Forged within Flame

short stories collection

Raymond McNeil

Forged Within Flame

A Collection of Interconnected Short Stories

By Raymond McNeil

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Printed in the United States of America

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Cover illustrations by Elin Tan

First Printing, 2018

ISBN: 9781717935243

Celtic Phoenix Publications
CelticPhoenixPublications@gmail.com

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PREFACE

There is something to be said for putting your right foot forward when embarking on a new venture: it's nervewracking. Even now, after having it vetted by three different editors of varying analytical heat, I am anxious over how this collection of short stories will be received, by both critics and the public at large. Be you the latter or former, I wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart for joining me in my first foray into the literary world. I sincerely hope I do not disappoint!

That said there are a few things I wanted to address before going in, as there are some controversial seas ahead. First and foremost the stories beyond this page contain sexual content involving what most readers in the West would consider minors. This story is set in Japan, which as to this authors understanding has more complicated consent laws than those here in the states. On a technical level, the national age of consent there is thirteen years of age, which may seem appalling to most Western sensibilities, but I assure you there is more to the laws than that singular number. For one, the laws are very specific about the age-range of those in consensual sexual relationships under the age of twenty, with the age gap between participants typically being no greater than one year. If the age gap is any more severe than that the legality is quickly called into question. Secondly, and this is important, much like how states operate in the US, the different prefectures of Japan also have their own laws that can further limit the age range of consent beyond the national law. With all of this in consideration, everything I have detailed in this collection is legally above the board. However this does not speak to societal taboos or norms, of which there is an abundance of conflicting information and accounts.

This comes then to the reason behind including it in these stories. When I decided to sit down and begin penning this collection my goal was to explore a group of characters growing up and learning how to continue living in the face of life's more uncomfortable hardships. In my experience most stories centered around similar premises end up glossing over the latent sexuality of the human condition, a condition that comes into play far earlier in a

person's life than most adults are comfortable admitting. It's that gap in observance that I wanted to explore and how critical those moments are in defining a person's life once they escape the orbit of their teenaged years. This is not to say there is anything explicit in these stories; my principles as both a human and an author vetoed any consideration for that well before I put finger to keyboard. Nor is it to say that sex is the *only* thing present; more often than not sexual overtones and undertones will be eclipsed by a much bigger situation or concept. But all of this is to say that minors will discuss sex, their thoughts will occasionally center on sex, they will joke about sex, be put into uncomfortable situations involving sex and yes, even *have* sex.

But on more pleasant topics, there is something to be said about the format of this book. You'll notice that it's a 'Collection of Short Stories' and not a novel, novella or any variation thereof. Each story was written and intended to be an individual piece unreliant of any previous or subsequent work, and theoretically speaking should be readable and understandable in any given order, barring the installments that required two parts to function properly. However, the works included in the 'Fireworks' grouping can be read as a single, cohesive narrative tapestry that provides a greater context and understanding for the happenings in the lives of these characters. Meanwhile, the 'Wild Fire' grouping serves more as an extended epilogue for this tapestry and can be read in any order based on personal preference.

Wrapping this overlong preface up, I would like to give a huge thank you to Harrison Calla, Ben L., and Stephen Rothenfield for all reviewing and editing this work for me. Without any of their biting criticism this collection would be nothing but gibberish distinguished only by its questionable use of commas and the glut of malapropisms that plague it.

Now, without further preamble, I hope you enjoy reading *Forged Within Flame*.

FIREWORKS

Directed, with a purpose

Sparks

May, 2010 – May, 2011

It was days like today that made her wonder why she was so lucky.

Well, 'lucky' wasn't the most befitting of words, she supposed. It would probably be for the best if she didn’t throw it around so loosely considering her living situation. Yet, here she was, hale and hardy; sole survivor of the car crash that'd taken her parents' lives a year ago to the day.

Being at a festival almost felt wrong. Perhaps that's why Mahiru had volunteered to help bake for one of the vendors; a type of penance for wanting to go to the local fireworks show as a guilty pleasure. The work was simple enough and well within her skill set and it made her feel like she wasn't making light of the tragedy that had abruptly malformed her life.

She just got done handing out the last of the crepes, passing back a smattering of change to the customer, when the stand's manager rounded out from behind the rolling skillets, doughy hand rag thrown over his shoulder.

"Alright Okawa, looks like we got things covered here for the rest of the night. You go ahead and enjoy the festival," the man said, a gentle smile settling on his lips.

Mahiru shuddered.

"Really?" she asked, eyes flying to her watch. Through a cloud of flour she could barely make out the time. It was far later than she'd expected. The blonde raised her head, eyebrows flying into her hairline, "But, well, there's still another hour left of the festival! I can still make another batch of muffins if you let me!"

The protest was met with an amused sigh. "Don't worry, we've been doing this for years; you've already helped enough as it is.

Besides, the missus already told me she won't stand for a 13 year old missing out on such a fun festival."

Speak of the devil, a dark plume of hair peaked out from around the fryers, a distended belly partially obscured by the blocky utility. "Hey, you're telling Mahiru to leave, right?"

The man gave a pleasant huff, "Yes dear."

"And is she refusing to go?"

"Just like you said."

Mahiru watched the back and forth move by so smoothly; the relaxed tone, the graceful interplay. The two adults were captivating.

"Well, tell her she's fired; she's too damn nice. Makin' me look bad in front of the customers!" the woman ordered, the serious tone in her voice only thinly obscuring a more playful motive.

"Are you sure that's not just because of the hormones? You *are* about to pop, dear," the man chuckled.

"Oh, just wait till we get home mister, I'll show *you* what 'popping' is really like!" the woman sniggered back. Mahiru had to stifle a giggle at the retort, though she felt there might have been something underlining the banter. "But really," the woman groaned, pulling herself out from behind the fryers, "go out there and have fun girl. He and I can handle the last hour trickle on our own. We didn't mean to have you captive all day."

Mahiru's mouth opened a fraction, a single 'buh' syllable escaping before a finger was placed twixt her lips.

"Ah, ah, ah, no 'buts' missy. You will get out of that apron," the wife explained, ripping the offending article off the young teen, "you will take this bag of treats, on the house," a brown bag of sweets from the vendor was shoved into her hands, "and you will enjoy the rest of this festival like a regular girl your age. Because that's what you *are*."

The ravenette slapped the blonde's shoulder and shoved her out the stall, into the space between venues.

"Now, I am an emotional pregnant woman; I don't want to see your face for the rest of the night or else I might cry. Go!"

And like that Mahiru was pushed off into the night, abandoned by her employers to the wilds of a Golden Week festival.

The woman's smile slipped from her lips as Mahiru's blonde ponytail vanished into the crowd, "…She's too young to be so…"

"Responsible?" her husband finished. "You weren't kidding about that whole crying thing, were you?"

The woman shook her head. "I really might… I'm barely holding it back now, honestly… No one that sweet should have gone through something like that…"

"Well," the man replied, resting his hands on his wife's shoulders, "I'm at least glad we could help her, if only a little bit."

The woman slipped her fingers into his. "So am I…"

She leaned into his hold, smiling up at him and kissing him on the lips.

The quiet between them tied nicely into the ambiance of the festival, leaving them alone in their own little bubble.

She smiled. "And I wasn't lying to you about showing what 'popping' *really* means when we get home, mister."

The woman popped her lips for emphasis, smiling and leaning into another kiss.

"Then maybe we should close down the stand early," the man replied back.

O/o\O

Mahiru sighed, leaning back on the temple steps, one hand languidly resting on her stomach. She'd downed a good third of the dango the manager's wife had given her, along with one of the taiyaki, and she was already feeling full.

She considered, briefly, that maybe having a big breakfast hadn't been such a great idea, but the other half of her brain argued back that she hadn't planned on eating during the festival. She hadn’t planned on doing *anything*.

Sucking in the cooling air, Mahiru frowned. The couple had rushed her off, and she appreciated the effort, but without baking she was left with nothing to occupy her mind from the buzzing of the festival, the beat of distant drums, the squeals and screams in the distance, the flashes of the headlights, the blood on her hands, the

way her mother had cried as Mahiru had dragged herself from the wreckage, the way her mother had reached for her in her last moments, the way her father's head had bee-

"Y-you gonna finish that?"

Mahiru snapped up, spine straight. The words were barely a whisper and here she was practically leaping ten feet up; at this rate a squeaking mouse could have bowled her over.

Golden eyes fell upon a fiery spirit in a ratty green kimono, a girl no older than herself and irrefutably more uncomfortable where she was standing. The redhead's arms were crossed and demure, her face angled off to the side, completely avoiding eye contact, pink crossing two gently puffed cheeks.

"…What?" The question was reflexive, almost completely unconscious, and it shocked Mahiru almost as much as the flinching girl.

The redhead nodded to the box of dango situated in Mahiru's lap before looking away once more. "That… are-are you gonna finish it?"

The words digested and Mahiru let her face soften into a warm smile.

"I wasn't planning on it-…" she started. The redhead didn't even bat an eye before narrowing her brows.

"You better not waste it!" the other girl snapped, her face going from shy to enraged in a heartbeat.

Mahiru flinched, her hands tightening around the box instinctually. The grip only loosened a few seconds later when she managed to recompose herself, doing her best to seem calm despite the sudden outburst.

"I-I… as I was saying," Mahiru stuttered, "as I was saying, I wasn't planning on it… so if you want it, you can have it."

The box was extended, Mahiru's smile wavering ever so slightly while specks of doubt prickled at her thoughts. That doubt faded the minute the other girl blanched, eyes completely averted.

A second passed before the girl took the box and sat down beside Mahiru, her eyes never leaving the flimsy container. It was only when the girl got closer that Mahiru could tell how gaunt the

redhead was: cheeks sunken, eyes dark, her yukata hanging from emaciated wrists and bony ankles. There was no doubt in Mahiru's mind that if she were to see the girl's stomach she'd see a flap of skin pulled taut over constricted ribs.

A hesitant, bony hand dropped to the half-eaten skewer of sweet rolls, fingers twitching as the redhead seemed to wage an internal battle. After a moment of thought, she dug in, downing the half eaten stick and it's still full sister in a fraction of what it had taken Mahiru to do the same.

The blonde watched, both fascinated and horrified by the behavior.

The ambient crowds around them to filled the air unabated; children screaming, teenagers laughing, adults talking, all mixing around like a milky summer elixir.

Then, the first hint of tears.

The redhead shuddered, long, unruly bangs hiding her eyes, though there was no mistaking the glitter of dew falling from her cheeks.

"Th-thank you… a-and I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap…"

A sleeve jumped to the girl's eyes, a hard sniff resonating behind crimson locks.

Slowly, Mahiru reached out a hand to the girl's, gripping down on the knuckles gently when the redhead tried to jerk away.

"Are… you okay?" Mahiru asked, brows furrowing.

"Eh?" the girl grunted, finally raising her eyes to meet Mahiru's for the first time that night. "What? Yeah, 'f'course I'm fine…"

The words were hollow, much like the girl's sallow lips.

"Because eating ten dango that fast is rather… alarming…" the blonde noted with a wince, freehand stroking through her ponytail.

To her surprise, a genuine, albeit strained, laugh escaped from the girl, bordering on a bark, "If you think that's scary, you should've seen me when I was younger. I could eat for days before…"

The words trailed off.

Mahiru tightened her hold on the girl's hand, only for the redhead to finally wrest it away.

"I…" the girl droned, the smile from her laugh vanishing in a flash, "m-my sister… my family… we don' got much to eat…"

Mahiru watched as the girl glared into the empty dango box, eyes trailing over what remained of the sticky sauce. The redhead's hand was svelte, dripping with soy that spilled over her fingers and between her knuckles to pool in puddles of red below her-. No. It was soy sauce. It was *only* soy sauce.

"I… I didn't mean to eat… I mean… I wanted some for Aiko…" the redhead mumbled, pricks of tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

Mahiru stared for a moment longer before offering the gentlest smile she could muster. Without a moment's hesitation she plopped the brown bag of goodies right into the girl's lap, letting her grin widen when the redhead blinked back at her in confusion and surprise.

"I wasn't going to eat all of that; I'm already full for tonight and if I want sweets I can always make more," Mahiru explained. "And, if you want anymore, the dango I helped make weren't exactly selling well since I think another booth down the line had a better asking price… So I'm sure I could ask the manager if he'd be willing to part with a few extra skewers after closing… that is if you don't mind them being cold…"

The redhead was dumbstruck, mouth parted, letting Mahiru catch sight of sauce residue gracing the girl's jaw. The miniature chef plucked a napkin from the bag and dabbed at the girl's face, causing the wild girl to turn away with the dusty pink coloring renewing on her cheeks.

"…D-dad told me to not trust strangers who were too nice…" the girl growled, though there didn't seem to be much bite in her bark.

"Well… I mean… if you don't want it then," Mahiru sighed, coy smile tilted *just* out of the redhead's eyesight. The girl seemed to get the picture.

"No! No!" the redhead spouted. "I-I do! Really! Please!"

Immediately the girl was on her knees, prostrating herself to the blonde, who was taken aback by such a desperate gesture. Mahiru shook her head, laughing as she stood and patted the girl on the back.

"No, no, you don'- I was kidding, I'm going to help you!" the blonde explained, helping the girl stand. Mahiru dove into the girl's red irises, doing her best to beam her brightest smile. "I'd never take back an offer to help someone. Ever."

She ended the little speech by resting her hands on the girl's shoulders, feeling the shaking bones underneath her fingers. It might have been an illusion, but she thought she heard the girl rattling.

"I… I…" the girl sniffed, lowering her head. In a blink the girl was wrapped around her, pawing at Mahiru's back in a desperate attempt to hold the blonde closer. Mahiru returned the hold, though the sudden spike in both affection and adoration put her a little off-kilter in more ways than one.

"T-thank you, thankyouthankyouthankyou so much!" the redhead bawled, rubbing her face into Mahiru's shoulder.

Mahiru patted the girl's back, and though she herself felt incredibly uneasy, she allowed herself to relax into the hold.

"Not a problem," Mahiru sighed. A few stray moments passed before she managed to peel the redhead off her, extricating her face from the fiery locks that framed the girl's back.

"I… didn't… I'm Makoto, Makoto Ume," the girl beamed, tears still staining her cheeks. The blonde closed her eyes, keeping her grin constant.

"Mahiru Okawa. It's nice to meet you, Miss Ume," Mahiru laughed. She pulled herself from Makoto's grasp, picking up the errant doggy bag.

A distant flash signaled the start of the fireworks display for the night, a distant rumbling echoing through the town in the wake of the first explosion.

Using her free hand, Mahiru looped a palm around one of Makoto's, clasping it like a singular claw, a nice, friendly, calming gesture. Smile never fading, she asked a very simple question: "So, should we go get those treats for your family?"

Makoto nodded, her eyes alight with distant fireworks, both real and figmented.

That night, for the first time since the accident, Mahiru's thoughts escaped their dwellings on her horrendously amazing luck.

O/o\O

"I'm comin' in!"

The jubilant voice bounded around the room, giving Mahiru pause as she removed the lasagna from the oven. Setting the heated dish on its cooling rack, she removed her oven mitts and patted her hands to dust off a smattering of dough that had caked its way onto her fingers.

"Welcome h-back, Makoto!" Mahiru smiled, running a finger over one of her laurel wreath braids. "I'm in the kitchen finishing up dinner!"

It had been quite some time since they'd met, a year to the day if it weren't for the leap year, so the casual way that Makoto entered Mahiru's apartment wasn't all too surprising. It was almost ritual at this point for the redhead to spend time with the blonde when she wasn't at school or off helping her father with church work. Heck, Mahiru would have guessed that she and Makoto probably spent the majority of their time together, going so far as to get Father Ume's blessing for Makoto to stay over at Mahiru's a few times each week since she lived so close to school. It probably helped that her tutoring almost singlehandedly kept Makoto's grades afloat.

The two had become fast friends after the festival the year prior. Originally, Mahiru had thought the two would never see each other again after that night; play good Samaritan and never reap the results of her labor, a fitting trade off for finding enjoyment on the anniversary of her parents' deaths.

But, lo and behold, shirking Makoto wasn't something she had been able to do so easily. No, following the close of Golden Week and her return to school, Mahiru found out that she and Makoto were actually in the same school, in the same grade even, though not in the same classroom (obviously). Finding each other during lunch

had been a treat for the two (though, more so for Makoto, considering she swiped a healthy portion of Mahiru's homemade bento). They made plans to see each other after class and the rest had become history for the two.

Mahiru found the less emaciated Makoto to be entertaining in her own right: an active and spunky girl who often prided herself on her dedication to the good in people. Despite a consistently crass exterior, marred by irreverence for polite conversation and a shirking of social taboos, the redhead often seemed to have other people's best interest at heart, and at the very least tried to make others around her smile. She was far and away a departure from the desperate girl Mahiru had met on those temple steps a year back.

For her part, the blonde had embraced the companionship that came with Makoto. Normally she'd have writhed against it, an affront to her family's tragedy, but Makoto carried with her an aura of determination and finality; she wanted to be Mahiru's friend, she was staying, and Mahiru had the choice to embrace that or utterly reject a good person who'd done nothing wrong.

And she supposed it was for the best. In a way, she was still doing a service. Makoto was *much* healthier now that Mahiru was offering her food every lunch period. It had been quite a surprise to learn that the redhead was actually quite tonned from hours of playing soccer on a community team, making her a rather stark contrast to the emaciate husk Mahiru had met the year prior. It also probably helped sway Father Ume when Makoto kept asking to stay over; he'd know that those nights Makoto would be fed. Very often he actually requested Aiko stay with the pair as well, something Mahiru was just fine allowing. Apparently a priest's wages weren't something that could help raise a family, especially after being cut off from the main sect due to 'theological and philosophical differences'.

Mahiru herself lived alone, an artifact of some legal mumbo-jumbo she only vaguely understood, so the company wasn't going to bother her. Plus, it felt good using some of her inheritance for someone's benefit other than her own, so it was in some ways a net-gain for everyone. She'd even gotten in the habit of making a weekly

meal to share with the Umes, where the five of them would enjoy it over at the family's household.

One such meal was just about done: a full course of Italian dishes, a switch up from her usual traditional choices. Of course, she almost *always* erred on the side of making western desserts, no matter the circumstance; she found the stronger flavors and varied presentations attractive and often leapt at the challenge of trying a new baking recipe. Tonight's dessert was composed of individual tiramisu bites topped with a light strawberry sauce, something she was *very* eager to hear feedback on.

"Mmm… Mahiru, it smells amazing!" Makoto cooed, floating into the room on the tips of her toes. Her eyes were closed and a small trail of drool was already threatening to roll from her lips.

The blonde gave Makoto a soft poke on the forehead, snapping the redhead out of her daze with a sheepish grin.

"Remember the last time you walked in here with your eyes closed? I don't want to clean up any pickles today," Mahiru droned, doing her best to stifle her own smile.

The girl pouted, crossing her arms, oversized cerulean sweat jacket scrunching with the effort, "I'm not normally that clumsy, y'know. The floor was still wet from mopping. Even the best goalie on the planet would've lost their balance."

Mahiru removed her finger and nodded to the food. "Well, if you want to prove you're not clumsy, 'Miss Goalie', you can help me pack this all up to go. We should still have about an hour to get to your house, but I want to make sure the meal is still warm so heating it up doesn't take quite so long."

"Sure!" Makoto chirped, slipping over to the counter. And slipping *was* an appropriate term because a tile of Mahiru's floor chose that moment to slide out from under the redhead's foot.

The girl staggered forward, hands immediately reaching out for support. In a flash Mahiru was at her side, shielding Makoto from the impending counter with her own body. The two were captured by the sudden spike of adrenaline and its inevitable slow decline.

The chef let out a relieved sigh, chuckling, "Welp, proof's in the pudding Makoto…"

That's when Mahiru noticed where Makoto's face had landed. Things had changed rather abruptly after meeting Makoto, for only a month after meeting the other girl Mahiru had entered pubescence, with a whole host of irritations and embarrassing problems following right behind. The first had been the onset of a certain monthly inconvenience. The second had been the rather… generous bosom that Makoto's face was now wedged firmly in between.

Faces flushed the shade of Makoto's hair, Mahiru slowly peeled the shorter girl away.

Makoto scratched her cheek and looked away. "P-pudding… right…" The redhead immediately looked to the hall, crimson eyes flickering under an array of unreadable thoughts. "L-look… M-Mahiru… I gotta… use the bathroom…"

"Y-yeah…" Mahiru agreed, her own eyes flying to the window. "You should have done that before offering to help. Remember to wash your hands…" She tried to make her voice sound less curt, but her mind was far more distracted by the beating in her ears and the pressure in her chest.

"Mmm… yeah… I'll… I'll do that…" Makoto nodded, dashing off. There was an audible clack a few seconds later.

Once the door was closed, Mahiru allowed herself to uncoil, one hand leaning down on the counter while the other clawed at her chest. This was, she was sure, the third and most problematic of the things brought on by puberty: the gradual but intense attraction to her best friend.

Mahiru hadn't exactly been a late bloomer; there were plenty of signs of her adolescence over the last few years (hair, she remembered having a lot of issues with hair; those had been dark days), and she'd started feeling attraction to the people around her well before she'd met Makoto… but Makoto was the only real friend she'd had after the accident, at least the only friend her age.

There had been a number of issues that arose with the budding realization, compounding her irritation with the growing process. Front most was the question of whether she was actually gay. After some soul searching (and some… other types of searching) she found herself to be rather flexible on the matter,

though by all means Makoto was the only person she knew who'd captured her eyes.

She'd heard about how hormones got the best of people, how they'd swing between different emotions on a dime and attractions would flicker at a moment's notice. But damnit if every single time her golden eyes met red Mahiru's knees became weak by the sheer force of that earnest smile alone.

"And now I almost suffocated her in my breasts… great," Mahiru huffed, giving her breasts an irritated push. She didn't see why boys were so attracted to them; all they did was throw her natural balance off and give her back problems forty years earlier than she was supposed to have them. That also wasn't accounting for how expensive bras were for C cups at age seventeen; she was convinced it was a racketeering ring.

There was a flush from the hall, the sink spouting to life a hair later.

Mahiru swallowed, trying to compose herself, slowly smoothing out her frilled white blouse.

The door opened and Makoto came around the bend, looking far less flustered and far more relaxed.

"A'ight! Ready to go!" The redhead grinned, throwing out a confident thumbs-up.

Thick, uncertain air dispelled from around the two following Makoto's assurance, letting Mahiru give an unintentional sigh of relief.

"Good, now help me with this pan, it's a tricky one…"

And with that, things returned to normal, or as normal as things could get between an orphan and a priest's daughter.

With the food packed up and ready to go Mahiru donned a light blue cardigan and joined Makoto in putting her shoes on.

"Oh yeah, you did that princess braid thing with your hair today, too," Makoto noted, tightening a rabbit ear and standing to her full height.

Mahiru touched a finger to her hair, smiling. "Yes, I think I rather like it. I isn't too terribly hard to pull off, either."

"Well, it looks good on you. I hope you keep it around." Makoto shot another 100-watt smile and Mahiru's heart almost burst through her chest.

Dinner was going to be quite the ordeal.

O/o\O

"Look, it's not my fault you're bad at catching fish…" Makoto huffed, stuffing her hands behind her head.

"It's less that and more that an 11 year old showed me up four times in a row…" Mahiru groaned, poking at the bagged koi. The fish flittered to the other side of the pouch to avoid the intruding finger.

Makoto bumped into the blonde's side. "Aw, c'mon. At least you caught one. Remember how bummed I was after that pickup soccer game where I wiffed like three scoring shots? You've got nothing on that."

Mahiru glared at the tongue sticking out of Makoto's mouth.

After dinner the Umes and Mahiru had changed out of their street clothing and into traditional festival fair before heading down to the stalls for a pleasant evening of games and familial shenanigans. They had all agreed to go together several weeks back, though Mahiru was somewhat hesitant to turn down the same offer to cook as she'd had the year prior. Ultimately she'd dedicated herself to spending time with Makoto's family, leaving her kimono over at the household during the previous week's dinner get-together.

Aiko, Makoto's younger sister, had managed to outdo Mahiru at almost every carnival game, leaving the buxom blonde distraught with her 'cool big sister' image irrevocably tarnished. At the very least, Makoto being better than her was fair: the two were the same age. But someone three years her junior absolutely destroying her at catching koi had been a major blow to her ego. Though, she *did* make up for it in some small part by creaming both Makoto and Aiko at the shooting gallery games.

The Umes had headed home only a few minutes prior, taking with them the exhausted Aiko and leaving Makoto under Mahiru's care for the night.

Mahiru found the mood delightful; the lanterns spreading diffused light over the stalls, the people creating an amiable background noise, and the smells that told of hundreds of ready-to-be-eaten sweets and snacks.

For a time, she and Makoto just glided through the stalls, perusing but never stopping, enjoying each other's company and conversation. At some point down the line the two had linked hands.

Eventually the night began to wane, with stalls packing up and people dispersing and heading home. By this time the red-gold duo found themselves on the steps of the shrine, sitting comfortably on the stone steps. They were content in the silence, Mahiru absently running her thumb over the webbing of Makoto's hand.

"This is nice…" Mahiru sighed, leaning back. "Look at how much has managed to change in a year… Maybe this shrine is good luck…"

Makoto was silent, her gaze squaring away into the distance, towards the stall workers but never quite reaching them.

A choked question dropped from the redhead's lips. "Can I be… honest with you? About something...?"

Mahiru cocked her head to the side, orange yukata sliding over her collarbone. "What is it?"

Makoto clenched her teeth before gently extracting her hand from Mahiru's grasp. A sardonic grin met her face.

"I was terrified when we first met," Makoto explained, hugging her knees. "I didn't know who you were, but… I was starving. My whole family was starving… And we're still struggling, but you…" In a rare scene, Makoto's trademark grin softened into a gentler smile. "You were a real hero. You still are, especially if you ask Aiko. Your meals are a highlight every week. Dad and Mom might not say much more than 'thank you', but I can tell, every time you walk through that door with your meals they relax, like you lift a burden off their shoulders, if only for a night or two."

Mahiru sucked in a breath. She had noticed the shift in the Ume family; the way they always complimented her cooking far more than she thought it was actually worth, the way they hoarded the

leftovers, and the borderline tears that appeared whenever she'd show up and surprise them with a second meal that week.

A well of feeling bubbled in her chest, not all of it comfortable, most of it embarrassing.

"So… thanks, I guess…" Makoto mumbled. "Y-you changed my life, y'know? My whole family… things with you around have been better. They always are when you're around…"

The look on Makoto's face was one Mahiru had only seen twice before, though in a far different context. Humility, a rare trait for the athlete to display; normally she was pompous, spry and could at times be condescending (especially when someone challenged her father's teachings), and though she could acknowledge when someone was better at something than her, this was something else entirely.

This was the look she gave her father when Mahiru had decided to visit one of the pastor's sermons. This was the look when she'd first thanked Mahiru for sharing her food a year back. This was the look of Makoto putting someone completely and utterly over herself.

Mahiru felt those uncomfortable feelings burbling over. This was wrong. Makoto was wrong.

She sucked in a breath and began to speak, "I stuttered today… when you came over…"

Makoto perked, clearly not expecting the tangential remark.

"I…" the blonde started, trying to piece together her words from the slaw in her head, "I wanted to say… 'Welcome Home'… I wanted to hold you close and never let go." She winced, the admission as embarrassing as it was painful. "I… I'm lonely, Makoto. You might have been scared when you met me… but as much as I know it won't happen, I'm scared that you're going to leave…"

"Mahiru…" Makoto breathed the air in a singular, surprised gust.

The chef continued, "It's easy to be kind… it's hard to be kind and stay sane… You've helped me realize a lot of things, and one of them is that I need to be selfish sometimes, even when it feels wrong to be…"

Her friend wrapped a calming hand around her own, reconnecting the two, wordlessly letting the blone vent. Mahiru could feel a rapid pulse through calloused layers of skin.

"I don't deserve to be happy like this… My parents died because of me… and here I am replacing them with another family that makes me happy…" Mahiru observed, tears dribbling from her eyes.

Makoto's finger scraped at the blonde's cheeks. She pulled her into a hug, letting the tears deepen the jade of her yukata.

"My dad says everyone deserves to be happy. And if life is unfortunate, we help pick each other up; that's just basic human decency," Makoto cooed, brushing a finger along one of Mahiru's braids. "God has a plan," the redhead continued, nuzzling into Mahiru's neck and closing her eyes. "Maybe He knew we needed each other… Maybe we were always destined to meet. Whatever it is, I could never blame you for anything that happens; you're like an angel…" Makoto pulled back and smiled, letting Mahiru dry her eyes, "… and what kind of idiot would blame an angel for being a little selfish from time to time?"

The two looked at each other, gold meeting red in mutual, unspoken appreciation.

That was before Makoto's eyes dulled a degree, causing the redhead to look away. She swallowed.

"And… what you said about being selfish sometimes… even when you feel it's wrong…"

Makoto seemed to steel herself, gulping in a mouthful of air before letting it turn to vapor in the night sky. Then, with little warning, she lunged forward and caught Mahiru's lips on her own.

Golden irises widened before the fire that Mahiru had kept tamed in the pit of her stomach decided to loose itself and she melted into the kiss. She lost track of how long the kisses lasted before they pulled back for air, but the fact they needed to breathe told her all she needed to know.

They peeled apart, though Makoto immediately wrapped her arms back around Mahiru and pulled her close.

"I love you, Mahiru…" Makoto whispered, for only for the blonde to hear.

Mahiru returned the hug, leaving a hesitant, but gentle kiss on Makoto's neck. "I love you too, Makoto…"

They pulled apart and looked at each other once again. Almost immediately they launched into another cavalcade of pecks, each more feverish than the last.

"Your dad though… the church," Mahiru asked in between the heated kisses.

Makoto hesitated before stealing another kiss. Eventually she pulled back and replied, "There's… a reason we all got excommunicated…" She shook her head, kneading her forehead against Mahiru's. Huffing and out of breath, the two met eyes. "Well, there are lots of them, but he's… okay with *this* stuff. Maybe not comfortable with it, but…"

"I think I get the picture." Mahiru smiled, threading a finger into Makoto's unkempt mane. "So… do you think we sh-should tell him?"

"N-no," Makoto answered, her head shaking a fraction faster, "he's been under a lot of stress, moreso now because I think we're almost out of money to keep the church: I… I saw the bills. He's been trying to hide it from us, but he hasn't been sleeping and it's starting to make him… *jumpy*." A dry grin wormed its way onto her mouth. "I think the shock of his little girl dating, let alone… well… *you know*, would give him a heart attack. So… maybe just you and me for now, then mom and Aiko, then we can work up to dad… okay?"

"You've… really been thinking about this," Mahiru remarked, brows rising till they brushed the bottom of Makoto's forehead.

"I've been trying to work up the nerve to do this for, what? Three months now?" Makoto chuckled. "I think I've already thought through the big things…"

"'The big things,' huh?" the blonde tittered. There was a brief pause just before Mahiru took in a little extra air with her next breath. "Then… well… uh… My bed is actually pretty cold…"

The blonde's face went red as she looked to the left, her insides boiling to a melting point.

"What?" Makoto asked, the sudden confusion breaking the mood. "Your bed's one of the comfiest things in your house, how could it be cold? Why is that even relevant…?"

Mahiru grimaced under her blush. "Makoto… that's not what I was… uh… asking…"

Makoto blinked, her own face lighting up even brighter than before. "Oh… Ooooh…"

There was one final moment of quiet before Makoto cupped Mahiru's face in her hands and pulled her into a slow, long kiss; an answer through action and not words.

Not a single syllable was spoken after that. The two gathered themselves, cupped hands, and made their way back to Mahiru's apartment.

Or as they called it, home.

O/o\O

Another year had come and gone. Another blissful year.

Mahiru watched Makoto's sleeping form, the redhead's hair sprawled out like webs on the satin pillows. She trailed a finger through the locks, letting each strand drip back to the bed, liquid in its movement.

Sadly though, as the rising sun in the window could tell her, the pair had little time to enjoy the morning. Perhaps once they were out of school they could laze around in bed together all they wanted, but as two fifteen year olds looking to pass pre-calculus they had priorities to attend to.

Mahiru nudged her girlfriend, engaging the patented 'Makoto wakeup sequence' as Aiko had so dubbed it. First a choked breath as the drool pooling in her mouth drained back down her throat, then a closed-mouth scowl, followed closely by a stretch and a yawn, both of which culminated in her eyes finally opening.

"What's'it? Time t'get up alrea'y?" the other girl mumbled, ruffling the sheets around her bare skin.

The blonde nodded, kissing Makoto's forehead before slipping out of bed. "Yep. Why don't you head to the bathroom and I'll get

breakfast started. Anything in particular you want for lunch?"

Makoto shrugged, languidly slipping from her own side of the bed. "That pork last night was pretty good. I wouldn't mind if you did something with that."

Mahiru nodded, sliding on her bathrobe and bracing a hand against the door. "I'll see what I can whip up."

Peaceful mornings like this were what Mahiru lived for these days. A moment in time inescapable, the moment she could do the thing she loved most for the person she loved on a lovely spring day.

A stray thought filtered through her mind, of whether Mrs. Ume had the same musings on pleasant mornings like today. Did she dote over her husband? Cook him something for breakfast before he set out to preach his word? Kiss him goodbye has he left out the door? It was easy to imagine the woman doing that once, but now it was harder to conjure, especially considering both parents were practically ghosts. Even with how much Mami had set out to help them the Ume’s home life never really improved, and while she was happy it gave her an easy excuse for Kyoko to stay over almost indefinitely there was no joy when she learned Mr. Ume had sold the home attached to their church in order to keep the building funded.

The family moved to a smaller, more manageable apartment nearby, a cheaper alternative but by no means a solution to the family’s woes. Mahiru was almost at the point of offering her own lodgings for the family, more ardently than the easily brushed aside, more polite offers she’d made previously. It didn’t help that none of the Ume’s knew how deep her relationship with Makoto went, a rabbithole that would no doubt be discovered and filled if the whole family were to move in. Pride had kept Mr. Ume from accepting the offer; desire had kept Mahiru from offering it in earnest.

All the same there would reach a time when Mahiru would have no choice but to propose the idea as a serious option, especially since Makoto had recently begun voicing the idea herself, so for now all she could do was enjoy each morning she had left alone with Makoto and pray that the Ume’s find some way to recover their livelihood before the proposition had to be put on the table.

She had just gotten done with the eggs when a pair of arms wrapped around her waist and a chin rested on her shoulders, a soft reminder of happier times the broke her from her dour ruminations.

"Gotta love me some eggs." A wicked, playful tooth printed into her skin. "Sunny side up like my sun…"

Mahiru snorted, craning her head to look at her lover. "What's got you in such a romantic mood?"

"Do I need a reason when you're dressed like you are?" Makoto asked, playing with the knot keeping Mahiru's robe in place. Mahiru slapped the hand away, chuckling.

"Oh please, we don't have any time this morning. Don't try to tease me like that," the blonde scolded, gently peeling her girlfriend away. At the beginning of their relationship they'd both missed a smattering of schooldays, or at the very least arrived late, due to a proclivity for… exploring the bounds of their relationship in the mornings. And while Mahiru had to admit that those experiences were some of the most pleasant she'd ever had, she had a far better grasp on her hormones at this point. What would once get them scolded at school could be easily put off until the duo had finished their homework at the end of the day.

"Drat," Makoto muttered, waltzing away from the kitchen, towards the bedroom. "Well, if I ain't usin' this smokin' body, might as well put clothes on it!" the redhead chortled.

Just as she went beyond the hallway's divider, the phone rang.

"Mako, can you get that? I'm in the middle of something here," Mahiru asked, rearranging the eggs very carefully so they wouldn't burn.

"Yep yep," the girl yawned, popping back from around the corner clad only in panties and the school's button up dress shirt. Mahiru made sure to avert her gaze; the first step to resisting temptation was to avoid it entirely.

"This is the Okawa house, how can I help you?" Makoto chirped into the receiver.

The sound of eggs was joined by panicked speech on the other end of the line.

Mahiru's spine went cold at the sound; something familiar for all the wrong reasons.

"What?!" Makoto gasped, her voice raising an octave halfway through. Mahiru glanced back and watched as Makoto's fist tightened around the handset. If she wasn't mistaken, cracks were forming in the plastic. "Where are they?!" The shout was harsh, bitter, scared.

The voice seemed to respond for only a scant second before Makoto dropped the receiver where she was standing and bolted into the bedroom.

"Makoto?!" Mahiru shouted, confusion leaking from the lone word. "Makoto! What's going on? What's wrong?"

Panic began to build in her chest.

Before she could blink her girlfriend was hopping out of the bedroom, one hand fastening a skirt while the other pulled a mismatched pair of socks up higher. Clothes disheveled, but on, she moved toward the front door, only pausing when Mahiru stood in her way.

"Makoto, what the hell has gotten into you?" Mahiru shrieked. An invisible force had her chest in a vise and with every word she spoke the acid in her stomach crawled further up her throat.

Makoto gave her girlfriend a single look, brimmed with tears, fear, and fury. And then those same eyes slowly began to widen, staring deeper and deeper beyond the blonde, almost as if they were piercing into Mahiru's very soul.

The redhead staggered back, blinking with her mouth agape before she shook her head, buried her chin in her sternum and sprinted for the door without a single word.

A minute later and she'd vanished completely from the apartment, with only a whirlwind of chaos left in her wake.

Mahiru's body felt numb as she padded into the kitchen. The look on Makoto's face had done more to terrify her than any car crash ever could. She could only imagine the look on her own: the dull, confused and empty stare that searched for answers with none to find… until she spotted the downed phone.

Clawing for it, she pressed it to her ear.

"Hello? Are you still there?" Mahiru asked.

"*Ah, yes… Who is this?*" a man replied.

"This is Mahiru Okawa, Makoto was staying over today… But you already knew that since you knew where to call…" she muttered, fingers playing with the hem of her robe.

"*I see…*"

"She… just left… I don't know where she's going, but can you please tell me what happened? She… she… The Umes are like family to me…" Mahiru pleaded, hoping that would give her some leeway.

"*Oh… uh… well… actually, this concerns them… you see, there's been an incident of sorts…*"

And for the next five minutes Mahiru listened to the man recount how Makoto's father had tried to murder his entire family before attempting suicide.

For the first time since her parents had died, Mahiru cried her eyes out.

O/o\O

A week later they met on the steps of the shrine, as they had so many times before. Only this time, there was no levity. There was no relief. There was only a thrumming in the air and the distant buzz of premature cicadas.

Pure pressure emanated from Makoto’s tensed shoulders, a force so great it left a bloody gap spanning between them in its wake: the paltry meters between them made lightyears.

"Makoto…" Mahiru started, taking a light step forward. Even with her voice as soft as it could possibly the athlete jolted at the word, a sleeping bear jarred awake by a child’s stick.

Makoto stepped back in response, her eyes buried in her bangs. Her mouth edged into a scowl.

"Just… stay back!" the redhead snapped.

Mahiru's hand, which had been outstretched, recoiled back, burned by words alone. The blonde frowned, fingers gripping the fabric of her shirt over her heart. "…Are they okay…?"

The wind created an extra rift between the two, howling from the tunnel created by the park pathway.

"They're… recovering… But…" Makoto's words were bitter, cold. Even at this distance Mahiru could see the twin streams hedging down the girl's face. "We're… We're going… Moving to Anashikio…"

Anashikio was three hour's drive from Fuzaiumi. Which meant…

"Are you… are we…" Mahiru tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

Makoto's fists tightened, her scowl deepened. "If I hadn't been with you that night, none of this would have happened… If I'd just paid more attention…" Her lips began to move more feverishly, each statement coming out like a freshly-tapped spring, "If we'd actually invited them to stay… If you hadn't been distracting me… If I hadn't been so dumb… I could have stopped him… I could have… talked him down!"

The words cut. Heat radiated from the athlete, nothing at all like the warmth that they had shared over so many nights.

"Mako-"

"Don't call me that!"

Mahiru flinched.

"Don't call me anything. Just…" Makoto was visibly shaking at this point, her finger pulling at the blue sweat jacket. There was a sharp inhale as the athlete stomped her foot and stared Mahiru down. "I never want to see you again!"

And with that Makoto turned on her heel and sprinted from the shrine, leaving Mahiru to mull over the cruelest words of someone she thought she knew.

The blonde collapsed, her legs falling out from under her as what had just happened began to sink in.

No more lunches on the roof sharing treats, no more family dinners, no more nights under the city lights.

The cold that began eating away at her heart was something she hadn't felt in a while, a familiar but unfriendly sensation that made her body start shivering.

Tears had come first, then the laughter, endless, raucous laughter devoid of joy or sentiment. Eventually her mind relinquished its feeble attempt to keep her sane. The laughter turned into moans and soon she was nothing but a sobbing heap on the stones, trapped in a coil of her own reality.

It was a moment, much like her family's death, that would stay with her forever; a moment in time, inescapable… the moment when she lost the last light in her world.

Misfire

March, 2011

Cold.

She felt cold.

Soraka knew there were blankets; she could feel them around her shoulders. But they were no better than ice contrasted with the imprint of her hand.

Cerulean irises fluttered, sleep melting away like hot wax into a frozen ocean; the night steadily returned to her.

The weekend after finals. Sumika, she'd gotten sick before the big sleepover, leaving Soraka and Fumine alone. But the mini party, even between just two friends, had been fun. Best friends doing best friend things; a night of games, snacks, movies, and getting into mischief…

Getting into…

Soraka gasped, feeling dulled cotton coating her mouth and tongue, among a variety of bizarre flavors festering in the moulds of her teeth.

The liquor cabinet. At some point Soraka, spurred on by some rowdy romcom, had gotten the insane idea to pilfer Fumine's family alcohol stash and try it. The other girl's parents weren't home, the two were safe within the house, there had been and would be no danger. And, though her normally reserved appearance may not have implied a rebellious streak, Fumine had agreed, on the caveat that they only stick to one bottle of something and that they wouldn't go overboard.

After feeling the cotton sheets roll around her bare skin, Soraka vaguely remembered that second rule flying out the window about an hour in.

Tokubē. Soraka remembered talking about her crush, though she very barely remembered staying vague with the name. Still, the

teasing and taunting from Fumine had culminated in the simple question of kissing etiquette.

From then on it was a quick, exponential decline down a road of practice, trial and error.

Brushing a dyed blue bang out of her eyes she glanced at the form sitting on the opposite side of the bed. Fumine's chestnut hair glimmered pale in the morning sun streaming through the windows. Only blankets remained to mask her bare form.

Soraka opened her mouth to speak, finding words difficult to form, both physically and emotionally. Eventually, the choked name "Fumine" escaped, though it was cracked and uneven.

"Soraka…"

Her friend's voice was shaky, a dull knife jittering against rock. The brunette turned, forest eyes distant, empty. "What did we…?"

The azulite shifted, reaching a hand towards her sitting bedmate, only for Fumine to flinch and pull the covers closer. Soraka stopped her hand, mid reach, her senses slowly alerting her to how sore she felt… How *filthy* she felt all over.

"We… uh… I think…"

In all honesty, she recalled them floundering on the bed, hazily attempting something they'd only heard about in passing. It wasn't like they taught about these kinds of relationships in sex ed. But, eventually, repeated attempts had led to success… which is probably why almost every inch of her body felt raw.

"N-no! No… we… we didn't," Fumine bit. The remark sheared through the air, ripping the mood to rags. "We… What…" The brunette sucked in a breath and stood, her spine locking straight, her shoulders squaring. Practiced, routine, proper.

Soraka averted her eyes; apparently sobriety signaled the end of her attraction.

"What we did wa-as perfectly natural for two growing girls," The words slipped out of Fumine's mouth like liquid, poisoning the mood even further. Soraka felt small slivers being chipped out of her heart.

"Fumi', don't… don't…" the azulite stuttered.

“Don’t what, Hayami?” Fumine’s response was callused; not curt but certainly very distant. The use of Soraka’s surname didn’t help matters.

“…Are we… still friends after this… I mean… I don’t feel about you…?” Soraka asked.

“Why would we not be friends, Hayami?” Fumine asked back. Her emerald eyes never once peeled from the windows while her hands busied themselves arranging a small smattering of clothing.

“D-don’t keep calling me by my family name!” Soraka barked, slamming a fist down onto the mattress. “W-we’re friends! To the end… and I don’t think either of us meant for this to happen, but it did a-an-and we need to talk about it, okay? We can’t just brush this to the side!”

Fumine began buttoning her shirt, eyes finally glancing back at the azulite.

“This was an accident; a… mistake. That’s all that needs to be discussed…” the brunette responded. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have tea ceremony practice to attend today. I must get ready…”

“B-But I thought you cancelled that so we could have the sleepover!” Soraka gasped, rolling to all fours on the bed. The blankets rolled off her, the cool morning air nipping at every inch of exposed skin. Every hair stood on edge, especially when Fumine’s face scrunched in this way that just made Soraka’s stomach drop. The brunette averted her eyes in an instant.

“Yes, well,” Fumine hummed, her breath catching in her throat, “I do believe we woke up early enough that I might be able to attend it…”

Soraka blinked. “And what the hell am I supposed to do the rest of the day?! I cleared my schedule to hang out with you! And Sumika’s sick!”

Fumine slid on some pantyhose, rounding out the outfit with a moderate-length skirt. “I suggest taking a shower. My facilities are open for you, but I would recommend making yourself scarce in an hour or so; that is when I will be heading to class…”

The brunette strutted to the door, her feet angled towards the kitchen.

“Fumine, please, let’s ta-!” the blue girl pleaded.

Fumine stopped in place, her head whipping to the side so Soraka could see bared teeth pulling the other girl’s lips. The words died in her throat as Fumine gradually recomposed her face.

“Soraka… please… *please* don’t make this any harder than it is…”

And with that Fumine strode out of the room.

Slowly, Soraka curled in on herself, a small hole growing where her chest should be. This was how she’d imagined it; rejection from Tokubē, the musical prodigy who’d started off the dangerous line of thought that led to the prior night. Only, for some reason, this felt worse than she’d ever imagined.

She hadn’t been rejected as a lover; they’d made a mistake, she knew that. Heat, puberty and alcohol were dangerous and they paid the price. In any scenario she imagined she knew that Tokubē would always be her friend, would never turn her away as a companion, even if he turned her down as a girlfriend. Fumine, though...

That cold demeanor wasn’t her friend’s. That troubled waver wasn’t her friend’s. That broken plea wasn’t her friend’s.

The girl that had just walked out of the room wasn’t Soraka’s friend… and it pained Soraka to wonder if she would ever be Fumine’s friend again.

She opted to skip washing off; the air was already dreary enough as it was, she didn’t need humidity to top it off. Instead she found her clothes, her gear, packed up and strolled straight to the front door.

She passed Fumine in the kitchen eating breakfast. Not even an acknowledging nod flew between them before Soraka was out the door into the mid-morning sun.

Letting confused tears finally drip from her eyes, Soraka fumbled for her phone, silently apologizing to whoever was listening for relying on the bedridden and ill for emotional support.

The phone dialed, a bleary voice picking up on the other end.

“Mmmm… Sorryaah-ka…?” was roughly exhaled through a cute, squeaky yawn.

“H-hey Sumika… Sorry to call so early in the morning…” Soraka mumbled. She passed a street sign and took hold as the strength drained from her limbs. “I-I h-hope yo-ou’re f-f-feeling better…” The words were becoming harder to say, the world much more bleary.

“Soraka! Wh-hhaa-at’s wrong?!” Sumika yawned once more, the panic in her voice only delayed by the involuntary yawn.

“I… I… I…” Soraka stumbled out. She fell to her knees, letting her weight collapse onto the road sign, shoulder to steel. “I screwed up, Sumika… I screwed up so bad…”

With the damn lifted, her emotions poured out before the striking rays of the sun.

Tinder Part 1

May, 2011 – December, 2011

The sun was gorgeous.

Sumika's heels clacked against the interwoven brick path, modest skirt bobbing like a flower around her legs. Mid-Spring had finally set in and the weather couldn't be much better. Perhaps, maybe, it could be a touch warmer, but Sumika felt she had all the warmth she needed for the school day thanks to the sun and to the companions to her sides.

Fumine paved the way while Soraka hung just behind Sumika, the two listing to the left and right respectively. It had become their regular formation, with the brunette and the azulite using Sumika as a buffer between them, a role that Sumika was hesitant to fill.

Yet, she resigned herself to it. She could do more wedged between them than she could being walled off from one (or both) of them completely.

Now, the reasoning behind this schism was somewhat… obscure, at least to Sumika.

One day a few months back Soraka had called up, crying. There had been plans to sleep over at Fumine's house only for Sumika to fall ill on the morning of, leaving her home and bedridden while her two friends celebrated the close of exams. Safe to say she had been ready to pout her way to sympathy the next time she saw either of them. When Soraka had called though, the rosette had immediately launched into 'best friend mode' and talked her musically inclined friend through what had happened.

The details Soraka had divulged were scant; Fumine and she had weaseled away a drink while the brunette's parents were out of the house, leading to the two of them getting drunk. After that Soraka had been unusually… quiet about what happened. They'd had a

fight, a big one apparently, the morning after, about something that they'd discussed while drunk. It seemed that whatever it was got so heated that neither of them were willing to talk to each other for weeks.

Sumika, worried that her two best friends in the world were going to tear themselves apart, launched in to play mediator, trying to stage conversation after conversation between the two over a hectically short period of time. She was surprised to find Fumine the one most resilient to compromise; normally the tea maiden would be the first to opt for the diplomatic route.

Eventually, though, Sumika broke through both their stubborn heads and the two agreed to discuss what had happened that night, with the caveat that Sumika wouldn't be in the room. Respecting their wishes, she'd made herself scarce and she was pleasantly surprised half an hour later when the two walked out of her room, laughing at one of her clusters of stuffed animals. Even though she was being teased, it put her heart at ease to see the two laughing and joking with each other.

There was *still* some tension between them, all these months later, but for the most part it was residual; the three gradually became attached to their staggered morning formation and the generally quiet walks into school had become pleasant instead of tense.

She never did learn about what the fight had been about; neither of them saw fit to tell her. But ultimately, she didn't care, so long as the two of them remained friends with each other and with her, that's all she really wanted.

A lazy arm looped around her, Soraka strutting up closer to Sumika and pulling her close.

"What's with this ribbon, Sumika, it's *really* cute!" Soraka gasped, tugging one of the knots along the thin red strand. "You look so good in it… Are… Are you trying to catch the attention of a *boy*, Sumika?"

Sumika blushed as a finger was pressed into her cheek.

"N-no!" came the stuttered reply. "M-Mom just thought I'd look good in them, is all! Red ribbons have always looked good in my

hair, you know that!”

It was true, and it was sometimes a little difficult to find accessories that matched her hair’s unearthly pink tint. When the trio were younger at a festival there had been a booth with temporary hair dye and each of them had gotten a different color; Fumine forest green, Soraka electric blue and Sumika hot pink. After that both Sumika and Soraka agreed they actually liked their hair having more eye catching tones, so they both decided separately to keep the colors.

Soraka was the only one who actually kept up with any kind of full-dying process, making sure her normally onyx hair was constantly washed a rich navy blue; colorful, but not too distracting. Sumika, meanwhile, had conspired with her mother to use a combination of products to squeeze the colors out of her sandy brown hair naturally, producing a color not quite brown, not quite pink, but somewhere nestled in between. Her mother called it ‘pastel rose’ and her dad said it reminded him of ‘rosewood’, but whatever it was, Sumika thought it looked great but was a pain to accessorize with.

Normally ribbons were used for pony-tails, but getting a recent haircut had made that difficult to pull off. Instead her mother used it to push back the hair around her neck and to keep it from spilling over into her eyes. Such a small addition and Sumika hardly recognized herself in the mirror; same face, same eyes, but just enough change to really bring out that extra touch of ‘cute’ that her mother loved to squee over. It was just a shame that looking cute happened to attract teasing from her friends…

A callused finger slid along the piece’s fabric, giving it a quick pinch at the end before taking off.

“But this one is so silky! Soraka’s right; you have to be trying to impress someone!” came Fumine’s reply. The girl had dropped back in order to appraise Sumika’s new wares, smiling as the girl squirmed under their combined scrutiny.

“N-no! Mom’s had this ribbon forever! I just wanted to look nice today, that’s all!” the rosette choked, stumbling forward.

Soraka's grip faltered enough for her to break through, only for the azulite to immediately give chase.

"Don't lie to me Sumika!" Soraka laughed, "You're seeing other people, aren't you! But you're only supposed to be mine, you know that!" The azulite launched forward and captured Sumika in a rather aggressive hug, nuzzling her face against her friend's. "Everyone will know that Sumika is *my* waifu!"

Sumika squealed under a sudden flurry of fingers to her side, causing her to bark with laughter, her voice chorusing with Soraka's.

"Oh please, calm down you two," Fumine pleaded, a good nature smiled plastered to her lips. "You'll get us all in trouble!"

Indeed, Sumika glanced forward and found that they'd almost reached their school, the gates appearing only a couple hundred meters away. However, Sumika glanced to her right and found Soraka's mischievous grin deepening as they both silently glanced back at the brunette. They made a wordless pact, swooping back and capturing Fumine between them.

The tea maiden was immediately set upon by the much maligned tickles of doom and began howling under the assault, "H-h-how d-d-did-d y-ou-u-u b-b-oth…?!"

Chastising palms pounced down, Fumine slapping at the duplicitous duet's hands as a meager form of self defense. The brunette scampered forward out of their clutches, catching her breath and looking back at the two, concern clearly etched upon her face.

"You both… how…" she breathed, "without saying a single word, how?" Fumine's eyes flittered between the two, her cheeks quickly igniting to a pleasant pink hue. "Don't they say that only the couples who've… who've…" The brunette's words bounced around the air as the pink became tomato red. "You two couldn't have… No, no, that's… its just improper! You're both perverts! Perverts!"

And with that, Fumine scrambled towards the school building, not a hint left behind whether she was being serious or kidding.

"Jeez, what kind of rumors is she listening to that she came to *that* conclusion? She really gets worked up quick, doesn't she?" Soraka asked, draping her bag across her shoulder and yawning.

“Well, she doesn’t know what she’s missing,” the azulite concluded, sending a playful wink Sumika’s way. Soraka began to skip her way towards the school building. “C’mon Sumika, or else you’ll be late for homeroom!”

Sumika watched her friend as she laughed all the way into the building, smiling softly as she resumed her normal, relaxed pace.

Both Soraka and Fumine had changed after the fight, subtly, but enough. Fumine was more reserved now, more skittish around uncomfortable subjects, which is probably why it was left up in the air whether or not she’d actually meant anything by ‘perverts’.

Similarly, Soraka had become more… feelsy, both emotionally and physically. They’d been plenty affectionate before, but Sumika sometimes felt that the sudden divide between the other two had left Soraka dumping her excess energy onto the rosette, meaning she got Fumine’s dose of physical fawning from Soraka each day.

Emotionally though, Soraka had become a little more open about some of her worries. They’d talked at length about the azulite’s crush on their mutual childhood friend, Tokubē Kagura, an acting prodigy who had gotten injured in an accident the year prior. Soraka had confided that she didn’t feel like she’d ever be noticed by him in quite the same way she took interest in him, even going so far as to make the rosette promise that if she never worked up the nerve to talk with him Sumika would become her wife when they were old and pruney.

Sumika of course agreed, though, like with Fumine’s earlier proclamation, it had been hard to gauge how serious Soraka had been. The promise became a running gag between them, something they brought up only when boys were mentioned or romance was even vaguely implied. Often times, Fumine would quiet down as Sumika and Soraka play-acted star-crossed lovers. She’d asked about that once, but Fumine had simply shaken her head and said that there wasn’t an issue.

At this point, the rosette was just happy that normalcy had returned to their little trio, even if it was a new, less comfortable normalcy. The stray thought that the three may never recover completely from the fight filtered through her head, but she

immediately squashed it. She clenched her fist, steeled her face and resolved to help everyone involved overcome the problems set before them.

That was when a friendly hand reached out and tapped her shoulder.

“Excuse me, but if you stand there all day staring like that, you’ll be late for classes.”

Sumika turned to find the source of the lilting voice. An ethereal blonde girl framed by tight royal braids was smiling down at her, and in only a flicker of time that golden gaze sent heat crawling up the younger girl’s neck.

“Uh… Uh… yeah…” Sumika stuttered, wringing her arms against each other. “S-sorry,” She glanced around the school’s courtyard, finding it mostly empty, though there was the odd straggler jumping in through the gate, “I hope I didn’t get in anyone’s way!”

The chirp seemed to amuse the older girl, whose smile deepened as she spoke, “Not a problem. I can’t have my juniors depriving themselves of a quality education, after all! Have a nice day!”

The blonde gave a small, friendly wave before passing on through the doors to the building.

Shaking the embarrassment from her face, Sumika scampered after her, fingers pulling at the heels of her shoes. She would make it to class just a minute before the homeroom bell rung.

O/o\O

“…and that’s why you always ask your loved one how they like their eggs before even starting with breakfast. Does everyone understand?!”

Sumika giggled following Ms. Wakuni’s rant, stifling the sound with an attentive hand. Her childish fit only spurred on when she shared a glance with Soraka who rolled her eyes and stuck a finger down her throat in mockery. It wasn’t exactly polite, she knew, but

the teacher *was* one of her mother's friends, so she felt somewhat comfortable entertaining a few quiet laughs.

"Now, with Aonuma properly scolded…" the teacher began.

"Hey! I only asked a question!"

Wakuni continued, "I have an exciting announcement for today! We have a new exchange student!" The teacher strutted over to the front door of the class, leaning out to a figure that could only barely be seen beyond the frosted glass wall. Moments later she returned with a rather mousy figure in tow.

The girl was only a little taller than Sumika, with a waterfall of silky black hair tied off in a thick bun that sat low against her neck. Thin, frameless glasses looped around violet eyes and narrowed near the top, almost becoming one with the girl's pencil-thin eyebrows. All of this was backed by pale, creamy skin that seemed to glow under the classroom bulbs.

The girl was… radiant. Sumika's eyes stuck to the girl and refused to let go.

"Everyone, please meet Ms. Yukima Katsumi. Katsumi, would you like to introduce yourself?"

The girl took a hesitant step forward, her body shaking under the entire room's scrutiny.

"H-hello, everyone… I-I-I l-look fo-f-forward to joining you this year!" the girl sputtered, bowing.

Wakuni rested a comforting hand on the nervous girl's shoulder, offering a warm smile before returning her attention to the class. "Miss Katsumi here has been in the hospital for quite some time now and this is her first day back in class. So I expect everyone to be nice to her. She's being brave coming back after so long away! …That means you, Hayami!"

"One time!" Soraka groaned, her head falling to the desk.

A chorus of 'Yes ma'am' rose from the students, eliciting a bloom of pink from the Katsumi girl's skin.

Sumika, for her part was silent, lips gently parted, eyes locked on the pale visage in front of her that only seemed to get brighter as time inched forward. At one point, those purple orbs met hers and stayed, pink briefly mingling with violet before the trance was broken.

Wakuni gave the girl a firm, but kind, pat on the back, nudging her towards the only open spot near the front of the room. “Well now, I’m sure everyone will learn all about you around lunch time. Take your seat; we’ll be switching to English soon.”

Katsumi looked up to the teacher and nodded, trotting over to the empty desk and sitting down.

Their eyes met one last time, and Sumika flashed the jittery mess as gentle and as friendly a smile as she could. The girl managed a smile back, small and demure, but a pure and thankful one.

With only that glance Sumika realized she had just made a new friend.

O/o\O

“Ah! Abe, just the woman I wanted to see!”

Sumika looked up just as she finished putting her math papers away, stuffing them into a folder before stuffing *that* into her bag.

“Ms. Wakuni? What do you need?” she asked, tilting her head towards the teacher.

Wakuni clapped her hands together, the clipboard she held making a ‘thunk’ rather than a firm ‘snap’. “Our new transfer student, Ms. Katsumi, has a bit of a medical issue that she needs to take pills for every day. She picks them up at the nurse’s office, but she’s new to the school. Since you’re the nurse’s aide for the class, I thought you’d be the best person to escort her there.”

Sumika nodded, an airy ‘oh’ slipping out of her mouth. Her eyes trailed to the exchange student, finding the raven haired girl beset by a mob of girls from their class, all of whom were heckling her for personal information and cooing over the new girl.

“And, between you and me,” Wakuni noted, leaning down closer to her student, “Yukima looks pretty nervous with all that attention on her. You’re the only person I know who’s a natural at making friends, so I was hoping you’d help get her some breathing room.”

“Ah! Of-of course!” Sumika stuttered, the compliment derailing her train of thought.

Wakuni stood, towering over her seated pupil. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get to the faculty lounge before they finish ordering food for everyone!”

The teacher turned and rolled out of the classroom, leaving the rosette in her wake.

Sumika looked over at the congregation of inquisitive students buzzing around Katsumi and stood, shouldering her bag; lunch was on her mind too and she didn’t know how long this little escort would take, so keeping her lunchbox on her would probably be for the best.

Taking a deep breath to still the nervous jitters roiling in her gut (a strategy taught to her by her mother), she walked over to the busy desk and popped out in front of all the talking heads.

“Miss Katsumi?” Sumika asked, putting on her most relaxed smile.

The shy girl was a mess and overwhelmed by all the attention she’d been getting, no doubt. The raven girl’s smile was passable but there were signs of strain hidden in how her lips tugged when she talked, with each question asked of her prompting an answer that illuminated her discomfort all the more clearly. The minute Sumika spoke up, all of that stopped; their eyes met and for a brief moment they were transfixed. Sumika closed her eyes, but kept the smile, doing her best not to get lost in the other girl’s violet irises.

“I’m Sumika Abe, the nurse’s aide for this class. You have medicine to take at the nurse’s station, right? I can take you there if you’d like,” the rosette explained, unscrewing her eyes. To her pleasure, she saw relief wash over the timid student.

“Y-yes, if you would…” the new girl requested, hastily grabbing her bags and scrambling to her feet. The gossipers surrounding her all let out a pitiful ‘aww’ that Katsumi was surprisingly quick to address. She twisted to them as she scooted closer to Sumika. “I-I’m sorry, I n-need to go take care of this… We c-can talk later, I promise,” the girl stuttered.

A few members of the collective seemed appeased, nodding and smiling as they waved Sumika and Katsumi off.

The rosette held the door open as Katsumi scurried over to her, the duet exiting out into the hallway. “We’ll be going this way,” Sumika pointed, turning left and letting the exchange student set the pace of their walk.

Katsumi nodded and the two settled into a relaxed stroll through the golden halls of the school. It was one of the more modern buildings in the city, layered with panes of frosted glass set into polished metal frames, with the exceptions of the external walls which were mostly pristinely crystal in their transparency.

It was when they were coming up on the first skywalk of the school that Sumika felt compelled to restart a conversation, having spent the last few minutes of walking in relative silence.

“So…” she started, drawing out her ‘o’s, “Is your first day back treating you well? I noticed you weren’t exactly enjoying all that attention…”

Katsumi seemed to squirm as Sumika looked back at her. The action was as endearing as it was concerning. The hospital stay must have really been hard on her if it was this difficult to communicate with strangers.

“I-I… Yeah… I know th-they mean well, it’s just… a lot to keep track of at o-once…” Katsumi mumbled. “A-also, th-thank you for showing me the way, A-Abe.”

The nurse’s aide twisted on her heel and grinned, walking backwards. “You’re welcome! But please, call me Sumika!”

Katsumi reddened, a nervous hand tightening around her collar.

“A-ah… but… I-I mean…” the raven haired girl stuttered. Sumika’s smile waned, though it was only to seem less overbearing with the order. Katsumi’s anxiety seemed to deflate in turn. “S-Sumika it is th-then… It’s a l-l-lovely name…”

The rosette’s grin became self-deprecating as she began to fondle the bow on her uniform, “What? Nah… I like your name better… It’s graceful, smooth… It means ‘snow’, right? That’s really cool. It also very pretty to say…”

Katsumi swallowed and looked out the windows. “W-well if you’re letting me call you by your first name, th-then I should let y-

you call me by mine…”

“Really!” Sumika chirped, clapping her hands together, hair drifting around the nape of her neck.

Yukima seemed startled by the outburst but made a show of composing herself, letting out a very minute smile. “Y-yes… I hope that we can be… friends… Sumika.”

Sumika let out a giggle. “I hope we can be friends too, Yukima.”

The mousy girl looked away and nodded, exposing the flushed skin on her neck to the cool spring air. A few moments of quiet passed between them before Yukima spoke again. “I… I like your ribbon.”

Sumika’s cheeks warmed, her fingers going to play with the red strand in her hair. “Pfft, what? This old thing? No, my mom just told me to wear it today…”

“I think i-it’s cute on y-you,” the mouse replied. “Your mom had a really good suggestion.”

Sumika ducked her head, suddenly finding herself on the social defensive. Hearing compliments was nothing new to her, but the intonation in Yukima’s voice was so… pure, so earnest; unfiltered admiration, not clouded by jealousy or envy or any hidden agenda like with Soraka and her mother. She needed to turn the conversation on its head before her head exploded from the surge of blood.

“Sh-she always does, it seems,” Sumika chuckled, scratching the back of your head. “But I think your hair is prettier. It looks so silky and that bun really does a great job of bringing out your cheeks!”

Yukima looked away, fidgeting in place, her face as red as a tomato.

It took Sumika a moment to register that they’d stopped walking; her feet had automatically halted the minute they’d arrived outside the nurse’s office.

“Ah! We’re here!” Sumika said, knocking gently on the door. “Hello, we’re coming in!” she chimed, pulling the boundary open.

To her surprise, the blonde girl who'd greeted her earlier was sitting next to the nurse's desk, a bento open for her to pick at the contents. The older girl was part way through what seemed to be a piece of futomaki as the two entered.

The girl jolted, quickly finishing the piece and wiping her lips with a napkin before standing. "Sorry about that! What is it you need? …You both look a little red, are you coming down with fevers?"

"Eh?" Sumika asked, feeling her own face. The heat seeping from her cheeks only got hotter, so she scrambled to cover it by scratching the back of her head. "No, no, we were just laughing at something together, that's why!"

Yukima seemed grateful for the excuse, shuffling up to just behind Sumika as a form of temporary social shield. Sumika dragged a nail down her cheek and gave an uneven smile.

"Uh, you wouldn't happen to know where the nurse is, would you? My friend here needs her medication," the rosette explained, motioning to the timid girl behind her.

"Of course!" the blonde perked, standing. "The nurse is actually out getting lunch with the other faculty. But I'm her designated aide so I can get it for you," the girl explained. She eyed Yukima, grinning ear to ear while offering out her hand. "Can I please have your student ID?"

Yukima swallowed and nodded, reaching into her bag and producing the laminate card. The aide whisked the card away and gave it a glance, returning it before tapping her way back to a desk with a paper and a series of assorted paper cups.

"You have a very nice name, Miss Katsumi," the girl commented, passing the fidgeting raven haired girl one of the cups. Yukima took the paper container, plopping the contents into her hand before walking over to the nearby sink. She filled the cup and downed the pills and water in one swig. The blonde pulled a clipboard from beside the cups, scratching down a short series of notes. When she was done she looked back up to Sumika. "You're the girl from this morning, aren't you? The little space cadet?"

The teasing chuckle caught the rosette off guard. “Ah? Eh, n-no! I… I mean…” Sumika sulked, sighing with acceptance. “Ye-yeah, that was me…”

“Oh, don’t look so embarrassed, we all get lost in thought sometimes,” the blonde snickered. “I was just worried. That lost look doesn’t suit a cute face like yours. Can’t have my juniors making themselves look bad, after all,” the girl chided, wagging a playful finger.

“Oh?! W-well in that case…” Sumika balked, bowing seconds later. “Thank you for looking out for me!”

The senior gave a sheepish smile and waved a dismissive hand. “Really, it was no big deal. No need to get so worked up over it.” The blonde sat back down in her chair as Yukima walked back over to Sumika.

“Thank y-you for escorting me, S-Sumika,” Yukima mumbled, giving a polite nod of her head.

“No problem, Yukima. Would you like to join me for lunch up on the roof? It’ll give you some more time away from the more badger-y students,” she offered in return. The timid girl wrung her hands, visibly pulling into herself at the thought before nodding.

“I… think that would be nice,” the exchange student relented, letting that little smile appear once more.

“Aha!” the blonde chirped, clapping her hands together. “Why don’t you both eat here instead? I was up on the roof earlier with my physics class and it’s actually gotten pretty chilly outside for this time of year. And I could always use the company.”

Sumika shifted; the blonde’s ribbon marked her as a second year, a year ahead of them… It would be rude to intrude on her time. A polite decline was in order. “We wouldn’t want to impose…”

“Oh, it’d be no problem at all. Being the nurse’s aide is just doing a little paperwork and lending a hand when things get busy. That’s usually just in the fall and winter though. Spring doesn’t lend itself to much other than a few sporadic allergy flare-ups or sports accidents,” the aide explained. She held up her lunch box with a coy smile, letting the two see the densely packed (and rather delicious

looking) contents. “I also made a little too much for myself today and I could use a few hungry mouths to share it with.”

Sumika and Yukima looked down at the bento, saliva pooling over the contents almost immediately. They glanced between each other before looking back to the blonde.

“I… If Yukima is okay with it, then we’ll stay,” Sumika answered, looking to her new friend for a response.

Yukima nodded. “I think that i-it’d be delightful to j-join you…”

“Excellent!” the girl cheered, pulling up two more seats for her juniors. “Please, sit, sit!”

The duo took the seats, setting their bags against the legs of their chairs. The blonde perked up, pressing a dainty hand to the center of her rather… generous bosom. “I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Mahiru Okawa. I’m a second year here.”

“Sumika Abe, first year,” Sumika chimed, suddenly feeling a little more relaxed. She rooted through her bag and pulled out her own lunch: a small bento that her father had prepared for her. It was usually enough for her, but she wouldn’t mind splurging with new friends.

“Y-Yukima Katsumi. I j-just transferred here,” Yukima explained, pulling out a rather small box of her own. Actually, an *incredibly* small box. Sumika had to hold back a gasp of surprise.

“Yukima, your lunch is so small. How do you get by on so little?” the rosette asked.

The raven girl shrugged and blushed, nudging some rice with her chopsticks. “I don’t normally eat that much… It’s hard to pack a variety of things in the morning…”

The nurse’s aide frowned. “Abe is right, growing girls need to eat more than table scraps like that.”

Mahiru immediately reached into her own bento and began pulling out pieces of nigiri, immediately plopping them down onto Yukima’s lunch.

“Ah, n-no! It-it’s fine, I’ll b-be fine, I a-always have been!” Yukima pleaded. But she was powerless as the sushi kept piling up.

“Nonsense. You have beautiful skin, but you look pretty gaunt. You need to get some meat on those bones. This is an order from

the nurse's aide," Mahiru chided.

Finally, the last piece of food made its way onto her platter, to the point where the box lunch was nearly overflowing.

"Uh… uh… th-thank y-you…" Yukima muttered, staring down at the rather daunting plate of food.

