

“Me? Your friend?” Mitsuru repeated, incredulous. That was illogical. It just didn’t make any sense. Mitsuru did nothing but burrow herself away inside of her laboratory, making inventions. Rias had spent almost all of her time with you. Going on dates, introducing you to her peerage – hell, even Venelana couldn’t stop herself from talking about her hopes for a long and fruitful relationship with you. “We barely know each other.”

Rias struggled to talk through her injuries, “I know enough. I know that you and me are similar in a lot of ways that you don’t appreciate.”

“You’re just saying that,” Mitsuru fretted. She didn’t have enough tissues to wipe away some of the blood.

“It’s hard to put into words just how grateful I am to you, Mitsuru-chan. I really love him. From the first second that we spent together – I knew that there was no way I could resist being his. You’re the reason that I got to experience this, to meet someone that I want to spend the rest of eternity with.”

“I know! But...”

“Everyone else feels the same way. You’re amazing, and generous, and you do all of these things for other people without expecting anything in return. You’re a hero...” Rias was short of breath, each statement emerging between desperate gasps of air. “...I can’t offer you anything but my friendship. But I started thinking that maybe I could do something else. The reason I wanted to go shopping with you so was that you could be honest with your own feelings too.”

Mitsuru closed her eyes, “It’s not about how I feel. It’s about how he feels. I don’t know if he wants a plain girl like me.”

Rias reached out and put a firm hand on her shoulder, “You know – even though everyone praises me for my looks, I feel insecure sometimes too. Always having to live up to their expectations is hard, and I feel like the girls who don’t have to worry about their reputation have an advantage over me. I appreciated it when he made it clear that he understood how many responsibilities I have. He has room in his heart for you as well, he always has. That’s why he’s your best friend, right? He’ll never forget about you. No matter how many hundreds of wives Chun-Li says he’ll have.”

Mitsuru couldn’t help but laugh. It was completely ridiculous in every possible way. To think that her own hands would have brought about a situation like this, where she was receiving a motivational speech from one of her friend’s numerous fiancés. Rias’ words rung true. Maybe a corny resolution like that was just what she needed to keep in mind.

“I hope you understand what you’re getting yourself into, Rias. Being my friend isn’t easy.”

“I’m good at handling a lot of things at once. But you should be friends with everyone else too, Lala really likes you.”

“I’ll consider it.”

Mitsuru turned away and tried to hide the smile that threatened to crack her cool façade open like a dropped egg. Her eyes were drawn to the dark corners of the building they had entered. She had almost forgotten that they were being pursued by an enemy! A paranoid twitch ran through her as she realised that they’d been speaking aloud for several seconds while he was looking for them.

“Mitsuru, get out of the way. He’s trying to find you.”

“I can’t just leave you here, look at these injuries!”

The crimson blood that flowed from Rias’ forehead made her ruby eyes shine even brighter, “What are you talking about, you’re my friend, aren’t you? I’m not going to let him lay a finger on you, because if he does – this and every other world is done for! And you’ll never be able to tell him how you feel!”

“Rias...”

Rias pushed against her chest, “Now go! I’ll distract him. Hurry!”

Mitsuru hesitated, but she knew that she couldn’t stand toe to toe with the enemy that pursued them. With a frustrated grunt she turned and ran down the aisle in search of a good hiding place. One of the dressing booths at the back of the store would have to do. She shut the curtain behind her and sat down on the bench. Her mind was awash with thoughts, some rational, others tinged with fear. This was what *you* experienced every time you left the garage and fought them back.

“I’m one shitty friend,” she murmured. Sure, having a harem of beautiful fictional women was great – but was it worth risking your life for? She hadn’t even considered how you felt about it before pressing the issue. You didn’t even know how to fight before Chun-Li taught you the basics. Why was she even trying to keep you at arm’s length? You used to do everything together. Had she believed that dumping a bunch of women on you was a good enough reason to move on from her own feelings?

And now, Rias was in serious danger. You were still busy disarming the last of the explosives, and even if you were free there was no certainty that you’d make it in time to save her. That meant there was only one person who could make a difference. But what did she have on her person that could possibly pose a threat to Sundar? She rifled through her pockets and poured out several miniature tools she kept for a rainy day, but the only materials and parts she had were what could be found in the shop and the explosive devices they had removed beforehand. That was an effective weapon – she could only hope that it would be enough to injure him.

“If I surge the amount of power going through this circuit, it should melt the wire and... detonate.”

It was crude and extremely dangerous, but it was something. A timed bomb that would potentially save Rias’ life. Quaking fingers gripped a screwdriver and started to arduous process of picking apart the exterior casing. The delicate work was not assisted by the sound of another explosion running through the store. He’d already found her!

