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Ayakashi  
and the  
Fairy Tales  
We Tell  
Ourselves



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Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

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# Chapter One

**WITH** a thunderous clatter, the woman's bicycle toppled to the ground.

There I was, sprawled on the pavement, holding onto Koro's leash for dear life. Propping myself up, I traced the leash to see Koro panting and grinning next to me as though absolutely nothing was wrong and we'd just had the time of our lives.

"Are you okay?!" the woman asked. I could only nod, my attention glued to the disaster in front of us. Groceries that had once happily sat in her bike basket lay scattered across the asphalt. My eyes narrowed on the poor eggs that hadn't survived the fall. *Ugh, not the eggs...*

Still on the ground, I watched as the lady rushed to my side, her face scrunched in worry. "Oh dear, your knee," she muttered, peering at me. "You're bleeding. I'm so sorry."

"N-No, it's my fault... I wasn't watching where I was going," I stuttered.

I'd been on an unusually long walk with my dog Koro, who, for some reason, had been reluctant to return home. Our casual stroll took an abrupt detour when he suddenly bolted like a creature possessed, dragging me straight into a blind turn—and right into the lady and her bike.

"I don't usually come this way; I didn't know what to watch out for," I said. "Um, I'm really sorry about your eggs and everything."

"Don't worry about it, dear. I was the one on the bike. I should have been more careful," she said, waving off my apology.

It was my first foray into that old-timey neighborhood, and I'd meandered along narrow streets barely wide enough to fit a single car. Right before we collided, the lady managed to swerve at the last second, but that wasn't quite enough to save me from myself. I'd lost my balance and gone down hard on the rough pavement, skinning my knees and palms in the process.



I berated myself internally for choosing to wear shorts that evening as she inspected my wounds, sympathy and concern still present on her face. Amid a flurry of additional apologies, she insisted on treating my injuries. I began to protest, and she brushed past my objections and introduced herself, seemingly trying to allay my suspicion. Her name was Ayako Towada, and she was a stout, older woman roughly my mother's age.

"I'm Haruka Kitazawa," I replied before appending another sheepish "sorry."

"No, no, it's my fault, dear."

At that point in our interaction, a peculiar realization dawned on me. Despite my usual hesitance around strangers, I felt none of the unease that typically plagued me in their presence. Ayako felt strangely familiar—as if we'd met before.

In the end, since neither of us had any first aid supplies on hand, I agreed to follow her to her home for treatment. She ushered me past the intersection, and after walking a little further, we encountered a row of waist-high hedges and a wrought iron gate. And then I saw the house.

"Here we are. Told you it was close, didn't I?"

"It— It's so cute..." I blurted. Before me was the most picture-perfect house I'd ever seen. With its white walls, gabled roof, bright red door, and a mailbox painted in the most vibrant shade of green, it was like a crayon drawing of a five-year-old's idea of a dream home come to life. *If only it had a big, conspicuous chimney...*

A majestic tree stood sentry in the front yard, its sprawling branches just begging to support a swing. Behind it and nestled all around the house in shades of delicate pink were stunning, fall-blooming roses that seemed to stretch affectionately toward the residence.

Ayako cracked a warm smile at my awed expression. "Why, thank you. I understand you might be reluctant to enter a stranger's house, so let's take care of you right here on the porch."

I trailed behind her onto a wooden veranda adjoining the front door. She offered me a seat on a nearby bench, and I dropped into it gratefully. Roses

twisted and twined all around me, creating a natural screen that shielded me from the world outside. The setting was oddly soothing.

As Ayako slipped inside to retrieve her first aid kit, I let my gaze wander, taking in the surrounds. The lot across the road gave way to a well-maintained wooded area hemmed in by a sturdy fence—the city must have put the fence there to mark the bounds of the neighborhood. A faint breeze swept through the dense woodland, transporting the alluring fragrance of tea olives. *Am I sure I haven't stepped into a fairy tale?* I thought to myself, enchanted.

Patches of rosemary flourished around the deck before blending with a wild, sprawling lawn. White stones and tree branches delineated beds that were crowded with various blooms. The scene reminded me so much of a classic English garden that even the plain old cosmos, flowers I'd seen a million times before, gained an exotic charm. My eyes drew once more to the tree near the center of the yard. It was adorned with golden ornaments that hung like cute little marbles, reminiscent of a Christmas tree.

"Sorry for the wait, dear."

Ayako's voice snapped me out of my reverie. She emerged from behind me through a pair of sliding patio doors. The hat she'd worn earlier was gone, offering a view of her natural, black hair. It was styled in loose waves that bobbed just above her shoulders. Her bangs were slightly tousled, probably from the aforementioned hat. As she ran water from an outside tap to clean my wounds, she studied me with concern. "Are you sure you don't need to call your parents?" she asked. "You scraped yourself up pretty bad. It doesn't hurt?"

"I-I'm fine!" I hurriedly reassured her. "I trip a lot, so I'm used to it." Or at least, I had when I was younger. As a middle schooler, skinning my knees was more than a little embarrassing. Nonetheless, I desperately clung to my facade, hoping she would relent.

"You sure?" she pressed, sounding unconvinced. "Okay then..."

After dressing my wounds with a few large adhesive bandages, Ayako packed up her first aid kit and disappeared back into the house. "Hold tight just a moment. I'll be right back," she said over her shoulder. She returned seconds later, bearing a tray with a tall glass of iced tea and a plate filled with treats. I'd

seen the packaging before—they were from a famous local pâtissier. “At least have something to eat before you go, as a token of my apology.”

“Thank you, but—”

“And what about you, Koro sweetie? Would you like some water?”

Spotting the proffered bowl of water, Koro, who was tethered to the porch railing, obediently readjusted himself, planting his butt firmly on the ground, tail wagging.

*Huh? And here I thought you were even more afraid of strangers than I am...*

Shaking off my surprise, I watched as Koro lapped thirstily at the bowl. Suddenly, I became keenly aware of my own dry throat. “Um, thanks. I guess I’ll have some,” I conceded. After all, I’d been outside for an hour by then, and to be honest, I was starting to feel a little guilty for continuing to refuse her hospitality.

I took a sip of the ice-cold tea. “Wow, this is good...!” It wasn’t remotely bitter and had that distinctive, refreshing aroma that only restaurant iced tea seemed to possess. To not gulp it all down at once took everything I had.

“Glad you like it,” Ayako said.

My thirst quenched, my brain suddenly kicked back into gear, and I remembered we’d abandoned her bicycle and all her groceries on the street. “Um, is your bike going to be okay?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, don’t worry. This is a cul-de-sac, so only residents come through here. Not many cars either.” She punctuated her sentence with a hearty laugh, which put me a bit more at ease.

She urged me to try the treats, so I carefully unwrapped a small, pink macaron from its packaging. Expecting strawberry, I bit into it only to be greeted with the tart and sweet flavor of raspberry. As she offered me another, pistachio that time, the click of the gate latch caught our attention. Koro’s ears perked up and our heads swiveled in unison toward the sound.

Before we could glimpse who it was, a male voice cut in, “Ayako, isn’t that your bike by the side of the road? I picked up your things, but...” His voice



trailed off and his approach halted as I, previously hidden behind the veil of roses, entered his line of sight. He was wearing a black school uniform, glasses perched on his nose, and carrying a slightly torn tote as well as a school bag that was all too familiar.







“Oh, um...” Recognizing him as someone from my school, I shot to my feet. My lips floundered in an effort to speak, but no words came. Before I could muster a proper response, another gust of the tea olive-scented breeze wafted past, rustling the golden baubles on the tree. They let out a soft, high-pitched jingle.

*They’re bells?*

“My!” Ayako exclaimed, her voice filled with soft surprise. “*Nos bonnes mères... Et bonnes dames...*”

*What was that?* I made a confused noise.

Ayako almost appeared just as startled at her outburst as I was, for she quickly shook herself and slipped into a warm smile. She directed such a tender, motherly gaze at me that heat crept up my neck.

“It’s nothing, dear,” she said. “My nephew has come home is all.” She turned her attention to the boy. “Welcome back, Takumi.”

“I’m home,” he replied curtly.

*There was that other bike propped up near the door,* I remembered. It looked very similar to the one my brother rode; it had to be the boy’s. Wrangling my thoughts back to the present situation, I hurriedly straightened to greet him. “U-Um, hi, I’m Haruka Kitazawa. We’re... I think we go to the same school.”

A silent nod of his head was all that awaited my tottering self-introduction.

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I learned that Towada did indeed attend the same school as me. He was even in my year. Since I’d just transferred there that spring, I was still finding my footing, grappling with the daunting task of remembering everyone’s names across six different classes. Names had never been my strong suit, and my brain already struggled with those from my own homeroom and the sections adjacent. Since Towada didn’t fall into either of those groups, his name hadn’t yet registered in my mind.

Despite my gaffe, Towada merely responded with a straight face, “I transferred here last year as well, so I get it. My parents relocate for their jobs a

lot and last year they moved overseas. I was tired of constantly transferring schools, so I decided to live with Ayako.”

Ayako had married Towada’s father’s older brother, making her his aunt. As the conversation touched on their family dynamics, I learned that his uncle, Towada’s actual blood relative, had passed away a few years before. When I faltered, not quite certain what to say in the wake of that revelation, Ayako threw me a lifeline by looking out toward her garden and assuring me that since she had Towada living with her, she didn’t feel the least bit lonely. Her eyes narrowed fondly, holding a tender gleam, as though the garden she gazed upon were full of memories of her late husband.

That, I felt, was my cue to leave. “Um,” I began, “thank you for treating me and everything, but I really should get going.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Ayako said. “Takumi, show her the way, will ya?”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary!” I quickly protested.

“Look out there, dear, it’s dark out,” she replied. “Besides, do you even know which way to go?”

I promptly shut up. No, I didn’t. Their old residential district, unlike the new development I lived in, teemed with sprawling properties and convoluted, narrow streets that twisted and turned every which way. It was quite easy to get lost in—as I had found out so unceremoniously earlier that evening. Still, having a boy I just met walk me back? I couldn’t. On the other hand, I had zero confidence I could find my way home on my own. *Ugh.*

Before I could say anything, Ayako flashed a warm smile. “And Takumi, buy us a carton of eggs while you’re at it, why don’tcha.”

“Sure.”

“Haruka.” She turned to me. “Apart from Takumi here there aren’t any other kids in this neighborhood who go to your middle school. This area doesn’t get much foot traffic at night; I’d feel safer knowing he’s with you.”

“O-Okay...” I stuttered in answer. “Then, sure...” If we were safe from prying eyes then I supposed I had no real reason to object. The whole affair was still a little embarrassing though.

**AFTER** thanking Ayako for her hospitality, I stepped outside to untie Koro. Once we were all ready, Towada and I set out together. We walked in silence, surrounded by an evening tranquility, a tangible shroud that seemed impossible to penetrate.

*Crap.*

The silence was deafening. *What do boys even like to talk about?* I had no idea. My experience was limited to conversations with my older brother, mostly from our shared childhood. Since he started high school and his commute lengthened, we didn't interact as much anymore.

Summoning my courage, I blurted, "Um, sorry about all this."

"It's fine," he replied. "I had to go buy eggs anyway."

"But we have midterms tomorrow..."

"I'd still have to go to the grocery store regardless. There aren't many landmarks here, and the roads can be tricky. It's not easy to get around."

"That is true... I'd probably get lost."

"I got lost too, at first."

Our dialogue petered out, both of us retreating into the stifling quiet. I couldn't help but feel that Towada was somewhat awkward himself. He spoke in monotone, and his words came out a little stilted, yet his voice was soft and oddly soothing. He wasn't like the boys at school who always either teased or ignored us girls. Frankly, I was a bit surprised. Did boys like him even exist? Or was that how they all behaved outside of school?

No matter the answer, it didn't change the fact that the silence stretching between us was physically uncomfortable. *Thank goodness Koro is here with me*, I thought. Searching for something, anything to say, I glanced at Towada, my eyes flicking upward. *Jeez, he's tall*. Or was I just short? Either way, the difference in our height was striking. He was probably as tall as my brother. I could tell he noticed my gaze because he turned to look at me. Our eyes locked. I swallowed the squeal rising in my throat and mustered a flimsy smile. "Y-Your

house is really pretty. It's like straight out of a picture book."

"A picture book?" He appeared genuinely confused.

"Y-Yeah. You know, like a place where a gnome or a wizard might live?"

He didn't reply, just stared at me, his face creased into one big question mark. *Oh god, why did I say that?!*

I laughed nervously, my face heating. "Not that you're a gnome or a wizard or anything! I just love houses like that, you know? So much so that I'd like to live in one myself. Oh, not that I'm unhappy with my current house or anything! My dad works really hard to provide for us and I'm very grateful. I even have my own room!" The words tumbled out uncontrollably. "It's just like, um... That house, it appeals to my inner child, you know what I mean?" Finally managing to rein in my runaway mouth, I looked up at him again. He was still watching me, his brow furrowed even deeper—I could see the wrinkles forming in real time.

*Ah, I did it again.*

I was the type of conversationalist no one aspired to be. When asked for input, I took ages to frame a response, so by the time I was ready, the discussion had already left me far behind. Or I was the girl who, in a panic, babbled a nonsensical stream of consciousness that seemed to freeze any exchange underway in its tracks. Although nobody ever vocalized their annoyance with me, I could always read the silent judgment in their expressions—that I wasn't providing the reaction they anticipated was all too obvious. Consequently, I'd carved out a role for myself as a listener. But even in that capacity, I had my weaknesses, awkward silences being chief among them. And my current dilemma was about as awkward and silent as they came. *You've really outdone yourself this time, Haruka.*

That someone like me was able to transfer in halfway through middle school and make the two friends that I did was a minor miracle. I still remember my mother's reassurance before we moved: "It's a more rural area. I'm sure the kids there will be less intense," she'd said. Even though that seemed a rather dismissive assessment of our future neighbors, I'd nonetheless found myself hoping that she was right.

In our old neighborhood, everyone always acted so serious, so driven, and so absorbed in their own lives. Our new home was less than an hour away by train, yet it felt like a completely different universe. Everything seemed more open, less constricting, despite the reality that my life was pretty much the same: school, extracurriculars, cram school, rinse and repeat. I hadn't hated the people where I used to live, of course, I just felt less out of place elsewhere. That said, I had yet to conquer my shyness or innate awkwardness. Surely, those were the sort of thing that gets better with age, right?

After the previous conversation's misfire, I didn't dare start another. I trundled along, mute, until abruptly, Towada pointed to a convenience store cresting into view on the next street corner. "If you follow the street right in front of that store, it'll lead you to the civic center."

"The civic center?"

"The large building with the library and the concert hall where all the musical events are held?" he supplied.

"Oh! Right, of course. I know that place."

The civic center was a multi-purpose hub. It boasted event halls of varying sizes, a small public library, and a branch of the local municipal office. In spite of its utility as a landmark, I'd somehow overlooked it during my walk with Koro. At only two stories tall, it evidently escaped notice. Once there, my house was a short ten minutes away.

I bent toward my dog. "You hear that, Koro? We're going home!"

The relief and change in energy in my voice must've been apparent, because I saw Towada's eyes widen slightly behind his glasses. His lips followed suit, quirking upward into a subtle smile as a flicker of youthfulness danced across his otherwise solemn visage. *That's the first time he's smiled all evening....*

"Um," I stammered, astonished, "thanks for bringing me all this way."

In response to my fumbling gratitude, he nodded and leaned over to pet Koro. "Bye, Koro."

"Do you like dogs?" I asked, intrigued by the gentle interaction.

“I like all living creatures, whether they’re dogs, cats, or birds,” he answered. “Ayako’s often not home during the day, and as her freeloading nephew, I can’t exactly keep a pet.”

With that, he lifted his hand in a wordless gesture of farewell. I reciprocated, watching as he pivoted in the direction of the grocery store. Then I turned to Koro. “Let’s get going too, shall we? We’re already late enough as is.”

Koro eyed me briefly before breaking into a trot, a newfound spring in his step. Koro was a rescue dog—part Shiba Inu with a delightful, toasted-marshmallow coat that faded into pure white at his paws, his little “socks,” as we fondly called them. He joined our family around the same time we moved. I still recall the day my father unexpectedly brought him home, catching me, my brother, and my mother entirely by surprise. To say that Mom had been furious was an understatement. But I hadn’t minded, not one bit. To me, Koro was a dream come true. I’d always said I wanted a cat or dog once we got out of that company-sponsored apartment.

Koro was fully grown when we adopted him, a creature somewhere between extremely docile and wholly skittish. He seemed to be afraid of just about everything and everyone, and we could only guess the conditions at the animal shelter he came from. Cars and people were an absolute no-go for him, which meant walks were short-lived, stressful ventures, and a trip to a crowded dog park was utterly out of the question. The only place he appeared to feel safe was “his” cushion—a designated cushion to which he always retreated, curling up and making himself as small as possible.

But with some time, love, and care, things started to change. My calls of his name, the touch of my hand as I petted him, the consistent parade of meals, and the gradual elongation of his walks slowly eroded his apprehension. The sight of Koro’s tail beginning to wag in my presence was a small victory, a reward reserved only for me—at least initially. Neither my brother nor my mother, nor even Dad—the one who brought him home from the shelter in the first place—was privy to his warmth. His partiality, of course, just made me love him all the more. Recently, he’d started to wag around my mother too, but that was fine by me. I would always be the first he’d opened up to.

I looked down at him. His tail, which had once hung low, swaying



despondently from side to side, was coiled tightly above his butt, bobbing gently in rhythm with his steps. It was such a simple sight, yet it made my heart swell with affection. I wouldn't have been exaggerating if I said that his tail could make me forgive him for anything—even, say, if he were to lead me on an almost *two-hour* detour the night before midterms. *Ugh, I really gotta get home and study.*

Over time, not only his tail perked up, but also his attitude toward strangers, as I had discovered that night. Witnessing him warm up to Ayako and Towada—and even let them pet him—was quite the surprise. I wasn't exactly complaining. That he was settling in and mellowing out was certainly a positive step forward. As I mulled over that unexpected development, I realized we'd reached home.

"We're back," I announced, stepping inside.

"Welcome back, Haruka," came my mother's reply. She was already home from her part-time job and busily preparing dinner in the kitchen.

Curious, I peeked at what she was making. "Yes, my favorite! Hamburg steak!" I adored my mother's Hamburg steaks—they were delightfully round and braised more than fried. *I hope she's stuffed quail eggs in them!*

"You two were out for quite some time," she noted.

"Yeah, Koro seemed to enjoy being out, so we ended up wandering all over the place."

"Really? Maybe it's the weather. It's more comfortable to walk now than in the summer." She smiled, shaping more of the ground meat into balls. "But remember, that also means the days are getting shorter. Did you check the flashlight battery in your walk bag?"

My "walk bag," a small pouch that held a personal safety alarm and a mini flashlight, always accompanied me on walks with Koro. Though I balked at the idea at first—seriously, in our peaceful neighborhood?—Mom wouldn't let me leave the house without it.

"Yeah, it's still good," I replied. "Do you need any help?"

"Let's see... Maybe you could take these veggies and—" she began, only to cut

herself off. “Haruka, didn’t you say you had midterms coming up?”

My eyes widened. “Whoops, totally forgot I had homework. Gotta go, bye!” Swiftly spinning around, I dashed for the stairs.

“Haruka!”

I bounded up to the second floor, dodging my mother’s chiding about prioritizing study, and threw myself into my room. I took out the business card Ayako had given me. “I should let her know I made it back okay,” I mumbled to myself, reaching for the tablet on my desk and firing up the mail app. Ayako had neatly jotted her personal details on the back of the card: her address, phone number, and email.

My thoughts whirled as my fingers tapped her email into the recipient field. In parting, Ayako had extended an invitation back to her house. She’d expressed concern for my injuries and seemed keen to have me visit again. I’d accepted, not due to her insistence but because I found myself genuinely, oddly, wanting to return—to see that storybook house again. And besides teachers and relatives, I’d never talked to an adult for so long before. The encounter hadn’t felt like a first meeting; she was inexplicably familiar.

I glanced at the front of the card. “Endou’s Cooking Salon,” it proclaimed in bold print, and beneath, in a smaller typeface, “Ayako Towada: Chief Assistant.” *Endou’s Cooking Salon...* The name rang a bell. It was a studio-like space that hosted cooking classes two train stations away. *Chief Assistant, huh?* An image of Ayako clad in an apron and a chef’s bandana floated across my mind. *Yep, I can totally see that.*

*“Chief Assistant is just a fancy way of saying jack-of-all-trades. I help with anything and everything. I’m usually home in the evenings, and all day Tuesdays and weekends. Feel free to drop by any time.”* I could recall what she’d said with startling ease. Her tone had been so casual, so bright—unlike a certain tight-lipped, deadpan nephew of hers. Not that I thought he was a drag or uncommunicative, he was just...different...in a way that was hard to explain. Perhaps “reserved” was the best word to describe him. At least, he wasn’t rowdy like some of the other boys at school. Or was that my perception only because we’d just met? In any case, he seemed mature for his age, in contrast

to me. *Imagine not being paralyzed by every little minor hiccup that comes your way. Must be nice.*

After drafting, deleting, and redrafting my message multiple times, I finally hit send on a rather conservative version: *"Hi, it's Haruka. I made it home safe. Thank you for everything today."*

My social awkwardness didn't stop at verbal communication; it extended to the written form as well. Free writing assignments in particular were my worst nightmare. I'd rather slog through thirty pages of practice problems than one page of free writing. "I bet someone like Towada could churn out a paragraph in his sleep, easy," I muttered. With a hefty sigh, I pulled my textbooks from my schoolbag.

Just as I flipped open my notebook to review the material for the upcoming test, my tablet pinged with an incoming message. Ayako had replied.

*"Glad to hear you made it back safe. I'm sure your parents must've been worried sick! Look forward to seeing you soon, you're always welcome! P.S. Would love any updates about how Takumi's doing at school."*

A faint smirk tugged at my lips. "Sounds like something she'd say." I could hear the words resonating in my ears. *She's curious about her nephew's school life, huh?* Before I left her house, Ayako had confided in me that her nephew rarely talked about school with her.

*I'd love to help, but...* I was in class 1 and Towada was in class 5. Not only were we not in the same homeroom, because our classes weren't adjacent, we also didn't share any joint activities. The only time I'd likely see him was in the halls in passing, so unfortunately, the probability of me gaining any additional insight was slim.

"Maybe Mao or Honomi have some info," I mused aloud of my two best friends. I quickly dismissed the idea. Mao was a student-athlete who had nothing but track and field on the brain, and Honomi, well... Honomi was head over heels for an upperclassman in her club. I was almost certain that if I dared mention the name of a boy to her, she'd get the wrong idea and think I'd also caught the love bug. *Better not.*

Closing the mail app, I pressed the map icon and entered Ayako's address.

“Wow, these roads really are a mess,” I mumbled as I tracked the winding path from the civic center to her house. There was a forested area opposite her lot that formed a border between our city and the neighboring one—that had to be the woodland I’d seen. I was retracing my steps, revisiting the intersection where we’d collided, when Mom’s voice floated from downstairs—dinner was ready.

I glanced at my textbooks, yet untouched. *After dinner, you got this, yep.*

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I surveyed the dishes laid out on my aunt’s caramel-toned, timeworn dining table. The spread was elegant, understated, and Japanese to the extreme, consisting of *saikyoyaki*—grilled fish marinated in white miso—accompanied by a heaping pile of shaved daikon, braised burdock root, pumpkin salad, and a tofu and seaweed miso soup.

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“Help yourself, dear,” Aunt Ayako said. “Or were you expecting something heartier?”

“Not really.”

“Trust me, Takumi, a light meal is the right meal,” she assured me. “You’ll be up late studying, right? I’ll make you some crab meat porridge later.”

“You don’t have to.”

“Oh, but I want to,” she countered playfully. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll focus on the cooking, and you just focus on the eating.” She flashed me a smile so warm and motherly that it put my biological mother to shame.

I acknowledged her with a nod, then shifted my attention to the meal before me. The oily white fish, shellacked in a golden miso glaze, flaked apart readily under my chopsticks. Aunt Ayako may have been worried I’d want something more substantial for a main course, but it was more than enough. And the burdock root and pumpkin side dishes, each prepared meticulously from scratch, held their own as well—a far cry from the prepackaged sides I used to eat.

“Haruka seems sweet. Koro was quite adorable too.” My aunt smiled to herself as she ate, chopsticks darting between dishes with precision. “I really didn’t expect *those bells* to ring, though.”

I didn’t say anything, instead focusing on maneuvering another piece of fish into my mouth. After a moment, she shrugged.

Haruka Kitazawa. Her comment about the house resembling a gnome’s or wizard’s dwelling replayed in my mind—her eyes had sparkled with such unfeigned enthusiasm as she spoke. How long had it been since I last heard those bells? I certainly never would’ve imagined that I’d hear them again that afternoon. I knew what their peal meant, of course, yet the abrupt unfolding of the situation had left me grappling with disbelief.

“I wonder if she’ll come back,” Aunt Ayako wondered aloud.

“You’re hopeful.”

She chuckled knowingly. “It’s my job to be.”

In lieu of a TV, a soft melody played from an old record player—a keepsake from my uncle. The song flowed with an easy rhythm, its lyrics close to spoken word, seemingly as formless as a passing breeze.

“A French chanson with Japanese food?” I remarked.

“What’s wrong with that?” she rebutted. “What do France and Japan have in common? A love of good food.”

As I returned to my dinner, I noticed out of the corner of my eye several shadowy figures in a dim corner of the kitchen swaying in sync with the music—silhouettes that most people couldn’t see.

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**AGAINST** all odds, I made it through the first day of midterms. A flicker of triumph coursed through me as I strolled home; I felt as though I’d done better than expected. As I walked past the kitchen, my mother ambushed me.

“Haruka, what’s this I hear about you getting hit by a bicycle yesterday?”

My heart sank. *How does she know?* Resigning myself, I revealed my bandaged knee.

Mom thoroughly examined it before lifting her eyes to me. “I took Koro out for a walk this afternoon,” she explained, “it being my day off and all. When we were near the station—do you know what happened?—he darted toward a woman.” She placed a hand on her cheek, evidently still astonished. “Koro never approaches anyone on his own. I was so surprised.”

*I think I know where this is going.*

“And then do you know what happened? The woman recognized him and went, ‘Koro, is that you?’ And that just surprised me even more!”

*Yep, it was Ayako.*

“She felt terrible about the whole incident. But since you never told me anything, I was completely at a loss!”

“I-I didn’t tell you,” I interjected, “because I tripped on my own! It was my fault for rushing into the intersection like that. And she even treated my injuries and...lost all her eggs in the process...”

“Well, you should’ve told me that!” Mom scolded.

My eyes strayed to a gift box sitting on the dining table. “A token of her apology,” she said, noticing. “Listen, Haruka. I’m partially to blame as well here—I should have noticed you were hurt. But please, don’t hide things like this from us, okay?”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

She took my hand and inspected my palms. “At least you’re healing well. You know, she was quite worried about you, so how about we go pay her a visit the weekend after exams?” She glanced at the box. “But for now, let’s forget about all that and just enjoy these, shall we?”

With a final sigh, Mom poured us both a cup of tea. I studied the gift box’s packaging. It contained an assortment of baked goods from a patisserie run by Takanori Endou—the same source of the macarons at Ayako’s place.

“Wow, we really lucked out, Mom!”

Takanori Endou was a famous pastry chef and social media sensation who enjoyed a massive following both on network TV and online. He was so



devilishly handsome that his best-selling cookbook actually came with collectible polaroids of him. Admittedly, that gimmick was a bit corny for my taste, but his recipes were undeniably fantastic. From madeleines to dacquoises to tarts, all of his classic French desserts looked so good. *Man, I really wish you hadn't, Ayako. How much did this even cost?* The price was definitely beyond my middle school budget.

Mom handed me my cup. "The pastries? Yeah. Apparently, the son of her boss runs the place."

"Wait, what?"

*No seriously, what? Didn't she work at a cooking class? What was the name on the card again...? Endou's Cooking Salon? Endou...? Endou! Of course—how did I not put two and two together! I never would've guessed. She didn't give off the vibe that she was well-connected at all.*

Unaware of my internal epiphany, Mom barreled on. "That Takanori Endou guy's father is a renowned French cuisine chef—and Ayako's his assistant! Can you believe that?"

I bit into a *financier*, the sweet, buttery, almondy confection almost melting in my mouth. I washed it down with a sip of tea, and the fragrant, sharp brew cut through the richness beautifully. "Mom," I said, "these are way too good. They'd be wasted on my brother."

"You might have a point," she replied. "We'll save some for your father, but for your brother...a taste will suffice."

We exchanged knowing smiles and a quiet giggle. No doubt we were both thinking of my brother's tendency to inhale food with no intention of tasting it. His exclusion was unfortunate but necessary.

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**THE** weekend following my exams, Mom, Koro, and I visited Ayako as promised. Towada was out, which seemed to greatly disappoint Mom. I wasn't sure why she was so interested in a boy the same age as her daughter, *but nice going, Towada! I feel like I owe you one.*

I stepped into Ayako's storybook house for the first time, and the interior was

—well—exactly how one would expect it to look. Mom and I must have shared the same sentiment as our eyes danced around, taking in every corner of Ayako's home without reservation. The entranceway jutted out slightly from the rest of the house, and a skylight ushered plentiful sunshine into the compact foyer. A small display of cosmos, the same from the garden, adorned the top of her shoe cabinet. We passed through a narrow corridor interspersed with small picture frames to reach the largest area of the house—a combined kitchen and dining room.

The kitchen was noticeably uncluttered. I spotted a dish rack, a kettle—and that was all. I'd assumed that someone who worked for a chef would have professional-looking tools strewn about everywhere, and clearly I was wrong. No ladle lying abandoned, no stray spatula to be found, the space was immaculate. A large sink nestled in the spacious countertop, and right above it was a window offering a gorgeous view outside as one prepped in the kitchen. *Wow.*

In the dining area, a polished wood-grain table sat center stage, surrounded by four chairs although it was easily large enough to accommodate six. Complementing the table was a matching wooden dish cabinet. All in all, the interior design was one of timeless beauty.

Glass-inlaid *koshido* sliding doors partitioned the dining area from a cozy living room that felt more like an extension of the dining space than a separate room. Beyond, through another pair of sliding doors, I spied the porch where I'd intruded previously. Ayako ushered us into the living room, and first to hit my eye was the *books*—the sheer number of *books*.

Towering above a dark hardwood floor and a crimson kilim rug was a massive bookcase that occupied an entire wall. Its shelves were crammed with complex-looking tomes and books in foreign languages, or so I inferred from the non-Japanese lettering on the spines. A high-backed tweed sofa was the next biggest object in the room, and beside it was a floor lamp equipped with an additional reading light. A small end table bounded one side of the sofa, topped by a smattering of yet more volumes. The space was more *reading* room than *living* room. I could almost picture Ayako with a steaming hot mug in hand sinking into the plush couch cushions with a good book.

Ayako gestured for us to sit on the sofa. Once seated, I presented my healing knee. She released a sigh of relief, and I, glad that we could finally put the episode behind us, exhaled one of my own. She then set about making us some tea.

“Your home and garden are absolutely beautiful,” my mother said.

“Thank you,” Ayako replied. “It’s my late husband’s taste. I like it too, of course, but the house, the furniture—everything’s getting older, and all the upkeep is getting to me.”

I half listened to their conversation as my gaze roved across the living room—something was conspicuously absent. “There’s no TV?” I mumbled. Where a TV would usually reside was instead a rectangular object with a glass lid. Inside rested a black disk. I’d seen such a contraption at Grandma’s house before—it was a record player.

“I have a small TV in my bedroom, but my days are so hectic I barely get a chance to watch,” Ayako answered. “Besides, in this day and age it’s all about the computer, isn’t it?” She indicated a laptop next to the record player. She further explained that she hadn’t bothered to replace the living room TV when the previous one broke.

While I didn’t watch TV much either and could certainly see her point, our living room was nonetheless dominated by a large screen; the lack of one probably contributed to the room’s study-like air. I glanced again at the bookcase. In addition to books, the shelves were dotted with picture frames and little decorations. A photograph near eye level of an older man caught my attention. A small coffee mug and a candle sat next to it. The man had to be Ayako’s late husband.

My gaze drifted toward the living room window and past its lace curtains to the porch outside. The large tree in the yard was visible, its branches swaying faintly as the little golden bells glimmered—silent—under the midday sun. I could almost still hear their beautiful peal. Though they’d been at a distance, they’d rung with a striking clarity as though they’d been right beside my ear. I wouldn’t have minded hearing that vivid sound again, but it would get tiring for both Ayako and her neighbors if the bells clamored nonstop. They were likely

made to chime in nothing short of a strong gust.

As I stared outside in a daze, the conversation moved on to Ayako's place of work. "Takanori guest hosts special workshops for Christmas and Valentine's, but apart from that it's a normal cooking class. His father is also quite famous, you know?"

*Even dreamboat patissier Takanori Endou is just Takanori in Ayako's eyes, huh?* The casual way she spoke about him was like how one would discuss a family friend. They had to be close then.

"His father is Tadashi Endou, the French cuisine chef, right?" probed Mom.

"My, you knew? How wonderful."

Apparently, Tadashi Endou had been a successful restaurateur until he sustained an injury a few years back that affected his ability to stand and work for long hours. He stepped away from the business, leaving the restaurant to his daughter and son-in-law while he focused on authoring cookbooks and managing his cooking class. Given that his son was a popular pastry chef, the whole family seemed to be chefs.

"Would you be related to him, by any chance?" Mom asked.

"No, no," Ayako quickly replied. "I got to know them through my husband—he and Tadashi were good friends." She paused. "Though I suppose I am quite attached to them. I've known Takanori and his sister since they were kids, after all."

The conversation then shifted to their ages, and Mom and Ayako discovered that they were indeed only a few years apart. *Man, they are really hitting it off.* I found myself a little envious of Mom's ability to form a connection with someone so effortlessly. *If only I could do the same...*

"—right, Haruka?"

Had someone called my name?

"Haruka?"

"Oh, hi, yes, sorry Mom—huh?" I snapped out of my thoughts, my gaze flitting down to what Mom was holding. My eyes widened.

“Your mom said you made these yourself, Haruka?” Ayako ventured. “They look scrumptious.”

I was mortified. On the table was none other than the brownies I’d baked the night before. Baking was just a hobby I’d picked up in grade school. I wasn’t particularly good at it but found it fun regardless. I’d made the brownies as a kind of mini celebration for finishing midterms, before the stress of grades and results kicked in. *I thought Mom was kidding when she said she’d bring some for Ayako!*

“M-Mom, why’d you bring them?!” I choked out.

“Why not?” she answered, nonchalant. “It’s not every day you bake, and I thought it’d be nice to share. Besides, would you prefer they were gobbled up in seconds by your brother instead?”

*That’s easy for you to say, Mom!* They were just ordinary, run-of-the-mill, bog-standard homemade brownies! They were hardly fit for a normal person’s consumption, let alone the chief assistant of a famous chef!

Internal grumblings aside, it was too late. Ayako had already brought over forks and plates; she looked eager to partake. *Wait, these plates are so cute though...* They were white porcelain, lustrous and smooth, and an adorable little pink rose graced the center of each. I loved that kind of stuff. On closer inspection, I realized the design on each plate was unique. *That one has a lily of the valley, and that one’s a...poppy? Not sure. Ooh, and a marigold.*

*Wait, four plates?*

There were only three of us: Mom, Ayako, and me. So who was the fourth plate for?

“I’m sure Takumi will be delighted.”

*No.*

While I was distracted by the cute plates, the conversation had progressed without me! Not only had I failed to plead my case about the brownies, but I also had to contend with Towada?

“That boy sure likes his sweets,” Ayako continued.

A male classmate—and one I'd only met once at that—trying my homemade brownies? Could the visit get any more embarrassing? I watched Ayako take a bite, and okay, she appeared to really enjoy it, but still! If I'd known a sampling was in store, I would've put in a little more effort! Like, weigh out the ingredients to the gram, or sift the flour twice, or use high-quality couverture chocolate instead of regular bar chocolate...!

Flustered, I turned back to the garden. Movement by the tree caught my eye. *What was that? Something brown colored...and furry?* I wasn't sure what I was looking at. It seemed a little too big to be a cat and it definitely wasn't Koro—I'd tied him securely to the porch railing. Plus, Koro's coat was a toasted marshmallow, while the creature before me was a darker shade of brown. To confirm it wasn't Koro, I checked the porch again to see him sitting obediently and quietly. Considering his usual nervousness, the obvious lack of barking suggested that whatever was in the yard wasn't a threat.