Mahiru stuck another piece of futomaki in her mouth before letting out a pleased sigh. She patted her lips with a handkerchief she'd drawn from her pocket before looking at Sumika.

"And while it's my prerogative as nurse's aide to help students with their health, it's my job as an upperclassman to help my juniors when they're struggling with other things as well. So, Abe, if it isn't prying too much, what was on your mind this morning when we first met?" Mahiru asked, popping another morsel between her teeth.

Sumika hopped in her seat, a nervous giggle bubbling out through her words. "Eh? What do you… uh… mean…?"

"The look on your face was…" the blonde started, sitting on her words for a brief spell. "It was conflicted… concerned. You have a very pretty face, and I feel it's very unbecoming for it to look so lost. I only ask out of my own concern for your wellbeing. If it's something serious, just know there are people around you who are willing to listen."

The rosette sunk into herself, pulling out a sample of her bento and chewing on it quietly. She felt both Mahiru and Yukima's eyes look at her, curiosity being the most apparent emotion. Swallowing, Sumika finally decided to speak. "Well, it's… it's nothing, really. It's just I was worried about my two friends; they kinda had a fight recently and things have only really started to cool down. My biggest worry is that our little trio won't heal all the way after it…"

"Hmmm… I see…" Mahiru hummed. "Well, as someone who's been in one of those types of fights, I know it isn't easy to overcome heat of the moment animosities." The blonde looked down at her bento, eyes falling for only a second. "But," she continued, golden irises firming with confidence, "the important thing is if they both try to be friends again after that. If they put effort back into their friendship, I'm sure things will go back to normal soon enough!"

Sumika smiled, but it was void of genuine feeling. “That’s not the problem though… They’ve done that, but things are different now. Not bad, just… different… I guess I’m just being nostalgic…”

“Ah, okay, that makes sense,” Mahiru sighed. She pulled a water bottle from the table and downed a few generous gulps. “There’s no shame in appreciating the past, or wanting it back; that’s very human. But sometimes we have to acknowledge what life is *now* and appreciate it for what it is. The past can only haunt you if you let it, so try and live in the present as much as you can,” the blonde finished with a smile.

“Th-that’s pretty deep, Okawa…” Yukima observed, having polished off the nigiri while the two spoke.

Mahiru’s cheeks flared up. “Yes, well, with age comes experience and all that, right?”

Sumika remained silent, her mind still partially absorbing the speech. She glanced out the window to see the sky clouded, with bits of golden light streaming through cracks in the formations. The thought bounced around her head; appreciating the life she has now instead of dwelling on what could have been…

She smiled, looking up to her senior. “Thanks Okawa. I don’t think there’s much more I can do about the problem, but you’re right… I just gotta shift how I look at things…”

In that moment, the bell rung, startling the three.

“Ah! Yukima, we’re going to be late for class!” Sumika panicked, closing her bento and throwing it in her bag. Yukima had just done the same when Sumika grabbed her hand and began pulling her out the door.

“S-Sumika! W-w-wait! S-slow down!” Yukima cried, trying not to trip over herself.

“Nice meeting you Mahiru! We should have lunch on the roof together when it’s warm enough!” Sumika called back, waving at their senior.

Mahiru laughed at their antics and waved after them, following them to the doorframe. “Remember, no running in the halls!” she called after the pair.

The blonde’s voice was an echo in the distance as the two reached the skywalk.

Mahiru was right, though. From this moment forward, Sumika would only worry about what she had now and what she could protect in the present… like her newfound friends and the ones she already held dear.

Tinder Part 2

May, 2011 – December, 2011

Yukima was happy.

This was unusual.

Not only that, but Yukima was starting to feel happier on a regular basis.

This was unprecedented.

Life for the transfer student had never been particularly easy. She was born with a weak constitution, her life swaying on the crux of a stray cold for the first few years of her life, while even now the mildest fever would leave her bedridden for days. For the longest time she'd been cut off from the world, hidden behind closed doors for fear of stray illness leaking into her bubble and bringing a pox upon herself.

Conjoined with that fear were her parents, a void in her life that never seemed to ebb away. A wealthy couple, a businessman and his trophy wife, it was an open secret that they'd viewed her as a disappointment. They may have said their platitudes and paid the medical bills, but the subtle sneers and constant need to hide her from their peers told her how much she really mattered to them. She was a burden, and when her father died of a sudden heart attack her mother had decided to follow soon after, choosing to end a life filled with misery and disappointment instead of caring for her only daughter.

For the early stretches of Yukima's adolescence she was alone. Her father's parents, her grandparents in Germany, had flown in back then in order to keep Yukima's affairs in order, but it was still deemed too unsafe to take Yukima back to Germany. The older couple couldn't just uproot, so they were stuck at a crossroad, the decision that was ultimately made ending with Yukima stuck in a

Japanese hospital while her relatives would fly in once every few months to check in.

The hospital staff became a second family, though that tie was as real as a phantom pain. Nurses aged and left, switched positions, doctors were transferred and were as fleeting as sakura petals, tutors even more so.

When her conditioned improved, when her immune system was deemed strong enough for her to leave, she was old enough to attend high school. The thought was terrifying, heart-wrenchingly so. Interaction with other people had been limited to family and staff. Everyone else she'd ever met had been passersby and those often seemed colder than an ice bucket. Even if they shared a conversation with the unsocialized mess, they always seemed distant and uninterested, as though none of her words mattered. She was a ghost to them, nothing more.

To be frank, strangers scared her.

So when she'd gone to her first classes, she was shocked to meet a pink ball of energy named Sumika Abe, a girl who immediately pulled her from an overwhelming bombardment of questions, who'd volunteered to guide her to the nurse's station, who took the first steps to really befriend the introvert. Yukima had the metaphoric wind knocked out of her.

The rosette had a presence like a warm spring day; soft, lulling, and never invasive or overwhelming. In the months since they became friends Yukima was ashamed to admit how many times she'd fantasized about dozing off on the girl's lap.

She had been terrified about stepping out into the world, but Sumika had seemingly jumped from the heavens to personally ease her back into society without a hitch or hiccup.

Mahiru had been helpful too, she admitted. The blonde acted as a guiding figure the minute they'd met, offering help to both herself and Sumika on any occasion, popping out advice like she was a fortune dispenser and stuffing them with treats like some fairytale witch looking to make them into meals.

Together the two had helped crack Yukima out of her shell bit by bit. Sumika was swift in introducing her closest friends: a polite

and dry girl named Fumine and the snarky and playful Soraka.

The five had coalesced into their own little circle, eating lunches up on the roof when they could, visiting Mahiru's house in the evening when they were free, hanging out on the weekends, and so on.

And for once, Yukima felt like she belonged. She had, for all intents and purposes, a family to rely on: the motherly Mahiru, the raucous Soraka, the demur Fumine and last but not least the affectionate Sumika.

Yukima sighed as she reflected on the good times the group had had together. Trips to the mall where Fumine had chided both her and Soraka about their senses in fashion, eating out at restaurants where everyone would agree that Mahiru was a better cook, walks in the park where Yukima could smell Sumika’s shampoo as she lingered just downwind; life was peaceful.

Sumika… How often her mind seemed to wander to her best friend, how often did pink and red blink across the blank landscape of her thoughts? She'd begun catching herself hanging from every word that left the other girl's lips, catching her eyes drift over to the rosette when they were together or when they were in school and she was supposed to be focusing on a test or quiz.

The reflex to follow after Sumika was practically ingrained in Yukima; a reflex she loved for the warmth it gave her and a reflex she hated for its ever growing distraction.

Even now, in the solace of Mahiru's kitchen, where she was quietly cutting veggies, her mind drifted. So much so that she nicked her finger while dicing a cucumber.

"Ah," she winced, pulling her finger back to suck on it. The bitter juices of the vegetable mixed with the copper tang of her blood to create a displeasing menagerie of flavors.

"Watch yourself!"

A cool hand pulled the finger from her mouth, a soft towel immediately wrapping around the wound. Mahiru smiled down at Yukima, making the transfer student blush. She, Mahiru and Fumine were busy preparing dinner for the five while Soraka and Sumika ran out to get snacks and the movie they'd all be watching together. It

was no surprise, then, when Fumine flittered over with an adhesive bandage in one hand and disinfectant in the other. In moments the brunette and blonde had patched the wound before flying back to their other kitchen duties.

"You seem to be lost in thought, Yukima. Is everything alright?" Fumine asked as she fiddled with something out of Yukima's vision.

The transfer student paused before responding, ultimately deciding a little honesty wouldn't be so bad for conversation.

"Yes, everything is, actually. I was just thinking *about* that, believe it or not," she hummed, scooping up the bits of cucumber that touched her blood into its own pile for the waste bin.

Mahiru gave a pleased 'ah', nodding her head. "I can see what you mean. Things have been pretty pleasant as of late. Any reason you're thinking about it now?"

"I… have my reasons," Yukima responded, returning her blade to the cutting board. "I'd rather not go into specifics, though."

"That's perfectly fine," Mahiru nodded, giving the girl a knowing smile. "No bad thoughts though, I hope. That's when I'm usually the most thankful about how nice life is…"

The phrase struck a chord within Yukima. There was always something to Mahiru, something… hollow, empty. The girl was bright and jubilant; she exuded happiness that seemed to infect everyone but herself. Her curiosity was piqued.

"No, no bad thoughts…" the transfer student replied. "Though I do that too…" Yukima sucked in a breath and set down her knife. "Mahiru, it may be impolite, but can I ask you a personal question?"

Mahiru pulled her own knife away from the tomatoes on the chopping block, wiping her hands on her apron. "I don't see why not…" The response was hesitant, though it was clear through her curious inflection that Mahiru didn't want to hide something from her junior.

"Your parents… how did they die?"

The blonde rested the knife on the table, a deep breath releasing from her lungs. "It was a car crash… I was… My father died instantly… My mother… she wasn't so lucky." The frank

admission tore at Yukima's heartstrings, making her look away from the blonde. In an attempt to ignore the awkward air suffocating the room, she returned to cutting the cucumber.

"I… I see…" The raven girl nodded. "My dad had a heart attack… Mom… she also wasn't as lucky…"

Mahiru nodded in kind, though a rather dour laugh etched from her lips. "Looking to share sob stories, Yukima?"

Yukima managed a wry smile at the thought. "N-no… I'm just… I was curious…" Another thought occurred to the transfer student, one that formed so fast her mouth didn't give her time to taper its rougher edges. "I-I… who crashed… who was responsible…?"

A displeased gasp came from the other side of the kitchen's island. Fumine glared daggers at Yukima from across the way. "Yukima! That is incredibly out of line to ask!"

Yukima winced. Normally, she got along with Fumine more than she did with Soraka, usually because Soraka could be rather blunt and crass and Fumine actually took care to soften difficult topics with some kind of grace. However, for once, Yukima longed for the azulite's presence, just so she'd have the other girl's boundless curiosity back up her own.

Mahiru shook her head toward Fumine, even as her eyes darkened a shade. "No, no, it's perfectly fine. Morbid curiosity is normal, I suppose." The blonde sucked in an even sharper breath, shakily exhaling her response to the question. "Technically speaking, it would have been my father's fault. But, we couldn't have known the brake would snap like that, at least not at the time. The whole situation was out of our hands… a cruel twist of fate, I suppose…"

The transfer student carefully examined her senior, purple eyes watching as Mahiru's shoulders sagged for a fraction of a second. Then, like magic, she perked back to life, her spine straightening into what Sumika affectionately called 'mother mode'.

"But I've found no reason to dwell on such things, so I don't want either of you dwelling on it either. No pity parties, am I clear?" the blonde huffed, crossing her arms.

Yukima and Fumine shared short, droll grins before nodding in compliance.

"Good, I'm glad that's settled then," Mahiru tittered, hopping up on her toes briefly. She looked at Fumine. "Fumine, those chicken slices look good, I can take care of the rest. Could you do me a favor and straighten up the living room? I haven't had time to pick it up this week so it's been a mess since I last had you all over."

"Sure thing, Mahiru," Fumine responded, pulling off the apron and hanging it on a rack by the counter. "Should I pull out the kotatsu? It's getting chilly out, after all."

"No, no, I don't think it's quite time for that. But soon, very soon," Mahiru laughed.

Fumine nodded and slid around the bend, vanishing behind the wall.

Mahiru released a tensed breath and walked back over to Yukima, who was busy adding the fresh cut cucumber to a table salad. Mahiru rested a tentative hand on the girl's shoulder, allowing her to tense mid-scoop.

"Is everything alright, Yukima?" her senior asked, giving the girl's shoulders a concerned squeeze.

"I just… I've had a lot on my mind lately…" Yukima sighed. She set down the half-loaded cutting board and rested her palms on the counter.

"Is it about Sumika?" Mahiru prodded, her face popping to Yukima's left to give her a sly grin.

Yukima blushed and hastily picked up the wooden slab, sliding the rest of its contents into the bowl. Mahiru's hand gripped hers and paused its frantic motions, laying it still on the table.

"You're falling for her, aren't you?" Mahiru asked, her voice dipping in tone.

"I-I… I am," Yukima admitted, bowing her head.

The blonde picked up on a lingering sentiment from the admission. Raising a critical brow, she tried to finish the sentence. "…But…?"

Yukima's face puckered, a storm of conflicting emotions inside her bubbling to the surface. "But I don't want to be a burden… My…

My mother chose to die instead of being with me. I strained her and dad my entire life, and without him she collapsed in on herself. I… I don't want that to happen, I don't want anyone to have to lift me up. I don't want her to have any weight on her shoulders because of me…"

Mahiru frowned, sliding over to Yukima's side completely in order to help her toss the salad.

"You vastly underestimate Abe, Yukima…" Mahiru sighed, fingers deftly mixing herbs and greens. "She's much stronger than you think… Someone with that much love to give-."

"But she gives too much!" Yukima cried, slamming her fist down, her body shaking. "I… she's always so close with everyone. I want to be the only one she clings to, I want to feel like I'm the only one who matters to her, and I'm scared because I want something that's impossible to have… She's too sweet…"

Mahiru recoiled at the outburst, momentarily at a loss for words.

"She… was the first person in my life that isn't my family that's cared about me… Damnit, even my parents didn't care! And Sumika only cares about me because she cares about everyone," Yukima growled, letting warm streams roll down her cheeks.

The blonde sucked in a breath and wrapped her arms around the crying girl, holding her tight. "Yes, yes she does… and I think that's one of the reasons you love her…"

Yukima nodded into the embrace, her body quaking.

"It's why we all love her. And she loves us all back equally… maybe some more equally than others," Mahiru continued, allowing a gentle smile back on her face.

The transfer student managed to stop sniffling for a time. "What…?"

Mahiru squeezed the girl a bit before separating. "You and her are pretty thick headed in similar ways, aren't you?" Yukima's senior shook her head, "You say she clings to everyone, right? Do you know who she clings to most?"

Yukima wiped her face with a sleeve, blinking and shaking her head as she faced Mahiru.

The blonde pointed a svelte finger right at Yukima's nose. "You. Who does she talk with the most after school?"

Yukima looked to the side, red blooming under her tear trails.

"And who doesn't notice when Sumika does very considerate things without being asked to?"

"What?" the junior gaped, her voice upping an octave. "I always notice when Sumika's considerate!"

"Oh really?" Mahiru teased. "Then how about her not pouncing on you with hugs all those days you were sick since she knew that'd just make you feel worse. Or the way she always checks in the morning to make sure the nurse's station has the pills you need during lunch? Or that one time when we didn't and she skipped class to make sure you had them?"

Yukima's head was redder than an apple, her mouth askew as Mahiru chuckled.

"You see, Yukima, she cares for you a great deal, even going so far as to lie about being sick so that she could make sure you didn't get sick yourself," the blonde explained, resting against the kitchen island.

"B-but she's the nurse's aide for the class, that's just second natur-!"

"Ap-ba-buh!" Mahiru sang, wagging a dismissive finger, "There are three other kids in your class that have medicine they take during lunch. Admittedly, they only take them every few days, but I've still never heard a peep from Sumika about checking shipments or anything like that. Heck, there was one time where a kid's meds were lost and she had to be told about it after the fact. She was still concerned, but nowhere near as concerned as when yours were missing."

"I… I… I…" the other girl floundered, lavender eyes drilling holes into the floor.

Mahiru rested a confident hand on the girl's shoulder. "She loves you Yukima, I'm sure of it; the same way you love her. She just probably doesn't realize it yet. Give her time, and I'm sure she'll come around to realize what she's been feeling this whole time." The blonde looked out the kitchen's window, eyes sinking. "Just… don't

forget to tell her how you feel before it's too late. You never know what's going to happen. Life can be cruel…"

Yukima started a rather grim chuckle before, as if on cue, it devolved into a series of pained coughs. Mahiru snickered in kind, though her face was still rather void of mirth.

The minute the younger girl's coughing fit subsided, the two shared an understanding glance.

"I'm glad you're my friend, Mahiru." Yukima smiled, small but strong.

"Same, Yukima. I'm glad we got to meet," Mahiru sighed, letting her smile become more genuine.

"We're back~!"

Yukima perked at the sing song voice, eyes immediately clawing towards the entryway to the kitchen. She briefly spared a glance over to Mahiru, who only chuckled and waved a hand towards the exit. "By all means, go get'er." The last part was met with a playful wink that made Yukima blush.

The girl composed herself as she strutted towards the doorway. A blob of pink enveloped her as Sumika sprung from the entryway of the house. She bounced back, smiling up at the raven haired girl.

"How's it been goin', Yukima!" Sumika chirped. The cheer almost left her completely as she looked at Yukima's face. "Yukima! Were you crying?"

Reflexively Yukima scrabbled at her face with her sleeve, hoping to rid herself of the tear stains to no avail. "Uh… I-I… I, uh… I cut myself by accident." The reply was stammered and hasty, but it seemed to do the trick as Sumika quickly lifted the girl's fingers to check for damage. Recognizing one of Fumine's 'hello-kitty' bandages, Sumika gasped, cupping the hand gingerly in both her hands.

"Aw, that's terrible Yukima…" Sumika crowed, deflating. She perked a bit a second later. "I know! This'll make it better!"

Without warning the rosette pulled the injured finger towards her lips, pressing them gently to the plastic slip. She pulled back, a

self-satisfied smile mounting on her cheeks. "There, now it should be healed in no time flat!"

She let Yukima's hands drop, the residual warmth hanging from the raven girl's fingers like honey.

"Oh! Fumine! Look at what we got at the store for you!" Sumika called, rushing off into the living room.

Yukima smiled, gingerly cupping her finger in her hands.

Yukima was happy.

That was unusual.

And now she also had hope.

O/o\O

"I'm surprised how warm it is out…" Sumika sighed, leaning up on the railing.

Yukima hopped in place, surprised at the rosette's sudden appearance. She, too, was leaning on the railing, eyes originally glued to the twinkling skyline surrounding Mahiru's apartment. Sumika found that far-off stare to be one of Yukima's most adorable habits. Getting to know her over the last few months, it'd become clear how contemplative the sickly girl was.

For her part, Yukima wrung her hands out over the street. "Y-yeah, especially being this high up…"

The stutter was another one of those little things that Sumika found she enjoyed. After a few weeks at Fuzaiumi High the transfer student had seemed to integrate into the class completely, becoming a natural part of everyday life. In the process she'd gradually become more confident and lost her constant habit of word-tripping. But, whenever Sumika talked to her, the girl seemed to revert ever so slightly back to her old, easily embarrassed self.

The thought brought a warm blossom to Sumika's chest; it was something only she was able to provoke, and while she adored the fact that Yukima had become more self-assured she couldn't help but think the fumbling was cute.

The quintet had fully assembled at Mahiru's house, celebrating the coming winter break and, of course, Christmas Eve.

Normally they'd do something with family, and while
Fumine *was* going to be leaving in a bit to be with her parents, everyone else planned to stay until around midnight. Soraka's parents were overseas, Sumika's had given her permission (and a hearty encouragement to have fun), and Yukima and Mahiru… well, Sumika didn't want to dwell on what were ultimately morose thoughts.

These gatherings were nice, though admittedly they weren't always consistent. Fumine was often out and away doing formal training or cram school, similarly with Mahiru who was gearing up for her final year at the high school. Soraka would often jump out herself to visit a friend of hers in the hospital, a crush that Sumika did have a soft spot for teasing her about. Usually that'd just leave Sumika and Yukima alone, which she found was fine. They'd often just head back to Sumika's house, finish homework together, have the snacks that Sumika's father usually brought up to the room, and then end the night by watching videos together on the internet (usually cute, fluffy animal videos, if the rosette had her way).

Regardless, spirits were high among the group tonight, though Sumika couldn't quite get her cheer up to celebratory levels.

Tomorrow Yukima would be flying to Europe to visit extended family in Germany for the holidays. Technically she should have left the day before Christmas Eve, but she'd postponed to stay with her friends… to stay with Sumika just a few days more.

Sumika smiled as she slid up next to Yukima and bumped the taller girl's shoulder. The raven haired girl blushed but leaned back against Sumika, bumping her back. Sumika blushed back, a little smile on her face.

It was little moments like these that she'd dedicated herself to cherishing after Mahiru's little speech all those months ago. There was something between herself and Yukima that just made the world a little more vibrant, a little more electric. And the two seemed to have realized this, sticking close together whenever they could, with Sumika always saying something cheery about the day she had, or Yukima positing a dry observation she'd made along her own path. It was pretty obvious to Sumika at this point where the two were

headed… but she was comfortable where their relationship sat for the time being, and she got the same feeling from Yukima as well. They were content before they decided to make any big next steps.

"So, the gift exchange is starting up before Fumine leaves," Sumika sighed. "Buuut… I wanted to give you your gift now… while it's just the two of us out here."

Yukima nodded, smiling. "I was thinking it'd be probably good to do it now, too." Lithe fingers raked through raven tresses as Yukima turned. Sumika swallowed, watching the girl face her; ever since convincing the girl to let her hair down during summer break, Sumika had had trouble focusing whenever that lilac gaze fell on her. The black hairs drifted like dark cotton against the dim lights bouncing off the towers around them.

"So, who should go first?" Yukima grinned, cocking her head to the side.

"Uh… Wh-why don't you go first?" Sumika offered, wincing internally at her own stutter. That habit she loved so much in her friend had seemed to rub off on her as well. The two were their own set of stuttering idiots, she supposed.

"Hmm…" The raven girl nodded. She reached into her purse, an artifact of her grandmother's that she'd found this past fall. Since then she'd never let it be too far from her at all times.

Her fingers retrieved a small, square box that had a store's name etched in gold font on the front. "I… uh… I saw this at a store and I thought… well… Just… here…"

Yukima squeezed her eyes shut as her voice seemed to fail her. She held out her hands, presenting the box right in front of Sumika's face.

The rosette smiled and took the box, giving Yukima's hand a confident squeeze. "I'm sure it's going to be awesome."

And she was right. She popped open the case to find a large, beautiful pink gem set into a teardrop frame, flanked by two minor gems and tied off to a cherry red bow-tied choker. Sumika gasped, timidly lifting the parcel from the package.

"Y-Y-Yuki… y-you, this is too-…"

Yukima placed a shaking finger against the rosette's lips. "I-I have pl-plenty of money, Sumika… If I-I don't spend it on someone I'll feel like it-it's going to waste…" The transfer student smiled. "Besides, I… noticed that most of your outfits frame your neck… I thought this w-would look g-goo-nice as an accessory…"

Sumika felt tears in her eyes. She launched forward and pulled the other, surprised girl into a hug, rubbing their faces together before pulling away while cheering, "I love it, I love it, I love it!"

Without pausing, she pulled out the small box she was holding behind her, completely ignoring the frozen, sappy grin heat-steamed onto Yukima's face.

"Accept my present as well!" Sumika cried, shoving her box into Yukima's hands. The raven girl blinked, fumbling briefly with the gift before holding it steady. She carefully pried open the top, her fingers stopping after they'd peeled away the soft packing paper.

Sumika's pleasant mood fell when Yukima's face twisted in consternation.

"Sumika, these-! I can't!"

The rejection was silenced as Sumika placed her full palm over the other girl's mouth.

"You told me to accept yours, even though it had to be expensive… because it was meant for me, right?" Sumika started, going slow. She picked up the pace. "Mine is the same. It's expensive in a different way… and it's meant to show that I want you to have something to remind you of me while you're overseas. So please, accept my gift…"

The plea was met as Yukima pulled a strand of silky red ribbon from the box.

"But… Sumika, your ribbon? Y-you love this ribbon…" Yukima fussed, running her fingers through the red length.

"Remember when you were over at my house… it was only a few weeks after we first met… but we put on that little fashion show?" Sumika replied, cupping Yukima's hands in her own, the two threading the ribbon together. "A-and I convinced you to put this in your hair… you looked… I remember how beautiful you looked. I

knew right then and there that you were the person that needed to have this ribbon. I just… I've been saving it for today."

"Sumika…" the other girl sighed, hands welling inside of the rosette's.

"Besides," the shorter girl chirped, bobbing her head with emphasis, "I've still got plenty of ribbons. So we can even match when I wear my regular red ones!"

Yukima drew her hands back, wrapping the strand around her palm. She allowed herself a small, shy smile as she gazed lovingly down on the material.

"I'll… I'll treasure this… Forever…" she replied, resting her forehead against Sumika's. The motion surprised Sumika, but feeling the flow of warmth from the other girl's touch, she leaned into it, the two leaving their eyes to linger between them.

A bang came from the glass sliding door to Mahiru's balcony.

"Hey lovebirds get in here! We're about to start the gift exchange! Fumine has to be out of here, like, yesterday!" Soraka barked, half of which was actually an amused laugh.

The two blushed and detached, though their errant fingers managed to find each other.

"Soraka, it's not that big of a deal, I swear!" Fumine's voice drifted from farther inside.

"Aww, but Fumine!" Soraka cawed, cornflower hair drifting to her side. "The transfer student is trying to steal my waifu away from me! I can't just let her! That's completely unfair!"

"Gah, Soraka, just leave them alone, okay? Don't get on this again!" came the frustrated response.

Mahiru stepped into sight from down the hall, her braided blonde ponytail drifting in her wake. "I think what Yazuno is trying to say is that you should let the two collect themselves so that we can do this properly."

Sumika scratched the back of her head, wriggling under the suspicious gaze that her best friend was giving her and her… her and Yukima.

"Alright. You two better be in here in five minutes or I'm opening all of your presents without you!" the azulite sniggered,

turning and vanishing down the hall.

Mahiru watched her go by, sparing a glance to the other two before flashing them both a joyous thumbs up and making herself scarce.

The balcony bound duo turned to each other, faces red as stoplights as giggles fought an easy battle up their throats.

"We should probably get in there before Hayami gets any angrier," Yukima choked out.

"We should, we should," Sumika agreed. Her fingers tightened around Yukima's hand, pulling the two of them towards the door.

Yukima did nothing to resist. She even tightened her hold.

Sumika's pulse quickened.

O/o\O

Sumika's pulse quickened.

A day ago, no, only *hours* ago she'd said goodbye to Yukima after walking home together. Only hours ago had the two of them had a fantastic time with friends playing games over teeth-rottingly sweet Christmas music. Only hours ago…

She dropped the carton of milk she was holding, its white contents blending in with the tile.

"*Lufthansa Flight 431, on its way to Frankfurt, Germany has been reported missing. While news is scarce, there are eye witness reports of a plane with smoke leaking from its fuselage flying over a mountain range in Iran. So far there are no reports on where the plane is now or the status of the crew or passengers, but the sighted plane was described as making a sharp dive towards the mountain range, followed closely by what appears to be an explosion. Phone recordings from passersby cau…*" the newscaster's voice tapered out as Sumika's pulse became too loud in comparison.

LH431.

Yukima's ticket had been for flight LH431.

Yukima was…

Yukima was…

Sumika fell to her knees, brand new, hand-sewn poodle skirt soaking up in spilled milk.

Her eyes were wide, distant, and brimming with shocked, scared tears.

"Y-Y-Yukima… Y-Y-Yuk-k-kima… Y-Y-uki…" Sumika grit her teeth and let the tears flow.

And that's how her mother found her, curled in on herself in a puddle on the floor, catatonic and muttering the name of a ghost.

The sun set onFuzaiumi City as Christmas Day came to a close.

Charcoal Part 1

[redacted]

January, 2012 – December, 2012

Yukima Katsumi.

To the public, that was just a name, one of dozens on a list of victims and unfortunate souls.

The name of a girl who had hoped to see family in Germany over Christmas break, to come home and spend time with the people she loved, to graduate and go on to college.

A name inscribed on a plaque in a graveyard just outside of Fuzaiumi's city limits.

Sumika was right though: it was still a lovely name.

Lufthansa Flight 431 had crashed in the Elburz mountains in Iran, casualty of a skirmish that had broken out between radicals hiding among the local villages and the current reigning regime. Fifty-two unlucky passengers, six hostesses and two pilots were counted among the missing or dead.

No one was really sure how many, if any, people survived the crash. Scouts had been sent in by Iran's military, assisted by Japanese and American coordinators, only to find the crash site being scoured and defended by the very rebels accused of the attack. By the time the area had been secured, there were only 46 charred, unidentifiable skeletons left at the site. Any others were either buried in the mountainside from the sheer force of the crash or the bodies had been taken by the insurgents. Regardless, the 'rescue' team had been left with half a hundred dead and very few answers.

Search parties combed the mountains for days after the attack, but after a week and a half of fruitless searching the parties were called back to focus on dealing with the terrorists instead.

No one had been found; the whole flight's roster was considered a complete loss.

The dedication funeral had been lovely, Mahiru admitted. The flight was international, but the majority of its occupants had been Japanese, so those that died were given a memorial in the city's nicest graveyard. Ceremonial ashes were laid to rest three weeks after the crash; wood ash, of course, since what bodies left behind were still being examined for identification.

The four remaining members of their crew had been present when they put the urn to rest at the memorial.

Mahiru glanced over to find Soraka and Fumine parked next to each other. Normally that would be a good sign; ever since she'd met them the two had seemed slightly at odds. But now it seemed less a bridge to repair a broken friendship and more putting aside their differences in the name of grief. Fumine was patiently patting Soraka's back as the azulite did her best to compose a stoic façade, an attempt marred by the quakes in her cheeks and the tears from her eyes. The brunette was better, but nowhere near perfect. Her posture was proper, her face was neutral, but she rivaled Soraka when it came to how many tears crawled towards her chin.

Worst off was Sumika. It had broken her heart, seeing the rosette at the ceremony, bawling her eyes into any shoulder she could lean on. Even conversing with the girl's parents, friends of Mahiru's from a day long past, failed to stifle the sour blood running under her skin, under the mood of everyone there.

In a way, Mahiru understood why Sumika was so much more emotional than anyone else at the funeral. The elder had observed her junior's grand empathic nature first hand; she was dedicated to helping the world however she could, to cheer it up one day at a time. Even Mahiru herself couldn't tout such purity; she did what she did – volunteering to cook for hospitals, becoming the nurse's assistant, going to soup kitchens on the weekend – out of guilt, which was an admission she buried deep, far and away from anyone who might pry.

But in circumstances like this, that purity was a double-edged sword.

Sumika genuinely loved everyone, had faith in *everyone*, no exceptions. To hear that one of her closest friends, maybe her

closest friend ever, had died, and that dozens had died with her… The poor girl was probably suffering the worst month of her life.

She seemed especially torn when she heard that Yukima's personal funeral would happen in Germany, a place she was not prepared to go to in the slightest for any number of reasons.

Hope had been stricken from the greatest dreamer in their ranks and that served to drain what little morale everyone else had.

The proceedings ended just after midmorning, with grieving couples, widows and friends lingering around as distraught souls do in times of grief.

Sumika was one of the last ones to approach the statue and plaque, Mahiru and Sumika's mother gently pushing the girl forward, giving her the boost in confidence she needed to take those deafening steps.

The rosette collapsed just as she reached the monument, fingers skimming across the plaque as her knees hit the ground.

"Sumika!"

"Abe!"

Mahiru and Sumika's mother didn't react in time to catch her, though their hands immediately fell again to the girl's shoulders.

"I… I… Y-Y-Y-Yuk-k-k…" the girl blubbered, her words punctuated droplets of saliva flinging from her lips.

The girl gave a rough hic, prompting the older student to rub her back.

"Shhh… Sumika… Just… Let it out, okay?" Mahiru cooed. A look up found the eyes of the weary mother, who motioned for Mahiru to press Sumika into a joined hug.

Mahiru did so, easing the small girl between them, and there they stayed for half an hour as Sumika cried herself to exhaustion.

O/o\O

"Will you be alright taking them back alone, Nobu?"

Mahiru watched as the elder Abe saw off her husband, Sumika and her brother Ryuuki asleep in the back seat of the

compact car. Neither of them handled emotional drain put on them by the service very well and had seen fit to nap on the way home.

"I'll be fine, Rise. Just be sure to be home earlier today, okay? Sumika needs you," the man replied, leaning out of the driver's side window. The two shared a chaste peck before he sat back down, rolled up the window and drove off, leaving the waving student and business woman next to the cemetery.

"You have a lovely husband, Miss Abe," Mahiru noted, allowing herself a half-smile.

"He's the best in the world," the woman sighed, her form slumping. Another breath and the confidence returned to her form. "And that's Rise little miss; you'll make me feel old calling me 'Miss Abe' all the time."

Mahiru puffed out a dry chuckle. "I suppose you're right. I'm not a fan of when little kids call me 'Miss Okawa', either." The blonde blinked, looking at the briefcase in Rise's hand. "You're still going to work, even after all of that?"

Rise nodded, a weary grin on her cheeks. "Yep." She patted the case, "World doesn't stop; sometimes you just have to grit your teeth and run with it till it gives you a break. I won't be getting one quite yet… and I don't think Sumika's going to get one soon either."

The older woman began to step towards the nearest bus stop. "I'll walk you home before heading into work, Mahiru. I have something I need to ask you."

Mahiru tailed behind, fingers knotting with the smaller frills on her black dress.

"What do you need, Mis-Rise?"

Rise glanced back briefly before looking forward again, seemingly pleased that Mahiru was following her as she'd requested. "I want your help to keep Sumika afloat. She's a very strong girl… maybe even stronger than I was at her age, and I was quite the spitfire… But, she's always been so sensitive to other people… I don't think she can handle this alone."

Mahiru frowned, brows knitting in consternation. "Rise… I don't think that I'm really the best person for the job…"

A scoff came from the businesswoman. "Are you serious, Mahiru?" Rise's voice softened. "You're one of the strongest people I know… What you went through with your parents… the fact alone that you're still here today, working so hard at living a normal life… It's more than enough proof to me that Sumika would be in good hands."

A knot formed in Mahiru's chest, causing the blonde to grip at her heart.

"I'm… I don't think…"

A gentle hand landed on her head.

"This isn't a situation where you need to think, Mahiru. This is one where you need to feel. I've always been the one who was good at thinking, never all that great at feeling…" Rise admitted, glancing wearily to the side. "I'm wise enough though, to tell when I need to call in help. My husband and I can only do so much at home; Sumika will need someone to help her get through school and when we're not around."

They reached the bus stop, idling by the post.

"But, I'm not strong!" Mahiru lamented, feeling something inside her crack. "I'm barely holding my life together as is… I depend on Sumika, I depend on all of them… How can I help them when they're the only things keeping me sane?"

Mahiru closed her eyes and began to rub her temples with one hand, a glittering stream trailing from her lids.

Once more, that friendly hand landed on her head.

"I can see that. But what you don't see is just how powerful *being* there can be," Rise responded. She raised up her hands flat, parallel to each other while the briefcase hung off her thumb. "Right now, you two are like unsteady wooden posts… well, I mean your whole group is like that right now, but that's not the point I'm trying to make. You're like two posts that have been uprooted and are unsteady…" Rise steepled her hands, pressing the fingertips together in a crude pyramid. "Alone, you would both fall over, but together you become each other's crutch. It's still not the most stable, but then add another post and another post and another and soon you have a structure, a web that can't be knocked down by

anything. Go ahead, lean on them, but remember that they're all leaning on you just as much, Mahiru."

The blonde watched as Rise dissected her inner conflict in seconds, almost in awe at how swiftly her issues were critiqued.

"In fact," the woman continued, perking just a touch, "it might be beneficial if you lean on Sumika a little bit…"

"Uh… what?"

As rudely as the question was phrased, the perplexing nature of Rise's statement threw Mahiru's normal formality for a loop.

Rise chuckled. "Sumika always comes to me about feeling powerless, at least she did before that Katsumi girl popped up…" the woman explained, her pleasant façade dropping as she spoke. She reached a middle ground, a neutral face that seemed to stick. "She hates feeling like she can't do anything to help… so… maybe if you become someone she has to *help*, someone she *can* help, as you've observed yourself… Well, that might help her in return. Make her feel like there's something she *can* do."

The bus finally arrived, the two dutifully climbing aboard.

"I… I'll do it," Mahiru decided, standing next to Rise. The older woman smiled down on her.

"I appreciate it, Mahiru. I know she'll be safe in your care," warm violet eyes carried the same message. The blonde blushed and looked away, an uneasy pressure building in her chest… a familiar pressure. One she thought she'd never feel ever again… one she never *did* want to feel again.

A groaning broke out across the bus, causing the few other passengers to turn their heads towards the business woman. Rise scratched her cheek as Mahiru lifted an eyebrow.

"I… uh… skipped breakfast this morning thanks to an early meeting…"

Having been the underdog in the conversation thus far, Mahiru suddenly found herself in familiar territory and breathing a sigh of relief.

"Then might I invite you in so I can make you something? It wouldn't take long, I assure you," Mahiru offered.

Rise gave a small, dismissive wave. "No, no, I couldn't possibly impose on you after dumping all that responsibility on your shoulders, that'd be overkill."

"I insist, though! You shouldn't go through such a long day without eating!" Mahiru pushed.

Rise leaned back and sighed, scratching her head. "Well, how's this. I'll treat *you* to a tea shop near your house; your pick. Consider it an early thank you-slash-down payment. That way I also don't get my husband mad at me for turning down his offer to get up early and cook for me!"

Mahiru slumped into her hand hold, an empty but resigned smile on her face. "I suppose that'll do…"

O/o\O

The memorial had been put in place in late January, yet now sagged the dusk of May.

Mahiru finished signing a kanji at the bottom of the report, a soft sigh dancing from her lips.

Almost five months since she had to bury one of her juniors, at least in name. Normalcy had seemed to reestablish itself, a status quo achieved, though one that wasn't so pleasant. There were less meet ups, less hang outs, less friendly visits…

Fumine had maybe been the first to recover, or at least was the only one to do it gracefully, considering she tended to restrain outward signs of emotion. While Mahiru couldn't say such behavior was healthy (and made the girl seem a little cold), she couldn't blame the brunette. Soraka hadn't changed too much, aside from a few dour bouts and a sudden spike in how protective she was around people she cared about. She'd become very touchy around people outside their respective circles, often starting arguments with strangers after simple misunderstandings just because she felt defensive about something or someone.

Perhaps the worst came from Sumika. The girl had become… distant; that jubilation, that balmy temperament becoming more air than mist. The lack of get-togethers were troubling as well, meaning

that Mahiru had less of a chance to speak with Sumika on the regular… even then conversations didn't seem to last long unless it was something of dire importance.

It frustrated the blonde at how quickly her promise to Rise began to slip away, but there was little she could do without trying to demand control over Sumika's life in its entirety. Instead, she settled for being content, or at least trying to be, with the lot life had thrown her *this* time.

She leaned back, resting down the pen and looking out to the midday sky; clear for the most part, dots of white and a bright orange disk making the urban landscape a little more cheery.

She glanced around the room, eyes picking over the four empty cots lined against the infirmary wall. With the nurse out at a small conference for the hour, the room was surprisingly quiet. Chillingly so. Mahiru popped out of the chair, shivering as she walked to the window and shoved it open, letting warm springtime winds into the building.

Technically she wasn't supposed to do that too often, to keep the infirmary as sanitary as possible, but she couldn't deny the temptation of the sweet smells of the season. The only other times she got something like that was when…

She blinked, realizing she'd let her mind wander where it shouldn't.

The quiet still ate at her, though. Her fingers drummed on the window sill, if only to generate a little noise to break the monotony. Having an hour off from classes each day was nice, but she only took this position to help people, not waste time. She clutched her chest as a cold swell began to ebb from her core, one that not even the warm spring breeze could relieve.

The door slid open behind her, startling her. Briefly, she thought of someone specific, hoping for the warm smile that could put the cold at ease.

And while her desire was met with disappointment, it was mixed with pleasant surprise as well.

Fumine gave a soft smile as she carried in a small potted plant atop her delicate fingertips.

"Oh, Yazuno, I didn't expect you to pop in," Mahiru sighed, letting her lips curve up a tick.

Fumine nodded to Mahiru has she carefully rested the plant on the table. "Well, it seems as if our teacher lost a bet with the nurse. This was the payment." The brunette rolled her eyes, brushing a bang out of her periphery. "As class representative it was 'my duty' to deliver the spoils of war." The observation was punctuated with an airy and amused chuckle on the younger girl's part.

"Well, it's certainly pleasant seeing a friendly face. It's been rather slow around here all day," Mahiru replied, giving a broad motion to the empty cots.

"Did I interrupt rush hour?" Fumine sighed, her words insincere and teasing. The dainty hand to the collar bone perfected the joke, leading to a very unladylike snort from the senior. Soon enough, the two of them had devolved into a fit of giggles.

This was a unique pleasure she could share with Yazuno and Yazuno alone; the dropping of the proper girl garb. The two had a shared history of growing up learning proper formal etiquette, and so, unlike most of their peers, often remained more uptight while in casual conversations, usually taking on a more parental role among peers and as dutiful wards to educators and seniors. But, when the two were alone, like the occasional baking session together, the two could relax their façades. That didn't mean that Mahiru didn't relax it around her friends, but when something was as ingrained as her manners it took two familiar in the art to lift the burden quickly and efficiently.

The two finished their giggle fit as the bell rang in the background.

"Well, I wish I could stay and chat, but classes call. I'll see you after school, Okawa!" Fumine smiled, waving as she trotted out the door.

"Be careful until then!" Mahiru replied, going over to the door to wave the girl off.

Once the door was safely closed behind her, Mahiru pressed herself against it, rubbing her chest.

The cold was growing, slowly, steadily, only fractionally impeded by the other girl's interruption. It didn't help that she had to waltz back over to the desk and work on filling out forms for the nurse, the one who she had to admit more than once felt more like an aide to *Mahiru* than the other way around with how consistently the woman took off during these hour periods.

For what felt like an eternity she sat there, pen scratching away, ears longing painfully to hear the sounds of distant birds and people milling around the school. Chimes wafted over the wind, briefly breaking the worldly monotony with a heavenly tone. And, for a moment, the cold ceased to grow, prompting a shallow smile across her lips.

The door slammed open, making Mahiru's pencil tip snap.

Her eyes shot up to find a tussled mass of cornflower hair in the doorway.

"We…" Soraka huffed, ocean blues flying up to meet Mahiru's gold, "We can't… hha… can't find Sumika…"

Mahiru stood, eyes jumping to the clock. It was five minutes before she herself was supposed to go back to class, which meant that her juniors were in the middle of a lesson.

Mahiru strode to the door, grabbing her bag; her shift was over as far as she was concerned. "When was the last time you saw her?" she immediately asked. The azulite shifted backwards to let her senior out of the doorway, Mahiru indirectly dragging the two down the hallway with her aimless steps.

"Lunch in the cafeteria… she seemed down the whole meal but I couldn't get her to open up!" Soraka groaned, threading fingers through her fringe. "She said she needed to go to the bathroom after the bell rung, so I went on without her… When she didn't show up I was worried, but I thought she was just running late… but she just wouldn't show up so I decided to ask permission to go look for her…" the junior scowled, gripping her shoulder uneasily. "She's not in the cafeteria, or the bathrooms or… anywhere… Damnit, I shouldn't have let her go off alone!"

The senior placed a comforting hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "We'll find her… did you try her phone? Is there anything

odd about today, other than the way she's been acting?"

"She left her bag in the classroom and she turns off her phone when she's in class anyway," Soraka lamented. "And it's been a pretty ordinary day so far. Nothin' weird goin' on besides Sumika actin' all depressed…"

Depressed. The word stuck with Mahiru, maybe in part because Mahiru knew that's what she herself was suffering, but also because there was the brief wonder of why Sumika would be depressed on such a random day…

It hit her.

"She invited her to have lunch on the roof…" Mahiru whispered, the implications hitting her like a load of bricks. Soraka gave her a quizzical look, but before she could even open her mouth Mahiru snapped her head to the side. "What day is it?!"

Soraka staggered back at the sudden entreaty, her fingers fumbling into her pockets to pull out her cell. Moments later, it was flipped open to the calendar, displaying a very clear date.

Mahiru turned away, immediately launching into a jog towards the stairs. "I know where she is!"

O/o\O

The roof access door burst open, Mahiru and Soraka toppling out onto the spacious terrace, their feet stumbling from sudden panicked exertion.

Exertion that was well earned, because the moment they looked up they found exactly who they were looking for.

Sumika was sitting on the bench in the middle of the square, curled in on herself like a ball, what could be seen of her eyes distant and glazed. In her hands was a thick red bow that dangled out from between her fingers.

Mahiru collected her breath quickly, standing straight and swallowing the lump in her throat. She turned to Soraka, who was even more winded from her frantic search around the school.

"Soraka… go tell your teacher that Sumika's gone home for the day," Mahiru ordered, her voice barely above a whisper.

The azulite straightened, resting her hand on the door frame while still taking in air. "Mahiru, what's going on?"

Mahiru turned back to Sumika, eyes sullen. "Today… is the day we all met Yukima. One year ago…"

Soraka's mouth drooped a bit as recognition sunk into her pupils, "I… o-oh…"

There was a pause. Instead of leaving, Soraka stepped forward, gripping Mahiru's arm and dragging the two of them towards the stationary Sumika.

"What are you doing, Hayami!?" Mahiru sputtered, confused.

"Shhh…" Soraka responded, giving the older girl a glare.

The two neared the catatonic girl, who barely lifted her head at their presence. The rosette's mouth began to form words, only for Soraka to cut them off by pulling the three of them into a group hug, pinning down the errant student.

She realized what Soraka was doing. Without using words she was trying to comfort her best friend, trying to ease the pain by spreading it out between the three of them. It was a rare moment of seriousness from the playful teen, and while it may not have been very polite Mahiru couldn't help but find pride in how maturely Soraka was trying to handle the situation.

Sumika, for her part, buried herself into both their arms, tears dampening their shoulders as they squeezed her tighter.

"There, there," Mahiru cooed, rubbing the girl on the back.

Even though the words she spoke were meant to comfort, it was difficult when her own chest was constricting at such a rapid pace. It became apparent to her that she and Sumika shared a bond, empathic in nature, that the older girl felt the same crippling pains as the younger.

But, through that tension, there was also relief, as the cold began to recede from whence it came; that touch, the soft, dainty weight of the girl below her salving the frostbitten edges of the senior's psyche.

"It was too cold…" Sumika sobbed, her words absorbed into Soraka's shoulder. "You said it was too cold but when we did come

up here we ended up loving it… We ate up here every day we could."

The rosette hiccupped, her face smearing against the creamy uniforms.

"We know Sumika, we know," Soraka sighed, pulling one of the smaller girl's hands into her own.

Sumika took in a sharp breath, her body beginning to shiver. "It's just… why? Why her? Why anyone?!"

Soraka flinched at the caustic tone, but Mahiru didn't bat an eye. Those sentiments echoed from a time long past, back after the day that had changed her life. If Sumika was at all similar to herself, this would be a hard conversation to stomach: that of the idealist colliding with the emotionless wall of reality.

"It's not fair!" the rosette wheezed. "None of this is fair!"

"It's not, Sumika, we both know that, but it's something we all need to push past in our lives. It's not easy, it hurts, but there are some things we all just need to let go of…" Mahiru admitted, holding the girl tighter.

As the blonde expected, Sumika jutted back from the hold, setting Soraka off balance but leaving Mahiru unfazed. She was ready for what was coming.

"Hurts?" Sumika cried, her voice cracking. "Hurt doesn't last for months on end! It doesn't go away when every day I can see her walking to school with me! Or walking home! Or in the halls! Or her overtop the boy sitting in her desk!"

Mahiru waited, flexing her fingers, knowing the moment was nigh. Soraka caught glimpse of the action, only to ignore it while in awe at the vitriol escaping the normally tame girl's mouth.

"It's too much, alright!? I just… None of you… None of you could understand-"

The words the senior had been waiting for having been spoken, her hand lashed out, snapping Sumika across the cheek.

Soraka froze. Sumika froze. Mahiru glared.

Mahiru let her hand linger in the air, waiting until Sumika composed herself enough to stare at the blonde in shock, and maybe a little bit of terror.

"Don't think you're the only one to ever go through that!" Mahiru snarled. "Did you forget that Yukima was my friend, too? Or Soraka's? Or Fumine's? You might have been the closest to her, but you're not the only one that's been hurt by her dying!" The other two stared at her, unsure how to respond. So instead, she continued, "I've lost several people who are dear to me, people who didn't deserve what happen and not a day goes by that I don't think about any one of them, that I don't *miss* any one of them! Whatever you're feeling now I've gone through a hundred fold!"

It would have normally been uncouth, no, unheard of for Mahiru to *ever* raise her voice against a junior, but it seemed to do the trick.

The angry Sumika, the unnatural rage and fire, subsided, leaving behind waves of anguish in its wake. For a moment, all that was left was a husk, a shell that had been Sumika, which shifted as the scowl on her face melted into a tortured frown. Again came the water works, and again Mahiru was ready.

Gently, very gently, and without making sudden movements, she pulled Sumika against herself, the two molding briefly into one lump of sorrow. Mahiru only vaguely registered that she was crying now too. She wasn't sure when that had happened, or when Soraka had also begun sniffling along with them.

"I miss them… Mom… Dad… Friends…" Mahiru sniveled, pushing her face into the crown of Sumika's head. "I want them back so much, and I try to be strong about it, but sometimes I can't be… And that's why I'm so happy to have you, all of you," she blubbered, looking over at Soraka.

The azulite edged forward and wrapped her arms around Mahiru and Sumika, face uneasy, but determined to do something. The two leaned into it.

"So I know how you feel, and I'm telling you it doesn't get better, but it does get easier when you have people to rely on…" Mahiru hicked. "You both, Fumine… I depend on all of you when it's the hardest… So please, Sumika, don't feel like you can't rely on us for the same thing…"

Sumika shook in their arms, her head swaying back and forth, golden ribbon brushing just under Mahiru's chin.

"I… I'd just be… a burden…" the rosette mumbled.

"Nonsense," Mahiru laughed, a rather genuine one at that. "We all *need* you to rely on us… Just as much as we rely on you." She punctuated the comment by squeezing a little tighter into to the hug, "We'll all get through this, together, okay? All of us, I promise."

Mahiru pulled back to look down on the crying Sumika, prompting Soraka to lean back as well.

Sumika sniffed, her eyes to the ground, before she finally gave a nod and looked up at the two. Mahiru smiled and wiped a tear from Sumika's eye.

Soraka, meanwhile, reached down and picked at the ribbon in Sumika's hand, pulling it from the girl's grip. The rosette was resistant at first, her fist clutched tight, until Mahiru carefully peeled it open, revealing it was not a ribbon but a choker with a gorgeous fuchsia teardrop pendant.

"She gave this to you, right?" Soraka asked, finally holding the item in her hand. She held it with reverence, as one would hold an urn.

The rosette nodded, eyes closing for a flicker to expel what seemed to be the last of her tears. The girl appeared to have gone dry.

Cornflower eyes sparkled, maybe from joy, maybe a trick of the extra moisture around the iris, but there was no reason to doubt the confident smile on Soraka's face. The girl reached forward and unbuttoned Sumika's school collar and pulled it low enough so that she could tie the choker in place, letting it dangle awkwardly over the junior's uniform.

Sumika touched the pendant, giving Soraka an inquisitive stare. Soraka smiled more in response. "We'll never forget her; we could never pretend she didn't exist. I may not have liked her the most, but she was still my friend, and she meant a lot to my best friend in the whole wide world. So I want you to wear that every day you can and every time you do, I want to see you smiling, alright?

Because Yukima wouldn't ever want to see you like you are now. She would want you to be happy. That much I'm sure I know."

Mahiru grinned, adding, "And so do we. We all want to see you happy, so if you're ever having problems coping, come to us, alright? I'm sure none of us mind going through a few good sob sessions if it means having that old smile back."

The rosette managed a teary grin, earnest and thankful. She sniffed, wiped her own eyes and nodded, loose bangs bouncing in place. Words seemed to escape the girl, leaving her only with affirmative grunts and whines.

"I feel like we're starting to repeat ourselves…" Soraka chuckled, combing fingers into her bangs.

Mahiru stood and patted herself off, "Well, I've found that grief is a very circular condition. Treating it may very well be circular as well." A few wipes and the blonde freed herself of the moisture in her eyes, "Mik-Soraka, if you would go tell your teacher that Sumika isn't feeling so well and that you need to escort her home… I'll do the same and I can treat you both to something nice at my place where we can… talk about this more. If that's alright with both of you…"

Sumika thumbed the jewel at her neck and grew a decidedly wistful, sad smile. She glanced at Mahiru and nodded, giving a hoarse, "I think that would help…"

Soraka, for her part, looked at the tear stains running down her uniform and sighed, though she certainly kept her smile. "Sheesh… saying a tipped mop bucket did this would be quicker…" The girl looked up, patting herself dry as best she could. "'Course Mahiru, I'll go do that. You two meet me down at the shoe lockers."

The azulite stepped forward, gave Sumika one last hug, and then jogged off towards the door, leaving the two alone. Mahiru bent at the knees and smiled at Sumika.

"Feeling any better?" she asked, brow raised.

Sumika swallowed, eyes shifting off to the side, her fingers playing with the pendant idly.

"No," the girl responded.

Even bracing herself for the obvious answer Mahiru felt the hollow force behind her eyes push that much further against her lids,

causing her smile to slip a touch more than a hair’s width.

The rosette gave a rueful smile as she looked down at the gem. "But… I think I will soon…"

Mahiru's smile returned to full strength… and for a brief moment she had hope that that cold spot in her chest might fade away completely some day.

Charcoal Part 2

January, 2012 – December, 2012

The emotional release that day had been cathartic, and the pact they'd all made lifesaving. Mahiru had even been sure to invite Fumine to her house that evening so she could be brought into the fold proper. The days were frequently slow, and occasionally very painful; sometimes Sumika would ask them to hold her during lunch break, sometimes something would remind her of Yukima and she'd break into a fit of tears (a couple of times in the middle of class, prompting her to go to the nurse), and once she'd even told them that she wasn't going to be coming into school at all.

But the four stuck together. They made an effort to hang out more, to see each other more, to talk more and get whatever bad miasma hung around them to dispel.

Mahiru placed a teabag in the pot, her mind wandering to one of those nights back in August over summer break, when the four had come back from visiting the water park.

They had all been exhausted and had milled in her living room finishing up some shaved ice they'd bought on the way home, all of them still lounging on damp towels. The quartet had been bantering back and forth all day, a tradition that had been seemingly lost after Yukima's passing, but now was gradually coming back into play after so long away.

The topic was an old one: Soraka's crush on her childhood friend, a boy by the name of Kagura Tokubē. The azulite swatted away taunts and teases like she usually did, her attempts to deflect the questions proving feeble until one moment where she asked a question that struck a chord.

"What about you, Mahiru, you're gorgeous! Surely you've had a boyfriend or two!"

At the time the blonde had been finishing up her shaved ice, only for the question to catch her off guard and for her scoop to fall back into the bowl.

Three sets of eyes looked to her, expectant. With dignity, she set down her bowl onto the triangular glass coffee table, picking up a napkin to dab at her face.

"I…" Mahiru swallowed, words not coming to her naturally. She broke form for a moment and chuckled self-consciously, brushing a loose bang behind her ear. "I don't… actually… I don't play for the same team, so to speak…"

The admission was a long time coming. She'd kept a lot of her past regarding the Ume family tight-lipped, even after promising everyone they'd work together through the tough times.

Admitting you were gay, in any context, was awkward, even without local social stigmas. And even now she saw the shock on all of their faces. Sumika leaned forward, the concern on her face almost adorable. Soraka had her head cocked at an angle, curiosity gleaming behind sapphire orbs. Fumine… Fumine averted her gaze, fists clenching at her skirt.

"There was this girl…" she continued, fingers playing off each other, "Makoto…" Mahiru closed her eyes and swallowed hard. "We were happy, but one day something… tragic happened and we had to split up. To this day it's one of my biggest regrets that I let her go…"

"Mahiru…" Sumika sighed, the girl's eyes brimming with empathy.

The blonde waved a dismissive hand, lackadaisical smile on her lips. "Oh, don't you worry about me, I'm fine… She… she might have hurt me in the end, but I cherish all those happy memories together."

Fumine jutted from her seat, her form stick straight.

"Well, that's… wonderful to hear, Okawa," the brunette said haphazardly, hands reaching for her affects, "though I realized I'm late to… to…"

The girl's reaching voice was stopped by a palm lancing out and grasping her wrist.

"…Fumi’, you can't run from it forever…" Soraka sighed, tugging the brunette back towards her seat. The azulite's face became pained. "Neither of us can."

Fumine was silent, her arm still tensed as she tried to pull it away, like a deer caught in headlights Mahiru imagined.

Eventually the tea maiden stopped struggling and Soraka's grip loosened, fingers dropping to grip the proper girl's palm and gently guide her back to her seat.

The two were silent, letting Sumika and Mahiru share a worried glance.

"S-so…" Soraka started, hand pushing at the hair at her brow. "About… a year and a half ago? Remember that big fight we had, Sumika?"

"Ah! The one where you two got drunk and upset each other!" Sumika perked, eyes flying wide with recognition.

The azulite rubbed the back of her neck, giving a nervous giggle, "Yeah, so… it wasn't… really… an argument…"

The bubbly girl leaned forward, giving Soraka that same concerned stare that she'd given Mahiru not two minutes earlier.

"Soraka… you… please…" Fumine pleaded meekly. The brunette's face was twisted, her lips curled into a grimace and her eyes narrowed.

Soraka shook her head, adamant, "No, I'm sick of us keeping it secret from them, especially Sumika when she had to deal with all of our shit back then! Mahiru *just* came out to us, I think they'll both understand!"

Mahiru's brow flexed, but she stayed her tongue, refraining from the risk of ruining the moment.

"Are you two…?" Sumika gasped, eyes swaying between them.

Soraka sighed, resting her elbows on the table. "Last year, we got drunk and we…" Fumine screwed her eyes shut. "We ended up sleeping together…" The air was still, but the girl pressed on, "We've both agreed that it was a mistake and we've been trying to push past it all this time… all of *that* was thanks to you, Sumika. Without you we probably would have stopped being friends…"

While the look in Soraka's eyes was conflicted, the smile was genuine and seemed to put the rosette at ease.

Seeing the relief cross Sumika's face had made her stomach flutter and a subtle, familiar warmth billow from her gut. To the point at hand, though, Mahiru decided a small, accepting smile was the best course of action, as opposed to verbally responding.

"So, does that mean that you're both…" Sumika fought with the words, "…gay?"

The girl was meek when she was outside of her element, and she spoke the word as if it were taboo. In many regards, it was. Japan was relatively traditional with its practices: women married men, men supported the household, and so on. Which, she'd noted, was odd; Sumika's family was the least traditional of the four, the odd one out (not counting Mahiru's deceased parents who were pretty straight arrows). Maybe, in a twisted sense, it meant that words like that were more sensitive to her. She was the outsider trying not to offend a native culture, or a child trying to speak in 'adult' for the first time. Whatever the reason, the behavior was adorable.

"No!" Fumine snapped, her voice layered with panic. The hostess and her two other guests blinked at the brunette, who shrunk into herself under the deeper scrutiny. "I… I mean… n-no…" the girl finished weakly.

Soraka shook her head and scratched her cheek. "I… well… I don't…. I haven't quite figured that out, to be honest…"

Fumine didn't bother to look up, but the other two repositioned themselves to look at the azulite.

"I mean… I didn't hate it, but… I just don't feel like that towards Fumine… And Tokubē… I l-like him, so, y'know… Maybe I am… a little?" Soraka shrugged, raising her palms in uncertainty.

"I'm straight," Fumine barked, slamming a suddenly confident hand onto the table. Everyone jumped, and Mahiru was getting whiplash from her head nodding between the two. "I… Soraka and I agreed it was a mistake, and it was. I…like *guys*, so I don't want any of you to get any ideas about me, okay?!"

It was more a plea than an order, but the other three seemed to understand. Mahiru shifted in her seat and patted the shorter girl's head, giving her an award winning smile, "We'd never ostracize you for something so trivial, Yazuno. And I'm sure we'll all do our best to not make you uncomfortable now that we know."

Fumine pouted and crossed her arms, grumbling, "Not like Soraka hasn't been doing that on purpose since we had our talk about it…"

"Hey, it's not my fault you're such a stick in the mud," Soraka retorted, sighing as she leaned back on her hands. Her eyes found their way over to Sumika, who had rested her chin in her hands and was dopily smiling at the other girls. The azulite grinned, a mischievous glint in her eye. "What about *you*, Sumika? We're all here spilling our guts, only fair you cough up too!"

"Ehh?!" Sumika stumbled, falling through her hands. Mahiru reached over to catch the girl before she plunked face first into the soggy Styrofoam cup in front of her. "Ah, thank you, Mahiru!"

"Not a problem… Though, I have to say, I'm curious as well…" Mahiru replied, tapping a finger to her chin and letting a playful smile uncurl.

"Aww… you too…?" Sumika pouted. "You guys are ganging up on me…"

Soraka rolled her eyes, "C'mon, we're not going to bite!"

Sumika sunk into herself, somewhat squeezing her eyes closed.

"I… I don't really know…" she squeaked, her shoulders slumping. "I… care about so many people that it's… kinda hard to tell how many people I love like… *that*… And the only one I was sure of…"

Mahiru sighed, knowing that they were about to poke down into a sensitive topic. But the mood was light she decided that it probably wasn't the best time to dwell. She rested a hand on Sumika's shoulder, taking care to thumb the ribbon at the girl's neck.

"And I know she felt the same way about you… You don't need to say anymore, Abe," Mahiru cooed. Sumika's grateful eyes met her and Mahiru's insides began to melt. She steeled herself

inside and squeezed her fingers around Sumika's shoulder, a tender, caring move. The warmth in her gut was beginning to get distracting, having wormed its way into her throat. She stood, smiling. "How about I go warm us all up some tea and we can get a jump on our Summer homework?"

Soraka groaned and hit her head on the table. "Ugh! Do we *have* to! I thought I could put that off at *least* one more day…"

O/o\O

A loud beep brought Mahiru back to the present day, to the teabag lounging in the simmering water. She removed the bag and replaced the lid, shifting the hot porcelain to a tray with two cups and a plate of colorfully decorated cookies with flakes of green and red.

Mahiru mused to herself how quickly the years could pass. Last Christmas Eve had been one of the best memories of her life, with her and her four friends all enjoying the holidays together and watching sappy rerunning specials together. She'd never felt more at home than with her raucous friends… well, maybe with Makoto, but that was a memory she didn't exactly want to pull up. Nor was the day after last Christmas Eve. Instead, she wanted to focus on tonight and her lone guest, waiting patiently for her at the dinner table.

"Here we go," Mahiru sighed, placing down the tray in the middle of the table. Sumika smiled up at her, gently swishing her legs underneath the table. The blonde seated herself just across, pulling out the finely carved wooden chair and gracefully sliding into place before pouring tea for the two of them.

The plan had been for all four of them to spend Christmas together, like the year previously. Only, it hadn't worked out right. Soraka and Fumine's parents, longtime family friends of each other, had apparently connived for the two families to travel south for the winter, and neither felt comfortable leaving their girls alone, especially since Soraka's parents missed her last Christmas and wanted to make up for it.

So that left Sumika and Mahiru, and while the blonde had tried to insist they just cancel, Sumika counter-insisted that none of

her friends were going to be alone on Christmas. Ultimately the rosette won out and here the two were, enjoying a post-meal pot of tea and some light conversation. Or, at least, it was supposed to be light, but the events following the previous Christmas party hung over the two like humid summer air.

Sumika took her cup and sipped at the contents, bristling as the hot liquid tore down her throat.

"It's great, Mahiru," Sumika cooed, setting her cup down on the saucer. "Really warms you right up, doesn't it?"

Mahiru took a sip of her own cup and winced. The liquid was still scalding hot.

"You have a higher tolerance than I do, then, Sumika," Mahiru chuckled, fanning her tongue.

The rosette scratched the back of her head. "Well, my mom always said I had a 'strong constitution', at least when it came to battling the elements…"

Mahiru smiled, setting her mug down to let it cool. "You sound like Makoto. No matter what you stuffed in front of her, no matter how hot or cold it was… if it was edible, she'd eat it without complaint…"

Sumika's sheepish grin faltered, her hands cupping her tea for warmth. "You… never really talk about her."

"Hmm?" the blonde hummed, her thoughts momentarily lost to herself. "Oh, Makoto?"

"Yeah. You talked about her that one time… but you've never really talked about her since…"

The cook frowned. "Mostly because it's… somewhat painful. She was very dear to me. And then came a day where something terrible happened and she decided that it'd be best… not to continue our relationship… to any degree…"

"I'm sorry to hear that." Sumika knit her brows and pursed her lips. "Ho-w… What was she like?"

Mahiru leaned back in the chair, finally taking another careful sip of her tea. This time, she could bear it, though it was still definitely on the 'hot' side of the spectrum.

"She was… wild, in a lot of ways. ‘Very passionate’ is probably the best way to put it," the blonde mused, finger edging around the lip of her mug. "She could put down food like a disposal and never broke a sweat whenever we decided to go out and exercise. She was lazy too, though. She'd always complain about going out and doing things, but she was tapered because her father brought her up very structured." Mahiru's smile became wistful, leaning forward as she took a heavy sip of her tea.

"She'd do what she had to, but she'd complain about the actual work involved, even if it was for a good cause. Never complained about the good stuff though. She volunteered in soup kitchens from time to time, always ranted about how the aprons were too small or the pot handles always got too hot to lift, but she never once complained about the people she served…"

A flash of red hair appeared to Mahiru, Makoto wearing a tight apron and smiling face pocked with splashes of tomato sauce as she handed out pasta to the homeless. Ever so briefly, Sumika, kindhearted girl that she was, took Makoto's spot, laughing sheepishly at a bumble in the kitchen.

"Makoto was… she meant the world to me…" The cook frowned. She drank the last of her tea.

A sniffle brought her back to the present.

Mahiru didn't realize she'd gotten lost in her musing before looking up to find tears trickling down a shaky Sumika's face.

"Ah, Sumika, are you alright?" she asked, hands reaching forward to wipe the tears away. As her thumb skimmed across the stained skin, Sumika held the older girl's palm in place with her own, leaning into the finger pads and scrunching her face. More tears squeezed from the ducts.

"She sounds nothing like Yukima…" Sumika shuddered as the words slipped out, "But the way you talk about Makoto… it's the same way I think about her…"

Mahiru's fingers pressed back into Sumika's face as they curled in empathy, her heart tearing in two at the wimpering girl.

"I… I miss her so much," the rosette cried. Mahiru stood and circled the table, wrapping the smaller girl in both her arms. As

Sumika buried herself into Mahiru's chest a mix of desire and heroic desperation bubbled and boiled about her body.

The blonde made a decision right then and there. A very stupid decision, she knew, but a decision nonetheless.

"I know how you feel, Sumika," Mahiru shuddered. She squeezed the smaller girl and lifted herself from the hold, watery pink (almost red now) eyes staring up at her, confused. "We've both lost people we cared about, and maybe… I might have something that'll help us for get, at least for a little while…"

The blonde bobbed her head to the side and approached a closed cabinet fitted in the corner of the dining room. She popped the latch and reached inside, pulling out a wide-bottomed bottle with a red label and a very bright cork.

"My mom and dad had a modest wine collection…" Mahiru explained, setting the bottle on the table. She strode over to the kitchen and reached around to her cup cabinet to pull out two crystal wine glasses. She walked back in, set them down, and held up a cork screw. In seconds, the cork was undone and they both stood there, looking at the bottle. "I've only dived into it once or twice… They're for very special occasions… And I think getting us both through a tough night counts…" Mahiru sucked in a breath before pouring a glass for herself, sticky red swirling around the clear material before settling like a crimson lake floating in the middle of the table. She went to pour a glass for Sumika, but noticed the hesitant look in the girl's eyes. The blonde pulled back, wondering if she'd made a worse move than she thought. "You don't have to drink if you don't want, I won't force you…"

The rosette eyed the bottle warily… before shakily pushing her tea saucer aside, reaching for Mahiru's generously filled glass, and downing its contents in one gulp.

Sumika released a satisfied sigh mixed with a bitter wince at the alcohol's acidity. She grinned up at Mahiru, eyes closed, tears still dampening her cheeks. "I… I'd like some more, please."

Mahiru swallowed, poured a full glass for each of them, and then guzzled down her first for the night before Sumika could even get hers back to her lips.

Whatever happened that night, Mahiru had no problem forgetting every misery in her life for just a few hours, no matter what it took.

O/o\O

The morning always brought grogginess. Mahiru wasn't necessarily the worst waker in the world; heck, she considered herself pretty good at dragging herself out of bed… but that didn't mean that she enjoyed it. It didn't help that most mornings she felt that horrible chill clawing at her chest.

She was always of two minds about it: one, the morning was often a lovely time of day where the sun illuminated prettier parts of the world and the world itself was quieter as it stirred, and two, the morning should never come because it wakes people from rather peaceful slumber.

Luckily, those rare mornings where she was able to sleep in met the two in the middle where she could observe the serenity of the world from the warmth and comfort of her sheets, all while enjoying the cathartic flexing of her muscles in peace.

This particular morning felt hazier and she felt a bitter combination of tastes roll along her tongue. She frowned, recognizing the taste of wine among the menagerie, though the other taste wasn't quite familiar. She must have drunk the night prior. That was unusual.

Added to the 'unusual' list was the absence of her clothing, which her sheets clearly told her had been discarded in bulk before she'd slipped under the covers. That was fine, she'd had her flights with sleeping commando before, rare as they may be. She chalked that up to the probable drinking as well.

Alarm bells in her head only started to go off when she felt patches of damp sheets beneath her body and a soreness between her legs. She furrowed her brow and began to take more detailed stock of her surroundings.

She didn't have to search long, because in moments one of her stretching arms came to slide across a warm body to her left. A

warm body covered in soft, supple skin. A warm body completely naked resting comfortably to her side.

Mahiru blinked before glancing left. Her eyes widened in panic.

A full head of puffy rose hair was curled up on the pillow besides her.

The night flowed back to her.

Opening the wine, downing a glass, then another, then another, then the next bottle.

Drunken jokes with Sumika, who had helped her and then some with the bottles on her own.

That awkward moment of quiet, that moment where Mahiru decided to drop the pretense and kissed Sumika on a whim of her heart.

