Eyes Wide Shut

by taiyakisoba

Summary

A shut-in's life is turned upside-down when she encounters the mysteriously beautiful and awkward Komeiji Koishi.

(Note: Don't let the Rape/Non-Con archive tag put you off! I'm just erring on the side of caution: there's a brief flash-back in Chapter 2 where the protagonist recalls being bullied by some other girls, and some of the bullying is of a 'sexualised' nature; nothing gratuitous or graphic, but potentially upsetting for some people.)
Chapter 1

It was the day I took Mia to the zoo to see the okapi that I first met the strange girl named Komeiji Koishi.

My mother’s nagging had become unbearable and I really had no other option but to give in to her demands. She’s always telling me how unhealthy it is to just stay locked up in my room, playing video games and arguing on internet imageboards, and the word NEET was mentioned. I’d started to dread our fights even more than the thought of going out in public, so I gave in and told her I’d take my little sister Mia out to the zoo just to get her off my back.

My mother has never understood what social anxiety is. I guess she thinks it’s just laziness, an avoidance of responsibility. For me, though, it’s hell. Walking out the front door is hard enough, but going to a public place is like sticking my hand into a nest of spiders. But the zoo wasn’t exactly the most popular place in the world, since it’s just a small one next to the local shrine with monkeys and mountain goats and meerkats and an old elephant and not much else. You mostly only see elementary school-groups there on weekdays, so since it was a Monday I thought I’d risk it, especially because a few hours there staring at the animals meant a few weeks of enjoying my NEET lifestyle without interruption - well, at least until the next time my mother’s nagging reached critical mass.

Mia was overjoyed. She kept going on and on about how she wanted to see the new okapi the zoo had bought. Mia’s a cute kid. I do love her, since she’s about the only person at home that isn’t constantly nagging and criticising everything I do. She treats me like a normal person, too; well, as normal as a little girl can treat her older sister, anyway. We caught the bus and there were only a few old ladies on it, so the trip didn’t freak me out too much. I fumbled with the change after I bought my ticket, though, like a moron, but luckily no one seemed to notice.

I made a fool of myself again pretty much as soon as we reached the zoo. There was a girl around the same age as me at the ticket gate, not exactly pretty, but not ugly either. Somehow I managed to buy our tickets from her without fumbling with the money again. She just smiled and said how cute Mia was and how nice it was for a big sister to take her little sister out. I stammered something incomprehensible, but it didn’t seem to worry her.

‘"Enjoy the zoo!” she said as we walked through the gate.

“You too!” I replied, then cringed, wishing I could die there and then.

We went to see the monkeys first, then the meerkats and the capybaras. It wasn’t too bad. There were only a few people around, like I said, mostly school groups, some tourists. I made sure we gave those a wide berth in case they asked me something in English. There were only a couple of them, so it was easy enough to do.

Mia kept going on and on about wanting to see the okapi, but I was pretty tired. The sun was hot and I was sweating like your typical fujoshi; not that I’m fat, just out-of-condition, I guess, from my sedentary lifestyle. So I forced Mia to sit down for a minute while I went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. I came back and of course she was nowhere to be seen.

I panicked. With all the lolikon in the world, my first thought was that she’d been taken by one of those perverts. I ran around looking for her, trying not to panic and failing. I cursed the fact that I’d left my room and resolved never to do so again. It only ever brought trouble.
I eventually found her. She was standing up against the railing around the mountain goat enclosure and talking to someone. They had their back to me, so I couldn’t see much, but it was a girl. She was wearing a yellow blouse with flared sleeves, a knee-length green skirt and a black hat decorated with a yellow ribbon, kind of old-fashioned get-up, almost Lolita-style but by way of Victorian England rather than Harajuku.

Great. I love Mia, but she really is my exact opposite in almost every way. She has this bad habit of talking to strangers and befriending them. Now I’d actually have to interact with someone, and worse still it was a girl.

You might be wondering why I keep on saying stuff like that. Truth is, I like girls. And yes, I do mean it that way. And no, it’s not just your typical fujoshi obsession with yuri I’m talking about. I guess I really am what you’d call a ‘raging lesbian’. Well, someone called me that, once, at least.

I don’t really want to remember that, though.

Anyway, somehow I managed to settle the rapid beating of my heart. I couldn’t just stand there like an idiot staring at the two of them - in a lot of ways, the awkward tension was far worse than actually just getting the whole encounter over and done with. So I gathered up my courage and approached them.

When Mia noticed me she cried out, “It’s my big sister!” The girl beside her turned and when I saw her face I died a little inside.

She was beautiful

She had curly platinum-grey hair under that hat, and large green eyes. Her skin was pale, her body slender, a tiny little doll of a girl, and dressed like a doll as well. Beautiful, like I said, but there was something odd about her, even odder than her clothes. Then I realised what it was.

She wasn’t smiling.

Usually, when people meet you for the first time, they at least try to smile, even if it’s a fake, forced one. But the girl just stared at me, her wide green eyes seeming to look right through me.

I swallowed and pushed on regardless. “Hello,” I said, waving at her and smiling in my best approximation of a normal person.

The girl’s eyes went wide with what I took to be shock, and she turned and began to walk away.

My heart almost stopped. I may be a fujoshi and a NEET but I’m no hideous monster. I’m not one of those really weird girls you see around, the ones who smell bad with dishevelled hair and look like they’ve been sleeping in a dumpster. I think I actually look pretty normal despite my social anxiety.

Mia was as surprised as I was at her reaction and shouted after her. “Hey! Don’t worry, it’s just my sister!”

The girl stopped and turned. She looked back at the two of us from across the enclosure.

Mia beckoned to her like you would a frightened animal. “It’s okay. My sister might look a bit weird, but she’s a really nice person,” she said, loudly.

Great. Mia, my own little PR agent.

The girl stood there a few moments longer, as if unsure what to do, and then slowly walked back
towards us. She had a hesitant way of walking, like she wasn’t really used to it. It gave me enough time to pull myself together. I was still startled and a bit upset at her reaction.

“Who is she?” I whispered to Mia.

Mia shrugged her shoulders. “Just a nice onee-san. Her name’s Koishi. She was looking at the mountain goats.”