My eyes lingered on Koro. He was so calm, so docile, a far cry from when we first adopted him. Where had his cowardliness gone all of a sudden? Not that I was complaining or anything—I was glad that he had relaxed a little.

"See something interesting out there, Haruka?" Mom interrupted my train of thought.

"Oh, uh, yeah. I think there's a cat outside," I replied, realizing I'd been goggling out the window with my plate and fork still in hand.

"A cat?" echoed Ayako; she sounded confused.

"Oh, did you not have one? It must be a stray, then—a brown one." I pointed at the base of the tree. Then again, the animal *was* a little too big for a cat. It was also kind of long—and slender? Maybe it was a raccoon dog or something similar. The forest was right there, so I wouldn't have been surprised.

"I don't see anything..." said Mom.

"What?" I said. "It's right there—by the base of the tree. It's kinda hard to see, but it's there. Look. That's its back—I think."

"I don't know..." She sounded unconvinced and rubbed at her eyes. Ayako, too, had assumed a perplexed demeanor.



*Really? It's right there, still wriggling around.*

*Wait.* A thought struck me. The creature wasn't some supernatural phenomenon only visible to me, was it? *No, no, no.* I shook the notion from my head. I certainly wasn't in possession of a sixth sense or anything of the sort. Besides, I was sure that if it *were* something freaky, I wouldn't be so blasé about it. They couldn't see it due to their angle of sight. *Yes, let's go with that.*

"It must just be a stray," I reiterated, trying to put the weird situation behind us. "It's probably gone now... Probably." I went for a bite of my brownie to distract myself. "Huh?"

My eyes fell to my plate. It was empty. But I'd been holding it all that time. Had I forgotten that I'd eaten my piece already...?

## Chapter Two

**ABOUT** a week and a half had passed since Mom and I visited Ayako's house. As the dreary vestiges of summer retreated, the vibrant blue of an airy autumn sky emerged in its place. In PE, our focus was dedicated to the looming interclass sports meet and thus dominated by soccer, basketball, and volleyball. That day, awash with soft morning sunlight, soccer took center stage.

While the teacher was engrossed in overseeing the boys' spirited scrimmage, we girls were enjoying a much more casual affair. Our engagement was limited to half-hearted attempts at kicking and chasing the ball and served more as a backdrop to cheerful conversation than a contest of skill. I found myself comfortably caught up in easy banter with Mao and Honomi.

"I am *starving*," announced Mao, an undertone of frustration coloring her words. She was crouched in a deep squat, raking her hands through her bangs. "Whose bright idea was it to schedule PE right before lunch?"

"But you've hardly moved," I observed.

"Hear me out, okay?" she rebutted. "I woke up late this morning, so all I had was a glass of milk. I used up all my energy just to *get* to school. It's like climbing a freaking mountain every morning."

Honomi laughed at Mao's dramatics. Her ponytail swishing, she said, "You really struggle on an empty stomach, don't you, Mao?" She poked a teasing finger at Mao's cowlick. "Unfortunate for you that our school is on a hill."

"I also had a light breakfast, so I'm also a bit hungry," I admitted.

"Not you too, Haruka," chided Honomi gently.

"It's soccer, okay? I just want it to be over already."

Mao and Honomi, my two friends, were my school ambassadors when I first transferred. They fell into the role through no volition of their own and simply because they had the misfortune of sitting next to me. Initially, they were to

help me acclimate for just a week, but that week turned into two, then three, then a full month. After a month, I was perfectly settled in, yet they stuck with me. Our bond deepened, and soon we were inseparable in everything we did.

The first colorful character to adopt the introverted newcomer that was me was Mao Kagami. She was a classic picture of athleticism: lean, tall, and fast. Even her dark brown hair, cut short and naturally curly, seemed to fit her image. A track-and-field sensation, her reputation was sealed during our first trimester's athletics meet, when she single-handedly outran two boys as the anchor in the mixed relay, securing our class a medal. She was secretly nicknamed and revered as "The Prince" among some of the girls in the grade below us.

The other classmate to take to me was Honomi Kudou. Outwardly, she was the laid-back, gentle type, and had known Mao since kindergarten. She always wore her waist-length black hair in a ponytail and sported glasses in class. She was currently nursing a debilitating crush on an upperclassman in her club. During exam periods or club breaks—whenever she was away from him basically—her soft, puppy-dog eyes drifted dreamily, shimmering ever so slightly, the expression usually earning her a stern reminder from Mao to return her attention to her studies.

From an outsider's perspective, Mao might appear to occupy the position of an older sibling in their relationship, and Honomi the younger, which couldn't be further from the truth. Honomi's relaxed demeanor extended only as far as her speech, and (in matters aside from romance) she was as diligent as they came. In fact, she took care of Mao—in a way more akin to a mother than an elder sister.

How I found myself in their company was as big a mystery to me as to anyone. But they were unmistakably the real deal: true friends with whom I felt at ease, even with all my bungling awkwardness. Sometimes they almost seemed too good to be true, and I puzzled over why they'd bothered to befriend someone like me. Though I might never understand the reason, I was nonetheless overwhelmingly grateful for their friendship.

Our eyes lazily chased the soccer ball zipping across the field.

“Just soccer, Haruka?” Mao asked, her tone playful.

“You got me. I’m a total lost cause,” I replied. “Oh, except for gymnastics. I like gymnastics.”

“You did ballet. That makes sense,” Honomi offered. “You must be pretty flexible. Meanwhile vaulting is like my worst nightmare.” Her eyes shot to my knee. “Oh, hey, your bandages are gone.”

The shift in topic conveniently presented an opportunity for me to steer the conversation toward Towada. “Hey, do either of you know a guy named Towada from class...5, I think?”

“Hang on, Haruka. Is this about a crush?”

*I freaking knew it.* Honomi’s eyes radiated with the intensity of a thousand suns as her lovestruck brain shifted into gear. I launched into an explanation before her misunderstanding could manifest further, breathlessly recounting how I’d gotten lost with Koro, my near miss with the bike, the unexpected encounter with Ayako, and my escort home with Towada. “I’m still piecing together all the faces in our grade. If he hadn’t been wearing our uniform, I don’t think I even would’ve known he was from our school,” I concluded.

“True, there are a *lot* of people in our grade,” Mao said. “But yeah, Towada? I know him. He’s in the tennis club. They practice near the track, so I see them swinging their rackets around all the time. But I dunno...” She shrugged. “He’s kinda pretty...ordinary? Like there’s nothing about him that really stands out.”

Honomi nodded. “Aside from Sakai, the president of the club, most of the members are all pretty meh—hardworking, but meh. Towada transferred here last year, didn’t he? I’ve never been in the same class as him, so I don’t know much about him either.”

“You didn’t have to add that first bit. We already know you’ve got nobody but Shinjo on the brain,” Mao retorted.

Shinjo was the upperclassman Honomi was smitten with. At the mention of his name, her face flushed bright red and she giggled shyly. *Cute*, I thought before she suddenly clasped my hands, saying “Good luck to the both of us!”

*I thought I told you it’s not like that!*

Before we knew it, PE was over, and we hadn't seen even a hint of a soccer ball in our vicinity.

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**AFTER** school, Mao changed into her gym clothes and sauntered off to track, while Honomi beelined to concert band practice, the pep in her step no doubt due to the prospect of seeing her crush. Shinjo, a third year, should've already retired from the club to focus on his high school entrance exams, but admirably, he'd decided to stick around to help until after our school's annual cultural festival.

"That's why I can't afford to slack off now!" Honomi had declared before we parted at the staircase, she heading to the band room and I toward the school gates. Incidentally, I was in the home economics club, which was just a front for those of us who went straight home after school.

Just before I stepped outside the entrance, Ayako's request crossed my mind.

"Maybe I'll go take a look," I mumbled, spinning on my heel toward the athletic fields. I wasn't personally interested or anything; I simply felt obligated since she'd asked. The plan was laid out perfectly in my head: I'd sneak a peek at the tennis club and report back with a casual "Hey, I saw him at his club!" and that would be the end of it. I wouldn't need to get close, just stand by the nearby planters, take a quick look, and skedaddle. *Five minutes, yep. Five minutes* was all I needed.

I was slinking toward the flower boxes near the courts when a male voice suddenly sounded from behind me. "Kitazawa, perfect, just who I wanted to see."

Startled, I whirled to see Mr. Ikeda, my homeroom teacher, holding a watering can.

"Mind lending me a hand with these flowers?" He gestured toward the planters. "I've got a staff meeting soon, so I'd appreciate it."

"Oh, sure, of course."

"Kind of ya," he said. "By the way, you seem to be getting on well with Kagami and the others. Are you settling in all right?"

“Yes, I’m doing well, thank you.”

Mr. Ikeda was a seasoned educator in his fifties. He ran a tight ship but could be quite compassionate from time to time. After handing me the watering can, he retreated into the building. *Honestly, not a bad deal.* I could observe while watering.

As I went about my task, I stole glances at the athletic complex. The tennis club didn’t appear to have kicked off practice yet as I couldn’t spot them. Instead, I spied Mao and the rest of the track-and-field club warming up. She stretched her tall, sun-kissed limbs with an eager impatience as though ready to take off at any moment. Mao loved to run. She’d been late that morning, but usually she would’ve been out on the running track by herself, even on days when she didn’t have morning practice. Honomi often teased, “Mao’s always in motion. She’s like a tuna fish or a horse!”

Honomi wasn’t one to talk, though. Even if she weren’t crushing on Shinjo, I suspected she’d be equally serious about concert band. Looking at her, one would expect her to play a delicate instrument like the flute, but—surprise!—she was a percussionist. That had been fun to find out, and when I heard her play for the first time, I was completely blown away. She was extremely good, especially on the drums. The way she could roll on a snare so carefully and continuously was impressive. The band had not advanced past the preliminaries for nationals that year, unfortunately, yet with the cultural festival on the horizon, they were busy practicing at every opportunity, even during lunch.

Both Mao and Honomi were driven, wholly absorbed in their respective passions, while I, on the other hand, did nothing. Ballet, the one activity I’d sort of kept up for years, I dropped when I moved. They were forging ahead and leaving me floundering in their wake as the distance between us grew painfully apparent. Sure, I felt a little left out, but I couldn’t be angry about it—not when it was essentially a mess of my own making.

I thought I knew what I needed to do to fix the issue. I just needed to find my “thing,” a pursuit of my own that I could dive into headfirst. If I had one, then maybe the future wouldn’t look so bleak. But that was easier said than done. And as for what my “thing” was or could be, I hadn’t the faintest clue, which was starting to really bug me, honestly.



Relatedly, that morning in homeroom, Mr. Ikeda had announced that parent-teacher conferences would occur at the end of the trimester and that career counseling would be included in the meetings. *Career counseling, huh...* It felt like an impossible ask. How could I know what I wanted to be in the future when I didn't know what I wanted to be in the present?

Before my thoughts could wander too far, the watering can ran dry, pulling me back to reality. It was time for a refill. Watering the flower boxes had taken longer than expected; when I next glanced around the grounds, Mao and her team had migrated to the far side. The tennis club had replaced them, starting their practice quite close to me and my planter. I instantly located Towada, the tallest of the bunch. He was sorting tennis balls and relaying instructions to a few first years. Our school had only two tennis courts, so they must use them in turns while those waiting practiced close to where I was.

"Okay, time to go," I told myself, draining the last drops from the can. Having accomplished my main mission and even a bonus side objective, I resolved to make my exit. After all, no one appreciated lollygagging.

Just as I turned to leave, an unidentified blur slashed past my cheek, followed immediately by a blast of wind. Before I could begin to process the event, something crashed into the planter behind me with a thud. Startled, I dropped the watering can and instinctively ducked.

"Hey, who hit that ball?!" I heard a voice yell.

"I-I'm so sorry!" piped another voice.

The scene erupted into commotion.

"Somebody get the teacher!"

"Jeez, that was close."

The voices came at me from all directions. I didn't know what to do. I remained low, making myself as small as possible, when a familiar voice asked, "Are you okay?"

Looking up, I saw Towada. The sun beamed down from behind him, obscuring his face.

“It doesn’t look like it hit you directly, but you’re red here—did it graze you?”

I was too flustered to respond. Instead, I touched my cheek, which had started to sting.

Another club member joined the fray. “You’re the, um, transfer student—Kitazawa, right?” he said. “Towada, if you know her, then take her to the nurse’s office. I’ll go get the teacher.”





“Sure,” said Towada.

“No, I’m fine, I don’t need to—”

Before I could finish protesting, Towada had already grabbed me by the arm. *Wait, the watering can!* My eyes darted back to see the other boy, possibly the club president, picking it up. *His name, what was it?* Honomi had mentioned him during PE. *Sasaki? No... Sakai! That’s it!* I could see why she didn’t classify him as meh: he was loud and confident and radiated sheer charisma and leadership—the exact type of person I shied away from. Just how conspicuous was a transfer student anyway? We’d never talked and yet he knew my name.

We arrived at the nurse’s office shortly, and she exclaimed, “Is she hurt? Let me have a look,” before examining my cheek and promptly starting treatment. She handed me a mirror and I saw the flushed skin where the object—a tennis ball—had whizzed by. Since it had merely grazed me, icing the area was the first step. After handing me a towel-wrapped ice pack, she left for the staff room, marooning me with Towada.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “I feel like this keeps happening.”

“Not really,” he replied, staring absentmindedly out the window.

Though to be precise, I didn’t “feel” like it kept happening, it *did* keep happening. The occasion was the second in recent memory that I’d inadvertently troubled him so—and found myself alone with him! I sensed my blood pressure spiking.

I assured him that I was fine and that he could return to his club, but he insisted on staying until its advisor and president showed up.

“But you’re missing out on practice?” I prodded.

“It’s fine. More importantly, shouldn’t you be applying that ice?”

“R-Right.”

*He really just says nice things in the bluntest way possible.* Firmly rebuffed, I had no intention of pushing further. As I pressed the ice pack to my cheek, a deafening silence ensued. *Hurry up, nurse, please!*

“Hey,” he abruptly said.

“Y-Yeah?”

Strangely, he didn’t respond right away. A hint of unease played on his face as he slowly asked, “I know I wasn’t there last time, but after you came to my house, have you noticed anything unusual at your place?”

“Anything unusual?” I echoed. Towada wasn’t the sort to joke around or poke fun, so I seriously considered his question. Our visit had been ten days before. The sole odd occurrence that sprang to mind was the vanishing brownie at Towada’s, but that incident was probably due to a simple lapse of memory, and besides, he was inquiring about my house, not his.

Catching my puzzled expression, he elaborated, “Like food—snacks or milk—disappearing, or finding items not where you left them.”

*Hm? Food? So maybe the brownie is worth mentioning?* No, no, I shook the thought from my head. “Food disappears all the time, but that’s usually thanks to my brother.” Actually, the previous day, my snacks had mysteriously vanished from their shelf, and the trash can had also been moved to a weird place. But such occurrences weren’t entirely out of the ordinary. Again, they were often the result of my brother using things without cleaning up after himself. “I don’t think there’s been anything unusual...” I answered. “Why?”

“Nothing. If there’s nothing, then that’s...good.”

I nodded. He seemed to be struggling to articulate his thoughts. I empathized all too well. *No worries, Towada, you can take all the time you need with me!*

Still, his faltering surprised me. I’d thought him immune to such awkwardness, but maybe that was just my presumption. His gaze meandered for a moment before settling on me once more. He opened his mouth. “Ma—”

“Sorry, I’m here! How’s your cheek?”

“Mind the door, Sakai.”

*Ma?* Before Towada could utter a word, the door slid open with a loud clatter, and in walked the tennis club president and the school nurse. After assessing my freshly iced cheek, the nurse applied a gauze pad. There were no signs of swelling, and the redness was starting to subside. It seemed I would be able to go home without much of a problem.

“Kitazawa,” the nurse began, “we phoned your parents, but no one picked up, so we left a message just in case.”

“Oh, my mom’s probably on the train right now. This is when she usually gets back from work.” Answering one’s phone on public transit was frowned upon, after all.

“In that case, make sure to tell her that we’ll reach out to her later to explain what happened.”

“Sure.”

Soon thereafter, the tennis club’s advisor appeared with the first year responsible for the errant ball. After a flurry of awkward apologies that left me more uncomfortable than the actual incident had, that was ostensibly the end of it. The first year did look relieved to see that I was fine, though.

“I really oughta see to it that you get home safe myself, but I can’t exactly leave school at the moment,” the advisor said.

“That’s okay, I can make it home on my own just fine,” I asserted.

“I know what we can do,” he said, seemingly ignoring me. “Sakai, Towada—you two walk her home.”

My mouth fell slightly agape. When I pointed out that my face, not my legs, was what was injured, I succeeded in having my escort downgraded to just Towada. Why Towada? Apparently because he knew me.

*Hold on, how is this a downgrade?! Now I have to be alone with him! Also, why was everyone acting in such a manner? First Ayako, then the teacher. They were all being rather overprotective. Was it because I was short that people treated me like a child? Or wait. Was it like when Mao petted me on the head, saying, “You’re like a little mouse, and it makes me want to baby you”? Was that it? Was that what was happening?*

Before I could fully marshal my thoughts, Towada and I were once again en route. He offered to carry my school bag, and I fought tooth and nail to keep it. Again, my cheek was hurt, not my hand!

As I insisted that I was fine, he countered, “Aren’t face and head injuries

pretty serious?”

“You think?” I could not be persuaded. “I used to be a bit of a klutz, so I’ve had my fair share.”

Once, I’d taken a tumble and received a nasty gash on my forehead, where a tiny, millimeters-wide scar still marked the injury. Tucked into my hairline, the scar was essentially a tiny bald spot, small enough to go unnoticed. I swept up my bangs to show him. “See? This is from a nasty fall when I hit my head so hard I had to go to the hospital.”

He squinted at it, furrows forming on his brow. I could tell he wanted to say something like, “You should be more careful,” *but I was a child back then, okay?* Children are top-heavy. When they fall, it’s usually headfirst. My propensity for face-plants was a concern my mother initially raised and partly why I started ballet in the first place. Dance was a means to improve my balance, and amazingly, it kind of worked. I stopped tripping as often, though ballet did little to enhance my overall lack of athleticism.

Before our conversation had run its course, we arrived in front of my house. *Wait, right in front of my house? Why didn’t I ditch him at the nearest intersection or something?!* Thank goodness none of our neighbors were out and about. They all knew who I was because they’d seen me walking Koro. If they caught me gallivanting home with a guy I’d die on the spot.

“Um, are you really going to come in and say hi?” I asked.

“Well, they told me to.”

*Right, they did tell him to.* In fact, his sense of responsibility was downright admirable. Most boys would’ve fled before even entertaining the idea of interacting with the parents of a girl they barely knew.

Resigning myself, I wrenched open the door and announced my arrival. Mom materialized with a pile of fresh laundry. “Welcome home, Haruka. I just got back myself and—oh, well hello there.”

“Mom, this is Takumi Towada. You know, Ayako’s...”

“Nice to meet you,” Towada said.



Mom's eyes darted first to the gauze on my cheek, then the boy beside me. I could practically glimpse the gears turning in her head. *She really did miss that call from school then.*

After informing her that the school would be in touch later, Towada folded in a deep bow of apology.

"Oh dear, please don't bow," Mom fussed. "Really we should be thanking you for walking Haruka all the way home."

I was flustered right alongside her. Towada hadn't launched the ball my way, and his actions since then—accompanying me to the nurse's office and then home—warranted no apology.

"My club was at fault," he reminded us, still bowing.

*How very vice presidential of him.* Indeed, Towada was the tennis club's vice president, I'd discovered in the nurse's office. Mom shot me a sidelong glance before smiling. "Okay. Apology accepted. Your teachers and I will handle the rest, okay?"

He finally lifted his head. He seemed to want to say something else—his expression hinted at concern—but instead, he offered a simple goodbye and left. I was just about to step out of the entranceway and into the house when my mother let out an appreciative hum. "So that's Takumi... He seems like a nice boy, don't you think?"

*Why are you asking me?*

Without waiting for my reply, Mom changed the subject. "How's your cheek? Still hurting?"

"It stings a bit."

But thanks to the nurse's ice pack, it had yet to swell.

"Oh, Haruka, when do you think you're going to grow out of it?"

"Mom, you don't think I'm accident-prone, do you?"

"Well, you do kind of have a habit of tripping over nothing."

"Hey..."

“Just try to avoid getting seriously hurt, okay?”

I headed to the bathroom, clutching the topical ointment the nurse had given me as a precaution. I removed the gauze and examined my cheek. The skin was still a little red, but the flush was hardly noticeable unless you knew it was there.

*He missed most of club, didn't he?* My mind wandered back to Towada. Instead of practicing, he'd been stuck escorting me home for a minor scrape. And I never learned what he was trying to tell me in the nurse's office. *Ugh, what am I doing?*

Swallowing my self-loathing, I climbed the stairs to the second floor and trudged into my room to find my laundry on my bed. Until recently, Mom left our clean clothes downstairs, and we were responsible for sorting and fetching our own. But evidently she had taken over that task too. *What a peculiar way to fold them.* She must've picked up some newfangled, efficient folding method from an infotainment program or something.

One of her socks was mixed in with mine, so after I changed out of my uniform, I brought it down to her in the kitchen. “Here, Mom, your socks.”

“Oh, thank you. Are you all done?”

“All done with what now?” I responded, a little confused.

“The laundry. You've been helping me out with that, haven't you? Folding it and bringing it up to our rooms. I really appreciate it.”

What was she talking about? I hadn't folded any laundry.

“Ah, the soy sauce! I knew I was forgetting something,” she suddenly exclaimed. “I'll be right back.”

She dashed toward the door, abandoning me to my unanswered questions. Dad and my brother weren't home yet, meaning only Mom and I had been there that afternoon. If I hadn't folded the laundry, she must have, right? But then why did she think I'd done it?

“That's weird,” I muttered.

I made myself a cup of instant coffee to try and settle my thoughts. Because

no cup of coffee is complete without a snack, I reached for the biscuits I'd purchased just the day before to find—nothing. The shelf was empty.

"Huh?" I squeaked, even more befuddled.

*Hold on, they were here this morning.* I remembered the packaging: bright red and impossible to miss. I checked the trash can—nothing, not even a trace. And Mom couldn't have finished them all.

Abruptly, Towada's words replayed in my mind: *"Have you noticed anything unusual at your place?"*

Yes, something unusual was happening all right!

*"Like food—snacks or milk—disappearing, or finding items not where you left them."*

My biscuits had vanished, the laundry had mysteriously folded itself—in a strange fashion, no less—and the trash can was empty, contrary to the pick-up schedule.

"Is this what you meant, Towada?" I whispered.

I was standing there, struck dumb in the middle of the kitchen, when a flash of brown zipped across the corner of my vision—or was that just my imagination?

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**"THE** biscuits? The ones you bought yesterday? No, I didn't touch them—must've been your brother."

Upon returning from her errand, Mom quickly denied any involvement with the missing biscuits. Thus, after dinner, I sequestered myself in the kitchen to bake. Those biscuits had been the last of my snack stash, and with them gone I was left with no choice but to make my own.

My brother also claimed innocence when I asked him. I didn't want to believe him, frankly, but I could hardly accuse him without proof.

Pulling the freshly baked cookies out of the oven, I set them on a cooling rack. Tiny, gleaming flower-, star-, and bird-shaped cookies crowded the mesh, their surfaces nice and glossy from the egg wash I'd applied. They had come out

looking particularly good that evening, which lifted my spirits.

Slapping my brother's hand away, I plated three cookies and sealed the rest in a container, hiding them toward the back of a shelf. I brought the plate upstairs with me and placed it on my desk.

The door to my room was equipped with a way to lock it from the inside—a simple chain that allowed the door to open only a sliver when engaged. The lock wasn't robust by any means; it gave a fair amount with a proper tug and could undoubtedly be easily forced open. Mom had installed it for the sake of my privacy because my brother and kindergarten-age cousins tended to barge in without knocking when I was changing. It never saw much use, but that night it would.

After confirming that my trash can was not empty, I switched off the lights and climbed into bed. I considered staying awake but, more tired than I realized, soon drifted into a deep slumber. Right before I faded to unconsciousness, the faintest rustle tickled my ears, yet my eyelids were too heavy to look for the source.

My alarm roused me the next morning. I checked the door—the chain was still in place. But my trash can was vacant, and the cookies on my desk? Not a single crumb remained.

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**WHEN** I arrived at school, I immediately beelined for class 5. How was I going to get his attention? *Wait, wait, wait*, I thought as I screeched to a halt. *What am I even doing here? I've never stepped foot in another class before!*

I snapped out of whatever trance had ensnared me, ready to beat a hasty retreat, but it was too late—someone from his class had noticed me. Panicking internally, I hastily divulged my reason for being there and positioned myself near the doorway to wait for them to fetch Towada. Penetrating stares from within the classroom pierced me like daggers. *I knew it. This was a mistake.* Why had I not taken time to think? Why had I barged in so impulsively? Finally, after what felt like the longest ten seconds of my existence, Towada approached, apparently unperturbed by my presence. *Sorry, now they're staring at you too!*

“Kitazawa? It looks better.”

“My cheek? Yeah, it’s all good,” I replied. “Um, sorry about this.”

“It’s fine. Did you need something?”

My heart was hammering wildly in my chest. I could feel heat radiating from my gauze-less cheeks. I glanced up at Towada. He seemed confused.

*No, I reminded myself, I’ve come this far. A girl needs to be brave, right, Honomi, Mao?* Despite the prying eyes, I had to persist—just pretend they weren’t there. *Nope, can’t do it! Still can’t look him in the eye either!*

“Um, remember when you asked me if unusual things were happening like snacks going missing and stuff? Well, yesterday when I got home—”

He cut me off. “Are you free after school today?” His hands gripped my wrists. Startled, I looked up at him again, and our eyes met. His expression was serious—desperate, almost. “Wait for me by the entrance after school,” he pressed.

I nodded mechanically, like a puppet. “S-Sure. After class, yeah? Got it.” My gaze fell to his hands still holding my wrists. He noticed and quickly let go.

“Oh, sorry—”

“Okay, bye!” I interjected, spinning around and darting away.

“Who was that, Towada? Your girlfriend?”

“This freaking guy...”

As I hurriedly retreated, the jesting voices of his classmates whirled in my wake. I was mortified. *I’m so sorry, Towada, I really am! I really didn’t mean to put you in an awkward situation...but it’s too late for apologies, isn’t it?*

Upon reaching class 1, I was immediately accosted by Honomi and Mao.

“What’s wrong, Haruka?” Mao asked.

“You’re all red, do you have a fever?” added Honomi.

I slumped into my desk, burying my face in my arms while they patted my back and gently prodded me for an explanation. I could tell from their tone that they were genuinely worried about me. Unable to bring myself to tell them about the disappearing snacks, I instead relayed the incident of the near miss

with the tennis ball.

“I just wanted to check in with him after what happened yesterday, but everyone was staring at us...” I finished.

“I see,” Mao said thoughtfully. “So that’s what all the fuss was about yesterday. If I’d known it was you, I would’ve come over straight away. We really can’t take our eyes off you even for a second, huh?” She flashed a wry smile, patting my head.

Honomi peered at my cheek with concern. “That must’ve been scary, having the ball fly right past your face. Does it still hurt?”

“No, I’m fine now,” I assured them.

“But you went all the way to his class just to thank him? And you still say you’re not into him?”

“I-I told you it’s not like that!”

“Come on, you can tell me!” Despite my denial, the mischievous glint in lovestruck Honomi’s eyes didn’t diminish in the slightest.

“Ope, teacher’s here,” Mao warned.

“Haruka, we’re having a heart-to-heart later!” Honomi decreed.

“About what, huh?” I whined.

For the first time in my life, I was thankful for the teacher’s arrival. As we all scrambled to our seats, I found myself studying my wrists where Towada’s hands, the hands of a man who was not my father or brother, had held them. My fingers brushed over the spot where he’d touched me. His hands were big, rougher than I expected. Given that he was a tennis player, I supposed, he would naturally have calloused hands. I’d heard blisters could develop just from gripping the racket.

Suddenly, I felt eyes on me. Glancing up, I found Honomi gazing at me. I attempted a weak smile, but she seemed to be fixated on something else. My face... It was still red, wasn’t it?

*Hold on a second.*

Why on earth did I think to go to his class in the first place? Couldn't I have simply emailed Ayako and arranged to meet at his house?

Utterly exasperated with myself, I buried my face in my arms once more.

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**HOMEROOM** and the day's classes ended without incident. After saying goodbye to Honomi, who had business in the staff room, I headed toward the entrance with Mao. She had already changed into her gym clothes, and as we turned onto the staircase, we were halted by a familiar voice.

"Kitazawa!"

I recognized that grin. It belonged to the tennis club president. *Sakai, was it?*

"I heard from Towada. I'm so glad you're fine," he said.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks," I replied.

"Back off, Sakai," said Mao. She planted her hands firmly on her hips and puffed out her chest. "Last time I checked, Haruka was *my* friend, not yours."

*Are they friends?* She certainly was speaking as if to one.

Noticing my confusion, she elaborated. "This guy lives near me. We went to the same kindergarten and elementary school."

"Whoops, I never introduced myself, did I?" Sakai said. "The name's Yuuto Sakai. Back in elementary school I was the class president, and Kagami here was my deputy."

Ah, they were childhood friends—that made sense.

As I nodded along, Sakai's expression abruptly shifted to one of sadness. "And it was awful, just awful! Can you imagine receiving letters and Valentine's chocolates from girls, getting all excited only to be asked to pass them on to Kagami? Seriously, it was the worst!" he lamented in mock despair, palms raised in a shrug.

Mao countered with a theatrical sigh of her own. "Yeah, like I had it any better. You know how many times I was asked for you specifically?"

Wow, they'd both been popular. I wasn't surprised.

“Right, right.” Sakai turned to me. “So that first year who hit the ball at you yesterday? He’s on ball boy duty for a month. And he can’t even touch a racket unless he’s on the court.”

“That seems a bit harsh, no?” I was taken aback, but both Sakai and Mao seemed to find the punishment appropriate. “It’s not like he did it on purpose, right?”

“There’s a standing rule against hitting balls toward the planters or buildings,” Sakai clarified. “Which is only an issue because the grounds are so cramped. Ah, what I wouldn’t do for a bigger lawn and two more tennis courts.”

“Good joke,” snorted Mao. “Two more tennis courts? Try an actual track for the track-and-field club.”

Their conversation devolved into playful tit-for-tat. And as entertaining as it was to listen to, I was sure Mao wouldn’t appreciate being late for practice. “Um, don’t you two have somewhere to be?”

Just like that, they froze, then made a mad dash for the shoe lockers.

“See ya tomorrow, Haruka! Hey! Sakai! No running in the halls!”

Sakai flashed a cheeky smile. “Bye, Kitazawa!”

Watching them leave, jockeying with each other as they went, I was struck by how similar they were. Once they vanished from view, I slipped on my shoes and strode outside. A quick scan of the area showed no sign of Towada. Perhaps class 5’s homeroom was running late.

I shifted to the side, leaning against the fence next to the school gate. I gazed up at the clear blue sky. Doubt began to creep into my mind, leading me to question my handling of the whole situation.

“Did I make the right call?” I muttered aloud.

Cookies disappearing without a trace, chores completed with no one claiming responsibility. It was all so incredibly far-fetched, yet I could no longer dismiss the occurrences as mere imagination. I’d sought Towada that morning, unable to shake off our conversation in the nurse’s office. As his hesitant words echoed again and again in my head, I turned, my back resting against the world and my



hands clutching the railing.

He seemed to know something. But *what* did he know? And even if he did, that didn't automatically give me the right to the knowledge as well. Absently, I glanced down to see that my feet had instinctively assumed a ballet pose.

*What the...* Well, that was strange. The moment my hands touched the railing, my legs had moved of their own accord. *Muscle memory is a powerful thing indeed.*

Strange and *new*: I'd never realized that although I'd given up ballet, my body hadn't.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Wah! Oh, jeez, it's just you." Towada's sudden voice had knocked me out of my thoughts. I could only hope that my reaction hadn't come across as rude.

I looked up, half expecting him to seem annoyed, but he appeared merely rather stern. "Was it that much of a surprise to see me?" he asked. "Sorry, I had to stop by the teachers' office to drop off the class log."

"No, sorry. I was just spaced out." Towada was wearing his uniform instead of sports attire, which was odd considering that Sakai had just sprinted off to club practice. "Don't you have club?" I asked.

"I took the day off," he said. "Can we go to your place? There's a lot to talk about and I'd rather not do it here."

"Oh, um, sure."

"Okay, then let's go."

The shouts and grunts from the athletic fields behind me seemed louder than usual—or was that just my conscience berating me for causing Towada to skip practice two days in a row? I felt somewhat uneasy as we retraced our steps from the day before in total silence.

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"**UM**, here we are."

The locked door indicated Mom wasn't back yet. We'd exchanged not a word

our entire walk over, so I had yet to unravel any part of the mystery. I'd been wracking my brain for an explanation, and the uncertainty had lingered for so long that I just wanted it to end. I no longer cared if the occurrences turned out to be a product of my imagination—*just let it be over*.

I decided to start with the previous night's incident. "Last night, some treats disappeared from my room—even though I locked the door. Also, my trash was emptied."

"Right, sorry," he said. "I'll explain everything, but it's better if you see for yourself."

"See what?"

I invited him inside, but he insisted the entranceway was fine. He swiveled to address the interior of the house. "I know you're in there. Come out, *now*," he demanded, his voice authoritative.

Silence.

*Um, what?* My eyes darted between the still corridor and a defiantly postured Towada. Five seconds, ten, passed in uneasy silence. Then, just as the awkwardness was reaching an unbearable height, a small, brown puff of fur peeked out from behind the kitchen door. "Wh-What is that?" I asked incredulously.

"Come. Here," Towada ordered.

Nosing around the door frame was a dark-brown creature covered in fur. Tiny black eyes like shiny little marbles peered out from underneath its midlength coat. It was larger than a cat, smaller than a medium-sized dog, and rather slender. Waving its long, thin tail from side to side, it eyed us warily. On closer inspection, it had diminutive, triangular ears that were mostly hidden in its fur. *Just what is this thing...?*

"Come here—now."

The little being twitched at Towada's stern command but slowly inched toward us—on two legs though it had four in total. The soft tap of its paws echoed on the hard flooring as it ambled over. Once near enough, it promptly jumped into Towada's arms and nestled against his chest.

*What is that? What is that? What. Is. That?!*

“Sorry, Kitazawa, this is the perpetrator—”

“It’s so cute!” I gushed.

At my outburst, both the tiny creature and the boy cradling it jolted in surprise. Whatever, they could think I was crazy for all I cared, because right then, in front of me, was the most...!





“It’s so cute—no, it’s way too cute. Huh? What even are you?! A cat? No. A tanuki? No, not that either. Hey, Towada, what is it? Tell me—tell me!”

“C-Calm down—wait, you think it’s cute? *This* thing?”

I’d sprung forward and was practically clinging to him to get a better look. He seemed genuinely a little revolted by my reaction, and to be honest, that hurt a bit...but I had a more pressing matter at hand!

“You’re the cutest! I’ve never seen anything this adorable! Is it a weasel? A ferret?” I gasped. “You’re a stoat, aren’t you? A stoat with long fur and a brown belly! Wait, no fair! I wanna hold it too!”

“A stoat?”

“Well, technically, I think a stoat isn’t as tall and round and has shorter fur, but yeah!” Whatever it was, it was *freaking* adorable—like all of it. How its glossy little marble eyes peeped from beneath its fur like Koro’s did, how its tail gradually darkened to black at the tip...!

“So you really can see them,” Towada said, sounding somewhat resigned.

“Of course! It’s too cute not to see.” *Oh my god, it’s reaching out with its little hands! It wants to come to me, doesn’t it? It wants a hug!* Seduced by its puppy-dog eyes, my arms involuntarily stretched out, and it scampered from Towada’s grasp into mine. “Oh my god, it’s so fluffy!” It was lighter than I expected, its fur like that of an Angora rabbit. As it cozied into my arms, it extended its tiny hands to touch my cheeks—which tickled. Between its ticklish touch and overall fuzziness, I was having a hard time keeping it together.

As we stood in the doorway, I a captive to the ball of fluff and Towada dumbstruck by my antics, my mother breezed in.

“I’m...back?” she said, surprised by the scene.

“Oh, hi Mom, welcome back,” I answered.

“Hello Takumi—did you walk her home again today? That’s very kind of you.”

As Mom passed us, suggesting that Towada step inside for refreshments, she seemed to ignore the adorable creature cradled in my arms. “Mom, look! This is —”

“Thank you, I’ll come in,” cut in Towada abruptly. His tone was strained, and he appeared troubled—extremely so. “Listen,” he whispered into my ear, “your mom can’t see this thing. The only ones who can are you and me.”

