash of bright green flame, spilling new data into Ajuka's mind.

"Thank you for your cooperation." Ajuka slurred, eying the way the wizened goddess heaved and held a hand against the seeping wound in her gut. A wave of his arm and another ration of energy restored Ajuka's formerly pristine appearance, smothering out all pain and ugliness like a coal dropped in a bucket of water.

"You… You…"

Ajuka raised an eyebrow at his seething opponent, but disregarded her as he clapped his open palms together. The green sigils caved into the flesh of his hands and arms brightened as Ajuka began to feed them magic and information, and with a small thrill he realized he was actually a little excited. It wasn't every day that he got to play around with a god after all. They were considered such unapproachable and mysterious existences.

The drain on his reserves hit Ajuka like a horse kick to the chest, sucking out every spark of vigor until the Satan was forced to collapse to his knees and suck desperately at the air. His heart was stuttering in his chest and warning him off, but the Kankara Formula required still more to move to its conclusion, so Ajuka emptied himself of everything. Either it would complete, or he would perish.

Darkness shuttered in on his vision, but Ajuka didn't register the threat of impending death. He had no thoughts. He had no words. He had no awareness or sense of self or any sort of existence. He was simply the battery that fueled the formula, rushing it to the end as the raw force of his magic drained out of his husk of a body and changed, and in doing so changed the world.

When light and consciousness and his sense of self rushed back in, it was with the force of a hurricane. In one moment Ajuka was practically dead and at peace with the empty corners of the universe. The next moment he was lurching to his feet with a racing pulse and the disgusted realization that his body had thought it was dying and pissed itself.

How droll.

Ajuka briefly considered running through a third restoration sequence to clean his clothes, but dismissed it as a frivolous venture. Perhaps in half an hour or so when he'd had the chance to build his strength back up, but there was no point in killing himself just to get rid of a little urine.

Thus resolved, the devil ran a hand through the sweat soaked green locks of his hair and turned his focus to his enemy. Cihuacoatl was neatly contained in a gleaming golden box, archaic runes shimmering in silver on the sides and flaring as the crone raged inside her new confinement like a mad dog.

"It's useless to struggle." Ajuka advised, stepping forward and nearly falling on his face. Each step was practically a new stumble, but he eventually managed to cross the snow packed field and lay a proprietary hand over the yellowed glass of the enchanted prison.

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It was one of his older calculations, graded for the strength and characteristics of its prisoner, but it still worked just as well as it had the day he'd first perfected it. With the data he'd forcibly collected on dozens of captured Cihuateteo, and the new samples he'd worked through on the battlefield, he'd
had enough information to personalize the spell for Cihuacoatl. It would hold the old goddess for at least twelve hours, or until Ajuka died; whichever ended up coming first.

"It's unfortunate that Azazel isn't here." Ajuka told the wizened goddess, frowning at her silent screams and the way she hammered her lean fist into the conjured glass right in front of his face. "He has a preference for living samples and seeing what he can create from them. I personally prefer creating something entirely new on the basis of my own thoughts."

Generally speaking, unless it was necessary Ajuka disliked experimenting on sentient beings. He might be cold and unempathetic, but he functioned based on a rational code of ethics in order to relate to his fellow beings, and typically things like vivisection were a gross violation of conventional morality.

Still, in handing her children over to Mictlantecuhtli, Cihuacoatl had made the invasion of Gehenna possible. And when they'd invaded Gehenna, they'd become Sirzechs' enemies. So Ajuka ran a thin finger over the glowing gilded crystal and smiled malevolently, blue eyes shining with cold fire.

"But don't you worry. I'll savor the data I carve out of your bones instead."

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Serafall wasn't sure when Xototl had managed to hedge her away from the results of her Celcius Cross Trigger, but evidently at some point he had, because when the dog-faced god slammed a knee into her chest he launched her through the warm trunk of a palm tree.

"Ah!" the only female Satan was unable to contain the gasp of agony as warm splinters riddled her back, shredding through the deep viridian cloth of her uniform and revealing the white flesh of her back to the Underworld. Normally she wouldn't give a damn, because a few pieces of wood wouldn't be able to cut through her skin.

But Serafall had fallen into the heartless grip of her own magic, and every square millimeter of her body was supercooled to the point that the touch of her finger could coat a lake with rime in an instant. The ability to commit such violence on mere contact didn't come cheaply, and the world rejected her just as surely as she rejected the world. Even the faint warmth of the breeze was enough to make her body prickle with the sensation of fire and needles.

Swallowing back the pain, Serafall slammed a hand into the forest loam and pushed herself upright. One foot remained in a dark leather boot, the surface iced over and gleaming, while the other was bare and seeping bluish blood into the soil.

Hellfire and ashes it hurt, but Serafall was used to pain.

What was the mere lash of physical suffering compared to the all-consuming despair of having lost her only child after all?

Serafall peeled back her black lips in a hungry snarl, peering up through the broken boughs at her opponent. The psychopomp was no better than her, with his flesh striped all over from her arctic predations and his formerly glossy fur falling out by the handful. Xototl didn't bleed yet, but that didn't really matter, because Serafall knew that her touch struck more than just the surface.

Every frostbitten line that snapped over Xototl's body was just the tip of the iceberg, hiding mortified flesh beneath. His own body was probably killing him by pumping blood through the deadened parts, carrying the filth and infection of the deceased through his veins.

Shaking her head, Serafall absently jarred lose the small collection of snowflakes that had begun to pile along the midnight tresses of her hair. Then she moved up, arms crossed over her chest and face
apathetic as she levitated out of the humid jungle.

"Damn you," Xototl panted, coughing up a thick burble of bloody phlegm before wiping his mouth across the back of a furred hand. He might be a god of monstrosities and disease, but he still had a very small notion of chivalry, and took little pleasure in beating a woman, even though the Satan seemed like a glutton for punishment. "Just stay down."

Slamming his palms together, Xototl flexed the muscles of his arms and neck. The strain built through every sinew of his twisted flesh, squeezing out physical potency to be converted into magical energy that was then fed into the swiftly building star shielded between his hands.

Orange eyes flickered as Xototl boldly meet his foe's icy violet stare. The resolve he saw there only irritated him further, because a murderess descendent of murderers had no business holding her head up so high.

The devils and angels were just the same, cruelly conquering and oppressing other pantheons simply because they could. They were greedy beings that covered up their avarice with feeble justifications about truth and survival, but Xototl had lived during the conquests and seen their real faces.

He was going to strike her down, and pave the way to a better world with her blood. It didn't matter what kind of freak magic Serafall Leviathan had, because no evil empire could endure forever, and with the God of the Bible dead the devils and angels were finally vulnerable. If his brother and the Aztec gods of the Thirteen Heavens had been willing to fight too, Xototl knew that the war would have been won already.

The deep red star hidden between the death god's fingers flared yellow, and then white, and with a wolfish grin, Xototl peeled his hands back. The white orb pulsed once, and then began to stretch and elongate, forming a dense ivory pole of glowing sorcery.

Serafall eyed the staff warily, hands coming up to cautiously summon up a trio of ice barriers. "What is that?"

"Fire." Xototl breathed as his spell reached the length of his armspan and ceased to grow. "Fire made into lightning." When the dog-man wrapped his furred hands around the plasma quarterstaff, it flickered happily, but didn't singe even a single hair.

Somehow, Serafall doubted that it would be so kind to her.

A heavy moment passed where the two warriors assessed each other, and then Xototl was flashing forward with his crusade in his heart and jubilant cry on his lips. He smashed through ice shield after ice shield, shattering the conjured cold in a tingle of broken crystal and with all the ease of popping a soap bubble.

"It doesn't matter how cold you can become." Xototl grit out, stabbing forward with his blunt plasma pole like it was a spear. The hardened collection of thermal energy pulsed like a heartbeat, hungrily seeking Serafall's flesh as the Ultimate Female Devil spun and weaved through the air with the grace of a ballroom dancer. "Light always chases away the darkness in the end."

Clenching her jaw at the sanctimoniousness, the former Sitri heiress stepped into the wide swing of her foe's arms and relieved her frustration by delivering him a blistering bitch slap.

"Did you just-"

She slapped him again, deepening the cold burn that had been left behind by the freezing palm of her hand before diving back to avoid the sudden renewed intensity of Xototl's angry attacks.
Serafall didn't escape unscathed, humming plasma slicing through one of her pigtails and leaving her nearly bald on one side.

Resisting the urge to gingerly examine her newly shortened locks, Serafall sneered and turned her back to the furred god.

Then she fled, flying through the sky and leading Xototl on a merry chase. She needed time to sink her heart again. She needed to be even colder, even darker, and even more unrelenting to smother out the embers of a god of fire.

With all the precision of a surgeon, Serafall proceeded to mentally lobotomize herself. Patriotism? She didn't need something like that. Morality was an unnecessary construct. Kindness and happiness were the purview of the ignorant. That sort of Serafall was a weakling, and more fit to dopily grin and rule over the Sitri clan rather than take the name of a Satan.

Cutting loose the strings of heartache and love hurt, but Serafall found it easier the further she walked down the road into the cold void of spellcraft. She was tearing up the garden of her soul, blackening every plant with a killing kiss of frost and leaving only the seeds behind in case spring ever came once more.

Serafall Leviathan was not a woman.

She was a weapon, and weapons had no use for friends or families or the soft yearning for a child lost. There was only one thing spared from her inner crusade as Serafall offered up everything else to the magic and filled herself with crystalline stillness; the unyielding loyalty she gave to the Crimson Satan. So long as she had that marker, even the thing she became could find its way home and become a woman again.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

When Serafall turned and abruptly reversed her flight, it was to a sonic boom and the sudden appearance of glistening frosted rings that briefly froze even the air with her newfound chill. Snow followed in her wake, water vapor and wind condensing into ice crystals with the mere contact of her pale flesh.

Xototl's orange eyes went wide at the speedy approach of the frost coated devil woman, and gripping his plasma rod with both furry hands he brought the blunt point to bear. He slowed to a stop, small platforms of hardened magic keeping him afloat as he watched and waited.

Any second now he knew that she'd peel off and redirect her course. Apparently Serafall had found some new stratagem, or she intended to spring some kind of trap, and he would be ready for it when it came.

Perhaps if he'd been dealing with another devil, Xototl's preparations would have had a purpose. But if he'd been dealing with another devil, it was unlikely he'd have been pushed to such frustrated and fearful limits. If he'd been dealing with another devil, his expectations wouldn't have been wrong.

Serafall didn't veer to the side or attempt to dodge the staff of tightly contained fire. The Ultimate Female Devil took it straight on, letting the shimmering ivory pole slam right between her breasts and melt away her supercooled flesh in an agonizing flash. It hurt, it hurt – until Serafall bundled the sensation up and fed the ache to the hungry cold emptiness of her magic too.

Blandly taking in the shocked and vaguely horrified expression that twisted Xototl's doggy face,
Serafall lifted a hand up to clasp a grip around the searing spell that was impaling her. If she wasn’t mistaken, it had glanced off the column of her spine and was currently partially paralyzing her lower body, and she’d have to find some way to compensate for that later.

No matter. Serafall began to *squeeze*, skin and muscle charring and blackening at the heat. The bones of her fingers began to crack under the competing struggle of fire and ice magic, but still she pressed on. Suffering wasn’t something that mattered, and any damage to her body was incidental. It was just a bag of flesh that existed for two purposes.

One, ably serve the Satan Lucifer.

Two, feed the aching emptiness that yawned eternally at the center of her heart.

Everything else was erroneous, having been sacrificed to strengthen her ice and might and would only matter once more if Lucifer decided he was best served by resurrecting the feeble things that separated Serafall from Leviathan. He’d done it before and would probably do it again, but the weapon could never be entirely sure that *this* time would be the same as the previous ones.

White plasma shattered into tinkling shards of light at the same time that Serafall’s right arm exploded in a shower of cooked meat and frozen gore. Violet eyes watched dispassionately as her flesh fell to the distant green ground below, and with a wave of her remaining hand Serafall froze over the gaping holes in her shoulder and chest.

"What kind of monster are you?" Xototl breathed, awed and disgusted all at once. What the woman had just done was at the utmost height of self-destruction, and while the death god loved to win as much as the next warrior, he couldn’t comprehend the idea of just so cavalierly destroying his own body in the struggle for supremacy. If a sacrifice had to be made for victory, it had to be made, but what the Satan had done was just destruction for its own sake.

Or perhaps, for the sake of satisfying some relentless urge for mayhem that he couldn’t even begin to understand.

"A victorious one." Serafall answered, voice level and toneless as she lunged forward and closed the remaining gap between them in less than an instant. Her foe was off guard and shocked by her brutality, and it was enough for her to dig the ice-coated claws of her remaining hand through the muscled furry skin of his abdomen and into Xototl’s soft visceral cavity.

Tangling her fingers in the slimy entrails, Serafall tilted her head in a birdlike motion as the dog-faced god howled and writhed at the end of her arm. Blood ran hot and thick over her hand, encased as it was in Xototl’s warm fleshy body, but pain was irrelevant. And even if it wasn’t, any pain the action was causing her was no doubt ten times worse for him.

Serafall stepped even closer, binding think columns of ice to her legs to support her weakened muscles.

She twisted her hand and grabbed hold of the god’s liver in a punishing grasp. Xototl’s magic was fading, and as it did the weight of his body pulled more and more on the muscles of her arm and shoulder, but she had no intention of relenting. She’d hold on until the end, freezing his organs one by one until there was not a single spark of life remaining.

Desperate fists crashed into the planes of her face, breaking one of Serafall’s cheekbones and sending sharp shards of marrow into her eye. Half the world darkened as Xototl’s efforts managed to destroy half her sight, but still Serafall held on. The only concession she made was to lower their entangled bodies to the grassy plains below.
As Serafall's feet made contact with the soft loam, a thin curtain of ice swept out for several metres in every direction. The contact with her supercooled skin was enough to flashfreeze and blight the world, just as she was slowly blighting the Aztec god of fire and lightning. Already there were sheets of ice clinging to the crevices of his body, and when she lowered her dying enemy to the ground Serafall heard the crackle of ice as his frozen organs began to shatter.

Xototl choked, finally going limp and surrendering to the chilly embrace of death. All of his justifications and his search for justice seemed like temporary constructs, holding up for a brief span before being blown out by the arctic wind. Even the season of life for a god came to an end, and he'd accepted that long ago. The only thing he didn't understand was how. There were certain expectations and rules in honourable combat. "How can you consider yourself a warrior and then win like this?"

"There is no such thing as right and wrong in the quest for conquest." The weapon answered, black lips cracking as she spoke. The faint dilation of the cold purple stone that made up her remaining eye was the only signal of her intent. "We live in a cruel world." Then she turned her hand one last time, fingers crooking into cruel claws as she pulled up.

Blood and gore splattered across the pale broken planes of Serafall's face as she eviscerated the fallen god and tore his head from his spinal column.
Chapter 49

Sirzechs could feel the moment Serafall fell into the grip of deep winter. It was a sixth sense, raging along the storm of his mind like a savage barbarian taking a blade to the smooth threads of his thoughts. Once the battle was ended he'd have to put her back together, convincing the pieces of her broken mind that she needed all the little emotional pieces she'd given up in the pursuit of power. Destroying her own sanity made her stronger, but Sirzechs disliked the healing process that always followed after.

Still, such thoughts were for a later time.

Spitting out a mouthful of dirt, the Satan ran his tongue over his gums and coughed up another gobule of saliva and soil. Then he reached up, digging his hands into the rough loam walls and pulling his battered body out of the crater he'd just created on impact with the ground.

Mictlantecuhtli hit hard, and Sirzechs knew that physically at least, they were evenly matched. Which was inconvenient to say the least, since turning to sorcery and running until he hit his limits always ended up with him devolving into a mindless spectre of pure rage.

"I have to say, I was expecting more from the great Crimson Satan." Mictlanteuhtli folded his thick arms over his barrel chest, floating over to peer down at Sirzechs with a disappointed air. The bone mask that had been strapped to his face had broken some time ago, revealing handsome tanned features. A few wrinkles around the eyes and a thick white scar curving down the god's cheek disrupted the perfection, but with his shaggy white shoulder-length strands the death god managed to look roguish.

"Well then I'm sorry I'm not living up to your expectations." Sirzechs sighed, brushing away a bit of the dirt that clung to his slightly cracked armor. He wasn't defeated, just tired. Tired of always having to be the one to bloody his hands for the future of Gehenna. It was a burden he'd taken up when he'd decided to become a Satan and shape the realm, but that didn't mean Sirzechs liked it.

Not that the distaste would prevent him from winning and putting his opponent in a grave. He was just biding his time for a little bit, because he wanted to try to get a feel for Mictlantecuhtli. Why had the god and his compatriots invaded Gehenna in the first place? What motivated them to throw everything into a war that they were sure to lose once it escalated? Perhaps they'd been powerful in their time, but none of the Aztec gods could stand up to the Satans. They were forgotten divinities, drained of power with the near extinction of all their worshippers.

It was in a way, a tragedy; because whatever reason Mictlantecuhtli had to resort to war was probably one that other gods in other pantheons had. As someone that preferred peace and dialogue over combat, Sirzechs needed to understand in order to prevent something like the Gehennan-Mictlanese war from happening again.

"But perhaps if you answer a few of my questions, I might be persuaded to actually try and meet those expectations." The insult hung in the air, and while Sirzechs doubted the death god was naive enough to lose his cool over a few words, he could still see the faint spark of interest that glittered in those red eyes. Whatever else Mictlanecuhtli was, he was a Nahuatl warrior; and the thrill of combat was in his blood.

For the sake of a more ferocious conflict, he'd likely answer a few questions.

"Do you think we live in a theatre play, Lucifer? Are you expecting me to monologue my life story
for the sake of drama?"

"Not at all. I just thought that a little erudite conversation might appeal to you." Sirzechs pulled his mouth up in a small smirk, and he kicked off from the icy ground. "You see, I had certain expectations about what sort of man you might be. I was ready for rants about how angry you are and how you'll destroy us all for the sake of justice. Instead, well..." the devil motioned vaguely at his opponent.

A silent beat passed before the god shook his head, crimson feather headdress whipping about in the cool breeze. "Sometimes I forget how young you all are." the death god mused, more to himself than to Sirzechs. The Satan couldn't be more than a thousand years old, where Mictlantecuhtli and his allies were all pushing nearly three times that. Perhaps once Sirzechs had lived a few more centuries, he'd better understand.

A perfect white grin flashed across Mictlantecuhtli's face, full of bitter mirth and a certain indulgent nostalgia. "You might have been a better match for Xolotl or Cihuacoatl if you were looking forward to such things. Even my wife would have been more to your liking, though she was opposed to going to war in the first place. How unfortunate that you only have me to strive with."

"I don't find this unfortunate at all." Sirzechs smiled back, perfect and polite as he charged a tight red-black ball of sorcery in his palm. "If anything, I can appreciate a little nuance in my enemies."

Flipping up and over the dense sphere that Sirzechs launched at his chest, Mictlantecuhtli struck back with a thin emerald beam that practically seared the very air. "Your enemy? Oh, I would say that you're wrong there."

The death god swung his arm out, continuously firing his green column of energy as he lazily followed Sirzechs' weaving form through the sky. "The best way to describe it would be to say that I am you."

"I don't see how." Sirzechs replied conversationally, traveling in a swift low arc that brought him right underneath the Mictlanese King. He wrapped both hands around the man's ankle, folding back at the waist so he could heave the god right over his shoulder and throw him to the ground so violently it created yet another crater in the formerly pristine landscape.

Mictlantecuhtli crawled out of the hole in the ground, grimacing and dragging the back of his hand over his mouth. The look he shot up at Sirzechs was softened by an odd paternal mockery, and as he rose back up into the sky he gave a rusty chuckle. "No ruler is absolute, Lucifer. Sooner or later, you'll find that you can't control how the world changes. It will evolve without you and pass you by, and the only choice you'll have left is to bow out or try to reclaim the past with force."

"So is that what you're doing? All those people had to die just because you couldn't let go once your time was up? Even if my time passes, I wouldn't sacrifice others just for the sake of my own vanity."

For the first time since walking into Mictlan, Sirzechs was feeling the sting of actual anger. Maybe it was the idealist in him, but as far as he was concerned there was never an excuse to spill blood when dialogue would suffice. He'd been on too many battlefields as a child to crave war, and needlessly spilling blood was one of the few things he personally felt was truly evil.

Calling up a thick collection of mingled black and emerald sorcery, the death god rolled his eyes and pulled his casting out until it formed a thin whip. He drew his arm in wide lazy lashes, the enormous length of the whip allowing it to crack through the air and soil to leave behind the smell of burnt ozone and churned soil. "All beings were born in order to die. None of us are infinite existences meant to endure the ages. Even gods end. A handful of sacrifices here and there are meaningless, if I were really inclined try to bring back the old ways."
Sirzechs frowned deeply, wreathing his hands in the shroud of his magic so he could catch the end of Mictlantecuhtli's conjured whip. A swift pulse shattered the conjuration, forcing the summoned weapon to break into tiny motes of light and fade away. "Was this all a bait and switch then?" he muttered, focusing on the tail end of the death god's riposte.

"Trying to bring back what we've lost is a fool's errand, but I'm still enough of a man to want to choose the way I die. Either we would win or I would go out with a fight to sing of." Mictlantecuhtli released his fading whip without a second thought, holding out one hand and focusing his magic into the deadly form of a cleaver that would replace the one Sirzechs had broken at the start of their battle. "And one day, you too will have that choice. Are you going out in a blaze of glory, or will you just sit and wait while your strength slowly fades and you become a doddering old man?"

They rushed together once more, light and sound crackling with enough force to kick up wind and clear away the collection of clouds that had grown to hide the black sky. Mictlantecuhtli was smiling, eager as a young boy and drained as an old man combined in one expression. There was no trace of guilt in the god's face over the knowledge that he'd essentially fed hundreds of thousands of servants along with his kin into an enormous metaphorical funeral pyre.

Sirzechs hated that face. He hated the easy way that Mictlantecuhtli laughed when either combatant scored a grueling hit on the other. He hated the knowledge that he'd essentially played into the god's hand, because fighting would grant the deity the end he craved but shying away would simply give Mictlantecuhtli the unlikely gift of a second Aztec golden age. Even when he won, the Satan would lose.

And the worst part of the whole charade was the knowledge that one day Sirzechs too would be drawn and haggard with age, and that every cell of his body silently rebelled against such a fate.

"You see? We are not so different after all, my young friend. I just hope that when your time comes, you have a youthful and strong opponent of your own to give you a good death."

Hot blood ran between Sirzechs' knuckles, and in between one strike of explosive sorcery and the next he made a silent promise. No matter what, he would never become Mictlantecuhtli. He would never allow his heart to calcify beyond all notion of compassion and magnanimity. The Crimson Satan would never become such a figure of fallen savage nobility, twisted up by ancient warriors' ways and determined to sacrifice anything and everything for the sake of a good ending. The people he ruled over and the untold generations of their descendants were entitled to his kindness, rather than to be the victims of aged fatalistic desolation.

When Sirzechs passed on, he was going to do it as a man that his son and grandchildren could be proud of, rather than as a selfish figure they cursed under their breaths.

"I suppose I ought to thank you." Sirzechs murmured, teal eyes going hard and merciless. It stung to know that the central motivation behind the massacre of millions was little more than the perverse vanity of an ancient warrior. And it ached even more to realize there was little Sirzechs could do to challenge that mentality if someone else decided to take the same course.

The only thing he could do was drink deep of the destruction that lurked deep within the marrow of his bones, and destroy his enemies so utterly that there wasn't even a fragment of a memory left behind.

If someone decided they needed a good death and an ending worthy of song, let them search for it elsewhere, rather than assaulting Gehenna.

Pale skin began to peel.
Slowly at first, but the crackling crimson lines started to carve over Sirzechs' flesh at an ever increasing speed. His body was little more than a fertile field, showcasing in real time the progression of a deadly malevolent growth. Along with the transformation came more power and more hate, slowly tainting over the calm pool that was Sirzechs' mind until nothing was left behind but one all-consuming urge.

Destroy.

Mictlantecuhtli smiled.

When Sirzechs fell utterly into the grip of the Power of Destruction, Ajuka knew that the realm of Mictlan was going to become a wasteland. Even though he flew over virgin forests with his raging prisoner floating along behind him, the Satan could already tell that very soon the landscape would turn to ash.

Everything was going to end.

When he and Sirzechs had become Satans, people had whispered and gossiped about their ascension over and over until one common label managed to bubble to the top. Super Devils. Ajuka and Sirzechs were worlds above the common devil, and even when weighed against their fellow Satans the pair were still more.

But there was a difference. Ajuka was a Super Devil because he combined his power with his skill and creative application of magic. Sirzechs was a Super Devil because he was the strongest member of their species ever born. In terms of pure, unadulterated power, the Crimson Satan reigned supreme.

A true genetic freak.

When Serafall cut loose, she was a continent destroyer. When Sirzechs let the façade fall down so everyone could perceive the horror within, he was the apocalypse that would end the world.

The Bael Clan's Power of Destruction was at its most basic, the ability to break things down. The more skilled the user, the more thorough the dissolution. And Sirzechs was so talented that his entire body could transform into a man-shaped Aura of Destruction that could annihilate anything.

The process unfortunately rendered Sirzechs mindless, but Ajuka supposed it was a fair trade for the inability to be killed. Until Sirzechs ran out of energy to fuel his rampage, he would remain an intangible Aura of Destruction, and any attempt to harm him would just prompt him to instinctively regenerate his form.

Perhaps one day some enterprising magician would discover a way to nullify the Power of Destruction, but until then the only possible way to defeat Sirzechs was to prod him into transforming and then hope that he tired before he managed to kill whoever was foolish enough to challenge him.

If Ajuka were a normal man, he might even be afraid at the sight of crimson and black waves of magic consuming the horizon. But he wasn't a normal man, so the only thing he felt was a certain exasperated satisfaction.

Soaring over a destroyed section of forest, Ajuka kept his sharp blue gaze peeled until he encountered a familiar sight. The Satan clenched his jaw when his roving eyes settled on a bloody dark-green figure, and after checking Cihuacoatl's gleaming gold prison one last time he descended.
"Serafall." Ajuka called out cautiously, slamming his heels into the ground as he landed. He was forced to swallow back the urge to recoil when she turned her blank one-eyed stare on him, because dealing with Serafall after she'd gone and submerged always required more than a little delicacy. "I see that you've managed to win here."

"Yes."

The scientist waited for a few moments until it became clear that she'd offer up no more commentary on her own. "Good. In that case, will you let me put you through a restoration sequence? It'll make sure that you're more effective if you get called to the field."

Ajuka focused on appealing to the need to be a good little weapon that he knew she'd have in her current state, and roughly tightened his barriers around his captive to prevent any sound from leaking.

If Cihuacoatl managed to set Serafall off, he'd have a disaster on his hands. Without Sirzechs to calm her down, she was an unreliable loose cannon, and Ajuka needed to be careful. Fellow Satan or not. Fighting Serafall wasn't something he was keen to do, and as wounded as she was he might actually accidentally kill her – if he wasn't killed himself because he held back.

"Do it." Serafall agreed after considering his offer, turning to face Ajuka fully. One violet eye was still clear and sharp, but the other had gone milky and glazed after some injury had damaged it.

Ice shone here and there over the expanse of Serafall's exposed chest, plugging up various injuries and ruining any pleasure that a more red-blooded man might take out of her partial nudity.

She was in rough shape, but Ajuka kept such remarks to himself. Even in the best of times his friend wouldn't have appreciated those sort of comments, and the partially lobotomized sociopath he was currently dealing with was unpredictable and dangerous. Instead he slowly raised his hands, keeping them in her sight at all times while he called on his Kankara Formula.

Ajuka was still a little winded after his little tit-for-tat with Cihuacoatl, but he'd rested for long enough to have a good little nugget of energy. Healing Serafall and restoring her broken body to pre-fight condition would drain him, but it wouldn't kill him, and as long as he continued to play the role of helpful fellow weapon he wouldn't trigger her into thinking he was a threat that had to be eliminated.

"I'm going to start now." Ajuka warned, prompting a nod from his currently insane friend before he released his grip on the Kankara Formula and let it do its work. The spell wasn't really built for healing per se, but Ajuka knew his own body and the bodies of his friends perfectly. Overwriting their current conditions with their previous healthy ones was as simple as constructing a homemade battery for him, and while the energy consumption was noticeable it wasn't crippling.

Under the scientist's watchful eyes, Serafall's body was consumed in a wave of white light. Green and gold sparkled here and there, trailing up towards the sky like errant fireflies. The pale shape stretched and visibly shuddered, morphing from broken to unbroken until Ajuka’s conjuration dispersed with a final pulse.

As the white faded, two cold purple eyes watched Ajuka stumble about and try to regain his footing after losing yet another chunk of his energy. But outside of the reptilian movements of her eyes, Serafall remained still and passive.

If Sasuke were a gambling man, he'd bet that he knew the second the war was over. At one moment
he was reluctantly engaged in a little game of dice with Phineas, and in the next he was fumbling for his sword as the Mictlanese soldiers swarmed the Gehennan lines with a fury that was born of despair.

If the soldiers his company had helped to contain in Theta Pocket were suddenly assaulting Gehennan lines with no mind for strategy or purpose, Sasuke could really only see two possibilities. Either their commander was an enormous fucking idiot who had just handed Gehenna's disciplined army a chance to slaughter, or in some strange psychic way they could sense the death of their gods.

It was no great secret that the Satans had crossed into Mictlan a day past to fight the Aztec gods on their home turf. Gossip was plentiful, and the enormous conjured dome that engulfed the southern horizon was hardly discreet.

Tightening grip around the hilt of the black meteor iron blade he'd taken as a trophy from one of the tzitzimimeh he'd killed, Sasuke cast a gimlet eye over his shocked comrades before rushing forward in a crackle of lightning. "Get your shit together!" he shouted, moving with deadly grace at he cut through a bonespider and then bisected a cihuateteo at the waist.

Sasuke frowned as hot sticky blood splattered over his face, but he moved forward and kept at his butcher's work. He wanted to go home, for a half a dozen reasons that he wasn't entirely ready to admit to himself. In a way, Sasuke was tired of fighting, though he was glad for the chance to tangle swords with Mictlan one last time.

"Form up! Form up!" Sasuke roared as fire licked across the edge of his stolen blade, flickering with a sinister light before the Uchiha brought it down to slice right through a battleaxe and cut open the brain of another foolish woman that had thought to oppose him.

Every time Sasuke approached death and escaped her chill embrace, he returned harder and stronger. Perhaps it was for the best that Mictlan's hapless troops experienced his cool merciless aggression, because only their blood could soothe the faint throb that lingered in Sasuke's burnt scars.

Brown flickered around the corners of Sasuke's vision as Phineas stepped up, always close and hemming in enemies for Sasuke to fight without getting in his way. That implicit recognition of strength and talent pleased the Uchiha, and he marveled at how long it had been since someone so automatically and sincerely trusted in his skill.

It stoked his ego, and made Sasuke want to fight even harder. There were too many enemies for the crippled Moon Demon Company to handle alone, but they weren't alone. They were surrounded by allies and supporters, and for the first battle since the war had begun Sasuke was feeling smug and superior.

Mictlan's assault wasn't a strategy. It wasn't a distraction for some new front or even a desperate gamble to reach the homeland and regroup. It was just the last gasp of a fanatic army throwing itself against the vigilant walls of its enemies.

When the Mictlanese troops swarmed Gehennan lines without a single concern for tactics, it wasn't a battle. It was a massacre.

Casting a Sharingan glare back at his troops' lines, Sasuke smiled with a vicious blood drunk satisfaction. They were all arranged in the appropriate defensive maneuvers, leaving him relatively free as a so-called champion to personally take the fight to the enemy.

Stepping around the wide swing of a jade battleaxe, Sasuke barely had to cover his hand in a shroud of flaming sorcery before he reached out and clawed at the Cihuateotl's throat. Her tan skin and the
flesh of her throat gave way easily, and she died with such an odd smile on her face that Sasuke was forced to frown.

What sort of triumph existed in enforcing his superiority over a bunch of fools that wanted to die? Sasuke was strong, stronger than he'd ever been since being reborn as a devil. But what was the purpose of that strength when matched against a cluster of spineless weaklings with a death wish?

Sasuke wished for Naruto's presence. It was hardly the first time he'd done so since being deployed, but perhaps it was the most earnest. As Sasuke slapped away the thrust of a crystal emerald spear, he realized he needed Naruto's council.

Even though the war provided some vague sense of purpose, what was going to be left after it was done? Sasuke doubted the Satans intended to invade some other strange realm, so once the rabid Mictlanese troops were put to the sword there wouldn't be anything left. Sasuke would go home and see the friends that he'd left behind all those months ago.

The Uchiha wanted to see them, but he was afraid. How had Yuuto changed in his absence? Was Koneko still her typical aloof self, or had she found another party to lean on and soften? Did Akeno still want to lustily tease him, or had such feelings been smothered in her? What sort of reception could he expect from Rias – the beautiful woman he'd decided that he intended to win?

It was a queer sort of hunger, but as Sasuke slit open yet another belly with his black sword, he decided that for once he'd be the one hounding Naruto for a moment of his attention. He had some questions for his brother through time, and he had full faith that the former shinobi would answer them.

"Silent again?"

Naruto ran a thumb over the burnished gold face of Uplifted Star, briefly considering prodding at Kokabiel's mind within before dismissing the thought. He was in Heaven, and the proximity to the spirit's homeland was enough to make the fallen angel stir.

At first, Kokabiel's words had been little more than senseless mutters, promising violence and longing in equal measure. But the longer Naruto was forced to remain in Heaven, the less incoherent Kokabiel's mind became. Maybe being in his ancient home was enough to make Kokabiel soften, but based on the dwindling sheer mindless rage Naruto had found colouring the fallen angel's mind, he doubted that it was just about being in Heaven.

Eying the artificial Sacred Gear warily, Naruto debated locking the thing back up before he shrugged and hung it around his neck on a thin golden chain. It was risky and created the opportunity for Kokabiel to try and attack his mind, but he'd never get anywhere with the spirit inside his Sacred Gear if he always treated him like an enemy.

So rather than hide away in his room or try to bury the artificial Sacred Gear away, Naruto settled a hand over its roughly polished surface and strode out into the Third Heaven. "It's beautiful." He murmured, patting at Uplifted Star's metallic surface.

There were seven separate realms considered part of Biblical Heaven that were ruled over by the angels, and the Third Heaven was the home of human souls as well as apparently being infinitely large. Naruto wasn't sure he believed such a claim, but he gave his father's allies the benefit of the doubt.

The Gremory Heir wasn't really interested in the Third Heaven anyway. He wanted to find a
pathway into the Fifth Heaven, since while it currently hosted the angels research facilities it had previously been the truest homeland of the Grigori.

Even a broken home was better than none, and Naruto knew that the spirit inside his Sacred Gear would appreciate being able to see his former home through his eyes. He wanted to find some common ground with the man.

Naruto supposed that he could always have simply forced Kokabiel to give power up. It wasn't like the fallen angel was particularly adept in the mental arts, and after many years struggling with Kurama fending off the fallen angel was child's play. But he'd become friends with Kurama, and Naruto was well aware of the humiliation that came with being sealed up and having one's power stolen.

Naruto would rather die than have such a thing happen to him, and the thought of inflicting such pain on someone else made his chest burn with guilt.

"So." Naruto drawled, settling down into the grass of the Third Heaven's oh-so-perfect fields and staring out over the blue horizon with an absent glare. He spoke both physically and mentally, passing the one-sided conversation down to Kokabiel but occupying his own ears as well. "I've been asking around, and I heard that Michael is gonna show up and have dinner with us tonight."

Kokabiel offered very little in the way of sentiment towards the angel that had been his leader once upon a time. It was probably to be expected, given that it had been many centuries since the Grigori had rebelled. Any lingering affection had probably been consumed during the Great War.

However, the utter nonchalance Kokabiel's mind was exuding utterly vanished when Naruto mused that Gabriel would also make an appearance. The sudden intense focus and silent demands hit him hard enough to make the space between his eyes hurt, and scowling down at his Sacred Gear Naruto rose to his feet.

He might have known. Without tearing through Kokabiel's memories it was unlikely he'd ever get a straight answer, but Naruto wasn't a total fucking fool either. The reasons for Kokabiel to start to mentally fidget so suddenly could be counted on a hand, and the redhead really doubted the fallen angel was considering Gabriel his friend.

It really only left one possibility.

"You're in love with her." Naruto marveled, pressing a hand over the red-gold star that made up his Sacred Gear. Kokabiel's sudden mental strike was fierce, but Naruto deflected it with the ease of long experience and continued on his amused train of thought. "I can't believe it."

Kokabiel, the ancient warmongering rebel was in love with Gabriel. Or perhaps it was just a queer possessive lust? It would certainly explain why the angel had fallen, and why he had such an enduring hatred for God and almost everything to do with Heaven. Hell hath no fury like a fallen angel scorned.

When Naruto spoke up, it was cautious. He'd made sure he was relatively alone, though no doubt some meddling angel would come running if he started to bleed too badly. "You know, there's nothing wrong with it. Just as long as you accept it and move on. Obsession's not healthy, and it's not like trying to destroy everything she ever cared about makes you Prince Charming."

The enraged desolate lashing out that Kokabiel gave in response to his suggestion was enough to make Naruto wince as his left nostril gave a tiny trickle of blood. "Look, just stop. I'm not gonna run around spilling your guts out to everyone. We're partners now, aren't we? So from one partner to
another, I have to tell you to stop chasing after someone who is never going to feel the same way about you.”