She was next to us now. I tried to smile at her again, and halfway through it, just when it began to feel fake and weird and I was about to give up, she smiled back at me. It was a faint smile, but for all that it was a reassuring one and I relaxed. I knew the kind of smile well. I’d seen it in the mirror more than once. It was the smile of someone who doesn’t usually smile, a smile made up from the memory of real smiles.

I bowed and introduced myself and in a gentle and strangely toneless voice she did the same. Komeiji Koishi. That was her name. ‘Koishi.’ An unusual name, but very cute, don’t you think? I wondered what the kanji for it were. “Pebble” seemed to suit her, though. She was a tiny little thing, beautiful, but so unassuming that you might not notice even despite her strange attire.

Those clothes. They were pretty weird. Pretty, but also weird. Haha. Just like Koishi herself.

Suddenly Koishi said, “You can see me,” and I realised she’d caught me staring.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, dropping my gaze to stare at my feet. Then that became awkward and I looked back up at her.

The smile had appeared again. Was it warmer this time? Maybe it was just my imagination. But it broke through that ice that usually forms around me when I have to deal with other people. Soon I found myself asking her questions, wanting to know more about her.

And somehow, for once, I was actually able to talk to a pretty girl without making a fool of myself. I asked her if she was here alone and she nodded. Did she live around here? She shook her head. She said she came from some place called Gensoukyou. It didn’t sound like a real place, or maybe she was making some joke or other. Then I realised she might be a cosplayer. I didn’t recognise the clothes she was wearing, but it looked like something you might see in a magical-girl anime. Maybe the whole Gensoukyou thing was just her staying in character. I didn’t press her on it. Self-delusion is something I understand and respect.

Mia helped the whole awkward conversation along in her own indefatigable way. She took over, began to press Koishi for all kinds of information. With her help I learned the following: Koishi had a big sister called Satori (cute name!), who she lived with in a big mansion which had an onsen (come to think of it, she did give off a bit of an ‘eccentric rich -girl’ vibe), and she had lots and lots of pets.

“Oh, you love animals, don’t you?” said Mia, excited. ”We do too. I guess that’s why we’re at the zoo, right?”

We do too. Mia is always trying to get me to come out of my shell. Now she was trying to get me a friend? I couldn’t be annoyed at her, though. It was adorable. And besides, Koishi seemed genuinely nice. She wasn’t like most of the pretty girls I’ve met in my life.

At the word ‘animals’ Koishi’s face lit up; at least, that’s how I interpreted the slight widening of her eyes. “Oh yes, I love animals. Every kind of animal.”

Mia took hold of her hand. Koishi blinked in surprise but didn’t let go of it.
“Let’s all go see the okapi!” she said.

We eventually found it. If you’ve never seen an okapi, it’s a funny looking thing. Funny looking, but definitely cute. They have a stripy butt and legs and look a bit like a giraffe with a short neck.

This guy was just standing around and eating leaves. Mia thought he was adorable, but she was also worried about him.

“Do you think he gets lonely?” she asked suddenly.

Koishi was staring at the okapi, and she said, “I don’t know. I used to be able to understand what animals are thinking. I can’t anymore, though.”

Like I mentioned before, Koishi had a weird way of talking. Her voice was high and gentle, very feminine, but kind of emotionless. Her words might be happy or sad, but her voice never was. It somehow endeared me to her all the more. It wasn’t that faked ‘coolness’ that girls often have, where they try and act like they don’t care about anything. It was more like that robot-girl moe you sometimes see in anime. Koishi’s words always sounded genuine. It was just that she seemed to be talking to you from someplace far away.

“Well, I think he looks lonely,” said Mia.

I had to agree with her. The little critter did seem listless. I sighed. This was all becoming kind of a downer.

“Maybe we should break him out,” I said. I was just trying to break the oppressive mood. Koishi turned to me, her face questioning. Or at least, the blankness of her look had something of the question about it.

“Won’t people get angry?” she asked.

I laughed. “I was just joking,” I said.

“Oh,” said Koishi.

Mia began pestering me for ice-cream, having already forgotten about the lonely okapi. You can’t blame kids for being like that, though. Koishi stood staring at the beast for a while longer, and I started to wonder if maybe our brief encounter was already over. Then she turned and joined us.

It looked like our little group had picked up an extra member. Despite her weirdness, I wasn’t complaining. I hid a blush as she walked beside me.

We got ice-cream at the zoo’s little kiosk. I bought Koishi one as well. She had chocolate. She made no attempt to pay for it, but that was okay. It was worth it just to have a cute girl at my side to practise talking to.

I found it easy to talk to her, almost like she wasn’t a stranger at all. Maybe it was her calm demeanour. I’d say ‘relaxed’, but I don’t think Koishi was relaxed at all. I suspected that under the unemotional façade was an extremely nervous person. Her introspection, I decided, was likely a kind of defence, just like mine was. As a screw-up myself, I didn’t try to force her to come out of her shell. I just talked, and then she’d talk. It all seemed quite natural, even if it was a little odd. Mia would push in all the time, and Koishi paid her lots of attention. I suspected she liked kids as much as she did animals.

Eventually, though, it was time to say goodbye. We left the zoo together and as we made our way
down the hill to the bus stop I asked Koishi if she was alright to get home. It was actually a pretty insulting thing to ask, I guess. Of course she was. She was an adult, right? But she didn’t take offence. I think it would be pretty hard to offend her. I was just trying to find an excuse to keep talking to her.

“I’m going to walk home,” she said. “It’s not far.”

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t want her to go, but what could I do? Invite her home to dinner? It was stupid.

The bus was already pulling up at the stop when we got there, so there was a flurry of goodbyes as we got on board.

Mia waved to Koishi from the bus and she waved back. I just looked at her. She stared at the bus as we pulled away.

Then she was gone.

It occurred to me then that I could have just swapped cell-phone numbers with her. But then that would have been the sort of thing a normal person does. I felt the reawakening of my depression stirring inside me. For a few hours I’d been reminded what my old life had been like and it had been just enough to make me feel even lonelier.

There was always the chance that I would see her again, though, I told myself. If she could walk home from the zoo, that means she must live nearby, right?

But the more I thought about it, the more I knew I’d never see her again. It plunged me even deeper into despondency, and as I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, the different layers of shadow there a grey maelstrom hovering above me, I beat myself up about the lost opportunity. Why had I met someone so beautiful, only to have her snatched away from me again? It seemed too cruel.

