

CHAPTER 5

AS A WOMAN, AS A MOTHER

It is not correct to refer to what occurred in September of 2017 as a 'conclusion' to Youka Fudoji's story, as you are well aware, but it was certainly the conclusion of a certain segment of her story. It was the final time, before the events of the Dragon Wars, that she was a 'hero'.

The elections for the Prime Minister were soon to arrive, and Botan and Park had come over to Youka's apartment to spend some time with their good friend. She had, since letting her children have the house, not been sure how to adjust only fending for one person—so she often found herself more comfortable with people over.

It was noon. Botan had turned on the television to see what news was on, and a forecast for the election had been what. "...noting the push by Councilman Ryuji Kozakura's party to rally for the election, while moderate candidate Inazuka is still heading polls—"

"Turn that off, if you would," said Park, who was working with Youka on a jigsaw puzzle. Botan switched the channel, and Park sighed. "I don't like hearing it, you see."

"Yeah," Youka said.

"Don't blame me, blame the TV people," Botan said with a shrug. She started flipping channels looking for something entertaining.

—There is a saying. It goes, "speak of the devil, and he shall appear". The concept of a 'Devil's Proof', a logical fallacy that dictates that the lack of evidence fails to disprove the existence of something—say, God, or the Devil—and as such those things are unfalsifiable, is presumably named after the Devil because he is someone people do not want to see. The saying, 'speak of the devil and he shall appear', is the following to that fact—while it is unfalsifiable whether speaking of something that then occurs truly does alter its likelihood, the human mind is keyed to notice when such a thing occurs: for instance, if one mentions their mother having not called, and then their mother calls, in that moment the mother is the devil.

In the year 2020, a woman named Sumie Kazuki would instruct her friends, including Youka, on the intricacies of this philosophy, which she refers to as 'jinxing', because she is not a superstitious woman, nor does she speak English as her primary language. Youka, when hearing about this subject, always seemed to remember the moment that her home phone rang just after Botan started flipping channels.

Youka picked up the phone without particularly looking at the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Ah, Miss Fudoji," said the voice from the receiver. "It's been some time. This is Councilman Ryuji Kozakura. I'm calling to make good on a statement I made some years ago now."

—Youka turned the phone on speaker, a cold sweat having broken out on her forehead. She

gestured Botan and Park over, and both of them gazed down at the phone, a grave silence having broken out. “I’m well aware you’re listening, so allow me to explain myself,” Kozakura continued. “As you’re no doubt aware, the election for the role of Prime Minister is coming up. As I do intend to win, I have a vested interest in cleaning up loose ends—you primarily among them. I have made good on my promise not to campaign in Yotsuya, of course, but our agreement said nothing of—”

“Do you ever shut up?” Youka asked. “What’s your point?”

“Yes, you’re correct. I should make my point clear,” Kozakura said. There was a brief rustling. “Young lady, please verify yourself as collateral?”

In the background, there was a small shout—“*Mom!* You can’t! He’s definitely—!”

Youka rocketed to her feet, clenching her fists and staring down at the phone, her breath growing heavy. “You son of a bitch,” she said.

“Let me make one thing clear,” Kozakura said, returning to the phone. “At the moment, I am the most powerful man in Yotsuya. You cannot run or hide, and your daughter will pay the price if you do not agree to my terms. Please ensure you are here in five hours—I shall be calling you with more information. Goodbye.”

Click.

“—!! —!!!!” Youka grunted and drove her fist onto the wall, pounding at it hard enough to shake the wall. “Damn it! Damn it!! Damn it!!!”

“Y-Youka—” Park started.

In response, Youka turned on her heel, ran to the doorway, and grabbed her coat. “Get in the fucking car! Now!”

Ryoma was still an enthusiast of the pompadour, even after growing out of everything that surrounded it. To see his hair utterly flattened, and him just as flattened on the ground in front of his own home, was enough to get Youka shouting. “Ryo! *Ryo!*”

She knelt down in front of him, and he stirred a bit. “Mom...? That... that you?” His eyes managed to crack open. Another one of his teeth had been knocked out, and he was bloody—Park started looking in a knapsack he kept about for some bandages. “Shit... I’m... I’m sorry,” he said. “I couldn’t... Cocona, I couldn’t—!”

He winced as he spoke, and Youka barked at him, “Don’t try to move so much, idiot! What happened? Was it guards of Kozakura’s, or—?”