That wonderful moment where Sumika reciprocated.

That airy moment where the two had pushed each other towards Mahiru's bedroom.

That reverential moment where Sumika had slipped off Yukima's gift. Along with everything else.

Blood rushed to Mahiru's face as she finally understood what the other taste in her mouth was.

The blonde had know about her attraction to her junior for quite some time. Sumika had wormed a special place into Mahiru's heart, a place that Makoto had filled previously. But Mahiru thought the crush was just a consequence of her loneliness, that she could simply hold Sumika as a friend and still fill that void.

Drunk Mahiru didn't seem to agree. And now Sober Mahiru had to deal with the fallout.

Sumika stirred underneath, fuchsia eyes fluttering open as a yawn escaped her mouth.

The blonde stared down at the girl like a deer in headlights; the rosette met her stare with a gentle, dreamy smile.

"Mornin', Mahiru…" The girl yawned a second time, a single slender arm reaching for the headboard.

"I… I… I… I…" Mahiru's mouth flapped like a fish deprived of water.

Sheets slipped away as the blonde jerked back, away from Sumika. In seconds she'd realized her error and fumbled for the blankets before her generous bust became exposed. The rosette watched, eyes filled with confusion as Mahiru continued to stare on in horror.

"S-S-Sumika… I'm sorry… I'm so sorry!" Mahiru quivered. "I didn't mean to take advantage…"

A finger pressed itself to Mahiru's lips. Sumika moved up, not even making an attempt to stay decent, and kissed the blonde, pulling back to smile at the floundering senior.

"Mahiru, you didn't…" Sumika sighed, blinking the bleariness from her eye, using a knuckle to grind out the dew in the corners. She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Mahiru.

The senior hesitated, but gently returned the hold, so cautiously that it barely felt like a hold to begin with.

"I… needed that," Sumika admitted, tightening herself around Mahiru's middle, making the blonde's heart pound faster. "This whole year I've been stuck on Yukima… I haven't really been myself, and I'm sorry… I'm the one that's sorry…" Mahiru started to cry and finally dedicated herself to the hug and buried her face in the pink tuft. "Do you remember what I said last night?"

Mahiru shook her head, words stuck in her throat.

"I said," Sumika breathed, "that I love Yukima… I won't ever stop… I can't stop. But I love you too. And I need to stop moping over something I can't change. I need to love what I have now… So I chose this. Mahiru, I *chose* this. I *chose* you."

The girl's breath was hot on her skin, which prickled.

"But we were drunk…" Mahiru moaned begrudgingly.

"We were honest," Sumika replied.

The blonde was still for a time, the rosette burying into her side.

"I… I feel guilty… I feel dirty," the senior admitted.

"And I feel like we're supposed to feel that way…" Sumika pulled back and looked up into those golden eyes. "But I think we're supposed to work through that… together."

Mahiru stared into deep pink pools before finally giving in, leaning down, and taking in Sumika's lips.

"I just don't want to be cold anymore…" Mahiru whimpered, her lips coming loose from the rosette's.

Sumika smiled. "Then I better get started warming you up!"

Dying Coals Part 1

November, 2014 – March, 2015

When she was young, Soraka had professed that she wanted to be a knight when she grew up, that she wanted to be a strong, heroic figure to save the damsel in distress and return home a champion of justice from distant lands.

They were childish dreams. She had been told so by her parents, by her peers, and even by her friends.

But one day she had told this ambition to someone, someone who hadn't blinked an eye, who hadn't questioned the azulite's vehement proclamations for a second: a young boy with bourbon hair and an unearthly talent for acting.

Tokubē Kagura was quite possibly Soraka's oldest friend, rivaling Fumine and only narrowly beating out Sumika by a small margin.

He, along with Fumine, had become Soraka's first real posse, meeting before school, hanging out over breaks, doing homework together. And while that dynamic had changed when he had dived into perfecting his thespian craft, he still remained close to the two girls.

And yes, the distance that popped up between the three, physical as it was, was emotionally painful, but Soraka wouldn't have Tokubē give up on his dreams for anything. He was aiming to become one of the greatest actors on the planet, and Soraka knew he would get there.

She remembered the very first time she saw him in a play: they'd been eight at the time, and seeing him handsomed up in a little tux and bowtie for his role still gave her the shivers. He'd been so small in comparison to everyone else on stage, but the minute his voice entered the hall all eyes had been sucked right to him. The

other people on stage had melted away and Soraka distinctly remembered crying at how beautiful the performance was.

That was the moment she knew she'd fallen head-over-heels in love with the boy.

Admittedly, she hadn't realized it at the time. She was too young to understand that bubbling feeling and had simply stuck to the boy as best she could, like some kind of adoring gnat. But come 3 years, sexual education and the onset of puberty and she realized why exactly she had problems talking around him in coherent sentences and why her palms sweat if he even so much as glanced at her.

It had almost been nine years since she fell in love with him… and yet she couldn't even stomach the thought of confessing. It had become a running gag in her circle of friends that there was a betting pool on when she'd finally spill or when he'd get scooped up by someone else, and while she despised the joke she couldn't deny the truth buried under it.

Soraka was procrastinating at love, was hindering her chances to be happy with him, and yet…

He could always say 'no'.

Tokubē was a passionate young man, but his demeanor had always been polite and quiet despite the underlying fire. This led very often to him casting the unnecessary riffraff of the day to the side in favor of focusing on what he loved. And while she was sure that he loved her back she was equally unsure about him holding romance in very high regard. At best he could possibly see it as an unnecessary time sink and at worst he might even consider it a dalliance that hindered his artistic pursuits.

And it was this unease that kept Soraka at arm's length for nine years of her life.

She wondered how Sumika and Mahiru had managed it as long as they had, the discomfort of not knowing what the other person was thinking. Maybe Fumine hadn't been wrong about needing to reach a level where partners could read each others' minds…

Then again, there was nothing normal about Mahiru and Sumika's relationship, starting with the minute Soraka had first learned about it.

It was supposed to be a day out with the two, getting new phones together using money left over from a rather relaxing Christmas. The suggestion had been at Sumika's behest initially, who proclaimed she wanted to get something nice before Soraka, Fumine and her graduated come spring.

Having finished her chores at home early, and knowing that Sumika had stayed over at Mahiru's the night prior (something that only became suspicious under the filter of hindsight), she'd decided to make her way over there so the three of them could go out early, maybe even get a bite to eat.

Instead, through a series of boneheaded thoughts, Soraka had misconstrued a sound from beyond Mahiru's front door to be a cry of pain from the blonde. After scrambling for the emergency key and bursting into the apartment, she found it to be anything but. Instead of finding a burglar assaulting her sempai she found a bouncy plume of rosewood hair between the older girl's legs, with Sumika apparently *also* thinking that it was a good time to eat out.

Soraka blushed at the memory, snapping her eyes closed even harder at that pun that had weaseled its way to the surface of her thoughts.

Sumika had scrambled, weakly trying to justify that she'd dropped something to explain why she was beneath their senior’s skirt. The blush on her cheeks (among other… *stuff*) told otherwise.

So the day had turned out more interesting than the three had expected, with Sumika and Mahiru explaining exactly where they stood. Despite the sudden onset of discomfort between them Sumika insisted they still head out to shop, arguing that a dose of normalcy would go miles towards dispelling the awkward atmosphere. With a little cajoling, Soraka agreed, but also managed to squeeze a more complete explanation out of the two. Apparently the two had kept the relationship a secret since the Christmas before last, meaning it had been just a little over a year where Soraka's best friend had hidden

the fact that she and another one of their very close mutual friends had entered into a pretty explicit relationship.

Though, it *had* clarified some weird things she'd seen happen over the last year. For one, Sumika breaking down in happy tears at Mahiru's graduation seemed to make more sense. She'd known the rosette to get emotional, but the waterworks had seemed like a little overkill for what was ultimately a pretty mundane event. The other were the occasional fallings out between the two that had happened over the year where they wouldn't talk to each other for a week or two before suddenly returning to normal without explanation.

Sumika had been nice enough to clear that up, explaining that both of them had their fair share of edges to smooth out in the relationship. Mahiru was apparently a little clingier than she let on, and while Sumika didn't elaborate, it did add up to how so much of the rosette's time in the last year had suddenly gone up in smoke. Sumika, on her part, had anxieties over measuring up to Mahiru's expectations, especially because she already had self-image issues from before the relationship started. While Sumika hadn't gone into specifics about any of the fights they'd had over the past year, the girl *had* expressed relief that she could confide in Soraka now instead of bottling up her concerns about Mahiru.

Which raised the obvious question from the azulite: why had the two kept quiet for an entire year? To which Sumika gave a less than satisfactory answer. Short story, it had been a game. Long story, they were uneasy with the relationship and didn't want to disrupt the group dynamic since everyone was still off-kilter with the loss of a member two years prior. The two developed a game around it in order to make it easier, and they'd not felt a need to break the game, even after a year.

While the groan Soraka had given after that probably rivaled a jet breaking the sound barrier, she was at least happy to see two of her best friends in the world happy together. The couple had opened up a bit around her, even came out to Fumine to Soraka's surprise. Holding hands, brief chaste kisses; the two were very endearing, even though they were going through extra lengths to be subtle, especially when out in public. And that look the two shared between

them, the soft smiles that Soraka would catch when neither of them noticed... well, they warmed the azulite's heart… and made it hunger for something just like it.

At times Soraka caught herself swapping places with one of the two in a dreamy recreation of when she'd walked in on them; sometimes in place of Mahiru, others in place of Sumika. If she was honest, and she felt guilty with the admission, she'd lingered on those thoughts some nights, lingered on that pure, genial warmth that wafted off the two in waves. Sometimes she even caught herself wanting to forgo Tokubē entirely and throw herself at the two, to leech on that warm aura. But she passed off those feelings as frivolous crushes, ones ultimately born of her own mind to challenge her devotion to Tokubē.

Which brought her back to her own quest for love and how crooked the road had become.

Sumika had explained that she and Mahiru weren't exactly… right. Part of the struggles in their relationship came from emotional traumas long past. But, they worked together to pull each other out of their holes, no matter how far one of them sank. They were each others' knights and each others' damsels, a notion that seemed so incredibly romantic to the azulite that she couldn't help but get behind it the minute the concept plopped into her head.

How many times had she fantasized about playing opposite her predisposed role? To become the damsel in all those stories, to be faint and dainty, to fall into Tokubē's arms after he rescued her from some vile pursuer? Such fantasies were nice, especially the moments she imagined after in the lonesome quiet of her room, illuminated only by the screen of her laptop and the finest princes the internet had to offer.

Still, something revolted inside her at the notion that she would be the frail end of the relationship. The dream of being pampered by a prince was sweet, but it was a dream nonetheless. She was content to play her part of the 'hero', even if it meant she wouldn't have quite the robust wish-fulfillment she wanted.

And then something mundane had happened; some rain, a puddle, some marble flooring and a shattered bottle. A concussion

and lacerations were bad enough, but it was the stroke that followed as a consequence that warped the promising future of a rising star into a living nightmare for his family and friends.

Soraka had been the first person behind Tokubē's parents to arrive at the hospital and the definitive first when the news had come down about the partial paralysis ailing the left side of his body, about the torn tendons in his wrist.

For the first time in her life, in her role as the hero, Soraka had found her 'damsel'. And the thought absolutely killed her on the inside.

Tokubē's prospects in the future were shattered in an instant. If he was lucky, he'd regain control of his limbs in the grand scheme, but the odds of fine motor control returning completely were beyond astronomical. Acting had been torn away from the boy without a single warning, and the news had crushed him.

Those had been lonely days for everyone – everyone except Sumika and Mahiru, Soraka supposed. There was a reason Soraka hadn't probed about Sumika vanishing on her; she had spent almost every other day cooped up at the hospital trying to support Tokubē. Every thought had been hijacked by the need to ensure his comfort and safety, to give him the best recovery he could ever have.

He had isolated himself at first, until about two weeks had passed when Soraka got sick of sitting outside in the hall and finally confronted him. Had it not been for how desperate she was to get her concern across to him he probably would have just told her to leave again by the end of her rant. But no, the two sussed out a visiting schedule, dependent on when he was feeling well, and she'd kept him company at least once each week since.

At some point along the line she'd struck upon the idea to collect plays for him, to give him scripts to occupy his time, rare productions and musicals to fawn over. She reasoned that while she couldn't provide miracles, maybe she could provide a fraction of what he loved about performing to set his mind at ease. The idea was a hit and she'd did what she could to bring him scripts every week to refresh his collection. Hell, she even collected books on

theatre history and directors he liked, hoping they'd help him pass the time.

Months had passed since their pattern emerged, and Tokubē was happier. Even after she started college she kept it up, trying her best to be there when the boy wasn't in therapy or visiting the on-site psychologist.

And things were good. He was taking large steps towards regaining his ability to walk with his left leg, and his left hand apparently had occasional spouts of feeling.

And yet, despite all she had done to try and better his life, she had not confessed.

Soraka stepped out into the brisk, bitter air, sinking her chin beneath the folds of the red scarf around her neck and affixing the white knit cap atop her head. November was colder than she remembered, and she was briefly thankful for the central heating the hospital had, else poor Tokubē would probably become a Tokuscicle.

The azulite snorted at her internalized joke, shaking her head of the strange strand of thoughts and memories that had dominated her mind the last few minutes. Leaving the hospital always brought out an assortment of emotions from the girl.

"Oh, Soraka!"

The student perked at the voice, eyes trailing to her right to find a wavy haired brunette clad in beige ushanka and coat, giving her a gentle wave.

"Fumine! What are you doing around here?" Soraka grinned, walking up to her friend. The two shared a hug.

"Actually, I came looking for you. You just got out from visiting Kagura, yes?" Fumine asked, shifting the satchel over her shoulder. "Would you like to come get a drink with me? I was hoping to talk with you about something important; something about Kagura."

The azulite's smile waned somewhat as she sensed a shift in her friend's words. The cheer and honesty were still there, but the closer she got to the end of the sentence the more the words became hollow and dull, despite the outward lilt.

"Uh, yeah, that'd be fine. There's a coffee shop not too far down that way," Soraka replied, pointing just down the street. "We

can talk there, if you like."

"I would appreciate that, Soraka," Fumine nodded as she spoke, burying a little deeper into the warmth of her jacket.

The two stood there for a moment, neither moving, an uneven air surrounding them. It was stifling, almost like a heavy sauna despite the freezing twinge at the edge.

"Uh, right, well… C'mon Fumi', let's get going! I was hoping to go shopping for groceries after this," the azulite cheered, choosing to dispel the miasma with a boisterous proclamation.

Fumine's smile waned as Soraka's had, but only so briefly before she responded, "Yes, of course. Lead the way!"

And just as instructed, Soraka led the brunette down the street.

O/o\O

Soraka shivered, trying to soak in what rays of light were streaming in through the window. She momentarily mused that a bright sunny day shouldn't be so cold, especially when seated in a nice comfy coffee shop, but those thoughts were cast aside when Fumine sat down across from her.

Contact with the brunette had been sparse since they'd graduated, though the distance seemed to do good for their relationship, smoothing over the last edges from a mistake they'd made together before high school. They went to different colleges these days, so unlike Sumika and Mahiru who attended the same school, seeing Fumine was a crapshoot of schedules and planning. So Soraka tried to savor moments like this, despite the growing unease that seemed to be clouding the mood.

"Have Mahiru and Sumika been doing well? I haven't talked with them in a couple of weeks," the brunette started, stirring some creamer into a fresh cup of coffee.

"Well, you know them, being all kissy-kissy and goo-goo eyed over each other. Makes me jealous, to be honest," Soraka chuckled, taking a sip from her own piping hot mug. Hot chocolate; a childish

dalliance on her part, but one she found refreshing after knocking back so much coffee on a couple all-nighters.

Fumine shivered, eyes squeezing shut. "Please, I was just asking if they were healthy is all, I don't need details like that. You know how uncomfortable it makes me…"

The chiding was good natured. It was true that Fumine never quite acclimated to the idea of same-sex couples, or the apparently more malleable leanings her friends seemed to have, but the girl was good about expressing her unease as a personal issue and never once tried to blame her friends for some kind of immoral behavior. Sure, from time to time she cracked a joke here or there about it ("You’re both perverts!" from those far-off halcyon days had become a running gag among the group), but she was always very considerate.

There was a small stab of guilt at Soraka's chest. Her brief fling with Fumine, if it could even be called that, was most likely what set the brunette on a prudish route, even beyond the formal upbringing. It was one of those moments that Soraka wished she could take back, not because of her own emotions which had settled on the matter a long time ago, but on her friend's account.

"Alright, alright, I'll cool it," the azulite replied, rolling her eyes. "But yes, they're doing well. In fact, Mahiru got a car about… what? A week? Week and a half ago? One of those real energy-efficient ones… the hybrids or whateveryacallsit."

"I thought she wasn't a fan? Where does she park it?" Fumine asked, taking a sip.

"The building has an underground parking garage. Her family had a space paid for already with her apartment. And she's not exactly comfortable with it, but she got a part-time job at this really ritzy bakery that doesn't exactly hit the right train lines, so it was more necessity than anything," Soraka elaborated, swishing her lips to the side in a half-scowl. Mahiru's fear of cars had been a rare topic of discussion, but she couldn't deny her own unease. And if even Fumine was off-put by the idea of Mahiru behind the wheel, Soraka could only imagine what Sumika was feeling. Deciding a topic change would be better than dwelling on the issue, Soraka

hopped to the point of the chat. "So… what did you want to talk about…?"

Fumine's soft smile fell away in an instant and Soraka knew immediately something very unpleasant was coming.

"Right… well…" Fumine cleared her throat, setting down her coffee and folding her hands very properly in her lap, straightening her back. "I… This isn't exactly the easiest topic to breach, so I apologize if I seem blunt or overbearing." Now Soraka's face fell, lagging behind the brunette's only by a few seconds and a few spoken words. The girl continued, "I have been your friend for almost as long as I have been alive, and in that time I know how close you've become with Kagura. I know how much you love him and I understand that you would do anything for him. But I also know that you're unobservant and probably haven't noticed too often… I am his friend in very much the same way."

The azulite's throat tightened. Did that mean…?

Fumine's eyes shot up to meet concerned cerulean. "I love Tokubē Kagura just as much if not more than you, Soraka."

Soraka froze, her fingers deadlocked around the cup, the calming warmth growing scalding hot with the prolonged contact.

"Fum… mika… Why are you telling me this…?" Soraka managed to stutter out.

Fumine closed her eyes and went to take another sip of her coffee before answering.

"Because I intend to confess to him within the next three days."

The air caught in the azulite's throat, her fingers finally wincing away from her cup.

"I… but Tokubē and I-…" Soraka started.

"Are just friends, Soraka. You two are *only* friends." Fumine leveled her eyes in challenge at her, green boring in through Soraka's skull. "You have passed up every chance to change that, to tell him, and you've shirked the courage needed to do so at every turn. I have watched you flounder, and while my feelings are most likely younger than yours, they are no less passionate about making

him my own. In three days time I *will* confess to him, of that I am more than intent; I am determined."

Soraka pawed at her mug and lifted it to her lips, the container shaky and spritzing her face with boiling liquid as it neared. She winced, but downed a sip in a vain effort to calm herself.

"But, *why*?" the azulite growled. "Why tell me any of this? Why not just do it?"

Fumine's defiant expression softened, became sad. "Because I love you Soraka. You're like a sister to me, you *and* Sumika, and I want to see the both of you happy. I've waited so long to tell him because I thought that one day you'd be happy with him and I'd be able to move on… But I just can't wait any longer, especially since the accident."

"The… h-he's going to be fine…" Soraka muttered, her bangs falling over her eyes as her head lulled forward.

"He's not, Soraka," Fumine retorted, her voice raising in both volume and desperation. "His life, and anyone who spends their life with him, is going to be impossibly difficult, and I don't want to see two people waste away in denial when they both could be happier. I don't… After what happened with Yukima, and then Kagura's accident… And seeing you there day after day doing *nothing*…" The brunette's voice drew on a malignant note, her face screwing in a grimace. "I'm not standing by any longer."

The girl collected herself, eyes carefully tracking the blue slumped form across from her.

"Three days, Soraka. I'm giving you one last chance to tell him. In three days I'll confess, and I'll live with that decision, come what may." With that Fumine finished her cup and left it to sit on its saucer. She stood, collected her bag and turned towards the door. "I want to see you and Tokubē happy, 'Raka. Please, don't pass up this chance to make everything right."

Soraka jumped at the childhood nickname, though all that served was to make her silently slump all the more in her chair.

Fumine, with her words said, quietly strolled towards the door.

And still, to Soraka, her footsteps were deafening.

O/o\O

Soraka's hands were shaking.

It felt like they'd been shaking for two days straight.

Two days.

Leave it to a B student like herself to procrastinate on something this important.

She turned the booklet around in her fingers, cuffs of her oversized sweatshirt clipping against its edges every few turns. The elevator was taking forever to reach the right floor.

A quieter part of her mind was nervous because this would be a rare occasion where she visited Tokubē only a few days apart. The louder half was more preoccupied with how she was about to spill her guts to him. It briefly occurred to her that she may very well spill her stomach too.

Fumine's words had hurt. Who was Soraka fucking kidding? The words had *burned*, searing into the azulite's core like a cattle prod.

But, as a prod does, it finally spurred the girl to action… if only when there were only a few waking hours of cushion. Still, the fact that she'd run out to the mall to find a present, anything that could convey how she felt along with her words, spoke volumes of how the challenge had affirmed her desire to secure the other teen's love.

Now though, as the elevator doors opened, she felt her confidence waning. Jellied legs slipped through the barrier, though they carried her no further than the first foot of hallway.

She didn't want to be doing this. It had occurred to her the night after Fumine's declaration that the brunette was *right*. Soraka was stuck in a perpetual fantasy, locked into believing that spending enough time with Tokubē would somehow prod him into making the first move, an endearment strategy with no bite and no end goal. She'd become complacent, and as a result it was quietly stunting the normal benefits of friendship, leave alone any attempts to ascend beyond it. With how difficult his life was going to be, he needed both of them to be at their best.

Her mind crystallized, the memory of two nights prior reenergizing her will.

Knuckles white, Soraka stalked off towards Tokubē's room, taking deep, shuttering breaths in an attempt to maintain her confidence.

The world was still as she knocked on the door and slid it open.

"Soraka?"

Cerulean eyes bounced up to meet cool steel, the puzzled gaze of a young man with shaggy grayed hair in a dingy green hospital gown.

The azulite gave a wave and a sheepish smile, slowly pacing over to the boy's bedside with her arms behind her back.

"Hey, Tokubē! Hope you don't mind me popping in on you!" she said, her voice dipping into a moment of apology near the tail of the sentence.

A stream of emotions popped across his face before he smiled softly and shook his head. "No, it's no problem, I just… didn't expect to see you."

"Yeah, well…" Soraka sighed, plopping into a chair next to his bed. She'd planned for this question, mulling over any number of probable responses she could give. There was some embarrassment to admit that it had been more than just one of the reasons she hadn't gotten much sleep in the last forty-eight hours. "I'm going to be busy next week with preparing for finals and my hours at the café are getting worse the colder it gets. I won't be able to swing by till the week after."

Another odd look crossed his face, almost like relief, before he nodded in response, "I see. Well, a little more time together doesn't hurt, now does it? Though are you doing alright? You have… bags under your eyes…"

He gave her a concerned smile, one that she tried to ignore, but there was a moment of lapse in her demeanor when the hollow echo of sleep deprivation came knocking.

"What? Pffft, I'm fine…" she chuckled, rubbing the back of her neck with one hand. Tokubē gave her a doubtful look and she

sagged in her seat. Realizing that she needed something, she dug deeper in her bag of half-truths. She bobbed her back up just a bit to reply, "Well, actually, trig's been kicking my ass. Y'know, it was Sumika who really got the whole Math thing going for her. I don't struggle in English nearly as much…"

The concern in his eyes twisted to recognition. "You've got to stop staying up so late Soraka. You keep it up and your grades will suffer regardless how much studying you get done."

The azulite rolled her eyes. Admittedly, a lot of the time she spent up late at night wasn't exactly studying. Not unless she was planning to become a cat herder on the internet or a theatrical critic.

"Geez, you sound just like Fumine. Stop it; it's weird."

The comparison slipped out easier than she would have liked. In fact, she hadn't been planning to say that at all. Instead, her body had willed it via autopilot. And the scariest part was that her little statement was the truth. Just how close *were* Fumine and Tokubē? They'd all been friends roughly the same length of time, but only now was Soraka actually beginning to notice the kind of impact the brunette had on the boy. His speech was more eloquent than most, his posture a little stiffer, his eyes a little more scrutinizing than any of their peers; it was scary to admit, but even with his professional acting training taken into account there was far more in the boy's behavioral ticks that reminded her of Fumine than of herself.

Fumine. Her thoughts, her words kept coming back to that harlo- that… traitor. She bit down the silent insult and composed her thoughts.

Tokubē chuckled. "Because we both care about you, Soraka. We want to make sure you're being healthy *and* getting a proper education. It's possible to do both, you know, even if it seems impossible."

Doing the impossible. Right. Now wasn't the time to falter. She had a man to woo, and she was going to woo him with flying colors!

"Ah, but yes," Soraka chirped, pulling the script out from around her back. "Just because it's an off day doesn't mean I didn't bring a treat." She set the booklet down in Tokubē's good hand,

letting him grip it and give it a proper once-over. "I remember you liked this guy's comedies, but he apparently wrote a drama or two, so I thought it'd be a nice change of pace from the normal stuff."

"Yeah… I think that'd be nice…" he said softly. His eyes weren't exactly present, staring a touch past the script even though they seemed to be locked onto it.

Soraka bit her lip, words coming to her throat, a confession playing at her lips.

"Tokubē… W-would you like to read it? Now, I mean?"

She slapped herself mentally, making a note to cut out her own tongue for its betrayal of their cause.

Tokubē shifted in his bed, startled. "What? Oh, yeah… sure…"

Soraka's hands jumped to the bedside table, nervously shifting through the various booklets lining it to flick on the reading light. Retrieving his reading glasses, she flicked them open and handed them to him, placing them just close enough to let him simply press them onto his nose. Her hands were still jittery as she dragged her chair closer to his side, leaning in so she could help him turn the pages. Tokubē held onto the pages in his right hand, up high enough for the two of them to read together.

The familiarity was soothing, almost instantly wiping away the anxieties crowding her mind. A script's pages carried with them a bouquet, as did all books, smells that tied in with every memory of reading beside him. Her nerves began to still and her confidence returned, even in the wake of chickening out.

She sucked in a breath and exhaled, her hands finally stilling. She opened her eyes, barely having registered having closed them. It seems as if minutes had passed already, her mind having been lost in the sounds of Tokubē's reading voice.

Soraka looked up to the boy, following his body from his hand to his face.

The words 'Tokubē, I love you,' once more burned behind her teeth.

She only saw the tears dripping down Tokubē's face.

"Tokubē…?"

Only part of her confession made it out.

"Soraka, do you hate me?"

The question took a minute to register, so long so that the boy continued before Soraka could stutter out a response.

"I… I keep thinking… 'why is she doing this to me?', but I can never think of a clear answer…" Tokubē's voice shook, his body trembling.

"W-what? Tokubē, what are you talking about?" she asked. Her heart was beginning to speed up. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

"You know what I'm talking about!"

Soraka jarred backwards at the boy's sudden outburst, his voice rising in volume in time with his left arm. The shout was capped by the limp limb flying up to his face and plummeting down, smashing his reading glasses in one fell swoop.

Tokubē's cheeks were stained at this point, his eyes red. "You come in here every few days, with booklet or a script, and make me read every damn page like everything is normal. I… I'm never going to be able to act again, Soraka! You *know* that! I can't… I can't move, I can't… *think*…" The boy began to curl in on himself, "Why? Just… why? Why do you keep torturing me? What did I do to deserve this?"

The azulite froze, her jaw trying to form coherent words. "I… n-no, Tokubē, I…"

"You what?!" he shouted, his eyes latching onto her shivering form, glaring knives into her skull, "You *what* Soraka? Every time you walk through that door I feel nothing but dread knowing that my best friend is trying to make me miserable!"

"I… I thought it would help…" Soraka offered weakly, eyes wide and dripping with tears.

Tokubē squinted, his grimace becoming pained. "You thought it would *help*? Did you even bother asking?"

"Did you bother even trying to tell me?!" Soraka snapped back, her emotions finally taking full control; anger and panic had taken the wheel.

"I thought my *friend* would have noticed, but I guess you're not very observant, are you!? You've always had your head in the

goddamned clouds too much to notice!"

That comment pierced her, chilling her blood down every lone capillary and vein.

"Just… get out of here, Soraka!" Tokubē huffed, shrinking in on himself and cradling his reinjured arm.

"T-Tokubē…-"

"I SAID GO!"

Soraka flinched to her feet, legs staggering back towards the door even as she knocked her chair over. She scrambled down the hallway, briefly pawing at the elevator until it finally let her on board.

She'd barely registered she'd left the elevator by the time her feet hit the brick walkway outside the hospital. She was angry. She was lonely. She was scared.

But most of all, she was just desperate for a way to stop the world from spinning.

Dying Coals Part 2

November, 2014 – March, 2015

"*See something?*"

Sumika shivered, her eyes wincing against the blaring neon signs that seemed to stretch on past the horizon.

"Nnmh," she replied, shaking her head, a drip of water flinging from her nose.

She had wished she'd seen something. The lights were playing tricks on her eyes and all it served to do was exacerbate her anxiety.

"…*You alright, Sumika?*"

Mahiru's voice was a calming presence in her ear. The rosette sighed and tightened her grip on the umbrella.

"I'm just cold. And worried. Some hot chocolate sounds nice right about now…" she sighed.

"*Well, I'll make you some after we find her. Only two more places to check before we call it a night; she* has *to be at one of them…*"

Sumika nodded, picking up her pace, her boots kicking puddles up from under her frantic heels.

Soraka had gone missing.

Mahiru and Sumika had been enjoying a peaceful night after a long day of work and school, only to receive a call from Fumine sometime late into the evening. The brunette's voice had been calm, but it was only a veil placed over poorly restrained panic.

According to her, she'd talked to Soraka's friend Tokubē that afternoon and apparently the two had some kind of falling out. And while Tokubē had expressed a desire to apologize, Soraka wouldn't pick up her phone. Fumine had gone home thinking it was just Soraka being angry, but after a call from the Hayamis claiming she'd never come home, she'd realized that Soraka may have gone and

done something more… drastic. Where this realization came from she was reticent about.

That, however, wasn't Sumika's concern. Before she'd even hung up she'd decided that she would personally go out looking for Soraka, goading both Mahiru and Fumine to join her. Her girlfriend joined without batting an eye, but the brunette had hesitated, saying that she may very well be a contributing factor in the fallout, that Soraka would just be angry to see her. It took Sumika *begging* to pull Hitomi from her wavering and get her out on a search for the elusive azulite.

Three hours and four stops later, Sumika was running around in the November rain, protected in part by a warm jacket and her umbrella, running a three-person search party with Mahiru and Fumine. The brunette stuck around Soraka’s apartment complex and its surrounding area, considering their colleges were closer together than either were to Mahiru’s home. Meanwhile the couple had split, each searching different haunts that Soraka favored: soccer fields, parks, coffee shops, music shops, game stores, most of which were closed now at this time of night.

Sumika frowned, realizing that both Mahiru and Fumine had been out just as long as she had and were most likely just as soaked. Spend a few hours in a downpour and it didn't matter how you used your umbrella; you weren't coming out of that situation with a set of dry clothes. The thought of her girlfriend cold and shivering only twisted on the growing knot in her gut. And then she thought the same of Soraka, who was emotionally hurt and alone and was most likely just as cold and the knot blossomed even larger.

She picked up her pace.

Her last stop for the night was a coffee shop, one that Soraka occasionally went to on her way to Mahiru's apartment, or so she said. Typically this would have been the first place that Sumika checked, but recent construction meant that it was difficult to get to from the hospital. It only took a glance to the right to see the pit in the road where a sinkhole had eaten the asphalt to confirm that it was nowhere near a sensible route.

When she got to the glass doors her heart sank, finding the lights off and the sign flipped to 'closed'.

"Mmmnnn…" she groaned. "It's closed…"

There was a pause on the other end, though she could still hear Mahiru panting on the other end.

"*Yeah… this one's closed too… Sumika… I think we're out of luck…*"

Sumika's shoulders deflated.

"Where could she be?" the rosette whined, wiping a tear from the crux of her eye.

"*I wish I knew, Kikya…"*

Sumika gripped the phone tighter, gritting her teeth and pressing it to her ear as a slow stream of tears released themselves. "…Soraka…"

And like that, her feet started to carry her away from the café, empty handed saved for some soaked clothes and a distressed heart.

A heart that leapt when she caught a flash of blue out of the corner of her eye, a speck nestled just beyond the window of a nearby bar that was hopping with nightlife.

A heart that was sure that this time it wasn't a neon light.

"Soraka!"

Her feet changed direction all their own, rushing towards the azulite in a daze.

"*What?!*"

"Mahiru, I think I found her, she's at a bar near the Aonuma Café!" Sumika explained, her hand resting on the door.

"*Uh… right… I think I know where that is. Do you think she's…?*"

The rosette looked in the window again, finding the blue speck to be a resting head surrounded by emptied glasses.

"Yeah… I think she might have gotten drunk…" Sumika winced.

"*I'll grab the car. You make sure she doesn't give herself alcohol poisoning. I'll be right there.*"

Sumika nodded, more for herself than her girlfriend. "Alright. We'll see you soon. I love you."

"*Love you too. Get in there!"*

Sumika pocketed her phone and pushed the door open, closing her umbrella in a single learned motion. A few patrons eyed her but no one approached. Soon enough all the curious gazes had fallen away, letting Sumika stroll over to her friend without the anxiety of eyes on her back.

The bar was modern, with rich oak surfaces and golden trim mixed with clashing steel panels and dim, jewel-like mood lighting. Patrons weren't exactly quiet, but for the time of day the mood was surprisingly mellow.

After a short trek she arrived at the slouched blue form, clothing disheveled with still drying mud crusting on every inch.

"Soraka?" Sumika asked, her concern elevating after catching a glimpse of the azulite's clothing.

A garbled groan was the response, the contorted blueberry rolling to the side to reveal a tear-streaked face with bloodshot blue eyes.

"Hhhey… Sumika… You're lookin'… Fluffy…"

The rosette smiled softly down at her friend, knowing she couldn't restrain the unease in her lips.

"And you're looking like a mess…"

Soraka leaned back, almost knocking over one of the *several* tall glasses that had almost been completely emptied of a number of colorful liquids. The azulite feigned shock, arms drifting to her cheeks like they were plowing through pools of molasses. "Oh nnooo! I can' look bad for maaay… for my waifu!"

The girl hiccupped before lunging forward and wrapping her arms around Sumika, eliciting a surprised blush from the shorter girl and forcing her down into the seat besides the drunk. Her embrace was warm, almost uncomfortably so, her arms were much stronger than Sumika would have thought given her inebriated condition, and her lips were far more chapped than she'd previously thought.

Wait, lips?

Sumika's chest stopped as Soraka pressed herself closer, deepening the sloppy kiss before gently pulling back, leaving a trail of saliva that reeked of alcohol to coat their cheeks.

"*My* waifu…" Soraka mumbled, her lips still only an inch from Sumika. Sumika barely processed the acrid waft of the azulite's breath before she collapsed against Sumika in a sleepy pile, fresh tears dripping freely from her lids.

Sumika sat there, staring at her best friend in a state of pure confusion. She was still there, lost in thought, when Mahiru finally arrived to take them home.

O/o\O

The drive was short and quiet, both relaxed and somewhat tense in equal measure.

Soraka's soft snores carried up from the back seat where she'd curled up on the bench seat, her head resting on a bunched jacket that Mahiru had scrounged up.

Sumika sat in the passenger seat, fingers wringing. Mahiru drove.

They were a minute out, about to pull onto the drive that'd take them towards the parking lot, when Sumika finally spoke.

"She kissed me…"

Out of the corner of her eye she caught Mahiru's fingers flex against the wheel and when they stopped at the stop light the jolt was a little sharper than it usually was.

"What?" Mahiru asked back, her voice soft, confused.

"Mnn…" Sumika shook her head and leaned into the seat, "I think, whatever happened, Tokubē really hurt her… maybe she just…" The rosette sighed, deflating in her seat. It was a lot to process in a short span of time. She looked out the window, not able to bare the silence plaguing the car. "Sorry for being awkward. Tonight is weird."

Mahiru turned the car as the light switched to green.

"N-no, it's fine. It's not your fault," Mahiru hummed. "She's not in the best of ways right now. All we can do is try to take care of her

until she comes around…"

Sumika nodded, resting her hand against the cool pane of glass, her clothes sticking to the seat's plush material.

"I…" the words were hard to get out, "I liked it, I think…"

There, she said it; the thing that had had her mind in a bind for the last twenty minutes.

Mahiru was silent, streetlight bent by rain occasionally sliding through the windows.

"…Do I have to worry?"

The words were calm, honest, but there was a twinge of emotional panic buried at the heart of it. This isn't what Sumika wanted with her admission, but it *is* what she'd expected.

"No, no, never!" Sumika popped up in her seat, leaning over to peck her girlfriend on the cheek. Mahiru visibly relaxed, though some of the tension failed to flow away. And she wasn't wrong to remain a little bristled. "I just…" Sumika leaned back, pulling at her damp clothing, "I'm starting to realize I might care about Soraka a lot more than… Well, than I realized…" The words were recursive, heavy, but honest. She was just as confused about what she was feeling as Mahiru. "I'm not looking for a breakup, or time apart or something… I don't know what I want, but it's not either of those. I wouldn't give you up for the world!"

The two in the front seat fluctuated between emotions so rapidly it was a surprise the car hadn't exploded from strain in the air tension alone. They pulled into the parking garage, the automatic sensor picking up Mahiru's parking pass and letting them through the security shutter without issue.

"I… I think I understand… It's… weird to wrap my head around, but I know you, Kikya. You've got more love in you than anyone I know," Mahiru finally spoke, her words soft, same as her distant smile. "I… I'd rather have a chat about this later, if that's alright…"

The words were said as the car pulled into its allotted space. Sumika cupped Mahiru's knuckles and gave the blonde a chaste peck to the lips, accompanied by a nuzzle to the older girl's forehead.

"That's fine. I love you, Mahiru," the rosette murmured, smiling.

"I love you too, Sumika," Mahiru whispered back, the long day finally sagging on her shoulders. She looked in the back seat at the curled azulite, who was still peacefully snoring away. Mahiru let out a tired chuckle, "Let's get this rock upstairs, shall we?"

O/o\O

Soraka awoke halfway up to the apartment. Groggy, but now partially sober, the girl had squirmed her way out of Sumika and Mahiru's carrying arms and walked the rest of the way herself, even going so far as to sit and pout on a stool at the kitchen bar once they'd gone in.

The minute the two stepped through the door, Sumika kissed her girlfriend on the cheek and began walking towards the bedroom. "Mahiru, I'm going to take a warm bath. I'll be out in a little bit, okay?"

Mahiru leaned her head down against the matted fuzz of Sumika's pink locks, "I thought you would; I put out a few things for you before I left with the car. Don't worry about leaving enough hot water for me, though; I'll take a shower in the morning."

The rosette nodded and skipped off down the hall, already busily pulling at her jacket.

Mahiru glanced at the somber Soraka and decided that a hot cup of tea was just what they both needed. She sprung to action, gliding towards the teapot with a practiced grace and pulling the ingredients from the cupboard in the flash of an eye.

Soon enough she'd placed down two piping hot cups between herself and Soraka at the counter, sitting down on the opposing stool. The blonde took a sip of her tea before finally taking her time to examine her former junior.

"…God, you're a mess…" she noted, raking an index finger through some cornflower bangs and letting them fall limply against Soraka's forehead.

The azulite swatted the older girl's hand away, grumbling something under her breath.

Mahiru quirked a brow, "What was that?"

Soraka lifted her head, eyes still half-distant, half-focused. "Do you have a name?"

"What?" the blonde asked, setting down her teacup.

The drunk stared, undeterred and nonplused, "A nickname. You gave Sumika one, called her Kikya in the car… Did she give you one?"

The blonde choked, briefly patting her chest while she brought the cup back towards her face to chase the cough away.

"Uh… well…" Mahiru blushed, sipping her tea. "That's… uh… You weren't supposed to hear that… That's an 'us' thing…"

"Right," Soraka slurred, finally picking up her cup and blowing away the steam. "Forgot you guys get your own language. Don't let me intrude…"

The azulite's tone was rather caustic as she finally downed a significant portion of the tea without flinching. Mahiru frowned.

"I'm sorry, but do you have some complaint about how my girlfriend and I handle our private matters, Miss Hayami?"

Soraka rolled her eyes and pointed at the blonde with her free hand, "Oh, don't go raising those decorum shields, Mahiru. You're going to listen to me bitch and moan regardless, might as well say what you mean."

Mahiru's frown deepened.

"Fine then, I'll be straight."

The azulite stifled a chortle, "Good luck with that…"

Mahiru's frown turned into a scowl, but otherwise ignored the joke and remained civil, "Sumika told me that you kissed her. I am wondering if you have any designs on her, romantically."

For the first time Mahiru could recall, Soraka's face twisted into a rather pleased sneer, "What? Naaahh. 'sides, if anything were the case, she'd leave you for me; I mean, who wouldn't want a piece of this rockin' bod?"

The line was punctuated with the girl dragging her fingers along her form like she was showing herself for auction. But it wasn't that which caused Mahiru to wince with anxiety.

The thought of Sumika leaving, that constant, niggling sensation that maybe, *just* maybe the rosette would have had a last straw with the blonde somewhere along the way…

"What is *wrong* with you Soraka?" Mahiru finally manage to growl out, her teeth perpetually bared. The question was a desperate attempt to derail the conversation, for the sake of Mahiru's sanity.

“Wrong with *me*?” the azulite muttered, her head falling to the counter. “What about you and Madoka? Running around in the rain looking for some dumbass that got her heart broken? Fuckin’ waste of time if you ask me.”

"Because we were worried about you," Mahiru snarled, though the reply was laced with a level of concern. "We went out there because we didn't know if you'd be safe! We heard that something happened with Kagura and we thought you might need a shoulder to lea-!"

"I DON'T NEED TO BE SAVED!" Soraka shouted, slamming her fist on the counter.

Mahiru reeled back, though her hands were steady around the teacup, holding it in place as the rest of the counter shook.

"I don't need anyone else's help, okay? I don't want pity! I don't want anyone lying to me anymore!" The girl’s words edged the line of hysteria, a gargled sob escaping between breaths as she began crying.

Mahiru reached out a hand and wrapped her palm around Soraka's knuckles. The azulite tried to jerk away, but Mahiru was firm.

"Soraka, why are you saying all of that? Where is all of this coming from?"

Soraka looked up to her left, her chest and head bobbing as her breath bounced in inconsistent beats. Tears and mucus began to drip down her chin. She finally looked down at Mahiru's hand, her eyes screwed in anguish.

"Because I'm jealous…" she coughed, using her sleeve to brush away the mucus.

"Because I'm angry… Because I hate both of you… Beca-… Becau-… I'm so goddamned lonely…"

Mahiru stood and walked around the bar, never once letting go of Soraka's hand. She wrapped the younger girl in a tight hug and squeezed her close, pressing her chin into the cornflower locks.

"He hates me…" Soraka snorted, "He hates my guts… I… I couldn't tell him, I can't… he hates me…"

Mahiru patted her shoulder, cradling the girl as she bawled onto the counter below.

Finally, the blonde found words to speak, "I… I know what it's like to be lonely… I… We're both here for you, remember that, okay? We'll help you through this, alright? We won't let you down, I promise."

Soraka curled in tighter, but didn't react otherwise.

They stayed there like that until the azulite was sound asleep in Mahiru's arms, a mirror of how she'd passed out in Sumika's arms only an hour or so earlier.

Once Sumika returned she helped Mahiru get Soraka into a spare set of pajamas, not a pleasant task but a necessary one all the same. With that done she changed herself and the couple laid Soraka to rest between them. There had been plans before the whole ordeal to 'spend the night in' together, but such plans were cast to the side.

Right now, Soraka needed them, and they weren't going to let the girl dream the coming nightmares alone.

O/o\O

The morning came sooner than Soraka had expected. Still, the experience wasn't unwelcome.

She surprised herself with how quickly she hopped out of bed and how much spring was in her step, so much so that it took her a moment to realize that she wasn't in her own home, hopping out of her own bed.

It took her another moment to realize that she was in Mahiru and Sumika's apartment.

And then another moment after that to remember what had happened the night before.

It took her much longer than a moment to finally leave the room and face her hosts.

When she finally wandered out she found the two having a rather quiet breakfast at the table in Mahiru's living room. The duo looked up at her as she stumbled in, hands behind her back, smile reeking of unease.

"H-hey guys…" the azulite squeaked, giving a small wave.

Sumika smiled, "Good morning!"

"Well Sleeping Beauty, about time. I was about to call in the dwarves for the funeral," Mahiru chuckled, hiding a playful grin behind her tea.

Soraka scratched her head, not really knowing where to start the conversation, or if one even needed to be started. Luckily, Mahiru took mercy on her.

"There are waffles here, if you want some," the blonde said, lifting a plate.

The azulite's stomach chose that moment to voice its opinion that, yes, it was in fact time to eat and not to talk. Soraka nodded, gave a quick thanks to Mahiru, and then sat down beside Sumika in order to devour the offered food.

Minutes passed in content silence; Mahiru reading the paper, Sumika and Soraka finishing their meals.

Soon enough though, it was time for the three to finally have the talk about what had happened.

"So…" Soraka started, leaning back into the living room chair, "I… I'm sorry about last night, guys… Thanks for taking care of me…"

"Anytime, Soraka," Sumika chirped, leaning against Mahiru on the loveseat.

"As I said last night, we're both here for you, and we have no intention to let you down in that regard. If something is wrong, please come to us first," Mahiru smiled. The smile waned, "Though, now I think it would be best if we address exactly what led to last night's episode? I'd rather we not dance around the subject."

Soraka frowned, slumping a bit in her seat.

"Okay," she sighed, pushing her bangs up, "here it goes…"

And she explained everything; her jealousy of the pink and gold couple, Fumine's ultimatum, her attempt to confess and the subsequent derision that had scared her out the door. She covered how she'd run from the hospital in a blur, how she's taken the familiar path without thinking and fallen down into the pit in the road, and how she'd stumbled into the bar to drown her sorrows.

"And that's where you two came in…" she finished.

Mahiru and Sumika appraised their friend for a moment afterwards, letting the whole story sink in during a quiet period of reflection. Soraka's form was limp in the chair, almost as though exhausted by the effort of relaying her night.

It was Sumika who broke the quiet.

"And the kiss…?" the rosette asked, shifting uncomfortable in her seat.

Soraka met the fuchsia eyes and blushed, dropping her own to the coffee table in response.

"I… that and the outburst… I was, y'know, drunk, so I just… acted out. Don't read into it too much…" the azulite laughed, scratching at the back of her neck.

Mahiru bit the inside of her lip, deciding to retort the statement, "Soraka… I've been drunk a couple of times. In fact, Sumika and I… when we started this…" She motioned between herself and the rosette, "It took a few drinks to loosen up. You don't… *change* when you're drunk; you just get more relaxed and more honest."

Soraka pulled at the collar of her pajamas, still looking to the side.

"Ah… oh… well… I mean…" the azulite fumbled, tongue tied at the challenging statement.

"Soraka, do you have… feelings for me?" Sumika asked, eyes wide as a doe's.

The other girl took one look at the innocuous face and swallowed.

"I… *maybe*…" The azulite shrugged. She gritted her teeth, "There's… there's too much in my head. I'm… I'm… not thinking

straight right now, but I feel… something towards you. I'm sorry if that makes either of you uncomfortable…"

She rested an elbow across the table, dipping her head to shield herself from the duo of fixed gazes. Soraka wrung her other hand between her knees, trying to make herself as small as possible on the chair.

To her surprise, Mahiru reached over and gripped Soraka's coupled fists. The azulite looked up to find the blonde holding both her hands and Sumika's, an offkilter smile plastered to her face.

"It's alright, Soraka, neither of us blame you, least of all me…" Mahiru spoke, diving to the heart of why the admission was so uncomfortable for her other junior. "Sumika is wonderful, more than anyone could have asked for… which is why I'm not angry. She's too kind for one person. She has enough love for dozens, which is why if you want to pursue her, I won't have any objections."

The azulite blinked, her mind slowly processing the words.

Her hands flew from Mahiru's palms, her body reflexively curving back on itself in embarrassment, face going completely flush.

"Eeehhh?!"

Mahiru sighed, knowing that her… *idea* would probably have that reaction. She looked to Sumika, who was giving her an understanding smile.

"Th-that-?! N-no! No, no, no!" Soraka sputtered. "I-I-I mean, yeah that'd be nice, b-but I just… everything with Tokubē, I don't think that…!"

"Soraka." Mahiru's voice was firm and controlled and served to calm the frantic girl ever so slightly.

Soraka relaxed a bit in her seat, though her posture still remained drawn away.

"I… I understand what it's like to suffer rejection… I know how hard it is to be alone, when you feel like no one is there for you…" the blonde elaborated, tensing. "I… it might not be today, or tomorrow, but if you and Sumika… she and I talked about this, and if you want… I won't stop you from pursuing her."

The azulite looked off to the side, scratching her chin, "I… I appreciate the offer, but I… I think for a while I'm just going to put

myself off the market… I… *might* be tempted to but… I don't know."

"That's fine, take all the time you need," Mahiru exhaled. Then she looked up, "Though I do have one condition if you do." The azulite looked up, uneasy at the blonde. The older girl closed her eyes and composed herself, her hands still shaking with uncertainty, "I'd like you to allow me to… help as well. We can both help you. We can do it alone, but together… Well it would alleviate my fears and I know what you're going through. Whatever capacity you want that to be in, I'd be fine with, but I just want to put my own troubled thoughts at ease regarding this whole affair."

The azulite soaked in the condition, inhaling before letting out a nervous sigh.

"I… uh… I don't think that'll be too much of an issue…" Soraka hummed, eyes plastered to the ceiling, hands rolling uncomfortably between her thighs.

"Soraka?" Sumika squeaked, leaning forward.

The azulite laughed and scratched at her temple, "Y-yeah… y'see… I… It wasn't just the Sumika end of the equation that I… uh… *admired*. So… I guess that makes things a little easier…?"

You could hear a pin drop with the silence that followed. Mahiru's ears suddenly felt like molten lead and Sumika's eyelids were threatening to shoot into the atmosphere.

Immediately Soraka jumped on the defensive, frantically waving her arms in front of her, "Th-that's if I decide to take up your offer in the first place! I mean, you guys can't just throw this on me so soon after having my heart broken!" Her tone sobered the more she spoke, "I… I just want to take a step back and try to figure things out, but to know you two would be willing to go that far… It makes me feel like a bad friend, to be honest. I don't know if I'd be willing to go *that* far to help someone…"

Sumika smiled and laughed, "Soraka, you're one of the most selfless people I know; you'd do something like this in a heartbeat."

The azulite blushed and scratched the back of her neck, giggling unevenly, "I… I'm not too sure about that…"

The rosette clapped her hands, "Well I *am*. And I know that I love you for it and many other things, and I want to help you get

through this as best as you possibly can!" She slid down onto the floor between the loveseat and coffee table so as to be able to reach Mahiru and Soraka's hands, cupping them in her own. "Take as long as you need, but remember that Mahiru and I are *always* here for you… However you *want* us to be here for you."

The emphasis left a blush on all three of their faces, though Soraka didn't reel away. Instead she began to tear up.

"I don't know what I did to deserve someone like you at my side, Sumika…" Soraka sniffed. She slid down onto the floor and wrapped her arms around the rosette. After a moment, she looked up to the blonde and beckoned her down to join them, "You too Mahiru… you're both amazing…"

The chef shook her head in pleasant exasperation, sliding down into the hold.

After a short period together, Soraka pulled back, laughing a bit as she wiped her eye, "So… If I do join in this… whatever… will I get a nickname too?"

"What?" Sumika asked, puzzled.

Mahiru groaned, "She overheard me calling you 'Kikya' last night…"

"Oh… Oh! Yes! I could totally come up with one for you!" the rosette grinned.

Soraka sniffed, grinning back. "Sounds like fun… though I never did get an answer from you, Mahiru…" The azulite looked pointedly at the blonde, "What *is* your pet name?"

Before Mahiru could manage a dignified response, she was interrupted, nay, *betrayed*.

"Oh, you mean ‘Moo’hi?" Sumika giggled.

The azulite looked at the steadily blushing blonde, not even bothering to repress a snicker, and Sumika did nothing to restrain her own personal chuckle fest.

The blonde felt the reflexive need to hide her face, pulling a throw pillow over it in response.

"It's… actually really kinky in the bedroom…" Mahiru muttered, blushing harder.

Soraka belted out another laugh, joining in with Sumika's clutch-stomach chorus. And Mahiru had to admit, as much as she resisted, it was too hard to struggle against the temptation to join in.

The three that began their day on unsteady terms would end it knowing that regardless of where their lives ended up going they'd be going there together.

O/o\O

About five months later Soraka approached the couple and expressed a desire to cash in on their offer.

They had been five rather arduous months for the azulite, filled with quiet reflection and nights spent crying into the shoulders of her friends. She actively avoided Fumine and Tokubē, going so far as to block them on her phone and on all of her social media accounts. For their part, there didn't seem to be much of an attempt to reach out after the first two or three weeks of her self-imposed isolation.

But that dark time slowly came to an end, and with the bold step to become… *whatever* with Sumika and Mahiru (girlfriends, she supposed), she was hoping to perhaps put a capstone on this chapter of her life that wouldn't leave her sick.

Classes were out for break, Mahiru had a week off from her job, and the festival season had rolled around. The air was jovial, energized, and the dawn of spring seemed like the perfect time to finally take the step and join a… *moderately* healthy relationship.

At least, that's what she *thought*, until the day the three had arranged for the occasion finally came around. She'd almost puked three times in the last hour, and Mahiru hadn't even arrived at the apartment yet. Nervous was an understatement at this point.

"Are you sure you're going to be alright? You really don't look very well…" Sumika prodded, slinging a concerned arm over the azulite's shoulders.

Soraka shook her head, "Nnmm. I'll make it. Once Mahiru gets here and we… start, I think my nerves'll settle…"

The girl shuddered, but took in a breath that steadied her. The two stood on Mahiru's balcony, looking out at the evening streets. The skyscrapers and towers around them glistened in the orange sunlight, the warm breeze tickled their skin, and the sounds of the city, for as hectic as they were, lulled the two into a relaxed lean on the railing.

There had been brief discussion about, well, starting early, just her and Sumika, but Soraka had argued that she wanted to do this right and that Mahiru needed to be there. That had led to a whole slew of implications, especially since the trio weren't exactly sure if the night was going to be a chaste night of connection or a wild night of consummation. For all the planning that had gone into the night, the three had talked surprisingly little about what would actually *happen* once everyone was together in the apartment.

"Hmm… She was supposed to be here already," Sumika muttered, biting her lip. She pulled out her phone, fingers speed dialing the older girl as her foot hammered on the balcony.

"Sumika, stop it, you don't need to rush her for my sake, okay?" Soraka sighed. Even with her complaint she was grateful with how it distracted her from her stomach's back flips.

"No, I'm just worried that something might ha-Oh!" Sumika stopped midsentence, eyes widening. Her index finger shot out to point at the intersection below them where a blue Prius was pulling up in the right lane, "There she is! Mahiru!"

Feasibly, there was no way the blonde would be able to hear Sumika's calls, what with the apartment being somewhere on a floor beginning in the late 'teens. All the same, though, Mahiru must have already been looking towards the balcony, as the two could see, barely, the blonde girl wave back at them from her car.

And then Sumika's phone connected the call.

The rosette went to say something, her tone chipper and pleasant. But all that sound was dulled out for Soraka as she watched Mahiru pick up her phone to answer… and then drop it and fumble to grab it.

The car, for reasons unseen by the azulite, jerked forward right into oncoming traffic.

"MAHIRU!" Soraka shouted, her voice cracking just as the semi clipped the front bumper of the blonde's Prius.

In a shower of sparks and flame, their quiet night came to an abrupt end.

Pit and Mortar

The first time she awoke, there was fire and pain.

Her breaths were stifled, choked, and it felt like her lungs were all but charred to a crisp.

After a distant popping, the world became black.

The second time she awoke, there was movement.

Her back was sliding, ground against gravel, against grit, against garbage.

The popping was louder, more rapid. A distant quake sent her back to the land of dreams.

The third time she awoke, there was talking.

Hushed whispers along bleached walls melding into a subtle beeping.

She was thankful, this time, for the mysterious fluff beneath her, as it let her drift back to sleep with no complaint.

The fourth time she awoke, there was choking.

Or drowning, to be more accurate. Shouting too, but by thrashing against clammy palms she effectively tuned it out.

There was a pinch to her side, and the shadows returned.

The fifth time she awoke, there was hope.

After moments of panic, of pain, moments of confusion and wakefulness, she was aware.

For the first time in days, Katsumi Yukima was conscious and alive. And she was determined to stay that way.

O/o\O

December, 2011 – February 2015

Two terrorists, half a kilometer out.

She lowered the sniper rifle's sight, wiping her brow with a free hand. It'd be a difficult shot, even if she got in closer. That also

didn't account for the haze in her vision from the fever. She thought that after maybe a day or so it would have passed, but like the others this one seemed to keep itself present with little concern for her present situation.

Her present situation.

Her present situation.

Yukima's brow twitched, forcing her to tighten her grip on the rifle. She ignored the pain in her chest, but the memories were harder to brush away.

O/o\O

Yukima knew that asking where she was, were she even *able* to form coherent speech, would be a moot gesture. While she'd busied herself with reading the majority of the flight, she'd occasionally glance at the TV affixed in the back of the chair ahead of her, the display of which passively showed the plane's projected and current flight paths. When they'd gone down, they'd been somewhere in the Middle East, so from that fact alone she knew two things: communication beyond the rudimentary would almost certainly be impossible and even if she could ask someone her lack of geographical knowledge would impair any type of recognition.

When it came to where she was in the world, she was basically blind.

That said, she was surprised with how much she could deduce once she'd woken up. Albeit, her deduction was a slow process, but being bedridden (or mat-ridden, as the case may be) allotted her enough time to piece some things together.

The first thing she came to recognize was that she wasn't in a hospital, but in a home. She, along with half a dozen others, were placed side-by-side along the length of a room with chalky-white walls made out of some kind of stone or hardened clay. The floor was dirt, though nicely kept. Air in the room was dry, rather stale, and particularly unpleasant during midday, with the measly two small windows doing little to ventilate in the cramped conditions.

What tipped her off as to the building being a home came with her first encounter with the person she assumed owned the building. He was an elderly man, or seemingly so, with deep bronzed skin that wrinkled and hung from his bones like pendulums. His chin jutted forward and was coated in a finely-kept graying beard, the peppered, curly hair continuing up his jaw line and running along his balding head. He walked with a hunch, and though his presence seemed rather terrifying, what with the way he energetically burst through the door carrying a tray of tea, his eyes quickly dispelled any tension she felt around him.

He'd passed out the tea to each member of the room that was conscious, even going so far as to carefully give water to those that were still unconscious. It was this consideration that had him finding her awake, pleasant surprise written over his face. He was immediately at her side, and any remaining unease was cast aside when he naturally and calmly lifted her head with one of his hands and let her sip her own cup of water, which was nirvana on her throat.

As she had figured, the man didn't speak Japanese; instead, deep, soothing Arabic words drifted from his mouth. His aura was relaxing, his kindness unforgettable, and his smile was so genuine she knew of only one other person who had ever served to rival it.

It had been that thought that shocked her wakefulness into full-blown anxiety, as she suddenly realized she'd been switched out of her clothing and into something that made treating her (admittedly numerous) injuries easier. This included the ribbon which had been lovingly braided into her hair before she left. To her relief though, her panicked patting of her head spurred the man to take her hand and guide it to a small table, one of many in the room, where the red strands were resting undisturbed.

She gripped the parcels and drew them close, feeling the cuts, bruises and broken ribs along her back twinge painfully with the movement. The shift also alerted her to the fact that her left leg wasn't able to move and that the pinky on her right hand was completely encased in some kind of elementary splint. Still, she struggled against the pain and held the ribbons close to her chest.

The man had backed off, giving the girl space and letting her caress the strands in peace. It was all she could do for several days as her injuries slowly stitched themselves together. By the end of the second week she knew every knick and bump in the ribbons' shape, understood where every fiber started and ended.

In the intervening time plenty had happened. The first thing was her deduction of the man and their current living situation. He'd set up a makeshift hospital of some sort in his home, complete with two rudimentary heart monitors, one of which had been assigned to Yukima herself. The other… well… got passed around a lot. None of the unconscious 'survivors' lasted more than the first week of Yukima's consciousness. All but one of the conscious survivors followed suit the second week. The old man wheeled the bodies out himself, and where they went after that, she didn't know.

The one survivor that was still with her turned out to be German, which meant that she was just as in the dark trying to speak with him as she was the old man. At the very least she knew a passing phrase or two from her grandparents, so she occasionally could pick up on some of the man’s personal utterings. Every once in a while the urge to strike up a conversation with him clawed against her teeth, but her social anxiety clawed back, keeping her teeth sewn shut.

It would have been almost damningly cowardly… if she could even speak at all in the first place. It seemed that in her unconscious state she'd had a rather bad… fit of some sort. It had happened occasionally because of her immune disorder, but her lungs would fill with liquid and it would be a race for the doctors to clear her airways before she drowned. It seems like the old man had saved her from one of those attacks, but maybe not as delicately as a trained doctor; any time she tried to speak, all that managed to escape was a pained rasp.

The last thing of note, to Yukima at least, were the visits from other people. All of them spoke Arabic, but tone of voice was borderless; these people were all professional and they were *very* angry about something. She never saw them, but the old

man had answered the door a number of times, with the people taking longer and longer to go away each time.

Eventually she'd gotten the implication that the people at the door weren't friends or neighbors, but searchers of some kind, and, with the way the old man hid the survivors, she got the feeling that they weren't exactly friendly towards her. It would also explain why the old man had kindly, but firmly, prevented either her or the German from leaving the room once they'd recovered enough to walk.

Soon, though, the days began to blur together and she quickly lost track of how much time she'd actually spent in the man's house. Thoughts of home became muddled memories, blurred as the days she'd come to live through.

Every day she prayed to whatever would listen to her that soon enough someone would find the old man, would find her and the German, that they would be taken home to be with family and friends… to get back to Sumika. She even mused that she would learn Arabic, if only so she could personally thank the man who had probably saved her life after the plane crash.

Then came the day those hopes were dashed, along with most of the innocence that had resided within her.

It had started out like any other; peaceful, quiet. The man had passed out tea to her and the German while the two enjoyed a bout of chess. The old man had provided the board and pieces and the game didn't require anything more than simple rule knowledge in order to play, so the three had found it as a suitable replacement for deep conversation.

Then came the knock on the front door, hard and loud.

The old man had drawn away, closing up their room behind him as he went to answer the call. A beat had passed, the distant cricking of the wooden slab being shifted aside.

Normally, there would have been talking. Instead there was a single 'BANG' and a myriad of celebratory cries.

Yukima flinched at the sound, reflexively curling up and pushing herself into the nearest corner, trying to make herself the

smallest person she could be. Everything after that was a terrifying blur.

Men with guns had burst into the room. The German had yelled, had fought back, had punched and kicked and bit at the men, and by the end of it all three had wound up in a bloody heap in the other corner of the room, each with at least a single bullet wound to their name.

When she finally came back to reality Yukima found herself alone, the assailants and the German piled atop on another, unmoving… and in her own trembling hands she noticed a pistol, it's barrel still smoking.

Her finger twitched, tugging at the trigger, the weapon's mechanism clicking fruitlessly at the digit's demands. Had… had she shot someone? How did she even get the gun? She scrambled back to the scuffle in her mind but only found the brief flashes of memory already fading into the abyss. One moment there had been a fight and the next, bodies. Breaths choking in her throat she dropped her eyes to her finger, still insistently pulling the trigger as her blood slowly ran cold.

Yukima had shot someone. Yukima had *killed* someone.

Her hand reflexively jumped, the gun clattering to the floor, but then she otherwise locked stiff, terrified that if she moved someone would have seen her and shot her. After what felt like hours of stillness she started inching towards the door, limping lightly on her still healing knee.

She found the old man in his living room, still conscious, with a bullet in his side. He looked at her, eyes glassy and pained, but even then he managed to put a smile on his face for her; strong until the very end. She crawled to him, tears of fear and despair dripping from her eyes. The man reached out for her, cupping one of her small hands in his own large callused palms. He squeezed, blinking as he did so, the smile never fading.

Yukima hicked and squeezed back, leaning her cheek down to his chest, her eyes still looking up at his face as the blood drained from his skin.

He smiled even after his heart finally stopped beating.

The school girl stumbled to her feet in a daze, fingers pulling at the ribbons in her hair absently. The man's warmth lingered on her skin, but the air around her began to chill rapidly to compensate. He had been a buffer, a savior of sorts, protecting her from a violent, unpredictable world, a world that had quite literally kicked in the door and taken the only light around her from her.

So she ran. She grabbed what she could carry and ran.

It was twenty minutes before she realized she had no idea where she was running. Streets of houses made of stone and mud, a maze of a town built into the shadow of a mountainous cliff and its overhang.

She was lost, with no home, with no help, with no way to contact the outside world and without anyone to trust.

No, that had been wrong, she thought. She could always trust herself. She wasn't always the most reliable person, but she knew what her limits were and how she could push them.

And the world might have taken most of the light away from her, but there was still a shimmering star in the distance, a star that made the gorgeous night sky pale in comparison.

She stopped her running and rested a hand on the wall of one of the houses, catching her breath.

"Sum…" Yukima hacked, a thin trail of yellow liquid dripping from her lips. "Su-Sumik… Sumika… Sumika… Sumika…" she doubled over but did not collapse, palms resting on her knees. She wiped her chin and stood, each proclamation of her chant granting her one more ounce of strength, "Sumika! Sumika! Sumika!" Her voice raised in pitch and volume, eventually becoming strained shouts that rubbed her fatigued throat raw and reverberated into the desert around her.

That's right. The world had yet to take the brightest star away from her, and she was going to follow that star all the way home. No longer would she sit in hope of rescue; now Katsumi Yukima would make her own way in the world. She had survived the crash and come out alive, and she doubled down on her intent to stay that way.

O/o\O

Yukima slipped back behind the crate, narrowly dodging the patrol that passed by moments later. She swallowed a satisfied breath and pocketed the key in her left hand, ghost of a smile worming its way onto her lips.

Months upon months of struggling, of fighting, of warding away her body's defective nature… Soon she would be ready to leave this hell hole and get back to the only place she wanted to be.

But, as she snuck her way back out of the camp, a lingering question weighed down her grin: had it been months or had it been years?

O/o\O

Leaving the area was a non-option.

After a day of hiding among back alleys she'd come to terms with her own disorientation and decided the most logical solution would be to find out where the hell she was. So, she did the most logical thing in order to fulfill that goal: she'd climbed to the top of the village's cliff. It was difficult, and took her far longer than she was willing to admit, but she'd gotten where she needed to be in order to see the several kilometers encircling the crag of rock.

From what she'd managed to observe, her plane had gone down near the center of a valley, cut off from the world by mountains and cliffs going every direction. There was fighting nearly every day at the passes leading out of the range, skirmishes between who Yukima could only assume were insurgents and government officials. The people of the valley, a congregation of about seven or eight villages total, were enslaved to the insurgents it seemed, with the terrorists cutting off practical access to the world and forcing the residents to go to them for supplies.

Supplies, Yukima had quickly realized, that she had none of.

So she started stealing.

Small things at first, absolute necessities: water, food, clothing. Her inaugural theft came about for food, her stomach roiling over the lack of nutrition. The only place she *knew* there was food

was the old man’s house, but that had become a swarm of activity over night, no doubt because of the intruders going missing. So that left her wanting for an alternative.

This led her to stalk a whole street for a day, her stomach slowly twisting into knots as she took account of people’s daily routine from sunup to sundown. She watched and waited, piecing out which houses might be abandoned during the day and it was disheartening to figure out that between all of the children and wives that stayed home only two of the buildings were left anywhere near unoccupied.

Still, two was better than none and she set her plan in motion the following morning before daybreak, slipping into a single man’s yard just as the sun was edging over the horizon. Hours passed and the wait only became more unbearable when she heard him leave, waiting long enough for him to be completely out of earshot before she took her chance. The break-in went smoothly by all measures: the back door had been left unlatched and his food stores weren’t exactly hard to find. She’d made out with a haul of flatbreads, rice and a hunk of some kind of meat she’d have to figure out how to cook out in the wilds.

The caper had been nervewracking to say the least, but any hint of anxiety or guilt were washed away the minute her stomach was full.

She spent her first nights huddled in a dust pit, covered by a stolen wicker basket and tarpped by a thick wool blanket. In a cruel twist she'd been thankful for the lack of rain, as she most likely would have died from simple hypothermia long before she had time to do much of anything resembling making it home.

As such, her already present immune disease was her only major health issue that she needed to keep on top of. When they'd released her from the hospital it had been explained to her that the condition was no longer anywhere near as severe as it had been when she was young, though medicine and a stringent list of guidelines had been prescribed as precautionary measures, measures that had come in handy during rare but oh-so-terrifying attacks.

The worst it had gotten was the occasional fever that left her unable to do anything for a day or two at a time, though the phantom pains of that drowning episode from when she was partially unconscious still crept up from time to time.

Nothing, though, beat the figurative heart attack she had when she'd returned one night to her basket only to find a pair of snakes settling a nest beneath it. After that little episode, she decided that more stable shelter was necessary.

Over the weeks she managed to find a relatively well-hidden crag in the cliff, and once she'd stolen some lumber she managed to make a pretty good cave for herself to sleep in each night that was also easy to keep rodents and vipers out of. Again, though, she didn't exactly want to admit how many tries it took in order for her to get the door to hinge properly; the stories she'd read while in the hospital could only teach her so much about surviving in a hostile world and her limbs were still struggling to recover from the atrophy they'd suffered over being bedridden for so long back at the old man’s house.

For a time, life was purely about making it to the next day, often beginning one day sore, tired and caked in dried blood only to end it exhausted, bruised and nursing burns and scabs accrued while piecing together some facet of her new (temporary) life.

It was only after one of the terrorists found her shelter that her necessities finally stepped over morally comfortable boundaries.

He hadn't seen her, only her living space. He hadn't radioed in for backup, but rather stepped in to examine on his own. She could have left the shelter behind and fled…

But she didn't.

For the first time, Yukima made the conscious choice to kill someone. And it hadn't been pretty.

She only had a small work knife that'd she'd stolen in order to make food preparations all that much easier; she'd even started practicing with it in order to catch small game like rats and, to her disgust, scorpions.

