

# Mission 1 : Fleeing, Caring and Meeting

The ceiling above was dim steel, low and suffocating, vibrating with the thrum of the Ark's buried engines. The hum pressed into his bones, reminding him with every beat that there was no sky at this level, no open riverbank, only walls and walls and more walls.

Issei tried to focus, to carve a clean line through the blur of his identity. But the divide remained: two breaths rising in his chest, colliding like tides.

One was his own; ragged, hungry, panicked, driven by the raw animal craving for bread, for warmth, for something to prove he was alive.

The other belonged to Vali; slow, measured, calculative, with a discipline that had been trained and tested until it became second nature.

For a moment his ribs felt too narrow to hold them both. An ache formed in his sternum, as if the two rhythms would crack him apart from the inside. Even if he kept his external composure and tried to convince himself that everything was alright but deep down he staggered.

He felt his mind drift away, crushed beneath a weight of existential question that promised to shatter him from within.

The clicking of the Ark's engines pressed down like a second heartbeat, each vibration oppressing his ribs as though the ship itself conspired to expose the fracture inside him.

Every breath he forced outward seemed stolen, every blink a performance that required utmost concentration, costing more than it gave.

*Am I truly still myself?*

As he felt like losing himself, Vali steadied him.

Not brutally, not ill-intended, it was like a hand placed gently on his shoulders, reminding him of posture, of balance, of where to put his feet.

The blur thinned.

His lungs remembered how to move.

And in that recovered stillness, a voice rose within him, faint but unmistakably his own, overlapping and yet other :

*You'll help me carry out my vow... and in return, I'll help you hold yourself together.*

Against his chest, Marianne stirred. Bundled in thin cloth, she shifted in sleep, her tiny hands pawing clumsily, curling and uncurling like petals brushing against his shirt.

Her warmth seeped into him, fragile and innocent at once. She smelled faintly of milk and sweat, the scent of helplessness, of trust, of something alive and depending wholly on him.

Maybe that was the love Issei really craved for,  
Pure and boundless love.

That weight, light as she was, tethered him harder than steel chains.  
In her breathing, shallow and steady, there was no Vali, no Issei, no conflict at all, only a truth both could accept: she had to be protected.

That's when it struck, *Hunger*:

The thought rose from somewhere primal. His own stomach knotted, raw and empty. Yet Vali's fatherly instincts took over: *Feed the child first. Then yourself.*

So he walked, the corridor cold beneath his boots, toward the market. Lights flickered overhead in rhythmic pulses, every step echoing hollow against metal floors, like a drumbeat leading him forward.

When he reached the marketplace, the atmosphere changed.

Steam from boiling roots mixed with the acrid tang of oil lamps.

Voices rose in barter, metallic coins clinked, vendors shouted over one another to draw attention.

The corridors spilled him into chaos.

His ears ached from the stalls clanging with pots and pans, hawkers shouted the price of bread and roots, the air was thick with spices but even that couldn't hide the overwhelming stench of metal and sweat.

Steam kissed his cheeks, and the smell of roasted grain stabbed at his empty stomach.

He moved carefully, Marianne pressed close against his heart, scanning the stalls. But soon he noticed something sharper than hunger.

A thousand eyes brushed over him like passing currents. Some slid away without thought but others lingered.

His skin prickled, his blood hummed. Other people felt it, even if they didn't know why. However one gaze clung harder than the rest. Too steady. Too intent. He didn't know who it was but one thing remained certain, it was malicious.

*Am I imagining this?* Issei's fear clawed at him.

*Test it, Vali reasoned. Don't trust panic when you have the power to confirm it*

His hand slipped into his pocket. A coin pressed cool against his palm, engraved with the Pillar's seal. He shielded it with his fingers and whispered, low enough the crowd's noise devoured the words:

"Am I being followed?"

He flipped the coin infused with his spirituality. It spun once, twice, glinting before slapping into his palm.

Heads.

A tremor of certainty rippled through him. His spirituality flared just enough to whisper: *Yes.*

He forced himself to look sideways, not back, catching fragments in polished steel panels, the angles of glass panes.

Tall.

Leaning forward, shoulders predatory.

Steps light but practiced, *too quiet for a casual shopper.*

Boots scuffed at the toes, *too careless to be an official*

Left hand grazing the hem of a jacket, *a concealed weapon !*

Every detail layered itself into a picture. Issei's panic wanted to scream. Vali's clarity fits the pieces together.

*Not random, it can't be a coincidence. Someone is here for us.*

And then it hit him, sudden and undeniable: being a Reader was never about memorizing words or parroting passages.

It was about unraveling the world itself; every glance, every movement, every fragment of life.

To read was not to turn a page, but to draw meaning from everything around him.

