

duck and run

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duck and run

by [down](#)

Summary

This is how they meet.

Notes

For 'point' at fan_flashworks on dreamwidth.

"It was meant to be a boring mission!" Umi hissed to herself, more a breath than a sound, as she hauled the very-unconscious body of the Director to the edge of a ditch, and the only real shelter in sight - a low stone bridge which blended in to the reddish dust and rock underfoot, clumps of tough dried-out grass sticking out of the crevices the same as they did everywhere else.

The whole area was baking hot, littered with scrubby low trees and other prickly shrubs, which had veiled their passage enough for Umi to get them away but was hardly a solid screen - or up to hiding them from anyone searching with decent binoculars, or a drone, or anything that would pick up movement. She was relieved to see that at the moment the ditch contained more of a trickle than a stream, and edged towards it, trying not to trip the two of them down the slope.

"Just go to a conference, wear a suit, look fancy. No one mentioned the car-breaking traps and the explosions and the bad guys!"

The Director made no response. She'd been drifting in and out of consciousness as they went, but was very much out right now - hopefully just because of the lump on her head. Umi could do first aid, training had included a fairly extensive course, but they'd lost their kit with the car and all their bags, and she'd never had to use it for real. Not until now. All she had was the clothes she was wearing and the gun strapped to her side, and the Director didn't look like she had much in the way of pockets in her dress either.

Unfortunately she was pretty certain the damp heat against her side wasn't her own blood. She had a cut across her arm, but it didn't seem that bad, just stinging - and she was sweating, but sweat wasn't usually so - tacky.

The people with the heavy weaponry and the carefully disguised explosives hadn't left her a choice about staying put. The driver (poor man) had started to swerve before the explosion hit, seeing the line of watchers up ahead, but the car had still caught on fire as it was flung away. She'd managed to get the director out, at least, the burning car itself giving her cover to do that - the watchers had been waiting for the flames to finish the job, and hopefully hadn't checked yet to find there was only one body, not three. But they were going to find out. It had been almost an hour, she reckoned; she couldn't have much time left to get them as hidden as she could.

She hadn't expected to have this long, but they had seemed slightly less competent assassins. After all, they'd stood there - five figures waiting by their quad bikes - and gave them the warning they needed to not be square on the bomb when it went off.

It was dry as old bones in this scrubland, which would hopefully make it harder to track them - she'd done her best to not leave footprints, and to disturb the dust back over the ones she couldn't avoid, a pine-like branch serving her as a dust-randomising broom. The grasses and trees were tough and took little impression from their passing.

The bridge hadn't been visible from the car. It was practically invisible until you were nearly on it, in fact, but there was a thin track leading to it. Umi had hoped there would be

something out this way, but she hadn't been sure. The track and the ditch had both been on the map she was studying in the car, trying to look productive in front of her new boss as well as entertaining herself - and she hadn't been to the USA since she was a small child, so she had absolutely no idea where they were beyond what she could get from the maps. The driver had been a more experienced agent - no one was going to let the Director go to an international conference with just a rookie - and he'd pulled the maps from the glove compartment and tossed them back to her with an apology. "They're the only things we've got to read," he'd called back.

He hadn't made it out of the car.

Umi glanced back once as she slithered down into the ditch, and she could still see the black smoke on the horizon. Of the enemy, there was no sign at all - then she was too low to see over the brim, and had to concentrate on keeping her feet and all of the Director out of the muddy trickle as she got them into the shadows under the bridge.

It was just high enough she could stand in the middle of it, if she wanted to. Instead, she tucked the two of them up against the side, and flopped to the floor. It was at least a fraction cooler than out under the blazing sun.

She checked her watch. It was now an hour and a half since they'd left the main road.

Grimly, she turned back to the Director and trying to find where she was hurt, hoping someone friendly had been anywhere close enough to have picked up the car's distress signal before it went up in flames - and would somehow find them before the enemy did. She hadn't dared bring a beacon with them.

oOo

Ten minutes, half an hour - it could have been either of those or longer still before a furtive noise coming around the corner in the ditch had her head snapping up, and her hand going for the gun holstered under her arm. She held it ready, pointed to where another tiny sound followed the first - and then someone spoke, muttering very quietly.

"You'd better be here, Em. There's no other cover for miles - you've got to be in this damned ditch, and if you are-"

A strange man rounded the corner, keeping low though he wasn't particularly tall. Pale wisps of hair escaped from underneath a hat as nondescript as the rest of his clothing - an image slightly marred by the large pack he wore and the gun strapped by his side.