But it was all my own fault, after all.

Somehow I finally fell asleep, but it was that feverish, disturbed sleep that makes you even more tired after you wake up, like the night has sucked the energy right out of you, out of your body and soul.

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The next day, though, I met Koishi again.

We live across from a park. It’s your usual kind of park, just a slide and some swings and stuff like that squeezed in between the abandoned lot and the convenience store. Mia often plays on the swings.

I went over to collect her. I’d usually try to avoid this job, but that day I felt like getting out of the house. I’d been brooding all day. Nothing I did felt right, and the four walls of my room which usually offered me a kind of bleak safety now felt unbearable. I was happy for the distraction from my dark thoughts.

Mia wasn’t on the swings. I asked some of the kids if they had seen her, and one pointed her out in the abandoned lot. She was standing there, amongst the weeds, with her back to me.

She seemed to be talking to someone, but there was no one there.

I hurried over to her. It was only when I got close that I saw it was Koishi she was talking to. I stopped dead. How was it that I hadn’t noticed her before? She was standing there right next to Mia,
and there was no way the weeds were high enough to have obscured her from me. It was like she’d just popped into existence.

Great, I thought. I have brain cancer or temporal lobe epilepsy or something. But the usual dark, depressive thoughts dissolved away almost as soon as they sprang up.

I wasn’t imagining things. It really was Koishi!

My heart skipped and nervousness poured through me. I began to sweat, felt it cold down my legs and on the back of my hands. Damn it, now I was stinking of sweat! And I was still dressed in my house clothes with not a drop of makeup on my face. I hadn’t even brushed my hair.

Koishi spotted me before Mia did. I was almost on top of them. Like the first time we’d met, she seemed surprised to see me, her dark green eyes going wide. This time, though, she didn’t try to run away. She did, however, take a single step back.

“Hello,” I said. Wow, suave, but actually not too bad an attempt given how hard my heart was pumping inside my chest.

“You can see me,” said Koishi.

“Yeah,” I said, going along with something I thought was a game. “I caught you. Are you guys playing hide and seek or something?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“Well,” I said, feeling awkward. “It’s, uh, it’s really nice to see you again, Koishi-san.”

“You remember me.” This time her eyes grew even wider. Only a fraction, but on a face that was usually so emotionless it seemed particularly dramatic.

I laughed. “Of course I do! We only met yesterday. At the zoo.”

“You remember me.” She still seemed to find it hard to believe. But then the edges of her lips turned up into a shy smile. It made her look so fragile that my heart started to race. I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Mia came to the rescue as usual. “Koishi came to play,” she explained.

I blinked. “How do you know where we live?”

“Oh,” said Koishi. “I followed the bus you took yesterday.” She turned and pointed to the bus stop at the far end of the street. “It dropped you off there and then you walked home.”

The innocent way in which she described stalking us made her confession a strange mixture of disturbing and cute. I wish there was a word for that, because whatever it’s called, Koishi has a ton of it.

I kind of laughed it off. I knew that she must have been making it up since there’s no way she could have kept up with a bus. Mia must have mentioned where we lived to her when we were at the zoo, or else she just read the number on the bus and made an educated guess or something.

At that moment, some of the neighbourhood kids that Mia was friends with turned up. Mia introduced them to Koishi, happy to show off her new, cool older friend.

One of them, the little sister of one the boys around Mia’s age, piped up. “Are you onee-san’s
Koishi blinked at her, although her expression didn’t change. “Girlfriend?”

“Haha,” I said, embarrassed. Kids see a lot of things that you think are hidden. “She meant to say ‘friend’. Why don’t you guys go off and play?”

They dragged Mia off and I was left alone with Koishi.

She turned the gaze of those glacial green eyes of hers at me.

“Are we friends?”

“Oh,” I said. Maybe I had been a bit presumptuous. “Well, I’d like to be, if that’s okay with you.”

Suave. That’s my middle name.

The almost-smile returned as she nodded and I thought my heart would break at the sight.

We sat down on one of the big concrete pipe sections that they always seem to have in abandoned lots and watched in silence while the kids chased each other about. Like before, though, it wasn’t as awkward as it would have been with another person. Usually the two of you are squirming internally, trying desperately to think of something to say. I didn’t get that feeling with Koishi. I think she was used to being quiet. She didn’t strike me as the sort of person who was naturally outgoing.

It was Koishi, though, who finally broke the silence. “Why did that little girl think I was your girlfriend?”

I laughed, but inside I was cursing the kid who’d said it. “Oh, you know what kids are like. They just come out with the first thing that pops into their heads. I guess she saw you and me next to each other and kind of assumed.”

“I’ve never had a girlfriend before,” said Koishi.

“How about a boyfriend?” I asked, without really thinking.

She shook her head.

I looked at her. I wanted to say that I found it very hard to believe, since she was so pretty. I wanted to say it, but my lips remained glued together by a sudden wave of anxiety. She’d know I was attracted to her, wouldn’t she? There was no way she wouldn’t guess, since I’ve never been able to hide anything from anyone. Koishi stared at me, knowing I wanted to say something. This time the silence was awkward, so I said, “I haven’t either. Uh, had a boyfriend, I mean.”

I turned away, flushing. Geeze. Well, I’d said more to Koishi in two days than I’ve said to anyone else in the last year, probably, so I guess it was progress.

I looked out across the playground. I was desperate for Mia to come save me, but she was busy playing. I needed a lifeline, anything to save me from this spiralling social death.

The swings. No-one was on them.

“Want to swing?” I asked. Then I realised how stupid that sounded, but Koishi didn’t seem to mind. She was pretty unflappable. I think probably she didn’t understand a lot of what I said to her.
“Yes,” she said.

She sat down on a swing and I joined her on the one beside her. I started kicking my legs out and getting myself some height. It’d been years since I’d been on a swing, but it’s something you can’t forget how to do. Koishi watched me.

“So that’s how it works.” She kicked her legs, but out of time so that the swing didn’t really do much more than shift a little.

I slowed myself down and hopped off. “You have to kick out your legs at the end of each swing,” I explained. “Here, I’ll give you a push to get started.”

I came up behind her and placed a hand on either side of the swing. I was so close to her that I got a bit nervous, but luckily I didn’t push too hard and end up flinging her to the ground or anything.

“Kick your legs out... now!”

