

## Winter Pilgrim

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# Winter Pilgrim

by [Stealth\\_Noodle](#)

## Summary

Ryoji does December, mostly by happening to Social Links and Not Quite Getting It. (Or, Akinari waits, the Kitamuras feed a stray, Rio tries girl tactics, Maiko fails at Stranger Danger, Saori goes to Catholic school, Mutatsu goes home, Ms. Toriumi attempts a good deed, Koromaru smells things, and Kurosawa has an uneasy night.)

# The Sun (The Courage to Change)

[Sunday, 12/6]

It was strange to sit in the sunlight beneath the bare trees without growing chilled or weary, without bracing for spasms of pain and trembling in their aftermath. Strange, too, to breathe without a sense of drowning; it might have felt wonderful, if breathing felt like anything at all anymore. Everything was different on this side, where Akinari was present but distant, solid but not substantial enough to hold the light.

He could wait like this, he thought, for quite a while.

A boy who looked a few years his junior wandered out of shadows that Akinari hadn't noticed a moment before. Unlike everyone else who had visited the shrine that day, he didn't seem to find anything inherently uninviting about Akinari's bench; instead, he sat down on the opposite side of it, smiled crookedly, and said, "Hey there. I'm not supposed to be here, either."

Akinari considered the way the light stuck to him, the way the hairs on his forearms prickled in the cold. There was something faintly, unplaceably familiar about him. "But not the way I'm not. Are you a shinigami?"

"No. Not exactly. I mean, I'm not going to drag you off or anything, don't worry." The boy scratched the back of his neck, under his long yellow scarf. "I just wanted to know what you were still doing here."

He seemed lonely, and Akinari didn't mind company. "I have unfinished business."

"Really? I didn't figure you for that kind of ghost."

Akinari smiled. "Oh, it isn't revenge or anything like that. I'm just keeping a promise to a friend."

"Ah." The boy seemed to want to say more, but he looked out at the playground instead, where the wind blew a plastic bag into the monkey bars. After a pause, without making eye contact, he asked, "Do you wish you'd had longer?"

"Doesn't everyone?" It would have been nice to see the trees blossom again. Akinari's mother might have liked to see him come of age, too, though Akinari himself hadn't anticipated much satisfaction from it. "I'm sure the alternative is worse."

The boy gave him a rueful smile. "If it's any consolation, you're not going to miss much."

"It isn't, but consolation doesn't matter much to me now."

"It isn't supposed to matter to me, either. It's... weird that I care. But it's weirder that it's weird that I care." With a heavy sigh, the boy added, "Sorry if I'm not making sense."

Akinari shrugged. Strange, still, not to be fighting tremors and gravity. "It's all right. It helps to talk, even to someone who can't understand."

The wind rose, tugging at the boy's scarf. "Does it?" he asked at length.

"It helped me." Akinari stroked his thumb over his notebook, the only thing that still bothered to transmit any sensation when he touched it. "It's how I found the answer to the question of my life."

The boy smiled again, but his eyes were pained. "That's why you're at peace, isn't it? I'm happy for you. I know the purpose of my existence, too, but..."

Silences had never made Akinari particularly uncomfortable, so he let this one spool out until it was clear that the thought wouldn't be finished aloud. "I don't think a purpose and an answer are the same thing," he offered. "My answer is that no one can know the purpose of his own life. We create it, but only others can perceive it." He shrugged again, letting the sunlight pass untroubled through his bones. "Of course, maybe I'm wrong."

The boy's face drained to gray. "That might actually make it worse."

"You'll have to find your own answer, then. I don't think you'll find it among the dead."

"Funny you should—no, there's nothing funny about it." The boy slumped backward, curved his neck over the back of the bench, and stared up at the sun until the dazzle forced his eyes shut. "Am I bothering you?"

"Nothing bothers me anymore."

"Yeah. I know that, but..." He bit his lip. "It really hurts not being able to help."

He was quiet for a long time, so Akinari reached over to touch his hand. There was sensation, but dissonant and strange, like reaching for a face and brushing the smoothness of a mirror, or expecting water and tasting milk. The rest of the world paled and receded.

"I don't need help," Akinari said gently. "As long as you're alive, you should be among the living."

With a soft sigh, the boy opened his eyes and faced Akinari again. "You're right. I shouldn't be here at all. Thank you." He squeezed Akinari's hand before letting go, bringing the park back into color and focus. "I'm sure she'll be here soon, so... see ya later."

He walked away, presumably for the same reason that Akinari chose to sit as if the shape of the bench mattered. And then there was only the wait.

The shadows grew long, and still she had not come. Akinari didn't mind. He could wait like this for quite a while.

# The Hierophant

[Thursday, 12/10]

They were just about to close the shop for lunch when they noticed the boy rearranging the book display outside. He kept picking up books, eyeing them critically, and reshelving them according to some intricate personal system. Every now and then he'd blow a bit of dust off, or wedge a warped paperback tight between two hardcovers.

"That's a Gekkoukan High uniform, isn't it?" said Mitsuko.

Bunkichi whistled. "That makes, what, five of them in the last few months? We must be a hip new trend with the youngsters! Someday we'll look back on 2006 as the year kids started caring about the classics again."

"It's 2009, dear."

"Eh? When did that happen?"

The bells over the door jingled as Mitsuko cracked it open to call, "May we help you?"

The boy looked up with a start. "Ah, actually, I was trying to help you. These are all out of order, aren't they?"

"Order?" Bunkichi poked his head out the door and laughed. "No one comes to Bookworms looking for anything in particular. Half the fun is digging through the piles!"

"We don't have enough space to put everything on shelves," Mitsuko explained.

"Shh, dear, I had him believing it was for *ambiance*. Didn't I, my boy?"

The vaguely disappointed look on the boy's face worked its way up into a smile. "So the idea is to make shopping an adventure?"

Bunkichi grinned. "Come on in and find out, why don't you?"

The boy looked uncertain for a moment, then set down the book he'd been about to shelve. "I'd be delighted. It sounds like a wonderful shop."

He enthused over the rows and stacks of books as Mitsuko discreetly hung the "CLOSED" sign behind him; she did intend to serve the meal soon, after all, and if anyone else wandered in, Bunkichi was liable to let lunchtime slip away.

"I like the smell in here," the boy said, running his fingers over the top of a stack of hardcovers. "I've been to Book On, but it's different with new books. Here you can tell that every book's been read by someone before, and they've all left an impression on it." He wrinkled his forehead. "Well, I guess in Book On you know that people stood around and read it until they got yelled at, but that's not the same."

Bunkichi laughed. "Ah, you've got an old man's heart. Hope it ticks a little better than mine, though." He winked before adding, "I'm Bunkichi, by the way, and this is my darling Mitsuko."

"A lovely name for a lovely lady," said the boy, with a lilt that Mitsuko was certain would get him in trouble someday, if it hadn't already. "My name's Ryoji Mochizuki."

Bunkichi wagged his pipe. "Ah-ah-ah, I saw her first!"

Mitsuko patted his shoulder with a long-suffering sigh. "I'd say you both have little boys' hearts, but I'm not sure there's any difference."

"Didn't I promise to always be the man you married? ...No? Well, I'm sure I meant to."

Ryoji watched them with a curiously familiar sort of fondness; Mitsuko wondered if his own grandparents lived far away. Families so often lived apart, these days. "Why don't you show our customer around, dear?" she said. "I'll get lunch ready."

"Of course, of course. Why, I've got just the thing..." As Mitsuko headed into the back of the store, Bunkichi picked his way behind the counter and unstacked a pile of older books. "Ah, here we are. See this copy of *Botchan*? It must've been read by at least four generations by the time it found its way here. See all the notes in different handwriting?"

With a series of small, fascinated noises, Ryoji thumbed through the pages. "This must be a really interesting book for so many people to have written so much in it."

"Well, most people read it for school, of course. Didn't you?"

"Not personally, but sort of, maybe? Ah, never mind." Ryoji set *Botchan* down carefully and gestured to a nearby table. "What're all those?"

Bunkichi let a half-formed inquiry into Ryoji's unorthodox schooling slip away as his attention drifted. "Why, that's all detective fiction. Those books are always coming and going; I think people don't like to read them again once they've solved the case."

"I can understand that. Possibilities are more appealing than certainties, don't you think?"

"Not when I'm looking for my glasses." Chuckling at his own joke, Bunkichi made his way over to one of the shelves, then wondered what he had meant to say about it. Instead he let his mind wander elsewhere: "We have three copies of *Norwegian Wood*, my wife tells me, but we can never find all three at once."

"Maybe that should be my adventure." Abruptly energetic, Ryoji scanned the shelves before pointing to the top of one and asking, "What's that up there?"

"Out of reach, is all I know. Mitsuko made me promise not to climb the ladder anymore."

"Here, let me."

Back in Bunkichi's day, a young man reached a hundred and sixty centimeters and called it good; nowadays he just kept shooting up like bamboo. Ryoji didn't need more than a few steps up the ladder to reach the handful of books stranded on top of the shelf. He passed them down one by one to Bunkichi, who read off the titles.

"*Woman in the Dunes... 'In the Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom' and Other Stories...* Hmm, this one must be French... *Kitchen...* Why on earth were these all together?" As he accepted the last book, he laughed. "Well, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* isn't too far off."

"I'll keep looking," Ryoji resolved.

Bunkichi clucked his tongue. "Didn't I tell you that no one comes in here looking for anything in particular? Relax, my boy. Let a book find you, instead."

"Lunch is ready," Mitsuko called from the back.

"Then I should be going," said Ryoji, hopping down the last two steps of the ladder. "Thank you for—"

"What, so soon?" Bunkichi, whose hearing wasn't what it used to be, let his train of thought slide gently backward: "Ah, you're supposed to be in school right now, aren't you? You can't give up now! Play hooky all day, or not at all."

With unexpected melancholy, Ryoji replied, "I'm not in school, exactly. I guess you could say I'm in-between." He smiled ruefully and tucked his chin down into his scarf, mumbling something.

Bunkichi cocked his head. "Eh? What was that?"

Mitsuko emerged into the shop and gently reached behind her husband's right ear. "You can't keep turning that off, dear. I said lunch is ready."

"And I said maybe I am playing hooky, after all," said Ryoji. "I really should have left Port Island by now, but I'm having more trouble than I should leaving. It's hard to let go, isn't it? Even when you know you have to."

Mitsuko sighed softly; Bunkichi said, "Tch, you're too young to be letting go of anything. Youth is for grabbing life by the horns and riding it wherever it takes you!"

"Don't mind him," said Mitsuko. "We know that young people are growing up faster these days."

"Personally, I think it's just time moving faster. A decade isn't what it was forty years ago, I can tell you that. I hope you're not too grown up for melon bread, at least!"

Ryoji blinked in bemusement at the snack Bunkichi shoved into his hands. "No, I, uh... thank you. I really like sweets." He smiled as he tore open the wrapper.

"Oh, no, you don't," said Mitsuko. "You'll spoil your lunch."

"That was going to *be* lunch," he said as she confiscated the melon bread.

Bunkichi chuckled. "Don't be ridiculous. We're having oden."

Ryoji looked alarmed. "You really don't have to feed me. I don't want to impose or any—"

Mitsuko poked him in the ribs with her finger, which cut him off with a squeak. "A skinny thing like you needs a good meal," she said firmly. "Besides, it's oden. There's always more than enough of it."

"She cooks like we have ten sons," Bunkichi said. "Speaking of which, dear, is he coming to lunch today?"

She sighed heavily and turned away from him. "*Please.*"

Bunkichi furrowed his brow for a moment, then let out a long sigh of his own. "Forgive this old fool. So easy to fall back into pleasant times, isn't it?"

Ryoji didn't ask about the pronoun or the awkwardness, but he looked sad again. Nowadays, young people stitched their hearts to their sleeves. "Memories are malleable," he said, "I think that's why it's easier to find comfort in them than in the future."

"Ha! You sound like an old man yourself." Bunkichi patted him on the back. "Cheer up, my boy; you've got nothing but future ahead of you. Why, you've got futures coming out of your ears!" Arthritis took a heavy toll on sleight-of-hand tricks, but Bunkichi thought he did a passable job of pulling a piece of candy out of Ryoji's ear. Beaming, he dropped it into Ryoji's pocket. "See? Sweet things are ahead!"

"Oden's ahead," Mitsuko said. "Follow me, please—we have a little table in the back."

She rationed her husband's hot mustard, because his stomach was more delicate than he liked to admit. Rationing Ryoji's didn't even occur to her until he'd slathered the stuff all over a piece of chikuwa and popped it into his mouth with all the clueless gusto of a foreigner. She sighed and pushed a bottle of Cylon Tea toward him even before his eyes began to water.

"No guts, no glory," Bunkichi said cheerfully.

The rest of the meal passed uneventfully, with their guest complimenting Mitsuko's cooking but otherwise mostly listening as she and her husband reminisced about meals of winters past and speculated about how the colder weather was sure to drive up sales as more people stayed indoors. What better way to pass a cold evening than curled up under the kotatsu with a good book?

"I can think of warmer things to curl up with," Ryoji said, which made Bunkichi chuckle. He was very little like their son, as distinct a contrast in his own way as the excitable foreign boy or the big-hearted girl who'd settled into their lives like the daughter they'd never known they were missing.

Contrast helped; change helped. Memories were warm and soft, but if you weren't careful you'd sink into them, and the world would go on without you. Like any precious thing, they



weren't for everyday use.

On the way out, Mitsuko gave Ryoji back his melon bread. "Thank you again," he said. "You're both very kind. I'm glad that she—never mind."

He looked unreasonably sad again, so Bunkichi said, "Say, you still haven't let a book find you, have you? Maybe we ought to give that book a hand. Let's see, we just bought a bunch of that manga you kids are so crazy for..."

As he rooted through a stack of recent acquisitions, Mitsuko bent as much as her back allowed and picked up a very pink volume from the middle. "Ah, this is a classic! Our son's girlfriend was always leaving her copies at our house, so I used to sneak a peek. That poor little witch got herself into the strangest situations."

Bunkichi clucked his tongue. "That one's for girls, dear."

"Oh, but I'm highly attuned to girls," Ryoji said brightly.

Bunkichi laughed and clapped him on the back. "Aha, you really are one to watch out for! Reminds me of myself, back in my younger days."

"There you are, then." With a satisfied smile, Mitsuko set the volume of *Lovely Witch Detective* down in front of him. "I hope you'll enjoy reading about this girl."

