

Chapter 153:

– Haru –

I had learned a lot of important things since opening the Fox Hole.

For example, I had learned that dragons tasted incredible when properly aged, that gods were significantly less immortal than advertised, that giving Milim sugar after midnight was a mistake on par with handing a toddler nuclear launch codes, and that no matter how powerful I became, no matter how many tails I grew, no matter how many divine souls I accidentally ate, there was still no defense in the multiverse against two beautiful women petting my tails at the same time.

Absolutely none.

I was sitting on the couch in the Occult Research Club room with Rias Gremory pressed against my left side and Ranni the Witch tucked comfortably against my right. Rias was still in her Kuoh Academy uniform, which should have been normal, sensible school attire and absolutely was not when she wore it. The white blouse hugged her chest in a way that made me suspect devil tailoring operated on different physical laws, and her skirt showed off enough thigh that several civilizations could have gone to war over it.

Ranni, meanwhile, wore one of her long blue robes, though she had abandoned her oversized witch hat on the low table in front of us. Without it, her soft blue hair fell around her face in gentle waves, and her four arms had arranged themselves with unfair efficiency. One pair hugged my arm and waist. The other pair had taken possession of my tails.

Rias had claimed three tails.

Ranni had claimed four.

The remaining three were curled defensively against my lap like prisoners awaiting judgment.

I had never felt more outnumbered.

On the large screen TV in front of us, a magical girl anime blazed through what appeared to be either the climactic battle of the season or a mid-episode misunderstanding involving reincarnated moon royalty, ancient space curses, and a talking rabbit wearing a waistcoat.

I had stopped trying to follow the plot twenty minutes ago.

That was apparently a mistake, because Rias was very invested. Her lips were parted in excitement. One hand stroked slowly down the length of my fifth tail while the other pointed at the screen. "There," she said, leaning forward. "See? That proves Princess Luminaria still remembers the original timeline, even if her memories were sealed by the Crystal Compact."

On my other side, Ranni's fingers paused in my fur. "What compact?" she asked.

Rias blinked. "The Crystal Compact."

Ranni tilted her head, blue eyes narrowing thoughtfully at the screen. "I confess, Rias, mine understanding doth founder upon these waters. What manner of tale is this? I had thought the maiden in pink was sworn to protect the kingdom of stars, yet now she doth weep over the masked youth who was, if I recall rightly, her enemy, her brother, her future son, and perhaps also a bird?"

"She was never his brother," Rias said immediately, sounding offended on behalf of the entire genre.

Ranni looked at me. I gave her a helpless shrug. I didn't know what the fuck was going on in this show either. When my country pumps out over a dozen Isekai slop shows every season, it's impossible to keep up.

Rias sat up straighter, which unfortunately did things to her blouse that made my ears twitch. "It's actually really simple," she said.

That was the exact moment I knew we were doomed.

Ranni, poor innocent goddess of the dark moon, nodded politely.

Rias began to explain the plot to us. "The heroine, Hoshino Mikan, is secretly the reincarnation of Princess Luminaria, who ruled the Moonlit Kingdom ten thousand years ago before the Obsidian Eclipse destroyed the Twelve Star Courts. But because her soul was fractured during the fall of the kingdom, she was reborn into three different bodies across three timelines."

Ranni's expression did not change, but one of her lower hands tightened around my tail.

I tried not to laugh.

"The first body is Mikan, obviously," Rias continued, warming to the subject. "The second is her rival, Kurobara Nocturne, who thinks she's the last priestess of the Eclipse Cult, but she's actually the part of Luminaria that inherited her anger and trauma. And the third is technically her daughter from the future, but not biologically, because she was created from the wish crystal after Mikan sacrificed her memories to rewrite the Silver Apocalypse! That's really important so don't forget."

Ranni stared blankly at the screen.

A pink-haired girl in a glittering battle dress was currently screaming something about friendship at a black hole shaped like a swan.

"Ah," Ranni said slowly.

Rias nodded with absolute confidence. "Exactly!"

"That doth explain nothing..."

"It explains everything!" Rias insisted.

I bit the inside of my cheek.

Rias pointed at the masked boy on the screen. "Now, he's Prince Solvius, except he isn't really Prince Solvius. He's the shadow copy of Prince Solvius created when Queen Araminta tried to resurrect the real Solvius using forbidden star magic, but she accidentally pulled his soul from the doomed timeline where he married Mikan's future self and became the Emperor of Ash."

Ranni's brows drew together. "And the rabbit?"

"Oh, the rabbit is her grandfather."

Ranni went very still. "Through blood or sorcery?"

"Both!" Rias said brightly.

I lost the battle of trying to understand anything my devil fiancé just said and snorted.

Rias whipped her head toward me. "Don't laugh! It's a very emotionally complex story!"

"I'm not laughing," I lied. My third tail twitched.

Ranni's eyes slid toward it.

Traitor tail.

Rias pouted at me, but she was smiling too much to make it threatening. "This is why I keep trying to get you into the good magical girl shows. You need cultural education."