Koishi picked it up quickly. I guess I really didn’t need to keep helping her by pushing, but I didn’t want the moment to end. I was pushing a pretty girl on a swing! I know, it’s pathetic. But I was the happiest I’ve been for a very, very long time.

It got me thinking: what kind of girl our age doesn’t know how to use a swing? Was she really an even bigger shut-in than me? She didn’t look it. Her appearance, for one thing. Those fancy clothes she wore didn’t look cheap. Then I remembered what she’d said about a mansion. Maybe she really was the eccentric daughter of some rich family. There was a certain nobility in her features, it was true, and it would explain the formal way in which she spoke and acted.

I decided she was okay to do it by herself now and got back on my swing. I quickly got into the same rhythm as hers so that we could talk. Somehow it was easier to talk while we were both doing something.

“So you don’t have swings in Gensoukyou?”

“No,” she explained. “At least, not in Chireiden. And I’ve never seen them anywhere else.” She turned to me, that almost smile on her lips again. “I think I’ll ask Satori to put one in the mansion.”

I soon got tired of swinging and when Koishi noticed she let her own swing slow down until we were really just sitting on them and giving the occasional kick to stay in motion. We sat there and talked about a lot of things while Mia and her friends chased each other around the lot. Well, I guess it was mostly me asking questions and Koishi answering them. With someone else I might have worried that they weren’t interested in talking, but I never got that feeling from Koishi. She seemed more than happy to just share my company.

More than happy to share my company. Before that day I never would have thought such a thing was possible. I’d been so used to constant rejection that it had become a way of life for me.

I managed to squeeze more information out of her. She wasn’t a shut-in like me; in fact, it sounded like Koishi spent most of her time wandering around from place to place. From what I could make out, even though her relationship with her sister was good, the two spent little time together. Koishi seemed to prefer to be on her own.

“So you’re the lone-wolf type?” I suggested, tongue-in-cheek. Wolf was the last word I’d use to describe the shy and introspective girl beside me.

Koishi blinked at me, not really understanding. “A wolf?”
“You know, someone who likes spending time alone.”

She stopped kicking out her legs and stared down at the ground as the swing slowed, seeming to think things over. I slowed my own swinging and watched her. Had I said the wrong thing? I began to panic.

Then Koishi looked up at me and shook her head. “No,” she said. “I don’t like spending time alone. It’s just the way things turned out.”

I wanted to say something, but there were so many things jumbling around in my head at that moment that I just stared dumbly at her. At last I nodded.

“I know the feeling,” I said.

We sat there in silence for a while. It was a little awkward again. I kept turning over things to say in my head, but it all seemed so unnatural. You know that feeling you sometimes get that you’re faking everything? I decided it was better to just stay quiet. I didn’t want to fake anything with Koishi. She seemed so honest.

Mia to the rescue again. She’d finished her game and joined us. It was starting to get dark but she managed to flood Koishi with a rapid-fire account of everything that had happened between her and her friends. Koishi smiled at her and asked her questions which she answered with breathless excitement.

I was suddenly jealous. But kids are all like that, aren’t they? Able to punch straight through to being someone’s friend. Why do you lose that ability as you grow up?

Darkness settled over the vacant lot. The other kids had all gone home. I knew our mother would be out on the front doorstep any moment now, calling us for dinner, and I wanted to avoid that embarrassing scene, especially in front of Koishi.

“We have to go,” I told her. “B-but w-would...” Geeze, I was starting to stutter like I was disabled again. “Would you, uh, like to come and play with us again sometime?”

Koishi nodded, but then she lowered her gaze and frowned. It was a drastically different expression to the ones I’d seen on her face previously.

“It was not the memory of a sad look, but a real one.

“I want to,” she said. “But I can’t.”

“Why?” I came out with the question before I could stop myself. I hoped it hadn’t had sounded as pathetically plaintive as I’d felt saying it.

Her great wide green eyes glimmered as they considered me. “Because you won’t remember me,” she said. “No-one has ever remembered me twice in a row.”

I stared at her. It was such a strange thing to say.

“But you’re very memorable,” I said. It was then, I think, that I blushed like a fool.

The smile that passed across Koishi’s lips at that moment was so achingly sad and beautiful and so utterly fleeting that even today I wonder if I didn’t imagine it.

Then I heard someone shouting Mia and my names. God, it was our mother. I was suddenly ten
years old again.
The moment had passed.

“Goodbye,” said Koishi, that brief smile now a distant memory. “And thank you.”

“What for?” I whispered.

“For being my friend, even for a little while.”

Then she turned and walked away, just like she had the first time we met at the zoo. I watched her go. This time she didn’t turn back. I glanced across once to check if Mia was still beside me, and when I looked back, Koishi was gone.

I felt myself crumble, as though everything had drained away all at once, leaving me hollow inside. What had she meant, when she’d said I’d forget her?

“Onee-san?”

Who knows how long I’d been standing there, staring at nothing. I grabbed Mia’s hand and dragged her across the road back to our house.

“Onee-san, you’re crying,” she said, in that matter-of-fact way kids have.

“No I’m not,” I lied, wiping at my flooding eyes with a sleeve.

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I lay in bed, tossing and turning until the early hours of the morning. I probably should have stopped trying to get to sleep after the first hour or so, but I couldn’t bear the thought of staying awake. Sleep was the only place I could escape the awful feeling that was weighing me down. Wonderful sleep, where I forgot how much of a failure I was and all the bad things that had happened.

The good things, as well. The good things that would never happen to me again.

She’d called me her friend.

I was sweating through my pyjamas and into the bed, my hair matting to the back of my neck. The stickiness and the tension and the ache of my heart was my entire universe.

Then I heard something outside my window.

A strange sound. One I’d maybe heard just a couple of times in my life, and never, ever from my own bed. I’m sure it had been a common sound in the past, but now it seemed so odd that I thought I must have finally gotten to sleep, albeit that semi-delirious sleep of insomniacs, and was already dreaming.

It was the clip-clop of a horse’s hooves.

I strained to hear it. Clip-clop, clip-clop. Not a heavy sound, but in the silence of the early morning it was clear and defined, almost like the tapping of a hammer.

It grew steadier louder, then all at once it stopped.