Ryoji frowned. "But weren't you going to sell this?"

"We got all these for a song," said Bunkichi. "If you want to pay for it, you can sing us one yourself."

He looked thoughtful, then sang something that probably, technically, was a song. It sounded like what Bunkichi called "youthful ruckus" and Mitsuko called "bad for your ears," and it reminded them, vaguely, of noises they'd heard leaking from a pair of bright red headphones. It was difficult to tell whether Ryoji was off-key, or whether off-key might have been an improvement.

"Sold!" Bunkichi said quickly, in case there was a second verse.

Ryoji smiled uncertainly as he accepted the book. "Thank you. I'm sorry I wasn't very helpful to you."

"Don't be ridiculous, boy! Nothing makes us old folks happier than sending a book off to a good home." Bunkichi winked. "So tell your friends about us, hmm? We're open Sundays now!"

"And wear a coat," Mitsuko added, unable to contain herself any longer. "You'll catch a cold."

With an easier grin, Ryoji thanked them again and headed outside. The door jingled shut behind him.

"What an odd young man," said Mitsuko.

"We do seem to attract the odd ones." Bunkichi laughed. "Speaking of which, that foreign boy hasn't come by lately, has he? You know, the German one?"

"He's French, dear."

"So he is, so he is. That's excellent news, because I have something for him, and I'm sure I'll remember what it is by the time he comes back."

They had a little while yet before the sign on the door promised they'd reopen, so they set about straightening one of the more precarious book piles. After slowly adjusting the angle of her back, Mitsuko said, "Perhaps we should hire someone young to help out around the shop one of these days."

"Is your back bothering you again, my dear?"

"Not too terribly. I didn't just mean someone to do the manual labor; I think we could use that kind of energy around here, at least in small doses."

Bunkichi chuckled. "The hard part is turning their energy off. Youth truly is wasted on the young, isn't it?"

"Or perspective's wasted on the old."

"Ha! Fair enough." He set his pipe in his mouth and puffed thoughtfully around it. (She didn't let him light it anymore, at least not indoors.) "Forgive me," he said at length, "because I'm sure I've asked you already today. You're still happy with our choice?"

She set her small hand over his. "Yes, of course. I'll cry again, I'm sure, but I know he doesn't want to see us moping around."

He curled their fingers together. "That son of ours did hate to see you cry, didn't he? Never mind that he was usually the reason for it."

"Oh, that son of ours." She dabbed at her eyes with her free hand, to keep a little swell of tears from spilling over. "Memories are too precious to be bound to fleeting things, aren't they? The persimmon tree wouldn't have lived forever."

Bunkichi squeezed her hand. "True, true. They also tell me the sun's going to burn out someday, and we'll all be able to look out our windows and see California." He whistled. "Won't that be something? Hollywood right in our backyard!"

Mitsuko laughed in spite of herself. "Mmm, it will surely be something." She paused before adding, "The fruit won't keep forever in the fridge, either. Why don't we share a piece before we reopen?"

"I'd like nothing better, dear."

# The Chariot

[Sunday, 12/13]

It was a crisp, bright day, the last they were likely to get before winter set in. Spending it indoors, poring wearily over the same notes and formulas, would be worse than wasteful. It would be downright *ungrateful*.

That was how Yuko put it, at least, and Rio was inclined to agree. Anything she didn't already know, she wasn't going to cram into her brain by tomorrow morning.

"We should invite Kazushi," she said.

Yuko breathed a little burst of static over the phone. "Seriously? 'Cuz I'm sure he's got nothing better to do, but we can't even make him carry the heavy stuff with his leg like that."

"It'll be fun. We haven't all hung out together since summer." It felt a little exciting, scheming like this. "I mean, it's okay if you want it to be just us."

"It's always just us, though." Something in Yuko's tone shifted as she added, "We should invite Kenji, too."

Rio nearly snapped her pencil. "Why? I mean, he won't come. He's been talking about those 'private study sessions' with Ms. Kanou all week."

"Ugh, when is that idiot going to shut up about her?" Rio started to protest the insult, but Yuko pressed on: "I'm gonna invite him anyway."

"Fine! And I'll invite Kazushi."

"Fine!"

An hour later, they met Kazushi at Iwatodai Station and took the train three stops west out of the city, then tromped off together through the field until they were out of sight of the tracks and could almost pretend they were properly camping. Yuko didn't offer an excuse for Kenji's absence, and Rio didn't pursue one.

"I brought the chicken," Kazushi announced as they set to work gathering wood for the fire. "Man, it's a great day for yakitori!"

"Did you bring the skewers, too?" Yuko asked.

After an awkward pause, he said, "I'll go get some."

"Don't be an idiot! You've already done too much walking today." Yuko passed Rio a bundle of sticks and straightened up. "I'm gonna run to the convenience store back in the station. Did you forget anything else?"

"I didn't forget the skewers," he protested. "You didn't tell me to get them."

"'Cuz it's common sense, dumbass."

As Yuko moved out of sight, Rio said, "I don't think she means it when she calls you names like that."

"Nah, she does," Kazushi replied. "It's cool, though. I worry more when she *doesn't* call me an idiot, 'cuz that means she's *really* mad." He shuddered. "Man, when she found out about my leg..."

"That was your own fault. An injury like that can take you out of competition for life if you're not careful!"

"I know, I know! Don't you start in on me, too!"

"I just meant," said Rio, feeling increasingly out of her depth, "that she's a very caring person underneath all that."

"Yeah, sure," he replied, in a tone that she couldn't even begin to decipher. This was turning into one of those days when Rio wondered what she'd been doing while everyone else learned how relationships worked.

They gathered wood in silence for a while, and had just finished arranging it in the fire pit when Yuko returned. Following her was a skinny boy with an unnecessarily long scarf. He looked familiar in a way Rio couldn't quite place, though the fact he was wearing a variation on the Gekkoukan uniform offered a clue.

"Hey, look who I found!" Yuko announced. "He was hanging around the station looking at timetables, like a total weirdo."

"There's nothing weird about looking at timetables," the boy protested. "They're there to be looked at."

"Classic Mochizuki logic," Yuko said dryly. "The *point* is you were hanging around the station for no reason."

"Yeah, I heard you moved, man," said Kazushi. "What're you still doing around here?"

The boy, who was apparently Mochizuki, laughed awkwardly. "Well, it's a process."

Rio glanced between him, Kazushi, and Yuko before asking, "Am I supposed to know this guy?"

"Of course you know him," Yuko said. "We had double P.E. with his and Kaz's class, remember?"

Context clicked into place. "Oh, is he the one you kept taking to the nurse's office?"

"Yep." Yuko ticked incidents off on her fingers: "Volleyball in the face, basketball in the face, soccer ball in the back of the head—"

Kazushi chimed in with, "Remember that time Kenji got him in the chin playing dodgeball?"

"Hey, I'm standing right here!" Mochizuki pressed his hand to his chest. "Those are all very painful memories for me."

Yuko snorted. "Every single time you got hit, it was 'cuz you were watching girls instead of the ball!"

Rio looked back and forth between her and Mochizuki, frowning. "So you brought him here because...?"

"Because look at him! He's gotta be hungry. Plus, now there's four of us."

"Why does *that* matter?" Rio asked, almost in unison with Kazushi.

"Division of labor," Yuko replied brightly. She thrust a plastic sack of skewers into Mochizuki's hands. "You make the yakitori with Rio. Kaz, come help me build a fire."

Something was definitely up; skewering chicken wasn't a two-person job, and Yuko had always been picky about inviting new friends to cookouts. If they'd really *needed* four people, Rio knew just the tennis teammate to ask along—she had an outdoorsy spirit and seemed in need of a little cheering up lately, too. No, this had to be about something else entirely, and Rio had a sneaking suspicion that it had to do with Kenji's absence. Every now and then she cottoned on to girl tactics.

As Yuko dragged Kazushi off, Mochizuki smiled at Rio in a way that she couldn't quite make sense of. "I'm really looking forward to this," he said. "I've never made yakitori before, but I'll certainly enjoy your company."

"Well, it's not hard," she replied, and began setting up her workspace. "You just put the skewer through the chicken, and then you brush the sauce on."

"Ahhh." The inflection in his voice left her wondering if she'd accidentally made a dirty joke, which was the only way she ever made one. He continued to hover. "You don't mind if I watch, do you?"

Rio caught the dangling end of his scarf and tugged without looking up. "Sit down. You're making me nervous."

"Sorry, sorry."

He sat on the edge of her personal bubble, centimeters away from prompting her to shove him out of it, and watched her assemble the yakitori with unwarranted fascination. "You're good with your hands, aren't you?" he said.

"I guess? I mean, this isn't surgery." Vowing to have a long talk with Yuko about this later, Rio impaled a lump of chicken and picked up a new skewer.

Mochizuki gently caught the other end. "I think I've got it. Here, let me help."

The skewering part wasn't her favorite, anyway, so she shrugged and moved on to mixing the sauce. They worked quietly for a few seconds, with the background entertainment of Yuko and Kazushi squabbling over the best way to get the fire started.

"They're cute, aren't they?" Mochizuki chuckled and passed her a completed skewer. His fingers brushed along the length of hers, not at all accidentally; Rio coughed on a reply as she realized that he was *flirting*. Flirting was not something that happened to Rio, at least not that she'd ever noticed.

With an embarrassingly high-pitched noise, Rio snatched her hand back and nearly fumbled the skewer. She shot a sharp glance at Yuko, who was now wrestling with Kazushi over the matches, and willed the heat out of her face. More than one, she decided, could play at girl games.

"Are you okay?" asked Mochizuki.

"Never mind!" Rio snapped. She lowered her voice: "I want you to do me a favor."

He beamed at her. "It would be my pleasure."

"Don't be weird." She looked at the yakitori instead of him, because the yakitori wasn't making her feel flustered. "I just want you to, uh... sort of... flirt a little with Yuko? Not in a creepy way or anything! Just... you know." She didn't know.

"I get it," he said brightly. "You'd just like me to make her aware of her own feminine charm."

To her intense annoyance, Rio felt herself blush again. "Don't put it like that! She just needs a kick in the pants with Kazushi, is all!"

"So you'd like me to make him jealous?" Mochizuki's voice lilted as he leaned in closer. "Anything for you."

He had breached the bubble. Rio pointed the skewer back at him and let the raw chicken serve as a natural deterrent. "Well, good. Thanks. Go do that."

With an obnoxious wink, he ambled over to the fire pit. Rio sneaked glances so often that she couldn't focus on the chicken long enough to skewer it straight.

To her disappointment, Mochizuki kept his voice low enough that she couldn't hear him. Whatever he was saying didn't seem to be going over well; Yuko appeared first bemused, then irritated, then loudly of the opinion that he was supposed to be helping Rio. "I've got this covered," Rio shouted to her. "You can keep him!" Mochizuki made a series of aggrieved gestures.

Less than a minute later, he came back, shrugging. "I don't think she's in the mood," he said as he sat down beside Rio, well inside her bubble. "I hate to have disappointed you, but I have to say that I'm not at all unhappy with how this turned out."

She stood up. "Okay. The sauce is ready, so you just need to finish the skewers."

"You won't give me the pleasure of your company?"

"I think you can handle this by yourself."

He sighed and got to his feet. Something weird was going on with his face as he leaned in uncomfortably close to whisper, "That's really not what I'm interested in handling."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sometimes a great doubles play warranted a celebratory slap to your partner's ass. Which, Rio discovered, felt absolutely nothing like a boy setting his hand back there and *caressing*. She yelped and swung her fist into his face.

It felt like punching a wall, like he had solid steel under his skin. Rio pulled her hand back with a pained hiss. Immediately she felt stupid—she hadn't punched anyone in so long she'd clearly forgotten what a punch was even supposed to feel like—but Mochizuki toppled backward like a felled tree, so she'd probably done all right.

Yuko gasped and ran over from the fire pit. Kazushi's "Holy shit!" carried after her.

A whimper rose from Rio's bested opponent as she shook feeling back into her hand. "Quit whining," she told him. "If a basketball didn't break your nose, I know my fist didn't."

"I was just following instructions," he said through the protective dome of his fingers.

"Oh, shut up," said Yuko. She turned to Rio, eyes shining with enthusiasm. "You should've seen yourself! You were *so cool*. He copped a feel, and you just—bam!"

Rio beamed until her brain skipped back a few beats. "Wait, what instructions?"

"Yuko's," replied Mochizuki. Yuko laughed nervously and nudged her foot into his side with diminishing gentleness. "She asked me to—ow! Hey! You thought this was a great idea a few minutes ago!"

"Ha ha, I don't know what," Yuko began, and caught the full force of Rio's glare. She winced. "All I said was to be less subtle!"

"That's not all you said."

"Well, I didn't mean out of the blue like that!"

Rio took a long, deep breath that came back out as a growl. "So what *did* you mean?"

"Probably," Mochizuki volunteered, "about the same thing you meant when you asked me to flirt with her."

Yuko looked abruptly less guilty. "*You* told him to do that?"

Having finally hobbled over from the campfire, Kazushi knelt next to Mochizuki and said, "Dude, what the hell did you do?"

"Helped?" he replied hopefully.

"Shut up!" Rio snapped. "Listen, Yuko, it was for your own good!"

"My own good?" Yuko scoffed. "I'm not the one who can't see there's other guys out there than Kenji! If you're gonna stay hung up on him, you at least oughta learn to pop him one when he's a jerk!"

"You're one to talk! You can't even decide if you like a guy or dread ending up with him!"

Yuko made a choked noise. "Since when do *you* know anything about relationships?"

"Oh, shit, man," said Kazushi, just over the rising hum of Rio's temper. "You ever feel like you're in the middle of somethin' you shouldn't be?"

"Pretty much constantly," Mochizuki replied.

"Yuko! Girl talk! Now!" Rio barked. As she stamped off toward the trees, she added, "You boys... cook or something! I don't care!"

Several seconds passed before she heard Yuko's footsteps running after her. When Rio deemed herself safely out of earshot of the campsite, even if she shouted, she turned and crossed her arms. Yuko halted a few steps in front of her and adopted the same posture.

After a tense pause, Rio opened with, "I am *not* hung up on Kenji!"

"Oh, really? What do *you* call it when a girl moons over some dumb jerk who compares her to food?"

Rio huffed. "He's not a jerk! He's just an idiot sometimes! And I'm not mooning. I'm not sitting around waiting for him to notice me so I can be happy. I just *like* him, okay? Maybe I'll stop someday. Maybe he'll like me back. Maybe he never will. Either way, I'm not hung up on it." Even though striding off for privacy hadn't been very physically taxing, Rio found herself panting.