Digging in the pit of his memories, Naruto summoned up the forlorn ache he'd felt when Sakura always turned him down in favour of an absent Sasuke before projecting that remembered emotional storm at his tenant. Given how utterly fucking bitter and cruel Kokabiel was in general, Naruto doubted he'd get anywhere with his little salt and honey routine. But it didn't hurt to try.

What was the worst that could happen? It wasn't like Kokabiel could make him cry. That sort of privilege belonged with his mother, and Sasuke at the rarest of times.

Fucking bastard.
Grayfia gave a great sigh of relief when she felt her husband cross back into Gehenna. Intertwined as she was in the great barrier, the sudden appearance of four weakened but very alive Satans made the silver-haired devil go just a little bit weak in the knees.

It wasn't that she'd seriously doubted Sirzechs' eventual victory, but even with the steps Gehenna had taken to contain it collateral damage was always possible. Additionally, no battle was guaranteed; and there was always a chance of being left a widow - no matter how small that chance was.

Perhaps it made her a weak woman, but if the man she loved was killed Grayfia would wither away. She didn't want to live in a world without Sirzechs, and the only thing she'd have left to survive for if he died would be her son.

The forms of the Satans were little more than a distant speck on the horizon, slowly moving towards her and the other devils that were holding up the inner barrier.

As much as Grayfia wanted to initiate the breakdown of the spelldome so she could go to her husband, she knew she had to swallow back her impatience and wait. It felt like her husband and his comrades, and as they drew closer Grayfia saw that the small cluster looked like the Satans too. But until she was entirely sure that it wasn't an illusion or some other trick, Grayfia couldn't give the order.

The double barriers were the only method they had to contain hostile foreign gods, and if one of the Mictlanese deities could summon mirages and infiltrate Gehenna, the end result would be a disaster.

So Grayfia watched, and Grayfia waited, silver gaze cool and expectant as the moving blob in the distance came closer and eventually resolved into distinct figures.

Falbium stood the tallest and the most energetically, despite his lazy nature, and only the blood soaking his forearms and the rents in his clothes provided testament to the battle he'd just been in.

Ajuka practically slouched with exhaustion, hands shoved in the pockets of his voluminous green coat. The scientist was pristine and clean, thanks to one of the sequences he could conjure up with the Kankara Formula, but the drain on energy was obviously taking its toll.

Not that the fatigue put a dent in the self-satisfied expression on his face, and given the angry woman floating along in a golden cube behind him, Grayfia knew her husband's best friend had obtained a new specimen that he was looking forward to studying.

To Grayfia's immense irritation, Serafall rounded off the group, carrying Sirzechs' unconscious form in her arms. She was just as unruffled as Ajuka, save for having removed her overcoat to wrap up the Crimson Satan's naked body and provide some form of modesty.

The way the violet eyed woman held her husband close raised Grayfia's hackles, but there was no point in making a scene over it. The Strongest Queen may have lost the battle for the title of Leviathan, but she'd won the battle for Sirzechs' heart long ago, and that was the greater victory.

Plus, Grayfia was familiar with the dead glint in Serafall's eyes. Evidently the only female Satan had decided to go and feed her mind to her magic again, and until Sirzechs woke up and pulled her back from the brink, Serafall was dangerous and unpredictable.

The woman probably wouldn't even care about it if Grayfia made a few barbed comments, but she
could also take umbrage and decide the best way to fulfill her purpose was to slaughter them all. At
the least Grayfia would wait until Ajuka recovered enough to be able to contain Serafall before she
took any kind of risk.

"Salutations." Ajuka called out as soon as he drew within earshot, lips curving up in a friendly grin.
The light in his blue orbs was sharp and expectant, scanning along the enormous smoky purple
barrier before settling on Grayfia and softening slightly. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to let us in?
My feet hurt and I could use a nice long bath."

Tearing her chilly gaze from the former Sitri heiress, Grayfia gave Falbium a small nod of greeting
before cocking a silver eyebrow at Ajuka. "Password?" she prodded shortly, folding her arms over
her chest and ignoring the creak of leather skin and scales as Tannin shifted in place behind her.

It wasn't like the Dragon King could roast Ajuka if he answered wrongly, given the barrier between
them; but the threat was still there. Sometimes, everything was about appearances, and a giant purple
dragon could make quite the impression.

Ajuka huffed quietly, shrugging one shoulder and lowering his floating prison cube to the ground
with a wave of the hand. "Each matin bell, the Baron saith, knells us back to a world of death. These
words Sir Leoline first said when he rose and found his lady dead. These words Sir Leoline will say
many a morn to his dying day."

"And you're sure that the rest are who they appear to be?"

"Have a little faith." Ajuka sighed, tossing a look over his shoulder at the slumbering Sirzechs and
the sangfroid Serafall. "I wouldn't be much of a scientist if I wasn't able to tell the difference between
my friends and imposters."

Grayfia considered the quartet for a heartbeat longer before inclining her head.

Unwinding herself from the barrier's spell matrix was like ripping off a bandaid. Best done quickly
and as painlessly as possible, and as soon as she tore herself away Grayfia could see the sudden
spreading of cracks across violet crystal that wascaused by her absence.

The splintering built up speed as more and more spellcasters followed her example and pulled away
from the working, until with a final crackle the whole thing collapsed into a shower of purple motes
that fell like gentle snowfall.

Grayfia could still feel the faint burning of angelic light magic on her back that radiated from the
fallen angels' outer barrier, and she would deal with that in a few minutes. But first, the Silver-Haired
Queen of Annihilation would check on her husband, and perhaps see if she could convince Ajuka to
persuade Serafall to relinquish him.

The war ended not with a bang, but with a whimper. Wiping a few chilled splatters of blood from his
face on his sleeve, Sasuke scanned the battlefield one last time before deactivating his Sharingan.
The only thing left to see were hundreds of corpses and the odd enemy that had thrown down their
weapons to beg for mercy.

All in all, it had been a bit of a one-sided slaughter, but Sasuke was glad for the bloody work. He
wasn't physically tired, but the Uchiha was mentally drained. How long had it been since he'd seen
the faces of his friends? How many months had gone by without being able to get a full night's rest
due to explosions going off at all hours?

Even a shinobi could get sick of blood.
Sheathing his black meteor iron sword, Sasuke gave the trophy a last pat. It had served him well the past few weeks, but it wasn't really his style. He'd probably find a mantelpiece somewhere to hang the thing over and forget about it once he made it home.

"Yeah! Suck it!"

Sasuke turned and glared at Phineas, eying the private who was swaying with a drunken fatigue. "Very humble." He snarked, reaching out to grip the boy's shoulder with a steadying hand and pushing his subordinate into the long march off the battlefield. "I can see how gracious you are in victory."

"Come on, chief." Phineas mumbled, nudging the point of his elbow into Sasuke's side and ignoring the way the taller man grunted with irritation. "You have to admit that it's pretty nice. We won, we're goin' home, and we've got all our body bits. It should be okay to play it up a little."

Deliberately stepping into a puddle of gore, Sasuke twisted his boot in the bloody mud and raised a mocking eyebrow at the grisly squelching noise.

"Gross! Don't do that chief!"

*Squelch.* "I really have no idea what you're talking about."

The brunette just sighed, deflating like a balloon with a hole in it before perking right back up as a new thought occurred to him. "So, since we're bestest best buddies now, did you want to come meet my sister once we're discharged?" Phineas never spoke about any other family members, and Sasuke suspected that he and his sister were orphans and didn't have any.

Sasuke shoved at the green-eyed devil to urge Phineas to walk just a bit faster while he pondered over the offer. It wasn't that he disliked the brat who reminded the Uchiha of a less crude and more innocent Naruto. Phineas had grown on him like foot rot, but in the end they lived in entirely different worlds. He was the Pawn of the Ruin Princess, and Phineas was just a commoner.

However, if he did agree, it would give Sasuke a little extra time to think. Stopping in to meet his underling's mysterious sister would provide a few hours of distraction, and as reluctant as he was to admit it, Sasuke was a bit of a coward. He wasn't afraid to fight in a war, but looking at Rias with his new perspective and having to deal with the emotions she created scared him just a little bit.

Maybe if he was lucky Sasuke could kill some time and then sneak into the Gremory manor to get his hands on Naruto. His brother through time might be a little dense when it came to academic theory, but the Gremory heir understood the heart much better. If Sasuke needed a question or two answered, Naruto could probably answer him without mocking too horribly.

And if Naruto did take the opportunity to lord it over him, Sasuke could always just blackmail him right back. There were quite a few stories from the old days on Team Seven that his friend wouldn't want getting out. Turnabout was fair play.

"Fine." Sasuke agreed when Phineas began to fidget and send curious looks at him. "Just make sure she doesn't try to shove more of her baking down my throat." He hadn't had much of a taste for sweet things since his mother died, and the Uchiha doubted that was going to change anytime soon.

"Aww! That's no fun. Did you ever think that the reason you might be so mad all the time is that you don't eat enough sweet things, Chief?"

"Did you ever think that the reason you're such a fool is that you eat so much sugar it's gone and rotted your brain?"
Phineas worked his face up into his tried and tested sniveling expression. The brunette's emerald pupils glimmered faintly with the shine of unshed tears, and his pink mouth pursed into a trembling pout. "Why do you say such mean things to me, Chief? I thought we were friends, but maybe you hated me all along. That's it, isn't it? You think I'm just a big stupid nuisance."

"Stop blubbering like a woman." Sasuke smacked the private about the ears, sighing with exasperation. "Or is this your way of telling me that you're a cockless wonder?"

The crocodile tears were wiped away in an instant, and Phineas shook his head. "I'm just doing my job, Chief. What would you do if I wasn't here to make you laugh? You'd just frown all the time and get all wrinkly and stuff. How would you catch the ladies then? We both know your pretty face is your only redeeming feature."

Well that sounded like something Sasuke would hear out of the Gospel according to Naruto. He could almost picture it in his head. 'Ye shall act like a blundering imbecile for the sake of promoting amusement and chaos'. If such a book existed, no doubt Phineas and Akeno would both be staunch adherents.

"No matter where I go that I'm surrounded by idiots."

Ravel almost felt like kissing the dirt when they crossed back over into Gehenna. She felt like kissing the doorknobs when their ramshackle group of nobles and servants were finally able to teleport to the Gremory main family's manor. She also felt like breaking out in song and racing through the winding corridors. She even felt like throwing herself into her bed and rolling about in a giddy little ball of glee.

She only did the last.

Oh, to be home. It was an indescribable kind of relief.

She could practically feel Naruto's incredulous gaze digging into her back as Ravel twisted and flailed in the sheets, but the blonde Bishop didn't really care if her fiancé found it a little odd. There was nothing wrong with Heaven per se, but it wasn't Hell, and no devil really belonged in the Overworld. She'd felt like there were ants crawling over her skin the entire time she was there, and given how irate in general Rias' peerage was, Ravel doubted she was the only one.

"Are you done?" Naruto asked sardonically, folding his arms over his chest and leaning into the door frame. The redhead rolled his eyes at Valerie, urging her to take part in the banter, but the dhampir just feebly wrung her hands and smiled softly, refusing to join the on ribbing.

"Give me a minute." Ravel muttered, wiggling for a few more seconds before stopping to offer Naruto a taunting cock of the eyebrow. "Is there a problem, dear? Or are you just standing there and gaping at me because the two brain cells you have can't figure out what else you should be doing?"

"Keep it up and I'll give you a good spanking."

Stretching her body over the mattress in an arch, Ravel sucked in a slow breath before giving a throaty sigh. "Oh, how naughty." She appreciated the lack of boundaries and small flirtatious teasing she'd been able to take part in with Naruto recently, but Ravel wasn't entirely satisfied. She wanted more.

Still, Ravel was patient, she could wait as long as she felt like there was some progression.

Naruto just snorted, shoving his hands in his pockets before ambling away. The redhead probably
had his own unpacking to do. Or maybe he just needed a bit of space. They'd been in relatively close quarters in Heaven with nothing to do, so Ravel couldn't begrudge him the solitude if he wanted time alone with his thoughts.

Valerie, however, remained in her spot by the double doors.

Hopping back out of the bed, Ravel made a half-hearted effort to tidy up the sheets before giving up. If Valerie wasn't taking the hint, the older blonde obviously wanted something. "Can I help you?" she prodded, voice a little gruff after a few minutes passed in which she didn't hear Valerie shuffling away.

Ravel didn't hold a grudge against the other Bishop, but their first meeting had been poor, and a certain cool distance remained. They'd had no time before taking refuge in Heaven to talk out any issues, and between the stress of moving and the many curious eyes in Heaven itself, the two girls had never really formed a bond with each other.

"I was wondering..." Valerie bit her bottom lip, motioning vaguely at the small pile of luggage at the foot of Ravel's bed. "If you'd like some help? If it's not too much of a bother, that is..."

Ravel turned to blink at the older blonde, blue orbs scanning up and down the young woman's hesitant form before she shrugged. "Do what you want." She'd been honest when she told Valerie it wasn't really her that Ravel was angry at, so at the end of the day Valerie was more of a familiar stranger than an enemy. They had a blank slate, save for the first negative impression.

If the dhampir decided to lend her a hand unpacking, whatever. And if she decided not to, again; whatever. Ravel didn't give much of a damn either way.

The faint sound of a zipper filled the quiet air as Ravel opened the first travel bag. A small collection of dresses were neatly folded inside, freshly laundered in Heaven; so the only thing left to do was thread some hangers through the outfits and stuff them in her wardrobes.

Ravel hung up two dresses before Valerie moved away from her spot by the door, moving right up next to the young blonde and joining her. The pair silently divided up the task, such that Valerie took the clothes out and placed them on a hanger before handing them off to Ravel, who would then find a proper place for them in the room at large.

That was the way they proceeded through the entirety of Ravel's belongings, the routine broken only whenever Valerie encountered Ravel's undergarments. The younger Bishop put her panties away alone, ignoring how Valerie flushed and stood awkwardly to the side.

Once the pair of young women completed their small task, they were left standing in a quiet uneasiness in the confined space, not quite able to move past their mutual reluctance despite the lack of actual grudges between them.

"Well." Valerie smiled brightly, lips pulling up in a practiced mien of courtesy and friendliness. It wasn't that she disliked Ravel by any means, but they were hardly friends, and their first meeting had been more than a little contentious. Mending fences was taking time, and was overall a rather discomforting process. "I'm going to go to my room and unpack my own bags."

Swallowing thickly as the dhampir gave a final submissive bow and shuffled towards the door, Ravel cleared her throat. "Thanks. For the help... I'll come with you." She tacked on lamely, biting the inside of her cheek and stepping after Valerie.

Ravel grinned thinly at the older blonde's look of surprise. "It's only fair, right? You helped me out,
so I'll give you a hand too."

"…Right."

Let no one say that Naruto was by any means a relationship councilor. He had many talents, but healing the rift between two hesitant women was not one of them. Building bridges seemed to be for them to do and them alone.

Azazel lunged forward, catching Sirzechs before the younger man could crumble to the floor and helping the mortified redhead to the nearest seat. "Be careful there, will you?" the fallen angel complained, settling Sirzechs in the plaid armchair before pulling back. "If you fall and crack your head open, they'll lynch me alive."

Offering an unimpressed look, Sirzechs sunk back in the cushions and folded his hands in his lap. He'd forgone the grey-blue steel armor he'd been wearing for the majority of the war, glad to settle into his more comfortable but still stiffly formal gold and crimson robes. "I sincerely doubt that even if you let me fall that I would be injured. So if you intend to grumble for its own sake, get on with it. But let's not pretend that you're motivated by honest concern."

Perhaps he was being a little uncharitable, but the Crimson Satan was hardly in the best of moods. He wanted to spend another few days snoozing away, rather than being dragged to meetings with various officials while doing his best to put Serafall back together on his downtime.

"Oh, I see you've picked up a little bite." Azazel chuckled, digging around in the front pocket of his deep red overcoat and pulling out a cardboard carton. "Do you come by that honestly, or did the wife manage to train it into you?" the Governor-General teased, lighting a cigarette and taking a deep drag.

Pursing his lips at the smell of burning tobacco that began to taint the air, Sirzechs hummed. "I don't think it would matter either way, would it? The result is the same. Me sitting here and enjoying the quiet while you lurk around with your tongue cut out."

Azazel scoffed, striding across the office to grab a little chair for himself and dragged it back over to face Sirzechs directly. "Jeez, sorry I asked. I didn't know that you were having your period for fuck's sake. You gonna be okay for a few minutes or are we gonna have to reschedule?"

Sirzechs bit the inside of his lip, raising on hand to massage his left temple. The aching headache between his ears was making him irritable, but it wasn't really Azazel's fault. Diplomacy waited for no man, and the Grigori had their own problems to deal with. He couldn't take out his personal frustration on the fallen angel. "No, it's fine. I'm just a little on edge. Other issues popping up, you understand?"

Smirking genially, Azazel waved off the little exchange they'd had with a lazy hand. He hadn't ruled over the fallen angels for a few thousand years by getting worked up over every little personal slight, and Azazel had no intention of starting now. "Don't worry about it. Let's just get down to business, fair enough?"

The Governor-General waited until the Satan nodded in agreement before relaxing and running a hand through the mingled blond and black strands of his hair. His mane was a little messier than usual, but other than that the war had been kind to Azazel. No serious wounds, no heavy fights, and no insurrection from the lower levels of the Grigori.

He could afford to be a little generous and forgiving.
"So just between you and me, off the record, what's the Senate have in mind for dealing with Mictlan?" In winning the war, Gehenna had conquered another realm, which raised all sorts of questions about what their alliance should actually do with the world they'd won. The entire question was also complicated by the fact that at the end of the day, the fallen angels and devils each had their own interests.

Sirzechs frowned fiercely, practically glaring at the interlocking of his hands. "They're of a mind to simply annex the whole thing and carve it into pieces for their clans." The proposal was arrogant and cruel and exactly what they both would have expected out of the devils' government.

Mictlan rightly belonged to the Cihuateteo who remained after the death and capture of their gods, but the Senate had come to their decision long ago. Any cihuateotl would be given the choice of death or being reincarnated into being a devil. The planned genocide would be paid back with actual genocide, and Mictlan's land itself would be parcelled out to the various noble pureblood clans that sat in the Diabolical Senate.

The only complication was how the fallen angels would react, because despite being the weakest of the Biblical factions, the Grigori still had some power. They'd fought and bled for Gehenna, and expecting them to walk away without some form of recompense was idiotic to the extreme.

"I think…" Azazel began slowly, inhaling a slow breath that lit up the burning embers of his cigarette to a bright glowing orange. "That there's probably a more sensible solution. Give us Mictlan, and we'll evacuate our settlements in Gehenna proper. With the assumption that we can take everything that's not nailed down with us, obviously."

The knuckles of Sirzechs' hands flexed white, and the Crimson Satan chuckled with bitter humor. But of course Azazel would suggest such a thing. The angels and devils were arguably equal precisely because they each practically ruled a world and could exert a similar level of military strength. The fallen angels had power of their own, but were considered parasites living on the edges of Gehenna.

If the Grigori uprooted their species and moved to Mictlan, they'd be able to claim a similar prestige and power as the other two species despite being the smallest and weakest. The Biblical faction would be divided between three uneasy powers rather than two and a little kingmaker.

In a different life, Sirzechs would have more ambition for the devils. He'd rule more fiercely and more belligerently, but the Crimson Satan was what he was. He considered peace a greater good than conquest.

If the devils and fallen angels were forced to reside together in the long run, they'd eventually fall to civil war like any other multiethnic society. It was less idealistic to propose that all of Gehenna be given over to the devils, and that all of Mictlan be given to the fallen angels, rather than assume they could live in harmony forever.

Sirzechs hoped that the pragmatic proposal would win, because that was the only road to peace in the long run. It wasn't like Sirzechs was slavering over the idea of more land and more gems for Gehenna as a whole.

All Sirzechs would have to do would be convince the Senate to see things his way and be content with the partially mined lands the fallen angels left behind.

"I'll see what I can do."
Rias ran her hand over the smooth black stone of her bedroom’s mantelpiece, feeling how the formerly rough surface was polished to be smooth and even. In a way, the angular perfection represented her.

Oh it was pretty and neat enough at first glance, but the more it was examined the more the shelf revealed its fatal flaws in tiny cracks and pits.

The Ruin Princess had been born as little more than a vehicle for the aspirations of others. Her parents wanted a perfect daughter to love. The clan wanted an alliance to sell. Gehenna itself wanted another gifted pureblood to breed. And all of those various factions had competed to polish her into the ideal little pawn to move around on the board.

One day all the people who had staked a claim in her future would realize that Rias had decided to walk her own road, even if she had passing fondness for the hopes of one party over another.

Naruto's previous life gave her the courage to take such risks, but at the end of the day it was Rias who had decided to be selfish for once. Even if she was ruled over by millennia of traditions and several generations, the Ruin Princess would stand. Courage and pride were selfish impulses, and Rias drunk deep from them.

She was more than just another woman.

Heaven had taught her many things. Caged in alone with her thoughts and her friends, Rias had more than ample time to think. She had time to question what if from dawn to dusk. What if Naruto wasn't a shinobi living a second life? What if her brother had not been a Satan? What if Grayfia had won her duel for the title of Leviathan? What if the Great War was still raging on?

What if Sasuke had never stumbled into her life on the whims of a dragon god?

Some questions were easier to answer. If Naruto was just an ignorant young boy, Rias would probably still be the heir to the Gremory clan. If Sirzechs had not been a Satan, Rias would have grown up knowing her brother better, but would live in a poorer and weaker household. If Grayfia had triumphed in her battle for the title of a Satan, Rias and Naruto would both have grown up in a far emptier home. If the Great War was still being waged, Rias would have been trained for battle the day she could walk.

Imagining life without Sasuke was both easier and harder. Without a few words from her Pawn, Rias would probably still resent her nephew for his successes in life. Changing that single outcome was simplistic.

But Sasuke had been more than a nudge here and a nudge there. Rias had been more involved in his development and growth than she ever would have been for a meagre human contractor.

"God help me." Rias prayed, brushing away the sting that always came with the attention of the God of the Bible. The redhead rested her forehead against the cool ebony stone of her fireplace mantle, pulling in a steadying breath with all the patience of a saint.

The Uchiha Pawn was a weed, tunneling down into the soil of her heart until Rias couldn't truly picture life without him there. She'd tried to sketch out an image of her and Akeno sharing tea and discussing politics, but it wasn't complete without Sasuke's steady pragmatic outlook chiming in from the side.

 Conjuring up a scenario where Sasuke never came back and where Yuuto trained alone should be easy, but Rias could never quite force herself beyond the initial depiction of a lonely blonde knight.
And the very idea of Koneko being more than a chill bodyguard without Sasuke's relentless teasing seemed ludicrous.

"Are you alright, Rias?" Akeno's voice was low and concerned, barely audible in Rias' left ear as a warm hand settled across the back of her neck. The steadying presence was welcome, but not quite enough. Maybe in one world it may have been, but in the one she actually lived in Rias could feel the Uchiha's absence keenly.

Curse Sasuke. Curse him from the heights of Heaven to the very depths of Hell. Curse him from dawn to dusk and from the North Wind and the South Wind. Rias knew her Pawn was alive, but every second that trickled on by without him ached. The war was already won, so where the hell was he?

Rias had already gone too long without her steady right hand. All the members of her peerage were faithful and determined, but it was Sasuke that had stepped back with her to discuss who needed what. Without her Pawn, Rias was missing someone to bounce her ideas off of. Akeno came close, but Akeno was vulnerable and innocent, and needed comfort and protection.

Tearing herself away from the support of the mantle, Rias straightened her back into relentless steel. She wouldn't break, and she wouldn't bend, no matter what false courtesy and small favours she had to trade. The weight of lives and hopes depending on her was familiar after her little stint in Heaven, and after a final bitter laugh Rias readied herself to deal with them.

Where are you?

I need you.

Please come home.
Sasuke grimaced, bringing the cheap umbrella that he'd picked up at a corner store a little closer to shield his head from the rain. The pavement was dark and damp, but when the Uchiha stepped into a puddle his thick leather boots kept his feet dry.

"Well, we're here." Phineas declared, coming to a stop in front of a weathered apartment building. The deep red bricks were speckled here and there with moss, showing the structure's age, but Sasuke could tell that its foundations were strong.

Once upon a time, it had probably been the abode of up and coming middle class families. But like most of the other buildings that lined the street, time and the organic demographic changes caused by economic decline had taken their toll. Cracked pavement and peeling paint told the story of the struggling working class.

Settling a hand over the slightly rusted handrail, Sasuke followed his subordinate up the steps.

Phineas' face wore a queer nostalgic expression, twisted in a melancholic fondness that was at odds with his usual bubbly nature. Perhaps it was to be expected though, because the brunette was finally coming home after months living on the knife's edge.

"She's not much." Phineas mumbled, leading Sasuke inside the foyer. "But she's home." The private dug around in the breast pocket of his coat, pulling out a gleaming copper key and sliding it into the locked front door with a quiet snick. "I grew up here, you know? We could probably afford to live somewhere a little more glitzy now, but the thought doesn't feel quite right."

Sasuke just grunted in reply as the two soldiers entered the building proper. He could sympathize in a vague way, because as a boy he'd refused to move out of the Uchiha district despite the massacre turning it into a ghost town, but he doubted that Phineas' sentimental attachment was at that level. It was probably more about disliking change and personal comfort, and Sasuke could understand those feelings too.

A thick yellow plastic sheet was tacked over the entrance to the building's elevator, 'Out of Order' was stamped across it over and over in bold black letters. Phineas shook his head at the sight, mumbling lowly about lazy landlords before plodding up the winding staircase.

They ascended two floors before Phineas veered off and stopped in front of a white painted door. Thin flecks of coating had fallen away, revealing the cheap pine underneath, and the thin tin number fourteen that emblazoned it was slightly twisted.

Sucking in a steadying breath, the brunette threw a weak smile over his shoulder at his taciturn commanding officer before twisting the doorknob with a faintly shaking hand. There was no world in which he was scared of his sister, but Phineas couldn't help but be a little nervous after going so long without seeing her face.

Sasuke's first impression when he stepped into the apartment was cat lady. The decorations that hung from the walls and that were scattered around the kitchen were better suited for an aged grandmother than two young siblings. A few plastic duck magnets clung to the pitted face of the fridge, and the Uchiha couldn't contain the snort of sardonic amusement.

"Shut up." Phineas mumbled.

Giving a rough chuckle, Sasuke sniffed at the faint scent of cinnamon in the air. It had been decades,
but he was reminded of his few faint memories of cooking with his mother. Apparently Phineas' sister was a fan of baking.

Bending down to unlace his boots, Phineas pulled them off before stuffing them in the closet. "Iris?" the brunette called softly, sock feet padding over the tiles of the kitchen and carpet of the living room. The private could feel the way Sasuke loomed over his shoulder, but he chose to dismiss it in favour of calling out his sister's name again.

"I'm coming."

Sasuke had just enough time to process the look of rebellious fierce pride that Phineas offered before the door to one of the apartment's small bedrooms opened. The faint squeal of rubber and steel filled the air as Iris appeared.

Warm green eyes stared at Sasuke, a slightly confused smile pulling at Iris' lips before her focus moved to her brother. The thick curls of her brown hair were bound up in a motherly braid, laying over her chest and rising with every breath. Her pale skin was faintly freckled over the skin of her nose, telling a silent story about how the young woman enjoyed her time in the sun.

"I see you've brought someone home for a visit, Finnie." Iris commented kindly. She was shocked by her brother's sudden appearance, but she took the surprise in stride, and when she gripped the rims of her wheelchair and forced it forward there was no hesitation in her motions.

"Yeah." Phineas laughed, voice thick as he stepped up to his sister's side and sunk to his knees. He was about to throw a careful hug around her thin shoulders once he drew level, and the young brunette sniffled quietly when Iris returned the embrace.

Sasuke hovered awkwardly, hands in his pockets as he shifted from one foot to the other. The reunion seemed like a private thing, and he felt like his presence was unwelcome. It didn't matter if Phineas had invited him, witnessing such an emotional display never sat easy with him.

After a few long moments of quiet whispering and shaky breaths, Phineas pulled away and rose to his feet. The private wasted no time in coming up behind his sister's wheelchair, gripping the handlebars as he gave Sasuke another flaming defensive glare. It didn't matter if they'd fought on the lines together, but the boy seemed to want no pity about his home life.

That was just as well. Crippled sister or not, Sasuke wasn't the simpering sort. He might offer the rare example of empathy, but he tried his best to avoid conceited pity.

"So who's your friend?"

"I wouldn't call us friends."

"Ahh! Don't be so mean, Chief!"

By the time evening rolled around, the rain clouds had partially broken to reveal glittering stars. Sasuke's crimson uniform was soaked to his skin, but the discomfort seemed irrelevant after he'd managed to quietly enter the Gremory clan estate. After he got inside it would be child's play to find a change of clothes and a warm bath.

Oh he couldn't sneak in – Sasuke had to go in by the front gate no matter how much he disliked it – but at some point during the war the wards had been changed. He couldn't just teleport into Naruto's room and hope for the best. Telling the guards to be quiet bought him some time, but Sasuke had no surety that he'd manage to have a good long chat with Naruto before getting spotted or before one of
Sasuke didn't want to face Rias without having marshalled his thoughts into some order. Taking a few hours off to talk to Phineas and Iris had helped steady his nerves, but it hadn't given Sasuke any actual solutions. Was he just supposed to walk in and approach everything aggressively from the get-go? Or was he meant to be a little more cautious? Looking for a quick fuck in Otogakure had very little similarities to courting, and Sasuke wasn't dumb enough to think Rias would appreciate being treated the same way he'd try to pick up a one night stand.

Maybe Phineas' crippled sister could offer him a few words of advice as a woman, or perhaps her condition had ensured she was an inexperienced young virgin girl. But even if Iris could have given him some measure of guidance, she was little more than a stranger, and Sasuke would never spill his guts out to someone he didn't trust.

Sasuke was much more comfortable with the idea of going to Naruto. Which wasn't necessarily saying much. But Sasuke would rather put up with his friend's crass teasing and jibes for a while than muck everything up. Relationships were a minefield and second chances were rarely given.

Slipping into the front doors as quietly as possible, Sasuke frowned at the wet prints his boots left over the smooth tiles of the foyer.

His socks were disgustingly damp, and every step made a quiet squishing sound. The best thing to do would be to creep around the corridors and find his room so that he could change his clothes before looking for the Gremory heir, both for comfort and to avoid leaving an obvious trail.

It was to Sasuke's benefit that he'd arrived home a couple of hours after supper. The hallways were clear as most servants had gone home, and the handful of people that actually lived in the manor were likely caught up in their own pursuits. Ravel and Rias were probably holed up in the library, and Akeno would be lurking around the Ruin Princess. Koneko enjoyed lounging around a fireplace in the evenings, and Yuuto spent a lot of time in front of the television getting caught up on the popular culture he'd missed because of his childhood as an experiment.

Valerie and Gasper were unknown quantities, but from what Sasuke could piece together from the letters Rias had sent him, the two dhampir would rather cuddle in isolation than wander the corridors. Gasper supposedly lived in a box, but Sasuke didn't quite believe that. It seemed like the kind of joke Akeno would put Rias up to.

The only unpredictable factor was Naruto, since his evenings were random, but if Sasuke ran into the redhead it was to his advantage anyway.

Sasuke reached his bedroom without incident, peeling the wet clothes from his flesh and throwing them into a messy pile on the floor along with his soaked luggage. Some maid would be along eventually to sort through them, so it was no longer his problem.

The dark strands of his hair hung damp and chilly in his face, but the Uchiha decided it wasn't worth the hassle of drying out. Instead he simply stuffed himself into some black sweatpants and a warm blue hoodie. Not the classiest ensemble, but he wasn't going to court.

He managed to take three steps out into the hall, sock-clad feet quietly padding across the hardwood when his half-baked plan to find Naruto went straight to hell.

"Sasuke?"

Crushing the urge to wince, Sasuke ran a half-hearted hand through his wet bangs before turning to
meet an astonished pair of grey eyes. "Hello." He greeted shortly, considering the utterly flabbergasted expression on Yuuto's face. It was rather unbecoming.

The blond Knight gaped for a few more seconds before shaking himself out of his daze, lips curling up in rueful grin. "I suppose it's fair that you wanted to get changed up before meeting everyone." Yuuto huffed, reaching forward to roughly clasp the Uchiha's shoulder and shake him. "It's raining cats and dogs out there."

The Pawn gave a noncommittal hum, shrugging lazily and shoving his hands in the pockets of his black cotton sweatpants. "Where's everyone else?" Sasuke prodded, fishing for the whereabouts of the rest of Rias' peerage. If he was lucky, he might still be able to beg off and go hunt down Naruto before they showed up.

Waving airily, Yuuto strode forward past Sasuke. "They're just off doing the usual stuff. Bookworming it up."

After he crossed half the length of the corridor, the blond stopped and gave Sasuke an expectant glare. "We'd heard everything was getting wrapped up and that you'd probably be home soon, but we weren't expecting it so quickly. Not that I'm complaining."

Sasuke briefly clenched his jaw, accepting that Yuuto obviously intended to escort him right up to everyone else. Unless he outright told the younger man he needed some time, Sasuke wouldn't get it, and he was too proud to do that. He supposed he'd just have to wing it. "They decided to discharge the conscripts first." The Uchiha explained, following the Knight with no further protest.

"Makes sense. Conscripts are always more of a problem compared to volunteers, and it would be better for discipline and effectivity to dismiss the draftees first."

"I see someone decided to start studying politics while I was away."

A rusty chuckle bubble up from Yuuto's throat, and the blond scratched at his chin with one hand. "Well I couldn't not do it. There was always the chance that the war would go bad, and the Senate would expand the conscription pool. We all spent a lot of time cramming military tactics when we weren't training."

The thought of Akeno grimly preparing to head to the battlefield crossed Sasuke's mind, and he flinched. Despite her sadistic kinks, the Thunder Priestess wasn't a woman made for violence. Perhaps it was innate, or perhaps it was the result of her early childhood, but Akeno would never do well in a warzone.

"Harsh."

"It is what it is."

Lapsing into silence, the two young men swiftly made their way across the third floor of the manor and towards the library at the east end that Rias seemed to prefer. No servant disturbed them, and there were no further interruptions or complications.

It was only when the pair made it to the dark wooden doors of the library that Yuuto came to a stop, back ramrod straight and shoulders stiff beneath his crisp white button-up shirt. "It's good that you're back." The Knight muttered, spinning to pin Sasuke with a hard stare. "It hasn't been easy. While you were gone, anyway."

Shadows hung in Yuuto's eyes, sharpening the teen's focus until his gaze was full of a familiar desolation. Sasuke wondered how many sleepless evenings the blond had suffered through in the
past several months without someone to beat exhaustion into his body and gift him dreamless nights. Valper Galilei's cruelty had taken its toll, and it was questionable if those wounds would ever truly heal.

Sasuke's lips thinned, but he decided to hold back on the acidic commentary that was bubbling up in his throat. The codependency Rias' peerage was exhibiting was inconvenient, even if it was endearing, but Sasuke was the last person that had a right to complain about how someone was handling their grief. He was practically the poster child for bad decisions.

So instead of letting loose a sharp barb, Sasuke simply leaned forward to ruffle Yuuto's straw-coloured strands with a rough hand. Telling the Knight that everything would be fine or that he'd done good would be condescending, so he didn't. "I'm here now."

Wrapping a hand around one of the gold door handles, Sasuke swallowed thickly and twisted. He wasn't ready, but perhaps he'd never be ready. Dry mouth and anxious pulse or not, he'd have to face the music. He just hoped that he didn't say or do anything unwise.

"It's about time that I got a hold of ya." Naruto grinned, white teeth flashing as he leapt up on Sairaorg's back and wrapped his arm around the older man's throat. The horseplay was for naught, since the Bael heir immediately broke his grip and shook Naruto off.

A peeved light shone in Sairaorg's eyes as he spun about to glare at his younger cousin, black eyebrows drawn tight and angry. "Are you having fun?" he asked coolly, stomping across the parlor and throwing himself into one of the faded red armchairs.

Naruto watched with a faint prickle of worry as the Strongest Youth poured himself a generous glass of brandy. He was hardly the kind of guy that would go around preaching abstinence, but Sairaorg didn't look well, and gulping down alcohol probably wasn't going to help with that.

Thick dark bruises stained the skin under Sairaorg's eyes, and his face was thinner than Naruto remembered. His cousin moved heartily enough, so the redhead doubted that Sairaorg was ill. Maybe he'd been sick recently and lost weight because of that?

"Well don't just stand there." Sairaorg rasped, pausing to savor the burn of his drink. "Sit your ass down and tell me what you want."

Frowning at the way Sairaorg's voice deepened with hard notes, Naruto moved to obey. Something told him that his cousin was in a shit mood, and that the Bael heir wasn't going to tolerate his typical antics.

"Fine." Naruto sighed, waving off the silent offer of a glass of brandy with one hand. "It's been a long time. We haven't really wrangled up the group since the war began. That's fair, since we all had our things to do, but now that the war's done shouldn't we try to get everyone on the same page again?"

Sona had been basically a nonentity for that past half a year to him, and Naruto hadn't seen hide nor hair of Sairaorg since their disastrous little murder mission in the human world. It wasn't something to raise alarm bells over, since their conspiracy was probably going to be a decade in the execution, but Naruto still liked to cover all his bases.