"I run an interdimensional restaurant," I said. "I feel culturally educated every time I meet someone from a new universe."

Ranni hummed softly, resuming the slow glide of her fingers through my tail fur. The sensation rolled up my spine like warm sake. My shoulders loosened before I could stop them.

Rias noticed immediately.

Her smile turned dangerous. "Oh?" she murmured. "Sensitive today?"

"I am always sensitive when both of you cheat."

"Cheat?" Rias asked, all innocence.

"Thou dost accuse us falsely, mine consort," Ranni said, while one of her lower hands found the base of my eighth tail and stroked in a slow, deliberate circle.

My brain produced static. Actual static.

On the screen, the magical girl detonated a moon-shaped laser with the power of seasonal friendship or whatever the hell was happening. I could not have cared less if the hamster became emperor.

I stared straight ahead with the grim determination of a man resisting interrogation.

Rias leaned against my shoulder, warm and soft and smug. "See? He likes the anime now."

"I'm not watching the anime."

"You're looking at the screen."

"I'm focusing on it to survive what's happening right now."

Ranni's blue lips curved faintly. "A noble struggle."

I should have let the moment continue. It was peaceful and comfortable. But my mind had been circling a different thought for days after I finished helping out with the First Class Mage Exam.

So I looked at Rias, my devil fiancée, the woman who had somehow decided being engaged to a fox chef disaster was a great idea, and asked, "When do you want to get married to me?"

Rias froze. The hand in my tail stopped. Her entire face went red so fast I wondered if **Power of Destruction** could be used internally by accident.

On the screen, someone screamed about the Eternal Glitter Covenant.

Rias made a small sound. Then another. Then she sat upright so quickly one of my tails slipped off her lap. "HARU!"

"What?"

"YOU CANNOT JUST ASK THAT OUT OF NOWHERE!"

"I thought we were already engaged."

"We are!" she sputtered. "That isn't the point!"

"What's the point?"

"The point is I wasn't emotionally prepared for a question like that while watching Magical Star Princess Luminaria!"

Ranni looked vexed. "Is there a proper tale during which marriage proposals ought be discussed?"

“Yes!” Rias said.

I raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“No! Maybe! That’s not—” She dragged both hands down her face, then peeked at me through her fingers. “Haru, my heart nearly exploded.”

“That sounds unhealthy.”

“I’m a devil. I’d probably be fine with some Phenex Tears.” She lowered her hands, still flushed, and gave me a look that was softer now. Nervous. Hopeful. A little overwhelmed. “Why are you asking?”

I rubbed the back of my neck, suddenly very aware of Ranni watching me from the other side. “Because I’ve been thinking about it.”

Rias’s expression gentled. Then both of us shared a moment of silent understanding. Rias looked down at her lap, fiddling with the edge of her skirt. “I do want to marry you.”

My chest warmed.

“But not immediately,” she said quickly, looking back up at me. “I want to finish high school. And then human college. At least human college. I want that experience. A normal one, or as normal as it can be with devils, yokai, aliens, Demon Lords, and whatever Milim is doing on any given weekday.”

“That’s fair,” I said with a nod.

Her cheeks darkened again, but her voice steadied. “I love you, Haru. I know I’m going to marry you. But when I do, I want it to feel like the beginning of the life I chose, not something I squeezed between crises.”

I smiled at her. “That sounds exactly like you.”

Rias then smiled back. “Is that a good thing?”

“It’s one of my favorite things.”

Her blush came back with a vengeance.

Ranni shifted against my side. “Mine consort asks because he shall soon wed the women who carry his children.”

Rias’s head snapped toward her.

I looked at Ranni too. “You know, usually when people say things like that, they ease into it.”

Ranni looked utterly unbothered. "I have eased."

"No, you opened the gates and rode through with cavalry."

She ignored me with the serene arrogance only a moon goddess could manage. "He shall propose properly, of course," Ranni continued. "Such matters deserve form and beauty. Yet Naruko and Kushina bear his heirs, as doth Daenerys. They have given him life within life. It is meet that vows should follow."

Rias's eyes widened. Then she squealed. It was not a dignified devil heiress sound. It was not a future Lady Gremory sound. It was a pure, delighted, high-pitched, magical-girl-fan-watching-the-finale sound. "Naruko-chan is going to be so happy!"

My ears perked.

Rias grabbed my arm with both hands, bouncing slightly against my side. "And Kushina-chan too! Oh my gosh, Haru, have you thought about how you're going to propose? Are you doing them separately? You have to do them separately. Naruko will want something romantic but also fun, and Kushina will pretend she doesn't care but she absolutely does. You need to make her cry."

"I don't think making pregnant women cry is a good goal."

"Happy tears!" Rias insisted.

Ranni nodded sagely. "Joyful weeping is oft desirable in matters of courtship."

I stared at her. "You too?"

"Verily."

My ears twitched despite myself, and one of my tails wagged against the couch cushion.

