

Omote-ura is a dualism by which Japanese culture operates. 'Omote' is the public face, a version of the self constructed of the self as well as myth and kind lies—'ura' is the true self, that which others are not meant to see. Degrees of *Omote-ura* permeate not just society, but the culture itself. *Omote-ura* cannot be avoided.

Let us start at the end.

A girl stands at the bottom of a submerged tower, just off of the coast of Japan's Tottori prefecture. Though the tower is wholly underwater, its construction is sound enough—wrought by hands of a culture long forgotten—that she does not get wet.

Drops of water fall from floor to floor within this stone tower, where light can only be found by the soft blue glow of the runes on the wall. The construction is not alien—it is built for people who are like humans, but unlike them. She can walk down the stairs, and she has.

The girl stands in front of a mural. No, perhaps 'mural' is too strong of a term for this small picture. It is a remnant, a picture wrought into the wall. This was not a photograph, no, nor was it drawn with minerals—the rock itself was twisted into colors, shapes, that depict a moment in time with stunning accuracy.

It is unlike anything the girl has ever seen before. She is cold, and still rather damp, but this is drowned out by the indescribable emotion she feels looking at this image.

There are five people within the image. All five are dressed in clothing unlike any the girl had seen. Each of them is scarred, and bleeding. Some have lost limbs. And yet, despite that, they are rejoicing. Their joy is palpable. One holds a grand spear, which is quickly losing the same blue glow which comes from the walls.

To any who come after,

on this day, we fought and defended this world

from a scourge from beyond the stars.

You need not remember our names, only our deeds.

It is plain to the girl that this civilization did not survive. If it had survived, she would not be within this ruined tower. But the triumph within this picture is clear. All five of these people fought, desperately, and in the end, they were victorious. They died proudly.

And yet. Was that correct? The girl found herself wondering. This image was such an accurate shot, so eerily lifelike in its composition, that it could not have simply been a drawing, even through this foreign method of twisting minerals.

No, something within her says. This is a photograph. Photographs must be taken. A picture must be captured. In other words—

There were six people here, at this moment. Five in the picture... and one behind the picture.

And was that sixth person—celebrating? What feelings coursed through their heart? This historian, tasked to capture the last victory of an entire civilization, yet fated to eternally be apart from it, invisible...

The Royal Historian.

It is a title the girl has never heard before, and yet it is one the girl is intimately familiar with. She has learned of many such concepts as the Royal Historian in her time on Earth.

The Royal Historian's existence was not one that was always so distant. The Royal Historian was a person like any other. They lived, and died, and laughed, and loved, and cried, and hated.

Or—was that correct?

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Or—was that correct?

“I don't... get it,” the girl says.

No. Of course not. Of course the person taking this image was not happy. They were not celebrating. Instead of fleeing to whatever refuge was possible, the person taking this image was standing here, in this very room, crying, weeping for all that they wished to do, all that they wished to *be*.

There is a whisper on the stagnant air, lilting into the girl's ears amidst the vapor.

“Oh, gods,” says the whisper, “oh, gods. Please... in some next life, let whoever comes after me... be who they are meant to be.”

The girl turns her head. There is a pane of glass there, and it reflects her image.

“Should I be... afraid of you?” the girl asks. “I don't understand. Please, tell me. Don't just leave me alone down here. I can't... I'm afraid. I just... I just want to hear you tell me that it's alright.”

And the girl responds—

“Don't worry,” she says. “No matter what happens, I swear, I'll always be your friend.”

~1. The Cursed Child~

Let us now start at the beginning. It will be quite some time before we reach that point, but you have by now proven your patience.

In the year 1997, a child was born. This child was born to a man of the Kazuki family and a woman of the Akiyama family who had taken her husband's name. From the moment this child was born, it was clearly unusual—you see, this child possessed long, pointed ears, like those of an elf from deep in a fantastical forest.

The woman of the Akiyama family—this child's mother—had little time to appreciate what it was she had created. At first, it was thought that perhaps the child's unusual ears had caused more severe hemorrhaging in the birthing process, but in fact the truth was much more mundane—the woman named Mayuri Kazuki had suffered a case of a disease known as viral myocarditis some years prior, and this disease led to an unnoticed onset of dilated cardiomyopathy from the weakening of her heart.

By the time her condition had been properly diagnosed, it was too late. Her condition proved to be fatal. For her child born into this world, she had only time for one thing—granting her child a name.

Unit 13's captain, the young lady, was asked not to repeat this name in the case that she needed to tell their story. As such, it shall not be fully reproduced here, either. The name was Hi _____, for after all, this child was male.

—But that is moving forward in the story.

At the time of Mayuri Kazuki's death, her older sister, Himiko Akiyama, was twenty-seven. The two had always been quite close. As it happened, Himiko, and not their parents, was the greatest gatekeeper to Mayuri's love life, and it had taken some time for Himiko to fully accept her sister's partner. Himiko loved Mayuri with all her heart—she had once professed that she could never earnestly take a partner so long as her beloved younger sister required protecting.

However, Takahiro Kazuki, the child's father, knew from his time knowing Himiko that she was fundamentally a kind woman, that she did not wish undue harm upon those around her, and that her protective instincts were, or should have been, ultimately harmless—

Takahiro was not a short man, but neither was Himiko a short woman, so she had the leverage to slam her fists onto the wall around his head and lean in uncomfortably close to his face. “Kill it! I want that baby dead!”

“What?” Takahiro asked. She had seemed intense, but he hadn't imagined her grief would cause such a violent reaction. “You... You can't just ask me to kill my own son.”

“That child murdered Mayuri and you want to let it go? Look at it! It did something to her, I know it did!” Himiko's teeth were bared, and her spittle flecked upon her brother-in-law's face.

“He didn't do anything wrong! Hi _____ couldn't hurt anybody—he was only just born!” Takahiro protested. “Himiko, you're not thinking straight. That's your nephew. Please—”

“Just because that thing is related to me by blood, I shouldn't be allowed to punish it? It's a murderer! A devil child! It killed my sister, your wife, and you want—?!”

“Hi _____ didn't do anything! It was...” Takahiro trailed off. “It was her heart.”

Himiko's arms trembled. “Her...” Her body shook and shivered. “The infection? Again?” Takahiro nodded. “That can't be. She recovered! She was fine! We all saw her!”

“Do I look like a doctor?!” Takatoshi shouted back. “I don't know, Himiko! I don't understand either! All I know is what they've told me, but her heart failed! My wife is dead and you want me to kill my son?!”

Himiko slumped to the ground, her eyes heavy with tears. “That can't. That can't be.” With a weep and a sob, she repeated, “That can't be.”

The child's long ears were a mark of his unusual birth, but the young Kazuki would not learn for quite some time of this mark. The structure of the bone was not so fundamentally different from a human's at this young age that they could not be reconstructed, and Takahiro worried for his child. Without knowing the significance of the child that he had helped to bring into this world, all he could do was act in concern for the livelihood of his son.

It is best not to cast undue aspersions on those acting in good faith. Takahiro Kazuki was not an ill-intentioned man, nor was he a poor father. Indeed, even into adulthood, his daughter would remember him fondly, and think on a world in which she had had the opportunity to live as his daughter more directly. He deeply loved his child, and did his utmost to ensure her well-being.

Hi _____ Kazuki was a quiet boy, who took to video games as a means of expression from a young age. His face did not display many emotions, but his father Takahiro learned to understand him. Moreover, from a young age, his senses were keen—his senses of scent and of hearing, in particular. Hardly a word could be whispered by him without him hearing.

Naturally, this was not well-liked by his peers. He was quite honest, and lacked the sense of social niceties that would have prevented him from repeating unfortunate discussions not meant for his ears. As a socially awkward child with such an unfortunate habit, he became a ripe target for those looking to assert their superiority.

However, this was mundane suffering, suffering held by many such children, and he did not think of his life as a particularly bad one—he had his time at home which was pleasant, and he was not so hurt by his time at school that he felt he needed to be helped. Whether he was correct or not is another matter.

—Then, in 2007, an unfortunate circumstance occurred. It was a workplace accident that took Takahiro's life—he worked in construction, and there was an unfortunate incident with a steel beam which stole away his breath. His funeral was held with a closed casket. There were not many remaining in the Kazuki or Akiyama families who could reasonably be expected to care for a child after he vanished, so as Hi _____ stared blankly at the casket which he presumed held the brutalized remains of his father, a discussion was being had which they believed he could not hear.

“What about his son?” “Hi _____? Ah, well, you see, we're so old...” “We've got children of our own. We can't take another.” “He's a sweet child, really, but I don't quite understand him. I don't think he'd be very happy.” “What about Himiko? She doesn't have any children.” “Ah, yes, of course! I'm sure she'll be a fine mother, right?”

It is best not to cast undue aspersions against those without the chance to speak for themselves. As such, it is good to understand that Himiko Akiyama did agree to take in her sister's parentless child. Moreover, she provided monetarily for the young Kazuki's existence. In truth, there were even times when it was not miserable for him to exist there.

However, that is only the speculation of the child in question. In a show of respect, only due aspersions will be cast against Himiko Akiyama—and there are many such aspersions to be cast.

~2. Stray Cat Strut~

—The image came clearly into focus in the glass of the mirror, as the blinds were drawn, and he could not see inside. He was not a tall boy, and his messy, frizzy, dark brown hair frequently drooped between his eyes and his glasses. He was still in his uniform—plain, dark, and a bit ill-fitting.

After about five minutes of standing outside and knocking on the door, he finally worked up the energy to speak. "...A-Aunt Himiko?"

"I don't want you around tonight," came the answer from behind the door. "Go find something else to do."

"Huh?" The boy stammered wordlessly for a moment. "But... Aunt Himiko, my bed is in there."

"Go find another bed!" Himiko yelled back.

It was 4:30 in the afternoon. The young Kazuki was a proud member of the Go-Home Club, so he had nowhere in particular to go, and no excuse to return to his school. He began to shiver as the sun slowly fell behind him, and what was happening began to sink in. Okay, he thought, okay, okay. Hold on, you can get through this, hold on.

Himiko Akiyama did not have next-door neighbors—at least, not that the young Kazuki knew. He couldn't simply ask them for help. No, next door were two businesses. Himiko Akiyama lived in Shinjuku. To the young Kazuki, whose first decade had been spent in the much further western city of Hamura, among its relatively meager population of fifty-seven thousand, the raw density and bustle of the special wards of Tokyo was greatly daunting.

