

After I tell her she's my first kiss, Taihou snuffles and looks at me with a level of adoration I don't feel I really deserve, but I smile anyway and squeeze the hand I'm still holding. It's nice to just sit together in the aftermath like this.

It's a milestone, and... well, it feels a lot less problematic than the way in which I lost my virginity.

Not wholly without problems of course, and they're ones I need to address.

"I like you, Taihou. But it doesn't feel fair, it doesn't feel enough in the face of your... love," the swing creaks as I push myself back on it a bit, foot digging into the furrowed ground underneath. "I know love doesn't have to be logical or make sense, but I still can't help but feel like I don't deserve it."

She pushes her own feet against the ground, shifting her own swing towards mine while they're side to side, slipping her hand free of mine and resting her head against my shoulder. Maybe not quite as intimate as the way she's been pulling my head against her chest lately, but it's warm, it's nice. "What you did tells me you deserve it, Commander," she whispers.

I guess calling me by name was a special event? I wonder if it represents backsliding, but it does help contextualise the importance of what just happened, for both of us.

"Taihou has never done anything," she says, still speaking softly. "As a ship, she was sunk in her first battle. Only one torpedo hit her, and then she fell under the water before she could matter." I can feel how this is something hard for her to talk about, something important, and I reach up to rest my arm around her own shoulders to try and offer some kind of reassurance and comfort while she nuzzles in.

"When I opened my eyes in this body, when I saw your face... I swore to myself it would be different. There wouldn't be a thing I wouldn't do for you Commander. If you asked, I'd pull the moon out of the sky for you. Because this is Taihou's precious second chance. I'd make up for everything I failed at before, I'd grab hold of happiness with both hands and never let go. For you Commander... and for me. Because if you looked at me with the same love, if you patted my head and told me I was good... I'd know I wasn't a mistake."

I'm not that dense. I shift my hand up off her shoulder so I can palm my big meaty hand atop her silky black hair. "You're good, Taihou."

"Hehehe..." she giggles, nuzzling her head in more against my side, her hand reaching over to rest on my chest, fingers curling into my t-shirt. "Thank you, my kind and gentle Commander."

"You're gonna give me a big head, you know," I chuckle self-deprecatingly.

Her fingers tighten, bunching up the fabric between my flabby pectorals, and she turns her head up to look at me with a serious expression. "When I felt my heart being crushed by worthlessness just now, you saved me Commander. You saved this lonely woman's heart. Don't ever think you don't deserve to be praised. Even if the whole world becomes your enemy, Taihou will always cheer for you... Jiro." Her cheeks redden and she turns her head to look down again, and yeah, there's definitely something to her using my name rather than calling me by a rank. A tactical weapon to only be deployed sparingly, huh?

I blush a bit myself. Dramatic or not, it's nice to be so well regarded. Above her head my hand drifts a bit to the side, finding the base of one of her twintails and idly twirling my finger through her hair while I try to bring order to my thoughts and express them in a way that won't just ruin things.

It would be so easy to just say "*Yes, I love you, lets fuck.*" She wouldn't question it at all. But I don't love her. If this was just a girl who admitted to a crush and wanted to go on a date, I could roll with that. But Taihou's feelings are intimidatingly deep, and I need to respect them whether or not I reciprocate them, not just take advantage of them.

"I'm still... figuring out a lot for myself. The world's a lot bigger than it seemed a month ago, and my place in it... it's both better and more uncertain. Before I at least knew where I stood, now things are exciting and complicated and... I'm trying to figure out where I really stand, in a lot of places," I say to try and get across to her my own mindset. She at least doesn't interrupt as I take a moment, gathering my thoughts and my breath after that start.

"I want to find out where you and I can fit together, it's just... it's hard for me to accept such strong feelings when my own are uncertain. Anything I do with you, I feel like it's taking advantage, or making a commitment my own heart's not ready for. And yet *not* doing anything feels like I'm playing with your heart and stringing you along."

She lets out a slow breath of her own, I guess digesting that. I hope it makes sense and doesn't just sound stupid and wishy-washy. Most guys have probably been dating girls since they were in middle school, they've had chances to figure relationships out. For me it's like being thrown in the deep end on the first try.

"I think I understand," she says, giving me some sense of relief. "You don't want to tie yourself down to someone unworthy of you. So Taihou needs to work hard and prove she's worthy of the Commander's love."

No... no, that's not quite it either. She can't see my face right now but I'm wincing, and I stop playing with her hair so I can squeeze her shoulder. "It's not about worthiness, it's just... learning if I can be compatible with you or anyone else for that matter."

"Idiot Commander," she mumbles, closing up her fist and thumping it lightly on my chest. "It's easier for me if it's a goal. I don't want to lose you because of something I can't even control."