Rias noticed and her smile softened into something unbearably warm. "You're excited."

I looked away. "I'm terrified. And excited. I can be both."

Rias laughed and kissed my cheek.

For a moment, the three of us settled back into warmth and quiet. The anime continued to shriek colorfully in the background, completely ignored. Rias leaned against me again, Ranni's cheek resting on my shoulder, their fingers moving through my fur with gentle, familiar affection.

Then Rias's eyes sparkled. I knew that look. That was the look she got before saying something mischievous, expensive, or both. "So," she said sweetly, turning toward Ranni. "When are you and Haru getting married?"

Ranni tilted her head, genuinely confused. "Whatever dost thou mean?"

Rias blinked back. "I mean, when are you two getting married?"

Ranni stared at her as if Rias had just asked when water intended to become wet. "Rias Gremory," she said slowly, "mine consort and I are *already* wed."

The room went silent.

Even the anime picked that exact moment to cut to a dramatic pause, as if the universe itself wanted to hear this.

I turned my head very carefully. "...We are?"

Ranni's gaze slid to me. Something flickered across her face. Confusion first. Then realization. Then horror? Adorable, blue-skinned, four-armed horror. "Aye," she said, though the word had lost a great deal of confidence. "Upon the moment I bestowed upon thee the Dark Moon Blade, thou wert welcomed into the Carian royal family as mine chosen consort, and our bond was sealed beneath the witness of the moon."

I waited. Rias waited.

I said, "What Dark Moon Blade?"

Ranni's lips parted. No sound came out. Her blue cheeks darkened. The constellations faintly shimmering along the hem of her robe began moving faster, like the stars themselves had entered panic mode. "Oh," she whispered.

I felt my ears slowly rise.

The Witch of the Dark Moon slowly sank deeper into the couch until only her eyes and the tips of her blue hair were visible above my shoulder. "Oh no," she murmured. Ranni squeezed her eye shut. "...I forgot to present the ceremonial blade which signifieth to all Caria, Raya Lucaria, and mine mother that thou wert already mine husband in all but formal celebration."

I stared at Ranni. *She gives me a magic sword and we are automatically married?* That sounded like the gist of it anyway....

Ranni groaned and pressed all four hands over her face. "Mother shall never let me hear the end of this."

I tried to hold back. I really did try. But the laugh escaped me anyway.

Ranni made a wounded little noise behind her hands. "It is not amusing."

"It's a little amusing."

Rias was laughing as well, her face buried against my shoulder, her red hair spilling across my chest. "Ranni forgot her own wedding sword!"

"**Dark Moon Blade**," Ranni corrected miserably from behind her hands.

"That sounds incredibly important!" Rias pointed out.

Ranni whined. "It is incredibly important..."

I gently wrapped one tail around Ranni's waist and tugged her closer. "For what it's worth, I will be honored to accept your magic family sword."

Her blush deepened. "Even though I have committed an unforgivable lapse in ritual propriety?" She studied me for a long moment, then sighed and leaned fully into my side again. "Thou art far too forgiving."

"I'm a chef," I said. "We work with whatever ingredients we have."

Rias wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "That was either romantic or about potatoes."

"Both can be true."

Ranni gave a soft huff, but her arms tightened around me. "Very well," she said with as much dignity as a flustered moon goddess could gather while cuddled against a couch in a devil club room. "I shall retrieve the Dark Moon Blade properly. I shall present it beneath suitable stars. You shall look forward to the day I properly surprise you!" Her eyes narrowed suddenly. "And thou shalt not tell mine mother Rennala that I forgot something of such importance..."

– Rias –

Ranni left a few minutes later. *Technically*, she did not flee from embarrassment.

But Rias Gremory had good eyes, and she knew exactly what it looked like when a woman gathered her oversized hat, muttered something about "ceremonial obligations long neglected," opened a fold of blue-white starlight, and vanished before anyone could bring up the fact that she had forgotten to give her own husband his wedding sword.

It looked like fleeing. Very dignified fleeing, but fleeing.

Which meant Rias had Haru all to herself!

At last. She wasted absolutely no time.

The moment the blue starlight faded from the Occult Research Club room, Rias leaned sideways into Haru's chest, wrapped both arms around one of his, and claimed him with the absolute shamelessness of a woman who had waited patiently for her turn and now intended to enjoy it.

Haru looked down at her, golden eyes warm and amused. "That was fast."

"I have no idea what you mean," Rias said sweetly.

His ears twitched.

She loved when they did that. His ears were honest in a way Haru rarely was. He could keep his expression calm through divine threats, political negotiations, and women openly plotting over his body in front of him, but his ears and tails always betrayed him.

Surprise, amusement, embarrassment, pleasure—every little feeling flicked through them before he could hide it.

It was adorable. Dangerously adorable.

Rias picked up the remote from the low table, restarted the episode Ranni had been too confused to survive, and settled more firmly against him. "Now that Ranni is gone, we can watch properly."

Haru stared at the television. Then at her. Then back at the television. "Rias."

"Yes?"