Sourness twisted Sairaorg's mouth, and a few heavy seconds passed where it looked like he was going to make a sharp comment. Eventually though, the older devil just clenched a white knuckled fist and gave a jerky nod. "We'll start meeting again. Anything else?"
Chewing the inside of his cheek, Naruto considered the newer darker Sairaorg. It wasn't that the man felt evil or anything, it was just that there seemed to be a sense of barely restrained violence and despair about him. The Gremory heir felt like he should try and do something to fix it, but he wasn't sure it was him that should be comforting Sairaorg.

If Kuisha hadn't been able to soothe things, would his needling just make it worse?

"Are you doing okay?" Naruto questioned carefully, gripping the arms of his chair as Sairaorg glowered heatedly at him.

"I'm fine. Why does everyone keep asking that?"

The swell of his own temper wasn't surprising to Naruto. But the fact that he decided to just bite his tongue rather than lash out was. He seemed to be crushing back his anger a lot recently. Wouldn't mother be so proud?

"Just doing the old family duty of looking out for ya."

"Don't."

Well, if Sairaorg decided he wanted to be left alone to wallow, Naruto would leave him alone to wallow.

Under careful supervision of course.

Stepping into the library felt like taking a kunai between the ribs. Sasuke's heart seized up so suddenly and fiercely that he wondered if this was what cardiac arrest felt like. How morbid.

Koneko was curled up by the window in one of the reading nooks. The white haired nekomata was sleeping with a thick red fleece blanket drawn right up to her chin as she rested her head on a balled-up sweater.

She faintly twitched when Sasuke's quiet steps sounded, because her senses were better than anyone else's. If he was a threat or a stranger she'd have woken up, but it seemed her subconscious still recognized him, and let her snooze through the intrusion. The little show of familiarity warmed Sasuke, because it meant he was still welcome in the home he'd left behind.

Slipping between the bookcases with Yuuto at his heels, Sasuke strode directly towards a specific couch. The crimson strands that crowned Rias' head tumbled down her back, looking exactly the same as they had in his memories. Sasuke didn't rationally expect her to change in the few months he'd been gone, but emotions were irrational.

Sasuke was five feet away when Akeno noticed him, startling out of her lazy daze and gaping at him with an open mouth and wide purple eyes. He was half tempted to make a shushing notion at her, but dismissed the idea as soon as it popped into his head. He wasn't a child looking to sneak up on Rias.

Just a man with a thick ball of anxiety clogging up his throat.

It didn't matter in the end, because Akeno didn't give him away. Sasuke was able to come up right behind Rias, settling one hand on the back of the couch behind her and reaching forward with the other. Her vanilla scent hit his nose, soft and sweet and so perfect it made him ache.

"If injury is done to a man it should be so severe that his vengeance need not be feared." Sasuke read
over her shoulder, the fingers of his free hand settling on the page next to Rias'. "Not exactly what I would call light reading."

There was no shriek of surprise or sudden jolt of shock. Rias simply stilled, a single finger twitching as the Pawn's voice rumbled in a low baritone next to her ear. Yuuto and Akeno's eyes drilled into the pair, silent and weighty as the quiet dragged on.

"It is for me." Rias murmured, slowly twisting her hand so she could wrap a careful grip around Sasuke's wrist. The touch was warm and electric, sparking in a way dreams never could, and branding it into both of their minds that the homecoming was real.

Sasuke wasn't sure who moved first. Perhaps they broke the tableau at the same time, the book slipping from Rias' hands as Sasuke leaned forward fully to wrap his arms around the Ruin Princess' shoulders. Sasuke still couldn't see her face, because he let his neck crane down to rest a cheek against the crown of her skull.

He didn't care that Akeno and Yuuto were staring at him like he'd managed to lose his marbles somewhere on the battlefield. He didn't care that such an embrace was arguably beyond the bounds of propriety for a commoner and a noblewoman. He didn't care that her family could walk in at any moment and decide to do away with him before he ruined her reputation. Maybe it was arrogant and selfish, but the only thing Sasuke cared about was the way her hair tickled his skin and how soft she felt in his arms.

But if he could see Rias' face, he probably would have cared about that too.

The flush that coloured the redhead's face was deep pink, burning thick over the pale skin of her cheeks. Rias was hot with mortification. Her inexperience in matters of the heart made public displays of affection disconcerting, and even if it was just her peerage that was still too public. If she had the sense God gave a goose she'd have pulled away, but she couldn't. The contentment outweighed the embarrassment.

After a few hushed minutes passed, Akeno decided to cut through the awkward atmosphere and coughed into her fist. It took a few tries, because eventually the Uchiha managed to clue into what she was trying to tell him and pulled back like a snake slowly slithering away from its den.

"Welcome back." The Thunder Priestess leered cockily, rolling to her feet and plodding over to Sasuke. She cocked an eyebrow when he made an uneasy face. Had their relationship really been that damaged by the distance?

Or maybe it was just the fact that she'd decided to wrap her arms around his neck and lean right in. Sure, it made Rias look madder than a wet hen and Yuuto blush, but a girl had to get her kicks. It wasn't like Sasuke was going to complain about the sensation of her heavy breasts pressing right into his chest. That wasn't how their game was played.

"I missed you." The halfbreed crooned throatily, rubbing her cheek up against his like an overly affectionate cat. "Did you miss me too, lover?"

"No."

The choking sound of inarticulate disgust that Rias gave off made it all worth it.

Then a balled up sweater hit Akeno in the back of the head.

"Nice." Koneko growled, rubbing at her golden eyes with the back of a wrist.
"You didn't die." The nekomata addressed the Uchiha, kicking her blanket off and letting it drop to the floor. Her voice was just as chilly as it typically was, but there was an undercurrent of warmth as Koneko brought up the promise she'd made Sasuke swear to before leaving.

"I didn't." Sasuke confirmed, extracting himself from Akeno's claws and smirking at the dejected pout the woman gave him. Then he trotted over to the Rook, settling both hands on his hip and giving the most disapproving mien he could muster. "Ears."

"Die now." Koneko kicked Sasuke in the shin.

Rolling her eyes at the display, Rias ran her hand through her bangs in a half-hearted effort to tidy them up. It was a pointless little task, but it steadied her nerves. "Enough playtime, children." She chided, stomping down on the storm of dissatisfaction in her stomach.

There would be other times to be greedy for Sasuke's attention, if she dared. But with all of their friends in the room, the embrace he'd greeted her with had been too much, and the thought of asking for even more than that made her feel like she'd spontaneously combust.

Sasuke turned to offer Rias a deadpan look, having picked up Koneko at some point with his hands under the girl's armpits. The Rook just glared, making no serious efforts to wiggle free from the hold. "I'm cat wrangling here."

A sharp grin pulled at Sasuke's mouth, bright and brittle and the sight of it made Rias feel a hundred times better, because it told her that Sasuke too was feeling empty and dissatisfied.

Koneko gave a final growl and reached up to dig her claws into Sasuke's wrists, scratching thin red lines into the Uchiha's pale skin and forcing the taller devil to release her.

Their antics were too normal, especially given how Sasuke had left a hole in their lives for months, but none of them were keen on disrupting it. If they all pretended like he'd never been absent, perhaps one day soon it would truly feel that way. The war with Mictlan had put a pall over the household, but it wasn't a shadow that needed to hang around forever.

"If you're done playing, would you like to meet the newest member of our family?" Rias smiled at Sasuke, folding her hands in her lap as her Pawn agreed with a nod. She knew he hadn't believed her about Gasper's agoraphobia, because Rias was starting to know how Sasuke thought, which would make her little joke all the more amusing.

"Well, there he is." Pointing at a rather looking cardboard box in the corner of the library, the Ruin Princess just beamed beatifically when exasperation filled Sasuke's face. "Go on and say hello."

Snorting at the sudden conspiratorial smirks the peerage shared, Sasuke shook his head. Well it wouldn't hurt him to indulge their need to get one over on him. They'd been apart for so long, and everyone was probably hoping to get their pound of flesh before Sasuke got back into his jerkass stride.

So with an exaggerated bow, Sasuke strode over to the box and unceremoniously tore open the top of it.

"Ahhhhhh!"

Slamming the cardboard flaps back down, Sasuke blinked. Then he opened it again.

"Ahhhhhh!"
He closed it.

"What."

Third time's the charm?

"Ahhhhhh!"

Rather miffed, Sasuke gave up on making sense of the box. "Why?" he stressed, ignoring the way the box seemed to tremble. In what world did children seriously live inside of boxes? Why the hell were they indulging the Bishop's queer behavior? Sasuke might not be the face of well-adjusted citizen, but there were limits. Shouldn't they be forcing the boy to live a somewhat normal life?

Rias eventually decided to take pity on the baffled Uchiha, drifting over and linking arms with him like they were a genteel lord and lady. "You should be kinder to Gasper." She scolded, tuning out the soft snickers the Akeno gave at Sasuke's puzzlement. "He simply needs a soft touch. I'll show you."

When Rias went to crack open Gasper's hideaway, it was a much more complex process. First she tapped on the top, sounding out what most be some kind of ridiculous secret password. Then she called Gasper's name quietly, telling him who it was and letting the boy know she was going to open the box. Only then did she actually expose the small blond, smiling down at him like a mother.

"That's not so bad, is it, Gasper?"

"No," the red-eyed dhampir muttered, staring unerringly at Sasuke with a steady gaze. It was like the boy wasn't sure if he should run away and hide or just sit still and absorb the sight. Rias wouldn't have blamed him for doing either, since Sasuke could be foreboding to those who didn't know him, but even when he was cold he was still darkly handsome.

"Sasuke. This is Gasper, the Bishop that I wrote to you about. And Gasper, this is Sasuke, the Pawn that I told you about." Having to so carefully explain the obvious faintly irritated Rias, but Gasper did better with instructions and boundaries. The clearer the better.

Giving a dubious snort, Sasuke nonetheless bent down to offer the dhampir his hand. He was careful with his handshake, putting about as much force into the clasp as he'd need to tear open a wet paper bag. He'd known that Rias had a motherly soft spot, but there were problem children and then there were problem children that needed professional help.

Sasuke would know. He'd been one of the latter.

"I-I'm glad to meet you, Major Uchiha sir!" Gasper practically squealed right in Sasuke's face, looking like he was going to keel over and die at any moment from the attention.

A silent heartbeat passed.

Then Akeno began, fanning herself and fluttering her eyelashes at Sasuke. "Major Uchiha, huh?"

"Watch out guys, we've got a badass over here." Yuuto snorted.

Amber orbs flashed. "Standing on formalities? How arrogant."

"Shut up, I didn't ask him to do it!"

The sound of Rias' laughter was high and clear like a bell, and against his will Sasuke found himself
staring as mirth filled her teal eyes.
Chapter 52

Steel clashed on steel, bright yellow sparks flying as Yuuto's longsword slammed into the edge of Sasuke's black meteor iron blade. Warmth throbbed over his back and limbs, warning of the bruises that would shortly be appearing. But despite the pain pounding through him and the sweat pouring down his temples, Yuuto grinned wolfishly.

This was what it meant to be alive.

The two swordsmen broke apart, feet dancing over the lush green grass they settled into cautious stances.

"Are you holding up alright, old man?" Yuuto taunted, smirking. He'd grown taller in the years since joining Rias' peerage, and ever more handsome. Between his genteel manner and lordly face, the blond Knight could give off the impression of a perfect white knight. But when he was matching blade to blade and sinew to sinew, Yuuto found all masks falling away.

There was no propriety. There was no sense of polite lordliness or refined speech. There was just sweat and blood and bone, struggling for supremacy in a feral struggle that demanded victory or death. Sasuke would never kill him, but that didn't prevent Yuuto from feeling the heady adrenaline filled richness running through his veins.

Sasuke's eyes just narrowed, the red disc of his Sharingan thinning to an intent slit, and when the Uchiha twisted into his next backswing it was with much more force. The collision rocked up Yuuto's arms, settling into his shoulders and the blond knew that he'd be feeling it once the rush of combat wore off.

Another slash.

Another block.

Another dancing sidestep.

Yuuto relied on his instincts to keep up, eyelids peeled back and watching every twitch of Sasuke's muscles. He had no Sharingan, but the Knight had natural talent in spades, along with techniques that had been beaten into him over the years.

But Yuuto was tiring, and in the long run his young body couldn't keep up with Sasuke's war-hardened flesh.

The flat of Sasuke's blade delivered a stinging slap to Yuuto's right wrist, forcing the Knight to drop his sword with a growl. He lunged forward in an effort to scoop it back up, only to find a deadly gleaming point pressing up against his Adam's apple.

"Yield."

Blowing a sweat soaked blond strand out of his eyes, Yuuto held up his hands in surrender. "You're still too much for me." The Knight commented in a tone of mingled admiration and envy, watching as Sasuke sheathed his blade with a quiet click.

"You've improved."

Yuuto swelled up at the terse compliment. Every day made him stronger, and closer to revenge.
Yuuto had potential of his own, and didn't need anyone to spoonfeed him power or skill. Sasuke's help was always welcome, but the blond wasn't dependent on him. No matter what, one way or another Galilei would die at his hand.

"Come on. Supper." Sasuke snapped his fingers in front of Yuuto's face, startling the teen out of his daze. The sun was just barely starting to pinken the horizon, and they'd been sparring for hours. The Uchiha could already feel the sweat that dampened his clothes rapidly chilling in the late autumn breeze.

Dismissing the demonic sword he'd conjured up with his Sacred Gear, Yuuto let go of his tight mental grip around Sword Birth. "Shall we go the baths, then?" the Knight suggested, piecing back together his polite manners and stepping past Sasuke. "The girls won't appreciate it if we show up all filthy."

Sasuke made a face, but quickly moved to follow the younger male. It wasn't like he'd forgotten the rules in the time he was gone. Taking a quick dip in one of the various enormous baths that were scattered around the manor before going to dinner was something he always did. There was no need for the clan to have a rule about such things – unless they'd had trouble with someone else showing up stinking of the tiltyard before, Sasuke supposed.

It was with no sense of shame the two young men stripped nude once they settled into a great marble bath chamber. The pool was always full of steaming hot water; the Gremory clan being more than rich enough to afford the luxury, so Sasuke was able to toss his clothes in a wicker hamper and slip into the bath before Yuuto turned around.

"What's been happening around here?" Sasuke prodded once he settled into the liquid heat, idly scrubbing shampoo through his messy black mane. It smelt like sandalwood, lending his hairy a arboreal fragrance. "Don't bullshit." Rias might have sent him letters nearly every day, but there was always the possibility she'd try to protect him by leaving something out.

Scrubbing under his arms until he'd worked up a good soapy lather, Yuuto snorted. "In regards to whom exactly? We've been the same as we've always been, even if the girls worried about you. It's Naruto you need to worry about."

"What about him?" Sasuke demanded sharply, rinsing out his hair before combing his wet bangs back. Unlike Rias, Naruto hadn't kept in daily contact through letters. And while it wasn't their way to be clingy and emotional, the Uchiha would have assumed if Naruto had issues that the Gremory heir would have mentioned it long ago.

Yuuto laid back against the marble rim of the bath, resting his hands on his knees as he contemplated how exactly to put it. "He's darker now, for lack of a better word. Did you know that he went and had the entire civil service in Azamarin mind flayed? Not that I'm judging, but I hadn't thought he could be so ruthless. He didn't seem the type."

No, as far as Sasuke was concerned, Naruto wasn't the callous type. The boy that had wanted to become Hokage had been a reckless idiot with a stupidly big heart that would never hurt someone if there was any other way to do succeed. Even when Naruto was grown, he hadn't had a taste for cruel violence. But Sasuke had changed dramatically since being reborn in Gehenna. Should it be that much of a shock that Naruto had decided to be more pragmatic?

"I'll talk to him." Sasuke decided, firmly closing the matter. He already intended on interrogating Naruto for romance advice, ancestors help him. The Uchiha could hit two birds with one stone and try to take a measure of the redhead's personality changes at the same time. "What else? What about that dhampir woman?"
Accepting the change of topic with grace, Yuuto squirted a handful of soap into his palm and discreetly began to scrub at his groins. "Valerie? There's been no problems with her. She's quiet, helpful when you ask, and goes out of her way to avoid causing trouble. You'll have to meet her to decide for yourself I guess, but I don't think you'll hate her."

Sasuke accepted Yuuto's character reference with a short nod, letting the conversation die away until the only sounds in the air were the soft splashes of water as they washed their bodies. He'd have to reserve judgement until he met the girl, but he'd make the assumption that she wasn't a bad influence he would need to remove.

Once Sasuke had finished cleansing the soles of his feet, the Uchiha sighed and rolled over to grip the lip of the bath and haul himself out of the water. He wasn't adverse to lazing around in the bath for a long while, but they were on the clock. Rias and the others were expecting them.

Sasuke had only just begun rubbing at his damp hair with a fluffy white towel when Yuuto cursed viciously. Hanging the cloth from his neck, Sasuke threw a questioning look over his shoulder at the Knight. "Hmm?"

Grey eyes blinked at the sound, flying up to Sasuke's face before slowly trailing back down to the Pawn's stomach. "They're going to murder you." Yuuto chuckled, crawling out of the bath himself to start drying off.

Ah.

Almost subconsciously, Sasuke let one hand drop down to settle over the red scar that marred his abdomen. It was thick and almost scaley, and even though the phoenix tear drip had healed all of his internal injuries, he still bore the marks of his cauterization. Both burns were the size of small dinner plates, and uglier than a diseased whore.

"Don't say anything about it."

"If that's what you want, but don't blame me if trying to hide it comes back to bite you in the arse."

Yuuto had a point. There was no point in keeping secrets, because eventually Rias would find out that he'd managed to get himself stabbed. There wasn't even the hope of quietly getting his hands on medicinal creams to remove the scarring, because they were above Sasuke's actual paygrade – he didn't get much when the clan already bought all of his necessities.

Sasuke supposed he could ask Naruto to smuggle some in for him, but that was a stupid gamble. Naruto might be his friend, but the man had the loosest lips anywhere this side of the Limbo Strip.

Still, that didn't mean Sasuke was going to go and tell Yuuto that he was right.

"Real life is not a romance movie."

"Fuck, you're such an asshole."

Azazel watched as Serafall twitched. It was a tiny little muscle spasm, thickening over the pale flesh of her neck and shoulder before subsiding. If he were a less observant man, the Governor-General of the Girgori wouldn't have noticed it at all.

There was a fogged over glaze in the Satan's violet eyes, her focus seeming to peer through Azazel as the fallen angel lounged back in his armchair. She might be lucid enough to function, but she wasn't all there. It would take her a few more weeks to fully recover from the dangerous cost of her
own sorcery, and she really had no business sitting on a backroom diplomatic meeting, but
sometimes the appearance of health mattered more than actual fitness.

In his own way, Azazel pitied the devils. The Satans were all powerful warlords and conquerors in
their own right, but they were still so young in comparison to old hounds like Michael, Gabriel,
Baraqiel, or Azazel himself. There was a certain fire in the belly that they hadn't managed to put out
yet, and it made them take risks and make sacrifices older warriors knew not to.

Casting a wine-red eye over the conference room, Azazel noted the half a dozen empty chairs and
smiled grimly at Falbium. "Are we expecting more guests?" he'd only be interested in meeting and
winning over the Satans first, but if they decided to invite extra nobles he wasn't going to get up and
leave.

He couldn't afford to. The Grigori needed Mictlan.

Running a hand over the bald pate of his head, Falbium shook his head. "It's tiring enough to have to
sneak this meeting in underneath the Senate's nose. Do you really think we'd waste the time and
energy to wrangle around with the rest of them?"

"Too much trouble, is it?"

"Exactly. It'd be a damn dog and pony show."

Ajuka just snorted, folding his arms on the circular table they were all seated around and burying his
face in the crook of his elbow. The scientist didn't want to be there, and he didn't really see the
purpose in them being there. He was perfectly content to just support whatever Sirzechs wanted
done. Falbium had the same outlook, and Serafall was still in the stage of forgetting that she needed
to match her socks.

"If it's such a problem, perhaps we should simply cut to the chase?" Sirzechs suggested wryly, dark
hallows of exhaustion under his eyes. As the days went by he recovered strength, but the Crimson
Satan was still tired from his rampage through Mictlan after transforming into the Aura of
Destruction. "I've already told them what you asked for, but it's up to you to convince us that it's in
the interest of our kind."

Raising an eyebrow as Sirzechs reached out to steady Serafall with hand on the woozy demoness's
shoulder, Azazel chuckled rustily and dug into his breast pocket. Withdrawing a cigarette, the fallen
angel lit it with a spark from one finger and took a long drag. "Whatever you say. The long and short
of it is that the Grigori want Mictlan. We'll cede all our territory in Gehenna to you in exchange.
We'll hold to the treaty and still be allies, but we'll get out of each other's hair."

Green eyes narrowed as Ajuka lifted his head from the table to fix a suspicious glare on Azazel. "My
first assumption is that you know something about Mictlan that makes it worth moving to, despite the
enormous costs of the endeavor you're proposing. What did you discover there? Unique minerals?
Rare herbs? A wellspring of magical energy?"

Smirking ruefully when a faintly irritated expression flashed across Falbium's face, Azazel plucked
the cigarette from his mouth and waved it at Ajuka like a conductor's baton. Whirls of smoke curled
through the air as his arm moved. "I'm shocked and appalled that you assume I'm so nefarious. I've
heard nothing about Mictlan that makes it such an attractive investment prospect, really. By most
descriptions it's just a ruined wasteland right now."

"Then why do you want it?" Serafall cut in, surprising the men gathered around the table and
drawing more than one gaze. Her voice was chilly, and her eyes glittered with reptilian intent. She
had not fully recovered from her self-lobotomization, and was full of a mishmash of strange emotions and impulses, but she was still able to fall back on her core drive and function.

Azazel sagged slightly, the thousands of years of his life seemingly piling on in a moment. Even the crow's feet around his eyes looked deeper. "Because I've been watching the humans since I was a little brat. Maybe you haven't, but if you have I hope that you're willing to learn from their mistakes. Sooner or later the fallen angels and devils will go to war, and I intend to prevent that by moving the Grigori into another realm entirely. Roads can be rebuilt. Mountains can be raised back up. We can terraform to our heart's content, given time. But it's not that easy to replace lives lost."

Rubbing at his chin, Sirzechs closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "I see. Multi-ethnic societies are doomed to tribal conflict, so you want to nip that in the bud by separate mono-ethnic states on separate worlds. There's enough struggles already because of class and ideology and resources without throwing species conflict on top of the fire."

"Exactly. The difficulty of living on the frontier of a new world for a few years is nothing compared to another Great War."

Sirzechs tapped his nail against the wood of the table, clicking out an irregular beat as his exhausted face turned thoughtful. "I'm not opposed to it. And it'll be easier to convince the Senate than you might think, provided we have certain guarantees. The nobles can be greedy, but they're not beyond reason. Sweeten the pot and you'll get your deal." The Satan was generous with his allies, but not selfless, and had Gehenna's interests to defend.

It was exactly what Azazel had expected. He could even respect that sort of patriotism, especially considering he was motivated by it himself. A ruler's first duty was to look after his own. "What do you want then?"

"I would think that obvious." Ajuka muttered, rolling up the long sleeves of his wooly green sweater. They were all dressed casually, because despite their rank they had just fought a war and felt entitled to a little rest and relaxation. "As you said, uphold the treaty. Free trade, trial by combined jury, keep the same coinage, a military alliance, and so on. They'll probably just want to expand it with by sharing rights to whatever natural resources you have over there. And see that you don't wreck your infrastructure when you hand it over. We'd hate to spend the money to rebuild it all needlessly."

A cool smile pulled at the corners of Azazel's mouth. There was the hook in the bait. Although the devils and fallen angels were allies, they kept all sorts of technological and military secrets from one another in the hopes of having the edge if war came again. If the fallen angels were not permitted to alter their factories, laboratories, and military bases, then the devils could just waltz right in and reverse engineer anything they found. They'd lose any hope they'd have of starting a new war with the upper hand, all in exchange for a frontier world that the fallen angels had already made concessions from.

Pressing a hand to his forehead, Azazel gave a great defeated sigh. "If that's what it takes." The Governor-General lied. He could easily get away with leaving behind a few crumbs while hiding all the big secrets, and Azazel was no saint. He had no problem bargaining in bad faith. He might like the Satans on a personal level, but that didn't make them his kind.

Words were just wind, and a treaty was just a piece of paper. Platitudes like honor and honestly were the purview of the strong and good. The Grigori may have survived several wars, but it hadn't been without cost, and in comparison to Heaven or the devils, they were not strong. And considering that the entire existence of the fallen angels to begin with was based around corruption, they couldn't be considered 'good' either.
They were simply men and women that would do whatever they needed to survive. That was the way of the world. Azazel knew it, and he knew that the Satans knew it as well. If he needed to pull a little deceptions out of his ass here and there, that was just how it was. Sirzechs and the rest would understand.

"Not a fan of carrots? You have to eat your veggies to grow up big and strong."

Making a face at Ravel's mocking comment, Naruto picked his fork back up and deliberately shoved a heaping pile of carrots in his mouth. He almost choked on the thick ball of orange mush when he swallowed, but it was worth it to hear his fiancé's snort of amusement.

"How very classy."

"What can I say?" The Gremory heir shot back, oozing arrogance. "I aim to impress." Valerie gave a small laugh from her seat on his other side, and satisfied that they seemed to no longer be at each other's throats, he picked out a new target. "Pass the salt, bastard!"

Rias frowned at his crudity, but Sasuke just scooped the silver salt shaker up and threw it at Naruto's face.

The two peerages were seated around a long mahogany dining table that was covered by a thick green linen tablecloth. It wasn't the most luxurious cloth Naruto's family had, but they weren't entertaining guests; just family. Even their silverware set was just regular silver, rather than a centuries old antiques.

Naruto knew from conversations with Ravel that every dining occasion with her family was formal, and he was glad his parents and grandparents were different. There was no need to go whole hog with extravagance. Let people sit wherever they wanted to sit, wear whatever they wanted to wear, and eat with whatever they wanted to eat with.

Formal barriers with friends were just an irritant.

"So, soldier boy." Naruto began, cutting his thick slice of roast beef into chunks and chewing one. Sasuke cocked an eyebrow at him, and the redhead swiftly swallowed the morsel. "Got any interesting stories to tell?" The Gremory heir was snooping, because even though he'd ended up governing Azamarin he didn't forget that he originally wanted to *fight*. A few tales from the front lines would never replace the actual experience of being there, but he was still curious.

Oddly, Yuuto seemed to bristle his question, which baffled Naruto. The blond Knight sat at Sasuke's right, and along with Koneko who sat at the other end of the line of seats occupied by Rias' peerage, was the furthest away from the redhead. But the kid was still more than close enough to draw the eye.

The blond settled at a short chiding look from Sasuke, who then turned to give Naruto his full focus. The Uchiha's dark eyes were heavy and intent, but not angry. "What do you want to know?" The dark-haired devil was short and to the point, and more than one devil sitting around the table slightly stiffened with inquisitiveness. His best friend had only been back for a day, and Naruto would assume no one had the opportunity to thoroughly interrogate him yet.

"Eh, did you manage to meet anyone interesting?"

A vaguely irate light flashed through Sasuke's black orbs, and he resumed cutting into his meal with the careless grace that all Uchiha seemed to have. Itachi probably ate the same way – dainty as a princess. "Just what I mentioned in my letters. Vali and Phineas were the only ones worth talking
Naruto found it a bit of a funny coincidence that the cocky silver haired half-devil he'd met in Shamond had managed to get posted along the same part of the front as Sasuke, but such was life. Sometimes the bitch decided to pull a funny. Phineas sounded like more his type, and Naruto wondered if he'd see the kid come around sometime. Still, Sasuke had met nobody else? Naruto couldn't quite resist ribbing him over that.

"Are you sure you didn't manage to scare the rest off with your ugly mug? No wonder you don't have friends."

"It's difficult to form friendships with people that are going to die within the next three days." Sasuke replied, blandly cool as he effortlessly dumped ice water all over the previous light atmosphere. If not for the morbid amusement that Naruto could see in the minute smile on the Pawn's face, he might have even felt bad for him.

Apparently the rest of their friends weren't so discerning, since Rias' hand clenched around her silver goblet in a white knuckled grip while Koneko started stabbing at her beef like it had personally done her wrong.

Naruto rolled his eyes when he felt Ravel pinch the outside of his legs, slapping her hand away like she was a naughty child breaking into the cookie jar. "That was rather amateur wasn't it? I'd rate your angst at seven outta ten, but since you've got the Uchiha brooding genes, I'll dock you some points. Four stars there buddy."

The snide remark was enough to break the little cloud of tension that had built up, and soon enough Akeno was smirking along with him. Just like that, the floodgates were open, and conversation started flowing much more smoothly.

Tuning it out when Sasuke began to explain at great length how utterly revolting their rations had been, Naruto turned to the young blonde woman sitting at his right. "You're quiet tonight, something botherin' you?"

Valerie's slitted red eyes trailed up from her half-eaten plate to settle on her King's face, and she smiled in her sweet-tempered way that always managed to make Naruto's heart stutter just the littlest bit. "Not at all, I'm just thinking about Gasper."

Fuck she was beautiful.

Ravel's implied permission and Gehennan expectations aside, he was no harem king, and the idea that he might one day be one gave Naruto a mingled flutter of guilt and hunger. He'd been born and bred in Konoha, and it was a much more egalitarian society than Gehenna. Those morals had left their stamp in him. But at the same time, once he'd hit puberty Naruto had sampled more than his share of female flesh. His sensei had been Jiraiya after all, and what man didn't dream of having a bed full of beautiful women?

Forcing the little ethical conflict aside, Naruto decided to focus on Valerie's words rather than the softness of her voice or the way that her red silk blouse showcased a hint of her cleavage. "You mean how he's not here?" he wet his dry mouth with a hefty sip of water. "It's not healthy, I guess, but isn't that just the same thing he usually does?"

"It is." The dhampir agreed with a sad little frown. It made Naruto want to cuddle the despair away, or make her face take other expressions with a bit of the skills he'd picked up over the years.
Down boy. Damn hormones.

"But you'd like to break him out of it?" Naruto finished, feeling a little smug when she nodded at him. Eager to see his friend smile – for friendship's sake, not his dick – the rehead turned his focus to the problem. "You've all been pretty soft with him. Even Koneko cuts back on the ice princess thing."

Smiling cheekily when said nekomata glared at him, having caught wind of his comment with her exceptional hearing, Naruto moved his idle gaze down the table past Akeno and Rias to focus on Sasuke. The Uchiha had grabbed Yuuto by the ear and was twisting the fleshy appendage, mouth pulled in a mocking but indulgent smirk.

And then he knew. "Have you ever thought that might be the wrong way to look at it?" Turning back to Valerie, Naruto shrugged. "It might be better to go tough love with him. Gasper wouldn't like it, but maybe the only way he's going to get out of the box is if you make him get out of it. What do the shrinks call it, exposure therapy?"

Valerie gave a hum of comprehension, bringing one hand up to grab one of her blonde forelocks and rub it between her thumb and forefinger in consideration. The nervous gesture was a little endearing, and maybe it actually helped her reach a conclusion, but at the end she still sighed in defeat. "You might be right, but I don't know if I can do it."

"You've got a weakness for the puppy eyes?" Naruto teased, grinning at her and prompting his Bishop to smile back.

"If that's how you want to put it."

Their conversation would have gone on longer, if not for the sudden shriek of metal that filled the air and killed every voice. Naruto twisted to stare at Rias, blue eyes lowering to gaze at where she'd utterly crushed her silver chalice in one hand. The Gremory heir would have even been a little impressed, if not for the empty way she looked at her palm.

The pale skin was sliced through by metal fragments, little streams of blood running through the cracks in her flesh to drip on the table below. A few droplets even landed in Rias' potatoes, providing a morbid copper tasting seasoning if she was of a mind to eat them. "My apologies." The Ruin Princess declared blankly, flexing her fist before gracefully rising to her feet. "I'm feeling unwell. Please excuse me."

Rias fled the dining room, her red hair streaming behind her like a banner. A brief harsh stillness settled over the remaining devil, which was broken when Sasuke lurched to his feet, eyes burning with a fell light as he turned and followed after his mistress.

"What was that about?" Naruto demanded, half ready to jump out of his seat himself and go after the two. He felt Ravel settle a hand over his, and snapped his attention to the Bishop.

"Sasuke was apparently wounded on deployment. She took it badly."

"Well, I would think that would be a given, right?" The sense of urgency bled out of him, and the Gremory heir settled back in his chair with a shake of the head. "Did she think he was going to go to the battlefield and not get a few scratches?"

Koneko set her utensils aside, amber eyes glittering as one corner of her mouth pulled up in a fond smile. "Rias can be a little… irrational about those she cares about." A few cuts were nothing in the grand scheme of things, but Naruto's aunt would still hate them.
"They weren't a few scrapes." Yuuto muttered, tone low like he was giving voice to some shameful secret. Or perhaps the blond himself just felt like he shouldn't have been talking about it. "I saw them in the bath. The size of them and the way they looked... let's just say it wasn't pretty. I'm no doctor, but it's pretty easy to tell burns like those were painful."

A vaguely ill paleness suffused Akeno's cheeks, but when she lifted her chin it was in a smooth strong motion. "Painful or not, either way they won't stick around. We'll simply have to find some scar removal cream and get rid of them."

Despite her strident dismissal, Naruto was suddenly reminded that no matter how mature the Thunder Priestess appeared, she was still at heart the young girl that had lost her mother to violence. Sasuke was her something – Brother? Paternal figure? Sexual target? All three? – and the knowledge he'd been hurt was probably galling.

Still, something niggled at Naruto. There was always the possibility they were simply large burns, but the Mictlanese troops weren't known for relying on fire overmuch. "What did they look like? And where were they?"

Yuuto frowned at the redhead, but acquiesced to the question with little protest. "One was right under the ribs on the right side, and the other was on the back in the same place. They were about the size of hands I guess. In fact, they even looked like hands."

Burn scars on opposite sides of the body in the same place that were shaped like hands. A rueful chuckle escaped Naruto's lips, and he shook his head with exasperation. "He did it to himself, the bastard. It probably looks like a bitch and hurt like one too, but that's how cauterization is."

"Cauterization?"

Turning back to Koneko, Naruto smiled grimly. "Someone probably ran him through, and he was too far from the lines for a healer, so he had to make do. Reckless dumbass." More than one jaw clenched at his guess, and Naruto swallowed back the sudden sheepish guilt that bubbled in his gut. Whoops?

Oh well. Maybe if they hung him out to dry for a while it would teach Sasuke to treat his life a little more carefully. Cauterizing himself. Seriously? It was like the bastard thought they were still shinobi killing machines running around on S-ranked missions with no support.

Then again, it wasn't like Naruto had a leg to stand on. He was just as bad. He had the sudden image of Ravel skinning him alive for being irresponsible and shuddered. Perhaps a little sympathy for his brother-in-arms was in order.
Chapter 53

Rias knew she was being irrational.

She knew she was being a silly woman, overreacting to a few scratches she'd known that Sasuke would come home with. What would were her parents say? What would the clan think? They'd probably shake their heads at her shameful weakness and wonder why she'd ever been given Evil Pieces in the first place. She'd make a terrible King for the Rating Games.

Yet no matter what self-recriminations she summoned up, Rias couldn't quite stuff down the curling sickness in her gut.

Sasuke had admitted to being wounded in the field, but he was obviously still alive and well. So why couldn't her mind stop conjuring images of his body broken and mutilated in some filthy ditch somewhere? Why was the only thing she was able to do was stride briskly through the corridors of her father's mansion and pretend she could run away from her own emotional frailty?

Perhaps there had been more justification to her father naming Naruto his heir rather than just battlefield prowess. Perhaps her father had already seen then her feeble strength and known that her heart could never bear the burden of lordship. But not even the force of her shame was enough to stop her moving feet.

It took Sasuke looming out of the dark and settling a firm grip around her upper arm to jerk Rias to a stop, blue-green eyes wide and dazed.

"Why are you running away?"

"I'm not." Rias denied instinctively, lowering her gaze to his blue t-shirt and staring at the broad surface of his chest. She'd seen him shirtless before, once in a blue moon prior to deployment; and wondered how he'd changed while he was gone. Did the cotton conceal thin white lines left behind by a blade here and there? Were there huge pink ropey lines where he'd almost been gutted?

The skin of her upper left arm burnt like a brand under Sasuke's palm, reminding Rias of scars long gone and her own experience with dismemberment.

"You are." The ebony lines of Sasuke's eyebrows drew tighter in thought. Satisfied that the Ruin Princess wasn't going to try and run off into the night again, he loosened his clutch and let his hand run down over the pale skin of her forearm so he could grasp and inspect the faintly bleeding slashes along her palm.

He didn't bother to ask why. It would have felt wrong to do so. Looking for answers so boldly would drag uncomfortable truths to light, and Sasuke didn't know if she was ready to face them. He didn't know if he was ready to face them, coward that he was. An irrational concern for friends was what it was, but he wanted more, and he was afraid of having that hope crushed.

So Sasuke made the only move left to him, and used his other hand to yank the front of his shirt up to reveal the pale and muscled planes of his abdomen.

The pupils of Rias' eyes dilated as her focus was drawn unerringly down. She skipped over the silvery hairlines where some lucky blow had managed to nick the Pawn. The steady pulse of her heart lurched in her chest as the redhead considered the thick leathery blemish marring Sasuke's otherwise smooth skin.
"It's ugly."

Sasuke's voice held a coil of black amusement, and sparked a brief blaze of rage in Rias. How dare he just make light of his injuries! Was he was making a mockery of her concern for him as well as the affection that motivated it? Did he think her foolish and ridiculous for feeling the way she did?