Her first stab didn't kill him. The man was young, but untrained, and instead of going for his guns he clawed at her, trying

to pull her away. She hung from his neck, holding on to the knife wedged under his Adam's apple for dear life; he gurgled the entire time, thrashing about like a cornered coyote.

The second stab did the trick, and the man floundered into a sad sack of meat and bone.

She had vomited afterward, and the follow up work had been far from pleasant; hours stuck in the shelter with a corpse waiting for night to fall, stripping the man of everything she could use (especially his weapons) before dragging the corpse to the middle of the valley and leaving him in the heated desert sands, coming back and cleaning up both her puke and the blood.

It was only after she was done scrubbing the rock with a soiled rag that she realized her cardigan, one of the few scraps of clothing she still had from before the crash, had been stained with the man's gore.

After that she decided that it was becoming too dangerous to simply lay low and she needed to redouble her efforts to leave. But that required a plan beyond 'live another day'.

Yukima began to plot.

O/o\O

"Sumika…"

The raven girl's eyes fluttered open, pupils pining for the fields of pink that had graced them only moments earlier.

She shifted where she lay, rubbing her lids. The dreams were getting less vivid, and it was beginning to scare her. She had dreams of all of them: Mahiru, Soraka, Fumine… though mostly of Sumika.

Their faces, all of their faces, were slowly drifting away from her, blurring and malforming as the days grew longer.

"Soon…" she whispered, curling in on herself and struggling not to cry, "Soon I can see you all again… I can see you again, Sumika…"

O/o\O

She'd taken plenty of lives since she'd first killed.

To escape the valley, she would need weapons, she would need transport, she would need protection.

Much like she always had, she acted only at night, only now it was far more than scavenging to survive: now it was a hunt to accrue tools of liberation.

She'd spend days resting or watching from atop the cliff, marking movements and storehouses. At night, she would sneak out and steal what she needed: guns, grenades, body armor. Occasionally she wasn't silent enough and needed to kill a guard or two in order to slip by. The death toll began to rise and the insurgents started to get restless.

At some point one of the guards had managed to snag the bun of her hair, leading to a protracted fight. Survival only made her paranoid about how much hair she had so she cut the bun loose, with all of the hair that came with it, leaving her locks jagged and short.

Sometimes she observed the soldiers practicing with their guns, learning every intricacy of each weapon she could through the cracked lens of a worn pair of binoculars she'd pilfered what felt like ages ago. She even found a dune in the desert that did a decent job blocking sound and muzzle flashes, allowing her to practice with the weapons herself with a reduced sense of paranoia.

Guns were… interesting.

Yukima preferred them over some of the explosives she’d stolen for sure; there was a catharsis she could appreciate in pointing at a problem and making it go away. They were less exhausting than a knife, safer than using a grenade, and far easier to practice with than either. They became her best friends and greatest timesink: when she wasn’t busy cooking, sleeping, or prepping for a job she was cleaning and fixing her steadily growing arsenal, or slipping out to the sandy hills to refine her aim.

Of course, all of this came after repeated practice; she could count on her (thankfully still intact) fingers how many times she’d almost maimed or killed herself trying to train with one of her guns. Self-inflicted scars littered her body now, from the drag marks of a

pistol slide across the webbing of her hand or a chipped indent in her brow where a rifle’s iron sigh had slammed just above her eye. The worst was probably the long bullet trail where a sheathed pistol had discharged against her thigh. She never forgot to safety a weapon ever again after that little mishap.

Most of her incursions didn’t necessitate her drawing her weapon; in and out without a problem, all completely under the nose of half a dozen guards. Then came a night at what she called village three where she accidentally tripped an alarm and engaged in a firefight with the insurgents living there. She'd only survived by the skin of her teeth, but by the end of the night she'd killed seven men and only taken a bullet to the thigh.

Some twisted luck was thrown her way as a number of locals came to her aid, pushing back a mob of their angrier, justifiably upset cohorts while their friends ferried her to safety. Chief among them was a man who wordlessly offered her shelter for the night. Even with the language barrier, he tended to her wounds, fed her, and the morning after managed to hide her from other insurgents with the help of his neighbor.

While in hiding she became well acquainted with the man's bubbly daughters. One was barely out of her toddler phase and one was slightly older, probably edging around adolescence by Yukima’s best guess. The older of the two took a liking to Yukima, calling her 'binet kuhariqua', or something that effect that was equally as unpronounceable. There was some solace to be found in how the girl clung to her, behavior all too familiar to a certain rosette back home.

After that night there was a change. Rumor and word of 'binet kuhariqua' floated on the winds and Yukima’s escapades only became that much more chaotic. The insurgent became antsier, the villagers more incensed; sometimes she’d enter a village and be driven out by the people that lived there and in others she’d be welcomed with open arms by people just as angry at the insurgents as she was.

Unintentionally, Yukima had become a fixture in reality for these people, an anti-presence to the insurgents that either liberated

the oppressed or destabilized what little order was left. It was a mantle she had not asked for nor one she was prepared to be saddled with, but one that did occasionally prove itself useful: without their help her plan to escape may never have had a chance of getting off the ground.

O/o\O

The humvee skidded over the rocks, dirt, debris and fire kicking up in their wake.

"Hold it steady!" Yukima screamed. She doubted the man could understand her, and he probably already knew he needed to keep his driving smooth. But, in a situation like this, yelling was cathartic in a way.

She pulled the trigger, trying to keep the rifle level at the three jeeps tailing them, popping off shots that aimed for the drivers in specific. Attempting to shoot the wheels had been fruitless, so she settled for hoping their pursuer's windshields weren't bulletproof.

With no small amount of satisfaction, the car that she'd been firing at swerved to the side, toppling off the cliff to the left of the caravan, just as the cliff itself came to an abrupt end in a rock wall. A flash, some smoke and a metal-wrenching crunch told her all she needed to know about what had happened to the car.

Add a few more notches to the casualty list.

O/o\O

The man from village three had managed to track her down. After months of not even visiting the village, she'd been surprised. Even more surprising was the condition the man looked to be in. He was far more gaunt than she remembered, pale and emaciated; he looked like walking death.

How he had found her, she didn't know, but he had immediately prostrated himself to her, continually waving a worn photograph of his two daughters and openly weeping like a child.

She allowed him in and they 'talked', using crude drawings and images to try and convey what meaning they could. Yukima had managed to pick up on some of the language, a couple basics, but nowhere near enough to convey what needed to be said.

The man, from what she understood, wanted to leave the valley, wanted to escape the insurgents, but most importantly he wanted a better life for his daughters. He wanted Yukima to take the three of them out of the grasp of this hellhole.

She would have never considered it if it hadn't been for the fact that she was almost ready to leave herself, but was starting to come up against some logistics issues when it came to any kind of pursuit force. Terrorists were constantly refreshing their forces at the border to the valley from some kind of outside training camp, and while things had begun to quiet down inside the valley itself there were bad omens on the horizon of that changing very quickly.

So Yukima agreed. She had plans to leave within the week, and the man, through scrawl and art, said they would be ready.

She hoped they would.

O/o\O

Yukima chucked the rifle out the door, having expended all the ammunition they had for it.

She reached back to the back seat, "Boom boom!"

The two girls, who had been keeping their heads down, dutifully reached for one of the four RPGs loaded in the back of the humvee and passed it forward. The three of them had worked out a crude command system before leaving so as to keep Yukima armed during their escape.

An escape that was getting rockier by the second.

She'd managed to take out two cars so far, but a fourth car had come in, all of which were pocking their armored car with small arms fire.

Yukima leaned back out the window and targeted the lead jeep. She pulled the trigger and the red-tipped grenade zipped

forward, plowing into the ground below the car and causing it to hop but failing to stop it completely.

Yukima winced, ticking her tongue and tossing the expended launcher into the wastes.

"Boom boom!" she called again. Another RPG was passed up to her, which she immediately began to aim back at the approaching cars.

Her heart was beating faster than ever, the world was beginning to blur, her hands were shaking more and more… and all she could think about was how *close* she was to escaping her miserable life in the Middle East and making it home to Sumika.

She pulled the trigger and the RPG sailed true, striking right between the two cars and blowing off both their carriages.

Only, before that a similar streak had left the rear car, heading right for the humvee.

Yukima's eyes widened, throwing her body into the car as fast as she could.

"Get dow-!"

The back of the car exploded.

O/o\O

She had found the plane's wreckage a few weeks after she'd housed herself in the cave.

It was embedded pretty firmly in a mountainside, and relatively unguarded.

There had been very little there to recover, which met her expectations but certainly didn't match her hopes.

Her travel bag had been shredded, and for the most part there was nothing in there to recover beyond a few scraps of clothing.

There was something, though, something that had sat in her cave since she found it.

A photograph, of herself, of Sumika, of Soraka, Mahiru, and Fumine, all at the beach during the summer, having the time of their lives on the hot sands and cooling surf…

The frame was broken, but the picture was still mostly intact. Every night she would go to sleep imagining the sand outside was a beach away from the world she loved so much.

O/o\O

Yukima was alive. She had made it. There was no more pursuit, no more terrorists, no more anything. Just desert for miles going East and an overturned humvee filled with guns.

The man's head had been caved in on the steering wheel; she'd woken up next to it. Had it not been for her hardening over the whole ordeal, she would have probably had more of a reaction.

The youngest daughter had been relatively lucky when it came to her death: a twisted neck, as far as Yukima could tell. It seemed to have been brief and painless.

The older daughter, though…

Yukima had found her outside the humvee, crushed from the waist down, still breathing.

There had been a brief glimmer of hope that the child could be saved, but it died when it became apparent neither of them had the strength to lift a several-ton vehicle… one that had probably caused too much damage for the young girl's body to take.

The girl had smiled.

That's what stuck with Yukima the most. The child had smiled at her and motioned to the pistol strapped to her hip. Like a fool, Yukima had brought it out… and the girl finished the motion by bringing it to her own head and closing her eyes in resignation.

The Japanese girl froze.

Death, murder… all justified in the name of survival and morality… In the name of justice and order… Every kill had been working towards freedom and against the people who had tried to kill her.

But this…

Her heart *hurt*.

The child squeezed her eyes and the smile became more of a grimace as she tugged on the barrel, pressing it further into her forehead.

Yukima hiccupped, her hands shaking as tears drifted from her eyes.

She scowled, closed her own eyes, and screamed.

Her voice completely overtook the sound of gunfire.

O/o\O

After hours in a disheartened daze, she'd gathered what she could and began following the road east.

Her chest hurt, her fingers shook, and her eyes were fresh out of tears.

But Yukima was alive.

And she was determined to stay that way.

Kindred Pyre

March, 2015 – June 2015

When Mahiru had been young, her parents had taken her to the beach; a day with the family, filled with fun, sun and surf. It was one of her clearest and most treasured memories, and even the jellyfish sting that had ended the day early couldn't take away the nostalgic pleasure she got each time she recounted what happened.

Even after they'd passed on she could still rely on that little piece of Eden in her mind, and when she'd found Makoto, someone who could take the misery of her loneliness and chuck it out the window, she decided to enrich those memories by going to the beach with the Sakuras, a lovely little vacation for a family going through a rough patch. Yet another precious memory, this time left unmolested by the gelatinous menace from the deep.

The trip became cathartic to her, and once a year she'd visit that same spot, no matter the company, because when she stood on that beach it always felt like she was with her parents, with the Sakuras, and more recently with Soraka, Fumine, Yukima and Sumika… Especially Sumika.

Her eyes dipped.

And, as with most events in her life, they would remain memories, never to be repeated as they once had before.

Sumika had broken up with her.

It was a twisted turn of events, to say the least; normally couples would bond over disaster, or else break apart in the light of some disability such distress revealed or created. And maybe this situation fell into the latter category, but that was without considering motive. Sumika's decision had been made with pragmatic intent, one borne of fear and concern: the rosette believed she was cursed and had broken up with Mahiru as a form of protection.

Mahiru smiled wryly, wringing her hands together as she mulled over the situation for what was probably the hundredth time that day.

She'd always known about her girlfriend's (well, ex-girlfriend's) superstitious leanings. Even with her knowledge of sciences and her rather grounded mother, Sumika had always loved peeking into the clouds despite knowing that far more logical explanations probably existed. And some of her arguments were hard to ignore: her father's uncanny ability to known when rain was coming based upon his joint stiffness, Sumika's penchant for picking lucky numbers, and even how bad luck seemed to befall the girls in their group if they accidentally spilled salt without throwing any over their shoulders in the aftermath.

Still, even with all that, Mahiru hadn't expected Sumika to distance herself so drastically as a consequence… And it sucked that she couldn't do anything to assuage Sumika's illogical leaps. The rosette was concerned about every person she ever fell in love with dying in some horrible accident. If Mahiru were to use *that* sort of logic, she would probably put more stock in herself being cursed to die in a car crash than her ex-girlfriend getting her targeted by the universe itself.

Regardless, the deed had been done, the argument had. Hell, it hadn't been so much an argument as it had been a blubbering session for Sumika. And no matter how adorable Sumika had looked apologizing for getting Mahiru wrapped up in a 'curse', it didn't change the fact that the small girl had chosen to end their relationship of two years.

As odd as it was, Mahiru didn't cry. She hadn't shed a single tear. Oddly enough, the split seemed to affect Soraka more than Mahiru, and the blonde spared a moment of empathy for the poor azulite. The girl had only just gathered up enough courage to finally try and fall under Mahiru and Sumika's protective wings, only to have those same wings wrested away from her, what was once shelter leaving her exposed… Still, as guilty as it made her feel, she didn't spare all that much time to mourn the other girl's disappointments. In fact, she didn't spare that much time to mourn at all.

After her parents, after Makoto, after Yukima: she was numb to loss. Compared to those, Sumika *choosing* to leave, because she was scared *for* Mahiru, seemed like a drop of heartache in an ocean of misery.

Or maybe it was the concussion that, even after a week in the hospital, had failed to go away completely.

It could go either way, honestly.

Yes, it had been a grueling week for her, relationship troubles aside. Surviving being clipped by a semi had been a stroke of luck; surviving a neck injury without permanent damage had been a downright miracle. For as much as she would have loved to gripe or moan about her swiftly collapsing social life, or about the weighty plastic brace looped around her neck, she decided to take a page out of Sumika's superstitious beliefs and count each blessing she had, lest her ungrateful curses turn around and untwine what few threads were still keeping her functional.

The crash had been deemed a mutual fault instance, a rare occurrence for accidents but not unheard of. Mahiru *had* accidentally driven into the intersection against the red light… but so had the semi-driver, who had failed to slow down during the yellow light and blown right through the red when it finally made its appearance. In effect, they were both responsible for their own damages, which meant that Mahiru could look forward to a scrap-heap of a car and a rather daunting medical bill after she left the hospital.

For once in her life, everything was coming towards her in seemingly equal measure. For every negative, there had been a silver lining, and she was grateful for such a benevolent turn of fate.

Even Sumika's rejection of their relationship had a counter; not a particularly powerful one, mind you, but it was still a show of good faith from life. She had a natural aversion to hospitals, primarily because they were the first place she'd ever experienced the true, crippling loneliness of life without her parents. So when she'd awoken there, one of her first concerns, one which she never voiced, was being left alone.

In stepped the answer to her silent worry; a perky, gangly seventeen year old with long platinum hair slipped into a set of

twintails that sat over her shoulder.

Satsuki Kokawa was an interesting presence, erstwhile and punctual; the girl showed up at the same time each day dressed in herFuzaiumi Middle School uniform, chipper and ready to visit Mahiru's roommate: Mayumi Kokawa, the younger girl's mother.

"Hello, Mama!" Satsuki chirped, skipping forward and resting her bag beside her mother's bed.

There was no response from the elder woman, her bald form motionless save for the peaceful highs and lows of breathing. Mahiru's thoughts momentarily turned piteous. Satsuki arrived that way every day, voice strong and full of vibrant energy, as though her mother wasn't trapped away inside a coma. Cancer was a beast that, for all the tragedy in her life, Mahiru had managed to avoid coming into contact with, at least until she wound up in the ICU next to someone with a terminal case.

Not that Satsuki knew that. She had heard the doctors talking about their diagnosis of the woman during one of her daily checkups. Mahiru knew that she should have been paying more attention to the nurse who was attending to her instead of eavesdropping, but she'd been hospitalized for a week and seeing that poor girl come in every day struck a chord, a chord that rang even louder when she found out the doctors were concealing the truth from the poor platinum girl, telling her there was still a chance, that there was still hope when everything else pointed to the contrary. They claimed it was for her own good, but with how valiantly Satsuki showed up each day, without fail… Mahiru could only see the situation ending in disaster.

"Afternoon to you too, Miss Okawa!" the small girl greeted, flashing her sunset eyes towards the golden haired lass.

Mahiru returned the cheerful cheep with a polite nod, at least the best nod she could muster with the collar cast secured around her neck, "And how has your day been, Satsuki?"

"Busy, busy, busy," the girl buzzed, rubbing her temple. "Graduation has everyone in a tizzy, even the teachers are going haywire over getting things prepared! I don't really understand *why* exactly. I mean it's not like many of us are going to different schools; most of us are sticking in theFuzaiumi chain, so

we'll still be in the same building too… Miss Wakuni even had a breakdown today, crying about how she wasn't ready to see us all graduate… I really don't understand the hassle."

"Wakuni…?" Mahiru mouthed. The name seemed vaguely familiar. She decided to muse aloud, "Is she the one that always talks about her failed dates?"

Satsuki blinked, hunched shoulders perking, "Yes, actually. How did you know?"

The blonde smiled, "I used to go toFuzaiumi high myself… In fact, my g-… My juniors had her for homeroom. The stories they told were pretty entertaining." The statement was rounded out by a short laugh that devolved into a small coughing fit.

Yeah, her throat still wasn't 100% after the crash either.

"Oh… sorry, I didn't mean to make you laugh…" Satsuki shrugged, sinking into her seat.

"N-no, no," Mahiru coughed, grabbing the water glass at her bedside. She sipped a sliver from the straw before wiping her mouth. "It wasn't your fault. I hear Miss Wakuni just has that effect on people."

Satsuki snickered, though the anecdote wasn't particularly funny, "She *is* kinda funny like that. Then again, things seem to be settling down with her and her husband now…"

Mahiru coughed hard this time, spitting out the straw. "H-Husband?! I thought you said she was still talking about failed dates!"

The platinum girl scrambled out of her chair at the outburst, "I-! I didn't know it was a big deal!"

The pastry chef beat on her chest before responding, further clearing her airways. "I thought you said she was still complaining about bad dates!"

"Sh-she still does! She's complained about every date her husband has ever taken on her so far, at least that's what I've heard!" Satsuki fumbled. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to mislead you!"

Mahiru's breath began to even out and she finally set the water cup down.

"It's… it's fine…" the blonde sighed, easing into the bedding. She flashed a playful grin at the young girl. "It's still you're fault, but it’s fine."

However, Satsuki seemed to take the blame at face value, lowering her head even more, "I-… I'm sorry!"

"Satsuki, Satsuki," Mahiru sighed, leaning forward as best she could, "I'm kidding, I don't blame you, and I am *fine*…" It took a minute for the small girl to stop fidgeting in her seat, but the placation seemed to have hit the spot for her. "So, this husband of Wakuni’s… she didn't take his name?"

Satsuki actually laughed at that, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms, "With her personality? No, I think he took her name… What *was* his name, though… Aoi… Aou… uma…? Aonuma? I think that was it…"

"I… wasn't…" Mahiru stuttered, confused. "He also sounds familiar… I think he was in my friend's class… I'll have to ask Sumik-…" The blonde's voice trailed off, words going silent as Sumika's name left her lips.

The younger girl cocked her head to the side, mouth opening, "Sumi-?"

She was interrupted by a sudden gasp from the other bed. Satsuki twisted in her seat to find her mother, still unconscious. The woman's breathing had only had a momentary deepening before stabilizing; an unconscious sigh.

The student dropped the conversation, her hands immediately flying to her mother's, cupping them while she stared worryingly down at the gently moving woman.

After an extra moment of concentration, Satsuki returned her gaze to the blonde, rubbing her head, "S-sorry about that… what were we talking about?"

Mahiru smiled softly, shaking the sudden, depressing subjects from her mind, "N-No-Aonuma, I think. Wakuni's husband."

"Oh!" the platinum girl perked, "The stories about him are hilarious, and Miss Wakuni always gives him such grief but he sounds like a really good guy! Like, she was talking about how they went to the carnival…"

O/o\O

Such exchanges continued over the month that Mahiru stayed hospitalized. The young girl did not falter in her visitation, stopping by every possible day to see if her mother had recovered. After some prying (only a small amount, mind you, Mahiru *was* very delicate about the matter) she learned that Mayumi's husband had left the two shortly after the woman had learned she had cancer. Ever since, the two had been on their own, a mother-daughter tag-team against the world… that was, until the cancer suddenly got worse about two weeks before Mahiru was even in her accident.

It was cruel, really, the way the universe was making this poor girl suffer. In some ways the universe could be downright petty, like a rather awkward moment that had occurred roughly halfway through Mahiru's hospitalization.

"Satsuki, are you okay?" the blonde asked, shutting her book.

It was evening now, with Mahiru and Satsuki having settled into a comfortable silence, the chef reading a pleasant book from the hospital library and the student ardently going to town on her studies. It was only when the sounds of scraping pencil had been replaced by uncomfortable shuffling that Mahiru had decided to look up. Her concern had been born from Satsuki's irritable fidgeting, hands pressing the folds of her skirt between her legs.

At the question, Satsuki straightened, her hair standing on end, "Y-yes, M-Mahiru, I mean Miss Okawa… I'm j-just fine." The reply was waved off with a broken chuckle.

Mahiru narrowed her eyes, not buying the act for a second, "Satsuki, it's rude to lie to your seniors."

The student looked aside, blush crawling up her neck. A muted mutter weaseled out of the girl's throat, one that Mahiru couldn't hear.

"Speak up, I can't hear you…" the older girl ordered, her tone simultaneously commanding and reassuring. Trying to balance an authoritarian command with a touch of concern wasn't exactly easy, but it seemed to be doing the trick.

"…forgot my pa…" the girl mumbled, louder this time, so it was only broken instead of illegible. Brown orbs met gold for a brief second before Satsuki redirected her eyes away, recognizing that Mahiru would still push for honesty. The small student sighed, "I forgot my pads at home today… and I got caught off guard… That is all…"

Mahiru leaned back into the bed and sighed, satisfied with the answer and a little relieved it wasn't something more serious. In fact she couldn't do anything to suppress a brief chuckle that faded into the sky with her sigh. Watching her come here day in and day out, fretting over her mother’s health… Well, it was always a refreshing change of pace to see the girl actually acting her age.

The girl shrunk into herself at the vocal bark and Mahiru realized she needed to do some damage control before the girl's thought process beat her down too much. After spending several weeks together, the college student had gotten a feel for her high school counterpart's nature; polite and energetic, she was often a pendulum of emotions, most often swinging between insanely optimistic and horrifically self-defeating. Any periods where she had a middled-out disposition were few and far between, so it was important that Mahiru always try and keep the girl nudged towards the 'optimistic' edge of the spectrum, else the small ball of electricity would fizzle into self-loathing.

"Don't look so down," Mahiru cooed, chuckling, "I just find it amusing how embarrassed you seem over this. You realize you're in a hospital and you could probably just go ask an orderly to get you some, right? It’s not a big deal, I’m sure they know exactly what you’re going through."

Satsuki shrunk even further, tears prickling in her eyes, sniffing, "I… I don't think I'd be safe standing…"

Mahiru nodded, realizing that there was a little more severity to Satsuki's problem than she'd first assumed. Striking upon an idea, she reached for her purse which sat open atop her bedside table. After fishing in it for a second she found what she wanted. She tossed the item to Satsuki, who fumbled to catch it.

"I… hope you've used one before. It's not hard, but it might take some getting used to if you prefer pads," the blonde noted, grimacing a bit.

"It's… it's a cup…?" Satsuki blinked, looking at the small silicone container.

"Yep, and it's *way* healthier than pads or tampons, believe me…" Mahiru chuckled. "Though, if you don't feel comfortable giving that a try, then by all means I'll call you a nurse so you can get something more familiar."

"Ehhh… I'm fine trying it," Satsuki replied, though she was still fidgeting, "I… just… how do I *use* it?"

The blonde froze, realizing that it *would* be necessary to impart that knowledge. She quickly reached into her bag, looking for something *very* specific in her panic. To her relief, it was there.

"Here, the instructions are on the box," the chef replied, tossing a small cardboard box to the girl. "It'd probably be better with a demonstration, but I'm not exactly going to volunteer for that; something like that'll actually cost y'something," Mahiru chuckled again, winking at her junior.

At that Satsuki's face went completely scarlet, matching her two hair ties for vibrancy.

"I… I… I'll be in the bathroom…" Satsuki stuttered out, standing and doing a rushed waddle to the private toilet attached to the room.

Mahiru let her chuckle rise higher. Teasing the small girl was too much fun sometimes, despite knowing that the girl suffered from fluctuating moods.

Maybe the blonde had a bit of a sadistic streak to her, or maybe Satsuki's panicked face was just too adorable to pass up. Regardless, she knew she needed to reel it in after that, if only for the rest of the day.

O/o\O

Little moments like that pocked their time together, with embarrassment shared in seemingly equal measure between them.

Despite that, though, the two were fast friends during Mahiru's recovery time.

However, near the conclusion of her stay, there came a boiling point. The more familiar Mahiru became with Satsuki, the more knowledge of Mayumi's condition became a burden. Two days before Mahiru was scheduled for release, she broke.

"…and I'll give you a call so you can give me a hand, if that's alright?" Satsuki asked, cocking her head to the side. When Mahiru failed to respond, the smaller girl narrowed her brows, "Mahiru?"

The blonde blinked, jolting up in her seat. She grew a sheepish grin and scratched at the back of her head, which was a little unwieldy given the neck brace, "I… uh… Sorry, I wasn't really paying attention…"

Satsuki puffed her cheeks, "I was talking about the cheesecake I want to bake for Mama for when she wakes up. You said you'd help me, right?"

Mahiru's face fell sallow, "I… yeah, I… I'll do that."

The junior's face fell to match, "Mahiru… Is something wrong?"

"N-no!" Mahiru jolted again. "Nothing's wrong. I just… there's a lot on my mind recently, especially since I'm probably going to be hit with a big hospital bill soon…"

One platinum eyebrow raised, "But didn't you say you could cover that pretty easily?"

Mahiru winced, "I mean, yes, but it doesn't stop it from hurting the wallet… I also have a few personal issue going on that aren't exactly pleasant… Including my… uh… friend moving out of the apartment…"

Satsuki wracked her memory, scratching her forehead, "That crass one with the red hair who gives me cheese sticks each time she visits?"

The blonde laughed a little at the particular details Satsuki chose to remember, "No… a different friend. I don't think you've met her. She… only stopped by once or twice before she stopped visiting altogether…"

"She doesn't sound like a very good friend, then…" Satsuki mused, scratching her chin.

"I… don't think she's wrong, actually," Mahiru sighed, feeling some tears prickling the corners of her eyes. "Sometimes, you have to let go of things you love, even if it hurts… Because if you don't you wind up hurt even worse… or they will…"

The small girl puffed her cheeks, "That's defeatist talk! If you love something, you fight for it however you can!"

"Not if you're doomed to fail!" Mahiru snapped. Satsuki jumped, reeling back from the blonde in shock. Mahiru's face softened, but her toned remained convicted, "You reach a point where going forward isn't viable… and you have to drop that thread or else you're going to just get swallowed by your own emotions."

"Stop talking like that Mahiru, you're stronger than that!" the platinum girl cried. She mellowed out in her chair, wringing her hands, "You're… you're scaring me…"

Mahiru grit her teeth, "…You should be scared…"

"What…?"

The blonde clenched her jaw and screwed her eyes shut, pushing tears down her cheeks, "She's… she's not going to wake up, Satsuki… I-I overheard the doctors. They want to protect you, but they're just making it worse when the truth comes out…"

Satsuki didn't quite register the words at first, but slowly her face drained of color, quickly matching the pale, ethereal nature of her hair.

"…No…" she choked, "…No. Mama's going to wake up, and we're going to have her favorite cake together, an-and we're going to go back to the way things were."

Mahiru looked at the girl, finding a mirrored set of tears leaving her sunset eyes. "Satsuki…" the blonde cooed.

Satsuki jumped to a stand and dashed to the side of her mother's bed, pressing the nurse call button, jamming it down with a balled fist.

"Satsuki, what are you doing?" Mahiru managed to cough out.

"Showing you that she'll make it… proving you're wrong…" Satsuki wheezed.

A minute later, a male nurse came walking into the room, curiosity written on his face. That curiosity was replaced with surprise and a miniscule amount of panic when Satsuki began shouting.

"She's going to live, right? You keep saying she'll wake up, you all keep telling me that, she's going to wake up!" the girl hicced, wiping her tears with her sleeve, "Tell me she's going to wake up!"

The nurse backpedaled out of the room, and returned a minute later with another nurse and Mayumi's doctor.

The room took on a surreal presence as Satsuki kept making the same demand, over and over again, to be told that her mother would pull through. Mahiru watched the whole time, as the girl devolved into a more hysterical panicked fit, as the doctors tried to placate her… as they finally told her the truth they had been withholding from her for so long.

Satsuki spent the rest of visiting hours (and even quite some time after that) crying into her mother's shoulder, confessing to every woe her heart had borne around the woman during their time together, pleading for forgiveness and for her not to go.

But of course, the woman would never reciprocate the cries, the hugs, or the tears.

And Mahiru had no choice but to bear witness to the night the young girl's heart broke.

O/o\O

Mayumi passed away in the middle of the night, two weeks after Mahiru had been discharged from the hospital. Neither she nor Satsuki were there when it happened.

It was surreal; attending a funeral for someone she had never exchanged one word with, dressed in a simple black dress that was garishly offset by a stark white neck brace that the doctors still refused to give the okay to remove.

She felt as if a minnow among sharks as she walked among the grieving family members; swallowed up by that ocean she cherished so deeply in her heart. For her there was no grieving; to

her the woman had only ever been a shadow of a person, a body fighting for life while the soul had already left.

But if that were only the case, she would have no reason to be among the mourners. No, she was there with purpose.

In the corner of the funeral home was a small figure, huddled over with her eyes in her elbows, clothing damp from rampant tears. A lone man stood guard for her, awkwardly shuffling against the wall trying not to look at the huddled form beside him. It was less apathy, though, and more guilt; a man naturally unaffected by death, unlearned in the ways of comforting those who have lost. He was relieved when she silently directed him away, indicating that she would take his place.

Satsuki didn't budge as Mahiru took a seat next to her, eyes casually watching the other patrons of the service with short-term curiosity. A few uneasy stares were thrown her way, unsure and uncomfortable. She smiled at them in return, which quickly deterred the scrupulous gazes from digging any deeper.

The shuddering girl next to her fell into her side, still balled up and bawling, sinking into the increasingly familiar warmth that had sat beside her. Mahiru smiled softly and wrapped an arm around the lost chick, pulling her close. Her body began to vibrate in kind with the smaller girl's choked sobs, and as uncomfortable as that was, she pulled even tighter, eventually even threading fingers through the silver locks in an attempt to sooth the errant daughter.

Yet another surreal element to the pile, Mahiru mused… how, in just a little under two months, she and Satsuki had become friends worthy of support in times of grief. Admittedly, seeing someone each day during a traumatic point in their life (or even her own) probably played a role, but the two shared a bond beyond that. Born from different disasters, the two were sisters in orphanage.

But Satsuki had a clear leg up on Mahiru in their mutual suffering.

For one, Satsuki had a guide in the older girl. Mahiru had strayed along some dark roads, and still strolled them to this day. There was a spark of hope that this piddling friendship might help them both find their way off the roads to a safer, brighter meadow.

And for another, one that Mahiru had no hopes of equaling…

"You got to say goodbye…" the blonde mumbled.

Satsuki's head rubbed into her shoulder, only for the diluted brown orbs to peak up at the taller woman. Groggy, she asked, "Wha…?"

"I never got the chance," Mahiru elaborated, feeling warm streams crossing down to her chin.

Flashes: of her mother scrabbling at the glass and metal and concrete, of what remained of her father's absent eyes, of the crippling terror that pushed her to crawl from the twisted wreck, that screwed her throat shut to preternatural silence.

Then, there, outside the room, a day after she'd been discharged, hearing the small girl finally muster up the will to let go, at least with words, after days of agonizing crying. Eavesdropping, feeling pride in the girl, embracing her in a hug after entering the room; good memories of sad events.

Mahiru sniffed, wiping her nose, "I don't know where people go, Satsuki… But I'm sure your mother is happier knowing you were there to say goodbye, even if she couldn't say it back." The blonde smiled down at the student, tears still flowing, "You've been the best daughter you could be for her, and after seeing everything you've done for her, how much you loved her, I can only wonder about how much she must've loved you."

Satsuki's fists gripped Mahiru's dress and pressed her face into the young woman's side, mewling, "M-Mahiru…"

Mahiru wrapped her arm tighter around the girl, her calm demeanor waning to a shadow of what it once was, "Satsuki… I'm so… so sorry…"

For the rest of the service the two remained huddled together, inseparable among the ocean of grief.

O/o\O

Unlike what literature, movies and games have ingrained in the masses, life does not stop with death. There is no bookend to the tragedies of life.

And so the world moved forward for Mahiru Okawa, though now with a little more weight to it than she had ever anticipated.

Her friendship with Satsuki was not a fair-weather one. She kept a revolving door policy open for the small girl, always making sure the spare bedroom was well kept and that the fridge had enough cheesy confections for that extra boost that the other orphan would need from time to time.

Of course the visits, which steadily became a weekly occurrence with the stresses of a new school year, didn't sate the support the platinum girl needed. In a show of good faith, or perhaps embarrassed acknowledgement of their own callous retention of her mother's true condition, the hospital offered Satsuki grief counseling at a discount that her late mother's insurance would cover for a handful of months.

She didn't want to go alone; she never did. Even if she walked into the office without an escort, knowing there was someone waiting for her a door away was cathartic for the mousy teenager.

Perhaps, too, it was cathartic for Mahiru to be that escort, to be that solace, to be that shelter. To be needed. To have someone.

Two months into this routine Sumika had reentered the picture, no longer reclused, but still hesitant, the living embodiment of a shadow jumper. But the offer this time was to reset the past, to go back to how things had been.

Mahiru had nearly choked where she stood and it took two weeks beyond that for the two to even attempt talking again. They would be friends, nothing more, nothing less. The two years they spent together would be naught but a memory for the two, still pleasant but tarnished with hindsight and longing.

That same longing that Mahiru had known her whole life, that had plagued her since her parent's death, that had sunken with Makoto and deepened further with Sumika… There was nothing but a gaping void there now, and it *hurt*.

But at some point along the road, she realized the void didn't feel so expansive, so intimidating, and she came to realize that someone had been there since her own accident, filling in the gaps, the pothole diminishing in depth.

It had been over a lovely bout of afternoon tea with Satsuki that the moment crystallized. She watched the girl, matured so much from the moment her mother had died, take a bite of homemade cheesecake, and it occurred to her how similar they really were: dead mothers, orphaned, and for the most part alone.

Those moments, those calming words that Mahiru spoke to the girl, were really the ones that she'd needed to hear herself, and by speaking them aloud to a matching soul she had unconsciously begun picking up the pieces left in that wake.

One of these pieces, however, teetered on her fingers as some very quiet words were uttered across the table.

"My father's family is trying to take me in…" Satsuki squeaked.

The pleasant mood of confections and tea slipped away as the girl made the sudden and rather dour admission.

"What?" Mahiru asked, resting down her cup.

"They… my aunt and uncle here are moving overseas to America, and they can't afford to take me with them…" the small girl meeped, "So my father's brother up in Russia offered to take me in. He's working with my aunt on the paperwork now."

The blonde blinked, fingers picking up a small cheese pastry out of habit. She played with the flaky delicacy before responding, "I… I see." That piece, like a seashell held only by the ring and pinky, began to slip back to the eternal sands below. Mahiru's face was neutral, deciding that neutral questions would help her to hide the sadness boiling in her belly, "Do you have many friends in Russia?"

Satsuki pushed a slice of cake to the side of her plate, her reluctance to eat it tantamount to a betrayal of everything Mahiru knew about the teenager.

"No… I've… never been…" she replied.

"Oh… do you speak Russian?"

"Nope… Everyone agrees it's the most feasible solution… not the best one," Satsuki sighed resting her chin in her hands, "Especially since the insurance for the counseling is going to run out soon… It didn't last all that long, now did it?"

The last statement was made with a shaky breath.

Mahiru set down her pastry without taking a bite, golden eyes seeking out the dual sunsets of Satsuki's.

"Satsuki… do you *want* to leave…?"

She knew where this line of questioning would go, what she was tempted to offer.

"Everyone would be happy about it. My aunt and uncle can move to-."

"That's not what I asked," Mahiru stated, her voice elevated, firm, but not overbearing. Satsuki fidgeted in her seat. "Satsuki, do you *want* to leave Japan? Do you *want* to leaveFuzaiumi?"

The platinum girl let out an exhausted sigh before shaking her head, "I don't want to go. I… I was just starting to make friends again at school… and… and… I don't think I'd ever get a chance to talk with you again…"

For a moment the piece was about to fall, its teeter edging near the tipping point… Only for Mahiru's fingers to curl and pull it close, rolling it back down into her hand.

She sucked in a breath, "Satsuki… what if you were to come live with me?"

The look in Satsuki's eye was heart-wrenchingly conflicted. But slowly, so slowly, Satsuki's brow became more firm and certain; not confident, but focused.

"I… I would like to give that a try…" the girl nodded.

Mahiru's fist closed down around the shell and the piece returned where it rightfully fit.

"Then let's have a talk with your family about this tomorrow, shall we? For now, I think your cake is getting warm," Mahiru chuckled, dispelling the tension.

Satsuki yelped and quickly scooped the remainder of the sweet into her mouth.

"Not so fast, you'll choke!" Mahiru laughed, reaching over to slap the smaller girl's hands.

It was in that gentle summer afternoon that Mahiru realized that she was healing. The same afternoon that Satsuki told her that her father's family would be taking her to Russia. The very same afternoon that both of them knew that Satsuki's home wasn't with her

family in Russia, or with her scattered relatives in Japan; it was at Mahiru's side.

The next day the two would make sure it stayed that way.

O/o\O

"Mahiru! Look! The waves are so big today!"

The blonde smiled, lips only graced by a sliver of the shadow provided by her wide straw hat, "They certainly are. Where do you think we should set up?"

"You can figure that out!" Satsuki laughed, blowing a raspberry at the older girl, "I'm gonna dive right in!"

Mahiru perked, "Not without your sunblock, young lady! Get back here…! Gah…! Satsuki! Satsuki, get back here this second, you little troublemaker!"

"Only if you can catch me!"

"I'm carrying the umbrella *and* the basket; I only have so many limbs!"

"Then just grow more!"

"That doesn't make any sense!"

And even though she would become tired and sweaty and burned over the next few hours, every second to her was precious.

This day, like all the others, would become a memory. But, for now, Mahiru was content to enjoy it as it came; hot sand, gentle breezes, and the companionship of someone very dear.

Untended Embers Part 1

March, 2015 – April, 2015

"*So you're sure you'll be back by dinner?*"

Makoto sighed, itching the underside of her nose. "Yes, Hina. I've only told you a dozen times that it's just an hour-long train ride. Maybe if you stop asking me obvious questions I'll be nice enough to pick you up one of those fruit cakes you like so much…"

"*I thought you said we only had enough for the bare necessities tonight! Besides, you'd probably just end up eating most of it like you usually do…*" the voice replied indignantly.

The redhead scowled, "I do not! And I'm feeling generous tonight so I'm going to try and scrounge up some extra change before I go home. You gotta problem with that, twerp?"

"*N-no! I just… well…*" the girl on the other end stuttered, her voice falling away.

Makoto gripped the bridge of her nose, "We're not in the worst spot, Hina. We'll… be fine."

"…*You hesitated…*"

The hothead smiled, wry against the receiver, "You really gotta be less observant. I'll be home tonight. Tell your Auntie that I've got the groceries covered for today. Heck, I'm even tempted to cook for you two."

There was a small *humpf* from the other end of the line before, "*It better be something good!*"

"It'll probably just be curry," Makoto sighed sardonically.

"*But curry* is *good!*"

"Well, yeah, but it isn't exactly rocket science to make it…"

"*You're making it, so it has to be good!*"

"…Aren't you thinking a little backwards here? Demand I make something good, then say anything I make is good?"

"*I… Just… Get home soon, alright?*"

"Alright, alright you little weasel…" Makoto grinned.

"*I love you, big sis!*"

The redhead paused, smile slacking. With her eyes somewhat distant, she responded, "I love you two, twerp. See you tonight." With that she hung up the desk phone, sliding it back over to the receptionist, giving a polite "thanks" before walking off down the hall.

Big sis, huh?

Hina certainly had a penchant for making Makoto feel conflicted. On one hand, hearing the younger girl refer to her so affectionately was heartwarming. On the other, taking pride in the title felt more than a little like betrayal.

Shelving the thought, she focused on what she was here to do: tackle an equally uncomfortable part of her past.

Her target was on the sixth floor, somewhere near the middle of the hall, which was kinda hard to distinguish given the abstract architecture that made the passage appear to go on forever.

"This better be worth the fuss…" Makoto muttered under her breath, shifting her head side-to-side to readjust the position of her busy ponytail. She felt out of place among the stark white walls and finely polished windows, what with her ratty blue hoodie and denim cut-offs. Then again, decorum was never really her thing. It always felt like just another layer of superficial grime to pick at before reality could be reached.

The redhead's eyes lingered on the walls, skimming from door number to door number, "Six-oh-eight, six-oh-nine, six-ten, six-oomph!"

She reeled back, hearing a mirrored 'oomph' come from whoever she'd run into.

"Ahk, watch it, will ya!"

Makoto rubbed her shoulder, turning to meet some of the shiniest blue eyes she'd ever seen in her life. Sad, then, that those eyes were drawn with a very pronounced ire, one that was pointed right at the athletic girl. Makoto had already considered apologizing; it had been an honest mistake and from what she could tell the other girl was as equally unharmed as she was. But the way the taller girl was glaring at the redhead set off a number of alarms in Makoto's

head, let alone the mop of blue hair the girl had. She’d met dozens of people with dyed hair and every single one could be described with an equally colorful version of ‘asshole’. So, instead of voicing some form of apology or kindness, she opted for a more… aggressive response.

"'Watch it?' I wouldn't have to 'watch it' if you weren't standing in the middle of the hallway!" the redhead flared, eyebrows narrowing.

"Why not?" The girl motioned to the floor with both hands, "Not like the floor's goin' anywhere. Look'it all the space you had to walk around me!"

"Hallways are for walking, dumbass, not for standing. If you're gonna stare off into space, do it where you won't get run over," Makoto shot back, not letting up an inch.

The girl bristled, the air shifting between them. What had been a momentary spat had begun to evolve into something more intensive.

"Maybe *you* should be more aware of your surroundings, asshole! It's not too hard to weave around a stationary object. If you hit a traffic cone, would you blame the cone?" the azulite snapped, ending her argument on a baffling note.

Makoto wasn't taking any of that. "You ain't no traffic cone, and those cones do their damn jobs. What the fuck you think you're doing standing out here doin' nothing?"

The girl placed fingers over her cheeks, feigning confusion, "Gosh, I don't know, maybe there's a reason I'm *at the hospital* and it's on my mind." The azulite dropped the act and gave her opposition a rather dry and unimpressed stare.

"Well, while you're so busy having a moment, people trying to get shit done," Makoto snarled. She glanced up, realizing she'd ended up beyond the room she was looking for, 612. She started towards it. "Now, if you excuse me," she bit, putting her hand on the door, "I've got someone I need to see."

To her surprise, a rough hand gripped her arm, preventing her from opening the sliding barrier.

"…Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

It was the azulite again, but something was different. Her voice didn't carry the same confrontational edge it had moments ago. This voice sounded cold, passionless. And it sent a chill up Makoto's spine.

She batted away the hand, turning to face the girl, "Goin' to talk to someone. Look, I don't want this beef, so let it drop, will ya?"

Those eyes were caught again, but this time they were empty, just as fireless as her voice. It honestly made Makoto more than a little woozy.

"Who did you come to see?" the azulite growled.

Makoto took a reflexive step back, her stance widening at the increased threat lingering in the air, "None of yer damn business!"

"Bullshit it's not; I got a friend in there that doesn't need some bitch like you around. Who the hell did you come to see?"

There was a moment of pause as the azulite's words rolled over her, the combination of terms sliding gently under her skin *just* enough to irritate her… The stray thought passed through her head, the thought that maybe Mahiru wouldn't want her around, a thought that she'd believed buried years ago.

Years of regret and longing. Like hell was some stuck-up school girl going to get in her way.

"Back off, Blue Balls, I'm warning you. This is the first chance I've gotten in years to see Mahiru, and you're not going to stop me from seeing her!" Makoto hissed, reaching once more for the handle.

"What would Mahiru want with someone as obnoxious as you?" the other girl balked, her eyes regaining some of the earlier intensity. That, oddly enough, put Makoto more at ease. Fire she was familiar with; fire she could deal with.

"To get my sympathies; I heard she got pretty messed up in a car crash so I thought she might want company!"

"I've known her for two years and I've never seen you; if you're such a dedicated friend, where *were* you when the crash happened?" the azulite spat.

That particular comment caught Makoto off guard. Yes, it enraged her; it enraged her *quite* a lot. However, if there was one

thing she knew about dealing with shit on the streets it was that this chick was projecting, big time.

"I never said I was 'such a good friend'. I'm probably a pretty shitty one at this point," Makoto shot back, poking the other girl in the chest. "I'm here now, that's all that should matter. If it's really so important, where the fuck were *you* when shit hit the fan, huh?"

The azulite staggered backwards, momentarily at a loss for words. For the first time since they'd met, she saw fear and confusion in the other woman's gaze, fear and confusion that swirled together into outright rage.

"I… I…" the girl choked. She began to tremble, "I've been at her side this whole time… Even Sumika… You're right, you're a shit friend!"

"Well it don't sound like you're exactly a ray of sunshine either, Papa Smurf," Makoto huffed, pushing the girl aside to get to the door.

She was certainly prepared this time for the azulite to get in her way, only to be further surprised when she was grabbed by the shoulders and slammed against the wall.

"Who said I was done with you?" the taller girl snarled.

Makoto locked her jaw and coiled a spring kick to the girl's gut, only for a third, familiar voice to ring out.

"Soraka, stop!"

The hands around Makoto's shoulder weakened and she wasted no time in flinging the other girl, this 'Soraka', off.

The redhead looked over to find a short rosette with her hair tied up in a ponytail by a single yellow ribbon.

Soraka, for her part, huffed and breathed, obviously still running off the adrenaline of rage, before shaking her head and stomping down the hall.

"I'm going to get some air. Find me when you're done, Sumika," Soraka seethed, vanishing down the passage.

Makoto watched the girl go, a weight settling into her stomach. She really must have scratched at something she shouldn't have. On one hand, she wasn't especially proud having done that. On the other, she had a gift for picking scabs, both real and

figurative, and that talent wasn't something she was keen letting go to waste either.

"I'm sorry about that…" stuttered the shorter girl, her head ducking to hide pinked cheeks.

Makoto kept her grimace on, looking down at this shivering girl with some veiled disdain, but after a moment that fire dissipated, having been sucked down the hall with the azulite.

"It's fine. Girl's got a few crabs up her ass, though," Makoto huffed, leaning against the wall. "You the girl that called me?"

"Soraka… she's going through a lot right now. Mahiru and I were trying to help her when all of this happened… She's feeling responsible for the crash," Sumika sighed. "And yes, I was the one who called you. It's… uh… nice to finally meet you, Makoto."

The rosette's face was trapped in a plaster of false optimism, a mask that was strained by underlying stress. The redhead sighed to let off more of the earlier tension, hoping to drain some away from the other girl as well. It seemed to work.

"Yeah, well, she didn't need to take it out on me, did she?" she asked, waving her off-hand passively.

Sumika hopped in place, her cheeks puffing just a bit and her hands gripping at her collar protectively, "What? No, never! S-Soraka wouldn't… She…" The small girl trailed off, head listing to the side, "I did… I'm the one who made this all happen. I'm sure of it…"

Fury scalded through Makoto's blood, but she reeled it in just enough to see the absolute agony wracking the rosette's face. It by no means cooled the fire in her veins, but it certainly did quite a lot to temper her words. Makoto had been through counseling, she was at least somewhat aware of her anger issues, and while she felt no remorse going off on someone with their head in their ass she knew that snapping at the sullen girl wouldn't get either of them anywhere.

"L-look…" the redhead stuttered, scratching just below her ponytail's base. "From the way you said it on the phone it doesn't really sound like you or frostbite over there are actually responsible… I was just blowing off steam, I don't really think… yeah…"

The words were difficult to force out, mouth drying as she spoke.

"But… you don't understand," Sumika deflated, sinking more into herself.

Makoto shook her head, "No, I really don't. Why did you call me? Why ask me to come here? If you know who I am, you've gotta know she really wouldn't want to see me. She'd probably rather see her regular friends over me…"

"N-no!" Sumika spluttered, stepping forward. Makoto actually took a step back to avoid the projectile spittle that flung her way. The rosette blushed and muttered a weak apology before continuing, "Right now she needs someone who isn't… us… You were the only person I could think of so I dug up your number from her old phone…"

The redhead raised a brow, "Did you ask her if that was okay?"

The smaller girl squirmed where she stood, fingers playing at the hem of her pink dress, "She doesn't know you're coming…"

Looking to the door, the athlete couldn't help but shake her head again. "After that little spat? Like hell she doesn't realize who's standing out here," Makoto grinned, if only a little.

Sumika gave a light chuckle, scratching her reddened cheek, "Well, I mean, you *weren't* exactly subtle…"

"Well hey, your friend got on my nerves. Tell her to stop standing in the middle of hallways the next time you see her," Makoto laughed, turning to face the door. With her hand in the handle, she looked at the girl, "Wanna come in with me? Might be less of a shock for Mahiru…"

"Uh… no, I-I can't… Soraka and I were just leaving," Sumika squeaked, her joy draining away.

Makoto shrugged, "Well, then I guess it was nice meeting you then, pinkie. See ya around I'spose… And… thanks for calling me about this… It must have been a pain to track me down from that old number…"

Sumika gave a weary smile, "I just want to make sure Mahiru's happy again with me gone… It was nice meeting you too,

Miss Ume. I hope you have a nice visit…"

With that the rosette gave a short, polite bow before shuffling off after her friend, a noticeable, depressed lag in her step.

Makoto turned to face the door, listening to the light footsteps fade down the hall. She sucked in a deep breath, scraping at the well of her experience before turning to the retreating form.

"Hey, piglet!"

Sumika turned and pointed to herself, "…'Piglet'?"

The redhead's face was calm, even, and serious, "Don't blame yourself, okay? I'm sure it was an accident. Mahiru's a good judge of character, so you and your friend Soraka back there need to stop beating yourselves up over it… Else… you're not going to come back from that place sane." Her voice trailed off, painful memories boiling back to the surface, memories she succinctly squelched.

The rosette nodded, mouth still open. Makoto could tell that the message hadn't quite arrived at the station in the girl's head yet, and didn't know if it would at all. Yeah, she was a prick, but damned if she wasn't going to at least make a token effort to help. Sumika swiveled before continuing down the hall, waving briefly with a morose smile. Makoto snarled before breathing, composing herself, and opening the door.

O/o\O

"I… never thought I'd see you again."

Makoto winced as that voice trickled past her ear, one that she herself wasn't exactly prepared to listen to. She was facing the door, having closed it and buried her eyes in the frame so as to avoid seeing the source of her guilt.

"To be fair, I didn't think I'd be seeing you again, either…" the redhead hacked, finally turning around.

The room was as stark as the hall, the only accentuating color being the blue curtains encircling the beds for the sake of privacy. Mahiru's golden locks, downed and smoothed, stood in stark contrast to the blanched materials. Honey irises dug at her heartstrings, prompting Makoto to bypass the only other occupant of

the room, an unconscious woman in the first bed. Her eyes lingered on the motionless form, only for the golden girl to interject.

"She probably won't bother us… actually it'd be great news if she woke up," Mahiru explained, her voice filled with a levity that never really managed to push past her face. Maybe it was harder for her, considering the rather bulky neck brace around her collar.

"I…" Makoto started, standing awkwardly by the blonde's bedside, "I… The minute that I heard you were here…" Mahiru gave her a warm grin, strained as it was, and motioned for the redhead to sit down, which she gladly obliged. "I-I would have tried bringing one of those little pies you liked from that one bakery, but they were always so expensive there…"

Mahiru chuckled, though the sound was hoarse. "Its fine. I work there now, believe it or not. I can make those little pies any time I feel like it."

"Lucky you, I'd kill to know how to make those things," Makoto sighed, leaning back against the chair. The mood was starting to shift. This felt natural, smooth. There had been lingering fear that maybe the divide between the two was too wide to cross, but already it felt like things had returned to normal. "Well, that and all the ingredients to make them. It's hard enough affording curry these days, y'know?"

The blonde stifled another laugh, hacking up a few coughs in the process, "It's a double-edged sword, you know? When I first started working there all I did at home was make sweets. Sumika and I almost blew up like balloons…"

The name hung in the air and suddenly the mood began to drag.

"Sumika?" Makoto breathed, not just feeling the name but *tasting* it. "Is… Is she the one you're… That pink girl…?"

Mahiru frowned, folding her hands, "We… well… Right now things are a little confusing between us both… and Soraka, and that just makes the situation all the more unsettling."

The news sent needles into Makoto's heart, but hearing the distress wafting off Mahiru's voice pushed her to approach from a more lighthearted angle, "Yeah, well, she seems pretty sweet. I could

see why you like her… And if you two really were bloating up like that I think calling her piglet might have been the right move…"

"'Piglet'… what?"

Makoto snickered, ignoring the dull thump in her chest that was becoming increasingly painful, "Yeah, well, can't you see it? The big ol' eyes and that small little nose and the way she walks around? I could totally see her with two little floppy ears and a curly-q tail."

Mahiru balked at the redhead, slowly shaking her head as best she could, laughing, "You haven't changed a bit, Makoto…"

Her chest constricted again, desperately trying to drag attention to itself again and again. Makoto pursed her lips as she looked to the ground, the feeling welling in her stomach making her almost queasy.

She looked to the door, then to the unconscious woman, then to the amused but still rather demure Mahiru. Makoto squeezed her eyes shut and sucked in a breath, letting the icy air spill into her lungs.

"I… I really missed you, Mahiru…" the girl finally squeaked. Her voice cracked and before she'd finished the sentence she felt warm trails speeding down her cheeks.

All was quiet as she finally gathered the nerve to look her ex-girlfriend in the eye.

What she found were sun-dipped orbs shaking with moisture.

"I missed you too, Makoto," Mahiru croaked back. This time her smile was a little more genuine, a little more firm.

And that was the very smile she'd waited three years to see one more time.

O/o\O

"…So the three of you were…?" Makoto trailed, her voice laced with unease.

"Y-yeah… None of us were really sure about it, and now I don't think it's going to ever really… *happen*, but that was the plan," Mahiru winced.

Makoto leaned back, munching on a stick of pocky before waving it in Mahiru's face, "Y'all motherfuckers need Jesus. That's some nasty heathen shit you had goin' on. Probably why you got all banged up like that…"

Whether the statement was made in jest or not, the flat delivery was definitely intentionally comical, which caused the blonde to burst out laughing. At least, that was, until it devolved into pained coughs. Makoto quickly rushed some water to the older girl's side.

Mahiru sipped at the liquid, replying, "Are you really sure you want to be taking moral high-ground here considering what *we* did in that broom closet back at the chapel?"

The redhead matched her hair and shook the rather *distracting* memories away, "We agreed that *didn't* happen, okay?"

"Sorry," the blonde grinned teasingly, "but it's kinda hard to forget the 'Sister Koko and her Heavenly Fingers' routine."

The athlete looked aside, letting the memory wash past her instead of allowing it to simmer and heat her face further. "In all seriousness, though," Makoto leveled, resting her chin on her knuckles, "it might have been a bit weird but I'm glad you found someone… or someones…? who make you happy."

Mahiru frowned, "I suppose I *should* be grateful, but Sumika's refused to come in and see me for the last couple of days… since she told me her decision. And things are actually pretty awkward with Soraka around, since our relationship was left in a kind of grey area…"

"Hey, don't be too disappointed with piglet, okay?" Makoto remarked, rubbing her nose with an index finger. "She called me up, didn't she? She's tryin' for ya; I've only met her once so far and even I can tell ya that."

"I suppose…" Mahiru muttered, listing her head to the side.

"Can't say the same about that Soraka chick, though. Really seems like someone shoved a stick up her ass…" the redhead huffed, crossing her arms.

"She's been through a lot, Makoto," Mahiru frowned, "Seeing me hurt might be really hurting her too…"

"Yeah, well, she's also blamin' herself for what happened; at least I *think* that's what's goin' on. Both of them are, but I've lived through this *and* quite a lot of shit; her being up on her high horse and all justified was just bullshit."

"Everyone's entitled to their own sorrows, Makoto…" Mahiru sighed. "Speaking of which… How is your family doing?"

The redhead sighed, feeling those needles return to her chest. This was a conversation she'd known would be coming the minute she stepped through that door.

"Mom's… not doing too well. She's in a psychiatric ward after what happened. Dad's locked up in jail, though he got a reduced sentence due to a temporary insanity plea." Makoto dug fingers into her calves; the last one was the hardest to croak out, "Aiko and I were put into protective services, but we ended up getting split. I still talk to her on the phone, but I haven't seen her in years…"

Mahiru reacted by closing her eyes and downing her chin (as much as she could with that plastic nightmare on her shoulders), letting out a sound of bitter acknowledgement.

"What about yourself?" the older girl asked.

Makoto scratched at her neck, "I got picked up by a couple after about two months; a month after Aiko got adopted. Turns out they were crocks of shit who just adopted me for some tax breaks; barely took care of their own daughter… So, me an' her have been livin' out at her aunt's till my mom gets out of the hospital… Whenever *that* happens… Money's a little tight between the three of us, and her aunt isn't exactly the picture of health right now, but we're livin'…"

"That… doesn't exactly sound comfortable…" Mahiru frowned, "Is there something I can do to help you guys out?"

"Well… I mean… If you're offering…" Makoto sighed, rolling her head, "Maybe you could work up some dinners and come over once a week when you get out of here… Y'know, like old times…?"

The end of the sentence trailed off, almost enough to ward off the implication at the end. But that ward wasn't quite enough.

"I… I'd be happy to cook for you guys, Makoto… but are you…?" Mahiru asked, brows knitting.

Makoto was quiet for a moment, eyes shadowed by her bangs. Then she responded.

"N-no," came the simplified yet painful response. "I… I don't think either of us are really in a position right now to be thinkin' about something like that… And… Honestly…" Makoto curled in on herself just a bit, "Even though I know it's not true, that it's just a lie, that I'm just angry at myself… I still kinda… I mean a part of me still kinda blames you for what happened. A small part… but even now it's been pissin' me off." She picked at some earwax with her pinky. "N-Not you, I mean. The feeling. It's frustrating to know that it's in there and I can't do anything to get rid of it. I don't know if it'll ever go away…"

"I... see…" Mahiru exhaled. And then she smiled; hurt, but genuine, "You've really matured in the last three years, you know that, Miss Ume…?"

Makoto rolled her eyes and leaned back in the chair, "Hey now, don't go using formalities like that again. Keep it to 'Makoto', kay?" The redhead rolled forward again, looking at Mahiru with a sympathetic smile, "I hurt you saying all of that, didn't I?"

Mahiru shook her head, "I'm not going to lie, it does hurt, but I don't blame you. It's not easy to change how you feel. And I agree, I don't think it'd work out between us… too much baggage." She leaned back into her pillow, sighing.

"If that's the case, then why were you even considering a relationship with baby blue back there?" Makoto hacked, throwing her thumb towards the door.

Now it was Mahiru's turn to roll her eyes, "Soraka's a good girl, and yes, she *does* have some baggage, but it's… different than yours. She's really been through some tough times recently… I bet she still is." Mahiru was quiet a moment, "Makoto, the next time you see Soraka, try to be nice, okay? No more shouting matches in hospital hallways?"

"Heh… Y'know, the more I think about it, I'm wondering why a nurse didn't try to kick us out…" Makoto mused, itching her brow.

"Am I clear though? Try to make up with her. She's a sweet girl, just… more than a little on edge," the blonde pushed, laying

down her stance in no uncertain terms. "I'm sure if you guys hung out you could wind up being friends. I think you two would really get along on a good day…"

The redhead scoffed, "Ch'yeah, a 'good day'…" There was silence, Makoto slowly recognizing the rather adamant glare digging into her temples. She blushed and ducked her head, "Okay, okay, I'll… I'll try." She popped her head up and waved a fresh stick of pocky in Mahiru's face, "But if she really is a pompous bitch, then I make no promises tryin' is gonna end pretty, got it?"

Mahiru sighed and closed her eyes, "I suppose that's the best I can ask for." The chef looked to the clock, frowning, "Visiting hours are almost up. Are you going to be safe walking home alone?"

"'Course I will. Don't gotta mean left hook for looks," the athlete grinned, her misshapen fang popping over her lower lip. She paused mid action pose, Hina's face flashing into her vision. Makoto twisted her jaw, figuring there was no harm in asking. "Hey Mahiru, do you have your wallet here by chance?"

"I… do? Why?" the blonde asked back.

"…Could I borrow some yen?”

Untended Embers Part 2

March, 2015 – April, 2015

"And what exactly are *you* doing here?"

Makoto looked up from her CD player, the perfect position for her worn pair of headphones disrupting partway through, causing the song's left channel to go dead. She cursed against her lip at the ratty technology and stuffed the relic further into the pockets of her hoodie. A red hoodie, this time, she was proud to say. It was rare for Makoto to actually bother swapping out clothes when they didn't need washing, but she figured the azulite glaring at her from just down the path already had enough reasons to spite her; she didn't need to add 'poor hygiene' to that list… regardless of the fact that it'd be an accurate assumption.

The redhead stepped forward onto the cobblestone path, kicking off the tree and twisting to face the azulite in one swell foop.

"Thought I'd teach you proper loitering protocol. Y'get arrested if you don't know how to do it right, y'know…" Makoto grinned, letting her disfigured fang pop free. "You'll note I was out of the main path and firmly supported by the nearest tree."

Soraka tightened her glare, her brows becoming more and more wrinkled, "…Wanna bitch me out for something stupid? Is that all you came for? Because the only currency this complaint department is dealing in at the moment is fists…"

The redhead's smile shrunk, crimson eyes scanning over the shaking azulite. Makoto had made a massive miscalculation. And the fact that such a cringy line deserved a solid retort was borderline torture not to respond to. But alas, for the sake of diplomacy, she’d have to swallow her normal barbs and eyerolls.

"H-hey! Wait, ch-chill, okay?" Makoto started, scratching the back of her head. "I was just making a joke, okay? Break the ice and all that…"

The glare did not falter. In fact, it may have gotten sharper.

"Then why *are* you here? Because, if you don't have something important to say, I have a paper to get a jump on," Soraka snarled, fingers digging into the frilled sleeve of her blouse.

Makoto twisted her mouth to the side and scratched at her chin, small tints of pink rising to her cheeks, "I was actually coming here to apologize about the other day… I… uh… I'm sorry for getting so snappy with you. I mean, with Mahiru and everything, I wasn't exactly in the right state of mind either. Can't imagine what it must be like for someone who's been around her these days…"

The glare gave just a bit, though one of Soraka's hands was still clenched firmly around the threads of her denim vest. She opened her mouth, "Then what the fuck was that whole 'loitering' spiel you just blew at me?"

"Tch…" Makoto swished, embarrassment fading to the wind, "It's called 'teasing', *Eiffel 65*. I wasn't being serious or anything, just having a good time laughing at you…"

Soraka's eye twitched, "And I'm supposed to be happy about you laughing *at* me?"

The redhead finally rolled her eyes, "Look, do you want your stupid apology or not?"

The azulite crossed her arms, eyes lancing out over the expansive college campus, "I just find it hard to believe you'd be apologizing so suddenly. I might not know you, but you don't feel like someone who'd do this kind of thing willingly."

"Would you believe me that Mahiru strong-armed me into doing this?" Makoto sighed, "And that I agreed so I could buy a surprise for someone on the way home?"

Soraka's stance slackened, her eyes bouncing back and forth; captivating, like crystals being tossed through the air. "I… guess that sounds about right…"

A ghost of a smile reemerged on Makoto's face, seeing the other girl relax a bit, "Yeah… She was kinda bein' thickheaded about the two of us getting along since we had that little shouting match… And I mean, I wasn't doin' anything today… not like I'm going to pass up the request of someone in the hospital…"

"If that's… what she really wants…" the azulite muttered, biting her lip. Her shoulders finally fell and she looked into Makoto's eyes. "I'm… sorry too. I probably shouldn't have been standing in the middle of that hallway."

"Damn straight," Makoto barked, vindicated. Before Soraka could even usher in a counter glare, the redhead continued, "And… I should have been watching where I was walking. We're both in the wrong, we both apologized. There, no skin off either of our backs…"

The statement was matter of fact and firm, ending with Makoto placing her fists on her hips and her chin in the air, eyes closed and dignified.

At least, it would have been dignified if Soraka hadn't broken down laughing.

"Oh-h my God… you… are so corny… What's with that pose?" the azulite spluttered, an arm under her gut.

Makoto craned her head to the side, smirking as her fiery plume of hair trailed over her shoulders, "What? Just because I'm a pain in the ass doesn't mean I can't be *elegant* from time to time. I thought since I was stooping myself to your level I might as well act the part."

"'Stooping' to my level?" Soraka asked, raising an intrigued brow, "I wasn't aware having some dignity actually indicated lower status."

The redhead shrugged, "Yeah, well, you wouldn't. People only act 'prim an' proper' when they get rich; it's all for show and none of it means shit. As far as I'm concerned, hoity-toity people like that have their heads up their asses. From what Mahiru told me though, yours might just be loose enough to pry out."

Soraka shuddered at the imagery, but a bemused smile seemed to counter the inadvertent tremble, "You're a real word smith, y'know that?"

"What can I say?" the girl shrugged again, "It's a gift! Pocky?" The statement was punctuated by a small red box extended from an unpocketed hand.

The azulite hesitantly reached for the outstretched confection, svelte fingers drawing a single stick from the package. She admired

the chocolate stave for just a moment before looking the other girl in the eye.

Those stunning blue eyes; Makoto swallowed as her stomach did a flipflop, seeing a brief smile behind those hypnotic orbs.

"Thank you… and really, I'm sorry about chewing at your throat… and slamming you against the wall," Soraka sighed. "I've been… the last few weeks… hell, life in general's kinda sucked recently."

Makoto nodded, looking away from those eyes as quickly as possible. The statement touched a chord and the blush racing to her face died before it even became a tint. The redhead shrugged and gave the azulite an understanding smile, "Preachin' to the choir there. Maybe we should form a club."

The proposition was met with another snicker from the student, knuckles pressed to rosy lips, "Maybe that's not such a bad idea."

The redhead's grin morphed into a smirk as she held out her hand, "Makoto Ume."

The palm that gripped her own was cool but pleasant, like rainwater on a stormy spring evening, "Soraka. Soraka Hayami."

With a firm shake between them the two parted hands, both basking in the momentary awkwardness that was edging at their lack of conversation.

"Soo… College girl… You busy right now?" Makoto asked, eyes switching side to side.

"Well… I have a report due in a few days, but nothing immediate, no…" Soraka replied, not entirely sure where the other girl was going to take this.

"Well," Makoto clapped, misshapen fang popping above her lower lip, "Let's start the first 'Life Sucks' club meeting by hitting the arcade!"

O/o\O

"You know, this doesn't feel like much of a club if I'm the one paying for most of these," Soraka glared, thumb sliding off the coin

slot. A thin film peeled away with the digit, making her reflexively itch the pad against her jeans. Normally she'd have reacted in disgust, but having been at the arcade for about an hour already it was a sensation she was becoming well acquainted with.

Makoto shrugged from where she leaned, a stick of pocky dangling from her teeth, "Club protocol; rookie pays."

The student rolled her eyes, fingers tapping at a myriad of buttons on the arcade's control board as the game started up, "Didn't we literally just create it? *Together*?"

"Yeah, but I'm still your senior, so I deserve that much respect," Makoto smirked.

Soraka smirked back, challengingly, "If you think you're my senior, I'll start calling you an old woman; won't even wait for those red hairs to turn grey."

Makoto popped a half-lidded eye, a half-hearted glare tearing through the space between them, "Call me old and I'll call you baby-face."

"Why not?" the azulite replied, shrugging, "You're already calling me all those other names, what's one more to the list? You, on the other hand, don't sound like you've got yourself a nickname yet, so I suppose I'll be gracious and grant you one."

"I've got plenty of nicknames… they're just ones you don't know about," Makoto huffed, "Not like we're going to learn *everything* about each other in a day."

Something about the sentence gave Soraka pause, and her hesitation ended up costing her the game. As the flashing 'Game Over' title illuminated her face, she looked Makoto over and knitted her brows, "In just a day… A week ago we were at each other's throats… how… how the hell did I wind up in an arcade paying for you…?"

The question wasn't spiteful or venomous, nor was it layered with sarcasm as her earlier lamentation had been.

"I…" Makoto started, leaning forward and standing under her own power, "I was actually starting to wonder something like that too…" The two stood in an uncomfortable silence as Makoto circled past the azulite, leaning on a railing overlooking the first floor of the

arcade. "Maybe Mahiru's got a better eye than I thought… If we hadn't started on bad terms maybe we'd have hit it off like this right away…"

"Mahiru…" Soraka started, pulling away from the machine to lean next to the redhead, "She's something special, I can tell you that much…"

"She really is," Makoto smiled. The smile flexed briefly, "So… what *is* she to you? You were pretty defensive the other day. I mean I can't blame you, but that's not necessarily ordinary for 'just' friends…"

The azulite sighed, "How much did she tell you?"

The athlete grinned, answering as bluntly as she could manage, "That you, her and pinkie were about twenty minutes away from doin' the horizontal tango for the first time together." She grinned even harder when the normally azure girl could practically double as a tomato.