His face was so close that I could feel his breath on my skin. My heartbeat surged. “Sh-She can’t see it?”

“This creature is an *ayakashi*—you know, like a *yokai* or a fairy, that sort of thing.”

My jaw dropped at the revelation. The only thing that stopped the little creature’s hands from ending up in my mouth was Towada swiftly slapping them away.

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**WE** sat in the corner of the L-shaped sectional in the living room. Mom had just finished setting out some snacks when the phone trilled. Looking somewhat displeased, she moved to answer it. From the snippets of conversation I could make out, the caller was my aunt, so Mom was bound to be tied up for a while. She seemed to have been hoping to chat with Towada, but that had become unlikely.

The stoat/yokai/fairy/ayakashi was comfortably ensconced on my lap. It clasped one of my homemade cookies with its tiny, grubby hands, nibbling on it like a hamster. *Yup, utterly adorable.*

The furry little creature fascinated me, and I sensed Towada studying me just as intently in turn. “These beings have inhabited my uncle and aunt’s house for a very long time,” he began, his voice quiet. “Occasionally, members of my family are born with the ability to perceive them.”

I hummed in acknowledgment.

“When you visited our house last time, this one followed you home. I’m sorry about that.”

I’d been engrossed in observing the small, charming fur ball, but at those words I quickly met Towada’s gaze. “Why are you apologizing? It’s not like it caused any trouble.”

“Didn’t it eat your food?”

“I mean, yeah, but now that I know it was this little guy, it’s not that big a deal anymore.” I turned back to the stoat. “In fact, if I’d known you were here, I would’ve gladly fed you! Sorry, you must’ve been hungry, huh?”

The creature tilted its head at me, the cookie still clutched in its mouth.

*You did that on purpose, didn’t you? You’re so clever! And cute!*

“No, they can’t starve,” Towada interjected. “They eat because they enjoy eating, not to survive. They don’t actually need food.”

“Really?” Still, the sight of the stoat enjoying my cookie was so endearing. I was happy it liked its treat.

Towada explained further, revealing that the creatures assisted with household chores in exchange for food, so they weren’t just eating for free. The mysterious laundry and trash incidents suddenly made much more sense.

“They’re kinda like brownies then. You know, like from fairy tales?” I said. I had a cherished picture book from my childhood, a tale about brownies who lived secretly in a grand old manor. They pilfered snacks and milk but also helped around the house. Perhaps the little guy on my lap had been the inspiration.

“You’re not creeped out?” Towada asked.

“Not really.”

“I see,” he murmured after a beat, relief apparent in his voice. Sure, the circumstances were quite extraordinary, but the stoat seemed so harmless. I couldn’t see why I should fear it.

The fur ball finished its cookie and turned to Towada as if eager to share a secret. From its mouth spilled a brilliant shower of sparks and glittering light; that had to be how it “spoke.” *Now, that is truly fantastical.*

“I can see the little sparkly bits but can’t understand what it’s saying,” I confessed. “Must be nice being able to communicate with them.”

He looked at me, a peculiar expression on his face. “*Nice? You think so?*”



“You don’t?”

Wasn’t it pretty common to wish we could converse with our pets? If I could talk with Koro, I’d be over the moon.

“It said it enjoyed the snack you brought over last time so much it followed you home in hopes of getting more,” Towada said.

“Ah!” I exclaimed. “The disappearing brownie!” *So it was you?* The little bandit gazed at me pleadingly and my heart almost broke. “Don’t worry, I’m not mad at you! Sorry for raising my voice.” I hadn’t baked any brownies since then, I realized. The poor little guy must’ve been so disappointed. *I’m sorry!*

“Anyway, I’ll be taking it home. It won’t be bothering you anymore,” Towada declared.

“Really? I wouldn’t mind it sticking around a bit longer.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh, but all its friends and family are at your place, aren’t they? It’ll probably get lonely here, huh?”

“*That’s* what you’re concerned about?” His forehead drooped to his palm in exasperation.

*Did I say something weird?* Meanwhile, my little stoat friend seemed to be thoroughly enjoying itself. It had clambered up to my shoulders and curled itself around my neck like the perfect scarf. A stream of sparkles floated from its mouth—I wanted to believe it was serenading us.

Stroking its velvety fur, I mused, “It’s a pity my mom can’t see this little guy. It’s so cute.”

Towada opened his mouth cautiously. “I’ll be honest, I don’t find it cute at all.”

I glanced at him, surprised.

“Those who can see ayakashi are rare, and the creatures appear differently to each person. And none of us see them for what they really are. You’re the first person I’ve met who sees them as stoats.”

“Really?”

“Ayako, for instance, says they look like *zashiki warashi*.”

“She can see them, too?” I mumbled, somewhat taken aback. “And wow, she perceives them as those doll spirits?”

“As for me, they look like shaggy, long-haired goblins.”

*Goblins? Like the grotesque little green fiends that show up all the time in games and movies and stuff?* His admission entirely eclipsed my shock about Ayako.

“Wait a second,” I said. “So from your perspective, you’re watching a goblin crawl all over me right now?”

He nodded, looking slightly apologetic. “Yeah. A small, hairy goblin.”

“Aw,” I sighed. “But the stoat is so adorable.”

The image of myself draped with a goblin rather deflated my mood. No matter how I tried to spin it, I doubted the sight was one anybody would cherish. In fact, it almost made me feel like I was involved in something extremely questionable.

When I turned to Towada again, I caught him scrutinizing my furry scarf through his glasses. “It might look like a stoat, but it’s still a supernatural being. Does that not creep you out?”

“When you put it that way, I guess maybe?” I replied. “But I don’t know. I don’t really feel creeped out. A little surprised, but not creeped out.”

“Really,” he muttered, deep in thought. “What about me? Do I not creep you out?”

“Huh? Why would you?” His question caught me off guard. Find him creepy because he lived with ayakashi? He watched me, his gaze seeming to pierce right through my body. Sensing the weight of his question, I opted for a more lighthearted response. “Nope, not really. It feels more like I stumbled upon your big secret, that’s all. And don’t worry—my lips are sealed!”

“Are you always this carefree?” he asked.

The remark made me realize I'd been interacting with him as naturally as I would with my family or Mao and Honomi. "Hm, you're right," I said after a beat, "I don't feel nervous at all."

*Why is that?* I wondered. *Wait, Towada wasn't making fun of me, was he?* A surge of embarrassment washed over me, and I buried my face into the plush fur of my stoat companion. *There's just no way this little guy could be a goblin. Not when its fur is so irresistibly soft and fluffy.* As I burrowed deeper into its fur, the creature snuggled back into me. Gosh, it was so precious that I wanted to squeeze it in sheer delight. In its dense, chocolate coat where I sought refuge, I felt my cheeks heating as the nagging idea of Towada amused at my expense refused to go away. I couldn't show my face just yet, not when it was the hue of a tomato.

Once my composure returned, I said, "I've been shy and nervous around strangers since I was a kid. Still haven't really managed to get over it."

Towada hummed. "Why do you need to get over it?"

"B-Because it's...bad?"

"I don't think being cautious around people you've just met is necessarily a bad thing."

*That's certainly a novel take.* "But doesn't it suck to be around someone who's acting all cold and unfriendly?" I countered.

"Better than being around somebody you barely know who's acting like you're best friends." His gaze wandered as he responded, as though it wasn't me he was trying to convince. His expression was raw, childlike, almost, as if he were struggling to hold back tears—which wasn't the most flattering analogy, yet I didn't know quite how else to describe it.

"Thanks," I murmured. "I never thought about it that way. That makes me feel a little better." My voice was so faint that I wasn't sure whether my gratitude even reached his ears.

Before my mother could escape the clutches of my aunt, Towada rose to leave, no doubt about to take my new furry friend with him. But then, unexpectedly, he asked, "Would you like to come meet the rest of them?"

“The rest of them? There’s more? Yes—of course! Wait, right now?” I said, almost tripping in excitement.

“They usually keep to themselves, but I think they’ll make an exception for you.”

That was all the confirmation I needed. I dashed upstairs to swap my uniform for more casual clothes, returned downstairs, and—since the outing was a perfect opportunity for a walk—scooped up Koro and his leash before reconvening with Towada at the front door.

Side by side, we set off into the rising autumn chill. My new friend, a living fur scarf of the finest quality, nuzzled against my neck, snug as a bug, while Towada, not quite as cozy but seemingly just as content, led Koro, who trotted along happily. *Koro really is comfortable around Towada.*

And he wasn’t the only one. Given the number of commutes we’d shared by then, any residual awkwardness between Towada and me had all but evaporated. *We humans really can get used to anything. Crazy.* And I felt a certain kinship to him as though we were partners in crime, sharing a secret exclusive to us. We could stroll in complete silence or deep conversation, and it’d be all the same to me.

“It’s not a problem, is it?” I asked. “Me just showing up like this.”

“I texted Ayako just now. She says she’s excited to see you.”

Efficient. In the maybe five minutes I’d spent changing out of my uniform, he’d sorted out all the details.

As we walked, Towada told me why he’d suspected that an ayakashi had invaded my house. “I’ve been finding a few of them trying to leave,” he explained. “When I caught one and questioned it, it complained that it wasn’t fair that only *it* got to go. That made me think that something was up.”

Did that mean all the ayakashi were craving my snacks? I *really* wished I’d baked some brownies for them.

“Right! Almost forgot to ask,” I said. “What do you call these little guys?”

“They don’t have names.”

“They don’t?” I repeated, perplexed. “How many are there in total?”

“I dunno.” He shrugged. He clarified that although the ayakashi called his house home, they came and went as they pleased, so the population was constantly fluctuating. “They mostly look alike. I’m sure if you lined them up you could make out a few differences, but they’re similar enough that I never bothered to identify them individually.”

“What about their personalities?” I asked.

“Never bothered to find out.”

“Really?” Somewhat surprised, I mentioned that it seemed a pity, given his ability to communicate with them. Evidently, he didn’t appreciate the comment, because his expression soured, his gaze riveted on Koro’s back.

Speaking of Koro, he seemed to be able to see the stoat as well. When I clipped the leash on him, he’d moved closer, sniffing curiously. Neither creature appeared startled by the other, so perhaps they’d been aware of each other all along?

“You wanna go play with Koro?” I asked my scarf. It tilted its head in thought for a moment before wrapping itself tighter around my neck. *Aw, it likes me!*

“Yeah, that still looks weird to me,” Towada remarked. “Creepy little goblin.”

“No, it’s a stoat!” I retorted.

“To me, it just looks like it’s hanging onto you for dear life.”

“It’s not gonna fall, don’t worry,” I reassured him. I was supporting it with a hand as well. But still, a hairy goblin clinging to me in desperation? A smile crept onto my face. I glanced at Towada, and he looked at me—and we both burst into laughter.

Our most nonchalant jaunt to date was temporarily halted by a red light, and my eyes drifted toward a cluster of clover flourishing in a nearby parking lot. “Nope, no four-leaf clovers here...” I mumbled, more to myself than anything.

“Four-leaf clovers?” he echoed.

“Just something I always look for when I see a patch. I’m not too bad at finding them either,” I said. “You’ve never done that?”

“Can’t say I have.”

I hoped I didn’t sound too childish. But I couldn’t help myself. Finding a four-leaf clover was like finding hidden treasure. “They’re special, right? I’m kinda just drawn to them.”

“I heard that four-leaf clovers are just regular clovers but deformed. They sprout the extra leaf when the plant is stressed, like when they get trampled on a lot.”

“I’ve heard that, too,” I said, though I was tempted to pronounce science a buzzkill.

*Wait, who did I hear that from?* The memory was so distant. I hadn’t been at my usual park but somewhere else. I’d discovered a four-leaf clover and given it to another kid, and then—

“Let’s go. Light’s green.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.”

I couldn’t remember. I felt as though I were chasing shadows in my mind, recollection darting just beyond reach.

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**AS** his house came into view, I voiced a question that had been gnawing at me the whole way there. “When you said, ‘So you really can see them,’ what exactly did you mean by that?”

Without answering, Towada moved to unlatch the front gate. It clanked open and he ushered me in before him. In the fading twilight, I noticed that the house windows were ajar, signaling perhaps that Ayako was home. Towada led the way forward, and as we neared the large tree in the front yard, he stopped. “The first time you visited, these bells rang.”

“Oh, yeah,” I replied. “The sound was really pretty.” So pretty, in fact, that I had yearned to hear them once more. Falling into step behind him, I lifted my gaze to the golden bells.

“No matter how hard the wind blows, or how much the branches sway, they don’t make a sound. Even in a typhoon.” He reached up, grabbed a branch, and

gave it a sharp tug. The bells stirred yet stayed mute.

My eyes widened in awe. “Wow...”

“The bells only ring when *they* sense somebody they favor.” Towada gestured to the stoat draped over my shoulders. He studied my reaction as though dissecting my every facial movement. “They were drawn to you from the outset, which led me to suspect that you too had *the sight*.” As he spoke, his face contorted into a familiar, troubled expression that I’d seen several times that day.

“So, does that—”

“Welcome back, Takumi. And welcome again, Haruka.”

Spinning around, I spotted Ayako standing on the porch in an apron. Her domestic appearance suited her almost too well. “Hi Ayako...”

“I’m sure you have a million questions, and I promise to answer as many as I can, but let’s do that inside, shall we?” Beaming at me, she flourished a hand toward the door. Her welcoming demeanor was an odd comfort, as if reminding me that despite all the uncertainties whirling in my mind, everything was going to be okay.

Stepping inside, I noticed an array of vegetables spread across the kitchen counter. A pot on the stove was bubbling away, filling the house with an appetizing fragrance.

“Sorry about the mess, dear,” Ayako said. “And don’t worry about all this, Takumi. Just gotta throw the rest in the pot and we’re all set. Go ahead and get changed.”

Suddenly remembering the cookies I’d thought to bring, I presented them to her. “Um, the little ones seemed to really enjoy them, so...”

“Oooh, are these homemade? Why, thank you. Let’s enjoy them straight away, why don’t we?” She happily accepted my cookies and moved to fetch a plate from the cupboard. “Wow, look at these,” she said, observing the contents of the container. “By the way, how much did Takumi tell you? All his text said was ‘Talked to Kitazawa, she can see them, I’m bringing her over,’ and that was it! The little rascal...”

“Yeah. He mentioned he would introduce me to the others.”

“Did he now? Well then, let’s get ’em out here, shall we?”

My “okay!” was louder than I intended, betraying my excitement, and Ayako chuckled at my palpable enthusiasm.

“All right you guys,” she said in a raised voice, holding the plate in front of her, “come introduce yourselves. Haruka here baked you all cookies!”

With a rumble, the house seemed to come alive all at once. I sensed countless, reticent gazes peering at me from every nook and cranny—then nothing. The house settled back into tranquility.

“If you don’t come out, you don’t get a cookie,” Ayako added, hoisting the plate high above her head.

That did the trick. Tiny brown heads began to emerge from every shadow, every crevice. Beneath the fridge, behind the cupboard, beyond the kitchen door, face after face materialized. *No way... There’s this many?!*

“Oh my. Quite a lot of ’em today,” said Ayako.

“Yeah, ’cause there’s food,” Towada muttered, returning just in time to cheekily qualify her statement. Out of his uniform and in a light-blue button-down shirt, he appeared older, as though he could pass for a high schooler. Compared to his outfit, my oversized shirt and leggings combo seemed downright childish.

Before I had a chance to dwell on the difference, I was swarmed by a pack of stoats. There must have been at least thirty of them huddled around me, standing on their hind legs like a mob of meerkats. And just as Towada had warned, they all looked strikingly similar. They were cute but a little overwhelming.

*Uh-oh.* I’d expected five, maybe six, of them at most. I glanced at Towada for help. “What do I do? I don’t think I made enough cookies to go around!”

“Out of everything happening right now, *that’s* what you’re worried about?” he asked, exasperated.

“I mean—!”



“I really don’t get you.”

Ayako chuckled before pulling over a chair and offering me a seat. She placed the plate on the table and addressed the crowd. “All right, form a line. Come say hi to Haruka and you’ll get one cookie each!”

The room erupted with energy as the stoats jostled for position. One by one, they climbed onto my lap, each offering a unique greeting. A handful gave me a small hug, some touched me with their tiny paws, and others just stared. For a while, my lap was transformed into a stoat sanctuary as I handed out cookies.

When the very last stoat received its share, I sighed in relief. “Thank goodness there was enough.” Due to Ayako’s one-per-stoat rule, I’d rationed the treats successfully. If a few of the creatures had been left out, I was sure the guilt would’ve crushed me. In the future, I’d just have to bake more to avoid that exact scenario!

After accepting its treat, each stoat disappeared whence they came—all except one little guy who kept clambering back onto my lap. As I took a seat at the dining table, the fellow climbed back up.

Towada studied it closely. “Is this the one from your house?” he asked.

“I think so.”

“It’s really likes you,” he noted, appearing puzzled.

Ayako sat down opposite me. “I’ve never seen one act so friendly either—not even with Kaoru.”

“Kaoru?” I echoed.

“Kaoru Towada, my uncle,” Towada clarified. That did little to dislodge my confusion, however, and he further elaborated that Kaoru was Ayako’s husband who’d passed away.

“Oh, um...”

Ayako flashed me an understanding smile—one that reminded me of Towada. Although they weren’t blood related, I thought they resembled each other. “So, Haruka. What would you like to know?” she prompted. The swift change of topic and her serene smile felt like a lifeline tugging us away from the complex

subject of her late husband.

*Let's see... The most pressing question on my mind would be...*

"Do they really look like zashiki warashi to you?"

"Really?" Towada's elbow slid off the table in his astonishment. *Was my question really that surprising?* Regaining his composure, he explained to Ayako, "To Kitazawa, the ayakashi look like stoats."

Ayako blinked once in surprise before glancing at the creature on my lap. "Stoats! Well, isn't that adorable," she said. "And yes, zashiki warashi is probably the best way to describe how they appear to me. But that wasn't always the case."

"It wasn't?"

"In the beginning, they looked like brown, fuzzy balls of fur with a pair of googly eyes stuck to them." Ayako used her hands to suggest a size as big as a basketball. "No arms, no legs—they looked pretty harmless and goofy, all things considered."

"You mean the way we see them can change?" I asked, trying to process that disclosure.

Ayako nodded. "Yes, it seems so. Those without the sight can't magically gain the ability, but for those of us who do have it, our perception of them can change, and sometimes it changes because of the company we keep. Kaoru, for instance, saw them as bisque dolls."

*Well, that's awfully lovely,* I thought.

"My uncle was a professor of French literature," supplied Towada.

"Oh! That explains all the foreign books you guys have," I exclaimed.

"After I married Kaoru and moved in here, the fur balls gradually took on more humanoid features and, eventually, became zashiki warashi. I guess the traditional kimono is more 'me' than the western-style dresses bisque dolls wear."

*How fascinating.*

“Kaoru’s perception of them never changed though. I interpreted that to mean a humanoid form might be closer to their true appearance.” Turning to me, she asked, “Has Takumi told you what they look like to him?”

“Yeah. He said they look like, um...*goblins*.”

Ayako was silent, but her wry smile said all.

Towada seemed to feel the need to defend himself. “What, it’s not like that’s my fault.” I had rarely witnessed him so flustered.

“But a stoat is lovely,” giggled Ayako. “Maybe if Takumi spends a little more time around you, he’ll start seeing them as stoats too.”

I glanced upward, aiming to decipher her remark, and met Towada’s eyes instead. My heart fluttered. I needed to say something, and quickly! “A-Are there are other types of ayakashi?”

Towada averted his gaze. “No. Not here, at least.” His reply was somewhat evasive, yet it suggested that other ayakashi existed, if not in his house. His reluctance piqued my curiosity—had I stumbled upon something I shouldn’t have?

“Haruka,” Ayako said, interrupting my thoughts. “Do you know that Kaoru and Takumi come from a lineage that can see ayakashi?”

“Yes, Towada told me.”

“Then you’ll do well to know that they can see *all* ayakashi. Me? Not so much. Ayakashi are fairly common, yet they tend to keep to themselves.”

*They’re common?* “Then why haven’t I seen any before now?” I wondered aloud. I’d never once encountered spirits or ghosts; I was as far removed from the supernatural as they came.

“I only started seeing them after marrying Kaoru,” Ayako said. “There might be a specific trigger, but I’m afraid I don’t know what it is.” She then apologized for her spotty knowledge, recognizing that she had promised to answer all my questions. “Some ayakashi even cause trouble for those like Kaoru or Takumi, so they’re not all harmless.”

“I’m used to it,” interjected Towada.

Ayako cast a sympathetic smile at her nephew.

*Goblins...* The thought of such malicious little creatures flitted across my mind. If that was how he saw my adorable stoat friends, I couldn't help but wonder how other types of spirits might appear to him. Just how long had he lived in their presence, all alone?

The sound of the pot boiling over caught Ayako's attention and she excused herself to tend to it. She opened the lid, and the delicious scent of their evening stew wafted through the air. I managed to reign in my stomach's growl, and glancing out the window over the sink, I noticed the sky was already dark.

"I would love to have you stay for dinner, Haruka, but your mom responded to me earlier saying she wants you back home," Ayako said.

Wow, she was efficient. She must have contacted my mother while I was being overrun by stoats. Did the Towadas work fast, or was I just slow?

"I'm sure you have a lot more questions, and I would love to answer them, but it's getting late. Let's call it here for today."

"Okay, sure," I replied, a little relieved. That was probably for the best—better not to overdo it with the life-changing revelations.

After thanking Ayako for her hospitality, I waited at the door while Towada stepped outside to ready his bike to walk me home. As I slipped on my shoes, Ayako's voice drifted over my shoulder. "Be honest, dear. How are you taking all this?"

"Um, well, it's definitely a lot to take in, but they're cute, so..."

"That's good," she said, a knowing, slightly pained smile spreading across her face. She didn't say more, but that smile told me everything: there had to be people out there—normal people—who couldn't wrap their heads around her and Towada's ability to see the supernatural.

"Towada asked me if I was scared or creeped out. But no, I'm not—at all," I realized. Considering my lifelong fear of ghost stories, haunted houses, and horror movies, that was saying something.

Relief washed over her features. "That's good to hear. You see, I'd never

encountered one of these creatures before meeting Kaoru. I thought that maybe you and I were similar in that way, so I'm glad to hear that from you."

"I'm ready," Towada called, peering through the doorway.

"Yeah, um, well, thank you for having me!" I said to Ayako.

"My pleasure, dear. Take care getting home."

As we distanced ourselves from the door, I thought I heard a soft "thank you" in reply.

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I traipsed toward the gate, my stoat friend contentedly wrapped around my shoulders. Towada loosed an audible sigh. "Do you plan on taking that home?" he asked, his voice tinged with dry amusement.

"It said it'd walk me back!" I smiled down at the creature, and its beady eyes gleamed with some secret understanding.

Towada's brows shot up. "Since when can you communicate with it?"

"Since never—I just guessed." And I suspected it was a pretty good guess. Regardless of how much—or how little, rather—Towada had to say concerning my swift camaraderie with the stoat, I just couldn't see the little guy in a bad light—not when it seemed to like me so much.

As we passed through the front gate, a comfortable quiet enveloped us. Towada walked alongside me, the spokes of his bike clicking, while I led Koro. My eyes were firmly fixed on the plump Swiss roll of Koro's tail as it bobbed from side to side in rhythm with his steps.

I was the one to break the silence, the words tumbling out as soon as they came to mind. "Have you always been able to see them?"

"Yeah, I was born with it. I know I said it was a family thing, but the only person who had the sight beside me was my uncle."

It had been a simple yes-no question, and he'd shared more than I anticipated. "Really? So not your whole family can see them?"

"Nope, especially not my father—he doesn't like to think they exist at all. Safe

to say, he and my uncle didn't exactly get along well. When I started showing signs of being one of 'them,' he really didn't take it well. He was desperate to 'fix' me, taking me to all kinds of doctors—psychiatrists, neurologists, you name it. But when none of that worked, he finally just gave up and left me alone."

His words flooded over me, heavy with unspoken emotion. Was he even aware of how deeply personal he was getting? "Wh-What about your mom?" I asked.

"My father never told anyone the truth about his lineage. She only found out when I started exhibiting signs that were too obvious to hide. They had a big fight over it."

"They fought?"

"Think about it. If your son could see things that weren't there, wouldn't you feel disgusted?" His tone grew hushed, haunted. "Before I moved here permanently, they would drop me off for weekends and holidays—my mother's idea. After my sister was born, she wanted me as far away as possible so that my sight wouldn't somehow 'transfer' to her."

"You have a sibling...?"

"She's in her first year of elementary school. She lives overseas with my parents."

We stopped at a red light, and even after it turned green, I remained frozen, the weight of his words pinning me in place.

"Let's go?" His voice was gentle, urging me forward.

"I'm sorry," I said after a beat.

"For what? Not like any of that was your fault."

*No, that's not it.* Guilt suffused me as I realized how tactless I'd been in forcing him to delve into painful memories. If I'd just paused to think, I would've recognized that his situation was more complex than it appeared. No matter how often his parents transferred for work or relocated overseas, that wasn't reason enough to leave him behind with his aunt.

Shamed into silence, I stared at the ground, my feet moving almost without

my command. Koro's leash drooped at my side.

Towada's quiet voice reached me from somewhere above, soft as a whisper of wind. "I like it better here anyway. My uncle was one of us, and Ayako's... well, Ayako. I'm pretty okay with the way things are right now. Before he died, my uncle taught me a lot too."

His words were a balm, soothing the raw edges of my conscience. Grateful for the change in topic, I ventured, "Ayako... She can cook, yeah?"

"Ayako's home cooking is the only home cooking I've known. My father was always too busy to come home, and my mother is most definitely not a chef, so I don't think I ever shared a meal with them."

"I see..."

When we arrived at my house, I finally raised my head, my eyes catching the soft glow of the streetlamps. My stoat friend slipped from my neck, and I felt a chill in its absence. It looked downright grumpy as Towada placed it in his bike basket. I grabbed its tiny little paws and wiggled them in a goofy farewell.

"You really don't have a name for them, not even just to get their attention?" I asked.

"I don't," he replied curtly.

"Then can I name them?"

His eyes widened behind his glasses.

*Was what I said that weird?* I wondered. "Wouldn't it be convenient if they had a name? That way you wouldn't have to keep saying 'it' or 'you.'"

"Okay, then be my guest."

Excitement bubbling, I pondered long and hard. Dozens of possibilities sifted through my mind, but none felt right. Naming the creatures wasn't as easy as I'd thought.

Then it hit me. "How about 'oatie' 'cause they're stoats? Oatie, stoatie, get it?"

"That's certainly a...unique take..." His voice trailed off, and his eyes sparkled

with mirth.

*Hey, that was a bit uncalled for.*

He looked like he was fighting a grin. “So what’s the plural—oaties?” he asked.

“I didn’t even think about that, but I guess it has to be... Ahhh! It’s too late. Now I can’t think of anything besides oatie!”

Towada finally laughed, his chuckle ringing into the quiet evening. “You know what? It works. Did you name Koro too?”

“Koro? No, that was my dad. ‘Dogs are either named Shiro, Kuro, or Koro!’ he said. And Koro here wasn’t white or black, so Koro it was.” I giggled, imagining Dad dubbing a cat something equally cliché like Tama or Mi-ke.

“Your dad seems fun.”

“Y-You think?” I asked, not entirely convinced, before leaning to study the stoat’s face. “What do *you* think of oatie?”

The little guy reached out with both paws and patted my cheeks. *Ahhh, my heart! What an adorable way to express your approval!*

“That settles it. See you later, oatie!” I said, then turned to Towada. “Thanks for walking me home again.”

“Yeah, no problem. Okay, well, you better get inside. And sorry—for dragging you into all this.” The laughter on his face had vanished, replaced by a somber expression.

I could only manage a quiet “huh?” before he murmured, “Bye,” and slowly backed into the night.

I looked down at Koro. “Towada’s strong, isn’t he?”

I thought about how kind and honest with me he’d been despite his difficult circumstances. He’d set his own concerns aside, seeming to care only about me, a complete outsider, and not himself. Towada and I were different people, and I could never claim to speak for him, but if I’d been in his shoes, I thought I’d be angry—angry and bitter.



“Do you think there’s anything I can do for him, Koro?”

Koro’s tail swished against my legs, his silence as poignant as any sentence.

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I never intended to tell her about my parents.

I was supposed to simply explain my ability, ask for her discretion, and then distance myself—and perhaps I wouldn’t even need to do the latter. Once she knew, she’d get creeped out and avoid me of her own volition.

So why didn’t she?

When those bells rang, an old thought surfaced anew. *Maybe this time, it will be different.* Maybe I’d find understanding, acceptance. But I’d been down that road before, had foolishly gotten my hopes up only to be disappointed—again and again.

So why was she different?

Not even my parents accepted me. Yet she didn’t try to deny or judge anything about me. She approached me with genuine curiosity and surprise, not fear or condemnation. That was a first for me, and I couldn’t help but wonder: *why.*

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I had a vivid memory from when I was young, in the courtyard of a hospital where my father had taken me for an examination. Those days were filled with endless tests and consults. I’d escaped from the sterile confines of the exam room and stumbled upon a young girl.

“I’m really good at finding four-leaf clovers,” she’d declared, her one good eye bright with excitement. She’d been admitted to the hospital for an injury, a bandage wrapped around her head such that she looked like a cyclops.

With an innocent lisp, she’d scampered up to me, saying, “Let’s play!” and handed me the four-leaf clover she’d found without so much as a second thought.

“Here! Now you’ll be lucky!” she said.

“Isn’t this yours?” I asked, my voice muted and downcast despite the thrill I’d felt at witnessing a real four-leaf clover for the first time.

“That’s okay! I found it, which means I’m already lucky, and now that I gave it to you, you’re lucky too!” She chattered on and on, telling me how she’d bestowed another clover on a small girl earlier.

*Smaller even than you?* I’d thought.

I hesitated, then blurted, “Four-leaf clovers grow when people step on them. They’re just deformities. It’s not like they chose to be four-leaf clovers. Just like how I didn’t choose to...”

*...be able to see them.*

I’d unleashed my anger on a tiny, innocent girl. I remembered how her eyes had rounded in shock.

I’d derided her fun, taken her proffered olive branch and thrown it right back in her face, and yet she didn’t cry.

Instead, her eyes sparkled with curiosity. “Is that why?! There’s this big field next to my granny’s house. It has clovers all over, and I looked so hard but couldn’t find a single one!”

Perturbed by her enthusiasm, I took one step back, and she took one step forward. She seemed determined to close the gap between us.

“Y-Yeah?” I stuttered.

“I always wondered why, and now I know! There are no four-leaf clovers there because nobody plays there!” She puffed out her chest proudly as though she were a scientist who’d just made the discovery of the century.

Never in a million years had I expected her reaction.

“Okay...” I murmured, at a loss for words.

“Ah! Mom’s back! Bye-bye!” She spun on her heels, racing toward a voice calling her name. Standing alone in the suddenly silent courtyard, I clutched the four-leaf clover in my hand—the only tangible reminder that she’d been real. Until the nurse came looking for me, I’d stood there, unmoving.

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“**NEVER** thought she’d be the same age as me,” I mumbled to myself, reflecting on my unexpected realization.

My bike basket rustled as the goblin—or oatie, rather—turned to look at me. Its chest swelled as verbal glitter flew from its mouth. Ayakashi had no concept of time. The oatie had known all along that the girl at the hospital and Kitazawa were one and the same.

*Oatie, huh?* The term was fitting. Even my uncle had never thought to name the creatures. Then again, the girl had a way of catching me off guard; I shouldn’t have been surprised.

The oatie emitted another series of sparkling symbols.

“Yeah, yeah, you were right. No need to gloat.”

After learning about the ayakashi and my unique sight, she hadn’t pulled away from me. Did she not realize how much of a burden it could be? Or did it simply not matter to her?

I sighed deeply, confusion swirling inside me. *What am I even doing?*

“Sorry,” I whispered to no one in particular. I continued to pedal my way home, the road and all else fading into the background as my thoughts consumed me.

## Interlude: The Transfer Student and Me

I was considered kind of a big deal at my middle school. So a request to act as student ambassador for an incoming transfer student should have come as no surprise.

Frankly, supervising a new student was pretty darn low on the list of things I wanted to do, but I understood what our homeroom teacher was thinking. By seating them next to me—Mao Kagami, a student-athlete with a decent reputation—he hoped the kid would settle in more easily and avoid any potential issues.

But really? Avoid *possible* trouble by causing me *actual* trouble? I was annoyed. The responsibility felt like a giant, looming rain cloud headed straight for my parade. I'd been thrilled to finally share a homeroom with my best friend Honomi, and suddenly I had to contend with a stranger?

"Oh, cheer up, Mao!" said Honomi.

"But this sucks!" I groaned.

"Aren't you at least a little curious?" she countered, a spark of excitement in her voice. "I wonder what she's like!"

I was unconvinced, though she had a point. We lived in a typical commuter town that had enjoyed its heyday decades previous when my parents were still young. Sure, Tokyo was close, yet not near enough to make our burb a convenient place to live; express trains didn't stop in the area, and ride transfers were a pain. What lacked in convenience, however, was compensated for in affordability, which attracted a higher proportion of homeowners. Or so my father claimed.

In an established, boring neighborhood like ours, changes in residents were rare, and transfer students even more so. I'd grown up with the same kids from kindergarten to junior high. And all three elementary schools in our district funneled into one middle school, so we all knew each other like family. But a

new student was stepping into the mix, right in the middle of middle school. That was big news, and for better or worse, she was about to become the center of attention.

“If she doesn’t play nice, I am dropping her so fast after the week is up,” I declared, my tone more serious than I intended.

“Don’t say that!” Honomi chided. Then her voice softened. “But yeah. I guess.”

We made our way to the teachers’ office, my legs dragging as though it were late afternoon rather than early morning. *Meeting her, figuring her out, finding the right clique for her, laying the groundwork to get her assimilated...* Ugh, what a drag, yet it had to be done. Better to help her find her place than to leave her to her own devices, risking more drama down the road. I’d learned that lesson quickly in elementary school and was all too eager not to repeat it.

I was fully aware of the frown on my face as I slid open the door to the office. “Excuse me,” I announced. My gaze immediately landed on a girl in a black sailor uniform standing beside our homeroom teacher’s desk. Her posture was upright and impeccable, yet it screamed an uneasy tension.

“H-Hi. I’m Haruka Kitazawa.” Her voice was soft, her short hair styled in a bob that curled inward at the tips. Her eyes were large and innocent, and her petite frame further emphasized her youth.





“Are you a squirrel?” I blurted under my breath.

“Mao!” whispered Honomi, smacking me on the back.

The new girl must not have heard me, since she merely tilted her head in a way that made her appear even more squirrel-like. In fact, I wasn’t convinced she was the same age as us. She was so small, so cute, that I couldn’t help imagining her as a tiny mascot, something I could print out on an acrylic strap and attach to my school bag to carry around forever.

Honomi, ever friendly, was the first to speak. “Wow, is that a sailor uniform? That’s so cool.”

“Y-Yeah,” Kitazawa replied, her voice shaky. “Where I used to live, all the middle schools had blazer-style uniforms except for mine.”

Indeed, a sailor uniform was quite the rare sight in our area. Hers was black, paired with a white neckerchief. Our uniform, on the other hand, was fairly standard for a public middle school: blazer over a white blouse with a navy-blue, box pleat skirt.

Kitazawa explained that her new uniform was delayed due to a sizing mix-up. Given her small stature, I could see why the school may not have had the right one available. She’d be wearing her old uniform for a week, she said.

“I see...” said Honomi, her eyes fixed on it. “It’s a cute uniform though. I always wanted to wear something like that.”

“No, I um... I really hope my uniform gets here soon. I’ll stick out so bad wearing this...” Kitazawa’s voice wavered, her eyes shimmering. The words “harmless” and “docile” sprang to mind as I looked at her.

We escorted her to the classroom, and just as predicted, she was instantly dogpiled by the other students. The girls swarmed her with questions, while the boys kept a safe distance, feigning disinterest, their ears clearly attuned to the conversation. Though obviously disconcerted and incapable of coherent answers to much of anything, Kitazawa hung in there, trying her best to keep up, which was kind of admirable in a way.

During lunch, we gave her a tour of the school, and after classes ended, we



introduced her to the clubs. To fulfill our duties as student ambassadors, Honomi and I had been excused from club activities for that day and the next. I wasn't thrilled about missing an opportunity to run on the track, but getting to know Kitazawa wasn't actually that bad of a trade. She was reserved and quiet, yet genuine, which Honomi was quick to recognize.