“N-no,” Ryoma said. He shook his head. “It was... it was the big guy. It was Inoue... and his guys. They were with that old guy.”

“...I-Inoue?” Youka said, shaking her head. “What the hell is he doing with Kozakura? What’s...” She turned her head. “Botan. Give me your phone.”

“Right,” Botan said, kneeling down by their side.

Youka quickly entered in the number—one ring. Two rings. Three rings—then it was picked up, and Youka could hear Mimiko crying into the receiver. “Mimiko!” Youka said. “What's going on over there?”

“Mimi doesn't know what she's gonna do,” she said, continuing to cry, “she doesn't know, she doesn't know. They—they—”

That was all Youka needed to hear to know. “Shit,” she said. “Shit! God *damn it!*”

Five people all barging into the door of an old brothel was probably not what its proprietor was expecting, but when Orchid saw Youka barge in with Botan, Park, her unconscious son-in-law, *and* Mimiko, all she could do was sigh. “You can't keep yourself out of trouble, can you?” she said. “We've got an open room.”

“There's nowhere else safer for him,” Youka said, still holding Ryoma. “Thank you.”

Ryoma got a bed, and Mimiko got to sit down and finally catch her breath. She was having difficulty speaking, but from what Youka could glean, this was what Kozakura's guards had been on—they'd burst into Satoko and Mimiko's home, and forcibly escorted Satoko off of the premises. Mimiko wasn't a fighter like Ryoma—all she could do was watch.

Orchid, for her part, came in, locked the door, and asked, “What the hell have you gotten yourself into?”

“Cocona's been kidnapped,” Youka said. “It's Kozakura—that United Nations Party crackpot. He's got Inoue working for him.”

Orchid shook her head with a heavy sigh, and slowly walked over to a seat around a round table to join the gathering of people prepared to think about this. “I always figured something like this would happen. I always told Tomoe, no, that boy's trouble, but she didn't listen to me.”

“E-excuse me?” Park asked, raising his hand.

“An old friend of mine's always been one of those wandering martial artist types, even long after that sort of thing went out of fashion.” Orchid steepled her hands. “Runs a circus these days with her grandson. Back in the day we'd get into adventures and all. Her name's Tomoe, and about thirty years ago or so now she decided she wanted to take on an apprentice to master her style. She picked up this boy off the street, an orphan with a fire in his eyes.”

“Whaaaat?” Botan exclaimed, her eyes wide.

“Yeah, it was that Inoue kid. He was tough as bricks, just like she needed, but I always thought the kid wasn't right in the head, if you asked me. He'd been abandoned by his father for being a bastard, and he always talked about wanting to show his old man that he'd made a mistake, that he was strong enough to get back at him. Tomoe's a real nice woman if you get past the resting bitch-face, very strong

sense of justice, and she believed in the kid too much—but you know what happened. He didn't care about defending anyone—he just wanted to become strong enough to show up his father. If you ask me, he's still trying to.” Orchid sneered a bit. “Punk-ass kids. Real upstart, that one. But no matter how strong he gets, he's always just running after some shadow.”

“That's an awfully in-depth psychological analysis of someone you don't know that well,” Park said, “but based on what I've heard of the man I have no doubt you're right.”

“Even if he's an upstart,” Youka said, crossing her arms, “he's a damn tough one. If I'm going to have to fight him, it's not gonna be easy.”

“—Kidnapping both of your daughters and trying to pit you against each other, huh?” Botan said, looking up at the ceiling. “I guess this guy's betting a lot on your 'talent'. He just wants to see which one of you would make a better weapon.”

There was a moment of silence, before Youka asked, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Well, it's a long story, but... you ever heard of this organization called 'Murakumo'?” Botan responded. For once, there wasn't even a bit of a smile on her face.

“I'm here,” Youka said.

“Ah, good,” Kozakura answered over the phone. “I had hoped you would be. Please come to the concert hall at Tokyo Opera City—do you know the place? If you don't arrive before midnight, I'll be forced to take drastic action. I would prefer you came alone. Good day.”

Click. The call ended, and now Youka and Botan sat in Youka's apartment. “One thing I wanna know,” Youka said. “Botan. This Murakumo organization—how do you know about it?”

Botan averted her eyes, but chuckled a bit. “See, my family business is in with a bunch of unsavory elements like that. Sure, that kinda thing's in with the government, but it needs support from less savory sorts, too. It's the kind of open secret nobody wants to admit.” There was a pause, during which Botan let out a small sigh. “Plus, I'm a valuable commodity, too.”

