

~XIV. The Farmhand and the Cold Room~

When Raven awoke, she was in a room she didn't recognize—by the paneling on the walls, or what she could recognize without much light, it was still part of the Inomiko house, but she'd never been in this room. The slight sound of rushing water bubbled from just a bit of the house's waterway system which ran in a corner of the house. There was something about this room that repelled heat, it seemed—it was cold in here, colder than in the rest of the house.

There was a small desk, with a candleholder on it, on one side of the room. The sliding door on the far end was locked.

A desk. A candleholder. A waterway. A locked door. Cold. Darkness. Raven's eyes adjusted quickly, but she couldn't truly register what had happened.

She pounded at the door. “What—what's going on?! Where am I?! Hey—hey! Someone, let me out!”

“Ah, so you're awake,” a voice from the other side said. It was Yuuya Inomiko—Chisa's father. “So, let me explain how things are going to go for a while. We're going to deliver you breakfast and dinner each day—and the rest of the day, you're going to meditate and reflect on yourself. If you go out, it's only when we tell you to, and only under our strict supervision.”

“...What?” Raven sputtered, then pounded on the door again. “That's—this is ridiculous! How long do you intend to keep me here?”

“Until Ikuko has her daughter back,” Yuuya answered. “No earlier, no later. We can wait a long time—you know, I actually spent about three months in that room myself when I was your age, just like you. You learn a lot while you're in there—it gives you a lot of perspective.”

Three months.

Three months?

Three months?!

“Three months?!” Raven pounded on the door again. “You can't seriously mean that! Let me out of here! This—*this is illegal!*”

“You know, you don't seem to understand who we are,” Yuuya said. “The Inomikos are one of Japan's oldest houses. We don't *care* about what's illegal. This is a room in the center of a private manor. *Nobody* is going to come looking for you. *Nobody* is going to know you're here. Eventually, that Akaneno girl will give up on you, and find someone else. So give it up, and meditate.”

“No—”

Mio? Give up on her? That was ridiculous, wasn't it? It—it was impossible! This man just didn't understand—he didn't understand the kind of bond that they had! Mio wouldn't leave her—she'd find her, eventually, wouldn't she?

Wait—no, no no no, she couldn't just give up and accept that she'd be trapped in here! “Father, you have to let me out, *please!* This isn't reasonable, this is—”

“You don't have the right to call me 'Father' until you come out of that room,” Yuuya said.

It was in that moment that Raven finally understood why Yuuya was such a terse man, usually. There was an undercurrent to his voice—a shaky, trembling terror, from a part of him he had likely forgotten even existed. But in that sentence, there was none of that—it was not Yuuya Inomiko who said that. It was Chisa's grandfather, no doubt—a man Raven had never met. Or perhaps it had been the one before him, or the one before him—the long line of Inomiko heads who wrote the book on the sword techniques Raven had read so much on stretched out generations.

The shambling husk that acted out these foolish ideas—how many times before him had this room taken something special? How many dreams had died here? How many ghosts still sat, unfulfilled, within the Cold Room?

Yuuya Inomiko—the thing that wore his skin, at least—was not a human being who could be reasoned with. He was a manifestation of this Cold Room. No, it was more accurate to say—this Cold Room Raven found herself in—this *was* Inomiko. And that realization was what made Raven understand—

She was trapped. Well and truly trapped.

Within the first few hours of her imprisonment, she inspected everything she could see—primarily, the little river within the room. It had to have an entrance and exit, and she did find those—but they were so small for solids that she would have to chop herself into pieces to get out. She tapped around on every inch of the wall trying to find a structural defect, but it was solid—nothing she could break through with her bare hands, that she could tell.

The lock on the door was solid—it was probably chained from the outside. The door was flush with the ground, allowing no light in from outside. If this were a murder mystery, about the only way Raven could've been murdered was perhaps a poisoned dart through a small slip in the river entrance—and they'd still call it a locked room mystery, and it would likely take some great detective like Holmes or Poirot hours to solve the case... unless Holmes deduced something on the spot and then started investigating from that idea, and happened to be right the first time.

Perhaps it would be curare—a poison which inflicted complete muscle paralysis, leaving a body asleep from the outside, but still conscious as death encroached from within. A horrible death, really—it was the kind of thing that Raven had shuddered about during her own reading of such mystery stories.

No, she very much hoped that if a poison dart were to shoot into the room, it would kill her instantly—or perhaps simply debilitate her long enough for the Inomikos to remove her from the room, so that she could then regain her strength and fight back against them. Perhaps that was more idealistic, the kind of thought she should be having at a time like this. She could handle poison. She *had* handled poison.

Then, she screamed. She screamed and screamed and screamed, in the vain hope that someone would hear her. She screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed until her throat was raw, and then she screamed and screamed and screamed some more. These odd tangents in her thoughts could only help her avoid screaming for so long, so she screamed more. Screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed—

When she stopped, she flopped down onto the ground and stared up at the dark ceiling for a while, trying to study it to see if there was any speck of light she was missing. There, of course, was not. Eventually, without realizing it, she fell asleep—but when she awoke, nothing had changed other than her being hungrier. She had no idea how long she had been asleep, or if she actually had been asleep, or simply imagined it.

The next time something happened that she registered, it was a jiggling of the lock on the door, and she stood up and prepared herself for an attack—

but when light flooded the room, she was blinded for a moment, and then she understood what she was seeing. Her younger brother was coming into the room with a tray of food, but Yuuya was there at the door—he wasn't such a fool to leave the door unguarded.

“Hey...” Taichi muttered, setting down the tray of food and looking away, his face wracked with a horrible guilt no boy his age should ever have had to feel. “Um...”