"Sure, keep telling yourself that." Yuko snorted and wagged her finger. "Also, you have *no idea* what it's like with me and Kaz. We go way back! It's *supposed* to be complicated. And anyway, it's none of your business!"

"And that's not a cop-out or anything," Rio muttered, but she could feel the adrenaline draining out of her. They fell into a gentler lull, during which she watched her foot dig into a layer of dry brown leaves. When she made eye contact again, Yuko's chin was still set, but her stance had softened.

"Hey," said Rio, "should I apologize to Mochizuki? I think I hit him pretty hard."

"He grabbed your butt! You were totally justified."



Rio nodded, then slugged Yuko in the arm.

"Ow ow ow!" Yuko scurried back a few steps and rubbed the point of impact. "Geez, I think you bruised me! What the hell was that for?"

"You told him to," Rio replied. "We even now?"

Yuko scowled, then retaliated with a slap. "That's for sending him to hit on me."

Cupping her hand over her stinging cheek, Rio nodded. "Fair enough."

They sat down with their backs against a pair of nearby trees, facing each other.

"You're right," Rio said, "about me not really knowing anything about relationships. I thought this thing with Kazushi was making you unhappy, but, um, I guess I should've just talked to you."

"Yep," Yuko replied. "Just like I should've talked to you about Kenji. Who's still an idiot, by the way."

"Well, *yeah*."

They both laughed. For a little while they were peaceably quiet, listening to the rustle of the wind in the fallen leaves.

"Hey," said Yuko, "after graduation, you're going pro with tennis, right? You're too good not to."

Rio blushed. "I really want to. If I practice hard enough, maybe I can go to college on a scholarship. And after that, who knows? But whatever I do, I'm going to play tennis."

"Good!" Yuko nodded emphatically. "When you say things like that, I feel like I should get all fired up about the future, too, but..."

When she didn't add anything further, Rio prompted, "But?"

With a faint frown, Yuko picked at the bark of her tree. "There's nothing I really want to do. I'm starting to get a little worried—like, what if I graduate and I still don't know? Maybe I'd better figure out this thing with Kaz; if I have a boyfriend, at least I can get married."

"You don't get married just because you don't know what to do! That's *awful*."

"Yeah, I guess so." Yuko sighed. "I'm not like you, though. I don't have anything I'm really good at."

"That's not true. You'd be an amazing coach!"

Yuko looked up, eyebrows dipping together. "Huh? Why?"

"The way you are with Kazushi—I mean, he complains, but he stays in line. You're tough, but anyone can tell it's because you care. And you're really good with kids, so I bet you could coach a school team all the way to the finals."

"Ha, wouldn't that mean being a teacher? No way!" Yuko laughed, cheeks faintly red. "I dunno. I guess I've got another year to think about it."

Rio grabbed her hand and hooked their pinkies together. "But no desperation boyfriends. Promise me!"

"I promise, I promise, ow!" As Rio eased her pinkie pressure, Yuko added, "And no pining!"

"No pining."

They held on a second longer before disentangling their fingers.

"So," Rio said, "do you think dinner's ready yet?"

Dinner was not ready; Kazushi was sitting alone by the fire pit, unsuccessfully applying lit matches to the wood.

Yuko set her hands on her hips. "I thought you knew how to start a fire!"

"I do!" he replied. "The wood's wet or something. I *told* you we need more newspapers."

"Hang on," said Rio, before the argument could pick up steam, "where's Mochizuki?"

Kazushi shrugged. "Eh, he took off. He tried to give me this dumb shoujo manga, and then he said he'd helped enough for one day. So that's more yakitori for us, right?"

"Give me that," Yuko snapped, and grabbed the matchbook.

# The Hanged Man

[Wednesday, 12/16]

There was takoyaki here, but it had too much dough and not enough sauce and everything about it was different and stupid. Maiko didn't complain about it anymore, though, because she didn't want her mom to be sad. Instead she started buying onigiri for snacks. The onigiri here was different, too, but not in a bad way.

She tried to keep track of the things she liked so she could write her dad a letter that would make him smile. Her new school had pet bunnies, and her music class was fun, and there was a really nice park near the school, a lot bigger than the one at the shrine. On her first day, one of the bigger kids gave up his swing for her. She was making new friends. So her dad didn't have to worry about her.

She'd have to leave today out of her letter, though. Today wasn't going well at all.

First she'd forgotten her homework, and then she'd gotten caught copying Nao's, so she had to stay after school and do extra clean-up as a punishment, which meant she didn't get to walk home with everyone, and *now* it was pouring rain, and she'd left her umbrella at school in her rush to leave. There was no way she wasn't going to catch a cold walking home.

Running into the nearest convenience store when the rain started had kept her from getting soaked, but her mom would worry if she wasn't home soon, and the rain wasn't letting up. Maiko watched the downpour through the store window as she finished her weird round onigiri, then carefully began to count the rest of her money. New umbrellas, it turned out, were pretty expensive.

Back home—no, she had to stop that—back in Port Island, everyone who worked in the convenience store on her route to school knew her. If she'd been there, one of them would have said, "Oh, Maiko-chan! Poor thing! You can borrow my umbrella! Here, have some juice, too." The old man behind the counter here looked kind of scary, like he didn't even want her hanging around after she bought the onigiri.

Her mom was going to be so upset, no matter what. Maiko sniffled and lost count of her ten-yen coins.

The bell over the door chimed. Maiko glanced up to watch a young man with a long yellow scarf and matching umbrella enter. He looked like he was about Big Sis's age, which didn't help at all with Maiko's efforts not to cry. Big Sis would have walked her home and bought her a soda and told her mom not to be mad.

He closed his umbrella, cocked his head at her, and said, "Hey, what's wrong?"

There was something a little bit familiar about him, like he was a family friend she hadn't seen since she was a baby. "I'm," Maiko began, before it occurred to her that her mom could be even more upset. She narrowed her eyes. "Are you a stranger?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "Well, yes and no, but no's complicated. Is it okay if I am?"

Maiko crossed her arms. "Mom says I'm not supposed to talk to strangers anymore."

"Ah. Hmm." After a thoughtful pause, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a big piece of milk candy, which he held out to her with a smile. "Would you like this?"

"Yeah!" Maiko snatched it, tore the wrapper off, and popped it into her mouth before remembering to say "thank you."

He beamed and replied, "So now I'm not a stranger, right? I'm the guy who gave you candy."

Her mom couldn't argue with that. Maiko nodded and pushed the candy into the pocket of her cheek before saying, "My name's Maiko."

"Ah, what a lovely name! Mine's Ryoji."

She grinned. "Nice to meet you, Ryoji-san!"

"So now," he said, "can you tell me why you're upset?"

Maiko cracked the candy with her teeth to make space for talking. "I forgot my homework and I got in trouble and I forgot my umbrella and it's raining and I'm gonna catch a cold and my mom's gonna *kill* me."

"Wednesdays can be rough," Ryoji agreed. "May I walk you home? My umbrella's big enough to share."

Big Sis would have bought her a soda, too, but Maiko didn't want to push her luck. "Thanks, Ryoji-san!"

The door chimed behind them as they stepped out onto the street. She noticed that he stooped a little to keep the umbrella closer to her head. "My house is that way," she said, pointing up the road. "It's not too far."

The rain was driving down like it wanted to leave holes in the sidewalk. Despite Ryoji's stooping, her shoes and the cuffs of her jeans were getting soaked. When they halted at an intersection, he frowned down at her feet, stooped lower, and asked, "Are you thirsty?"

"A little, yeah." Sucking down that candy hadn't helped.

From one of his pockets he pulled a small can and offered it to her. It was a little warm, but Maiko stopped caring about that when she saw the bright red logo. "Oh, wow! Is this really Mad Bull? I thought you couldn't get it here!"

"You can't," he replied, looking pleased with himself. "I was just in Port Island, though."

Maiko stifled a fizzy belch. "Really? I miss Port Island. Here's okay and everything, but it's not the same."

"Yeah. I miss it, too."

The light changed, and they made their way across the street. "Mom says this is home now," Maiko said, "but it doesn't feel like it, 'cuz I'm still homesick. How long till it does?"

"I honestly don't know," Ryoji replied. "It's supposed to be easier when you're young."

Maiko squinted up at him as she guzzled more of the Mad Bull. "Did your family make you move here, too?"

"No, nothing like that. I just... had to leave." He frowned, then looked worried as he put an arm out in front of her. "Ah, careful!"

A lot of people told Maiko to watch where she was going, but usually only when she was running or crossing the street. Now all she saw in front of her was a big puddle, which she ducked under Ryoji's arm to gleefully stomp through. The rain poured down on her hair before he managed to get the umbrella back over her.

Maiko giggled until her gaze landed on Ryoji's pants legs. They were both soaked now from the knees down. "Sorry," she said.

He sighed. "I'm not doing a very good job of keeping you dry, am I?"

"I *like* puddles," she said mutinously, before realizing he hadn't scolded her. Her mother definitely would, though. Maiko scuffed her wet shoe against the sidewalk. "Sorry," she said again, and meant it.

Ryoji patted her shoulder. "Let's just get you home before you catch a cold, okay?"

She nodded and started walking again, sticking close. She wondered how comfortable it was for him to keep stooping like that. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Please don't worry about me."

When grown-ups didn't like the answer they had to give you, they always tried answering the question sideways first. Maiko was wise to this tactic. "Why not? *You're* worrying about *me*. Are you gonna catch a cold?"

"Really, don't worry about me. I'm not even sure I *can* catch colds."

There was sideways, and then there was some kind of crazy backflip. "Huh? I don't get it."

"Don't worry about it," Ryoji said again, which was starting to get on her nerves. "I've got a lot of stuff in my head that doesn't fit." He laughed a little, but he sounded sad. "Actually, I guess it's my head that doesn't fit."

Maiko scrunched her nose as she stared up at him. "Are you gonna cry?"

"No, no. I'm all right." He smiled at her, almost convincingly. "Don't you ever get in a funny mood when it rains?"

Her eyebrows angled into her best *seriously?* look. "It's okay to be sad," she said. "Even my big sis gets sad sometimes."

That seemed to work; he stopped walking, took a big shaky breath, and bit his lip.

"It's okay," Maiko said. "It's not as good here as Port Island, but I can tell you where the best snacks are."

He made a weird noise that wasn't quite laughing or crying. "I won't be here long, either. Please don't ask where I'm going. It's very complicated."

Of course, Maiko wanted to ask, but she still felt a little bad about splashing him. Instead she reached up to pat his arm. "Hey, so before me and Mom moved here, we made a list of all the stuff we were gonna miss about Port Island, and then we did that stuff a lot. I got takoyaki every day for a whole week!" She'd made sure to gobble it up so fast that her mouth burned every time, because that way she could feel it for a while after it was gone. "So you should try that, too."

Ryoji sighed, but he looked less gloomy as he gave her a crooked smile. "I'm no good at this, am I?"

"At what?"

"All of it. Helping. Being human. I'm sorry."

Maiko stared at him for a while. "You're weird," she decided. "But you're pretty nice, so I don't think you're a bad person."

His smile got a little less lopsided. "You're very kind. Come on, we shouldn't just stand around in the rain."

They walked on, across another street and up the hill. "That's my house," Maiko said, pointing ahead. The rain washed over her hand. "I made all those teru-teru-bozu, but they didn't work."

"Maybe a lot of other kids were wishing for rain."

She blew a raspberry. "That's a dumb wish. Dumb wishes shouldn't come true."

"Even if a lot of people make them?"

"It doesn't matter if *everybody* makes 'em if they're dumb."

Ryoji's smile looked funny again as he patted her on the head. "I wish you were in charge of the universe, Maiko-chan."

"Me too!"

A few of Maiko's neighbors waved to her through their windows as she approached. She waved back, grinning. People were getting to know her and her mom now, which was really

nice. Maybe this place would start to feel like home when everyone acted like she belonged.

"Hey," Ryoji said as they walked toward her door, "you like manga, don't you?"

"Only if it's about fighting robots. Bam! Pow!" Maiko boxed the rain to demonstrate until Ryoji caught her shoulder and pulled her back under the umbrella. "I tried to read one of Nao's this one time, and it was *so boring*. Everybody talked a lot and *nobody* blew up."

"Ah. Never mind." He rang the doorbell.

A second later, the door opened, and Maiko found herself grabbed and dragged inside before she could even say "I'm home." Her mom clutched her tight and asked sharply, "Where have you been? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Mom! Geez!" Maiko squirmed to freedom. "Ryoji-san walked me home."

"Hello," Ryoji said, waving cheerfully from where he still stood outside. "I hope she's not too wet."

Maiko's mom looked at Maiko, who also waved, then at him, then back at Maiko. Her eyes got narrower and narrower. "Maiko, sweetie, what did we say about talking to strangers?"

"He's okay, though," Maiko replied. "He gave me candy!"

"Did he, now?"

Ryoji coughed. "She got caught in the rain, is all. I shared my umbrella with her."

Maiko's mom didn't look very happy about that. "Maiko, where's *your* umbrella?"

"Um, at school." She looked down at her shoes, which were leaking water over the genkan. "I forgot it."

Her mom sighed. "Take your shoes off and go get in the bath. We need to warm you up."

"Okay." As Maiko padded down the hall, leaving a trail of soggy sockprints, she kept looking back to watch her mom talk quietly with Ryoji. Their voices were too low for her to hear, but whatever they were saying ended with the door closing and Ryoji not being invited in for tea.

Maiko's mom caught up with her a few seconds later and confiscated her nearly empty can of Mad Bull, saying, "Please stop talking to strangers, Maiko."

"Even nice ones?"

"*Especially* nice ones."

# The Hermit

[Saturday, 12/19]

Making friends at Saint Mary's had proven quite different from making friends at Gekkoukan. For one thing, Saori didn't stand out much; she wasn't the only one too old for her grade, and she hadn't done anything truly outstanding, like burning down a convenience store. Blending in was almost easy, to the point that she had to be careful not to let herself blur.

After all, Saori couldn't just subsume herself under other people's expectations again. She had promises to keep.

She also had access to the contraband hole, because Mami liked her and Mami brought the organizational prowess of a longtime sukeban with her to the academy. Mami's take on it was that she couldn't be expected to give up fighting if she didn't have cigarettes to calm her nerves, which sounded reasonable to Saori. It must have sounded reasonable to whatever shadowy operatives kept the contraband flowing into the school, too, since there was a bonanza of booze, tobacco, magazines, makeup, and junk food behind the loose bricks in the old shed.