Before Rias could descend further into a spiral of self-recrimination, Sasuke pulled her hand closer. Perhaps he was motivated by something he'd seen in her face, or perhaps he'd always intended to press the flat of her palm against the coarse texture of his scar.

"It's a burn." Sasuke told the Ruin Princess, voice low and rough. Even though he'd lost much of the feeling in the skin where he'd placed her hand, the Uchiha found himself hypersensitive to the touch, the few remaining nerves stretching out to catch more of her.

"Here," the Uchiha paused, gently pulling her questing fingers along around the curve of his side to the back. "And here."

The movement left thin crimson streaks along the path her hand had traveled, and by the time her palm met its destination Rias had been forced to lean in so they were nearly flush at the chest.

Heat thrummed through her, familiar and dangerous, and Rias swallowed dryly before trying to dismiss the half-lidded heaviness in Sasuke's eyes.

"Burns on both sides in the shape of a hand. Did you come across someone particularly grabby?"

Shaking his head, Sasuke gave a tiny smirk full of morbid humor. "No, I did it to myself. A battlefield cauterization after I took a sword to the gut." He paused, releasing his shirt and letting the cotton fall down to hide his scars. "The same one that I brought home with me, now that I've mentioned it."

Rias' first instinct was to tell Sasuke to get rid of the blade he'd picked up as a trophy in the war. She wanted the heavy black thing ground into dust and scattered to the four winds. The meteor iron sword would never be more than a reminder of the near death experience her Pawn had. And it was a near death experience, because why else would he have needed to weld the stab shut?

But the young redhead beat back that instinct, knowing that no matter what her opinion on it was, Sasuke wouldn't have brought the blade home with him if he didn't want it. Rias had no desire to make the Uchiha's life more difficult than it was.

"I see. You're rather calm about it, aren't you? Death must be no big thing for such a puissant warrior." The sarcastic anger was thick in Rias' words, but her eyes burnt with unshed tears, and beneath the battered rage was a sort of bleak despair.

"I never said that."

"You didn't have to."

Silence slithered through the air, strangling any efforts at further conversation. Rias felt like she must be trembling with some queer mixture of mortification and fury, but her hand was steady even as Sasuke brought it up to press over his heart, never letting go despite the faintly sticky feel of the blood between their palms.

"I never said that." Sasuke repeated patiently, the skin around his eyes tightening with a sort of aged wisdom. Abruptly, Rias was reminded that despite their physical bodies, her Pawn was twice her age. "It's not pleasant to feel your life slipping through your fingers, but who do you think I am,
Smiling with a grim satisfaction as the Ruin Princess took on a faint expression of desperate baffled consideration, Sasuke pressed on. "I may be a devil, but once I was Sasuke of the Uchiha, born in Konoha as a good little soldier. It's my birthright, and Naruto is no different. We're monsters bred for war. From the moment we drew breath, we were marked for death."

Rias slapped him with her free hand, softly enough not to hurt but harsh enough to shock. "Don't ever say that again." She demanded, incensed and disgusted at the shinobi system that had taught Sasuke to value his life so cheaply. "You're more than just some sack of meat to be sacrificed for some pompous idea of the greater good!"

The black of Sasuke's eyes swirled Sharingan red, piercing the night and studying Rias' face with hawkish clarity. He could see every fine red eyelash fluttering, along with the way the moonlight illuminated her as it slanted in from the corridor windows, and the faint flush of her pale cheeks.

"Perhaps." He responded in a noncommittal chuckle, shrugging one shoulder in a lazy motion sure to irritate. "But you're forgetting that no matter when and where they were born, all men were born to die."

"I won't-"

"But before I die." The Uchiha cut her off, the expression on his face turning maudlin and fey. "I intend to live. I spent days and days fighting a battle that never seemed to end, and met death too many times to count. I've already spent one life throwing away everything I cared about. I won't go to my grave again with regrets."


None of them mattered, because they couldn't adequately describe the way Sasuke felt when he finally broke after years of denials and swept down to capture her mouth with his own.

Whatever reply Rias was going to offer was swallowed up by the warm press of Sasuke's lips. It was both like and unlike the kiss they'd once shared before. There was that same fire in her veins, searing and heady with such a strong sense of contentment that she wanted to cry. But unlike that first rushed meeting, there was no clattering of teeth or clumsy desperation. Sasuke was patient and skilled, and it showed.

Despite the panic bubbling up in her stomach, Rias surrendered for the moment. Political concerns didn't matter. They couldn't even hold a candle against the fierce song of joy inside her, and as her mouth shyly opened up to the questing of Sasuke's tongue.

Rias was forced to admit that Naruto had been right. Her nephew had been crude and teasing, but he'd known what he saw in her.

Rias knew she could never have been contented without experiencing this. Sasuke's free hand came up to cradle her cheek, and the redhead realized that she'd unconsciously wrapped a desperate fist in his shirt. Their other hands were still clasped tightly, pressed so tightly against the Uchiha's breast that she could feel his thudding heartbeat and know that he was just as affected as she was.

When they finally broke apart for air, Rias felt the chill of desolation pour over her like a bucket of ice water. The separation could be mended in any moment, but she knew that at some point it would
have to be permanent. She was a noble daughter of the House of Gremory, and Sasuke was just a commoner. Every stolen moment was a curse, soothing her heartsickness and deepening the suffering that would come with the inevitable parting.

"Don't…"

Sasuke kissed her again and again, heedless of her feeble protests. Rias caved every time to the sweet pain, the fire in her belly thrumming happily and filling her up.

Perhaps it was mad passion, or just stubbornness, but the Uchiha refused to relent until both of their mouths were swollen from the forceful desperate way he kissed her. It was like he was trying to fit a lifetime of affection into a moment.

"Stop." Rias finally ordered, thick tears running down her face. She couldn't bear to look at him, because she wanted, so instead she settled her focus in the vicinity of his throat.

She hadn't even told him it was the end, and already her heart was squeezing in her chest so tightly Rias found she struggled to breath. "You can't do that again. What if someone had seen? The clan would kill you!"

"Fuck the clan." Sasuke rasped, still leaning in so they were nose to nose. The smell of him reminded her of woodsmoke and flames, but Rias had to stay strong. A moment of weakness could be forgiven. But she couldn't allow him to risk his own life for her sake. The laws were clear.

All relations between a pureblood female and a commoner male were a capital crime. It was for the good of Gehenna and the devil species. At that moment Rias loathed the kingdom she'd been born into with the fire of the sun. But the law was the law. "I'm sorry."

With a final press of her mouth on his, feather-soft and tasting of her own tears, Rias fled.

Naruto was just pulling off his socks to get ready for the bath when Sasuke burst into his chambers like a whirlwind. "No please, come right in." he complained, straightening up and turning. "What do you mean I have to knock? That's for faggots."

Whatever further insults the Gremory heir intended to offer up died the moment he caught sight of his friend's face. "What happened to you?" Naruto prodded, voice cautious like he was approaching a wild animal.

It wasn't far for the truth with the way that Sasuke's features were drawn into a rictus of tormented rage. A wrong word here or there might trigger the Uchiha to have another meltdown and go on another quest for revenge.

The horror.

"The clan this, the clan that. This fucking Senate and all these god damn noble pieces of –"

"Whoa now. Deep breaths." Waving his hands in a frantic effort to slow Sasuke's borderline treasonous rant, Naruto shed the last drags of tiredness and turned all his focus to the Uchiha. Things were probably a little more serious than taxes or whatever else usually got people angry at the government if it was Sasuke getting all up in arms about it. "Slow down and tell me what happened."

Waiting and watching as Sasuke's heated anger slowly simmered down into a sort of quiet sullenness, Naruto jerked a thumb at the nearest chair. "Let's have a seat, yeah?"
Like all members of the 72 Pillars, Naruto had more wealth to shake a stick at. His parents owned
dozens of mansions, all outfitted with enormous rooms and more luxuries than he would ever spend
in five lifetimes. Having a small table he could sit around with a friend and talk about sensitive issues
was just a convenience that was par for the course.

Once Sasuke had grudgingly settled into one of the chairs, Naruto sunk down across from him and
cocked a red eyebrow. "So, what's going on?" Even as he assumed a façade of calm nonchalance,
Naruto felt the anxious twisting begin in his chest. What the hell had happened that managed to work
the Ice Prince into such a frothing lather?

"I kissed Rias."

A pause.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

"You know what I said, dobe."

Naruto grunted at the old nickname, propping one elbow on the polished surface of the table to he
could rest his head in his palm.

"Well it could be worse. Did you just do it out in the open where everyone could see you? I didn't
think you were so damn reckless." It must have happened after they ran off after dinner, and Naruto
just hoped they weren't dumb enough to start locking lips where some servant could walk in on
them.

Frowning at the defensive glare his friend gave him, Naruto shook his head. "Well since you're here
already, you feeling up to a drink?" Not bothering to wait for a response, the redhead summoned a
few bottles of sake from the kitchen with little more than a faint trickle of crimson magic.

Maybe it was a bit inappropriate considering Naruto was a minor wearing his frog pajamas and
Sasuke looked fit to explode, but he just knew it would help.

Alcohol made everything better.

Quiet tension hung so thick in the air it could be cut with a knife, not in the least relenting as Naruto
wordlessly poured out two saucers of sake and offered one to Sasuke. He watched at the Pawn down
it in a single gulp, and just knew that they'd be regretting it in the morning. Oh well. Such were the
costs of friendship.

Sasuke slammed the saucer down, craving for a smoke or something to just take the edge off of the
resentment clawing around inside of him. He didn't in the least blame Rias, because she was only
doing what she thought she had to in order to protect him. But Sasuke could certainly hate the social
barriers and the system that enforced them.

A hand hovered in the air, pointing right at Sasuke's breastbone until he smirked ruefully and met
Naruto for the offered fist bump. Considering their real ages, they didn't have any business running
around with secret handshakes or other such nonsense, but that didn't stop Sasuke from appreciating
the gesture. It was a silent reassurance that Naruto was still on his side, rather than on the side of the
clan or the government or anyone else.

"I'm not gonna ask you if you had fun." Naruto chortled as Sasuke gave him an absolutely
venomous stare over the rim of his second saucer of sake. "Just like I'm not gonna ask you if you
were dumb enough to think this might be a good one night stand. I'll assume you've got enough
smarts to not take the risk unless you were serious about her."
Sasuke just looked unimpressed and impatient as he let another mouthful of burning liquor sear over his tongue. Determined to match the older devil shot for shot, Naruto pounded back two saucers in quick succession. The booze made him gorge rise, but Naruto clumsily forced down the urge. He wasn't much of a drinker in his second life, but he'd had plenty of experience in the first.

It was kind of sad, Naruto mused as he sipped more. Two old warhounds like they were had no business huddling around in the dark getting drunk like a pair of naughty kids.

But then again, did one ever get too old for drinking alcohol? Maybe it was a crutch that was ideal for broken people like them. Once upon in time they'd both been innocent ignorant children, until Konoha had written over them with violence. A little bit of relaxation wasn't too much to ask for after all the fighting and killing and bleeding they'd been a part of.

"I convinced Dad years ago not to get in your way, and I know that Granny Venelana doesn't give a damn about bloodlines. Unless you're dumb enough to get caught on film, the clan won't be able to convince them to have you killed off. They'd have to prove it." Naruto began without preamble, blue eyes narrow in thought as he chewed the inside of his cheek.

A few heavy red strands of hair hung in his face, and the Gremory heir irritably brushed them aside. "This'll be easier than you'd think it would be, but harder than you'd like it to be. You just have to enter the nobility. Well that, or overthrow the government."

"We'll keep treason as Plan B, shall we?" Sasuke shot back wryly, the tight stress in his shoulders finally loosening. He'd originally intended to ask Naruto for advice on wooing Rias, but with the way she'd responded to him the obstacle wasn't a lack of feelings on her part. It was the society they lived in.

Naruto was going to help him just the same, and he felt a warm flicker of gratitude he'd never ever put words to. Sasuke might feel thankful, but that didn't mean he was going to put up with the mocking that would come from admitting his appreciation. He'd already have enough to deal with from Naruto about Rias once their little fireside chat was over.

"Fine then." Naruto teased, luxuriating in the burn of alcohol in his blood. Maybe they were getting a little drunk, but it was all for the good. It had been too long since he'd sat down and had a real heart to heart – or fist to fist really – with Sasuke. "So, we'll just need to get you into the nobility. Simple enough."

"I wouldn't call it simple. I've never heard of a commoner doing it before."

"But the legal process is still there." Naruto pointed out. In Gehenna the most powerful noble families had votes in the Diabolical Senate, but not all pureblood families did.

Those who came from houses with the viscount or baron rank had all the privileges of nobility save the right to vote in the Senate. Beneath them were the baronets, who were gentry made up of commoners and reincarnated devils that had managed to convince the government to acknowledge them, and had some abridged rights. "You've just gotta get famous. Win a lot of Rating Games or something."

"Somehow I doubt that they're going to let me play as a one man team in the Rating Games without a King, and you know Rias doesn't care for them."

Waving off the mild objection, Naruto grinned. "Details. First we make you a baronet, and then we make you a baron. You meet pretty much all the requirements anyway."
In order for a commoner to ascend to the rank of baronet, they needed a noble sponsor – which Naruto would easily provide. After that, the petition would go to the Senate, where it would be accepted or rejected based on if the devil in question had merit. If Sasuke became well known and powerful enough, he'd easily make the cut for merit.

After reaching the baronet rank, the devil would have a few of the rights that nobles enjoyed. Namely the privilege of rank over the common masses, being able to legally have a harem of lowborn women, and the right to be tried be nobles or other gentry in the courts of law. Most of the more famous reincarnated devils like Tannin or Souji had managed to reach the rank.

"You've already got the crazy eyes, and you've got a service medal. Plus, I can shake down a few contacts." Naruto pointed out, ignoring the scowl the came when he mocked Sasuke's Sharingan.

Becoming enobled was technically possible for any commoner, but it had never been done before in Gehennan history. The requirements were stringent. Only a baronet could become a baron, and they needed five pureblood sponsors to do so. After that, they needed to demonstrate some form of service to Gehenna, prove they had the cash to support a 'noble' lifestyle, and then prove they had some genetic inheritance that would get passed down to their children. It was the question of bloodline ability that had always hamstrung prospective barons before.

Sasuke met most of the requirements. The Sharingan was a genetic boon, he'd served in the war with Mictlan, and Naruto had enough connections to dig up five sponsors for him. Once he had the fame for the Senate to consider him and the cash to support a noble household, the Uchiha would have an in.

It helped that Ophis' ritual had made the Uchiha a first-generation pureblood anyway, not that they could ever claim that in front of the Senate. Even building a revolution was a better option than admitting to the Senate's face that Sasuke had been part of the capital crime of soul consumption in the service of a foreign power.

"Sure." Sasuke agreed bitterly, swirling around a dollop of sake in his saucer before swallowing it back. "Give me a few decades and I'll get right back to you. I suppose I'll have to find a way to kill whoever Rias has an arranged marriage with by then too. Easy as goddamn pie."

Kicking his bare feet up on the table, Naruto grabbed one of the green glass bottles and twisted the cap off so he could drink from it directly. "Hellfire and ashes, you're in a mood. Didn't you listening to me, you bastard? I told you, my dad is neutral, and if I know anything about my granny, she's on your side. Do you think Grandpa Zeo would piss her off by selling Rias off to some old shitbird? I didn't say it would be quick, just low risk and simple. Patience is a virtue or something like that."

Naruto clenched his jaw as Sasuke glared into the bottom of his saucer. It was like the Uchiha was holding the cup personally responsible for running out of booze to drink. "Besides, is it that serious? It's one thing to like her – and don't get me wrong, I'll twist your balls off another time for that – but marriage shouldn't bother you so badly unless you're thinking you might go that far yourself one day."

"Maybe I'm just attached to the idea of you calling me Uncle."

"Go fuck yourself."

An ice-cold splash of water woke Naruto up, the redhead shrieking and kicking out wildly. His foot made contact with something hard and fleshy, and after another push the redhead's flailing
successfully managed to shove Sasuke right out of the bed.

"You're fucking dead, dobe!"

"Pipe down you." Naruto winced, pressing a hand to his throbbing forehead and cracking his gummy eyelids open to muster the best hateful stare that his hungover ass could muster. "What the fuck, Ravel?"

Smirking at her fiancé, Ravel tossed the cheap plastic bucket to the side and settled her hands over her hips. She'd chosen to forgo her usual drill-like curls, instead wearing her blond hair in a braid that trailed down her chest. "Time to wake up and get the blood pumping, moron."

Naruto ran a tongue over his teeth, shuddering at the feel of built up crud from a long night of drinking. He could still hear Sasuke cursing lowly as the Uchiha rolled about on the floor, but he chose to focus on the girl that had so cruelly woken him up. "What's with the scrubs, spitfire?"

Typically, Ravel wore her signature pink dress. It was well made, conveyed her family's wealth, and showcased her youthful elegance. But today the Bishop had chosen to forgo any sort of dress at all in favour of a pink tracksuit with black stripes running along the seams. "Well after dinner last night, most of us – which means everyone but you, Sasuke, and Rias – got together and decided that we could use a change of pace."

Heaving himself up from the floor, Sasuke turned two bloodshot obsidian orbs on Naruto's fiancé. The light that shone in them promised violence. "The fuck are you on about?"

Sneering at the Uchiha's foul mouth, Ravel drew herself up and settled an emphasizing hand over her heart. "Don't look at me like that, you Neanderthal. I suppose I'll have to put it in a way that you both understand. Since soldier boy here went and got himself stabbed, we've decided it's time to train until we all die. To prevent death by stabbing, you understand."

It took a few seconds for the explanation to work its way through Naruto's throbbing brain, but eventually he pressed his hands against his eyes and moaned in denial. "No!"

"No!" Sasuke repeated.

For a moment they weren't shinobi veterans, or devious schemers, or damaged adults. Instead they were just two young men, groaning about their shared misery and wishing they could spend a little longer sleeping in after a night of illicit binge drinking.

"Oh yes." Grinning like the sadistic cat that caught the canary, Ravel leaned forward over the edge of the bed to flick her hungover fiancé in the forehead. "It's not our fault the two of you decided to turn into a pair of lushes. Now you have to suffer the consequences. Get ready, and don't make me come back in here."

Naruto sighed, gingerly poking at the heavy dark bags that hung under his eyes and watched his Bishop stride out of the room. Was it just him, or was she swaying her hips as she left?

"No, she's actually doing it."

"Fuck, did I say that out loud? Don't answer." Naruto grumbled, forcing his body to its feet. There was no way that he'd regret getting sloshed with Sasuke the night before, since it had helped his friend and Naruto was always ready to help his friends, but damn if it wasn't taking its toll. "What do you say we sneak on outta here before they get a chance to run us into the ground?"

Pale faced and tired, Sasuke's black eyes narrowed as he considered it. "Best not. You know they'll
"Ahh, but what if we skip for twice in a row? Betcha never thought about that, did ya?"

Exasperated amusement filled Sasuke's voice as he wandered about Naruto's bedroom in search of his socks. The wood was pleasantly cool against his bare feet, and he was tempted to lay down on it. "But then we'll have to put up with all that nagging when we come back. It doesn't diminish, it gets inventoried. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they put interest on it."

"Fuck."

"Exactly."

Roughly running a hand through his greasy red mane, Naruto turned to the window and scowled at the red dawn. "Did they wake us up at the crack of fucking ass?" Oh well, they'd done enough pissing and moaning over spilt sake. It was time to suck it up.

Sasuke found his socks balled up in the corner of the room, and stuffed them in his pocket with a grimace. Both of them urgently needed a bath. Hopefully it would be enough to wake them up for the torture of the day that was going to come.

"By the way." Naruto called out, shamelessly stripping naked and throwing his clothes in the nearest hamper. "I had an idea yesterday. So stick with me. You know how you've done your whole Chidori thing? And I've got my Rasengan? You know?"

Unfazed by Naruto's nudity – they'd been on enough missions in Team Seven not to care about such things – Sasuke folded his arms and turned to face the Gremory heir expectantly. "Yes, I know."

"Well what if we decided to try to, you know, put together some more jutsu-spells? I figure if we put our heads together we can get something right, and it's not like the Chidori and Rasengan are the only things we ever learned, and two heads are better than one."

"We'll see. First, get your ass in the shower. I can smell your stink from here."

"That's just your own rotten crotch, Uchiha."

"I don't think the Harem King can go around lecturing anyone else for having a rotten crotch."

"Do you want to die? Because we can fight it out right here."

"Sure, me and your buck-naked ass. Why not? We'll film it, and the winner gets all the profits."

"We could probably get more if we made naked mud wrestling vids. You might even get enough to buy that nobility you're hankering so desperately for."

"Should have known you'd suggest something homoerotic, you faggot."

"Die."
Chapter 54

Grayfia was tempted to throw her glass of apple juice at the wall. Not because she disliked apple juice, or because the cup was dirty, or even because she was angry. She just wanted to do it for the simple sadistic satisfaction that she'd get after seeing Naruto flinch.

There wasn't a parent in the world that wouldn't enjoy smugly torturing their son after he'd decided to sneak in a night of binge drinking. The silver-haired woman could almost picture it already. She'd toss the mug, listen to it shatter, and watch Naruto wince as the sound needled his hangover.

Alas, she was supposed to be the adult in the family.

"I see that you had some fun last night," Grayfia commented dryly, eying the telltale bags under Naruto's eyes. Even though he was fresh from the shower and had managed to find a clean orange and black track suit, the cleanup hadn't quite managed to hide the evidence of his little escapade.

Rubbing the back of his head, Naruto chuckled anxiously and didn't even try to deny it. Lying always made his punishments worse, and even if he wanted to risk it there was too much knowing in his mother's voice to bother. "Eh, well it is what it is, ya know?"

The corners of Grayfia's lips twitched with reluctant humor. "You can stop worrying that I'm going to skin you alive." Her amusement only intensified when the Gremory heir rubbed at his chest and gave a great sigh of relief.

Motioning at the seat beside her, Grayfia turned to look out at the carefully cultivated garden and waited for her son to join her at the little round glass table. "I hope you weren't drinking alone?" she asked, voice deepening with a touch of sternness as her silver eyes considered a juniper shrub. 'Like an alcoholic' went unsaid.

Naruto's lips puckered faintly, and he shoved his hands in his armpits to keep them warm. It was a chilly morning, and autumn was slowly yielding to winter. Even his mother had made a bit of a concession to the changing of the seasons and abandoned her typical maid outfit in favour of a classy red wool coat. "No, I was with Sasuke."

Which was just about what Grayfia would have expected, she reflected wryly. Those two boys seemed to drift apart and come together every second time she took a look at them, and no doubt they got into all kinds of mischief. Rias' Pawn had a certain quiet restraint Grayfia approved of and sometimes exasperatedly wished Naruto had, but the boy also seemed to have no desire to live cautiously.

All of the young ones were like that, the gaggle of fools. Though that might just be Grayfia's age cropping up wistfully.

"I see. And who decided to make today a training day?" her questions were little more than idle small talk, but Grayfia enjoyed the conversation. The war had stolen nearly a year of their lives, and Naruto seemed to have grown much older in their time apart. Most of the time she had to be the Strongest Queen, but sometimes, she just wanted to be a mother watching over her only child.

"Ravel's."

Humming in comprehension, Grayfia downed her cup of juice. She'd been infuriated about their son being boxed into an arranged marriage, even if she had understood the need for it. Politics would take its pound of flesh, and there was little to be done about it. But despite her initial misgivings,
Grayfia had come to feel like it was a good match.

Ravel was a pretty enough girl, and would grow up to be a beautiful woman. She was smart, passionate, and not afraid to keep Naruto in line when his head got too far in the clouds. Even if there was no romantic love yet, Grayfia could appreciate the blonde Bishop, and suspected that love would come.

Still, Grayfia hadn't summoned her son simply for a little chat while she mused about how old she'd gotten and what she'd missed in the boy's life. She'd meant to speak to him more on Azmarin, but between shipping the children off to Heaven and the cleanup after the final battle, she hadn't managed to set aside some time until now.

"Don't worry. I don't intend to hold you up for much longer. I'm sure Ravel is already feeling impatient." Grayfia sighed, enjoying the look of consternation that crossed Naruto's face. "But before you go, I need to impart a lesson to you."

Shifting in his chair, Naruto eyed his mother with a sense of trepidation. While he doubted that she was going to spring anything truly shocking or harmful on him, the Gremory heir was fully prepared to get a bit of an earful. She might have promised not to skin him alive for drinking with Sasuke, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to give him a lecture.

"Before we sent you to the Third Heaven, you came to me and asked me to hand the reigns of Azmarin back over to you." Grayfia began, threading her thin pale fingers together as she took in her son with her metallic coloured eyes. "You told me that you did well as governor, and I told you that your performance was 'novel'."

Naruto swallowed dryly, and nodded in understanding.

"The truth is, you ruled more like a heavy-handed warlord than you did as a politician. Your father and I are not disappointed in you, because you're only young and it's merely expected that you make some mistakes. You did admirably striking fear into the hearts of your enemies and in purging your underlings for disloyalty. But you forgot your image, so I had to quietly step in and manage that for you."

Blue eyes narrowed with involuntary indignation, but Naruto forced it back and managed to question politely. "What do you mean step-in?"

The silver strands of Grayfia's bangs faintly moved in the breeze, and a tiny frown pulled at her eyebrows before smoothing away like it had never been. "Being a ruler is as much about perception as it is about actual strength. You must have both hard and soft power. When you decided to take to the streets and crush all criminals you could find, or when you decided every member of the public service must have their minds read, did you not think about how that would be perceived? The commoners would see you as a hard man that must be feared and respected, perhaps even hated."

"And do not mistake me." Grayfia continued when Naruto only stared at her in expectant silence. "Fear and respect are necessary attributes in a ruler, but as the human Machiavelli has written, you must not only inspire terror. You must avoid hatred. The simplest way to do this is to speak and act in such a way that your subjects both fear and love you. Destroy anyone who opposes you, but be as gentle as a lamb to the innocent. If you commit atrocities, only commit them in service of the greater good. When you asked the police officers to submit to mind reading, you should have taken the time to inflame their hearts against any traitors, so they would view it as a patriotic duty rather than a cruel punishment from above."

Smiling faintly when Naruto grimaced, Grayfia resisted the urge to reach out and ruffle his hair. It
was queerly cute that her son was a devil and the descendent of generations of warriors, and yet he shied away from bluntly discussing the Great Game. "Because you forgot to propagandize and control your public face, I had to do it for you. A few words in an ear there, some anonymous graffiti there, and the people of Azmarin lionize you as young Augustus. It is a good reputation to have, and the next time that you take on a similar task, I have faith that you'll be more cautious with your image."

"Thanks." Naruto managed to croak out as his mother gave a small beatific smile. She was in a sense, not wrong about the reputation she'd crafted for him. The commoners of Rome had been cared for by Caesar's nephew, and loved him so much to riot in his name any time it looked as though the Senate would force him from power. That kind of affection was exactly what he'd hoped for as a boy in Konoha.

But that didn't mean Naruto could forget the other side of Rome's first emperor. The cunning, cruel, and charismatic tyrant. The whole purpose of The Conspiracy was to wrest power from the nobility and hand it back to the people, not concentrate it in one man and make him a God-King. How was he supposed to give power to a people that adored him so much they craved to be ruled?

Maybe he was overthinking it though. A few months were nothing but a drop of piss in the bucket compared to the hundreds or thousands of years most devils had survived. They'd be easily forgotten, as long as no other self-appointed helpers decided to keep building up a false legend of Naruto as the populist strongman.

Thick beads of sweat clung to her white hair, clumping the strands together into a wet sticky mess. Fire raced up the muscles of her arms, exhaustion making them tremble even as she forced her limbs to keep the giant boulder suspended above her head.

Koneko bared her teeth as she carried her burden over the finish line, stepping over the line that existed only in her mind and gladly letting the huge hunk of stone drop to the ground with a thump. Despite the disgusting way her perspiration had soaked her clothes and made the track suit cling to her thin body, Koneko wanted to just lay down and rest.

But she couldn't, since she'd only completed the physical portion of her training.

Ignorant laymen might think that the only function of a Rook was physical power, but they'd only be half right. There were limits to the amount of strength a devil body could actually attain. Beyond that, any 'physical' prowess was merely the result of magical energy reinforcing the muscles.

Of the many different types of sorcerous energy that could be used to buttress the body, chakra was the most effective. It produced the most 'bang for the buck', so to speak. And as a nekomata, Koneko had the inborn capability to draw in chakra. She supposed that made her a bit unfortunate, since she refused to use it and had to try to build up her other magical reserves to compensate.

It was too bad she hadn't been born as almost any other kind of creature, since she might have had a different gift instead of passive chakra absorption.

"Are you okay? Do you need a breather?"

Sucking in a last breath, Koneko shook her head at Yuuto's question and squared her shoulders. "No." Ignoring the faint concern that the blond Knight was looking at her with, Koneko deliberately turned her gaze elsewhere. "I'm fine."

Amber orbs settled on Rias, the redhaired woman juggling several balls of the Power of Destruction.
with one hand while she carefully swung her rapier with the other. Learning to split concentration in a fight would be a useful skill, but Rias was still only at the stage of slowly moving through a memorized kata while she played with her magic.

And quite frankly, Koneko felt that considering her performance all day, Rias had a long way to go before she would master the task. Not even on the morning after Sasuke was conscripted had Koneko seen the Ruin Princess so distracted.

Rias made a half-hearted effort at training, eyes vacant as her mind wandered elsewhere, and it was showing in her lack of progression. Dark bags hung heavy under her eyes, as they did under Naruto's and Sasuke's, but unlike the boys Koneko doubted Rias had descended into drunken revelry.

In a real fight, such distraction could be lethal.

Koneko sighed.

"I know." Yuuto muttered, settling a hand over the Rook's orange clad shoulder and ignoring the sensation of cold sweat under his fingers. "I don't know what happened, but they're both all tangled up in knots today. You just see it less in him because of the hangover angle covering it up."

Turning at the Knight's suggestion, Koneko let her yellow gaze drill into Sasuke instead. It took her a few moments to see what Yuuto had been talking about, since despite the hangover the Uchiha was engaged in a lively conversation with Naruto. Only after the Pawn shifted was she able to catch a glimpse of the desolate dullness dimming Sasuke's eyes.

"What do you propose we do then?"

"I don't know." Helpless frustration darkened Yuuto's voice to a growl. The blond could always stomp up to Sasuke and challenge him to a spar so they could beat all thoughts out of each other, but that was only a temporary fix. The underlying issue would still be there until Rias and Sasuke actually spoke to one another. Just outright telling his friend to go speak to Rias would have even worse results, and end up with Sasuke angry, embarrassed, or both.

"We could ask Naruto to step in." Koneko pointed out, gaze shifting to the hungover redhead. Even as she suggested it, the nekomata could practically taste the bile in the back of her throat. It wasn't that she disliked Naruto, but the Gremory heir wasn't part of their peerage. He was more of a cousin rather than a brother to their makeshift little family, and Koneko resented the thought that they couldn't fix their issues themselves.

Not that she or Yuuto were much good as far as healing emotional problems, Koneko admitted. Naruto might be his own King, but he was still a better option for fixing Sasuke's and Rias' disagreements than Yuuto or Koneko herself would be.

Yuuto considered the idea, a muscle jumping under the pale skin of his jaw. "We could." He conceded slowly, still turning over the problem in his mind. Naruto would fix it immediately, even if he had to look the pair in a room to force them to talk whatever it was out. But was that fair? "Or we could wait."

As Koneko cocked a snowy white eyebrow, Yuuto found himself warming to the idea. "It's only Wednesday." The Knight pointed out, shoving his hands into the pockets of his grey tracksuit and turning his back on Naruto and Sasuke. "We could give them until, say, Friday or Saturday to figure it out on their own. It's only fair, right? Don't they deserve a little time to work through it on their own before we start meddling?"
Staring at Sasuke for half a beat, Koneko moved her gaze to Rias. They were both utterly run down for reasons that weren't purely physical, and the longer an emotional wound went untreated, the worst the infection. Yet, Yuuto had a point. "That's fair." They'd give the two devils a few days to work it out alone.

And if they didn't, then Koneko and Yuuto would try to step in.

"No, no, no. That's not going to work."

"Why not? It's exactly what we agreed to."

"You know exactly why." Azazel glared at Ajuka, annoyance curling through his gut as the Satan only gave him a shit eating grin in response. Taking up the thick booklet that contained the proposed agreement that would cede Mictlan to the Grigori, Azazel slapped the scientist with it.

"Well that's just rude."

Another slap.

"Stop that."

A third slap.

"Sirzechs, he's being mean to me."

Pinching his nose with a put-upon expression, Sirzechs rolled his eyes to the ceiling as if to ask their slain God why he had been cursed to suffer so. Once he'd managed to rediscover his patience, the Crimson Satan settled his hands in his lap and gamely met the gaze of the Governor-General of the Grigori. "Stop fooling around you two. That said, Ajuka is right. This is exactly what you agreed to."

"But," Sirzechs rushed to add when Ajuka looked amused and Azazel looked fit to explode. "We should all understand that this is a preliminary document only. It's only there to serve as a starting point for us to work forward from."

After a few seconds where the two men shifted anxiously under Sirzechs' cold glare, the atmosphere of tomfoolery bled right out of the room. The three of them had work to do if they wanted to hammer out the new treaty to completion and present it to the Diabolical Senate before one of the nobles there jumped the gun with a different proposal.

Falbium had begged off and Serafall was still recuperating from her self-inflicted mental injuries at home, so there would be less cooks in the proverbial kitchen and ideally the conversation would move more quickly.

"Fine." Azazel conceded, running a thumb over his goatee as his wine-red eyes narrowed at the packet contained the first treat draft. Despite his lazy air, he was taking the whole negotiation seriously, and it showed in the way he'd donned slacks and a white button up shirt rather than one of his messier outfits. "But you know that this can't stand. Especially the resource provision. I'd have about three days after this went public before getting flayed by my own men if I agreed."

Nodding wearily, Sirzechs gave Ajuka a final stern frown before waving Azazel on. "We're open to counterproposals. This was just mean to serve as a bit of a skeleton before we sat down and hammered out the small details of our agreement. We're not going to be offended if you point out something you disagree with. That's what a discussion is all about."
Snorting at the implication that he needed Sirzechs' permission to do such a thing, Azazel tossed the booklet on the table and tapped the front of it with his forefinger in emphasis. "Well I hope you're ready to hear me bitching then, because this is unacceptable. Cede Gehenna a ten percent ownership stake in all our natural resource deposits in perpetuity? Are you trying to start a nationalist revolution against an imperial foreign power here?"

"Then make another suggestion." Ajuka bit out, sulking a little at having his chosen entertainment shot down by Sirzechs before it had really gotten going. He'd dressed up in his typical green robes in anticipation of having to look a little formal, but not too formal; and now he was wondering if it might have been better just to stay home. Sirzechs didn't really need him as a second negotiator anyway.

Azazel blew the blond bangs out of his eyes, reluctantly picking the proposed treaty back up and thumbing through it so he could better study the proposition under dispute. "What we'll give you is the right for the next hundred years to purchase any resource that doesn't also occur in Gehenna at cost. After that, we'll give you the right to purchase at halfway to market in the second century, and then expect you to purchase at full market price in the third. All after the date of discovery, obviously."

"So you take with one hand and offer a pittance with the other."

Pulling a cigarette from his pocket, Azazel just laughed before lighting the end of it and sucking in a breath. "Don't be so melodramatic, Sirzechs." He told the Satan, enjoying the taste of smoke on his tongue. "It's the fairest deal. Don't forget we bled for Mictlan too. It's not all yours to keep. We're just giving up our territory in Gehenna, with all the infrastructure we've already paid for, and all the natural resources we previously had access to. From my point of view, letting you guys buy anything new and exciting we find there at cost is being generous. And besides, that's what you want anyway, isn't it?"

Sirzechs just smiled ruefully, shrugging his shoulders. Azazel wasn't wrong in the end. Once the fallen angels were already given their fair share, trading the undeveloped Mictlan for the rest of Gehenna was a no brainer. It wasn't like the fallen angels had strip mined their lands bare, and even if they did the devils were still able to trade other goods and services for anything they didn't have. Getting some rights to any previously unknown minerals was just the cherry on top.

"If that's all you intend to give us, we'll accept it." Sirzechs answered, polite and friendly as he conceded. "But I hope that you don't harbor any illusions going forward. If Gehenna has a stake in Mictlan's resources, then of course we will be willing to contribute any capital needed to develop them and move them to market. But if we don't, well…"

If Azazel didn't want to grant Gehenna mineral rights, then the fallen angels had no right to expect any sort of subsidy or economic development aid on the part of the devils. They would be on their own.

The Governor-General's grin bared his white teeth. "I wouldn't expect anything else. Shall we discuss timetables?"

Rias pulled the hood of Akeno's hoodie tighter around her face and shuffled through the darkened corridors of her father's mansion. After carefully tucking her distinctive red hair out of sight and wearing one of Akeno's most signature outfits, the Ruin Princess hoped she could pass unidentified.

When the stakes were so high and the risks so lethal, she couldn't be too careful.
Tugging the back of her jeans up, Rias hunched a little so that she'd practically be swallowed up by the hoodie. LOVE was stamped out in bold white letters across her chest, flaring up against the dark purple cloth, and Rias hoped that the words and the swell of her breasts would discourage anyone from examining her face too closely. She could pass for Akeno at a distance, but never close up.

Maybe she was just being paranoid, because despite the sweat on her palms or the way that her heart thundered up into her throat, Rias managed to skulk on over to her destination without encountering a single soul.