“...Taichi,” Chisa croaked out. She then realized that there was probably a reason that the river was there—she was likely meant to drink from it so as not to die. “Are... you okay?”

“Well...” Taichi's eyes darted back toward the entrance of the room, but then nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good,” Chisa said, sitting down to her plain tray of food. She didn't have the mental acuity to register what exactly it was—only that it was food, and she needed to eat. There was something nice about having light, about having someone there—

'I'll get you out of here, *nee-san*.'

It took a moment for Chisa to register the words Taichi had mouthed to her, but when she did, her eyes went wide.

'I promise. I'll save you.'

She nodded to him, and then continued eating. “C'mon,” Yuuya said, holding the door open. “You've got places to be, kid.”

And the room was flooded with darkness once more. But... now, Chisa had a ray of hope. Even if he was just a young boy—she could believe in Taichi.

No matter how long it took—

~XV. Taichi Inomiko, Month 1~

Taichi was a young man, not quite twelve yet, and at that point, he had seen things a boy his age should never see—his father's madness, his mother's cold, cruel callousness, and his own sister imprisoned like a beast. But he knew something very well—his sister was not insane. His sister was a good person—and if his parents wouldn't believe that, then he would side with her over them.

So, in his room at nights during winter break, he started off by thinking. He had picked up a habit of pacing from his sister, and he paced. “Maybe the police,” he'd say to himself, before remembering—no, he knew by this point that the police wouldn't be helpful. He needed to either reach someone higher, or reach someone who had the determination to break the law.

To tell someone that his own older sister was imprisoned like this... many wouldn't believe him. However, Taichi had one idea. One single idea, one line of thought he could follow.

'The Akaneno girl'. From overhearing the conversation where his sister had been imprisoned, he knew that she had been seeing someone—that Chisa had a girlfriend, and that her name was Akaneno. It was at this moment that Taichi cursed something he had never had to be conscious of before—the Inomiko household was very poor at keeping up with modern politics, and he felt like he'd heard the name Akaneno somewhere before, but it had been in passing at school, and who remembered things like that?

He needed to find Chisa's girlfriend, somehow. However, a problem had arisen—his father's paranoia had only increased since Chisa's imprisonment, and—

“What?” Taichi sputtered at the front door, being barred by his father. “I'm almost a middle schooler, Dad. You can't just let me not leave the house.”

“I can,” Yuuya said, “and I will. I know what you're thinking—you're thinking I don't know what I'm doing. You—you think I'm the mad one, don't you?”

“I—” Taichi stepped back, his teeth clenched in terror. “No, I—”

“This family is going to go back to normal!” Yuuya said, running his fingers through his hair. “It's going to go back to normal, and we're never going to speak of any of this again—and until then, you *keep your mouth shut, Taichi*. I'm your father, and I—I'm the one in charge here.”

So, it was pointless trying to leave the house at the moment. Until school started, Taichi only had his own home to work with... and sneaking around was hard—it felt like the watchful eyes of his father were always around every corner. He could only think, and wonder, try and remember if he'd ever heard anything more about this woman's name.

However, approximately two weeks into Chisa's imprisonment, something happened—“Try anything funny while I'm gone,” Yuuya said with his hat on, holding a briefcase, with the front door open, “and you won't like what happens afterwards.”

It was a business trip of some kind. Taichi really wasn't sure what his father *did*, and he wasn't concerned with it—it was an opportunity. It left his father's study, usually tightly guarded, open for a few hours.

It was a small room, full of books that were so dusty Taichi wasn't sure his father had ever actually read them. The chair in front of the desk was weary from overuse, and his father's computer sat there—but Taichi certainly didn't know anything about his father's security credentials, so the paper goods were the best he could get. Let's see... an attendance list for past business trips... Oh! Wait, this was good, Taichi realized!

Akaneno, Akaneno... Here! A woman named Homura Akaneno was present at one a few years ago... He needed to find a way to learn more about this Homura Akaneno—and her daughter, hopefully—

That was when Taichi heard *footsteps* coming from the hallway. His eyes darted around the room, and he closed the folder, carried it with him, and hid under the only place he could think to—the desk.

Creak. Creak. The door opened, and the floorboards at the entrance creaked. “...Taichi?” Ikuko said, and Taichi's breath began to quicken—but he liked to consider himself a hide-and-seek champion, so he could breathe quietly. “You had best not be in here.”

Her footsteps were slow—his mother always stepped with purpose, and as her footsteps slowly, sloooooowly approached closer, Taichi began to sweat terribly. She—of course his mom wasn't stupid! She was going to check under the desk, know he was there! *Creak. Creak.* He was dead. He was dead, he was dead. He needed to find some way out of this or he was dead. Think, think, think, Taichi! Getting out from under this desk was death, but staying under the desk was death, too! He needed to—

No, he needed to consider something. He needed to consider that this was his father's desk, so—

Ikuko approached closer, step, step, creaaaak, creaaaak, to the desk, slowly coming around to the somewhat ajar chair, and cast her gaze upon the desk, and the space under it. “...Hm,” she said, and then turned and walked away. “Where could he have gone, then? Has he found somewhere in this house I don't recognize? ...It's nearly dinner, silly boy.”

Taichi's heart pounded a mile a minute, in the crawlspace under his father's desk. There was a small switch under the desk to open a way into it, and so Taichi huddled in this under-floor space, where the cool air brushed past him and gave him goosebumps. In the small light, he studied the folder for any further details about Homura Akaneno. She was a scientist of some measure, famous for... some stuff he didn't understand. At the time of this meeting, she was forty years old, and she... had one daughter, yes!

—If she was famous, then he needed to watch the news. “What are you doing watching that?” Ikuko asked, seeing her usually rather unruly son sitting in front of the TV watching the news.