Saori considered her options. It would be rude not to help herself to anything after Mami made a point of offering, but she wasn't sure what to do with most of it. She felt so naïve around the other girls, sometimes.

After a little dithering, she dug out a near-empty pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She didn't want to make a fool of herself the next time she was invited to a smoke break. Besides, Mami always claimed that cigarettes calmed her nerves, which sounded nice.

Saori replaced the bricks carefully and crept back out into the dark courtyard. There was always at least one nun patrolling for wayward students, but always on strict routes and schedules; the only patrol Saori couldn't simply avoid was the 11:35 bed check. She strolled back the way she'd come, sticking close to the chain-link fence, and nearly jumped out of her skin when a voice said, "Hey there. Can you tell me where I am?"

A *boy's* voice, no less. Saori hadn't heard one of those in weeks. More curious now than alarmed, she turned to find a skinny young man standing just outside the fence, barely catching the illumination from one of the light poles. He didn't look particularly menacing, particularly with the fence in his way.

"I got off the train and started walking," he added, "and I ended up here. I must have come to meet you."

Saori had several questions, but the first one to make it out was, "Are you a hobo?"

"I was going for more of a dashing ronin vibe." He waited a moment for her to laugh or something; when she didn't, his shoulders drooped. "Sorry, am I scaring you? This doesn't



look like a place that gets a lot of visitors."

"It really doesn't." Even the nearest convenience store was a trek. Isolation was good for moral development, according to the brochure written by someone who'd clearly never attended a boarding school. Saori sized the boy up as she asked, "Um, what did you mean, that you came here to meet me?"

He sighed. "I thought it was a good line, but maybe I'm losing my touch. You're not the fantasy romance type?"

Sometimes she still liked to daydream about being a princess imprisoned in a tower, waiting for her prince. Lately, though, the prince favored skirts and ponytails and brought a spare sword so that Saori could fight her own way out. Not that a stranger needed to know any of that. Instead she replied, "Can I help you with something?"

"Actually, I was going to ask if you needed help breaking out of there."

He sounded so serious that Saori couldn't help laughing. Which probably hurt his feelings, though it was hard to tell in the shadows, so she cleared her throat and said, "I'm sorry, it's very kind of you to offer. But I'm not out here tonight to run away. I don't do that anymore." Patting the pack in her pocket, she tried to sound casual and worldly as she added, "I'm just going up to the roof to smoke."

Either his feelings weren't hurt, or he had no trouble swinging his moods: "Ah, that sounds fun! May I join you?"

Saori tapped the fence pointedly. "How would that work?"

"Don't worry." The light caught his grin. "Just tell me which roof and I'll meet you up there. If it's okay, I mean."

When people asked her to do things now, Saori made herself consider whether she really wanted to go along with them. Sometimes she had to go along anyway, and sometimes she couldn't sort out her own feelings well enough to tell. This felt like a case of the latter; all her pros and cons were muffled under thick layers of curiosity. She was already breaking two rules tonight, anyway.

"Okay," she said at length. "It's the second one from the right, over there."

"See ya soon," he replied, and backed away into the darkness. Saori squinted after him for a little while, straining for footsteps in the silence, before heading back to her dorm.

She knew how to twist the doorknobs and ease open the doors without so much as a squeak. She knew which hallways the nuns kept an eye on and when. She knew that she didn't have to worry about other girls having claimed the roof already, either, because most of them were accustomed to the local climate and considered tonight's temperate intolerably cold.

The only surprise came when Saori pushed open the heavy access door and found the boy perched on one of the cement planters as if he'd been waiting for a while. Only one staircase

went up to the roof, and she was quite certain she'd been alone on it. As she approached him, she furrowed her brow and asked, "How did you do that?"

"Please don't ask." He scratched the back of his neck. "It's nothing dangerous or anything; it's just that you'd want to know *how*, and I can't explain it. Trust me?"

Instinctively she started to nod, but she caught herself halfway. There was nothing particularly trustworthy about the situation, though to be fair, she wasn't much unsettled by it, either. Maybe he climbed like a spider, or maybe he was a ghost. Saori didn't have anything against spiders or ghosts, necessarily.

"If you want to be trusted," she decided, "this is the last thing you get to avoid explaining."

He nodded and got to his feet. "That's fair."

It was still strange to assert herself, still a little thrilling and terrifying. It was a slippery slope, probably, from sneaking out to eat fast food to taking over the school broadcast room to visiting the contraband hole to inviting ghosts or hobos up to smoke.

To determine which she'd invited, she poked him in the arm. His shirt felt like cotton, and whatever was beneath it resisted like flesh—most likely not a ghost, then. When she withdrew her hand, he caught it briefly.

"I'm Ryoji," he said, with a little bow. "I think I forgot to introduce myself."

"I'm Saori," she replied. First names only felt nice; normally Saori's introductions came with so much baggage. "Have you ever smoked before?"

"Nope."

"Heh, neither have I." Saori pulled out the pack of cigarettes. "I know which end to light, though."

Frowning, he said, "I'm not going to get you in trouble, am I? Are you allowed to smoke here?"

She laughed. "I don't think *any* school lets you smoke. Honestly, I'd get in more trouble for being here with you in the first place than smoking." He looked a little anxious, so she smiled and added, "I said it was okay."

"Is the roof seriously off-limits or something? Or is it because I'm not a student here?"

Whatever route he'd taken to the roof must not have taken him past any well-lit signs. "Um, that's one way to put it. This is Saint Mary's Academy for Wayward Daughters."

Ryoji cocked his head. "That's a strange name for a school."

"Well, it's a Catholic girls' school. There aren't many of them in this country, so—why are you making that face?"

He continued making it. "You mean it's nothing but girls in here?"

"That's the whole point of a girls' school."

"And you all wear those little plaid skirts?"

Saori self-consciously tugged hers down. "Everyone but the nuns. Please stop making that face."

"Sorry, sorry." His face settled into a poorly suppressed goofy grin. "No wonder you weren't trying to get out. It sounds like paradise."

"I think you might have some wrong ideas about Catholic school." Saori shook a cigarette into her palm and held it out to him. "Here, if you hold this, I'll light it for you, okay?"

He held it like a fork, so she had to model for him the method she'd seen almost everyone else use. Not that she was certain it mattered which fingers the cigarette went between, but there was something to be said for doing a thing properly the first time. Once his grip was right, she flicked the lighter and immediately lost the flame to the breeze.

They ended up shielding the lighter with their free hands as they tried to get the sparks to catch. "I think it's supposed to be in your mouth for this part," Saori said eventually. "Maybe you're supposed to puff." A few tries later, it turned out that inhaling worked better, even if made Ryoji cough. Afterward he lit her cigarette, which went almost smoothly. The inside of her mouth tickled as she sucked air through the fire.

Triumphant, Saori admired the red glow at the end of her cigarette. Smoking struck her as elegant and strangely, darkly beautiful; her uncle had smoked heavily when she was a child. There was something about the way Mami did it, too, the way her eyelashes swept low when she set a cigarette to her lips and the way the smoke spooled thick and pale from the side of her mouth.

"I feel so sophisticated," Saori said, setting the back of her hand to her chin to strike a pose.

"It's a good look for you," Ryoji agreed, which made her laugh. Something about the low light and furtiveness of it all bubbled up inside her like champagne.

He was still holding his cigarette at arm's length and watching her like she had any idea what she was doing, so she supposed she ought to go first. When she tried to take a long drag and breathe out narrow ribbons of smoke, she ended up with a coughing fit.

He patted her on the back through it, then regarded his own cigarette with some trepidation before putting it in his mouth. Almost immediately he started coughing. When he'd collected himself to a point of red-eyed wheezing, he asked, "Is there a trick to it?"

"I honestly don't know." She tried again, with shallower breaths, but all she accomplished was making her eyes water and her stomach twist.

"Ah, don't make yourself sick!" Ryoji held his cigarette on one side of his mouth and breathed through the other, which didn't seem effective. With a heavy sigh, he said, "Maybe

we should just pose with them."

"Good idea." Saori leaned back against the railing and held the cigarette at a respectful distance, watching its blue smoke snake up into the night sky. Her stomach twinged. "Ugh, I can't believe Mami smokes these every day. Do you think alcohol tastes awful, too?"

"I've heard some people think it tastes good." He joined her at the railing and flicked his ashes over the edge, sending faint specks of orange to fall through the dark. "Maybe it's an acquired taste?"

"I'm not sure I want to acquire this one." She levered her cigarette between her fingers like a tiny baton. It was kind of cute that way, but the smell was getting to her. She let her arm hang backward over the railing, as far from the rest of her as possible.

Ryoji laughed, then tipped his face up toward the bright sliver of the moon. "I'm glad it's not just me."

Saori had read somewhere that friendship meant recognizing yourself in another person. She'd spent more of her life trying to be a polished mirror than trying to cast reflections, but loneliness always shone out of her, regardless. No wonder it was so easy to detect when it bounced back, amplified.

He'd agreed not to avoid explaining anything else, so she asked, "Why were you out wandering, anyway? Is your school out already for winter break?"

"Probably not," he replied. "I was at Gekkoukan High in Port Island until a couple weeks ago."

Now that Saori looked closely, past the scarf and suspenders, he did appear to wearing something like the uniform. "Really? I was there until just a couple months ago. It's funny that I don't recognize you." Maybe he was a ghost, after all.

He shrugged, drawing a short line of light with his cigarette. "We just missed each other. I transferred there in November." He looked at her again to add, "Maybe we have friends in common, though."

Only one friend, potentially. "So you just... left Gekkoukan?"

"More or less. Staying would have been too painful." Before she could follow up, he asked, "Why did you leave?"

"Um, my parents decided that it would be better for me to be here." If she asked for more detail from him, she supposed she'd have to volunteer more of her own, and she wasn't sure yet that she wanted to. "I'm sorry, was I being too personal?"

"I think being personal is the whole point of talking to someone." He smiled again, warmly, and she had nearly made up her mind to pry when he asked, "Did you leave anyone special at Gekkoukan?"

Late-night girl talk in the dorm had almost desensitized Saori to outrageous questions, but she still felt herself blush. For several seconds she was too flustered to answer, or even figure out whether she wanted to answer.

"Too personal?" Ryoji looked away with a frown. "Sorry. I did. There's so much in my head, but I still think about her all the time, you know? It's selfish, but I can't make myself wish she'd never met me."

It didn't seem right to leave that hanging in the air unmatched. Besides, if you couldn't talk about this sort of thing with a stranger you'd probably never see again, when could you? "I left behind someone very dear to me," she said, without making eye contact. "I don't know if she feels the same way, and it must be selfish to hope now that I'm so far away."

"She, huh?" Ryoji chuckled but did not make the face he'd been chastised for earlier. "I wonder if we're talking about the same person."

A school the size of Gekkoukan had hundreds of girls in it. The odds were strongly against, but the night was deep and strange and already woven thick with coincidence. Saori had fire between her fingers and the giddy ghost of a secret in her chest. "That would make us rivals, wouldn't it?" she replied, and laughed. "Well, I should warn you that she taught me not to give up without a fight."

"Aw, let's not fight. I'm not much of a fighter." Something about this statement made him slump a bit, as if he'd just poked himself in a place that hurt.

"I don't like to fight, either," she said. "I really just want to get along with people."

"I'd like that, too."

Smiling gently, she reached over and tapped her cigarette against his, like a toast. "I think we're getting along pretty well."

With a small, contented noise, he shifted closer to her. They watched the sky together for a while in silence.

The thing about making your own choices was that you also had to work out where each one fell on a scale of right to wrong, and all the while they kept unfolding along unfamiliar axes, and there never came a point when everything wrapped up neatly with praise for doing as you were told. Saori wondered if she'd ever again feel the calm clarity that descended over her in the broadcast room, if her heart would ever again overflow so purely through her lips.

To lighten her mood, she raised her cigarette and found the end dark. "Ah, it went out."

"Mine too." Ryoji blew on it, scattering a few cold ashes. With a hint of trepidation, he asked, "You don't want to try again, do you?"

"I, um, don't think smoking is for me." She'd have to refine that later, in front of a mirror; if practicing smoking wasn't going to work, she'd have to practice graceful refusals. "It seems like a waste, though, doesn't it?"

He shrugged, still watching the ashes disperse. "At least they got to burn for a little while."

His tone was disproportionately moody, to an extent that might have been funny if not for the late-night confessional feeling that had settled over the roof. Saori aimed for a cheerful lilt to disperse it: "You know what else I miss? Cielo Mist."

This drew Ryoji's gaze and what sounded like a pleasantly surprised laugh. "That's a few steps down from a precious person, isn't it?"

"Of course! I still miss it, though." She sighed. "My friend Mami can get soda smuggled in from the convenience store, but the closest thing they have is 1UP, which is much too sweet."

Making a request that couldn't be fulfilled was almost as unthinkable as asking for something she couldn't be grateful for, so Saori always demurred when Mami offered. Which, come to think of it, was probably why she'd been instructed to dig through the contraband hole tonight and take *something* that appealed to her. The wasted cigarette weighed guiltily between her fingers.

"If I had any, I'd give it you," Ryoji said, with what sounded like sincere regret. "I'm sorry."

"There's no need to apologize for something like that."

After a moment's pause, he asked, "Do you miss manga, too?"

Reading manga used to mean sneaking out on Sundays to visit Book On or staying late after school at the library, and in either case involved the first person who'd ever refused to let Saori efface herself. It had been so strange the first time she'd been asked what she thought of a manga without any hint as to the desired response—a moment of terrifying freefall until she realized that the ground was only centimeters below her, and she'd be fine no matter how she landed.

She tried not to blush at the memory of sitting back-to-back in the empty library, enraptured in parallel, the silence broken only by rustling pages and reaction noises. "I haven't read much manga," she replied, "but I enjoyed some of it. Why do you ask?"

He pulled a very pink volume out of his shirt, a maneuver that didn't quite make visual sense. Saori's eyes watered briefly as he waved her closer to the floodlight mounted over the access door. "You might like this," he said, in tones that implied this was almost, but not entirely, impossible.

She traded him her dead cigarette for the book, then opened to the beginning and began to skim. Better lightning would not have helped; if anything, the dimness worked to the manga's favor by making it harder to focus on the anatomy and dialogue. For all she knew, this was a work of genius that she didn't have the background to appreciate, but she wasn't going to pretend that she did.