So I had dreamed it.
The silence that followed was like the sort you’d encounter in the depths of the ocean. It was almost a sound of its own. The heaviness of it made me suddenly nervous. I got up and open the blinds. My room is on the second floor and my window looks out over the street towards the abandoned lot and the park, even though it’s never made any difference to me since I’ve always kept the window closed and the blinds pulled down. I didn’t want to be reminded of what was outside. I would have preferred to live in a basement, but our house didn’t have one.

I struggled with the blind-pull for a few moments. I was still half-asleep, my eyes bleary, my usually ungraceful hands fumbling even more than usual. Then I got them open and peeked out through the window pane.

I didn’t see them at first. It was hard to make out anything. But then I saw something move, there, not far from the light pooling at the feet of that street light.

*Clip-clop.* It stepped into the light.

I’d expected to see something larger, something horse-sized. But it wasn’t a horse.

It was the okapi. And on its back was someone whose shape, even if I hadn’t been able to see her face clearly, I would have recognised at once: the wide-brimmed hat, the clothes, the short silver-grey hair.

Koishi.

I didn’t know what to do. I was still dreaming, wasn’t I? I wanted to open the window but I was worried that if I did, the spell would be broken. It might be the last time I could see her. I didn’t want to do anything to spoil it.

She sat there on the okapi’s back looking straight up at me, or so I imagined. She made no move to signal me or anything like that. I guess she couldn’t see me even though I could see her. Dreams have their own strange logic, after all.

The okapi was eating some grass on the verge. Koishi leaned down and said something in his ear, and he raised his head, licking his long tongue back into his mouth, and broke into a trot again.

*Clip-clop, clip-clop.*

Then the shadows drew them in and they were gone.

I stared out that window for I can’t remember how long. Then I went back to my bed and lay down. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I don't usually give trigger-warnings, but there is a bit of 'sexualised' violence in this chapter - nothing graphic, mind you - within the context of bullying. It comes up pretty suddenly, so just a heads-up.

When Mia came back from school the next day, she was a miniature tornado of excitement.

“Onnee-san! Onnee-san! You’ll never guess what happened!”

I agreed that I’d never guess in a million years what had happened, so I told her to just go ahead and tell me.

“The okapi escaped from the zoo!”

I’d spent the day moping around, having slept in even longer than usual after my long, restless night. In the light of day the whole Koishi riding the okapi thing had seemed more and more like just a feverish dream I’d had. And now Mia was telling me the okapi had escaped.

So maybe he had. Maybe I had been woken up by the clip-clop of his little hooves on the footpath and looked out the window. And maybe I had seen him, but been so sleepy that by a trick of the light and shadow I’d imagined Koishi riding on his back.

Koishi. All day I’d been haunted by her beautiful but emotionless face, her eyes of glacial ice. Had I really felt a glimmer of warmth from her, in that moment she’d smiled, really smiled? It had been like the glimpse of a furnace hidden deep within her...

Was that why I imagined fire wreathed around her whenever I thought about her?

Mia went on and on about the theories the kids at her school had about how the okapi had escaped. A bunch of them were planning to go hunt it. Apparently he’d left tracks here and there around the neighbourhood, but the clearest of them led to the little wooded hill where the shrine was, and then disappeared.

“Maybe he got scared and wanted to go back to the zoo,” I suggested. “They’ll find his sooner or later. I mean, an okapi can’t just disappear into thin air, right?”

Mia nodded. Then she grew excited again. “Hey, hey, hey! Do you think maybe Koishi will come to play today?”

I remembered the platinum-haired girl’s words to me.

“I think so,” I lied.

Koishi didn’t come to play. I sat at the window, waiting for her to appear in the park, to come walking down the street. I tried to will her into existence, imagined her pressing our doorbell and how excited I’d be as I ran down to let her in so we could hang out together in my room and talk and play videogames and then, maybe....
I ended up playing videogames alone, like every other day. Even the most angsty and erotic scenes of ‘Naked Butlers in Love 3’ couldn’t draw me out of the haze of misery that had settled over me.

I felt even more pathetic than usual. What the hell was I expecting? Was I such a ravishing beauty that Koishi had no other choice than to come and see me again? I was just lucky that I hadn’t scared her off that time we met in the zoo, that I’d actually been able to talk to her like a normal person.

I’d been lucky, but that just made everything worse. Normal human interaction was a stroke of luck for me.

Normal human interaction? Koishi was scarcely normal. More normal than me, maybe, but that wasn’t saying much.

I lay there wondering about her, who she was, where she lived, what kind of pets she had. Well, I knew she had an okapi now.

Hehe. So stupid.

Sleep struggled over me. Maybe, I thought, maybe she and the okapi would come back. Even a dream would be okay. I’d consider myself lucky just being able to see her in a dream...

I had a dream. In it, I got out of bed and opened the curtains. Koishi was there, on the other side of the window, staring in at me. Her eyes were huge, like an owl’s. They burrowed into me, cutting through everything and leaving me raw and naked. Shivering in fear, I threw the curtains closed again.

I woke up sweating. I slowly turned over and stared at the window. The curtains were thankfully drawn. No, wait, that was worse.

I started to imagine I could sense something on the other side of the window, something hidden from me by the material of the curtains.

I imagined it was a single eye, peering in at me.

I lay there, staring at that stupid window, feeling panic rising in me. Then, just as quickly, it was gone. I got out of bed and with a trembling hand slid the curtain aside.

Nothing, of course. The street outside was empty. Nothing moving at all, except...

In the park one of the swings was swaying, almost as though someone had just got off it.

Just the breeze, I decided.

I closed the curtain, but didn’t get back into bed. I picked up a game and read the back of it. I decided I didn’t feel like playing it. It all seemed so stupid, now.

I threw a jacket on over my pyjamas and crept out of my room. I grabbed the flashlight from the laundry then let myself out of the house. It was cool outside, but not particularly cold. With the glow from the streetlight I didn’t need the flashlight and I quickly looked around the playground. Nothing. The swing had stopped moving.

I switched on the flashlight and darted it about the abandoned lot. Again, I found nothing.

Then I did something weird. I shoved the flashlight in my jacket pocket and started walking down the road. I knew where I was going.
The shrine. Where Mia said the okapi’s prints had ended up.

It wasn’t the okapi I was hunting, though.