After our rounds, the ice had been thoroughly broken and we conversed with ease. "We don't have many clubs, but they *are* mandatory, so you'll have to join one. What did you do at your old school?" I asked.

"Um, the home economics club," she answered.

"Oh, we have that too. It's mostly for kids too busy with cram school and lessons and that kind of thing, so it's more like the going-home club. They don't usually do much," I explained as we passed the home ec room, the door firmly locked. "See? Nobody's here."

"Oh, yeah. My old school was like that too."

"Are you busy with cram school?" I asked.

"Not cram school, but I, um...did ballet four days a week," she confessed, forcing the words out as if they were uncomfortable.

Honomi clapped her hands together. "So that's why your posture is so good! Wow, four days a week? You must be serious about it!"

"I was one of the more casual ones, actually. Others went every day, so I kinda felt pressured to keep up."

"Really? Have you already found a ballet class here?" inquired Honomi.

"No, I quit."

*Oh.*

She admitted it so readily. In fact, that might have been the most emphatic statement she'd made all day.

Honomi appeared surprised. "What? You quit? But all that time spent! You must've been pretty good if you went four days a week!"

"I'd been practicing since kindergarten, but...no, I'm glad to be done with it,"

Kitazawa muttered. "All the kids there were aiming to compete or study abroad, so I was way out of my depth."

"Wow, that sounds intense," Honomi said.

"I only joined because it was close to my house. If I'd known it was like that, I wouldn't have joined. It wasn't like I wanted to go pro or overseas. But I also didn't have it in me to quit, so I kept going..." Her voice trailed off, then strengthened, a touch brighter: "Also, I kinda wanted to be able to snack whenever I wanted."

"Wait, they didn't let eat stuff?" I asked. I couldn't say I was *that* surprised; ballerinas always seemed so slim, after all.

Kitazawa smiled slightly and shrugged. "It wasn't like you couldn't eat junk food at all, but there were a few girls there who hadn't had a single piece of chocolate or candy, like, *ever*. Some girls even ate specially prepared meals."

"Really? That sounds like what pro athletes do." I'd never considered that ballet could get that serious. My cousin danced ballet and she loved her junk food. Maybe that was simply the difference between amateurs and professionals?

Kitazawa's gaze drifted to the ground, and her voice grew distant. "I like ballet, but the difference in passion was getting too much for me. And then, just as I was really reconsidering, we happened to move, so..."

"Really..." Honomi mused. "Wait, then can you do the thing where you raise your leg all the way up? I wanna see!"

"You want me to do it...right here?" Kitazawa's eyes widened.

"Yeah! Look, there's a handrail right there," Honomi insisted. Although I was just as curious, I thought she was being a little too pushy.

Kitazawa looked torn, but our eager faces won her over. "Fine, just once, okay?" she conceded.

She took hold of the handrail. And something magical happened.

She transformed. It was as if the world around her had melted away and she were the last person on earth. Her left hand firmly grasping the handrail, her

right foot glided back and forth across the floor as once, twice, three times, she prepared herself. Then, in one clean motion, she bent her right leg, toes exquisitely pointed inward to delicately trace the contour of her other leg up to her knee, before swinging it out and up, sketching a beautiful arc through the air until her foot soared past her face and behind her head.

I gasped in quiet astonishment. Her leg was fully extended, stretched out beautifully, and yet she was in total control, her body as still as a tree trunk. The pose was standard, one I'd seen my cousin do many times at her recitals, but on Kitazawa, it became extraordinary. She looked every bit like my cousin during a performance, yet Kitazawa wasn't dancing on a shiny stage—she was in her school uniform, gripping the handrail of a random staircase. Even her fingers seemed to have their place, precisely positioned out in front of her face. Her poise spoke volumes of her dedication.

“And that's it, I guess? I'm a little out of practice, so...” Her face abruptly turned a deep shade of red as she gently lowered her leg. “Also, thank god I'm wearing leggings.”

“I forgot about that!” Honomi exclaimed, her eyes round with realization and delight. “I almost made you flash the entire world, I'm so sorry! But wow, that was amazing! Did you see, Mao? Her leg went *whoop*! It was so good!”

“Honomi, you're so excited you're losing brain cells,” I gently teased, but truthfully, I was just as dumbstruck.

As squirrel-like as ever, Kitazawa giggled, light and airy, as she fixed her bangs. Her cheeks still glowed, the reticent, shy girl from earlier nowhere to be found.

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**WE'D** finished our tour for the day, the three of us trekking back to the classroom, when the door of the homeroom next to ours slid open with a bang. Out dashed a random boy, his bag swinging wildly from his shoulder.

“Eek!” squeaked Kitazawa as the bag slammed into her with considerable force.

“My bad!” grunted the boy hastily, and without a second glance, he barreled off with a stack of papers in hand.

“Hey!” I yelled after him.

“It’s okay, I’m fine.” Rubbing her shoulder, Kitazawa smiled at me.

“Yeah, but he should’ve at least given you a proper apology,” Honomi huffed indignantly.

Kitazawa’s next sentence took us both by surprise: “Maybe he really needed to go to the bathroom?”

I gaped at her. “Huh?”

“It’s bad to hold it in, right?” she posited, her eyes wide, innocent.

“The...bathroom?” I repeated. The word hung in the air, absurd and unexpected.

I looked at Honomi, and she looked at me, and then we both burst into laughter. We were helpless before Kitazawa; just what was her deal? She was so tiny—well, not that her height was relevant whatsoever—and had been so mortified to wear a different school uniform, was so quick to blush, so meek, so harmless. And yet she busted out ballet moves like no big deal after dropping dance like a bad habit; and when bumped into by a random boy, she spouted equally random excuses to forgive him.

Seriously? The bathroom? That was the best she could come up with? We all knew he was in a hurry to turn in his schoolwork so he could go home faster, and her naive cover-up was too strange, too endearing to ignore. She truly was a weirdo—a weirdo I wanted to talk with more, know more about.

“Did I say something funny?” she asked, her eyes round with confusion.

“Nope, not at all. I mean, yeah, but also no.”

“I...huh?” A delightful shade of red crept up her cheeks as Honomi and I continued to cackle. *Oh man, where has this girl been my whole life?*

“She’s not so bad, is she, Honomi?”

“She really isn’t, Mao.”

“Wh-What are you two talking about?”

Even her fluster was cute, precious. The rest of the journey back to our desks,

where we picked up our bags, was jolly indeed.

“Wanna walk home together, Kitazawa?” I asked.

“Yeah...yeah, sure!” she said, her eyes lighting up.

We’d only just met, yet I couldn’t help but feel that my second year of middle school was going to be a treat.

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“**HEY** Sakai, so what’s Towada like?”

“What’s this? Has my dear Kagami finally awakened to love? Who knew you had a girly side to you after al—hey, okay, stop, stop, I was just kidding.” Shielding his head with his arms, he immediately backed down when I clenched my fist in a playful threat. Sakai had always liked his exaggerated reactions; I suspected he still had a soft spot for Power Rangers or other overdramatic hero-type stuff. Some things never changed.

“No, I getcha. You’re asking for Kitazaw—I mean, Haruka, right?” he babbled.

“Get her first name outta your mouth. It’s gross. Also, shh! What if she heard that!” I glanced toward the landing where we’d left her.

I wasn’t usually one to pry about my friend’s friends, but I wanted to help her. All I knew about Towada was that he’d transferred in the previous year after living in Tokyo. The mysterious guy’s name was the first mention of a male to come out of Haruka’s mouth since her own transfer, shy as she was. And as her friend, I had a duty to ensure she was falling in with good company.

“Towada’s a good dude,” Sakai said. “Doesn’t talk a whole lot, though.”

“Yeah, I knew that already—he’s your vice president, of course he’s a good dude.”

“Hey, your words, not mine.”

“Is there anything else?”

Sakai sank into silent contemplation. In thought, he looked oddly mature—grown-up, almost. I’d been noticing that about him a lot lately. I used to tower over him, and to be at the same eye level felt weird.

“Well, just don’t worry about it—she’ll be all right,” he concluded.

“And your proof is?” I asked, and he merely ruffled my hair. “Hey!”

“Haruka is your friend. Towada is mine. What’s wrong with our friends becoming friends?”

“Seriously, how come you’re calling Haruka by her first name?” I snapped.

“Oh, I see. So you’re upset you’re being left out, *Mao*?”

“Ew, gross, I don’t wanna hear you say that ever again!”

Laughing, he sprinted away, and I chased after him as we’d always done, both of us oblivious to our two friends exiting the school gates.

## Chapter Three

**SECOND** trimester came and went. With the interclass sports meet and cultural festival behind us, we were on the cusp of Christmas and ready for a well-deserved winter break.

It was amid that festive atmosphere that I found myself standing in a brightly lit, studio-like kitchen space, wrapped in an apron and surrounded by adults and teens of various ages. I saw college girls, working men and women, even a few high school students who'd come with their parents. Middle schoolers, though? None—except for me.

“Hello everyone and thank you for coming. My name is Takanori Endou, and I welcome you to Endou’s Cooking Salon’s special winter workshop!” announced the charismatic pastry chef, effortlessly commanding everyone’s attention. “Since it’s a special holiday session, we will of course be making a classic—no, *the* classic—Christmas dessert. That’s right: a yule log! Now, to start off...”

As he instructed us, I reflected on the twist of events that had brought me there. I wasn’t even the one supposed to attend the “Exclusive Winter-Themed Pastry Workshop” in the first place—my mother was. She’d been invited by her new best friend Ayako and had been thrilled at the idea of baking an extravagant Christmas cake for the family. Until my grandmother in Miyagi Prefecture took a nasty fall, breaking her wrist and derailing all of our plans.

To better care for her, we initially asked Grandma to spend the holidays with us, and she argued that because she had a dog, cat, and some goldfish in her care, she couldn’t leave Miyagi. She requested that we go to her instead, and my mother, with no other option as an only daughter, left immediately. The rest of us would depart once the school break began and return after New Year’s. As a small consolation, Mom assured us that she would insist that Grandma install handholds around her house, especially near the entrance and in the bathroom, so a similar incident wouldn’t happen again.

Given everything that was going on, Mom decided to forgo the workshop, yet Ayako managed to convince her to send me in her stead. “There’s no age limit, really. I mean, I wouldn’t send a grade schooler, but Haruka should do just fine. She can already bake, and besides, I’ll be there,” she’d said. She’d also pointed out that opportunities to learn from a professional were hard to come by and that we’d be relinquishing a spot for a workshop that had a waitlist in the double digits.

So there I was—alone and supremely uncomfortable as the only middle schooler in the mix. If Ayako hadn’t been shooting me reassuring glances from time to time between her assistant duties, I might’ve fled. Rallying against my anxiety, I studied my surroundings. Everyone was focused on the instructor; nobody was paying attention to me and my solo presence. I breathed a small sigh of relief, mentally shaking off my nerves.

“...okay, and if there are no questions, then let’s get to it!”

Upon his closing remark, the classroom erupted into a frenzy of activity. I shared my table with two women around my mother’s age and a college-age girl, a party of four in total.

“P-Pleasure to be working with you all,” I mumbled.

“Oh my, you came by yourself? How admirable!” the college girl said.

“I wish I had a daughter... All I have are boys,” one of the mothers said.

“Same here!” the other agreed.

Instantly connecting, the two women bonded while the other girl gazed longingly at Chef Endou. I swiftly started to crack eggs. *All right, I’m going to do a good job today*, I told myself. We could take home whatever we made during the workshop, and the cake was to be the centerpiece of our slightly earlier-than-normal Christmas celebration. Such a chance didn’t occur often, so I wanted to bake something truly special.

The process to create the log-shaped dessert was essentially two steps: make a Swiss roll, then decorate it with chocolate cream. With premeasured ingredients, professional equipment, and meticulous guidance from the chef—he even explained what to look out for when whipping cream—success seemed



almost guaranteed, barring any catastrophic mistakes.

My work progressed swimmingly, and soon I was pulling my freshly baked sponge cake, the base for the Swiss roll, from the oven. It looked perfect—moist, smooth, and uniform in color. I inhaled its sweet aroma and was about to praise myself for a job well done before remembering my triumph was thanks only to the high-quality equipment—*whoops, almost got ahead of myself there*. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but admire its appearance as I submerged the chocolate for the frosting into a warm water bath.

"Very well done," a male voice commended from beside me.

I turned to see Mr. Dreamboat Pâtissier himself. "T-Thank you!" I stammered. *Oh my gosh, that startled me*. So enamored by my cake, I hadn't noticed his approach.

After inspecting my efforts, he flashed a broad smile. "I'm sorry, I didn't scare you, did I?"

*Wow, pictures and videos really don't do him justice*. Complemented by roguishly handsome features and neat dark-brown hair, his charm was even more striking in person. I was momentarily lost in appreciation as he peered into the bowl I was using. "That looks about done as well. The chocolate just needs to melt; it doesn't need to heat up too much. And remember to grab your cream and everything else from the staff members."

"R-Right."

He'd hunched to my eye level to talk to me. With his hands on his knees, he resembled a parent speaking to a small child. His face was also kind of extremely close to mine—like, able-to-count-his-every-eyelash close. *Uh-oh. Why is he so close? Why so smiley?*

"Excuse me, Chef? Does this look right to you?" interrupted a female voice.

"Sure, one second." He directed another dazzling smile at me. "Keep up the good work, Haruka."

"Y-Yes, sure..." I choked out as he moved to assist the woman who'd called for him.

*Oh thank god.* I wasn't sure how much longer I could've withstood that interaction. I felt drained as though I'd just sprinted a mile. Still wobbly, I teetered over to Ayako to retrieve the cream. As she swung open the fridge door, her words floated to my ear as if from a distance. "You'll have to excuse Takanori, dear. He's just been dying to meet you."

"Dying to meet...me?" My voice wavered in disbelief.

"Absolutely. He got all excited when I told him about 'Takumi's new lady friend.' I tried to keep him from accosting you in the classroom, but he has a will of his own. He's due for a stern talking to later." She cast a calculating glance toward Takanori as she handed me the cream as well as some strawberries. She really did speak of him as if they were family.

"For the strawberries that will top the cake, feel free to cut them however you like," she advised, resuming her role as assistant. "But for the ones for inside the roll, make sure you follow the instructions closely."

"Yes, thank you."

With my ingredients secured and her instructions looping in my mind, I returned to my workstation. I began by slowly blending the melted chocolate into a portion of the cream to make frosting. Next, I beat the remainder into submission to fill the Swiss roll. The yule log's trunk would consist of cake, whipped cream, strawberries, and chocolate cream frosting. Seriously, two types of cream? Talk about a decadent experience. Home cooking it most certainly was not.

Even the cosmetic flourishes provided to us had a certain level of pizzazz: traditional holly leaves, a tiny marzipan Santa, and a tastefully executed "Merry Christmas" topper—much cuter than what one saw on cakes from the grocery store. The true stars of the show, however, were Takanori's handcrafted garnishes. He'd prepared for each of us a glossy red poinsettia out of sugar, a striking dark chocolate rose, and ethereal snowflakes of white chocolate, all of which took my breath away.

Determined to make a yule log worthy of that exquisite ornamentation, I poured my heart and soul into the Swiss roll. It came out looking amazing—or at least, I liked to think so. After we finished decorating our cakes, Ayako and

the other assistants very gently—and I mean *very* gently—boxed our creations. That was an undertaking in itself, and I was grateful to have their expertise.

I volunteered to have mine packed last, and eventually I was the only student left in the kitchen. “I appreciate your patience, dear,” Ayako said, hurrying over. “Wow, look at that. You’ve really outdone yourself, haven’t you?”

“Thanks. With the garnishes, it almost looks like a cake from a bakery,” I said.

“Your family will be absolutely blown away. Now, you mentioned not having plans for Christmas Eve, is that so?”

“That’s, um, yeah.” Mom was at Grandma’s, Dad was scheduled to work late, and my brother had a date he wouldn’t shut up about, so I was going to be all alone.

“In that case, how about joining us for Christmas dinner?” proposed Ayako. “It’d feel so much more festive with you there. Besides, Takumi and I can barely finish half a cake let alone a whole one.”

“Oh,” I murmured, taken aback by her sudden invitation.

She leaned forward and, as if sharing a secret, whispered, “Not to mention the little ones have been asking about you.”

I sometimes stopped at their house while out with Koro just to say hi to the oaties from the garden gate. But recently I’d found myself a little hesitant to visit; each time I did, Ayako insisted that Towada walk me home. And as much as I enjoyed the little guys, I couldn’t bring myself to keep troubling Towada.

“Thanks, but I wouldn’t want to impose,” I said. I was touched by her invitation but uncertain about intruding on a family gathering.

“Nonsense!” said Ayako. “All right, it’s settled then. Oh, I can’t wait! You’re not allergic to anything are ya? Pickles, herbs, everything’s okay?”

“Yeah, they’re my favorite,” I said. “Um, if I’m coming, do you mind if I help with dinner? It’ll be a half day at school anyway.”

“Of course, I’d appreciate the help! I’ll get Takumi to go pick you up.”

“N-No, that’s fine! It’ll still be light out. I don’t get lost anymore!”

She gave me a look that seemed to say, *Are you sure?* and I wondered whether I still appeared so naïve that I required an escort. I certainly hoped I didn't come off as that much of a child; I'd be in my third year of middle school the following year!

"Hmm. Maybe I'll make an appearance myself then," a familiar voice teased from behind me.

I emitted an instinctive shriek.

"Takanori," Ayako admonished, her voice stern. "Don't scare Haruka."

He chuckled lightly. "My apologies, couldn't resist," the handsome pastry chef said, grinning at me. Was the man really that good at sneaking up on people or was I just incredibly obtuse? Though I had to say, despite his multiple accolades, published cookbooks, and successful store, Takanori was surprisingly down-to-earth. His patient and clear explanations for even the simplest of questions had been invaluable in class, and his occasional digressions, rife with amusing anecdotes and jokes, hilariously fun.

"I thought you were working Christmas?" Ayako said with a note of suspicion.

"Sadly, yes. The shop's a battlefield leading up to Christmas."

"Then you had better do your job, huh? Customers first."

"As you wish, Lady Ayako," answered Takanori with a flourish and a mock curtsy, earning a gentle smile from Ayako.

"Some things never change, do they?" she observed.

"Really? I'd like to believe I've matured, haven't I?"

"Have you? Do you still carry around a pocketful of pill bugs wherever you go?"

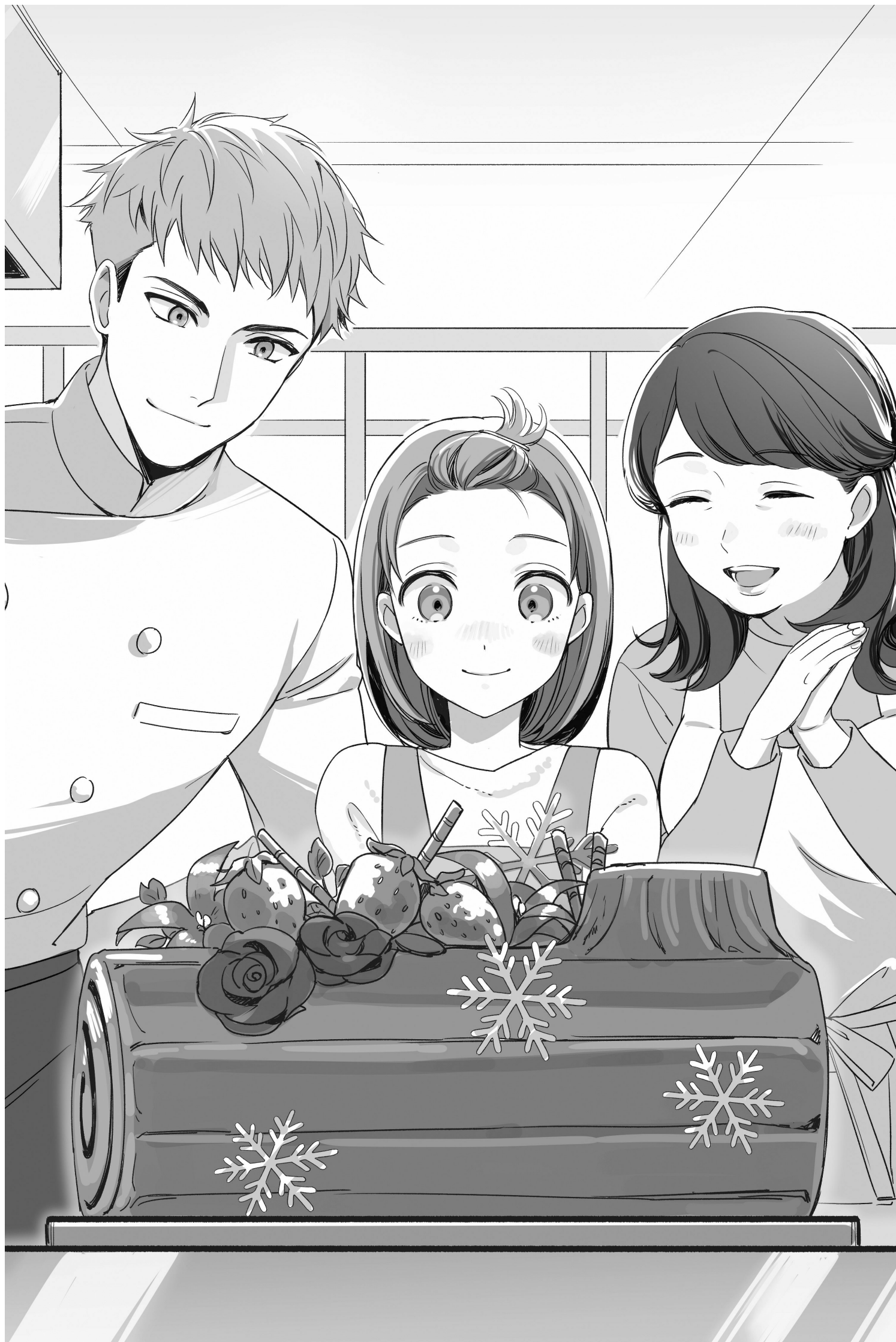
At the mention of pill bugs, I took two involuntary steps back.

"Hey! I haven't done that for decades, and you know as much! Haruka, don't listen to her!" Takanori protested. He made a show of patting down his chef coat as proof of its insect-free status, which drew a reluctant smile from me.

Then, unexpectedly, he said, "You seem to have a knack for cake-making—

yours turned out wonderful. Have you ever considered pursuing this line of work?"





For a moment, I didn't realize he was addressing me. As the compliment sank in, I felt my face heat. "I, um, I think it only turned out as good as it did because of your guidance...and the beautiful garnishes you made..."

"Oh? And here I was under the impression you were here because you wanted me to take you under my wing as my pastry chef apprentice."

"Me? Oh, no, I couldn't..." I mumbled bashfully. *Is he saying I'm good at this?* My cheeks burned.

"For what it's worth, I think you have what it takes. But I guess there's no need to rush. You're only in middle school, so you still have plenty of time to figure things out."

His words caught me off guard, particularly *there's no need to rush*. Parent-teacher conferences had occurred earlier that month. I was about to enter my final year of junior high, and high school entrance exams loomed on the horizon. And although our school didn't segregate students based on grades or future leanings, I still had to decide which high schools to apply to.

To be honest, the choice was overwhelming. I'd been a decent B student for as long as I could remember, and the sheer number of high schools open to my consideration was formidable. Sure, some were automatically eliminated based on academics or tuition, but even just amid schools within biking distance, I had dozens of options. If we broadened the selection to institutions reachable by train, those dozens became hundreds of public and private schools, each unique in its curriculum and reputation.

To make matters even more complicated, the student guidance counselor had advised me to consider college and beyond when choosing a high school, concluding the conversation by saying high school and college were just milestones, checkpoints in life's grand narrative. Okay, that was probably true, but checkpoints to what, exactly? What kind of adult did I aspire to become? How could I possibly know what I wanted to be in the future when I didn't know who I wanted to be currently?

Everyone was always saying, "Be yourself," but what did that actually mean? Which "self"? I had a sense of who I was, but didn't everyone else as well? Which "me" were they talking about? The "me" of my conception or the "me"



as others viewed me? You couldn't convince me the two were the same people.

*What do I want to do?*

*What should I do?*

Those were deeply personal questions, so why was I, their subject, the most perplexed by them? Such doubts, like a frigid gust of wind, brushed against my chest whenever the topic arose, inducing only dread.

At the parent-teacher conference, I'd picked two fairly innocuous schools just to satisfy the counselor. Unable to confront my future past that step, I'd stared blankly through the window at the barren cherry trees instead of watching the counselor fill out the rest of the worksheet. That anxiety was still fresh in my mind, so Takanori's statement touched me profoundly. "Do I really...have that much time?" I mumbled.

He appeared perplexed. "Why not? You're still in middle school, aren't you? I wasn't thinking about anything at your age."

"You didn't always want to be a pastry chef?" I asked.

He chuckled again. "Nope, not at all. I made that decision in high school—in my third year, no less. Shocked everyone. Dad's restaurant was already going to my sister, and everyone expected me to go to college, so."

"Really..." What an unexpected revelation. I had assumed Takanori had been chasing a lifelong dream.

"When it comes to the future, I believe as long as you're putting in the effort to do your best in the present, things will work out. Especially when you don't know what you want to do yet, it's best to keep your options open. Mind you, academics may not matter in my field, but there's no harm in keeping up, right?"

"You mean like going to high school and college?" I asked.

"That too," he replied, crouching to meet my gaze. "You know, a good buddy of mine thought he was going to be a teacher. He even got his teaching certificate and everything but ended up working on a farm without ever stepping foot in a single classroom. Another friend of mine landed a cushy job at a reputable

company only to quit and start roasting coffee out of his garage. Does that make all their previous effort a waste of time? No, of course not. What matters isn't so much *what* we do, but rather that we're *doing* something, you know?"

His words struck something deep inside me. Was he saying it was okay to feel lost, to wander? *What the heck, why are my eyes starting to water?*

"Hmm. Was that too preachy?" he mused after a beat. "What do you think, Ayako, did I sound like an adult just now?" He blushed faintly and averted his gaze, sheepishly running a hand through his hair.

"You did up until you ruined it with that," she replied with another smile. She turned to me. "Haruka, want to know something crazy about this cooking class assistant over here?"

"What is it?" I asked, curious.

"I hardly cooked a single thing until I got married. In fact, I'd never set foot in a kitchen."

What? No way. That was unbelievable, but Ayako's warm smile told me she was wholly serious.

"That's true," affirmed Takanori. "When she first came to my dad, she was awful—even worse than grade-school me. She couldn't even peel an apple."

"I'd like to see you do any better your first time! But it's true. Kaoru and Chef Endou taught me a lot."

"Really...?" My surprise drained the tears welling in my eyes. The revelation turned my impression of Ayako entirely on its head.

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**A** few days later, I stood frozen in my room, studying my bed. I stared longingly at my favorite moss-green covers. They were flannel, warm, and inviting—the ideal partner for frosty winter mornings when one wanted nothing more than to stay in the realm of dreams.

...Or at least, I would've been if not for the colossal mound of clothes piled atop them, obscuring every square inch of that enticing bedspread. Surveying the mess, I heaved a deep sigh. I'd ransacked the entirety of my closet and

dresser and *still* hadn't found anything to wear. *How can this be?*

I glanced at the full-length mirror on my closet door. There I was, clad in my school uniform. I'd just gotten home and was due to head over to Ayako's for Christmas dinner. Only I, Ayako, and Towada would be in attendance—and Koro and the oaties, of course.

We would merely cook and then eat. I didn't need to dress up or wear any fancy attire—not that I owned any fancy clothing in the first place—so why was I still there? All I had to do was select something other than my uniform, literally anything, and I couldn't decide. Even my favorite jersey-knit top seemed inadequate.

I checked the clock and sighed again. I had to leave soon. *Ugh, what is wrong with me; this shouldn't be this hard.*

In the end, I snatched the sweater I initially chose at the start of the whole ordeal and quickly pulled it on, not daring to steal a glance at the mirror as I hurried out of my room.

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I arrived in front of Ayako's house lugging a hefty amount of baggage. Ayako emerged, took one look at me, and immediately remarked that she should've sent Towada to pick me up. I assured her I was fine—the day was still light and I was more than capable of carrying the load.

The reason for all the parcels was the Christmas gifts I'd brought for them. Although I'd tried my best to find things they'd like, I was still a little uncertain about my choices. Therefore, I would give them the presents just before I left their house for the evening.

"Do you have an apron, dear?" inquired Ayako as I stepped inside. "If any sauce gets on your outfit, it's not coming off."

"I brought my own!" I replied, extracting mine from my overfilled bag before heading to the kitchen. Towada was absent, having excused himself to run a few errands, Koro in tow. He really did love animals.

Treading gingerly around the little oaties milling about on the kitchen floor, careful not to send one flying, I joined Ayako at the counter. The oven was

preheating, ingredients strewn across the dining table ready for processing, and Ayako had donned a *kappogi* over her clothes. The traditional Japanese apron suited her perfectly.

“Okay, we’ll be starting with the meat sauce. Haruka, can you dice those onions for me?”

“These?”

“Yes. We’re going to simmer them for quite a bit, so you don’t have to go too fine. And the celery as well, please. For the celery, cut them diagonally into thin strips first, then just kind of fan them out and—yep, just like that.”

While instructing me, she busied herself at the stove, melting some butter to make a white sauce. The main dish was to be lasagna, which had surprised me a little since she was an assistant in a French cooking class. But evidently Towada preferred Italian cuisine. That was often the case for boys, Ayako confided with a soft chuckle.

“This knife is so nice,” I commented.

“I just sharpened it, so be careful.”

I swiftly set to work, the sharp knife in conjunction with the recently refrigerated onions making for a tear-free dicing experience. Then I minced a few cloves of garlic and sauteed it and the onions together with some ground meat. Once the mixture was nicely browned, I deglazed the pot with white wine and, after letting it come to a boil, added a can of whole tomatoes, crushing them as I stirred. From there, it was just a matter of letting all the flavors mingle.

“It looks so good,” I said, admiring the rich sauce.

“Here, add this in as well,” said Ayako. She handed me a bowl of demi-glace from the fridge—real, restaurant-made demi-glace, not the canned stuff I was used to. “Make sure you keep everything moving so it doesn’t burn. After that, you can just let it reduce until it’s nice and thick.”

“Wait, this is so authentic!” I exclaimed. “It smells amazing...I can’t wait to try it.”

“Patience, my dear,” she responded with a quiet giggle.

As we stood shoulder to shoulder, diligently tending to our respective pots, laid-back conversation bouncing between us and the fragrance of home cooking filling the house, a sort of anticipatory energy roiled within me, and I was sure Ayako felt the same.

As if to confirm my thoughts, she confessed, “Oh how I missed cooking with someone else.”

“Does Towada never cook with you?” I asked.

“Sometimes, but you know him; he’s not much of a talker—not like Takanori anyway. I think he likes cleanup duty more, actually. We don’t have a dishwasher after all. Besides, it’s faster to hand-wash with just two people.”

In accordance with her words, Ayako’s kitchen was rather minimalist despite the fact that she worked for a chef—she didn’t even own a food processor. When I asked her about the lack of equipment, she simply stated, “What a home cook needs is space not tools.” She emphasized the importance of enough room to do what was needed with all the necessary implements and ingredients within arm’s reach.

Her philosophy made sense. Minimize tasks such as fetching components or tidying clutter, and the cooking process became that much more frictionless, a definite quality-of-life improvement. And after utilizing her kitchen, I wholly embraced her perspective. Once again, I found the notion that Ayako hadn’t cooked all her life unbelievable. Her skill in the kitchen was beautiful to behold, and she had a knack for teaching the craft as well.

When I told her as such, she said, “That’s probably because I had such a late start. Those who grow up doing certain tasks often take for granted the little inconveniences and subtle mechanics that people like me had to learn from scratch.” I had never thought about it like that but could definitely get behind her hypothesis.

Once both sauces had simmered to perfection, we began the delicate task of layering the noodles, sauces, and cheese. We slid the assembled lasagna into the oven to incubate while we focused on the other dishes.

Ayako took charge of the cream of pumpkin soup. She stewed peeled carrots and pumpkin and thinly sliced onions until tender before blending them with milk into a smooth puree. For seasoning, she added a bouillon cube and a dash of salt and pepper.

When I ducked outside to pick fresh rosemary for the oven-roasted potatoes, I spotted Towada returning from his errand. “Hey, welcome back. Thanks for walking Koro,” I called.

He responded with a grunt, his gaze landing on the oatie that had hopped down from my shoulder to say hello to Koro, the two sniffing at each other amicably. I still wasn’t used to that. Koro typically hid behind me when we encountered other dogs, yet he seemed comfortable around the oaties. I wished I could ask him how they appeared to him; I was so curious.

Towada’s eyes flitted to the scissors and sprigs of rosemary in my hand. “What’s that for?”

“It’s for the potatoes. It must be nice having fresh herbs right in your front yard.”

“I guess?” he said, somewhat aloof.

I abruptly realized that while I’d happily accepted Ayako’s invitation, I hadn’t consulted Towada. “Um, I hope I’m not intruding by being here, am I?” I was concerned he might not appreciate my frequent visits—since he was the one who had to escort me home every time.

“Not really,” he replied, stooping to pet Koro’s head. “Ayako seems happy, and walking Koro is always fun.” Though his face was hidden, his tone suggested he didn’t mind my presence, which was a relief. As we drifted toward the door, he picked up a small bag of dog food from the porch. “It’s cold, so why don’t you get inside? I’ll feed Koro and let him in.”

“Oh, sure. Thanks,” I said, a bit taken aback.

Leaving my dog to him, I entered the kitchen to find Ayako busy peeling potatoes. “Thank you kindly,” she said, glancing at me. “Go warm yourself up; it must’ve been cold.”

“I’m fine,” I assured her. “Towada just got back, by the way.”

“Really? Then let’s get these puppies in the oven, shall we? Could you give the rosemary a quick rinse and pat it dry?”

I did so, hearing a soft “I’m back” from the front door. Towada walked into the kitchen and announced, “They only had red leaf lettuce at the store.”

“That’s fine,” said Ayako. “Haruka, could you wash the lettuce as well?”

“Sure thing,” I said over my shoulder.

While the potatoes roasted, Ayako and I prepared a simple salad with the lush red leaf lettuce, threads of thinly sliced carrot, and French dressing, the latter also specially made in a restaurant. Meanwhile, Towada set the table. He arranged the plates with a practiced hand and was placing the bread he’d bought in a wicker basket when he appeared to remember something. “Oh, Ayako, the bakery owner says hi.”

“Duly noted,” she jested as she tended the soup on the burner. She was ever the popular figure, just as Takanori had told me in confidence at the workshop: Ayako was friends with everyone, regardless of age or gender. “If you ask me,” he’d whispered, “she was even more popular than my dad in the classroom.” I shared his sentiment, of course. Ayako always welcomed me with a big smile and open arms, her kindness far more than what my socially inept self deserved. If she could make even someone like me feel at ease, no doubt she could everyone.

But that was exactly why I wished to know...

“Hey, Towada,” I said quietly as I toted the soup to the table. “Does Ayako ever get mad?”

“Of course she does.”

“She does?”

“Yeah, but her face stays the same, so it’s really scary.”

*I...can totally see that.*

“Look at you two all buddy-buddy and whispering to each other.”

I turned to see Ayako, her characteristic smile in place. A nervous grin crossed my face as I chuckled half-heartedly. When I dared a peek at Towada, I

discovered he'd abandoned me to grab glasses from the cupboard. *Great.* My only viable escape from the awkwardness was to look down and find solace in the lone oatie milling around my feet.

After that brief interlude, dinner preparations resumed, and soon dishes started to accumulate on the dining room table. "The lasagna should come out of the oven now. We'll save the cake for dessert, yes?" Ayako asked.

"This looks so good," I marveled.

Before us was a veritable feast: the lasagna, its top layer browned to a lovely crust; fragrant, herb-roasted potatoes; cream of pumpkin soup garnished with fresh parsley; a beautiful, crisp green salad; and warm, freshly baked bread. The deep crimson liquid swirling in our wineglasses was grape juice, next to which stood tall glasses filled with refreshing lemon water.

In lieu of a Christmas tree, a floral centerpiece of dark red roses and St. John's wort sat in the middle of the table. Festive red and green placemats bordered it, flanked by gleaming silverware. The spacious table accommodated dish and decoration with room to spare.

"This is a welcome change of pace from the Japanese fare we usually eat," Ayako said. "Haruka, how did your father and brother like the cake you baked at the workshop?"

They had been more than a little impressed. Even Mom was. Upon glimpsing the photo Dad uploaded, she instantly texted us to vow that she wasn't going to miss the following year's workshop for the world.