"I still have no idea what's happening."

"That's because you weren't paying attention."

"I was paying attention. I heard the rabbit was someone's grandfather through blood and sorcery. My brain decided that was enough."

Rias huffed and tugged one of his tails into her lap. The thick golden fur spilled over her thighs like sunlight made soft. "You'll understand if you watch two more episodes."

"That sounds like a punishment..."

She ignored him and pressed play.

For the next forty-six minutes, Rias lived in bliss.

Haru sat beside her, warm and solid, his tails draped across the couch, his shoulder under her cheek, his scent wrapping around her in that unfairly comforting mix of spices, clean fur, and something distinctly Haru. The club room was quiet except for the anime, the soft hum of the television, and the occasional little sound Haru made when her fingers stroked too close to the base of his tails.

Rias definitely noticed those sounds.

The magical girl anime continued. Haru watched with the expression of a man staring into the abyss and wondering why the abyss wore ribbons.

Rias loved every second. Mostly because he stayed. For someone as absurdly powerful as him, Haru gave so much of himself in small, quiet ways.

By the second episode's ending theme, though, even Haru's heroic endurance began to fail.

His eyes lowered once. Then again as he fought to not fall asleep. His head dipped forward slightly before jerking back up.

Rias finally showed mercy. She lifted the remote and turned off the TV.

The sudden silence made Haru blink. He looked at the dark screen, then down at her, faintly sheepish. "Did I miss the part where the rabbit became emperor?"

Rias giggled. "No. That's next season."

His expression went blank.

She laughed harder and leaned up to kiss his cheek.

Haru yawned, raising a hand to cover his mouth. It was a big, helpless, honest yawn that made his tails flex lazily behind him. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to fall asleep on your anime."

"You *almost* fell asleep," she corrected. "I turned it off before you could disgrace yourself."

He smiled at her, and for a few peaceful seconds they simply sat there together on the couch. Rias curled against him, cheek resting against his shoulder, fingers combing through the nearest tail. His warmth seeped through her uniform blouse. His heartbeat was steady beneath her ear.

She could have stayed there all evening. Maybe all night.

Then Haru shifted a little and asked, "How has Sasuke been doing as your new Knight?"

Rias's smile dimmed. Only a little. Not enough that most people would have caught it.

Haru caught it immediately. His golden eyes softened with amusement and sympathy. "You haven't made any progress, have you?"

Rias groaned and let her forehead fall against his shoulder. "I haven't made any progress at all."

Haru chuckled.

Rias lifted her head just enough to glare at him. "Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing." His lips twitched.

Rias pointed a warning finger at him. "Stop it, or I will kiss you."

"Oh no," Haru said, his handsome fox face brightening with a grin that did absolutely unfair things to her heart. "Whatever will I do?"

Rias narrowed her eyes.

The worst part was that he knew exactly what he was doing. Her fiancé had many weapons. Foxfire. Demon Lord aura. His ridiculous cooking skill. Ten tails that could crush steel or gently wrap around her waist like she was something precious. But that grin was among the most dangerous. It was warm and teasing and just a little wicked, and it made Rias want to climb into his lap and forget every responsibility she had ever possessed.

Which, honestly, sounded like an excellent plan.

But first, she had to complain about her new ninja Knight. She flopped dramatically backward against the couch, still keeping his arm captive. "*My Uchiha* is too stubborn!"

"*Your Uchiha*?"

"Yes. Mine." Rias pouted. "Do you know how much potential he has? Do you know what kind of Knight he could become with proper training, devil imagination magic, immortality, and access to the kind of resources I'm willing to offer him for free?"

"Probably terrifying." Haru admitted. "Madara Uchiha would shit his pants in fear..."

"Exactly!" She threw one hand up in frustration. "I offered him immortality, magic, resources, safety, a path to unlimited power, and the backing of the Gremory family, and all he does is *brood* all day."

Haru's chuckle grew warmer.

Rias kicked his shin lightly with her socked foot. "Haru."

"I'm sorry," he said, sounding not sorry at all. "It's just very funny hearing you complain that the emotionally damaged revenge teenager you recruited is brooding."

"He has so many reasons not to brood now!" Rias insisted. "Danzo is dead. The elders involved in the massacre are being exposed. His mind has been healed. He's no longer trapped in whatever awful emotional spiral the manipulations left him in. He has a room, food, access to training grounds, and Akeno has only teases him a little every day!"

"That last part sounds suspicious."

"It was a little by Akeno standards."

"Which means deeply traumatic by anyone else's."

Rias waved that away. "He survived Orochimaru. He can survive Akeno making comments about his tragic pretty-boy aura."

Haru snorted.

Rias tried not to smile and failed. "He barely speaks to anyone. He trains, reads, stares out windows, and occasionally asks when he can fight you."

"Me?"

"You, Naruto, Naruko, sometimes Ranni, though he goes pale whenever he says her name. Oh, and once he asked whether devils can learn sage mode."

"Can they?"