Umi stared, but her hands didn't waver - and the man stuttered to a halt, staring first down the barrel of her gun, and then behind her. His eyes widened as he saw the Director, who hadn't stirred since Umi lay her down.

"Em!" he hissed, taking a half step forward before he checked himself, eyeing Umi again. "I'm here to help - how badly is she hurt?"

"Who are you?" Umi demanded, matching his voice so far as low tone and urgency went. She could hear the buzz of several engines starting up in the distance.

"I'm Emeraude's best friend. And you're one of our new recruits - Ryuu-something. Ryuuzaki?" She flinched despite her best efforts to make no reaction - his knowing their names meant nothing, they were listed with the Conference they'd been to. And the enemy choosing to move *now*, as this guy showed up, was a coincidence she did not like. "I thought Roy was with you. Is he-"

Careful not to take her eyes off him, Umi shook her head slightly. "He didn't make it. You're saying you work with the agency too? How come we've never met? Why would you even be on this *continent*?"

"I've been on holiday," he said, and it was an absolute lie, no questions. "I was trying to find you to ask for a lift, my travel plans got a little derailed. Look, is that your blood, or is it hers?" He gestured at the stain on Umi's side, urgent.

"It's not mine."

"Then let me help her. Keep your gun pointed my way, whatever, I'll drop mine over here, but let me help her. Please." He took a breath. "If she's that badly hurt, she needs one of us to do something, and I can hardly make things much worse. Plus, I have a first aid kit."

Umi did her best not to glance back at the pale, still form she was guarding, and eyed him a moment longer, before admitting to herself she had no other reasonable choice. She couldn't help the Director. If he could...

"Take three steps back up the ditch, then drop your pack, gun, and jacket on the ground. And roll your trousers up to the knee and ditch the boots, too."

He stared at her. "You want my boots?" he hissed, sounding perplexed.

"I normally keep knives in mine."

"...Fair point." He even had a knife on his right ankle, as it turned out. He dropped it on the pile of his belongings without hesitation. "I'll need the first aid kit."

"Take it out and leave it on the ground," Umi ordered him. "I'll check it and hand it back."

He obeyed with speed - and when she let him by, he dropped to his knees by the Director with what looked like real worry, reaching for her pulse.

Umi watched a moment as he put her horribly make-shift padding aside to check the wound on the Director's side. "What's your name?" she asked, as his hands worked carefully, checking bruising and cuts.

"Clef," he said, distracted. "I'm Clef. I'm going to need that first aid kit, then we need to get out of here - I have a car about a mile along this ditch. We need to reach it before these friends that you've made reach us."

Sidling along the ditch, she grabbed the first aid kit, looked through it, and grabbed a few things to stick in her pockets before bringing it back to him.

"Why should I trust you?" she asked, hoping her voice didn't waver. She wanted to trust him so badly, but- it didn't make sense, his being here.

He looked up at her with blue, blue eyes, and instead of saying 'because I'm helping you', or 'because you have no choice', he said "You don't have to. In fact, you shouldn't. You just need to make use of me."

oOo

She couldn't remember much of the terrible scrambling along the ditch - it was so short in places, and she had both guns and the pack, coming along behind Clef who had the Director over his back. But eventually they reached the car - hidden inside an old barn behind a rusting metal wall and an even rustier tractor, and she stood trying to get her breath back, sweat trickling between her shoulder blades and a deep ache growing in her chest.

Carefully holding onto his charge with one hand, Clef reached into his pocket and held out the car keys to her. "I can direct you, if you drive - there's a safehouse an hour up the road and I know where there's a local doctor who could make a visit with little fanfare, or if you keep going there's a town about half an hour further on. Em's stable enough to reach either - I think the heat is hurting her almost as much as her side, and the car has aircon."

She had his weapons and his pack. (She'd let him have his boots back, though not the knife.) If she took those keys, she could wait until he got the director in the car then order him out of it, take off and leave him behind with nothing. But still he held the keys out.

This was either a more complicated plan than she could possibly see through, or he was telling the truth. And he'd been swearing under his breath at the Director all the way here.

Umi took a breath, long and slow. "It'll be quicker if you drive, especially if we find trouble. I've got the guns. I should keep my hands free to use them, right?"