“I'm trying to learn things about Japan,” Taichi lied. He flipped through a number of programs until eventually landing on one that seemed promising—'The Discovery of Psychic Abilities'. Basically everything in this program went utterly over his head, other than his mother scoffing and calling it all bunk, until a woman in far too clothes came on screen on a stage, declared the one responsible—'Homura Akaneno'.

“Y'know,” Homura said on the screen, “I really love my daughter. Sure, sure, I bet you're thinking that sounds totally unrelated, but it isn't. See, one time I was talking to her and I go, hey Mio, I—”

Ikuko forcibly switched the channel, a scowl on her face. “That woman is a clown. You would do best to never associate with any of her kind.”

—Mio. Mio Akaneno. That was the girl's name. That had to be it. Mio Akaneno was his sister's girlfriend. So he needed to contact her—he *needed* to, somehow.

~XVI. The Young Lady, Slipping Away~

The first thing to disappear was Chisa's sense of the passage of time. The growth of her hair and nails was the only way she could mark any idea of time—she quickly lost count of her brief meetings with Taichi, who similarly looked ever more frazzled with each passing day. Chisa was sure she looked absolutely monstrous, but with no way to see herself even in the reflection of the water without any light, she had no way of confirming that.

The second thing to disappear was a simple memory—even after only a few weeks in this space, Chisa found herself beginning to forget her mother's face. Ikuko, specifically—she had not seen the woman in some time, and the memory of her was evidently so frail that it was easy for it to disappear. She remembered the woman's name, the feeling of Ikuko Inomiko, but nothing more—just that she was some manner of ghost.

Soon, a certain grip on reality began to disappear, and it was about seventeen days into her imprisonment that she began to say things to the ghosts she imagined inhabited this room. “So,” she said, “you would've been my father if you hadn't gotten trapped in here? I wonder what

kind of person you were like?”

She couldn't help but fantasize about what kind of man Yuuya Inomiko was—how he had gone against his parents to be placed into the Cold Room. She imagined a happy family, a father that supported her—the Yuuya in her fantasies rather resembled Raven's father, in fact, even though she had no proof that Mr. Hillshead would ever have been so. It was just a belief she held to.

Eventually, though, she began to doubt something else. In the darkness, day after day after day, she suddenly realized—nobody had called her name in quite some time. Taichi only called her *nee-san*, and ever since the day she had been trapped, the name 'Chisa' had been stripped from her. She was something else—something rather unlike Chisa.

Chisa Inomiko, after all, was a girl who was perfect, unflappable, never-wavering, and she had to admit that she was not like that in the slightest. She had memories of a girl who was like that, who she had thought was her. But was she? Was that really her? After day in, day out of nothing but this darkness, it was hard to imagine that she had ever been outside of it—ever heard anything but the sound of that water, ever seen anything but the inky blackness...

A perfect girl like that existed in a world of light, didn't she? Taichi's older sister. Taichi's older sister, Chisa. So whatever had happened to Chisa, Raven must have caused it. It must have been her fault. It must have been her fault that Chisa wasn't here. That was why she was in here to begin with, wasn't it? It only made sense. She couldn't be in here for no reason—that was too cruel, too nonsensical. Right. Yes. Chisa must have gone somewhere, and Raven took her place.

So, what she had no idea was one month into her imprisonment, she told Taichi as much. “I'm sorry,” she said, laughing under her breath, staring at the tray of food.

“What?” Taichi blinked. “*Nee-san*—”

“No, no,” Raven said, shaking her head. “No, I'm sorry, Taichi. I don't think that's right. I think I must've made your sister go away somewhere. I'm not really Chisa Inomiko. I'm someone else and your sister is gone because I'm here. I'm just a hick.”

“No, come on,” Taichi said, holding Raven's shoulders. “Please—”

“When I told you I had amnesia, it wasn't a lie,” Raven said. “That was when I got here, and I replaced your sister. Eventually, I convinced myself I was her, but that's not true. I'm nothing like her. That whole period was me trying to figure out who she was, and I could never really be her. I'm not that perfect girl. I'm just a useless hick.”

“*Chisa!*” Taichi said, shaking Raven's shoulders. “Please, I'm—”

Yuuya was still there.

“I'm... I'm not giving up on you,” Taichi said. “*You're* my sister, nobody else.”

Ah. There was Katanako, going on her roll again. Katanako—her real name was Touko Kujo—was a girl in Taichi's homeroom who was... odd. Not in looks—she was rather plain, aside from her prettily long hair—but the fact that she carried a wooden sword with her everywhere, and insisted that she was going to grow up to become a samurai despite the fact that she was a middle schooler. A security guard was attempting to rip her blade from her hands, but Katanako was a tough girl.

—For the record, the nickname was not from nowhere. The 'Tou' character in her name could also be misread as 'katana'. Hence, Katanako.

Occasionally, she gravitated toward Taichi during group study, and today was no exception. Taichi was screwing up his face, considering very strongly how to deliver this letter after what felt like a week of having it burning a hole in his pocket, and when she returned to his table and exclaimed, “Damn these people and their misunderstanding of my spirit!”, the sound rankled a nerve.

“Katanako, what the hell are you talking about?” Taichi grunted.

“I told you not to call me that! It's Touko! 'Tou-ko'. Come on!” Katanako insisted, but Taichi was too busy thinking about much more important things to consider that. “I can't believe you sometimes, Taichi-*kun*. To think you could be related to this world's greatest modern samurai?”

“...What?” Taichi blinked. “What are you talking about.”

“Your sister, man, your sister!” Katanako said. “Chisa Inomiko! Only the most powerful samurai in this modern day—a shining example of everything that is a *Yamato nadeshiko*, taking up her blade in hand to—”

“*Don't!*” Taichi hissed, before getting back to his textbook. “Just... just don't. Not right now.”