"I have no idea, but now I want to find out." Rias sighed, her pout returning. "He's polite to me in that stiff, wounded-pride way, but he won't open up. He won't bond with the peerage. He won't even react properly when I offer to let him pick the video game we play on game night!"

Haru looked amused.

Rias puffed her cheeks. "I am suffering," she said.

"You are trying to domesticate a traumatized ninja prodigy who thought his life plan involved killing his brother, killing another snake-themed lunatic, returning home as a tragic hero, and marrying Naruko to rebuild his clan."

Rias's pout deepened. "When you say it like that, it sounds unreasonable, but I am a Gremory. We specialize in unreasonable affection projects. Just look at my entire peerage!"

Haru hummed thoughtfully after a moment, one of his tails curling around her waist. "Maybe I can take Sasuke off your hands for the rest of the day."

Rias tilted her head. "Why?"

"Because I've actually been talking with Hela's little brother, Thor, and the two of us made plans and I guess he could come with us."

Rias sat up slightly. "You made plans," she repeated slowly, "with the guy who got his hammer stolen by your ten-year-old sister."

Haru's mouth twitched. "Technically, Kunou borrowed it."

"She renamed it Sparking Lightning-chan."

"She got bored and gave it back."

Rias stared at him a second longer, then burst into giggles.

Haru shrugged, utterly shameless. "He's not the brightest *version of Thor* in the multiverse, but he grows on you. There's something about the earnest enthusiasm. He's like a very large golden retriever with divine trauma and upper-body strength."

Rias smiled despite herself. That was Haru. He could get along with almost anyone eventually. Haru fed people, listened to them, insulted them affectionately, and somehow ended up with their loyalty. It was terrifyingly effective.

Rias leaned into him again. "When do you have to leave?"

"In about an hour."

Her good mood collapsed into a pout so immediate and dramatic that even she recognized it was childish.

Only an hour?

She had finally gotten him alone in the club room! Rias's fingers tightened around his arm. "That's not very long," she said. She looked up at him.

He looked down at her.

Then, because subtlety was overrated and she had learned from the best collection of shameless women in the multiverse, she asked, "Wanna have sex?"

A slow grin spread across his face, warm and wicked and entirely too pleased. "My tragic fate," he said, "being propositioned by my beautiful devil fiancée in a private club room. How will I endure?"

Rias smirked and reached for the buttons of her blouse. "Bravely, I hope..."

His eyes dropped to her fingers.

She undid the first button quickly.

– Sasuke Uchiha –

Sasuke Uchiha grunted as a wooden practice sword smacked into his arm. The impact was not hard enough to injure him. It was, unfortunately, hard enough to count.

"And that's another point for Kiba-kun!" one of the annoying school girls from the kendo club declared from the sidelines, practically vibrating with excitement. "Match to Kiba-kun!"

A chorus of high-pitched cheers immediately followed.

"Kiba-kun was so cool!"

"Sasuke-kun almost had him!"

"They're both so handsome!"

Sasuke lowered his shinai and glared.

Across from him, Kiba Yuuto gave him a polite smile. The blond devil looked barely winded, his practice sword resting loosely at his side. "Good match."

Sasuke's eye twitched. "It was not a good match," he said.

Kiba's smile did not move. "No?"

"You only won because we were not using any special abilities."

"Those were the rules."

"I could not even use my Sharingan..."

"That was also one of the rules."

Sasuke's grip tightened around the shinai.

Kiba tilted his head, infuriatingly calm. "That is the whole point of sword training. To get better with the sword."

Sasuke brooded in silence. It was either that or break the wooden sword over Kiba's head. The worst part was that Kiba was not wrong. Which made him more annoying. Sasuke hated that.

He had been trained as a shinobi. He had fought killers, monsters, missing-nin, cursed seal abominations, and a jinchuuriki who had apparently decided rap lyrics counted as psychological warfare. He had faced Itachi. He had survived Orochimaru. He had broken away from the village that lied to him, betrayed him, manipulated him, and then, somehow, through a chain of humiliating events he refused to fully examine, he had ended up here.

In school. *Again*. In a different dimension. Wearing a uniform. *Surrounded by fangirls.*

The gods were cruel. No, that was not dramatic enough! The gods had looked upon Sasuke Uchiha, last loyal son of a slaughtered clan, survivor of manipulation, revenge, betrayal, and psychological torture, and decided the most fitting punishment was to trap him in another academy full of girls making squeaking noises whenever he adjusted his hair.

He was supposed to be done with school after the Academy.

That had been the point. Graduate. Become a genin. Grow stronger. Hunt Itachi. Kill Itachi. Return to Konoha on his own terms. Rebuild the clan. Somewhere along the way, that plan had been stabbed, burned, resurrected, stabbed again, sold to a redheaded devil heiress, and forced into a Kuoh Academy blazer.

“Sasuke-kun looks so serious when he broods,” one girl whispered.

“I know! It’s so tragic and mysterious! Isn’t it so cool that he has the same name as that one manga character...?”