Take a deep breath. In, out. The young Kazuki breathed in and out, as the glowing orange light fell behind the tall buildings. Shinjuku Station was nearby, so if he went there, he'd probably be able to at least find something he could do—

No, wait! You're twelve! What are you doing?! He couldn't just go out looking for a place to stay! For that matter, he had no money! Where was he possibly going to stay? Was he going to have to sleep on the ground? How was he going to eat dinner? How was he going to get to school the next morning?

Take a deep breath. In, out. He started walking. He was thinking about this wrong. If he thought about this as... say, a test of his ability to be self-sufficient, then... yes! Of course he could try his best, and maybe if he failed, Aunt Himiko would let him back inside. Eventually. Yes, he was going to be fine. He would try his best. So...

At first, he thought about finding a hotel. But those were terribly expensive, especially for someone with little money. So, the best option would be... oh, of course! An internet cafe! He'd played a few games where people mentioned staying overnight at those, so it was probably a good idea to find one of those! He began to scroll through his phone, looking for one with suitably cheap rates.

"Customa Cafe... Kabukicho," the young Kazuki muttered to himself. The nightly rate for a 12-hour stay appeared to be 2,310 yen on a night like this. Okay. 2,310 yen. That was doable, right?

Kabukicho... Right, that was where Hanazono Shrine was, wasn't it? Okay, that was to the west from Aunt Himiko's apartment.

If anyone thought seeing a twelve-year-old boy on the street as the sun continued to set was odd, they didn't say anything. The hustle and bustle only increased as the young Kazuki walked the blocks to Kabukicho. Seventh floor of the #2 Koa Kaikan Building, 1-21-1. That was straight on from the Ichiban-gai.

Kabukicho was Japan's most famous entertainment district, and the young Kazuki knew it instantly from the bright red sign. The *Kabukicho ichiban-gai*, a neon sign that served as an archway to enter the district, was rather famous, so the young Kazuki did know it by sight. Both walls of the entryway were lined every which way with bright signs on the buildings, advertising dozens upon dozens of different establishments just within this pair of roads.

Seeing it for the first time, the young Kazuki's eyes widened, and he could only stand and stare on the side of the road, sidling away from the crowd to ensure he wasn't trampled. The glowing lights, the noise of the cars and the barkers, desperately ensuring any who came by that their business was the one to visit—

“Wow,” he said. It was dazzling. One's eyes couldn't land on an unmarked spot. Everywhere, everywhere, was *something*. Okay, so if he navigated from here just straight, he'd find 1-21, and then... Yes, heading straight past four turns, he found it. The #2 Koa Kaikan Building. Customa Cafe wasn't the only net cafe in this building, as it happened, but the young Kazuki's intuition told him to look at it.

Okay. There it went. He'd found a cheap place to stay. The problem was, cheap did not mean free. He needed 2,310 yen or so—a few hundred more if he wanted to shower. He'd be able to eat some food if he got in there, but that was a big 'if'. Surely there was something a twelve-year-old boy could do to find some money around here, right?

The young Kazuki thought. He thought and thought and thought. He did not have a job—he did not even think it was legal for him to have a job, as it happened. So... could he just ask people on the street for money? No, they'd never agree. He was twelve. They'd probably tell him to go home, which he couldn't. There was theft—no, of course there wasn't theft, he'd get caught instantly!

The option that the young Kazuki came to was prowling the streets. He'd duck into small alleyways looking for dropped coins or something worthwhile to sell. One yen, ten yen, a hundred yen... Surely he'd manage to find something.

One hour turned to two, and then three. Drunken salarymen began to populate the streets ever more strongly as a small child in his uniform dove into alleyways to try and find something, anything, of value. He'd managed to rack up five hundred and forty yen. That... wasn't nearly enough. His stomach was growling, his hands were cold and wet, he was dirty and tired from all the work... Tears began to well up in his eyes.

Meow.

Luckily, a sudden sound interrupted him. “Eh?” He looked around him, but saw nothing until he looked upward. On an air unit on the side of a building was a cat—a stray calico, by the look of things. It leapt down in front of the young Kazuki, and stared up at him. “Oh!” He knelt down to pet it. “Hi

there. What's up? Do you have somewhere to sleep?"

Another meow. This was a small alleyway, with not much but grey cement and a dumpster, so there wasn't much chance of the young Kazuki losing it when it began to walk away. He began to follow it. "Where you going?" Even through the crowd, it didn't scamper or start away. It just walked, slow enough for him to follow.

'Shinjuku Golden Gai', as it was called, was a historical relic of the relatively recent past of Tokyo—comprised of six narrow alleyways, hundreds of small eateries, clubs, and whatnot were crammed tightly against each other, some so small that they could only fit a single-digit number of people. It was soon to hit nine o' clock, when most of the bars opened, but it had not still had its late-night rush.

Small alleyways tight enough for a single person to fit through were the way through Golden Gai, and the calico cat led the young Kazuki through some of them. This could perhaps be associated with the young Kazuki's intuition as well, but he felt as though this was the best thing for him to do—so when the calico snuck in through a small hole in the wall next to a door with an empty sign out front and no sound coming from within, he tested the door.

Locked. Of course. It seemed this particular door wasn't currently in use, and the only ways in were through that hole in the wall or this door. It was either this or get back to scrounging, though, so the young Kazuki sighed and looked in his backpack. This building was unused, so it was unlikely to be locked particularly thoroughly, and he knew how to pick a basic lock (a day's curiosity some time ago), so he pulled out a small wire to work the lock.

Right, yes, it was in fact a tumbler lock, and not a particularly complex one. It was a bit nerve-wracking to pick a lock right before the nearby establishments opened, and a bit of sweat came to his forehead, but with a soft click—"Yes!" he whispered, pumping his fists slightly. He opened the door, then swiftly spun inside, turning the knob as he entered so as not to make noise.

The electricity was still on, so the young Kazuki could see that at one time, this was one of Golden Gai's many bars. Five stools still sat at a bar counter, but all of the alcohol had been removed. Places where decorations once hung were less dusty than the rest, but some had clearly been re-appropriated by this bar's new resident—the calico cat had made a bed for itself in the corner behind the bar, and it strolled over to it without a care in the world.

"Wow. You just have a bed right here?" The young Kazuki stared in awe at the small bed, made of posters, twigs, leaves, and other such refuse. "That's incredible. I... hey, hold on a second."

Beside the cat's bed was something that didn't look to be quite fitting. No, it wasn't a pillow. Was that... The young Kazuki tilted his head over to look at it. 'E.YAZAWA'. It was a square container held behind a glass case the cat had nested in front of. He quickly searched it on his phone and found that, oh, of course, this was a CD case. A 1990 reissue of a 1981 album, it looked like. It had never even been opened, it looked like—it was still in the plastic.

"Huh. Cool," the young Kazuki said.

He took a moment to think, and then his head whipped around to the cat as he exclaimed a choked-out "Thank you!", opened the case, grabbed the album, and ran. There was a pawn shop in

Kabukicho that closed at 9, so he only had a few minutes to get there. Since he was so small at this point, his agility allowed him to dart out of Golden Gai and back into wider Kabukicho without alerting anyone to his presence or running into anyone. 1-5-3. It was a straight run, or so it seemed—waiting to be allowed to pass a crosswalk was going to kill him! But he ran and he ran, and—

“Sorry! *Sorry!*” the young Kazuki exclaimed, running through the doors into the Daikokuya pawn shop. The clerk, an aging man with thinning hair who was clearly not expecting a customer so close to closing, started awake to see a small schoolchild running in. “How... how much?! How much for!”

“Hey, kid, hold on,” the clerk said, raising his hands, “shouldn't you be at home?”

The young Kazuki put the album down on the counter, and said, “I need... I need to sell this. Bad. Please. How much?”

The clerk shook his head before looking down at the case. “Wow, still in the plastic. *It's Just Rock And Roll*, huh? Ah, Yazawa. I'm a big fan. Let's see... I've got this in vinyl still, but in CD form, no, nothing so clean. This is nice. Something your family told you to sell?”

“Um,” the young Kazuki mumbled, “is it good? I've never sold anything before.”

“Hm. Let's see... Honestly, still in the plastic, this'd probably get you... Ah, you're sure nobody wants to keep it?” A frantic shake of the head. “You really want it, huh? Alright. Well, I should have enough for this. I'll give you 7000 yen. How's that sound?”

The young Kazuki's eyes sparkled with glee. “Yes! Yes, that's amazing! Thank you! Thank you so much!”

Holding the yen he'd collected inside his backpack and full of pride, the young Kazuki made his triumphant walk back to Customa Cafe. He entered the elevator and rode it up to the seventh floor, and his glee was such that even the growling of his stomach couldn't stop him from being overjoyed as he entered the chic and modern net cafe.

While there was obvious concern for the well-being of a child this age coming to a net cafe this late at night, money spoke in Kabukicho, and luckily for the young Kazuki, there was still an unreserved room that night. To say relief flooded his body when he laid down on his room's bed would be a great understatement—were he not so hungry and dirty, he would likely have passed out right there. The anxiety of thinking about tomorrow could wait.

He had passed this little trial. And, indeed, after eating, bathing, sleeping, and going to school again, Himiko allowed him back into her home the next day—but he kept the money, and began to smile and wave at any stray cats he saw on the street.

~3. A Casual Thought~

“Maybe I'm actually a girl?”

The thought was casually tossed out amidst a hail of other thoughts. The girl who would soon be named Sumie Kazuki was playing a video game—Empire Sweeper Online 2, or ESO2, as it was commonly called, a multiplayer online RPG taking place in the medieval kingdom of Baselard. She was fourteen at the time, and had been playing the game for some months.

The girl who would soon be called Sumie Kazuki was here looking at her character. Empire Sweeper Online 2 offered reasonably robust character customization options, and Sumie was considering the nature of her character. For as long as she could remember, she had picked female character options for avatars when given the option. Her username, 'SATSUKI', was, among other things, a unisex name with a female connotation.

(It was also, it should be mentioned, a type of azalea native to and cultivated by the Japanese people. Sumie's love for this flower was why she chose the name to begin with. It should be added here that the name 'SATSUKI' is written in capitals to approximate the use of katakana script, a phonetics-based script often used for, among other things, foreign approximation or loanwords, company names, and plant and animal names. 'Sumie' is written, meanwhile, in kanji. 数希寿美恵, read 'Kazuki Sumie', is her name, whereas SATSUKI is written サツキ.)

...Apologies. That was, again, a rather long parenthetical.