“Yeah?” Youka asked.

“See, they really value people who can be used in combat,” Botan said. And, for the first time ever, directly in front of Youka, she demonstrated a few bits of lightning flying between her fingers. “A lady who can shoot lightning? Well, that's an easy S-Class psychic, especially once psychics were proven a few years ago... but even back when I was a kid, they wanted me.”

Both of them were hunched over on the sofa, neither looking at each other. “Y'know,” Botan said, “the only reason this Inoue guy is such a big guy in the first place is because the Sumadera family's having a crisis. Have been for the past while—gosh, must be a decade.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Youka said. “Something about the rightful heir refusing or something.”

“That's the one,” Botan said with a little nod. “Gave Inoue—who's married to one of the branch

family heads—gave him an in. If that woman had been there, y'know, none of this probably would've happened. If she'd just taken over the family business like her mom wanted.”

“—It's all about family businesses, huh?” Youka said with a snort. “Why didn't she?”

“Oh, people'll tell you all sorts of stories,” Botan said with a shrug. “But, here's the story you'll hear from me. This girl, she always wanted to be an idol when she was a girl. A performer who could inspire people, you know? But people would turn her away for her family—she wasn't clean enough for that kind of image. It's always about your family. So she had two choices, really—either she became a dog of the military for this Murakumo bunch, or she took over the underworld, put herself in a cloak and dagger world with no way out, when all she wanted to do was inspire people.”

“So what'd she do?” Youka asked.

“If she was going to be stuck in the underworld, she might as well make the most of it. There are ways to inspire people, aren't there?” Botan said with a laugh. “It's not the same. It could never really be the same. But it was something, and it wasn't a life she couldn't be proud of. Of course, now that girl's getting a bit older, sooner or later—probably sooner—it's gonna be the end of that. And what she does after that, who knows, right?”

“Huh,” Youka said. Then, she turned her head to Botan, and pointedly did not mention the tears coming to her eyes. “Here's what I think. There's this adage—'those who can't do, teach', right?”

That got Botan to stand up straight, and widen her eyes, her arms hanging limply by her side. “What?”

“See, this lady, here's what I think. If the time ever comes, even if she couldn't ever be an idol, she could be a damn good manager, right? Channel all that spirit into seeing some other kid get up on stage.” Youka snorted, and shook her head with a little smile. “I mean, hell. This lady knows me, and lord knows I meet a whole lot of people. Maybe one day I'll send someone her way.”

There was a moment's pause, before Botan lit up with perhaps the most genuine smile Youka had ever seen on her face—and it was quite a beautiful smile. “You're really something, you know that, Youka?”

“Sure, sure, of course,” Youka said with a little laugh. “Just answer me one more thing before we go. The hair—does it run in the family?”

“Ah, the ladies start off with red hair, but it goes white pretty early. I just got a head start,” Botan said with a laugh.

The Tokyo Opera City Tower is the third-tallest building in all of Shinjuku, standing two hundred and thirty-four meters tall. While forty-eight of its floors are dedicated to office space, the first four levels feature several shops and restaurants, as well as an art gallery, a media art center called the NTT InterCommunication Center, and, particularly to this visit, the Takemitsu Memorial Concert Hall. (In truth, 'Tokyo Opera City' as a label also applies to the neighboring New National Theatre, rather than just the tower.)

It was, in the whole of things, not the sort of place Youka visited often. While Botan and Park had come along in the back seat of the car, only Youka got out to enter the building. “Please... do come back alive,” Park said through the window. “I couldn't take it if you died because of me, you see.”

“Because of you?” Youka asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh, you know! Because originally, you and Councilman Kozakura came to blows—” Park shook his head. “Ah, who am I kidding? It is you, of course. I have little doubt you would've wound up doing so anyhow, hm? But, well... Unless you, Cocona, and Satoko all come back, this won't end properly. I would rather this chapter in the life of Jong-ki Park did not end so sadly!”

“Yeah, yeah, keep talking,” Youka said, waving over her shoulder once again, strolling toward the massive building. “Botan, make sure he doesn't run out of words before I get back.”

“You got it!” Botan said, with a thumbs up, putting her other hand over Park's mouth.

“And neither of you follow me!” Youka said, knowing full well that they were definitely going to wind up following her.

—It was night, the sun having fully set, but the lights in the building were still on. Not a soul was about, which lent the place an air of deathly finality. It didn't take Youka long to find the concert hall's entrance to the first floor seats, and fling the door open.