“Kiba-kun’s smile is so princely though!”

“They should spar again! They need to get even more sweaty for us! I need to smell them!”

Sasuke considered defecting from existence.

Kiba, traitor that he was, looked amused. Kiba rested his shinai on one shoulder. “If you let them bother you this much, they will do it more.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed. Sasuke did not want advice. Especially not from another *Knight*. He was still not sure how he felt about that. Rias Gremory had been kind. That much he could admit, even if admitting it made something uncomfortable twist inside his gut.

She was beautiful too.

That was also annoying. Rias Gremory had long red hair. Impossible to ignore. Not the exact same shade as Naruko’s, but close enough that sometimes, when Rias stood in the afternoon light with her hair spilling over one shoulder, Sasuke’s mind supplied the wrong face for a fraction of a second.

Naruko. Loud. Stubborn. Infuriating. Stronger than she had any right to be. The girl he had once, quietly, arrogantly, foolishly assumed would eventually look at him the way every other girl did.

She had not. Worse, she had looked at him with disappointment.

Then he learned why. Or rather who.

Haru.

Sasuke’s fingers tightened again. Haru, the fox bastard who had appeared out of nowhere, ruined his mission for the akatsuki, dumped him unconscious on Tsunade’s desk like a package, and somehow become the center of every crazy thing happening across the Elemental Nations.

Haru, who was dating Rias Gremory. And Naruko. And Naruko’s mother. And apparently half the multiverse, if Akeno’s teasing comments were to be believed.

Sasuke did not know what offended him more, the sheer arrogance of it, or the fact that everyone involved seemed happy.

The kendo club girls suddenly screamed again.

“Oh my gosh!”

“No way!”

“It’s Haru!”

“Rias Gremory’s super sexy fiancé!”

“The one who always cosplays as a kitsune!”

“What is he doing here?!”

Sasuke turned.

Haru stood at the entrance of the kendo hall as if he belonged there. Which was impossible, because Haru looked like he belonged nowhere normal people were meant to exist. He wore a dark fitted jacket over a casual shirt, sleeves rolled to his elbows like he had just come from cooking or trouble. His fox ears stood proudly atop golden hair, and ten golden tails swayed behind him with lazy confidence. They moved too naturally to be cosplay. The girls, of course, did not know that. They saw a handsome older boy with amazing costume work and immediately began dissolving into puddles of admiration.

Sasuke saw a monster wearing a smile.

Haru’s golden eyes swept the room, skipped over the fangirls without lingering, and landed on Sasuke.

Sasuke lifted his chin. “What do you want?”

The fangirls went quiet in the way crowds did when they realized a fight might be about to happen.

Haru raised both hands. “Wow. Not even a hello?”

“You dumped me on Tsunade!”

“You were unconscious...”

“That’s because you knocked me out!”

“No, Ranni was the one that knocked you out...”

Kiba made a sound suspiciously close to a laugh.

Sasuke shot him a look.

Kiba looked away with the serene expression of a man choosing life.

Haru stepped farther into the dojo hall. The girls parted for him automatically, whispering behind their hands. One of them looked like she might faint when one of his tails brushed past her sleeve.

Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. “What do you want?” Sasuke repeated.

Haru looked him over, gaze briefly taking in the shinai, the kendo armor, and the bruise forming where Kiba had struck his arm. His smile widened by a fraction.

Sasuke pointed the shinai at Haru. “Did you come here to mock me?”

“A little.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed.

“But mostly,” Haru continued, “I came to invite you on a *hunt*.”

That made Sasuke pause. “A hunt?”

“Yeah.” Haru tucked his hands into his pockets. “Giant monsters. Dangerous terrain. Probably some blood, possibly Thor yelling something dramatic before getting thrown through a tree by one of those monsters.”

“I’m not going,” Sasuke said automatically.

Haru tilted his head. “Didn’t say where yet.”

“I don’t care.”

“Giant monsters?”

“No.”

“Good training?”

“No.”

“Chance to hit things without Rias yelling about collateral damage?”

Sasuke hesitated for a fraction of a second. Haru’s grin returned.

Damn him. “No,” Sasuke said again, more firmly.

Haru sighed dramatically. “Fine. I guess after the hunt I’ll just stop by Konoha without you.”

Sasuke went still.

Haru turned as if preparing to leave. "I mean, I was planning to visit Naruto and Naruko anyway. Maybe drop off some food for Kushina, check in with Tsunade, see if Ichiraku's old man wants a rematch—"

"I'm coming." The words left Sasuke's mouth before pride could stop them. *Dammit, I replied too fast right there!* Haru was giving him a smug grin. Sasuke turned away and began removing the borrowed kendo gear. "Don't get me wrong. I am only coming because I have business in Konoha..."

Haru nodded with that grin still on his face. "Of course."

"And because fighting monsters is more useful than wasting time in this club."

"Absolutely."

"And not because you asked."

"Never crossed my mind."

Sasuke glared at him some more...