“What?” It turned out Katanako could be concerned like anyone else, though. “Is something wrong with her? If there is, you have to tell me—my sister would kill me if I didn't learn that.”

“...Your sister?” Taichi asked.

“...Tsubaki Kujo? Only Chisa-*sama*'s best high school friend?” Katanako scoffed. “She must not tell you much—”

“Wait, Tsubaki-*san* was your older sister?” Chisa *had* mentioned the name, in fact, several times. Katanako nodded, and Taichi inwardly decided that maybe he should try and stopping the nickname. Taichi's eyes darted around, before he mouthed—

'I'm going to write you a note. We need to pass it quietly. I'll get it to you when it's done.'

To Katanako—er, *Touko's* credit, she took this very easily. Group study hadn't much time left, so Taichi had to get to work on a second letter, as quickly as he could. So, he spent a few more days composing that, but something unfortunate occurred—the two stopped being paired in group study, on account of Touko's 'behavioral oddities'. He needed to think of something else, some other way to get the note to her—the two nodded to each other and spoke about normal things when they could, and he probably talked to her more than anything else...

“Excuse me, children,” said the teacher in math class, an old man who was definitely no-nonsense. “Kujo-*kun*, what exactly is that you're looking at?”

There was a slip of paper in Touko's hands. She looked up, flushed and red-handed, from the note she was reading. “What?”

“...Who passed her that note? Who is passing notes in my class?” the old man said, and everyone who had had a hand in passing it immediately pointed at Taichi, who lit up, blushing. “Kujo-*kun*, this class does not tolerate keeping secrets. Please tell us all what that note says.”

My sister is being held captive in our house. She's been stuck in there for over a month now, and she only gets a bit of food. Our parents think she's insane, but I think my father is the real insane one.

The second note in here is a letter to Chisa's girlfriend, Mio Akaneno. I've never met her, and I don't have a way to get a letter to her, or even know where her house is, so you need to get it to your older sister. I can only trust you with this. Please.

You're going to get caught reading this note, so here's what I need you to read when he tells you to:

“Dear Kujo-san, everyone else thinks you're weird, but I think you're cool. I'd like to spend more time with you, and I like you. Please send a note back with your answer. Taichi”

The very idea of being interested in a wacko like Katanako Kujo caused the entire class to burst out laughing at Taichi. He hid his head in his arms, blushing up a storm—but inside there, inside that false embarrassment, he was only determined. Even if it required him to survive ridicule, he would save his sister, no matter what it took.

The next time they saw each other, Touko gave him a stern nod. Taichi would place his trust in her, no matter what.

~XVIII. The Farmhand, Slipping Away~

Raven began to experience hallucinations some time after she was imprisoned. At first, it was just sparkling lights that she would frantically chase, but they were beginning to split into

wider displays, perhaps whole scenes. Her brain, she supposed, was desperate to see anything in this place.

Her memories of Chisa were beginning to slip away, with the understanding that she was not that girl. She was often sleep-deprived for reasons she didn't understand—in truth, she had settled into a pattern of thirty-six hours awake, then twelve hours asleep, and that was deeply unhealthy for her. However, with no concept of where or when anything was, there was no way she could stop herself.

In her regular gulps of water from the small stream, her brain briefly became more aware, but then she had to deal with the fact that she was still stuck in this room. Somewhere, she had heard the number, 'three months'. 'Three months' was something she had latched onto—three months, three months. That was how long this would last, wouldn't it? Somehow or another, this would be over after three months, right? That had to be it.

She had nothing but her memories left, and she often retreated into images of the Akaneno home, and her old home with the Hillsheads. She had lost the ability to imagine truly new scenarios, but simply repeated old happiness in her head, again and again, like a child in front of a looping video screen.

Eventually, those visions started to form in the lights of her hallucinations—she would sit at fake tables and make conversation with people who no longer existed. Of course, her memories were foggy—she remembered, for instance, the hair of Gracia Hillshead, but not her face, or her voice. She remembered a number of things about Homura Akaneno, but she couldn't quite remember the tone of her voice.

There was a time in her life when she was as free as could be. When she had left home, to go where she desired—to find adventure. And there were many people, then, many people she had broken bread with. She remembered an awfully short boy—a woman with a glowing green eye—an old woman with a hound and a hawk—but what did she talk with these people about? The visions she had were muffled, breaking up bits of real memory with muffling fuzz that went through the motions.

The heavy-set man ruffled her hair, but who was he? The boy ran fast as the wind, but who was he? Those two with the light hair, they argued and loved in equal measure, but who were they? Details like their names and voices were falling into the darkness.

There was only one person she could truly remember—Mio. No matter what, she swore she would not forget a single detail of Mio. Mio, from then, to now. Mio, the one she wanted to see more than anything. Raven wanted to see Mio—

It was a starry night in Iorys, after many lights had gone off, that Raven saw before her. The two of them sat on the roof, talking about something or another. It was muffled, but there was warmth there, and the two of them laughed. Then—

“...But I've been thinking,” Mio said, “what if you went away somewhere?”

“Huh?” Raven asked, tilting her head. “What do you mean, Mio?”

“I mean, if you went somewhere, and came back a different person, and you felt differently and thought differently, would you really be the same person?” Mio shrugged. “I’ve been thinking about that recently.”

“...What?” Raven blinked. These were... unusually existential thoughts for Mio. “Why?”

“I mean, because in the real version of this memory, you were a boy, right?” Mio asked.

_____“—?”

“I mean, think about it,” Mio said. “You weren’t a girl then. You don’t really know whether you really were ever a girl, or whether you became a girl because Chisa was a girl, right? You don’t really know what Raven was really like.”

“But—”

I am Raven, she wanted to say.