The concert hall had three tiers of seating, and taking in its full height, tapering to a triangular roof that led to a great window through which the stars looked down, would have been an incredible sight at any other time. The second and third layers were along the walls on the upper levels, but Youka began to walk forward through the aisles of the first level's seating—toward the stage, behind which stood a colossal pipe organ. The canopy above the stage and the dampeners in the walls—all white oak wood—were all designed for the maximum acoustics.

“Good evening, Miss Fudoji!” said Kozakura, seated below the pipe organ on the second level. Next to him, with her arms and mouth bound, was Cocona—but Satoko was nowhere to be seen. It had been several years, so the man's age was becoming much more clear. “I'm glad you elected to arrive.”

Sure enough, Inoue was leaning against the wall, and only looked up, a grim expression on his face, once Youka stepped up to the stage. “I really thought you were better than this, Inoue,” Youka said with a sigh and a shrug. “Sure, you're a real asshole. But I thought you knew better than to help kidnap my daughter.”

Inoue said nothing. Instead, Kozakura continued speaking. “Now, allow me to be as clear as I can. Japan only has need for the greatest warriors—those who will never lose to another. Many a project I have backed has fallen through—I have no need for failures. Do you understand, boy?”

“Understand?” Inoue said, crossing his arms and scoffing, his face twisted into a scowl that Kozakura could not see. “It's you who doesn't understand. You don't understand a damned thing about a warrior's heart!”

And then, Inoue removed himself from the wall, and in one swift motion—his suit, and his coat, flung to the wind. His bare, rippling muscles exposed for all to see, he pointed his finger at Youka. “Fudoji! I've wanted to fight you for a long, long time, but always, these circumstances, these complications, they all get in the way! All of these pretensions, all of it, it's *nonsense!*” He flung his hand to the side to punctuate his statement. “You're the strongest in Yotsuya—to strike fear into everyone's hearts, I must defeat you! Yotsuya can only have one ruler!”

“Oh yeah?” Youka said, cracking her neck—and then, in one swift motion, her sweater and her coat flew off of the stage. (For modesty's sake, she had worn a sports bra.) “I never said I was the ruler of anything. But you wanna know something? I've wanted to kick your ass ever since we met!”

Inoue took the first step, running forward for a straight punch—“You're going down, Raging Bombeeeeeer!”

“Shove it up your ass!” Youka roared back—and their outstretched fists collided.

FUJITO INOUE

HEAD OF THE INOUE CLAN, A SUMADERA FAMILY SUBSIDIARY

Inoue spun into a front kick, which Youka caught, gripping his knee, and hurled him over her shoulder, sending him crashing onto the ground. He leapt right back up and weaved to the side, left, right, then under a jab from Youka to punch into her stomach. Youka gritted her teeth from the pain, then drove her elbow down into his arm, attempting to crush it against her rock-solid knee. His bone, however, was sturdier than that—he grunted from the pain of the impact, but his arm retracted.

Youka went for a swinging backhand to his side, and managed to connect, causing him to recoil. She stomped forward, and aimed for his chin, knocking his head up with an uppercut before delivering a double hook body blow. He bounced back quicker than anyone she'd ever fought, though, for a two-handed overhead crush that Youka's guard still stung taking. Swinging her body downward from the force, he launched his knee upward to hit her in the jaw, and dashed forward in his momentary opportunity for a straight punch to Youka's gut.

Youka took the gut punch in stride, despite the raw impact making her stomach feel a little weak—she once again grabbed his arm, and this time went for an over-the-shoulder arm lock that she capitalized on to do her best to crush the joints in his elbow. Inoue roared in pain, but went for a counter-punch to the face—so Youka used one arm to grab his other arm, and twisted them together before tossing them to the side and going in for a series of one, two, three, four punches to the body, and then—!

Inoue managed to backstep away from the headbutt that finished Youka's most brutal combo, and went in for a chop to the back of Youka's head—a strike that made her start seeing stars *before* he grabbed her by the waist and started attempting to hold her upside-down to perform a brutal tombstone piledriver. Unfortunately for him, he underestimated the power of Youka's leg muscles—she split them in the air, then sent them crashing together with his head in the middle to stun him long enough to drop her. Despite the position, she landed, then sent a double back-kick into his stomach to knock him back long enough for her to stand up.