– Haru –

By the time I got Sasuke back to the Fox Hole, he had brooded so hard through the streets of Kuoh and Kyoto that I was honestly impressed the pavement hadn't cracked under the emotional pressure.

The kid has talent. Brooding talent. Elite levels. Possibly bloodline-enhanced.

Thor was waiting for us at the bar when we arrived, sitting on one of the reinforced stools I had ordered after Wrex broke three normal ones by existing near them. He had a tankard of mead in one hand and a plate of roasted meat skewers in front of him. His blond hair was tied back with a strip of leather, his borrowed Nord-style tunic stretched across shoulders that made most doorframes look like suggestions.

He looked up the moment we stepped inside and his face split into a grin. "Haru!" Thor boomed.

Several regulars looked over.

A pair of Nords near the back cheered on reflex because Thor had said something loudly, and Nords generally approved of volume.

Thor rose, crossed the room in three enormous strides, and clapped me on the back hard enough that a normal man would have become part of the floorboards.

Thankfully, I was not a normal man.

“Hah!” Thor laughed. “It gladdens my heart to go upon a quest with you, my future good-brother!”

Sasuke stopped behind me.

I grinned.

Thor’s hand was still on my shoulder.

“Technically,” I said, “since I’m dating Frigga too, I might also be your future good-father.”

Thor froze.

The restaurant went quiet for half a second.

His expression shifted through confusion, horror, denial, bargaining, and then right back to horror. “Please,” Thor said, in a voice much smaller than a man his size should have possessed, “do not make me think about that...”

I considered pushing further. The chef in me believed in seasoning. The older brother in me believed in torment. The part of me that had seen Thor trying to process the fact that his mother had apparently moved on with a ten-tailed fox Demon Lord after escaping Odin’s magical abuse decided he had probably suffered enough for one week. I patted his arm. “Fair enough.”

Thor exhaled in relief.

Sasuke scoffed.

I turned my head slightly.

The Uchiha stood near the entrance with his arms crossed, posture rigid, expression carved from pure irritation. He still wore the Kuoh Academy uniform, though he had loosened the tie and somehow made it look like he was one bad conversation away from declaring war on the school dress code. It was still better than that ugly purple ribbon he wore at the start of Shippuden.

“Where are we going?” he asked. No hello to Thor. Just straight to business. Honestly, that was probably progress for Sasuke at this point though.

I leaned back against the bar and crossed my arms. “Ranni found a new world and it sounded interesting when she messaged everyone about it.”

“What kind of world?” Sasuke asked.

I smiled in a way I knew would annoy him. “The *fun* kind.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed.

I gestured toward the front door with one tail. “Just think of massive stretches of untamed wilderness. Dangerous unique terrains full of hostile life. Ecosystems full of giant monsters ranging from ‘large enough to eat a horse’ to ‘large enough to use a castle as a scratching post.’ The humans there hunt those giant monsters, harvest their bones, hides, claws, scales, fangs, organs, and other materials, then craft weapons and armor from them so they can hunt even stronger monsters.” The chef in me wondered if they ate those monsters too.

Sasuke at the very least looked intrigued from my explanation.

Thor slammed his tankard down on the bar with a look of pure religious revelation. “This world,” he declared, “sounds amazing doesn’t it? A warrior’s dream!” Thor said, spreading his arms wide. “A realm where one proves strength not by birth, not by titles, but by facing mighty beasts beneath the open sky and fashioning their fallen strength into one’s own armaments!”

One of the Nords in the back shouted, “Aye!”

Another raised his mug. “Monster bones make the best trophies!”

A Quarian by the window looked deeply concerned by the entire conversation.

Sasuke gave Thor a flat stare. “You talk too much.”

Thor looked down at him. Then laughed. “I like this brooding little warrior,” Thor said. “He has the bite of a starved wolf and the height of a squire.”

Sasuke’s killing intent flickered.

I stepped between them before my restaurant became a cross-dimensional incident involving a depressed ninja and a thunder god with self-esteem problems. “Thor,” I said, “don’t call him little.”

Thor nodded solemnly. “Of course.”

Sasuke relaxed by approximately half a millimeter.

Thor added, “His spirit is surely taller than his body.”

Sasuke’s eye twitched. “At least I didn’t have my prized weapon stolen and renamed by a ten year old...”

I clapped my hands once. "Right. Before we start a rivalry based entirely on hammer trauma and height insults, let me explain why I invited both of you."

Sasuke looked suspicious.

Thor looked eager.

The restaurant leaned in because my regulars had all developed the deeply unhealthy habit of treating my life like live theater with snacks.

I took a breath. "This isn't just a hunt. It's a material-gathering expedition."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed. "For what?"

"For proposal gifts!" I declared, my tails swayed excitedly behind me. This was finally happening.

Sasuke stared at me in confusion. His brows furrowed together.

Thor nodded with immense seriousness. "I told Haru this would be a worthy opportunity," Thor said. "A warrior should not go empty-handed when asking for the heart of a fierce woman."

Sasuke's expression cracked. "WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT MEAN?"