Rias had her back against the wall now. Her magic had been drained completely by the teleportation and the ensuing battle. All she could do was use the last of her power to put up whatever defence she could. Another laser shot knocked her even further back through a display of various pairs of pants and bras.

“Why are you putting your neck on the line for someone like her anyway? She only called you here so that you could fight for her sake. What do you get out of it?” Sundar taunted. “I might even offer you a chance to walk away. After all, you didn’t choose to be a part of this.”

Rias spat some of her blood onto the floor and scowled, “You don’t understand because you don’t have a decent bone in your body. I’ve always despised gutless men like you. Everything has to be about ‘getting something,’ money, power, influence...”

Sundar shrugged, "Are those not the things that matter most? For a scarcity-based society like yours, money quite literally makes the world go around."

"Then let's just call it a difference of opinion. You can choose to believe that, and I can choose to hate you for it."

"Hmph. You have a pretty sharp tongue there, girl."

"I don't usually talk this much with slimy bastards like you, but in this case, I had to make an exception."

"Oh? Thinking of dumping that loser and joining the winning team?"

Rias smirked, "No. I just wanted to keep you distracted while she planted that bomb on your back."

*Beep.*

"What?!"

Sundar swung around, but the only thing he saw was a pair of spindly legs disappearing around the corner. He reached back to try and locate the device, but his back was too broad and his arms too short to remove it. Second by second, the electricity flowing through the circuit was starting to melt the wires inside – and once the connection was broken...

"You bitch! I'll get you for this!"

His roars of protests were cut short by a deafening explosion, completely engulfing his body and obscuring him in a flash of orange light. Rias was forced back by the shockwave. But she knew that things weren't going to end there. Sundar was still on his feet, stunned but alive.

With one last cry, Rias gathered all of her magical power and unleashed her most devastating attack yet. Sundar took the full brunt of the blast – flying through the air and crashing down onto the tiled floor. A flash of green light signalled the retreat of Sundar. An automatic retrieval system triggered whenever he became too injured to fight for any longer.

Rias gasped and fell to her knees as her injuries and expended energy caught up with her. Mitsuru was already by her side and trying to wipe away the blood with a cloth. "Look at you! He's going to be furious when he sees the state you're in!"

Rias was still cracking jokes; "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

A few moments later another voice called out, attracted by the commotion, "President!"

"Xenovia?"

Chun was with her too, "They're still defusing the last bomb, but I heard the explosion!"

Rias tried to wave away Xenovia's concern, "Don't worry. I'm fine. Asia can patch me up, it looks worse than it really is."

"I... I see. Apologies, but we've successfully defused all of the bombs in our sector."

Chun-Li was already moving Rias' hair and checking the cuts, "Thankfully these are superficial wounds. A few stitches will take care of it, or healing magic, in your case."

"This place is swarming with police officers," Xenovia explained, "We'd better move – they'll have heard the explosion just like we did."

Chun-Li and Xenovia offered their shoulders to Rias – helping her stand steady as her knees tried to buckle from under her. Xenovia wished badly that she had mastered teleportation magic like Rias had, but moving four people such a long distance was simply beyond her ability. They would have to split up and fly her back to the garage.

“Won’t it be easier to summon Asia and get her to heal Rias right away?” Chun suggested.

“You’re right,” Mitsuru agreed, “But we need to get somewhere quiet first. Let’s go.”

The gang moved quickly out of the back door with bags in tow. It was a violent battle, but they had succeeded in dismantling yet another evil plot. The only thing left to do was heal Rias, escape from the police, and hope that you and Motoko had handled things on your end too. Mitsuru had little doubt that Motoko was the right woman for the job. She was fiercely competent and skilled in counter-terrorism operations.

“Ugh, you’ve soaked my towel through already!” she griped, “Are you *sure* you aren’t feeling faint?”

“I can stay awake until we have Asia here,” Rias insisted. Her clothes were absolutely ruined. Torn and charred, and now drenched in a dense splattering of her own blood. All that hard work in putting together a fashionable outfit had been flushed down the drain. Rias didn’t feel ashamed about what she had done. Mitsuru was safe, and her words had clearly sparked a change in her like she had originally wanted.

But being so close to defeat was a bitter pill to swallow. She had underestimated the power of the enemy that she now faced. These aliens didn’t play by the same rules that she did, a non-magical attack would normally pose little threat, but Sundar had nearly shattered her barrier several times over. She needed to get stronger. Luckily, she was with the right people who could help her get there. You and Mitsuru may not know anything about magic or rating games, but your magnetic personalities have a strange way of gathering all kinds of people in one place.

Rias made a final resolution before closing her eyes and preserving her strength, “Next time, I’ll beat him. I swear.”