After checking both directions down the shadowed halls, Rias pressed her ear up against the dark mahogany of Sasuke's bedroom door. Her straining ears didn't pick up anything, which meant that Sasuke was either alone or he was off elsewhere. Either outcome was acceptable, because they needed to *speak*, but Rias hardly wanted to do so under Naruto's knowing gaze.

Wiping the sweat from her hand on her blue jeans, Rias carefully settled it over the gold-plated doorknob and began to turn. By the time she'd opened the door enough to slip into Sasuke's bedroom, she felt like she was going to explode from the adrenaline fueled stress, and they hadn't even spoken yet!

Teal orbs flickered over the room, piercing each corner wearily and scanning across the sparse collection of furniture before they finally settled on her target. Sasuke seemed to be sleeping deeply, the pale shirtless expanse of his chest rising and falling steadily.

The sight of it was enough to pink her cheeks, but Rias shook over the mortification. *Aroused* mortification to be more precise, because despite her fear of the clan and of what their infatuation might cause, Rias was at least strong enough to admit *that*.

Creeping over on sock clad feet, Rias quietly crossed around and up the far side of the bed, looming over her Pawn in the dark like a crazed axe murderer. Or a stalker. Either comparison would have been enough to make her giggle in better times, but instead the Ruin Princess just swallowed thickly and reached down.

Her fingers managed to get within half a foot of Sasuke's face before his hand was wrapped around her wrist with bruising force, the Uchiha's eyes sharp and Sharingan red as he glared up at her partially hidden face.

It only took half a second for Sasuke to realize who the intruder was, and he immediately released his grip and pulled his hand back as if he'd been burnt. "Rias?" he questioned, voice dry and rough from sleep but very *alert*.

The Uchiha could have tacked on a question, clearly demanding the reason for her sudden strange presence, but the extra words would have felt *off*. Like a jarring addition to a scene that would have been perfect on its own.

Sometimes, a single word could contain the universe.

Rias inhaled jerkily, lungs inflating even as she stood silently under the pressure of her Pawn's focus. She searched for something appropriate to say; to somehow convey the storm raging inside her heart and put into words something that could never be adequately *described*.

But sometimes speech wasn't right. Sometimes the truest way to communicate was through actions. So rather than try to string together a few stuttering explanations, Rias settled one knee on the mattress so she could swing her leg over Sasuke and settle in his lap.
The black and red of the Sharingan was still as mesmerizing at it had always been, glittering in the dark like a pair of sinister rubies, and Rias smiled bitterly at the sight. "How could I stop?" she whispered, leaning down until she could softly press her mouth to his.

The first time they'd kissed, it had been a mutual thing of mingled lust and sorrow and desperation. The second time they'd kissed, Sasuke led with all the grace and experienced patience of a snake slowly constricting its coils around his prey. The third time, Rias was the one who led the way, mouth moving with the hesitation born of innocence.

Sasuke let his eyes fall shut, feeling the initial flame of lust that had ignited in his blood slow down to a quiet simmer. He wanted, and probably always would, but the blazing desire had yielded to something earnest and sweet. Settling one proprietary hand over the curve of Rias' hip, Sasuke left it there and gave himself up to the clumsy movement of perfect pink lips.

A long moment later they broke apart, Rias leaning back feeling like it hadn't been nearly long enough. She hadn't been nearly so base as to come for a make-out session, but now that she was actually there all Rias felt like doing was to keep kissing Sasuke forever.

"You probably think I'm fickle." Rias said instead of giving into her urges, the faint glistening of a tear hanging in her crimson eyelashes. How could he not? She was all over him one minute, running off and ignoring him the next, and then back for more in the third. She doubted her mother or Grayfia had ever been such irrational messes during their courtships. If this even was a courtship and not some release that would eventually be ignored like a dirty little secret for the rest of their lives.

The pad of Sasuke's thumb found the thin strip of bare skin between the top of Rias' jeans and the bottom of her borrowed hoodie. "No." he denied, his touch burning like fire as it dragged over the same small patch over and over again.

Perhaps it was meant to be a comforting gesture, but all it did was inflame the warm liquid heat in her lower belly.

Offering a little rusty laugh, Rias cupped Sasuke's pale cheeks in her hands.

Everything they were doing together was stupid and reckless. If they were ever discovered, she'd be packed off to the first lecher that would take a spoiled woman and Sasuke would be absent a head. Her parents and brother might conceal the scandal as best they could, but secrets like that always got out. It was the biggest gamble she could ever have wagered, because to lose was to lose their lives, and in the long run, she would eventually lose.

Did it mean Rias was a fool if she wanted to roll the dice anyway? She only had the one life to live, and if Sasuke were still intent despite all the risks, then maybe a short existence together was better than longer ones apart.

Or maybe she was just being a besotted fool.

"This is illegal."

"I know."

"You could end up executed."

"I don't care."

Rias' eyebrows climbed to her forehead as she stared down at Sasuke's face. There was a shocking amount of resoluteness in his gaze, and the sight was enough to make her teal eyes sting with the salt
of hot tears. Hellfire, he was serious; and that sort of devotion was what she'd craved for since she was just a babe. "They'll kill you."

"Not if I kill them first." Sasuke swore viciously, a dark promise filling his voice as the tomoe of his Sharingan began to twist murderously. Sometimes it was easy to forget because of his gruff kindness, but Sasuke was still the man who had been willing to destroy everything for the sake of the few things he treasured the most.

Pressing the palm of her hand over his heart, Rias felt the quiet thump thump resonate reassuringly through her fingertips. The touch of bare skin on bare skin burnt deliciously, but she dismissed it with pure will. "We could just leave."

"Come away with me." The redhead elaborated when Sasuke only frowned in question. "My parents have accounts in the human world – secret ones that no one else in the clan knows about. We can take Akeno, Yuuto, and Koneko with us and just leave. Gasper would be happier to stay behind with Valerie, and Naruto would look after them both."

Sasuke was tempted. It was such a simple and easy solution. It would take very little time to set up, and once they were gone it was unlikely Gehenna would care to look for them. They could even stay in contact with Rias' family easily, so it wasn't like they'd never see Naruto and the others again.

But as he reached up to push down the hood of Rias' borrowed hoodie so he could properly tangle his fingers in her magnificent crimson hair, Sasuke knew in his heart that he'd reject the option. Naruto's solution had already seared itself into his soul. It would take much longer and be much more dangerous, but the payoff was much larger.

"You deserve more than to spend the rest of your days hidden away in some abandoned corner of the world." Sasuke told her, gently pulling her head back down so their breaths mingled. "I'm going to make them acknowledge me as their equal."

Bringing his left hand to his face, Sasuke tapped beneath each Sharingan eye with a finger. "This is the proof."

Ophis had left the choice in his hands, and as much as it made the bile and self-hatred rise back up in him like a relentless tide, Sasuke already knew what he was going to do.

For Rias' sake, for the sake of his clan's name, for sake of his own pride, and the sake of the future he was going to carve out in this second life.

Power was for the living.
"Ahhh, my eyes!"

"Don't you ever knock?" Riser growled, half a scream and half a moan as he pushed Mira away. The pop as his Pawn's mouth was forced away from his cock echoed in the air, lewd and sloppy.

Slapping the fleshy globe of Mira's ass, Riser managed to break the Pawn out of her lusty haze.

Glaring at his sister, Riser waved away his mortified servant with a crisp wave. "What do you want?" the devil demanded irately, rolling to his feet and pulling his black silk robe around his naked body. The rapidly diminishing tent formed by his dying erection went unspoken of.

Covering her face with her hands, Mira quickly fled the room, her long indigo ponytails bobbing as she went. The girl was willing to please him, just like the rest of his peerage, but that didn't mean she wanted to make a show of it.

Ravel gulped, prying her hands away from her eyes. Her blue orbs darted from the floor to the ceiling and to each corner before finally settling on Riser's face. "Well, I was hoping…. That is umm… well…" The Bishop stuttered, threading her fingers together and staring at the corner of the den with bright red cheeks.

"God be good and help me." Riser begged, ignoring the faint sting that always accompanied a devil at prayer. "What do you even want? For fuck's sake." As a brother he was more than willing to help his sister in any way he could, but as a man Riser wanted to wring her scrawny little neck. He'd been so close until Ravel had decided to stop in for a god damn social visit.

The flare of her own temper twisted Ravel's features into a glare, but with a clench of the jaw the blonde Bishop managed to shove it back in exchange for carefully sculpted neutrality. "We'd heard rumors that you and Sairaorg Bael were running in the same circles for a while during war time. Never would've thought that the two of you shared any interests, but Naruto wanted me to drop by and ask you anyway."

Riser settled a hand on his sister's shoulder and steered her out of his bedroom and down the hall.

Claiming that they needed better surroundings to have a chat quieted Ravel down for a bit and gave Riser time to think. He supposed it would be inevitable that people would think he was friends with Sairaorg, since they had to spin tales of shared outings to cover their missions in the human world, but he hadn't thought it would cause people to assume he had a heart-to-heart connection with the Bael heir.

"Ask me what?" Riser muttered as they entered the drawing room of his townhouse, hoping to hell that he wasn't going to get bombarded by questions about the rather illegal and dangerous culling he had to be part of. The Lucifer would have his head on a spike if it got out, and Riser rather liked his head where it was.

Peering at the framed reproduction of Ciseri's Ecce Homo that hung over the obsidian mantle of the fireplace, Ravel shrugged and turned to watch her brother throw himself in a leather armchair. The flyaway strands of his blond hair hung in his eyes, and with the afternoon sunlight slanting in from the bay window Ravel was struck at how tired he looked.

And she doubted the cause was his special activities.
"Ask you if you know what's happened with Sairaorg recently." Ravel studied her brother and filed away the way he briefly tensed in the back of her mind. It could be the hint of some shared secret, or maybe Riser had just fallen out with Sairaorg and got irritated whenever his name was brought up. "Naruto tells me he's short-tempered, wants to do nothing but hide inside all day, and looks completely strung out… Know anything about it?"

Riser pinched the bridge of his nose, letting his head roll back and rest against the headrest of his chair with a sigh. He should have expected it, Riser supposed. Sairaorg had been easy enough to work with in the beginning, but as their kill count climbed the man had gotten more and more difficult to deal with. The guilt of massacre had started to eat the Bael heir alive, and it seemed like Sairaorg still wasn't able to just let it go.

It wasn't that Riser was entirely unsympathetic to his former partner's struggles. The whole farce had been pretty damn grisly; especially towards the end. The blood and gore had even managed to disturb Riser for a little bit. But they were only humans in the end. Did Sairaorg get all twisted up when there was beef on the dinner table?

It wasn't that Riser was entirely unsympathetic to his former partner's struggles. The whole farce had been pretty damn grisly; especially towards the end. The blood and gore had even managed to disturb Riser for a little bit. But they were only humans in the end. Did Sairaorg get all twisted up when there was beef on the dinner table?

"Couldn't really tell ya. It's not my business." Riser offered after a drawn-out silence. While spilling the beans to his sister would make things easier for Ravel's fiancé, Riser was in no rush to commit minor treason just because Sairaorg hadn't managed to find his balls yet.

Still he could throw her a bone, since she'd come all the way over to see him. "All I can really say is that you should just give him some time to get over whatever's got him all tangled up. Not even your boyfriend can pull happiness and rainbows out of his ass. Sometimes you just have to let things run their course."

"Well thanks for nothing, I guess."

Grinning smugly at his sister, Riser let his head dip down in a mock bow. "Well you know me; always in a rush to help. Any other questions you want to ask the wise sage? Or are you just going to run on home now?"

Ravel snorted, turning on her heel towards the door and taking half a step before a thought struck her. She twisted back around and smoothed down the pink folds of her dress. A faint mortified heat flushed her pale cheeks, and she smiled tremulously. "Well I was wondering… That is, umm… How could I…"

"Oh for fuck's sake, spit it out! I don't think I've seen you mumble this much since you were six."

Making a rude gesture with her hand, Ravel clenched her jaw and straightened her spine so she could stare down at her seated brother imperiously. She twisted back around and smoothed down the pink folds of her dress. A faint mortified heat flushed her pale cheeks, and she smiled tremulously. "Well I was wondering… That is, umm… How could I…"

"On what?" Riser growled back, fingers twitching as he craved for a cigarette to soothe his frayed nerves. The two siblings might fiercely love each other, but they had all the fire of their ancestral magic blazing in their hearts. Butting heads all the time was part of their routine.

"On how to appeal to a man, you buffoon."
And suddenly, Riser looked very amused. "Well, you've come to the right place. Why don't you pull up a chair and let the master work his magic on you."

"That sounds perverse."

"As perverse as asking your own brother to make you sexy?"

"If you're going to make it sound so incestuous I'm just going to go."

"Well you know where the door is. Don't let it hit you on the way out, little sister."

"I hate you."

A small bead of sweat trickled down from his hairline, clinging to the curve of his jaw. It was like an itch he wasn't able to scratch, because both hands were tied up in molding magic and there were certain things Naruto would never ask another man to do.

Wiping away his sweat was at the top of that particular list.

"Try to pull the rest of the red out of the center."

"Why don't you try to pull your head out of your ass?" Naruto snapped in frustration, making Sasuke blink and turn to eye him in displeasure. It wasn't the Uchiha's fault, since he wasn't making Naruto do anything, but that didn't mean the redhead appreciated the backseat spellcasting.

Luckily, Sasuke decided not to rise to the barb, and instead returned to studying the pseudo-Rasengan that was roiling in Naruto's hands with his Sharingan.

Several hours past they'd decided to finally get a move-on in regards to recreating jutsu, but had managed to get sidetracked by an odd question. Why was the Power of Destruction two colours? The majority of it was made of a sort of black unlight, but why was it edged out in blazing crimson? Did it represent two subtly different kinds of energy, or was it just the rule of cool?

Over the course of their experiments, Naruto had managed to pull most of the crimson out and hammer it into concentric rings around the obsidian sphere in the middle, but there were still a few flecks here and there he needed to get rid of.

Humming in thought, Sasuke took his chin in his hand and slowly circled around Naruto. Creating a new spell was a time consuming and difficult process, and the Uchiha wondered if they wouldn't have been better off to try and build the new working with glyphs first.

"You've got a little bit here and here," Sasuke pointed out, careful not to let his finger touch the dark surface of the throbbing sphere. It looked about as threatening as a regular Rasengan, which after his years of conflicts with Naruto wasn't saying much in Sasuke's opinion, but the quiet hum it emitted still managed to set his teeth on edge.

Naruto grimaced at his friend's prodding, but obeyed the implied demand and painstakingly drew the highlighted flaws out into the circling rings with the rest of the crimson energy. "That all of it?"

"Yeah," Sasuke informed the Gremory heir, the dark tomoe of his eyes slowly twisting as he gave the spell a once over. "You might want to mold the sphere some and see if more crimson comes up. Just in case."

"Oh fuck off."
Shrugging, Sasuke moved to stand behind Naruto. A few little mistakes here and there didn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things on their initial test. They were just trying to see if separating and shaping the two different shades of light had any effect. If it did, then Naruto would need to work on perfecting the process.

"Try it out."

Naruto snorted and considered the dense ball of enchantment in his hand. He was going to be pissed if he’d just put in hours of work for the sake of a snazzy looking Rasengan. Not that the ‘new’ spell didn’t look cool, but it wasn’t worth the effort if the end result was just aesthetics. "Well here goes nothing."

Then he tossed the spell on the ground, keen to see how deep it would drill and expecting that he’d have to measure out how big the hole it dug would be.

Instead, his entire field of vision was filled with heat, white light, and the choking smell of burning hair.

The concussive force blew the redhead right off his feet, sending Naruto crashing into Sasuke in a tangle of limbs as they were thrown clear of the nexus. Naruto had just enough time to wonder if he’d burnt his own eyebrows off before they hit the dirt.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Sasuke wheezed as they rolled to a stop, bruised and aching all over. A faint trickle of blood was dripping from his left nostril where Naruto’s elbow had managed to hammer into his face, and the skin of his upper lip was split and oozing.

Shoving the other groaning devil away with a curse, Sasuke painfully crawled back to his feet. Grass stains and streaks of soil marred the rich blue of his hoodie, and the Uchiha made a futile effort to brush away the dust before glaring at Naruto with venom. "Did it never occur to you to throw it someplace else instead of right in front of us?"

"Oh, quit your bitching." Naruto spat, gingerly touching at the rapidly swelling skin around his left eye. Every prod stung and made him jerk his hand away. "Did you break a nail or something, princess?"

Sasuke rolled his eyes and grabbed the collar of Naruto’s bright orange tracksuit. Hauling the other boy up despite his protests, Sasuke briefly considered planting a fist in the reckless dumbass’ face before dismissing it with a put-out sigh. "Whatever. I don't have the energy for this."

Cocking a red eyebrow at the Uchiha, Naruto filed away yet another example of his friend refusing to rise to the bait. Sasuke had been doing that a lot lately. It was almost like someone had pulled the stick out of his ass and left Sasuke in a permanently good mood.

"Well, at least we found out it does something." Naruto said slowly, weighing the gaping trench that had been dug into the lawn. The hole went deeper than the redhead stood and several times the length of his body. "What do you think?"

"Do I even want to know?" A new voice broke into the discussion, drawing two surprised stares.

Sirzechs tentatively moved over the yellow grass, taking care not to step on a loose stone that had been kicked up by Naruto’s little explosion. Sallow tiredness drained a bit of the color from his skin, but despite that the Crimson Satan looked flush with quiet contentment.

Eying the new hole in his father’s lawn with a curious glance, Sirzechs folded his arms over his chest and favoured his son with an expectant gaze. "Well?" The white and green robes that hung about his
form were pristine despite the little clouds of dust that still wafted through the air.

Grinning at the sudden appearance of his father – it had been too damn long since he'd seen the man – Naruto energetically motioned at the huge hole his new spell had carved out of the ground. "You know how the Power of Destruction kinda has two colours? We decided that we'd try and separate them and see what the results were. Took us a few hours, but we did it. Not bad, huh?"

Sirzechs sighed fondly, hooking one thumb in the loop of his sash and settling the other over the bone of his hip. "And I suppose it hasn't occurred to you that you could just ask me or your grandmother about this? I could have told you about it easily enough. It's not like you two were the first in the history of the Bael clan to wonder."

Naruto shrugged sheepishly, flexing the fingers of one hand before brushing off the gentle barb. "Yeah, yeah. Well don't hold out on us Dad, what do they even do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Naruto shot back, shocked and appalled. The Gremory heir cast another glare at the evidence left behind by his newest spell before shaking his head. "Absolutely no way. Just look at what I pulled off there!"

Stepping forward to ruffle his son's hair, Sirzechs smirked at the indignant squawk Naruto gave before fleetingly meeting meeting Sasuke's dark eyes. The moment passed, and the Satan decided that perhaps he'd consider his sister's Pawn more deeply at a later time. "Whatever you pulled off, it was the result of the extra energy and how you shaped the new spell you created. The black is the 'real' color of the Power of Destruction. The red is just our magic signature tainting the natural base a little. That's why my mother's Power of Destruction is black and purple."

Naruto pouted, sulking over the fact that he'd just wasted the afternoon for no reason. Sure, at the end of the day he'd recreated an old spell with a cosmetic facelift, but that hadn't been what he'd been hoping for. There wasn't much of a point to creating a prettied-up version of the Rasenshuriken. "I can't believe we wasted so much time. Man, this sucks ass."

"Was it wasted though?" Sirzechs asked, turning to face the two boys. "It's good for young people to relax and just take it easy now and again. You're not going to be able to whittle away your days in luxury forever. You had fun, didn't you? That's what matters, rather than if you managed to create the next atomic bomb."

By the time Sirzechs little impromptu speech was over, both Naruto's and Sasuke's eyes had glazed over.

"You done with the ramblings, Old Man?" Naruto deadpanned after a few silent seconds passed, lifting his chin to meet his father's gaze with a teasing leer. "Or do you need a few more minutes on the soapbox?"

"I should box your ears." Sirzechs huffed, shaking a half-hearted fist at his son. "Everyone else is afraid of me, but I come home and get no love and no respect. It's enough to break a man's heart."

"Yeah, yeah, cry me a river."

Switching gears, Sirzechs jerked a thumb at the gaping cracks and deep hollow that had been dug out by his son's newest little spell. "So, have you thought up a name for it yet? Or is it just going to be referred to in passing as 'that spell that you spent too long on making'?"

Naruto snorted, rolling his eyes but giving the question its due consideration. Despite the fact that
their afternoon had basically been a great big time sink, he had managed to created yet another version of the Rasengan. It was a little more badass looking than the regular one, but after the energy it needed and the power it actually had, it was just the Rasenshuriken done over. It packed the same punch and took the same amount of magic.

Still, the thick black orb in the middle surrounding by glowing rings of light reminded Naruto of something from a half-remembered dream he'd had a long time ago. "Rasenringu."

"Spiraling Fear Wheel? That sounds a little dark."

"As if you have room to talk, Mr. Ruin the Extinct."

"Touche."

For the first time in several minutes, Sasuke spoke up, voice thickly laden with sarcastic acid. "Well, look on the bright side. At least he didn't decide to name it – how did it go again? 'Kourin Shippuu Shikkoku no Ya Zeroshiki'?"

Clenching his fists together, Naruto frowned heavily at the Uchiha. "Ohhhh. Low blow."

Sirzechs' stared at his son with a deeply disturbed mien. "Naruto. Did you name one of your spells 'Halo Hurricane Jet Black Arrow Style Zero'?"

"No!"

Cupping her hands around the thin white porcelain of her teacup, Rias watched Valerie lift Gasper out of his cardboard hideaway and softly smiled. "Another round of dress-up?"

The contentment thrumming over her nerves was gentle but resilient, uplifting Rias' moods and soothing away her stress.

A couple of weeks had passed since the night where she'd mustered her courage and snuck off to Sasuke's room; a couple of weeks in which there had been no further kisses or passionate words. They were being careful, restricting themselves to significant looks and platonic touches that lingered, and for the time being Rias was satisfied.

Oh, Rias wanted more than a split-second glance or a reassuring shoulder pat that lasted longer than it should - she wanted the heart pounding embraces and the delicious new warmth that curled her toes. But discretion was the better part of valour, and for now the Ruin Princess was happy enough to know her affection was given and returned.

"Yes. What do you think – the sundress, or the maid cosplay?"

"The maid's outfit." Rias didn't really even have to think about the answer to Valerie's bubbly question. Her own preferences for cosplay aside, the redhead didn't feel that the little green sundress Valerie was holding up for her to inspect would really suit Gasper. It would cling too close to his body and reveal his male bone structure. The idea behind a 'trap' was to make the boy look as close to a girl as possible after all.

A red flush crept up from Gasper's neck, mottling his pale skin as the young Bishop gaped at his sister figure and his mistress. Despite his androgyne and preference for cute clothes, Gasper still wanted people to see him as a man. If he had more confidence, he might refuse to be dolled up out of principle.
But he didn’t, so instead Gasper just dipped his head and let Valerie’s fingers work their magic.

The blond’s slitted pink eyes lazily slipped half-lidded as he stepped into a discrete corner of the parlour to change into his new outfit. Crossdressing felt routine and comforting, especially when it was Valerie mothering and fussing over his appearance. It reminded the agoraphobic dhampir of the few good things there had been back home.

Gasper had missed that familiarity in the month or so that he’d been living in Gehenna. Rias and most of her peerage were fun, Naruto and his peerage were nice, and Valerie was still around, but everything felt so different. It used to be just Valerie and Gasper, and now his sister spent half her time following Naruto around.

If he wasn’t getting dogpiled by Rias and her peerage all the time, Gasper would probably feel really jealous about it.

"All done." Valerie chirped, smoothing her hands over the shining blond strands of Gasper’s mane before taking the Bishop’s hand and leading him over for Rias to inspect. "It looks pretty cute, right?"

Teal orbs tracked from the ruffled white headpiece crowning Gasper’s head to the tips of his shining black shoes before settling on the boy’s faintly blushing face. "It is cute." Rias complimented kindly, taking a small sip before she nodded at the pair. "The only thing I might suggest is that we find him a pair of knee-socks. Do you like it, Gasper?"

A silent beat passed where the dhampir boy seemed rather put on the spot, but eventually he mumbled out a short affirmation. Rias supposed she could have pressed him for a longer answer, but the Ruin Princess let it go with a little wink instead. At least Gasper had stopped stuttering so much when they spoke.

Waiting until Valerie had finished her gushing and let Gasper return to his box, Rias studied the solid gold lamps that had been bolted into the walls with a detached interest. They burned with conjured candlelight, casting a warmer, more organic glow over the room than electric lightbulbs would have.

"I had a question for you." Rias murmured once Valerie had settled into the seat beside her and she heard the quiet jingle of Gasper’s handheld game console turning on. She wasn’t sure if the boy was too young and sheltered to understand what she wanted to ask, but it never hurt to be too careful and avoid the possible drama.

Slitted red eyes blinked guilelessly as Valerie looked between Rias’ face and the lamps that the Ruin Princess seemed to be staring at with odd fascination. "Okay." She’d try her best to answer whatever query Rias had, because despite the fact that Naruto had been the one to come and save her, Valerie still remembered that it had been Rias who made the whole escape possible.

"Do you…” Rias began hesitantly, mulling over her words before changing tracks to try and be a little more delicate. "What are your intentions regarding Naruto?"

When Valerie only looked adorably befuddled, Rias heaved a quiet sigh and mentally cursed out the entire vampire kingdom for leaving her friend with little understanding of the subtleties of social interaction. "Do you like Naruto?"

"Of course I do." Valerie replied, even more confused. "Why wouldn’t I? He’s kind, and helpful, and fun to be with. What’s not to like about him?"

"The same reckless behavior that makes him brave that also makes him shoot himself in the foot over and over?" Rias commented wryly, eying the brown sides of Gasper’s corrugated cardboard box
with caution. "But no, I don't mean in general. I mean romantically. The way that a wife is supposed to like her husband."

There was no blunter way to put it, and by the choking gasp Valerie gave off, Rias knew she'd managed to get her point across.

Swallowing dryly, Valerie threaded her fingers together and stared at the polished dark wood of the table. It was an embarrassing question and reminded her too much of the idle fantasies she'd had as a child of some prince coming along to rescue her from her father's castle. But she'd promised herself that she'd do her best to answer Rias. "Even if I did, how would I know what that felt like?"

Valerie's quiet response was tinged by the bitterness she had towards her father, making Rias hum in thought and set her teacup aside. Perhaps it was a little unrealistic to expect Valerie to know what romantic love felt like when the blonde had lived in the same cold stone room for nearly twenty years.

"It feels like craving their presence. Not in the general feeling of loneliness, but rather something more specific. It's like a hole in your chest that aches, ruining your life until you find that one person that fills it. And once you do, you're more than complete. It's not just the ache that stops. You feel even happier than you did before you ever loved them."

"I see." Valerie murmured lowly, chewing the inside of her cheek. Rias' description hung between them, clearly providing a standard for the Bishop to compare her feelings against. Yet in the end, she offered up neither yay nor nay; remaining noncommittal.

The herbal cream that Akeno slathered over the pale skin of Sasuke's back was a bright mint green. She could feel the faint tingle of phoenix tears in the mixture as it coated her fingers, but Akeno chose to ignore the cool sensation in favour of her self-appointed task.

"Let me know if it stings." Akeno informed the Pawn as she traced around the raised scaly edges of his burn. It would have taken much less time and cost much less if the Thunder Priestess had only focused on the largest and ugliest scar, but there were half a dozen white lines slicing over the muscled planes of Sasuke's back, and Akeno didn't like to see any of them.

The mere presence of scars was enough to remind her of how close to death Sasuke must have come several times over, and Akeno had lost enough people she cared about to violence. It wasn't in her power to prevent Sasuke or any of her other friends from fighting, but at least she could make sure war didn't leave a mark.

Scooping a coin sized dollop out of the plastic jar, Akeno cupped the cream in her palm before leaning in so she could reach around to Sasuke's front.

The skin of her hand felt prickly and warm and the Queen worked the lotion into the crevices formed by Sasuke's abdominal muscles, and Akeno felt her breath catch. She was Rias' friend, and knew better than anyone else the boundaries that could be crossed and those that shouldn't be. But the flesh was not always subordinate to the mind.

In the end, Akeno was just a woman with a woman's urges. Would it have been fair to expect her to feel nothing when she applied the scar removal cream to her friend's body? Yes, they were friends only. And yes, Akeno knew the only reason she was applying it and not Rias was the concern over propriety. But Sasuke was handsome, and reminded her in more than one way of how she'd once looked at her own father. So silent and strong…
"It's a good thing that you and Rias have managed to sort out your issues." Akeno cleared her throat, dismissing her base thoughts with effort. Maybe Koneko and Yuuto hadn't quite figured out the exact change in Sasuke and Rias' relationship, but Akeno knew them both too well not to see the difference and know what caused it. "I should still warn you though. Tread softly."

Sasuke's spine straightened like someone had abruptly shoved a rod of steel between the joints. "I have no idea what you're talking about." The Uchiha shot back, voice low and harsh. Sasuke's black eyes narrowed, darting cautiously around his bedroom like he expected to catch a spy poorly concealed in the drapery.

Shifting her knees on the bed, Akeno wrapped her arms around the Pawn's waist and leaned forward. If anyone walked in they would assume the two devils were locked in a passionate lover's embrace on Sasuke's bed, and the press of her chest on Sasuke's back was enough to make Akeno herself warm with arousal.

In a different world perhaps she would be the one caught up in a passionate forbidden romance with Sasuke. Akeno wasn't blind to his charms, such as they were. Other women probably would prefer a kind, energetic, and gregarious socialite like Naruto. But Akeno was not another woman, and what got her hot and bothered was a firm hand and taciturn austerity – someone who might lay down the law...

How masochistically perverse.

In this life, Akeno was only on the outside looking in, not quite sure which of her friends she wanted to kiss more. Rias had always supported her through thick and thin, but Sasuke was an unyielding pillar strength that could ground her.

Akeno had neither of them, but she still cared for them. So the only choice left to her was to do whatever she could to protect them, even if it left her puttering about like a forgotten third wheel. "You're a bad liar. Be careful, Sasuke. I noticed, don't you think others will notice as well? If you keep being so obvious, the clan might take matters into their own hands."

Throughout her warning, Akeno never moved her sharp violet gaze away from the gleaming glass panes of the window. "Oh, dear one." She sighed wistfully, settling her chin on the bare skin of Sasuke's shoulder so she could breathe her words into the shell of his ear. "If only you'd been born a woman, things would be much simpler."

"I'm not keen on that idea."

"Maybe not, but a woman would never threaten the clan's standing the same way a man does."
"A Victory Ball?" Naruto pulled his gaze away from watching the first snowfall of the season through the windows so he could gape at his aunt. "Please tell me that you're bullshitting me and that we're not going to have to go around rubbing elbows with half a hundred snooty pricks."

Blowing a huff through her crimson bangs, Rias sidled over to stand next to her nephew so she could peer out the glass too. "Unfortunately, I can't do that. It's happening. You'll need to commission a new outfit, though the ball isn't until nearly Christmas so you should have nearly a month to get ready. Ravel will obviously go as your companion…"

Naruto watched the Ruin Princess trail off and stroke her chin in thought. He could practically see Rias working through the various technicalities of their outing, her teal eyes darkening slightly as she filed away schedules and plans in the back of her mind.

"Whose is it?"

"Pardon?"

"Who's throwing the party?" Naruto clarified, testing his palm against the cool surface of the window. Whether they'd be paying a visit to their allies, their enemies, or their 'friends' would determine how he should try to behave during the festivities.

Planning so far ahead and so carefully felt alien to him, but he still remembered the sting of his mother's rebuke, and the Gremory heir fully intended to do better than he had been.

"There's more than one, but we'll be attending the one hosted by the Baeals."

Making a noise of comprehension, Naruto let his hand drop away from the window and stepped back. "Sounds fun." He muttered sarcastically. Relations with his grandmother's clan were complicated. There was the obvious marriage alliance between the Bael and Gremory families, and when Sirzechs had become the Lucifer both clans had benefitted from the transfer of power from Satans to aristocracy.

Yet only the thirty-three families that were left over from the 72 Pillars had clan powers; powers that were guarded jealously. The fact that Naruto, Rias, and Sirzechs had all inherited the Power of Destruction when there were many members of the Bael clan itself who hadn't led to some bitterness.

Still, at least they wouldn't have to endure another party thrown by Ravel's grandfather. Turning to meet her nephew's blue gaze, Rias gave a thin smile that offered little in the way of reassurance or comfort. "It would probably be for the best if Valerie and Gasper didn't come. Valerie might have some training in etiquette, but I don't know if she would be up to six or more hours straight of acting. And someone should stay behind to look after Gasper anyway."

Naruto stomped down on the defensive little flare of anger that automatically rose up and told him to defend his friends when someone questioned their abilities. As amazing as Valerie was in a dozen different ways, Rias was likely right this time. "She probably wouldn't want to go anyway." He agreed shortly. "Who would, if they could do whatever they wanted? Not having to go is a lucky break."

Whatever Rias intended to reply with was cut off by the sudden swing of the door inward, its hinges faintly squealing as Sasuke poked his head into the room. "Sitri's here to see you." The Uchiha
informed the Gremory heir sullenly, before the displeasure written into his face vanished as he met Rias' teal gaze.

The googly eyed way they looked at each other was not at all secretive, and really grossed Naruto the fuck out. Oh, he was happy enough for them, but Rias was his aunt and Sasuke was Sasuke. Just watching the pair eye fuck each other every time they were in the same room gave him nausea. It reminded him of how he felt when his parents got particularly grabby. There were some things a man shouldn't have to see.

"Alright." Naruto declared, clapping his hands to break Sasuke's and Rias' little stare off. Once both pairs of eyes were focused on him, the redhead smiled a little sickly. "That's enough of that, don't you think? It's like a sugar overdose, and not a good one. None of the high and all of the teeth rotting pain."

Mortification at having been called out flooded Rias' face, colouring her white skin pink. Even Sasuke looked a touch uncomfortable, with tiny little heated spots splotched along his cheekbones. "I don't… We weren't…" Rias stuttered, only to have Naruto wave her off.

Honestly, Naruto wasn't sure what was sadder. The sappy way they both seemed to go to goo in each other's presence, or the fact that he knew they hadn't actually done anything.

If they were being smart and cautious, they'd hold back on the public sugary sweetness and get their freak on only in private. But instead Rias and Sasuke seemed so caught up in avoiding the technically illegal tango that they weren't managing to keep a lid on the rest of their behavior.

"Look, the honeymoon's over, yeah?" Naruto rode right over their embarrassment. Maybe it was a little unkind, but someone needed to set the two dumbasses straight before they managed to blow it. "So maybe a little less of the 'O faces' and a little more of the hush-hush bow chika wow wow, hmm?"

Having dispensed his sage advice, Naruto sniffed imperiously before striding across the room and shoving past Sasuke so he could step into the corridor. He'd make sure to deliver some punishment to Sasuke later, since he did have to defend his sort-of sister's honor. For tradition's sake and the man code if nothing else.

But in order for Rias' honor to need to be defended, Sasuke would have to get it together long enough to do more than look. Otherwise, it wasn't really worth it.

So hopefully they would decide to take his advice, be more affectionate in private, and stop being so goddamn obvious in 'public'. In the meantime, he and Sona had to have a chat about Sairaorg.

The slow burn of whisky down the back of the throat would have made a less experienced man gag, but Vali just swallowed it smoothly like it was water before raising two fingers at the barkeep in search of another glass.

Smoke filled the air, and the occasional smell of sweat hit the half-devil's nose as drunk fallen angels came too near to his seat. But the White Dragon Emperor didn't really think it was something to raise a fuss over. No bar was perfect. If it wasn't the noise and faint stink of a lowbrow one, he'd have to deal with uncomfortable silences and too glitzy décor of the highbrow ones.

Sometimes a man just had to cut his losses.

Accepting a new glass of whisky from a rather buxom barmaid, Vali winked roguishly at the blonde
and enjoyed the way her pretty face flushed before she fled to resume her job. It wouldn't be too hard to seduce her, given his handsome features and the fact that everyone around knew he was Azazel's protégé.

But the thought left Vali feeling rather hollow.

Was that all he was ever going to amount to? 'Winning' things because of superficial bullshit like how he looked or who he knew? Killing his sadistic grandfather and father would take actual strength that he'd earned, but once those two fucks were gone, what then? Just fade away and spend the rest of the thousands of years he'd live submerged in debauchery?

The thought repulsed him. Vali enjoyed a good drink or a sweet cunt as much as the next man, but there had to be more to life than just that.

"Is this seat taken?" Without even waiting for Vali's reply, the newcomer slid into the booth across from him and folded her hands primly on the table.

Vali raised his cool blue gaze from the scuffed tabletop. The girl was blonde and blue-eyed; with cheeks still faintly rounded from childhood and a falsely friendly smile stretching her thin lips. The fall of her hair hung over her eyes, with the rest of her golden strands coming to curl at the shoulders. One day she would probably be an extremely attracted woman.

It was the fact that at the moment she looked like she ought to barely be in middle school that raised Vali's silver eyebrows and set off buzzing alarms in the back of his slightly drunk mind. "This isn't a place for little girls." He told her sternly, gulping down his liquor so quickly he thought he would puke it right back up.

Damn brats. Damn morality. If she hadn't been taken advantage of by some drunk already, Vali wasn't rating her chances of making it out unmolested too highly. "Let's go."

Wrapping an unyielding grip around the thin length of the blonde's upper arm, Vali ignored her fierce scowl of displeasure and led her directly towards the front doors. He hadn't paid yet, but the bartenders knew Vali was good for his tab, and the White Dragon Emperor figured he might as well get his good deed for the evening out of the way.