“Oh, I’m not saying any of that’s your fault!” Mio said, waving her hands. “But just, it makes me wonder whether you’re really the same person I fell in love with. Are you really Raven Hillshead, or just someone who’s convinced she is him?”

_____“—?”

“Not to say that I don’t love you—but are you sure you didn’t trick me somewhere along the way? That you didn’t trick yourself?”

Stop. Stop. Stop it. Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!

“That you aren’t really Raven?”

Stop it! Stop it!

“That this whole isekai thing—was it ever really real?”

STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT!

“That all these people aren’t really fake, somehow?”

STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT

“Can you really prove it actually happened? That you aren’t completely insane? Because, I mean, you’re talking to someone who isn’t there. That sounds pretty insane to me.”

STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT

“Heck, was I—ever even really real?”

—Of course—you were real—You're a real person—you exist—you existed—I love you—I loved you—that's real—it's real—I know it's real—it's real—that's real—you're real—I'm real—

“Of course you're real, but who *are* you? If you're not Raven, then you have to be Chisa—but if you're not Chisa, you have to be Raven.”

By this point, the voice claiming to be Mio had vanished from sight, only being a sound lilted up to her ears by the sound of the river. The girl in the room curled up into herself on the ground in the center of the Cold Room, caressed by the horrific, dark, dirty chill, whispering to her, 'give up, give up, give up'.

“So if you're not either—”

“then who, or what, could you possibly be?”

“**STOP IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIT!**” The girl in the room reached up and grabbed Taichi by the shoulders, shaking him furiously. “Stop it stop it stop it make it stop make it stop make it stop it won't stop it won't stop it won't STOP!”

“Get the hell off of my son!”

Yuuya struck the girl to the floor, leaving her reeling. She didn't have the power to move any longer. He dragged Taichi from the room, and locked the door once more.

That was the last time Taichi came to deliver food to the room. He was never allowed to come back again... and the girl in the room twisted ever deeper into nothingness.

~XIX. The Letter~

Ms. Mio Akaneno,

I've never met you before, but I think you know who I am. My name is Taichi Inomiko. I'm Chisa's younger brother. I need your help, and nobody else's.

My sister is stuck inside of the house. She's been in there for months, and they won't let me try to help her in any way. They've stopped letting me see her at all, and bad things are happening to her mind in there. I know you love her—and I know you and your mother can help her.

Please—do something. Call the police, and make them pay. I'm begging you. I'll give you

anything you want if you'll just save my sister, please. I love her more than anything.

It was two months and fourteen days after Chisa's imprisonment began that the letter was finally delivered. Tsubaki Kujo hand-delivered it to the Akaneno home, placing it in Mio's hands and saying, "Let her know—this doesn't count."

"Huh?" Mio blinked.

"I told her that the Kujo clan owed her a favor, but this doesn't count. I can't do anything to help you out other than deliver this letter—and besides, this is a favor to her younger brother, really." Tsubaki shook her head. "By the way... so you two were dating, huh? I had my suspicions."

"Well, uh—" Mio shook her head. "I—look, that's not important right now, I've gotta—"

"Yeah," Tsubaki said with a nod. "I know. I'll do what I can, but I think it's up to you and your mother."

It was two months and fourteen days after Chisa's imprisonment that Homura and Mio Akaneno arrived at the Inomiko house, where a wounded beast awaited them, frozen deep inside of a dark cave. There was a seriousness in the countenance of Homura Akaneno that few had ever witnessed—she was *mad*, and she had the power of not only her own celebrity, but connections, behind her. "We're gonna try for the easy way first, daughter," she said.

All Mio could do was try to contain her rage, her discontent. How could these people do this? Three months, Mio had wondered in terror where her lady love had vanished to—only to find out she was captive within her own home. If she had a chance to speak with Taichi Inomiko, she wanted to be sure Chisa knew what a brave young man he was.

Homura didn't wait, or knock on the door. She pulled out a little doohickey, and opened the door by herself, strolling out of the manor's impressive garden, Mio close behind. "The room should be somewhere in the center of the place," Homura said.

Trying to find it, though, was somewhat difficult. There were no clear places where such a room could be kept, and the center of the mansion was simply a nexus of the walkways. There was no room like that. But—

well, when the Akanenos came to the dojo where Chisa had battled her father time and again, they found something. Specifically, they found Yuuya and Ikuko Inomiko—Yuuya held a small tray of food, clearly too small for a person to subsist off of, and he was walking toward an inner wall of the dojo that led to an area that was hidden from all sides no matter which walkways the Akanenos had found. He slightly slid open the fake wall, revealing a small passage.

Then—the four people within the room all became aware of each other at once, and Yuuya dropped the tray and threw his arm in front of his wife. "*You!*" Ikuko hissed. "What are

you doing in our house?”

“Right, right, you two,” Homura said. She'd put on her cleanest labcoat for the trip out, but the grimace she affixed the Inomikos with as she wrung her hand about was downright filthy. “I thought I recognized the name, and now I see your faces. How's it going? I invited myself in—and before you say anything,” she said, seeing Yuuya grab a practice katana off of the wall and unsheathe it, “I've got permission to be here. May not be a cop, but I've got a warrant. Our understanding is that you have a minor imprisoned in this house. Now, my daughter and I have a vested interest in the continued health and safety of this minor—”

“*You!*” Ikuko spat. She pounded the wall. “You... you're the one that ruined my daughter! You and that daughter of yours both! You!”

“—so I'm gonna be blunt with you here. I'm willing to pay you,” and Homura produced a briefcase, “a lot of money. I will pay you plenty, and, you know, you're both younger than me—you can just have another kid to ruin, right? I will pay you whatever the hell you want—just give me Chisa. And let's throw in her kid brother, too—I can't imagine the kid's awfully happy here. Name a price.”