Without Mia with me, it didn’t take long to reach the shrine. It was right next to the zoo, after all. We always took the bus there because we didn’t want to walk, but alone, and on foot, and hurrying, it didn’t seem nearly as far away.

The little hill was a dark patch against the sky. There were no lights there. I knew I was being stupid, that it was dangerous to be wandering around at night, but I climbed up the little path anyway. The small admin building with its car-park was the final lit area and as I left it behind, the night swallowed me up.

My flashlight wasn’t particularly powerful, and I swept it back and forth whenever I heard a sound. Beyond the shimmering of the trees, the occasional swish of a car out in the never-silent city was all I could make out. Even the dogs were all asleep.

I made it to the shrine unmolested. Mia had said the okapi’s tracks had been found behind the te-arai. I stepped off the paved path and onto the grass, pointing my flashlight at the ground.

Nothing. Or maybe I couldn’t see a damn thing because the night was so dark and my flashlight so weak. Also, I had no idea what an okapi’s tracks were supposed to look like.

It was then I felt eyes on me.

Mist had drifted up off the ground. The temperature grew chill and I pulled my jacket tighter around me shoulders.

Someone was watching me from the shrine. I dragged my flashlight around and swept the jittery disk of light across the lacquered wood.

No, not from inside the shrine.

From on top of it.

There, sitting on the roof of the shrine, her feet hanging over the side, was Koishi.

Shocked, I stumbled back. The light of my flashlight slipped onto her face and she raised a hand to shield her eyes.

I moved it off her. “Sorry,” I said.

It was so stupidly prosaic a statement. But what else was I supposed to say?

“You’re looking for the okapi,” said Koishi. Her voice betrayed no feeling, of surprise, or happiness, or anything at all. In the shade of the trees I couldn’t see her face, and so the emotionless of her voice was all the more marked.

“Is he around here?” It was stupid, this fake conversation, but I couldn’t stop myself. I had to say something, or else she might have heard the crazy beating of my excited heart.

Koishi shook her head. “I took him home. To Chireiden. He’s asleep on my bed right now.”

“Koishi,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

The trees shifted in the early morning breeze that often sweeps through the streets of my
neighbourhood. Starlight lit her face for a brief moment, turning her skin the colour of mercury. She’d tilted her head. For once, she didn’t answer right away.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said finally.

It sounded like an excuse.

I’d had enough. This parody of a conversation had gone on long enough.

“Koishi,” I said. “It wasn’t the okapi I was looking for. It was *you*.”

“Me?” She pointed at her face with a finger.

“I saw you,” I told her. “Riding the okapi last night. I thought it was a dream, but...” No, I’d never really thought it was a dream. I’d always known it had been real.

Koishi stood up. Then she stepped off the roof.

I cried out, but she didn’t fall. She was just hanging there, in space. I thought it must be that thing some people say happens under extreme stress or fear: that time seems to stop.

But it wasn’t the case here. Koishi almost immediately began to float down to the ground, seeming to have no more weight than a leaf.

Those dainty little shoes of hers clicked as her feet touched the pavement and then she was walking toward me.

The flashlight slid from my hand and went rolling away.

The dream. Koishi looking in my window, that single staring eye.

I was petrified, but I refused to retreat. I knew that if I ran away now I would never see her again. It would all be over.

I couldn’t stand the thought of it. I stood there, my feet glued to the paving, my heart dancing staccato in my chest.

Koishi stopped in front of me. She was so close that if I’d raised my hand to her I could have touched her face.

“You were looking for me?”

I swallowed, nodded.

“Why?” she said.

It was a why, I knew, that asked a great many things.

“I don’t want you to go away,” I said. “At the park, you said I’d never see you again. I... I couldn’t forget you, just like that.”

“You remember me.” A tone had crept into her usually monotone voice, a breathless tone of disbelief. “Why do you remember me?”

With this beautiful, frightening, mysterious girl standing in front of me, so close I could smell the scent of her skin and hair, could feel the warmth roiling off her in the coolness of the night, close
enough to touch her face, which was what I wanted more than anything in the world to do right then and there, I finally knew why I had come.

I was in love with her.

I opened my mouth, felt my face flood with heat and turned away, suddenly ashamed by my feelings. To fall in love with the first person I’d spent any time with after being a shut in for so long, the first person who’d shown the slightest bit of interest in me. It was pathetic, embarrassingly pathetic and ugly. I knew what she’d say. I’d heard those words before. No matter how many times you hear them, they still hurt.

It was worse than that. Koishi didn’t say anything. I stared at the ground, terrified of what I might see if I looked up. Had she just walked away? Was she looking at me in disgust, or worse, pity?

I had to know. I lifted my face.

Koishi was smiling at me, that same sad, exquisite smile from before.

So it hadn’t been a dream.

She reached up and touched my face, her hand cupping my chin and my cheek, the tips of those delicate fingers against the edge of my ear. Her hand was cool against my skin, but for all that I grew warmer still. I closed my eyes, leaned into her caressing hand.

Her touch was gentle, shy, and I knew straightaway that she wasn’t used to touching people.

“Your skin is smooth,” she said.

I stepped forward and awkwardly slipped my arms around her. I wasn’t used to taking the lead in anything, but I knew that if I melted against her, like every part of my existence was demanding I do, that she wouldn’t know what to do. It was possible she’d never even hugged anyone before.

She didn’t go stiff, as I thought she would, but she just stood there. Her hand was trapped between the two of us and I gave her some space to remove it, which she did. Then I felt her hands tentatively slip around my waist to rest against the small of my back. Koishi’s face was right in front of mine and she was staring at me. Was that fear on her face? Hurt? There was a strangeness around her eyes, as though emotion was trying to crack through her emotionless façade.

Then she leaned forward, resting her forehead on my shoulder, almost as if she was going to cry. She didn’t. I squeezed her tighter against me. It was so strange to be the one offering strength for once. With her body crushed to mine, her tiny breasts pushing up against my own, the exquisitely subtle scent of her body, of her clothes, all around me, I knew I had to be dreaming, or dead. There was no way that this could be happening to me.

“Please,” whispered Koishi.

“What is it?” I murmured against her fragrant hair.

She squeezed me tighter. The suddenness of it startled me.

“Please forget about me,” she said.

“I can’t,” I said. “I know this is stupid, but I...” I swallowed. “I have feelings for you, Koishi.”