"Learning from a pro sure does make a world of difference," I replied.

"I'm sure Takanori would be thrilled to hear that," she said. "It's just too bad he has to work today."

That was indeed a shame. Apparently, he would be busy from dawn till dusk, tirelessly baking cakes on Christmas Eve. I saluted his dedication. Also, he'd invited me with that charming smile of his to a Valentine's Day workshop, which I was considering attending.

"Come to think of it," I said, my attention meandering to the little creature by my feet, "do the oaties not eat any of this?"



Ayako and Towada exchanged glances. “I don’t think they eat full meals,” Ayako answered.

“Just snacks, I think,” added Towada.

“Guess it’ll be snack time for you all later then, huh?” I said to the floor. In response, the oatie brushed against my ankle one last time before scampering away. “There it goes...”

“It’s probably off to spread the word to its friends,” Ayako mused.

“Gluttons, the lot of them,” Towada said.

“All right, Takumi. Let’s eat too, shall we?”

My mind elsewhere, all I could think about was whether I’d baked enough cookies as we raised our glasses in a celebratory toast and began our Christmas feast.

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**AFTER** dinner and the subsequent cleanup, Ayako and I retired to the living room, where she selected a record to play, while Towada busied himself in the kitchen preparing tea. The melody and voice that flowed from the speaker was unmistakably familiar.

“Is that Yves Montand?” I asked.

“Why yes, it is!” Ayako confirmed with delight. “I’m impressed you know him at your age.”

“My dad’s a fan. He plays him in the car all the time.”

“Is that so? Kaoru left behind quite a lot of records, as you can see.” Her gaze shifted to me. “But more importantly, are you comfortable over there, Haruka? You seem...rather popular.”

More accurately, her eyes weren’t on me but rather the army of oaties currently encircling me, scrambling across my knees, and eyeing my cookie tin with obvious longing. “I’m fine, just, um... Guys, give me a second, okay? I’ll open the tin, but line up first. Wait, just how many of you are there today?!”

They were at my feet, on my lap, and crawling all over my shoulders. There

were far more than the number I encountered during my first visit.

“Just how much do you guys like Haruka’s baking?” Ayako asked the crowd.

I loosed a wry chuckle. “I’m glad, but you have Ayako, you guys!”

I’d brought two types of cookies for the day’s visit: spiced ginger, and chocolate and butter checkerboard. With school on a half-day schedule leading up to New Year’s, I’d been able to bake in small batches, accumulating a fair bit of stock over time. But that stockpile wouldn’t amount to anything if I couldn’t move my arms to open the tin!

Just as I was on the brink of surrender, Towada returned from the kitchen. “Shoo, shoo. She can’t really hand out treats if you’re all swarming her, now can she?”

That seemed to do the trick, for the sea of oaties receded slightly. *Phew, I can finally lift my arms.* Twinkling sparkles flew from their little mouths; I still couldn’t understand them but liked to imagine they were telling me to hurry. *All right, I’m on it, just a little longer!*

“Thanks for your patience, here you all go—wah!” As I removed the lid, a surge of tiny paws shot toward me. Before I could react, my tin, previously crammed full of cookies, was empty.

“They really are shameless,” Towada observed as the oaties dissipated.

“Oh, look what they did to your hair,” Ayako fussed as she sat beside me to deftly smooth my disheveled hair. I’d worn a headband because I’d known I’d be cooking, and an adventurous oatie darting over my head had knocked it to the floor.

“I love your outfit, by the way,” she said. “Really fits the season.”

“R-Really?” I stuttered.

“You’re like a little rabbit, all white and fluffy.”

After my indecisive ordeal earlier that day, I’d opted for a white turtlenecked sweater paired with a dark green, knee-length flared skirt. While the ensemble wasn’t exactly groundbreaking, the colors felt appropriately festive. The sweater was noticeably oversized and soft, probably warranting the rabbit

comparison.

“Doesn’t she, Takumi?”

“I see a cat.”

“No, definitely a rabbit.”

“P-Please, you two!”

*Rabbit, cat, who cares!* I was dying of embarrassment! My face was surely beet red.

As I scooped up the last remaining oatie on my lap to bury my face into, Ayako rose to serve us all cake. She handed us each a deep-blue plate crowned with a stunning slice of homemade cheesecake, which looked so perfect that I would’ve believed it was from a specialty bakery without blinking an eye. “This looks so good!”

“I went through a lot of trial and error to figure out the recipe, so I daresay it more than just looks good!” Ayako contended.

Cooked slowly over the course of an hour in a bain-marie before cooling in the fridge overnight, the New York–style cheesecake was a gorgeous shade of cream throughout, not a blemish on its smooth surface.

“Here, your tea,” said Towada, offering me a mug.

“Thanks. Wow, this mug is so cute!”

A delicate watercolor depicted a rabbit against a soft blue gradient. The art wasn’t in the typical anime style but a technique more reminiscent of a relatively sophisticated picture book.

“Sorry we couldn’t get it wrapped for you, Haruka, but consider that your Christmas gift,” Ayako said, yanking me from my study of the mug. “From now on, that is your cup whenever you visit. I know there’s no box, but don’t worry—it’s never been used.”

Similar mugs sat in front of Ayako and Towada. My gaze flicked to the bookshelf, and just as I remembered, the cup in front of her late husband’s photograph was of the same design.

“To be completely frank, we’ve had the set for a while. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t mind, not at all!”

Each mug showcased a rabbit doing a different activity. Mine danced, Ayako’s knitted, and Towada’s was skiing.

“I remember seeing this set years ago and feeling like I just had to buy it. There were four cups in total, and Takumi wasn’t even living with us yet. I had no idea what possessed me at the time, but now it’s finally clear to me. The mugs were meant for me, Kaoru, Takumi—and you, Haruka.”

“Me? Really?” I hesitated, feeling out of place.

Ayako, with her signature smile, murmured, “I can think of no one better.”

I didn’t know what to say. A warm, fuzzy sensation stirred in my chest at being granted such a special place in Ayako’s heart. “Thank you. I’ll treasure it dearly.”

As my emotions welled, I hurriedly clasped the mug. It was a normal mug, nothing special about it, yet it settled right into my hand. I lifted it to my lips, and the porcelain was smooth, the rim not too thick nor too thin, as if it was made for me.

“A little rabbit mug for our little rabbit, Haruka,” Ayako teased.

“Cat.”

“Can we please move on?” I demanded.

The conversation veering back to my outfit was strangely enough to stave off my tears.

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**AS** we relaxed, savoring the cheesecake and black tea amid soft strains of music, I tenderly petted an oatie who’d dozed off in my lap.

“I didn’t know ayakashi slept,” I mused aloud, the creature warm beneath my fingers.

“I’ve never seen them sleep either,” Ayako admitted. “Every time you’re here, I learn something new about them.”

“Really?”

“They’re just always there. It’s not like we interact with them.” Towada’s curt tone cut through the coziness of the moment.

“You could stand to acknowledge them a bit more, you know?” chided Ayako gently. Towada pretended not to have heard, earning a wry smile from her before she said, “By the way, Haruka. You’ll be spending New Year’s at your grandmother’s, right? If you’d like, we could dog-sit Koro while you’re away.”

I hesitated. “Actually, there’s been a change in plans. My dad’s vacation got suddenly rescheduled, and my brother also has cram school. So not everyone will be away at once.”

Given how skittish Koro was around unfamiliar places and people, we’d discussed as a family what to do with him while we were gone. Grandma’s was definitely too stimulating for him, and a pet hotel seemed like a bad idea, so I would’ve gladly accepted Ayako’s offer were it still necessary.

“Oh, is that so? That’s a shame, isn’t it, Takumi?”

“Not really. I’m sure Koro’s happier that way.”

*Aw, he has Koro’s best interests in mind. That’s sweet.*

A few records and topics later, it was time to go—and time for the dreaded present exchange. With a shaky hand, I revealed their gifts. “Um, these are for you. I’m not sure if you’ll like them, but here...”

Ayako’s eyes sparkled with genuine delight. “Really? You shouldn’t have! Oh, how did you know I was in the market for a pair?”

The winter gloves were no special mug, yet I’d chosen them thinking they might keep her warm during her bike rides to the train station. And for Towada, I’d picked a towel he could use for tennis club. Although it wasn’t an actual sports towel, my brother swore by the brand. It was navy blue with little stars embroidered along the edges. The design reminded me of Towada, though I wasn’t sure why.

“Thanks.” His voice was quiet, a trace of surprise in his eyes. Meanwhile, Ayako had already pulled on the gloves, examining them from every angle. I

breathed an internal sigh of relief; they both appeared to like their gifts.

Reaching to leave, I bundled myself up in anticipation of the wintry chill while Towada dashed upstairs for his coat. As I wound my scarf snugly around my neck, I finally asked the question that'd been nagging at me. "Ayako, do I worry you a lot?"

She hummed in surprise.

"You always have Towada walk me back and stuff," I clarified.

"Does that bother you?" she asked.

"It doesn't bother me; it just feels like you think I can't handle myself," I mumbled, too quick to deny. In fact, I was the one troubling *them*. After all, what middle school student still had their parents chauffeur them everywhere?

Ayako's face softened into a compassionate smile. "Well, if it doesn't bother you, do you think you could put up with it? The roads here can be tricky and it doesn't take much to get lost. Plus, there aren't many people around to help if you do. So yes, I do worry, especially at night."

"But I feel bad..."

"If it's Takumi you're worried about, I wouldn't sweat it. He doesn't walk you back because I tell him to."

My shock caught in my throat and I felt my face heat. What did she mean?

"Towada men are stubborn," Ayako explained. "If he really didn't want to walk you back, he wouldn't—regardless of what I tell him. He's a lot like Kaoru in that regard."

I floundered, unsure of how to respond, and she raised a finger to her lips as Towada's voice emerged from behind me. "Ready to head out?" When I spun to face him, his eyebrow quirked upward. "You okay? You look red."

"I-It's probably because I'm an idiot and put on the scarf while still indoors," I muttered.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Definitely. Okay, let's go." My tone was unconvincingly casual, but

what else could I have said? I sensed Ayako's amusement lingering behind me as I hurried to the door. Fleeing the charged atmosphere, I slid into my ankle-high boots and stepped out into the brisk evening air. The sun had disappeared behind the horizon, and a biting breeze flurried from the nearby forest, cooling my burning cheeks. The neighborhood lacked any festive flair, Christmas Eve just like any other night.

"Take care, Haruka," Ayako called after me.

"Thank you! I had a really great time and—oh?" An oatie had darted out of the house, clutching something in its mouth.

"What's the matter? It's cold out here," I said in playful reprimand. Curious, I crouched down to meet the creature, and it delicately dropped what it'd been carrying into my hand. The object resembled a piece of *konpeito*, traditional star-shaped sugar candy, blown up to the size of a ping-pong ball. It was a delightful lemon yellow and had a surprising heft. "What's this?" I asked.

Sparkles cascaded from the oatie's mouth, intertwining with the misty vapor of my breath. "Think of it as compensation," interpreted Towada. "You fed them today without expecting anything done in return, so."

That was right! The creatures *worked* in exchange for treats. They must've made a first-time exception on my previous visit and would insist on paying me back moving forward. *Aw, the conscientious little guys.*

"You're giving this to me?" I asked.

As if in confirmation, the oatie rose on its hind legs to brush against my cheek. *That tickles!* It seemed to be saying something else, because Towada mumbled to himself, "Throw it high into the air? That's safe...right?"

The oatie leaped into my arms, nuzzling me affectionately as though to assure me of its intentions. Ayako's curiosity also appeared to have been piqued; she stepped outside to join us. "Oh my, I wonder what's going to happen. Go on, Takumi," she urged.

"Fine." Our eager faces must have won him over, for he trudged over begrudgingly to take the little star from me. He backed away a few paces, positioning himself at a distance. "All right, here goes," he announced.

“Go for it!” I cheered.

With a gentle underhand toss, Towada propelled the star skyward. It ascended, cresting the large tree’s tallest branch, then—it detonated with a flash of light. *BOOM*. A soft rumble reverberated into the stillness as countless luminous orbs burst from the star, exploding in a shower of sparks like a firework. Simultaneously, the bells hanging from the tree rang out in unison.

“Wow...” The spectacle left me breathless. Radiant spheres rained down around us, creating a brilliant dome of light centered on the tree, all while the bells’ melodic ringing continued to serenade the night. Whenever an orb touched my hair or shoulders or settled on my outstretched palm, it flared momentarily before vanishing like an ephemeral soap bubble.







I no longer felt the chill evening breeze. There was only the light, the sound, as though I were levitating within their mesmerizing bounds. Dizzily, I turned to Towada, our eyes meeting. “It’s so pretty, isn’t it?” I breathed.

He held my gaze, looking at me as if I’d uttered something incredibly childish. Then he started to chuckle, an unrestrained joy evident in his laughter. It was a side of him I’d never witnessed—a genuine, carefree laugh—and my heart fluttered wildly. Surprised, I rapidly blinked. He didn’t seem to notice me as his laughter subsided, his attention returning to the celestial display.

I clasped the oatie to my chest to help calm my racing heart. Half burying my flushed face in its soft fur, I stared upward once more, watching the receding magic.

As the bells’ chime faded, merging with the general din of night, the final remnants of light winked out, one by one, until only a sense of profound sentiment lingered. I closed my eyes, clutching that overwhelming emotion, unwilling to let it escape from the depths of my heart.

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**ON** New Year’s Day, Dad and I joined Mom at Grandma’s house while my brother stayed home to hold down the fort. To my relief, Grandma assured me her injury wasn’t as severe as I’d imagined. Instead of a cumbersome cast, she sported only a stiff wrist brace that permitted some movement in her fingers.

“Thank you for your concern, Haruka,” she said, “but it’s my nondominant hand. It’s really not that bad.”

“Really? But what about, like, bathing?” I wondered.

Though it pained her to put weight on the hand, and the doctor had warned healing would take time due to her age, Grandma was as spirited as ever, her smile reassuring.

Mom, however, didn’t seem to share her optimism. “You can’t wring out your towels, and you can’t very well clean or do laundry with just one hand, can you? You’re also lucky you haven’t gotten much snow, or else how would you manage that?”

“The Hayashis next door said they’d help with the snow,” Grandma answered.

“And your gas heater? How would you refill it?”

“Kenji can refill the heater when he comes with a delivery.”

Living alone, Grandma had cultivated a network of caring neighbors ready to lend a hand. While I believed in her ability to look after herself, I also understood Mom’s urge to help Grandma in her time of need. They lived apart, and she was her daughter, after all.

I was nodding along to their back-and-forth, maintaining neutrality, when Grandma rather eagerly changed the subject. “Haruka,” she said, turning to me, “would you like to walk Momo with me?”

Momo was my grandmother’s beloved dog, a very well-behaved Shiba Inu she’d adopted when I was in kindergarten. “Sure!” I said immediately.

“Mom, we’re in the middle of a conversation!” my mother grumbled. “Fine. Then, Haruka, could you grab some tofu on your way back? Silken, two blocks.”

With a perfunctory “okay,” I tugged on my coat and headed outside, where I was instantly assailed by winter’s chill, the sharp air needling my lungs and stinging my face. Dark, ominous clouds loomed to the west, no doubt ready to blanket the earth with snow.

As I clipped the leash onto Momo’s collar, Grandma asked from behind me, “Where’s your scarf, Haruka?”

I gave a nervous chuckle. “I forgot mine at home,” I said sheepishly. That wasn’t exactly true. I hadn’t forgotten it; my favorite scarf simply wasn’t available, and I couldn’t bring myself to wear anything else.

“Oh no, that won’t do, dear. Here, and put on this hat as well,” she insisted.

“Okay. Thanks.” Grateful, I obediently wrapped myself in Grandma’s handstitched scarf and hat, recalling in my mind what had happened on Christmas Eve.

After the oaties’ enchanting surprise, Towada and I had departed for my home, our path one I’d traversed countless times by then and knew like the back of my hand. For some reason, I couldn’t look at him without my face

growing hot and my heart racing, so I did my best to distract myself by blabbering on and on about the magical spectacle we'd just witnessed. As a result, I didn't notice how lightly Towada was dressed until we were over halfway there. His duffle coat hung open, revealing a mere shirt underneath. His uncovered neck looked uncomfortably breezy, and his hands were bare as they grasped the bike's handlebars.

"Aren't you cold? Where are your gloves?" I'd asked.

"I, um, forgot them at the door," he said.

A pang of guilt struck me. In my excitement over the night's events, I might have unintentionally rushed him. "Sorry, that's my bad," I mumbled.

"Not really."

"Still... Oh!" Hurriedly, I began to unwind my scarf. It was Black Watch tartan, the colors dark and gender neutral, so I was sure he wouldn't mind. Before he could protest, I rose on tiptoe to drape it around him.

He stilled, holding his bike steady while I crudely knotted the scarf, and although he didn't shrink away, he appeared perplexed. "What are you doing?"

Examining his newly snug neck and chest, I sighed in relief. "I'd feel terrible if you got sick walking me home. I have plenty of scarves; you can use this one," I asserted, trying to sound confident.

He looked a little uncomfortable swathed in the scarf I'd shoddily foisted on him, yet nodded reluctantly. "Thanks."

A bit more at ease, I switched topics. "Are you taking any extra cram school classes over break?"

"No, just the usual ones," he said. "What about you? I never took you for the cram school type."

"I've been looking into a few options," I replied. "It's just that all the cram schools here are so exam-centric, and it's hard to decide which high school to attend when I just moved here, you know?"

Tons of cram and extracurricular prep schools surrounded the main station in town, and they were all hyperspecialized for specific schools' entrance exams.

To choose one before determining a target high school seemed ill-advised.

“Do you know where you want to go?” I asked.

“Kinda, yeah.”

“Really? I’m still kind of undecided. It doesn’t help that there are so many options...”

Our discussion outlasted the trek to my house, and in a kind gesture, Towada parked his bike to hear me out.

“Don’t girls like to try for the same school as their friends? What are Kagami and Kudou doing?” he asked.

I hummed in thought. “Yeah, I guess. But Mao is Mao, and Honomi is Honomi. I’ve asked them, for sure, but I think this is ultimately something I need to choose for myself.” And though I’d requested their advice and their read on certain schools, I hadn’t dared reveal just how anxious I was feeling about it all.

“Hmm. Well, I don’t see any problem with going your separate ways either.”

“It’s always better to have friends, of course,” I sighed. “Have you...ever thought about what you want to do in the future?”

My question might have been too sudden, because he merely looked at me, appearing slightly stunned.

“S-Sorry, if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine. I just have no idea what I’m doing. I was curious what you were maybe thinking,” I clarified.

“Me?” he said, still confused.

“Yeah, it kinda seemed like you have it all figured out, so I thought... But anyway, sorry. Forget I asked.”

“I’d like to work with animals,” he said.

*Wow, that’s a fantastic answer.* And it made all the sense in the world. I only had to glance down for evidence: the ever-skittish Koro sat at Towada’s feet, not mine. He certainly had a gift with animals. “You mean like a vet?” I asked.

“If at all possible. I’m aware it’s not easy by any means.”

He spoke as though he were unsure, but I could already picture him, a bit

older, in a white coat, cradling a dog in one hand and a cat in the other. The image was so fitting. “I think you can make it happen,” I said.

“And you can cook, right? Ever thought about pursuing that?”

“I dunno. I’m not so sure. Takanori mentioned something similar.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, when I was at his workshop. Are you close with him?”

“Ah, the Christmas cake one? And yeah, somewhat. He was close with both my uncle and Ayako, so he visited often—less so lately, though. Not with how busy he is.”

“Oh, I see...”

I relayed the advice Takanori had given me that day, which elicited a “Sounds like something he would say” from Towada.

“Don’t get me wrong,” I hastened to add, “I’m happy he sees something in me, but I only took up cooking when my mom was hospitalized; it’s really not all that deep.”

That had been two years before, when I was in sixth grade. She was expected to need ten days to recover, and with Dad away on business, my brother and I had to step up. Mom had already taught us the basics: laundry, cooking, and cleaning, and somehow, we managed in her absence. Although the surgery was routine and Grandma came over to help, that mattered little to my anxiety. There were no certainties in life, especially on the operating table. What if Mom went under and never woke again?

Needless to say, those were the longest ten days of my life, and they changed me. I couldn’t help but think that if only I’d been a little more capable, done more around the house, maybe Mom wouldn’t have required the surgery. Chores were my refuge that week and a half, offering a mild distraction, and my culinary ventures traced back to that time. I hadn’t started cooking out of genuine passion, so to claim it as my future felt disingenuous.

“I just feel like I don’t have anything,” I admitted.

“I’m sure everyone feels that way.”

“You too?”

“Yeah. It’s not like you’re pursuing a specialty that requires you to start training in high school. I don’t think you need to force yourself to decide.”

His words, spoken with such casual conviction, caught me off guard.

Maybe that was true. Maybe it was okay for me to explore and wander, to find myself. A weight seemed to lift from my shoulders at the realization. “You’re probably right,” I said, sensing the hint of a smile finally returning to my face.

Towada pulled a small, festive package from his coat pocket. “Here. It’s not exactly a stoat, though.”

“For me?” I said in disbelief. He placed the present in my hand, and I unwrapped it to find a collectible keychain featuring a brown ferret character. “It looks just like an oatie! Thank you!”

As appreciation tumbled from my lips, I felt a gentle touch on my forehead—over the old scar that my headband had exposed. I recognized the pressure as Towada’s finger, and my breathing stalled. A wave of stillness washed over me; I was paralyzed. *What’s happening?!*

“Were you taken to K University Hospital for this?”

“Y-Yes,” I heard myself say.

He was so close. I remained rigid, my body so stiff it might have creaked. He was calm, whereas my heart betrayed my composure. I could hardly discern my voice over its wild beat.

I could’ve easily taken a step or even a half step backward to break contact, but I didn’t. Instead, I began to clumsily retell the story: “I hit my head and lost consciousness—which wasn’t great. They took me to a big hospital for tests.” The sentences careened out faster than I intended. “They didn’t keep me long, but I had memory issues afterward. It happened the spring break before I started elementary school, so that entrance ceremony is a blur.”

“You had memory problems?”

The scar was a testament to the severest injury that accident-prone me had



ever inflicted on myself. An accident, loss of consciousness, and ambulance ride—though I was standing in the freezing cold, my face was aflame.

“That’s why you don’t remember,” he murmured, finally dropping his finger. With a resolute nod, he said, “I was at that hospital too.”

“What?”

“My father took me there for an EEG and counseling for my ‘condition.’ You and I crossed paths in the courtyard.”

As the icy evening wind swept through me, a dormant memory awakened in vignette: a diminutive clearing; towering, sterile white walls, a sliver of a cerulean sky. *Right, this is what I was trying to remember the other day.* The distant sounds of hospital activity, the sunlight filtering onto the earth, the bright-green clovers, and his hand on mine. I’d glanced up, and he was—

“I remember now.” My voice quivered. “The four-leaf clover?”

His eyes softened behind his glasses.

“That was you?” I whispered.

“I never got the chance to thank you for it. I’ve thought about it ever since.” Relief seemed to flood his features as though a long-standing burden had been lifted, and I—

“Haruka,” a voice asked, “where are you going? That’s a dead end.”

“Oh, oops.”

*Crap.* I’d been lost in my recollection of Christmas Eve. I lightly clapped my hands on my flushed cheeks, attempting to wrangle myself back to the present. But hold on—a dead end?

“Grandma, wasn’t there a field here?”

Directly ahead, at the end of the narrow street, should have stood the small meadow where I once played as a child. Yet the space was obscured by a chain-link fence, blocking it from view.

“They’re building something. Construction began last spring,” Grandma said.

“I see...” I’d hoped to revisit my old clover patch once more, but was evidently

too late.

“It’s a shame, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, a little. But it’s okay; there were no four-leaf clovers there anyway.”

I’d found that elusive variety much closer to home—in that hospital courtyard, for instance. *No, stop.* I vigorously shook my head, dispelling the memory once again. Momo gazed up at me with a puzzled look. Gently tugging the leash, I said, “Let’s head home, Grandma. Mom’s probably getting impatient.”

“You might be right about that.”

As we walked, I heard the clink of the keychain Towada had given me in my coat pocket. I’d attached my bike lock and house keys to it immediately. The memory of that night refused to abate, sending a warm rush to my cheeks. Raising an elbow, I tried to shield my face from sight. Sneaking a glance beyond my arm, I observed the dark clouds from earlier advancing ever closer. I wondered if Towada was under a clear sky at the moment. Japan wasn’t all that big, yet what we experienced could be so different.

“That reminds me, Haruka,” Grandma mused, pulling me from my reverie. “Your brother used to dart about everywhere, but you were always crouching down, searching for something. You were hunting for four-leaf clovers in that field, were you? Ever find any?”

“Nope, I never did.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” She let out a soft chuckle, and the rest of our journey home was interspersed with her amusing anecdotes of my younger days.

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**AFTER** watching Takumi and Haruka fade into the winding neighborhood streets, I retreated indoors. The evening’s vibrant display of light and sound still played in my mind.

“You all sure are full of surprises,” I told the “oaties,” the little creatures Kaoru had once described as bisque dolls.

They cast me a fleeting, curious glance before slipping away to darker corners

of the house. Their hasty exit seemed to imply that with Haruka gone, they no longer had any business with me.

“Fickle as always,” I muttered.

An eerie silence permeated the house, a stark contrast to the earlier festivities, such that the liveliness and camaraderie of our time together seemed almost an illusion. Yet, the sense of fulfillment warming my chest lingered.

“That was quite the Christmas Eve, wasn’t it, Kaoru?” I reflected aloud, taking a seat at the dining table with a cup of warm water cradled in my hands. I directed the question to the chair Kaoru used to occupy. I never really expected an answer, yet I could never quite kick the habit.

“Haruka’s a good kid. She could do with a touch more confidence, but I suppose that’s easy for me to say.”

Wounds of the soul, as ambiguous and invisible as they seemed, often cut deeper than any physical injury—even more so when the person bearing them remained oblivious to their origin.

I recalled a conversation I’d shared with Sakiko, Haruka’s mother, a few days after their initial visit. She’d called again, that time hoping to speak with me alone.

“You must think I’m overprotective of my daughter, don’t you?” A note of self-deprecation strained her voice as she glanced downward, her eyes tracing the rim of her cup.

I had started to reassure her, “No, I wouldn’t—”

“Only a few close relatives know about this, but Haruka experienced a traumatic event as a child,” she said.

“And that’s okay for me to know?” I asked. “My lips are sealed, of course.”

“Yes, I want you to know. Seeing Haruka reach out to someone on her own is a rarity. And besides,” she added with a playful tilt of her head, “I’d like to think I’m a good judge of character.”

Her lighthearted demeanor did not prepare me for that grievous tale.

She recounted a sunny spring day from years past, when the cherry blossoms were beginning to bloom. Haruka, her brother, a few kindergarten friends and their parents met at a distant park for a playdate. The day was supposed to be a fun celebration of their graduation and a farewell to those heading to other schools. The park, buzzing with the energy of spring vacation, was a mosaic of gleeful children, watchful parents, and white-collar workers on break.

“I ran after my son who was chasing a ball out of the park. I thought Haruka was safe playing in the sandpit with her friends and the other moms.”

Just as she reached her son, preventing him from bolting onto a busy street, a heart-stopping scream sliced through the air. Whirling around, her eyes were drawn to a chilling scene: a man in a dark suit looming over a fallen figure, a thick branch in his hand. In an instant that lasted an eternity, she recognized the prone child as Haruka.

The incident had unfolded in a horrifying blur. A seemingly ordinary middle-aged businessman sitting nearby had inexplicably wobbled to his feet and approached Haruka before striking her with a branch he’d picked up. The randomness and swiftness of the attack had paralyzed the surrounding adults. Fortunately, a soccer coach on an adjacent field heard the scream and sprinted over, restraining the man and calling for help; the man didn’t resist. After the blow, Haruka had collapsed, her head cruelly meeting a curbstone.

“She lost consciousness, and an ambulance sped her to the hospital. Only when she awoke the next day did I breathe again. While the doctors couldn’t find anything wrong with her physically and discharged her soon after, her psyche bore the trauma.”

Sakiko described her daughter’s subsequent emotional turmoil: Haruka would laugh one second then cry uncontrollably the next. She’d be happily enjoying a book, only to become furious or terrified for no apparent reason. Her exhausted and frayed mental state was manifested by visual or auditory hallucinations, and during episodes, she displayed an irrational fear of other people, especially older men. Perhaps she was reexperiencing the assault in those moments, because she’d start to cry, yell, and hyperventilate whenever her father or a male doctor neared.

“We were in and out of hospitals for weeks before she finally started to stabilize. But, in the process, she also forgot about the incident entirely.”

Doctors believed it was a defensive mechanism: her mind had buried the trauma to protect her from reliving the event. Both parents agreed that letting Haruka heal naturally, rather than force her to confront the hidden memories, was the kinder option. Though symptoms of her psychological injury occasionally flared, over time, those signs diminished, and Haruka’s recollection of that period disappeared.

The incident changed Haruka. Gone was the bright, effervescent young girl, replaced by someone more cautious and introverted. Her passion for ballet, however, persisted, and she was excited to return once fully healed.

“She’s definitely not the same girl she was before the incident, but she’ll always be my Haruka, no matter what her personality is. I just find it heartbreaking that she doesn’t remember.” Sakiko trailed off, her gaze distant. “If only I hadn’t left her...”

The man who hurt Haruka had accepted his fate readily. He seemed relieved—eager even—to be prosecuted, but his motives remained unclear. He cited an inexplicable urge to harm someone that day, and for reasons unknown, Haruka was who caught his eye amid all the others in the park.

“Inexplicable...” I murmured, lost in thought.

“The senselessness of it all haunts me.”

“I can only imagine.”

Sparked by Sakiko’s story, something Kaoru once told me flashed across my mind. While the oaties in my house were harmless, there were ayakashi that bred malice simply by existing. There were also people who, although blind to ayakashi, felt their presence and could be influenced by them.

“The ability to perceive ayakashi,” Kaoru had remarked with a wistful smile, “whether by sight or presence, is something of an inherent trait, a mark etched onto our souls that compels us, and not the other way around.” He’d claimed that most with the ability were unaware of it. I had no reason to doubt him; after all, I’d been none the wiser until I married him.

The affection the oaties harbored for Haruka was, in a word, abnormal. It implied a unique quality in her, something that spirits—both good and bad—found attractive. Had the assailant played host to an entity he'd unknowingly nurtured? An entity that was drawn to that special something in Haruka, an entity that possessed him to carry out that heinous act? Such a theory might explain the lack of motive, though admittedly, it seemed a little far-fetched. While Kaoru had taught me much about ayakashi, to see real-world confirmation of that knowledge was a different matter.

I yearned for his counsel. *If only he were here now*, I wished impossibly.

"We've done everything we can to maintain a semblance of normalcy for Haruka," Sakiko concluded. "Being overprotective about something she doesn't even remember would only distress her. But I'm still worried. If it were up to me, I wouldn't even let her go to school by herself. They say lightning doesn't strike the same place twice, but that's cold comfort to an anxious heart."

*Naturally*, I thought. But to shelter Haruka would only help so much. The decision had to have been torturous. Haruka's solo walks with Koro, she revealed with a hint of sorrow, were like therapy for her, a way to ease herself into letting her daughter regain some independence.

Sakiko had come that day because she wanted me to understand her daughter's reality. After expressing her gratitude for my attentive ear, and with somewhat lighter steps, she'd ventured out into the tea olive-scented day.

The sensation of something brushing my lap roused me from my reminiscence. Looking down, I found one of the ayakashi settled there.

"Well, this is unexpected. Missing Haruka, are we?"

To Kaoru, they appeared as bisque dolls; to Haruka, stoats; to Takumi, goblins; and to me, they resembled small children clad in kimonos. I'd heard that their forms mirrored the conceptions of the beholder, yet a bisque doll and goblin were so comically unlike.

That my nephew regarded them as grotesque and charmless wasn't exactly without reason—he had his fair share of struggles, the curse of being such a discerning child.

“Still. Hate alone won’t get us to where we need to be. Isn’t that right, Kaoru?”

Those rare individuals gifted with the sight to perceive otherworldly beings performed a vital role in maintaining harmony between our realm and the one beyond. And among the “Regulators,” as they were known, Kaoru had been particularly notable for his prowess and influence.

Upon his passing, Takumi seemed the logical successor. But until he accepted the mantle willingly, his potential would remain latent. “It cannot be thrust upon him,” Kaoru had pleaded at the end.

A Regulator’s psyche was intimately tied to their sight. While Takumi had not chosen to bear those faculties, I hoped he would at least come to terms with their reality.

As I stroked the dark, raven-black hair of the ayakashi seated on my lap, it gazed up at me, its head angled inquisitively. Such gentle behavior was new, and likely due to Haruka’s—no, *Takumi’s*—influence, his heart slowly changing in tandem with his growing connection to Haruka.

I glanced absentmindedly at the clock on the wall. *He’s usually home by now.* But if his tardiness meant the aloof boy was actually taking the time to talk to someone, then that was all right with me. Though I did worry he might catch a cold; he’d dressed awfully lightly.

The gloves he’d forgotten in the entranceway were a gift from his parents abroad. They’d been tucked away by them as if in afterthought, carelessly nestled among other packages, with no card or special wrapping. It was an oddly heartwarming sight, one that signaled that the two mismatched buttons on the Towada family jacket might, at last, be ready to reunite.

“Takumi is so much like you, Kaoru. Stubborn, reserved—yet will undoubtedly protect us all.” Yes, my endearingly awkward nephew—he of the tired gaze, weary beyond his years—certainly would.

I was sure he felt a strong sense of responsibility for dragging Haruka into the world of ayakashi, and I knew that should the need ever arise, he would safeguard her from its perils, with which he was all too familiar. After all, when I first proposed that he accompany Haruka to and from our house, he simply

noded in agreement.

I exhaled a long sigh, my contemplation trailing off just as the scuff of the front door signaled his return. When he entered the room, he was gingerly unfurling a scarf I'd never seen him wear. He treated the garment with such delicacy that I couldn't help but suppress a smile.

"I'm back."

"Welcome back. You can hop in the bath."

Perhaps surprised by my nonchalant response to his lateness, he shot me a puzzled look before leaving the room once more.

"She won't be back until after New Year's," I murmured to the ayakashi on my lap. "Until then, you'll have to wait patiently for her to come back from her grandmother's." It replied with a gentle headbutt before hopping down and scampering away.

The enigmatic beings, those remnants of my connection to Kaoru, straddled the boundary between worlds and time itself. I wondered how we might appear in their eyes. Such thoughts lingered as I cleared away my cup, the distant sound of running water echoing in my ears.



## Chapter Four

**NEW** Year's concluded, and Mom and I returned from Grandma's. My father and brother had arrived home a week earlier and had been fending for themselves, so the house was in the exact state one would imagine: dreadful. Under the watchful eye of my mother—and the bulging vein on her temple—our first order of business in the bright dawn of the new year was to clean. While sorting through living room clutter, I found myself secretly wishing for a few oatie helpers.

The first days of January sped by, and it wasn't until the long weekend preceding Coming of Age Day that I had the chance to visit Ayako with souvenirs and New Year's well-wishes in tow.

Wandering through the quaint, familiar neighborhood with Koro, I noticed that many of the properties had substantial lawns. The zoning laws must have been very different in the past to not require developers to maximize every inch of buildable space. Perhaps that was why so many homes, especially those by the road, had such meticulously tended gardens. They transformed our walk into a delightful journey through lanes adorned with flora. In some gardens, plum blossoms had already bloomed, their scent wafting through the crisp winter air.

"Oh?" Upon reaching Ayako's house, I spotted a tall man about to unlatch the front gate. He turned at my noise of surprise and greeted me with a striking grin. *Ah, there it is, the blinding smile of a modern-day heartthrob.*

"Haruka, happy new year," Takanori said. "Walking Koro?"

"Happy new year. Yes, and I brought some souvenirs as well," I replied, hoisting a paper bag brimming with local delicacies from Grandma's area.

He nodded in sudden understanding. "Ah, I thought maybe you were also here to partake in some *amazake*, but I guess you're still too young for that, eh?"

“Amazake?” I echoed.

“Ayako serves amazake instead of the more traditional *tosu* for the new year. She makes it from sake lees she gets from a brewer friend of hers. It’s good stuff but quite strong—more so than the normal kind. Not exactly a middle schooler’s drink.” He ruffled my hair and said, “Something for when you’re older, eh?”

Yikes, he was close. His proximity spurred Koro to hide behind me. *Huh, I guess Koro’s not good around Takanori.* Given how well he’d taken to Ayako and Towada, I’d almost forgotten that he was still a little scaredy-dog.