"Y-yeah… well… I mean… It's more complicated than just *that*…" the student spluttered. She took a calming breath to compose herself and moved to respond, "There's this… guy. T-Tokubē. He's really sweet, a-and, uh, he's this prodigy stage actor. I've known him since I was young and I always thought that one day I'd be able to say those three little words to him and he'd… well… we'd get married and have a dozen children together until we were old, grey and senile." The memory for her, even if it was only imagined, was pleasant and she couldn't repress a chuckle. "Then… my best friend… besides Sumika that is… she egged me to confess and I tried, only I never realized that when Tokubē had gone into the hospital, ever since he'd been there, I'd been hurting him. He… and I… It didn't work out and my friend got him instead… If it weren't for Mahiru and Sumika, I'd probably have tried wandering home from the bar and drowned in a ditch somewhere… They saved me from myself and that's where a lot of it came together for me that the two of them were something far more special to me than just friends…"

"That's what you got all worked up over? You're a real drama queen by the sounds of it…" Makoto noted, popping open a can of orange soda and downing a swig. The azulite glared at her, but

Makoto raised a hushing hand to indicate that she wasn't finished, "I can see why it's confusing though. Got a lot of people at play there, so things are going to get more convoluted. That's why I don't have many friends; keeps things streamlined." The statement was finished when she pulled another stick of pocky from the box in her jacket and bit down hard on it.

"Are you sure that's not just because you're an asshole?" Soraka retorted.

Makoto huffed, her eyes amused, "I do it on purpose; easier to be an asshole than to be nice." She shoved shoulders with the azulite, "I'm puttin' in some real effort here bein' here with you and *not* strangling you."

Soraka laughed, but decided not to follow the tangent. Instead she reoriented her body and began to pick at her nails, sure to try and scrape out grime accumulated from the dirty arcade cabinets, "…I mean, hell, I still don't know if I'm a lesbian or if I'm just bi… I mean, I'm in love with Tokubē, but he's the *only* guy I've ever wanted to be with… and the more I think about it, Mahiru and Sumika are the only girls I've ever wanted to be with, too… I have no idea what's going on in my head…"

"Less your head, more your crotch there," Makoto replied dryly, pointing a stick of Pocky to the younger girl's groin. "The blood that should be pumpin' to your noggin for those decisions is goin' somewhere else. Should probably learn to get that under control."

While she chuckled, Soraka also shoved the redhead, wincing in some minor disgust, "God, does *everything* have to be sexual with you?"

The shorter girl shook her head, unmoved from the physical contact, "Nah, but I find that kind of stuff funny. I mean, so many people worry about *finding* the people they love… I learned the hard way that it's holding onto them that's the hard part…"

The azulite's smiled drooped at the words, the little anecdote hitting her with a weight that Makoto had never spoken with before. "The hard way?" she asked, tilting her head to look at the older girl in more detail; a struggle, considering the dark lighting of the arcade.

Makoto's gaze hollowed, her face flicking back towards the jumpy arcade floor, "What has Mahiru told you about me? About what happened?"

"She never really went into detail… Only ever mentioned that you two broke up… Which, I mean, gotta say, when Sumika told me who you were, I was surprised someone like you was Mahiru's girlfriend. You two seem like on completely different levels…" Soraka explained, tapping her chin.

"Yeah, well…" Makoto started, rolling her shoulders, "I used to be a cute kid, or so I've been told… I also used to be a goody-two-shoes. Maybe not as good as Mahiru… or Aiko… but I was actually really religious. That was all before my dad tried to kill the rest of our family."

Soraka flinched, not exactly expecting the sudden tonal shift in the conversation.

"He… he what?" the azulite asked, confused.

The athlete shoved her hands in her pockets and turned around so her back was leaning against the bar, "Murder-suicide. Attempted; he didn't actually succeed, but things still got pretty bad. See, dad was a priest who didn't fit in with the parent church… so he tried setting up shop on his own. But barely anyone would listen, and while Mahiru was a sight for sore eyes to us, like really, she saved our sorry asses, it was a real hit when the biggest donor we had pulled their money. Never did learn why they did it, only that they apparently sent one hell of an apology to dad that made him lose it." Makoto paused, wiggling a pocky between her lips, "I think he was trying to spare us from starving to death… but in the end he couldn't go through with it, especially when he remembered I was staying over at Mahiru's. That's why he cut mom and Aiko down and threw out his own noose. The ambulance guys must've been miracle workers too, honestly…"

The conversation died off, with Makoto pointedly looking away from her younger compatriot. She only turned after she heard sniffling from just below the ambient noise of the arcade.

Then she felt a rather precise fist to her shoulder.

"Goddamnit," Soraka hicked, "Why'd y' gotta go and tell me that… Make me look like a fuckin' idiot with my problems, will you?"

Makoto raised up her hands in defense, surprised by the violent outburst. Another set of knuckles was caught in her palm as Soraka threw another limp punch, "Relax, relax blueberry, I wasn't trying to make you cry over it, okay? That's all years gone now, alright? By the sounds of things your crap happened *way* more recently, so I don't blame you for being a little more crazy about it." She lowered the captured fist and tried to get a bead on the crying eyes behind sunken blue bangs, "… Mahiru said somethin' like 'Everyone's entitled to their own marrows'… no… no, that wasn't it… 'woes'? Maybe… Huh…" The redhead paused, trying to regain her train of thought, "But that's not the point! Point is, you feel real strong about that shit, right? My shit is my shit, yours is yours; if we start trying to prove whose smells worst all we're going to do is stink up the joint, so don't worry about it, okay?"

"Jesus Christ…" Soraka shuddered, reeling from the analogy, "You have the most disgusting sense of poetry I've ever seen!"

Makoto glared, "Hey now, I use to be an altar girl. Keep using the lord's name in vain like that and I'll kick your ass."

Soraka paused, biting her lip as she decoupled her hand from Makoto's, "But, I mean… I really don't have room to talk… Wow, I really shouldn't have yelled at you in the hospital…"

"No, you shouldn't have," Makoto grinned, "but that's behind us now, and so is all that shit that we were both talking about. So, let's play another round of Time Crisis to kick off the festivities!"

Soraka smiled, lips reaching not her ears, but certainly her eyes, "Better idea. Wanna come hang out at my place? I've got some home consoles that *won't* eat my wallet that I've been neglecting for the last semester. They could use some love…"

The redhead raised a surprised brow, "You know, my mom told me never to go anywhere I didn't feel safe with a stranger… 'sides, I don't think I've quite schooled you enough at DDR. We need a rematch since I'm sure that last game was a fluke…"

"There'll be snacks…~" Soraka tacked on, voice dipping into a pleasant falsetto.

Makoto stared her right in the eye, red matching blue for a scant moment before Soraka was dragged forward by her wrist. Before she could blink the two were outside, rushing down the street.

"Slow down you speed demon!-Do you even know where you're going?-Damnit Makoto listen to me!-I LIVE IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION!"

O/o\O

"Jesus motherfucking Christ, I *know* you're cheating!" Makoto shouted, bashing her controller against the floor pillow.

"And you said *I* needed to be cautious about being sacrilegious. And watch where you're slamming that controller," Soraka replied, half laughing, half threatening with that latter statement.

"I *used* to be an altar girl. *Used* to be, so I'm allowed to," the redhead huffed, pointedly ignoring the scoreboard on the screen.

"That makes even *less* sense!" Soraka giggled, playfully throwing her hands into the air. “Jesus didn’t go around throwing f-bombs, did he?!”

“How would you know, you weren’t born Christian were you?” Makoto narrowed her eyes, poking a finger to the other girl’s chest, “Tell me three things about Jesus and I’ll be impressed.”

“Uh…” The azulite recoiled at the digit, raising a palm to push it aside. “He… didn’t he do something with fish, or something? Like magic? And some people say they buried him in Aomori?” Seeing the bemused look on Makoto’s face, Soraka rolled back and raised a pair of shaky hands, “Look, I never said I was an expert, just that I don’t think you get special permissions for having worked at a church!”

“Right…” Makoto drawled, her voice dipping. “Let me tell ya somethin’ ‘bout Jesus; he was a real pain in the ass for the people around him and I guarantee you that cursing using his name is a-okay-”

“Bullshit, then why can’t I-?”

“*A-okay if you’re in on the joke.*” Makoto finished, snapping off the last words. “You *weren’t* Christian, you *aren’t* Christian, you don’t plan to *be* Christian; you can’t say his name like that.”

“Oh you are *so* talking out of your ass,” Soraka laughed, slapping at Makoto’s accusatory finger.

“Maybe I am; it’s a fine ass to talk out of,” Kyoko humpfed, jutting her nose towards the ceiling.

Soraka’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t get so high and mighty because you think you’re part of some kind of exclusive club.”

Makoto shot back with finger quotes. “But the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ *is* an exclusive club!”

The azulite crossed her arms, and leaned back with a smirk. “Pfft, please, like *you’re* going to heaven. With lips that dirty my bet is you’re going to the other place.”

“Yeah, and?” Makoto shrugged. “At least I’ll have company, because I know for a fact you’ll be right down there with me.”

“Yeah right, I’m going to drift off to be with my grandparents. You can have fun with your brimstone.” Soraka laughed, picking up her controller.

“Why am I even bothering to argue this shit with you, I don’t even believe in half of it…?” Makoto sighed, grabbing her own controller again and fishing into a half-empty bowl of potato chips. “You cheat at the game, you cheat at the argument…” Her voice rumbled through the room as Sorak busied herself with setting up another game.

“You can’t cheat at an argument, you can only win one.” Soraka smiled, her back erect with pride.

Makoto rolled her eyes, "Jeez, you're almost as annoying as this one chick in gradeschool: kept bragging when her team won the soccer tournament. Wouldn't stop harping about how her team was better and how, when we *knew* they were cheating, we were just lying…" The redhead trailed off, pieces of that particularly unpleasant memory coming back to her. It was only when there was a flash of blue among the images that she narrowed her eyes, "Wait a minute…"

She shot a stunned glare over to Soraka, who was looking at her in much the same way. The two pointed, and shouted, at the same time.

"*You!*"

The duo sat, shocked mouths agape, unsure where to carry the conversation.

"Y-you kicked me in the shins!" Soraka spluttered, fist balling.

"You deserved it for being a lying cheat! You tripped me when I was trying to steal the ball from you!" Makoto snarled back.

"Your cleats weren't tied up right! It was your own stupidity that tripped you!"

"Like hell it was! My sister made sure they were extra tight each game *because* she didn't want that to happen!"

Hands gripped at Makoto's shoulders, and only then did she see how Soraka's eyebrow was tweaking, like it wanted to tear itself off her face, a face that had morphed into a horrifyingly empty smile, "I… I got a red card for that little argument. I couldn't play in the championship match. I was the laughing stock of the team…"

Makoto raised her own challenging brow at the azulite, gripping the girl's wrists in defiance of the taller girl's hold, challenging Soraka’s ghostly grin with a demonic smile all her own, "Yeah? And you think I did any better? I couldn't even afford to play after that and my soccer career here in Fuzaiumi had me going out as a delinquent."

"As I recall," Soraka twitched, lowering her eyes with a taunting glare, "You were already on the district's budget team. It's already filled with delinquents; you were just one of a pack."

"Back the fuck off," Makoto snapped, easily shoving Soraka backwards. The mood changed. The banter, until that point, had been accusatory but not necessarily unpleasant. There was an underlying energy to the shouts and grapples, barbs with no teeth that massaged into existence a resolution to old, pointless wounds. But the last line had shifted the field into a far more serious place for the former altar girl. "Don't talk shit about them; any of them! This shit is between you and me!"

Soraka for her part didn't know how to react to the harsh outburst. She drew back and rested her hands in her lap, swallowing in uncomfortable silence as Makoto glared at the TV.

"…Is that really what people thought of us?" Makoto asked, her voice cracking along the words.

The azulite frowned, wringing her hands, "…Yeah. The 'Misfit Team' was pretty infamous in the league… Always losing, filled with kids who didn't behave; people knew the only reason the team existed was because they had enough kids and could somehow get enough money to pay the entry fee for the league." She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, "Can't say you exactly endeared me, either. That little red card made me hate the misfits."

Makoto drew her legs closer to herself, wrapping her body up into a ball, "…Some of them were bullies… but most of us didn't have enough money to be on a better team, or had some kind of health defect other teams wouldn't take. Everyone was there to have fun; I was the only one who played to win, which is why you pissed me off so much. I wanted to show my little sister you didn't need money to win big. Of course, rest of my team kinda tanked that idea, but I could still do something on my own."

"She means a lot to you, doesn't she?" Soraka asked, drawing in and hugging one of the many pillows scattered on the floor.

Makoto nodded and wiped a few frustrated tears that had gathered on her cheeks, "I almost never get to see her, barely even talk to her, and each time she sounds so different… I just hope she's being raised right… I wanted to be there for her and I can't."

The azulite tightened the hold on the pillow, biting her lip for the right words, "…I don't know what to tell you. I've never had a sibling, so… I mean, I guess Sumika and I have been close forever, but…" Her voice dipped, uncomfortable to carry on that chain of thought, "…S-still! If your sister is even half as stubborn as you are, I think she'll be fine."

"Hah," the athlete sniffed, sleeving at her nose, "Aiko's the squishiest person I've ever known… But thanks. I can only hope she managed to grow a solid backbone while we've been apart."

Quiet floated between them, more comfortable this time with the tension in the air dispelling.

"Would… do you need a hug?" Soraka asked, looking at the slumped shoulders and the tired eyes of the other girl.

"N-no," Makoto blushed, pulling her legs in tighter. "We just met, don't expect to get all touchy feely with me okay? It's weird enough we're talking about this kind of heavy shit right out the gate."

The student shrugged, "I mean, I was kinda thinkin' the opposite; this is the quickest I've ever gotten to know someone… It's been a quick turnaround, so why not just go all in?"

"…You're the weirdest chick I've ever met…" Makoto huffed.

"Pot and kettle, pot and kettle," Soraka sing-songed, smiling.

The redhead growled, "Look if you're going to hug me, just do it already, alright? Stop playin' around."

Soraka laughed, wasting no time in wrapping her arms around the pouty ginger. A few seconds in and the fiery girl relaxed into the hold. Her frown may not have dissipated, but the tension between them dispelled almost entirely.

"It sounds like you were a good older sister…" Soraka mumbled, pulling away, "And I think you're going to look like an even better one when you get to tell her that you were right about that bitch at that one soccer game all those years ago…"

Makoto blinked, face suddenly growing red for a whole new reason, "What? So you did cheat?!"

The azulite chuckled, "No, I'm all about playing fair… but she doesn't have to know that. If it means helping someone like her stay on the straight and narrow, I'll play the bad guy for you. You can tell her I 'admitted' my guilt the next time you see her and that I'm very sorry for hurting you."

The redhead stared at her, quickly punching the taller girl in the shoulder.

"Ahch! Hey! I'm helping you out here!" Soraka pouted, rubbing her arm.

"Yeah, well, stop being nice to me! I don't like taking pity," Makoto pouted back.

The student shook her head, "It's not pity; it's taking one for the team. Friends do that for one another."

"You think we're friends?" Makoto asked, raising her brow.

"Of course we are. I think sharing our sob stories is like the friendship rite-of-passage," she shrugged back. "You might be an ass, but I had a lot of fun today. So I'm pretty sure that in small enough doses I can handle being your friend," she added, sticking her tongue out and winking.

Makoto had to remind her heart to keep beating at the little silly display; a galling fact considering the backhanded compliments it included.

The redhead managed a smile, "Yeah, well… Okay… I… I guess we exchange cell numbers now? Or something?"

Soraka nodded, digging out her phone, as did Makoto. It was only after they finished passing over the numbers that Makoto realized how late it actually was.

"Ah shit, I need to get to the station before they close down the trains," she explained, standing.

"Oh! I'll walk with you!" the azulite said standing.

Makoto stumbled over a pillow on her way to the apartment entranceway, "More like running, actually, and you'll only slow me down."

"I've got longer legs!" Soraka shot back.

"Doesn't count for shit if you don't know how to use them!" Makoto laughed.

It took only a split second for her to get on her shoes and another to crack the door. Before she continued outside, she turned back, looking at the azulite on the wooden step. She shot the girl a toothy grin.

"I had fun today too… So I'll text ya. I promise!" With that she was out the door, shouting back, "Have a good night!"

She barely heard from behind her the taller girl shouting, "Be safe, don't get mugged!"

Makoto laughed, maneuvering her way down the apartment's steps to the bottom floor before bolting down the street. Soraka was a real rollercoaster to be around, but that was more than just a little

invigorating. Hell, Makoto's heart was still beating a mile a minute by the time she reached the station, winded but nowhere near drained of energy. She made a silent vow to herself to do a few laps around her neighborhood in order to blow off the excess steam when she got home. Maybe it'd give her time to sort through why she couldn't get those sparkling eyes out of her head, or that majestic smile, or those previously noted 'longer legs’.

As the train pulled into the station, Makoto grinned, excitedly thinking of something else she could do with Soraka sometime this week. So distracted was she that she forgot to wait for passengers to get off the train before trying to get on herself. She ended up running into another woman, one who bounced against the open doors with a quiet 'oomph'.

Makoto, shaking off her sense of déjà vu from the day at the hospital, moved to apologize, only for the dark haired girl to ignore her and continue on her walk, slogging forward as though she were walking through a swamp.

The redhead shrugged, figuring that if they wanted an apology they could have asked, and let the other woman go. As frazzled as the raven girl looked, she wasn't Makoto's concern.

When the doors finally closed, her thoughts drifted back to that silky head of dyed blue hair and the new friend she was eager to see again soon.

Flash Fire Part 1

April, 2015

"…u okay?"

Sumika blinked, her head lifting from its perch atop her palm. The cool eyes of her mother met her own, scrutinizing and concerned.

The older Abe had aged somewhat in the last three years, a wrinkle under her eye here and a grey hair there, yet despite these early signs of wear, the woman still managed to give of a youthful exuberance that none of her peers could manage to match. This same exuberance was now weighing on the younger Abe's shoulders as her mother continued her worried stare.

"Eh?" Sumika asked, blinking again.

"I said, 'are you okay'… though I think you've just answered my question…" Rise sighed, sipping from her brandy glass.

Reflexively Sumika looked to her own, still half full in comparison to her mother's one-fifth. Late night talks like this weren't unusual between the two, though in the nights of yore Sumika had been relegated to orange juice while her mother alone was allowed to enjoy the acrid taste of alcohol. When Sumika had graduated high school and moved out, however, the older woman had finally declared that Sumika was old enough to finally hit the bottle and every time Sumika visited home afterwards she managed to wait till nightfall in order to share a crisp drink with her mother. Even now she wasn't too fond of the taste of alcohol but she had to admit there was a pleasing sensation that ebbed from the burn of liquors streaming past her palate.

But the dynamic was different now, more uncomfortable, and Sumika knew it was almost entirely on her own head. Choosing to move back home after moving out for a year, even with parents as accepting as her own, was still incredibly awkward. The rosette was

trapped, and that was only in regards to her family, not to mention the mess that her social circle had become…

Rise's face fell even more, betraying a few more years on her normally youthful face, "Come on Sumika, spit it out. Just like a splinter, remember? Quicker you get it out, the quicker you get it over with…"

Sumika kept her hands folded in her lap, pinkies trapped between her squeezing thighs. With her eyes still averted, she tried to speak, but only succeeded in flapping her mouth open and closed.

The older woman drooped her head in momentary defeat. Moments like this had become commonplace over the last few weeks, after Sumika had chosen to return home. In recent days, though, it had gotten worse, to the point where the rosette was refusing to talk at all.

"Sweetie, please, talk to me…" Rise breathed, frowning, "I'm… you're not yourself…"

Sumika was silent, jaw clenched shut. Her ponytail wiggled briefly as she shook her head in a fine, quiet motion.

For what felt like the hundredth time, Rise sighed, standing, "Maybe I should get Nobutaka… he's better with things like this…"

"No!" Sumika jolted, her eyes widening. Her mother had to resist a flinch at the outcry, giving only the subtlest of tells that she'd been taken off guard.

Rise quickly composed herself and slid back into the seat, eyeing the fidgeting girl carefully. She chose the next words carefully; inviting, but direct, "Okay, then. Talk."

Sumika sucked in a breath, threading fingers into her hair with both hands. Satisfied with her own composure, she finally said her first proper words of the night, "So… I… there's something I never told you and papa about Mahiru and me… It's been making this all a little bit harder…"

The small girl glanced towards the staircase, almost as if she expected her father to come down and hear what she was about to say, which would have made it infinitely more difficult to speak. At Rise's supportive nod, Sumika licked her lips and continued.

"She… Mahiru and me… We were… She was my girlfriend a- and I was hers… We were lovers…"

The words were saturated with anxiety and fear, laced not with any rational concern but with that of a guilty child explaining to their parent why they'd punched the other kid. Such a stutter was almost preternaturally unbecoming of Sumika, who had always been the purest of children even at her most mischievous, so she was almost entirely out of her element.

Rise raised a brow, calmly sipping down the rest of her drink. With a pleased exhale, she smiled playfully, elation bubbling from below; the root of the issue had finally started coming to light.

"So tell me something I don't know," Rise chuckled.

Sumika hopped in her seat, "W-what?"

The older woman rolled her eyes, "Tell me something I don't already know, Sumika. I knew you and Mahiru were together."

"Ah, wha- whe- How long have you- how?" Sumika sputtered, eyes wide as saucers.

"Hmm…Year and a half ago… when you both stayed over here for the holidays. I didn't think anything of it initially, but one too many run-ins with Mahiru in the hall where her hair was askew, her clothes were ruffled and her face was red started to tip me off. Add that to odd laundry loads you two pushed onto Nobu during that time… Honestly, who changes out three pairs of panties in a day unless they're on their period? Both of you were guilty of that a couple of days."

This entire spiel seemed unending to Sumika, whose face resembled a furnace more every second as Rise ticked off instances on her hand.

"But the real kicker for me was this one time when I came back in to get my phone when Nobu and I took Ryuuki for a walk. Mahiru was bending over to pick something up in front of you in a way that *no one* would in front of their hosts… and she was missing a certain pair of garments. The way you were staring at her and the way she was *unusually* comfortable with it was the last piece of the puzzle I needed…"

By this point Sumika's face was buried in her hands, every facet of her either a deep crimson or a bright pink. An art major could probably look at her and tell you every shade of the red spectrum represented on her body at that very moment.

"Wh-why didn't you say a-a-anything?" the girl trembled, still refusing to look her mother in the eye.

"Because you're an adult now, Sumika," Rise responded smoothly, deftly anticipating the question. "I trust you to tell me things when you're ready to tell me… Though I have to say, I didn't expect you to really wait this long… Maybe you're getting too old to confide in your poor, old mama…" the 'crone' mused, feigning tears.

"N-no!" Sumika snapped, almost too suddenly. In an instant, Rise was alarmed; Sumika's response had been primal, immediate and completely uncalculated. "I still need you!" the rosette continued, "I still need you because… Mahiru and I… She and I… we… I broke it off…"

Rise pressed the pad of her finger against her glass' edge, gently gliding it around the lip, "I figured as much. Didn't imagine you would have moved back home if things were going swimmingly over there… but… she needs you, doesn't she?" The question was asked out of concern for the older girl. The poor blonde had been through quite a lot in the last few years, in the last month especially. And with as well as she managed to care for Sumika, the mother was more than willing to show a modest amount of favorability towards Mahiru.

"Nm-mmm," Sumika shook her head, "Not… me. I… I found a friend for her… And Soraka is helping her too… But I… I can't… I don't want her getting hurt anymore. Not because of me. I never want to hurt her again…" The rosette began tearing up, droplets landing on the polished table, "And I know I've hurt her by breaking up with her already… but that's quick… that'll fade… She's strong and she can push through that, and if I'm lucky this curse around me won't hurt anyone else!"

She was trembling at this point, her fists curled on the table, head drooped. Surprised, Rise decided that Sumika's last words needed a little more evaluation.

"Curse? Honey, what 'curse'?" Rise asked.

"The one that keeps trying to take away the people I love!" Sumika cried, her voice becoming raw despite the low volume, "Remember when Ryuuki almost drowned because I was stupid and brought him into the pool? Or when I could have asked Yukima to stay over for the holidays? And then Soraka tried to drink herself to death in November when I could have asked Fumine to… And then Mahiru… I… Everything… it's… it's all my fault… All of it… I could have protected all of them!"

And with that incoherent rambling, Rise finally got a clear look at the picture: survivor's guilt. Or at least, something resembling it. The older woman had experienced several similar emotional loops before, and she had to admit that it had been a struggle to push out of them. But she had always stuck to her guns and powered through, and damnit if she was going to watch her daughter suffer through the loop unguided. And the type of guiding right now was a cold bucket of wake-up call.

"No, you couldn't have," Rise stated bluntly, not bothering to dance around the issue.

Sumika sniffled and wiped at her eyes, "Wh-what?"

"You couldn't have saved them, Sumika. You can't even entertain that thought," the mother explained, purpled eyes going cool. "I'm not saying not to learn from what mistakes were made, but I *am* saying that you need to push that little voice in your head that blames you for *everything* that happened to the side and keep focusing on your own life moving forward. If you spend too much time focusing on the past you'll only make more mistakes in the present, and then you'll get sucked in focusing on *those* mistakes. You'll eat yourself alive."

The rosette simply stared at her parent with rapt attention, unsure of what to say or what to do besides continue wiping at the tears dripping down her cheeks.

"But… What if I… what if I am cursed and all of these things…" Sumika stuttered.

Rise rolled her eyes, "And what if I'm the last queen of China? So long as that kind of thing remains in question, why not simply take what facts you have and build forward? Now, let's work through

this, okay? When you brought Ryuuki into that pool, what did you do when you realized your mistake?"

"Uh…" she paused, "I… I got him out of the water and tried to do CPR…"

"Correct. Not too many big sisters I know who actually know how to deliver CPR to a toddler, but you kept him breathing long enough for the lifeguard to take over. Okay, and now Yukima; what could you *possibly* have done to stop that plane from crashing?"

Sumika squirmed, "I… uh… I could have asked her to stay…? I said that, didn't I…?"

"And would she have stayed?"

"I… I think so…?" the rosette replied, biting her cheek.

"Would she have been happy staying?" the mother prodded.

"Well…" the girl sighed, "No, I don't think she would have… She did really want to visit her family… but she'd be alive, with us all, right now…"

The lavender woman shook her head, "You know as well as I do that there would have been other flights and other chances where something that bad was just as likely to happen. For all you knew, you'd just be delaying an inevitable flight to Germany for her and costing her precious time with her loved ones besides you. You would have come out as selfish and not as some hero."

Sumika gripped her shoulder, craning her head away from her mother.

"And now Soraka… I'll be honest, this is the first I'm hearing about anything Soraka related, at least anything that happened a few months ago…" Rise continued, scratching her chin.

"O-oh yeah…" Sumika shuddered, "She was… you see, she confessed to Tokubē… or she tried to, and then she… uh… She got rejected, I think, and tried getting drunk… And Fumine, she asked Tokubē out and now they're together, but Soraka went to this bar and was just putting down drink after drink, and she tried to confess to *me* and then when we all woke up in the morning Mahiru and me decided to let Soraka into our relationship and-"

Rise blinked at the words spilling out of her daughter's mouth. Suddenly, her child wouldn't shut up; a complete reversal.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa Sumika, slow down! I think we're derailing here…" the woman noted. "…What was that about you and Mahiru letting Soraka into your relationship?"

"Uh… yeah… that's also kinda why things have been sorta tense with Soraka recently, too…" Sumika explained, rubbing her neck. "We… never really got it off the ground, but we were all going to be in a relationship. Together. The three of us. The more I look back on it the sillier the idea seems…"

"I don't know…" Rise replied, "I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with that, though I can't say I speak from experience here. It might have worked but I can hardly say that's a normal notion…"

"Yeah, I thought so, too…" Sumika meeped.

Quiet fell between them as the moment drank itself in.

"So… Soraka drinking…?" Rise started again.

"Right, right…" the girl perked, "She… Fumine basically challenged her to confess to Tokubē, and Soraka tried but Tokubē hurt her instead… It was a really messy situation…"

"Hmmm… I see…" Rise replied, "and what would you have done differently…?"

"I… well, if Soraka had told me beforehand I could hav-."

"Op-op-op! Stop right there! Say that back to me, crystal clear for us both to hear," the mother instructed, waving a definitive finger in the air.

"'If… Soraka had told me…'?"

"Exactamundo," Rise cheered, "That phrase, my worried daughter, is your 'get-out-of-jail-free' card for just about any emotional guilt you have."

"What?"

"Think about it; was there *anything* you could have done unless Soraka told you?"

"N-no…"

"So then why are you blaming yourself for it?"

"I… I don't know…"

"Precisely," the mother explained. "When something bad happens that we can't control, we like to imagine what would have

happened had we known more. It's a wonderful tool for learning lessons, but a horrible vice that sucks down the best of us when we dwell on it. But, when we're not given that info in the first place and we're unable to find it on our own, it's completely irrational to blame anyone but those who didn't inform us or who kept the information from us. *They* are the ones at fault, not us.

"Now, don't go thinking that this means you can blame *all* of your problems on other people, it's not an excuse for laziness; it's an admission of powerlessness. The clearest sign of intelligence is knowing what you do not know yet, and in the same way for wisdom is knowing when there is nothing you can do. Had Soraka told you, things would probably have turned out differently, but the mistakes she makes are not yours and never will be."

Sumika sat in silence, soaking in the words, fingers gripping the edges of the table, knuckles bending back against the pressure she was exerting. "What… about… Mahiru then…?" she asked, eyes looking to her mother's for some form of confirmation.

"You blame yourself for calling her when she was in traffic, yes?" Rise summarized quickly. There had been finer nuances to the situation that her daughter had described just after the event occurred, but that blunt-force condensation rocked the majority of the truth for her educational purposes.

The rosette opened her mouth, "If I hadn't-"

"Stop starting sentences like that," her mother interrupted, "You'll just stay stuck in the downward spiral. Besides, it was ruled a mutual fault accident, wasn't it? Meaning that both Mahiru and the truck driver were in the wrong. If you really want to expand that, then all three of you were in the wrong. You shouldn't have called her, she shouldn't have tried to pick up, and he shouldn't have run the red light. Now you've learned a very valuable lesson about calling people while they're driving, but besides that there's nothing else to gain from this situation for you. Don't keep steeping yourself in doubts."

The girl was silent, once again appraising her unfinished glass, the copper liquid swishing to and fro under her idling hand. Rise stood and drifted around the table, leaning over her daughter and pulling the girl's back against her in a deep embrace.

"Sumika, I'm sorry you've had to go through all of this. None of this should have happened to someone like you. But please, *please* don't go blaming yourself for all of these things, and *please* don't pull away from your friends. You're one of the brightest stars I've ever seen in this world and for some you might be the only light they ever get to see; you'll never be the bad luck charm you think you are because all I've ever seen you do is put smiles on peoples' faces," Rise pleaded, her voice soft in Sumika's hair.

Sumika leaned into the hold and wrapped her arms around her mother's, doing her best to twist and bury her face in her mother's embrace.

"I'm scared…" she muttered weakly, letting a few more tears drip loose.

"I know, baby…" her mother cooed, using their rearranged position to rub her daughter's back, "But you're strong and I know you can get back on your feet." The older woman pulled away from the hold ever so slightly, squatting so as to look Sumika in the eye. She smiled, "Now tell me, what is the definition of 'courage'?"

The rosette sniffled, wiping at her lids, "Doing something even when it scares you." Sumika smiled as well, soft and even a little bit wry, "I'm not a kid anymore, mama…" To anyone else those words may have seemed ungrateful, or even indignant, but to Sumika, and to Rise, they meant something else entirely. In one little sentence Sumika had just promised her mother that she'd do what she could to heed the elder Abe's advice and push forward, to brave the beaches of life against all odds. But most importantly, it was Sumika signaling to Rise that everything would hopefully be okay in the end.

Even when she was the comforting presence in Sumika's life, seeing the little glimpse of her daughter's confident underlying nature shine through alleviated almost every worry Rise had.

The rosette pulled back, smiling, though with still a few scant tears dripping down her cheeks, "I think I'll talk to Soraka tomorrow about all of this… in fact, she should still be up, let me send her a text so we can meet up…" Sumika reached for the pocket of her skirt, only to find the folds devoid of phone. She blinked, standing,

"Ah, crap, I left my phone back at Yukima's… I'm gonna have to go get it…"

"Language, young lady," her mother chided, standing.

"I'm not a kid anymore, mama," Sumika rolled her eyes, her statement this time actually indignant, but playful.

"Wait, Yukima's?" Rise paused, confused, "What were you doing at Yukima's?"

"Uh, oh, well," the girl fidgeted, "since I pass it on my way to class I decided to pop in every few days to keep the place clean… You know… In case… yeah…"

The older woman almost gawked at the girl. Almost.

"You've been keeping a whole lot of secrets from me, young miss…" the shocked woman replied. She rested a hand to her chest in (mostly) feigned offense, "I was joking earlier about you being too old to talk to me, but now I'm *really* starting to worry…"

The girl chuckled, sashaying towards the door, a little more spring in her step than when she'd entered, "Well, you *were* the one that told me that 'a girl has to have her secrets'!"

"But never from me!" Rise 'shrieked', putting the back of her hand against her forehead and giving a faux faint.

Sumika smiled and laughed, pausing in the doorway to the living room. Her smiled drooped, the muscles on her face warring for direction. Her fingers clenched around the doorframe.

"Mama…" she breathed, "I still feel guilty…"

Rise kept her smile, even if it was reigned in just a bit, "I know, Sumika… but you'll get through it. Just keep on that smile for yourself and you can get through anything."

The rosette grinned, and though a little bit strained, most of it was genuine as she skipped towards the exit to their home.

"And don't be out too much later! You've got class tomorrow, little missy!"

Flash Fire Part 2

April, 2015

Dial tone.

All dial tone and her fists were as snow, shuddering mounds atop a crumbling mountain. The insidious noise persisted, pressing into her ears as searing spears, bleeding out whatever hope lay dormant in her malformed heart, just as it had in Pakistan, in India, in China. Only now, there was no excuse, no forgotten national area code, no connection problems.

Yukima wanted to cry, but by this point her tears had all but dried. She settled for a tired swallow and a need to lean against the payphone.

Her inner monologue berated her, that she should have made the call when she'd made port in Kagoshima, but she'd stubbornly refused to take such suggestions to heart, to stave off what she knew was not coincidence but was actual, tangible disappointment. She pushed off from the hooded payphone, pulling the ragged jacket on her shoulders tighter together, doing her best to insulate herself from the droplets of rain that started pounding the asphalt at her feet.

Home.

That was her focus, her goal, and her only point of desire. As much as she hungered for the warmth of human connection, Sumika would have to wait.

Besides, what exactly was her plan? "Hey Sumika, I'm back! Guess that vacation took a little longer than expected!"

Yukima scoffed at that played out monologue. She didn't even know how long it had been. She'd done everything she could to snag a date and time while she was trekking across Asia, but the format of each paper she found was confusing and she could never trust the date when she found one. It couldn't have possibly been that long,

her mind kept saying, it'd be impossible for that much time to pass without her noticing.

I mean, she mused, if that much time had passed, Sumika had probably moved on.

Nails bit into callused palms, a thin trail of bile rising to her teeth. With a growl she turned away from the payphone and refreshed her efforts to be homebound, leaving behind such dismal thoughts.

There was a chill in the springtime air, especially with the burgeoning rain, and Yukima couldn't stop the shiver that emerged from her spine. Having spent so much time in warmer climates, especially after passing through the cities dotting India's interior, she’d become accustomed to boiling temperatures. Acclimation to the heat was going to play hell with her once winter rolled around.

A stranger hurried past, carrying an umbrella that inadvertently spritzed the errant girl with extra rain as he ran by.

Yukima's fingers tightened around the handgun secured just above her hip; a reflex that seemed alarmingly normal to her now that she was back in her own society. Still, the pistol and the two spare magazines stuffed down her belt were a comfort to her at this point.

Her mind drifted back to what other things used to mirror such comfort and her mind struck upon an evening tea she'd had alone with Mahiru one day during the Summer and how soothing the chai had been going down. She wracked her frazzled mind and found scant recollections that she had a few bags of it herself back home. Hoping that they hadn't spoiled, as well as wondering *if* teabags could even spoil, Yukima made her first real plans for the minute she arrived home.

And then after that would probably be dusting. Oh boy, the dusting.

That said, she had to wonder if the house had been sold or if she'd even been declared dead.

She shivered again and made the rather dull remark that sleep and rest should probably be her priority, the longing for her old lonely bed having grown entrenched in her psyche over the days.

But, she had become accustomed to tireless days working, exhausting herself right down to the bone before collapsing, and even with the discomforting nature of travel she felt too pert and energetic to even entertain the thought. She needed to tire herself out or else she'd be up long past midnight.

It was only when her feet began to beat those familiar steps closer to home that reality started to sink in; the aged sidewalk, ever changing with repair and decay, the grey buildings that sucked in the blinding colors of the sun or dyed with the shades of night, the wires that tangled above and between both and created a lattice that divided the skies above. She wasn't quite sure when the exhausted smile crawled between her lips.

That little moment of heaven, of warmth in a windy, rainy spring night, was capped when she finally found herself stood before a gothic door laden in deep blues and rich golds, more worn than she recalled but still just as proud. Her fingers pulled off the pistol in her waistband and scrambled for the keys in her pocket, recovered from the crash what felt like decades prior and having served as yet another reminder that dragged her along her path homeward.

An intoxication beset her, something akin to the seasickness experienced from stowing away on the cargo ship into Kagoshima combined with the fumes during the festival she passed through in India, though this sensation was entirely born from beneath her skin. With her world skewing crooked, she jammed the key into the lock and twisted, pushing the door open in one swaying motion.

Her feet skittered forward, with her toes jamming against the wooden step. She dropped to her knees, shins jamming against the boards as her hands flew to support her against the onset of gravity. Even now, after so long independent of medication, of medical aide, fighting against her own faulty body never became easier. She swallowed, focusing her vision.

She kicked out at the door and shut it behind her, pushing the shoe off her foot with the opposite leg as she drew the limb back. Quickly shedding herself of both her jacket and her other shoe she crawled to her feet, wiping the sweat from her heating brow and staggering in towards the kitchen. It was strange to her, how foreign

and yet so familiar the world felt around her now; the air smelled rich and soft, like a velvet flower, and was a scent that by all means should have been familiar. It was her own, or had been long ago, and now it was almost alien to her. There was, among it as well, a hint of something else, something sweet that lingered in the air but wasn't prominent enough to identify.

Pushing such thoughts to the side for later, Yukima approached her kitchen cabinets, ratty, dusty socks stumbling across the laminate floor. Quick and efficient, she reached beyond those doors, pulling down a number of different bottles, all with different labels, sizes and caps. Though her vision was about as clear as Vaseline at this point, she managed to identify one of the many bottles, opened it, and downed twice the prescribed dosage, praying that the pills, like teabags, did not sour with age. Mission complete she stumbled to the kitchen table, yanking out one of the three chairs and dropping down into it, only sparing a moment to shove her accrued munitions to the table's surface so as to make her posture all the more comfortable.

And there she sat for minutes on end, until the world stopped spinning around her and until the heat had left her head. Eventually her vision cleared enough and her balance tuned enough to move again. She pushed back and stood, stumbling a moment before regaining her footing.

She looked back at the pills and approached, scanning the bottle she had downed pills from and ensuring she'd not ended up poisoning herself. Satisfied from what she could read on the bottle, she replaced her assortment of medicinals only to hesitate with her daily pills. What she had just taken were her emergency medications, in case of an attack of any severity… but she'd gotten along fine without both for god knew how long. Did she even really need the daily medication if she'd survived in its absence?

Scowling, she put all of the medication back and set about finding a pad and pen, making a note to call her doctor to consult on such an issue. Just as she finished she paused, pen tipping the katakana. Doctor… Banker… Accountant… Police… School… There

were a lot of people she'd need to get in touch with over the next few days, let alone her friends.

She sent out a silent prayer that Sumika had not moved, and barring that that Soraka Hayami, Mahiru Okawa and Fumine Yazuno would be willing enough to track the rosette down.

Yukima edged into her living room, a round, cavernous space filled with an eclectic myriad of seats and chairs, all forming a circle around one central table and spiraling to two smaller ones that hung out near the edges of the great curvature. It only now really occurred to her how strange the arrangement was. Her mother, she'd know, had been an architect, having designed the house and furnished it alongside her entrepreneur father. For her, it had simply been home, but after seeing so many different houses and homes across the world, now she was beginning to realize her home life had been anything but mundane. At least, now she was *feeling* that it hadn't been mundane; thought didn't necessarily equal comprehension.

It also very briefly occurred to her that those thoughts were the first time in forever where she'd actually thought about her parents… and the first time she'd ever thought about them so distantly. In an instant, almost winding, she realized that the impact they'd left on her had been diminished from miles to inches. They had lived, they had died; no different than those she'd fought alongside and killed across the globe. Whether or not they'd actually cared about her while they were alive no longer concerned her.

With this thought in mind, she did an about face and dove back into the kitchen, quickly whipping up a cup of tea for herself and waiting out the scant minutes the water would need to boil by checking her handgun for fault and malfunction. Satisfied the weapon was functional (as she had been the dozens of times she'd check on her ride over) she allowed it some solace on the table, unloaded and safetied.

She took her tea and loaded it in a tray, bringing it out to the living room table. Seated and with a nice, long steeped cup of tea in her palms, she relaxed into the moment, allowing the familiar chai to slip down her gullet and sooth the weary walls of her throat. Satisfied in her seat she reached for the remote, taking a moment to

remember exactly how to operate the TV that decorated her wall. Normally, the TV wouldn't be alone, instead matched by a number of projectors in the ceiling designed to decal the walls in inventive shapes and brain-jogging imagery; yet another design of her mother's, though one she knew had been born from one of her father's suggestions.

But the projectors remained off, and at this point the stiff movement from each news caster was about all she could handle for the moment.

She didn't really pay attention to the news, so much as had it on to fill the air. Hearing Japanese spoken so rapidly, without broken grammar and without soiled diction, was soothing; a luxury in her world that she'd taken for granted the minute the plane had crashed in the Middle East.

That, right then, was when she noticed the pile sitting under the television.

Rolled into tight tubes and stacked atop one another were thick papers all sleeked in plastic coating, each one neatly arranged next to one another in order from yellowing to pristine white.

Yukima blinked, confused.

Even before she had been born, her father had subscribed to a particular, ritzy paper, one that was only delivered once per week in sequence with a number of economic factoids and figures. She had never seen fit to cancel it as several years had been paid in advance and she wasn't necessarily hurting for funds with the lifestyle she lived.

Still, to see all of the papers, tucked away with such order and care…

The girl placed down her cup and saucer, gently padding her way over to the collected sheets, floating her way over towards the freshest copies she could, where the stack was only half as tall and the pages were only yellowed by a day or two. She took the nearest one on the stack, pulling it out of its disposable sheath and flicking the page open. The plastic wrap fluttered to the floor, forgotten, landing atop a pink cell phone still charging at a plug in the wall.

Her eyes skimmed the pages, flying immediately to the top right corner. She gagged, her fingers going numb as the paper spilled to the ground, leafs flying around her ankles like dancing sparrows.

Yukima blinked, her mind reeling.

The date.

It was impossible. She hadn't been gone that long. Sure, months could have passed, a year even…

But three and a half?

Her eyes blinked, her arms twitched, her mouth moved, yet it felt like all motor function had effectively ceased.

Three and a half years. She had been gone for three and a half years.

In that time she should have graduated high school.

In that time she should be in college.

In that time she should have been planning the direction of the rest of her life.

In that time she should have been with Sumika.

But instead she had been confined to deserts, bazaars and seedy alleys, to industrial street corners and rotting docks, scavenging each day for food and, if she was lucky, shelter. She was trapped behind the walls of desperation while the world had completely passed her by… while Sumika had passed her by.

Yukima wanted to cry.

She wanted to cry and she couldn't.

She wanted to cry *damnit*, so why wouldn't her body let her.

The ailing girl fell to her knees amid the news caster's talk of seasonal storms. It was getting harder to breath, and this time she definitely knew that it had nothing to do with her body's condition. In and out, in and out, the huffs of air skittering between her teeth as the hyperventilation began to take hold.

She was going into shock. Or, at least, what she had labeled as shock; she'd felt it before and knew that, whatever it was, giving in would just lead to her writhing on the floor like an invalid. So she did the only thing she could do.

Yukima screamed. Raw and ear piercing, right to the heavens and straight to every hell she could imagine, she screamed, her voice shredding to a rasp against the clenching of her throat.

And after that, silence lingered in the house.

She stood, still shaking, approaching her tea and sipping at it with trembling hands, the scalding liquid that spilled onto her knuckles going almost entirely unnoticed.

Lavender eyes blinked into the distance as she stood, aimless in her world. She set down the cup and leaned on the table, long raven streaks of hair pooling down onto the tray. Her fingers brushed by a button on the table and with an accidental click the projectors whirled to life, the room suddenly becoming a mishmash of color and imagery all beset against a blackened background.

Yukima jumped back, startled by the sudden movement around her.

She winced against the projections, seeing so many lights like flashes across sand and rock. And once more she was back on those dunes alone against the berating hordes of zealots and fools. She was not safe; someone had collected those papers. She was not safe; the house had been cleaned and dusted. She was not safe; the projectors should be entangled in cobwebs.

Flashes of the men who'd stormed into her savior's home, flashes of the first man she had to kill in cold blood, flashes of the humvee flipping through the air around her, flashes of the plane shredding to bits. She pawed at her waistband only to find it empty, remembering only too late that her protector, her *friend* had been so callously and carelessly left on the kitchen table.

Someone had been in her home, and it was only when the front door opened not twenty-five feet away did Yukima feel entirely helpless, frozen without her sidearm at her disposal.

"H-hello…?"

A voice drifted through the disturbed darkness, and the confused lilt only truly began to register when the home intruder finally reached the wall panel nearest the front door. The projectors went off and the lights went on.

Yukima's voice caught in her throat.

"…S-Sumika?"

O/o\O

Sumika checked her watch, wincing at seeing how late it had gotten. It didn't help that she had run out of her home without anything particularly warm on. An umbrella was great against the light rain coming down around her, but the chill in the air was wreaking havoc with her skin.

Yukima's house was about a twenty minute walk from her home, and though she felt some pride in having cleared that distance in ten, there was really no winner when it came to being out alone in the cold. Still, the commute was warming in that it was familiar for her. The house had been built by the girl's parents and completely paid off before they'd passed on. When Yukima's plane had crashed, Sumika had taken it upon herself to use the emergency key the raven girl had given her to keep the place tidy for her. She wasn't exactly sure what the legality of the situation was, but no one had come to claim the property yet, and so long as it looked maintained she didn't think there'd be any major issues cropping up. That way if Yukima came back…

Sumika shuddered. It had been quite some time since she'd thought about Yukima… at least in any positive context. Her home was one such positive aspect, something she could care for, maintain and adore, something that helped her hold onto hope, no matter how slim. These last few weeks had been utterly draining and it almost felt like she'd left a part of herself behind as the days dragged on. To remember happier times, hanging out at Yukima's house, watching movies, sleeping over, gossiping and studying…

She laughed to herself. Even *studying* seemed appealing to her now. At least in retrospect; she still wasn't thrilled with studying for English.

The little pep talk her mother had given her before leaving had been therapeutic. In many ways, she'd known everything her mother had told her, but for someone to spell it out to her, to put it to words… Well, she could feel those anxieties slipping away, never

quite leaving, but her focus was crystallizing the more she managed to sort through them and push them to the side.

It felt like the world was both a much larger place and yet a smaller one, and as disorienting as that should have been, all she felt was confidence that she would eventually be able to take on both. When that would be, however, she wasn't sure. A flash of Mahiru's face in her memories was all she needed to make her flinch in place and lose her bubbling edge. She had a feeling that mood swings like that would be rather regular going forward.

She perked up, stopping at the navy blue door with her key at the ready. There was no need to drag more morose thoughts into the hauntingly beautiful home; it had enough of its own and Sumika only wanted to contribute some light to the shaded house.

Twisting the tumbler of the door, Sumika frowned, realizing that the door hadn't actually been locked. Had she forgotten to lock it? Did someone break in?

She lowered the umbrella to her side, collapsing it so she could use it as a cudgel just in case there was danger. It'd probably do her little good, but she needed her phone and she was certainly more than a little uncomfortable with someone snooping around Yukima's house. Or worse yet, what if someone had finally come to inspect the home, to take it away under some kind of property law?

Sumika swallowed, gently pushing the door open and letting herself in. She would have normally removed her shoes at this point, but the unease was enough for her to justify leaving them on.

"H-hello…?" she croaked, walking to the doorway leading towards the living room. Someone had turned on the projectors and the TV and Sumika moved to shut them off and bring on the proper lights.

With the room cleared of distraction, violet eyes met fuchsia.

"…S-Sumika?"

The rosette dropped the umbrella, eyes locked open, her mouth agape and trembling.

There was silence as the two just stared at each other, two ghosts crossing paths in an unmoving world.

"Y-Y-Yukima…" Sumika sputtered. She put a step forward, wobbling on her legs.

The raven girl was different than Sumika remembered. The girl was taller, taller than Sumika would have imagined her getting, taller than maybe even Soraka at this point, though that might just be because Sumika had only grown a few scant inches herself over the years and the heights of tall people were hard to gauge. The previously silken hair was dried and loosed from its regular bun, jaggedly chopped at the neck so the individual fibers became a serrated line aligned with her jaw. Her clothing was dirty and stained, torn in places, and pieces of the ramshackle outfit looked either one size too small or one size too big. But the real difference sat in those eyes. Where there once had been youthful hesitance there was weary acceptance, where once there had been fear there was resolution. Even through the shell-shocked expression Sumika could tell that Yukima had grown beyond what she could remember.

But none of that mattered now, not to either of them. The second Sumika had taken her first step forward, Yukima had already strutted three.

In seconds, the two were embraced, holding together tighter than any vice, as if the world would wrench them apart one more time as a sick, twisted joke. Almost immediately their legs buckled, one set from physical exhaustion and the other from emotional. On their knees, intertwined, Sumika and Yukima began to cry, bawling into each other's shoulder, fingers desperately grasping at cloth and fabric, doing what little they possibly could to pull themselves tighter into the embrace.

"I… I never thought I'd… I always hoped but I never… Yukima…" Sumika strained, nuzzling further into Yukima's neck. "I missed you, I've always missed you, every day… Oh, God, I thought you were…"

The raven girl twitched with each word, the sounds so saccharine and sweet, so mature yet so familiar that a flare of joyous pain burst from her chest with each syllable. In her own right, she responded, "Sumika… Sumika…" She pressed her jaw to the girl's temple, drinking in the intoxicating aroma in the girl's hair, the same

aroma that undercut her home's natural scent, "Sumika… I love you Sumika…"

The words were pained, but practiced and confident.

Sumika hiccupped and pulled back, pursing her lips at the admission, the confession. Her fingers flew to Yukima's lapel, rubbing the ruined material of the girl's blouse, unsure. Steeling her gaze, Sumika squirmed, a war waging behind her eyes before she nodded to herself, looked the errant girl right in the eye.

In the next second, she pulled the taller girl into a kiss, briefly blinding them both to the world around them. Cold lips against warm, chapped against full, weary against apprehensive; all of the horrible weights of the world, crashes and crushes, anxieties and woes, all slipped away between two pairs of broken lips.

Sumika pulled back, unable to stop even more tears from falling. She averted her gaze to the ground, shivering while keeping her hold on her friend, "That was… that was for when you left… but now… I… I'm not the same… You're… you're not the same… We're… A lot's happened, Yukima… I don't know if I-"

"I know…" Yukima croaked. "I know, I know, I know…" she repeated, pressing their foreheads together. "Just… Just right now… Just the two of us… Right here… We can talk tomorrow… But right now…"

Sumika leaned in and rewrapped her arms around the other girl, "Right now…" She closed her eyes and nuzzled closer, "Just you and me…"

Yukima closed the hug and leaned back, bringing them both to rest against one of the many cushions of her home, "Just for tonight… If only for tonight…"

Within ten minutes the two had stopped crying and by twenty they'd both fallen asleep. In the morning would come no class but instead explanations and conversations, talk of struggles, of disasters and successes. And from that would be born solace, would be born reprieve from those same struggles and disasters.

There was time for them both to fall in love again, to know if their old flame could be salvaged, but they knew that now was the time to heal, and that was something the two could do together.

Inferno

June, 2015

There was a saying that 'all good things must come to an end', that nothing beautiful can remain that way forever and all will eventually fade into the night. This dystopic, entropic idea permeates all cultures, all civilizations, and even the most optimistic of people can feel the tingle of the concept curling down their spines. In the wake of recent events, it had become a sort of mantra for Soraka, who took a morbid comfort in the idiom as time progressed.

In the past she would writhe against such suggestions, her personal identity as a stalwart knight bumping heads with the acceptance of defeat, but ever so slowly the philosophy had wrenched it's frozen clutches on her spine and latched there to stay, creating a form of sluggish anxiety that quietly dragged her down each and every day. And though it would more often than not slip into the back of her mind to never be uttered, its presence was always lingering, always haunting her, waiting to renew its self-serving proclamation within her thoughts.

For you see, today Soraka had been having a pretty good day.

A Saturday off from classes (thank *god* universities didn't function like normal school), no work at the café, and hanging out with Makoto for the day. No worrying about what major she was going to sort herself into, no worrying about meeting quotas and quality standard, and no obligations or responsibilities to anyone except for the one friend that'd been there for her the last two months. All the elements were there for a relaxing afternoon (barring the inevitable barbs the two would sling between each other).

Back in the day, moments like this would have entreated Sumika's presence and Mahiru's as well, but while the strain between the three had died down, the distance had only grown.

Mahiru had been rather busy sorting out any number of legal papers lately, trying to integrate that little mouse of a girl Satsuki into her home life. Likewise, Sumika had been steamrolled by her own rather hefty issues, helping the miracle girl assimilate back into normal life. From what little she'd heard from the rosette, Yukima had managed to wean herself down to carrying a combat knife instead of the incredibly illegal pistol she still had stashed away in her home. Hell, the knife was still probably pushing it. Makoto, the red spitfire herself, was the only one who managed to consistently hang out with her these days. Maybe the natural chemistry that milled around them made it easier to relate than with Mahiru or Sumika, or perhaps it was simply because Makoto had none of the dead weight from any of Soraka's failed relationship endeavors like the other two, but whatever the reason the girl had become an emotional tent pole for the azulite and for that she was eternally grateful.

Barring that, it was hard to find someone who could go toe-to-toe with her on DDR and it was also rather nice to have *someone* appreciate her home cooking. While she knew the shadow of Mahiru loomed over their joint history, unlike her other friends Makoto never seemed to judge Soraka by her skill; the girl gobbled up whatever she was served, and if it was half competently made she let her approval be known. Hell, she'd even received a handful of compliments from the redhead, though she'd figured they were just schmoozing in order to get an extra helping (something the shorter girl could have always just asked for). Still, it was nice to dream and pretend the words were genuine.

Today in particular involved all of those elements and then some; going to a movie, hitting the arcade, and then going home for a nice, relaxing meal before sending her newfound friend on her way home with a box of leftovers.

But all of that ground to a halt after leaving the arcade and heading towards the train station that'd take them home.

"…Soraka, is that you?"

The azulite ground to a halt along the concrete path, her redheaded traveling companion coming to a stop beside her.

"Hmm?" Makoto shrugged, craning her neck towards the voice behind them. She looked back at the motionless college student, raising a brow, "Hey, Soraka, got some brown-haired chick talkin' to ya."

Soraka swallowed. That voice, she knew that voice, even if it had been seven months since she had heard it in person. Steeling her nerves, she kicked on her heel, turning to face the voice, her jaw set and her little, whimsical evening completely shucked out the door. She wasn't necessarily ready to face her rival, but it had been long enough since their falling out that maybe she could at the very least look the brunette in the eye.

But the eyes she found first weren't those of viridian but those of steel. Cold, tired, and concerned steel.

"Toku… bē…?" Soraka squeaked, taken completely off guard. Her lips and eyes floundered for a second before finding that deep forest she'd been looking for just off to the side of the steel, her riled nerves steadying enough to utter out a polite, "Fumine…"

For all Soraka had known following the verbal lashing he'd given her, Tokubē had still been in the hospital. That did her little good when he was here now, comparatively much healthier than he had been. His left hand, wrist and forearm were locked in a plastic brace while he managed to suspend himself on crutches. It also didn't escape her that Fumine had her hand loosely fit around his good arm's bicep, not enough to hinder him, but *just* enough to send clear indications as to where these two stood. The fact that they were coming out of a moderately popular Italian restaurant together dressed to the nines only further compounded that silent message.

"H-hey… Long time no see…" Tokubē opened, leaning on one crutch and scratching the back of his head.

"Ah… Y-yeah…" Soraka greeted back, her tongue feeling heavier as a weight dropped past her gut.

Silence hung in the air between the four, Soraka, Fumine and Tokubē all sharing uneasy glances without much to say. Which was why it was both a godsend and a curse when the fourth member among them decided to speak up.

"So…" Makoto broke in, brow raising further, "Someone die? Am I missing something here?"

The three winced at the rather rude interjection (Soraka less so considering her exposure to the other girl over the last two months), but Fumine seemed to roll with it rather quickly, snapping to face the redhead with a plastic smile.

"N-no, no! Of course not!" the brunette prattled, waving a dainty hand. "Soraka, please, is this a… an acquaintance of yours? Introduce us!"

"Oh, right, right…" Soraka started, biting her lip. "Makoto… this is Fumine and Tokubē, old… friends…" her throat constricted as the word left, making it much rougher and far more accentuated than she'd intended. "Fumine, Tokubē… this is Makoto. We've been hanging out recently."

"Hey… Soraka… aren't these two the…?" Makoto started. Soraka elbowed her in the side before she could get the words out. The couple looked momentarily perplexed by the silenced statement, but Fumine pushed forward, placing a lithe finger to her lips.

"Makoto… Makoto… Why does that name sound familiar…?" she asked, muttering to herself out loud. The azulite shifted uncomfortably.

"Mahiru… because of Mahiru. She's… that Makoto…" Soraka explained, gritting her teeth. She knew what was coming.

Fumine snapped her fingers, smiling, "Ah, that's right! Mahiru… Mahiru… Oh…" And like that, the realization seemed to hit the waifish girl like a freight train, "The same Makoto… *that* Makoto… The one that Mahiru was… Oh…"

Makoto shifted on one foot, folding her hands, "Yeah, Mahiru and I used to be together; got a problem with that?"

Fumine bit her lip, smudging the well applied makeup ever so slightly. She moved to respond only for Tokubē to slide in and give her an out.

"Oh, no, no, neither of us do. What people do in their own lives is their business," he responded smoothly. He smiled down at his beau, "From what I hear there was some history involving the

topic that simply discomforts her, so shall I suggest we move on to a different topic?"

A pang of jealousy spiked through Soraka's chest at how quick Tokubē was to defend his gi… Fumine. To defend Fumine.

Makoto rolled her eyes at the diplomatic speech, "Look here, mister 'prim and proper', you don't nee-."

"No, no, he's right," Soraka replied, cutting off the redhead. Letting Makoto keep talking like that would just lead to a more strained, painful conversation. She strained a smile and looked to Tokubē, "So, tell me, you're looking very… healthy. When did you get discharged?"

"Hmm? This?" he asked, nodding to the crutches, "I've been out maybe about three months now? Over the winter my body just… started to work right… I still go back for physical therapy, but as far as I know I'm going to make a full recovery."

There was a moment of bafflement as the azulite processed what she'd just been told. All of the testing, diagnosis, and prognosis had indicated the boy would never have a normal life again. Every day she was helping him she'd prayed for a marvel like this, something that would quite literally get him back on his feet… And to learn that she wasn't around when it'd happened… Fire and grief began to bubble against her ribs.

Soraka's smile twitched, "Oh, really? That's fantastic to hear. In fact, it's kinda miraculous…" She tried to resist, to stop there, she really did. But some mixture of temptation, spite and retribution pushed her to continue speaking. She looked pointedly at Fumine, "I'd heard that it was almost impossible that you'd ever recover…"

The brunette's eyes widened in seconds, her mouth falling slack as words failed to materialize.

"Really?" Tokubē quizzed, "I mean, I know the doctors weren't very optimistic back then, but they never gave me such a dire prediction…"

"Oh, no… It wasn't the doctors that told me that," Soraka replied, her grin becoming genuine with sadistic glee. She looked Fumine dead in the eyes, "Isn't that right, Fumine?"

"I…! I said no such thing!" Fumine snapped quickly. Too quickly. Tokubē's curiosity was piqued.

He looked over to her, brows crossed, "Fumine… what is she saying…?"

Fumine fidgeted, "Nothing! She's talking absolute gibberish!"

"Hey!" Makoto snapped back, "I might not have known Soraka the longest here, but I know she ain't a liar. If she says you said that, you said that. She can't keep a straight face to save her life."

Among the roiling emotions inside her the briefest blip of something positive, small as it was, manifested through the stream at Makoto's words, but something on that scale was dwarfed and drowned by what she was already feeling. If only it had been bigger, maybe it would have helped her stop herself.

Fumine was about to respond when Tokubē grabbed her hand, "She's right, Fumine… What did you say?"

Soraka didn't even wait for the other girl to respond.

"That the people around you would struggle, that you'd never get better… that you'd be some kind of invalid… She told me to give up…" the azulite muttered, her voice softening and dipping in tone, a dark whisper echoing around them. Fumine winced as each word landed on her ears like hot grease upon skin, all the while Tokubē regarding her with an ambiguous stare that told of hurt, confusion and something eerily similar to barely restrained anger. "But look…" Soraka continued, "He's getting better, isn't he? Look at him. They told him he might never be able to *walk* again, you told me to give up on it, didn't you?"

"What else were we supposed to think, Soraka?" Fumine shot back. Tokubē's eyes widened at the outburst, but the brunette persisted past his emotional gaze, "Everyone, all the doctors, all the nurses… All those x-rays and charts…"

Soraka pursed her lips as her breathing became labored and she felt water pool amongst her pearly blue eyes. She choked back a sob, steeling her teeth, "We were supposed to be there for him… And you know… Even after everything happened, I still hoped for you… that you'd get out, get better… Isn't that the irony, huh? Turn

your back on the one person who genuinely believed you could do it…"

Tokubē and Fumine shuffled apart, both of them looking off to the side, distraught. Soraka had long since stopped caring. The numbing sensation crawling around her chest was new and exciting, a release of tensions a long time coming.

"I… I don't know how to react to this," Tokubē voiced.

Soraka laughed, dry and empty, "Yeah, you'd think you'd be better at reacting to things with how many improv classes you've taken."

"You don't have to sound so happy about it…" Fumine growled, "You sound like a kid right now, Soraka, tattling on her friends…"

The azulite dipped to a scowl, "If only I had friends to tattle on, then you'd have something to talk about."

Tokubē looked up, his mouth locked before speaking, "Look, Soraka… I'm sorry about what happened back at the hospital… I didn't mean to hurt you…"

"'Didn't mean to hurt me'?" Soraka twitched, "That's the verbal equivalent of bandaging a decapitation…"

The boy's eyes narrowed, "Look… Soraka, we really hurt you, we get that, but that doesn't mean you can't be civil…"

The azulite chuckled, looking at the cracks in the sidewalk. She nodded at his statement, pursing her lips and looking him dead in the eye, "Did she tell you…?"

"What?" Tokubē blinked.

"Did." Soraka asked again, "She. Tell. You?"

His brows rose, "Tell me what, Soraka?!"

"That day, when you snapped at me, do you know why I'd come in early?" she asked. There was no waiting for a response; it had been completely rhetorical. "Why I came to see you?! I was going to confess," the broken admission was made with a brief but grandiose wave of her arms, "Fumine had given me a deadline, my last chance to tell you before she decided to step in and ask you herself, and I was about to take it the moment you started yelling!"

Tokubē's face froze before going pale, blinking. It took him a moment to even form words, "I… Soraka… I didn't…"

Soraka's head snapped forward from her little flamboyant arm motions, "Of course you didn't! You never noticed *anything*!" She was shouting now, and the bubbling fire in her throat told her that she should be *happy* that she was, "Because you're blinder than a goddamned bat! It's almost like that fall took your fucking eyes too!"

Silence echoed through the street. A few passersby took note of the shouts, one or two even taking a moment to stop and scope out the situation before carrying on their way. There was a small, rational part of Soraka's mind that noted how low it was to resort to his injury in such a flamboyant way… but that part of her brain wasn't in control at the moment anyway.

Tokubē, the target of Soraka's rage, was the quickest to respond, catalyzed by her vitriolic slights, "Soraka, p-please, I'm sorry! I… If it… we can talk this… maybe we can… It's not like I don't like you. If you want, maybe we can try…"

His scrambling did nothing but make her want to look away. Instead she found Makoto, standing tense by her side, seemingly ready to pounce on either of the couple's halves at a moment's notice, crutches and brace be damned. And in that moment some simple words came to mind, almost the same words that Makoto had told her the first day they'd become friends.

"I don't take pity, Tokubē," she spat, her face twisting with disgust and indignation. "I was *trying* to be nice, I was *trying* to be there for you, and all you did was turn around, chew me out, and throw me to the fucking curb because I'd made a fucking mistake," Soraka seethed, her fist trembling at her side. "I've seen what kind of man you are, and I don't want any part of that." She met his eyes dead on, glaring, "Fuck you." She looked to Fumine, "Fuck her." She looked to Makoto and gave her a nod for them to leave, turning to storm away from the couple, "And fuck this whole fucking mess. I'm out!"

Makoto was quick to follow, relaxing her tensed stance before shrugging at the couple and giving them a snap/finger-guns combo, silently vanishing into the summer night behind the azulite.

O/o\O

Makoto was, understandably, concerned.

Soraka didn't say a word as they approached the station, her legs a constant patter against the beaten path, leaving the redhead to double time it in the taller girl's wake. A number of times she almost reached out, almost opened her mouth and asked the simple question, but she had a feeling she already knew the answer and how it might simply irritate the azulite that she even had to ask.

It hurt, to be honest. In only so many short weeks the two had grown insanely close, even by Makoto's own brash standards, and with how strong that connection was the redhead was more than a little disheartened that Soraka hadn't told her some of the things she'd yelled at those two scatterbrains. Then again, the more she thought about it, there were quite a few emotional things about her own issues that she'd left on the cutting room floor, so she supposed that to accuse Soraka of hiding something would be more than a little hypocritical. And she hated hypocrites. All of the jibes building in her stomach would have to stay shelved there until Soraka’s emotions had cooled, and even then something told her she’d have to be *very* tactical with how she would tease the girl over this whole charade.

Makoto scowled, looking behind her to make sure the two dumbasses weren't following them. Satisfied that the six blocks they'd walked had left the couple in the dust, she felt more comfortable finally taking some action. Normally she wouldn't be one to be so cautious, but in this particular case, with this particular girl, Makoto had her reasons for being hesitant.

"Hey, *Who* girl, slow it down, will ya?" the redhead barked, grabbing Soraka's swinging wrist. Soraka snarled in response, not even glancing back and struggling to pull forward regardless of the sudden restraint. When that didn't work, she finally turned around, her eyes red and laced with tears, pawing at the grip on her wrist with her free hand.

"Let go, Makoto, let go now!" the azulite rumbled.

Makoto didn't move, letting a snarl of her own loose. To outsiders it might as well have looked like two dogs ready to throw down.

"For Christ's sake, Soraka, I think we did a pretty good job of hitting the concrete, you can take a breath," the shorter girl retorted, swatting Soraka's liberating hand away.

"Get the fuck off, Makoto!" Soraka shrilled, finally managing to yank her hand away.

Despite the hurt she could see in the taller girl's eyes, the redhead gave the azulite a flat, condescending look. To her credit, Soraka didn't continue her march, instead taking a moment to rub at the raw circle left around her wrist.

"Look, we've left them in the dust. Now either you can calm down and talk this through with me, or keep on pouting and suffer more. Your choice," she laid out, her eyes narrowed and accusing.

"You wouldn't understand," the azulite hissed, whipping her hand to her side and turning around. Makoto rolled her eyes as her friend quickly chose to restart her march.

"Of course I don't understand, *because you're not talking to me*," the redhead emphasized. "I can't help you if I don't know what's wrong."

Soraka glared at her as the shorter girl kept pace, "I don't *want* your help, Makoto. So please, just… just shut up." The azulite's voice got more and more level as the sentence let on, leaving Makoto’s worries a little more alleviated. Though, that didn't help the sudden stab of pain in her gut that sprouted out after Soraka had denied wanting any help.

"And if I *want* to help…" Makoto started, her words slowly failing her, steadily fading as her thought went on, "What do I do then?"

Soraka paused, taking in a deep breath, eyes never leaving the walk ahead of her, "I don't know… Go home, or something. I don't need someone's help right now. I'd rather be alone."

Makoto clicked her tongue. Even without looking right into them she could feel the fire dimming behind Soraka's eyes. It was something that'd happened to herself a few years back when her

father had attempted to kill her family; that disheartened stature, the lifeless irises, the demands for isolation that were nothing more than cries for companionship. She wasn't about to let Soraka tread that path. At least, not alone.

"That's the last thing you need," Makoto stated, her poise adamant as she came to stand besides the azulite. The younger girl glared down at her.

"Don't tell me what I need. You don't know everything, Makoto," Soraka snarled, resuming her trek.

"Yeah, and? Smarts or not, I'm not letting you out of my sight," the redhead replied smoothly as they finally reached the station. The two swiped their train passes and started their short jog to the boarding platform. "That's the most raw I've seen you since we met. I'm not going to let a good night end on such a shitty note."

Soraka sighed, the bags under her eyes becoming more and more pronounced as the minutes dragged on, leaning against one of the support pillars of the platform, "You don't fucking give up, do you?"

The redhead put her arms behind her neck, stretching out her empty stomach and accidentally prompting it to growl. She gave a wry smile to her younger companion, "Not when there's food on the line, I don't."

Soraka blinked at her with tired eyes. And then she snorted. And she snorted again, her mouth opening in a brief hiccup. And then she devolved into full blown laughter, clutching her gut as she relied almost entirely on the support pillar to keep her steady. A few of the commuters looked their way, most likely finding the sound unsettling or annoying, but to Makoto even that mirthless, tired laughter was music to her ears in the wake of the absolute bile that had poured from Hayami's mouth not ten minutes ago.

"Always with the food, aren't you…?" Soraka giggled, wiping away a tear. Be it from the laughing fit or from the screaming fit, Makoto wasn't able to say.

"Well, yeah, got an image to maintain and all that, right?" Makoto noted, scratching her chin and sashaying once to the side.

Soraka gave a weary smile, though stayed slumped against the pillar, "Yeah… Gotta make sure no one mistakes you for someone who gives a damn…"

"Damn straight," Makoto nodded.

Quiet slipped between the two as they waited for the train, a nice, silent moment, though undermined by a subtle unease. Soraka's eyes had become lifeless, absently staring up into the night sky, craning her neck at what was most likely a very awkward angle. That hadn't stopped the girl's behavior before, admittedly, but the listless way the girl move still gave Makoto shivers.

"The stars are beautiful tonight, don't you think…?" Soraka asked, her voice distant, neither happy nor sad.

Makoto gave a curious glance upward, huffing in amazement that she could actually make out the slivers of light among the light pollution emitted by the city itself, a rare sight in this day and age.