At any rate, the avatar represented by the name SATSUKI was a woman as could be expected. She was a particular woman, for that matter—lithe and wiry, with vibrant green hair much unlike Sumie's own. (She also happened to have cat ears, since Sumie very much liked cats.) Being a girl in a video game was nothing new to her, but having grown to identify with this particular avatar as she had, just for a moment, the thought passed through her head.

“Huh,” she mumbled to herself, as she continued pressing buttons. “Yeah, maybe. That's a thing, isn't it?”

Externalizing her own internal monologue helped her to think while she worked, though she did her best to keep it quiet—if she didn't, her aunt would become quite angry. She was fourteen, and had been living with her aunt for four years, so by now she well understood how to handle her moods.

“Hm,” she muttered, “yeah, if I had the choice, I'd be a girl. That just makes sense, right?” Sumie nodded to herself. “Yeah, that makes sense. So then I must be a girl. I wouldn't want to be a girl if I wasn't a girl, right? Or... no, that just makes sense. I wouldn't want to be a girl if I wasn't a girl.”

So should she tell anyone? Hm. Well, Aunt Himiko likely wouldn't like it... and she had the strangest sense that people wouldn't really understand it if she went to school and started saying she was a girl. So she should probably keep it to herself. Yes, that made sense. Maybe she could start thinking about it later, into adulthood.

By this point in school, Sumie had learned to be quiet. People had, in turn, learned to ignore her—there wasn't much reason to attack someone who didn't fight back, after all. There was a boy in

the disciplinary committee who would, at times, even look at Sumie and say, 'look at how polite Kazuki-kun is! He respects his teachers and this establishment! Why can't you all be more like him, eh?'

...What was his name?

“Sorry, Senpai, but I have a question,” Sumie said one day in menial labor she'd been roped into one day after school.

'Senpai' here was one year older than her (ten months, to be precise, as his birthday was in early January and hers in October), and soon to graduate into high school. He had a short, finely combed head of silver hair, and the fit, tough physique of the scion of an old and storied family, which she was pretty sure he was. His face was sharp, keen, boyish and pretty, and his eyes, in the same shade of silver, had a way of piercing right through Sumie if she tried to look away. Incidentally, he had the cleanest school uniform Sumie had ever seen.

He was, in other words, very cool until he opened his mouth. When he did, he tended to get a self-righteous smile on his face, his posture righting with whatever discipline it was the disciplinary committee worked to enforce. Today was no exception, turning to her as he carried at least three boxes. “Of course, Kazuki-kun. What's that?”

Sumie averted her eyes. “I don't actually, uh... know your name.”

Senpai had to work very hard not to drop the boxes in his momentary shock, and opted to instead put them down on the ground. “Eh?” He blinked at least five times, recoiling a touch in shock. “You don't mean that I've never told you?!”

“Well, you might have...” Sumie mumbled. “I, um, don't remember if you did. And I thought it would be good if I could stop thinking of you as just 'Senpai'.”

Recovering quickly, Senpai nodded sternly, grinned a toothy grin, and then put his arm around Sumie, making her squeak. “Of course, my reliable underclassman! For you, my friend, anything.”

Then he was standing in front of her, bowing. “Kirimaru of the house of Ayanokoji, at your service.”

Kirimaru Ayanokoji. Ayanokoji-senpai, so that was it. He was a pretty guy, wasn't he? This was someone who was definitely a man, if Sumie didn't miss her mark. The sort of earnest guy she admired.

—Sumie couldn't always predict when she'd come home and the door would be locked. She'd figured out how to unlock the door and get in, and even to get in through the window, but if Aunt Himiko found out she was in the house, she would react violently. Sumie had marked herself lucky that a particularly nasty bruise was covered up by her frizzy hair, so nobody gave her any undue concern.

It was fine. She was going to get through this. She just had to overcome this, right?

As a result of her occasional homelessness, Sumie had become a regular visitor to Kabukicho and the net cafes therein. In particular, she found a comfort in the cramped spaces of Golden Gai. The vacant space where the calico had taken up residence was, from what she understood, a hotly contested

space that wouldn't last forever—but there were times where she wound up having to sleep there, instead of in a bed or even in a chair.

There were many stray cats about Kabukicho, and Sumie had become adept at following them into spaces others might've passed up—she was becoming a deft hand at scaling short walls, and ducking into smaller passages than others her size may have been comfortable with. There was a curious scent to it, sometimes—she wasn't sure how to describe it, but it was like rather than actually picking up the particles of a *smell*, her nose was starting to pick up the scent of a lingering opportunity. When she picked that up, she tended to find discarded money, or something that could be effectively pawned at Daikokuya for at least one night's sleep at a net cafe.

So it was that she continued living. Even when she had to spend quite a while at a net cafe, she could at least pass the time playing ESO2 and whatnot. In the guise of SATSUKI, it was very easy to speak to people, and nobody seemed to question that she was what she said she was—a girl. (Of course, not mentioning her age was an important thing to keep in mind.)

~4. The Wasp~

Sumie had started leaving clothes out for herself, hidden behind the apartment, in case Himiko decided to kick her out that night—she was finding that she enjoyed orange accentuation, but for now it was just the lining on her otherwise-black jacket. Not going too flashy meant that she didn't have to worry too much about staining if she got cut while following after some treasure or another.

She was fifteen, soon to be sixteen, when a nightly interruption—something halting her otherwise standard evening of scrounging for treasure—presented itself to her. The scent went to her head sooner than it usually did as she ducked into the alleys of Kabukicho, in and about in Cinecity Square. There were actually a number of police cars out tonight in the near vicinity, so Sumie attempted to remain inconspicuous.

What was not inconspicuous, as she looked behind a dumpster to find the location of the treasure she'd sensed, was the quite visibly foreign woman panting behind it, clutching her right arm. “Argh, damn it,” she hissed with what Sumie was pretty sure was an American accent, “of all the times for this thing to crap out!”

Blonde hair, blue eyes... Yeah, she was a picture-perfect American, according to the anime that Sumie watched, anyway. It was long, straight, and she had two little blue hair tubes on some strands that hung by her face. She was very pretty, or at least Sumie thought, with a sharp, cool, kind of boyish air about her features. And, hell, she was in a black leather biker jacket and jeans—she looked like she'd be more at home on a bike than she would be on the street. She even had cowboy boots on, with little gold spurs! Wow!

“...Eh?” “Eh?”

The two finally registered that they were aware of each other's presence, and the woman's left arm went quickly to her side before she realized that she was looking at a teenager. “...Huh,” she muttered. “A kid? Quit staring. You're gonna get me caught.”

Sumie looked to her side to ensure nobody was looking this way, then ducked behind the dumpster herself. “Hey, seriously! You gotta get out of here,” the foreign woman said, cocking her eyebrow and grunting to accentuate her point.

Shaking her head, Sumie said, “You're hurt. Are those police looking for you?”

“Eh, technically no, but yeah,” the woman said. “Seriously, get out of here—”

Sumie's gut told her this woman wasn't a bad person, so she wrapped the woman's right arm around her shoulders and started trying to stand up. “C'mon,” Sumie said, “I know a good place for this.”

“Huh? Well, hey, I can walk, y'know!” The woman protested, standing up on her own and just letting her right arm dangle uselessly. Sumie put a finger up to her own mouth to shush the woman, and the woman nodded.

Police patrols were never completely safe, and Sumie had gotten a good idea of how the police around here patrolled—so taking the right paths, even this foreign woman, relatively tall as she was,

wouldn't catch much attention. Once they passed Sakura-dori, a right, a left past the Shinjuku Ward Office, another left, and then a right, and then Golden Gai, flawlessly. Inwardly thanking the odd woman for being willing to put up with this, Sumie produced her lockpicking set (a birthday present she'd gotten herself this year) and cracked open the still-vacant space, hurrying the woman inside.

The electricity had been long since cut off, but Sumie had brought a lamp and a small battery in there for her own light. She re-locked the door, pulled a deadbolt she'd re-installed shut, and peeked out the cat hole just to make sure they hadn't been followed. Nothing. She let out a heavy breath. "Phew. That was scary."

Illuminated by the light of the lamp, the foreign woman was looking around the old, deserted bar space and whistling. "So what, you just have this place to yourself? You hide strangers in here often?"

Sumie shook her head. "This is the first time. And it's not my place. It's Michelle's." Sumie pointed to the calico cat, still perfectly well nestled in her nest. "She just lets me stay here sometimes."

"Well, thanks, kitty," the woman said with a wink. "Saved my ass, that's for sure."

Taking a seat next to her on the bar stools, Sumie asked, "Why were the police chasing you?"

The woman hummed. "Well, ordinarily I don't really talk to strangers, see. But you did me a solid, so I'll help you out here. I was running someone over to Shinjuku Station. Sometimes people have to get in or out when the cops don't want 'em, you know? That's my job."

Sumie blinked. "So... huh?"

"Right," the woman said, "you're, what, in middle school or something?"

"High school now, actually," Sumie said.

"Lotsa stuff happens in this world. People need to get out of bad situations—maybe the yakuza have them by the balls, maybe they've been accused of crimes they didn't commit, whatever the point is they need to get out. I'm a runner. People pay me to help them get out and start somewhere else without anyone who might not like that catching wind." The woman snorted, waving her hand about to accentuate her story. "See, this time—Police chief around here? Totally in the pocket of the Sumaderas. If they'd caught the guy I was running, they'd have brought him to one of their crazy assassins and had him killed."

To Sumie, who had been in Kabukicho for some time, this made perfect sense. Her eyes went wide, almost sparkling, and the woman seemed a bit off-put by how awed the young girl looked. "Woow," Sumie said. "That's cool."

"Heheheh, well, yeah, I am pretty damn cool," the woman recovered to say with a smug grin. She looked like she wanted to cross her arms, but then she remembered that only one of them worked at the moment. "Ugh, shit. Right. That's gonna cost me. You got any money?"

"How much?" Sumie asked.

“I was *joking*,” the woman said with a snort, “not gonna take money from a teenager, c'mon, what do you think I am, some kinda crook? I'm way cooler than that. I'm, like, a total badass, actually. If I had both my arms, I totally coulda gotten outta there all by myself.”

“What's your name?” Sumie asked.

With a wink, the woman said, “Call me Vespa. You?”

“Um...” Sumie mumbled, before her answer stumbled out unbidden. “Sumie, ma'am.”

“Sumie, huh? Cute name. So you're a girl, huh?” Vespa said with a smile. Sumie's eyes wide, she nodded. “Tell you the truth, I kinda couldn't tell. Coulda gone either way. It's a good look, but a kid with a keen eye like that? Bet you're gonna be damn cute in a few years, huh?”