Halfway through a page featuring a purportedly attractive man who looked like a refrigerator wearing an upside-down sedge hat, Ryoji asked, "What do you think?"

"This..." She tried to keep a straight face, but her laughter came bubbling up her throat so hard that her shoulders shook. "This is *terrible*!"

"I *know*," he replied with exaggerated misery. "But I need to find a good home for it."

"Oh, look at this!" She tipped the book toward him and tapped her finger against the page. "She's trying to solve mysteries without anyone finding out that she's a witch, right? Then why is she casting a 'deductive reasoning spell' in public to figure out whether her boyfriend is a vampire?"

"That's not even the worst. See if you can find the part with the werewolf. The guy runs into a closet, a dog runs out, and she casts a spell to reveal secret passages."

Saori flipped through the pages until she found the scene. "Are you sure that's a dog?"

"Well, it can't be human. It doesn't have scary hands."

"Aren't they awful? They're like baseball mitts with knives poking through them."

His laughter wound down into a hapless shrug. "Apparently this is a classic. Do you think *anyone* here would like it?"

"Probably not, sorry. Most of the manga that gets passed around is a little more, um..." She wanted to leave it there, but he looked expectant. "A little less appropriate."

He sighed longingly. "I wish I could live here."

"I really don't think—" Saori's phone buzzed in her jacket pocket. She slid it out just far enough to confirm that her alarm had gone off. "Sorry, I have to get back to my room. Sister Agatha's bed check is in fifteen minutes."

Ryoji looked disappointed, but still smiled as he replied, "Don't get caught on my account."

"And she'll check the roof in half an hour, so please be careful."

His smile turned sly. "Why, what happens if I get caught?"

"I think you'll have fewer wrong ideas about Catholic school."

"Ha! Don't worry, I promise to leave with my fantasies intact."

Saori passed the manga back to him, squinting over his shoulder at the inky clusters of trees that blurred into the darkness of the horizon. "Are you sure you'll be okay? There's really nothing near here."

"You don't have to worry about me. Nothing out there can harm me."

She looked him over critically; he really didn't look like much of a fighter, particularly with a bright pink book in one hand and a pair of burnt-out cigarettes in the other. "Do you have a cell phone?"

His mouth twisted briefly downward. "Not anymore. Why?"

Only one road, unlit and poorly trafficked, ran past the school. The woods extended for several kilometers in all directions. Even on a clear day, the highest roof on campus scarcely afforded a glimpse of the convenience store, which sat at the intersection of the road that led to the train station. Rumor held that the trees were thick with bears displaced by nearby towns.

Saori held her phone out with both hands. "You should take mine. Please."

"No, really," he said, sounding slightly panicked, "I'll be fine. You don't have to—"

Interrupting was impolite, but sometimes it helped. "I want to. You can mail it back to me, okay? We're not allowed to use our phones during classes, anyway. I'll barely even miss it." When he looked unconvinced, she added, "Or you can visit again to bring it back. I wouldn't mind."

Several seconds ticked by as he stared at the phone, eyebrows low and lower lip tucked between his teeth. At last he said, quietly, "I really am terrible at this."

"At what?"

"Making other people happy. I thought, if I can't change anything that really matters, I could at least do small things. But I must be doing them all wrong, because I can't just *give* anyone what they want." He looked disconcertingly close to tears. "I keep getting it backwards or sideways or just *wrong*."

Saori was not especially good at stern looks, but she gave one her best shot as she replied, "That's an awful way to live."

He flinched.

"I don't mean to be harsh," she continued, "but giving people whatever they ask, telling yourself you don't really want anything—that isn't good for anyone. The kind of people who are content to let you... maybe they're good people, sometimes, but it isn't good for them, either." How strange to have let that thought out into the air after it spent so long hushed up inside her. Saori felt dizzy enough to need a deep breath.

"That's not exactly—"

She didn't even have to interrupt him this time; her stern look must have been working. Softening her face and her voice, she said, "Please let me give you this."

His lips wobbled upward. "Okay. Thank you."

His hands were full, so Saori slipped the phone into his pocket. Drifting a few steps backward brought her to the access door, where she halted to say, "It has emergency numbers in the address book, and there's the number of the taxi service I used to arrive here, too. Please be careful, wherever you're going."



"I will." Only a little obvious sadness lingered in his smile as he added, "I had a lot of fun tonight, you know."

"Me too." For all the practice she'd had, Saori had never mastered good-byes; the best she could manage was a clean cut. So she smiled, turned, and let herself back into the stairwell, then descended to the second floor as swiftly as she could in silence.

Once she'd tucked herself into bed, the clinging scent of tobacco wafted into her nose. With any luck, no one would get close enough to sniff her until she had a chance to shower; she'd have to remember to wash her uniform tomorrow, too, and dig the spare out of her laundry hamper. Better to smell a little sweaty during mass than like an ashtray.

When the door creaked open, she concentrated on breathing shallowly and steadily until the latch clicked back into place. The last sliver of the hallway light gleamed from the slits of Mami's eyes. Saori counted down from five, in case Sister Agatha felt the need to double-check, then sat up as Mami crept over to her bed.

Mami didn't say anything at first, just sniffed and patted the outlines of Saori's jacket in the dark. With a low chuckle, she whispered, "We smoke in the bathroom during the winter so we don't freeze our tits off."

"I didn't mind the cold," Saori replied, "but I think that smoking might not be for me." Mami snorted. "By the way, I misplaced my phone, so I won't be able to text for a while."

"Sometimes I dunno what to do with you, Hasegawa." Mami tugged open the knot of Saori's tie, which she hadn't had time to take off, and added, "Hey, if you can't find it, lemme know. I can get you a new one cheap."

"Thank you, I will. I'm hoping it turns up soon."

From the bed on Saori's right rose an annoyed sigh. "God, take it to the closet, already!"

"Shove it, Suzuki," Mami snapped. To Saori she said, "Better change your clothes before you stink up your sheets. See ya tomorrow."

As she shed her clothes in the dark, Saori wondered if she should have made a back-up of her recording.

# The Tower (The Serenity to Accept)

[Sunday, 12/20]

The nice thing about taking the night train to the middle of nowhere was that nobody bugged you. Mutatsu had an entire car to himself for the first leg of the trip, and when he transferred to a rattly diesel train shortly after dawn, he was one of only three passengers. Pleased, he helped himself to a seat in an empty smoking car, propped his feet up, and re-lit his cigar.

He wasn't satisfied with his speech, but sunrise over the mountains was a real sight to behold, and his stop wasn't for a while yet. No reason not to relax until the view and the nicotine got his nerves steady. He'd always worked best at the edge of a deadline, anyway.

After the train stopped at a tiny blip of a station, a kid who looked about high school age entered the car, glanced at all the empty seats, and took the one across the aisle from Mutatsu. "Hello," he said brightly.

Mutatsu puffed on his cigar and declined to make eye contact.

The kid waved for a while, as if sociability could be cranked to life like an old car, before drooping toward his window. When it became apparent that he wasn't going to be driven off, Mutatsu grunted and went back to his notes. Pleasant relaxation time was clearly over.

*I wanna recite the sutras with you by my side, for the rest of my life.* Hmph. *I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart.* Tch, everything had sounded better with that cheeky kid encouraging him.

The kid on the train said, "Look, you can see the snow sparkling on the mountains. Do you ever want to cry when you see something beautiful?" He waited so long for a reply that Mutatsu started to hope he'd spend the rest of the ride in silent expectation, but then he added, "I cry too much. I've got to stop."

What was it, Mutatsu wondered, with the youth these days? He cleared his throat. "Hey, kid."

The kid turned eagerly to face him, knees jutting into the aisle. "Yeah?"

"Cram it."

This earned him a pout and a few more seconds of peace, until the kid leaned over and asked, "What are you working on?"

Mutatsu tilted his notebook toward his chest. "Nothin' that's any of your business. Hey, here's an idea: why don't ya take your pretty pink lungs and go find a seat where you won't get soot all over 'em?" He puffed out a concentrated cloud of smoke to make his point.

The kid coughed but didn't retreat. "Too late, my lungs are already impure. Say, is what you're working on a love letter? I think I'd be good at love letters."

Getting up and finding somewhere else to sit would require straining creaky old joints that were already unhappy enough from the cold. Mutatsu scowled and flicked ashes from the end of his cigar, which sent the kid scrambling out of his personal space. "What I'm workin' on is getting ya to buzz off."

The pout returned. "You're not feeling any sort of special connection here?"

Mutatsu glowered over his cigar. "I'm goin' to see my *wife*."

"Ah, no, I didn't mean it like that!" The kid's look of panicked denial swiftly rearranged itself, until he was beaming like he'd just heard good news about a friend. "That's really great, though, that you're seeing your wife! That's what I was hoping—I mean, never mind." He leaned in so close that he was no longer even technically in his own seat. "So that *is* a love letter, isn't it?"

Maybe this was some kind of divine punishment for all the times he'd recited a sutra hungover. Or maybe it was just a divine reminder that living in the world instead of transcending it meant dealing with the world's bullshit. Mutatsu let out a heavy, grumbling sigh. "Look, you've got nothin' to offer here. I'm writing an apology, not askin' her out for bubbly tea or whatever the hell it is you kids do."

"A good apology needs flattery," the kid replied. He flipped his excess of scarf over his shoulder and leaned in as if he intended to get down to business. "So you want to describe the sophisticated charms of a mature woman, right?"

"Only if I want her to laugh the fat off my ass." Mutatsu reclaimed his personal space with a puff of smoke.

"Tell her she's like a maple tree in autumn, when the colors are at their most brilliant." Damn persistent kid was already leaning back in. "Hey, that was pretty good, wasn't it? Ooh, or she's like a pearl, worn to a perfect shine. What else gets better with age? Natto? Don't old people like natto?"

With a slow, steady shove, Mutatsu exiled him to the other side of the aisle. "This is the goddamn *definition* of none of your business."

"Okay, okay. I was just trying to help."

The kid slumped into a sulk, which, annoyingly, roused Mutatsu's paternal instinct; the posture slotted too neatly into memories of "You're not gettin' another yen out of me," "You'll have another birthday next year," and "Why would I even want to go your culture festival?" When all you had was a hammer, everything looked like a nail, they said; when all you had was a need to make amends, every teenage boy looked like a four-year-old shadow of your son. (And if you'd been hitting the brandy hard enough, he'd learned, a teenage girl filled the role just as well.)

It didn't help when the kid looked up and said, "Maybe this is supposed to work the other way. Can I ask you for advice?"

Mutatsu harrumphed. "I'm off the clock, kid. You plannin' to pay me for my words of wisdom?"

The kid's forehead wrinkled before he looked abruptly, alarmingly pleased with himself. "If you don't want to include any flattery in your apology, you'd better have a present, right?" From somewhere on his person he produced a very pink book. "Does your wife enjoy the classics?"

"The hell kind of classic is that?" Curiosity compelled Mutatsu to take the thing when it was offered. It turned out to be a volume of manga—and more like the kind he recognized from his youth, not those weekly toy ads the kids read nowadays, where everyone had spiky hair and couldn't stop yelling. Still stupid, of course, but a little less grating.

"Doesn't it fill you with a warm sense of nostalgia?" the kid asked, with faint desperation.

Mutatsu snorted. "What, you think *I* used to read this junk? Although..." Puffing thoughtfully on his cigar, he flipped back to the beginning of the volume in search of a publication date. "Yeah, I think the old bag used to read something like this. I remember it was ugly as sin. 'Course, she must like ugly, seein' as she married me."

"Then it's all yours!" For a change, the kid scooted backward of his volition, grinning like an idiot. "All yours forever! Hope you enjoy it!"

With a frown, Mutatsu shook the book to see if anything suspicious fell out. Nothing seemed out of order. Damn weird kid. He tucked the book into his bag and said, "So ya want a crappy comic's worth of advice? Don't bother a grumpy old monk outside his temple."

The stupid grin fell. "That wasn't really what I had in mind."

"Well, whaddya expect, going around bothering strangers?"

"An emotional connection?"

Mutatsu snorted out a mouthful of smoke. "And that's workin' out for ya?"

"So far, yeah." The kid looked thoughtful. "It's never really strangers, though, more... second-hand friends? Does that make sense?" Without waiting for a no, he continued, "Maybe it's wrong of me, I don't know. It just keeps happening, so I figured I might as well go along with it. Finding her reflection in the world comforts me. It's probably selfish, but I don't know what else to do."

Hard to imagine that girl at the bar telling her teenybopper friends how she'd wasted her evenings on a cowardly old drunk, in enough detail that one could recognize Mutatsu out of context. Or maybe she'd talked him up as better than he deserved; he'd always had the sense that she saw right through him to his potential, and he'd found himself trying to match his reflection in her eyes.

"In my professional opinion," said Mutatsu, "it sounds like ya need to get your act together."

"I know. I'm trying."

"I mean in a less stupid way." Mutatsu cracked the window just enough to ash his cigar into the winter wind. "I should tell you to seek enlightenment by letting go of your attachments, but here's me trying to clap the old ball and chain back on. So you want my advice? Go home."

The kid winced. "I can't. Not yet. It's very complicated, but I'm just trying to cause as little suffering as possible."

"That so? Well, don't go taking your bodhisattva vows just yet." It had been a while since Mutatsu was young, but he remembered the frustrating sense that everything was suddenly so *complicated*. Thing was, you grew up and realized that nothing was getting any simpler, so you just had to let go of getting your head all the way around it. "You want some bonus advice?" he added, less gruffly. "Never think you've got it all figured out."

The kid looked stricken. "But I *have*. I wish I didn't."

"Yeah, you and every other seventeen-year-old genius." Mutatsu drew a slow cloud of smoke into his mouth and let it out with a low chuckle. "Just go home and listen to your old man. He'll tell ya the same."

For a moment the kid looked withdrawn, almost wounded, and Mutatsu wondered if he'd stepped in it again; probably better not to take it for granted these days that any kid had the right number of parents. Not like he didn't have first-hand experience there. Come to think of it, he should have figured out a lot sooner that any teenage girl who frequented Club Escapade didn't have much in the way of adult supervision.

He wasn't going to apologize, because damned if he was going to apologize to some brat who couldn't seem to mind his own business, but Mutatsu was on the verge of adding something conciliatory when the kid asked, "Do you actually like the taste of that thing?"