"Yeah… it's nice…" the girl sighed, leaning on the pillar next to her friend. Maybe she couldn't really help Soraka for now, but indulging the girl on a tangent that allowed her to forget, if only for a moment, was enough to settle Makoto's fraying nerves over the whole ordeal. She gave a smirk; she knew how to steer this conversation. "My dad would take me and Aiko star watching when we were younger." Nostalgia leaked from the words, even as the heart of those very words was strained. "Always said that they were guardian angels, looking down on us, that they'd keep us safe when things go wrong…"

Soraka nodded, giving her feet a glance as they shuffled beneath her, "Is that so…?"

"Yeah…" Makoto continued, her voice still wistful and pained. "I don't know how true it is, to be honest. I haven't believed in just about anything since what went down with my family… But, whenever I looked up at them… Well, I guess that side of me hasn't quite died out yet…"

The azulite continued to stare into the speckled abyss. With the way her lips were parted and the way the light bounced off her porcelain skin, even with the empty eyes Makoto had to admit the girl looked stunning.

The redhead blinked, shaking the thought from her head and clamping down on any more outbursts from her subconscious.

"It's hard," Soraka breathed, "Hard to get over things you were so confident in being lies…"

"They weren't lies," Makoto corrected, "Just… misconceptions… That's the word, right?

Soraka frowned, "Yeah, I guess you're right… Doesn't change much."

The redhead bit the inside of her cheek. Somehow, Soraka had managed to walk the conversation back to her problems. For as much as she wanted to avoid confronting the issues at their source, the girl had a habit of dwelling on them.

A gust of wind caught Makoto by surprise, and she looked down just enough to find that their ride had arrived.

"The train's here…" she voiced, nodding to the open doors.

Soraka brought her head down and, upon seeing the carriages, gave a simple 'oh' before approaching. Makoto fell into step beside the azulite, her mind working overtime trying to think of ways to get Soraka's mind off those darker thoughts.

In a flash, she put plan 'B' into action.

"Soooo…. What are you planning to cook tonight?" Makoto asked, threading herself over her taller friend's shoulder. The two grabbed onto the hand holds over head, facing each other in the mostly empty compartment as the train set off towards its destination.

The azulite looked back at her, eyes weighted with dark bags, "I… Probably something microwaved, to be honest… I don't really feel up to cooking. Sorry if that disappoints you…"

Makoto stared at the younger girl, that distraught worm in her stomach wriggling against her belly as it had during most of the preceding fight with Soraka's former friends. She wasn't sure if she should be grateful it wasn't wriggling because she'd go hungry that night.

"Hey… If it's alright with you… I'll cook…" Makoto suggested, gripping her one arm uneasily.

Soraka appraised her with a mixture of awe and confusion before giving an empty smile.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm not in the mood to be taking pity…" the younger girl sighed.

Makoto raised her brow, "It's not pity; it's taking one for the team. Friends do that for one another." The redhead opened her free arm, an invitation that Soraka only had to blink at once before accepting it. The cerulean girl fell into Makoto's arms, resting her head on the shorter girl's shoulder, letting her limp form be cradled by Makoto's tightening grip.

"Thank you, Mako…" Soraka whispered, sniffling once as she buried herself into the girl's neck.

"Not a problem, Rocky," Makoto smiled.

Soraka leaned back, raising a brow at the redhead, "'Rocky'?"

The two parted as Makoto scratched her chin, trying to suppress the blush rushing to her face. Neither of them noticed the train coming to rest at the next station around them.

"Yeah, well, I'm running out of nicknames for you. I kinda peaked early with that 'Eiffel 65' joke, so I thought it'd be smarter to actually give you a real nickname now than keep the joke going till it got old," she explained thoughtfully.

The train jilted back onto its path as Soraka snickered, gripping at her stomach to resist another laugh. And in the moment she looked up at Makoto, the redhead saw that glimmer, that sparkle in the azulite's eyes that told her that the woman in front of her was far from dying; the best aspects, that bright personality, had only been put on hold while this day's ordeal unfolded.

"You're adorable, you know that?" Soraka giggled.

Makoto reddened, her skin becoming almost volcanic. She floundered in place at the compliment, stomping on the ground indignantly, "H-hey! I'm n-not 'adorable'! I'm rough-n'-tumble with the rest of 'em, y' got that?!"

The retaliation only led to more laughter and more missed words of mockery, missed because Makoto was too happy to hear more than just that empty laugh from just a few minutes prior.

And then, as with all best laid plans, it collapsed.

Words from just down the compartment of the train echoed back to where they stood, a man with a deeper voice talking to another a pitch higher, "Shit, man, you can't let the bitch make excuses; every yen counts, get her to give it all over. These girls, get their hands on some coins and they blow it all on stupid shit."

"Yeah, yeah, can't treat 'em like they got any brains, that's for sure. All'em got two bulbs short of a Christmas tree," the second man replied, his voice dragging like a scythe upon the steel paneled floor. Soraka stiffened where she stood, that momentary flicker of light dying far too quickly for Makoto's tastes. "My bitch's so dumb, she freaking loves it like that. I just tell her, 'I'll bust your shit!' and boom, no more complainin'!"

Makoto looked over Soraka's shoulder, just realizing for the first time that these two men were the only other passengers in their compartment. The skeezballs were dressed in casual street clothes, with unkempt beards and shaggy hair. The redhead looked down to her friend, whose face was drawing darker by the second. She reached a single hand out towards the azulite, a sudden pick of icy indecision stabbing into her stomach.

"Soraka…" she murmured, thinking she could pull the younger girl's attention back towards herself. That was a fool's errand.

"Give 'em a bit a slack and they go all homey on you, and they're all like 'I wanna get married'," the first man continued while the second man nodded.

"Don' give them slack, man, not an inch," the other man agreed, "I'm all like, 'you think an idiot cunt like you's gonna be making as much in ten years? Please, your tits are already startin' ta sag!'"

Makoto's lips curled at the blanket statements, her fingers curling into a preemptive fist. It would feel good to knock some sense into these guys. Too good. She needed to resist or else she'd probably land herself in jail. Her father had taught her about all the ills in the world, and though he may have turned out to be one of those monsters his advice in such circumstances had never done her wrong when dealing with them. To make the first move was more

than sinful, it was foolish; to be patient and wait for the fool to make himself known was for the smart and brave. Reacting brashly was her nature, but tapering such impulses was a point of pride for her, especially when the chips were really at stake.

Which didn't seem to be a concern of Soraka's, as the azulite turned on her heels and shuffled back towards where the two men sat, her face neutral but shaded, her steps soundless and void. Makoto only noticed at the last second before reaching out to the taller girl, an alarmed lasso that missed by scant inches. This… was not going to go well.

"Then you dump 'em, and they get all 'why me'," the first man mimicked, raising his hands in mock offense. He leaned onto his knees and pointed to his companion, "You know who we oughta talk to? Haku, he’s good at droppin’ girls. Now *that* bastard..."

Soraka stopped a foot or two away from the men before she started talking. But when she did, her words were cold, calculated.

"Hey, you," she breathed, "I want to know more about your girl."

The two men looked to her, the first one responding first, "Huh…?"

Soraka continued, "The girl you guys were talking about… I wanna know more about her…”

The demand was met with shared confused glances between the two men. The second man looked back at her, eyes drawing more narrow, "You're, like, in high school, kid. You shoul’ be home in bed…"

Even at this distance Makoto could see Soraka trembling. Very cautiously, so as to not trigger some kind of freak-out, the redhead began to snake her way behind Soraka.

The azulite's breath hitched as she ignored the man's suggestion, talking past his incorrect assumption, "Your girlfriend, I bet she loves you and tries really hard to make you happy, doesn't she? I bet you know she does, don't you?" The words were biting, almost inhuman with which she delivered them, so much so that Makoto almost recoiled in her approach. She watched as Soraka's knuckles turned white against the pale lighting of the cabin, "And

instead of saying thanks, you sit there calling her a bitch. Then dump her when she gets old."

The second man leaned over to the first, "Hey, y'know this kid?"

The first man shook his head, equally as confused, "What? No… Never seen her in my life…"

"Is any of this worth living for anymore?" Soraka wondered aloud, looking up to the ceiling as her eyelids began to twitch on an almost microscopic level. "What have I been bothering all this time for? Are all relationships so fucking broken that you don't feel an ounce of shame talking like that in public?" she asked, looking back down at the men. With her empty eyes and cheeks stained in fresh tears, it was as though she pierced through their non-existent souls with her gaze, "Answer me... right now." The growl echoed around the car, her teeth grinding shut as she took a step forward, fists raising, "Come on, tell me. Or else..." Soraka paused, shuddering in place, anger burning through her twisted face, "Or else… Just *tell me*!" The shout was echoed by three equally quick movements.

The first was Soraka, who lunged for the poor excuse for a man seated in front of her, the one berating his girlfriend unabashed.

The second was the man in question, who saw the attack coming a split second early and moved to get out of the way.

The third was Makoto, who had seen this eventuality the minute Soraka had waddled over to dig into the men.

As the first man hit the ground Makoto had already wrapped her arms around Soraka's, locking the taller girl in place. This was a point, though, where Soraka's stature wouldn't help her. While tall, Makoto had had quite the rough time living as an 'orphan', and thus had upper body strength to spare while restraining the enraged azulite.

"LET GO OF ME MAKOTO!" Soraka shouted, thrashing against the redhead.

"NO! I'M NOT GONNA LET YOU MAKE A GODDAMNED MISTAKE!" Makoto shouted back, taking a step back and pulling the girl with her.

The man on the ground skittered to the complete back of the train, hands immediately going for the door handle to the next compartment. "THE FUCK MAN?!" he barked, "BITCH IS RABID, KEEP HER ON A GODDAMNED LEASH!"

Makoto snapped her eyes at the man, her insides finally boiling over in a more… acceptable fashion than violence, "IF SHE NEEDS A LEASH, ASSHATS LIKE YOU NEED A FUCKING MUZZLE! IF YOU HAD A SHRED OF COMMON DECENCY SHE WOULDN'T BE LIKE THIS, PRICKS!"

"We were mindin' our own fuckin' business!" the second man butt in, his voice lower but no less aggressive than anyone else's.

The train beneath them shifted, slowing to a stop at the next station. Immediately Soraka wrenched herself from Makoto's hands and bolted out the door, without even stopping to check which station it was.

Makoto watched her go, dumbfounded if only for a second. She looked back at the men, both of whom were now standing and snarling at her.

"Get out of here, you dyke," the taller man growled.

Makoto rolled her eyes, resisting the urge to hit them herself. She lifted her middle finger as she exited the car, "May your balls shrivel off and get eaten by a squirrel."

The minute her feet hit the platform, she was off, praying that this would be the last time that day she'd have to go running off after her favorite azulite.

O/o\O

"*I've been out maybe about three months now?*"

Her legs burned beneath her, the world smudged into watercolors with her tears.

"*You sound like a kid right now, Soraka, tattling on her friends…*"

Her teeth bashed against one another as they struggled to stay closed, leaving a dull ache along her incisors.

"*I've seen what kind of man you are, and I don't want any part of that.*"

Lies, all lies. Lies to them, lies to herself. She squeezed her eyes closed, blinding her dash into the night.

"*I… Soraka… I didn't…*"

"*Of course you didn't! You never noticed* anything*!*"

Breathing was almost impossible, making her face mirror her hair in complexion. Soraka skid to a halt, briefly realizing that she'd stumbled upon one of the city's numerous highway overpasses, its beautifully carved stone, intricate railing and gorgeously carved murals mocking in the face of its mundane purpose. It was something she could relate to; trying to appear as something more when in reality only serving a single goal; it was just a bridge and she was just his friend.

The friend that had been with him the entire time. That had sat there as they'd read off his prognosis, that had faced every frown with a smile, every ache with soothing words and held his hand as the world seemed to close in around him.

"*Yeah, yeah, can't treat 'em like they got any brains, that's for sure. All'em got two bulbs short of a Christmas tree.*"

The words from the older men burned, like acid against her tongue and razor wire down her throat, but they burned with the weight of truth. She gripped the railing, managing to lean over it just as the first involuntary retch wormed its way up her esophagus. She was thankful that no cars passed below as her stomach made its way to the pavement.

She shivered. She should have known better. She should have known that he never shared any of those looks, that he never shared a sweet word with her outside of basic courtesy, that he never gazed at her the way she had always gazed at him.

"*My bitch's so dumb, she freaking loves it like that. I just tell her, 'I'll bust your shit!' and boom, no more complainin'!*"

If only! If only, she thought, if only she had even had a relationship like that! Then she would at least have the relationship she so craved. Her mind spit back at her, chiding her for such

puerile, juvenile thoughts, but there was no shaking the want to be abused rather than ignored.

"*Then you dump 'em, and they get all 'why me'.*"

Soraka laughed bitterly at that one. Yeah, 'why me?' indeed.

On the asphalt below her bile was but a black splotch against grey stone, creating a splattered pattern that she actually found to be rather… enticing.

"Jesus Christ…" a voice huffed from behind her. It was Makoto. She knew it was Makoto. The redhead was more than persistent. There were a few more exhausted breaths before the other girl's words became more reliable, "Fuck you're hard to keep pace with…"

Soraka didn't spare the shorter girl a glance; no need.

"So, how much longer are you going to keep running like this?" Makoto asked, her voice even. What would normally have been a biting accusation from the spitfire was instead tame and distressed.

The azulite leaned back from the rail, gripping it so as to crane her neck in a backwards stretch. She looked at Makoto from the bend, giving the girl an empty smile, "I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble…"

"Apologizing for that? Seriously?" Makoto scrunched her brow, "Really have gone out of your mind…"

Soraka frowned, leaning forward and looking back out at the glistening cityscape. Makoto was wrong. Nothing had changed. This was how she always felt, like a burden; wanting to be the one to lift the weight and instead becoming the weight itself.

"…Soraka…" the mutter was tentative and lacked confidence. Makoto was quiet after that, watching, she was sure, uncertain how to react.

"…I can't keep running from it. I *still* love him, damnit! I want to hate him! I want to hate her! I want to *so badly*, but I just *can't*!" Soraka shouted to the sky, her voice choked and raw. "I put so much time and effort into it… I should have known it would end up like this! I was blinder than Tokubē was…"

And at that Soraka took one last, longing look at that smattering on the roadway below before finally willing her legs to bend. In moments she had clambered up onto the railing, standing perfectly balanced on the metal pole.

The road was maybe 30… 40 feet down. It was a pretty high bridge. She was sure it'd be painless.

She was confident she saw Makoto's eyes widen out of the corner of her vision.

"Soraka! What the fuck are you doing?!" the redhead shouted. The girl tried to move closer, but Soraka flexed her legs and the she was forced to pull back. For once, the azulite was in full control.

A cool breeze whisked through the air and Soraka closed her eyes, imagining herself in the cool running surf of the ocean, submerged and falling deeper. She smiled as the depths surrounded her and blotted out that harsh sun above. She opened her eyes to the darkened city, the glistening windows like the bubbles of the sea, towering above her.

"Life sucks, y'know? The more I tried to help I only ended up making myself more and more miserable…" she croaked, smiling over a torrent of tears.

She looked Makoto in the eye, her heart finally breaking with the pain she saw reflected in those orbs. There was a titillating thrill from the sight, a vindication of her actions; yes, she would hurt them all the same way. She would not be forgot, she would be the painful stain on their lives like her guts upon the freeway.

In that moment, Soraka chose carefully, rasping out what she fully intended to be her last words, "I'm just an idiot… the biggest idiot in the world…"

And with that she spread her arms and fell, surrendering herself to the metropolitan ocean depths.

There was a pleasant upending in her stomach as gravity took over. She had long ago readied herself to be married to a disabled man, a daily struggle; in comparison, falling was easy.

And then she stopped, her weight becoming far more pronounced as her biceps were caught by an unseen wedge.

Maybe it wasn't as easy as she thought.

Soraka looked up, her gaze empty. To her surprise, she was met with a dangling plume of red hair and the infuriated face of its owner.

"Not…" Makoto snarled, her breath strained under the exertion of holding Soraka aloft, "on my… watch… Hayami…"

"Just… Let me go!" Soraka screeched, shaking in the redhead's grip. She stopped, though, when she got a glimpse past Makoto's mane: the redhead was barely keeping them aloft with stomach dangling just off the railing, leaving them both in an incredibly precarious position. Were Soraka to struggle too much, the other girl would be going with her.

A sick part of her mind liked the idea of not going out alone.

"Just… please, Makoto… Please…" Soraka begged, letting her head sag back down.

"For Christ's sake," the other girl grunted, trying to heft them both back up to the ledge. She only gained a millimeter of ground, "All of this because some boy never got it up over you. Fuck, you're shallower than I thought."

Soraka gritted her teeth, "It's not just that. Everyone… Everyone… Tokubē might never have noticed me… but it's not just him…" She felt herself dragged up another half inch. For a moment Makoto's arms slackened, a moment of weakness that left Soraka dangling close to her objective only for the arms to come back with even more zeal than before. "Mahiru and Sumika are drifting away, with their own problems... and now I've hurt two of the people I can't help but care about the most…" Soraka coughed. "Everyone's drifting away from me… I'm pushing everyone away…." the azulite wheezed, a small drip of bile sliding from her lips.

"Then what…" Makoto snarled harder, giving a hard tug. "… does *that*," she grunted hoisting Soraka up to the bar. "…*make me*?!" the shout resonated across the bridge as Makoto flung Soraka to the bridge, both girls collapsing once their bodies met stone.

The bricks flew up to meet the azulite's face, dragging a long scratch along her cheek and very possibly breaking the bone beneath. Fresh feeling waved through her body, the shot of pain waking up all of her senses and sending a jolt of adrenaline into her

bloodstream. In seconds she was back up, rushing back towards the railing.

And in seconds, she was back down cradling a second bleeding cheek as another wave of pain, this time *just* pain, edged into her bones.

"Not again, you are *not* going off this fucking bridge again," Makoto huffed, shaking her open hand in the air. Its knuckles were split and bloody, perfectly in line with the younger girl's cheek.

Soraka rolled on the ground, gripping the wound, a sound like a dying puppy bounding from her chest.

"Makoto… Please…" Soraka begged again.

"What the fuck am I, huh?" Makoto shouted, reiterating her question. Soraka looked up in time to find the redhead crying. The older girl gripped her chest and bit her lip, "What am I? Fuck those people, I'm here, aren't I?"

The azulite pushed herself to her hands, elbows shaking and unsteady the whole way. She looked up, "Makoto… I… You're…" Words wouldn't come to her lips. The redhead had been left out simply because so little time had been spent with her. To think she wouldn't have been affected by what happened was only natural. But that hurt. Soraka struggled to shake her head. Her thoughts were too muddled to make sense of what was happening.

Makoto fell to her knees and wrapped Soraka in a hug, pulling the taller girl in tight, "You're… the first friend I've had in a long time… And the last two months have been… crazy for me…" She squeezed tighter, rubbing her face into Soraka's shoulder, "Please, *please* don't make it end. You're my best friend… Hell, you're more than that…"

Soraka's shaking hand found its way to Makoto's back, resting like a wet noodle across the girl's spine, "What are you…?"

"Don't make me spell it out, will you?" the redhead snapped. After a prolonged and confused silence, Makoto growled, "Goddamnit… I'm… you… I think I'm…" The spitfire's words died out, what few she spoke after being quiet, reflective, and scared, "I think I'm falling for you. And I don't just think anymore… Seeing you up there… Seeing you fall…" She squeezed hard, almost suffocating

Soraka with how tight it was, "I don't want to live in a world without you…"

Soraka hiccupped ever so briefly, trying desperately to maintain some form of composure. But, within a minute, she failed, her face becoming a fountain of fluids and noises, none of which were very flattering. But that didn't matter. She was in someone's arms. Someone who was genuinely there for *her*, someone who cared for *her*, someone who loved *her*.

All this time she had thought herself the knight looking for the damsel… never once had she thought it'd be the other way around…

But Makoto wasn't finished, her words jittery, "It doesn't matter if you feel the same way or not. I just… I want to be there for you… I want to make sure you're safe… I never want to let you go."

Between the caress and the crying Soraka couldn't breathe at all, but still she managed to hug back with all her might, trying to hold Makoto as tightly as she was holding Soraka.

"Then… then…" Soraka sobbed, "I'll just… never let you go, either… Okay? Promise me… And I'll promise you…"

If it was even possible, Makoto tightened the hold, "In a heartbeat."

Soraka just smiled and pushed her face into the girl's shoulder.

Eventually, all things must end, but that day Soraka discovered why: in the wake of an inferno, new life is borne from the ashes of the old. In the wake of one relationship comes the birth of another.

As she sat there, coated in a mess of her own tears and mucus, nestled in the arms of someone holding her beneath that gorgeous starlit sky, Soraka mused that maybe the fire of the last few years would be worth the burns.

She wasn't sure if it would, but for the first time in what felt like forever, Soraka was eager to see where her future led.

Hearth

Her world was rubble.

She winced as her hand sheared across a piece of exposed sheet metal, though she managed to resist the urge to flinch away; she needed to keep her grip, even with the blood pouring down her palm.

With another mighty heft, Yukima managed to push herself over top the mountainous piles of collapsed concrete, wobbling to a stand in her stiletto boots. It was hard to see with her eyes half-lidded in pain, but once they finally managed to open, she had no problem keeping them wide.

The monstrosity was huge, easily the largest *thing* she'd ever laid witness to in her short time on this planet. Six massive, serpentine limbs reached out from a bulbous center mass composed of cog and clockwork, an angular, emotionless kabuki mask mounted upon the spindly neck atop the monster's form. Around it the world sank and shimmered, its very presence warping the air that surrounded it into fire and pushing the Pacific seas deeper into shore to ground the buildings ofFuzaiumi to dust.

Gritting her teeth, she hefted the rifle from her back, taking aim at the abomination and letting off a single, desperate shot. The bullet erupted forth, causing her to stumble. She didn't even have the chance to see if it had done anything before her exhausted balance overcompensated for the recoil and tossed her forward, over the mound and back down to the thin layer of saltwater below.

She felt her temple crack first, then her nose as she landed face first in the pool, smashing through it to the concrete bottom within a fraction of a second. Her body came after that, the gun in her hand wrenching away and snapping her wrist at an awkward angle. A grunt escaped her lips, drowning in the water, unheard by anyone else.

Yukima rolled to her side, cradling her arm before trying to retrieve the gun with her free hand. What she grabbed instead was

soft and malleable, but still firm enough to support weight. She looked down, finding her hand holding another; hand, that is.

A severed hand.

The sickly girl looked up further, finding the rest of the limbs discarded along a path, their vital essence streaming gently into the ebbing surf. At the end of the trail lay a single torso, the head and neck shredded but still attached, just enough so for her to recognize Satsuki's still, lifeless form.

She starred for only a second, a gasp dying in her throat. Dropping the hand, she returned to seeking out her rifle. She found only a pistol in its place. Muttering a curse under her breath, Yukima stood, letting her limp arm fall to her side.

The monster was still in the skies above, taunting every plan they had thrown against it. Yukima began to step through the wreckage, careful to keep her eye on its eerie, motionless form.

She plotted her path, weaving through what was left of what she hopefully recalled correctly as the financial district. Time distorted, making minutes feel like hours or like seconds with every given foot.

And with one given foot she found herself stumbling yet again. This time, however, she managed to keep herself standing, only losing her sense of balance briefly before recovering. Yukima blinked, chancing a glance at what had caused the issue. Her heart tugged as her eyes dragged across the still legs of a corpse; a girl a year older than her whose head had been smashed beneath a particularly large slab of concrete.

"Mahiru…" Yukima whispered, her jaw aching as the name passed her lips.

A bag of bile forced its way up her throat, but she managed to stomach it back down. Vomiting now would just make her feel sicker than she already was.

There was movement out of the corner of her vision.

The monstrosity, its form still and listless, shifted, gliding through the air with not a flick of its limbs nor a bob of its head. It flittered overhead, flying past Yukima and into the day's setting sun.

In a moment, it shimmered before vanishing entirely, taking with it a number of buildings nearby.

Yukima slumped next to Mahiru's corpse, eyes sallow and drained.

They'd failed. They'd all failed.

She looked to the distance where the thing had disappeared, finding a new figure that stood out amongst the rubble: a bob of blue hair and a seafoam jacket stained red, impaled clean through the abdomen on a section of rebar. She watched as Soraka's legs dangled in the air, moving gently with every passing gust, the blood dripping from her wound flowing down in small spurts to a body in the shallows below.

Makoto's fate seemed to have been more peaceful than the other three's. Her form was unmoving among the waters, her hands cupped together over a smattered series of deep holes in her chest that appeared as a blistering flower against what pale skin exposed by the wound.

This time she couldn't refuse the urge and what little stomach acid she had left made its way into the shallows, dispersing among the lapping water. Exhausted, she rested her head against the stone, her tongue stained with stomach, eyes closed amongst the lulling waves.

"Binet kuhariqua!"

Yukima blinked at the jubilant phrase, her armed hand reflexively pointing the pistol at the new entrant.

A young girl draped in middle eastern garb stood before her, black silken ponytail artfully drooped over her shoulder and eyes wide in a welcoming smile.

Yukima blinked gain, rubbing her eyes with her snapped wrist.

She opened them again. She towered over the tan-skinned girl, gun pointed down at her head as the rest of her lay crushed beneath an onslaught of debris.

"Binet kuhariqua …" the younger girl gasped, a single arm weakly reaching for Yukima's gun.

Yukima blinked again, only to find not the younger girl but instead a familiar tuft of pink hair beneath the barrel of the pistol.

Sumika smiled up at her, the grin tired and resigned as she guided the pistol to the center of her head.

Yukima snarled and writhed against her own skin as her finger tightened around the trigger.

There was a flash as the world went white.

O/o\O

Jaunuary, 2019

Yukima's eyes opened.

Fingers clenched around molten cotton sheets, forefinger reflexively pulling and tugging at the well sewn fabric. A breath was lodged in her throat, leading to a lengthy, airy, and somewhat muted exhale that croaked around the ample living space with little resistance.

She cleared her eyes and tried to sit up, only succeeding halfway as a weight around her right arm kept her pinned to the bed beneath her. It took Yukima a moment to register the rosy poof nuzzling into her shoulder.

The raven girl frowned, gently letting her fingers trail along the rosette's scattered locks, the silken material flowing like water over each pore and fingerprint. The smaller girl wriggled beneath the touch, mewling into the taller girl's elbow as she burrowed deeper beneath the blankets. Such a small, pure thing… well… not so much pure as radiant, Yukima supposed. Still; to have such nightmares, to put the star of her life into such bleak situations…

Yukima drew back, carefully prying herself away from Sumika, expertly using a series of innocent feints and tickles to escape while leaving her girlfriend asleep.

Girlfriend.

The word, despite being well aged, was still so alien to her: almost as alien as the deserts of Pakistan or as antiquated as the nightmares, though exceedingly more pleasant than either.

She rose from the bed and trotted out of the room, slidding a robe on over her pajamas and slipping on a comfortable pair of slippers. Her feet were as a rabbit’s, quietly thumping over the wooden floor as she trekked the hall all the way to her study.

The skyline of the world beyond was alight with street lamps and the occasional lit window, but otherwiseFuzaiumi was silent, or as silent as it would ever get at the blurry time of 4 AM. In just a few hours the early risers would be preparing for their days, and yet here was Yukima, only just awoken from two hours of restless sleep.

She gave a wry smile to herself as she woke her computer, going over to a small kettle in the corner to start some tea; the very term 'restless' sleep meant so little in this life compared to her last one. Here she was safe, behind the walls of her own home, in the arms of someone she loved. No longer was she waking up at some nameless hour, panicking over the sounds of distant-but-alarmingly-close gunfire. Instead, her dreams were her only source of anxiety, pitching bizarre manifestations of her mind against her in some twisting echo of what hell she had experienced in years gone by. Oddly enough, the two seemed to have switched places; when she was away, trapped beyond hope, her dreams were her solace from a torturous reality. Now, as she had found herself a reality worthy of those dreams, the dreams became replaced by nightmares.

It was fitting, she supposed. She'd much rather have the life she had now over returning to those scant, peaceful dreams. At the very least, those dreams had helped her push forward and make something of the disaster that was her teenaged existence.

As the tea finished she returned to her desk, sitting down and pulling up the most recent manuscript, still half finished, taunting her with a number of missing threads, plots and characters. And, like she had so many times before, she dove to the bottom of the page, putting a significant distance between the last words she'd written and the ones she was poised to transcribe.

Yukima sucked in a deep breath and meditated quietly on the dream, doing everything she could to recall each minute and visceral detail.

This was a practice long in the works, one that had already earned her some acclaim, though she was sure what she was attempting now was of a much higher skill level. Transcribing what had happened and having people laud it as 'brave' and 'awe-inspiring' was seemingly easy to her. It had only taken her a few months to pen the auto-biography of her time abroad, and it was thanks to that book and the remainders of her parent's fortunes that she had such a peaceful existence in the present.

But she didn't want to stay idle, and her mind would not rest; her experiences were easy to jot down, but the *feelings* of what had occurred, of what had happened, were much harder to express. And while she had been hailed for her work tugging heartstrings something had always felt… disingenuous about what she wrote, like certain pieces of her emotions were absent from where they were supposed to be.

So she set out to try and quantify those feelings (or otherwise go stir-crazy from boredom), sitting down to pen her first truly original tale, something she hoped worked as well if not *better* than her original novel. And, of course, her dreams played a role. Magical girls and faeries, monsters and mayhem; all perfect representations of those emotions that had felt muted before.

Of course, that was only in her writing, which still felt jilted and stale to her own tastes. She supposed that was the curse of all artists; to feel inadequate among the masterpieces of the past.

But yet, only her writing felt the suffering of the mundane curse. Yukima herself, on the other hand, had been through quite the rollercoaster since returning. Coming back from the dead had a way of drawing attention, and there was no exception for Yukima as the news and gossip circles had quickly catapulted her to the temporary status of national celebrity. She was more than willing to admit that the amount of scrutiny her life had suddenly gained was a major contributor to writing the auto-biography; repeatedly telling the story, over and over, each time being asked for more and more insignificant details had become tiring to the point where just putting it all in writing served as a quicker alternative to scores of lengthy, often repetitive interviews.

Though, she couldn't give all the credit to peer pressure. Mr. Abe, Nobutaka as he'd insisted she call him, had been a gentle hand among a sea of pawing fingers, suggesting that chalking down her experiences would not only serve to lessen her 'responsibility' in giving the world an explanation but also serve as a form of therapy to come to terms with what had happened over the years. His words were rather encouraging and it was that warmth that finally gave her the confidence to put pen to paper (or rather, finger to keyboard) and hash out the first draft of her horror story. Of course, Mrs. Abe, Rise, had *also* weighed in on the suggestion and pushed her with a more… *firm* hand to write, but the badgering was always good natured and only present whenever Nobutaka was the first to broach the subject.

She smiled now, fingers flying over the board, as she recalled just how tightly he and Mrs. Abe had held her when they'd met again after all that time. Sumika really did echo so much of her parents; the calm, fuzzy, passive presence of her father and at the same time that energetic, confident and intelligent edge of her mother. The girl was a miracle that she could encompass such disparate natures so fluidly.

Not to say that Sumika was always like that. As collected as the rosette was today, the girl was decidedly scattered when Yukima had returned. Those elements that had defined her were still present but they were buried under a thick layer of self-consciousness and chronic indecisiveness. It had been painful to see the gentle soul in such turmoil, and it was more than a relief that the two had pushed beyond those times… despite the brief periods of regression that would rear their ugly heads. Sumika would still occasionally fall into a slump and lock herself in their room and in similar fashion Yukima would still occasionally tuck a combat knife beneath her pant cuffs out of unwarranted paranoia. Even the nightmares could be considered a form of regression, though by virtue of the fact that she hadn't woken up screaming and thrashing at an undead assailant it was a strict upgrade from where she had been at the beginning of their relationship.

For a brief moment, Yukima stopped typing, giving herself a moment to lean back and reflect, thumb absently spinning the silver band around her ring finger.

Fiancé. It hit her again that she was still reflexively using 'girlfriend' when the correct term was 'fiancé'. Yukima was engaged. She was alive and engaged to Sumika Abe. There was no force on the planet, no terrorist or sandstorm that could tear the giddy, stupid smile that encroached on Yukima's face. There was no way any of her dreams back in those hellish days had anything on this imperfect reality.

But such a sweet promise was no magic salve for the fact that both of them were still broken in some way; chipped at and chiseled into new shapes by the passing of time. It felt as though that quiet moment atop Mahiru's balcony had happened among another life. In fact, in mention of the blonde, it felt as though much of their circle of friends had gone through similar hardships, especially back when Yukima had returned where their group operated disparately of each other, paired off in some unconscious fashion in order to weather the stormy emotions around them.

Yukima had monopolized much of Sumika's time in those early days, and even now she was sure the rosette doted far too much on her in comparison to the others. That led to a noticeable strain between the survivor and two of the other members from their original quintet. Mahiru and Soraka had gone from close friends, a caring senior and a mischievous imp, to being rivals for her girlfriend's affection and time. Of course Sumika had filled her in, about the lengthy time spent with Mahiru, about inducting Soraka in for a collective relationship, and that knowledge, though gifted willingly in an attempt to stem further drama, still ate at her confidence. Even though she kept her unease well guised, the looming presence of measuring up to Mahiru had landed Yukima in a number of emotional loops that took Sumika's chiding to break her away from.

Otherwise, the two were more stiff and confrontational with her when she had attempted to reengage in friendship with them. Mahiru, despite politely saying otherwise, was quite obviously still

somewhat sore about what happened between her and Sumika, and the uncomfortable air that swirled between the three would not die out for a year following Yukima's return.

Soraka was less stiff and more confrontational, several times pulling Yukima to the side to complain about how much Sumika's free time had been monopolized. Thankfully Yukima had come to weather direct aggression rather well over the years, so she was less affected by the azulite's arguments, but there was a twinge of guilt when she looked back on her cold-shouldered approach to dealing with the situation. Soraka, though much warmer in the present, still seemed somewhat irritated by how little time she had to spend with her best-friend-turned-almost-lover-turned-best-friend.

Which led Yukima's thoughts to the two key elements that had softened her return; Satsuki and Makoto. If she were honest, her opinions of the two weren't of the highest caliber, since she occasionally found the younger girl more annoying than endearing and often found the older one more crass than necessary. But the duo brought their own charms to the table, and she supposed that's what made them such good partners for Mahiru and Soraka.

Mahiru was noticeably less lonely with the platinum blonde high school student prowling in the background, and even when compared to how she had been back when Yukima had been normal it was easy to tell that the two were more than incredibly happy sharing the unique bond that came with living together. Though, there was some question as to when Mahiru would finally notice that amount of adoration leveled at her by her junior had stepped beyond the more platonic and familial realms; poor Satsuki, despite the occasional grating whining and screeching was left in the dark when it came to her emotions and both Yukima and Sumika felt pity for the younger girl.

Soraka, meanwhile, was more often distracted by Makoto than she was soothed, often times with the redhead butting in to create her own form of drama with the azulite in order to sway attention away from her gripe with someone else. The spitfire was more intelligent than Yukima had initially given credit; there was a jaded wisdom that Makoto seemed to be imbued with, something

earned through trauma that Yukima had instantly gravitated towards. Despite her openly flamboyant and aggressive nature, the two shared a level of respect that didn't need to be spoken. And, unlike Satsuki, Makoto's attraction to Soraka wasn't kept secret, and in fact became a point of good-natured prodding during the first year and a half of them knowing each other (which was ultimately good, because two girls holding secret crushes would have been too much drama for Yukima to handle, let alone care about).

For her part, Soraka didn't seem to mind the romantic notions filtering between the two of them. Yukima's understanding of the azulite's situation came from a number of differing sources, leading to a scattered piecemeal of what probably actually occurred, but by the sounds of it she'd had a rather major falling out with the boy she'd liked, leading to some kind of self-harm attempt a couple of times. Makoto and even Sumika were light on the details, and Mahiru had a less than stellar view of how everything had gone down. Recovery was apparently slow for Soraka, who (thanks to Makoto) tried to be more active and not sequester herself from the world. And those efforts did pay off. She eventually eased up on her scrutiny of Yukima, she was able to look Mahiru and Sumika in the eye, and even now she was making an active effort to repair what she could from the ashes of her friendship with Fumine. The crowning point of all this was probably when, at the end of a trip to the pier with what had become their regular sextet, she'd brazenly and suddenly kissed Makoto in front of all of them.

Yukima stifled a chuckle as she thought back on the moment; seeing the normally cool and snarky girl suddenly completely flummoxed had been something of a scene, so much so that Yukima regretted not having a camera ready.

The last of the original five was arguably the biggest outlier among the newly formed group: Fumine. Long before Soraka had even attempted repairing their friendship, Yukima had decided to reach out to the brunette. Yukima had recalled the girl as arguably the most composed one among the original five, rivaled only by Mahiru's ability to combine that composition with graceful humor. Now, though, she found the girl to be more a bundle of nerves than a

well collected debutant. It had been an odd first meeting, but Fumine had welcomed Yukima back with open arms and in fact reveled in the regained connection, using Yukima as a form of confidant.

The girl had been incredibly troubled over everything that had transpired with Soraka, to the point where she was having anxiety attacks about how distant she'd become from their circle of friends. Had it not been for Tokubē 's presence by her side, the girl might have done something as drastic as Soraka. For Yukima, the situation was surreal; typically she'd felt she'd been the one to most often confide in others, often to Mahiru or even Fumine herself, but now she was on the receiving end of such confidence and it proved itself pretty rewarding in an incalculable way. It also helped that Fumine shied away from any details to do with Yukima's vanishing act; the squeamish girl was content with the bare basics of what Yukima had described and restrained herself more than even Sumika ever did from digging for new tidbits, which was something that Yukima could certainly stop to appreciate. She was sick of ridiculous struggle, especially since it was her work now; some mundane troubles were far more inviting.

It was only after Soraka had proclaimed that she wanted to make amends with the girl that Yukima finally got to use her new position to its fullest potential. To this day she'd been a critical mediator for the two to converse through, and she was especially pleased when Fumine had mentioned that Soraka was the front runner to be maid of honor at her wedding. While some would probably have taken that as a slight against Yukima and her hard work, Yukima looked to it as a shining success; something that not only made her feel wanted but *needed*.

She stroked the silver band once more. Fumine's wedding was in a couple of months and she calmly wondered when she and Sumika would finally tie the knot as well…

There was an admission that neither of them knew exactly when they'd get married; it was still illegal in Japan, even with word spreading around each province about upcoming elections. But Yukima had sworn off plane flights for potentially the rest of her life, so escaping overseas was made a more difficult notion. Still, Sumika

was content to wait, as was she. Even if they were old and grey when it happened, so long as they stuck by each other, they didn't need some fancy ceremony or some document in a ledger at the city hall.

Of course, Mahiru had been opposed to that line of thinking. She came from a rather 'proper' family, and despite being orphaned (and of a markedly different alignment than her parents) she was still very staunchly in favor of weddings to cap off a relationship. Yukima allowed herself an amused huff. She adored Mahiru, but the girl was almost as staunch as Fumine when it came to the 'proper' order of just about anything. In similar fashion, Satsuki echoed the decree, leading Yukima to subconsciously label the teen a 'noisy little mouse'.

Soraka was always one to jump in to defend the two, citing that 'love is love' and that Yukima and Sumika would be just fine taking things at their own pace. The azulite's defense was a surprisingly welcome force, especially considering how much bad blood the two had managed to work through.

From there, of course, the room would erupt into debate and argument, all of which was pleasantly lighthearted. Laughter and retorts, jokes and barbs.

Yukima saved her document and put the computer back to sleep; she wasn't going to get as much work done as she'd hoped. Writing down the ideas her dreams had given her was about as far as far as she could push her delirious state this early in the morning.

She yawned, stretching her arms high as two warm, lithe constrictor's wrapped around her torso from behind. Yukima let her arms fall, cupping the hands clenched just below her sternum. A gentle poof landed on her shoulder, rubbing into the crook of her neck as though a cat.

"You're up too early…." Sumika yawned, planting a light kiss to Yukima's shoulder.

The survivor couldn't help but shiver at the contact. She smiled.

"So are you. Don't you have work in the morning?" Yukima asked, reaching up and stroking near the rosette's ear.

"I close the bar tomorrow. I told you, I like the night shifts…"

"Right, right; well, Counselor Abe, does that mean you have time to stay up?" Yukima asked, smiling more mischievously this time.

Sumika shook her head, "No… too sleepy… In the morning…"

Yukima's playful smile softened and she twisted her head to kiss the bartender on the temple.

"Alright. C'mon, let's get back to bed, okay?"

"Mmmn," Sumika nodded.

Sumika didn't let go as Yukima stood, forcing her to stand at a more awkward angle. Ultimately though, the two managed to make it back to their shared sheets, snuggling deep under the covers to await the break of dawn so it could be promptly ignored.

For Yukima, moments like these, teetering on the edge of awareness and sleep, shared with the most beautiful woman on the plant… they were heaven. She could only hope that sleep would bring back those sweeter dreams that so reflected her current world.

Because right now, if only for a little while, her world was perfect.

Rekindled

May, 2019

Stark white garlands strung atop marble pillars, platinum table cloths folded around the seats of smooth white pine chairs, and a glowing, glistening white cake that towered over it all.

Yes, Mahiru smiled, this was exactly how she hoped to have her own wedding one day. She made a mental note to thank Fumine for the chance to help organize the event and to cater; as difficult as the job had been, the chance to run some trial and error for her own future plans definitely offset the additional stress. Though, not necessarily the guilt; using a friend's wedding as a guinea pig for your own wasn't considered thoughtful, now was it?

She shook her head, amused with her own benign duplicity. Waist braced comfortably against the balcony's railing, she took in the night, watching as the filled reception hall bustled with levity, light and laughter, eagerly soaking in the positive rays wafting through the massive hall's windows with every available pore.

Even with that boost, though, her cheerful mood didn't necessarily last. Oh, she kept the façade up; she was an expert with the kindly eyes and the good natured smile mounted on her face. But the genuine feeling of relief never seemed to stay all that long.

Her eyes accosted the floor and slowed like molasses when they found an unruly mane of red hair. Though she was often to deny it vocally, deep below she still felt sparks percolating in the recesses of her heart every single time she looked at Makoto. The wildfire had been such a catalyst in her life, a savior of sorts, that it would probably be impossible to shake every ounce of romantic affection still coiled inside of her.

Mahiru watched as Makoto stalked the dessert table, descending upon the well-carved cake like a raptor, razor fangs bared just as a wave of mahogany hair stepped beside her. Fumine's

more refined form sought the same prey: the largest carving of cake, and also the last with a white chocolate flower on top. Mahiru stifled a chuckle as the two shared challenging stares; one hungry and ravenous, the other haunting and daring, like a banshee waiting to curse an unlucky traveler.

Knowing that an altercation might occur, she began to push herself off the railing, only to have her action rendered moot as a swath of blue and black burst onto the scene to ensnare the unruly redhead.

"Makoto!" Soraka snapped, struggling against the thrashing entrepreneur, "Makoto, that's the last flower, let the bride have it!"

"Listen to her, Mako!" the smaller girl piped up, yanking at Makoto's arm opposite of Soraka. "You're being rude!"

Makoto sent her girlfriend a glare, all the while snarling at her second captor, "Hina, it's an *all you can eat buffet*, which means first-come, first-serve! Guess who got here first?!"

"I think that would be in debate," Fumine noted, her smile still crooked and her gaze still hooked firmly into Makoto's skull.

The shorter girl sneered, "Oh please, show me proof you got here first. Hell, I'd be willin' to look at the security cameras!"

"We're not doing that, Makoto! Bride gets to go first, even if it’s seconds," Soraka growled, hoisting her girlfriend closer.

Makoto twisted and looked Soraka in the eye, leering. Mahiru couldn't make out what the redhead said in such a hushed tone, but it apparently was enough to make both Hina and Fumine turn crimson.

Soraka, though, was unfazed. "Yeah? And if *you* don't start *behaving*, I won't for a whole *month*. You got that?"

Makoto blanched at the rebuttal, her movements freezing; prey caught by a much, much larger predator.

"L-l-ladies! P-please! Can we remain… *polite*?" Fumine flubbed, eyes jostling inside her head. Makoto slowly slid out of Soraka and Hina's grasp just as Fumine claimed the small dessert plate.

Hina perked up, blinking, "Uh… Hey, guys…where'd the flower go?"

Fumine, Soraka and Makoto all glanced down to the slice, now conspicuously missing its crowning garnish. It was then that all of their gazes, Mahiru's included, were drawn to the opposite side of the dessert table, where a very self-satisfied duo stood.

One was a girl, on the verge of her adult life. She stood a solid inch or two shorter than Makoto and mirrored the girl's fiery locks, thought they were braided in a low ponytail instead of an unkempt mane. The other was a boy edging close to pubescence, with a cherubic face and a soft, shaggy head of brown hair. The two were mid-high five, their whitened lips still freshly coated, when they were finally discovered.

"Aiko…" Makoto growled.

Fumine's voice matched, her eyebrow twitching, "Ryuuki…"

Aiko turned, giving the two a softer rendition of Makoto's signature grin before turning on her heel and pushing Ryuuki towards the nearest doorway, "Run YuYu, we've been had!"

The boy gave a proud thumbs up, his tenor voice carrying quite eloquently, "It was delicious, Miss Yazuno!" before he scampered off to Aiko's prompting.

"Get back here, you twerps!" Makoto snarled, chasing after her sister.

"It's Kagurau! Miss Kagurau!" Fumine called, her voice suddenly more concerned with the improper name calling than the flower itself.

Hina trailed after them, "Aiko! No fair! Why didn't you tell me!?"

The quintet of comedians filtered through the door as an enraged train, the bushy umbrella of Fumine's dress bobbing just behind everyone else.

"They're really a bunch of clowns aren't they?"

Mahiru raised her brow, turning to face her new, rather tall, companion.

"This says the woman who wanted to wear white and pink polka dots to a wedding…" the blonde snarked, finally releasing some of the built up laughs through a good natured prod.

Satsuki pouted, locking her gangly arms at the joints as her fists balled, "I looked good in it, though…"

Mahiru rolled her eyes, "Yeah, when you were twelve maybe. Now it just looks too… eye catching. Rule one of a wedding: don't show up the bride. Besides, it's not just your taste in dresses; if that were cheesecake, you'd be right up there with Makoto. It's why I made it a red velvet cake instead…"

"Okay, okay, that was *one* time where I kinda went overboard!" the teen groaned, grabbing her forehead.

"*Three* times. I'm not as blind as you think I am, and I'm *sure* there were more from what little I *have* seen," the blonde chuckled. She peered up at the taller girl, the back of her mind still reeling at how sudden the petite girl's growth spurt had been back when she was 16, but keeping that line of thought subdued to transmit a calm, accepting eye to her housemate. "It's fine, though; you wouldn't be you without those odd cheese cravings…"

Satsuki blushed and looked away, scratching at the back of her neck, "Geez, make me sound like some kind of monster, why don't you?" The younger girl twisted to the side to look out over the distant city lights, leaning down and resting her elbows on the railing. Her face, if only for a split second, became more pensive. "Would… would you make me cheesecake for when I… before college in the fall…?"

Mahiru had to struggle to keep up her smile.

The wedding had allowed her to forget, if only for a moment, the issue that had been drilling itself into the back of her head since. Satsuki, her constant companion of four years, was going to be moving out at the end of summer, striking out on her own for the first time in an accelerated languages program in America. Alone. Just as Mahiru would be.

"Yes, I believe that's more than doable," Mahiru replied, doing her best to maintain her mask. She deepened the smile just a touch, even going so far as to close her eyes, "Just promise me not to make a mess, okay?" The words left with a light chuckle, one so feathery it'd be hard to tell how forced it actually was.

Satsuki, however, did not seem amused, her long platinum hair falling over the straps of her pressed-white dress. "…You don't have to hide it around me, Mahiru…" the taller girl said, her face falling sour.

Mahiru twisted to look out at the city herself, though less to sight-see and more to save face. "You're not the only one here…" Mahiru replied, letting her tone slip a little bit lower.

Satsuki just gave a light 'hmmm' in response. The two sat there, quiet, letting the festivities behind them drown out the night in both sound and light. Mahiru wracked her brain for a number of conversation topics, something to lighten both their moods, but each time her predicted playout ended with them on the same depressing topics, the same disheartening dialogue. She was about to excuse herself when she noticed Satsuki's knuckles whitening on the rail.

"Mahiru, I love you."

The blonde locked up, her spine chilling while her heart beat ever faster. Her eyes flew up to the younger girl's, the taller figure shivering and shaking, arms locked stock still and her face wet with the first traces of fearful tears. She wanted to respond, but any inkling as to *how* didn't come quickly. She settled on turning away, looking pointedly in the opposite direction to let the heat rising to her cheeks and ears subside.

"No…" she finally said after a prolonged pause. "No, you don't…"

Satsuki hissed, jerking to look at her older friend. "Y-yes, yes I do!" she snapped back. "Don't speak like you know how I feel!"

"Satsuki," Mahiru twitched, "I'm more perceptive than you give me credit for. Don't think this is a surprise to me… I kinda had a thought that this might be coming…"

The platinum girl let her jaw sag, teeth limply trying to clench and only making half the journey, "You knew?"

"Since you were sixteen," Mahiru replied. "And you're just… Satsuki, it's a puppy crush, okay? I know what it's like. I had a crush on the lawyer that helped me out when my parents died… It took forever for that to go away."

Satsuki's eyes narrowed, "You've known I've felt this way for two years and never said anything?"

"Of course not." The blonde rolled her eyes, "I didn't want to burst your bubble and break your heart."

The platinum girl persisted, "You've known for *two years* and you still think it's some kind of 'puppy crush'?" That gave Mahiru pause. She had forgotten to take into account how much faster time seemed to be moving for her now that she was older. She was about to respond when Satsuki continued, "Do you know *why* I didn't tell you? Two years, and you think I wouldn't have admitted it to you in that time?"

Mahiru shrugged, finally looking her friend in the eye again, "I just thought you were embarrassed!"

"Well… yeah, okay, it was partly that…" Satsuki relented momentarily, scratching her reddening neck. She recovered quickly reaffirming her rather obstinate stance, "But-but-but, I also knew you'd just think I'm some kind of kid. I know how you think Mahiru, I wanted to wait until you were comfortable, especially since you're so anxious about being the older person in a relationship!"

Mahiru narrowed her eyes back, snorting, "Now who's making assumptions, Satsuki? 'Don't speak like you know how I feel', right?"

Satsuki stomped, "You've been my role model for four years Mahiru, you've been my *guardian*, I would like to think I've picked up on a few things about you!"

"Yes, and maybe you should take that into consideration; I'm like family to you at this point," Mahiru retorted, letting some of her exacerbation bleed through. "You're practically asking out your older sister… hell! You're practically asking out your mother!" The words left Mahiru's mouth before she could even comprehend how they could be interpreted.

Satsuki froze, amber eyes widening in surprise, droplets of hurt searing into the corneas. This was closely followed by actual droplets of saline. On reflex Satsuki's arm jerked to the side, hand clawing as though she were about to slap Mahiru, only for the girl to stop her arm mid-reel, a rather pointed and physical effort on her part. She sucked in a breath, hissing through her teeth as she did so.

"Don't… *ever*… compare yourself to my mother…" Satsuki seethed. "You might have taken me in, you might have cared for me, but you have *never* been a replacement for her; am I *clear*?"

Mahiru was taken aback. Normally Satsuki was a sweet, caring young girl, rivaled only by Sumika with her optimistic attitude and positive disposition. To see her… *angry* was scary, let alone unsettling.

"S-Satsuki-i?"

"No!" the younger girl snapped. "My mom… She always told me to look for the best in the world, even when it's unfair… Always told me to hope, to pray, and to work towards the world I want… She never talked about failing so bad you give up, she never talked about letting go of what you love, and she never told me to back off when I feel sad; those were all things *you've* told me. Don't compare yourself to her… Please…" The last plea was made with an exposed heart, a fresh wound unplastered.

"Satsuki… I'm sorry, I didn't mean to… That was callous of me…" Mahiru stuttered, her eyes growing heavy. Her eyes flowed back to the ballroom and found a number of eyes peering out at the rather vehement conversation; not *all* the eyes, but enough that Mahiru was beginning to feel self-conscious, "This… Maybe we should talk about this all later…"

Satsuki shook her head, "You'll just run again. You always do when you have to face something like this…"

Mahiru cringed, knowing that, while true, the statement did nothing to relieve the number of people looking at them, "Really, Satsuki, this isn't the time…"

"'This isn't the time', 'It's just a crush', 'I'm like your mother'… Do you realize you're the only one here making excuses, Mahiru?" Satsuki asked, looking up to the sky as her face finally unclenched from its infuriated wrinkles. Mahiru felt the words land like a physical blow across her cheek and the other girl persisted, "If you really don't like the idea of giving me a chance, then why don't you just say you don't like me like that? Why do you have to keep making excuses?"

The blonde stayed silent as Satsuki faced her, tears flowing freely now, "I… This is one of the last nights I have my chance to ask

you… I've got about a week to ship the last papers in to get all of the scholarships before I'm locked in to the university. I… I want… I want something, a reason, to stay… I *need* one Mahiru… I don't want to go, but if there's nothing here for me…"

Satsuki fell forward, Mahiru barely raising her forearms in time to catch her. The younger girl pawed at the silken shawl around Mahiru's shoulders, eyes staining the smoothed fabric, hicking, "I'm an adult now, Mahiru… I… I'm old enough to know what I want. I love you, so please, please, *please*… Tell me if I'm right or if I'm wrong… do you want me to stay or do you want me to leave?"

A knot twisted in Mahiru's chest, the words leaving her breathless. Every demon in her life, her anxieties and fears, slammed into her like a cannonball to the gut and she was left unable to even respond. It only took a moment for Satsuki to glance at her and know, to understand, that Mahiru couldn't respond.

Satsuki furrowed her brow and backed away, folding her hands genially. Then, without a word, she sped towards the archway at the end of the balcony, exiting out onto the stone pathway that led out towards the garden which in turn led out towards the local village center.

It was only when Satsuki was at the tree line that the numbness entrenching Mahiru in silence began to subside, but even then the feeling was swiftly replaced by a newer numbness more intense than before. The platinum girl vanished behind the wall of leaves and foliage leaving Mahiru very much alone. One of her hands fell limply against the granite rail beside her, the warmth of her hand shriveling against to the cool stone masonry.

And all at once familiar pangs began to echo from within her chest, an old companion of ill repute that she had come to terms with years ago, a transitory curse made eternal by the passage of time. The realization of what she had done, through her inaction, began to sink in. The edges of her vision began to warp, the grass, blackened in shadow, became less than even the inky blur it ought to be, the moon a lifeless disk without face, the stars but specks instead of gleaming gems.

Mahiru inhaled, closing her eyes and focusing.

She was okay. She was scared to lose Satsuki; she knew this, and she knew this well. Be it physically, emotionally, or both, that fear was ever present in her life, a crude anxiety wedged after incidents gone by. But in times of such strife she reminded herself; there would always be Makoto, there would always be Sumika and Yukima and Soraka, there would always be Fumine. She had friends. She was never really alone, and to know that restored the world to its rightful contrast, with sharp edges and twinkling stars. Another lesson learned hard but well earned that helped her function normally on the day-to-day.

Even still, with her technique, the world did not completely return to normalcy, and something still felt decidedly missing without a certain bundle of energy nearby. To even know they were at odds was almost painful.

"Yeesh…"

Mahiru blinked, having been stuck in a stupor of emotional discontent for who-knows how long. She turned to find the Soraka's svelte form draping itself over the railing behind her, seafoam dress wrinkling at her waist as though ocean waves. She looked over at the blonde, her cerulean stare deadpan and tired.

"How did you ever live with that woman…" Soraka groaned, rubbing her eyes, "I might as well keep her on a leash at this point with the way she acts…"

It took Mahiru a moment to realize Soraka was referring to the earlier incident with Makoto and the cake.

She tried a smile, but it was so leaden with unrelenting emotion that she didn't need to glance in a mirror to know it looked painfully fake, "Yes, well, she wasn't *quite* as… uh… *feral* back when I first knew her…"

Soraka huffed in acknowledgement, seemingly ignoring Mahiru's emotionally sorry state, "Ain't that the truth? She seems to get more rambunctious every year… Then again, that's also kinda what makes her great, I guess… I mean, I'm also one of the few people who can reel her in, and that sort of feels *really* vindicating…"

"What was it you threatened her with back at the table, anyway? I didn't quite hear what she'd originally threatened…"

Mahiru asked. It probably wasn't the best time to continue this particular conversation, talking about couple life with Soraka that is. It only served to compound the lonely feeling she was so desperately waging a war against inside herself. Were it not for her general curiosity and some small delusion that keeping the blue girl talking would distract her, the conversation would have stopped dead almost immediately.

"Oh, that?" Soraka laughed. "She threatened to not put out for a week. I threatened to quadruple that." Somewhat forced, though still from somewhere genuine deep below, Mahiru managed a chuckle. The azulite continued, gripping her shoulder and letting her smile fall to some pleasant, distant place, "Though, not quite sure how well I could have held that up… I might have a way to pull her back, but she… she always seems to know how to make me cave right in…"

Mahiru put up a better smile this time, "That sounds rather romantic… You balance each other out, I suppose. Not many people are quite that lucky…"

Soraka nodded, letting her smile fall, "Then why did you turn her down?"

The blonde clenched in place, her muscles clamping still.

She turned away, back to the night, "That's none of your concern, Soraka…"

Soraka groaned, rolling her eyes as she slumped against a nearby flowerpot, one of the many flourishes bequeathed on the 'main' pillars of the railing. "I've said those same words… like… four billion times at this point and all it winds up meaning is 'I don't want to talk about it because I'm confused'…" the azulite huffed.

Mahiru allowed her brow to twitch, a graciously gifted visible hint for Soraka to change the subject. But, the cerulean gaze leveled at her did not stir, and thus the blonde found no other recourse than to retort the statement, "Not everyone has the same defenses, Miss Hayami; do not make assumptions so blithely."

The azulite hummed, not directly replying to the curt words. Instead her eyes glazed over to one of the few well occupied tables. Mahiru followed the gaze, finding herself trained to a rosy fluffball

and her sharply dressed companion, both sitting quietly and giddily sharing a slice of cake between them. Sumika dabbed a piece of frosting to Yukima's chin before kissing it off, an act that was followed by a hearty laugh from one of the table's other occupants, a rather boisterous older woman and her much more sober husband. Realizing they had an audience, the young couple recoiled, blushing, only for Yukima to boldly grab her fiancé by the chin and pull her into a deep, amorous kiss, one that from this distance seemed to settle Sumika's nerves.

"God, Sumika's such a nerd…" Soraka chuckled.

"Yeah, they certainly are…" the blonde sighed. Mahiru's verbal reaction, however, didn't quite align with what she felt. Each section of the saccharine act had been borderline painful to watch, to see that jovial face be tied to someone other than herself. To know the two were betrothed was just a nail in the coffin and it had quietly been driving the baker mad for months.

Noticing Mahiru's mental withdrawal, Soraka smiled softly, her eyes alight with mischief.

"You're still crushing on her, aren't you?" the azulite posited, leaning forward to get beneath Mahiru's chin.

On reflex, Mahiru recoiled a step, blushing and raising her hands.

"I… no, that's… that's none of your concern!" the baker chattered. It took a moment for her own words to really resonate with her mind; by the time she realized what she'd said it was too late.

"Bingo," Soraka smirked.

"What 'Bingo'?! There aren't any games at play here, Soraka!" Mahiru asked, clenching up. She knew perfectly well where Soraka's devilish plan had been going. But what surprised her is that Soraka's smile melted from her Machiavellian grin to a Guineverian beam.

"I know what that's like," she explained softly, sidling closer. There was still a respectful distance, nothing becoming of a come-on, but it was definitely a show of intimacy that Soraka and Mahiru rarely ever expressed with others. "It becomes reflex," she continued, letting her frown dip. "It's hard to get rid of it, to open up, especially when you fuck up a lot like me… But I promise you

Mahiru, I'll listen, just open up a little okay? I'll listen… or if not me, then Makoto, or Sumika or even Yukima… We're all here for you, okay?"

Mahiru gripped her biceps and squeezed, feeling her junior's concerns lord over her. Eventually, though, that tension had to give, and finally Mahiru released a breath.

"It's… This is really hard, I guess…" she groaned. "Usually if I have a problem I talk about it with 'Suki…. But with something like this… I don't know how to deal with it."

"What would the harm be?" Soraka asked. "I mean, it's not like you've put yourself out there the last four years; why not just give her a shot?"

Mahiru tightened up a bit, but forced herself to stay open conversationally. "I'm… scared. We're more than just friends already, we're anchors, and if we were to have a relationship and break up… that'd fall apart on me… And even then, my track record with the ladies in my life seems to always wind up in disaster… Why even *try* at this point…?"

"Because you're lonely?" the azulite returned. "There's some phrase in English, something like 'Man cannot survive on bread alone'. You might be alive, but are you really *living* if you keep giving in to your fears like this?"

The blonde shrunk, "I… I guess you have a point there. Things stopped really settling well with me when I started suspecting she might… you know, have feelings for me…"

"Well then, that begs an obvious question: do you have feelings back?"

Mahiru paused, breathing just a moment to compile her thoughts. But as she sifted through her memories and feelings, she realized something; she shouldn't have to. With the impulse in control, she responded, "Yes. I think I do."

The azulite cocked her head to the side, "So then why don't you accept *her* feelings?"

This too was an impulse response, though one that had certainly spent more time ruminating in her mind, "Because I'm terrified I'm just going to screw myself over again… or that life might

screw me over again…" At this point Mahiru was shaking, the words not quite resonating so well with her mind, but certainly resounding within her chest and along her spine.

"We've all been there," Soraka grinned earnestly. "Believe me."

"You're awfully perky about all of this," Mahiru noted, eyes narrowing at the giddy girl.

Soraka huffed and leaned back, "That's because at *this* point I *know* it gets better…" Then, rather suddenly, her mood morphed again, once more soft, though with an extra tender edge. Whereas her look of concern a few seconds ago had been more along the lines of a welcoming blanket, this one conveyed a much more exposing initiative; a baring of her soul.

And indeed, that's what the azulite did, in a sense. She slowly pulled a small velvet box from the folds of her dress, running her thumb along the golden trim of the case with care.

"It really *does* get better, Mahiru…" Soraka repeated wistfully.

Mahiru's eyes widened as she reached forward to clench down on Soraka's hands, "You and Makoto are-?!"

"Not engaged yet, I'm still working up the courage to ask her. That, and right-time, right-place, y'know…?" she shrugged. She pocketed the ring case. "I can't fall behind with the love bugs over there showing me up. I got an edge because I'm *fairly* certain Makoto and I'd be willing to get married out of the country, but Sumika caught the bouquet, so my plan to propose on the spot got shot in the foot pretty quickly…" The girl chuckled, looking back to the sky. "I guess the wedding didn't help me feel any less pressured to join the bandwagon…"

Soraka sucked in a breath and stood up straighter, looking Mahiru dead in the eye.

"The point I'm trying to prove here… eh… sort of…" she fumbled, scratching her cheek, "The point I'm trying to prove is that we've all been to that place, where we're all scared to move forward with life. But things *get better*. Sumika used to be living at home lost in a daze, now she's one of the best damn bartenders in the city (probably) and engaged to the girl of her dreams!" At this point

Soraka became more animated, waving her arms in the air, "Yukima apparently pulled off some Rambo shit just to get back to her, and look now: a comfy life as an author with a creampuff like Sumika hanging on her arm! And…" she slowed down, fingers resting over the surreptitious pocket containing the velvet box, "Makoto saved my life… And yeah, it sucks being in middle management, but that's what schmoozing up to Mrs. Abe's for. And we always have enough to eat thanks to Makoto's food cart. Life can *always* be worse, but if you push for it, if you believe in it, it gets *better*!"

By the end of Soraka's babbling Mahiru found herself fighting a fit of giggles, "I think Sumika's rubbing off on you. You're way more optimistic than I remember…"

Soraka flashed her teeth, "Hey, I've always been optimistic; just because I was a smart ass doesn't mean I wasn't *trying* to stay positive!"

"If only that worked as intended for me…" Mahiru sighed. She glanced in the taller girl's eyes, suddenly wishing for Sumika or Makoto at her side just so she wouldn't feel so dwarfed by the two girls she'd talked to this evening. "You know, you stumbled there at the beginning but the rest of that was really… smooth. More smooth than normal… Was that rehearsed?"

Soraka blinked, reaching back to scratch her head as a blush flashed across her face, "Uh, well… y'know… The rest of us kinda saw this comin' a mile away… We all agreed to come up with something just in case we could help out…"

"'Rest of us'?" Mahiru asked, brow drawing, "So there was a conspiracy behind this?"

"Satsuki doesn't have a clue, believe me," the azulite replied with a sheepish grin. "If things ever went south, we've got some speeches prepared for her, too… Sumika even looked up a nice cheesecake recipe for her…"

Mahiru stared at the girl in disbelief, eyes flickering between the blue bomber and the two shorter girls seated several dozen meters away.

And then she laughed. A chuckle at first, but it quickly devolved into a guttural chortle that almost seemed to rock the

ballroom. It took Mahiru a moment to come down from the fit, and though she was hot and embarrassed from the attention leveled at her by the other guests it had felt more than good to crack a genuine smile.

"You said that Sumika was a dork, but you're *all* dorks," Mahiru giggled, wiping a tear from her eye.

Soraka knocked her own forehead with one of her knuckles, sticking a tongue out during a protracted wink, "Guilty as charged, I guess."

Mahiru released the last remnants of energy from her laugh in the form of a gentle sigh, looking at one of the intricate chandeliers drifting overhead. As her eyes lazily traced the bends and twists of gilded metal and glistening glass, Soraka spoke again, this time with a question.

"So, what are you going to do now?"

The blonde let out another sigh and looked to the flute of champagne that she'd abandoned near the start of the evening, still sat on the railing, unattended and awaiting her return. She grabbed it, gave it a momentary glance, and downed it in one take. Setting it down, she responded.

"Either ruin the one relationship I could depend on the last four years, or make the best decision of my life," she stated resolutely, feeling the bubbles burn down her throat. "Jury won't know until I do the crime…"

"Well, we're here for you; both you and Satsuki," Soraka replied, giving a gentle thumbs up. "Now go get 'er, Tiger!"

Mahiru smiled and took her own stroll towards the archway. Conflict or not, she wasn't going to let her nerves stop her from taking a decisive action.

O/o\O

"You know… you chose a lousy time to confess…"

Mahiru watched as her words made the mousy girl perk, platinum locks floating, displaced in the air as she stumbled to her feet. The half-Russian was speechless as Mahiru sidled up to her,

heels clicking against well-worn stone. Just as she was about to speak the blonde pushed a small crepe into her hand, catching the younger girl off guard.

"Really ran out the clock on this, didn't you?" Mahiru continued, her feet finally reaching the steps. Below came the lights and sounds of a distant festival, with tents and stalls lined up neatly on the sprawling terrace at the end of the stairway the two lorded over. The near, yet seemingly distant festivities waved over Mahiru's skin like a warm breeze, fond memories buzzing up from the back of her mind. Or perhaps that was the alcohol from her champagne finally sinking in. Regardless, she'd have to thank Fumine for holding the wedding over Golden Week, be it for the simplicity of Mahiru's work schedule or be it the calming effect the proximal crowd had on her in such a confusing moment of her life.

"I… I'm sorry, Mahiru…" Satsuki sighed. She looked down at the crepe and blinked, "Uh… Blueberry…?"

Mahiru blinked in turn, looking down at her own crepe and smiling sheepishly, "Uh… sorry, mixed them up… This one was yours…" She held the raspberry-filled dessert out for her housemate to take, smoothly trading the sweets between them. The blonde motioned for them to sit on the highest step, and as they bent down she began to talk, "Jeez, I try to swoop in here and be the 'older, wiser' mentor figure and I'm too lost in my thoughts to get my left and rights straight…"

"I know what you mean…" Satsuki nodded, taking a nibble of her crepe. "I've been… out of it all day."

Mahiru hummed, nodding as well, "I can imagine you've been building to this for a while, haven't you?"

"If only you knew…" the taller girl sighed.

The blonde rolled her eyes, "I *do* think I have a *rough* idea…"

"Right, right…" came the rueful response.

The moment settled into silence as the two snacked on their sweets, both nervously biding time before the real conversation came their way. But eventually the pastries dwindled down to crumbs and all that was left was silence.

Well, and wrappers, but mostly silence.

"‘Suki…" Mahiru finally breathed out, "You were… right that I was just trying to avoid the subject. But I'm not lying when I say I'm…" The baker pulled herself into a hug, her knees bunched to her chest, "I'm just… scared, okay? Terrified. I never even considered looking at you that way until I figured out you had feelings for me… But… Even then…" She looked up to the stars, hoping the words she so desperately searched for would be spelled out in celestial lights, "When Makoto and I got together, she saved me from a lot of *really* dark places. And after that, Sumika helped me stay afloat, even before we were a couple… And every time I find someone I can trust in, that I can rely on… that I can fall in love with, something terrible happens to them, or to me, or to both of us and I just… I gave up on love." At that, she sucked in a sharp breath, letting it out through her teeth, "But… your mom wasn't wrong when she said not to give up on things… I was being a coward…"

She turned and met Satsuki's eyes, eyes staring at her both knowingly and with mildly sad amusement. The platinum girl shrugged with a deprecating chuckle, "Yeah, you kind of were."

Mahiru pursed her lips as the oppressive feeling in her chest began to take flight, her fingers reaching forward to curl over the taller girl's head. Yet, that painfully present descriptor flew in to frustrate her once again.

"You're too damn tall for me to ruffle your hair…" Mahiru muttered. In response, Satsuki plopped a single, jovial hand on top of Mahiru's crown, bringing no small amount of irritation to Mahiru's face. The blonde's eyes narrowed further, "Don't push it."

Satsuki snickered but swiftly removed her hand, allowing Mahiru to recompose herself.

"So what are you saying?" the younger girl finally asked. Those amber eyes sparkled down on her, tears preemptively collecting across the lids in preparation for some heartrending negative… or perhaps some earth-shattering positive, judging by the hopeful gleam reflecting off the girl's irises.

"I'm saying, that without you, I'm going to be lonely," Mahiru replied. She hissed again, bracing herself for the more damning

words building on her tongue, "In fact, without you, I'm going to be more than lonely. Satsuki… I… I don't want you to go…"

Her golden gaze fell in line with those vibrant brown eyes just as a beam overtook the younger girl's cherubic face. In a flash Mahiru had been tackled to the ground by the excitable platinum girl, face smothered into boney shoulders and tufts of glistening hair.

"H-hey! Careful Satsuki! We still have to look presentable back at the reception!" Mahiru shouted. Admittedly, the laugh that accompanied the shout didn't quite help her case, but there was little she could do about that. Satsuki nuzzled deeper into the blonde's side, cheeks warmed with tears as they finally came to be shed.