That last comment made Sumie blush and look away. Vespa laughed aloud, and reached over to ruffle Sumie's hair. “No need to be embarrassed. What's a girl your age doing in Kabukicho this late, though?”

“Um, I was going to go to the Customa Cafe,” Sumie said. “I need to get a room, I have school tomorrow.”

Vespa first wore a blank stare, before her eyes widened and she let out a loud, nasally “Huh?!” which was followed up by a “Wait, don't you have a house or something?”

“My, um...” It was very tempting to admit that her aunt had kicked her out of the house full stop, but Sumie tried her best to resist the temptation.

“No, no,” Vespa said, shaking her head, “nuh uh. If a kid who saved my ass needs to spend the night out of her house, she ain't spending it at a net cafe. Unless you're one of those kids who just lives at those?” Sumie shook her head. “I know they've got lotsa amenities and shit there these days, but listen, Sumie, you gotta value yourself a bit more.” Pause. “Wait, you're not actually homeless, are you?”

Sumie shook her head. “No, this is one night. My aunt, um... Things are... hard. Sometimes.”

“Tell you what,” Vespa said. She pulled a small key out of her pocket and started spinning it around on her finger. “I've got an apartment I stay in sometimes over in Shin-Okubo when I gotta get heat off of me or help someone out. I'm gonna have to go there to work on making my arm work again, so how's about I let you stay the night? As thanks.”

Her eyes wide, Sumie said, “Would you? That would be very nice.”

“Yeesh, what's a kid this nice doing in Kabukicho?” Vespa snorted. She rolled her eyes and said, “You know, I'm a suspicious lady from out of town the police are chasing. Should you really be trusting me?”

“I think you seem like a good person,” Sumie said, “and I have good intuition.”

Vespa's apartment, to be blunt, wasn't as nice as a net cafe. It was fairly messy, with a

workbench with many a mechanical tool given much of the main room—there was a kitchen, but it hadn't been used in a while. It was two-room, but Vespa appeared to prefer sleeping on her own couch than the bed. That said, there was a bathroom for Sumie to look at herself in the mirror.

...It was true. Behind her bushy hair, it was true that she had yet to develop any particularly masculine features. If she had a word to describe herself, it would be... 'fey', maybe? Her face was a touch angular, sure, and her chin was a bit blunt, but...

That was the first time anyone had ever treated her like a girl. It was an intoxicating feeling. Just for a few hours, she got to exist in a space where she could be more honest about herself. She didn't have to change anything, either—she said she was a girl, and Vespa believed her.

Sumie smiled into the mirror. It was a good feeling. She felt good. She could smile about it, even as the strange foreign woman milled about in the room outside, grumbling and mumbling and yelling a “Damn it, c'mon!” or two.

—It only hurt all the more, then, when she returned to school.

~5. Breaking Point~

If being able to be SATSUKI in ESO2 was causing dissonance, then that one night of being treated like a girl before Vespa headed off in the morning—that one night before Sumie returned to her normal routine—tore a rift between Sumie and her physical self.

All of a sudden, existing was pain. She had the smallest taste of what it was like to live in a space that was more correct, and returning was a hell which tore into her soul. Every time she had to put on a boy's uniform ripped into her soul, knowing that everyone around her saw her as a boy. It was like a veil had been lifted on the horror of her existence.

Having to be near 'other boys'. Any class segregated by gender was the worst, and nothing was more horrid than having to change into gym clothes. She wanted to vanish. She knew people didn't give her the time of day, but she wished they would give her less than that—that she could be invisible. She was beginning to feel like she was choking when she arrived at school, hardly able to gasp anything out.

Those who did speak to her were largely teachers—and they always seemed to find some way to worm in a mention of how Sumie was certain to become a strong man any day now, and she just had to believe in herself, or something like that, into every conversation. “A sweet boy like you will make a great husband, I'm sure,” was one that stuck in her head.

She could be SATSUKI at home, or in a net cafe as the case may be, but the instant she was removed from the computer screen—

“Shitty *brat!*”

Sumie had begun to prefer the nights when Aunt Himiko kicked her out over the nights where she was furious, but let her in. On those nights, it seemed that Himiko would frequently find something to go over the edge about.

Himiko was not much taller than Sumie, but when she stomped on Sumie's back, she felt as heavy as the world. “Damned kid! Don't you look at me with those eyes, like you want me to feel sorry for you because you look like Mayuri!”

Sumie's aunt had a favorite sweater. It was a grey one, but it was warm and 'helped her think'. The days when it was on her body were safer than the days when it was tied around her waist. Her hair, so much like Sumie's but carefully straightened most mornings, was beginning to go grey. And though Himiko was only in her early forties, she had stress lines and frown lines burnt well into her face already.

On the outside, she was an ordinary middle-aged woman, perhaps a bit thin for her age. But to Sumie in those moments, she could only be a wrathful god delivering punishment for a crime Sumie did not understand.

Today, Sumie had done nothing but look at her aunt. She had been struck to the ground with a well-placed smack, then kicked into submission. Now she was being stomped. “C'mon! Say something! Say something!”

“Auntie Himiko, please—?”

“What? What?! What are you asking me for, huh?!” Himiko kicked Sumie's side, rolling her over again so she could start aiming her foot into Sumie's stomach. “Say it!”

“Please, stop.”

“Why? Why should I stop?!” Again. And again. And again. Sumie didn't think she was going to manage to eat anything tonight.

“Because it hurts. I need to go to school tomorrow. If you hurt me too bad, people might get suspicious of you.”

“Is that a *threat*?!” Himiko crouched down on top of Sumie, and raised her fist like she was about to punch Sumie across the face, but then—

—nothing. She stood up, shook her head, unclenched her fist into a hand and held her head, and then staggered off to her room, saying, “Just go. Go to bed. I'm... I'm tired.”

Once again, video games were Sumie's only retreat. Once again, she took control of SATSUKI. Her avatar was ever-confident, ever-strong, as always. As the darkness of the night settled in, the only light remaining for Sumie was her screen. She couldn't help hunching closer, ever closer, to the screen.

Why? Why did there have to be this division? Why did she have to be weak? Why couldn't she handle it? She was trying her hardest, she really was, but why couldn't she handle it? Why did she feel so terrified? Why did she have to keep trembling at the pain of her bruises? Why—

Why couldn't she just be SATSUKI outside, too? Why did SATSUKI only help her inside the screen? She couldn't take this. She needed help. Everything was so much and she needed help, and SATSUKI wouldn't help her. She was sick. Everything hurt. Her head was swimming, and it felt like her computer was warping slightly under her touch as she grabbed it.

“Why? Why?” Sumie implored the screen. “Why? Why is it like this? Why am I like this? Why do I have to be like this? Why can't I be you?”

The rest of the world disappeared for her. At that moment, two things happened. One, Sumie fell to the floor, curled up on the ground, shivering. Two, Sumie found herself sitting in a space that existed nowhere on Earth—on a reflective, watery floor, gentle ripples cascading about it with each movement, surrounded by an expanse of flowers with glowing white petals. The petals fluttered about in the air around her.

In this White Room, Sumie was not alone. Sitting on the other side of this circular room, on a pure white chair—and Sumie then realized, or imagined, perhaps, that she was on such a chair as well—was another girl. Sumie knew this girl well. You, as well, know this girl.

“Well,” said SATSUKI, as she crossed her legs and kicked back in the chair, “if you're having that much trouble, I guess I can step in.”

“Wha... huh?” Sumie blinked.

“You're having a lot of trouble, right? It's not like I don't want to help you. Don't you worry. Leave it to me! C'mon, c'mon, stand up!” SATSUKI stood up, and Sumie did so as well at SATSUKI's command. SATSUKI extended her right hand.

“Huh?”

“Hey, we're partners from now on, yeah?” SATSUKI said with a wink. “Any good partnership begins with a handshake. Ain't that right, Zach?”

That was language Sumie understood. The nervousness broke, and she let out a little laugh of her own, reaching out to shake SATSUKI's hand. “Yeah. Sure. Let's... Let's do it. I wanna be happy!”

SATSUKI transitioned the handshake into a hug, causing Sumie to squeak. “Remember. I'm you, and you're me. There's no reason to be afraid. Okay, Sumie?”

And the White Room vanished into the light—

~6. The Beautiful Satsuki~

It was early December, nearing the end of the second term of Sumie's first year, when a seemingly ordinary Wednesday morning heralded a radical shift in Class 1-C. The weather was becoming chilly, leaves falling off the trees, but one student that nobody seemed to recognize was as chipper as anything coming in through the gate.

She had bright green hair worn in pigtails, a fit body approaching one of the school's track club stars, and a sparkling attitude almost visible from space, so it seemed unreasonable to assume that they had simply missed her beforehand. A transfer student, perhaps? At least a few eyes followed her to see what class she entered.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat's *good*?!” said the new girl, as she opened the doors to Class 1-C. Those who were already seated all looked up, befuddled—if a new student joined the class, wasn't it tradition to have the teacher announce them? And yet—“Love the new hair, Tanaka. Oh, Yamabuki-kun, is that some Kill La Kill merch? Banger show, ain't it?”

With her bag slung over her shoulder, she casually strolled down the columns, then passed the front desk on the far side by the wall to reach the second, placed her bag on the back of the chair, and gracefully twirled into the desk, landing with her legs crossed, her arms behind her head, and a contented smile on her face, her pose illuminated by the light of the sun through the window.

...In a desk that was, to everyone else's knowledge, already occupied.

“E-eh? Ka—K, Kazuki-kun?!” someone shouted, but the new girl didn't respond. Surely this couldn't be quiet, bushy-haired Kazuki-kun, could it? For one thing, this person was wearing a girl's uniform, and her hair color, her eye color... At the very least, nobody was certain what sort of build Kazuki had had, considering he kept to himself, so it was at least maybe, slightly, possible that this was Kazuki, and yet...

No, no. This girl? Her skirt was even a few centimeters shorter than school regulation dictated! There was no way!

“Er, um...” A young man whose surname was Kurabe, who currently served as class representative and was wholly unremarkable (so please feel free to imagine him in whatever amusingly nondescript fashion you like), cleared his throat and walked up to the new girl's seat. “Are you... are you Kazuki-kun?”

The new girl turned her head, cocked it to one side, and said, “Not unless I've missed something real important. You okay, Kurabe-kun?”

“Well, it's just... um, that's Kazuki-kun's seat, so if he shows up, you'll need to...”

Giving a thumbs up and a grin, the new girl nodded. “Sure, sure! If he shows up I'll just sit on the windowsill or something. No worries! The beautiful Satsuki is a kind and understanding woman.”