Koishi stiffened in my arms. She took her head from my shoulder, drew her arms from around my
waist and stepped back.

Her expression was blank, but tears were streaming from her eyes.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please go away and don’t ever come back here again.”

“Koishi,” I began. My heart was pounding as if I was standing on a precipice and looking down, the ground shifting under my feet. Everything was collapsing. I thought I was about to faint. “Koishi, I don’t know what happened to you, but I... I think I can understand. I’m sorry if I...”

Koishi shook her head. “No. Please don’t be kind. It hurts too much.”

“Koishi...” I took a step forward and she retreated, sudden panic in her eyes. Her heels touched the step leading up to the shrine and she tripped, sprawling back across them. I gasped and moved forward to help her but I stopped when I saw something snake across her. For a moment I thought that an animal or insect had been lying unseen on the steps and had crawled up onto her, but when I saw that it wasn’t like anything I’d ever seen before, I cried out.

It resembled a spider, in a way, or an octopus, or something like that. It was round with long, impossibly spindly legs. No, not legs: tentacles, or rather tendrils. They curled around Koishi’s arms and legs, but loosely. Whatever it was, it wasn’t trying to constrict her. As I stared, unable to look away, the little round body at the centre of the tendrils shifted over her chest. There was a slit across it, glowing with a pencil-thin thread of light. It was an eye, an eye closed shut.

“You’re afraid,” said Koishi as she got to her feet. Her voice, usually so emotionless, was breaking. “You don’t have to be though.” She drew her fingers over the smooth head of the thing and it drew closer to her, as though trying to hide itself.

My voice was little more than a whisper. “Koishi, what is it?”

“My third eye,” she said. “There’s no need to be scared of it. It’s just part of me.” Her eyes grew glassy, as if remembering. “I... I wish it wasn’t, but it’s part of me, just like my hands or my feet or my hair.”

I took another step backwards, but Koishi didn’t move. She just stood there, looking at me, her eyes full of sorrow. I’d never seen pain on her face, and it horrified me even more than the thing she called her third eye.

“So, now you see why you have to stay away from me,” she said. “I’m not human. I’m a youkai.”

“A youkai?” I didn’t say it like it was impossible, that I didn’t believe her, or that I thought she was joking. I mean, how could you, in that situation? With her third eye nestled against her chest, as real as the cedar trees in the starlight, the wood of the steps she was standing on, the grit of the shrine’s path underneath my feet, it was impossible not to believe.

Koishi nodded. “Now you should go. Thank you for...” Her voice faltered, but she struggled to continue. “...thank you for being so kind to me. You have to forget me, but I... I’ll never forget you.”

I just stood there. I was in shock, but I also knew at that moment that something was coming to an end and I didn’t want it to. I didn’t want Koishi to leave, to go back to wherever it was she was from, to never see her again.

I took a step forward. Koishi stared at me.

“What are you doing?”
“I’m not frightened of you,” I said, taking another step. “It doesn’t matter to me that you’re a youkai. You’re a good person, Koishi. Youkai or human or whatever, I don’t want you to go.”

It was true. I wasn’t frightened of her, whatever she was. The thing I was frightened of was never seeing her again. I couldn’t return to the way things had been. I just couldn’t.

My path was laid out for me. I took another step and reached my hand out to her.

I might not have been afraid of Koishi, but she was afraid of me. At the sight of me reaching out to her, her eyes took on a look of terror. It was by far the strongest emotion I’d ever seen on her face. She was cowering from me, there, on the steps of the shrine. If I hadn’t been so desperate, I would have pulled my hand away from her. But I’d come too far to do that.

I leaned down and took her hand.

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed.

The thing that was her third eye writhed. I felt something wash over me, some strange, invasive force. And then I was no longer on the steps of the shrine. Koishi was no longer there. In fact, the memory of her fled quickly away, like a dream lost on waking. With it went all my other memories, lost in a maelstrom of weirdness.

I was standing in front of my locker at school. I’d just opened it. There was a pale pink envelope inside with my name on it.

I glanced about as I took it out. No one else was around at the moment since it was so early. I always came in early to school, since I didn’t want to hang around at home for longer than I had to.

I brought the envelope to my nose. There was a lovely scent imbued in it, a familiar one. My heart racing, I opened it. There was a letter inside, written on cute stationery.

As I read it my heart beat faster. It was a confession. The name at the bottom, signed in an adorably cute hand, was a name I recognised, just as I’d recognised the fragrance.

The letter was from Ayumi, Sugimoto Ayumi. A girl in my homeroom. She sat just across from me, next to the window. She was popular, but not one of the really popular girls. I talked to her now and then, but we weren’t really friends. I didn’t have that many friends at the school, having just transferred there. After leaving my previous school, I’d hoped beyond hope that a new start at this school would help me forget about all the terrible things that had happened to me there. And now it looked like I hadn’t hoped in vain. That whole thing in anime about the ‘mysterious transfer student’ being attractive was real after all.

Was it a trick? Ayumi wasn’t the type. She always smiled at me in class. I guess maybe a girl who likes other girls can tell someone who’s the same.

I brought the letter to my nose again. Her fragrance. She often leaned across my desk to ask me questions, and so I knew it well.

Meet me on the rooftop at lunch, the letter said. I want to tell you something.

The whole morning I kept glancing over at her. She came into rollcall late, as she always did, but as she passed my desk she ran her fingers along the edge of it, those long, slender fingers of hers that were so perfect for playing the violin. I’d remembered watching them during an ensemble presentation at assembly. I guess she’d caught me looking at her. She’d known about all those furtive glances.
I was almost too scared to look at her during class, but when I finally got the courage to, she winked at me. I turned away, hiding my blush by staring down at the top of my desk.

The morning passed agonisingly slow. And then it was lunch. She slipped out first with a quick glance back at me. A few minutes later, as long as I could stand, I got up and followed her, leaving my lunchbox on my desk.

My heart was thudding in my chest, my skin feeling as though every part of me was blushing when I opened the door to the rooftop. It wasn’t an out of bounds area: third-year students were allowed to eat up her, although no one ever did since it usually got too cold from the wind that came straight down from over the mountains.

The door opened. Late summer light was spilling across the rooftop. Ayumi was standing there, her long glossy hair flicked up off her shoulders by the chill breeze. Her back was to me as she stared out across the school grounds at the mountains with their white-gold caps of sunlit snow.