The crowd parted before Vali's tall form like the Red Sea before Moses, drunk patrons scattering when he gave wordless annoyed growls.

Once they stepped out into the cool night air, Vali promptly pushed the girl towards the asphalt street and fumbled around in his pocket in search of a smoke. "Go home kid." He ordered, sticking a cigarette between his lips and trying to flick his lighter with alcohol numbed hands.

"I don't think so." The blonde shot back, stepping into Vali's space so she could flick her fingers at the end of his cigarette, lighting it with a faint flare of magic. "We can talk outside if you like, but either way, I'm going to talk to you, Vali Lucifer."

The White Dragon Emperor's spine stiffened at his true name, and he glared down at the blonde with a blazing azure glare. "Who the hell are you, and what do you want?" he demanded, tired and not at all appreciative of some tiny upstart thinking they could just waltz on in and fuck with him.

Drawing in a breath, the calm girl seemed to struggle for a sense of calm before she smiled at the half-devil and swept into a little bow. She even doffed an imaginary hat to him. "My name is Le Fay Pendragon, and I'm here to pass on a message."

Even half intoxicated as he was, Vali jerked to attention at the name of Pendragon. King Arthur
might have become little more than a fairy tale for most of the humans, but any being that knew the
truth of their world was familiar with the man's name and achievements. The mystical king that had
united Albion with the might of the Holy Swords Collbrande and Excalibur, before being killed by
the son he'd had with his own sister.

The House of Pendragon consisted of King Arthur's, Morgan le Fay's, and Mordred's descendants,
mixing the bloodlines of sacred king, bastard traitor, and cruel sorceress queen under one roof. The
affinity for magic had been passed down through the generations, along with Collbrande and several
of Excalibur's fragments.

The Pendragons were not the descendants of the Old Satans or the Grigori by any means, but they
were powerful. Especially considering they were only humans. Which posed the question, what
interest did the House of Pendragon have with him?

"What do you want?" Vali grit out, pulling his hands of his pockets and reaching internally in search
of his wellspring of magic. Maybe he should have been a little more polite, but he was too wound up
to muster more than a half-assed effort.

Irritation twisted Le Fay's face, but when she spoke there was no trace of annoyance or offence in
her airy voice. "As I said, I'm just here to pass on a message. It's up to you if you want to respond or
just walk away." Then an envelope was shoved into Vali's hands.

Taking the letter, Vali flipped it over to stare at the black wax seal holding it shut. A single snake,
curled into a circle and consuming its own tail. The sign of the world serpent was associated with the
Norse Gods, but none of them would have dared to use it as an insignia since they were too afraid of
drawing the attention of the Ouroboros Dragon.

Mouth dry, Vali cracked the wax and practically tore out a single folded square of paper. Written
over it in bold curving lines was a single question along with a time and meeting place.

'What are you fighting for Hakuryuuou?'

5 AM Shembal Ave.

Blue eyes flashed under the light of the moon as Vali looked up from the page. But Le Fay
Pendragon was gone, having melted away into the night like she'd never been.

"I think there's been quite enough of this."

"Sasuke!"

Brushing off the worried way Rias was scolding him, Sasuke tore open the lid of a slightly beaten
cardboard box to reveal Gasper's petrified face.

"Let's go kid." The Uchiha ordered, roughly grabbing the back of Gasper's collar and lifting the
Bishop out of his little hideaway. A teeny tiny part of him felt bad about it, but Sasuke had learned
from the school of tough love. Itachi would've never coddled the boy like Rias seemed to want to.

Sometimes, the only way for someone to move forward was to strip away all their security blankets
and force them to deal with the world. "Starting today, no more boxes." Sasuke declared, dark eyes
sternly meeting Gasper's utterly terrified pink orbs before he vaporized the cardboard container with
a wordless Koujin.

Gasper nodded vigorously, because no matter what his personal opinion was he had known from the
day he was born that it was almost always better to just give into those with power. Refusal could equal humiliation, pain, or worse. "Yes sir."

"I'm not a sir."

The aghast expression twisting Rias' face lasted for another half a moment, before smoothing away in favour of determination. "That's quite enough." She stated icily, stomping right up to her Pawn and grabbing Sasuke's forearm in a bruising grip. "There's no need to go and scare him like that."

Coal black clashed with sea green, and Sasuke wordlessly lowered Gasper so the dhampir could stand on his own. The independence didn't do much to reassure the blond, since he just hunched over and waited for the next order while the older devils argued over his head.

"You're too lax."

"Or maybe you're just being too harsh with him."

"He's been here for a few months now and all he ever does is cower away. Your soft touch isn't having any results."

Rias rolled her eyes, settling a comforting hand on Gasper's shoulder and shuffling the boy behind her. When one's lifespan ran for thousands of years, a few months were just a drop in the ocean. Maybe Sasuke's immersion 'therapy' would work, but the redhead was just as confident that Gasper would come out of his shell after being treated with tenderness.

Even if it ended up taking longer, wasn't the Bishop's happiness more important than meeting some conjured up deadline for wellness?

Something hard and chill flickered across Sasuke's obsidian orbs, and Rias was acutely reminded that no matter how tame he and Naruto seemed to be, both of them were essentially former child soldiers. It hadn't ever really been a cause for conflict before, since the other members of her peerage responded well to a firm hand, but Gasper seemed to be too fragile for that approach.

Or maybe Sasuke was correct. He didn't interact much with Gasper, but every time he did the boy caved like a pup showing its belly for the top dog. There was always anxiety in Gasper's pink eyes, but there was an earnest respect too. Did that mean Sasuke was right despite how worked up the blond Bishop seemed to get?

Rias wanted to groan with frustration. Contrary to what everyone seemed to think, she wasn't their mother. Looking after older children and caring for the needs of her peers was simple enough, but Gasper was legitimately a child. Rias herself was only twenty-one; how was she supposed to parent a broken little boy? Valerie was little help, given she'd grown up just as shut-in as Gasper.

Part of Rias wanted to go running to her parents for advice.

"We'll compromise." Rias decided with a sigh, lifting her chin so she could boldly meet Sasuke's dark eyes. "Either he can stay here without the box, or he will be taken around with us while he has a box as a safety blanket." The press of Gasper's face was still warm against her thigh, and the redhead softly pat the boy's head.

Almost reluctantly, Sasuke smirked. "Fine, he can keep the damn box." The Uchiha had no particular attachment to Gasper one way or the other, but that didn't stop the moment from feeling queerly parental. Maybe one day he'd be disagreeing with Rias about their own brats.

But that was a long way away, and Sasuke brutally squashed the sentimental train of thought before
it could run away on him. There was no point in building fantasies about a day that might never actually come. Reality was less disappointing that way.

Pink glimmered as Gasper peeked his face out to stare at Sasuke, prompting the Uchiha to offer back a cool stare that had the boy scampering for cover. If he had to play the bad guy to get the blond to start nutting up, he would.

Technically speaking, Rias did hold all the power, so if she wanted to 'compromise', Sasuke had to accept that. However, that didn't mean that he couldn't work around her bleeding heart a little. Gasper wouldn't last a day as a Konoha genin, and Sasuke intended to change that, Rias' morality be damned.

"Well that didn't take long."

"Hmm?" Naruto looked up from his plate of cookies only to resolutely drop his gaze back down to the baked sweets. *What the hell?*

If Naruto were entirely honest, he could admit that he was a man who had certain appetites. He liked his food, he liked his booze, and he liked his women. But that didn't mean he was a barbarian who would go around eating and fucking anything that caught his fancy. He had standards, and one of those very important standards was that he didn't play around with little girls. It was a pretty basic and sensible rule as far as he was concerned.

So what did Ravel think she was doing getting all dolled up like *that*?

Oh, Naruto hadn't caught on at first. If her lips were a little glossier than they used to be, it was just her girling it up. If Ravel had suddenly started wearing her hair down, well maybe she felt like a change. If she decided to wear perfume more often, Naruto had just assumed she liked the smell.

Once it got to the point where she'd changed her outfit, even Naruto had been forced to sit up and notice. Jeans and a black cashmere sweater were innocent enough on the surface, but when they were as clinging as Ravel's were - on top of whatever new bra she was wearing to push up her cleavage - the blonde was looking quite a bit more womanly than she used to.

Ravel in pink dresses and with drill curls had been cute. The easiest way to describe the new Ravel was *jailbait*. Not that Naruto would get arrested in Gehenna, or even Konoha for that matter if he decided to tumble her, but the Gremory heir had some damn *principles*.

Cramming a chocolate chip cookie in his mouth, Naruto tried to kill the mingled frustration, shame, and lust that was boiling in his blood. If Ravel was a more malicious woman, Naruto would assume she was just sexying it up to spite him, because the conflict between his dick and his head was painful.

"Your little chat with Sitri." Ravel clarified, tilting her head as she considered her fiancé hunching over the little table in his bedroom. "I was expecting that if the Sitri heiress decided to pay you a visit, that it would be a little more substantial than a few minutes of small talk."

Crawling onto Naruto's bed, Ravel fisted a hand in the bright orange sheets before laying down on her side and propping her head on her elbow. The new angle was comfortable and let her drill her blue gaze into the redhead's back, even if having to sort out the tangle of her waist length blonde hair took a little bit of getting used to.

Naruto swallowed the thick ball of cookie dough in his mouth before he turned halfway around in his seat and *tried* to ignore the fact that jailbait was all curled up in his bed. It was like the woman
was trying to give him a coronary. "It wasn't small talk. We just didn't waste time beating around the bush."

Expectantly, Ravel cocked a golden eyebrow.

Huffing at the Bishop, Naruto briefly considered telling her it was none of her business before quickly dropping the thought. He liked living, thank you very much. "We were talking about Sairaorg and what we ought to do with him." He said instead, vaguely motioning with his hand.

Ravel digested that silently, the light of suspicion slowly growing in her eyes until it consumed all other emotions. "And why exactly, would Sona Sitri be interested in Sairaorg Bael's personal emotional state?"

There was no real rational excuse for it, since the two were hardly kinsmen and they had no known friendship. It was odd for Sona to drop in and see Naruto too, since she was closer in friendship to Rias, but at least there was some connection there to go on.

As far as Ravel could guess, either Naruto was lying to her about the conversation he'd had, or Sona was hiding whatever relationship she had with the Bael heir from Gehenna at large. If she had to pick, the blonde would pick the second. Naruto was willing to keep secrets and avoid talking, but he didn't outright lie often.

So what sort of relation was Sona hiding? Lovers was the default assumption in high society, but it didn't quite click for Ravel. Sona and Sairaorg would have no need to hide a courtship, since they both had good breeding and were an appropriate match. A political alliance was more likely, but again, there was little need to hide such a thing since it was typically the public strength of alliances that determined the perception of power.

The memory of a particular outing to the human world during the war with Mictlan tickled at Ravel's mind, and suddenly she had a very worrying concern. If Naruto and Sairaorg were willing to get together to break the law on one occasion for the sake of their convictions, what was to say they wouldn't do it more than once?

"Naruto." Ravel began, agonizingly slow and letting her gloss coated lips carefully form each syllable. "Please tell me that you haven't joined an extremely illicit little scheme?"

When her fiancé only grinned sheepishly, the Bishop swallowed back the hot burst of shock in favour of cold deliberation. "Do you have a death wish?"

"Course not."

"Then what, exactly, is going on in that empty little head of yours?"

Silence hung heavy as Naruto narrowed his eyes, chewing the inside of his cheek as he weighed how he should be moving forward. Letting his fiancé help during an arms' length one off mission was one thing, but actually being aware of The Conspiracy was another. It could get very dangerous if the powers that be decided to stop indulgent idealistic children and start assassinating their opponents.

Then again, considering she was his Bishop, Naruto doubted Ravel would be any safer if she was kept in the dark. She might even be less so, considering she wouldn't be alert for threats.

Plus, if Sairaorg kept dragging his heels and wallowing in whatever had him so depressed, Naruto might have to step up.
And stepping up to lead their little gang would mean that he'd do well to have Ravel's brain in his corner. So after letting his blue gaze lower to briefly study Ravel's little pink pout, Naruto took a deep breath and began to speak.

Warmth had long ago settled into her bones, and pressing her palms against the smooth marble bottom of the bath, Akeno pushed up until her head broke the surface with a little splash.

She hadn't been under long enough for her lungs to burn from lack of oxygen, and Akeno had the urge to submerge until they did. Floating around under the surface with nothing but the muffled sounds of the world and liquid heat helped her think, just like laying naked and chilled in a draining bathtub while she listened to the sound of the water swirling away did.

Koneko had told her such quirks were odd, but Akeno didn't care nearly enough to try and stop them no matter how weird it made her look to her friends. Sometimes it was good to just go away inside, and be alone with the void of her heart and the streaks of light that were her thoughts sparking across the abyss.

Futilely attempting to brush the tangle of her soaked midnight bangs out of her violet eyes, Akeno gave a sad little huff and rose to her feet. The water lapped around her knees as the Thunder Priestess moved across the bath, her approach prompting Rias to lazy open her eyes and watch.

Perhaps it was just the angle and height difference, or maybe it was the fact that they were alone, but Akeno couldn't help but feel like her friend was studying the triangle of dark curls that nestled between her thighs. The thought was enough to make Akeno's cheeks flush.

"You should move back to Starling Hall." Akeno murmured into the steamy air, strangling the automatic burn of arousal that raced through her loins with the determination of long practice. Lusting after Rias was just like lusting after Sasuke; a sinful little thrill that Akeno had learned to bury over the years so that it wouldn't complicate things between her two friends any further.

Ahh, the selfless little things she did for love. Akeno just supposed she was lucky that a little more redness in the cheeks would go unnoticed in the hot bath. Otherwise she might have to deal with uncomfortable questions about her little fantasies that would never and could never be true.

A droplet of water clung to the end of Rias' nose, and after brushing it away with her thumb the Ruin Princess pursed her lips. "Why do you say that?" she prodded reluctantly. It had been a long time since the botched assassination attempt had spoiled her peerage's isolated life at Starling Hall, but the reach of Rias' memories was long.

Life under her parents' roof was safer, and without the all-consuming urge to get away from Naruto, Rias didn't really see the point in going back. The beauty of 'her' Star Chamber wasn't nearly enough of a justification.

Settling on her knees beside Rias, Akeno lazily slapped at the clear surface of the water. It burbled satisfying, and after peering through her wet bangs at the redhead, the Queen made her pitch. "It's a very private place, don't you think? Safe enough too, since your father went over the top commissioning new wards for it after that unfortunate incident. So if I had a naughty little secret that I didn't want getting out, well…"

Akeno shrugged one pale shoulder, refusing to be daunted as Rias' face shifted from anticipation to anger to worry to a neutral mask. They hadn't really spoken of Rias' entanglement with Sasuke, but Akeno would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to notice the chances in two people so dear to her own heart. And Rias knew that, so the Ruin Princess didn't bother with questions about how Akeno
had found out.

"I'll consider it." Rias quirked one corner of her lip up in exasperated amusement before laying her head back against the edge of the tub and closing her eyes once more. "But we couldn't go right away. Two months from now, I would expect."

Violet eyes furtively watched the slow slide of half a dozen little beads of water down the smooth white column of Rias' exposed throat. Akeno could enjoy at least this much, couldn't she? Just as long as she said nothing or did nothing that might be taken seriously.

"And why's that, princess?"

Rias gave a half-hearted growl at the teasing title, but let it pass without further notice. "Mother and Father would be disappointed if I left before the Christmas holiday, and we're attending the Bael's Victory Ball right around that time too. So we can't leave right after, or people will think we've fallen out at the party or some other such nonsense."

"Are you sure?" Akeno wondered dubiously. It seemed like a bit of a stretch, even for the Gehennan nobility that loved to read too much into every little word spoken or action ever taken.

Rias just sighed. "Who knows? A rational person wouldn't connect the events, but no one ever accused devils of rationality. They'll probably start gossiping that someone met someone else there and did something that annoyed someone, so that's why someone left."

Snorting at the way the nobility and their twisted little minds thought, Akeno settled her back against the white marble side of the bath. "I'll take your word for it, Firecrotch."

An irritated teal eye shot open, and there was a tiny spark of crimson magic.

"Owwie. Did you enjoy punishing me, mistress? Would you like to do it some more?"

"You're perverse."

"Isn't that the way you like it though?"
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Ravel cradled her chin in thought, golden eyebrows drawn tight as she shifted from one side to the other and back again. The silver gilded mirror and clean glass reflected her perfectly from every angle as the Bishop looked for imperfections in her appearance.

Shining clear gloss was evenly applied to her lips, giving her pink mouth a sleek wet sheen. Ravel's waist-length blonde hair tumbled down her back while her forelocks rested on her collarbones and her bangs barely hung in her eyes. Champagne liner circled her blue orbs, adding depth while maintaining a certain natural earthy look.

Riser's advice had born fruit. Even if she discounted her own personal vanity, Ravel knew that she'd looked sexier over the last few weeks. The Bishop might be only fourteen, but like many devils she was a physically mature fourteen, with more curves to her hips and larger breasts than a human girl would have at her age. Ravel couldn't do anything about being only five feet tall, but she could at least display her charms in hope of catching her fiancé's notice.

It galled Ravel a little to have to try and catch Naruto's eye on the physical level rather than just having faith that he'd love her mind and eventually notice her body, but her irritation was secondary to making sure the engagement held.

She wasn't an idiot, and Ravel was well aware that Valerie Tepes was older and more developed. Naruto wasn't exactly subtle when showing his interest in the vampire girl. Further, the redhead was emotional, and if he decided to elope with the dhampir and refuse Ravel, then she would be out on her ass politically.

Given the fact that she'd already basically cut ties with her family for Naruto's sake, that wasn't much of an option. Ravel had taken a gamble for Naruto and Sirzechs when she'd become the Gremory heir's bishop, and losing that wager would be catastrophic.

So Ravel was walking a tightrope, trying to look physically appealing to Naruto while not reminding him of the fact that he was mentally several decades older than her.

She hadn't had much success, since Naruto had refused to do anything but let his eyes wander a bit over the past month, but at least he looked. The Gremory heir's human scruples irritated Ravel, but she couldn't do much about them beyond stick to her guns and hope she could wear down his resistance.

"What do you think?" Ravel asked Rias, smoothing her hands over the red silk that covered her body. The careful design of the dress pushed up her budding breasts and left her shoulders bare while paying homage to her fiancé's house with its colour, but Ravel was still nervous about it.

Pink frills had been her style for longer than she cared to remember, but Riser had been very clear what was appropriate for a girl and what was needed for a woman.

"It's excellent." Rias complimented with a smile, stepping away from the wall to circle around the blonde. Admiring teal eyes alighted over the tight waist and the elegantly sculpted ruffles of Ravel's skirt. It managed to combine appearance and function, looking well-crafted without giving up the ability to press close in ballroom dances.

Grunting in agreement, Ravel turned to consider her future sister-in-law. Where Ravel had decided to pay homage to her fiancé's house with crimson silk, Rias had struck out on her own with pure ivory
cotton and furs. The Ruin Princess was much more modest in her dress, covering herself up to the neck and hiding her arms beneath pale cloth. Strangers would interpret it as a statement of independence since Rias hadn't dressed in crimson, but Ravel knew that Rias' relationship with her parents was unshakeable and that the redhead just wanted to look nice.

Politics had a way of souring everything. The Victory Ball was supposed to be one of many celebrations of Gehenna's triumph over Mictlan, but instead was just another way for the Bael clan to demonstrate the strength of its alliances and its renown.

The whole charade of competing parties hosted by different clans made Ravel wish she could just gather up her friends and find some commoner pub to celebrate in. Or better yet, just stay home with a good book. That way she wouldn't have to worry about how all of Gehenna would be examining her every action under a microscope...

Ravel already had enough to deal with in regards to Naruto's little revolution without complicating everything by adding traditional Gehennan noble politics on top of it. Hopefully no one would be glaring at her with the expectation that she seduce Naruto immediately or kill all her possible competitors.

If Naruto's conspiracy had one saving grace, it was that it was supposedly a gathering of equals rather than a hierarchal party that required rubbing elbows.

Still, the promise of a platitude like 'equality' wasn't enough to sway Ravel. She'd probably end up joining Naruto's little rebellion simply to keep her fiancé happy, but Ravel didn't really agree with the whole plot's basic premise.

People were not equal. Some were born smarter than others, some were born stronger than others, and some were born prettier than others. Trying to treat everyone equally was a fool's errand, and those who were more naturally skilled than others would inevitably rise up to rule the horde.

Ravel would be the first person to admit that she had some dumbass cousins, but those cousins were still infinitely stronger than most commoners simply because of their firebird bloodline.

So for Naruto to stand in front of her and proclaim his hope that one day all people would be treated equally regardless of origin and capability was sweet, but it only reinforced for Ravel the fact that his years as a shinobi hadn't quite managed to beat the naivety out of her fiancé. Meaning that Ravel would have to turn to sure allies and hope that they could keep Naruto safe long enough for him to wake up and change his goals.

"I suppose." Ravel agreed, smiling earnestly at her future aunt. "But it's not as pretty as yours." The blonde's words were too sweet to be entirely genuine, and Rias' expression was wary enough that Ravel knew that Rias knew that Ravel was just buttering her up. But flattery or not, Rias still managed to flush faintly with pleased embarrassment.

"Enough with the preening."

"I'm not preening." Naruto declared indignantly, smoothing a hand over his cravat before turning to give Sasuke a heated glare. "You're just jealous that you can't look this good."

"You're right. I'm sad that I don't look like the result of a partial birth abortion."

Flipping the bird at the Uchiha, Naruto slipped his round ruby embedded gold cufflinks into place and gave his outfit a once over.
Red was the colour of the Gremory clan, and it showed in almost everything he wore. His trousers and a knee length overcoat were the same shade of wine-red, gold tread stylized in weaving vines around the seams. His cravat and dress shirt were white, along with his black silk waistcoat, but the neutral colors only served to accentuate the blazing crimsons dyes and the hue of his hair.

It was like being soaked in blood and passion, and despite living many years in his second life, Naruto still hadn't managed to become fond of red in abundance. The only upside was that the clan's tastes made the blue of his eyes all the more striking, which the ladies seemed to like.

Naruto picked at the gleaming gold of his belt buckle before giving a final sigh. "Well I guess it's time to get this party started, yeah?" He hadn't even attended the ball yet and he was already tired. At one point the pomp had appealed to the little boy in him still craving for admiration, but none of it was real, and at the end of the night the whole charade was just exhausting.

Accepting Sasuke's quiet grunt with a nod, Naruto turned on his heel and strode from the dressing room. His parents and grandparents had already left for the Bael clan's party, and while it had taken the younger devils a little longer to get ready, they still had some time to spare.

No one in Naruto's family was fond of trying to pull off the 'fashionably late' cliché.

"You got everything you need?"

"Yeah." Sasuke had much less difficulty deciding on his clothes than Naruto had. As an officer who had fought in the war the ball was celebrating, it was expected that he'd simply wear his dress uniform. It was important for the various houses to show off which 'pets' had performed well and brought glory to their name after all.

"You sure? Cause I thought you were gonna forget your little ribbon, and if you could forget that you could have forgotten something else."

"I'm sure." Sasuke shot back irritably, one hand coming up to fiddle with the decoration pinned to his chest. The Mictlan War Victory Medal was a thin jade coin attached to a short black strip of cloth, and it felt inordinately heavy where it hung from his overcoat. The Uchiha wondered if the government had forged them out of the melted down weapons of slain cihuateteo.

Shrugging at the Uchiha's prickly response, Naruto decided to just drop it and let his friend stew in silence. Sasuke was like a dog gnawing at a bone sometimes, and the best thing to do was give the dark-haired man time to work through his issues in quiet. Supervised silence of course, since Naruto really didn't want a repeat of 'Sasuke's Adventures: Vengeance Edition', but silence either way.

Although to be fair, Naruto did have some faith in the Uchiha's ability to cope with annoyance. Sasuke wouldn't stir up trouble just because Rias would be dancing with Yuuto rather than him at the ball. Keeping their so-far chaste affair secret was more important than the inevitable little spark of possessive jealously.

"Isn't it supposed to be the women that take too long in the dressing room?"

Naruto rolled his eyes at the snarky comment his aunt greeted him with as he stepped into the foyer. "You still took longer. You just started getting ready a lot earlier." He defended against the implicit insult to his masculinity, waving Sasuke ahead as the Pawn slipped into the room behind him.

"Excuses, excuses."

The absinthe slid down Sairaorg's throat, brilliantly green and slightly bitter as the Bael heir pressed
crystal glass to his mouth and tipped back. The buzz of alcohol tingled through his muscles, humming in a way that was a little like freedom and a little like weakness. At least it quieted the relentless whispering of those souls he'd massacred with his own hands.

Fixing a narrow violet eyed glare on the quaking servant that hovered beside him with a tray full of drinks, Sairaorg returned the empty glass and plucked up another.

"Sairaorg." Kuisha murmured, laying a delicate hand over his forearm and unsuccessfully trying to draw her King's gaze. "Wouldn't it be better if you took some time to speak to the guests?"

The suggestion was little more than a way to try and convince Sairaorg to slow down his alcohol consumption before he made himself sick or did something he regretted.

Pulling his arm away from Kuisha's grip with a sour frown, Sairaorg just shook his head and started in the next cupful of absinthe.

"Enough, Kuisha. Get off my back." He reprimanded in a gravelly tone, reluctantly conceding to her concern about his public image and stepping further back into the shadows that ringed the edges of the ballroom.

"The booze is mine by rights. All who deny it are my foes." Sasuke cut in sarcastically, his own half-empty drink clutched in hand as he earned a slightly intoxicated cackle from Naruto and a sneer from Sairaorg.

"You malicious little prick."

"Oi, simmer down you two." Naruto commanded with a snort, nodding sympathetically to his cousin's overwhelmed Queen to let her know she could go. He was perfectly capable of handling a pair of assholes. "Or I'll have you kiss and make up."

"Fuck off."

Waving away the curse, Naruto nursed his own glass of the green fairy and turned back to watch the milling crowd with heavy lidded eyes.

He'd had a surprisingly fun time spinning Ravel around, joking under his breath and tasting the new spice of her perfume on his tongue. But the good times didn't last forever, and sooner than he'd have liked Naruto found himself babysitting a pair of surly drunk fuck nuggets.

Truthfully, Naruto wasn't sure what Sasuke was so pissed about. Sairaorg was simple enough, because his cousin had been sulking and groaning for weeks. It didn't take a damn psychologist to figure out that the Bael heir had some issues to work through. But Sasuke's bitterness was kind of out of the blue.

Naruto watched Yuuto lead Rias into another slow swing and frowned. All of the Knight's hands were placed perfectly politely, and the amount of sexual tension was so nonexistent it might as well have been a dance between two robots. Maybe Sasuke just had such a stick in his craw because their mutual expression of affection was so recent and now he had to hide it?

Either way, it was beyond Naruto's scope to try to figure out. Romantic bullshit drama was too much of a hassle for him to puzzle through, especially when he had his own problems crawling up the drain. Unless it reached the catastrophic level, Naruto would rather focus on trying to figure out how to put a leash on his own dick than whatever had Sasuke tied up into a knot.

After all, at least Sasuke's issues hadn't made the jailbait scale.
Blue eyes narrowed as Naruto watched his grandparents step back into the dimness ringing the ballroom floor. It wasn't like Zeoticus and Venelana were going to get smashed in public, even if the Bael clan had decided to go a little exotic on the drink, but there was one less pair of friendly faces dancing for the pleasure of Gehenna's nobility.

The clan, the clan – always the clan. Pinching his mouth bitterly, Naruto swept a wary gaze over his silent companions before surrendering to the fresh burn of a new glass of absinthe on the back of his tongue.

It was just fucking sad. The whole charade was such bullshit that it made Naruto want to curl his lip in disgust. He had nothing against a good party and a wild night of dancing and drinking, but the nobility had transformed celebration into yet another public function. He'd much rather have Kiba and Shikamaru chortling over dirty jokes than the pack of bluebloods eying each other for weaknesses.

"Having fun?" Ravel murmured as she slid out of the mingled press of bodies, wrapping a hand in the crook of Naruto's elbow and cocking an eyebrow at a rather phlegmatic Sasuke.

The red silk of her dress and the bare skin of her arms were dimmed by the lack of light, shadowed as she stood away from the dancefloor but close enough to catch the afterglow. Naruto couldn't help but chuckle in the back of his throat as his fiancé cocked a golden eyebrow at him.

"You know it."

Ravel made a comprehending noise, lips drawn into a tight smile as she pressed even closer to the Gremory heir. The heat of her bare skin practically seared over Naruto's hypersensitive nerves, and it was enough to make the redhead's pants grow tight.

Fuck.

If he'd been fully sober Naruto might have recognized the danger and yielded to conventional human morality. Ravel was nearing fifteen and Naruto was mentally more than twice her age. It wasn't an unsurmountable gap for politics, but it would never be the root of someone's idea of a love match.

But Naruto was drunk, so rather than pull away instantly he let himself indulge for a while.

Rather than stiffly pull away Naruto wrapped an arm around the blonde's waist and pressed in hip-to-hip. The tip of his nose found her throat and settled over her pulse, inhaling the fresh scent of her spicy perfume. "Ravel." He growled, just barely swallowing back the instinct to run his tongue over the quaking point of her pulse.

Slamming down his own perverse instincts with every ounce of focus he possessed, Naruto twisted his hungry smirk into something more mocking as he shifted his eyes back out to the dance floor. "Look at old man Astaroth go!"

Ravel huffed a short laugh as a middle-aged devil wearing the crest of the Astaroth clan jerked his hips in an offbeat fashion. It was crude and out of tune and not at all appropriate for a formal ball. Someone was absolutely hammered and would have regrets in the morning.

Quirking his lips at their shared mirth, Naruto watched the old devil make a fool of himself for a few more minutes in silence before turning his gaze to sweep the room again. His wariness was probably useless, since Naruto doubted anything would actually happen in the heart of Bael power, but it kept him from feeling like he was doing dick all.

The usual pomp of a nobles' ball was bad enough, add in the post-war celebration vibes and the
whole thing became downright stifling. It wasn't that the Great King cluttered his walls with gaudy shit like Marquis Phenex did. It was the more subtle atmosphere of crazed relief and misplaced pride. The bluebloods were trying too hard to have a good time, and they paraded around the various soldiers in their peerages who actually did fight like prize bitches at a dog show.

"What a damn shitshow."

Pinpricks of pain flared in his hand as Ravel briefly tightened her grip, nails digging in and warning Naruto that even now the things they said could be noted. Mocking the efforts of one of the 72 Pillars to host a magnificent party wouldn't endear the redhead to them.

Naruto squeezed back in acknowledgement, watching how the plastic smile Ravel had on for the benefit of the crowd grew more genuine.

Fuck it.

"Wanna go dance a few turns?"

The gaze Ravel turned to offer him was dark as lapis lazuli, burning underneath like a molten core.

Rias was tired. Not in the all-consuming physical way that would have demanded she collapse to her knees against the wall and snooze, but in a more cerebral way. Dance after dance after dance had taken their toll on her flagging reserves, and the only vaguely enjoyable reprieves were when her Knight managed to cut in.

"Is it time to leave yet?" Yuuto breathed lowly as he dipped his mistress, young face drawn into a polite steel for the sake of the Gremory clan. The blond knight still hadn't quite acclimated to the political realities of their station, and he'd been asking if they could leave since the very first dance.

"Soon." Rias reassured him, sparing a teal glare for the dwindling crowd around them. If all went to plan they would neither be the first nor the last who left the Bael clan's party. Rias and her peerage weren't enemies to flee at the first chance, but neither were they close friends to endure until the last hour.

Yuuto made a noise of comprehension, stepping back with a nod to allow a scion of the Vassago to cut in as the song ended and the next began.

"Milady."

"Milord."

And then they were off, moving with all the careless grace that came from an upbringing within a decadent nobility. Identical plastic smiles pulled at their mouths, but neither made an effort to engage in demure small talk. The Vassago was ultimately one of the more pleasant partners Rias had to dance with, since he seemed to be just as uninterested in her as she was in him.

Temporarily freed of the need to play nice, Rias let her mind wander to her aching feet and sore cheeks. Blood and ashes, it would be good when they could all go home and simply relax. Formal dances were enough of a gauntlet under usual circumstances, but with the recent changes in her relationship with Sasuke niggling in the back of her mind she felt run utterly ragged.

Rias didn't regret their changed dynamic for a second, but that didn't make the stress any less draining. At the best of times she needed to be cautious in how she acted and who she trusted. Now outside of her peerage and Naruto's, everyone was a potential enemy. She couldn't even speak to her
own parents about it out of the fear they might react badly and do something terrible.

At least once they all packed up to move back into Starling Hall Rias wouldn't feel like she needed to wear a mask every hour of every day in case one of the guards or maids overheard something.

C'est la vie, Rias supposed.

The song ended on a mournful note, and Rias allowed the Vassago lordling to thank her for the dance. Smiling vapidly, the redhead scanned the crowd that clustered just beyond the illuminated dance floor in search of her Pawn. She'd come with Yuuto to avoid making anyone think she favoured one over the other, so surely it wouldn't be seen as unusual if she had a dance or two with her other male servant?

"May I have this dance?"

Stretching her smile even wider against the urge to frown, Rias turned to meet a familiar face. The same turquoise eyes and the same crimson hair as her own shone beneath the light of the chandelier.

"Of course, Silas."

Rias accepted the upheld hand of her second cousin and let him pull her into yet another dance, all the while fighting the instinct to glare ferociously. After her immediate family, Silas and his father were the closest in kin to Rias, and the young man had made no secret of his desire to overcome both her and Naruto for the right to succeed as the next Duke Gremory.

It was expected for the strongest of each generation to inherit the mantle, so Rias had no real grounds to complain about Silas' ambition, but even as children they'd never gotten along. Silas had always wanted to choose all of the games they played and never wanted to share anything, spoiled little prick that he'd been.

Still, whatever his flaws, Silas was a prodigy in his own right. Not to the level that Naruto or even Rias herself had been, but gifted enough to make waves and have people asking questions.

"It's been a long time." Silas murmured conversationally as he swayed his cousin to the slow tempo provided by the Bael clan's musician. "Too long, if I'm honest about it."

Rias quirked one lip up into a mocking smirk that Silas would either take as directed at him or would assume was directed at the world in general. "Time passes quickly when you have ten thousand years to spend. A year or two here and there can feel like nothing in comparison."

"Just so." Silas agreed easily as the lights dimmed from a steady white to a more organic and very pale red. The chance in tint was miniscule, but it was enough to just barely catch the eye. "I find that given the long lifespan that it's easier to get involved with long running strategies and quiet plans. It breeds patience on most matters, more than anything else."

"Most would suggest not all. What sort of matters are you involved with that might require you to make a decision immediately?" Rias prodded, her voice a mixture of curiosity and barely implied disdain. Truthfully, as far as she was concerned Silas could go hang. But if Silas wasn't cooperative enough to get rid of himself, she needed to know what else he might be getting up to.

"Ahh, well this and that," Silas chuckled throatily as they made a slow turn. "Nothing that would change the world or anything so droll. Mostly just more personal matters like what sort of spells to learn or if I should buy into the latest fashion trend… or who to love."

"Love, dear cousin?" Rias murmured as Silas led her through an elegant twist. "You're only two
decades older than I am. I really doubt your parents would be all that thrilled at you getting involved in some great romance."

"What can I say? Love waits for no man."

"Is that so?"

Silas just smiled mildly, eyes sharp and intent as he tightened his grip on Rias' waist and carefully dipped her.

"It is." The older redhead confirmed as the music swelled into its final high note. "Maybe she's too close to home for my parents with her red hair and blue eyes, but I know we can do great things together."

The prickle of iciness in Rias was like a knife to the back, and her eyes narrowed a fraction. She was no fool and could read between the lines. Any woman who was 'close to home' that shared the same colouring as Silas himself was a relative, and the only reason that Silas would mention it to Rias' face would be if he intended it to be an indirect proposition to her.

Great things indeed. Rias might have lost in a duel to Naruto, but she was nobody's fool. All of Silas' talk about hominess and achievement and love could only amount to one gut wrenching conclusion – the proposal of a marriage alliance. Maybe it was something Silas had been planning for a while, or maybe her choice of white ensemble had a greater impact than she would have ever guessed. Either way, Rias wasn't sure how to express her utter disinterest without explicitly making Silas her political enemy.

Letting her smile deepen, Rias set her gaze adrift over the crowd as the latest song wound to its end. "Well cousin, I would hope your mystery girl is the sort to appreciate what she has, though I couldn't even begin to guess who she is."

Silas' crimson brows raised as they stalled on the last beat. "You couldn't even place a guess?"

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a sleuth." Rias demurred.

Before Silas could clarify himself before his kinswoman, Akeno slipped through the press of bodies like the prow of a ship shattering through ice. "There you are." The Thunder Priestess declared, raising one hand to press over her heart as she shuttered her glimmering purple stare. Combined with the black silk and gold embroidery of her kimono, Akeno was the perfect picture of forlorn lover.

"Didn't you say it was time for us to go, love?" The Queen continued, shifting a curious stare over to Rias' slightly amused and more than a little baffled cousin before sweeping in to press her lips against the baffled Ruin Princess' in a heated kiss.

"I still can't believe you did that in front of everyone."

"Just let it go, Rias." Sasuke exhaled, flopping the back of his head against the headrest of the couch with a tired frown pulling at his face. "Maybe it wasn't the lifeline you wanted, but Akeno still gave you an out."