The two charged at each other, and began exchanging direct blows to the face and body—a rapid barrage of blows with little finesse or strategy, simply attempting to deliver as much damage as possible. Youka managed to get Inoue to stagger for a moment, but as she began to capitalize—

—the lights turned off. “Wha—what's going on here?” Kozakura yelled, in the darkness.

Then, the doors to the second floor opened, and both Youka and Inoue stopped fighting to attempt to see what was going on. “Guards!” Kozakura said. “Whoever just entered, kill them!” And there was a loud sound, almost like a gunshot, yes—but it was no gunshot. Youka knew that from the type of bright light that emanated, causing the sound of a guard who'd doubtless been hiding in the room to exclaim, then collapse to the ground. Another shot, then a third and a fourth—from the sound of it, one had just fallen from the second level to the ground.

“You, you're—!” Kozakura exclaimed. “The electrokinetic!” *That* was a gunshot—from the position, Kozakura had just fired a bullet in Botan's general direction, but then—

At that moment, three voices cried out. “Go, Cocona!” “Eat *this*, you stupid old man!” “Who—?!”

The lights flickered back on, and suddenly the situation was clear. “*Cocona!*” Youka yelled, running to just below the pipe organ to catch her falling daughter. She did, Cocona landing in her arms with an ‘oof’, but Ryuji Kozakura's landing was not nearly so graceful; the old man crashed to the ground face-first. Park poked his head over the balcony to give a thumbs up to Youka.

“Yeesh! Okay, I never wanna do *that* again,” said Cocona, who stood up, dusting off her legs... in front of Inoue, a man who had assisted in kidnapping her to begin with.

“...What the hell is this supposed to be?” Inoue, crouched over and covered in sweat, asked.

In quick succession, Botan entered through the door. Then, Park was shortly behind, as he took a bit longer to come down the stairs. “That damn Korean...!” Kozakura said, slowly staggering up onto his arms after his rough landing.

Cocona ran over to Botan and Park, and Youka took that moment to ask, “What the hell just

happened?”

“To be honest, I don't fully understand the specifics,” Park said, “but—”

Then the door opened one last time, and who should come in, bolting through the door, but Satoko Inoue and Mimiko Morishima. “Dad, *stop!*”

When Inoue saw his own child running through the doors, he stood up. “S... Satoshi? What's going on here?”

Mimiko had to huff and pant a bit, since she wasn't much of a runner, but she started off, “Mi, Mi, Mimiko! Mi, Mi, Mimiko! Mi, Mi, Mimiko! You know it's me because it comes in threes! Lately, I've started using a software called YUUHI that lets me use infophysics to manipulate certain software! The... the lighting software in Tokyo Opera City... is... haa...”

Satoko ran up onto the stage, and stared her father in the face. “You need to stop! This man doesn't have any leverage over you! I—”

“Stop! Hold on!” Inoue said, raising his hands. “I have questions of my own! Two, specifically. The first is... why do you look like that?”

—Everyone who was in the know shared a look with each other at that moment, considering that this conversation was coming at a stunningly inconvenient time. Satoko was, well... wearing a dress, for one thing. But Satoko, to her credit, took a deep breath in, and said, “Dad, I—well, I've decided to live as a woman, that's why!”

There was a moment's silence before Inoue said, “I... see. I suppose that makes sense. I have no problem with this. I'm glad you've decided so strongly on that. Congratulations.”

There was another, much longer silence.

“Oh,” Satoko said. “Thank you.”

“But why are you here?” Inoue said, finally managing to stand up straight despite the wounds he'd taken. “This—”

“Wait,” Youka said. “I thought the whole reason you went along with kidnapping *my* daughter was because he kidnapped *yours*?”

Kozakura finally managed to stagger to his feet, and the air in the room turned electric as Inoue's head slowly, slooowly craned in his direction. “You. Did. What?” Inoue said.

“You think I trusted you? It's leverage, you stupid boy,” Kozakura said, leaning against the wall for support. “I—”

“You promised me!” Inoue said, roaring, baring his fangs at Kozakura and stepping ever closer. “This organization of yours—you promised me, if I served as your candidate—!”

“That I'd acknowledge you, yes, I remember. Do you know what it takes to lead Japan? It takes

a willingness to lie, boy!” Kozakura stood up proudly, pointing his gun at Inoue. “There are people in this country who would be very willing to help me in this election if I could present either one of you, and I don't care how I had to do it. You're just a bit easier to wrangle, is all.”