A smile bright as the sun flashed across his face, a revelation that twisted something in her chest in a completely unfamiliar way even as it vanished. "Come on, then," was all he said, and between them they got the Director safely laid in the back of the car, stashed the pack, and then Umi came to join him in the front. She was battered and bruised and nowhere near safe, but... hopeful, for the first time since the car had gone off the road.

oOo

It was a bit hair-raising at a couple of points, but they escaped back to the main roads and the safety of witnesses, and that was when the Director finally stirred. Umi didn't notice until she spoke up, voice rusty and confused. "Clef?"

"You couldn't have woken up an hour ago and identified me, of course not," Clef said, shooting a glare at the back seat. "You stay down, we're near to Doctor Taylor's spare place, we'll get you patched up."

"...You're on assignment," the Director continued, still sounding confused.

Clef rolled his eyes, though he stayed facing the road this time. "I'm done. I was trying to find you to see if you could fit me on your plane home, I'm not due out for three days, and that was three days too many to spend with a flock of fluffy baby technicians following me around in confusion."

"Heh." The Director's eyes closed again, but she looked more like a living person than she had when they first reached the car, so Umi started to give some weight to Clef's theory about the heat.

Umi looked at him, frowning. "I guess you really are someone I should know, then," she muttered, slumping lower in her chair with a sigh.

Raising one eyebrow at her, Clef steered the car towards the next off-road. "Well, we've never met. I'd remember someone who makes me take my boots off. So I don't think you should really know me. *Of* me, possibly, but you are very new to the office."

"You had a knife! It was perfectly reasonable!"

"I'd forgotten the knife, and there might have been snakes."

"What, camouflaged on the bare dirt?" She snorted, but let her eyes close, holding her arm a little tighter to her side. "...I'd have remembered you, too."

"Thanks, I think."

She let the noise of the car wash away everything else for a time, until they slowed right down and the surface below turned rough, and opened her eyes to find a one-storey, ratty-looking house in front of them, with peeling blue paint and a screen of trees, no other houses in sight.

"If you let me have my gun back, you stay here with Em, I'll check it through," he offered. "Unless you want to check it yourself?"

"No," Umi said, trying not to look like undoing her seatbelt had sent agony down her side. "That's - fine. Leave the keys?" Not that she knew if she was actually capable of driving, at that moment in time. He handed them across, and she took shallow breaths and counted to ten slowly until he came back, his gun holstered.

"It's fine. I'll get Em, if you could get the pack?"

"Sure." Umi nodded, and the Director woke enough to help slide herself out of the car, leaning on Clef as he got her into the house.

That left Umi alone to slowly ease herself out of the car. She hadn't been hurting like this after the car accident, was all she could think - it wasn't fair she should get through all that then start hurting more-

She heard Clef calling for her just as she tried to pull the pack onto her back, and it hit her side. She wheezed, feeling like someone had just stabbed her right through the lung, and tried to grab the car as her vision fizzled.

A shout, and then Clef was next to her, hands on her arms. "What's wrong- did something-"

"I guess some of it was my blood too," she got out, as everything fizzled out.

oOo

Umi woke, feeling strangely floaty, but warm and barely aware of the aches and pains she was pretty certain she should be feeling. Blinking her eyes open, she stared up at a white-painted ceiling in confusion, and slowly got her arms out from under the light blanket that covered her.

Turning her head, she looked to the open door on the bedroom. Late-evening light was flooding through the windows, giving everything a golden tinge, and she could hear two voices beyond - the Director, and the man who had come to find them. Clef.

Pushing back the blanket, she swung her legs over the bed. She was still in her clothes, but one side of her top had been cut half-way up her side, and she was pretty well bandaged. On shaking legs, she made her way over to the door in time to hear the Director say "Well, whoever I have to apologise to for your vanishing on them, I'm glad you did. Thanks for the rescue."

"That's what friends are for," he said back, and she leaned on the wall so she could see through the gap between door and frame; he was sat on a chair in the next room, hands wrapped about a mug of tea. "But I didn't rescue you this time. Your new recruit did that, very competently; I was just your lift."

"Mm. At least you had good timing for once."

Blinking, Umi turned back to the bed, and shuffled across to it, wrapping herself up again and burying her face in the pillow. That way, if anyone looked in, they wouldn't see the flush on her cheeks - and she was asleep again in a few minutes, resting easier now than before.

It wasn't the boring mission she'd been promised, but maybe... maybe she'd done okay.

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