*To be a Reader, he murmured inwardly, is to read anything, books, people, signs, the spaces between them all."*

He stroked Marianne's back to keep her calm, hiding the tremor in his fingers.

He could not run here, not in this market full of witnesses and bottlenecks.

Panic would give his tail the advantage.

Instead, he turned casually, adjusting his path through the stalls, each step angling closer to a memory.

The library.

Celia's library. A modest annex tucked against the edge of the market's spine, quiet, nearly forgotten. He still carried her badge, her small smile had lingered when she pressed it into his hand one night.

*"If you ever need me, come find me here."* That souvenir cut through him now, sharp and soft at once.

He gripped Marianne tighter. The pursuer's malice pressed closer, patient, certain of its prey.

*Good, Issei thought coldly. Follow me. Just a little longer. Then I'll vanish where only she would have taken me.*

He pressed Marianne closer, her tiny body light but insistent against his chest. Each step through the corridor was careful; his posture, glance, rhythm were all studied to be precise without allowing a single misstep. He knew a single wrong step could cost Marianne safety

At that moment, a stall appeared at arm's reach, warm bread still steaming from the oven. Marianne's soft whimpers tugged at him.

*If I am, then she's hungry,* he thought, stomach tightening.

For a heartbeat, Issei allowed himself the risk. Fingers darted in, snatching bread crumbs and giving it safely to Marianne

She nibbled quickly, crumbs falling onto his sleeve, eyes wide and trusting. *Eat, little one,* he murmured. We'll pay for it later. He knew that it was reckless and dangerous, but her wellbeing came first.

The corridor narrowed, the dim glow of Celia's library ahead promising sanctuary. Behind him, the pursuer lingered, cautious but persistent, each step measured, searching for a clue. Issei felt the tension coiled tight around his chest but for now, they had a sliver of time.

Enough to feed her.  
Enough to survive another moment.

The crowd thinned as the stalls gave way empty corridors, dust clinging where few bothered to walk. The further he went, the dimmer the lights hummed overhead, their glow sickly against metal walls.

Behind him, footsteps. Too even. Too measured.

*Still there*, Issei's panic whispered.  
*Yes*, Vali agreed. *They're cautious, but closing the distance. Don't look back. Don't confirm. Let them believe you're unaware.*

He tightened his grip on Marianne. Her small breath warmed his collarbone, her weight steadying him as the pressure behind his spine grew unbearable.

Tucked between abandoned storage units, its doorway was a rectangle of reinforced glass, a faint etching of the Pillar's seal still above it. Dust gathered along the frame but the sign was still readable

## Library

The library's glass doors slid aside without resistance. Unlike the market's chaos, the air here was calm.

Rows of narrow shelves pressed close together, the scent of ink and paper mixing with faint cleaning oil. A few patrons lingered at tables, heads bowed over texts, the soft rustle of pages the only sound.

It wasn't grand, but alive. A haven for the few who still believed in words.

Issei's eyes swept the room in a heartbeat. *Safe? No. Not yet.* The pursuer's pressure still clung to his back like a shadow.

And then he noticed him.

A man stood at the far end of the room, pretending to scan a shelf but never reaching for a book. His body leaned slightly toward the entrance, eyes darting between reflections in the glass and corners of the room. His hand rested too casually on his coat.

Issei's mind sharpened with his deepened understanding of a reader's principles.

Not a regular  
Not reading  
Trying to look relaxed.

*He's like us, Issei realized. Not here for study, here to hide. Someone's after him too.*

Behind them, footsteps skimmed past the library's outer hall. The stalker hadn't given up. He would come in soon.

Vali's fingers brushed Celia's badge in his pocket. The key to the employee-only archive room at the back. A single door marked *STAFF* in faded letters. A place out of sight.

He acted without hesitation.

Crossing the rows, he stopped near the man and murmured under his breath:  
"You're being followed."

The stranger's gaze flicked to him, sharp, evaluating. Not denying it. Not surprised. Just calculation and understanding of the situation.

"Come," Vali pressed, already moving toward the staff door. "If you stay out here, they'll catch you too."

A short pause. Then the man moved, steps as measured as his stare, slipping into stride beside Vali as though it had been decided long ago.



The badge met the reader with a soft *beep*. The lock clicked, and Vali eased the door open. Inside was a cramped room of ledgers, supply crates, and paper stacks that smelled faintly of glue.

He slipped in with Marianne held close, the stranger following fast. The door closed behind them.

For a moment, silence. Only breathing.

Vali turned to face him. The man leaned against a crate with casual ease, though his eyes gleamed sharp in the dimness.

Then, finally, he spoke. His voice was low, smooth, edged with wry calm.

“i’m Loki.”