That makes me sigh. Women are forever mysterious.

"If that makes it easier for you. In the meantime do you think you can be patient with me, and not cause trouble for Akeno or anyone else?" I ask, since ultimately she needs to be able to get along with others and not be so mono-focused on me. The attention's flattering, but also kind of smothering.

"I'm not sure if Akeno's the one to worry the most about anyway. You said you had fun with that Reya girl, and then there's everything you do with Kaori... you can do those things with Taihou too you know. You can do *anything* with Taihou." Her hand migrates across my chest to grab at my other wrist and she pulls it over towards her chest, and oh man the feel of that wondrous K-cup melon half-exposed out of her loose kimono is exquisite, my fingers curling inwards to feel the plump doughiness of her breast before I can even consciously decide on a reaction.

"I know, but I'd feel like shit doing stuff with other people after doing them with you," I say, biting my lip and savouring the feel perhaps longer than I should have, my willpower's not that strong, okay?

[spoiler=Wiki Roll]

[4-12 [url=https://deadoralive.fandom.com/wiki/Nassau_Station]]Nassau Station[/url]

A stage based on Cairo Station, an orbital defence platform from the Halo setting. Taihou's rigging and ship form are modified to incorporate the technology of such an installation. This grants her access to a bombardment attack based on the Mark V Super MAC Gun, and augments her air wings with Pelican gunships and Broadsword strike fighters.

Note that because of the way Azur Lane shipgirls function, equipment of a more modern or futuristic tech level doesn't necessarily beat WW2 vintage equipment, and the raw power output is more based on Taihou's overall capability. However, this definitely grants extra function in terms of an additional (extremely strong) attack method, and space-capable aircraft.]

[/spoiler]

She lets out a gasp at the same time as I feel myself losing the battle to keep from popping a stiffy while we're having a fraught emotional discussion, and I pull my hand away from her chest. I don't feel anything myself, so she probably got something here. "What did you get?" I ask. I'd normally be excited, but... it's kind of a distraction. Then again, maybe we need one right now.

"Ahh, it's... there are new planes in Taihou's hangars, and... there's a big gun. It feels unwieldy but strong," she answers, her own expression distracted. Then she huffs out an annoyed sound, "Commander, don't try to distract me with bribes! I was trying to tell you, you wouldn't want to do things with other girls after you've done them with me!"

She looks kind of adorably pouty, and I think this might be the first time she's seemed even remotely displeased with me, so I can't help but laugh, which only seems to upset her more.

"Commander, don't laugh! It's not supposed to be funny!"

"Sorry! Sorry!" I manage amidst my mirth, reaching up to give her a headpat again, "You're a good girl Taihou. It's just that's the first time you've kind of raised your voice to me, it took me by surprise in a good way."

"Nnngh... well I can't stay mad when you touch me like that, but for my Commander I'll even yell angrily if that's what you really want," she says while looking away from me, her attempt at seduction faltering through grumpiness.

"If it's needed," I nod sagely, pushing off the swing and rising to my feet. "C'mon, we're not gonna solve everything in one conversation, how about we head back, finish dinner and have a quiet evening with Kaori and Saeko?"

A quiet evening is asked for and a quiet evening delivered, Saeko and Kaori both being happy to just spend a relaxing evening watching TV and letting ourselves be distracted before we turn in with a minimum of fuss, I guess getting over the first night's sleeping arrangements managed to take some of the fight out of Taihou when it comes to who sleeps where. Well, that or our whole dramatic conversation on the swings.

[spoiler=Wiki Roll]

[9-2 [url=<https://senrankagura.fandom.com/wiki/Mai>]Mai[/url]

A ninja who is also an idol. Given the low power roll, all this summons is a CD containing one of her solo singles.]
[/spoiler]

It still doesn't stop Taihou from getting up early to watch over me, I guess progress comes in small steps, but she's able to report that the CD now resting atop my blanket appeared just before I woke up. The cover shows a cute girl with greyish-green hair in a kind of skimpy outfit that reminds me of a bunny suit without the ears. It proclaims itself as 'Mai from Milky Pop' singing 'Love Typhoon'.

We listen to it over breakfast while Saeko and I prepare for school. It's decent. Peppy pop stuff really, nothing special but still perfectly pleasant to listen to. But hey, I got to listen to actual angels singing earlier in the week, so I'm pretty hard to impress now!

"Hey, Kaori-chan, I just had an idea," I say after we finish listening. "While we're at school, why don't you make a Devitube account and upload that and the songs from the Elizabeth Bathory CD?" Yes the Bathory ones are kind of terrible, but it's still music from another world.

Maybe someone will be into it? “We can set up an entertainment division of Erect Solutions for spreading this stuff around.”