The student pulled back, looking down on her longtime mentor and friend with a conflicted warble in her lips.

"S-So… does… does this mean…?"

Mahiru pursed her lips and let her eyes shy away from the taller figure, her mind still pleading for her to back out while she still could while her chest was left in a flurry of emotions that couldn't even begin to be deciphered.

"I… I'm not saying it'll work out Satsuki… I'm not one-hundred percent on where I sit with all of this," the blonde began, resting her forehead against the scrawny shoulder. "But… but I wasn't being fair to you earlier, especially because there isn't *not* something there…" She gave a weak smile, "If you're okay taking the risk of dating me… Then who would I be to reject such kindness?"

Above her Satsuki was quiet, her bottom lip tucked tightly beneath her upper teeth. Despite her height, despite her own evolutions in maturity, despite all of the struggles she went through in her life, the girl still absolutely resembled a child, especially when her emotions finally got the better with her. Satsuki sniffed, trying to hold back a flood of tears that would probably rain down on the woman below her.

"…Can… Can I kiss you?" she asked.

It was innocent, almost innocuous. But in this position, pinned beneath her, Mahiru felt powerless, which was *not* how she wanted this relationship to start. They'd be standing on even ground.

"Not… Not like this… Let's stand, okay?" she pleaded, raising her brows in apology. Satsuki nodded and leaned off, allowing the two to finally rise again. It was then that Mahiru realized that 'even ground' really meant very little to a girl that stood at least a full-head taller than herself. Satsuki shuffled awkwardly in place, fingers playing in front of her dress. It was rather obvious the girl was in need of some direction, though she also seemed rather eager to be the one to initiate. "Um…" Mahiru started, looking the girl up and down, "Maybe you should go down a few steps…"

Satsuki blanched and nodded, shuffling down a few tiers of the staircase to where she was only a few inches separated from the blonde. Satisfied with the differential, Mahiru looked her in the eye and quietly nodded, allowing the platinum girl to proceed at her own pace. The taller girl swallowed, her gangly fingers reaching out to cup at Mahiru's jawline. Then, gently, ever so gently, she pulled the two of them together and… bumped her nose against Mahiru's. She recoiled at the contact, inching backwards only for the blonde to grip the hand at her jaw and give it a comforting squeeze. This time Mahiru reached out and cupped the other girl's face, and together the two finally pulled their lips into one embrace.

It was clumsy, at least by the practiced Mahiru's standards, but they could work on that, she supposed. Drawing away, the baker caught a glimpse of a bright streak sailing into the sky; the start of the night's firework show and the end of festivities for the night.

"Good timing," Mahiru giggled. "I guess some people take the phrase 'sparks fly' pretty serious…"

For her part, Satsuki was too emotionally overwhelmed to respond, instead reaching forward to pull Mahiru into another desperate hug, this one seeking not necessarily affection but instead peace of mind. It was only mildly effective, but the touch was not unwelcomed by the blonde.

It was only then that familiarity really started setting in. Standing there, holding someone she cared for deeply… the same cobbled path, the nearby rustic shrine; this had been where she and Makoto had confessed all those years ago. And in that time, so

much had happened, so much had hurt her, and beaten her, and tortured her.

Yet, it was only because of how much good had entered into her life that she could suffer that abuse; for every positive came a negative and for every negative, a positive. In a crystallizing moment, there was no malevolent force keeping her from happiness; only the balance that surrounded them all. She was sure that some tragedy would befall her again in the future, she knew that was an inevitablility. But now? No, she could stand a little suffering in the future if it meant she could spend the next few precious moments of her life in an embrace as sweet as this.

As she sat there, arms wrapped around Satsuki, watching as fireworks lit up the sky, Mahiru smiled.

It was days like today that made her wonder why she was so lucky.

WILD FIRE

Aimless, ever growing

Soot

July, 2017

"Stop picking at it."

Small, gentle pincers ran along her scalp, latching quickly onto another offending object and removing it with the utmost efficiency.

"I said stop it!"

Satsuki swatted at the invasive appendage, frowning as her hands swept through air. A second later and the pincers returned, darting into the bushel of pink locks before jumping back out with a new trophy.

"Mahiru, I said stoooop!" the girl whined, squeezing her eyes shut and stomping her foot.

Mahiru chuckled as she leaned back, flicking the grain of dandruff to the wind, "I *can't,* Satsuki. I never knew your scalp was this dry; we're gonna need to get you some different shampoo."

Satsuki frowned and shook her head, pigtails waving to and fro, "No, what I have now is supposed to stop the dye from bleaching!"

"Yes, well, that's all very good, but those bright pink hairs of yours are only serving to highlight how poor your skincare is," the blonde smiled, patting the shorter girl.

The formerly platinum girl pouted, crossing her arms as Mahiru's palm bobbed along her crown. The sleeves of her long brown shirt flopped over each other, leading the chipmunk-like girl to appear like she were trapped in a straight jacket, a pose that Makoto and Soraka had collectively dubbed the 'most adorable asylum escapee' pout.

"Fine..." the teen mumbled, sinking into the collar of her shirt, "we'll pick something up on the way home."

Mahiru smiled and removed her hand, "I'm glad you came to your senses." The chef leaned down, grinning and whispering as

though conferring a secret," And maybe we'll pick up some cheese sticks too when we do."

Satsuki perked, suddenly hopping on her toes with anticipation, "You're the best, Mahiru!"

The blonde grinned and the pinkette's body was awash with warmth from that genuinely happy smile. It was so rare for Mahiru to give a heartfelt smile, so the mousey girl had to savor each and every single one, especially when the reason was because of her.

A series of footsteps broke the two from their banter.

"Oi, if you gorillas are done picking at fleas, we were thinking of hitting the shooting gallery next," Makoto's lackadaisical grin melted out from the crowd, messy nest of red hair trailing behind her like a comet’s tail. Three other girls followed behind her, bobs of blue, rose and an inky streak of black all tightly huddled together as they wormed their way back from the bathrooms.

The blonde furrowed her brow as the four girls merged back with the errant two, "Makoto, don't call Satsuki a gorilla; girls her age have enough to deal with beyond juvenile insults."

The troublemaker smirked, crossing her arms behind her head, "Why, of course, Mahiru..." Her lips pursed and her words dipped with their widening tips, "But does that mean *you* like being called a gorilla?"

"Of course I don't mind being called a gorilla," Mahiru smiled, "Because it means I could easily break you in two."

Makoto paused, eyes constricting with sudden, barely restrained fear. Satsuki had seen this side of her guardian only a couple of times and each time she did it left her awestruck. By all accounts Mahiru was the ideal traditional femme figure: a cook with looks who was delicate by the books. But beneath that façade the younger girl knew her mentor was possessive and almost insanely protective. If she took a shine to someone or something, well... Makoto's reaction spoke more than volumes.

"Sheesh, do you want an early grave?" Soraka groaned, bopping the delinquent across her dome.

Makoto rubbed her skull, growling, "Look, I already got the death stare, I don't need you giving me a concussion."

The azulite rolled her eyes, "Like there's enough in there to get bruised to begin with."

"Don't test me, Rocky," Makoto snapped.

"Would ‘testing’ you not require some initial signs of intelligence, Miss Ume?"

Eyes fell to the tall ghost of a girl standing just behind Soraka, her fingers gently curled around the group's second rosette and with a playful grin brightening her otherwise ghastly features.

Makoto shrunk into herself, wrapping her arms closed as a comeback died in her throat. She turned away, grumbling, "Fine, guess it's 'everyone pick on the ginger' day..."

Sumika frowned at her beau, giving Yukima's shoulder a gentle slap, "Yukima, be nice..."

The raven girl gave her girlfriend a sidelong glance, mumbling a very quiet 'sorry' as recompense.

“Yeah Mahiru!” Satsuki cried, tugging on the older girl’s elbow, “Don’t be so mean to Makoto!”

Soraka sighed and sidled over to the group’s current punching bag, leveraging a hand on the bushel of red locks, "Don't dish what you can't take, Mako. Didn't you tell me that?" The redhead's lips tightened and she turned away from her taller friend. However the azulite didn't let her weasel away, wrapping an arm around Makoto's neck and nuzzling into the hothead, "Awww, don't be like that Makoto. We luuuuuuvvv yoooouuu!"

Makoto relaxed in the embrace, her features still clearly distressed but her cheeks slowly pinking. After a few seconds her cheeks went from rosy to crimson and she hastily detached herself from the student, "Awright, awright, don't push it."

Smile evening out just a bit, Soraka stepped back and appraised the other girl. She nodded, giving a quiet 'okay', following which Makoto’s shoulders sagged and her hung lips recovered a fraction. Satsuki watched the interaction carefully, cataloguing each little touch, every fine intonation between the two.

It was no secret in the group that Makoto had a more than passing attraction to Soraka and ever since she'd first seen them both together she’d been fascinated by their dynamic. A constant

influx of highs and lows, the two felt like a walking contradiction yet they stuck together like glue. This was especially head scratching to Satsuki because Soraka had apparently made it pretty clear that she didn't reciprocate Makoto's feelings... while also sharing an almost uncomfortable amount of skinship with the redhead. This nebulous relationship had maintained itself for the last two years, utterly baffling the poor high school student the entire time.

"Let's just get to the damn shooting gallery..." Makoto coughed, throwing her hands behind her head and waltzing off down the pier.

"Sounds like a plan!" Soraka chirped, skipping behind her.

Mahiru chuckled and waved the rest of the group to follow the bipolar duo. The four shuffled behind them with the intrepid blonde leading them and Yukima bringing up the rear, ardent hand threatening to drag Sumika back with her by proxy.

"I don't know how she puts up with that..." Satsuki muttered.

"Makoto or Soraka? 'She' isn't very descriptive," Sumika chuckled.

Satsuki swished her lips, shooting Sumika a glare, "Either of them." She shot her arms towards the confounding pair, "I mean, how does Makoto keep her cool with that kind of teasing? How is Soraka so casual about it? It just... It doesn't make sense..."

Sumika blinked, briefly throwing a distant look to Mahiru while tightening her hold on Yukima's hand. She tossed Satsuki a smile, "Everyone's got their own way of loving each other. Makoto and Soraka have something that works for them; it doesn't necessarily *need* to 'make sense'."

"Go through enough together and none of the petty things matter," Yukima added coolly. With a wistful smile she added, “Sometimes petty arguments and jibes become little signs of affection you never would have thought of.” Out of everyone the girl's monotone carried the most authority, despite how quietly the words were spoken. Satsuki had heard stories about what Yukima *used* to be like, but it was hard to imagine those amethyst eyes being any less analytical and piercing.

“I don’t know, Yukiki,” Sumika frowned, “I’m not sure if Makoto feels comfortable enough for you to start joking with her like that. Soraka and Mahiru maybe, but you and her don’t really do much together. That seemed kinda harsh…”

If Yukima flinched, it was small, but there was some kind of small shift in her eyes, “I… see. Then perhaps I shall apologize later. There was no venom intended…”

Sumika grinned, a small ‘thank you’ drifting out as she slid into Yukima's side, resting her head on the taller girl's shoulder. Satsuki's heart clenched, her eyes flipping to and from the couplet of couples. An ice bucket teetered in her stomach and which way her eyes faced only looked to decide which way it would finally tip; either she was staring at the couples among her friends or the happy couples dotting the boardwalk. Sweat beat her brow as she doubled her step to catch up with Mahiru, reflexively reaching out and taking the taller girl's hand.

Mahiru looked down and craned an eyebrow, "You okay, Satsuki?"

"Yeah!" Satsuki perked, skipping in line with the blonde, "I was just thinking that we should probably grab some funnel cake while we're here. It isn’t a trip to the pier without it!"

The blonde's brow stayed furrowed only for a moment before she relaxed, smiling, "That sounds like a wonderful idea. Let's just not overdo it so you can enjoy those cheese sticks when we get home, you little glutton."

The pinkette hopped in place, arm swinging gleefully entwined with Mahiru's, the shadow over her soul shrinking away if only for a moment.

O/o\O

Pop! Chaulk. Pop! Chaulk. Pop!

A wave of groans deafened the group as three perfectly good shots pinged off their targets. Mahiru frowned, standing back and lifting the BB rifle towards the air.

"Ooh, too bad, little miss," the stall merchant chimed, his frown every bit as gaudy as the bright pink shirt he wore, "Here's hoping you have better aim next time!"

A fist slammed down on the counter, a snarly redhead popping up behind it. "Bullshit, you scam artist, those shots were perfect. You weighted those prizes!"

The man shook his head, his scowl becoming deeper and patently more sarcastic. Without stopping the rock of his chin he lifted one of the prizes that had been hit, revealing not a single tether and a quick drop displayed no manipulation of weight. This did not deter the growling redhead, though it did prompt her blue companion to reel her back, gripping her by the collar like a puppy at its scruff.

While she maintained a modicum of self control, Satsuki had an unhealthy amount of empathy for the fiery girl; that disheartened scowl on Mahiru's face had her blood boiling, especially considering how dead-on each shot had been. She knew better than anyone how much of a crack shot the blonde was at carnival games, so if she had failed to topple a prize there was little hope for the typical bystander.

There was an expectation for Mahiru to demurely shrug off the failure, to quietly lay down the rifle and yield to the wills of the universe; she could even see the painful twist in Mahiru's feature slowly priming her to gracefully bow out. But before the blonde could say a word Yukima stepped up to the podium, proffering her own small wad of yen and plucking the gun from Mahiru's fingers.

"Yukima...?" Sumika asked, voice warbling with concern.

"It's okay, Sumika," Yukima said calmly, examining the weapon. She folded out a number of bills and slid them to the attendant, who in turn gave her the three BBs the gun would need in order to function, his brow laden with curiosity. She loaded the ammunition herself, giving the lever a solid cock before aiming it down range.

Pop! Chaulk. Pop! Chaulk. Pop!

Three more shots, more rapid than Mahiru’s and only a hair less accurate.

Chaulk. Chaulk. Chaulk.

Yukima cranked the lever a few more times, eyes peeling apart the mechanism as it moved. After a moment her lips parted and a pleased 'ahah' escaped into the coming night.

"I think I know the issue," she started. Without a second thought the gaunt girl reached into her pocket and fished out a small multi-tool, a gift from Sumika that had scarcely ever left her possession while outside the house. It seemed to dawn on the stall owner exactly what Yukima was about to do a second too late, as by the time he reached out for the gun she had popped the casing open and exposed its guts to the world. She pointed to a lose coil of metal, "The spring's been loosened." Satsuki, as well as the other girls, nodded and awed over the survivor's observation, though their appreciation was overshadowed by a lack of knowledge on the subject.

The stall owner gave a half-baked smile, beady red eyes quietly glaring daggers at the ghostly woman, "It was loosened for the kiddies; they have such a hard time pulling the lever. Everyone should be able to enjoy this game..."

Yukima reached into the guts of the weapon with the tool, quickly fidgeting with the spring before closing the toy rifle back up. She looked at him, not a single ounce of disdain restrained, "And I suppose making it too weak to actually knock a prize down was just a side-benefit? No matter, I've fixed your gun for you." She divvied out another wad of bills, "I'd like another round, if you please."

More of a scowl than a smile, the man swiped the yen, slamming down the corresponding pellets in response. Yukima, stoic as ever, loaded the gun, took aim, and fired.

Pop! Chaulk. Pop! Chaulk. Pop!

Three shots, three hits, and three plushies all hit the floor.

"That was amazing, Yukima!" Sumika chirped, jumping in place as the stall owner begrudgingly handed the plushies to Yukima. The gaunt girl blushed, taking the white cat and rabbit plushies and shoving them into Sumika's arms, saving a black lizard for herself. Sumika squeed into the fluffy toys, nuzzling into them just before nuzzling into her girlfriend.

Mahiru let out a frustrated sigh, gripping her nose, "You know what? I feel like singing. Let's see if they're still running that outdoor karaoke thing."

"Ooh, that sounds fun!" Soraka grinned.

And with the rambunctious girl's declaration, the group began to mosey their way down the pier once more, though one member elected to drag behind.

As the stall owner cleaned up his work station his hand reached for the newly disposed weapon, only for its retrieval to be stopped by an iron grip.

Satsuki looked the man dead in the eyes and raised a fist full of bills, "Before you go scamming more people, give me one round with the gun."

O/o\O

"So, little miss Rambo," Makoto started, ignoring the pointed glare that Yukima shot her, "I know you're like the master of guns and everything, but where'd'ya pick up that crap about BB guns?"

"Dogs," she responded smoothly.

"Dogs?" Sumika asked.

"Dogs," Yukima reiterated, her tone never wavering. The discussion was somewhat hard to make out over the pier's crowd, and on top of that the public karaoke booth was only making it more difficult. She managed to get her word in edgewise, though only in spite of the rather impressive performance Mahiru was managing to put on in front of the crowd. "Maybe they were coyotes, but there was a farming family in... I want to say India, but it could have been Kashmir. Their stock was getting attacked and I'd been living in their barn without them knowing. I... thought it would only be right if I helped them out, so I stole their BB gun and worked on it so I could scare off the dogs quietly. I think I ended up killing one or two."

"Of the dogs?" Soraka asked, managing to draw her eyes away from the rather entertaining blonde.

"Of the family," Yukima smiled, eyes distant.

"Ehhh?!" Sumika whined, mouth drooping.

The vision returned to the gaunt girl's eyes and she chuckled, "I'm joking, Sumika."

That earned her a pillowy thwap to her shoulder from the rosette, "Don't be so mean, Yuki."

"Wow, Yukima's got some bite to her jokes; no wonder they're so few and far between," Soraka chimed.

Yukima frowned at the jab, but a rebuttal died in her throat as the music beating around them faded and a frazzled blond stepped her way down off the small, elevated platform attached to the booth, bangs glued to her forehead. She wormed her way towards them through a still clapping crowd, frowning at the bantering girls.

"Glad to know I had an attentive audience," Mahiru coughed, pulling a loose bang behind her ear.

"I was listening, Mahiru!" Satsuki hopped, "You sounded beautiful up there!"

The smaller girl's enthusiasm was met with a pat to her head, dyed pink curls folding and looping under Mahiru's delicate fingers. Satsuki pouted, throwing the scalp ministrations to the side as her cheeks filled with color.

"I was listening, for the most part, but I mean when Yukima actually tries to tell a joke, you just gotta listen," Soraka defended.

"Oh, really now? Embarking on a new career path are we, Miss Katsumi?" the blonde chuckled.

Yukima's eye began to twitch, crests of her cheeks powdering like Sumika's hair.

"Guys..." the rosette whined, bobbing on Yukima's arm.

The survivalist sighed, patting Sumika on the arm as she looked the other two in the eyes once more, "It's okay, Sumika, they're just having fun."

Soraka leaned back, still allowing a few snickers to slip through her teeth, "Yeah, yeah, I don't mean to make you uncomfortable, either of you... But speaking of fun..." The azulite reached forward and grabbed Yukima's wrist, pulling her backwards towards the stage.

"M-Hayami, what the hell are you doing?!" the gaunt girl snapped. There was a moment of panic trapped beneath her eyes,

fingers instinctively curling over Soraka's wrist, against the grain of the palm over her own, breath sharpening to a near-fevered pitch. Everyone, even Soraka, paused, having seen the symptoms before. This night on the town was very quickly and accidentally accelerating down a far more dangerous route.

Soraka released the girl’s hand, letting her own wrist go limp in lieu of the nails against her skin.

"I... I'm sorry Yukima, I forgot, I totally forgot, I-!" she scrambled.

Luckily for her the worry in her voice was drowned out by a gentle hand resting over Yukima's steely grip. "Yukima, please let Soraka go..." Sumika hummed, carefully prying at each finger one by one to prevent the nails from drawing blood.

Yukima steadied and dropped her hold, pulling back to cradle the arm protectively. Stillness dropped over them all. Amethysts darted to Soraka, seeking an apology, or maybe an explanation.

"I'm sorry, really," Soraka started, listing on her toes, "I just... Remember we did karaoke that time at... uh... Fumine's place. I remember you getting really into it, so I was hoping that maybe... I don't know, it'd make you happy? I got overzealous, sorry about that..."

"It's... okay. Just please don't do that again..."

"I... I'll try not to... I just thought it'd be nice to bond with my sister's girlfriend..." the azulite replied, scratching her cheek.

"Well… I suppose that makes sense…" Sumika added, putting a finger to her chin.

"'Sister'?" Makoto perked, confused.

"Like, I mean, yeah, you're all like family to me..." Soraka sighed, waving her hand dismissively. "I just feel like I've done a pretty crap job bringing you into that, Yukima, so I saw my chance with a duet or something..." She scratched her cheek, scraping away a touch of midsummer perspiration, "It's a stupid idea though, so sorry for the fuss."

"It's not a stupid idea," Yukima stated, her shoulders slumping and her arms reflexively crossing, "I was surprised, but it's all very... *you*, Hayami. I'm not opposed to doing karaoke with you..."

Sumika squeezed her hand, eyebrows knit, "Are you sure, Yukima? The crowd, though..."

Yukima tucked a lock of hair behind her pinkening ear, "What crowd...? There's only one person I'm going to sing to tonight." She gave Sumika a knowing look and smiled, earning a warbling, teary smile in return.

"Alright, Casanova," Soraka sighed, reaching out for the girl. She paused mid reach, crossing her brow before flipping her hand over to present her palm to the prodigal girl, smiling, "Shall we? I know a few good duets we can ask if they have."

Yukima took the hand, other palm attached to her chest as she nodded, "L-lead the way, Hayami..."

"Wait, wait," Sumika cried, jumping to Yukima's side. Puckered lips pressed to Yukima's cheek and a gentle hand squeezed her bicep. The rosette leaned back and smiled, "Good luck up there, and don't be embarrassed to quit if it's too much."

"Geez, fuss over her enough and it'll be dark by the time we get on stage," Soraka quipped, giving Yukima a gentle tug, "I'll take good care of your girlfriend, I promise."

Sumika nodded and let the two slip away into the crowd towards the line of eager customers.

"Well," Satsuki breathed, "This is going to be interesting..." She looked over at her partner-in-pink, "Are you sure she'll be okay? This is a bigger crowd than some of her book signings..."

Sumika chuckled and scratched the back of her neck, "Honestly? I'm more worried about how well they'll end up singing... Neither of them were exactly the best at karaoke..."

"Yeah, believe me, I've got firsthand experience with Soraka's singing..." Makoto grumbled.

"And I can't imagine the time away made Yukima any better at it..." Sumika observed sheepishly.

"So you're just going to let her embarrass herself?" the smaller girl asked, a stoked flame boiling up behind her ribs.

"Mhhnn," the older girl responded, "I'm going to let her have some fun. Even if it might embarrass her in the end, it's rare she has fun without me... I wouldn't be a good girlfriend if I didn't try to help

her find a way to have fun on her own again." The flame died out as Satsuki watched the ink trail of hair meld into line. "I'd be selfish," Sumika mused, sighing, "And I wouldn't deserve her if I didn't hold myself back when she needs her distance, even if she doesn't realize it."

O/o\O

"I can see why Americans like to do this in bars instead of at parlors, the crowd is really enthralling..." Soraka huffed, wiping her bangs over the part in her hair.

“Mhhm…” Yukima nodded, pressing closer into Sumika’s side.

She’d been in a strange, almost catatonic state ever since coming down off that stage with the azulite, Satsuki observed. Poor Sumika’s arm was probably bluing from the lack of oxygen with how tightly she was being gripped and Yukima seemed unable to stop herself from rocking to-and-fro on her heels, an energy reflected only by the constantly fluctuating smile on her face, one that simultaneously threatened shouts of joy and tears of relief. Sumika, for her part, only managed to chuckle with an almost pained grin, her fingers trying to quietly tug Yukima’s death hold a little looser.

“You done getting all of that stupidity out of your system yet?” Makoto asked, patting her winded friend on the back.

Soraka flashed her pearly whites and shook her head, “Nope! In fact, while we were up there I totally figured out where we should head next!”

Makoto raised her hands to block some of the sweat droplets zipping off of Soraka’s scattering locks, frowning, “Oh really? And who made you the de facto leader of our little gang?”

“Wha…?” the student blinked. She looked to all the other girls, face slowly falling before she arched back up and rubbed the back of her head, “Well… uh… no one. I didn’t really think we *had* a leader… Do friends groups even *need* a leader?”

“Of course they do,” the redhead nodded, closing her eyes and officiously raising a finger, “As a matter of fact, Mahiru is our leader. I thought everyone had noticed this by now.”

The blonde perked at her name, blinking in time with Soraka, “Eh? I… I mean, I’m not sure where you’re pulling that from, Ume…”

Makoto raised half a lid to peek at the chef, “Of course you are. You’re arguably the most stable of any of us: a good job, a good apartment, even a little attaché servant following you around.” Satsuki jumped at the insinuation, letting out a snarled ‘Hey!’, but was ultimately overlooked as the redhead continued, “Not to mention it was your idea to come out tonight; don’t leaders usually come up with the plans?”

“Ah, well, you see,” Mahiru fidgeted. She turned and waved her hand gracefully towards her smaller companion, “It was actually Satsuki’s plan to come out today. I shouldn’t get all the credit just because I got everyone together…”

Satsuki, for her part, bit her tongue. She adored the other girls, she really did, but Mahiru was too dense to realize that Satsuki had wanted to come out to the pier with *just* Mahiru when she’d made the suggestion. It… hurt to hear Mahiru’s words.

“Not seein’ much of a difference there,” Makoto popped. “’Sides, Soraka already got to choose.”

“Oh… I see… well, I…” Mahiru stuttered. “I already got to pick. Makoto, why don’t *you* choose an attraction for us?”

The redhead froze, hand mid-draw on a piece of pocky. Slowly, deliberately, she placed the confection between her teeth and began to chew. It took a moment, but eventually she shook the box in the other girls’ general direction.

“Awright,” she mumbled, “Hey, Piglet, think your BFF there can take a few scares?”

“Ugh, the Haunted House, really?” Soraka groaned.

“I… I don’t know Makoto…” Sumika muttered, shifting on her toes. Either she was nervous or Yukima’s hand was finally cutting off enough blood flow to matter.

However, the subject in question stood forward, untangling herself from the natural rosette. Yukima looked into Makoto’s eyes, unsettled eyes coming to a rest to beat down at the scruffy ginger, “I have seen men, women and children die. I have been shot at, stabbed and beaten. I’ve even been blown up, if you count the cars

I've been in." She stepped forward again, her taller frame towering over Makoto's stockier form, lavender gaze beating down on her friend like a laser, "The cheap scares of ghosts and goblins are nothing compared to the phantoms and devils I've seen."

Makoto's eyes remained locked with Yukima's the whole way, the taller girl never blinking, always imposing. The redhead nodded, gulping, "Right. Got it. Devils, ghosts." She turned on her heel and started off down the pier, her movements robotic and stiff.

Soraka watched briefly before speaking up, "…The haunted house is the other direction…"

The redhead stopped, turned, and restarted her route unperturbed, "Right, right. I knew that."

O/o\O

"…I made a mistake. This idea was a mistake…" Makoto growled, her hands in her pocket.

Satsuki looked up at her, easily meeting the redhead's eyes, "So then why did you suggest it?"

"I… Well, I was kinda hoping Soraka would be the one hanging off *my* shoulder. Not… this…" she replied, motioning at the two intertwined figures ahead of them. Soraka and Sumika stood at the front of the group, locked tight in each others' arms as the group progressed through the haunted house. Makoto and Yukima held back, standing just behind Mahiru and Satsuki, their glares never once leaving the brightly colored duo at the front.

The attraction itself was rather unimpressive, even to Satsuki's younger eyes. It was pretty clear where corners had been cut, where walls needed patching and where pieces of different animatronics needed replacing, and it all led to an underwhelming amount of scares. Not that there weren't any there to be had or that there hadn't been *some* effort thrown into making the damages and wear look like part of the attraction, but there were just some spots where it was impossible for the truth to be twisted. Heck, some of the areas were brighter lit than they probably should be just so that people wouldn't trip over the uneven flooring.

Of course, none of this bothered Sumika and Soraka, who had latched together at the very beginning of the haunted tour and seemed to overreact at every twist and turn, letting their shouts echo through the halls at a rate that left the small girl more annoyed than horrified with the house. The lacking story didn't help, all focused around some hag that had died there years prior who decided to haunt the rest of her family and slowly kill them off so they could join her in torturing the living. If anything, just being in the house was more torturous than any of the actual haunts. Thankfully it was looking like they were coming up on the exit, as the scares had gotten far more numerous and the path less winding, all seemingly building to some sort of climax.

Then again, she could have been wrong. The six exited into a rather dim but wide room layered with damp tatami mats. Satsuki lifted her shoe and flicked at the soggy mush that clung to it, her nose curling.

"If this is part of the attraction, they owe me a new pair of shoes," she huffed, "This crap is going to take forever to dig out…"

"Hmm?" Mahiru hummed, looking down at her own feet, "I supposed it would have been nice to get some kind of forewarning."

Makoto scoffed as she leaned against one of the walls, kicking out her foot and trying to place it down somewhere dry, "Maybe it's not intentional; rest of this place is shot to shit, wouldn't be surprised if they had a leaky pipe somewhere." She chewed on her cheek, whipping her ponytail over her shoulder to avoid the undusted wall. She frowned, "Hey guys… where's the door we came in through?"

The other five turned and found said path gone, blocked by a wall that sat flush with the others in the room.

"…I'll give them that one, I didn't even realize it was gone…" Satsuki muttered under her breath.

"Uh… s-so… where's the exit then…?" Sumika asked, eyes flinging to different edges of the room.

Satsuki caught Soraka looking back at Makoto out of the corner of her eye, a stare that immediately averted itself the minute the redhead looked anywhere remotely near them.

“I don’t know, Sumika…” Soraka muttered. She tightened her hold around the girl, “But we’ll be fine. Remember, it’s only a show for us, nothing bad is going to happen, okay?”

The natural rosette nodded, burying herself deeper in the azulite’s hold.

Yukima, knuckles plastered white, blinked and lifted a hand to her face, “Is it… raining in here?”

Everyone looked to the ceiling, the actual space blackened by lack of light. Satsuki felt the first few specks of water land on her cheeks before the room darkened further. A loud beating began to resound through the chamber, the thin, paper-like walls shaking as the sound increased in depth and intensity.

“Great, and now I’m all wet,” Makoto snarled, pulling at her windbreaker, “This place really knows how to piss me of-”

Her voice was choked as she was thrust forward, the wall behind her exploding open. A twisted old crone with a wreath of thorns and roses stared out from the hole, her teeth brazen and eyes bugged wide.

“*Fools, fools of all, to enter my house and seek to be spared! Brothers, sisters, children of mine, feast!*”

Satsuki yelped as a figure landed at her side from the ceiling, a cherubic body weighed by a head shaped as an old television set, its screen broken to form a gaping maw with glass shards for teeth. In an instant she jumped away, grabbing onto Mahiru’s waist and burying herself in the other girl’s form. She felt equally panicked arms latch around her as more abominations dropped from the ceiling: a mass of blackened tendrils, a schoolgirl with only arms and no legs or head, at cat with its skull flayed open for the world to see. Around them the walls and doors began to twist and open, with one horrific sight coming after the last.

Sumika jumped as the floor beside her and Soraka opened up and a woman with a paintbrush for a hand and a fleshy easel for a head was elevated to her level, a single fleshy, malformed eye staring the brightly color pair down. It moved to attack them with the brush, only for one of the joints in the animatronics shoulders to stall, resulting in a sudden pop as the appendage came down.

And like that there was a blur of movement, ink flowing through the sudden chaos. In what felt like only seconds the robot's eye had been completely gouged out, a snarling, huffing Yukima holding the multitool that had robbed the attraction of its sight. Before the group had a chance to react to even the monstrous horde around them she had turned around, grabbed Sumika, lifted her into a bridal carry, and sprinted through a passage that had just opened up in the wall at the far end of the room, leaving the other four still trapped behind with the unyielding horde of horrors.

Makoto stood from where she had fallen on the floor, wiping her hands on her jean short-shorts as she glared at the animatronics. She waltzed past the grotesque displays, grabbing Soraka's hand, grabbing Mahiru's hand, and dragging the remaining three out the door as they clutched to her for support, muttering death threats to the owner the entire way out.

O/o\O

"It's okay, Yukima, it's not your fault…" Sumika cooed, cradling her curled girlfriend.

"Y-yes it is…" Yukima shuddered, "I… I didn't want you to get hurt. I forgot… that… I'm sorry… You must think I'm crazy…"

"No! Never!" the rosette pleaded, hugging the girl tighter. "You're just a little more sensitive. I should've known that haunted house was a bad idea…"

Satsuki and Soraka watched the two fret over each other, both fighting to take the blame for what happened unto themselves.

"God, those two are hopeless…" Soraka moaned, gripping her temples with one hand.

"I feel all… gooey just looking at them," Satsuki shuddered.

"I know what you mean. Sometimes it's hard to remember that Yukima's actually killed people before…" the azulite nodded. "Then again, no matter who she is now I guess she'll always have that soft spot around Sumika. No way that'll ever change."

The pinkette hummed in response, crossing her arms. "Speaking of change, though," Satsuki started, looking at the taller

girl, “You’ve been acting really weird tonight. Like, more… spunky than normal. Are you okay?”

“Ah, so you noticed, huh?” Soraka grinned, tousling the girl’s hair.

Satsuki pushed the hand away, “Yeah. I’m pretty sure *most* of us have noticed.”

“Oh, well… I guess I’m just happy,” she replied, tucking a loose lock of blue behind her ear, “There was something weighing on me for a while. I think I got it figured out, though.”

The smaller girl scrutinized her gangly friend, making pointed note of the flecks of red across her neck and the fledgling grin that crawled from her lips the minute Makoto and Mahiru came back from around the corner, the former still shaking her jacket dry.

“So, did they say anything?” Soraka asked, standing from the bench.

“It was a new part of the house. The old one wasn’t getting scares so what little cash they had was piled into *that* shit show. It’s so bad in there they think the robot’s eye came out on it’s own…” Makoto growled, kicking at a loose plank in the piers woodwork. “Bowl me over for a cheap scare why don’t they…”

Mahiru rested a hand on the miffed girls shoulder, looking apologetically out at the other four, “They’ve informed us that they’ll put up some warnings in the future about the water, put up some more barriers and retool the placement of the animatronics, but for the time being they gave us a refund.” She held out a wad of bills that was quickly distributed among those present. “

“Doesn’t fix my shoes…” Satsuki frowned, fruitlessly trying to scrape her heels against a jut in the bench.

The blonde wobbled over to the bench, mimicking much of the shorter girl’s actions, “Unfortunately, no, but it could have been worse: we had to talk in circles about the damaged animatronic. They think the eye popped out from a malfunction, so the fact that *we’re* not the ones in trouble is a blessing on its own, let alone getting anything resembling a refund. I think we’ll just have to set an hour aside to clean our shoes up and be happy with that.”

“Think it’ll actually take that long?” the mousy girl asked.

Mahiru beamed, stomping her toes so as to send a few more flecks of wet grass flying, “It won’t feel too long if we add hot cocoa to the mix, I’m sure.”

Satsuki chuckled and nodded, a pleasantly warm sensation flittering through her heart.

“Sheesh, how are you two not fat yet? You’ve been talking about treats all day…” Makoto whined.

Soraka tugged on the girl’s ear, earning a pained yelp from the redhead, “Don’t tease them; you eat more than three nuclear families a day so you shouldn’t be talking.”

“I don’t eat *that* much!” Makoto stomped. Another tug at her ear and her more docile side returned.

“We practice moderation, that’s how,” Mahiru tutted, narrowing her eyes towards the redhead. “For example, getting funnel cake is a treat; we don’t have sweets like that every day. And Satsuki is only allowed to have two cheese sticks a day when we have them… However…” weary eyes trailed over to where her roommate was beginning to fidget, “I *do* notice and sometimes *overlook* when an entire package goes missing, which *better not happen* to the one we buy on the way home…”

Satsuki paled and smiled, nodding vigorously under that threatening stare. Even still, with that laser-focused gaze boring a hole in her soul, she felt that same wonderful warmth and Satsuki swore she would eat a dozen packs of cheese sticks if it meant she could hold onto that feeling.

“Speaking of that, though, I think now would be a capital time to go get that funnel cake. What do you say?” Mahiru asked, looking precisely at her premier companion.

“Oooh! That sounds great!” Sumika cooed, her and Yukima finally joining the group proper after keeping themselves detached. “I was thinking the last place we should go is the Ferris wheel; why don’t Yukima and I grab us all spots in line while you four go get funnel cake for all of us.”

“Sounds like a plan if I ever heard it,” Soraka agreed.

Yukima handed out a couple notes of yen, the same yen refunded by the haunted house in fact, “Sumika and I will take

strawberry glaze, if that’s alright.”

Mahiru took the money and bobbed her head, “I kn-I’ll be sure to get that for you, thanks!”

Yukima nodded and linked back up with Sumika, the two sharing a brief, quiet conversation before waving to the group and departing towards the looming wheel in the distance.

“Who gets strawberry glaze on funnel cake…” Makoto muttered.

“I know; I like chocolate on mine,” Satsuki noted lightly.

The redhead gave her a glare, “Buncha heathens, all of ya.”

O/o\O

"This might have been the best idea tonight," Mahiru moaned, politely listing her palm over her mouth while she chewed. She swallowed, grinning, "Good call, ‘Suki."

Satsuki beamed, her chocolate-stained teeth brushing against the cool night air.

The two were seated hip to hip with the warm but cooling plate of funnel cake sitting over their legs. Half the dessert had been devoured and if Satsuki had anything to say about it that second half wouldn't last much longer either. It was a treat for both of them, sharing a Ferris wheel ride and splitting a delicacy between them; a nice quiet cap to the evening before returning to the ruckus of their friends group for the trip home.

Once the cake had been dwindled to a fourth, Mahiru leaned back, sighing, content, "This was nice. I wish we could all go out like this more often..."

"Mhhhm," Satsuki agreed. She grinned, leaning into her guardian, "Then we could have funnel cake every day..."

Mahiru snorted, shaving the small girl, "You'd get sick of it not too long after."

"Says you."

"Knows me."

"Spoilsport."

"Piggy."

The two began to laugh, resting their heads together as the ride gently lifted them towards the crest of the wheel.

"I don't want today to end... It's been too much fun..." Satsuki groaned, rubbing her face in Mahiru's shoulder.

The blonde gave her a solid pat on the head, "Enjoy it while it lasts and don't regret it; I learned that a while ago."

Satsuki smiled and wrapped her arm around Mahiru's waist, pulling her warmth closer, "I kinda want to go to sleep like this. Life lessons make me sleepy."

Mahiru rolled her eyes and peeled Satsuki away, earning a distressed groan in return, "I'm not carrying you, so you better stay awake."

"Drat, you saw through my plan..." the pinkette pouted. The two shared another look and another chuckle, though Satsuki's laugh petered out quickly as Mahiru's silhouette was layered in the setting sun. Her throat caught seeing beams of gold snared by beams of gold, amber gems backed by gilded streams. She had called Mahiru 'beautiful' a dozen times before; for the first time in her life she understood what 'beautiful' really meant. She coughed, a fleck of fried dough jamming her wind pipe. Immediately the blonde was upon her, palm slapping her back to dislodge the offending grain of food.

"Be careful, Satsuki, you'll kill yourself if you keep gobbling like Makoto," Mahiru chided, finger waggling in front of the pinkette's face.

"S-sorry... S-s-sorry..." she hacked, rubbing her chest, "I just... uh... remembered! I wanted to give you something!"

She reached into her satchel, a worn old aviator's pack that rarely left her shoulders and a moment later a plush pink figure was pulled from its depths, its cartoonish maw wide enough to devour a fist. The sproingy doll was quickly passed into Mahiru's hands, triangular ears flopping over the blonde's knuckles.

"Oh, it's that cartoon mascot... Uh... Ooh, it was something in English, wasn't it?" Mahiru mused. "Chom... Something...?"

"Chomplette, I think," Satsuki nodded.

"Has a nice ring to it... Wait, wasn't this one of the prizes back at that shooting gallery...?"

"Yeah... I thought the guy was being a real jerk with you... I mean, you had to have won at least ONE prize... So I doubled back and won something for you. You deserved it..."

Mahiru held the plushie close to her chest, cradling it against her sternum, "Aww... Satsuki... You're too sweet..."

Satsuki reddened, scratching her neck, "I... just like being fair..." The blonde pulled her into a hug, leaving her to blush all the more in response.

"You're a good friend, that's what you are," Mahiru cooed, pulling back just a bit. She flicked Satsuki's nose, "Even if you're a troublemaker sometimes." The pinkette shifted away, rubbing the dinged cartilage, yet still managing to smile. "Now," Mahiru grinned, leaning back that much further, "What do you say we finish this funnel cake? You can scrape up all the chocolate!"

Satsuki smirked, "I was planning on doing that anyway."

O/o\O

As was natural, the ride, and so too their night, wound to an end. Satsuki and Mahiru were only the second pair off, with Sumika and Yukima waiting for them at the exit platform. Makoto and Soraka were close behind, only a few minutes apart from the other four, though Satsuki noted that the redhead seemed more incensed than when she'd gotten on.

She stomped past, pushing through the lot with her hands dug into the pockets of her jean shorts. Soraka was almost passive by comparison, her brow taut and her lips pulled to a crisp line.

"Is everything alright?" Sumika asked, fingers briefly trailing after the spitfire.

"She's... angry," Soraka said simply.

"What did you say to piss her off?" Satsuki asked, arching a brow. A light swat to her skull made her wince.

"Satsuki, don't be rude!" Mahiru chided.

"No, no," Soraka interjected, "she's right... Kind of. I've not really been fair to her all day. I guess she was more affected by it than I thought she would be..."

Yukima stepped forward, mirroring the redhead's path, "Well, it looks like she's heading towards the exit. I suggest we follow."

And with that, quietly, the five girls drifted after the errant orphan, their steps quickly exposing the accumulated wear of the day's excitement. Crossing the pier took only a few minutes, though after that Ferris wheel ride another trip to the bathroom delayed their exit that much more. Because of this, when they finally touched foot on the adjoining wharf, they were met with a grimacing redhead, tapping her foot expectantly.

"Took you guys long enough..." Makoto glowered, "We ready to get going or what?"

"More than ready," Mahiru sighed, slumping her shoulders in a rare moment unfettered from decorum, "Though we noticed you've been kind of tense... Are you okay, Makoto?"

Eyes shifted between the redhead and Soraka, seeming only to enflame the older girl and cause the younger to shrink.

"I'm... fine..." Makoto growled, twisting on her heels, "I was just thinking, I live the opposite way so I'll probably catch my own train home. I'll see you guys later."

"But weren't you planning on staying over with us tonight...?" Satsuki asked, her voice quiet, confused and easily drowned out by the confidence-building exhale that erupted behind her.

"Ume!" Soraka shouted.

A dart of blue lashed out from the girls, catching Makoto just as she turned around. Cobalt and crimson melded as Soraka wrapped her arms around her friend's neck and pulled her down into a coarse, desperate kiss. Makoto's eyes widened and would fail to shut long after the embrace would end. Soraka only kept their lips together for a few seconds before she transitioned to a hug tight enough to almost suffocate Makoto.

Satsuki strained her ears, catching only the repeated utterance of 'I'm sorry' floating out of the azulite.

The four other girls witnessed Soraka's brash motions with a mixture of reactions; surprise, elation, confusion and contemplation, all of which were matched with accompanying silence.

After half a minute Soraka pulled back from her counterpart, "I just needed to say that before you went home."

Makoto blinked, giving her a moment of pause to digest what had happened. And after that moment she reached out and gripped Soraka's cheeks, smooshing them under her callused fingers, "What. The hell. Was that. Hayami?"

"Uhhh... Uh cuhnpheshion?" the azulite squeaked.

"That was all *way* more than a friggin' confession," Makoto snapped, leaning closer. She stopped inches from Soraka's face, fiery irises scanning her over line-by-line. The redhead pushed forward and engaged Soraka in an even more heated kiss, causing the two to stumble back a step towards their friends. The fevered onslaught only came to a halt when Soraka managed to push Makoto off, an act cursed by a feeble will.

"M-Makoto... I d-don't... Don't overd-do it..." she piped, cobalt eyes wavering in their sockets.

Makoto only responded by grabbing Soraka's wrists and holding them aloft, "Don't start what you can't finish, Hayami. Now you're going to take me back to your dorm, you're going to make us some snacks, and you're going to explain every goddamned thought that you had tonight." She tightened her grip, causing Soraka to wince, "Am. I. Clear?"

Soraka went a little slack, sighing in the face of a dragon, "Fine, fine... You deserve it..." The azulite arched her neck to look at the others, "If it's alright with you guys, we'll break off here. There's a lot to talk about..."

Sumika stepped forward, gripping her shirt's collar, "O-Of course! We'll see you guys later!"

Soraka smiled and waved, deftly worming her arm around Makoto's and dragging her off towards the train station.

A quiet moment passed after they faded from sight.

"What the shit was that?!" Satsuki asked, waving after the two. Another slap rung through her skull.

"Language," Mahiru tutted.

Yukima stepped up to Sumika, lips curved sharp and deadly. "What you just saw," she began, "were the last steps of the mating dance between a buffoon and an imbecile."

"Yukima, I told you to stop being mean!" Sumika crowed.

"Actually," Mahiru interjected, giving the spot where she hit Satsuki a delicate rub, "I find Yukima's observation rather accurate. I think it's about time those two saw some clarity... together."

"She gets to be mean, but I can't swear, even if I'm not being mean; make up your mind, Mahiru..." Satsuki groaned.

Mahiru leered at her housemate, "It's all in decorum, Satsuki. To insult someone to their face and have them think it was a compliment is not a skill easily learned."

"But it wasn't to her face!"

"Semantics."

"Plain Japanese!"

"We'll get a second bag of cheese sticks if you stop arguing with me."

"...You can't bribe me to win arguments forever."

"And a Danish you can eat on the way home."

"..."

"..."

"You win this round, Mahiru..."

Mahiru laughed and plopped a hand on the pinkette's head, doing nothing to reduce the small girl's pout.

Yukima pulled Sumika forward, stepping off towards the train station, "I think we've given them enough time. Shall we proceed?"

"I believe so," Mahiru grinned, "Ready Satsuki?"

Catching Mahiru's good natured smile prompted Satsuki's pursed lips to melt. She nodded and grabbed an offered hand from the blonde, her heart skipping a beat at the touch of fingers. The quartet began their trek home, sharing bits of chatter along the way.

Once they finally reached the station and worked through the turn style, Mahiru turned to her, asking, "So, did you have a good time too? I know you weren't exactly thrilled about everyone else joining."

Satsuki's face heated. It was true she wanted this to be a duo escapade, but the more she thought about it, things had wound up for the better. Without Makoto they never would have gotten the haunted house refund, without Soraka she wouldn't have heard Mahiru sing, without Sumika they wouldn't have ridden the Ferris wheel and without Yukima she wouldn't have won the Chomplette doll for Mahiru. Peering at the plush, nestled in the crook of Mahiru's arm, Satsuki smiled.

"Honestly...?" She asked, leaning into Mahiru's arm, "It was perfect."

Cinders

July, 2017

She took things too far, didn't she?

Soraka scowled, flipping an egg so the other side of the scramble wouldn't burn. Her eyes drifted to the lone figure sulking on the kitchen table, crossed arms overlapped by a bushel of red hair. She tucked a strand of cornflower hair behind her ear, biting her lip with a huff.

Yeah, okay, she'd *definitely* taken things too far.

Tonight was *supposed* to be celebratory, tonight was *supposed* to be exciting, tonight was *supposed* to be *fun*. A day out at the fair with their whole circle of friends, enjoying everything it had to offer, at the end of which she would confess her undying love for the redhead after years of tepidly testing the waters...

But that hadn't been enough for Soraka, *no*, she just *had* to up the drama, she just *had* to cling to Sumika, and praise Mahiru's singing, and drag Yukima off to the karaoke stand to sing a romantic duet. She just had to do *anything* other than giving attention to the one person she had planned her entire scheme around. And of course this wound up biting her in the ass; by the end of the night Makoto was more than ready to storm off and had it not been for Soraka's last minute confession the redhead would more than likely have gone home and drowned her frustration in chocolate and Pringles.

Of course, that wasn't much worse than what *did* happen; after they left together and Soraka explained her side of the story Makoto had gone quiet almost entirely, making few if any noises right up until she dropped her head to Soraka's dormitory table, which left them both trapped in the uncomfortable one-sided exchanges creeping over them now.

Stupid, stupid, she was so goddamned stupid.

Soraka opened her mouth only to slam it shut and finish preparing the tamagoyaki, dicing the fluff into bite-sized yellow puffs.

She divided them between two plates already occupied by small bowls of ramen. Flourishing a bit for show (her apron had frills and she was going to use them, unreceptive audience be damned) she arrived at the table, plates quickly placed and ready for consumption.

Yet the redhead did not stir, not a hair nor errant fang budging so much as a millimeter.

The azulite's brief play at a smile died with the lack of reaction; a Makoto unstirred by food was a Makoto unknown. Normally she'd jump at the chance to down Soraka's cooking. Even on the worst of days her gut had been her guide.

But even after two whole minutes the form did not stir.

Soraka coughed into her hand. "You're letting it get cold, Makoto."

No movement.

"It’s gonna go to waste..."

Not a budge.

Soraka swished her lips and reached for Makoto's bowl, "Alright, guess I'll just have to eat both..." To her surprise she managed to actually grab the plate and drag it towards her own. With her threat emptied she eased back into her chair, pushing the food back into place. This was more than a little disheartening; she’d take writing term papers five times over if it meant Makoto’s mood would improve even an inch. Well, okay, maybe four times over, but her point stood.

She sighed, rubbing at a crick in her neck, "I... I don't know how many times I can say I'm sorry..."

A reply finally edged out from the mound of red, though the barrier of hair kept it muffled.

"What did you say?" Soraka asked. She hazarded forward and lifted the matted ponytail, meeting drawn crimson irises.

"You could stand to say it a few more times."

Soraka deflated as Makoto stretched back into her chair, nabbing an omelet slice on her way back up. The redhead's face relaxed for just a moment while she chewed, reverting after swallowing the cooked egg.

"I'll say it as many times as you want me to."

"You'd lose your voice."

"If you won't talk to me what would be the point of having one?"

Makoto bared her teeth, daggers falling to the table, "Stop trying to be suave, damnit!"

Soraka narrowed her gaze, "And *you* stop trying to be so damn stubborn. I'm trying my best here, how much more do you want?"

"How much do you think I want?!" Makoto snapped back. "How many apologies do you think I want after all of that? How badly do you think watching all of that hurt, being the butt of all those jokes hurt?!"

"I told you, it was just teasing, I thought you would take it better than this," the azulite countered.

"Well I didn't..." Makoto murmured, her voice drawling to a whimper, "I... You don't play with someone's emotions like that..."

Soraka exhaled and swept back her bangs, "Mako..."

"What if Tokubē did all of that to you, knowing how you felt about him? Did you ever picture yourself on the other end?"

The student choked, fingers curling over the table into halfhearted fists. It was a low blow for Makoto to dredge him up. Ironically the other girl was usually Soraka's go-to person for forgetting that long abandoned love, so hearing her use that position as a sword was enough for the azulite's teeth to clench and her knuckles to bleach.

But any kind of verbal retaliation fizzled when the weight of those words finally landed home. Just imagining Tokubē berating her for cracking wry jokes made her head spin, seeing him sing a romantic duet with a girl described charitably as ‘unstable’ sent her spine tingling, and any image of another girl hanging off his arm, even his proper girlfriend, made Soraka queasy. She thought that the atmosphere at the fair would have lent itself to some good natured teasing, but all it did was make her look like she’d gotten swept up in the romantic fancies the event had to offer. All of those thoughts piled into the vat of her mind and she was stricken with fatigue, head slumping as her arms languidly scrambled to catch it.

Almost as quickly those thoughts of Tokubē were replaced, his visage cut and swapped for Makoto's, and the nausea only expanded. What she had developed as an emotional defense was now serving only to double down the wrenching boil in her gut.

"I... I... Crap..." Soraka shuddered, "I mean holy shit... I'm the worst friend in existence..."

Makoto exhaled through her nose, eyes watery, "No, no... You're just the densest..."

Soraka dropped her arms and gazed into her ramen, the swirling steam captivating her sinking eyes, "How the hell am I supposed to make it up to you...? Do you... still even want me?"

"Of course I do!" the redhead barked, "You're... I'm not going to give up on you over something so stupid... I just... I'm hurt and I'm probably more lost on this than you are..." Makoto kicked back in her chair, arms crossed, head lowered. A moment passed and she growled, leaning back over the cooling dishes, "Screw it; eat first, then we'll figure this out. I can't argue on an empty stomach..."

The student allowed herself a wry sigh, her lips heavy as she smiled, "I mean, are we even still arguing if I admit I'm in the wrong?"

The scavenger looked up, her lips already stuffed with noodles by the time Soraka finished speaking. She slurped her fill and pincered her chopsticks at her friend, "It'll *stay* an argument if you let that food go to waste."

Soraka raised her hands, giving a tepid chuckle, "Alright, alright, though don't be surprised if I balloon out after this. I eat too damn much when you're around..."

Makoto grinned as another slice of tamagoyaki vanished into her gullet, "And? Just more of you to love. Now shut up and eat so I can go back to being angry at you."

Soraka sighed and started her own dish, the wriggling python holding her heart in check slowly unwinding as the meal progressed, though never quite letting go entirely. Her reflection stared out of the broth and she gave a brief wonder how anyone could have fallen in love with an idiot like her.

O/o\O

"So... the more I think about this," Makoto muttered, turning her eyes away from the screen, "I don't think there's really a way to make it up to me."

Soraka craned her head, sunken lips standing out against the dull glow of the movie. The two had opted to finish dinner and start watching TV, catching an old samurai flick on one of the channels. Despite omnipresent action sequences the film had a number of surprisingly slow moments, leaving quiet drops for the duo to mull over their current dilemma.

"Nothing at all?" the student asked. She let her hand inch across the cushion between them, seeking the warmth of the fiery girl's grip. Her fingers were left empty.

"I just... Because honestly some of the hurt shouldn't be your fault..." the redhead sulked, "Some of this is on me..."

Soraka cocked her head to the side, her eyebrow borderline skyrocketing from her face, "That sounds kinda like, I don't know, Stockholm syndrome-y? How the hell is any of this *your* fault?"

"I... Well... I..." Makoto rocked in her seat, using the momentum to cross her legs and fully face the cornflower girl. "I was jealous, that's how."

"Uh...Yeah..." Soraka countered, "That was the whole point of the teasing."

The redhead shook her head, "I know, but that doesn't make it right for me to be super possessive of you. Sumika has a good lifetime ahead of me being your quote-unquote 'sister', you've known Mahiru since high school and even Yukima's known you longer than I have. You're... You're close to them and it's on me to not get so riled up when I see you with them. I'm kind of territorial, I know, but I can't pretend it’s okay to keep you for myself."

The azulite's lips slowly sagged as Makoto spoke, chin sinking into the top curve of the couch. She twisted to match Makoto's pose, crossing her legs and reaching out to grip the redhead's palms. A brief but satisfying smirk was allowed to spread, "Weren't you the one who always preached the virtues of being selfish?"

To her surprise, Makoto's fingers curled and the redhead's voice dipped low, "...You know you're one of the exceptions, right? You always have been."

Soraka felt prickling in the corner of her eyes, subconsciously squeezing back into her friend's grip. She leaned in and brushed her lips to Makoto's cheek. The redhead leaned in as she pulled back, resting their foreheads together in the dark, "You're really sweet when you want to be..."

"It's too damn *easy* around you sometimes," Makoto grunted. "I feel like I'm losing my edge. My dad warned me about succubi, never thought I'd ever actually meet one."

"...Don't succubi do something diff-?"

"It's close enough, don't read into it."

"I'm *totally* gonna read into it."

"Soraka..."

"Fine, fine..." Soraka smiled and leaned back, pulling the redhead with her so they were intertwined among the cushions. "I'll give you the jealousy thing, but I knew you'd be jealous and I played with it. If you want, we can share the blame; we're both goddamned idiots..."

Makoto paused, her nails biting into Soraka's shoulder, keeping herself aloft for only a second before she carefully burrowed into the azulite's arms.

"Yeah, yeah I guess we are..." she hummed, nudging closer as Soraka tightened her hold. A breath, and the thought continued, "Soraka... I forgive you."

Soraka pushed her nose into Makoto's neck, arms constricting tighter and tighter.

"Thank you," she whispered back, letting her words tickle at the redhead's jaw line.

Almost every argument they'd ever had ended with a hold like this: deep, personal, closer than any two 'just friends' should have been. But, with their dynamic change, this embrace felt more deserved, more honest.

"I was scared, you know, anxious," Soraka admitted. "You'll be the first person I've ever really dated... I mean the closest thing I had

to a relationship before this ended with a literal car crash... So I was scared and it made me a little... unstable tonight. I didn't want to screw up with you and I just made things worse by getting riled up."

"Mhhn..." Makoto nodded into Soraka's chest. The TV, long since forgotten, burst to life as samurai clashed with samurai, casting the two with the flutter of strobing lights. The redhead lifted her chin and gave Soraka a half-tired stare. "Hey, Soraka? Can I kiss you again?"

Soraka smiled up at her, "You don't have to ask."

Instead of responding Makoto connected their lips, slowly, yearningly, with the occasional tug or nip at her junior's own pair. A minute passed as the two enjoyed the kiss, a graceless waltz of taste and tongues that only came to an end when they needed to breathe.

But even without breath Makoto had something to stay. The minute their faces detached she gripped Soraka's cheeks, fingers squeezing deep into the supple flesh, "Never do anything like that ever again. Are we clear?"

Soraka stared into those vibrant red irises, her body catching fire under the scrutinizing crimson gaze.

And then she laughed. Deep and loud and hoarse, she laughed. Even as she felt Makoto's nails poise themselves across her face she kept on laughing, making little attempt to stifle the sound.

"Wow," she barked, snaking an arm around Makoto, "And you call *me* melodramatic. That was the best death glare I've ever received in my life!"

Even while speaking her chortle was drowning out what little sound from the movie still registered to them.

"*Soraka*...!" Makoto hissed, squeezing tighter.

Almost immediately the laughter quieted, though a few stray giggles slipped through the student's teeth. Soraka laid her hands over Makoto's and gently pried them loose, smiling all the way.

"Stupidity is like my lifeblood or something; you wouldn't ask a shark to stop swimming would you? I mean I'd try my best, but I'd most likely end up dead"."

Makoto frowned, fingers still positioned in optimal face-scratching range despite blue-nailed restraints.

"How about something a little more fair, ey?" Soraka grinned, "How about I promise to be the best girlfriend I can be, flaws and all?"

Makoto glared at Soraka, swatting her shoulder, "Shouldn't that promise be implicit?"

"Apparently not," the azulite laughed, sinking further into the couch.

"Sheesh, you're terrible..." Makoto groaned, falling back down into Soraka's arms, "Fine, make that promise and I'll match it too... Lord knows I'm going to futz it up somewhere down the line too..."

"I look forward to it," Soraka giggled, raking her fingers through Makoto's shaggy mane.

They stayed like that a moment longer, heartbeat matching heartbeat. And then reality set in and Soraka began to stir.

"Alright, time for bed..."she groaned, flicking off the TV and clicking on a light.

Makoto sighed and rolled to allow Soraka an escape, one she took with all the grace of a dead fish. After slamming to the floor the student stood and brushed herself off, giving a few quick stretches before stumbling off towards the bedroom. She stopped, though, and faced Makoto, who had sprawled herself across the couch in an alarmingly practiced manner.

"Hey... You comin'?" Soraka asked, locking her arm in a sidebar pull.

Makoto blinked, arching her head back over the armrest, "What?"

The azulite motioned to the open door, "Sharing a bed is better than the couch." The savage balked, blood rushing to her face, though most of it was probably from her rather obtuse position. Soraka groaned and rolled her eyes, "Just sleep, pervert. I don't think I'm ready for the funny business quite yet." She rocked on her haunches and pressed her forefingers together, a dash of pink visiting her cheeks, "But... I've also never had the chance to cuddle, so... You know..."

The redhead scrambled from her spot and was immediately in her girlfriend's arms. An impassioned kiss caught Soraka off guard, leaving her vision prickled with drowsiness and surprise. Fingers threaded together, Makoto jumped on her heels, fanged grin radiating like the sun.

"I love you, Soraka."

Shaking away her stupor, Soraka smiled back.

"I love you too, Makoto."

Mixed Ashes

May, 2015 – November, 2016

Days

Time.

As she loops one last wire into the detonator she wishes so desperately that time would just stand still. Finish the bomb, plant it in the hideout, grab what she can carry and run. Nothing new, mechanical almost, but it always rushed by so damn fast. Any slip up or gaff and her chances of getting home go from slim to none. Her finger slips against the last cog and she recoils, hissing as she sticks the pad between her lips.

"Damn this thing," she mutters, giving the cog two more twists before slamming the casing shut.

Okay, bomb’s done, all wires up and ticking.

Wait.

"Shit!" Yukima rocks out of her chair. She can't risk tossing it, too much noise, it'd just give her away, and trying to disarm it, a ramshackle IED, would probably just end up killing her. She built the damn thing which only means that she knew how temperamental it was to begin with. So the only option that faced her was to accelerate her plans.

Time really wasn't playing fair.

Metal drags against the granite counter, the explosive folding easily between her palms. It's probably not a good sign that dealing with jury rigged incendiaries has become normal for her.

She isn't far from the camp, just around the corner and up a staircase and she's in the heart of enemy territory. Her feet kicks chiseled stone, dust wafting into the ether in her wake. In a blink she reaches the stairs and in two she's already halfway up it, dashing around one more corner as her heart thumps in time with the bomb. Sweat glosses her hand when she dives into the compound; she has forty seconds to place down the IED, grab what she can and go.

A table rests beside a cot with perfect view of the room and she knows immediately where to set the bomb. Yukima jitters to the stand, her hands shaking as the four-pronged base touched smooth, laminate oak.

Thirty-five seconds; she can work with that. She saw a rifle in the corner of the room she'd need, and doubtless there was a pistol above the dresse-

There's a click downstairs and her blood ices over. There weren't any insurgents in the camp, she'd scouted it not ten minutes prior.

Thirty-two seconds.

Instinctively she reaches for her belt only to find her handgun missing. Yukima flinches, realizing she'd left it downstairs to clean once she'd gotten the bomb ready. Accidentally priming it early means she was unarmed with her back to the wall.

Twenty-nine seconds.

Thumps ring out from the stairs, deafened by a carpet of sand but still alarmingly loud. She calculates her options and finds her mind coming up empty. There ARE no options. Unless she can swivel past him, this is her last moment alive.

Twenty-four seconds.

Well, at least she can go out on her terms and bring one of those bastards with her. She drops her knees to a readied stance, fingers poised to pounce. She's actually pretty terrible in a straight up fight, but she's hoping the element of surprise will let her hold him in place long enough to get caught in the blast.

Twenty-seconds.

A rosy puff squeezed and pulled into an uneven shower of color stumbles into view, gentle fuchsia eyes popping up to lock with Yukima's own steely amethyst.

Yukima blinks and drops her arms.

"...Sumika?"

Sumika's wobbles a bit, balancing a cavalcade of grocery bags in her arms. She smiles and lifts what she can with pride, "Surprise! I thought I'd stop by and make you a home-cooked meal; must've been a while since you had one of those."

Yukima blinks.

"Uh, yeah. I-I guess it has..."

Ten seconds.

"What are you doing up here anyway?" the rosette asks, glancing around the bedroom.

Yukima glances to the bomb on the nightstand, "My clock. It wasn't set to daylight savings and when I went to change it I found out it was broken. I was fixing it..."

One second.

An earsplitting noise breaks through the air, causing both girls to flinch. Yukima reaches behind her and slams the nobule on top, ending the raucous cacophony.

"What's the alarm for?" Sumika's asks, raising a brow. Yukima shakes her head.

"To take my medicine. I was going to do that after vacuuming. Guess I didn't quite get my times right."

Sumika nods, "Well, that's okay, small mistakes are fine when we can learn from them. It might take you a while to get back in your groove." She glances over at the vacuum, tucked safely away in the corner of the room, "How about you grab that and get started on it and I'll have dinner done when you're finished?"

Yukima smiles, nodding, "That... sounds lovely, Sumika."

Sumika hops in place, her poff of a ponytail barely wisping the base of her neck. And then she just stands there. Motionless. Hesitant? There's a brief second where she scoots into the room and is a hair’s breadth from Yukima's cheek, to where she can feel the other girl's breath on her hairs and on her skin, warming Yukima's face and cooling her beaded sweat.

And then Sumika's presence is gone, recused and guarded with her head hung low and her arms bunched together either out of shame or to better support the plastic bags, she could not tell.

"R-r-ight, I-I'll get started on dinner. G-good luck with the kissin-cleaning, I meant cleaning!" Sumika stutters, her cheeks as rosy as her hair. With a couple of steps she's out the door, and by the time Yukima gathers her senses the sounds of culinary prep work have already started to drift through the house.

Yukima glares at the vacuum near her bed and grabs it, hefting it easily with one hand. She hesitates, however, next to the dresser. She carefully reaches up to the lip and pulls a bulky metal form from the cabinet's roof. Her glare becomes a scowl: she thought she'd left it downstairs to be cleaned. She needed to be careful; it was too dangerous to have something so important misplaced at the wrong time.

O/o\O

Half an hour after arriving and dinner was nearly finished, with Sumika adding the final touches to the tsukemen when the vacuum in the library down the hall shut off. Yukima's home had always been rather awe-inspiring with just how sprawling it was given the relatively small plot of land it was built on. Mrs. Katsumi had something to do with the design she knew, but Yukima was always so tight-lipped about her parents so that was all she knew on the matter.

Was. Is? Sumika wrapped her fingers around the seeping warmth of her mug, the coffee licking the rims in time with the small movements of her wrists. This whole situation was... weird.

Yukima was back! She was alive and spent the last three years making her way home! By every measure of the word it was a miracle, especially with how Yukima described her time over seas... at least what little she was willing to mention.

And therein lie the rub.

There were things Yukima was blatantly hiding from Sumika. Sumika had spent that three year expanse with her own life and times, but she never quite stopped grieving for her sickly friend and by the first Christmas without Yukima she had memorized every gaunt crease and bony limb she could lay eyes on in their old photographs together. The Yukima now may have gained more muscle, a sheen to her hair, and a confidence to her step, but those deep amethyst eyes she'd fallen in love with had lost something in that transformation, a softness that had been run beneath a grinder and sharpened to a fine point. Of course, there wasn't anything

wrong with that; in fact, Sumika would sheepishly admit that being dissected by that calculated gaze could leave her breathless, but it was clear that the first love in Sumika's life was gone and replaced with something more terrifying, more mysterious.

Sumika stood, freshly tied rosewood pigtails bouncing in sync with her steps as she prepared the last steps of the meal, filling two bowls with bubbling broth and one large one stacked high with veggies, noodles and meat. Her stomach churned watching every ounce of food spill into the dish from her wok. While she wasn't opposed to heavy meals, she'd been more than content with eating less in the last few weeks; the piles of calories were there for Yukima's sake, who doubtlessly had little chance for any well rounded meals while trapped abroad. Imagining her alone and hungry, eating trash or worse just to stay alive... Sumika's unsettled stomach was replaced by a guilty jolt down her spine. She would sit down with Yukima and they would both have a full, filling meal, even if their waistlines became a little rounder in the end.

The rosette turned to grab their chopsticks for the meal and froze as she found herself at the other end of that haunting gaze, purple gems carving at her features from the main hallway.

"Ah! Y-Yukima! You startled me!" Sumika sighed, gripping her chest.

Yukima opened her mouth and then shut it before languidly opening it again, "That wasn't what I.... I didn't mean to. I'm sorry."

"No, no, it’s okay. I, uh, forgot how quiet you are! You're a real ninja, you know that?" Sumika smiled.

"Not really," Yukima smiled back, flipping a thistle of hair over her shoulder as she strode into the room, "You're just lost in thought. I suppose some things don't really change much, do they?"

The comment decked Sumika like a sidewinder to the jaw. Years of playful banter with Soraka had taught her to puff her cheeks and pout after retorts like that. And so she did.

"Yukimaaa!" Sumika whined, "When did you become so mean?"

Only, this wasn't Soraka and that was clearly not the right response.

"I..." Yukima stammered, sliding back a step. In an instant the cool, composed confidence drained from her body, shrinking her to a husk that only vaguely resembled her younger persona, "I... Sorry, I didn't think. I was... I was j-joking and... I'm sorry, I-I'm sorry..."

Sumika was sure that the color had drained from her own face in time with Yukima's posture.

"N-No! Yukima, I'm fine, I'm fine, I was joking too!"

Reflexively she stepped forward and raised her arms, to pull the suddenly conflicted girl into a hug. And just as reflexively Yukima jerked away, suddenly cradling her own limbs and her right hand scrabbling over a blackened shape affixed to her hip. Sumika's blood became ice and her feet locked in place.

"Yu... kim... a...?" the rosette's squeaked, vocal chords dropping to a dry rasp. "Wh-wha-what *is* that...?"

"It-t-t... It's a..." something in Yukima's inflection matched what Sumika remembered: the anxiety, the spike in her pitch, and that stutter that she had always found adorable. But all of that was covered by a mask, one that was slipping off quickly and was only being held together by an almost animalistic panic. "It doesn't matter..." the ghastly girl finally choked out. She angled her side away from Sumika, pointedly concealing the shadow mounted on her belt.

"I... O-ohkay," Sumika breathed. "Let's both take a breath, alright. I think we're both getting worked up over nothing," she let the words simmer on her tongue, "I think."

Yukima's rabid features did not seem to falter, but as the seconds passed on her tightened lips and sunken eyes began to melt away, imploding under Sumika's watchful gaze. The survivor gasped, allowing her shoulders a moment of respite. There was quiet, save for the uneasy breathing flowing between them.

"It's... a gun. A-a pistol, to be more accurate," Yukima finally answered, stuffing a lock of her bangs behind her ear. "I've had it for a while now..."

"O-oh..." Sumika swallowed. Her eyes locked and listed in time with Yukima's hand, the trembling digits jittering over the matte black plastic.

Yukima trailed the gaze and in an instant she blanched, her knocked elbows curling into her stomach, "N-no, Sum-mika, I wasn't-please, don't be scared, I wouldn't ever think of..." She looked down at the tool, at how close she was to wrenching it free and what little color left in her face drained completely. Sumika flinched as the gun was drawn, expecting some kind of reprisal for an incomprehensible offense, but all that came was a clatter of plastic and metal as the pistol dropped to the floor, its magazine and a single loose bullet heralding it’s fall with their own.

"No, no, I wasn't going to, I wasn't, I was just..." Yukima sputtered, stepping to press her back against the wall. Fingers, knotted and calloused, raked through her ebony hair as she slid to the ground. "I wouldn't, I-I-I... No... No..."