Yuuya then stepped forward, swinging his sword in Homura's direction—though they weren't nearly close enough for it to damage her. “You think that the sanctity of this family—of everything the Inomikos represent—you think that's something you can buy with *money*, you lunatic?!”

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way,” Homura said. “You're not the one who's in a position of power here, Inomiko. Name your price, and we can end this relatively unscathed.”

“The Inomikos aren't going to bow to a low-down, dirty trickster like *you!*” Yuuya roared, baring his teeth. Frankly, it was rather pathetic.

At this point, Mio finally spoke up, spitting out, “Your family doesn't mean *anything!* All this shitty family of yours does is hurt people!” She leaned forward, her fists balled, to shout, “So give me back my girlfriend! She doesn't deserve *any* of this!”

There were likely many things that Yuuya Inomiko wanted to say to that. Some part of him, deep inside, probably wanted to scream, 'I didn't deserve this either!' or 'If she gets to go free, what was everything that happened to me even for?!' Some part, deep inside, wanted to scream that he was a person too, and that it wasn't fair that his daughter got to be freed if he never had.

But that wasn't what happened, because that Yuuya Inomiko was long since dead. Instead, he steadied his grip on his sword and stepped forward, causing Mio to yelp—

The girl inside the Cold Room had started to forget how to feel anything. Without even that slight bit of human interaction to tether her, she spiraled into the depths of blackness. She forgot what voices sounded like. She forgot faces. She forgot events. The hallucinations that ever taunted her were incomprehensible to her.

She wailed occasionally, but nobody would ever hear. It wasn't the wailing of a poor girl—it was the wailings of a miserable beast. Bereft of her identity, and of happiness and sadness both, she was numb, numb and tired and thoughtless. She passed her days in an unthinking haze of nothingness, neverending, with only three things to tie her down—the idea of 'three months', and the idea of a girl named Mio.

Mio's voice—that was a sound the thing inside the room was fairly certain it remembered. Her face... maybe. Her overall shape, yes, but her face, only perhaps. The beast couldn't trust any other memories it possessed—so it simply let itself sit in 'maybes' until the day came when those maybes could become yes or no, or simply disappear entirely.

Bereft of either of the identities it once held, the beast simply existed, ravenously eating the small bits of food it obtained. It was hungry, this beast—it was so, so hungry. It was hungry, and cold, and exhausted, and weak, but it was not yet allowed to die. It knew that it had to keep living, but it was unsure of why.

That was, until the day it started hearing things, outside of the room. It wasn't sure, at first, whether those things it heard were real—whether those were real sounds, but no, as they continued without disappearing, the beast slowly inched toward the door. “—the easy way or the hard way. You're not the only one—” That was a woman's voice, if the beast could be said to remember what a woman was.

“—a lowdown, dirty trickster like you!” That was a man's voice—the man who came to feed the beast with that hateful look on his face.

And then—

“Your family doesn't mean *anything*! All this shitty family of yours does is hurt people!”

Mio

“So give me back my girlfriend! She doesn't deserve *any* of this!”

That was Mio's voice

Cold and hungry and weak, the beast slunk toward the locked door, listening closely, wanting to be sure it wasn't hearing things. Mio. That was Mio, Mio, Mio. She was real. Her voice was real. The beast could hear her outside the door. And then—

“Go to hell, you damned devil woman!”

to hurt Mio. He was trying to hurt Mio.
He was trying to hurt Mio. He was trying to
hurt Mio. He was trying to hurt Mio. He
was trying to hurt Mio. HE WAS TRYING
TO HURT MIO. HE WAS TRYING TO
HURT MIO. HE WAS TRYING TO HURT
MIO. HE WAS TRYING TO HURT MIO.
HE WAS TRYING TO HURT MIO. HE
WAS TRYING TO HURT MIO—!!!!!!!!!!

The lock burst from the door inside the small passage, with such intense force that it embedded itself in the far wall, very nearly striking Yuuya in the head as it flew. A *claw* had burst through the wall of the Cold Room, shredding the chain to pieces and leaving the room unlocked. As the door swung aside, the claw opening it with such strength that it broke the door entirely, the thing inside the room took an unsteady step outside.

Its hair, long and matted, fell down to well below its shoulders, and its bangs were so long that all that was visible of its face were its beady, black eyes, burning with an intense malice. The nails on its dirty fingers were long enough that 'claws' were more accurate than 'hands'. The robe the thing wore was covered in dirt and dust and stains from water, and it walked with a gait rather like a lion on the prowl.

It took one step forward, then two, then three, and everyone present in the room felt an unbearable pressure—a vibration in the air unlike any on Earth. Only Mio was able to squeak out—“Chisa?”

The beast reared its head back and let out a guttural, unearthly howl—and then it *leapt*, a whirlwind of instinct and fury, towards Yuuya Inomiko, who leapt back, visibly shaken and sweating from the sight of this *thing* that had been unleashed. Its pin-prick eyes were focused solely on him, and in their sight he could feel the sort of pure, unfiltered *hate* that could haunt one's dreams for years.

Ikuko had fallen to the ground, prone and shaking, as the beast, crouched on both feet and one hand, ready to pounce, leapt toward Yuuya once more. This time, he swung his sword, but this beast's raw instinct was far too fast for his sword hand—it batted the blade's blunt edge away

like it was nothing, then reached in to slash him with its claws, drawing blood.

“Y O U H U R T M I O”

H-he had done nothing of the sort! Yuuya no doubt thought as he clutched his chest wound. He had clearly missed—she was fine! And yet, this *thing* continued approaching ever closer—he attempted to run out of the dojo and around the walkway, but—!

CRASH. CRASH.