"What, this?" Mutatsu rolled his cigar between his finger and thumb. "It's what they call an acquired taste."

"Doesn't that mean you have to *make* yourself like it? I always figured vices would be *fun*."

Mutatsu shrugged. "It's not about the taste, anyway. You'll understand when you're older."

"What about alcohol?" the kid asked. "Does that one start off fun?"

Clucking his tongue, Mutatsu wagged a finger. "Don't start. It doesn't fix anything in the long run."

"But it does in the short run?"

"Never once fixed a damn thing for anyone. Feels like it does, but all booze'll do for ya is shut your brain up for a while."

Mutatsu got the impression that this advice was having the opposite of the intended effect, but some people never learned without making their own mistakes. Not that it was any of his business, of course. This continued to be the very definition of not his problem.

Still. "Ya know," he said, drawling his way into a deadpan lie, "I was a real handsome fella when I was your age. Couldn't keep the girls off me. Then I started in with the brandy."

The kid looked skeptical but also faintly aghast, which was probably the best that could be expected.

The train rolled to a shuddering halt at the first stop of the day attached to anything like a proper town. Mutatsu read the station sign twice, then took a deep breath and asked, "Is this where you're from?"

"No," the kid replied.

"Then keep riding till you get there." Mutatsu put out his cigar against the windowpane and heaved himself out of his seat. As he picked up his bag, he added, "And go yell at your old man, even if all you've got is his ashes. Bastard probably deserves it."

He was almost out of the car when the kid called after him, "Tell your wife she's the only one there is for you."

With a noncommittal grunt, Mutatsu exited the train. His shoulder complained at the weight of his luggage as he made his way from the tracks to the adjoining bus stop, where he settled in on a bench. Per the bus schedule, he had twenty minutes to script the perfect apology to his wife. (Apologizing to his son would be easier, he assumed; he almost looked forward to getting socked in the face.)

On a fresh page, he began a new draft: *I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart. I was a stubborn old fool, and all I am now is older and stubborn, but I'm turning it around. I'm gonna apologize to you a thousand times. I'll live the rest of my life on my knees if that's what it takes. You're all there is for me in this world. I wanna recite the sutras with you by my side, for the rest of my life.*

It seemed like a pretty good start.

# The Other Hermit

[Thursday, 12/24]

There were nicer bars in this part of Port Island, but those tended to attract judgmental coworkers. There were also cheaper bars, but those averaged an uncomfortable number of fistfights per week. Only two bars within walking distance combined reasonably low levels of violence with an aesthetic that warded off respectable folk, and only one attracted a thoroughly antisocial customer base.

And so Isako Toriumi, connoisseur of dive bars, could honestly say that she had plans for Christmas Eve. She just didn't mention that her date was a tall, cool glass of shochu.

Drinking at a bar instead of at home was very social of her. Her mother should have been proud. A small, especially drunk part of Isako wanted to make a phone call to that effect, but the rest of her wasn't about to waste a nice buzz on a maternal lecture. So she drank, and ate edamame, and played games on her phone, and doodled on a napkin, and watched people trickle in and out in silence, and sobered up, and decided to round out the evening with one last drink.

Traffic patterns had shifted to exit-only, so she assumed the sound of the bar door opening was another patron heading home. The footsteps behind her sounded like an uncharacteristically prompt edamame refill right up until the point that a boy sat down at her table and said, "Ms. Toriumi?"

Isako stared at him for the moment it took her to shift contexts. "Ryoji? Didn't you transfer to another school?"

This did not appear to be the response he'd expected. "Ah, well, not exactly. Not yet."

"What do you mean, 'not yet'? I haven't seen you in class for a month!" She jabbed her index finger at him. "Ryoji Mochizuki, you'd *better* not have dropped out of school!"

"No! I... well... maybe?"

"And you definitely shouldn't be in here! Ugh, I'm going to end up getting blamed for this!" She pressed her hands to her temples before deciding that a gulp of her drink was a quicker way to dull her headache.

"Get blamed for what?" Without waiting for an answer, Ryoji reached for her shochu. "Say, what's alcohol taste like?"

Isako slapped his hand away. "Like a mystery you'll get to solve when you're twenty. You know you're not allowed to be in here, right?"

"Why not? No one stopped me this time."

Isako was still making exasperated noises at him when that edamame refill turned up, along with a request for Ryoji's drink order. "One of those," he said brightly, pointing to her shochu.

Both the pros and cons of a laissez-faire bar were that the staff didn't care about much of anything, and word was that the cops were starting to crack down on establishments that blithely liquored up teenagers. That was damn well not going to happen to Isako's personal alcoholic oasis, at least not on her watch. "Tea," she cut in. "He wants tea."

"No, I do—ow!"

Isako let go of his ear before repeating, "Tea." The server wandered away.

"I just don't wanna think about it," Ryoji whined. "That's why people drink, right?"

Teen angst was exactly what this drinking-alone-on-Christmas experience was missing. "Do I look like a therapist to you?"

"I don't know what a therapist looks like." He crossed his arms on the table and slumped into them. "I want to help, but nothing I do matters. I can't stop thinking about that. Everything matters so much, and I can't *do* anything."

And here Isako had thought he couldn't be any more incoherent than he was in his essays. Bidding farewell to a better version of the evening in which she was already strolling home in a gently inebriated haze, she asked, "Do your parents know where you are?"

He made a noise that couldn't quite pass for a laugh. "I don't even know how to answer that."

"It was a 'yes' or 'no' question."

For a while he was quiet, and his voice was barely audible when he said, "I shouldn't be here."

"You've got that right."

"I mean at all." To Isako's alarm, he sounded like he was about to cry. "Every moment I've been happy... should I regret them?"

"Hey, don't talk that way!" She sharpened her tone to a caught-you-sleeping-in-class point, which shocked him into sitting up. "I don't care what your problem is, you've got no business acting like you're giving up on life!"

He winced. "But it's not like—" her glare cut that line of defense short— "I won't! Sorry!"

A glass of ice and oolong tea showed up, without a coaster or an expressed wish that anyone enjoy it. Ryoji slid it in front of himself like a shield, then glanced between it and Isako's shochu. "Give it up," she said. He sipped his tea aggrievedly.

As the seconds ticked by and it became apparent that the situation was not going to resolve itself, Isako said, "Look, you need to call your parents. Get your phone out."



"I really can't. Anyways, I don't have my phone."

"I *know* you have a phone. I confiscated it during class at least twice a week."

"I got rid of it." He folded his hands together, and the subtle motions of his finger drew her attention to a little silver ring. "I couldn't trust myself not to call her, even though that would only make everything harder."

Pre-Christmas breakup teen angst, no less. No way in hell did Mr. Ekoda's homeroom students inflict this kind of thing on him during his downtime, though being Mr. Ekoda was a steep price to pay for that privilege. Isako sighed heavily. "You know high school's not the end of the world, right?"

"Funny you'd—no, it's never actually funny." Face falling, Ryoji traced a line in the condensation on his glass. This quiet depression was increasingly disconcerting; she was used to his expressing every thought that popped into his head, usually with enthusiasm disproportionate to how much he actually knew about the topic.

Isako cleared her throat to recapture his attention, then softened the impatient edge in her tone. "Look, I understand that everything feels overwhelming right now. So you're going to finish your tea, and I'm going to listen to you talk through whatever this is, and then we're going to get you home."

"I can't," he replied, ambiguously. "I'm sorry."

"Do you really think I'm going to let you wander off and get in trouble somewhere else tonight? Running into your homeroom teacher in a bar is game over."

His pout conveyed, with a clarity that had eluded every last one of his composition assignments, that his evening was not turning out remotely how he'd planned it. Good—neither was hers. Isako shrugged off his look and returned to the important business of finishing her drink.

"There's nothing to talk through," he said at length. "There's no point. I just wanted to pretend otherwise for a little while." He tipped his glass morosely back and forth, making the ice cubes clink. "It doesn't change anything if you plug your ears and cover your eyes, but at least—"

Isako blinked her way through a flutter of dizziness. Time to call it quits if she was tired and tipsy enough to zone out like that. It was probably near midnight by now, anyway.

"—selfish?" Ryoji was still talking, apparently to what little now remained of his tea and apparently not about anything he'd been saying a moment ago: "Maybe it'd be easier if I'd never been 'me,' you know? For me, at least. Except I wouldn't be me. But then they... I just want for them... No, there's 'I' again." Frowning, he pawed at his glass and tipped it over.

Isako dropped a handful of napkins over the puddle. "Hey, watch it! You—wait." She leaned in for a closer look and a whiff of his breath, then glared suspiciously at his empty glass. "How the hell are you drunk?"

He stared at her, big weird eyes unfocused in his blotchy face. "I cheated." With a widening grin and no regard for volume control, he continued, "I'm drunk! That means I'm—that means—I have *no idea*."

"That means you're done here." She caught him by the suspenders, which seemed to strike him as hilarious, and tugged him along with her to the bar.

As she settled up, he leaned into a salaryman and asked with desperate enthusiasm, "This is s'posed to to help, right? How d'you tell if it's helping?"

"It doesn't," Isako replied, pulling him toward the door. "Come on."

"Then why were *you* here?" Ryoji sounded on the verge of melancholy again, or at least petulance, but then he tripped over his own feet and collapsed in startled laughter. Getting him back to his feet was like untangling an octopus.

A sour-faced woman at the bar glowered at him as he rediscovered bipedalism. He got as far as an overwrought wink and a "hey there" before Isako got him outside.

She let him go long enough to take out her phone and call for a cab, during which time he took off stumbling after a stray cat. She tucked her phone against her shoulder, caught him before he fell over again, and propped him against the wall. Getting her point across to the taxi service required her to hush him repeatedly.

The moment she ended the call, he folded his hand over hers and stared at her with owlish reverence. "Did you know," he slurred, "that you're even more beautiful when you're stern? There's such warmth behind it." He smiled softly, then arched his eyebrows. "I got through a lot of history lectures imagining you being stern with Ms. Kanou."

She smacked his hand away. "Ryoji, have you ever heard the expression 'Quit while you're ahead'?"

"I'm ahead?" He cocked his head before breaking into another grin. "I am! I haven't thought about everything ending in... in... *I don't care about time*." Laughing, he slumped lower against the wall. "This is great! I should be drunk forever."

"Mmm-hmm. See if you still feel that way tomorrow morning."

What little remained of Isako's buzz faded as the wind picked up. She wished she'd worn a heavier coat or at least a pair of gloves; she couldn't very well duck back into the warmth of the bar to wait, and taking Ryoji with her wasn't even worth considering. Rubbing her hands together, she watched him push away from the wall, stagger three steps to a streetlight, and pitch forward to embrace it. The chill of the metal didn't seem to bother him.

"Isn't it beautiful?" He sounded wistful, or would have if he hadn't also been halfway to bellowing. "Look at the stars. Look at the lights in the windows. Look, you can see me breathing! Look, look!"

Vapor rose with Isako's sigh. "Yes, very nice."

"No no no, I mean I'm *breathing*. Every breath I take is miracle. I'm warm and I can feel everything and the stars matter and you matter and I—" he faltered— "I wish we could all see spring." Shoulders hunched, he curled tighter around the streetlight and tucked his face into his scarf.

"See, drunk isn't all fun," Isako said, slipping into her classroom voice. "I call this part the boomerang of melancholy. I hope you're learning a lesson right now."

After a heavy silence, he said, "Yeah, I should throw the boomerang back," and lurched toward the door. She caught him by the arm and pulled him to the curb.

"So cruel," he muttered, and she would have taken more offense if she'd been at all certain he was talking about her.

To her immense relief, the cab arrived. Getting Ryoji into the back of it went almost smoothly. As he regarded the seatbelt like a piece of alien technology, she asked if he had any money with him. "D'you think I should?" he replied, as if this were the determining factor.

"Dammit." Isako counted up her dwindling cash and glanced at the driver, who waited in awkward silence, before asking, "How far from home are you?"

Ryoji stared up at her blankly, then burst into tears.

She could leave him there and walk home, she tried to tell herself. This was probably a job for someone with a counseling degree. If he wasn't enrolled at Gekkoukan anymore, he wasn't her responsibility. She had to be at work in seven hours.

So she told herself, but what she said was, "Scoot over." As she slid into the space that Ryoji, still sniffing, had mostly unoccupied, she gave the driver her address.

"Where are we going?" Ryoji asked, in tones that indicated he already forgotten what he was upset about and had moved on to thinking of this as a field trip. He wiped his face ineffectually with his sleeve.

To the hospital if he blacked out or the police station if he hinted at being in actual trouble, but as it stood Isako didn't think either would be helpful. "My apartment. You're going to sleep this off, and tomorrow we're going to talk about it."

Ryoji's grin didn't seem to realize that it was spreading under a dribble of snot. "It's a cold Christmas Eve, isn't it? I hope you'll let me repay your hospitality by keeping you warm."

"*Ha*. You're on the sofa. With a bucket."

"Why a buck—" He flopped toward her as the cab took a tight turn; she caught his head on her shoulder to block its arc toward her lap. Hooking his arm around hers, he nuzzled her sleeve.

Isako rolled her eyes. "Any chance you're going to pass out?"

"I wouldn't want to miss the pleasure of your company." He let out what started as a contented sigh but hitched midway through. After a moment's silence, he mumbled wetly into her shoulder, "I miss her so much. Isn't that selfish?"

Dropping out of school after a breakup was a comprehensible, if melodramatic, sort of stupid. Isako could give him a lecture about it that would make even Mr. Ekoda proud, if there were any way in hell Mr. Ekoda could ever be allowed to find out about this. Taking a drunk student home with her on a school night was the kind of good deed that couldn't even dream of going unpunished.

She was pretty sure this was a good deed, at least. Between the cab fare and the mucus, she felt like she was atoning for *something*.

Ryoji shifted again, smearing snot over more of her sleeve, and poked something into her hip. Isako was relieved to find plastic sticking out of his pants pocket. After a quick inspection, she said accusingly, "This is a phone."

"Not *my* phone," he muttered, then made an unsettling "urp" noise as the cab came to a stop.

Isako hurried him out the door and bent him over the gutter, but he didn't do anything more than list from side to side, hands pressed to his knees, as she paid the driver. "For the record," she said, "this isn't as bad as it looks."

"I try not to look," the driver replied, and drove off.

When she went to escort him inside, Ryoji fixed her with an intense yet unfocused stare and latched shivering onto her arm. "I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as you're going to be." That sounded harsher than she intended; as she half-dragged him up the stairs, she added, "Just learn from it, okay?"