I shrugged. "It means I'm going to kill some powerful monsters and use the materials to craft weapons and armor for Naruko and Kushina. Something worthy of them. And then hopefully they will say yes when I ask them to marry me."

The restaurant went quiet in that soft, interested way people did when they heard something sentimental and tried not to make a big deal of it. My ears warmed anyway. *Damn ears.*

Sasuke, however, did not look touched. He looked offended. "Naruko is not the type of girl who will be excited by weapons and armor," he said with absolute confidence.

I stared at him.

Thor stared at him.

Aela, who had apparently entered at some point without me noticing and was leaning against the far wall with a mug in hand, stared at him too.

Even one of the Quarrians tilted their helmet slightly.

Sasuke looked between us. His confidence began to die. Slowly. Painfully. "Fuck," he muttered. "She is that type of girl, isn't she?"

"Yes," I said.

“Absolutely,” said Aela.

Thor nodded. “A shield-maiden’s heart must be courted with steel, fire, and deeds sung loudly by drunken men.”

“That last part might be more your thing,” I said.

Sasuke’s expression darkened. His pride had taken a visible hit, and like most Uchihas, his first instinct after emotional injury was escalation. He pointed at me. “I will slay monsters more dangerous than yours!”

I blinked. “What...?”

“I will hunt the strongest beasts in this world. I will craft Naruko a weapon so powerful and armor so magnificent that she will realize her mistake, dump you, and come back to me!”

Bro, she was never even with you in the first place...

But still, after his declaration, there was pure silence all around us in the Fox Hole. Several patrons froze with drinks halfway to their mouths. Aela made a strangled noise that sounded suspiciously like she had nearly inhaled mead.

I stared at Sasuke.

He stared back, dead serious.

There were so many things I could have said. For example, I could have mentioned that Naruko was currently pregnant with my child. I could have also mentioned that Naruko had made her feelings about Sasuke very clear, and those feelings had not included “please craft me monster armor so I can rethink my romantic decisions.” I could have mentioned that Kushina would probably laugh herself sick if she heard this plan, then threaten to kick Sasuke through a wall for upsetting her daughter. I could have mentioned that Rias was definitely going to find this both heartbreaking and adorable in the worst possible way.

But I looked at Sasuke’s face. I really looked. Under the arrogance, under the jealousy, under the desperate claim he was trying to stake on a future that had already passed him by, there was a kid who had lost every single map he had ever used to understand his life.

His clan was gone. His revenge had been twisted. His brother’s truth had shattered him. His village had betrayed him, then changed without him. Naruko had moved on. And now he was trying to turn pain into purpose because that was the only tool he had ever trusted.

So I did not spoil the hunt. I smiled instead. “Challenge accepted!”

Sasuke looked stunned that I actually accepted his challenge. Sasuke lifted his chin. “You will regret underestimating me.”

Thor's grin returned at full force. Thor slammed one fist into his palm. "Excellent! This hunt shall be epic! We shall test ourselves against mighty beasts beneath strange skies, harvest their strength, and return with trophies worthy of legend!"

The Nords cheered again.

Thor planted both hands on his hips, chest swelling with renewed purpose. "And I, too, shall use this quest to craft a weapon with which to win back the Lady Jane's affections!"

I paused. *Ah. Jane Foster.* Brilliant astrophysicist. Very pretty. Terrifyingly determined. The kind of woman who could stare down gods, aliens, and government agents if they touched her research equipment. *She was hot.* I was not blind.

But she had never quite been my type enough for me to pursue her when I already had so many other interesting women surrounding me.

Also, seeing the way Thor's whole face changed whenever he said her name made me very glad I had never made a real move on her after the few times we talked. The guy was earnest enough that breaking his heart would have felt like kicking a golden retriever.

"Jane likes science," I said carefully. "You might want to bring her something she can study too. Not just a weapon."

Thor went still. His eyes widened. Then he pointed at me like I had revealed the secret of the cosmos. "Yes," he whispered. "A trophy and a mystery. A blade forged of monster bone, alongside a strange organ or crystalline gland for her brilliant mind to unravel." Thor clasped my shoulder again. "You are wise in the ways of women, future *good-brother*."

"Future *good-father*," Aela called from the wall.

Thor physically recoiled. "NO!"

The Nords nearby erupted with laughter.

I shot Aela a grin. She blew me a kiss.

Sasuke looked like he regretted every decision that had led him here.

My shadow clone behind the counter gave me a lazy salute while continuing to pour beer for Farkas, who was already explaining to a bewildered Quarian that mammoths were excellent eating if you ignored the hair.

I started heading for the front door.

Thor picked up *Sparking Lighting-chan* from where it leaned against the bar and followed with enough enthusiasm to make the floorboards complain. Sasuke followed behind the two of us

and I could see the determination to win in his eyes. It was probably the most emotion he'd shown ever since being reincarnated into a devil.

I opened the Fox Hole's front door, and then found myself staring out at a vast desert...

XXX