“Er, yes. Thank you... S-Satsuki-san?” Kurabe sounded hesitant, but a slight twinge in Satsuki's grin told him he'd gotten her name correct, and he returned to his seat. The rest of the class was too

baffled by what either appeared to be a classmate they had no memory of appearing out of the aether, or Kazuki-kun metamorphosing into a completely different person essentially overnight, to actually make a statement.

That was, until the teacher, a man by the name of Minase, a middle-aged man with a thoroughly rectangular head and body, came in. He sat down at his desk, staring icily at Satsuki the whole time, until roll came about.

“Kazuki. ...Kazuki. Kazuki,” Minase-sensei said, before looking up from his sheet and looking at Satsuki, firmly seated at her desk. “*Kazuki*.” Satsuki was playing about, attempting to balance a pencil on one finger. “Kazuki!”

“Oi, Kazuki,” Satsuki said, “you better say you're here, looks like Sensei's pretty mad.”

Minase-sensei stood up from his desk and walked, with loud, pointed footsteps over to Satsuki's desk. “Kazuki! What is the meaning of this?”

“Seriously!” Satsuki said, returning fire with a baffled expression and a loud, cartoonish shrug. “If this is his desk, he should use it, right? Crazy stuff.”

“Showing up to class looking like... *this* is one thing, but at least answer me when I call your name!” Minase-sensei said. “And with your hair dyed, even.”

“dude, this is natural”

A silence came over the room.

“Wha.” Minase blinked. “What was that?”

“what was what”

A strange sort of unrest came over the classroom, as everyone inside dealt with the fact that they had just experienced *something* they weren't sure how to classify. She had spoken, that was certain, and the words made sense, but something felt... different, off, about it.

Minase's anger was cut through, and he was reduced to a stunned stare and a bit of stammering. “E-eh... ah...”

—No, his instincts yelled, no. Don't push this. There's clearly something beyond your understanding going on. Why wouldn't it make sense that Kazuki-kun was replaced by this girl if something beyond your understanding was going on? It's best that you accept it. You might be in danger if you don't accept it. Just accept it.

“...r-right, it seems, ah, it seems... that Kazuki-kun is absent today, so this... girl, will just have to...” Minase sputtered. “You, ah, your name?”

Satsuki grinned. “The name's Satsuki, teach. Remember that, now!”

The day continued on as normal, then—or, as an abnormal that was forced to be normal.

Teachers came and went over the day and were unable to crack Satsuki, no matter how hard they tried. She refused to budge. If they stood up to the unknowable *thing* in her words, then her personality and appearance did it—and then the fact that her hair was now green, of course. She insisted it wasn't dyed, and midway through the school day, during her lunch period, she was taken to the nurse's office to get that inspected.

Coincidentally, the school nurse had had an ex-boyfriend involved in forensics, so using a microscope at the school's science lab, she was given a strand of Satsuki's hair to inspect. If the fact that she was sixteen and could not be expected to have flawlessly dyed her entire head of hair down to the eyebrows and the nape of her neck, or moreover the hair on her body, was not enough, then this certainly was—it was natural green coloring.

Green hair was rare, yes, but not unheard of—but what was thoroughly unheard of was someone's hair being so thoroughly altered overnight. Only a few cases of spontaneous alteration of hair existed even after the advent of Akaneno's Syndrome, and most of those involved pigment being drained (as in the case of a certain Romanian young man who was, at this time, over by the Shimane-Tottori border receiving training from a curmudgeonly surgeon named Dr. Morinaga. He will briefly come up much later in this story—Dr. Morinaga, that is—so this parenthetical is not nearly so superfluous as certain previous parentheticals).

Laymen like the staff of this high school, of course, were not nearly so worldly to even understand the inner workings of the Psy-Gene, and would thus have no hope of discerning any of the physical processes that could lead to such a thing. As such, Satsuki, befuddling as she was, continued to evade punishment or reprimands through being one of the most baffling people any of them had ever witnessed.

This did not prevent Sumie from reacting accordingly to the situation she found herself in.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah what the heck are you doing?!” Sumie yelled inside their head, feeling about ready to shake SATSUKI by the shoulders. “They're going to kill me!”

“These jokers? Please,” SATSUKI said with a smug grin that made its way onto their face. “You just leave this to me, bud. Nobody's taking me down!”

As their schoolmate had made little impression upon them beforehand, most of the students in Satsuki's homeroom class, by the end of the day, had simply been forced to accept it as well. However, word gets about, and the idea that 'Kazuki-kun dyed his hair and is dressing like a girl' had begun to circulate as well. Frequently, it was met with 'which Kazuki', as there were multiple people at the school with that name as either a surname or a given name, but it got about nonetheless.

Over the next few days, Satsuki continued coming to school, and Hi _____ Kazuki did not. It would be laborious to go over every event that occurred to her as a result of this shift, but many a time did someone attempt to poke fun at 'Kazuki-kun going crazy', only to either be utterly ignored by someone who was very insistently not him, or to be shown up. Satsuki was a personality to be reckoned with—nobody could get a word in edgewise, or try to do so without being flummoxed.

That was, until a certain member of the disciplinary committee caught wind of her behavior.

“Ka-zu-ki-saaaaaaaaan!” came the shout from behind her in the halls one day. There were other

students milling about, but everyone turned to look behind Satsuki except Satsuki herself. “Look at me when I'm talking to you, Kazuki-san! What's the meaning of this?”

A noise of worry came from Sumie, but SATSUKI turned on her heel, looked around, and said, “Man, this guy gives everyone trouble these days, huh, Senpai?”

He was now a second-year in high school, soon to be a third year, but very little about Kirimaru Ayanokoji had changed aside from him becoming taller and more muscular. He was still just as much himself as he ever had been, which is why he was doubled over, panting, in the hallway. “You know very well that I'm talking to you!” Kirimaru said. Grimacing, he raised his head, then his fist, and shook it before pointing his finger at Satsuki. “You! Don't make me refer to you on a first-name basis—that's too informal! We are not good enough friends for that!”

“Aww, but I'm so friendly!” Satsuki strutted up with a grin on her face, her bag slung over her shoulder. “Can't we be?”

“Eh?” Kirimaru stood up straight, blushing and stammering for a moment. “Ah, w-well—wait, wait, wait, don't try to change the subject!” He cleared his throat. “I'm here to discuss your flagrant rule violations over the past few days! I've been inspecting you for some time now to ensure I was right, but my eyes don't lie! You—”

“Whoaaaa, you've been *inspecting* me?” Satsuki's smile lilted like a cat's. “Whoa ho ho, hey now, Senpai, I didn't know you were that kind of guy.”

Kirimaru turned bright red and recoiled as though he'd been socked in the gut. “No! No, don't say that out loud! People will get the wrong idea about me! I'm—as head of this school's disciplinary committee it's important that you and everyone else understand that I—” He vigorously shook his head. “You're trying to change the subject! Listen here, you! I have a problem with your skirt!”

Satsuki narrowed her eyes. “Seriously? What's wrong with a girl wearing a skirt?”

“Nothing at all!” Kirimaru said.

“...Huh?” Satsuki blinked. This was a new one.

“There's nothing at all wrong with a lady wearing a skirt! Naturally, I support your right to wear skirts within the uniform regulations laid out in the student handbook. However!” Kirimaru pointed his finger at Satsuki again. “Your skirt is one and a half centimeters too short! It's in clear violation of school policy!”

There was a moment of silence between the two. “Senpai...” Sumie muttered. It almost made her tear up a little.

Almost. “Wow, Senpai,” Satsuki said, leaning in closer bending over to look coyly up at him, “you've been staring at me long enough to know exactly how long it is? I see, I see, so you're into girls' legs, huh?”

“No! No, I'm not!” Kirimaru said, the bright red blush returning to his face. “I'm interested for wholly disciplinary reasons!”

“Oh, you're *interested* in my legs, huh?” With her arms behind her back, Satsuki wiggled ever so slightly closer. “You're so forward, Senpai.” She grinned a toothy grin, and reached over to poke him on the chest.

Kirimaru turned around and ran away at full speed, yelling behind him, “This discussion is not over! We aren't done here! This is a tactical retreat and nothing else!”

As he ran into the distance, Sumie closed her eyes and whispered under her breath, “Thanks, Senpai.”

~7. The Eightfold Eatery~

—Her face hollow, dark bags deep under her eyes, Himiko Akiyama bore far less resemblance to her niece than she had before. It took her two days to notice the change that had occurred, and another day past that to actually comment. “What happened to your hair?” she asked one night, as Satsuki obtained her dinner.

“Cute, right?” Satsuki said with a smile. “I think it suits me.” The idea of saying something so flippant filled her chest with anxiety, but SATSUKI squeezed Sumie's hand tightly to attempt to calm their heartbeat.

Himiko craned her head to the side from her couch, where she had been staring at a television program that Sumie was fairly certain Himiko wasn't actually watching. Himiko shook her head to wake herself out of her funk, then said, “It's alright. It's bright, but you look fine. Good, even.”

“Thanks, Auntie,” Satsuki said.

“Where'd the—where'd—” Himiko brought her hand up to her head, groaning. “I have a headache. Hold on. You're...”

“Satsuki,” Satsuki said. “Your niece. Remember?”

(“You can't try that on her!” Sumie shouted internally. “She'll—”)

“My... Right!” Himiko started up off the couch. “Right. Sorry. Of course. You're... You're Satsuki. Don't...”

It looked as though Himiko had entered a funk in the process of attempting to clean up some of the trash, as there was a large black bag of the stuff next to the couch. Satsuki stepped past it to sit down next to Himiko. “You sure you're okay?” Satsuki asked.

“Yeah, I'll be fine. I've... my head hurts, but I'll be fine. I think.” Himiko turned her head to Satsuki, then scrunched her eyes up. “There was... there was something I wanted to—you were... or was that you?”

“Has work been going okay?” Satsuki asked, tilting her head. “You haven't gotten into anything bad over there, have you?”

“Our chemical safety practices are pretty much perfect, no, I'm just...” Himiko shook her head again. “I'm sorry. I feel like I have something to apologize to you about but I don't remember what it is. I keep trying and it's not happening.”

“That sounds kinda bad,” Satsuki said. “Have you thought about seeing a doctor?”

“Maybe. Maybe I need to. But... I mean, I shouldn't leave you alone, should I? I'm not... I'm supposed to... I'm the adult here, I need to... to...?” Himiko stared off into space, trailing off without grasping at the words she needed.