“D-Dad...” Satoko said, holding her hands close to her chest. “That's—”

“Look at the state this nation is in! Look at this *room!*” Kozakura yelled at the approaching Inoue. “An orphaned girl with no family to speak of is the ruler of Yotsuya! A Korean invader, a dropout yakuza, and your own son—wearing women's clothing! To say nothing of you—I would *never* acknowledge a deviant who holds such company as my own progeny!”

“How *dare you—!*”

It all occurred within an instant. Kozakura's aim wasn't good enough—the bullet hole blasted through Inoue's shoulder, yes, but it was not fatal. But the blow Inoue struck to Kozakura's stomach, the raw force of it, made the old man crumple against the wall, cough up a hacking, choking dose of blood. Then Inoue struck again, and again.

Then, Inoue stood there, holding Kozakura's gun—the old man was too weak to hold it now. He gasped through his agony to say, “You'll... see. You'll all... see. The day will come... when Japan needs... a strong leader, and the power... of hunters. And when it does... Japan will remember me... as the leader it needed—!”

This gun held six bullets total, and the two shots left four left. All four were emptied into Kozakura's head, rendering him a corpse on the ground.

And it was then that time—resumed, for all present. “Oh my *god!*” Cocona yelled, gasping and staggering back. Botan caught her, and Satoko started to run up to her father—

“*Fudoji!*” Despite the bullet wound, Inoue stood up straight, and turned past his daughter to look at Youka. Having silently digested all that just happened, Youka just nodded. “Youka Fudoji. You've done me and my daughter a great service, helping her become a woman she can be proud of. But I will not back down! She is *my daughter*, and I'll give everything I have to her!”

“She doesn't need that,” Youka said, shaking her head. “You idiot. You're an asshole to the end, you know that?” She responded by girding her stance. “A life in the mud's only worth it if it's only lived once.”

“...Satoshi—or, no. I suppose I don't know if that's your name,” Inoue said. He looked toward his daughter. “I—”

“Satoko,” she said.

“That makes enough sense. Satoko. Get off the stage and let me settle this,” Inoue said. Satoko began to back away, and then... “I'm sorry, Satoko. Thank you.”

“I don't understand what's happening,” said Mimiko, who had now been seated in the front row. Satoko sat next to her. “Why are they going to fight?”

“It's about pride, I think,” Park said. “Pride, and 'one more afternoon', I suppose?”

“Fudojiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

“Inoueeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

In the near-empty room, with a crowd of only five, the gong rang out on Youka Fudoji's final round.

Inoue charged Youka with both arms wide open, preparing for an all-out attack, but Youka countered by grabbing his open hands with hers, and the two entered a raw struggle. Back and forth, sweat drops flew, until Inoue dipped slightly, and Youka lifted her head up—

—*Wham!* The force of Youka's headbutt sent him reeling, but Inoue roared back to life, catching himself and reversing his backwards momentum to launch forward with a hook to Youka's jaw. Youka managed to block it with one arm, but he came in with one from the other side she wasn't quick enough to block. Then, he came in like a horrific storm—strike! Left, right, straight, he continued attacking Youka in a hail of blows.

With a roar, Youka rebounded from one strike by ducking below the next and grabbing Inoue's legs, tripping him and beginning to spin around—“That's a giant swing, baby!” Botan yelled. She picked up momentum, and then released him, letting him hurtle into the ground. Inoue staggered to his feet, and with a wild shout in response, ran towards Youka aiming to strike her one more time, and Youka readied her own fist—

—and then, the air twisting around it like a drill, Youka's fist managed to stop Inoue dead by barreling straight into his stomach, causing to make an undignified noise from his wide-open jaw and bounce up before crashing, face-down, into the ground. He lifted up his arm one more time—and then slumped.

“You win,” Inoue said. He laughed weakly from the ground. “There's... no way I could ever defeat you.” With a cough, he continued, “Now... go. Before the police arrive.”

“Dad—!” Satoko stood up to shout, but—

“I'll face my crimes.” Inoue said, raising his head. “There's no reason any of you should have to... least of all you. Let me at least... act like an adult this one time.”

Youka had to stagger off of the stage, but Cocona and Botan were quick to come support her. Mimiko, for her part, held Satoko's hand, as Satoko looked down at the ground. “...Let him,” Youka said. “If Kozakura's murder goes unsolved, he'll become a martyr. At least this way, a few more people might see him for what he was.”

“I know,” Satoko said, “but... I'll... I'll see you again, Dad. This isn't goodbye.”