Huffing a final distressed sigh through her nostrils, Rias propped her feet up on the coffee table and leaned in the crook of the Uchiha's arm and let her eyes flutter closed. The combination of alcohol and spying and dancing had been enough to tire them all out.

To Koneko, it was just another day in the life. Politics and playacting abound.
The nekomata gave Akeno's knee a reassuring pat, smiling faintly at the exhausted half fallen angel before nestling herself more deeply between the plaid armrests of her chosen perch.

Just like every other piece of furniture in the study tucked in the back of the first floor of the Gremory clan main house it was luxurious, but at the moment Koneko was a bit beyond worrying about the quality of what she rested her bottom on. She was more worried how the new dynamics in their makeshift family could stir the pot.

Akeno's performance was unconventional, but Koneko could see why she'd done it. Koneko's silent approval was enough to make Akeno smile grimly, and both girls joined Yuuto in his tired half-drunk contemplation of Rias and Sasuke basically cuddling.

Maybe it was just the alcohol in her gullet, but the sight was enough for Koneko's guts to twist unpleasantly and for the unfamiliar urge to sneer to surface. Perhaps she was just a little irritated at such an open display of affection, or maybe she was just disgusted by how Akeno's little sacrifice of genuine emotion had gone basically unnoticed.

Koneko saw many things, and the Queen's feelings were one of them. For Akeno to be willing to play along without expressing her own real desires was actually pretty admirable. "If you keep it up, you might even convince everyone that you're a devoted lesbian."

"Wouldn't that be a treat?" Rias shot back with a touch of acid, one eye cracking open to blearily stare at her Rook. "I can just imagine it now. Hide your daughters and hide your wives, because Rias Gremory is on the prowl."

Akeno coughed out a dry laugh, reaching down with one hand to loosen the tie of her obi and give her generous chest a bit more air to breath. More than one guilty gaze was drawn to the heaving sight, and even Sasuke found it in him to offer a short appreciative look. "That might be a bit of overdoing what I pulled tonight, but it could buy Rias some time in the long run."

In a way, Koneko could appreciate the courage it had taken Akeno to pop out of the crowd in the middle of a nobles' victory ball and lay a big smooch on Rias. Everyone had probably gone home talking about how Duke Gremory's daughter had taken her Queen as a lover, and Silas would have written off Rias' initial disinterest as sexual incapability. If the two young women kept up the charade of Rias being some deviant lesbian, it would discourage the sons of the nobility from making advances. If Rias had no interest in men, there was no reason to try to court her.

Of course, Koneko knew no excuse was perfect. Sooner or later Rias' sexuality would be looked at as irrelevant for political alliances, but for now they might buy a few years before the real pressure mounted. And based on her own childhood with Kuroka where a day was enough to change everything, a few years was more than enough for their peerage to come up with a new defence.

As far as Koneko was concerned, no one – not even the clan – was going to tear them to pieces, no matter what games they had to play.
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Sasuke considered the pile of dirty laundry and fast food wrappers littering the floor of Sairaorg's bedroom, and then slowly moved to offer Naruto a very dubious look. "I struck numb by the shock and awe inspired by the mere presence of your fearless leader."

Every syllable was thick with sarcasm, and Naruto would have offered a snort of amusement if the sight wasn't so pathetically sad. He'd known that things were rough going with his older cousin, but he had no idea it was so bad that the Bael heir spent his days doing little but getting drunk and eating greasy garbage.

Sona just shoved her hands in the pockets of her blue jeans and frowned fiercely at a particularly moldy looking pizza box, head raised in aristocratic disdain.

"Just leave him." Naruto sighed heavily after a pondering moment, blue eyes dark with mingled pity and disappointment as he studied the unwashed and unshaved planes of his passed-out cousin's face. Whatever had sunk its claws into Sairaorg's head had sunk them deep, and sooner or later the young man would hit rock bottom. Once he did Sairaorg could begin the long climb back up.

Until then, maybe it was better if the dark-haired man didn't have to deal with the stresses that came with leading their sort-of rebellion.

Beckoning his two companions with a sharp nod, Naruto turned on his heel and led them down the hallway and into a small and spartanly furnished parlor. "I'd wanted to do this right, but I guess we'll just have to half-ass it." The redhead murmured to himself, wandering over to stare out the window at the snow-covered grounds.

Sasuke cocked an eyebrow, folding his arms over his chest and leaning back against the wall. He already had a pretty solid guess for what the little impromptu meeting Naruto had asked him to show up for was about. The official invitation of Sasuke into Naruto's little political movement and his eventual participation in the Gremory heir's mission to save the little people and fart rainbows every damn day.

"Well go on." Sasuke declared airily, smirking faintly when Sona Sitri lifted an ink-dark brow. "Here I am. Astound me with your revolutionary speeches and passionate oratory."

"You are such a prick. Were you born that way or is it something you picked up on the way?"

"What's that pot? Oh, just call me kettle."

The Sitri heiress just seemed reluctantly amused at the exchange.

"Whatever." Naruto decided, shuttering his blue eyes and letting his forehead rest against the window.

If it were another time he'd probably be more willing to get into a tête-à-tête with Sasuke. Pointless bickering was practically a cornerstone of their relationship. But with Sona's limited free time and Sairaorg's deepening depression, Naruto wasn't really in the mood.

Or maybe the mantle of leadership Naruto had just resolved to assume ten minutes ago was already getting to him. The redhead had always made a poor follower, but that didn't necessarily mean that commanding was easy as pie for him.
"Well I'm not going to give you a big speech or anything." The Gremory heir turned away from the window to fix a tired gaze on his best friend. Shrugging at Sasuke's slow blink, Naruto leaned back into the frosted glass. "Seems like a waste of time. You've already got the gist of it all. So, you in or out?"

Truthfully, Sasuke couldn't care less about spreading power to the people and whatever other egalitarian nonsense that Naruto swore by. Even when he'd decided to try and revolutionize the shinobi system, Sasuke had the intent of ruling as an absolute dictator. He had no problem with exclusionary power structures. People either had power by their own merit, or they would eventually lose power through their own idiocy. Many a noble family through history had fallen on hard times and vanished because of a poor ruler.

But regardless of Sasuke's personal ambivalence, Naruto was asking for help. His redhaired friend wasn't begging, and if Sasuke refused Naruto probably wouldn't hold it against him, but at the heart of it Naruto was still reaching out. So there really was only one choice in the end. "In."

Light flickered as Sona readjusted her glasses and studied the Uchiha with a sharper glint to her eyes. She still wasn't entirely sure that calling on Uchiha Sasuke was a wise decision. Wouldn't it have made more sense to approach Rias instead? The involvement of each conspirator's peerage was practically a given, so the fact that Naruto wanted to approach the Pawn rather than the King struck Sona as odd.

… But then again, there was something in the unconscious grace of Sasuke's poise - like a languid deadly predator - that reminded Sona of Naruto. Both of them seemed older and more lethal than their actual ages gave them any right to be, so commoner or not perhaps she shouldn't underestimate the Uchiha.

"Good." Naruto's lips twitched into a subdued grin as he bobbed his head in acceptance. He didn't really need Sasuke at his back, but the redhead still wanted him there. As far as Naruto was concerned, when they worked together there was nothing they couldn't do. "Once Sairaorg gets it together we can really start planning things."

Coal dark eyes shifted from one noble to the other and back. "That implies that you haven't planned anything so far." Sasuke commented shrewdly. "Were you just being cautious, or are you incompetent?"

"Course we planned things." Naruto shot back indignantly. "We even did a little bit of this and that during the war. But we're looking long-term here rather than trying to blow everything up by next Tuesday."

"Changes take time and require that we amass political power, unless you'd rather default to a bloodbath." Sona concurred coolly, stalking behind Sairaorg's brown suede couch and resting her hands on the back of it. "We'd prefer a covert political movement rather than another civil war in Gehenna."

"No movement remains covert forever." Sasuke pointed out, biting the bait and wondering if it might be worth it to get involved as more than a passive supporter in Naruto's little scheme. "As it grows and becomes a threat to the ruling order, people take notice. And once they do that, they need to know what you stand for unless you want your support to fall to pieces before you can do anything. Revolutions need a face and a creed."

"So, what, you want us to just announce to the world that we're a merry band of rebels?" Amusement and scorn mingled in Naruto's voice. 'I can just picture it now. 'Come one, come all! Join the Red Lions and follow a bunch of baby-faced brats to paradise.' We'd be assassinated by the
end of the week, unless they decided to make us a laughing stock for the next three decades."

"Eventually, yes. But we'd still be a long way from that. We need a lot more than what we currently
have. We need supporters, sponsors in power, some kind of propaganda machine to spread the
rhetoric, so on and so forth. A revolution needs more than a few deals discussed over whiskey and
cigars in some back room. Good name, by the way. Very, ah, simple and catchy."

"Thanks?"

Sona clicked her tongue in thought. "Perhaps the best thing to do would be to accelerate my plans to
construct a Rating Game Academy open to all. Academia has almost always held a place in various
ideological movements."

"Get them while they're young and indoctrinate them. I like it."
Sasuke snorted sarcastically, cynically conceding that it would be a very viable tactic. Then he turned his focus on the Gremory
heir. "And what are you going to be doing while Headmistress Sitri is turning the next generation
into pinkos?"

Naruto choked a rough chuckle at the irate frown that crossed Sona's face before answering Sasuke's
question. "I'm going to become a Satan. The next Lucifer, if I have any choice about it."

Taking a few seconds to digest that, Sasuke chewed the inside of his cheek. "You know if you
become a Satan you can't be the Duke Gremory, or the Gremory heir if your grandfather is still
holding on to the reins."

"Obviously."

So Rias had spent years resenting Naruto for taking a title that her nephew had never intended to
keep in the first place?

"You're such an asshole."

"Oi!"

"I told you to follow my lead you damn monkey!"

Whatever insult Bikou might have offered in response to Vali's finger-pointing was cut off when
Ophis pressed her dainty heel just a bit harder against the back of his head, shoving the youkai's face
into the dirt. "Better."

Vali just groaned at the gothic lolita's bland compliment and rolled onto his back.

Yellow bruises were already darkening both Vali's and Bikou's faces, streaking over taut skin and
bearing silent witness to Ophis' casually brutal training. Why the Dragon God had decided to spend a
handful of hours here and there to try and beat some skills into them escaped even her. It wasn't as if
she didn't have stronger warriors in her Chaos Brigade to whom she could delegate such a task.

Maybe even ageless beings like Ophis could feel the bite of boredom.

Narrowing her grey eyes at the pair, Ophis dismissed them with a wave of her elfin hand. "Kuroka
will accompany you next time." With that last command delivered, Ophis dispersed into a cloud of
black smoke and hurtled through space and time.

Ascending from Mahatmaprabha to Dhuparapha took slightly more effort for Ophis than it took to
snap her fingers, and she flickered into the Naraka realm that was once filled with choking ash and smoke.

All that remained of the dimension where once Jainist sinners had wandered in torment was gray soil and the camps occupied by Ophis' Army of Disaster that spread out over the desolate landscape. She peered up at the brown-tinted sky and wondered when the universe would finally take notice of her burgeoning conquest.

Ophis supposed that she could be generous with the spiritual powers that governed the various mythological factions. All the battles and conquering had been done by the Chaos Brigade rather than Ophis directly, and most people would choose to dismiss rumors of her involvement as fabrication instead of facing the terrifying reality that the Ouroboros Dragon had found an appetite for war.

At the rate events were culminating, Ophis' army will have conquered the entire Adho Loka and started an invasion of the Urdhva Loka before any of the larger players started to take the Chaos Brigade seriously.

How uninspiring.

To be fair, it would give her troops time to cut their teeth and pass through the fires of combat rather than be instantly annihilated by more experienced armies, but the slow path to the completion of her plan grated on the Dragon God.

For the first time in decades if not centuries, Ophis actually found herself impatient. She'd lived tens of thousands of years in silence and learnt to appreciate the value of personal serenity. Yet it was now that the ageless being was feeling the faint prickles of heat and irritation nettling at her nerves. She'd started training the Vali Team and taken up a more in-depth involvement with managing her armies simply to have something to do that would soothe the jangling emptiness that sometimes made Ophis want to twitch her fingers in agitation.

Such… impulsiveness was not like Ophis at all. It was foreign and disconcerting and she honestly rather disliked it.

A small bead of blood trickled from Ophis' right nostril to cling to her upper lip, and with a clench of her jaw the raven haired lolita swiped the bead away with the pad of her pale thumb.

It was coming again.

Ghostly recollections of blood and fire thundered through Ophis' brain like the relentless hounds of hell. The physical pain that seared through the back of her skull when the images came still took her by surprise. Like any living being Ophis was not unacquainted with pain, but her power was such that she was unfamiliar with it. The notion that her flesh could even be hurt against her will so easily was so outlandish that Ophis still struggled to process it.

The emotions that accompanied the alien memories were even worse. They were muted, but Ophis still felt them. Deep black hatred that tasted like blood on the back of her tongue. Bittersweet joy that filled her limbs with a strange lightness. The aching sensation of loss that made her eyes prickle. Ophis felt it all and loathed it all.

It was disturbing her previously ordered existence, and Ophis was starting to wonder if she should have left Uchiha Sasuke to die half a decade ago.

There were so many new colours to see, so many new scents to smell, so many new tastes and
textures to experience compared to the drab grey walls of Valerie's childhood prison. Tiny little things that others took for granted were still new and magnificent to the dhampir.

Valerie scooped up a handful of pure fallen snow, packing the icy white fluff into a damp cold ball and tossing it back and forth between her bare hands. The freezing burn against her naked palms was both painful and sweet, and not for the first time the Bishop marveled at the world in which she'd delivered to.

And 'delivered to' was exactly how Valerie would always describe that panicked journey from captivity to freedom. It truly was salvation, brought forth from the hands of a redhaired demon boy that still sometimes didn't even seem real to her. Looking back at that moment when she'd first seen Naruto haloed in the torchlight as he promised her liberty, Valerie couldn't help but feel that he'd appeared half a man and half a god.

Lifting the snowball to her mouth, Valerie took a tiny bite and let the slush slide down her throat as she turned to stare up at the spires that loomed over the Gremory family's manor. To an outsider it would probably seem imposing and austere, but to the blonde it had become home in a way that her father's castle had never been.

The only thing she could really complain about was the fact that Gasper had departed to live at Starling Hall several days back with the rest of Rias' peerage. Naruto had suddenly taken to spending a lot of time cloistered with Sasuke since then, and the manor was beginning to feel a little empty. Ravel was really the only familiar face that she was likely to encounter stalking the halls, and Valerie was still wary of the younger Bishop.

Taking another bite, Valerie shivered at the faint pain the bloomed in her skull. What did Naruto call it? A 'brain freeze'? A little unpleasant, but still yet another precious new sensation Naruto's involvement in her life had brought her. Valerie didn't begrudge the snow its price, and chose to take the final bite instead.

"Val? What are you doing out here alone?" Naruto's voice shattered the muffled frozen silence as he plodded over the snow-covered yard to stand in front of her. The azure tint of his gaze was darkened with fond concern that brightened when Valerie's mouth curved up in a gentle grin.

"Just… living." The blonde admitted, holding a hand out palm up so she could collect the fat snowflakes that were drifting down. Maybe she appeared a little crazy with her flushed pink hands standing alone in the snow, but Naruto only grinned back.

"Well I would hope so!"

The sudden warmth that shocked over Valerie when Naruto reached out to grab her hand tickled a soft giggle from her. Bare palm pressed into bare palm, chasing away the winter chill and prompting Valerie to inwardly agree.

Yes, she would hope she was living too.

Living a real life, rather than the lingering undeath that her father had consigned his bastard half-breed daughter to for nearly two decades. Valerie still felt the grey emptiness of the Tepes castle pressing in on her heart, and knew that now that she'd tasted true life that she would never be able to endure undeath again. She would rather die a true death.

In a way, Naruto reminded Valerie of the old legends of Prometheus. He'd stolen into the darkness of her life and brought with him light and life and warmth, just like the Titan was said to have stolen fire from Olympus for the sake of Mankind's deliverance. And more than that, Naruto kept burning away
the shadows with his patience and generosity.

Valerie was still so unfamiliar with the strange and wonderful new world she now inhabited, and Rias' advice had only slightly clarified things for her. If she had to make a statement, Valerie would admit - at least to herself - that she didn't know if she loved Naruto. But she was sure if she was capable of loving anyone, it would be him.

"Come on, let's head back inside and get warmed up. It'll be supper time soon and after that we can head on over to Rias' place." Naruto tugged just slightly at Valerie's hand, leading with exhortation rather than with force. His desires were clear, but the motion was slight enough for the blonde to know that the choice still remained with her.

It was just another subtle reminder of her new life and new freedom.

Reaching up with her free hand, Valerie tugged the purple woolen scarf wrapped around her neck up over her mouth and began to follow. Neither devil spoke any further as they tromped through the early evening snowfall back up to the manor.

Rias was a glutton for punishment. There was no other way she could have described it at the moment. All she could do was tangle her fingers in her Pawn's dark hair, silently urging him for more. Kiss her more, touch her more until she couldn't think of anything but the spice of his tongue in her mouth and the breathless headiness filling her brain.

Hellfire and ashes, did any man have the right to be so sinfully enthralling? She was already a wreck.

"Stop playing around." the redhead groaned when they broke apart and Sasuke stepped back. A low chuckle was the only response her secret lover gave, releasing his grip from her hip and leaving behind only the phantom heat of his touch. "Bastard."

"I have you know that my parents were married for years before I was conceived." Sasuke pointed out mockingly, eyes burning ruby red as he memorized the sight of Rias' kiss-swollen lips. He hadn't sought her out with the intent to press her into the library bookcase and kiss the air out of her, but sometimes he really couldn't help himself. And since they had moved into Starling Hall away from prying eyes, the Uchiha was finding it harder and harder to conjure up the resolve to refrain.

In his first life Sasuke had urges, but those primarily hormone driven encounters didn't hold a candle to the addicting high that lit into him when he touched Rias Gremory. Rather than satisfying the ache, each encounter only drove him to seek out more and more of her. Helen of Troy apparently had a face that could apparently cause wars, and for the first time Sasuke could understand all the old tales about how a woman could lead a man to ruin.

Rias just huffed, running a hand through her mussed crimson strands and tugging the hem her green cardigan back down to hide the pale strip of flesh at her hip. The lust was still boiling in her blood, and despite her prim effort to beat it back and not give into Sasuke's teasing she couldn't drag her teal gaze away from the sharp curve of his collarbones.

The attempt at denial only made the warmth in her stomach grow even tighter.

"You said that Saiaorg is still absent?" Rias murmured absently, splaying a hand over her stomach as she leaned back into the bookcase and peered up at her Pawn through half-lidded eyes.

The motion is enough flare the bright glint of hunger in Sasuke's gaze, and he leans back in close enough to inhale the subtle vanilla of the Ruin Princess' scent. "Yes, so if you want to muscle your way in, now is the time."
When Sasuke had decided to pledge to Naruto's cause, he had never intended to keep it a secret. Bringing Rias in seemed obvious to him, because of the personal relationships she shared with Sasuke and Naruto along with her very real potential as a political player down the line. That she hadn't been invited into the circle at the same time as he was struck him as foolish. So Sasuke simply showed up to the meetings and carried the news back home to Rias, letting her decide if she wanted to formally become a part of the plot.

Humming an assent, Rias reached up and trailed a finger over the hollow of Sasuke's throat. The edge of her smile was beguiling as the redhead put her limited experience to use to test the Uchiha's resolve.

It was enough to make Sasuke cave and slam his lips back down over hers, the pressure fierce and bruising as he wordlessly exerted physical dominance over the redhaired woman. Another lover would have probably found it too harsh, and Rias was still too innocent to really realize it herself, but if he had to guess Sasuke would say she was at least a bit of a masochist. She liked yielding too much.

Case in point; rather than reject him or press back in a battle for dominance, Rias whimpered needily and clutched at the collar of his shirt.

Sinking back into the bookcase, Rias barely felt the press of the shelves against the muscle of her back. It was nothing compared to the hard press of her lover's mouth as he wordlessly demanded submission and then rewarded her for it by gentling his lips and coaxing her tongue into a passionate dance.

Sasuke's arm wrapped around her waist, pulling Rias tighter against him so she could feel the firmness of his chest against her breasts. They hadn't gone beyond kisses and some petting, but it was already good. Too good when the Uchiha slipped his other hand under the hem of her cardigan and let it rest against the smooth skin of her stomach.

It was too much. Maybe she was just naturally wanton or maybe Sasuke had picked up too many skills in the other life he'd lived, but either way Rias couldn't stop the moan that vibrated up her throat. Nor could she prevent her hips from bucking, seeking something that she couldn't quite put a name to. She needed...

Then suddenly it stopped. Sasuke broke the kiss and turned to look to the side, Sharingan eyes mingling irritation with a mocking sort of invitation. It took a moment for Rias' nerves to stop thrumming with erotic pleasure, but after a steadying breath she was able to shift her gaze as well.

Akeno leaned into the side of the doorway, arms folded beneath her breasts and a slight flush to her cheeks. "Don't mind me." She teased lewdly, violet gaze raking deliberately over the embracing pair. "I'm just here to enjoy the show."

Querely, Rias was less bothered by the remark than she expected to be.

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

Azazel pinched his cigarette between two fingers and inhaled deeply, exulting in the familiar burn of tobacco smoke in his lungs. Then he breathed out, a white cloud seeping from his mouth to disperse in the breeze.

"Tell them to double time the excavation. We need that jade."

He didn't even have to turn around to know that Shemhazai had nodded and silently vanished.
Centuries of having the same man at his back had made Azazel intimately familiar with his Second-in-Command's habits.

Crouching in the dirt, Azazel scooped up a handful of soil and rubbed the coppery grit between his fingers. It was as red as the blood that had been spilled to take it. The thought made the fallen angel smirk mirthlessly.

Once again, Azazel found himself playing the part of a conqueror. At least this time he could safely point fingers at another party and lay the blame on their shoulders. If the gods of Mictlan hadn't decided to invade Gehenna, there never would have been a war. And if there had never been a war, there would have never been a counter-invasion and a genocide to tie up loose ends.

It made Azazel feel a little better to pretend he was only enacting an inevitable reaction rather than spilling blood as an independent actor.

Azazel let the last grains of dirt slip from his fingers as he turned narrow wine-red orbs down on the valley below. If he bothered to listen he could hear the roar of construction churned up by fallen angel settlers building their homes in the new world they'd won.

Now if only the remnants of Mictlan's original inhabitants were as cooperative, Azazel might be getting somewhere. Giving them the choice of death or reincarnation into either fallen angels or devils hadn't won Azazel any points, and renaming their realm Tophet had probably only enraged them.

But what else was he to do? It was just the standard for conquest. Destroy or assimilate the previous inhabitants, stomp out their culture, and after a few generations they would be just another loyal part of the greater whole. Maybe it was cruel, but the Grigori hadn't survived so many millennia by allowing weak sympathy to rule them.

"Too bad the world wasn't different."

"More than once, I've shared that sentiment."

Azazel paused, the glowing orange tip of his cigarette flaring slightly as he huffed in a tiny breath. "Michael."

The Governor General of the Grigori rose back to his full height, brushing off his hands on his burgundy suit before turning about to face the Supreme Commander of Heaven. Despite the mutually affable expressions on their faces, the air was still heavy with electric tension. That's how it always was when two men that had spent a thousand years on opposite sides of a war met.

Michael was sans armor, clad only in a white cotton tunic with gold scrollwork embroidery working its way around the edges. However, no amount of soft clothes and quiet serenity could quite conceal the aura of splendor Michael projected.

Stepping past his fallen counterpart, Michael stood on the edge of the cliff and looked over with his pale green eyes. His great golden wings were hidden from sight, but every few minutes a single glittering feather seemed to flicker in and out of existence. "It's going well."

Azazel rubbed a hand over his bearded chin at the observation, sighing deeply as he moved to stand next to the archangel. "I suppose." He agreed warily, folding his hands behind his back in an almost military posture. Even thousands of years removed from the hierarchy of Heaven hadn't quite managed to bleed out the almost instinctive urge to offer his respect to the most powerful angel ever created.
Silence hung between them before Michael slipped a hand into the fold of his tunic and withdrew a tiny purple velvet sack. There was a touch of wistfulness in the way that the blond bounced it in his palm before he wordlessly handed it over to the leader of the fallen angels.

Giving Michael a wary glance, Azazel pulled at the drawstring so he could peek into the bag's hidden contents. Then he recoiled.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

It was the utter surety in Michael's voice that gave Azazel the fortitude to ever so carefully dump the bright silver seed out from the bag and onto his weathered palm. The cherry sized sphere seemed to pulse with inner light, throbbing like a sluggish heartbeat but still commanding a total sense of reverence.

Unwillingly, Azazel felt the salty burn of unshed tears prickling in the corners of his eyes. How many thousands of years had passed since he'd caught even the slightest glimpse of one of the seeds that Michael was so nonchalantly giving him?

"Why?"

Why would Michael – the Golden Archangel, the Brightest Seraph, the Supreme Commander of the Heavenly Host, the Burning Son of the North Wind – give Governor General of all fallen angels a Seed of Eden?

"I trust you."

Azazel swallowed thickly, tipping the Seed of Eden back into its pouch and tucking the precious thing into his breast pocket over his heart. The generations of his subordinates born after the Fall wouldn't be able to appreciate the gift Michael had given them.

At least, not at first.

But when the seed sprouted into a Tree at the Heart of the World, spreading its canopy over the realm and filling the air with the constant thrumming of holiness, even the youngest fallen angel would be able to taste the difference. Tophet would be the first true New Homeland, a pseudo Underworld Heaven that would welcome them in like Gehenna had never be able to do.

"Everything changed after He died, and at the time I lacked the wisdom to know His thoughts." Michael declared, gentle solemnity ringing as he looked over at Azazel.

There was fire in the archangel's emerald eyes, burning like the sun and giving him such an inborn majesty that Azazel felt for a moment like he was young again. Young and watching their Father stride through the Seven Heavens planting Seeds of Eden to give the angelic realms the inborn holiness needed to stifle darkness and nurture the light.

For that moment, Azazel felt like he was standing in front of their Father for the first time in millennia.

"But in these later times I've begun to wonder what was on His mind in those last hours. Why did He make the choices He made, despite knowing the rebellion would happen? Why did He take the field when he must have expected it to be His death? And now that I reflect on it, I remember that He never did anything without Purpose."
A sorrowful smile pulled at Michael's mouth, princely and regal as the rest of him. "In the end, I don't know what choices He would make if He were in my place. But I do know one thing. Fallen or not, you are still angels. Maybe it's time for you to come home."
Winter passed into Spring, the flower buds began to shyly bloom, and the breeze tousled Ravel's blonde strands with the faintest promise of summer.

"I wasn't sure what to think at first, but you really are happy here, aren't you?"

Turning to stare at her oldest brother over her shoulder, Ravel pursed her lips. "I don't know why you'd think otherwise."

Ruval smiled faintly, stepping up next to his only sister and peering down at her seated form. The book she'd brought out to read on the veranda was easily forgotten on the crystal garden table, but she seemed unwilling to stand to acknowledge him. It was an unsubtle form of rebellion against her elder in the clan, but the high-class devil couldn't hold it against her.

Ravel and Ruval had never been close in the same way that Riser and Ravel were, and she'd been at loggerheads with their grandfather for more than a year. It would probably be stranger if she greeted her three-hundred-year-old brother fondly.

So instead of demanding respect with a terse word, Ruval opted to flop down in the seat next to his sister. "Some kinds of people like to hold grudges and talk poorly about others behind their backs."

The blond man offered slyly.

"Is that so?" Ravel wasn't surprised. Between the brutal beat-down Riser had given him and her own sudden desertion in favour of playing Naruto's Bishop full time, her grandfather could be expected to be bitter. The Marquis had lost all but the flimsiest strings of control over his youngest grandchildren, and for a man of his standing it would be the height of embarrassment.

So had Ruval been told to retrieve her? Her brother didn't have any legal authority over Ravel, but in some ways his mere presence could be viewed as a silent threat. Unlike their weak father and middling grandfather, Ruval held a spot among the top ten highest ranking players in the Rating Games. There was real power behind him; enough that many devils saw him rather than their father as the true heir to the Phenex clan.

Whose agenda was Ruval following? Their grandfather? Their father? His own?

A sudden bark of laughter accompanied the hand that Ruval placed on his sister's head to ruffle her hair. "Relax." He chuckled, the waist-length tail of his topknot swaying in the wind as Ruval shook his head. "Slow down. I can practically smell your brain burning."

"You can smell no such thing."

Ruval just winked and tapped his forefinger against the side of his nose. "How else could I tell that you've already decided to twist yourself up with paranoid plotting?"

The expression on Ravel's face was sharp and cold enough to rival a glacier, but beneath the displeased twist to her eyebrows was an unwilling softening of the tension that had drawn the blonde's shoulders tight. Ruval might not be close to his youngest siblings, but he was a warrior and a politician, and disarming a young girl's wariness was child's play.

"Regardless." Ruval demurred, picking at his thumbnail. It was an oddly unrefined gesture for a man clad head to toe in the finest of silks and jewels. "I came to see you for two reasons. A warning, I suppose, or maybe a request. And an offer, though I doubt you'll want it after having seen you here."
Ravel rubbed her thumb against the worn spine of 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra'. She wasn't playing for time, really. She just wasn't sure how she should handle her brother. Ruval Phenex was renowned for his affability and honor, but a devil's honor wasn't the same thing as human chivalry, and in the end his loyalty was to the clan name. Unlike Riser, Ruval was the ideal heir for a noble family.

"Maybe not." She agreed, boldly meeting her brother's azure gaze with her own even as her mouth pulled up into a welcoming smile. Polite, but never servile. Ravel was willing to hear her brother out, but she wasn't going to promise him anything. "But I'd like to hear it just the same."

Twisting a ruby-crowned gold ring around his right forefinger, Ruval hummed noncommittally. The distance between the siblings yawned wider than it ever had before. Perhaps it was Ruval's fault for not taking a more active interest in his siblings' lives, but with the centuries between their births he hadn't had much of an urge. He had never been cruel to Ravel, but lacking cruelty was not the same thing as nurturing kindly.

"Well first, the offer." Ruval threaded his fingers together and propped his elbows on his knees. "I know that we've never been close like you and Riser are, but that doesn't mean that I wouldn't look out for your well-being. When I came home and heard what happened…” Blue eyes skittered off to stare into the distance before resettling on Ravel with intent.

"I don't want you to feel like you're trapped between a rock and a hard place. You don't have to be anyone's pawn or anyone's Bishop. If you wanted to bow out of this play between our clan and the Gremory, you could just live with me. Unlike Riser, I have power in the clan. No one would be marrying you off or trying to make use of you without your consent."

Silence hung in the air are Ravel digested that. A few years ago she would have jumped for joy at such an offer, but now she could only greet it with vague appreciation and a rumble of suspicion. It was nice of her brother to give her the choice, but why now? Had Ruval truly been that out of touch? Or was he making a covert play at getting her back under the clan's thumb through the guise of brotherly affection?

Not that it would matter in the end, since Ravel's answer would be the same. "It's kind of you to offer, but I really am happy to be where I am. There's nowhere else that I'd rather be."

Ruval grinned without a trace of bitterness, the white of his teeth brilliant in the afternoon sunlight. "I wasn't expecting anything else once I caught sight of you here. So in that case, down to business."

Reaching an elegant hand into his breast pocket, Ruval withdrew a crisp leather date planner and presented it to his younger sister with a flourish.

"Regardless of the disagreements between you and our grandfather, you and Naruto Gremory represent a bridge between clans. But if you cut ties with us so blatantly, the value of that alliance is questionable. You should start showing up for the get-togethers like you used to, or else people will be asking questions we don't want them to ask. And relax, our grandfather won't be the Marquis forever."

The wind howled along the mountainside, digging its frigid fingers into every nook and crevice and sucking the warmth out. Sasuke huffed at the chill, his breath steaming white mist; and drew the dark green furred folds of his coat tighter around the pale column of his neck.

"It's not much further." Akeno called out as she heaved herself up onto the next bare ledge. Amethyst orbs glittered in the shadow of her hood as she turned back to watch Sasuke continue his climb up the mountain. She made no effort to offer the Uchiha assistance. Doing so would have defeated the purpose of their journey in the first place.
Sasuke grunted at the dark-haired woman, wiggling his gloved fingers into a gaping crack and pulling. It only took half a second for the former shinobi to scramble up on the plateau and perch next to his erstwhile guide. "I'm surprised that you're so familiar with places like these."

A bitter smirk twisted Akeno's lips. Reaching up to place a flat palm against the weathered rock of the mountainside, the devil priestess pressed into the granite and shuffled along, providing no opening for the wind to gust in and snatch her away. "I was born in this country." She murmured, voice carrying over the gale.

"I know this land. I know these gods."

Narrowing coal dark eyes at the orange covered expanse of Akeno's back, Sasuke clicked his tongue and mimicked her passage. They'd started their climb at sunup, and whittled away half the day on backwoods trails and hidden caves as they wound their way up one of the countless mountains in the Hida range. For two devils, flying right up to the peak or teleporting would take barely the blink of an eye. They weren't weak humans trying to conquer the mountain to overcome their limits, and Sasuke had said exactly that to Akeno.

The young Japanese woman had just tossed a glance over her shoulder, face drawn in elegant lines and her midnight dark tresses fluttering in the breeze as she shot the suggestion down. It wasn't about proving strength Akeno explained. The climb was about proving honor. Despite his name, Sasuke was a foreigner in Japan, and if he wanted a familiar from the country he had to demonstrate a willingness to pay respect before it would even consider giving him one.

"It's the time you spend on something that makes it important, huh?" Sasuke mumbled to himself, blinking through the stray hairs of his bangs that the relentless wind kept blowing into his eyes. The Uchiha wasn't sure how he felt about Rias' suggestion that he go find himself a familiar. On the one hand, after fighting a war for Gehenna it seemed like such a ridiculously mundane thing to do to prove he was really a devil. But on the other hand, Sasuke remembered Garuda and Aoda; he remembered their quiet companionship and earnest servitude, and thought it wouldn't be so bad to experience again.

The pair travelled on in silence, leaving no sign of their passage on the desolate grey stone. It was just one more journey that the ageless mountainside had played witness to in its untold thousands of years. Unremarkable and humble; no more worth paying attention to than a scuttling ant.

Eventually Akeno led Sasuke around a sharp corner, her toes coming perilously close to the shorn edges of the pathway as she moved carefully, but without hesitation. She didn't demand that Sasuke stay close at hand as she shimmied into an almost unnoticeable thin passage that led into the bowels of the mountain. But with the luminous burn in her eyes that shone brighter than the sun, she didn't have to.

Wrinkling his nose at the smell of must and bird droppings, Sasuke brushed the tips of his fingers over the pale lichen that crisscrossed the cavern walls. Sheltered from the wind under the bosom of the earth as it was, the cave was full of a damp warmth that seemed at odds with the gale just outside the craggy entrance. It was a faintly hollowed place, and Sasuke had the impression that only one sincerely seeking it could discover the strange little nook that seemed to stride between the natural and spiritual worlds.

"Come."

Sasuke hurried his pace at Akeno's hushed urging, padding over the pitted cavern floor and peering into the dimness. Faint cracks here and there let in the sunlight, preventing the cave from being dark as pitch, but it was still shadowed between the bones of the earth.
Some primeval instinct urged Sasuke to cast away his gloves, so that's just what he did, baring naked flesh to the mildewed air. One hand laid itself over the uneven granite; calluses rubbing against the wet grit. The other groped blindly as the pair moved deeper into the darkness, searching until at last Sasuke was able to find Akeno. Interlacing their fingers, the two pressed clammy palm to clammy palm and stepped further into the domain of some nameless minor kami.

"Here." Akeno breathed, tightening her grip around Sasuke's hand as they passed out of the shadows and into dull green light. The contrast between one step and the next was jarring, with faintly shining stars bursting into being. A closer look revealed that each star was simply a firefly buzzing about, but that made the emerald glow no less ethereal.

The sudden shriek of a hawk broke through the dank air, echoing off the jagged corners and shallow recesses of the cavern, distorted into throaty notes as it fled down the tunnel. Tiny amber orbs flickered, and Sasuke realized that atop a tiny chest-high shelf nestled a chocolate brown raptor.

Every step the pair took was slow, drawing them closer to the sheltered nest while allowing the mother hawk more than enough time to get used to their intrusion. In the wild, a true bird of prey might have squawked up a fuss or launched forward with punishing talons to drive them away. But they were not in the wild, and the sharp tawny gaze of the hawk was heavy with the presence of the nameless god.

A breath later they stood before the mother hawk, close enough to reach out and touch. Now that they loomed over her nest, Sasuke could see the hatchling cuddled right up against its mother's feathered breast. Unlike its mother, no unknown kami lingered in the bones and sinew of the baby hawk. Every pulsing heartbeat was its own, thick with potential but still ultimately mortal.

Coal dark clashed with ocher, and after a long assessing stare the mother hawk bobbed her head. Akeno's hand tightened around Sasuke's, and a hard smile warped the edges of his mouth as he turned his full focus to the tiny molting chick.

Splitting the skin of his forefinger between his teeth, Sasuke watched in satisfaction as blood seeped out to bead on the round tip of his finger. The dark red bubble verily seethed with the infusion of soul and magic and intent, and for a split second Sasuke hesitated. Then he pushed onward, smearing a streak of blood over the fluffy curve of the hatchlings downy head and crowning it in crimson.

"In my own name..." The dark-haired man began haltingly, every syllable falling from his lips like the strike of a gong. "I, Uchiha Sasuke, bind you as my servant, under the name Karura. My heart will become your heart. My will, your will. And my life will become your life. Now and forevermore."