“Hey, it's okay,” Satsuki said, leaning over to hug her aunt. Himiko didn't flinch or recoil. “Take all the time you need to think of it. But once I'm out of here, you don't have any excuse, okay?”

“Okay,” Himiko said. “I'll... I'll see about going to a doctor if my head doesn't clear up.”

The issues with living with Himiko Akiyama did not stop. They became less frequent, perhaps, but they did not stop. In a way, it only made them worse for Sumie—knowing that something was genuinely wrong with her aunt, but feeling that she had no way to act upon it, and still feeling afraid of her. It tore at her inside.

—Not that you'd know that from how raucously Satsuki enjoyed her time.

<SATSUKI> yoooooooooooooooo so what did you think?

<ToRo> What did I think? I thought it was great. A small place in Golden Gai, of all areas? I've been waiting for an opportunity like this! I have to know how exactly you managed to find it in that state, though.

<SATSUKI> would you believe that like. i got led there by a cat

<ToRo> I have heard far stranger tales, so yes.

<SATSUKI> cool cool well there's a calico who lives there and you might have to pay her rent
www

<ToRo> Is she a stray?

<SATSUKI> yea but her names michelle, she and i have like a business relationship? good lady, great sense for stuff

<ToRo> You really are one of the strangest teen girls I've ever met.

<SATSUKI> guy your age meet many teen girls?

<ToRo> Shut up.

“Wha-haaaaaa!” Satsuki said, taking another swig of the ramune she'd ordered. “Ahh, that's the stuff.” She then took another bite of her curry. “This is the other stuff!”

The once vacant building had been obtained by a man Satsuki knew as Toro. They met on ESO2—Toro was a slightly less experienced player who Satsuki had swooped in to assist when he was looking for someone to take on some more difficult content, and the two had hit it off.

His full name was Rokuro Togetsu, and he was thirty-one at the time. (His younger brother Shichiro would later become a member of Murakumo's Unit 10, as it happened.) Rokuro was not the sort of man one might expect to play such games with a teenager—he was a very tall, musclebound man with the constitution of a brick wall and a completely bald head. Satsuki would sometimes joke that he would look more at home in a suit and tie guarding a VIP than he looked in his chef's headband and apron. Or maybe in a boxing ring, she supposed.

“Is my 'stuff' satisfying you?” Rokuro laughed, turned away at a pot making more food to test the kitchen equipment. Despite the severity and solid construction of his features, Rokuro was prone to bright smiles and loud laughs. “I'm glad I have such an eager test subject! Don't be shy. If you want anything else, say so!”

(Incidentally, 'Toro' was a nickname he held in real life—for 'Togetsu Rokuro'. According to him, as a youth he had the temper of an enraged bull, and had done much to move past it.)

The bar and eatery now had warm orange lighting, and Rokuro had begun fixing the walls and putting up decorations. He planned to call it 'Eightfold', and as such was putting up a number of Buddhist-themed decorations when he could get them out of storage.

“I'll take another plate of this once I'm done! Ugh, I haven't eaten this good in years!” Satsuki said, continuing to chow down on her plate of curry. She preferred hers at a medium level of heat—anything further, and she would need milk to help the pain. Rokuro had it, but she preferred to err on the side of caution for other establishments.

“You've got it!” Rokuro exclaimed, pumping his fist. “Here I am in Golden Gai. Honest businessman Rokuro Togetsu! It's really something. I can't thank you enough, Satsuki. Though, and I know I've said this before, it's *very* strange that you're an expert on Kabukicho at sixteen.”

“It's a great town!” Satsuki said, eating the last few bites of her curry. “Bright, lots of people... You can find about anything in Kabukicho if you look hard enough. Y'know, just last week I was online from the Customa Cafe—and the old man at Daikokuya knows me on sight by now!”

“Oh, I don't mean to argue that, of course. But it is strange that you know all this at sixteen,” Rokuro said with a shrug.

“What were you doing at sixteen, then, huh, big guy?” Satsuki said, putting her chin in her hand and leaning over the bar counter.

“Ah, just the usual. That's about when I shaved my head for the first time, as I recall. Ah, now that was freeing. Things become so much less messy without hair!” Rokuro paused for a moment. “But at the same time, I can't help but feel like *you* wouldn't look right without hair. Not for everyone, I suppose.”

“So true, so true,” Satsuki said with a thoughtful nod, closing her eyes to picture it. “I would look weird bald. My head's not a great shape for it.”

“At any rate!” Rokuro turned around and slid a second plate of curry in front of Satsuki. “Please, eat! My curry is second to none in Tokyo!”

~8. One Kind Person~

—By the time Satsuki had become a second-year, the staff at the school had given up entirely on attempting to make sense of her. Her unresponsive guardian had been no help, and attempting to corral her aside from calling in an ambulance to forcibly restrain her seemed impossible. Satsuki was Satsuki. There was none who would challenge that.

There was one, however, who would challenge her conduct. “Again with the short skirt, Satsuki-san,” said Kirimaru, waiting diligently at the front gate to mark off punctual students—and Satsuki, for her part, was quite punctual. “How many times must I tell you? It's one and a half centimeters too short.”

“Mornin', Senpai!” Satsuki said, smiling and waving before jogging up to him. “Looking good today. Have you been working out?”

“I've had drills. My unit has been being reevaluated for its conduct of late, and one of my coworkers just quit. If I have been 'working out', it would be as a result of that,” Kirimaru said.

“Oh, that government thing you work at, right?” Satsuki said. She shot Kirimaru a fingergun. “Cool! Well, not cool you've got more work to do. That sucks.”

(It was mentioned at a much earlier point, but Kirimaru Ayanokoji was a member of Murakumo's Unit 8. Being that he was a high schooler, though, he continued schooling and tended to perform his assignments at night when called on.)

“My agency does important work, I know,” Kirimaru said, with a small flicker of sadness in his eyes, “but it is quite difficult. I envy you, Satsuki-san, and your laissez-faire attitude towards proper conduct.” Then the flicker was gone, and he said, “While I do miss the days of your strict adherence to school policy, at the very least you are enthusiastic about schooling itself. It's as though many of today's students don't understand what a privilege it is to even attend school at all! They treat it like it's a nuisance, a bother, when in fact schooling is a privilege that we could not take for granted even a scant few centuries ago!”

“Mmhm, mmhm,” Satsuki said, nodding her head. While she didn't get Kirimaru's strong feelings about this, having actually listened to him a number of times, it was true he had a point. Of course, the schooling systems had many issues Sumie was becoming keenly aware of, but those were not Kirimaru's fault—as a matter of fact, she thought that if all the adults listened to Kirimaru on things, matters might improve... though his crusade against her skirt was a bit silly.

“Er—my apologies,” Kirimaru said, rubbing the back of his head, “I appear to have gotten carried away. Have you found a club you might want to join?”

Satsuki nodded. “I was thinking about track. I'm a pretty fast runner, y'know.”

“Ah, I see,” Kirimaru said, narrowing his eyes, “attempting to skirt your skirt past me by wearing gym shorts after school, are you? A clever idea.”

“Oh, my, Senpai,” Satsuki gasped in mock shock, “now you're thinking about me in gym

shorts?”

“I am doing no such thing!” Kirimaru said, putting his hands on his hips and huffing. “And for that matter, I am perfectly capable of picturing you in gym shorts without breaking a sweat!”

Kirimaru closed his eyes and crossed his arms, and all was quiet for a moment, before he turned red and sputtered out a “W-what am I doing?! I don't need to stoop down to your level!”

“Well gee, Senpai,” Satsuki said, cupping her face with her hands and wiggling about, “maybe I wouldn't mind you thinking about me in gym shorts. You ever think about thaaaat~?”

“Quit trying to make a fool of me and get to class!” Kirimaru said, pointing sternly toward the gates, his face an even brighter red.

“Aww, okay,” Satsuki said, sticking out her tongue, then turning to run into school, waving behind her. “Later, Senpai!”

The curiosity of Satsuki's existence had begun to fade, incredibly enough, and what was left was a popular, well-liked, gregarious girl. She had nerdy interests, yes, but she could hold a conversation quite well without the need for them, and she picked up enough from her ears on the city that she could hold a conversation with anyone. For the first time, people liked Sumie—or someone that was at least partially Sumie, anyhow.

...Of course, many aspects of Satsuki's existence were underpinned by hard work on Sumie's part. Finding a way to discretely nudge her body in the direction she needed was difficult on its own, to say nothing of her lacking a parental figure's assistance. Sumie had opted to spend much of her time studying.

—Perhaps this should be explained further. Koron Nagataka was a fully 'gestalt' CPP case—her mental cores could not individually operate outside of severe circumstances. Sumie Kazuki, however, was only partially gestalt. The partial-gestalt 'Satsuki' identity did involve cooperation, and SATSUKI did not want to take away Sumie's lived experience as a physical person, but there were times that the anxiety of existing in the physical world became too much, and Satsuki would in fact be entirely SATSUKI, allowing Sumie time to think.

When a member of a CPP system exists in the back, the extra cognitive energy not being spent to operate the body can be used for study of materials even only briefly glanced—for instance, if Person A got even a second's glance at a crossword puzzle, Person B would be able to call that from their cognition with much greater accuracy, allowing them to tackle it at their leisure.

Money was required for the medicines Sumie needed to go through her proper puberty, so Sumie had taken up programming. Not with YUUHI, no, but matters such as webpage design, internet infrastructure, and other such work that could be done freelance. Such grunt work never seemed to go out of style, so she was able to at least afford what she needed.

All of this was to say that as her body became more in line with what a woman's was expected to look like, the fact that she was quite a pretty young girl certainly didn't hurt her social standing. But nevertheless, if she saw uptight, ramrod-stiff Kirimaru, she'd always seem to hail him down and say hi.

Occasionally, they would even eat lunch together if Satsuki could catch him at a good time. (She could always catch him physically, of course, as she was much faster than him, but she was not so rude as to ambush him when he was clearly busy.) For all his protests about her fashion, he never seemed to mind spending time with her.

Satsuki valued food that granted her energy above all else, whereas Kirimaru always came to school with a cleanly-packed, attractive bento. He told her once, on the roof, that he made them himself. "I value not burdening others," he said, "so being self-sufficient in making food was a natural step."

"Man, I gotta learn that," Satsuki said, groaning. "I'm no good in the kitchen unless I'm making frozen stuff, and the only guy I know who can cook other than you is like, a *businessman*."

Kirimaru turned his head to her and cocked his eyebrow. "You're friends with a businessman?"