We entered the yard together, following the paving stones and admiring the budding daffodils on our way to the door. Honestly, I was nervous; I hadn’t seen Towada since Christmas Eve, so I was glad not to be alone.

I was reaching out to ring the doorbell when the door abruptly burst open. Towada came flying out, and I jumped in surprise.

“Hey Takumi, Happy New Year’s,” Takanori crowed. “I’m here for your aunt’s amazake.”

“—new year.” Without stopping to invite us in or even look at us, Towada muttered a barely audible greeting and rushed off with his coat in hand.

“What do you think that’s all about?” Takanori murmured, sounding just as confused as I was.

“I’m...not sure...”

We exchanged concerned glances. Towada’s face had been clouded with an expression of anguish I’d never seen before—one that made my heart ache.

Bewildered, we stared in the direction Towada had vanished until we were jolted back to reality by Ayako’s voice: “Happy new year, you two. Come inside, why don’t you?”

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**THE** fragrance of the amazake Takanori had mentioned drifted through the open kitchen and dining room. After eagerly requesting a cup, he seemed to revert to high spirits. He sat cradling his prize in both hands, blowing gently to

cool it. Beside him, I grasped my own cup of green tea, an array of traditional snacks laid out before me—I'd come to give her souvenirs and ended up the one treated instead. I'd tried to decline out of politeness, and Ayako, true to form, waved me off with her usual "Nope, I'm not hearing any of it!" So there I was.

"Here you go, dear. To make up for the fact you can't drink," Ayako said, setting another plate before me. "I'll make sure to have some nonalcoholic koji amazake for you next year."

"Um, thank you! Wow, these are so pretty."

On the plate was an assortment of delightfully round, light-pink *jou-namagashi*—traditional desserts of sculpted mochi surrounding sweet bean paste. They were shaped like delicate flowers, fitting for the season. At first glance, they appeared to be plum blossoms, but a closer inspection suggested camellias.

As I hesitated, reluctant to consume such beautiful creations, something warm and furry climbed into my lap. *Oatie! Hi!* I glanced down and met its beady little black eyes. I reached to pet it—then stopped, remembering Takanori's presence. To someone who couldn't see ayakashi, I would be petting mere air. How strange would that seem? The oatie just gazed at my hovering hand, confused.

*I want to, I really do! But I can't! What do I do?*

Ayako, breaking into a tender smile, said, "Go on. He knows; it's fine."

I looked up in surprise, and Takanori flashed me an amused grin of his own. "Oh, I'm so envious—to be so loved by Ayako and the little ones alike!"

"Can you see them too?" I asked.

"Sadly no, not exactly," he answered. "I can only sort of feel their presence. And I've been coming to this house since I was a wee lad. How unfair is that?"

"You should be glad you can even feel them," Ayako remarked. She ferried over another bowl filled with rice crackers before settling down at the dining room table, clutching her own mug of amazake.

“Then, if you don’t mind... Hi, oatie! I’ve missed you!”

Under Ayako and Takanori’s warm regard, I petted the oatie with abandon. Reveling in the soft, silken fur that I’d been deprived of, I lifted it up and nuzzled it against my cheek. Seemingly pleased, the creature wrapped itself around my neck in response.

Takanori’s eyes softened, almost tracing the stream of sparkles emanating from the oatie’s mouth as he observed, “I can tell you two share a very special bond.”

“That one in particular really fancies her,” added Ayako.

Though their commentary was nothing but kind, my self-conscious self couldn’t help but latch onto the fact that the comments were still, well, *about me*. I wasn’t sure whether I’d ever get used to that feeling without my back prickling in alarm. Busying myself with the oatie’s plush fur, my thoughts drifted back to Towada. I was so curious about what might have happened, yet also accepted that he might never want to tell me.

As though reading my mind, Takanori turned to Ayako and said, “It’s been a while since I saw Takumi. He’s gotten taller, hasn’t he?”

“Yes, I think he has—and will continue to.”

“So, what happened? If you’re willing to share, I’m all ears,” probed Takanori. He asked as casually as if he were family, and I hoped they hadn’t forgotten I was there too. *Should I excuse myself or...?*

Either oblivious or indifferent to my internal dilemma, Ayako immediately answered, “Sorry about that. We just found out that Akira—that’s Takumi’s father, Haruka—is coming to visit.”

“I see,” murmured Takanori. He bit into a rice cracker with a resounding crunch. “Have I ever told you how much I can’t stand that man?” he said, sounding rather unamused.

“Takanori,” Ayako warned, “don’t be childish.”

Despite being scolded like a younger sibling, he remained defiant. “Who’s childish? Me or the guy who dumped Takumi on you and doesn’t even call?”

“You’re too harsh on him.”

“*I’m* being harsh? What, you’re just going to ignore all the bad things he said about you? He never even tried to get to know you!”

“It’s true that I was much younger than Kaoru when we married. I’d be worried too if I were in his shoes.”

“‘Worried.’ Yeah, right.”

That...was a lot to process. Clearly Takanori didn’t hold Towada’s father in the highest regard. I’d already gathered from the way Towada spoke about his family that there was some bad blood there, but... I was slightly uncomfortable learning so much about him behind his back.

As I squirmed, squeezing the oatie around my shoulders, Ayako looked at me apologetically. “Sorry, Haruka. I didn’t mean for you to hear all this. Akira isn’t the best at expressing his affection for his son. He and Takumi just don’t see eye to eye, is all.”

She sighed and glanced out the window while Takanori grimaced as though he’d bitten into something bitter. “Don’t see eye to eye, eh? Well, if you say so. By the way, for the Valentine’s Day workshop this year...”

Ayako perked up. “Yes, what do you have in mind?”

With that dramatic change in tone, the prior discussion about Towada and his father was set aside.

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**IN** the end, Towada didn’t come back before we had to leave. Ayako assured us that he was probably just at the library and that since he’d taken his phone with him, she wasn’t worried. Unexpectedly—or maybe expectedly by then—Takanori, who was supposed to be on his way to a New Year’s work party, was designated my escort home.

“Sorry for the trouble,” I said.

“Not at all, not at all. I was hoping for more time to chat.”

I’d tried multiple times to decline but was no match for his brand of radiant charisma. Takanori was famous, handsome, and, in spite of the hat pulled low

over his eyes, alluring. I sensed the stares and double-takes from strangers as we walked, their eyes questioning why I accompanied such a figure. God, I just prayed they assumed we were relatives.

“Has Takumi ever spoken to you about his family?” he asked, drawing me out of my mortification.

“Oh, um, just a little.”

“He did, did he? I thought as much. That’s great—that he now has someone to talk to about this kind of stuff.”

“Sorry?”

Not quite catching his words, I glanced up at him. He nodded to himself before the smile on his face faded into a graver demeanor. “You see, I don’t like that father of his. And even if Ayako tolerates the man, I don’t,” he said, reemphasizing his earlier contempt. “Uncle Kaoru—Ayako’s late husband—was classmates with my dad.”

“Um?” I wasn’t quite sure what he intended by saying that. But Ayako had mentioned that she was a lot younger than Kaoru... I attempted a few calculations: Takanori was around thirty, plus he had an older sister. If Kaoru had been classmates with Takanori’s father, that would have put Kaoru in his late fifties, early sixties, if he were still alive. And Ayako was close to my mother’s age, so...

*Their age gap was over two decades? That is substantial.*

“Ayako was still in college when Uncle Kaoru first brought her around, and she was met with instant disapproval.”

“From Towada’s dad?”

“Mm-hmm. The two brothers’ parents had already passed, so they were each other’s only family. While I get wanting to be protective, he took it a step too far. It’s not cool the way he’s distanced himself for so long and then only initiates contact to complain. It’s like he never even tried to hide his disdain for Ayako. Even as a child, his holier-than-thou attitude really grated on me.”

Takanori explained that Ayako and Kaoru’s journey to marriage was delayed

significantly because of the tension between Akira and Kaoru.

“Ayako is like an older sister to me, someone I always looked up to,” Takanori reflected. “She’s the nicest person, so it really upsets me to see someone disparage her without even bothering to genuinely get to know her.” His tone was knife-sharp; he made no effort to conceal his frustration. “Like, do you know how good Ayako and Uncle Kaoru were to each other? They cared so much for each other—to the very end.”

In my mind materialized a moment from Christmas Eve when Ayako dropped the needle on her record player. She’d placed it so delicately, her eyes narrowed in fondness as she gazed at the spinning disk. So much love lingered in the action that even I could tell she cherished him dearly.

“To be loved liked that—what more could we ask for in life?” Takanori regarded the sky wistfully, and in that instant, I thought he didn’t look any older than me. “Takumi’s been coming here since grade school. In the beginning, his mother dropped him off, but it wasn’t very long before he started coming by himself. His father never shows his face around here, so it’s been years since I’ve seen him. Can’t imagine he’s any different, though.”

*“He was desperate to ‘fix’ me, taking me to all kinds of doctors—psychiatrists, neurologists, you name it. But when none of that worked, he finally just gave up and left me alone.”* Towada’s words from one of our walks replayed in my head.

“And now he’s coming back, eh?” Takanori’s voice reached me from above. “Can’t imagine Takumi’s too happy,” he muttered, seemingly to himself.

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“**TELL** Takumi I’ll help in any way I can,” Takanori said in parting before leaving me at my doorstep. By all accounts, the return of Towada’s father did not herald a touching reunion. And frankly, if I’d been in Towada’s position, I didn’t think I would have often sought out my father either.

Still, Ayako claimed they simply didn’t “see eye to eye.” Not that I didn’t trust Takanori, but if Ayako, the person closest to Towada, could describe the relationship as such, then perhaps there was a slim chance of reconciliation.

Fumbling with my keys, I glimpsed the keychain Towada had given me. He

wasn't very talkative and was sometimes painfully blunt, yet he was undeniably kind and strong. So I would hold onto hope.

"Haruka? What are you doing?"

"Ah! Jeez, Mom!" I'd been so preoccupied that I hadn't noticed her open the door.

"I heard you outside, but you were taking so long with the door, so..."

"I was just kind of out of it."

"Uh-oh, you're not coming down with something, are you? Show me your forehead."

"No, I'm fine, I'm fine! I ran into Takanori while I was over there. He told me he'd reserve us a spot in his Valentine's Day workshop."

"Really? That's nice of him."

"Apparently he's bringing a chocolatier friend to help teach."

Mom's eyes widened. Yep, I'd been just as bemused. He'd withheld any further details, wanting to surprise us, but there was no doubt that the class promised to be amazing; I already couldn't wait.

"That'll be something to look forward to," Mom said.

"Since I went to the Christmas one, do you want to go this time, Mom?"

She hummed thoughtfully. "I would, but I think your father would be happier with something you made, so you go. Anyway, we really should get inside now."

Entering the living room, I switched on the TV for the weather but was met instead with breaking news. A senseless attack near a rural train station, the anchor intoned. I watched in stunned silence, struggling to wrap my head around the fact that such a tragedy had been taking place while I was out.

As a picture of the victims, a woman and young child at a local shopping district, flashed onscreen, I felt my mother shift uncomfortably behind me. "How awful. Let's watch something else." Her tone was calm as she snatched the remote from my hand—yet her fingers were ice cold.

Every time similar stories aired, Mom either shut off the TV or navigated to a



different channel. I'd assumed the nature of the news disturbed her, but as I'd recently realized, that wasn't the whole story.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "Mom, you really don't have to keep worrying about me."

"Haruka?" Her voice seemed to waver.

"What happened to me wasn't your fault." I gingerly pointed a finger to the faint scar on my forehead, and the remote slipped from Mom's hand and clattered to the floor. The news channel she'd failed to change was showing interviews with concerned residents.

*"I just can't believe it."*

*"It was so sudden."*

*"I heard screaming."*

Their shocked reactions played on the screen. Picking up the remote and switching it off, I asked softly, "Was it like that for me?"

"Haruka, you...remember?"

"I do. Not all of it, though."

Since Christmas Eve, since that conversation with Towada, my memories had returned little by little, starting with the image of the hospital courtyard.

"I was so young at the time, so there isn't really much for me to 'remember.' Now it just feels more like a normal 'I forgot' rather than 'I had amnesia,' you know?"

"Even what happened that day?"

"Mm-hmm."

I recalled fragments: making a large mountain of sand with my friends; a shadow looming over me, blocking out the sun. I'd turned, thinking it was my mother, to find an unfamiliar man instead. His figure was backlit, so I couldn't make out his face. All I could see was his dark suit, his arm raised high in the air, and the thick branch overhead. Fear had paralyzed me. I shrank into myself, closed my eyes, and when next I woke, I was in an unfamiliar bed, Mom crying

uncontrollably beside me. My head was pounding underneath gauze padding, one of my eyes covered. I remembered wondering why my father was there; it was still light out, so he should've been at work.

"I remember feeling scared, the bandages around my head, the hospital courtyard, and not much else."

"Is... Is that so?"

"Grandma told me too. Sorry, Mom."

During that year-end walk with Grandma and Momo, we'd talked about many things—the incident, my memory, and my mother. As I regained my recollection, I began to notice subtle changes in Mom's demeanor that I'd overlooked all that time. Sometimes her expression abruptly darkened only to revert to normal as though nothing had happened. That she harbored guilt for what had occurred to me became increasingly clear.

Had I remembered everything from the start, perhaps we could've processed the incident together, laughed it off, and said, "Well, that was a nightmare," and that would've been the end of it. But because I hadn't, that healing conversation never transpired, and Mom continued to bear the weight all alone. My regret over her years of pain, perhaps, was what compelled me to reveal to her the return of my memories.

"I thought you seemed a little bit different since Grandma's..." Mom mumbled.

"Yeah," I said with a half smile.





“You remember, but what about men?”

Grandma had told me that I’d harshly rejected anything that reminded me of the incident. My father in particular had struggled with the way I’d reacted to him. *I don’t remember any of that, but sorry, Dad.*

“I think that’s okay now,” I said. “I’m fine with Dad, my teachers, Takanori, so probably? Oh, but black suits are still a no. So maybe no funerals or formal functions for me for a while?”

At my joke, Mom finally managed to smile.

Who could have known that the boy I’d met in that hospital courtyard, then again in that fairy-tale house, would one day help me laugh about something so traumatic?

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**BEFORE** I knew it, winter break ended and third trimester began. I was putting on my shoes after bidding farewell to Mao and Honomi for the day when a familiar voice sounded from behind me. “Haruka, you gettin’ out of here?”

It belonged to Mao’s childhood best friend and the tennis club’s captain, Sakai. Surprised, I answered, “Yeah. And uh, are you heading to practice?”

Dressed in his gym clothes, his tennis shoes dangling from his hand, he grinned and said, “Yep! Third trimester’s short, so gotta do what we can.” He dropped the sneakers with a clatter, then stepped into them and began to knot the laces.

“Really? Then good luck. I’ll see you tomor—”

“Hey, Haruka, have you decided on valentines yet?”

I froze. *Valentines? Decided on? Decided on what? Also, did he just use my first name?* My head full of questions, I turned to look at him. He was all smiles, eager to hear what I had to say. Before I could muster a response, a black notebook came down hard on his shoulder. *Ah, Towada.*

“What the hell are you doing?” demanded Towada, exasperated.

I glanced up at his unusually annoyed expression. Our eyes met—and he

looked away quickly. *That...hurt a little.*

“Don’t get me wrong,” Sakai protested, “I was just curious what she was doing, that’s all.”

“I guess I’ll be giving some chocolate to my dad and brother, as I do every year?” I replied.

“Really? That’s great! Then it wouldn’t hurt to give some to us as well— Ah! I’m sorry, don’t hit me.”

“You’re unbelievable,” growled Towada.

Sakai’s voice had started out strong but faded into a terrified squeak. Towada was threatening Sakai somehow but had disappeared behind him; I couldn’t glimpse his method.

“Why not, man?” Sakai needled. “Don’t you want chocolate?”

“Oh, you want chocolate, Sakai?” I asked.

“You don’t have to entertain a thing he has to say,” Towada retorted. Heaving a sigh, he moved to change his own shoes.

*I mean, sure, that’s easy for you to say, but Sakai looks really expectant!* Suddenly, I understood. “Oh, I get it! You want chocolate, but from Mao, right? I’ll tell her right away.”

I heard a vocalization of astonishment from Sakai and a sputter from Towada.

“Wait, wait, wait, let’s not be... Hm? Maybe this could work, actually?” mumbled Sakai incoherently as he made a speedy escape, dashing toward the athletic fields.

Thoroughly confused, I watched as he vanished from view. “Was I mistaken?”

“No, I don’t think you were,” Towada said. “Also, sorry.”

“For...what?” I eyed him, unnerved by the abrupt apology. His gaze was fixed on the floor, avoiding mine.

“Your scarf. I never returned it to you.”

*Oh, that.* I breathed an internal sigh of relief. “No worries. I have this one, see?” I fingered the red tartan scarf around my neck. Then, suddenly

remembering the events of Christmas Eve, my face grew hot. We hadn't really seen each other since then, I realized. Somehow even more embarrassed, I hurriedly lowered my eyes and, in doing so, caught sight of the navy-blue towel in his grip. "You're using the towel!"

"Oh, yeah."

Excited, I lifted my head and our eyes met once again. My embarrassment peaking impossibly higher, I averted my gaze hastily. My stupid heart was beating so loud! I'd never been so nervous, not even during ballet recitals. I dropped my hand to my chest to try to still its pounding.

"Kitazawa, I—"

His voice barely began before an icy shiver shot down the length of my spine. Something dark, ominous, seemed to stretch its fingers from the stairwell behind me, making my shoulders twitch and tremble. The world winked out of existence. All noise, the hum and murmur of life, even the frenetic pulse of my heart, was consumed by an eerie void. I couldn't hear anything.

But I could feel it—something was there.

*Something's there?*

The air grew oppressive as though I were being smothered under an invisible weight. The sensation was like those odd, surreal moments in childhood when, on vacation with family at the beach or while alone in the forest near Grandma's house, one was seized by a strange isolation although loved ones were a shout away. A sense of experiencing the same scenery yet being worlds apart—tainted with overpowering foreboding, as if a jet-black hole of nothingness lay just over my shoulder, hungry and waiting.

The feeling was alien, a raw challenge to everything I held true.

My body moved on its own, starting an unwilling pivot toward the encroaching abyss. An abrupt, forceful tug on my arm pulled me off balance, and I staggered one step—two—before falling into Towada's arms.

"Don't look behind you." His urgent whisper wove through the dense silence.

Though my head was pressed tight against his chest, his arms brushing my

ears, I felt numb, distant. His voice filtered through once more: “No sudden moves. Just walk with me.”

I ventured a glance upward. His lips were opening and closing, but his voice seemed to lag behind. He stared firmly at whatever was behind me as he slowly, gently, backed us away. The instant we reached a shaft of sunlight, the shadow that gripped us faded.

Life roared back into my ears—the cadence of students training on the grounds, the thud of a baseball caught in a mitt, the dissonant notes of the school band as they rehearsed. As my heartbeat resynchronized with the world, I exhaled heavily and sank to the ground. “What...was that? An ayakashi?” I murmured.

He extended a hand to help me up. “Sorry, it was me it was after. Did it scare you?”

“Scared? No... No, I was fine, actually.”

“What?” he choked, utterly bewildered.

“I mean, I wasn’t fine—but I wasn’t scared either. I just felt...strange?” The sensation had been novel more than anything else. More off-putting than terrifying, more a tightness in the throat than a pit in the stomach. Yet if given the option, I much preferred that I never feel that way again.

“Were you headed home by yourself?” he asked.

“Yeah. Mao and Honomi both have club, so.”

“I’ll walk you back then. Hold on a sec, let me tell Sakai I’ll be absent.”

“What? No, that’s fine. It’s not there anymore, is it?” I glanced at the stairwell, which appeared as innocuous as ever.

“Just stay here. I’ll be right back.”

“But Towada—!”

“Just stay.” He cut me off with a resolute grip on my shoulders, his gaze intense, piercing.

“O-Okay, sure.” I nodded, and Towada released me and strode away.



As he disappeared from sight, I could have sworn I heard Ayako laughing, “Towada men sure are stubborn, aren’t they?”

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**THAT** ominous darkness, Towada later elucidated, was similar to yet entirely different from the oaties. His explanation of that new kind of ayakashi, those that flitted into and out of existence, was interspersed with apologies as though he believed he was at fault for the encounter. He refuted my every attempt to reassure him of my well-being, until finally, I insisted that I was at least physically fine.

“That’s not true. Your body reacted, didn’t it?” he challenged.

He’d noticed. And indeed, I’d felt oddly out-of-body, my hearing had fizzled out, and a chill had claimed my extremities. The fact that he had picked up on those subtle signs left me flabbergasted. “Well, by the time we were outside, I felt normal again,” I protested.

“It gave up because we distanced ourselves from it. What if you encounter it again when you’re alone and can’t escape? Do you really think you’ll still be fine?”

“I mean...” I couldn’t muster an answer, feeling rather as though I’d forfeited the argument with my lie.

“That was no minor ayakashi. An entity that powerful is bound to draw others, so you can’t risk being alone. Not all of them are benign like the ones you’re familiar with.”

I’d painted myself into a corner and could therefore only acquiesce to his demands. From that day on, Towada would accompany me home in the afternoons—and he would’ve joined me each morning too if I hadn’t wriggled my way out of that suggestion. He had morning practice which made an early escort inconvenient, and besides, I told him, I’d be safe among the throng of students headed to school. The notion of him arriving at my doorstep every morning was just too much. Wasn’t that something *couples* did? The very idea sent warmth rushing to my cheeks, and I shook my head to banish the thought.

And so, days later, there I was. The winter sunlight streaming in through the

library windows cast a warm glow on my back as I sat engrossed in my schoolwork, waiting for the tennis club to wrap up practice so Towada could walk me home. I would've been more than okay waiting for him by the shoe lockers, but he argued they weren't safe due to their proximity to the site of the "appearance." Honestly, I wasn't sure whether to be exasperated at his overprotectiveness or grateful for his pains to help me.

I glanced at the clock; he would be done soon. And as if on cue, I heard the library door quietly slide open and Towada enter. I swiftly packed up, then headed to intercept him, trying to avoid the library assistant's gaze.

As accustomed as I was to our shared commutes, a hint of embarrassment still lingered. Our topics of conversation primarily revolved around three topics: school, oaties, and other ayakashi that Towada could see. Given his taciturn nature, I typically had to steer our chats, which wasn't my strong suit. But I managed it with Towada, somehow.

"Do you often see ayakashi at school?" I asked that afternoon.

"Not really. That was the first time. I've never seen anything besides oaties at Ayako's house either, so I gather they're quite territorial or at least nonconfrontational."

"You mean the oaties are?"

The ayakashi we encountered at school had been starkly different from the oaties, I reflected. Rather than warmth, its presence had oozed apathy and foreboding. I pondered aloud the possible motives of such an ayakashi, and Towada's response surprised me.

"According to my uncle, they don't manifest with a particular purpose."

"Really? Then why do they appear?"

"They show themselves to 'confirm their own existence.' For example"—he gestured at a tree next to the sidewalk—"would you say there's anything in that tree?"

"I...don't think so?" There were no signs of movement in its evergreen canopy, nor did I hear any chirping.

Approaching the tree, Towada gently shook the trunk—once, twice—and two startled birds flew from the rustling branches.

“Whoa, sparrows—I think.”

“It’s the same as that,” he said, watching the birds flap into the distance.

I stared at him blankly, puzzled.

“Those sparrows weren’t hiding from us just now—we just couldn’t see them.”

“Right.”

“Which you took to mean they weren’t there at all—as if they never existed in the first place. Similarly, some entities need to be acknowledged to affirm their being. They reveal themselves occasionally—just so they can continue to exist.”

His explanation was more metaphysical than I anticipated. I tried to summarize. “So they get lonely is what you’re saying?”

Towada goggled at me as if I’d just said the most outrageous thing in the world. “I don’t think they feel emotions like that, but—I’m sorry, how did you get that from what I said?”

“Well, you said that if they go unnoticed, they fade away. And to avoid that, they seek out contact. That sounds like loneliness to me.”

Was I wrong? What he described seemed to suggest that the ayakashi didn’t like being alone. But judging by the amused arch of Towada’s eyebrow behind his glasses, perhaps I was off the mark. “I think I’m starting to understand why they like you so much...”

A passing truck drowned out his voice. I asked him if he could repeat the rest of what he’d said, but he didn’t oblige.

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**THE** following week, I was eating lunch with Honomi when she suddenly emitted an audacious little giggle. “So, what kind of chocolate is Towada getting for Valentine’s?”

“Excuse me?” I replied, dumbfounded.

She paused to select a cherry tomato from her salad, then fixed an intense gaze on me. “You’ve been walking home with him all trimester, *and* you’ve been to his house, right?”

“Well, yeah—but no, it’s not like that!”

“So have you decided? Store-bought? Homemade? It should be homemade, shouldn’t it? Ah! This is so much fun,” she trilled, seeming to wander off into her own fantasies, her eyes distant.

I shot a look at Mao, pleading for intervention, and she merely offered me a cheeky grin. “You think Towada likes sweets?” she asked. “What are you going to do if he doesn’t? But then again, Valentine’s only comes once a year, so—”

“S-Speaking of, are you giving some to *you-know-who*?” I said to Honomi.

She immediately deflated. *Uh-oh*. My attempt at deflection appeared to have worked a little too well. “I’d like to, but he has exams, so...”

“Oh, I see...” I muttered sheepishly. “Um, sorry.”

“But I’ll just have to make up for it at graduation!” she declared, her mood abruptly lightening.

Mao chimed in, “Yep, good luck with your band club tulip thing!”

“Thanks!”

*Band club tulip thing?*

Nodding gratefully at Mao, Honomi turned to me. “You know how it’s tradition to give flowers to graduating seniors? Well, in band club,” she clarified, “we take that a step further: it is also prime confession time for us.”

In turn, she and Mao explained that the custom, which involved a gift of red tulips alongside the confession, was started years before by an alumnus who’d successfully wooed their crush by doing just that. “In the language of flowers, a red tulip means ‘a confession of love,’ dontcha know?” gushed Honomi, clutching her cheeks in excitement. She was positively glowing—and not just from the sun shining behind her.

“That’s cute. Well, good luck then!” I said.

“Thanks! And good luck to you too!” she replied.

“Um, yeah, anyways—Mao! What are you getting Sakai?”

Mao, mid-drink, violently choked on her milk. As Honomi and I patted her back, she looked up with watery eyes. “Haruka...” she whined.

“S-Sorry! It’s just that Sakai told me he wanted chocolate.”

“F-From you, no?”

Honomi and I shared a glance, then shook our heads. “No, I don’t think so,” I answered.

“Definitely not,” Honomi added. “Mao? Why’s your face so red?”

“Because I just choked, okay?!”

Thus, we learned that lunchtime that Valentine’s Day was a sensitive topic for both Mao and me.

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**LATER** that day, I waited for Towada to finish practice as usual. The sky had turned a gloomy shade of gray, and a chill sharpened the air. As he approached, he thrust a paper bag toward me; inside was the scarf I’d lent him.

I glanced up at his neck—it was naked and surely uncomfortably cold. “Do you not have a scarf or neck warmer of your own?” I asked.

Still holding the bag out in front of him, he ignored my question.

“You can keep that if you need it,” I tried again.

“I don’t.”

“I feel cold just looking at you. Or would you prefer this red one instead?” I pointed to the scarf I wore.

In a rare show of surprise, his mouth gaped open.

“I’m serious. If you don’t mind a hand-me-down, take it,” I urged. Noting his reluctance, I played my trump card: “Take it, or I’m going home by myself.” That appeared to do the trick—his resistance melted and he draped the scarf over his shoulders.

"You know, my grandma always stressed the importance of keeping your 'necks' warm," I said.

"My necks?" he echoed, perplexed.

"Yeah, like your wrists or ankles. They're like necks, right? Just for your hands and feet. You'll get sick if you don't bundle them up, or so she says."

He hummed in response. A biting evening wind tore through a nearby alleyway, making me shiver. Recently I'd been getting home later because of Towada's practices. I rarely arrived in time for Koro's weekday walks anymore, so they had become my mother's responsibility. Of course, when I handed the task off to her, she just had to ask the reason.

*"I'm thinking of stopping by the library after school."*

*"Oh, why's that all of a sudden?"*

*"...Towada said he'd walk me back."*

She hadn't pressed for more details, yet the glint in her eyes told me all I needed to know.

Jolted back to the present, I realized Towada hadn't said much of anything. At a red light, I asked, "Are you okay just listening to me talk? I'm not being annoying, am I?"

"Not really," he replied curtly.

"Should I talk less?"

"Not really."

"Is 'not really' all you know how to say?" My voice came out snarkier than I intended. To constantly have to carry the conversation *did* feel a little unfair.

Towada looked at me—down at me, due to our difference in height—and he appeared almost amused. "You've changed since I first met you."

"I have?"

"You talk a lot, you smile, you sulk."

My back prickled. "So you *do* think I'm annoying?"

“Not really?” he teased. Yet his gentle gaze was reminiscent of how he usually looked at Koro, stopping me in my tracks. A lump rose in my throat, stoppering my reply.

“No longer shy, are you?” he added.

“Only with familiar faces.”

He chuckled. “Is that so?”

As the signal changed, Towada advanced, and I hurried after him. Since he was in a good mood, I figured then was as good a time as any to tell him. *Just say it casually, like it's no big deal.* “By the way, Takanori said he'd help in any way he can.”

“Help?” he repeated.

“Yeah, when he walked me home from your house that day.”

“Oh, yeah. That.”

His voice was neutral, and I wondered how he actually felt about his father's return. I'd wanted to pass on Takanori's message sooner and in a manner that wasn't too intrusive, yet the timing never seemed quite right. From what little I'd heard and the way he'd dashed out of the house that day, I certainly didn't think Towada and his family had the greatest of relationships. But I nonetheless clung to Ayako's perspective, preferring to believe that they simply didn't “see eye to eye.” Perhaps that was why I thought he looked rather unbothered as he walked beside me.

“Sorry for springing that on you,” I said.

Hoping to transition to a different topic, I was floundering in silence when he suddenly preempted me. “Hey, are you free after this?”

“Um, yeah, pretty much.”

“Then can we talk for a bit?” Towada halted, planting his feet in front of the entrance to a park. Replete with a plaza, sandpit, and a set of swings, it was the kind of place that overflowed with children doing radio calisthenics during the summer. But that night, under the budding glow of streetlamps in the swiftly encroaching twilight, it hosted only a group of older kids playing soccer.

Instead of heading inside, he settled against a U-shaped bollard at the entrance. “So, you know about me,” he began vaguely.

Leaning against the next post over, I simply nodded. I sensed the import of his words.

“I was born like this, so this might be obvious, but as a child, I didn’t know what was ‘okay’ to see and what wasn’t. That creeped my mother out, to say the least.” He described how he had often stared, seemingly for no reason, into nooks and crannies or empty space. How he’d touched and interacted with absolutely nothing, much like a mime would.

*He’ll grow out of it* was the hope his mother had clung to. But when he started to converse with invisible entities, present her with rough crayon sketches of the figures he claimed he could see, any remaining chance of that hope coming to pass vanished.

“People born with the ability to see ayakashi have dwindled in recent years,” he said. “Before my uncle, it was my great-grandfather.”

Towada’s father, who’d vehemently denied the possibility that his children could be born with the sight, had concealed his lineage from his wife. Often absent for work, he returned home a mere once a month. Given the issue’s sensitivity, Towada’s mother sought counsel not from her peers but the internet, and the dubious claims and unreliable sources she found there only served to amplify her fears.

“Maybe she didn’t want to burden my father, but she kept my peculiar behavior a secret.” Anxious about the risk of societal judgment, she began to curtail their outings, progressively becoming more reclusive. In her isolation, the mounting stress wore on her physical and mental health. “I was told she had postpartum depression that escalated into a severe mental crisis.”

I nodded, hanging on to every word.

“Only when she could no longer manage caring for us did my father find out. That’s when he reached out to Uncle Kaoru, and I started to visit him and Ayako. My father couldn’t accept that I was one of ‘them’ and took me to get examined at all kinds of hospitals.”



*Including the one where I met him...*

“Maybe because of how they were, I never thought of them as my parents. We rarely talked, barely even ate together.”

His story was heart-wrenching. A mother overwhelmed by guilt for feeling uneasy and fearful around her own child, for being unable to grasp his unique nature. A mother who couldn't manifest love, whose heart was instead consumed by an engulfing dread she couldn't name or understand.

A mother who wept, inconsolable, alone, while her son gazed at her in absolute silence, watching her with those horrible, horrible eyes.

“She never learned how to cook, so our meals were middling at best. But I think she did what she could. Once she learned the truth of my condition, she showed signs of improvement, though it was clear she still struggled in my presence.” Upon embracing the reality of her son's inheritance, the burden on her heart lightened; neither she nor her son were at fault. Yet although she could box away past sorrows, the deep, deep chasm dredged by her years of pain would require time to refill. And his father, who'd lived in willful ignorance, became even more entrenched in his ways, deeply affected by his family's suffering.

To deny an innate aspect of someone was akin to refuting their existence. All the more so for a young child incapable of distinguishing between himself and his abilities.

I was engrossed in Towada's history. He'd never talked for so long before, and his tale weighed heavy on my heart. Though his gaze occasionally drifted, his voice remained steady.

“In third grade,” he said, “I told my best friend about it.”

“About your sight?”

He nodded. “My father had always told me that if I wanted to live a normal life, I should keep my head down and my mouth shut, to never give cause for suspicion. But I wanted to believe in my friend, believe that he was good at heart.”

“Right,” I said quietly.

“Turns out, my father was right. Fortunately, the rumors never spread, and my family moved soon after for my father’s job.”

Then Towada told me about a teacher he once trusted. After tentatively revealing a sliver of his true self and seeing the unmistakable fear in the teacher’s eyes, he brushed the admission off as merely a “story.” He told me about hospital nurses who listened to him in feigned sympathy, nodding and sighing, “That’s rough, dear,” only to label him a compulsive liar behind closed doors.

Eventually, with the birth of his “ordinary” sister acting as a sort of buffer, their family gained a semblance of normalcy. But that was short-lived, for his father’s work would soon take them overseas.

“I saw it as an opportunity to stay behind in Japan and distance myself. The decision was mutual. Ideally, I’d prefer not to see them. I have no fond memories of them and never really considered them family anyway.”

I noticed that Towada’s fist was clenched, his knuckles a stark white. For a fleeting instant, despite everything that he had just disclosed, I found myself thinking that he had to be cold without gloves.

On instinct, I reached out and took his hand. I gently uncurled his fingers one by one, until at last he looked down at the deep indentations his nails had left on his palm.

I didn’t expect the scars he bore to disappear overnight, yet I wanted to be his solace, even if just for a moment. Lightly resting my hand on his, I whispered, “But you managed to open up to me, didn’t you?”

“Because one of them invaded your house.”

Unable to bring myself to meet his eyes, I locked mine on our overlapping hands. “And you saved me from the one by the stairwell.”

“Because you looked like you were about to faint.”

His hand was warming as the tension drained from it. “And you walk me home every day.”

“That’s because...” His voice trailed off. Realizing something in the park had

caught his attention, I followed his gaze. Past the group of boys chasing a ball in the dim twilight, perched on top of a hedge, was a *massive* bird.

Its beak was a deep, vibrant green. Its dull, blue-gray plumage seemed to melt into the surrounding evening, while its eyes were striking crimson, visible even from our distance. Staring straight at us, it silently unfurled an immense wing to reveal white feathers that shone with an almost otherworldly glow.

The rowdy shouts of the kids playing soccer, the hum of the cars on the street all dissolved into nothingness. The sensation was the same as that day at school, without the accompanying unease.

I blinked my eyes, trying to get a better glimpse, yet the bird faded into the darkness before I could. Towada squeezed my hands, reminding me that he was still beside me.

“W-Was that another ayakashi?”

“Well, that’s not one you see every day,” he murmured calmly, suggesting that that particular variety wasn’t a threat.

“That was one huge bird, wasn’t it? It kinda looked like a shoebill.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Oh, do you not know what a shoebill is? Hm, but they like to stay still, and that one moved...”

The first time I’d seen a shoebill at a zoo, I’d been astonished—and mildly terrified. It had towered above me, so eerily motionless that it more resembled a lawn ornament than a living bird. I remembered standing slack-jawed in front of its pen for a long while.

Towada appeared momentarily shocked but was quick to recover. “That looked like a shoebilled stork to you just now?”

Recalling how Towada perceived the oaties, I replied, “Its plumage was much prettier than the real thing, but yeah. Not the same for you?”

“You really do see them all as animals, huh?”