“That... makes me happier than anything,” Inoue said. And he began to laugh again, a more earnest laugh, as Youka and her entourage all left the concert hall. His laugh grew louder, and louder, until eventually, it echoed throughout the entire room.

“I can't believe I missed all that!” said Ryoma, with everyone now at his and Cocona's house.

(They had, since they actually had friends, put in a set of three sofas instead of just the one, around a round carpet.) He put his head in his hands and loudly sobbed. “I look like such a loser now.”

“Aww, c'mon, no you don't,” said Cocona, putting her arm around him and patting him on the shoulder.

“Don't be such a sourpuss! C'mon, let's party!” Botan said, having already decided to get drunk, spinning around the room like a doofus. “Heyyy, Park! Get something non-alcoholic and... whatcha doing?”

“Oh, just... thinking,” said Park, clearly doing more than that as he looked down at a tablet and tapped-tapped-tapped away on the couch to their left. “About all of this. I think... perhaps I feel inspiration coming on, is all.”

“Is it PreCure inspiration?” asked Mimiko, on the sofa to Ryoma and Cocona's right. “I'd really like to see something like that, I think.”

“Well, there is quite a bit of hand-to-hand combat. I'll have to think about that,” Park admitted.

Youka was confined to a futon in the corner, since she was very badly beaten, and it felt a little embarrassing to be on the floor for all of this. The night went on, though, most of the people present happy, but there was a moment when it was just Satoko and Youka where Youka asked, “So, what're you gonna do now?”

“I'm still not wholly sure what it is I want to accomplish with my life,” Satoko said, looking down at her hands, “but I think... I want to be the kind of woman my dad can be proud of, even if I'm not the kind of woman he wanted me to be. I'll think of something, I'm sure. I have time.”

“Yeah,” Youka said. “First thing on your list should be finally telling Mimiko how you feel about her.”

That got Satoko to start up, and even stand up, blushing very loudly. “W-w-well, I'm just trying to find the right time—!”

“Try 3:33,” Youka said, and both of them started laughing.

...Yes, that was the last time Youka Fudoji was a 'hero'. Everyone had a place to go. Everyone was happy. That should, by all rights, have been the end of it all. And for a time, it was—and for a time, they were all happy.

EPILOGUE

THE DESTROYER OF UNIT 13

With the electricity off, and only candles for light, the apartment of Youka Fudoji was an eerily quiet place—no small noises broke the silence. Only the sound of Youka quietly flipping the page of the book she was reading managed to break it. Cans of food sat by her seat, but she had just eaten, so she was not hungry.

Around the apartment were photos that Youka had hung over the past few years. So many smiling faces, swallowed by darkness. Who knew where they were now? If they were even alive?

—Well. Aside from two, of course. They were right with Youka, in a small box still inside her apartment.

There was a sound at the door, but it was softer than Youka expected. She stood up, and walked through the dimly-lit apartment to the door, then swung it open. “I told you *fuckers to LEAVE ME ALO—!*”

“*Aaaaah!*”

Her fist had managed to place itself roughly a centimeter away from the face of a young man—a human. His hands were up in defense. He clearly wasn't from around here, with his blonde hair and blue eyes, but he—“I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't know!”

“Oh, uh...” Youka lowered her fist. “Sorry about that.”

There was a girl by his side on the stairwell of the apartment, looking down at the corpses of all the monsters on the ground. Youka had lost count at eighteen. “Haha! I thought you must've been exaggerating.”

“Please, I don't exaggerate about things like this,” said the young man. He took a deep breath, tried to calm himself, and then extended his hand, his eye still twitching slightly. “Hello! We met once before, ma'am. I'm Richter Esslinger.”

Youka blinked, and then it came back to her. “Oh! Yeah, you. I remember you. How's it going? You need some food?”

“No, er, well, not quite,” said Richter. He cleared his throat. “Actually, I was hoping we could escort you to a shelter nearby. I'm sure you can survive quite well out here by yourself, of course, but—well, we could use your assistance, ma'am.”

“Mine?” Youka asked. “What for?”

“To kill the dragons, obviously,” laughed the small, red-headed girl. ...Nice cape, Youka thought. “What else?”

“Yes,” Richter said with a nod, “I’m a member of an organization called Murakumo—”

“You’re *kidding!*” Youka sputtered.

“—so we’re gonna have to outfit you with these weapons in order to ensure your body doesn’t get blown up,” said Kirino, handing Youka the cesti that she would be going into battle with. “And also, in the case that we survive this, that we don’t get sued into oblivion for deploying you.”