He laughed as if he were on the verge of tears again. "That's an important part of living, isn't it? But then you think about it stopping, and how can you think about anything else? I can't stand the thought of them suffering. I can't stand..."

Standing did indeed seem a little tricky for him, so Isako kept hold of him as she unlocked her door. She had to grab him again as he stumbled across the dark genkan and nearly tripped, shoes still on, into the hall.

"Careful," she scolded. Hitting the light switch illuminated the dirty laundry she'd left in a trail from the bedroom to the bathroom. That stack of empty beer cans was probably still in the corner of the kitchen, too. It occurred to her that she hadn't even been hoping to bring anyone home tonight.

Ryoji seemed to have retreated to a private pit of depression, where not even the sight of a bra strewn across the hallway floor could stir him to commentary. She got his shoes off with his minimal cooperation and steered him into the living room, where it occurred to her that he was likely to accidentally strangle himself with his own stupid scarf. She unwound it from his

neck, tossed it over a chair, and left him staring vacantly between the blinds on the balcony door as she walked the few steps to the kitchenette.

"Look at those lights," she heard him murmuring to an audience of malnourished houseplants. "Imagine them all going out at once, except you can't, because it's just too much to bear, you know? No, I don't want you to know. If you knew, you'd suffer."

Whatever came next she drowned out filling a plastic cup with tap water. Philosophical was the worst kind of drunk. When she returned, he was crying again, forehead resting against the sliding glass door. "Drink this," she said.

Ryoji straightened, swayed, and threw up on a rhododendron.

Taking a deep breath, Isako dug the nails of her free hand into her palm and tried to count to ten. She made it to four. "Come on," she said briskly, grabbing him by the shirt collar as he slumped toward the floor. "Up! Move!"

He stumbled to the bathroom like a meaty marionette with too many joints. "Sorry," he kept saying. "Sorry about everything. Sorry about me. Sorry about the world. I'm so sorry about the world."

She maneuvered him past the door and made sure he collapsed without smacking his head against anything. "Drink this," she said again, gently, as she set the cup by his hand. "And aim for the toilet, okay?"

He huddled wretchedly. "I wish I was already dead."

"Save that sentiment for tomorrow morning." After tossing him an old towel, she slid the bathroom door most of the way shut and headed back to the rhododendron.

It was salvageable, probably. Or would be when she wasn't up so late on a Thursday that she was technically up early on a Friday. In the meantime she banished the plant to the balcony, in hopes of rain.

That sorted, she glanced at the clock, gave up pretending that she wasn't going to call in sick to work, and set up a living room vigil with her laptop, a beer, and a bucket. "You can have the sofa once you stop puking," she called. "Or just pass out in there if you want, but believe me, it's no fun waking up on someone else's bathroom floor."

Innocent Sin Online hadn't bothered with new holiday content for years, but the server still dutifully trotted out the same festive skins and themed quests every December. If she remembered correctly, the mobs in Santa hats had a one-in-twenty chance of dropping SP-refilling cakes. "merry christmas! ^\_^" she typed to an empty world, over the sounds of Ryoji's retching.

Grinding felt even more pointless than usual. She logged off and let her untouched beer grow warm on the table.

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Isako was on her fourth cup of instant coffee when she heard vague thumps and groans from the bathroom, followed by vomiting. She turned up the volume on her laptop until the noise gave way to that of running water. Several minutes later, Ryoji shuffled into the living room, red-eyed and gray-faced, wet hair drooping against his efforts to slick it back. He regarded the world with wounded bewilderment.

"There's instant miso soup in the cabinet and Pocari Sweat in the fridge," she told him. "You need both."

His voice came croaking out: "I feel terrible."

"Serves you right."

He pouted at her before letting his gaze drift over her apartment like a seasick pendulum. Twice he stared directly at his scarf before recognizing it, retrieving it, and wrapping it with great care around his neck. On his halting journey to the fridge, he said, "You have a very nice apartment, Ms. Toriumi. I'm sorry about your plant. And your sink."

She sighed and squeezed her forehead. "I told you to aim."

"Sorry. I tried to clean up." After much squinting deliberation, he located a bottle of Pocari Sweat and clutched it to his chest like a talisman. Isako cleared her throat until he'd closed the fridge door, then pointed him toward the cabinet.

Her laptop dinged. Another email from Mr. Ekoda, who distrusted the gap between "too sick to work" and "not sick enough to be hospitalized." Best to wait an hour or so before replying, so she could pretend to have been asleep. In the meantime, she marked as unread an email from Mrs. Terauchi, who wanted to play mahjong over the weekend, and deleted an email from Ms. Kanou, who wanted to compare Christmas Eve dates.

Fumbling noises drew her attention back to Ryoji. He'd managed not to knock over everything between himself and the instant soup, but he didn't seem clear on what to do with the packet he'd retrieved, other than putting it through the world's slowest, saddest maraca solo.

"Hot water," she prompted. "There should be plenty left in the pot."

He regarded the hot water dispenser with bleary curiosity. By the time Isako realized that he had no idea what he was doing, he had already managed to scald himself. "What are you—never mind," she decided aloud. "Just sit down."

Ryoji deflated into a chair, folded his arms on the table, and nested his head and sports drink in them. Not for the first time, she was tempted to ask what strange foreign country he'd grown up in, but she suspected that he would start crying again. Better just to mix the soup for him and set the bowl out of accidental swatting distance.

He stirred, sniffed, and shuddered. "I don't think I can eat anything. Sorry."

"It'll settle your stomach." The visible portion of his facial expression still looked dubious, so she added, "At least get started on that drink. I don't want to lecture you while you're dehydrated."

With a ragged little sigh, he raised his head and gave her the sort of look she normally associated with exam days. "You shouldn't waste your time on me."

"I'll waste my time however I like, thank you very much. Drink up."

It took him a few tries, but he twisted the cap off the Pocari Sweat and sipped tentatively. With an approving nod, Isako tabbed back into Innocent Sin Online, where the Christmas decorations were gradually refreshing themselves out of existence, and resumed leveling her latest alt.

After several minutes' silence, she heard the gingerly scrape of chair legs against hardwood as Ryoji scooted over to see what she was doing. He watched for a while before saying, "You're playing a game?"

"It's an MMO." This clearly meant nothing to him, so she added, "It's a game you play online with other people. See? My avatar's a cute reporter."

"Huh, I wonder if Junpei likes this kind of game." He leaned in, squinting, as if this would make the empty streets of Konan any less lo-res. Tapping the mob she was fighting, he asked, "Is that another person?"

She took her hand off the mouse long enough to bat his finger away. "Don't touch the screen. And no, that's a monster."

"Where's everyone else?"

Isako shrugged and popped a healing potion. "It's a pretty empty server these days. Some kid logged in a while ago, but he said it was boring with no one else around and CoW has better graphics. Which is true, but this game has a lot more charm!"

"But you're all alone," Ryoji said, as if this were unfathomably tragic.

The witty response she needed failed to make itself known, so she settled for, "Don't let your soup get cold."

He held the bowl to his chest and breathed in the steam, eyes still glued to the screen. "Can you make friends with that one? It looks friendly."

"That's not how this works. I could negotiate with it, but I'm already up to my ears in Lovers cards."

He started to reply, then hastily set his soup on the table and took off in a shambling rush for the bathroom. Retching followed.

"Those are dry heaves," Isako called after him. "They're how you know you made poor choices."

By the time he returned, even paler and blotchier, she'd hit level seven and returned to Lunarvale Hospital to heal. He watched her roam the empty streets in silence, making a series of cautious efforts to get the lukewarm miso soup into his system. "This is depressing," he said at length. "You shouldn't be alone."

"Look, you don't judge my hobbies, and I won't judge yours."

"I meant in general."

Isako scowled. "Don't you start. I hear enough of that from my mother."

"I don't mean you have to get married or anything. I mean that you shouldn't have to play this kind of game alone, or drink by yourself on Christmas Eve." Despite the floppy wet hair and rumpled clothing, he managed to look solemn. "You're too kind not to have friends."

"I have friends!" Terauchi had to count; who but a friend would consent to being fleeced at mahjong every weekend? "And if you're up to talking, we're not going to talk about me. We're going to talk about the teenage dropout who somehow got completely trashed last night and cried every time I tried to send him home. Did you get in a fight with your parents or something?"

Ryoji shrugged. "There's really not much I can say about it. So let's talk about the lonely, kind-hearted, effortlessly beautiful twenty-two-year-old teacher who—"

She glared at him. "Is it just *automatic* with you? Your flattery isn't even believable."

"Hey, I'm being sincere." He pressed his palm to his chest and contrived to look aggrieved. "And I put real care into my sincerity. You know, I still don't understand why you wouldn't let me do career experience week at a host club."

"Because that's *not a career*."

"Why not? The difference between a job and a career is just dedication, right?"

"No. And quit trying to change the subject." She closed the lid of her laptop and directed a maximum-strength Disappointed Authority Figure look at him over it. "Listen up, Ryoji Mochizuki. I have no idea if you had a bad breakup or a fight with your parents or *what*, and I may never get a straight answer out of you, but you're going to promise me that I'll see you at school tomorrow."

His shoulders drooped. "I don't want to lie to you."

"Then come back to school."

He drooped lower and looked like he might cry again. "I'm sorry."

"Then go to another school. Just pretend you give a damn about your future, all right? You'll thank me later."



He started laughing, in ragged little bleats that teetered just on the edge of sobs. "I'll try," he managed, before tucking his face back into his arms, shoulders still shaking. Isako waited. A few seconds later, he took a deep breath, straightened back up, and sipped his cooling soup. "I'll try," he said again, steadily.

"Glad to hear it," she replied. "Finish that up and I'll call you a cab." Phone in hand, she left him to his soup and headed into the bathroom. One disadvantage to reliving your college days of people passing out on the toilet was that you also had to relive your college adventures of finding somewhere else to pee, and that was an adventure she was willing to undertake only once in a twenty-four period.

The state of the sink suggested that he really had tried to clean up after himself, but had failed in his selection of both techniques and materials. This was what came of doing good deeds, probably. The eventual payoff might be a blurb in the newspaper, under a headline like "Local High School Teacher Turns Around Life of Delinquent Student." Isako interviewed herself in her head as she made the bathroom less horrible, then took advantage of her handiwork.

As she pulled up the number for a taxi service on her phone, she called into the kitchen, "Hey, where do you live, anyway?"

No answer. Annoyed, she poked her head around the corner and got halfway through repeating her question before it registered that Ryoji was no longer at the table.

She didn't have a very big apartment, and he definitely hadn't walked down the hallway past the bathroom. She peered into the kitchen and behind the furniture, calling his name with diminishing patience. The soup bowl remained on the table, now empty; the bottle of Pocari Sweat had wandered off with him.

When she checked the genkan, she found his shoes missing and the door still locked. He couldn't very well have bolted the door after himself, which left only one exit. In a panicked corner of her imagination, Mr. Ekoda marched up to her desk and threw down a newspaper headlined with "Local High School Student Breaks Neck Jumping from Teacher's Balcony."

Unwilling to consider that option, she searched her closets. "Dammit, Ryoji, you are too hungover for hide-and-seek! So help me—"

Something thumped against the balcony door. Just once might have been an unfortunate bird, but rhythmic repetition suggested that someone was knocking. Isako froze, then gripped her phone like a tiny bludgeon and crept toward the glass.

When she opened the blinds, there was no one on the balcony. Of course. Only the vomit-encrusted rhododendron and, inexplicably, a grocery store pastry box. Inside appeared to be a strawberry-topped Christmas cake.

If this was a trap, it was an oddly specific one. Cake was worth the risk. She unlocked the door, slid it open just far enough to accommodate the box, and acquired her target. Nothing stirred outside.

As Isako set the box down on the table, she found a note taped to the side. "Thank you," it said, in the haphazard scrawl of someone who hadn't paid nearly enough attention in her class, "for wasting your time on me. I hope you like this kind of cake! Sorry I can't come back to Gekkoukan, it's complicated. :( Anyways, you won't see me again, at least not how you'd recognize me, so you should go make friends, okay? Don't wait! ♥ P.S. I am really really sorry about your plant."

God, that *kid*. She opened the balcony door again to yell, "Ryoji, if you're still out there, you've got an A-minus in cake selection and a D in composition! *Go to school!*"

Ignoring the reactions of her neighbors, she went into the kitchen for a fork.

# The Hermit, Revisited

[Saturday, 12/26]

Saori took a sip of sweet, fizzy contraband before saying, "I'm pretty sure that's not going to work."

"Not even for a few days?" Ryoji pouted up at her from her lap. She couldn't quite remember how he'd gone from stretching out perpendicular to her on the cement planter to pillowing his head on her thigh, but she didn't mind as long as he kept behaving himself. "I'd wear the uniform."

"That's, um, not the issue." Saori polished off her drink before adding, "We just started winter break, anyway. You'd have to wait a couple of weeks before they'd even think about admitting you."

He sighed, much more dramatically than the situation warranted. "Then I guess it can't be helped. Want another?"

"Please." She exchanged her empty Cielo Mist bottle for a full one and twisted the cap off, exulting in the hiss of carbonation. Ryoji dropped the empty bottle into the bag at the base of the planter, where it clinked satisfyingly against the rest. "Honestly," she said, "I think you'd be disillusioned right away. The nuns are really strict."

He chuckled. "I bet I could win them over. And either way, that's a risk I'd be willing to take to be surrounded by girls like you."

"If you like the uniforms so much, would you like to try on one of mine?" His facial reaction made her laugh so hard that she nearly rolled him off. "I'm just teasing."

He grinned impishly. "Would *you* like me to try on one of your uniforms? The skirt would be awfully short..."

She couldn't keep her face straight enough for a stern look. "We're rivals in love, remember?"

"Hey, I warned you that I'm no good at it."

"You're very good at presents, though, so I'll forgive you."

Ryoji chuckled, then broke eye contact and fell moodily silent. "I'm really not," he said at length. "I'm actually pretty selfish."

"Everyone should be, sometimes." She brushed his hair behind his ear, and he flicked his gaze back up to her. "Didn't I tell you this before? Never caring about what you want isn't good for anyone. You did something really nice for me; it's okay if you did it to make yourself feel better, too. That's just human nature, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," he replied, but he sounded happier. When Saori stroked his hair again, he gave her an almost untroubled smile.

"You can tell me what's actually bothering you," she said.