Sumika pulled her legs free of their stasis, creeping forward inch by inch, and with each soft fall of her heels Yukima crumpled that much more. The moment she was close enough she dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around Yukima's shoulders.

A split-second later she found herself unable to breathe. Rocky scarred pads dug into her larynx, thumbs pressing up into the curve of her jaw preventing anything from slipping down her throat. She tried to call Yukima's name but it came out garbled, unintelligible... strangled. Sumika scrabbled at the hand around her neck, moisture prickling in the corners of her eyes, the world blurring and spinning around her. A spark of adrenaline momentarily drowned out the agony, just as drool began to pool beneath her tongue. Once more she cried Yukima's name, a croak drained of air but tinged with desperation.

And the grip relaxed. Sumika slipped to the tile, coughing onto the pristine surface, her own fingers frantically probing the red streaks rubbed raw across her skin.

Yukima curled in on herself, doing her damnedest to melt through the wall through sheer force alone. "I'm sorry! I-I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" she shrieked. Her fingers fell to the kitchen moulding, her nails splitting and bleeding as she continued to push against the abrasive grout.

Sumika shuddered, fire slipping down her lungs, or perhaps her lungs were the fire. It made no difference as she snapped her eyes forward, drilling her gaze into Yukima. Without hesitation she threw her arms around Yukima's shoulders and squeezed her even tighter than before, tight enough to hold her still against her reflexive jolt.

"I-I'm s-s-sor-rr-rry..." she wailed at the ceiling, "I'm-m s-s-o s-sorry!"

"Yukima..." Sumika cooed, pressing herself even closer, "It's-It's okay, Yukima. I forgive you. I'm alright." She cradled her friend, gently running her fingers through the other girl's shady locks, "I... I forgive you, it’s not your fault... You've been through a lot and you're not well." Arching her back she did what she could to look into Yukima's eyes. Yukima remained focused on the ceiling, eyes unmoving. Sumika leaned back in and squeezed, careful to not pull too tight, "You're not well, but I'm here for you, I'm here to help you get better, no matter what it takes."

Yukima shuddered against the warm touch and wailed against the soothing words. But in the end she let herself be held and she continued to wail long into the night.

O/o\O

Weeks

Yukima isn't well.

She knows this, she's *known* this, and yet even then that knowledge did nothing to mediate her problem; all the self awareness in the world cannot shake years of compacted survival instinct.

The first time she hurts Sumika it is when she is questioned about the gun and she strangles the one person she had been so desperate to see for so long. And the jubilant rosy girl forgave her, held her close despite the threat of kneejerk reprisal, and vowed to help her heal.

The second time she hurts Sumika is when they are trying to take a walk and a blown muffler spurs her to slam both of them to the pavement; better bruised than missing a limb. After a minute of confusion Sumika laughs it off, ignoring the bloody gashes along her palm and forearm, and leads Yukima back home so she can tend to the cut on *her* face first.

The third time she hurts Sumika, she is hanging a mirror to light up her abysmally dark house only for a glint of light to bounce around Sumika's hand. And still, while having shards of glass removed from her scalp and stitches sewn beneath shortened crops of hair, she forgives Yukima, because Sumika is a saint beyond description.

Sumika's mother is less so. She was so warm when Yukima returned, relieved in a way only she can be, but she is furious when she finally learns why Sumika has been coming home so scraped and weary all month. The woman is shrewd, Yukima remembers, and no amount of crow's feet buried beneath copious layers of concealer will change that. But Yukima is now equally shrewd, if not decidedly paranoid, so when Rise goes to make a demand Yukima has already taken it upon herself to meet it. When she takes Sumika to the hospital for the mirror she does what she can to find a psychologist and the businesswoman is... not pleased, but perhaps relieved that Yukima has already recognized the problem, relieved in only a way she can be.

But it is probably best that Sumika plays mediator for them going forward; Rise is protective of her daughter almost to a fault and makes further attempts to connect more than a little difficult.

The psychologist is something that needed to happen eventually, even if Yukima denies it to the day she dies. There is a brief consideration of having a psychiatrist instead, but having lived her life before the crash chained from pill bottle to pill bottle, she's adamant that she wants to do this without messing with her brain chemistry. Even then, though, she eventually sees one for some sleeping pills and once or twice she is prescribed anti-anxiety medication. She uses both sparingly and grudgingly.

The sessions are painful, with question after question crystallizing memories that Yukima has left purposefully blurred. She is willing, though, and the psychologist loves to remark how incredibly cooperative she is compared to other clientele. Yukima takes the compliment with a grain of salt, especially when it's said in the same breath as an affirmation of how difficult her particular issues are to tackle, by both the psychologist and Yukima herself. Despite this she persists with the sessions, using the tingle at the tips of her fingers where she squeezed as a constant reminder of what she had to lose if she failed to tackle her own mental issues.

She begins counting the weeks. Time has become very important to her since learning how long she'd been away. The years she spent abroad were nauseatingly nebulous, a gelatin made of sand and to be swallowed as air. Her first days home are so feverish, of course, that there's really no accounting for them, and she's thankful that the frantic period is far shorter than the weeks she spent bedridden after the crash in the desert. She's also thankful that Sumika is there to remember those days for her clearly and give her a reference point as she sets forth to sharpen each week as a glasswork statue in her mind.

Many of these statues are of Sumika, many of mundane objects given more meaning, and others of people scattered along the way. During her third week home she finally meets Mahiru again, though it is far from pleasant. Why they go there Yukima is unsure; Sumika shies away from what few questions Yukima feels comfortable making, but she says that having Yukima there will make it easier for her. And of course, it had been three years since she saw Mahiru, wouldn't it be nice to see an old friend?

And it is nice for a little while. Mahiru seems as formal as Yukima remembers, maybe even more so, though it becomes more than a little apparent that it's more a product of some unspoken tension between herself and Sumika than it is any kind of decorum. There's another girl there at the same time, a high school student named Satsuki that Mahiru befriended in the hospital. Their company is enjoyable enough even though she finds Satsuki's adoration for Mahiru's cheesecake more than a little unsettling, but their time is

cut short when Sumika emerges from a room with a bag slung over her shoulder declaring that it's time to leave. Yukima stutters out a proper goodbye and Mahiru shows them to the door, promising to stay in touch. The hollow look in her eye is not missed but is tactfully ignored.

Soraka appears in the fifth week with school being her primary delaying factor. She's just as loud as Yukima remembers, though Sumika seems to have explained some of Yukima's sensitivities because she's more reserved during this initial reconnection. Or maybe, maybe it was something else Yukima couldn't quite pick up on. Regardless, Soraka's reticence is easily offset by the companion she brought on their joint shopping trip, a barbarian of a redhead named Makoto. For as aggravating as Soraka had been in the past, Makoto is five times as bombastic, crude, dramatic and snide. Or perhaps she just rubs Yukima the wrong way and she seems that way. Both are possible. Still, at one point Yukima almost draws her gun on the redhead, which yes she had promised Sumika she left at home, and Sumika has to scramble to both calm her down and explain to Makoto what is happening.

Soraka is appalled that Yukima is carrying an illegal gun. Makoto is amazed and impressed. They both let their feelings on the matter be known, but both promise not to call the cops and on that note Sumika decides it's time for them both to go home. Yukima is reprimanded and does her best from then onward to resist the urge to arm herself; more often than not she fails, but she slowly begins to make progress when Sumika gifts her a knife she bought online, something to put her mind at ease that's a little easier to conceal and a little less illegal to carry around, though even then Sumika is uneasy whenever Yukima has it.

The next time she sees anyone other than Sumika or her family is when Makoto arranges a party during week nine, which Sumika is quick to point out as odd. And it most certainly was odd, if not uncomfortably awkward. 'Party' is a strong word to describe a six-person gathering around snack food and silly board games. Mahiru and Satsuki show up as well to fill out that quota and in truth each of the pairs around them seems closer than the last time

Yukima had seen them. It made sense for Mahiru and Satsuki, as the two recently became official roommates, but for Soraka and Makoto something stranger was afoot, especially with the bags Yukima glimpses under her eyes.

This is all but confirmed when she and Makoto are alone, refilling a chip bowl in Soraka's tiny apartment kitchen. Maybe it's because Yukima feels just as much an outsider to this group as Makoto, but the redhead lets slip that Soraka was feeling isolated from her friends, and that's a feeling she never wanted Soraka to feel. Once more, like with Soraka's eyes, there's something Makoto has left unsaid, something else that weighs between only the two of them. Makoto's mouth only parts for a second before it closes again and that mystery remains unspoken.

Their return to the party is celebrated and they go back to enjoying their card games. Yukima makes some rather poignant observations during this, namely that she herself was rather boring. In fact, during a game geared entirely towards provoking the most perverse side of each player, her dealings were often the most mundane in the group. Next to Mahiru she was easily the least interesting of the six in terms of her dirty mind, and she was unsure if there wasn't something she was missing because of her… unique mental state or if she had just been dealt a continuously poor hand for the game itself. Surprisingly, the most distorted plays came from the least expected sources: Satsuki and her very own 'pure' Sumika. Then again, like with herself, it could all be dependent upon the more random nature of the game, so there's a chance Sumika wasn't quite so twisted… though Yukima's gut is quick to tell her that either option had upsides.

The evening progresses and Soraka is looking more and more lively. Makoto is matching it as well, and even the chill surrounding Mahiru seems to have dwindled. It's the middle of a rather intense hand when there is a knock on the apartment door. Soraka excuses herself and goes to answer, leaving the quintet stewing over their choices in the game. Yukima is seated on the couch next to Sumika, with the other three sprawled on the floor around the table in an assortment of poses: poised, reclined, antsy.

“Hello there, Miss Hayami.”

And then there is the voice. Yukima’s head snaps to the speaker in an instant, barely visible around the corner.

“Mister Tsukino?” Soraka asks.

“Sorry to bother you,” the man begins, stroking his fingers over his silvery wisp of a beard, “but my wife is trying to sleep right now, and you and your friends are being quite loud. She’s sick and really needs her rest, so I hope it wouldn’t be imposing to ask you and your group to lower the volume a bit?”

The cadence, the tone, the way his voice landed on each syllable. Too familiar, far too familiar.

“You’re dead…” Yukima whispers, her tongue numb across her teeth. She repeats it, louder, “Y-You’re dead…”

The man’s head turns and his skin molts, pale wrinkled cheeks stripping away to sun kissed leather. He squints, his cloudy grey beard rolls under his lips.

“I’m sorry, have we met?”

Yukima drops back against Sumika, shaking, “You died. I saw you die.” An arm loops around her bicep and she knows it is the rosette besides her. “They shot you… You and they and… They… And…” she withers and her teeth grind to a halt in her head. Breathing becomes difficult, the world desaturates.

“Yukima, what the hell are you talking about?” Soraka blinks, and yet her eyes are a verdant green and her jaw is chiseled and fine. Her words begin to make less sense and the man’s become gibberish.

“You… both…” she sputters, gripping her chest as her heart hammers into her head. It is only when she sees the world beginning to spin that she realizes she’s been crying for the last half minute.

In moments she’s been dragged to her feet. She knows this touch by now, though, and her pounding chest dampens knowing she is by her side.

“Soraka, I’m taking Yukima to your bedroom, okay?”

Sumika’s voice is soothing, even as an unintelligible, booming voice responds.

Yukima blinks and she’s alone with Sumika in a room filled with calming blue hues. No, no… she’s *been* here for the last few minutes. She feels it in her breathing, in her ragged lungs and raw eyelids. And that whole time, holding her close, is Sumika, creamy blouse stained and damp.

Yukima tears up again as it hits her that she’s ruined a wonderful day and Sumika is quick to thread her fingers in the other girl’s hair and shush away her worries.

It has been nine weeks and she has still not explained anything that happened. It has been nine weeks and the one person looking out for her is still making stabs in the dark to try and temper Yukima’s broken psyche. It has been nine weeks and Yukima cannot tell what that means, if she’s in the past, present or future.

It is finally at nine weeks that Yukima finally tells Sumika everything, weeping her soul out in Soraka’s bedroom.

O/o\O

"He was the one that asked *you* out?!"

"I kno- hey, why do you sound so surprised!?"

"Wakuni, with how you treat dating I'm surprised there are any fish left in the ocean."

"Hey, don't blame me for the lack of quality men around here, Rise!"

"I'm pretty sure the 'quality men' you were looking for steered clear of you for a reason, which is why you had to settle for a former student too naive to know any better."

Sumika watched as Mrs. Kenn- as Mrs. Wakuni bristled at the comment. She always knew her mother had a playful, teasing side to her, but seeing her interact with Sumika's former homeroom teacher was increasingly surreal. It had been casual knowledge for a while that the two were old friends, but she had never seen them hang out together, let alone while she was hanging out *with* them.

She often drank with her mother; it was one of the rare contexts where she felt comfortable drinking alcohol and it certainly helped ease her nerves when she needed to discuss something

serious. And today she really needed to discuss something serious with her mom. Having Wakuni there complicated the matter.

Sumika took another sip of her drink.

"So there I am, last day of classes before he graduates, and he runs up and freaking demands I go out with him!" Wakuni laughed, rocking back on her barstool. Sumika managed a small smile as the teacher scrambled to right herself against the bar's polished mahogany surface. "And then, get this, he tells me 'Every time you complained about your boyfriends you ended up taking it out on me, so you might as well date someone who's willing to put up with it!' I swear I've never been so flattered and insulted at the same time..."

Rise laughed and waved her glass in the other woman's face, "Probably pretty happy you started tutoring him when you did, aren't you?"

The brunette flushed and shook her own glass in retaliation, "Hey, hey, do *not* start insinuating things. I would never prey on any of my students like that! Back me up here, Sumika!"

Sumika lifted her chin, eyes clearing, "Uh...wh-wha-? I'm sorry, I wasn't really... um..."

"Hey..." Rise smiled, letting her head roll to the side. A perfect manicure crossed Sumika's knuckles and the fog faded just that bit more. "Sumika, you've been out of it all night, is everything okay?"

"Well, uh..." the rosette sighed, slumping in time with her groan, "No, actually... Mom? If someone had to do something you hated, something terrible... But you knew that it really wasn't their fault, that they were just pushed that way because they didn't have a choice... How-how do you... Could you stomach it?"

Rise's smile deflated, her lips quirking into a contemplative line, "Is this about Yukima?"

"Katsumi? You know when you told me she was alive I didn't quite believe you but then I saw her at the admissions office the other day... Is something wrong with her? Other than being taller she didn't quite look right..."

"Oh, yeah," Sumika mumbled sheepishly, "She went back there to ask about how she should approach her education. She

wanted to do it on her own because she felt like she depends on me too much..."

"Well, I'm glad to hear sh-"

"We're getting off topic," Rise cut in. The resonance to her voice was like a hot knife through the tangent; quick, decisive and graceful. Were it not for the concern evident on the woman's face, Sumika would have flinched. "Sumika, I'm not entirely sure how to answer your question. I typically find those kinds of situations toxic, but typically those people create their own problems. Yukima is a victim of circumstance, so whatever she did I'm sur-"

"She's killed people, mom," Sumika croaked. Quiet hung over them like a sword above a king, even forcing the light buzz of the bar's ambient conversation null to the trio's ears.

"Well..." Rise started, her eyes abruptly unflinching, unblinking.

Wakuni nodded in agreement, leaning back as she took in a breath for stability, "That certainly is quite the... um... extreme?"

"Y-yeah..." Sumika muttered, giving her plastic stirring stick a languid flick. "All of those outbursts she's had, all of the times she can't sleep. She's... seen some horrible things, but she's also done some horrible things too..."

Her mother swallowed, downing her glass in its entirety shortly thereafter. She let the burn sink in and brushed her sleeve across her lips, "So are you worried about how much that might have changed Yukima? Or...?"

"Sh-she did it for me," the rosette stuttered, "The Yukima I know wouldn't hurt anyone, the person I said goodbye to wouldn't ever... But... How well did I really know her? And... If she's... She killed people just to make her way back home, to *me*. It feels like all those people dying is my fault now and I just..." Sumika gasped and rested her elbows on the bar, cradling her forehead with the same hand holding her glass. Rise reached out and patted her daughter's back. "I don't know what to think... I don't want to hate her, but part of me does, but that part of me can't blame her either and I'm just..." She hiccupped, "I just wanted Yukima back but now I'm wondering if I was being too selfish with that wish if it means all this..."

Wordlessly Rise reached over and did what she could to pull Sumika into a one-armed hug without dragging them both off their stools. Her daughter leaned into the hold, nuzzling into the older woman's blazer. She actually expected Sumika to cry at this point; it wouldn't be the first time the night ended with an outlet of the girl's emotional insecurities. But to her gradual surprised the onslaught didn't come.

Sumika pushed off her mom and sniffed, using her creamy cardigan sleeve to clean her nose. She flashed a drippy smile and took another hefty sip of her drink.

"Look, honey..." Rise plumbed the depths of her mind for some kind of wisdom. For the first time in many years she came back empty. The following silence was deafening.

"Own it."

Both Sumika and Rise blinked as Wakuni bopped into the conversation.

"Um... What?" Rise asked.

"Sumika, if you feel guilty about that, you need to own it. You need to face the fact that you're almost *too* nice and some people are going to do things for you that you can't control," the brunette explained. She took a pointed interest in the liquor shelves behind the bar as she scratched her neck, "I've had some experience with that. Trust me when I tell you *that* breakup was messy… But if you were her drive to get home, if you were what kept her fighting day in and out, you need to accept it. She went through hell and highwater to see you again, none of which was in her control. I'm sure we'd all do some horrible things if it meant getting to see our loved ones one last time… Just make sure she knows that it is absolutely not okay to hurt people because of you anymore. You can take care of yourself."

Rise stared at her friend.

"Did... Holy crap, you should get married more often..." she sputtered, "You sound *way* smarter than the last time we drank like this!"

Wakuni threw a punch into the business woman's arm, huffing, "Don't act like you're so perfect Rise. I used to live by your advice and that ended one of my best relationships."

"I keep telling you, that *had* to be user error!"

"Mom, Mis-Wakuni, please..." Sumika sniffed. "I don't need you guys fighting over this..."

Rise relented, sighing as Wakuni scooted forward.

"Right, sorry," the teacher nodded, "But my point stands. If you want to still have Yukima in your life you need to take the reins in your relationship. Put your foot down and let her know you're more than capable on your own."

Sumika downed the last few flecks of her drink while Wakuni spoke, the words and the burn mixing together as they trilled up to her mind."I-I don't know. That... might hurt her more than anything..." she lamented. Her fingers gripped the bar as she slid off her barstool, eyes a mist of unsorted thoughts. "I'm going to go home and think this over. I've got a lot of things to consider. Thanks mom, Wakuni. This gave me a little perspective."

Rise frowned and watched her daughter leave, slipping out the bar's door in what felt like only a second.

"She's really grown up, hasn't she," Wakuni observed."I think you should be proud of her."

"She has... I just hope she finds the answer she's looking for," Rise sighed, rolling her elbows against the bar.

Her friend gave a supportive, affirmative grunt and returned to nursing her glass.

Then she stopped.

"Wait, wasn't she going to pay for her part of the tab...?"

Rise blinked, teeth beginning to bare as she downed another glass and slammed it to the bar, "Oh, that is *so* getting added to her rent this month!"

O/o\O

Months

She has time.

There’s plenty of time, there’s no rush.

Yukima glares at the unfinished document, a veritable storm of emotions crackling against the static of the computer screen.

Curses to Nobutaka. His suggestions are always nice to hear, but actually doing them is more difficult than their simple nature lets on. But he is Sumika's father and she can't just brush him off, especially when she notices it's becoming easier to focus after putting her story down on paper. That's especially nice since Sumika has been distant the last two or three days; it begins as an exercise of distraction and proves to be an outlet she never knew she needed.

She regrets confessing everything at Soraka's party (Makoto's party?). There was a reason she'd cooped all that up inside herself; she knows how sensitive Sumika is, even all these years later. Having it all down on paper will help clear the air, she hopes, something that she can reflect upon. As she works, though the distance between her and Sumika only widens and after a week of unease she suffers a breakdown alone in her room.

However, with her thoughts free of some of the cobwebs the fit does not last long. She calls upon a moment in the mountains, with ice dusting her cheeks and only a meager fire inside a dilapidated shack to keep her warm. It is still so easy to get lost in those feelings; the numb shake in her knuckles, wisps of hot breath slipping through her teeth, the daggering chill that eked through rotting structure. There are many memories like it, exotic in locale and each one equally as bitter. It is in these moments that she finds what she is looking for, the very drive that kept her going after three years of suffering. A photograph of her friends, ragged and ripped, a badge of adoration turned wear.

For so long she's focused so desperately on Sumika, pined over the warmth she exuded, but in doing she had forgotten that her warmth was merely the most comfortable, not the only one. Others, some more caustic, some too gentle, all revolved around her to keep her alight, and while her eye is trained on that single great flame she manages to remember the other tongues glowing against her skin.

That night, after soaking her pillows in tears, she renews her approach to life and vows to repair those abandoned bridges,

decrepit in age but she hopes still stable enough to cross.

First, though, she must talk with Sumika.

It's much harder to squeeze out the words than when she had initially bolstered her resolve. Having the rosy girl in front of her is almost always somehow intimidating and it takes every pound of willpower to broach the subject during a particularly quiet lunch. Staring down terrorists is infinitely easier.

But when she shows Sumika what she's written and talks about her plans to reconnect with the people she's grown so apart from, the rosette's elation is practically palpable and makes Yukima's heart skip. There is a brief health scare because of that but it's worth it to see that beaming smile after a week of worry.

Things are better after that, but Sumika still struggles with some of the passages, sometimes because they're too graphic, sometimes because they're too emotional and sometimes because they're too embarrassing. After the latter happens for the third time Yukima agrees to tone down some of the purple prose she heaps around Sumika and her role in Yukima's motivations. It's fitting anyway, she figures, considering that Yukima's trying to focus on more than just her in the present.

Sumika is surprised when she asks for Fumine's phone number, the one old classmate between them that Yukima had failed to reconnect with. But the kindly girl is more than willing to help Yukima get in touch.

Fumine is, understandably, surprised. Yukima still tries to piece together what happened to cause such a falling out between Fumine and the rest of their quintet of friends, but it is nice to know the brunette is safe and healthy. Well, mostly healthy. She has lost her sense of poise, Yukima observes, and is possibly even more riddled with anxiety than Sumika, though no more than Yukima. No one can match Yukima. Yukima frowns.

Mahiru and Soraka are different bridges to cross. They are among the first to welcome Yukima home, but like Sumika are quick to drift away. In fact, it is easier to get to know them as they are from those that cling to them, the young Satsuki and the brash Makoto,

and she quite quickly learns that those bonds will not be so swift to build.

And that is where she sits, after months of work, still staring at blank pages and pages preceding those layered in unprinted ink, chiseling piece by piece at rebuilding the friendships left rotting in the wastes.

“Yukima?”

Yukima lifts her head, pulling off her glasses to rub her weary eyes.

“Sumika? Are you home?”

A rosewood ball of fluff, reaching down to the base of Sumika’s neck now, appeared around the corner, “Y-yeah, I called out and you didn’t answer.”

“Oh, sorry. Writing. I think I’m getting close…” she replies. This is far from the first and is far from the last time Sumika will catch Yukima engrossed in writing. They joke that Yukima was lost in the desert only to make it home and get lost in her stories. In some ways the joke rubs her poorly, but she can appreciate the irony.

“That’s fine. Um, could you come out here, to the living room? I kinda wanted to talk with you about something.”

Yukima reviews the last few lines of her texts, a section describing life inside the shipping container from Hong Kong, and nods to no one in particular, “Yeah, I think I can take a break. I’ll be right out.”

She saves the piece and stands, wobbling a bit as she did. She gives the snowy cabin one more glance before heading through the door, ready to cross whatever threshold she may need to make it home.

O/o\O

Warm, wispy tongues of steam caressed Sumika's cheek as she brought the teacup to her lips, a chapped crack in the corner allowing a small dribble to strike out around its bell. She wiped her chin with the back of her hand and rested it down on its saucer, scant traces of the hazel liquid pooling where the indent and the cup

met. A soft grin managed to escape her composure as Yukima lumbered through the door and she let it stay for just a while, something genuine to put the damaged girl at ease. She offered another cup as her friend sat, leading to a comfortable silence littered with sips of tea.

"What is it you wanted to discuss?" Yukima asks, pulling the china away from her lips. Even now, with all of the progress she's made in the last few months Sumika can't help but catch how her hand wobbles while holding her dish.

Sumika let her smile fall though tried to not let it dip below a neutral slant. It might not have been pleasant to address, but she wanted to avoid emotionally harming Yukima before she got to more pleasant topics.

"It's about... all the things you did to get home," Sumika winced, pushing her shoulders as far into her torso as they'd go. "The things you said you did to get back to *me*..." She set her saucer down on the table in the center of the living room, "I'm... Thanks for waiting for me to take it all in. I know there's more about it you want to discuss, especially after reading those drafts you wrote..."

"I knew you might need some time to reflect on it," Yukima nodded, frowning. "After going through all of that I was scared of losing you because you were sensitive to people getting hurt... I'm actually still scared, if I'm being honest..."

Sumika twisted in her seat and grasped Yukima's hands, "I'd never just abandon you Yukima... But you're right that it isn’t easy to hear that people have... Aren't here anymore *because* of me... And I'm not okay with that. I'm never going to be okay with that."

Yukima deflated, but the rosette was quick to squeeze her hand.

"But... I don't have to. Neither of us can change the past Yukima, and you were put in such a bad place... Even with all of your issues I can see the old you shining through underneath..." Sumika breathed. She perked and leaned forward, "And you keep getting better and better. I can see how hard you're trying, and I feel proud every time you make it over another hurdle..."

Yukima recoiled from the proximity, more from surprise than discomfort.

Sumika took note and leaned back, a sheepish smile feinting only briefly over her lips before her face hardened once more, "But, I want to make something absolutely clear: no more."

The raven girl blinked, "What do you mean?"

The question was shaky, and already Sumika could feel the palm under her fingers trembling.

"No more hurting people because of me. I don't want that, I never want that, and sometimes, especially when I read parts of your book, I know it might have been necessary to protect yourself, but the way you talked about going out and hurting people to get supplies... I don't want more people hurt than there needs to be. The world already has enough bad in it, I don't want to lose *you* to that..."

Yukima paused, watching as Sumika's carefully measured façade fell. "Sumika... I... It's a lot more complicated than-..."

"I know," Sumika chewed, grabbing Yukima's shirt, "I know it is... I know I can't understand anything you went through, I don't *want* to make this about me, but I needed to say something... Let me be selfish, if only this once… I just need closure on this, so promise me. Please?"

The survivor hesitated only for a minute to pull her friend into a hug, "...Even if it means it takes me forever to get home...?"

Sumika nuzzled into her shoulder, "Yep, because now I know I can wait forever and you'll always make it back to me..."

"You know all of this will probably never happen again..."

A chuckle broke from both of them, though Sumika spoke through her own, "Oh, I certainly hope not. I don't ever want to think about you ever having to go through any of that ever again… or having to do any of those horrible things."

Yukima smiled and squeezed tighter, "…I promise. Only what's absolutely necessary from now on."

"Good," Sumika sighed, pulling away gently, "Because that's the only bad thing I wanted to cover."

"There are good things?" Yukima quirked her brow. Sumika flashed a massive cheeky grin when she nodded, pulling up a few

papers for display. She reached out and leafed through the files, squinting, "You're changing your major to Psychology?" Sumika nodded again. "But what about Social Work?"

"Well, I'll have to take a few more credits than I'd planned, but I can still use a Psychology degree to get jobs in social work. I want to be a counselor so I can help people work through their issues... Like you," Sumika explained. "I'm doing this because I want to help you. Because I..." she sucked in her breath and let it escape slowly to ease her nerves, "I love you Yukima, and I want you to be happy."

The word 'love' between them was a strangled term, all at once suffocating in its presence but impossible to speak. To use it would mark a change between them that neither of them was quite sure they were ready for. And yet, Sumika felt confident enough to say it.

Yukima swallowed.

"...I love you too."

Sumika tepidly shunted forward, her face becoming distractingly close to Yukima's, so much so that she didn't even register her own chin curving up to match. They both paused, sharing uneasy, half-lidded glances before finally committing and meeting in the middle. The kiss was brief, but pleasant, and something intimately different than the fervor they'd found themselves in some months ago after meeting again.

They pulled apart but their fingers kept them locked together by a thread.

"...Counselor Abe? I think that has a nice ring to it..." Yukima licked her lips. "Thank you. For everything."

"Hehehe..." Sumika smiled, "No, thank *you*... for coming home to me."

And with that they pull into one more embrace as time stopped around them.

Burn Out

May, 2026

"No."

"Makoto..."

"No, no, no."

"Makoto!"

"No, no, no, no, no!"

"Mako, you're not even listening to me!"

Makoto peaked out from her hand though left her thumb and middle finger squarely attached to her temples, "I'm not hearing this, Aiko, this has 'bad idea' written all over it!"

"It's not an 'idea' Makoto, it's a feeling, and you know just as well as I do you can't control those!" Aiko growled back, pushing a strand of blood red hair behind her ear.

"You're glancing over how you *just said* you want to go after *both* of them, I think that qualifies as a 'bad idea'!" Makoto snapped back.

Aiko slammed her palms on the table, shaking the empty plates that cluttered it, "It's the only option I have, isn't it? I can't just choose one of them!"

When Aiko had asked Makoto out to one of their favorite cafés for a little sisterly bonding she'd leapt at the chance. It was still a sore spot that the two hadn't been able to be together for some of the hardest moments in their lives, where a sibling would have been a godsend in this Topsy-Turvy world, so it was even more disappointing when, after reuniting, their schedules made it almost impossible to hang out without sacrifice. Luckily Aiko had chosen a particularly calm day to do this on and the stars aligned to give them this brief moment of quiet.

However, after eating a rather generous meal (Makoto's treat; no sister of hers was going to starve!) she had not expected to hear pleas for romantic advice. Romantic advice for her baby sister. Who

was in love with two people at once. Two people she wanted to be in a relationship with at the *same time*.

A number of eyes were attracted their way from the patrons of the café. Makoto glared at every one of them to stand down and reached the desired effect, though she had a sinking suspicion she and Aiko might get blacklisted from this particular shop by the end of this conversation. Damned to that though, her sister came first, and if that meant a little boisterous tough love, then she'd take that hit.

Wait, they have that really good cheesecake her and Satsuki liked sharing. Maybe she should reconside- No! Family first!

Managing to repress a sob of distress, Makoto grabbed her sister and pulled her back down to her seat, probably leaving a bruise on the younger girl's arm. Her mouth tightened to a scowl, her fang at full prominence, "You can and you will. Trust me when I say you're going to get yourself way in over your head!" If she was lucky she could play this smoothly and still be allowed back in the shop.

"Oww, oww, oww, Mako, that hurts!"

Yeah, definitely a bruise. May have overdone it.

She released her captive, prompting the smaller girl to rub the injured limb well, not that mere ministrations could heal the wound, "Look, if you're alone in your room at night I couldn't care less what you think about, but when you try to go to bat for two people all you're asking for is a fucking mess."

"But... I'm pretty sure that they feel the same! About me and each other!"

"Oh for Christ's- That's not my problem, Aiko!" Makoto sighed. She folded her hands into a mutter, "You've been hanging out with Sumika too much..." Elbows resting on the table she leaned forward, "I've been involved in crap like that before... I mean, I never *participated*, but I've watched the fallout of that crap and I don't want to see you get as hurt as they did. We only just got mom back, can we just take a breather before any more insanity rolls in?"

Aiko hopped up in her seat, "You haven't given me a reason why it’s a bad idea though! You just keep saying that it *is* and don’t offer anything to back it up!!"

"It’s not exactly an easy thing to explain!" Makoto groaned, "Do you even understand how much work goes into a relationship already? An insane amount! We're talking a minimum of an hour of lost sleep over rethinking everything you said each week, and that's if you're *crazy* lucky!" She picked up one of the many forks littering the table and added a second to her hand with flair as emphasis, "You are actively asking to double all of that strain, drama, anger; *everything*."

"But doesn't that also mean doubling the good things too?!" the shorter girl retorted, one of her pigtails landing over her shoulder with the bob of her head.

"Say one more sappy thing like that and I will personally strangle Sumika," the older sister deadpanned.

"Her wife would kill you before you could."

"Yukima can go fuck herself with how irritating miss piglet has made you; I'd happily take that risk."

Aiko gaped at her, shock flying to her eyes. Fake shock.

"Listen here, twerp, you ain't exactly the biggest saint either, especially with this whole 'pining over everything that moves' shtick you got going for ya," Makoto blinked.

"It's not everything! And my love for YuYu and Hina is pure as the driven snow!"

Makoto rolled her eyes, "That just makes me think you want to plow *both* of them."

Aiko's face immolated in a hot second, "N-n-n-n-n-no! M-M-M-M-Mako! Don't try to embarrass me like that!"

"Oh please, it's only natural," the older girl shrugged, scraping at the remains of her milkshake with a long spoon, "Which only raises further questions; you're twenty-one now, right?"

"Y-yeaaahhh..." her sister drawled. Oh, oh yeah, Makoto *knew* that *she* knew where this question was going.

"And Ryuuki is seventeen?"

"May... Maybeeee..."

Makoto pointed her spoon, the classic accuser's stance, "So then you realize if you two get together you'd be breaking the law, hardcore, right?"

"I'm telling you it's nothing lewd like that," Aiko cried, her face renewing that fresh-virgin shade of red.

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Aiko, I found those Yaoi mags under your bed the last time I was at the house. They were anything BUT ‘PG’. Besides, he's seventeen, and if common knowledge is reliable boys are even hornier than girls at that age; considering how *I* was, that's scary. He might expect you to put out on the first date."

The smaller girl floundered for a second before gritting her teeth and seemingly composing herself, "YuYu isn't like that! He's calm, reliable and always listens to both Hina and me when we have a problem."

"Great, so Sumika's brother is a bitch, got it," Makoto crowed.

"He's a sweet and kindly boy," Aiko seethed, "And I don't see the big deal considering what you told me about your relationship with Mahiru."

"Uggghhhh," Makoto threw her head back in frustration, only quieting the groan as she rolled back forward, "Mahiru and I were the same age and both of us were thirteen at the time... at least I think we were... It's been a while... So it was perfectly legal! You're way too old and he's way too young."

Aiko pouted and crossed her arms, "That's stupid and not fair at all."

"Scratch that, *he'd* be the cradle robber since you're apparently five years old," Makoto glared. Seeing the joke did nothing to lighten her sister's mood,” she sighed, “Look, my point is, relationships more often than not get hot and heavy, and regardless who pushes first you'll be breaking some laws. Now, I'm usually okay with that kind of thing, but you've got a spotless record and tons of crap going for you. I don't want you labeled a pedophile for the rest of your life."

"I know, I know…" Aiko groaned, dropping her head to the table, "I just don't know what to do. I... love them both so much it hurts..."

Makoto bit back the temptation to make a joke about her sister's digestion; at some point humor would only damage the situation. She decided sympathy was a good route, "I do too... Well,

Hina at least, I don't really talk with Ryuuki. Actually, now that I think about it, Hina's sorta my little sister too, so wouldn't that make things a little squicky with the two of you too-?"

"Makoto, you can't convince me to not love someone!"

Right, that's off topic. Makoto's relationship with impish little Hina was far different than Aiko's.

"Sorry, sorry, this is weird okay?" she mumbled, "The last time this kinda thing happened one disaster sunk the whole thing. Hell, even when I tried to arrange a no-strings attached situation it fell through pretty hard and only served to make Soraka and me angry for like a week afterwards. Some of the best sex of my life after that but fuck if I'm going to tell you it was worth it." Makoto leaned on the table and looked her angelic little doppelganger in the eye, "Please, just promise me you'll think this through more before going with it and take my words to heart. Ultimately I don't want to see you or Hina... or even that little Abe pest hurt, okay?"

"Uh... Yeah, I mean, I'm really thinking about it now, but uh..." Aiko pulled at the collar of her polo, "There's a bit of a problem with that middle part. So you know how I tried to glance over my ‘ideas’? Y-you kinda glanced over that I was talking in the past tense..."

"Aiko, now is not the time for one of your word factoids of the da-..."

Makoto paused, mid-spoon wave.

"Y-you... You didn't..."

Aiko's shoulders converged on her neck as a pained smile weaved up from her throat, "I already asked them both out...?"

Makoto wanted to scream.

So she did.

O/o\O

Aiko was dating two people at the same time. Two people who were also apparently dating each other. Three-way dating. Makoto's eyelid twitched.

Hina was a very responsible girl, a surrogate sister that had kept Makoto in check after she was passed around the foster home

circuit like a hot potato. Dependable, smart and insanely shrewd, the brunette was talented beyond what Makoto was ever capable of, especially with the promise of an art scholarship backing her path through college.

If Aiko were just dating her it would've been weird, but Makoto would have known both her real sister and her surrogate sister were in good hands. Now, however... the sanity of everyone involved was called into question.

All of this left Makoto in a delicate situation. From all of her past experience (eg, what Soraka had told her about years ago) the bonds between people in three way relationships were insanely tightly wound, but that just meant that substantial trauma would make those ties sever like high-strung rubber bands.

Every action Makoto took with the three had to be careful, calculated, and refined.

"HIIIINNNNAAAAAAA!!!"

There was a inky smear as Makoto shoulder checked into the younger girl, sending them both careening down the river embankment to the shoreline. The two became a tangle of limbs as they slid through the grass, dirt and splits of mud meshing into their clothes.

Makoto, having plotted this attack beforehand, was the first to recover, but Hina's athletic inclination meant she was close behind, even managing to get the first words in edgewise after the two disengaged.

"WHAT THE SHIT MAKOTO?!" Hina screamed, brushing a few loose blades of grass from her jogging shorts.

"I thought you were the sane one!?" Makoto growled, finger lasering in on her mahogany friend.

Hina stared at her, dumbfounded, "WHAT THE SHIT MAKOTO?!"

"Don't play dumb!" Makoto shouted, slamming her fist into the ground, "You, my sister, the Abe twerp!"

Hina coughed out another fleck of soil, "What does any of that have to do with tackling me in the middle of my workout?!"

"I was angry," the redhead sniffed, standing, "I wanted to hit something and you're more than fair game right now."

"I swear to whatever god is listening I will deck you," the artist snarled, jumping to her haunches.

Makoto narrowed her eyes, "If there is a God, there's only one and I promise you he's in my corner on this one."

"Randomly assaulting people doesn't seem very kosher."

"What? It wasn't random in the slightest!"

"Gaaahhh," Hina looked to the sky and rubbed the crown of her head, "Alright, look, what do you want? I have to get home and study for an art history test."

Momentarily Makoto's rage was replaced with confusion, "Wait, I thought you went to college to *paint* art..."

Hina's mouth sagged open very gently, "There's more to art than just making it..."

"That's stupid. College is stupid."

"Oh for Pete's-, Makoto, why are you here?!"

"Right, right," the redhead blinked, "What the fuck are you three thinking?"

Hina leaned to one leg, eyebrow raised, "That two of us are consenting adults and one is a kid mature beyond his years. Look, Aiko already told me what you're going to say, don't think body slamming me will change my mind!"

"Like hell she did!" Makoto snapped, "She got a different earful than I have planned for you. See, Aiko and Ryuuki are softies. I know how smart you are, which is why I'm confused as to why you're being so goddamned stupid. You know how dangerous crap like this can be, I told you about Soraka's whole stint with it, why aren't you stopping it?!"

Hina pulled at the drawstrings of her cat-eared hoodie, cerulean eyes casting a wide net over the river, "Well... because sometimes you can't let reason control you." Her face colored a bit around her petite nose, the very tip reddening more than the rest, "You taught me that, Makoto. If anything, I thought you'd be the first one to accept... us... Which is why we had Aiko go to *you* first..."

The redhead stood, mouth agape, her left eye stuck with a frenetic twitch. A moment was all she needed to come back on all cylinders, fingers flying from her brow to become claws by her kidneys, "There's being emotional and then there's being stupid, stupid!"

"Like you're one to talk!" Hina smiled back, "You do stupid shit all the time and expect people to bail you out! Aiko told me how you got both of you kicked out of 'The Tiniest Duckling'!"

Inside Makoto's hellscape of a mind was a smaller, more sensitive Makoto that cried a quiet tear over all the future cheesecakes lost to the void because of her brash and wholly unrestrained screech. That tragedy would need to be set to the side, though; bigger fish to fry. They just wouldn't be fried in any cafés named 'The Littlest Duckling' anytime soon.

"Of course I do stupid shit all the time!" she snarled, "I'm your role model, it’s how I roll!"

Hina’s face contorted with bafflement, "Are you supposed to set a positive example?"

"Pfeh," Makoto laughed, "Like I could actually pull that off. No, I get myself into shit so you guys know exactly what to *avoid*."

"How noble of you, but it doesn't exactly mean you're the font of knowledge on all things romance," the artist drawled, "Honestly, at the very least I thought you wouldn't care..."

"If it were anyone else, I wouldn't, but family takes the front seat when it means keeping them safe!" the redhead hissed. "You're my sisters and even putting aside how friggin’ squicky this is for me personally, I don't want either of you getting locked up for sleeping with a minor!"

Hina stomped her foot and dragged hard on the drawstrings, making the hood bunch round her neck, "Holy shit, Makoto, we are not going to be sleeping with him too soon. We all vowed to wait until he's old enough! Even Sumika has our backs! She understands what her little brother wants, why can't you?!"

Throwing her hands in the air, Makoto roared, "That doesn't friggin’ matter! Have you met Ryuuki's mom?! Our parents have been out of the picture long enough it doesn't matter what they think,

but Mrs. Abe is terrifying! She'll gut both of you like pigs if she even thinks there's something funny going down!"

The brunette blinked, physically taking a step back at the words. If Makoto had to guess, Hina hadn't quite thought of that little snag. Well, if her facial expression was anything to go by, it was more than just *a little* snag.

"Sh-she...she's very open minded! Remember when Sumika and Yukima g-got together? She was all open arms fo-"

Makoto jutted her arms forward, mouth still agape; how had someone as smart as Hina not thought this all through?!

Well, love *was* kinda distracting. Maybe her and Aiko were being genuine... Not important right now!

"That is a WAY different situation. For one, they were both adults! For two, Yukima fought tooth and nail to get home across like two continents! I think that earned her a little sympathy from Mrs. Abe. So unless you can magically age Ryuuki up or decided to go off to war for a couple years, I don't think winning over mamma bear is going to even be possible!"

Hina's lips were glued shut, their corners ripping and tearing in an attempt to rend itself from her face entirely. Makoto noticed, slowly, that the taller girl was trembling, blue eyes layered with crystalline droplets.

"We're...We'll make it work, Makoto!" she snarled. Often Makoto likened Hina's tantrums to a kitten mewling for milk... now though it was more like a tiger defending its territory, "Damn the torpedoes, we'll make it work! We couldn't give less of a shit about what any of you think about us!"

"H-Hina..." Makoto faltered as the other girl turned on her heel and sprinted away. Then she got angry. "Hina, get back here!" she shouted, trailing after her. Despite their matching physiques, the younger girl had already worked up a heady lead and by the time Makoto felt her lungs burning she was already well out of sight. The redhead tripped into the floodplain, rolling to a halt a moment later.

"Goddamnit Hina..." Makoto spat, rubbing her bruised knee.

O/o\O

She pulled her knuckles away from the door, leaving a resounding series of knocks hanging in the air around her. Makoto rubbed her nose and tightened the ratty green hoody around her shoulders, staving off the cooling evening air as best she could. Curse her affinity for jean shorts, but her legs were a gift to the world damnit!

A few seconds passed before the door opened and a rose plume bustled into view.

"Makoto...?" Sumika asked, pitching her head to the side.

"Hey there, piglet," Makoto nodded, though she also narrowed her eyes, "Wait, what are you doing here? You and Yukima on the rocks 'r somethin'?"

Sumika reached forward and lightly slapped Makoto's shoulder, flashing a wry smile, "Not all of us are like you and Soraka, Makoto. No, Yukima and I come over for Sunday dinner every week." The rosette stepped away, motioning the redheaded rascal into the house, "Come on in, we were just finishing up cleaning the dishes. If we'd known you were coming we would have saved a plate for you."

Makoto rested a hand over her chest, mocking shock and horror, "Sumika, don't flirt with me like that, I'm married!"

The rosette let out a slew of giggles and was quickly joined by the redhead, the laughter breezing them through Makoto removing her shoes.

"So, what has you stopping by?" Sumika asked. Her brows lowered, "You're not here to try and convince Yukima to advertise your food cart in her next novel again, are you?"

"What?! No...! Even if it *is* an awesome idea you should ask her about for me..." Makoto skewed, "But like I said, I didn't even know you two were here. I actually came here to see your brother."

The brief flicker of levity on Sumika's face leveled back to a more dour picture, "Oh... I see. You know I heard about it from him an-"

The redhead raised a hand to her face, "You can stop there, piglet. I already know your opinion on the matter and I couldn't care

less for it." Makoto spared no leeway in her tone; she would talk to Ryuuki herself and Sumika's input would be given on her own time.

Sumika pouted and pushed Makoto's arm away, "It's rude to interrupt, you know..."

"When my family is at stake I don't like mincing words," Makoto rumbled, one hand caressing a narrow, metallic weight in her jacket pocket.

"He's my family, Mako."

"And that’s why I'm fucking confused why you're not as concerned as I am about this."

The line was punctuated in a stare down between the two, with Makoto's magma slipping below the fuchsia clouds of Sumika's eyes.

"Is everything okay in here?"

The words made Makoto blink and back off. As adamant as Sumika would be, as long as the passion of an argument came from good intentions she could never really sink any claws into anyone. Her wife, on the other hand, was the complete opposite, a sheep dog on the prowl waiting to strike anything threatening its herd of one. And even though the intensity behind Yukima's death glare had waned with age, she was still one of the few people or even *things* to strike fear into Makoto. Not that fear had ever really stopped Makoto before, but it was still an annoying sensation sliding down her spine.

Sumika looked away, offering a soft smile to appease her hound, "Everything's fine, Yukima, just a difference of opinion is all!" The cheery tone was a far cry from the defensive stance she'd been in not ten seconds before and it constantly baffled her why Sumika had never considered being an actress. Then again, without her beau around she often devolved into a flustered mess after only a day or two, so maybe that was why. When Sumika spoke again, her smile was a touch strained, "Makoto here came to see Ryuuki, isn't that nice?"

"Very," Yukima nodded, appraising the redhead. Without breaking her stare, she continued, "Sumika, your mom wanted your help putting the dishes away. I'll take Makoto to Ryuuki's room."

Sumika gave a quiet nod, the strain on her lips relaxing into something more natural. As she passed by the raven haired woman she whispered in her ear, no doubt instructing the bloodhound to try converting Makoto as well. It wouldn't work.

And as predicted, it only took a half minute navigating the Abes' swanky house for Yukima to play Sumika's hand.

"You should just let them be together," the author stated, her head never curving back yet her voice clear as day; it was unsettling.

"Christ, fourth time’s the charm, right?" Makoto snarled back. "I've heard it before. I don't want my sister getting hurt, sue me for having emotions."

"I mean," Yukima corrected, cocking her head briefly to gaze at Makoto with a single amethyst eye, "Let them get hurt."

Makoto paused.

"That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Ever."

Yukima flipped an onyx strand of hair aside, "Is it? Sure, they'll be distressed over it, but they have so many people around them to turn to for guidance in the aftermath, so much that none of us really had growing up, except for Sumika, and she is arguably the most stable of all of us now. If they wind up like her, even if it means a little pain now, isn't that ultimately for the best?"

"That's..." she stammered, "That's really fucked up, Yukima..."

"But it’s true. And it’s the worst case scenario," Yukima nodded, "If they manage to maintain themselves, so be it, but everyone will be there for them if they crash..." Receiving no response, Yukima turned around to look her friend in the eyes, "Ryuuki is my brother by law, so my attachment to him is minimal, but his importance to Sumika makes him more than emotional liability to her. Believe me when I say I've given this situation a fair amount of my own thought. Sumika's sentiments are pure but I've taken it upon myself to be ready for the worst if it ever comes."

Makoto parted her lips to speak, only to close them again. Yukima rested a hand on her shoulder and nodded, leaving the redhead at the foot of a heavy-set door to pace her way back the direction they came. She watched the raven girl go, her malformed fang popping over her lip as she grimaced. There was a shared

respect between the two of them, what with their mutual histories of orphanage (actual and practical) and the difficulties they'd faced during their adolescence, so Makoto knew for a fact that Yukima wasn't bullshitting her. The girl genuinely thought that sounded sane.

The redhead rolled her eyes. If this was the kind of advice PTSD encouraged then it was no wonder veterans lead rocky lives. Her snarl sharpened; this was no time for judgment calls on people she didn't know. Yukima was being cold. There, proper judgment made.

She cracked her back and gave an annoyed huff as those inky tentacles of hair vanished around a corner. Finally alone with the door, Makoto knocked. It was sudden and faint, but she was confident she heard someone invite her in, prompting her to twist the knob. There had never really been an occasion for her to go into Ryuuki's room; heck Sumika had only lived at home for a couple months after she'd met the girl, so there was barely any time to hang out in *her* room either. Still, what little experience she had with the Abe household did not prepare her for a visual overload.

Where there had been simple white walls sat a series of monitors and tiles, where there had been well vacuumed carpet there was a tangled mess of wires, where there should be a desk was a switchboard probably the length of her body and where there would presumably be a proper lamp was instead a series of microphones propped up on polished aluminum stands. It took maybe about four blinks (and even a few head shakes) for her to process the ludicrous, almost bizarrely gorgeous mess that sat in front of her. Great God, there was barely any room for the bed!

"Oh, Makoto?"

A head of rosewood hair popped up from behind the microphones, a cherub-faced boy bounding out with a pair of over-sized headphones framing his head, one of which was peeled off his left ear. It, along with everything else, looked either brand new or well worn and taken care of. Damned rich kids. Lucky little bastards.

"H-h-hey there, kid," Makoto eeked out, still not quite sure how well her brain was processing the insanity of his room, "You… Your room always been like this?"

He looked behind him, his brow tight, giving everything around him a solid glance before some kind of recognition came to roost, “Oh! Yeah, sorry. Is this the first time you’ve been in here?”

“Uh-huh…” she nodded. She stepped in, closing the door behind her as she did and doing her damnedest to avoid a pesky pile of wires that had been naturally coiled together by the door’s repeated pushing. “Y’know, Sumika said you were some kind of singer, but this is kinda crazy…” she mumbled, managing to tiptoe her way to his bed, “Mind if I sit kiddo? I walked all the way here.”

“Sure, sure, sure,” he stumbled, rushing to the bedside to clear some sheets dotted with lines and bars that had wound up strewn across his comforter.

She sat and marveled at how plush the bed was; most of their friends group had western beds these days, and while she was thankful for how comfortable they were, she did sometimes miss the simplicity of a futon. Maybe when she gets home she should pull one out and force Soraka into a little slumber party; it’d give her a good excuse to crack open that package of gummy bears she’d been saving.

“I can guess why you’re here,” he smiled, tapping the pages on his desk before laying them aside. Right, right, sisters in a three-way; man she needed to get like, medication or something with how often her mind got off track. Ryuuki turned to face her, sliding his headphones to his neck, “I think you’ll be surprised to learn that you won’t be able to convince me to say ‘no’.”

Makoto rolled her eyes, “Don’t get cocky kid, I’ve basically resigned myself to that after talking with Hina; if I can’t talk sense into her, then no one’s going to listen. Least of all a kid like you.” She leaned back, crossing her arms and letting her eyes sag closed, “You’re really impressionable and neither of them should have put you in this kind of place, but don’t think this means you’re going to be cool kid on campus having two *older* girlfriends.” A single eye peeled open to wholeheartedly glare at him, “I don’t take you for the type to get a big head about things and for your sake I hope you never do, but you’ll learn soon enough that one girl is difficult enough to handle and that two might just be too much.”

Ryuuki visibly shuddered as an exhale left his lips. He bounced in place, “I’m relieved to hear you say that; I promise I won’t.” A finger looped around the cord of his headphones, a soft blush peppering his skin, “Hin and Ko aren’t some trophies; they’re my dearest friends in the world, and boyfriend or not I’d help them through anything!”

“Uhhhh, gag me with a spoon,” the redhead groaned, “Look, I get enough of that crap from your sister.”

“Heh, sorry. I guess I get pretty mushy when I talk about them,” he ran a few errant fingers through his short curls. “I’m just happy that you’re so accepting. Both of them adore you, so I was really worried about your opinion of me.”

Makoto pushed the growing smile on her lips to pull a little further up and her eyes to widen a touch more than usual, “Oh, who said that I was so ‘accepting’?”

The muscles in Ryuuki’s face contracting were the only warning his body managed to send him before the girl was upon him, grabbing him by the forearm and slamming him to the bed with the force of a gorilla. He looked from her, to his computer, to her again, keeping the same smile the whole way through though obviously not by choice, “You’re… very lucky my headphone cord is so long.”

“Stow it, twerp,” Makoto snarled, “If I have to deal with Hina *and* Aiko being in a relationship with you, that means you’re the only one of the three that I can actually go all-out big-sister on, so you’re getting ‘the talk’ right here and now.”

The only words that tumbled out of his mouth were, “Oh God please…”

She pressed her hand down to his chest, holding him in place. His own arms looped up to press her off but her physique was nothing to scoff at, even with a year or two of rust.

“You’re a minor, got that? Three years till you’re legal, right?” she glared.

Ryuuki managed a nod but not a word.

“Good. So you, Aiko, and Hina will not approach anything even *resembling* a bed together, *am I clear*?” All she heard was a swallow and that’s all she needed to continue, “Additionally, if

anything dips lower than their waistline you forfeit your right to have it attached to your body, and this also applies if anything dips below any *other* girls' waistlines. If I hear any goddamned rumors that you and *anyone* are doing any*thing* that you wouldn't do in a church, you are to immediately do as much damage control as possible to make sure those rumors never reach the police and to reassure me that those same rumors are certifiably false. I am not having my sisters put on any kind of watch list nor am I having them put up with a two-timer. Am. I. Clear?"

He nodded, but she grabbed his collar and slammed him back to the bed.

"Out loud."

"Y-y-y-y-yes, like the night sky!" he yelped.

"Good," Makoto huffed, leaning back a touch. She kept her hand to his chest and after letting the fear sink in a little, she leaned back down to add one more cherry to the proverbial sundae of terror. "And one more thing; if I learn either of them are pregnant…" Makoto's hand exited the pocket of her hoodie, a weight filling her hands, two metal slabs tacked in the middle that she slid to rest below the hand that had him pinned. "Chin-chin goes bye-bye."

Ryuuki's face went paler than his sheets.

Makoto's smile never faltered, never flinched, and when she pulled away there wasn't a single indication that the smile wasn't genuine. Stuffing the utensil back into her pocket, she hummed.

"Alright, Ken Hirai, I think we're all squared away," Makoto chimed, opening the door. "Have fun with those two; real spitfires when they want to be, the both of them," she punctuated it like a threat, closing the door behind her. And then her choice of words struck home and the door opened again, though only briefly, "And remember: not *too* much fun." She kept her eyes locked to his as she shimmied back out the door; the boy was stuck to his bed in what she could only guess was mind-numbing fear.

Closing it behind her for the final time, she was met with a puffy pout.

"Sup Sumika?"

The rosette crossed her arms, “Did you just threaten my little brother.”

“Yep,” she admitted, feeling exactly zero shame in having threatened a boy eleven years younger than herself.

“Don’t act so casual about that!” Sumika barked. Oh. Oh, the creampuff was angry. That was rare. Pouting was one thing, but genuinely angry was another. Makoto smiled.

“Oh, so *now* you care about the consequences of your brother’s actions, huh?” she shrugged, walking past Sumika. “Get your priorities straight, piglet. A little threatening goes a *looong* way towards keeping my sisters out of jail.”

She heard a foot stomp behind her, “You can’t just threaten people into doing what you want them to!”

“Of course I can,” Makoto sighed, “Governments do it, police do it, hell, even Yukima does it. Circle of life, strong and the weak, yadda-yadda-yadda.” A crane of her neck and she was eye to eye with Sumika, “Look, he’s a good kid, right? Keeps it in his pants for three years and I promise you he’ll be a-okay. Hell, I’ll honestly be impressed.”

“Y-Yukima doesn’-!”

“Yes she does, don’t try to play naïve,” Makoto rolled her eyes so hard she wound up facing forward again, “If you want to keep your brother intact I recommend keepin’ an eye on him yourself. Don’t just play the protective older sibling; *be* one.”

She let the conversation slide away on that single line, feeling satisfied at how much drama she’d milked from this. There was a sweet kind of entertainment she got from playing the brash, roguish voice of reason, even if it often made her the bad guy amongst her friends group. Seeing that look on people’s faces, the one where they realize she’s right but they *really* don’t want her to be, never failed to really brighten her day. Well, okay, she could maybe think of a few times where it didn’t quite help. Luckily her friends knew that most of it was coming from somewhere genuine, so it almost always blew over eventually, though when Sumika got angry it tended to simmer a week or so. She was suddenly thankful for how busy managing a food cart kept her.

“You say I’m fucked up, yet you threaten a minor?”

Of course Yukima was going to be waiting for her. She’d perched beside the front door, her brow raised. The shadow that haunts the Abe household; make her a little paler, maybe add a touch of blood her and there, and Yukima would be the archetypal horror movie girl.

“How… did you hear all that?” Makoto asked, swapping eyes between Yukima and the roundabout path she took from Ryuuki’s room.

Yukima brushed her hair to the side, a dramatic flip she did whenever she was trying to look mysterious and intimidating; it never really impressed Makoto, “I have my ways.”

Ah, a ‘fill-in-the-blank’ response. Classic. That just meant Makoto could have fun with it, so she chose to imagine Yukima hiding just out of sight of her and Sumika talking before quietly sprinting off to pose artfully at the front door as to not be caught.

Actually, judging from the small but extra labors to her breathing, that might just be the case.

“Look, what you’re talking about is more than likely going to come to pass since no one is really stopping this thing,” Makoto sighed, shaking her head, “And more than likely it’s not going to be any of the things I threatened him with. I was careful, I was specific, and the things I hung on him were things I don’t think he’d even consider doing willingly.”

“So the threats were empty?” Yukima hummed.

Makoto glared, “Not empty, just unlikely. I’ll take a pound of flesh the minute I’m in my right to.”

The raven girl sighed, opening the door and tapping Makoto’s shoes forward, “Well, I’ll keep my eye on them for you. Sumika is too kind to them.” She walked up to the redhead and rested a surprisingly warm hand on her shoulder, “Rise and me are on your side, I think the three of us just have… *different* ideas about how to handle it.”

Makoto blinked, “Wait, Mrs. Abe knows? How the hell did she find out and *not* immediately blow up the neighborhood?”

Yukima nodded, “She had her suspicions. Sumika’s mother is… scary in how intuitive she can be…” Makoto wasn’t sure but did she just bond with Yukima on something? That of a deep, primal, and almost unnatural fear of the Abe matriarch. The two shuddered before the survivor continued, “She’s been doting on them as a couple… er… trio. Her theory is that if you don’t leave them alone, they can’t get into trouble.”

The redhead choked back a chuckle, “She has never seen me and Soraka then…”

“Oh believe me, she has,” Yukima replied quickly, her eyes going dark. “*All* of us have.”

There was suddenly a warmth to Makoto’s face and it almost left her completely speechless, “I… look, I could give less of a damn about that! We’re married, aren’t we?!”

“As are Sumika and I,” Yukima answered smoothly, ghostly fingers trailing along her bottom lip, “And I promise you we’ve not been caught nearly as many times as you and Soraka.”

When her face resembled her hair, she knew it was time to check out of the situation. Instead of retorting Yukima, Makoto simply grumbled past her, slipping on her shoes and taking her first steps out the door, “Friggin’ perverts, the lot of you Abes.”

Even after years of rehabilitating in the real world, Yukima rarely laughed. So to know that all of what she heard was directed completely at herself left Makoto furious, embarrassed, and, oddly enough, a little bit proud.

O/o\O

Makoto was almost done laying out the futon in front of the TV when Soraka got home, making her curse at her own reflex to fill bowls with sugary garbage first and get the ambiance set up second. Well, no matter, she could roll with it.

“Makoto, what’s all this?” she asked, dropping her keys in a dish by the door and brushing a clot of blue bangs from her eyes.

The shorter woman finished spreading out the plush mat, giving it a firm pat as she did, “Well, yesterday I thought it’d been a

while since we slept in a futon, so I thought why not make a little night of it since neither of us have work tomorrow. A sleepover kinda deal." Even as she spoke she could feel the heat creeping up her neck, leaving her to flounder a bit under her wife's gaze. There were usually three ways her wife would react to something stupid like this: either she'd be all on board in a blink of an eye, she'd laugh at the redhead about how much of a sap she really was, or…

"Pffffft," Soraka gripped at her stomach, doubling over as a fit of giggles visibly bounced against her cheeks. In a second she'd cast away her jacket and her purse and she'd flopped down beside Makoto, spreading herself on the futon like a cat in the sun. That sunbeam grin and those dancing blue eyes tickled the back of Makoto's chest and left her with a hammering heart. "You're such a softie, Makoto," the azulite laughed, bopping her wife on the nose. Just as she was about to get redder, Soraka pulled her in deeper and kissed her, soft, sweet, and long, "My softie."

The two came together again and only parted when air became a concern, though Makoto knew that being flushed like a chili pepper had nothing to do with oxygen.

"So," Soraka smiled, flopping back down, "Did you still cook dinner, or are those chips over there supposed to be our nutrition for the evening?"

She motioned to the bowl and Makoto reached to grab the two others that sat behind it, "Not just chips but other goodies too." Soraka raised a skeptical eye, prompting a laugh, "*And* I have teriyaki cooking on the stove." She spared a glance over to the clock on the TV, "It has about ten more minutes before it's ready, but we can eat it down here and put on a shitty rom-com or something."

"That sounds wonderful," the azulite nodded, "Shit has been hard at work, lately. Taxes are coming in and everyone's got their panties in a twist. Bless Rise for being on top of everything or else we'd be out of legs to stand on."

"She's a wily one, she is," Makoto hummed. Rise Abe, mother of Sumika and Ryuuki Abe… bleh, there went Makoto's good mood.

"Oh, that reminds me," Soraka said, popping out of a stretch, "How did things go with Ryuuki yesterday? I came home so late you

were asleep before I could ask you."

Makoto rolled to her side and sighed, "Shitty. I was right that Hina and Aiko got to him first. All I could do was work damage control."

Her wife gave her shoulder a supportive squeeze, "Hey, I know you're worried about them, but sometimes you have to make mistakes before you learn what's really important to you…" She pushed a fleck of blue hair behind her ear, her face glowing pink and dropping some of its cheer, "I'm living proof of that…"

Makoto reached out her hand and gripped it, pulling the two into a tight embrace, "I hate how right you are… I just… I don't want to see any of them going down those roads. Aiko and Hina already went through so much… Don't they deserve to be happy? Without some kind of sword hanging over them the entire time?"

"They do, but we both know life isn't fair like that," Soraka muttered, playfully tugging at the bow sustaining her wife's pony tail, "They'll learn, they'll get hurt, they'll learn. So long as they're not dead by the end of it, I'm sure they'll be fine."

"Heh," the redhead laughed, "You sound just like Yukima."

"Maybe there's something to be said for people who've come close to dying," Soraka chuckled back, "Seeing your life flash before your eyes kinda gives you a strange perspective on things. I like to think it helps you realize what's really important to you." She kissed her wife's head, forcing Makoto to duck down deeper into her collar.

"I'm not sure how to take that, Soraka; I don't want to be grateful you tried to do that…" Makoto muttered.

"Sorry, sorry," the azulite cooed, brushing a finger through the tongues of fire on Makoto's head, "I'm not fond of that memory either, really." She pulled away and scooped Makoto's face into her hand, "I *am* fond of every memory with you, though, so it puts it in a weird grey area for me."

Makoto shivered as those gentle words caressed her ears. Goddamned, she was a punk! A total hardass! Weren't spouses supposed to get sick of each other?! Why was she always putty in Soraka's hands?! It completely ruined the image she'd practiced so hard to maintain!

“You play dirty, Hayami,” Makoto snarled without hinting a single ounce of genuine animosity.

“I play to win, *Hayami*.”

At that the redhead bristled and stood, trying to hide her blush and failing miserably because it had practically covered her entire body at this point, “I’m… going to go finish up dinner. Settle in and I’ll be back with food in just a second.”

Just as she was strutting away, Soraka caught her hand, prompting the two to lock eyes.

“I love you,” Soraka smiled.

And damnit if Makoto couldn’t resist a smile herself, “…I love you too, you sap.”

O/o\O

“Do you think Makoto might be right?”

Hina frowned and looked at her girlfriend, “What do you mean? You were the first to say she was wrong, weren’t you?”

Aiko’s fingers found purchase in the grass beneath them, casually pulling the blades and flicking them without a thought, “I know, but, like, I’m really worried that we’ve just kinda been hardheaded about it. If we don’t really think about it, maybe it’ll come to pass?”

“Aiko, she threatened YuYu with castration; Makoto isn’t exactly the most stable voice to take advice from.”

The hand in her left palm clenched tight as a shudder transferred from her boyfriend’s body into her own, “I… really wish she didn’t do that… I was never planning any of those things to begin with…”

“We know, YuYu,” Aiko trilled, leaning over Hina to clasp her hand over theirs, “Makoto was just being mean. She does that when she gets protective. I promise she’ll treat you better when she sees how important you are to us!”

Hina was about to break in as well, but another voice from farther along the camp grounds caught her attention.

“Hey Aiko, Hina, Ryuuki! The grill’ll be done in five minutes! Get over here!”

The brunette glanced across the field at the platinum-haired woman waving their way, her smile infectious. She waved back, “Okay Satsuki! We’ll be there in just a bit!”

Satsuki nodded, and used her almost disturbingly long legs to strut back to where a kindly blonde woman was quick at work fussing over a number of improvised grills and cooking utensils, the cacophony only being spurred on further by Hina’s surrogate sister who was helping manage the cluster of fire hazards.

A particularly brilliant gout of flame prompted a yell from Makoto, who swiftly closed the offending grill. She glared at the three, yelling, “Sooner the better, ladies, unless you want your food burned to a crisp!”

“I wasn’t aware Ryuuki was a lady, Mako!” Aiko yelled back.

“Well he is now! We’re a gaggle of *lesbians*, not a gaggle plus a guy,” Makoto snapped, patting out a single flame that had jumped to her hair. “If he’s going to date you two he’s gonna fit in, so he’s an honorary lesbian from here on in.”

Hina decided to chime in, craning her head back to view an upside down world from where she lay. “He graciously accepts the honor and thanks you for your decree.”

“I do?” Ryuuki asked, earning a playful nudge from his girlfriend.

“Damn straight he better. Now get over here, we aren’t telling you guys a third time!” Makoto huffed.

“Satsuki said five minutes, we’ll take that five minutes,” Hina replied, wiggling down into a more comfortable position on the blanket.

Makoto finally reopened the grill, appraising its contents with a skeptical eye. “Fine, but don’t cry to me when your food is more charcoal than meat.”

Aiko lolled back and smiled, “See Hina, I think Makoto’s more willing to play nice than you’re giving her credit for.”

“I just wish it didn’t take threatening our boyfriend before she decided that,” Hina sighed, blinking up at the sky.

“Let’s just not think about it…” Ryuuki interjected, shuddering for just a split-second. “It’s too nice a day to focus on the macabre…”

Right on cue a cool breeze whisked by, prompting the three to pull closer together to keep what warmth they’d stored from the low-hanging sun.

“It’s nice that we do this each spring,” Aiko sighed, letting her head rest on Hina’s chest. Ryuuki rolled over to let a hand rest across both of them, nuzzling in close too.

“YuYu, Makoto is going to kill you, you realize that?” Hina muttered, doing absolutely nothing to discourage the behavior.

He laughed and nuzzled in even tighter, “I’ll die happy then. Besides, cuddling wasn’t *off* the table, just the stuff that comes further down the pipeline. I think we should take the victories where we can.”

The artist shook her head, “It amazes me you’re not considering a career in law.”

Aiko pouted, “But then you we wouldn’t get to hear his pretty voice all for us!”

“If you call half the trash he sings ‘pretty’, then sure, I guess you’re right.”

“Hey!” Ryuuki jolted.

She gave his head a pat and smoothed down some rebellious curls in his rosewood locks, “A comment on the genre, not your voice, cutie.”

He groaned and flopped back down on her stomach, maybe a little harder than he needed to on purpose, “That doesn’t make it much better.”

The three were quiet, letting the night winds blow past them, the festival in the distance creating a pleasant hum to the air as onlookers crowded for the coming fireworks. They were all keenly aware that this little moment was fleeting, that they’d have to get up and socialize and eat and party with everyone else sometime soon. But they were content for this moment and for all those small moments surrounding it.

“I think we’re going to be alright,” Hina smiled, watching as the first fireworks entered the air, prompting a wave of awe from the

masses below.

“What makes you say that?” Ryuuki asked, “Not doubting you, just curious why you’re so confident.”

“I know, I know,” Hina nodded, “Makoto, Sumika, Soraka, Mahiru, Yukima… Satsuki, too… they all lived through so much, really went through the wringer and their relationships were forged like iron over a hot flame.” She looked to her girlfriend, then to her boyfriend, curving down to kiss them atop their heads despite the protest of her neck and her back, “I think… if we just watch them, if we learn from them… we can still shape our bond out of iron like theirs… maybe there’s enough residual heat to forge us just as strongly as them.”

“’With more of their strengths and fewer of their weaknesses’…” Aiko hummed, kissing Hina’s shoulder as Ryuuki laughed.

“Just couldn’t help but quote Bob Sagan, could you?” he asked.

Aiko shrugged, “An inspiration is an inspiration, and lord knows it sounded fitting.”

“I like it,” Hina grinned. More fireworks began to ignite the sky, burning brighter than any sun ever could, “All of those speeches and posters telling us that ‘we are the future’? Let’s prove them right. Together.”

“Here here!” Aiko cheered, laying her hand on Hina’s stomach.

“I second that!” Ryuuki smiled, resting his own over hers.

Hina cupped their hands in her own and kept her eyes to the sky.

Maybe there would come hardships. Maybe there would come pain and suffering and loss. But she had everything she needed right here beside her to get her through every second of it without fail. Even if life ended up dealing them a bad hand, they knew they could weather it in turn.

Who needed luck when you had love?

With that last thought in her head she glanced past the flames to the stars, and dared the world to bring it on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raymond McNeil is a Scotch-Irish crazy person from Ohio that is slowly taking over the world via low-quality YouTube videos and slice-of-life lesbian fiction stories. His only known weaknesses are an unhealthy addiction to Pepsi and chronically forgetting why he walked into any given room. *Forged Within Flame* is his first published piece and he is currently working on his first full novel. Raymond can be followed on YouTube at **Celtic Phoenix Productions** and on his Twitter account, **@Raymond_McNeil**.