“That means I’ll have to listen to the awful skeleton song again,” Kaori groans. “Alright fine, but you’ll owe me, Jiro-kun.”

“Taihou can help too, so you’ll owe both of us!” Taihou quickly raises her hand for attention.

Kaori gives Taihou a sly look and then back at me with a concerning yet sexy expression as she drawls out, “Well I don’t mind both of us taking on the debt if it comes to that...”

I might be setting myself up for trouble, but you know what, it’s time to go to school! “Great! You two have a good day then!”

It’s a familiar route to school, though one that might be changing if we find somewhere new to live next week, and we’re just out of sight of the apartment when Saeko gives me a kind of sly smile of her own and says, “Alone at last, hmm Jiro-kun?”

I laugh at the implication. Walking alone with a girl like Saeko should have me in fits of nerves, but she’s been kind of a rock this whole time, I don’t know what I’d do without her. “Yeah, glad you’re the sane one around here, things have gotten real messy, huh?”

Her expression slips back into pleasant neutrality and her gaze turns forward as she says, “I wouldn’t want to add to your troubles.”

That almost makes me laugh a little bit more. Okay she might have a bit of a fixation with violence, but in every other way Saeko kind of comes across as the perfect girl. I’m very lucky to have her around.

In any case, school shapes up to be a pleasant enough day. I chat some with Rias and Akeno before classes, no hard feelings over any fake phone messages, and midterms continue to go smoothly. When lunchtime rolls around I go off to find somewhere quiet I can eat my homemade lunch while Saeko takes her turn to enjoy the tasty magical desk bento waiting in the anime club room.

No wild encounters with members of the student council today, just a quiet bench over at the more scenic and woodsy part of the school grounds where I can eat in peace, not bothering anyone and not being bothered in turn.

“Yo, Jiro-san!”

Well, maybe bothered a little, but I don't really mind it as I spot Issei heading my way. Raising up the soda bottle I'd been drinking from in a wave I return his greeting. "Hey Issei-san, how's life?"

"Ahh, it's been rough. Midterms are kicking my ass, I haven't had time to study with all the other training I've been doing so these exam questions have me feeling lost," he says, joining me on the bench. The girl who'd been sitting on the other bench around the little circular seating area packs her own lunch up and walks off, I guess not wanting to be around such an infamous pervert. My presence alone didn't scare her off, I'll take that at least.

"Still working hard at the church, huh? How's that all going?" I ask, taking a bite of my lunch primarily made of leftovers from last night.

"Good! Good!" he nods quickly, his reply seeming a bit *too* quick to feel convincing. "Actually my mom and dad met Asia-chan, and they kind of fell in love with her. They also got real mad when they heard she wasn't going to school, said it wasn't appropriate for a girl her age, so it looks like she'll be transferring in next week."

Honestly that is good news, although I guess they'll have to make sure she doesn't share any classes with devils and it might be awkward to pass her in the halls. "I heard Sitri recruited a new guy into her peerage, and Rias got a new girl too. Plus I've got someone in my group that'll be starting school next week as well, maybe even Kaori if she can figure out human disguise magic. School's getting a lot of new faces."

"Th-that's right!" Issei stumbles over his own voice, pointing at me, "That girl I saw you with with the big badonkers! She's becoming a transfer student?!"

"Bro, c'mon," I chide him for his objectifying description, even if it's an objectively correct one. "Her name's Taihou and she's a sweet girl."

He grumbles and takes a bite out of his sandwich. "Man, I seriously underestimated you. You've got her and Kaori and Saeko too as your sex friends? How do you do it?"

"I don't do it!" I blurt out, feeling my face heat up. "The only one I've actually had sex with is Kaori, Saeko's just a regular friend." Not even gonna get started on the student council girls here, thank you very much.

"You're not saying Taihou's just a friend," he points out with a smug grin, which has me sullenly turn away and utter two profound words.

"It's complicated."

Thankfully Issei seems to understand the weight of those words, and he nods, chewing over his sandwich for a minute before he ventures with the air of a man needing to get something

off his chest, "Mine's complicated too. Things haven't felt right since that Azazel dickbag showed up."

I wince at the memory of that particular meeting. "Nanael's been neglecting you for the new guy?"

He shakes his head. "No, in fact he hasn't been back since that night. But like... it pisses me off. I'm supposed to be the harem king, I awoke to my supernatural destiny and everything, but she just goes off and screws around with this other sleazy looking guy? And like, even though there's other girls around at the church, I can't talk about this kind of thing with Asia-chan, you know? She's too pure."

I nod in agreement. Asia's innocence deserves to be protected, even having only known her for such a short time, her saintly aura of wholesomeness already had a profound effect on me.

"And the fallen angels... I thought I had a chance, or I thought they might at least agree with me since they're obviously crazy about that Azazel guy too, so maybe we could've been able to work something out with that. And you know what Raynare said to me?" he looks straight at me, his eyes almost bulging like he's struggling not to explode.