The monster's claws tore through the wall of the dojo on the other end as well, interrupting his path and forcing him to turn back in at the closest door, back in the monster's reach. Even while holding his fresh wound, he leapt back, keeping his sword in a defensive stance. Why wasn't it afraid of this blade?! It should be! This thing—it should know the meaning of a katana!

—! Yuuya gasped, and then ducked to the side, running away—even if he couldn't outrun the beast, surely he could reach it, the blade of the Inomiko head—!

But fate—was not kind to Yuuya Inomiko. In that instant, it understood that he was unsuited to be head of anything—and that was why the monster's hand caught the blade first, and it tore the sword off of the wall, reaching into a standing position.

“I ' L L K I L L Y O U ! ! !”

At first, the beast swung the blade in one hand, like it was a simple bat. Even so, the speed at which it swung the sharp edge still made it difficult for Yuuya to defend against—the strikes of raw instinct were not efficient in technique, but they were efficient in attempting to strike at Yuuya's vital points. “Chisa!” Mio called out. “Chisa—*stop!*”

But the beast—could not recognize that name.

As Yuuya continued fighting on the backswing, he realized something—the more the beast swung the blade, the more technique it acquired. It was learning, faster than anything he could imagine—where it had begun swinging the blade like a bat, now, it was truly wielding a katana in one hand, going for absurdly fast overhead swings before following up with lower slashes, spinning around to deflect Yuuya's vision, and outdoing his placement of guarding such that any attack he attempted to make left him further back than he began.

Then, it placed a second hand on the hilt, and began to truly properly wield the blade—

Ah, Yuuya realized, in that very instant. In that moment, he experienced something humans do not often experience. After all, humans are the dominant species of the planet Earth—to experience the sheer, utter defeat of having found yourself in the grip of a predator,

knowing that your life is *over* before it has ended, truly comprehending a force you have *no way of defeating*—this is how prey perishes in the embrace of a predator.

He realized this inside of his mind, as his body screamed in pain—for you see, the beast had swung its blade so cleanly, quickly, and efficiently, that his mind still had time to think for a moment before it realized that his sword arm, still holding the blade he had been wielding, was now in a bloody heap on the dojo floor. There was nothing there. More than he ever had before, Yuuya Inomiko had utterly, completely lost—he was defenseless, and helpless, before the maw of the apex predator before him.

Yuuya desperately dodged away from the beast's killing thrusts, even knowing how hopeless an endeavor that was—but when the beast's leg swept him off of his feet and placed him off of the ground, he knew that he was dead. It went for a finishing stab onto its grounded prey—

“*Nee-san?!?*”

And that, not any other voice,

got the monster from inside the Cold Room to pause

and look over to find Taichi Inomiko,

sweating and terrified,

and say,

“*Tai...chi...?*”

In that instant, the pressure in the air disappeared,

and suddenly, everyone in the room understood that where there had been a beast,

now, staggering backwards, shaking and cold,

was a deeply injured human girl.

“*Chisa! Chisa!*” Mio yelled, running up to catch the girl she called Chisa, blood-stained blade still in hand, and keep her from falling over. “*Chisa! Hold on, we're going to get you out of here!*”

—Get her—out of here? No, Chisa thought, as all of this sensation flooded back in, hold on. Hold on... wasn't there a reason I was doing this? A reason that all of this happened? There was something I was doing, right? Something I was...

And in that instant, as Homura forcibly sheathed the blade and started dragging Chisa

away, she did not understand one crucial thing—that the Inomiko household was soon to be investigated by police who did not answer to them. No matter what happened, the Inomikos would not remain in charge of Taichi.

But the look of horror in his eyes, as he reached his hand out, paralyzed—“Chisa,” he whimpered, falling to his knees, “Chisa! Chisa!”

—She could only hear that
as a painful, heart-shattering *reproach*
that after all of that
she had failed in the one thing she wanted to do.

“Taichi!” Chisa yelled, reaching her hand out for him—but she was far too weak to wrest herself from Homura's grip. “Taichi! *Taichi!* **TAICHI!**”

“Come on, kiddo, we need to get you to a damn doctor! We can talk about him later,” Homura said, and hefted Chisa's weary, thin body over her shoulder.

“No! Let me go! *Let me go! You don't understand, he's my brother, he's my only brother, he's all I have! I can't leave him! I can't! I can't leave him here! Let me go, let me catch him, I can't lose him! Please! Please, PLEASE! I'm begging you, please let me go, please, I don't want to lose him, I can't, please—!*”

As Homura dragged Chisa off of the premises, out the front door and into the garden, she wailed and wailed and wailed, holding her hand out to try and reach the brother she could not bear to leave. He followed behind, tears in his eyes—but whether they were of relief, or of fear, or of sorrow, there was no way Chisa could understand.

Mio turned back around, too, to face Taichi—and the two most important people in her life finally met. Even as Chisa wailed, screaming for her brother, Mio and Taichi, both crying, finally got to speak.

“I'm sorry it had to be like this,” Mio said, “but I'm glad to finally meet you, Taichi.”

The police sirens filled the air, as Taichi sniffled and said, “Yeah... you too... thank you. Thank you for coming.”

“Taichi, listen to me.” Mio knelt down, and rubbed her eyes clean of tears. She placed her hands on Taichi's shoulders, and then pulled him in for a hug. “I know things seem grave right now, but... I promise... I'll bring your sister back to you. This won't be the last time the two of you see each other. You'll be able to talk to each other again. I promise. I'll keep her safe.”

“...you promise?” Taichi asked, hardly able to speak through his sobs.

“I promise,” Mio said. The two of them stayed like that for some time, as in the distance—

“*Taichi! Taichi! TAICHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!*”

—the poor, pathetic wretch from the Cold Room howled to express pain unlike anything she had ever felt.