"Oh, yeah, Toro. He works down in Golden Gai. He just opened up his place recently, but we play games together on the reg. It's an, uh... I mean, he tossed a bunch of words at me but I just know he makes really good curry?" Satsuki said with a shrug.

Narrowing his eyes, Kirimaru said, "You are certain that he's—"

"Senpai. Please," Satsuki said, narrowing her eyes back, "I'm not dumb. Turned out we lived near each other by complete coincidence, and I brought a taser to when we first met up."

"Oh," Kirimaru said, "good. Golden Gai, though... in Kabukicho. That's something of a dangerous area. Be careful if you're going there." Satsuki laughed. "What?"

"Oh, no, it's just... I go there all the time, actually," Satsuki said with a grin. Kirimaru nearly coughed up a bite of his food. "It's kinda *my part of town*, y'know? There's so much to see, so much to do... Lots of cats there, too. Donno why, but I'm good with cats, so." She giggled to herself. "I fancy myself something of a treasure hunter, too, and there's lots of weird stuff you find around there. But it's also way safer than you think. For real."

"If you insist," Kirimaru said. "It's only natural for me to worry, though! You're a young lady! Any area such as that, after dark, is going to be dangerous for you."

A moment of silence came over the rooftop as Kirimaru continued eating. Then—"H-hey, Senpai..." Sumie croaked out. "Um, about that."

"If you'd like a bodyguard," Kirimaru said, "I would be more than happy to volunteer."

"No, no, um... you, uh..." Sumie's head turned down, and she stared at the ground. "Well, it's just... Sorry. I-I'm a bit nervous saying this."

Kirimaru stopped eating, and focused wholly on Sumie. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No! No, nothing's wrong." Sumie was certain he could see how awkward she felt right now, but the only thing she could do was talk. "You, um... when I... you called me a 'young lady', and I..."

“Aren't you?”

“W-well, yeah, um...” Sumie's words trailed off into mumbles. “But, even when you first saw me like this, you... I mean, I... I was really scared. That whole week, pretty much. I knew people were going to be confused and I thought maybe I'd get in a lot more trouble than I did. But when you...” She looked away, her cheeks a bashful red. “I mean, people gave me trouble for wearing a girl's uniform at all. But you told me you didn't mind me wearing it.”

“Of course,” Kirimaru said, his eyes wide, looking a little befuddled. “What else was I to think? If you said you were a woman, then for whatever reason, it's only natural to treat you such, isn't it?” He paused. “Well, the student handbook does specify students must wear their *assigned* uniform, and I'm fairly certain you were not assigned that uniform, but this is an edge case I doubt it was written with in mind.”

“Senpai...”

“Actually, come to think of it, there's an idea,” Kirimaru said, a gleam in his eyes. “Why don't we simply assign each student both uniforms and allow them to wear whichever suits them? It would increase the cost of uniforms, yes, but it would solve this edge case and likely solve many of the issues students feel about their uniform suiting them, no?”

“U-um, Senpai?”

Kirimaru blinked, and then shook his head. “I'm sorry. I got carried away again. My point is, you arrived at school saying you were a woman, so who am I to not believe you? Why should a role such as that be so limiting as to be strictly decided from the moment you're born? Many things about a person can change across their whole life, so I should see no reason that shouldn't be one if necessary—”

It was then that Kirimaru finally noticed that Sumie was tearing up. “Oh. Oh, no, I've said something wrong, haven't I?!” Kirimaru exclaimed. He stood and bowed. “Please, my sincerest apologies! You can take my head if you must!”

Instead of that, Sumie stood up and wrapped him in a hug, causing Kirimaru to squeak. “Thank you! Thank you,” she whimpered. “Thank you. I was holding it in for years because I was scared of how people would react. But you... You're a really kind guy, Senpai. I'm so glad I have a friend like you here.”

“A-a-ah,” Kirimaru croaked out, “aha, ahahaha, yes, o-of course, no problem at all! None... none at all. It's not. It really isn't.” As he felt Sumie's tears shake her body, his grasp became less awkward. “Oh, dear. I must be a poor senpai if I didn't realize you were holding this much in. Please, let it out. I'll blame myself if you're late.”

Sumie did her best only to cry a little bit.

~9. The Other~

It was hard for Sumie to completely figure out SATSUKI. Obviously, the green-haired girl was part of Sumie's overall mind, and she knew that. On the other hand, she had her own thoughts and feelings, but always seemed satisfied playing a second fiddle of sorts to Sumie—when Sumie had to finish a test in short order, for instance, SATSUKI would help her, or congratulate her on a good grade. SATSUKI was generally very supportive, as a matter of fact—she would be quick to offer advice or praise Sumie for anything from impressive performance on the field in track to an effective bit of programming work.

...Of course, Sumie knew why her mind would conceptualize something like this, but there was one thing she didn't quite understand. “Hey, SATSUKI,” she asked one day, “so... 'Kazuki' is my name, isn't it? I'm Sumie Kazuki.”

“Yup yup,” said SATSUKI, who was currently jogging along Shinjuku Station.

“Okay. So... why do you block that out? From me hearing it, I mean,” Sumie said. “I mean, the... the other name is one thing. But sometimes I feel like I actually can't process that it's my name, and it's not just an act we're putting on. But it is my name, right?”

“Well, the way I see it,” SATSUKI said, “there's a difference between you as people saw you before and you as you are now. You never told anyone you were Sumie Kazuki, so if they're saying 'Kazuki', they don't mean you. Soooo, it's better for us to answer to Satsuki. They can't deny that one.”

Sumie took a moment to process this. “So... if I told someone my real name, you wouldn't block that out, right? I could process that properly again.”

“Basically. You and I are both Satsuki, but you're Sumie, and I'm here to help you. Feel me, pard?” SATSUKI asked.

“Okay, but... why?” Sumie asked. “Don't you want to, like... do things yourself? Have your own life?”

That got SATSUKI to stop running for a moment, and turn to look at the sun dropping down in the sky. “No,” she said. “I really do just want to watch. I want to see what you can do with my help. It's not that complicated.”

Cognitive parallel processing was not an easy subject to research. It had only been confirmed to exist two years prior, as part of Homura Akeno's research into the Psy-Gene, and even now research on it was slow and largely done behind closed doors. It took Sumie quite some time to figure out what it was that had happened to her.

...It was curious, though. Yes, she did have a sensory ability, like those that matched the most common profiles of CPP systems. But... was hers really that strong? She could smell the opportunity of treasure and locate people in danger, yes, but if that was the extent of her psychic abilities—

Well, no, there was also the... thing. She'd settled on referring to it as 'lowercase', because she likened it to speaking as though she were typing on a keyboard in Romaji.

But those weren't really that severe. They didn't cause that much sensory load, so it was a bit odd that she'd had such a drastic split, right? Or... was it because she wanted it? Because she wanted something like this to happen, for someone else to take the reins of her life? Had she been so desperate that she'd split herself?

Of course, none of that explained her hair. When she asked SATSUKI, she got a shrug. Why did her hair change color? That was weird, right? Of course it was. When it came down to it, Sumie was as confused as anyone as to what had happened to her.

There was a bittersweet tinge to it, as well. Satsuki had started wearing contact lenses instead of glasses. These contacts were green, the same color as her hair. They covered Sumie's naturally dark eyes, and it made her a touch sad that she couldn't be fashionable and sparkling like she was now while looking just a bit closer to how she looked before.

It wasn't that she was unhappy with how she looked, no. Sumie looked more like herself than she ever had, but some part of her longed for something closer to normalcy, getting to be an *ordinarily* pretty girl. Knowing what she knew now about how things worked, she felt like she could've had that. That she could've looked more like... well, there was the thought, of course, that she could've looked more like her mother. She had never met her mother, but she had seen pictures, and there was no doubt she took more after her mother than her father.

She wondered if perhaps these feelings were part of her longing for a parent. In only a few more years, she would be an adult, but she had never stopped yearning for someone to care for her. No matter how she yearned, all she had was Himiko Akiyama. And that was an issue no other could solve.

“I'm sorry,” SATSUKI said, time and again, when the subject came up. “I'm sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” Sumie asked, once.

“That I can't help you with that,” SATSUKI answered.

~10. In The Gutter~

In the life of Sumie Kazuki, the most important changes seemed to never happen gradually. They would snap, crashing in all at once and forcing her life to accept them. Another such change occurred one rainy October evening in 2015, just a few days after Sumie's seventeenth birthday.

That night was another when Himiko's mood was rancid, and she had forced Sumie out of the house. The sky was heavy, the clouds a color shockingly close to the asphalt below. The rain came on softly at first as Satsuki headed to Kabukicho, but as the day turned to night, it began pouring, and would not let up.

Sumie had no money. Work had hit a dry spell, and she had run out of savings covering for a few days when she was unable to eat otherwise. She had been counting on at least having a warm bed that night, but nothing. She hadn't eaten since lunch at school, and she hadn't gotten much sleep the night before.

Her nose was dry. No matter where she ran in Kabukicho, she smelled nothing. She couldn't find anything. She could hide under awnings, but she would eventually have to duck out in the hopes of finding something, anything, to sell, or even just to eat. There were no cats to be found, only horribly wet alleyways causing her hands to become dirty as she dug around, pawing for stray coins like nothing had happened.

“It's gonna be okay,” SATSUKI said, “it's gonna be okay. Really! It'll work out!”

Nobody was even around. Nobody was there. Kabukicho felt completely empty. People were desperate to get home in this horrible storm, not having the time to look at the girl running about without an umbrella to her name.

There was grime and a bit of blood on Sumie's hands. She was sopping wet, everything on her body clinging to each other and wrapping her in a cocoon of heavy moisture. She was tired, and she hated the damned rain. Everything hurt. She was freezing cold and her body hurt and she was hungry and she wanted to sleep, and she just wanted to go home but she didn't know where home was because 'home' was somewhere you felt safe and she couldn't find anything like that anywhere—!

The best she could do, so tired and cold and hungry, was curl up under an awning where only some of the rain could get to her—but the wind shifted, and the rain swung sideways, forcing her to curl up with her face toward the wall. Eightfold didn't open until 9:30, and she still had at least an hour left to go—her phone had been inside the apartment, so she had no way of checking. Sumie's tears were lost amidst the rain no matter how hard she cried.

No amount of false flattery, of false assurance, was going to change the fact that she had nowhere to sleep, nothing to eat, and no money. The crushing reality of the fact that she had *nothing* to help her wouldn't stop setting in, over and over, hitting her with the fact that for all intents and purposes, she might as well be homeless. She didn't have a permanent place to stay that she could call home. It was conditional, random, whether she could sleep in an apartment.