I seemed to have been right on the money. “I guess so.”

Before I could ask him what the shoebill had looked like from his perspective, he changed the subject. “You feeling all right?”

“My hearing faded again, but I’m good now. Yep, just peachy.” Indeed, the ambient sound—the rustle of leaves on the wind, the screech of tires on asphalt, the lively chatter from the park—had returned. And I hadn’t collapsed on the spot, my hands and feet hadn’t gone cold, and my heart wasn’t beating out of my chest.

Just kidding, it totally was.

Why? Well, Towada and I were still holding hands. At some point, I must have gripped his, hard.

Wait, but why hadn’t he let go?

“That’s good. The one just now wasn’t dangerous.”

“Great—that’s great, but, um, your hand—”

“And you can tell Takanori thanks, but I don’t need his help. I was just a little surprised by the news that day, but I’m fine.”

“T-Towada, y-your hand!”

“What about my hand?” His amusement was clear in his tone; there was no way he didn’t know what I was talking about! I was at fault for grabbing his hand in the first place, but still!

“Thanks for hearing me out. Let’s get going; it’s getting dark.”

I mumbled in acknowledgment, our hands naturally separating as we resumed walking.

Even when we parted, my hand remained inexplicably warm for the rest of the evening.

## Chapter Five

**I**N late January, Ayako invited me to join her in making *chun bing* to celebrate the start of the new season. She explained that chun bing, “spring pancake” in Chinese, was a traditional dish prepared using the first vegetables of the new year’s harvest and consumed in the waning days of winter. The concept reminded me of *nanakusa-gayu*, the seven-herb porridge cherished as a seasonal delicacy in Japan.

It was a beautiful Saturday. My mother was away at work, my father was sleeping off another long night on the job, and my brother was out with his friends. With absolutely nothing else planned, I eagerly responded to her message with a “Yes!” and departed for her house.

“It’s essentially a thin dough filled with your ingredients of choice—vegetables, meat, you name it,” Ayako said.

“Kinda like hand-rolled sushi?” I ventured.

“More like Peking duck I’d say.”

We combined bread flour and cake flour, adding near-boiling water to form a dough. As I rolled and pressed it with my hands, the mixture quickly smoothed and developed a nice sheen. It stretched well yet still felt light and airy to the touch, which I hadn’t quite expected. Perhaps that was because of the hot water?

“When it’s as soft as a baby’s bum, you’re all done,” Ayako instructed.

Although I was tempted to continue kneading the soft, silky dough, it was ready. I shaped it into a ball and transferred it to a mixing bowl, covering the container with a damp cloth. The next steps involved dividing the dough into tiny, grape-sized balls before pressing them paper-thin and cooking them on the stovetop.

Ayako had prepared two fillings: a Chinese-style salad with shrimp, glass

noodles, and bean sprouts, and Peking duck. With the salad already done, all that was left was the honey-marinated duck breast, which I fried under Ayako's watchful eye, filling the kitchen with its fatty, sugary aroma. Once that was cooked through, we merely needed to shave it into thin slices akin to roast beef and voila, it was ready to serve.

Towada, meanwhile, was out in the yard, keeping Koro and the oaties company. Since we were just about finished in the kitchen, I glanced out the window and caught them in the middle of playing fetch. *Well, that's certainly a heartwarming sight.*

I moved to the patio door and slid it open. "Towada, food's almost ready!" I shouted. The oaties all dispersed in an instant, though one oatie—my oatie—swiftly bounded over to me. With a dexterous leap, it hopped onto my shoulders. *Aw, I love you too!*

As Towada approached with Koro, the distinct sound of the gate latch drew my attention. Expecting a delivery person or the postman, I was surprised to see a tall man dressed in a pristine suit and coat, his hair perfectly styled. Towada stiffened, and I heard him draw a sharp breath. The man advanced toward us purposefully. The color of his hair, his tightly pursed lips, his striking eyes—his features reminded me of Towada, yet his overall bearing couldn't have been more dissimilar.

"What are you standing there for, Takumi? Forgotten the face of your own father, have you?"

"Dad."

That was all that was exchanged before a weighted silence descended upon them, an unspoken tension thickening the air. Were they sizing each other up? Engaged in a staring contest? A wordless discussion? I didn't know how to describe just what exactly was happening between the two.

I was at a loss; I'd thought his father wasn't due for another week. I glanced at the oatie for support, and it simply looked at me with curiosity. *How are you still so cute even in times like these?*

"Hurry on inside you two, everything's rea—oh my." Ayako had finally stepped outside to check on us.

“A-Ayako!” I exclaimed, relieved to see her.

“Akira, welcome. We weren’t expecting you for another week,” she said, yet her tone was one of acknowledgment rather than shock.

Akira finally looked away from his son. “My plans changed.”

“They like to keep you on your toes, don’t they?” Ayako replied. “Have you had lunch yet?”

“No.”

“We were just about to eat. Would you like to join us?”

Towada visibly tensed, but his father nodded. And so we convened indoors to enjoy our chun bing.

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“**SORRY** I missed your text. I hadn’t realized you’d arrived and checked into your hotel already.”

“It happens. I didn’t expect you to adjust for me.”

Amidst the adults’ intermittent conversation, Towada and I quietly savored our meal. Luckily, Akira seemed rather understanding in that he didn’t fault Ayako for failing to check her phone while she was cooking. With Towada’s father suddenly thrown into the mix, I’d been worried the atmosphere might curb my appetite, and fortunately, those concerns were mostly unfounded: the chun bing was delicious, and the speed of my adjustment surprised me.

“You have great timing, Akira,” remarked Ayako. “Had you come a day earlier, you might have had to settle for a simple *ochazuke* for lunch.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Do you miss Japanese food?”

“I’m not fussy.”

“Glad to see you haven’t changed.”

Despite his stated lack of interest, Akira, sitting opposite me, voraciously consumed everything before him. Whether of the chun bing or the additional rice balls we’d made, he partook without hesitation. I momentarily forgot my

discomfort in the face of his appetite, it serving as a distraction from the peculiar scene unfolding before me.

I looked down at the oatie on my lap. No, the oatie wasn't peculiar in the slightest; it was always there. No—what was peculiar was *the veritable army of oaties gravitating toward Towada's father*.

Three settled in his lap, one perched on his shoulder, and five more lingered by his feet, seemingly waiting for their turn. Those already atop him sought to climb yet higher up his body, only to fall down, rise, and try again. *Just what is going on?*

He didn't possess the sight and had to be unable to feel their weight or warmth, because he appeared utterly unbothered. It took all I had to keep myself from bursting into laughter at the sheer absurdity of the spectacle. The mischievous oaties clambering up and down the stone-faced man as though he was a summit to be conquered was far too much for me to ignore.

I glanced at Ayako for help, and she simply smiled back at me. I swiveled to Towada beside me; he just looked away. *No, please, I need someone to acknowledge the situation. I'm going to explode!*

Attempting a diversion, I loaded another chun bing wrapper with duck, spring onion, and sweet bean sauce. But just as I was about to take a bite, an oatie scaled Akira's face and quickly slid off. My mouth was already open; there was no saving me. A series of puffs, huffs, and odd vocalizations emerged as I desperately struggled to hold back my laughter.

"Kitazawa, was it?" Akira addressed me. "I heard you're quite the bizarre young lady."

"Dad," said Towada in curt reproach. He shared his blunt manner of speech with his father, but I could hardly dwell on the realization. Two oaties were working in unison to tug on Akira's cheeks, stretching them out like dough. Another, having finally surmounted his head, appeared utterly triumphant as it started to rhythmically rap his scalp while singing what I assumed to be a song of victory.







The corners of my mouth twitched. I had no doubt I was making the weirdest face imaginable.

“Not to mention you come here willingly to meet them. Quite odd indeed.”

“Dad, you just met her. Don’t you think you’re being rude?” Though Towada rebuked his father once more, he was clearly uncomfortable doing so, his voice wavering ever so slightly. Ayako was staring blankly into space, a muted smile on her lips.

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Excuse me!” I shot to my feet, brushing the oatie off my lap, and neared Akira. I removed the creature from his head and held it at eye level in front of me. *Don’t give me that disappointed look. You know you can’t be doing this!* “No more mischief during lunch, okay?” I said sternly.

It looked unhappy as if I was confiscating a favorite toy.

I politely asked again, and that time, the ones pulling at his cheeks also halted. “S-So sorry. I just had to,” I said to Akira.

“I don’t mind. They were making a fool out of me again, weren’t they? This is exactly why I’m disinclined to visit.”

“Again? What do you mean again?” repeated Towada, incredulous.

“You never told him?” his father asked Ayako.

On the verge of breaking, she wiped tears from the corners of her eyes, saying, “Well, you told me not to tell him anything unnecessary.”

“And that was ‘unnecessary’ to you? I question your judgment.”

“If it were truly up to my judgment, I would’ve told him anything and everything.”

“You’re still as thoughtless as ever, I see.”

That...was certainly harsh. His voice was grim, but Ayako answered with a smile. The oaties, currently milling about restlessly, had brought an unexpected levity to the scene, helping to lighten the mood.

Finally swallowing her bubbling laughter, Ayako turned to Towada. “Takumi, they’ve always been quite taken with your father. So taken, in fact, that they

can't keep their hands off him. But not any other ayakashi, mind you, just the ones here."

"Being toyed with by invisible beings is insufferably irritating," Akira said flatly, refocusing on his meal.

Towada seemed absolutely floored by the news, his hand and its chun bing contents frozen in midair. "All this time and I didn't know?"

"What point was there in telling you?" his father retorted. "You can converse with them. I can't—or even see or feel them. It makes no difference to me."

"You really haven't changed a bit," Ayako quipped. She sighed. "No wonder people misunderstand you."

"I just told him everything. What more do you want?"

"You shared facts, Akira, but not how you feel. Not your emotions."

"Emotions?" His brows knitted somewhat. "Why divulge something no one else can truly grasp?"

Ayako, increasingly exasperated, responded, "Because that's how we connect, how we understand each other! You are just exhausting— isn't he, Haruka?"

"Uh..." *Ayako! Don't put me on the spot now of all times!*

As I sat in flustered silence, Akira heaved a soulful sigh. He studied me, oaties still occupying his lap and shoulders. "This has all been nothing but a nuisance to you too, hasn't it? You can't share your sight with anyone without being tagged as delusional or made out to be the butt of a joke. If you ask me, there is no benefit to engaging with these creatures."

Stumbling over my words, I said, "It'd... It'd definitely be a hard conversation to have..."

His gaze remained locked on me, deep and probing. Gently placing his chopsticks down, he reclined a little, the elegant silhouette of his interlocked fingers resting on his chest eerily reminiscent of Towada. Memories of that night in the park, the intimate warmth of Towada's hand enveloping mine, suddenly flooded my mind and set my cheeks aflame. Pushing them aside, I willed myself back to the present.

“Tell me,” he began, “what do you think about them? Honestly.”

The ayakashi? Those fleeting, whimsical beings who flickered in and out of existence, some of which I could see, and some forever veiled from my perception? After interacting with the oaties and crossing paths with others of their kind, my feelings had crystallized into a single sentiment.

“To me, they’re like the ocean.”

“The ocean?” interjected Towada, his tone revealing genuine surprise.

“Yes, the ocean,” I affirmed, abruptly aware of his eyes on me and the fact that I was still standing. I sat back down on my chair, and my oatie crawled onto my lap, scampered up my shoulders, and gave me a nuzzle. The solid weight of its tiny body and the soft fur caressing my cheeks were undeniable proof of its existence.

“The ocean is vast and deep, and there’s so much about it that we don’t know. I remember reading that the challenge of researching the depths of the ocean is just as difficult as exploring the reaches of outer space. That’s why I think the ayakashi are much the same.” As I endeavored to weave my scattered thoughts into a cohesive tapestry, my words may have sounded hesitant and wobbly—but they were true.

Oceans cover the vast majority of Earth. Everyone on the planet knew a fact or two about them, but did any of us truly know *everything*? My own experience with the ocean was limited to the small sliver of its surface I’d swum in. The mysteries of the deep sea and the plethora of life teeming therein remained enigmatic to me and perhaps forever would.

I recalled a distant memory from childhood. With my small hand firmly in my mother’s grip, we’d stood at the shore’s edge. “Look over there,” she’d said, pointing to the horizon where boundless blue merged with sky. In that fleeting moment, the ocean, its gentle waves washing over my feet to erode the sandy earth beneath, felt as unreachable and profound as the stars overhead.

Like species of fish that had yet to be discovered, in the way that life could thrive in the abyss where light itself, let alone humanity, couldn’t reach, ayakashi were there.

“Though they’re hidden from sight, they still exist. And perhaps, if we’re lucky enough, we might get the chance to meet them someday.”

Returning to the immediacy of the room after somehow managing to voice all my thoughts, I was met with Towada’s stunned silence, his mouth hanging open. *Uh, I didn’t say anything weird, did I?* I’d never been great at articulating myself, so why had I believed my latest try would be any different?

“‘If we’re lucky enough,’ eh?” Akira shattered the quiet at last. “I see. A bizarre young lady you are indeed.”

While his statement bordered on criticism, there was an unmistakable playfulness in his demeanor. The corners of his mouth curled upward the tiniest amount, and a glint of something twinkled in his eyes. The oaties on his shoulders patted him in what appeared to be endearing approval. Their luminous sparkles seemed to convey a message, and if I understood them correctly, he was actually...

*Praising me?*

I felt my face light up like a lantern. “Thanks, I’m glad you think so,” I replied sheepishly.

A soft rumble, too deep to be a chuckle, emanated from him. Towada was looking back and forth between us, obviously dumbfounded by our exchange.

Seeking refuge, I nestled into the velvety fur of the oatie cradling my neck. When I caught Ayako’s eye, her familiar, maternal smile was as present as always.

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**THOUGH** tension lingered, there was a palpable shift in the atmosphere after that. Father and son, their eyes still averted from each other, finally began to navigate a choppy conversation. Under Ayako’s warm and watchful gaze, they talked about family, about his mother and sister, before the topic naturally veered to Towada’s future. With his family set to remain overseas for the near future, he faced the choice of studying abroad or testing for a local school.

“Have you given it any consideration?” Akira asked.

“Somewhat,” Towada replied.

“Good. I can guarantee your tuition so long as you don’t intend on becoming a bum. Do whatever you wish.”

“Sure.”

I sensed the underlying strain in Towada’s voice. Although the playful oaties surrounding his father seemed to preempt any open show of defiance, the sharpness of his response still sent a shiver down my spine.

Suddenly, an exasperated Ayako interjected, “That’s not all you wanted to say, is it, Akira?”

“It is,” he replied.

“No, it’s not,” she asserted. “Takumi, what your father is trying to tell you is that you don’t need to worry about money. Whether you want to go to vet med school or go abroad or whatever, the choice is yours, and he will support you all the way.”

“What?” stuttered Towada

“Why else do you think your father works so hard?”

Ignoring Ayako’s clarification and his son’s startled stare, Akira resumed eating. His silence spoke volumes.

“He wants you to have the freedom to chart your own course—to decide for yourself, unlike the sight you inherited.”

Towada looked like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. His eyes fixated on his father, searching for validation.

Finally, Akira lifted his head from his food. “You shouldn’t be burdened any further in life,” he mumbled amid his furry entourage before looking away.

Towada blinked, opened his mouth to speak—then closed it again.

“Food’s getting cold, guys.”

At Ayako’s urging, Towada’s focus returned to his meal.

The air in the dining room, while not lively with chatter, was notably less stifling than before.

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**AS** the plates emptied and the oaties concluded their fun, wandering off save for the one on my lap, the conversation drifted to what had happened at school and the park.

“Haruka, you’ve seen other ayakashi, not just the ones here?” Ayako’s voice held a touch of disbelief.

“Oh, well, yes,” I stammered, taken aback by her surprise. Noting how she’d grown pale, I glanced at Towada, but he seemed lost in thought.

“Haruka, was it just the park and school? You haven’t noticed any at home, have you?” she pressed.

“No, none at home,” I confirmed.

“I see...” She paused, then turned to Akira and began to speak in a hushed tone.

“Should I not have said that?” I asked Towada, also lowering my voice.

“I don’t think that’s it,” he said.

His father’s expression betrayed no emotion as he and Ayako conversed. Midway, they switched to a foreign language. *Is that...French?* The intent was clear: they didn’t want us to understand. I could acknowledge the need for discretion, yet the secrecy unnerved me all the same. Their covert discussion lasted for what felt like almost two minutes, ending with Akira’s apparent dismissal of whatever Ayako had proposed.

“Sorry, did I do something wrong?” I asked.

Ayako, still appearing somewhat anxious, furrowed her brow in sympathy. “No, no, not at all. But tell me, when you saw them, did you feel different?”

“I lost my hearing briefly,” I answered.

“Sound, eh?” murmured Akira. “What about you, Takumi?” His hand on his chin, he pinned his son with a pointed glare, one I would have thought twice about returning.

Although severe, his tone wasn’t angry, and Towada was able to glower right



back. "I was fine. Same as usual."

"That so?"

The exchange was short yet heated—I swore I saw sparks fly. The oatie must have sensed it too, seeking to comfort me by nudging my hand. The gesture, though sweet, did little to dispel the unease settling within me.

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**AFTER** lunch, Towada escorted me home as usual. I'd asked whether he wanted to spend more time with his father before Akira returned to the hotel that evening, and he replied that the afternoon's visit had been more than enough.

"That was probably the most I've talked to him in...ever."

"R-Really?" My mind briefly drifted back to the worrying flurry of French at the end of the meal. "Ayako seemed concerned..."

"She's just afraid that things could get dangerous for you if the other encounters continue. That's probably what they were talking about anyway."

"You think so? But you always walk me home. Besides, it's just my hearing giving out for a bit—it's not that big of a deal."

Towada paused. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"For getting you wrapped up in this mess," he said, his grip tightening on Koro's leash. He was so considerate, always matching my pace. His eyes darted to the oatie on my shoulder. "All things considered, the oaties are more aligned with our realm than not, so more people can see or sense their presence. Their influence on us is also minimal."

"Right, Ayako can see them, and Takanori said he could feel them as well."

"But almost no one can perceive the ones we saw at school and in the park."

"Ayako did mention she couldn't see anything besides the oaties, didn't she?"

He nodded. He explained that while ayakashi were largely invisible, they could still affect our world in various ways. They could subtly alter the ambiance, for

example, or sway one's luck for better or worse.

"A variety of ayakashi visit us from beyond. Some are potent, others not so much. Cross paths with a malevolent one, and 'misfortune' could follow—accidents, injuries, that kind of thing. Positive encounters occur too, though their effects are much more...lackluster."

"Lackluster?"

"They might make your flowers grow better or something."

"Oh, is that why Ayako's garden is so...?" I blurted, immediately picturing her vibrant green yard. Every corner of her garden radiated life, from the flowerbeds to the bloom poised in decorative pots, to even the tenacious weeds. When Ayako told me she didn't take special care of the plot, I almost hadn't wanted to believe her. But after helping her plant tulip and grape hyacinth bulbs a few months prior, I had no choice but to accept the truth. The way she randomly dug the holes, tossed bulbs in, and covered them with dirt without a care in the world for orientation or arrangement or crowding had been eye-opening—and reassuring, oddly enough.

I'd rather hoped she didn't garden as adeptly as she cooked, because otherwise she'd essentially be superhuman. Yet despite her ad hoc method, the emerging tulip shoots looked robust and promising, and I eagerly awaited their full blossom come spring. I was sure both my mother and I would've killed for such a green thumb.

"But it's not like you get to pick and choose—and that's only how they affect those who can't see them," he cautioned.

"I see. Then it's different for us? How do they affect you?"

He hesitated, his eyes distant. "On the rare occasion they reach out to me, it's like...I'm momentarily tethered to the other side."

"What?" My voice quivered.

"If only they stopped there. Some are more insistent, trying to show me their world or even drag me there. Sometimes, I'm left falling into the hollow they leave behind when they disappear."

*The other side? The hollow?* The magnitude of his admission gripped my heart. There was an authenticity in his voice, a rawness that suggested he wasn't trying to scare me but was speaking from personal experience. "I...I can't see them like you do, so I don't know about all that..."

"Yes, but they seem drawn to you. If this continues, you might end up like me." The bitterness in his tone was tangible as he forced out the words one by one.

Suddenly, the pieces all fell into place—Towada's protective stance, Ayako's anxiety. "Is that why you've been so insistent on staying by my side? You were afraid they'd take me?" Was that also why Ayako and Akira had been so concerned earlier?

He lowered his head, guilt evident in his posture. "Sorry."

True, it was a lot to take in.

Definitely a lot to take in, but...

"Why apologize? You've kept an eye on me all this time. Because of you, I haven't been afraid, and besides..."

I hesitated, searching for the right words. Although I'd lapsed into silence, though my thoughts were a jumbled mess, Towada patiently waited for me to speak.

He really was kind.

I changed my approach and instead considered how I could express the warmth spreading in my chest. "Being with you, seeing the ayakashi, it's not all that bad."

My unfiltered opinion elicited a strange grunt from him. I turned, and his slightly slack-jawed expression indicated that I'd blundered again. Scrambling to explain, I stammered, "I-I mean, they all look like animals to me, right? So it just feels like I'm in one big, bizarro zoo..."

"A zoo..." he echoed in disbelief. "Okay, I get that, but how can you stay so positive about all this?"

"I don't think it's about staying positive. It just really isn't all that scary to

begin with. You're right here with me, and if this is something we *have* to face, isn't it better to face it together? Maybe they'd prefer it that way too."

"That's...not really something you need to worry about."

"You've been dealing with this alone all this time, haven't you? Ever since your uncle passed."

Towada's face tightened in pain.

"I don't know about you," I continued, "but I hate being alone."

Even when I still had amnesia, I'd never truly been isolated. I'd had my family, my ballet friends, and eventually Mao and Honomi—then Towada and Ayako. That missing piece of memory, though small, had cast a long shadow over my heart, dimming my self-assurance, and only with the support of those around me did I reclaim a sense of normalcy. I had come to understand that. And if I deserved help, why didn't Towada? If I could lessen his burden merely by being present, then shouldn't I? The ayakashi, phantoms that they were, entered our realm simply to be seen. Perhaps even someone like me could make the right difference in that regard.

While I justified myself the best I could, Towada listened intently. "I just have to stay away from them, right?" I concluded.

"I...don't think it's quite as simple as that."

"I'll also be careful, especially at night," I said, clenching my fists, trying to sound determined.

That time, it was Towada who lapsed into silence and I who waited patiently for him to speak. After a beat, he murmured, "We'll need more time..."

"Time?"

"And there's the matter of my parents..."

His words trailed off, voiced more to himself than to me, and he seemed unwilling to clarify. His earlier worry appeared to have faded, however, his face was markedly less troubled. "I'm...not sure what you mean, but 'there's no need to rush,' right?" I repeated his advice back to him in my best impression of his cadence. I hoped he realized how much of a comfort his counsel had been

that night.

Catching my intent, he met my gaze and offered a weary half smile that made my heart flutter in my chest. I wished our walk could last forever, but my house loomed ahead. He passed me Koro's leash, which I accepted reluctantly.

"I'll keep you safe from them. That much I should be capable of," he said.

"Sure," I replied simply, acknowledging the resolution in his voice. I would press no further.

He gently removed the oatie from my shoulders. His touch, warmer and more delicate than before, left a cold wake in its absence.

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**THE** butter and eggs sat on the counter, warming to room temperature. The parchment paper was lying ready for action when the doorbell chimed.

"Hey, Mao!"

"Hi, Haruka. And uh, sorry for bothering you..."

"Huh? Not at all! I was looking forward to baking with you!"

As Valentine's Day neared, Sakai's persistence finally won Mao over. Not only had he secured a promise of chocolate from her, but also—with an emphatic last-minute plea—ensured it would be homemade. She had never made anything sweet in her life, so she'd come to me for help. Since I'd planned to whip up some treats anyway, I invited her to join me, and there we were, about to bake some brownies.

Although she'd visited my house countless times before, a restlessness buzzed about her that day. We usually hung out in the living room or my bedroom, so perhaps the kitchen setting was the cause of her nerves? Mom wasn't around, having graciously retreated upstairs after a brief warning about fire safety, so what had Mao so jittery?

"It's not that," Mao said, shaking her head. "This is all just super out of character for me."

"Don't stress. Baking's easy," I tried to reassure her.

“I’m not talking about that...” Her voice held a note of resignation. “And by the way, I wish I had your family.” Her eyes darted to the stairs. “My parents and little brother are always such a handful.”

“I guess we get along,” I acknowledged. “No big disagreements.”

“Right? Must be nice...” she mused. “My family always seems to rub me the wrong way and I don’t even know why.”

“Yeah, I get that too sometimes,” I confessed offhandedly.

Mao shot me a puzzled look. *What, did I say something wrong?*

“Like, recently I’ve started feeling that way too?” I clarified, unsure of what she expected. By “recently” I’d meant ever since I regained my lost memories. Yet until Mao mentioned her respective frustration, I hadn’t found much reason to ponder the occurrence of my own moments of irritation without discernible cause. Though my mother’s amusement at my newfound attitude certainly didn’t help.

I explained my confusion to Mao, and she flashed me a provocative grin. “Only recently? I’ve been like that my whole life! Look who’s finally entering her rebellious phase. Our perfect little Haruka’s human after all!”

“What are you talking about?” I retorted with a snort.

“You’ve always been so squeaky clean; it’s hard to imagine you ever going against the grain. Made the rest of us look like misfits.”

“I am *not* squeaky clean! If anyone’s setting impossible standards here, it’s you! Still love you though.”

“Aw, thanks, Haruka. Love you too!” She gave me an affectionate pat on the back.

*My rebellious phase, huh?*

The person I’d been without my memory and the person I became with it restored felt distinct, although both were undeniably “me.” Previously, I had a neutral stance toward my parents—no overt negativity yet not much warmth either. I engaged with them rather superficially, so nothing they said ever really got to me. I *was* able to sense their concern for my well-being, even though I

didn't fully grasp its depth or source. And, I thought, out of some unconscious desire, I'd always strived to minimize that concern.

Yet lately, when I walked through the door to a typical "Where have you been?" I bristled in response. Maybe Mao was onto something. Either that or memories indeed play a pivotal role in shaping one's personality.

Regardless, the feeling was too complex to articulate. But Mao always seemed to enjoy venting about her mother, so maybe it wasn't all that bad. I chose to set aside my introspection for the moment and focus on dessert.

"Okay, you ready to begin?" I asked.

"Yep, let's do this."

Slipping into our aprons and after washing our hands, we started by precisely measuring out flour and sugar. We chatted as we worked, and Mao was a quick study. Despite my observation that she was perfectly capable on her own, she was adamant we tackle the recipe jointly. "It doesn't always tell the whole story," she said. "Sometimes you need someone to tell you if you're on the right track."

"You think? Baking's pretty straightforward as long as you know how to work a kitchen scale." *Especially for something as basic as brownies*, I added in my mind.

"Like this for example," Mao said, working a hand mixer through the batter. "When am I supposed to stop mixing? When am I supposed to add the eggs?"

"Ah, I see your point."

"Like, sure, the recipe says, 'Beat until soft peaks form,' but what even is a 'soft peak?'" Mao complained. "A video helps visually but not with the feel of it all. And it's all experts making those videos anyway—they make it look easy. It's misleading, you know?"

I chuckled, more in thought than mirth. "Yeah, I guess." A lot of cooking came down to "feel," which was something you could only figure out through firsthand experience. For an absolute novice, the venture could indeed be daunting.

The brownies we were making that day were a little different than my usual. Instead of standard cocoa powder or baking chocolate to impart that rich, indulgent flavor, we used cocoa liquor—a little secret from Takanori. He swore it was the only way to make brownies, and after a trial bake prior to that afternoon, I could only agree. We carefully melted the cocoa liquor and butter, then integrated the sugar, followed by the eggs. To slowly stir in the whisked eggs without the mixture separating was probably the trickiest part of the process.

“What happened to the chocolate from the Valentine’s Day workshop, by the way? Didn’t you go?” Mao asked.

“Those had liqueur in them, so they went straight to my dad,” I replied.

Takanori’s Valentine’s Day workshop, the vibrant sequel to his hit Christmas session, had transpired just the other day. The highlights of the event? A molten chocolate lava cake and alcohol-infused chocolate ganache truffles. Assisting Takanori had been a chocolatier friend of his who’d recently concluded an apprenticeship overseas before her homecoming to Japan. Oddly enough, she’d reminded me a little of Ayako, which had helped me warm up to her.

“Apparently Takanori’s going to sell her chocolate at his store,” I recounted.

“Really? Well that sounds amazing—but also expensive.”

“You’re probably right about that.”

Chocolates sold at artisanal boutiques tended to trend pricier than their grocery store counterparts, and after attending the workshop, I finally understood why. They were crafted with premium ingredients, of course, but their true value lay in the precision and artistry that went into their production. Every step of the process was so exacting, and the reason a “chocolatier” was a specialized profession *within* a specialized profession at last made sense to me. “You could just tell that she really loved what she did. It was challenging but also pretty fun.”

Meanwhile, on our own culinary adventure, we sifted the dry ingredients into the wet ones along with a sprinkling of crunchy walnut bits. Then we transferred the batter to the pan before popping it into the oven.



“That’s it?” Mao asked.

“Told you it was easy.”

“Yeah, because *you’re* here. I’m just glad I could help out.”

A little while later, the oven began to emit a tantalizing aroma, signaling that our brownies were ready, and we proudly extracted our hard work. They were visually stunning, which prompted a celebratory high-five.

Since any garnish should go on right before serving, I handed Mao her portion of chocolate icing to take home and was midway through my instructions when her tone dipped to a whisper. “Hey, Haruka. You...like Towada, don’t you?”

Caught off guard, I sensed my heartbeat surge. “M-Mao? What are you saying?” I liked him as a friend, sure, and he was important to me, no doubt about that, yet I suspected that wasn’t the type of “like” Mao had in mind.

If she meant *romantically*, then I...didn’t know.

How *did* I feel about him?

My fluster evident, Mao waved her hand dismissively, excusing me from answering. “Never mind. It’s just that I...don’t really know what’s going on with him.”

“‘Him?’ You mean Sakai?” My brow quirked.

She nodded, her face somewhat uneasy. As she fidgeted with her bag of chocolate decorations, her words slowly unspooled: “Like, why does he want chocolate now all of a sudden? He’d never asked once in the fourteen years I’ve known him!”

“Mao...”

“Why is he doing this? It’s not like either of us have changed or anything?”

I could offer no response to her question. The mood had dampened a tiny bit, but I still managed to see Mao off with a smile, the yet uncut brownies in her possession still radiating warmth.

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**VALENTINE’S** landed on a weekday that year, ensuring that we’d all be at

school for the big day. Our school strictly forbade outside snacks, however, and enforced that rule with a particular zeal on the fourteenth. Any chocolate discovered would be confiscated on the spot and our guardians notified, so all exchanges had to be conducted outside of school.

Typically, that involved arranging get-togethers after school hours to swap chocolate—anytime from the previous weekend to Valentine’s Day itself. The meetups were also an excuse to hang out, of course, but planning them could be a logistical nightmare, especially for those with wide social circles and/or full schedules packed with after-school clubs and cram school.

I couldn’t relate to that dilemma though. My circle was small, consisting of Mao, Honomi, and a smattering of girls from my after-school activities, so preparation was manageable. I’d baked chocolate chip muffins for the group; they’d come out great, yet I had to admit I was suffering a little chocolate fatigue after baking with it nonstop for the past two weeks. I was overdue for a break, definitely.

So, on the fourteenth, in keeping with my routine, I waited in the library for Towada. We walked home, and as we approached my front door, I asked him to wait for a moment while I hopped inside to fetch his brownies. His face registered complete surprise as I handed them over. “What’s that look for?” I asked.

“Ah, um... Nothing—I just thought I wasn’t getting any.”

“Really?” *Weird*, I thought. If he didn’t deserve chocolate from me, then who did? “Anyways, can you give this bag to Ayako and this one to the oaties?”

“Sure, but why not hand them over yourself?”

“I’d love to, but I can’t today.”

“You have plans?”

I nodded. “One of Mao’s cousins does ballet. She found out that I used to as well and really wants me to go with her.”

My old ballet school was one of her dream institutions, so she had mistakenly inferred that I was some star pupil like many of its alumni and therefore destined to compete or even shine on the international stage. Even after I

explained that I had been totally casual, she retorted, “You went there four times a week; there’s no way that’s casual!”

“She’s keen on showing me her class to compare,” I said to Towada.

Truthfully, I’d known about her ever since I befriended Mao and had been declining her invitations all that time. What could I do, really? Offer advice on recitals I never performed in? That didn’t feel right. And besides, I’d left ballet behind. But I changed my mind after stumbling upon my old pointe shoes during our New Year’s cleanup. Carefully packed away in the depths of my closet was not just one pair—but several.

“Seriously, just so many pairs of old, beat-up shoes—I’ve hung on to them for all this time. I honestly thought I’d left that part of me behind,” I admitted.

In ballet, one’s figure determined everything. No matter how much someone short and stubby like me practiced fouetté turns, they’d never land the role of the Black Swan. *Pas de deux*? Forget about it; the height difference between the two dancers would be glaringly obvious. Yet, for a while, my love for ballet propelled me to continue. But the sting of seeing my classmates leap and twirl past me, move ahead while I felt stuck, had started to hurt. The more vehemently I told myself I didn’t care, the louder my envy and self-doubt clamored to be heard. That unspoken resentment grew and grew until, under the convenient pretext of our family’s relocation, I left everything behind. My dedication, the countless hours, the shoes worn through from endless afternoons of dancing—I abandoned it all.

I’d anticipated a sense of freedom, a relief at letting go. But that wasn’t to be.

“So, yeah, I’m just gonna go check it out.”

I wasn’t sure whether I was going to start dancing again or not. As a soon-to-be third year, I had more pressing concerns than whether to return to an old hobby—like the impending high school entrance exams, for instance. Still, a part of me felt like I owed it to myself—to the me that existed before I lost my memories—to give ballet one more shot.

Towada, ever the patient listener, allowed me to babble uninterrupted. When I finally paused, he asked, “Is the studio close?”

“Quite close, but it’s in a residential area, so a little tricky to find. The cousin’s mom is driving me there.” I caught a familiar flicker of worry in his eyes, a reluctance to let me travel alone. Only after I told him I’d have company on the way back as well did his apprehension ease. “Overprotective much? You know we’re the same age, right?” I added teasingly.

“I don’t have much choice in the matter, do I?”

“You don’t think it’s too much?”

“No, not at all.”

I narrowed my eyes in feigned suspicion. “Really?”

He flashed a grin, sidestepping my mock interrogation. Then, with a “See you tomorrow,” he took his leave.

*Yep, definitely overprotective.*

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**IN** the end, I picked up ballet again—but with a much more relaxed approach, practicing only once a week. The grueling four-day regimen was left to the past; I wasn’t aiming to participate in competitions, or even recitals for that matter.

Sakura, Mao’s aforementioned younger cousin, was in fifth grade and already taller than me. In demeanor and appearance, particularly with her curly hair, she bore a resemblance to Mao, which made bonding with her effortless. Mao had always painted Sakura as affable, and she certainly lived up to that description.

The ballet school she attended was entirely different from my prior institution—chill, for lack of a better word. Evident in each class was a mutual respect between student and instructor, one born not from obligation or discipline but from sincere passion and enjoyment. During breaks, the students talked not about ballet, as had been the case at my old class, but about school and other things going on in their lives. An older group of girls always indulged in romantic gossip, for example. The ambiance was so unlike that of my previous environment that I almost experienced culture shock.

The class was helmed by a Miss Mariko, a seasoned instructor well past my

mother's age, and Yui, her thirty-something-year-old protégé. Arriving early for my session that first day, I'd had the chance to speak more personally with them. She'd started teaching ballet, Mariko said with a radiant smile and a touch of pride, because she loved it and wanted to continue dancing.

Most students in her class were amateurs, content to showcase their skills at the annual recital, but a select few pursued higher ambitions. While Mariko tried her best to accommodate their aspirations, if she felt they'd benefit from a more challenging environment, she graciously guided them toward more advanced classes instead of seeking to keep them in her own. Intriguingly, many of her current students had taken the reverse journey, transitioning from a more demanding ballet school to Mariko's in search of a gentler and less taxing atmosphere.

To participate in Mariko's and Yui's class, only one thing was essential: a love for ballet. No matter how accomplished or competent a student, whether one was in the studio every day or a mere once per week, they didn't care. Even working adults who showed up once or twice a *month* were welcome. I was sure a young, ambitious dancer with dreams of going professional or international would scoff at the laid-back setting. They might even criticize it for lacking the gravitas the art deserved. But why should that matter? Every student who stepped into Mariko's and Yui's studio did so with a genuine smile on their face.