~XXI. Denouement~

Eventually, Chisa had fallen unconscious, and it was several days until she awoke again. Homura had been given the right to take care of her for the time being, and in the fallout, Taichi had been placed into foster care—though the question of where, and in what house, was still up in the air.

Mio sat by Chisa's bedside for each of those days, slowly trimming Chisa's nails and cutting the gnarled mess her hair had become back to its normal length. She cared for Chisa, ensuring that she was kept healthy, and clean... and, perhaps most importantly, warm. When Homura came in to visit her daughter, who had been spending most of her time by Chisa's bedside, it was usually quiet, and *unusually* somber for the eccentric scientist.

They kept in touch with Taichi, of course—it was important to keep him posted. But after a slow, quiet, somber week, Mio came in one day to find Chisa stirring, holding herself up on her elbows to try and escape the embrace of her bed, grunting and groaning as she came to. “Chisa! Oh my god,” Mio yelped as she dashed in to embrace her, “oh my god, are you okay?”

“Mio...” Chisa croaked. “Where... where am I?”

“You're at my place,” Mio said, “and you aren't going anywhere. We got all your stuff and moved it over here—there's no problem. It's all over.”

“It's all...” Chisa rolled the thought around in her mouth a bit. “...over, huh?”

Chisa requested a glass of warm water, and drank it quickly. Though Mio had done her best to feed her during her time unconscious, she was also unbelievably hungry, and was fed as requested for some time. She stayed beneath the blankets as much as she could, and the heat was kept at a reasonable, but not uncomfortable level—enough for her to defrost, so to speak. The room she was in was a fairly plain guest room at the moment, but several of Chisa's possessions were in fact knocking around, ready to be unpacked and set up.

“They told me about that room you were in,” Mio said, as Chisa ate. “...I'm so sorry. I wish I'd known sooner.”

Chisa shook her head. “No... that's alright. It wasn't your fault.” She took a bite of steaming rice—tasteless, but delicious in the moment—and pondered this. High school was over,

and here she was, free of her parents' house at last. "I... can really stay here?"

"Yes, of course you can!" Mio said. "And don't worry if you need to take a while to recover. It's fine. You take as long as you need—I'll serve as the cutest nurse I can!"

—The blade of the Inomikos was among her possessions, Chisa noted. "Why is that here?"

"We took it with us, after you, um..." Mio trailed off into a mumble. "How much of that do you remember?"

"I'm going to be honest," Chisa said, and rubbed her head with one hand, "there's a lot I don't remember. How... how long was I in there?"

"About ten weeks," Mio said, and Chisa let out an involuntary shudder. "But it's okay. You're not in there anymore."

Ten weeks. How much of those ten weeks had Chisa lost in a haze of oblivion? But... at least it wasn't three months, she thought to herself with a wry chuckle. She had just barely missed that mark. "How'd you figure out where I was?" Chisa asked.

"Tsubaki actually delivered me a letter that day," Mio said. "She wants you to know that doesn't count, and you still have a favor." Chisa nodded. "It told us what was happening, and where to find you, so we got some warrants from people, called in some favors with my Aunt Natsume, stuff like that."

"Huh," Chisa said. "Well... I'm glad someone wrote that letter, then. I'll have to thank them."

"Oh, yeah!" Mio said, standing up. "I need to go let him know you're awake! He's got a phone now, so we can contact him—"

"Who?" Chisa said with a vague blink.

"Taichi," Mio said with a smile. "He was the one who wrote the letter."

—Chisa broke out into a brief sweat, her eyes darting back and forth and her head pounding slightly. That name was familiar, wasn't it? 'Taichi'? No, she definitely knew—

Then it stopped, and she asked, "Oh, well, that was awfully kind of him. Who is he? A friend of yours?"

—Perhaps it was out of guilt, horror, the association with her reason for staying—whatever the case, any attempt Mio made to remind Chisa of her brother from that point on was useless. As far as Chisa remembered, she was an only child, and always had been. The hardest part of it at first was telling Taichi himself—Mio kept in touch, always did,

informing him of how his sister was doing, and no doubt he would keep waiting and waiting for the day he was allowed to see his sister. Unfortunately, even attempting to remember his name caused Chisa a deep, searing agony—and her condition came first.

Aside from that, it took a while, but with some physical therapy, proper nourishment, and loving care, Chisa did eventually manage to make a full recovery from her time in the Cold Room, finally able to walk about. She was not, however, the same.

Anxieties had taken root in her that were not present before—the nervousness of her teenage years writ large, in a manner that would not seem to go away. She would suffer from the occasional migraine, and post-traumatic stress disorder had settled deep into her psyche and refused to leave, so the nights when Mio had to hold Chisa, to ensure her that she wasn't freezing to death, were numerous at first, and never truly went away.

There was a long time when Chisa suffered from a terrible fear of the darkness, as well, sleeping every night with a night-light on. And being alone—well, that was just the worst. Mio didn't mind staying with Chisa, but for the first period when Chisa couldn't even bear a moment without her, the restroom connected to the guest room stayed open during showers and trips to the toilet, no exceptions.

But she recovered and became functional, as people did. Smiles began to reach her face again. Laughter, happiness, joy—even in her damaged state, all of these things became real. And one day, she approached Mio with a new stack of papers. “I've got something to show you,” she said.

Mio flipped through them—it was the first sketches of what would become their next manga. “This looks great, babe! I knew you had it in you.”

“Well, I try,” Chisa said with a chuckle. “So, tell me about what happens next?”

KyuuKare was never finished. The question of its ending was swept quietly under the rug, and the two of them went on without ever figuring out how the story ended... but occasionally, both of them would wonder—how *did* that story end?

But the answer to that, too—the end of that dream—had likely died with all the rest, inside the darkness of the Cold Room.

-Fin.