It wasn't a game, and it wasn't a trial, and there was nothing she could do to make this rain go away. It hurt. Everything hurt. She was cold, and her hands were bloody, and she couldn't stop crying—

“S-Satsuki-san?”

Just after a scream tore its way from Sumie's throat, there was a voice behind her. Warm hands reached down to grab her, and an umbrella blocked at least a little bit of the rain. “What in the world happened?! Please, come on! Can you stand?”

It was Senpai. Kirimaru Ayanokoji. When Sumie looked up, even through the fog of her vision, she could see her Senpai's telltale silver hair reaching his hand down to take hers. “O-oh... hey, Senpai,” Sumie said with a smile. Why couldn't she stop herself from smiling? “D-don't worry about me, I'll handle—”

“No, you will not!” Kirimaru forcibly grabbed Sumie's hand and pulled her up. She staggered to her feet, and followed behind him as he led her to a parked limousine on the corner. It had black windows on it, so she figured it was probably company property for this agency he worked for.

Inside, in the seats in the back of the richest car she'd ever been in, it was warm and it was dry. Her tears were actually visible now, as Kirimaru removed the jacket she'd been wearing and produced a few towels to wrap her in. “You look horrible. I would be an embarrassment of a senpai if I left you alone in the rain like that.”

Letting at least a little bit of the moisture drain into the towels, Sumie's uncontrollable shivering began to abate a touch as her body remembered it was also hungry. “Thank you,” Sumie said. “Thank you. Thank you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Kirimaru said, as he reached over to bandage her fingers. “Why on earth are you out in Kabukicho *now*? You should be home, Satsuki. This is negligence on the part of your guardian, I hope you know.”

“N-no,” Sumie said, weakly raising her hand as Kirimaru pulled out a cell phone. “No, please don't blame Auntie. Please, it's not her fault, really.”

“Then why *are* you here?” Kirimaru asked, his eyes steely and narrow.

Sumie tried her best to block herself from saying it. She didn't want to hurt Himiko. It wasn't her fault, and Sumie knew that. She couldn't. It would hurt her, wouldn't it? But as more hot tears began to roll down her face, she couldn't stop herself—

“—dig through the trash for money, trying to find enough to stay—”

—from letting loose—

“—hurts, it hurts, half the time I have to dive through bramble bushes or barbed wire looking for things because I can't find anything else and it hurts but I try to convince myself it's okay because I'm being adventurous but I just want to go home I want to find home—”

—everything—

“—know she can't help it, I know it can't be her fault but I'm so scared because it hurts so bad

when she hits me and I swear I didn't mean to kill my mom I really didn't I didn't I didn't I didn't I swear I didn't and I know I'm a bad girl for killing my mom and that I'm the one who should be dead but I can't help being alive and I don't want to die and I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry—”

—that she had kept inside—

“—and I don't want to bother people with my problems but I have to and now I've dragged you into it and I'm so sorry and please, please forgive me, I don't want you to hate me I'm sorry I don't know what I'd do if you hated me Senpai you're the only real friend I have at school you're the only one who I feel completely safe around and please, please help me—!”

Kirimaru sat quietly and listened as Sumie cried and cried, screamed and wailed everything that she'd kept locked within her heart. Then, once her tears had begun to dry up, he leaned closer to her, and said, “Do you want to return to that apartment?”

“Huh?” Sumie sniffled.

His voice was even and calm, but Sumie knew that when Kirimaru was being calm, he was hiding a raging fire within his chest. “Do you want to return to that apartment? Or do you want my help finding a place to live on your own? I am a government agent from a wealthy family, but more importantly, I am your senpai. I will not accept this situation going on any longer than it already has.”

“A place... of my own?” Sumie blinked.

“It's perfectly possible. Emancipated minors do exist, and moreover, even if they didn't, I would find somewhere for you to stay. This is about what you want. Do you really want to return there?” Kirimaru asked.

The answer came out as soon as Sumie managed to process the words he'd said. “No,” she said. “No. I want... I want to find a home. A home of my own. A real home. Please. Help me.”

Himiko left her apartment in police cars, not an ambulance. Sumie had become adept at packing things into small spaces, so she was able to pack everything she owned within the span of an hour. A hotel room was reserved for her for the week, for Kirimaru and his associates to locate a place for her and strong-arm the government into allowing it.

This was the last time Sumie Kazuki ever saw her aunt Himiko. Her final memory of the woman was another horrible experience—and yet Sumie never could bring herself to truly hate Himiko.

~11. Striking Out On My Own~

“That reads... Sumie?”

“Mmhm,” Sumie said, nodding her head as she marked down the paperwork. As it turned out, not only did the Ayanokoji family have a lot of money, but the agency Kirimaru worked for had even more sway in government than Sumie expected. “It’s... Let me put it this way. ‘Satsuki’ is the character, the girl I play. And she’s me, but she’s also not me. ‘Sumie’ is my name. It’s my...”

“Your *ura*,” Kirimaru said. “Satsuki is who you are to cause the world to acknowledge you, but within your heart, your name is Sumie?” Sumie nodded. “You are a complicated young lady, Sumie-san.”

Sumie smiled up at Kirimaru from across the table. It was a small thing, enough to fit in the two-room apartment she was lucky enough to have obtained at all, but it was something. It was hers. “You’re the first person I’ve ever told, Senpai. I, um... I hope it’s an honor.” She let out a little giggle.

“Ahahahaha. Of course,” Kirimaru said. “Now, what would be more of an honor would be if you didn’t shorten your replacement uniform’s skirt.”

With a louder laugh, Sumie smiled. “Hehehehe! Okay, okay. For you.”

“Yes!” Kirimaru yelled, pumping his fists in the air. “At last, victory is mine!”

And just like that, as these papers passed into reality, that old name for someone who no longer existed passed from this world. Sumie Kazuki legally existed, and nobody could take that from her. She was seventeen years old, and had finally become a real human being. The struggle for survival would continue, but she did not have to live every day in fear. She could survive knowing she had somewhere to fight for, and that she was not alone.

“I guess in the end that I wasn’t that much help, huh?” SATSUKI said, as they slept on their own bed for the first time. “It was Senpai that came through.”

“No,” Sumie said, “I wouldn’t have gotten that far without you. You helped me have the strength to get that far in the first place. You did help, SATSUKI. Thank you.”

“Aww, that’s good to hear,” SATSUKI said. “I do like being praised.”

To go into needless detail regarding the remainder of Sumie Kazuki’s stay in schooling would be cumbersome and gratuitous, so it is best that we do not. It is not a particularly exciting time in her life—that is to say, it was exciting for her, and a period of positive growth for her lifestyle, but such events are not what we are here to discuss.

As a final addendum before we move on, though, the last day of that school year should be mentioned. Once again, Sumie and Kirimaru stood on the roof, both looking out over the schoolyard. “It seems my time as head of the disciplinary committee is over,” Kirimaru said, desperately attempting to hold back tears. “I shall simply have to uphold order somewhere else!”

“You did a great job,” Sumie said, patting him on the shoulder. True to her word, she had started wearing a regulation skirt. “Really. I think once you're gone, people are gonna realize they miss you. You're a good guy.”

“Ah, would that more people said that about me, eh?” Kirimaru squeaked, sniffing to keep in his tears. “I'll miss it, but now is the time for Kirimaru Ayanokoji to enter the adult world!”

“You've already got a head start with all that government work!” Sumie said. She grinned. “You're gonna do great.”

“Sumie-san, I just...” Kirimaru mumbled, turning his head away. “I wanted to say... thank you.”

“Huh?” Sumie blinked.

“Having a reliable underclassman like yourself has been a great help for me, even when that reliability was you *reliably* flouting regulations. In the years we've been in school together, I have greatly appreciated having you as a friend,” Kirimaru said. He still couldn't look at Sumie. “Thanks to you, I feel as though I'll be able to enter adulthood much more confidently than I otherwise could.”

“Aw, gee. You're too sweet, Senpai,” Sumie said. She twiddled her fingers and blushed. “I didn't do that much, really. You're strong, and upright, and... I think you're a really good guy. Really.”

There was a moment of silence, then two, then, three.

“But I guess I won't be seeing as much of you from now on, huh?” Sumie said. “I mean... we live in pretty different... y'know, spheres of society.”

“You're a skilled girl,” Kirimaru said, “and kind. You could very easily become a wholly upright member of society.”

“Sure, but... I donno. I think you're giving me a bit too much credit, hehe.” It was Sumie's turn to look away. “I'm messy. And I'm a bit too used to the city now, looking around for stuff. I feel like there's still more for me to find in Tokyo. I'm not done exploring all these opportunities. I want to find how I'm supposed to live. And...”

“Sumie-san?” Kirimaru said, coming in a bit closer.

“W-well, um...” Sumie's voice trailed off, sinking into a whisper. “I don't... think I'd, um, be very...” Then she perked up. “You're the eldest son, right?”

“Uh, yes, I am?” Kirimaru said, his lips curling into a perplexed frown.

“Well! Haha. I mean, I'm just thinking about you as like, a dad,” Sumie said. She started to laugh. “I mean, you raising some kids? Not sure if they'll grow up liking rules or hating rules,ahaha.”

“Ah. Well, ah, I'd have to find a wife first, no?” Kirimaru chuckled. “And I'm not... well, er, I don't think I'm particularly suave, but perhaps I'll get lucky at some point.”

“Right,” Sumie said.

There was a fourth moment of silence, then a fifth.

“Well... I'm gonna go ahead and go home,” Sumie said. She turned to leave, and waved her hand behind her. “I'll see you around, okay, Senpai? That's a promise.”

“Right,” Kirimaru said, still staring out on the schoolyard. “I'll meet that promise.”

Sumie was glad he wasn't looking over at her, and didn't try to turn her around. After all, she didn't want him to leave high school with his last memory of it being her tears.

“Are you really sure you're okay with this?” SATSUKI said, as Sumie began to run down the stairwell, hiding her tears with her sleeve. “I mean, he's still back there. You can turn back around.”

“Senpai needs someone more... more 'normal' than me,” Sumie said. “It's okay. He's my friend, and that's okay. It really is. I value that. Just...”

One more time before the end of her schooling, Sumie Kazuki's *ura* was hidden. She would think on what it would have been like for her to reveal her true feelings, and what would have happened to her, for years to come—of the opportunity she had given up, and whether it really was the right decision. However, whether she was correct in her assessment of whether this was better for either of them or not, this was the path she chose.

It was not the only path, but it is the only path available to us.

“...just give me some time to cry.”