"While commitment and dedication have their place in the classroom, claiming one must devote everything to ballet to merit its teachings is a little narrow-minded, wouldn't you agree?" Mariko said with graceful poise. "We come from all walks of life. Ballet has its roots in the West. Its history, its ideal body, its choreography—they're all based on Western standards. In those countries, potential is often spotted early, and children are molded from a tender age to dance. It's akin to how we nurture our Kabuki performers here. That said, should we give up just because we were born different? Or is a love for the art reason enough to dance?"

Her words struck a chord deep within me.

"We all have our unique approaches to life—and that diversity is beautiful. I just think that, ultimately, it's important to keep things simple. While striving

for excellence is noble, using it as a yardstick to measure others or keep others out is a little self-defeating, don't you think?"

In class, Mariko's insights were astute and considerate. And while she provided most of the verbal guidance, Yui was generally the one who physically adjusted our posture and movements. Her touch was so delicate that it felt more like she was gently nudging you in the right direction rather than pointing out a mistake.

Yui had trained abroad and competed at the national level. I was certain that the two of them could have easily achieved something greater than teaching a bunch of amateurs in a modest ballet studio converted from a residential home, yet there they were, enjoying every second. It was so strange. Reflecting on the experience, I could hardly remember why I'd been worried in the first place.

Afterward, I found myself deep in thought, and I decided to discuss my feelings with Mom. Sitting at our kitchen table, I began tentatively, "I know I'm about to be a third year and exams are looming..." Nevertheless, I confessed my yearning to join Mariko's class, and to my surprise, Mom agreed.

"I don't see any reason for me to say no. You seem to have your priorities in order about school and exams," she noted, looking contemplative. "Plus, you really want to do this, don't you?"

"I guess so," I responded sheepishly.

Sakura had given me a hopeful, puppy dog stare, whispering, "You'll come back, won't you?" and Yui and Mariko had encouraged me to mull it over. For some reason, I felt as though they saw right through me—my frustration in my old class, my hesitation, all of it. I supposed that was only natural. They had guided countless students throughout the years, and no doubt ones short like me, conflicted like me, facing exams like me...

My previous ballet instructors must've sensed my struggles too, I realized. Perhaps, had I approached them, talked to them about my concerns, we could have figured out a solution. But I hadn't. Instead, I quit without a word.

"Let's see, you mentioned the monthly fees and your plan to attend a public school to offset the cost... It's clear you've given this some thought," Mom said, pulling me to the present.

“I know it’s an expensive hobby, so...” Mentally weighing the cost of pointe shoes and tuition against our financial responsibilities, I trailed off. Even my young self could grasp that money was tight, especially so since moving out of company housing and considering my brother’s hopes for college.

Mom’s gaze bore into mine, deep and understanding. “You know your mother has been practicing tea ceremony since long before I ever met your father, right? It’s never brought in a cent, yet I persist. Why shouldn’t I support my daughter in pursuing at least one of her passions?”

“I...don’t know?”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “See?” Then her bravado faded, replaced by a solemn, haunted expression. “When the accident occurred, and I saw you so still in that hospital bed, all I could think about was how you might never wake up again.”

“Mom...”

“The mere thought of losing you... It swallowed me whole. My world...had gone dark.” Her hand trembled on the table, her fingers curling up tight. “Maybe this sounds cliché, but all I wanted in that moment was for you to open your eyes again. I didn’t care whether you grew up to be a good kid or got good grades or were good at sports—none of that mattered. I just wanted my baby back. This is probably inappropriate for a mother to admit, but I have never set any expectations for you—or your brother, for that matter.”

I pondered her words. Mom never hounded us to study excessively or insisted that we attend cram schools. She only ever asked about school on occasion, which I’d always interpreted as disinterest. But it wasn’t that she didn’t care, she was simply content with the way things were.

“All I ever wanted was for both of you to grow up happy and safe—and I mean happiness on your own terms, not just what society deems right.” She smiled gently. “Of course, I’m not saying there’s no merit in the whole ‘get a good education and a good job’ approach. It does provide financial stability, and money—let’s be honest—can solve a few...many problems, actually.”

“You ruined it, Mom.”

Looking at me, she giggled, then smiled again. “When I was pregnant with you and your brother, all I prayed for was that you’d be born healthy and live happy lives. But as soon as you were out, it’s like I forgot all of that and found myself caught up in the race. Wanting you to speak sooner, take your first steps faster, write earlier. In kindergarten, it was all about how well you drew and played. Then in school, it’s all about your grades...”

“Isn’t that, you know, normal?”

“Perhaps. But after your accident, I felt as if I was granted a second chance,” she replied, her voice softening. “It reminded me of my initial wish.”

Meeting her gaze, I felt a surge of emotion: a tightness in my throat, a warmth in my eyes. *Mom...*

“Be healthy. Be happy. I know now that there are things money can’t mend or replace. If you make a decision for yourself, I won’t stand in your way. And besides,” she added, her eyes narrowing fondly, “I’ve always loved watching you dance, Haruka.”

When I quit, she’d remained silent, never once hinting at the depth of her feelings. Burdens weighed on her, ones she couldn’t express. Perhaps we all harbored such silent struggles—even Towada’s father. And perhaps, I realized abruptly, it had always been that simple.

Blinking away my tears, I attempted to sound casual. “I won’t be performing in any recitals anytime soon, you know?”

“That’s okay; maybe I’ll join you for a lesson one day.”

“Mom, that would be so embarrassing!”

My mother looked at me and simply smiled, probably noticing the fact that I’d conveniently neglected to say no.

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**THE** sky was a brilliant hue of blue on the day of the graduation ceremony. Although winter’s bite lingered in the morning breeze, the sun’s warm embrace informed us that spring was just around the corner.

...Or at least, so I guessed. I couldn’t know for sure because the gymnasium



was so darn cold. By the end of the ceremony, which seemed simultaneously brief and eternal, my fingers were chilled to the bone. After homeroom, Mao and Honomi both rushed to their respective clubs to see off the graduating seniors. The main attraction of the day's celebrations was an impressive student-constructed arch over the inclined path leading away from school. The seniors would walk through it as flower petals rained on them from every direction.

Although the entire school buzzed with activity, I had absolutely nothing to do. My home economics club never met, and that day was no different. Heck, I didn't even know who the club's graduating seniors were. A sense of loneliness and restlessness crept into my heart as I watched the others, their joy and energy not quite infectious. I had half a mind to leave then and there, but I had promised Honomi I'd stay. Her face had been as pale as a ghost since earlier that morning. I supposed mine would be too if I were planning to bare my heart to my crush.

The school entrance was crowded with graduating seniors, current students, parents, teachers—it was a total logjam. The band club was somewhere in that press, yet I couldn't glimpse Honomi at all.

*Don't tell me she's going to do her tulip thing in the middle of all that? I would have been mortified to confess in front of that many onlookers. Honomi, you're a stronger woman than I.*

Reluctant to join the throng, I slipped away to the bike racks where we'd promised to meet. From there, through a chain link fence, I had a clear view of the path down the slope. The send-offs for the track-and-field and soccer clubs were in full swing.

"Oh, there's Towada."

The tennis club was present as well. Towada was so tall that he was always instantly recognizable. Sounds of congratulation, applause, and even an acapella duet from the music club reached my ears on a tepid breeze. Gradually, the number of students on the path dwindled, the crowd thinning.

Just as the procession started to wind down, Mao's voice rang out from behind me. "Haruka, thanks for waiting!"

“Hey, Mao,” I replied, my tone light. At the same time, I caught sight of a familiar ponytail swishing toward us, its owner approaching at a brisk and determined pace.

“Mao, Haruka!” Honomi slammed into me with all of her momentum as her arms encircled me tightly. The world tilted, and I almost lost my balance, but Mao helped steady me. Honomi buried her face against my shoulder, and I felt her body tremble. I gently patted her back, offering silent comfort. When she finally looked up, the worry that had clouded her face that morning had vanished, replaced by flushed cheeks and eyes shimmering with unshed tears; my breath hitched.

Mao and I exchanged nods.

“U-U-Um, so...”

“No, it’s okay, I think we know what happened,” interrupted Mao playfully. Despite her teasing, she clearly didn’t truly want to stop Honomi. And Honomi, for her part, wasn’t about to be stopped.

“He said he was really happy and thanked me!”

“That’s great, Honomi,” I said.





She nodded. “Yep! ...I was so nervous.” Her voice wobbled as she collapsed back into me and let all the emotion out. Mao placed a comforting hand on her back as the taller Honomi hunched at an awkward angle to find solace in my shoulder.

“I’m so glad,” Honomi murmured repeatedly, her voice hushed and broken by soft sobs.

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A week before the new trimester, toward the end of spring break, Ayako invited me over to witness the blossoming of the tulips we’d planted together.

On the familiar porch, I cradled a steaming mug of tea. The tulips stretched below me, the blooms plump and bursting with life, their hues in blended harmony—a marvel, considering the haphazard manner in which they’d been planted. The nearby grape hyacinths, too, commanded attention, the brilliant little dots of purple like the essence of spring itself.

Flanking the gravel from the gate to the house, a garden canvas unraveled amid a winding path of weathered stepping stones: Pale-green hellebores past their prime, their charm nonetheless intact. White and purple springstars stood at attention, while crimson anemones danced with petals fluttering softly on the breeze. Traditional garden favorites, like the pansy or violet were unexpectedly infrequent, their sporadic presence like easter eggs, happy little accidents waiting to be found. The roses that would eventually form a lush curtain around the porch already sprouted tender shoots and eager buds, hinting at the spectacle to come. And vigorous sprouts of clematis reached for the skies in earnest—no doubt the prospect of controlling their growth each spring was a challenge.

The oaties played an important role in the garden’s upkeep, or so I’d heard. I had yet to actually catch them in the act. Regardless, Ayako’s garden, with its plethora of plants, occupied a special place in my heart. It was a tapestry of randomness, yet everything seemed to belong—as if the garden, in all its wild splendor, mirrored the owner’s spirit.

Generous, warm, and welcoming—just like her.

I watched Ayako, somewhat lost in thought, as she poured more hot tea, tendrils of vapor escaping into the cold.

“Is there something on my face?” she asked when our eyes met.

“Oh, no. It’s just you changed your hairstyle. It looks great.”

Her loose waves were dyed a lighter shade of brown; the color suited her phenomenally. She brushed a hand through her hair, a pleased smile on her lips. “It’s spring, after all. Out with the old, in with the new.” She turned to me, sweeping a glance from my shoulders to my lap. “I know this is business as usual, but you’re okay there?”

“I’m fine. I wonder why they’re still around though. Usually they all scatter after snack time.” Two oaties rested on my lap: mine and another I didn’t recognize quite as well. Another was perched on my shoulder, three nestled at my feet, and a duo bookended me on the bench. Enveloped by their warmth, I had no need for the blanket Ayako had thoughtfully provided. “Are you guys waiting for Towada?” I mused.

“Maybe. He *is* late. I wonder what’s taking him so long at the post office.”

Towada had ventured out to mail presents to his sister for her upcoming birthday. We’d discovered the date recently when Akira made a rare phone call to his son. I remembered the call perfectly. Why? Because I, at their house at the time, had somehow ended up on the video as well. Why a video call? Well, that was because neither of the Towada men knew how to speak to each other.

In anticipation of Towada’s birthday the following month, Akira had asked in his characteristically stern, borderline-angry voice whether or not he wanted anything, to which Towada responded with utter silence. The exchange was so painful that I impulsively jumped in just to move the conversation forward. We then learned about his sister’s approaching birthday and naturally wanted to help her celebrate. Since it might have been weird to receive a gift from someone you’d never met, and given Towada’s inexperience with siblinghood, we opted to keep our well-wishes simple and both send her a card. Easter was afoot where she lived, so I picked out one with a pop-up bunny design, while Towada’s was very Japanese with a sakura motif. That the card would be his first-ever gift to his sister felt particularly heartwarming. And so he was at the

post office with the cards and a small gift from Ayako in tow.

“I hope she likes them,” I mumbled.

“Of course she will,” Ayako assured me.

As I set my mug down, the sound of the gate latch pricked my ears. “Welcome back—whoa, oaties?” Before I could turn fully, the oaties milling about made a mad dash toward Towada. They surrounded him, appearing desperate to tell him something all at once. The sparkles emitting from their mouths floated upward to the bells in the tree before disappearing into the sky without a trace. Unable to understand the creatures, I simply let myself be entranced by the spectacle while Towada crossed his arms and listened intently. When he finally glanced up at us, he looked rather conflicted.

“Something up with the oaties?” I asked.

“Um, no, it’s fine. You guys can go inside, I’ll catch up.”

I grunted in affirmation and stepped through the door.

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“**GOT** a little something special for ya,” Ayako said, presenting a box of mooncakes. “And a Chinese pastry, of course, deserves Chinese tea to go along with it,” she remarked as she deposited the kettle on the stove.

By the time she returned to the living room, bearing our matching mugs full of steaming hot jasmine tea, Towada had rejoined us.

“I have nothing against teacups; I just think mugs are easier to work with,” Ayako explained.

“My mooncake has pine nuts in it,” I said.

“Mine’s black sesame paste,” Towada chimed in.

The delectable mooncakes were a treat from our city’s Chinatown. Curious, I asked Ayako if she could make them herself, and she smiled, replying that although she could, they wouldn’t come out nearly as pretty without the proper molds. *Wow, still, that’s already pretty amazing.*

“If pastry-making is something you’re interested in pursuing, I could help you

get started on the right track,” Ayako said.

“I am, but...” *What do I want to do? What can I do?* I had mulled over both questions long and hard, and I voiced my tentative conclusion: “I haven’t decided yet. I do enjoy ballet and baking, but I think I kind of owe it to myself to explore more—actively figure out my future instead of just being passive and anxious about it. I feel like I’ve been too disengaged until now.”

“Is that so?”

“My friends deserve better from me. *I* deserve better, to be more confident in myself and everything.”

“So what’s next?” she prodded, her tone gentle. Towada also waited patiently for me to speak.

“I’d like to work on myself,” I said, trying to impart an air of determination. “And just try everything—no more excuses. Who am I to say if I’ll be good or not at anything; it’s not like I know myself all that well anyway.”

“Well, sounds like you have it all figured out,” Ayako said warmly.

“And then maybe I’ll discover my true passion, like Towada.” I aimed a sidelong glance at the boy in question, and he recoiled slightly.

“Like me? Um, sure, why not,” he replied hesitantly.

“I think you’d make a great vet,” I added. “The way Koro took to you is proof of that.”

“Takumi has always been an animal lover. Do you remember in elementary school when you went to the zoo, and the goat in the petting area—”

“She doesn’t want to hear about that, Ayako.”

“Wait, I do.”

“Nope.”

Ayako flashed me a look, mouthing, “Later.” I had something to look forward to, it seemed.

My oatie returned inside at some point and settled into my lap as we chatted about my new ballet class and Takanori’s latest recipe book. And suddenly, it



was time to leave.

Although the days were growing noticeably longer, evening retained its familiar chill. After Ayako bid me goodbye, Towada, the oatie, Koro, and I began our usual walk home. Bikeless for once, Towada still held Koro's leash.

Just as I zipped up my jacket in the face of a particularly harsh gale, we reached a parking lot—the same lot where we'd once talked about four-leaf clovers. That night, yet at the start of the growing season, the clovers stood small, hardly the height of my thumb.

"They're tiny," Towada abruptly murmured as we waited for the stoplight to change.

"I was thinking the same thing," I said, taken aback. Taken aback—but also happy, oddly enough. "Being both in the shade and exposed to the wind probably doesn't help."

He nodded.

"I'm sure the clovers in places with a little more sun are faring better." I was picturing that patch of green bordered on all sides by sterile, white walls.

"Like that courtyard?" he asked.

My lips curled into a smile. "Yep, the one at the hospital."

The light turned green, and instead of alerting me, Towada stretched out a hand. I reciprocated and let him pull me into the intersection. Together, we crossed the street, hand in hand.

Thank goodness it was dusk; the dim light concealed my beet-red blush.

Towada pointed at the oatie around my neck and said, "That one's going to stay with you."

"It's going to stay with me?" I repeated, incredulous.

Towada's face was resolute as if he were saying, "It's a done deal." The oatie seemed to be positively bursting with excitement. "It's not just Ayako and I that've been worried about you. These guys have been inconsolable all spring break."

“About what? *Me?*”

“They sneaked over to visit you multiple times.”

“I had no idea! I could’ve given them treats!”

“No, apparently you weren’t around. We were actually discussing an oatie staying with you permanently earlier.”

*So that’s what they were talking about when Ayako and I went inside...*

“I think it’s a good idea,” he said. “They can protect you from other ayakashi.”

“They can?”

“I recently learned that the absence of other ayakashi at Ayako’s house is because the oaties drive them away.”

“Really?”

“They’re actually quite belligerent.”

“These little cuties? Really?” Surprised, I looked at the oatie, and it puffed out its chest in pride. *Yep, you’re adorable.* At last I knew the truth about the lack of ayakashi around Ayako’s house. The oaties weren’t nonconfrontational; they were actively territorial.

“They’re protective of their home and not fond of intruders. I’m sure they can protect you from any unwanted encounters.”

Uncertain, I wondered aloud if separating the oatie from its kin was right.

“Oh, it volunteered. It even thought to obtain my approval instead of running off by itself—it couldn’t be more excited. But if you ask me, I think easy access to your snacks is what it’s really after.”

“Then I won’t disappoint!” There were so many desserts that I couldn’t bring to Ayako’s because they didn’t travel well, such as warm and fluffy steamed bread. Or ice cream! And I was sure Mom would enjoy another pair of hands—or paws rather—mysteriously helping out around the house. I patted the oatie, and it nuzzled into me with affection.

“You sure?” Towada asked, perplexed.

“Yes? Why not!” I crowed. “We’re happy to have you, oatie! Oh my god, now

we don't have to say goodbye to each other every time."

A cascade of luminous sparkles flew from its mouth, echoing the melody of a song—or so my hopeful heart imagined. Those gleaming shards evaporated into the cold like wisps of water vapor. *If only I could catch them in a jar and capture that glow forever*, I thought.

"Wait." A pang of realization gripped me. "Is it coming to school with me too?"

"Of course."

The creatures were invisible to others, so that wasn't my concern. My heart sank as the real issue dawned on me: "We'll be going home separately come April then..."

He walked me home because I couldn't be left alone. With the oatie as my escort, that would change. Waiting for Towada in the library was embarrassing, but beneath my chagrin, a quiet yet undeniable anticipation for our time together had wormed its way into my heart. Between cram school, ballet classes, and all of Towada's commitments, moments in his company seemed numbered moving forward. We'd soon encounter our independence, and although that freedom was supposedly for the best, the thought ached nonetheless.

"I'll stop by the library after school," he said.

"What?" I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

His hand tightened around mine. "And if I find you there, let's walk home together."

I required a few seconds to process what he'd just said. And though he was slightly ahead of me, his face hidden from view, I couldn't help but notice that the tips of his ears were tinged the faintest shade of red—as was my face.

"Sure," I finally managed to mumble. My gaze dropped to the roots of a tree shading the sidewalk. There, a lone clover emerged from the blanket of its shorter peers. Silently, I vowed: I would give the next four-leaf clover I found to Towada—again. I'd infuse it with my every ounce of aspiration, my every whispered wish for a brighter tomorrow, because wasn't that the heart of fairy

tales? That elusive promise of a “happily ever after”? And just like the heroines of those stories, I was determined to make that ending come true.

I lifted my face to meet an errant gust of wind. Twilight painted the sky a deep, passionate shade of red. From the oatie’s mouth, radiant flecks of glitter ascended, each a tiny beacon of hope, vanishing gracefully into the embrace of the night sky.





## After Story: Donuts, Donuts

**EVER** since my oatie and I began cohabitation, I more frequently detoured to Ayako's garden on my walks with Koro, worried that the ayaksahi might feel lonely separated from its kin.

Our visit that day was...different. As soon as we arrived, the oaties clustered around us. Usually, they started to frolic and play without delay, but they stood silent, glaring accusingly at us. Something was off.

"What's up, guys?" I asked in an attempt to break the tension. In response, they inched closer, tightening their circle. Intimidated, my oatie scrambled off my shoulder and sought refuge in my clothes. "Hey, that tickles!"

Before I could react, Towada grabbed its exposed tail and pulled the creature out of my top. "What do you think you're doing?" he growled.

I quickly thanked him before returning my attention to the oatie, which, hanging upside down, had curled into itself and was flailing about with all its might. Meanwhile, the others crowded around us, seemingly conveying something urgent to Towada, sparkles flying from their mouths in agitation.

One scampered up my leg and tugged at my hand with eyes pleading. My oatie, presently clinging to Towada's back, appeared terrified of the impending mob. "Okay, what is going on?" I finally demanded.

It looked at me with glistening eyes; it was so precious that a pang of guilt constricted my heart, almost making me tear up.

Towada peeled the creature off his back and held it out in front of him. "So you're the culprit."

"Culprit?" I echoed.

"Kitazawa, did you feed this guy something new recently? Something the color of tree bark, warm, round, and...ring-shaped?" he relayed, his interpretation replete with hand gestures.

“Something round and ring-shaped?” I murmured. Then it hit me: “Oh, donuts! I made donuts at home the other day.”

“Well, this little guy bragged about it, so now they all want a taste.”

I mentally kicked myself. The oaties loved snacks, and while I usually prepared enough to share, I’d made the donuts on a whim and it had somehow slipped my mind.

“Should’ve known it’d be food when they— Hey, stop that.” Before Towada could finish his sentence, the oaties began to barrage his legs with gentle taps. The prodding didn’t look like it hurt, and the sound of their paws’ contact was... squishy? And oddly adorable.

Picking up a disgruntled oatie, I lifted it to my face. “You wanted donuts, huh?” I cooed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

It stared back, eyes brimming with tears, sadness, and betrayal. Its little mouth quivered before it collapsed against my chest and hugged me with its tiny arms. *Oh my god, it’s so adorable I’m gonna cry.*

“Okay, here’s the thing. I have all the ingredients for more donuts at home, but the dough needs to be rested. I can bring some over tomorrow. How does that sound?”

Joy instantly returned to the oatie’s face. Satisfied, it gave me one last hug before scampering off. Instantly, the oaties dispersed, engrossed in their usual antics, leaving behind a smitten me and an exasperated Towada. Koro soon joined the merry fray, which added another layer of warmth to my heart.

“You really don’t have to go out of your way for them,” Towada said.

“It’s not every day my creations are in such high demand. Plus, I make cake donuts, not the yeast kind. And I deep-fry them, so they’re much simpler to whip up.”

“I have no idea what cake or yeast donuts are, but if you say so...”

“I do say so! I enjoy it, don’t worry.” Baking and ballet were some of the few interests I had.

As we chatted in the garden, Ayako returned from work. “Haruka! It’s awfully



lively today; what happened?”

After a brief recap of the afternoon’s drama, Ayako proposed that we make the treats at her place. And just like that, the donut party was set in motion.

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**THE** following day, I headed to Ayako’s house once more, well-rested dough in tow. As I began to fry the donuts, a crowd of oaties—the swarm even larger than normal—huddled around me in eager anticipation. I’d mixed an extra portion of dough just in case...but would even that be enough?

“They sure can’t get enough of Haruka’s snacks, can they?” Ayako observed. Waving away an oatie inching dangerously close, she warned, “Careful there, or you’ll get a splash of hot oil.”

“Unabashed in their gluttony is what they are,” quipped Towada.

I carefully submerged the rings of dough in the sizzling oil as he and Ayako passed them to me. I had a soft spot for old-fashioned donuts. I’d experimented with yeast-leavened varieties before, but nothing could beat a cake donut; they were easier to make and had more of a homemade feel to them.

Drawn irresistibly by the aroma, the oaties pressed in. “Look, I’m surrounded by an oatie donut,” I joked.

Ayako chuckled. “You really are. Even the color’s the same.”

“So you’re the hole?” Towada asked dryly.

The soft, pale dough hissed and bubbled in the hot oil. They turned a delightful shade of golden brown in seconds, releasing a mouth-watering scent. When they started to split beautifully on their surface, I knew they were done.

Before long, a towering stack of donuts sat before us. Miraculously, with one donut allocated per oatie, the count was just right. Their pleased faces said it all, which I was glad to see, but...

“Sorry, looks like we’re down to just these,” I said to the humans present, presenting a plate piled with donut holes. For some reason, the oaties insisted on eating the actual donuts—the shape was part of the appeal, after all.

“I’m fine with these. They taste the same anyway,” Towada said. He picked

one up and placed it in his mouth.

“They’re like little cake pops, right?” I added.

Just then, Ayako emerged with mugs of steaming tea. “Tea for you—and you.”

That wouldn’t be the last time I fried up donuts for the little fellas at Ayako’s house, but that afternoon did mark the end of any chance to taste a ring donut proper in all its toroidal glory.

## After Story: If Winter Comes, Can Spring Be Far Behind?

**THE** ayakashi of the Towada residence mirrored the conceptions of their beholder. Their appearance changed not by choice but via human inconsistency. And that inconsistency was itself incongruent, capable of shifting over time. I had once seen them as furry orbs. Then they sprouted arms and legs, transforming into zashiki warashi, and that perception had never wavered since.

For me, the mystery of their appearance was settled, but what about my nephew?

“Takumi, do they still appear goblin-like to you?” I asked.

He gave me a wary glance. “Why?”

“Just wondering. Maybe they’ve changed and now resemble something like Haruka’s stoats. Wouldn’t that be cute?”

He hesitated. He sat restless at the dining table, his brow creased with conflict. He’d always been a boy of few words—and fewer expressions. Whether his reticence was an adolescent phase or a lifelong trait, I honestly couldn’t have said.

“Have they?” I pressed.

“Not really.”

Though terse, he didn’t ignore me or stand up to leave, didn’t end the conversation prematurely. I liked to think that was his way of showing consideration, deference—or perhaps even affection—toward me, his guardian.

Kaoru and I never bore a child. Our age difference had caused the thought to drift away before it could take root. Besides, the ayakashi in the house had always felt like my surrogate offspring, and Takumi had begun to fill a similar space in my heart.

I was born into a venerable lineage in which the desire of the child was

secondary to family expectation. While my kin reveled in the exceptional talents they produced every generation, I, the ordinary child, had faded into obscurity, forgotten and unobserved. Takumi and I weren't related by blood, yet I recognized much of my younger self in him.

Neither of us initially had a place to call home; we were both isolated, frustrated by circumstances out of our control. In our first meeting, I couldn't help but feel that his vacant, emotionless gaze reflected the ghost of my youth. It wasn't sympathy that surged through me but a profound affinity—a silent recognition that we were, in essence, kindred spirits.

Unlike me, however, Takumi's ties with his parents were still mendable. As his aunt by marriage, I had no intention of usurping their role. Family was family, and reconciliation was the best possible outcome. All I hoped for, at least for the duration he lived with me, was that they would let me play pretend.

I'd never expected a family of my own, and then I met Kaoru, joined him in matrimony, and intertwined my path with Takumi's. I was struck by how insatiably greedy my heart had become.

"They changed, right? For you?" Takumi murmured.

"That's right. They used to be these little balls of fur. Over time, they grew arms, their bodies stretched out, legs appeared, and the next thing I knew, they were wearing kimonos, the cute little things."

He emitted a nonchalant hum.

"It was a gradual process. But back then, they didn't appear quite as frequently as they do now. One day, I happened to see one again and realized it was a zashiki warashi." I caressed the silky raven tresses of the ayakashi on my lap. Without a doubt, the hair was that of a human, not the fur of a stoat or any other creature. The bisque dolls Kaoru had described had multicolored, often curly hair, making me wonder if the beings had more individuality than I first thought. "They certainly didn't emerge just to see me like they do now. That was only after Haruka started coming around. Just how much do they love that girl?"

"I just hope she doesn't mind."

“Do you *really* think she does?” I probed, knowing Takumi was well aware of the truth by that point. Yet I couldn’t blame him; his condition provided him ample reason to disdain the little fellows. “You tell me if she feels anything but love for these adorable creatures. She’s on her way right now to make donuts for them, isn’t she?”

“I guess.”

The oaties climbed onto Takumi only for him to shrug them off. I knew he didn’t engage with them on purpose, but the oaties seemed to enjoy “playing” with him. He once actively ignored and slighted the creatures, so his newfound behavior was a refreshing change of pace. “I’m sure you’re used to it by now, Takumi,” I said, “but wouldn’t you feel more...I don’t know, *comfortable* if they weren’t so goblin-like?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you really?”

“They’re not so bad anymore.”

“Ah,” I giggled. “So they *have* changed.”

His lips zipped shut when he realized his misstep, and he averted his gaze.

Meanwhile I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face. As I watched Takumi battle his embarrassment, the doorbell rang. “That must be Haruka,” I said.

The oaties, previously clambering all over Takumi, dropped to the floor in unison as if compelled by some unseen force and scampered to the door. I rose to let her in, and Takumi stuck out his hand, halting me. “Just... It doesn’t matter what they look like to me, okay?”

“Well, I can’t help but be curious,” I said. If they were *cute* goblins, then that was one thing. But they weren’t. I just wished the whole experience could be a little less unsettling for him.

He moved to the door. “Why do moms always worry so much...”

*Moms?*

His words had barely registered since he was already a fair distance away, but I could’ve sworn... My heart fluttered erratically as I grappled with the

implication.

“Hi Ayako! ...Ayako?”

“Oh, hi, Haruka, welcome!”

“Are you...feeling okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine, I just gotta go wash my hands real quick.”

I didn’t need to glance at a mirror; I already knew how I must’ve looked. I rushed to the bathroom and splashed cool water on my face.

“He called me ‘mom’... Oh, Kaoru...”

My voice trembled not with sorrow but an overwhelming emotion I couldn’t quite name.

## Short Story: Class Shuffle

**ON** the first day of my third year in middle school, I stood amid a sea of students under a cascade of cherry blossom petals. We gathered around the bulletin board outside the school building, all of us eager to discover our assigned classes.

“Class 1... No. Class 2... Still no. Class 3— Oh! There’s Mao and Honomi!”

It was the biggest and most important event of the year: the class shuffle. It was the moment we learned who our classmates would be for the ensuing trimesters, a pivotal revelation that would shape our school experience. Despite all the headway I’d made on the social anxiety front, the presence of a familiar face or two—or better yet, a best friend or two—in my class remained a matter of life and death.

In the swarm of students clambering for a view, I stood on tiptoe, trying to catch a glimpse of the list. But after spotting Mao and Honomi’s names under class 2, I could not find my own.

“I’m not with them...”

The realization sank in before I could even pinpoint my own assignment. I knew it boiled down to sheer luck, but dismay weighed my heart nonetheless.

Sensing my gloom, the oatie snugly wrapped around my neck tried to cheer me up, playfully patting my face with its tiny furry paws. Its cute button eyes seemed to say, “You still have me!”

It was exactly right. As long as I had my oatie, I would never truly be alone.

I wouldn’t, but...

A pang of disappointment lingered.

The adorable little stoat around my neck was invisible to everyone else—a fact I had ensured with preliminary trips to the mall and grocery store. At first, I had harbored a slight apprehension that someone might perceive the oatie, but

those outings confirmed its invisibility.

Towada, who'd joined me on those ventures, had remarked, "If literally anyone else could see them, I wouldn't be the oddity that I am, right?"

He had a point.

From then on, the creature became my regular companion to and at school. In any case, even if I wished otherwise, the oatie would follow, or so Towada had explained. Better to have it with me than causing mischief elsewhere.

Snapping out of my reverie, I refocused on the bulletin board, gradually more accessible as the crowd thinned. Just as I reached the list of names under class 4, a familiar voice interrupted me. "Haruka, guess what? We're classmates!"

"Oh, Sakai, hey."

Pointing excitedly, he said, "Look, right there under class 4—our names are side by side."

Sure enough, I glanced up to see "Kitazawa, Haruka" right next to "Sakai, Yuuto." "That's awesome. I'm glad to see a friendly face," I said. Though Sakai wasn't much more than an acquaintance, that was still a step up from total stranger and was good enough for me. I breathed a huge sigh of relief; my painful memories of being the new, friendless transfer student were not fated to repeat. "Here's to a great year. Too bad we're not in the same class as Mao though, huh?"

"L-Like I care!"

"I do, though," I replied, heart sinking.

Sakai responded in a flurry. "Wait, I didn't mean it like that, okay? Oh, whoa, please don't be upset. If you cry, Towada's going to—"

"I'm going to what?" he said, seemingly materializing from thin air.

"N-Nothing! I didn't do anything, I swear!"

"Towada, hey!" I called.

"Morning, Kitazawa," he replied. Oddly, although we'd seen each other just days prior, the sight of him in his school uniform after such a long break was an



unexpected thrill. His eyes briefly settled on my shoulder, a silent gesture of acknowledgment of the oatie, a secret shared between us. “We should head in, homeroom’s about to start.”

I looked at the clock; we had less than five minutes. “Crap, you’re right!” That was five minutes to locate our shoe lockers, change into our indoor shoes, and find our way to class 4 situated on the opposite side of the school.

As we hastened inside, I realized I hadn’t asked about Towada’s class. “Which one are you in, by the way?”

Instead of answering, he joined Sakai and me by the lockers, stopping a row away. “I’m right here.”

“Wait, class 4? With us?” I asked, surprised.

“Seriously?” Sakai interjected.

“Sakai, you...didn’t notice?” Towada shot back dryly.

“Why would I check for male names? After seeing Kagami was out and Haruka was in, I couldn’t care le— You know what? Just kidding! I’m going on ahead. See ya!”

He bolted, leaving us in the dust. *Don’t run, Sakai, you’re going to get chewed out by a teach— See? What did I say...*

“Someone’s excited for the new trimester,” remarked Towada.

I chuckled. “Hey, it can’t be all that bad if we’re together. Let’s make it a good one.”

“Sure.”

That I was in Towada’s class felt surreal. That meant we’d be together for all the major events that year: the athletics meet, choral competition, sports day, even the school trip! And with Mao and Honomi in a neighboring class, I’d still see them often for joint activities. My upcoming year was painted in a much brighter hue than I initially feared.

“Perfect,” I whispered. The oatie, recognizing my mood, tightened its embrace, coaxing a smile onto my face.

“Bell’s gonna ring, Kitazawa.”

“Right, we need to move!”

Determined not to be tardy on our first day, Towada and I hurried up the stairs. Exchanging a smile filled with anticipation, we entered our new classroom side by side.

## Afterword

**DO** you have a love for fantasy? What about delicious food, delectable snacks, or heartwarming conversations with friends? Is school life treating you well? Are your studies? And for the grown-ups among you, how's work? Do you ever think about the future? How is your relationship with your parents?

It's a tall order for anyone to confidently reply with an enthusiastic "Yes, absolutely!" to all those questions. I know I can't.

Thank you for reading *Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves*, a literary tapestry woven with all those elements.

While writing this story, I was constantly reminded that the challenges of growing up and a looming uncertainty about the future might not be bound to any specific era or locale but are rather universal experiences shared by all. Even now, as an adult, I encounter anxieties in different guises. You know, if I had an adorable stoat companion, a circle of supportive friends, and scrumptious food by my side, I could also confront my issues with unwavering positivity—or at least, I'd like to think so.

I'm very curious to see how a tale so steeped in Japanese customs and school traditions will be translated and received. I can't wait to see how it'll turn out. And for those readers who are currently troubled and worrying—in the most present participle sense of the word—I hope this narrative provides a flicker of cheer.

In case you weren't familiar, zashiki warashi are spirits from Japanese folklore, specifically that of the Tohoku region. Their presence in a household heralded prosperity, and their departure, ruin. They remind me of the brownies from Western mythology: small beings who bring good fortune, accept gifts of food, and bear a resemblance to children, though zashiki warashi aren't typically associated with chores.

Even now, in present-day Japan, certain traditional inns are whispered to harbor these spirits. My younger sister once lodged at one such place. In one of her photos, a peculiar anomaly can be seen occupying part of a certain window.

There's just something so wonderful about the realm of the fantastical, don't you think? Meeting an ayakashi is on my bucket list, provided they aren't of the menacing variety. Oh, and I do hope to visit that inn someday.

As I write this afterword to a close, my heart swells with gratitude.

Building on the success of *I'd Rather Have a Cat Than a Harem!* I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to Charis Messier, the translation and editing staff, the illustrator, and everyone else at Cross Infinite World involved in bringing this book to life.

And I mustn't forget: To my family and friends, my fellow creatives, and to you, my dear reader—thank you so very much.

May our paths cross again sometime, somewhere.







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