The chick blinked, cocking her head from side to side as she considered the pair that had disturbed her simple existence. To the hatching's simple mind, the woman was almost unworthy of notice. There was a sense of pressure accompanying her presence, but that's all there was.

The man burned, blood and iron throbbing under pale skin. Fear and awe shivered off his form in equal measure, demanding that the baby hawk rise to become more than just another animal destined to breed and die in the circles of the world. Two roads lay before the hatchling, and a choice had to be made.

Karura chirped happily, waddling away from her mother to push her head into the curve of Sasuke's warm palm like a dog looking to be pet. The amber of her eyes glimmered a final time, and then began to shift into vermillion irises marked by a triplet of tomoe.
"Argh! Life after life and I still can't get into this, dattebayo!" Naruto growled to himself in pure frustration, digging his fingers into his scalp and mussing his hair into a balled tangle. Why did the nuts and bolts of politics have to be so damn frustrating? Training to be the next Hokage in the old world had been more paper pushing than he'd ever wanted to experience in a lifetime, and studying up to be a Satan was even worse.

Throwing the dusty book that went on and on about exchange rates back into the dusty pile of economic texts that his mother had dumped on him earlier in the day, Naruto groaned and closed his aching eyes. Why did he have to get stuck with all the number crunching while Sasuke got to run off on a familiar hunting adventure with Akeno? It wasn't fair at all.

Man, Sasuke got all the cool things. Sasuke got a wicked new pet while Naruto got nasty old books. Sasuke got to break some skulls during the war while Naruto had to lurk in an office and sharpen pencils all day. Sasuke got to be reborn with red eyes of doom while Naruto got stuck with firecrotch.

Damn Uchiha spoiling his fun two lives running. The prick.

"Well I see that you're having fun." Ravel teased as she stepped into Naruto's bedroom, eying the huge stack of books cluttering up her fiancé's nightstand with vague interest before considering the redhead that lounged on the bed. "I suppose I should leave you to it."

"No, please save me!" Naruto blubbered, rolling over to give the blonde 'puppy eyed stare number 3'. "I'm gonna die here. Really, I am!"

Despite rolling her eyes in mock annoyance, Ravel couldn't quite contain her fond smile as she plodded over to throw herself down next to her future husband. "You're such a baby, you know that, right?"

Naruto just gave her a sulky look, rolling onto his back and threading his hands behind his head.

Words fell away, leaving the two young devils to laze in companionable silence. For the pair of chatterboxes keeping quiet was rarely the first choice, but there were times when they felt the urge to do nothing but simply be around each other. For Ravel it was a chance to pretend there were no barriers and that she was getting everything she ever wanted from her fiancé. For Naruto it was a time to let his mind drift and wonder about what was and what could be.

The redhead could freely admit that he wasn't the ideal devil. Naruto had held onto his morals all through his first life despite being a soldier in a village of hired killers. Compared to that, not transforming into a raging pervert in his second life was a lot simpler. But at the same time Naruto couldn't help but ask himself a few questions.

Was Sasuke right when he'd said that they should live their current lives to the fullest and leave everything from the past; in the past? Uzumaki Naruto and Naruto Gremory were the same person, but he'd lived in different worlds.

Would it be so wrong to adapt a little bit and accept that maybe some things that weren't acceptable for humans could be acceptable for a devil? Ravel was much younger than Naruto by human standards and anything beyond purely innocent was wrong by those standards. But by the standards of the devil species Naruto had become, it was just an eyeblink.

It wasn't like Ravel hadn't expressed what she wanted in half a dozen different ways, from the subtle to the obvious…
"My brother dropped by today."

"Oh yeah? What's that siscon want this time?"

"It was Ruval that came to see me."

Naruto paused at that, blue eyes narrowing slightly. "Well what did he want?"

"Not sure." Ravel replied uncertainly, a furrow forming between her fine golden brows as she frowned in thought. "He was wearing his nice face when he decided to suggest that I start appearing at clan functions again. I'd guess that the real reason he showed up was to try and fix the Gremory-Phenex alliance before trouble started popping up. There's not much of a tie if it's a marriage to the clan outcast after all."

Rolling on his side, Naruto eyed the unbound waterfall of Ravel's hair before sighing. "Seriously, I'm not sure that I want an alliance with your grandad in the first place. Sure, my dad gets some benefit out of it, but for me…" The redhead shrugged. "I'm not really thinking that your grandad and I will ever see eye-to-eye, and down the line that could just be troublesome."

If the blonde teen was surprised at Naruto's admission, she didn't show it. Instead, Ravel just pursed her petal pink lips, unknowingly catching her fiancé's wandering cobalt gaze. "Well I'll have to start going again for now. Lord Sirzechs wouldn't exactly be happy if the arranged marriage turned out to be for nothing, and it's better not to burn too many bridges anyway. Ruval also asked me if I wanted to break the engagement off and come live with him, so no doubt the clan is already covertly sniffing around for alternatives."

Naruto was silent for a long time after that last tidbit. The quiet stretched until the redhead hesitantly broke it, not insecure but rather just requesting confirmation. "Well do you want to go back? Shit really hit the fan with your grandfather, but your brother is right. You've got options. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

"Don't be an idiot."

It wasn't an explicit affirmation of feelings, but Ravel's barbed tongue in that moment did what no amount of rationalizing and alcoholic consumption could accomplish. It soothed the seething complex in the back of Naruto's mind, so that when the blonde reached out to thread her soft fingers through his, the Gremory heir tightened his grip and did not pull away.

"You see, this is why we can't have nice things."

Rias tilted her head at Naruto's protest before clasping her hands together and giving him a begging look.

"That doesn't work on me, auntie." Naruto deadpanned, buffing his nails on his orange and blue striped t-shirt.

Teal orbs began to glimmer with unshed tears.

"Neither does that."

Pink lips pouted, adding an air of desperation to the Ruin Princess' features. All in all, it was the perfect image of a woman only the most hard-hearted of men could reject.

"Or that. I'm immune to your evil looks, haha!"
Then Rias reached out and slapped her nephew upside the head.

"Oi!"

Yuuto paused his efforts to sharpen his favourite sabre to killing perfection and spun around on the stump he was seated on, grinning in expectation. "Here we go."

Then Sasuke reached out and slapped his pseudo younger brother upside the head.

"Ow!"

Then Akeno joined in, slapping the Uchiha upside the head.

"Hn."

Koneko just sighed. "Another day in the life." It was like being part of an anime, complete with gratuitous violence and mimicry. All she needed to experience was some nude fanservice and the circle would be complete. The nekomata was already surrounded by bishounenz and other unreasonably beautiful women.

"Uh un. No way." Naruto declared firmly, crossing his arms in an X shape and figuratively cutting down his aunt's proposal. "There is no way I'm gonna sit on my ass in some high school for a couple of years doing fuck all."

Gamely trying to shove the envelope containing enrollment forms Naruto's hands, Rias wiggled her eyebrows. "But just think of all the benefits. Sona wants to open a school in Gehenna, so wouldn't it make sense to experience it for ourselves?"

"That's a reason for Sona to go and stick her head in the books. Not us! I already had my experience with academy hell. Sasuke, back me up here." Naruto turned to nod fiercely at his best friend. "Just think of it. Homework! Getting up early all week long and wasting your time everyday! Fangirls!"

Every reason Naruto gave had Sasuke's face growing darker and darker in remembrance of the hell that was their Academy Days. 'Fangirls' inspired a deep and visceral terror in the Uchiha. The Gremory heir could be silly at times, but he had some very valid points.

"We'd get to live away from Gehenna with no pressure and nothing to worry about, all by our lonesome without any kind of regular adult supervision." Rias cut in, holding the wrapped-up enrollment forms up against her generous breasts.

A bird chirped overhead.

"Rias has a good point." Sasuke said slowly, shifting his focus from the fuming redhead male to the pleading redhaired female.

Very sluggishly and deliberately, Akeno held her fist up and gave Rias a stern stare. Then her thumb wiggled out, pointing straight up. "Good job."

"Another win for Team Titties." Ravel mused, speaking up for the first time as she gave up her perusal of Kuoh Academy's brochure. "Just accept the loss, Naruto. There are certain laws in this universe that can never be broken. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Everything vibrates and nothing rests. And tits will always win over dicks."

"No way, it's bros before hoes!"
Valerie flushed a deep scarlet and reached down to cup her hands over Gasper's ears, ignoring the way that the younger dhamphir covered a snicker. "Ravel, that was extremely crude! You shouldn't speak like that."

"Naruto." Rias began haltingly, not sure if she really wanted to know. "What are you teaching these kids?"

Coyly covering her smile with her hand, Akeno lowered her voice into a throaty mock-whisper. "Isn't it obvious? He's giving them the foundation they need before he completes his metamorphosis into the ultimate harem king."

"I hate perverts." Koneko chimed, pulling a small ball of yarn from her pocket to begin creating a Japanese Butterfly string figure.

Naruto just flipped up both his middle fingers, offering the crude gesture to all the devils that had gathered on Starling Hall's lawn. "You know what? Fuck y'all."

Poking her fiancé in the side, Ravel rolled her eyes at the squawk of indignation Naruto made before giving her full attention to Rias. "There's only one big problem with this, if you really want to go ahead with it."

"Oh?"

Silhouetting her own body with a smirk, Ravel then jerked an emphasizing thumb over at Gasper. "Without even getting into the whole 'girl's only' issue, which I'm sure your daddy can solve after buying the place up, there's still an age gap between us and the other students that are going to end up in your classes. Gasper likely wouldn't care, but I'd rather not go through my high school career in Japan known as the kid genius or the nerd loli or something equally as ridiculous."

Rias chewed her lip while she gave the younger girl a once over. Truthfully, her sudden desire to abscond off to the human world was a plan she'd been debating for a while. On the surface she could admit to the selfish desire to satisfy her Japanophilia, and experiencing a real high school life was just one of many things Rias wanted to do. But underneath that particular bonus was the desire for the safety true isolation could bring.

With Silas waiting in the wings, Sairaorg's drunken depression, the sudden interest Ruval had in Ravel, and the several dozen other myriad pressures that always weighed in on the children of nobility, Rias had been struck by the desire to retreat. Despite the previous lives Naruto and Sasuke had lived, they were still all so young. Their makeshift family was young and vulnerable and walked along the edge of a knife. Their clan could protect them, to a degree, but mistakes were still mistakes and could end up hanging over them for centuries if they weren't careful.

Attending school in the human world was just an excuse to get away. No one would think it odd that the pampered children of the Gremory clan spent their time satisfying their whims. While they were supposedly lazing around they would have time to continue to grow. Starling Hall was removed from the center of Gremory power, but it was still in Gehenna, and being a short teleportation circle away from everything imposed all sorts of expectations. Life in the human world could be devoted solely to training and relaxation as they all grew a little older and gained a little more gravitas among Gehenna's upper crust.

Still, it wasn't an immediate concern. They could buckle down and suffer it out for another year or two for Ravel's sake. Three years in the human world was still three years, whether it started immediately or a couple of years down the line. So rather than try to pressure Ravel into signing up immediately, Rias just smiled and asked the blonde how soon she'd be willing to go.
Scratching his nose, Naruto watched his fiancé and aunt haggle over admission dates with a vaguely disgruntled expression. Beneath all the bluster he wasn't really that opposed to gritting his teeth and putting up with a couple of years of high school crap if it would make the girls happy. He'd just wanted to make his opinion known. Not that it seemed all that important lately.

Sasuke once mocked Naruto and said that Ravel was keeping his balls in her purse.

Bastard.

Sniffling haughtily when Akeno joined the fray and began offering her observations about genuine Japanese life, Naruto shoved his hands in his pockets and ambled on over to Sasuke. "Seems to me like you got it bad, my friend."

Dark eyes glared down at the redhead before flickering away to admire the curve of Rias' rear. "You're funny. But you shouldn't be blaming me just because you can't get some. Jealousy is so unattractive."

Digging an elbow into Sasuke's side, Naruto twisted his face into a sneer. "I could get some right now if I really wanted to. Don't try and make excuses for the fact that you're completely whipped."

"I am not whipped." Sasuke shot back irritably.

Snapping his hand in a vague cracking motion, Naruto mimicked the sound of a whip. "I'd say that you're pussywhipped, but you and I both known that you're not getting any."

"Dobe."

Whatever barb Sasuke gave passed in one ear and out the other, because Naruto was suddenly utterly consumed by a sensation that rather felt like his heart exploded. "Fuck." He moaned at the pain, clutching at his chest with a desperate hand. Gods above and ashes below, the pain. It ripped through him like a thunderbolt, burning over every nerve until Naruto's entire body was consumed with the phantom sensation of agony.

Against the palm of his hand, Naruto could still feel the steady beat of his pulse. Thump, thump, thump it went, steadily plodding one despite the fact that he was half convinced if he looked down he'd discover that his chest had been gouged out.

Sinking to his knees, Naruto could barely feel it when Yuuto lunged in behind him to offer some stability. Clamminess broke out over his skin, so cold and wet that it left the Gremory heir shaking. What was this? What was happening?

Blue eyes rolled in their sockets, seeking something his splintered thoughts couldn't quite put a name to.

Sasuke? His brother through a dozen incarnations from the time of Indra and Ashura was kneeling down beside him, lips bloodless and blue as they were both struck down by this nameless attack.

Ravel? The girl that he'd only so recently begun to allow himself to feel things for was cradling his face in her palms, mouth moving in words that couldn't penetrate over the ringing in Naruto's ears.

Naruto's mouth tasted like metal, copper and iron and gore, even though he somehow instantly knew the sensation of pain and mortality and dying was entirely in his own mind.

The very last thing Naruto saw before everything turned dark was the Ouroboros Dragon, her grey eyes stormy with unadulterated rage as blood dripped from her nostrils and dribbled from the corners
of her pert little mouth.

The last thing Naruto heard was a deep voice sixteen-years-gone, booming through his mind and seeping back into the hollow spaces of his heart like it had always belonged there.
"Don't just stare you fools. Pick them up!"

The crack of Ophis' voice broke through the panicked bustle of voices, uncommonly sharp with the demanding discipline of a drill sergeant. Blood still bubbled from her mouth and nostrils, but the Dragon God still stood strong and unyielding.

Yuuto cursed, looping his arms underneath Naruto's armpits and dragging the unconscious redhead somewhat upright. The blond knight clenched his jaw at the utterly boneless way Naruto continued to sag. It was as if the Gremory heir was gravely ill.

Or dying.

Scarlet sparks glittered as Rias twisted both hands into upturns claws, her magic reaching out to pluck Naruto from Yuuto's arms and scoop Sasuke off Koneko's back. Her levitation spell was slow and careful, rolling the two young men onto their backs and holding them ramrod straight as if they were strapped to invisible spinal boards.

"Let's get them inside." The Ruin Princess decided tentatively, teal gaze settling onto the pale-faced Ouroboros Dragon with disquiet. Rias had a strong suspicion they were dealing with something so far beyond any of their capabilities that there was no real hope for any of them.

Something that could injure the strongest being in existence was out of their league.

Grey eyes flashed as Ophis grunted an agreement, already turning to lead the way out of the Spring sunlight and back into the safety of Starling Hall. Almost absently, the gothic lolita attempted to swipe the blood from her face with the back of one dainty hand.

More than one devil in the crowd trailing after Ophis wanted to ask how the Ouroboros Dragon seemed to know the exact layout of their home. There was no sense of hesitation as Ophis led them through the halls towards Rias's bedroom. But discretion triumphed valor and they decided sometimes it was better not to know the answer.

Bursting through the double oak doors, Ophis motioned wordlessly at the pale green silk sheets. The expression of impatience twisting her features was so utterly Sasuke that it made Akeno blink and stare. It was queer seeing the Uchiha's narrowed gaze, pinched mouth, and slightly upticked left eyebrow on a literal god's face.

The Thunder Priestess shook away the idle curiosity that pricked her, and then stepped around the side of the massive bed, watching as Rias carefully lowered their two unconscious friends to the mattress. She waited just long enough for the scarlet swirl of sorcery to disperse before laying a hand over Naruto's pale forehead.

It was cold as ice with clammy sweat clinging to it.

"What is going on?" Rias demanded, summoning all of the sense of command that lay in her noble pedigree, only to be brushed aside as the dark-haired shapeshifting dragon threw herself in the bed between the comatose pair.

Little hands snaked down Naruto's and Sasuke's collars, settling on their chests with smooth palms laid flat over their stuttering hearts. A black sort of void began to flutter beneath Ophis' hands, throbbing like swelling black holes and sucking up so much light that it was visible even through
flesh and cloth.

Then the outpouring of energy stabilized, leaving Ophis sitting on her knees with a vacant expression. It was as if she'd fallen comatose as well, grey eyes dull and unseeing. Her body was before them, but her mind was elsewhere.

Koneko huffed quietly at the tense silence, amber eyes darting from Akeno to Ravel to Rias. The nekomata would have expected someone to suggest they should get in contact with the rest of the family, but she supposed the years of distance and self-sufficiency had taken their toll. Their first instinct was secrecy and trying to solve problems on their own rather than going to their guardians.

The bedsprings creaked when Ophis gave a full body shudder, dark light fading as she took her hands back and pinched the bridge of her nose. She'd survived millennia alone before, but now that she'd bled into Sasuke and had her pet soldier bleed into her she felt hollow without that too-close connection simmering in her heart.

"What happened?"

"Their souls are gone." Ophis' declaration was cool, the sharp tone of her voice finally edging towards its customary blandness. She didn't look particularly pleased as she slid off the bed, wiping at her face once more, but the faint manic energy that had been hovering in the air dissipated. She was not happy, but Ophis could work with this.

Ravel fisted a hand in the navy-blue cotton of her sweatshirt, unable to tear her gaze away from her fiancé's white face and bloodless lips. The shallow rise and fall of Naruto's chest was her only visible reassurance the devil she had developed feelings for was still alive. "That's not exactly good news."

"No, it's not." Akeno agreed, violet fire flashing in her eyes as she boldly met the Dragon God's passionless stare. As the daughter of a shrine maiden and a fallen angel, she knew a bit more about the stuff of spirits than most of her peers did. "Without souls their bodies will die. And without bodies their souls will be lost."

The thought terrified her. Akeno had already lost her mother and only just managed to rebuild her heart from the splinters of that loss. If her friends started dying around her, how would she be able to cope with it?

A pensive frown crossed Ophis' face as she smoothed a hand over the black folds of her gothic skirt. "There is no need for concern, Himejima Akeno. We are twice bound now, and I will sustain them."

The steady declaration masked a rolling sense of turmoil beneath. Ophis had already been regretting getting more closely tied to Uchiha Sasuke, but rather than cut her losses she'd bound him and Uzumaki Naruto's souls even closer to the wellspring of her being?

It was irrational, but despite the unease her choice caused her, letting go seemed... wrong.

"For how long?"

"As long as is necessary."

Zeoticus tightened the bright red necktie around his throat, light blue orbs glazed over as he considered the winding path of the Uji River as it passed Kyoto. It was fitting, he supposed, that he would be invited back into the city of Emperors. His own bloodline was more prestigious than any human's, and the woman he intended to meet had her own storied pedigree.
"She is ready for you now, Lord Gremory."

Running a hand over the cherry stained wood of the balcony, Zeoticus flashed a wolfish grin and turned to face the kitsune's servant. Every motion contained within it a mixture of arrogance and civility that was just barely within the expectations of propriety.

He was no common supplicant. He was the father of a Satan, a Duke of Hell, and a victorious general in his own right. If Zeoticus had to give them all a show to make sure they never forgot that, then that was exactly what he would do.

"Lead on then."

The black-haired tengu just bowed politely, folding his hands in his voluminous sleeves before sweeping a welcoming arm towards the innards of the shrine. He was, like all male youkai under the fox's rule in Kyoto; deceptively androgynous with a stoic face. It would be easily to mistake the youkai for a woman.

Fitting, perhaps, that the court arranged itself around the preferences of its monarch. To do otherwise would have suggested weakness, and Zeoticus had no use for weak allies.

The Duke stepped inside, padding along the winding hallways in sock-clad feet with the sort of self-confident swagger he'd use in his brother-in-law's home. Comfortable with the suggestion of familiarity, and self-assured of his own worth.

Taking the final turn, Zeoticus nodded gaily at the pair of kneeling shrine maidens that guarded the doors of their mistress' shamusō.

There was no hesitation as the brunette girls slid open the rice paper doors and allowed him to step into the smoky dim confines of the office.

Zeoticus inhaled the faint scent of burning tobacco, his sharp gaze easily picking out the embers that huddled in the bowl of a gracefully carved kiseru. "Well met, my lady."

Slitted golden orbs flared, and smooth pink lips settled around the stem of the kiseru for another dainty inhale.

As air moved into the blonde's lungs, her generous breasts shifted beneath the loose borders of her blue and orange koi patterned yukata. Creamy flesh peeked out from the neckline of the silk robe and below the waist, sinfully drawing the eyes to the exposed valley of her breasts and the elegant lines of her legs. Nine pale gold, white tipped tails cushioned her back, giving the kitsune an easy way to sprawl with all the refinement of a queen.

It was only after the thin stream of smoke slid between those perfect, perfect lips that Yasaka deigned to speak. "Be welcome in my home, my lord." She murmured with throaty sensuality, wielding her beauty like a weapon with the experience of centuries.

And despite his enduring fidelity to his own wife, Zeoticus was not entirely immune. He had eyes after all. Any redblooded male would find himself stiffening in Yasaka's presence when she took it upon herself to flirt.

Accepting the implicit invitation, Zeoticus sunk down cross-legged across the chabudai from the leggy youkai. "I see that your hospitality is as gracious as I remember." The redhead grinned winningly, the loose end of his ponytail trailing over his left shoulder and bobbing against his chest.

"One cannot help but do their utmost when hosting such an esteemed visitor." Yasaka demurred,
eyes half-lidded as she considered her guest. A snap of her fingers had the kiseru levitating so she could lean forward and take up the black ceramic pot in the center of the table with both hands, as was proper. "A drink, then?"

"I would be honoured." Zeoticus agreed, ignoring the view of his hostess' cleavage and bowing to the rules of propriety. Taking up his saucer to hold at the ready, he watched the fox demon pour him generous helping before switching to pour her a cup of reishu.

A faint smile quirked Yasaka's mouth as the chilled sake settled. "To your health." She toasted informally, lifting the ceramic bowl to her lips and sipping at the cold alcohol. It was practically slush, and a touch too cold considering the mild spring weather, but it was still her favourite.

A single shining droplet clung to the corner of her mouth, only to be artfully swept up by the quick dart of her glistening pink tongue.

Having exchanged the requisite greetings, Yasaka took her kiseru back up and inhaled another mouthful of spicy finely shredded tobacco smoke. It was not strictly a ladylike habit, but everyone was permitted a few vices, and it ultimately added to her feral allure.

"How has your daughter been?" Zeoticus questioned, voice husky from the scorch of youkai prepared alcohol. A normal human drink would never have such an effect on the inside of his throat, but rice wine fortified with demon sorcery could take its toll.

"She's well. Excelling in her studies and her duties as my heir. She does her ancestors proud. And your children?"

"Just the same. Rias's intellect and kind heart are sure to win her accolades, and Sirzechs is a son any father would be honoured to claim."

Yasaka hummed an acknowledgement. "How wonderful. It's a shame that I've never met your boy. I've heard so many things about him that I can't help but feel curious." The insult was subtle, reducing the Satan Lucifer from a warlord to a child only mentioned in passing conversation.

A less experienced man might have taken offense at the gentle slander, but Zeoticus let it pass by. It was all part of the game after all. "Well, I would be glad to convey your sentiments to him. I don't know if he'd be able to take the time away from his important duties, but I'll see what we can do."

The insult was received and returned.

Yasaka's smile grew a little broader, fangs gleaming and the faint sear of amusement lighting in her golden irises. "That would be most kind of you. Ruling is always a conflict between responsibilities, and sometimes the lesser must yield to the greater. A man like the Satan Lucifer, or the Duke Gremory even; can rarely take the time to indulge flights of fancy. So I must ask, what can I do for you?"

Smiling seductively, Yasaka trailed a hand across the visible pale expanse of her generous chest in a silent offer. A lesser man would have pursued that offer to his own ruin, so caught up in the smell of honey that he failed to see the steel trap. Perhaps he would have been turned into a puppet by the wiles of the fox demon, or simply rejected and accused of churlish deviancy against a foreign monarch.

Zeoticus was not a lesser man. "I had thought to convey an offer of alliance from the Gremory clan."

The statement was audacious, delivered with steely eyes and an unwavering voice.

It was enough to make Yasaka's hand briefly spasm around the stem of her pipe. "My, my. That's
quite a bold offer from Gehenna. I can't help but wonder why you would come with it to me now, having just triumphed in a war against Mictlan. You've even made the angels and the vampires your friends. Are you so gregarious?"

The gleam of Zeoticus' light blue eyes cut through the smoke clouding the room. "You've misunderstood me. This is an offer from the clan, not from the country." He was gambling by coming on so strongly, cutting through the usual dance of barely implied offers and months of courtesy. But even so, the Duke was confident. There was still a certain etiquette to be followed in such negotiations, and that meant even if he was to be refused he could still expect that Yasaka wouldn't be running to sell him out to his rivals.

Sometimes there was honor among thieves.

A twist of her hand vanished the kiseru, banishing the smoke and bringing an abrupt clarity to the darkness of the shamuso. There was no teasing smile on Yasaka's aristocratic face now, only a considering stare with the tips of her claws conspicuous as she cradled her cheek in one palm.

As the ruler of all the Kyoto youkai, Yasaka was bound to the city to govern the dragon veins that pulsed beneath it. She was both monarch and priestess, abating the possibility of magestorms and natural disasters through her constant presence. Leaving the city was a very rare occurrence, and something she only did at great need. But that did not make her ignorant to what was happening in the rest of the world.

She was quite aware of the scattering of conflicting spheres of influence. The youkai and the devils competed on one side. The native kami and the foreign Church of the Christians on the other. Then there were the agreed neutral zones ruled over by the primarily ignorant humans. It was a delicate balance of power maintained by constant alliances and the rivalry between pantheons, who were themselves undermined by subfactions and internal politics.

Friendly relations with some of the devil clans was expected, even applauded by those with an understanding of the realpolitik beneath it all. But Yasaka suspected that Zeoticus was proposing something a little more concrete than usual, and much more dangerous.

The amber burn of her eyes was hotter than liquid sunlight. "Fool. Have you gone mad? Coming to me with such an offer… are you trying to take over this country?"

Zeoticus' white teeth shone as he grinned. "Nothing quite so chaotic, I assure you."

Vali stalked from the war room, sneering at the puffed up gathering of self-important generals and collected nobles from a dozen ragtag pantheons. They were all parasites, clinging to Ophis' coattails in the hope that her power would lead to padded pockets and cushy titles for the lot of them.

Never in his life had the half-devil expected to be craving the company of idealists and warmongers. Maybe they were searching for something different in their struggle, but at least their motives were clean and greater than base greed.

"Ahh, Vali. Why don't you turn that frown upside down?"

"Le Fay." The Hakuryuuko greeted without pausing in his strides, prompting the teenager to huff and trot after him. "Any luck?"

"No." the blonde witch denied vaguely as she chewed her bottom lip, crystal blue eyes shifting from one side of the bare corridor to the other suspiciously. The Army of Disaster might have barreled into the Naraka realms like a Mongol horde, burning everything to the ground. But soon enough they'd
turned to building a kingdom on the ashes. And all kingdoms had dirty politics.

The walls had ears.

Vali cursed, shoving his hands in his pockets and stepping out into the courtyard. Layers of sorcery had turned it from an ash choked enclosure to a miniature Eden-esque garden. Easier on the eyes and nose perhaps, but just as fake as their supposedly battle-crowned conquest was turning out to be.

It wasn't like he could blame Ophis for misleading advertisement or anything. She'd promised battle, but she'd never said that he wouldn't have to train for it and that he wouldn't find himself caught up in the bullshit politics his noble devil ancestors had once lived and breathed for. It was just an unfortunate fact of life. "Where's Bikou?"

Le Fay just twirled her index finger in a silent 'around somewhere' gesture. The Monkey Prince had been the most shocked and dismayed when their erstwhile leader had suddenly started leaking blood everywhere before vanishing in a crack of void magic. The man had immediately taken off in a frantic search for her that the rest of their team had barely managed to cover up.

Their team was an odd collection of misfits that really had no business being as close to the Ouroboros Dragon as they were. Le Fay and Arthur Pendragon were humans descended from a royal family affiliated with the Church. Bikou was the son of Sun Wukong, and Kuroka was a triple S ranked criminal in Gehenna. Vali himself was half human commoner and half the blood of one of the original Satans. They had no business working together, much less in service to an ageless being that wasn't allied to any of their birth factions.

But somehow, they worked. Ophis tolerated them better than she endured any of her other subordinates, letting them hang around rather than ordering them to leave her be. She even trained them, always wearing a quizzical expression like she couldn't quite decide why she was bothering with a gaggle of lowly mortals.

For a collection of individuals less damaged than they were, it would barely be enough to be considered more than acquaintances. But for them, it was the foundation of a deeper bond. So when Ophis went missing, Vali worried, and was willing to lie to keep the secret of her sudden weakness. He just hoped she came back soon. They couldn't hide her sudden absence for much longer, and if the sycophants realized their untouchable ruler wasn't so untouchable after all there would be blood in the water.

Sairaorg wretched, his flanks tightening as he spewed chunks of vomit from his lips. Sweat soaked tendrils of dark hair hung in his eyes, crowding his vision until all the Bael heir could see was black shadows and the white porcelain bowl of the toilet he was currently wrapped around.

"Oh god." He groaned, the faint headache that bloomed with prayer going unnoticed beneath the throbbing ache of his hangover and the rippling pain that raced up his sides as he began to heave again. Strings of green bile dribbled from his mouth as his stomach came up empty and began milking the gall bladder for something to puke.

Gentle fingers combed through Sairaorg's hair, pulling the inky mane out of his face while another warm hand settled over his back to give a comforting rub. He didn't even have to look to know it was Kuisha, faithfully tending to him despite his spiraling descent into uselessness and alcoholism.

She had always been loyal like that, serving his needs in all capacities. Much of the time before he even realized he might want something. It was convenient and comforting and awing all in one. She
had always been too good to him. Especially lately considering how utterly unbearable he probably was as a depressed alcoholic.

For the first time in months, Sairaorg began to feel something that wasn't related to his nightmares about the blood of innocents on his hands. It was something like shame.

"Why are you still here?" he wheezed, clutching at the toilet as another urge to heave passed over him.

The rest of his peerage hadn't abandoned him. Not really. But there was a certain distance that hadn't been there before. They were giving him space and waiting for their young would-be monarch to return. It was the sort of choice made by those attached to the person he was at his best rather than all parts of him, and they all made it. All except Kuisha, who had followed him relentlessly into the abyss.

"I will always be here." The blonde Queen declared without a single tremor in her voice. She might as well have been describing the weather forecast, so effortlessly was the statement was offered. It was a fact for her, rather than an opinion or even a promise. It was a reassuring thought, but it also compounded Sairaorg's shame.

What had he become?

Wiping the back of his hand across his bile stained lips, Sairaorg shut his eyes and did something he hadn't done in ages. He dug deep for courage, and swayed to his feet despite the weakness in his muscles and the dizziness in his brain. What did the humans say? 'Sometimes one had to hit a wall', or something to that effect.

"Kuisha, I'm sorry." Sairaorg croaked, bloodshot eyes fluttering open as he turned to pin his Queen with a dim violet stare. The hopelessness in his eyes had settled deep, but after so long there was once more the faint embers of a familiar flame.

Without waiting for her acknowledgement, Sairaorg peeled the grimy clothes from his body and stumbled across the bathroom so he could throw himself into the shower. His hands fumbled for the taps, twisting them on with a savage jerk.

The shock of cold water hitting his naked flesh was so icy it burned, but Sairaorg just clenched his teeth and refused to cry out. Eventually the hot pounding between his ears subsided into a duller pulse, and only then did he turn to slather on the shampoo.

The chill and soap chased the filth of his body down the grated drain, and Sairaorg could almost imagine he was washing off the filth of weakness that had seeped into every crevice of his being. It hurt more than the guilt he'd been carrying. It hurt more than the oblivion at the bottom of the bottle. But as he pressed on until he was completely clean, Sairaorg found himself feeling renewed.

Stepping back out of the shower, the Bael heir straightened his back and sought out his toiletries. He gave his teeth a thorough brushing before shaving the planes of his face and neck. The beard of weeks fell away to reveal a jawline slightly sharper and a face more hollowed then Sairaorg was used to, but it was his face. The face of a soldier that had been bent and broken, but who could be reforged.

The devil traced a finger over the bags beneath his eyes, prodding at the purpled skin. It was a mark that couldn't be washed away, serving as a tangible reminder of his weaknesses until he successfully overcame them.
"Kuisha, summon the rest of the peerage. There's work to do."

Silas Gremory curled his fingers, tightening the summoned ball of fire between his fingers until the flames flickered from red to blue to white. The fatigue of a hard day of training had settled into his bones, but the redhead wasn't quite ready to give up.

He'd been raised to be more than third best, and if he had to cheat and steal and bleed to get there, he would find a way to scramble to the top or die trying.

It wasn't that he hated Naruto, Rias, Sirzechs, or Zeoticus. Silas was more than willing to recognize their strength. Naruto and Rias were both considered prodigies, while Sirzechs and Zeoticus were accomplished sorcerers and politicians. It was just that Silas had a keen sense of his own birthright and the conviction that might didn't make right.

His grandfather and Naruto's great-grandfather had been siblings, and Silas acknowledged the other boy as his kinsman. But Zeoticus' father had been a barbarian and a usurper, challenging his elder brother for the right of succession and triumphing based on brute muscle. Rather than selecting a successor based on tradition or the mental capability of governance, it had all defaulted back to force.

As the son of the elder line, Silas had the duty to uphold tradition and take back the rights of succession from his cousins. He also, from a philosophical standpoint, knew that he would be a more capable and enlightened ruler. What did Naruto have? An enhanced savant talent at tossing spells around. What did Rias have? Intellect combined with a complete lack of drive.

Maybe Silas didn't have as much raw magic backing him up, especially considering the Power of Destruction Naruto had inherited from his grandmother, but Silas was better prepared to rule. He'd studied every day since he'd left the cradle. What worth did a pretty spell have compared to maximized economic efficiency, ironclad political alliances, and a carefully cultivated cult of personality?

None.

The fire in his hands sputtered, but Silas just grit his teeth and forced himself past the pain. He would do this. He was the worthier heir, and he would prove it on every single field from academics to combat. His hard work would overcome natural talent and lazy genius.

"You better be prepared cousin. I'm coming for you."


In all the movies awareness trickled in slowly. Every heartbeat slowly pushed back the darkness in a gentle steady tide until the wounded managed to crack open bleary eyelids. Once the patient sought the world, details trickled in. A blinding white light inevitably resolved into blurry shapes, and then sharpened as the last remnants of sleep scorched away. A final blink, and then the protagonist would refocus on his faithful wife or girlfriend and smile innocently, the shadow of death beaten back once more.

For Naruto, the transition was abrupt. In one moment he was sleeping, blissfully unaware as half a dozen machines monitored his vitals and peered into the visceral parts of his body. In the next moment he was awake, eyes rolling and a scream bubbling up in his throat as he rolled off the bed and hit the tiled floor with a smack.

Fuck. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his heart was still trembling painfully in his chest.
Naruto squeezed his eyes shut, sucking in a breath to steady himself against the phantom pain and despair. Then he pressed a calloused palm over his breast, feeling the steady thump that told him no matter what strange pain and darkness had seeping into, he was alive.

"Fire and ashes." Naruto hissed, curling his abdomen tighter and letting his forehead rest on the cool floor. Satans below, he'd never felt so much pain in either of his existences.

The air was full of the low drone of an alarm, blaring in regular intervals as Naruto fumbled and tore the suction cups from his chest. Fuck the doctors, he wasn't going to be laying in wherever the hell he was longer than necessary.

"Naruto."

What.

What the hell was this?

Unsteadily rearing back on his knees, Naruto stared with dazed blue eyes. His pupils were blown wide from the shock and the stress, and every half-formed thought he could muster sputtered to a halt.

For Naruto Gremory, the woman staring down at him was an incomprehensible sight. She didn't compute within the boundaries of the son of the Duke's experiences.

She was, however, inalienable to Uzumaki Naruto. Age and stress had lined the familiar lines of her face with a handful of wrinkles, staining her bright springtime hair with streaks of grey, but he knew her. And she was someone he hadn't expected to see so soon, if ever again. So as he floundered, Naruto could only say one thing through cracked lips and a dry throat.

"Sakura-chan."

Emerald green eyes narrowed, and Sakura reached up one hand wreathed in green chakra to touch Naruto's forehead. Dainty fingertips danced over the skin of his forehead, trailing across the temples before threading fully into his hair to cradle the back of his skull. "Everything seems fine." She murmured, more to herself than to him. "Is it just the shock of resurrection?"

"Sakura, what are you babbling on about?" Naruto demanded, his lips moving in a way that didn't feel quite right.

"Naruto, breathe deep and calm down! Your BP is spiking. Take a minute and just breathe, alright?"

Thinning his lips, Naruto rocked back on his heels and pushed the heavy crown of blond hair out of his face. And then froze, pupils dilating as a fresh shock of adrenaline hit his system.

The strands threaded through his fingers were blond and golden like the sun, rather than bright red like the blood rushing through his veins.

"Sakura, what the fuck did you do?"

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