"I can't." He bit his lip. "Not all of it, anyways. The thing is, I'm going away soon, and I wanted to see you happy again before I go."

She took a sip of soda to cover her frown. "Where are you going?"

"It's very complicated. Just... away. There's nothing I can do to stop it."

Which sounded melodramatic, but Saori knew as well as anyone how much could hide behind "My parents are sending me to another school." He'd promised not to weasel out of explaining anything else, but she thought she'd give him this one. He'd just smuggled in half her weight in Cielo Mist, after all.

So all she said was, "You did make me happy. I'm glad you came back."

Ryoji smiled again, only a little sadly, and she felt his shoulders relax against her leg. "I'm glad, too."

For a long time he was quiet, eyelids low and breaths even as she smoothed his hair. She wondered if he'd fallen asleep. They had half an hour or so before she'd need to stash the rest of the soda in the contraband hole and sneak back to bed. Or a little less than that, since Saori's bladder now had two full bottles of fizzy bliss in it. At some point she supposed she'd have to think of an explanation for Mami of where all the Cielo Mist had come from.

Eventually his eyelids slid open again, and he raised his hand high enough for the moonlight to catch a thin silver ring on his finger.

"That's pretty," she remarked. "Is it from your special person?"

"I bought it for myself, don't worry. I wanted something physical to bind my memories."

Not a gift, then, but Saori's twinge of jealousy wasn't fading. She should have exchanged pieces of jewelry before she left Gekkoukan, she thought. She'd never been able to entrust her memories to possessions, but it might have been nice to wear the gentle weight of a reminder, and to know that something that had once been only cold metal was taking on the warmth of flesh, far away.

"It's small," he continued, "but it feels so heavy sometimes. Memories aren't like photographs; they keep changing long after you've made them. Carrying them with you is a risk, when you think of it that way."

"I think I know what you mean."

He smiled crookedly at her and lowered his hand. Something about the ambiguous emotion on his face held Saori's gaze; after a moment, she said, "Ah, you have one, too," and pointed at the mole under her eye. "I just noticed."

Ryoji tapped his forefinger lightly against her cheek. "It's a good look on us, isn't it?"

"Mmm. Have you ever heard that a mole in the path of your tears means that you're destined to weep?" When he looked blank, she shrugged and added, "It's just something people say. It's like fortune-telling—it's a way to give up control of your life when you're too weak to make your own choices." She averted her gaze. "Sorry, that was harsh. For all I know, you like fortune-telling."

"I had fun with it in Kyoto once," he replied. "I know what you mean, though. There's such a thing as fate, but it's more like the sea than a narrow path. It's up to you how you navigate it."

Saori met his eyes again. "Are you certain? Lately, I don't think I even believe in fate."

He held her gaze without blinking. "I won't try to convince you otherwise. I'm a little jealous, actually."

She tucked that away in her mind, next to the recording of her own voice over the broadcasting system, for the next time she was paralyzed by choices and terrified by consequences. With a nod and a smile, she tucked a strand of hair behind his ear, letting her thumb brush over his mole.

Her phone buzzed against the planter with the earliest of her warnings. As she muted the alarm, Ryoji sat up with obvious reluctance and said, "It's getting late, huh?"

"There's still a little time," she replied. "We don't really have to worry until the second alarm goes off."

"That's good. Before I go, I wanted to give you—ah, hang on." He fumbled with his pants pocket before coming up with a red pen, topped by an ecstatic cartoon strawberry.

Saori accepted it with gentle bemusement. "Thank you. It's cute."

His smile turned wistful. "We have the same 'someone,' right? She gave that to me when we had a pop quiz in Mr. Ekoda's class and I'd sort of accidentally tossed my pen out the window. Look, you can see where she used to chew on it."

The strawberry's joy was inspiring in the face of how thoroughly nibbled its leaves were. It was easy to imagine the furrowed brow, the groove pressed into the lower lip, and the moment of clarity when ink returned to paper. "You're sweet," Saori said, turning the pen over in her hand. "Are you sure it's okay? She's precious to you, too."

"Like I said, I won't be around much longer. I'd like—" he looked uncertain for a moment, but didn't break eye contact— "it would be all right if you forgot about me when you looked at it and just thought about her, okay?"

"Okay." Saori caught the word the moment it left her mouth and frowned after it. "No, it's not okay. I don't want to forget about you."

"It would be better if you did."

"I won't, though. Forgetting doesn't work like that."

"Doesn't it?" He caressed his ring, giving her a lopsided look that wasn't quite a smile. "I don't want you to be hurt."

"But it's my choice," she said. Sustained disagreement still made her so giddy that her hands shook. "If I decide getting hurt is worth it to me, then I'll choose to get hurt."

He was quiet a moment before saying, "You're a lot like her."

"I'm afraid you're giving me too much credit. But I'm going to keep trying until I am, and so should you."

He sighed but forced the sound up into a laugh. "All right, let's both promise to do our best." After a pause, he added, "You're very precious to her, you know. You're probably why I— never mind, there's no way to put this." His gaze swept away, then back. "Just know that she was thinking about you a lot after you left."

She'd won, or maybe she hadn't, or maybe it was impossible to make neat sense of anything that unfolded fractally. "I'm sure she's been thinking about you, too," Saori said gently. "She has a big heart."

"She really does. I'd... like to believe she passed some of it on to me."

The long shadow of figuring out how to react to other people's wishes was figuring out how to act on her own. It had always been easier to let moments slip away and convince herself later that she'd never wanted anything in the first place, that it was better not to be at fault for complicating the world. Now she had no ring to take on her warmth and no bittersweet memory on her lips, and no simpler world for show for it.

Ryoji's hand felt warmer than she expected as she wrapped her own around it. His smile came with a twitch of surprise and the slow, easy spread of delight. Without speaking, he laced his fingers through hers, and she squeezed, softly.

The phone buzzed again. Saori silenced it with her free hand and said, "I guess that's all we get."

"Yeah." He exhaled slowly, breath pale and heavy against the dark. "I hope you get to see her again."

"You too," she replied.

Her eyes couldn't make sense of what happened next: he let go of her hand, and then he let go of being there at all, and only the pen and the soda proved that he ever had been. Saori had never heard a ghost story before that went quite like this one.

Cielo Mist deposited and bladder emptied, she slipped back into her room just ahead of Sister Agatha's hallway patrol. No one woke; Mami was snoring, and her other two roommates had gone home for the break. When Sister Agatha moved on, Saori sat up in bed and explored the logs on her phone, to see if Ryoji had ended up using it at all. Nothing new appeared in the

call logs, but he'd drafted a series of unsent text messages: "i love you," "im sorry," "i love you im so sorry," and finally "fyi alcohol isa traaap :("

She left them all archived and flicked back to her phone's clock, to watch the seconds tick by toward morning mass. Sleep was out of the question.

Instead Saori crept across the room to her desk, using the light of her phone to guide her. She took a fresh sheet of paper from her drawer of unsent letters. With her own recorded speech playing low in her headphones, she pressed the nibbled end of the pen to her lips, then began to write.

# The Strength

[Sunday, 12/27]

Bird. Cat. Dog. Dog again. Poopies (no no leave it). Other dog. Human, and familiar.

Koromaru raised his head and barked before taking off in the direction of the scent. "Don't go too far, little dude!" Junpei yelled after him, and he barked again in acknowledgment. The source was just behind the shrine, it smelled like, by the tall fence.

It turned out to be on top of the fence, perched like a misproportioned cat. "Hey, boy," said the dorm's most confusing friend. He tapped his finger against his lips. "Don't let them know I'm here, okay? It'd just upset them, and it looks like they're at peace right now."

Koromaru pawed at the fence and whined. After a moment's hesitation, Ryoji descended and knelt to scratch behind his ears.

Ryoji's scent had changed; he no longer smelled faintly of Junpei nor quite so strongly of the leader, and something underneath had gone darker and subtler, the way trees did during the winter. Koromaru made him smell more like Koromaru.

"Have you missed me?" Ryoji chuckled, letting the sound fade into a quiet sigh as he nuzzled Koromaru's fur. "Do you understand much of what's going on? Or can you just tell that everyone's anxious? I hope you're not afraid."

Koromaru growled.

"Ha, of course you're not. You're very brave. Good boy."

Satisfied, Koromaru rolled over for a belly rub.

"Maybe I should have been a dog instead," Ryoji mused as he obliged. "No, I don't mean that. The miracle of this existence... I'm so grateful for it. I'm glad I that I got to be Ryoji Mochizuki, and I'm glad that I didn't know all along how it was going to end." The petting slowed. "I'm even glad it hurts, because it lets me feel like I really was human, even if it was only for a little while."

Koromaru twisted to lick his face. He laughed softly and didn't scold.

"It's about hope, isn't it? As long as the future is uncertain, you can see whatever you need in it. I hope I can save them from suffering. And they hope... well, I hope they let me." He patted Koromaru's flank and added, "You'd better get back to them before they get worried. Lick her face for me, okay?"

With an eager bark, Koromaru trotted back the way he'd come. His nose twitched as Ryoji's scent disappeared behind him, as if the wind had torn it away. He paused to sniff, paw the



ground, and let out a low whine, then went to see if the leader would appreciate her indirect kiss.

# The Moon, Reversed

[Wednesday, 12/30]

You saw all kinds of weird shit on the night patrol, and Port Island was deeply, persistently weird in ways that made every other precinct Kurosawa had worked seem boring in retrospect. Once upon a time he'd rolled his eyes at the claim that people got crazier around the full moon, but around here the stats spoke for themselves. Everything got a little twitchy around midnight, too, no matter how fat the moon was; some nights Kurosawa swore the world had rearranged itself in the space of a blink, and sometimes his breath stuttered in his throat, as if something had interrupted it.

Even if he'd never met Kirijo, he was certain he would have realized that something was very wrong in this city.

Garden-variety weird scarcely registered with him anymore. People carried on lengthy conversations with vending machines, or dumped so many coins in a mall fountain that the water level rose, or ran around half-naked on a cold night—so what? He concerned himself more with the missing persons who came back unharmed but babbling nonsense, or, worse, the ones who turned up mindless and drooling in the streets.

Every now and then he called in a murder and heard later an impossible estimate of the time of death. It was one thing to find a corpse in the rough part of Port Island, but quite another to find that the guy had taken a photo of himself with his phone at a quarter to midnight, while the autopsy insisted he must have been shot half an hour before. There was no pattern to any of it, and nothing Kurosawa could do but sell weapons to children and tell Norie every day that he loved her.

So he shouldn't even have registered that the same kid was standing on the same spot on the Moonlight Bridge every time he passed by tonight. The boy's parents probably expected him home by now, sure, and he was a little under-dressed for the weather, but he wasn't doing anything illegal or giving off jumper vibes. Nothing compelled intervention. Still, Kurosawa's nape prickled every time he passed that kid standing there, unmoving, staring down at the water.

It was getting close to midnight when Kurosawa's quiet unease got the best of him. Clearing his throat, he approached the boy and said, "Shouldn't you be heading home soon?"

The boy turned slowly, like he was buying time to compose himself. There was something sad in his smile as he replied, "I will. Just... not yet, please?"

Kurosawa frowned. "If you're having trouble at home—"

"It's nothing like that. Please don't worry about me."

"As long as you don't give me anything to worry about." Kurosawa took one of his cards from his pocket and held it out. "You know, we police officers don't just arrest criminals. You

might be surprised at how we can help."

"It's very kind of you to offer," the boy replied, without moving to accept the card. He looked back down at the water. "It's all right, though. I've stopped crying. I hope it'll be a little easier for her this way." He paused before adding, "I was born here."

Just a little moody and unfocused—nothing remarkable for this time of night. He didn't look like he was on anything. Kurosawa considered a few responses before settling on, "That must have been a traffic jam for the record books."

"Not exactly. I was sort of born in pieces, anyways. I think the most important part happened when she lost someone precious, and loss began to matter to me." The boy's smile turned wry. "Some things you just have to accept, right? I didn't realize how hard that would be."

Kurosawa waited until he was certain no further non sequiturs were coming. "I can give you a ride home if you need one. Or to the shelter downtown."

The boy frowned. "Is it wrong for me to be here? I just want to watch the light on the water. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

It was a jumble of colors casting long, bright shadows over the wavering face of the moon. Crossing the Moonlight Bridge had been part of Kurosawa's routine for so long that he couldn't remember the last time he'd stopped to appreciate it. "You get a nice view from up here," he conceded. "Listen, if you don't feel safe, or you get the urge to do anything weird, you give me a call, all right?"

He pressed his card into the boy's hand, and the boy gave him a fleeting smile and a nod before gazing back out over the water.

The rest of his patrol was as close to uneventful as any could be lately: three apparent victims of Apathy Syndrome, an argument outside a dive bar that his presence was enough to defuse, a couple of punks loitering suspiciously outside a convenience store. Over his radio he heard his fellow officers dispatched to one domestic disturbance after another. More of those every night, it seemed. Like people couldn't take off the masks they wore in public anymore without turning into monsters.

At the end of Kurosawa's shift, the kid was still standing in the same spot, watching the lights flow. Traffic was so sparse that Kurosawa almost thought he could hear the water in the gaps between cars. This late at night, he never felt tranquility without melancholy mixed in, and it was harder to ignore the idea that there were teeth in the dark, glinting only when he blinked. He radioed his relief to say, "There's a kid on the bridge. Don't hassle him, but keep an eye on him for me, all right?"

Getting older meant letting go of the illusion that you were ever completely safe, even in a place less dangerously uncanny than Port Island. That kid looked much too young to understand, but no one took in a view that intently without at least an inkling of his own fragility. Damn shame, or maybe it wasn't; who was Kurosawa to say? He changed his own mind twice a day.

On his way home, he measured his breaths and wondered if Kirijo and the others were out slaying monsters that no one else could see. He'd never understood how his wife felt watching him leave every day until he put a deadly weapon into a teenage girl's hands and watched her walk away into the dark. He never knew how much to say; surely some certainties had to be worse than the unknown. So he projected a layer of peace over the roiling chaos just outside the corners of his eyes, and Norie pretended that she could sleep while he was patrolling.

When he slipped into bed beside her, she nestled into his arms and said, "Another quiet night?"

The abyss still yawned below, but at times like these, when her racing pulse slowed against his skin, he remembered not to stare into it. "All's well."

# **The Fool (And the Wisdom to Tell the Difference)**

[Thursday, 12/31]

In the end, in the dark, in the face of certainty, he hoped.

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