“Sure, sure,” Youka said. “I’m fine with that.”

“You have quite the ability, it seems,” said Natsume Hikasa, head of Murakumo. With a coy little smile, she continued, “I’m hoping for quite a bit from you, Miss Fudoji.”

Leaving the tactical room, Youka stretched out to feel the cesti on her hands, and passed by Richter in the hallway. “So who’s in charge of our unit? You?” Youka asked.

“Ah, no, no,” Richter said with a little chuckle. “In truth, our captain is currently unconscious, and has been since the initial attack... ah, she’s in that room over there, if you’d like to go meet her.”

—But when Youka went to go meet her unconscious captain, there was another girl there. A heavy-set girl with a ponytail, and glasses, and a shirt for some manga or another—she was sitting by the bedside of a girl in a uniform, with one red swoop of hair.

As Youka sat down, the girl with the ponytail jumped a bit. “W-whoa! Okay, hi!”

“Hey,” Youka said with a little wave and a smile. “Just joined this Unit 13 business. Youka Fudoji. So this is our captain, huh?”

She was awfully pretty, Youka thought. She looked like a rich girl, from the clothes and the nice sword, but she had the kind of air about her that told Youka she was a formidable fighter. “Uh, Mio Akaneno. Hi,” said Mio, bowing her head. “Yeah, I’m just taking care of Chisa. I’m technically also a part of the unit, but I can’t fight, so they mostly have me doing odd jobs right now.”

“Gotcha,” said Youka. “Like taking care of a sleeping girl?”

“I wouldn’t let anyone else do it,” Mio said, averting her eyes and blushing a bit. “I mean, well—”

“Oh, I get it,” Youka said with a nod. “Young love. I understand.”

Mio blushed further. “Well, yeah. I mean... yeah. I just can't really stand the idea of anyone else getting to do it, ehehe.”

It served well enough as an icebreaker, and a good few minutes of conversation followed—Mio was an engaging young lady, and Youka was able to get well caught up on the state of things. “It's just,” Mio said, “it's like... I'm scared. I guess I'm scared she'll never wake up. Is that selfish?”

“Nah, I don't think so,” Youka said. “I mean... she probably wants to see you again too, right?”

“Yeah, but... if she wakes up, she has to live all this with me,” Mio said, her gaze falling to the ground. “And it's just... Chisa's... had a lot to deal with in her life, and I don't know what this is going to do to her. And I don't... I couldn't take it if this was too much for her.”

“It's a lot, that's for sure,” Youka said, nodding. “It's a lot.”

“I mean... I just... but I don't know how much longer I can keep going without her,” Mio said. She sighed. “I need her as much as she says she needs me. And... it's hard. It's really hard keeping going without her. But I need to be strong when she wakes up, so she can at least have something. I have to be strong so that she can keep going... so that I can keep going.”

“You really love her, huh?” Youka asked, tilting her head quizzically.

“Mmhm. I do,” said Mio, who looked up at her unconscious girlfriend with a soft smile. “Even with all this... she's the best thing that ever happened to me. I just... wish I could tell her some of these things while she was awake, you know? There's always... there's always things I wish I'd said. I never feel like I quite say the right things.”

“—When she wakes up,” Youka said, “take the chance. Whenever it comes. Okay?”

“I'll try,” Mio said. “But it... it's not easy.”

“I know,” said Youka, putting her hand on Mio's shoulder. “You'll get there. Believe in her, and let her believe in you.” She chuckled. “God, that's corny. What the hell was that supposed to be?”

—One last time, then. One last time for Youka Fudoji to enter the ring. Perhaps, just one more time... she could fight, before she died. Maybe this wouldn't be a bad place to die. Maybe here, the Ghost of Yotsuya could finally pass.

Or maybe, just maybe— she could find one more life.

*Aishiteta to nageku ni wa
(It's been too long for me to lament)
Amari ni mo toki wa sugi te shimatta*

(how much I loved you)

*Mada kokoro no hokorobi o
(The wind's still blowing through)
Iyasenumama kaze ga fuiteru
(that old gash in my heart)*

*Kawaita hitomi de dareka na itekure
(Someone, please cry for me with dry eyes)*

THE REAL FOLK BLUES

*Honto no kanashimi ga shiritaidake
(I just wanna know what true sadness is)
Doro no kawa ni sukatta jinsei mo warukuwanai
(A life in the mud's only worth it)
Ichido kiri de owarunara
(if it ends after the first time)*

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