"What did Raynare say?" I ask, playing my part even if I kind of dread hearing what the psycho fallen angel has to say regarding Issei's love troubles. Over his shoulder I see Momo walking down the path towards us, a cute wrapped bento box in her hands, a warm and friendly smile on her face when our eyes meet.

"She said I should be honoured to be eskimo brothers with Azazel-sama!" Issei shouts, a furious outpouring of humiliation and resentment washing out over me.

Down the path Momo abruptly spins on her heel and starts walking back the way she came without her expression so much as cracking. Godspeed sister.

"Yeah... yeah, that's pretty bad," I commiserate with the poor guy.

Issei slumps where he sits, his energy spent after getting that awful memory off his chest. "It's the worst!"

Against my better judgement I expend more precious braincells considering the dynamics of Nanael and Issei's love life. "I mean though, you were already sharing with Matsuda and Motohama, right?"

"Yeah, but that's different. We're buddies, y'know?" he says, still simmering over the situation. "We all graduated together with her, and sure it got a little weird sometimes, but it was all firmly within the boundaries of bro conduct. Plus she called me her number one

harem boy, so I still had that going for me,” his voice grows quieter at the end as if realising that it still sounds kind of pathetic.

“I guess it’s a good thing she never did win that tournament, she was gonna turn the school into her harem wasn’t she?” I muse rather than directly addressing whatever bro conduct entails in that kind of scenario. Why would she want a harem at Kuoh Academy though? There’s like four girls for every boy here.

Issei nods glumly. “She was salivating over that Kiba jerk, I just figured if I kicked ass in the tournament she’d see she wouldn’t need anyone besides me, you know? But it’s one thing hearing her talk, another seeing her actually... with, another guy. I thought I’d have an angel harem, but it’s just getting further and further away.”

In light of this, my own troubles with Taihou and Kaori seem really petty, don’t they? In fact if I were to share them with Issei, I think I might just make him feel even worse. I’ll just try and give him advice like the kind senpai I am. Even if I don’t have much romantic experience, I’ve seen a lot of romance and harem anime!

“Well you know, relationships are messy, and you just make them even messier when you involve other people. There’s a reason the harem route is always treated like a bonus option in a dating sim and when they do an adaptation they always pick just one girl to be the winning heroine.” Usually the most boring one too.

Taihou would never win if my life was an anime. She’d be treated as an outright villain in most adaptations in fact.

Not that I’m saying real life is necessarily more complex, the Taihou route in a game would surely showcase her vulnerability and charm so you can fall in love with her, but her... clingy personality makes her a good antagonist for the true couple to overcome on their road to happiness.

“Come on man, where’s the ambition in that?” Issei scoffs at my well-intentioned advice. “I’ve got too much love in my heart for just one girl! Besides, if that dickbag Diodora can have a harem, why can’t I?”

I mean, yes. I fully acknowledge the jealousy that knowledge inspires. The fucker is probably right now luxuriating in the NEET life with a harem of cute devil nuns fawning over him. But that’s a monstrous injustice, not something to emulate! “Yeah, you know he messed all those girls up with like, cult indoctrination techniques, to make them dependent on him?”

“That’s why I need to do better!” Issei surges to his feet, fists clenched and eyes burning with determination. Like seriously I’m pretty sure they’re glowing. “To prove a real harem with real love can work! Ever since the stone age, before man even came down from the trees, he’s looked to the stars and you know what he’s dreamed of?”

“A harem?” I feed the expected line.

“A harem! With all kinds of girls in it, big boobs and small boobs! Shy girls and bold girls! Girls that can’t be honest with their feelings and girls who’s actions show the love their faces can’t! But most of all *cute* girls!”

There’s definitely a presence radiating from him when he gets so fired up. Who knows, maybe if a girl saw this side of him she might even be impressed?

“Ewww, what are those two losers doing?”

“Don’t make eye contact, Nozomi-chan!”

A pair of second years girls come down the path in the opposite direction behind me and make their presences felt before scurrying past one keeping her head down and the other glaring viciously at Issei.

With a sigh I stand up and clap a hand on his shoulder, feeling that vibrant energy deflate like a sad balloon. “Keep dreaming man. Keep dreaming.”

Author Notes

It’s nice to flesh out Taihou and give her some character development. It’s necessary for her to actually be more than an antagonistic force in matters of relationships. It’s a shame her story in Azur Lane just ends with her briefly fearing she’s been too clingy, before the Commander says he loves her and it’s fine. No lessons learned!

On a lighter note though, Asia’s relationship with Issei’s parents is one of the most wholesome things in the show, so I had to make sure that happened regardless of divergences.