

The first port of call for Rias and Mitsuru was one of the major shopping districts in the city, more specifically an upmarket store that dealt in women's fashion. Mitsuru had never once in her life worried about her appearance. Old t-shirts, baggy tracksuit pants and frumpy jumpers were her motif of choice. Her short stature and large glasses made the concept feel like a lost cause from the start. Rias did not agree with that assessment. Dressing well was the easiest way to make oneself look more attractive without any real effort. If Mitsuru had a new wardrobe, one she could easily afford thanks to her Mother's meddling, she had a much better chance of stealing your heart.

"This is enemy territory," Mitsuru muttered, "The realm of normies..."

Rias rolled her eyes and dragged the nerdy girl down one of the aisles. She already had a fairly good idea of what type of clothes Mitsuru would accept wearing, but she wanted to make extra sure that she was agreeable. Rias presented three different mannequins to Mitsuru and pointed to them; "We can go one of three ways. Sexy, cute, or cool. Which one would you prefer?"

Mitsuru exhaled, "Do I look cute or sexy to you?"

"You're cute," Rias replied.

"Am not. Just pick something that isn't super embarrassing."

Rias knew that 'super embarrassing' meant anything that didn't already match her chosen aesthetic. This was a situation where the band-aid would need to be ripped off quickly and harshly. Mitsuru needed an injection of confidence and an assurance that you wouldn't react in a big way to her changing things up. It was very easy for people to get trapped, even should they wish to change. Perceptions were self-reinforcing like that.

The first step was picking something that Mitsuru would find somewhat agreeable. Rias studied the racks and mannequins closely, piecing together several interchangeable outfits that covered a wide gamut from being modest, to cute, to stylish. She also chose some clothes that Mitsuru could use in the laboratory without constricting her movement. She could feel Mitsuru's eyes digging into her back as she worked.

That sense of unease only grew when they reached the dressing room. Mitsuru was looking less and less enthused by the moment. Rias dumped the pile onto the wooden bench and waved her in, pointing out which pieces go with what.

"Okay, so just pick out any of them and try it on."

Mitsuru sighed in resignation, "Fine."

The curtain was drawn shut, and Rias waited outside by tapping her foot on the floor. She hoped that Mitsuru would see the wisdom in her approach after wearing one of them for a little while. Mitsuru took her time making sure that everything was on correctly. A few minutes after entering, the curtain was tugged open by a dour looking scientist. She had chosen one of the 'safer' outfits from the offering.

Rias had to admit that she looked really great! The leather black skirt cut at an askew angle, the green jacket and white undershirt – it really brought out her serious side. Mitsuru spun in place so that Rias could see her from every angle.

"I think that looks amazing," Rias nodded, "What do you think?"

"It's not the *worst*."

Better than nothing, Rias thought. The fashion show continued for nearly an hour as Mitsuru approved and rejected various options. When all was said and done, things had been narrowed down to a dozen or so different selections. Rias was surprised at how much Mitsuru had taken to the idea in the end, perhaps because she had mentioned impressing you a few times just to encourage her.

“But new glasses? Do you realise how thick these lenses are?”

Rias hummed, “Larger frames are in style, are they not? I’m sure there are many good choices that will allow you to see properly.”

“Large frames are in style for people that don’t *need* them,” Mitsuru replied, “I withstood enough teasing and ill-mannered words about these to last a lifetime.”

“Ah. So you believe that changing them to something new is giving in?”

“That would be a rather illogical conclusion.”

Mitsuru wasn’t shaken by Rias’ observation. She knew full well just how irritating it had been to see a point of mockery turn into something accepted. That was how the world worked. People made fun of things for being obscure or out of touch, but would soon jump on board given the off-chance that they increased their social standing thanks to a change in trends. Mitsuru doubted that a new pair of glasses, or even new clothes, would be enough to attract your attention when girls like Rias were hanging around.

But Rias saw right through her – she knew that. She’d continue to insist of her doing the impossible no matter how humiliating it was. Shattering the barrier between dimensions was child’s play compared to this.

“What’s wrong with just being friends?” she murmured. Rias turned back with a pair of bags hung over her arms.

“You don’t want to be ‘just friends,’ that’s what’s wrong,” her tone was stern and admonishing, “There’s no need to deny what you want for yourself.”

“That’s easy for a beautiful devil to say. I don’t have half of your looks, or half of your greed.”

“Do you really think that he’d feel that way about you?”

“While I’d like to think better of him, he is a man. I presume that being surrounded by sexy anime women is liable to move the goalposts beyond my reach.”

Well... Rias had to admit that it was kind of true. Even the most well-meaning of people could be influenced in ways they didn’t realise. She had taken your attraction to her for granted. In her eyes you were an incredible person – a fictional character made real in the same way that she was for you. Rias had never known a time where she wasn’t the most sought-after girl in the underworld. How could she empathize with Mitsuru?

“I can’t say that his opinions won’t change but I think you should still try, Mitsuru-chan. You’ll never know for sure until you ask.”

Mitsuru sighed, “That’s the hard part. Do I look like the type of women bristling with confidence?”

Rias shrugged, “You were very confident when you were in stressful situations. Like when you first explained how all of this worked to him.”

“There’s a big difference between giving a keynote presentation and asking someone on a date!”

“There is, but you need to manifest that same type of confidence when you ask!” The pitched debate was starting to attract some onlookers. Rias reached up and pulled down on the brim of her baseball cap to cover her face – the last thing she wanted was to spoil the day out by being identified as Rias Gremory.

“Look – I’m not a ‘main girl,’ okay? Do you know how often the childhood friends wins in your average romance manga?”

“Uh.”

“I crunched the numbers myself! Less than twenty percent! It’s unfair, childhood friend discrimination needs to stop!”

Rias nodded along, unsure of what else to say. Mitsuru was talking herself out of doing what she wanted again. Rationalizing all of her personal fears and trying to present them as logical decisions made with her own agency. It reminded Rias of herself before she met Issei – before he helped make the Occult Research Club more open with each other.

“A plain, childhood friend such as myself is statistically less likely to have a romance subplot develop than anyone else. The odds are only getting worse as he adds more women to his harem. Ergo, I have focused my efforts in more productive areas of study.”

Rias was going to need more drastic measures in order to break Mitsuru out of her negative way of thinking. It was going to be tough. Everyone she knew were so self-assured and confident. How could she provide the encouragement that Mitsuru needed? She looked down on the mastermind from above, but noticed that her gaze was elsewhere.

“Is something wrong?”

Mitsuru pointed to a man walking on the sidewalk across from them, “Don’t you think that he looks familiar?”

Now that she mentioned it, the lanky man wading his way through the crowd did have an odd air of familiarity. Rias recalled the extensive time she spent split into two identical clones, and the enemy officer responsible for it. He was a bumbling fool. The way he walked and nervously glanced at everyone he passed was identical.

“I don’t remember his name, but he looks like one of the Untethered.”

Mitsuru was already moving to follow him. Rias put a hand on her shoulder and stopped her from stepping out onto the road, “Wouldn’t it be better to contact him first?”

Mitsuru huffed, “I have you! Are you trying to say that the mighty Ruin Princess is afraid of one, itty-bitty fight?”

Rias’ brow twitched at the base insult, “I’m no coward. Very well. Let us observe him for a time and see if your suspicion is correct.” Thinking quickly, Rias ducked into a nearby alleyway and out of sight. She snapped her fingers and summoned a magic circle, teleporting their purchased goods through magical space and into the garage for safekeeping. After that, she hurried over the road with Mitsuru in tow.

Surely, they’d be more than enough to handle this.