She must have heard the door creak open since she straight away turned around. Her face lit up when she saw me, a look of joy like a flash of sunlight across it.

She called my name and I stepped onto the roof, almost tripping on the slightly raised threshold in my nervous eagerness.

It was then that they grabbed me. They’d been hiding behind the little building which housed the stairwell. There were three of them and I knew straight away who they were.

They were the popular girls that I’d been so careful to stay away from since coming to the school. At my last one, it had been the popular clique who’d put me through the worst bullying, and I didn’t want it to happen again.

I didn’t know the names of the two girls gripping my arms, but the other girl who came up and looked me over, a brilliant smile on her beautiful face, was Rika.

Everyone knew Rika. The daughter of the head of the school board, she was our class president: She’d made a joke when I did my introduction, that introduction they all make students give, calling me ‘our mysterious and glamorous new transfer student’, but since then we’d barely spoken three words to each other. I’d made sure of it. There was something in the way her dark eyes glittered, the way her lip curled, that told me she was dangerous.

Rika brought her hand to my chin and turned my face one way then the other, like you would when giving someone a medical examination.

“Pretty arrogant for such a plain girl,” said Rika with a sigh. “You really think you’re something, don’t you?”

I started to protest, but I knew it didn’t matter what I said. This was all a charade, a game for the benefit of Rika’s friends. Maybe, maybe if I kept my mouth shut, they’d just make fun of me a bit then let me go.

“Do you really think a girl like Ayumi would ever be attracted to someone like you?” She drew her hand across my stomach and up over my breasts before flicking my chin. “You’re fat and flat. It’s a real accomplishment in a way.”

Angry and humiliated, I started to struggle. The girls holding on to me pushed me back up against the wall of the stairwell.
Ayumi was beside Rika now. She turned to her, humour dancing her eyes. “Careful, Rika. Look at how hot you’re getting her. Her face is all red.”

One of the girls holding me down whispered in my ear. “It’s a shame you’re a dyke. You probably would’ve made some fat, ugly salary man very happy one day.”

Rika’s eyes took on a strange heat as they considered me. “I guess it’s been a while since someone touched you like that, isn’t it?” she said. “We heard the rumours about what happened at your last school. How you got caught with that other girl. What did you two like to do to each other?” She came closer, her lips so close to mine that I could feel the heat of her breath. Her voice became a whisper. “I bet it wasn’t just kissing, was it? Did you guys used to eat each other out as well?”

She reached down and drew a hand up along my thigh and under my skirt until it was between my legs. Her smile deepened.

“You’re very hot there. I guess you’re a bit M as well, huh?” She laughed. “You probably like being bullied, don’t you? I guess that’s why you always act so fragile and submissive. It’s just a come-on, isn’t it? Is this getting you wet?”

She grabbed me between the legs and squeezed so hard that I cried out. I kicked at her, but she’d already stepped back.

“Strip her,” said Rika.

And as I cried and screamed and struggled that’s exactly what they did. Rika watched the whole thing with prurient intensity, taking photos on her phone. I knew the reason why she was the way she was. She liked girls as well, but I don’t know why she ended up the way she had, so cruel and twisted. I can think about the situation with intellectual distance now, but as they tore my clothes off me, laughing, all I could think about was how worthless I was.

They tossed everything off the side of the building, including my underwear, and left me there, trembling against the wall, a hand between my legs, an arm across my breasts.

“Look at her!” cried Rika. “Like I told you, she’s an M. She’s so worked up now she can’t stop herself from masturbating.”

She drew her hand across my chin and I pulled away, shivering uncontrollably. I was petrified. She caressed the side of my face then, without warning, she slapped me so hard with the back of her hand that it left my ears ringing.

“Don’t look at any of us ever again,” she said.

Then they left.

I don’t know how long it was until I was found, but by the time the teacher came upon me, I could barely speak. I was curled up in a ball, my arms wrapped around my knees, and it was only after she grabbed and shook me that I realised someone was there.

She’d been calling my name over and over and I just hadn’t heard her.

Of course I never told anyone what happened. Even at the time I could barely remember what happened. I guess I blanked it out. After my mother picked me up, I shut myself in my room and lay on my bed, staring up at the ceiling, ignoring my mother’s knocking, wishing the hideous hollow pain that was pressing down on me, like someone sitting on my chest, would go away. I lay there for I don’t know how many hours, until I heard my phone ping at me.
It was mail, from a number I didn’t recognise.

I opened it, my fingers trembling, already knowing what it was.

A photo. Of me.

*A little memento*, the mail read. *So you’ll never forget our special time together. Love, Rika.*

Then I was back on the steps of the shrine. I collapsed onto my hands and knees, my throat convulsing as I dry-heaved, my stomach twisting with nausea. I’d blocked it out for so long, the details of what had happened, but now I’d relived it, just as if it had happened for the first time.

Koishi was still standing there, staring at me. Reliving the memory must have taken even less than a second. She reached out for me but I scrambled away from her, petrified.

Her green eyes wide with horror, she covered her face with trembling hands and fell forward onto her knees.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

I struggled to my feet. Koishi’s entire body was shaking as if she was gasping for air.

“Koishi…” My voice was exhausted, drained, but trembling with anger and fear. “What… what did you do to me?”

“Forget me,” she moaned. “You have to forget me. I can’t… I can’t love anymore. I can only hurt. Only hurt.”

She began to weep, the spaces between her fingers growing wet with tears. The sight tore me out of my shock. I took a step forward, reached down to her. After the horror of what I’d just experienced, I think it was probably the bravest thing I ever did.

Koishi took her hands from her face, saw my hand reaching for her, and she cried out. She stumbled back onto her feet and with a final look of terror on her tear-stained face she fled from me, running up the stairs and disappearing into the shrine. I stood there, paralysed, but then I forced myself to move. I leaped up the stairs and ran through the front doors of the shrine after her.

It was dark inside, but the starlight coming in from the front doors set the sacred mirror and the treasures arrayed before it glittering like an Aladdin’s cave. I saw a flash of green and yellow in a corner of the room, but just a flash. It was gone as soon as I noticed it.

She... she couldn’t have just disappeared into thin air, could she?

Who knew what she could do. She was a youkai, after all.

I ran over to where I’d last seen her. The air there was shimmering, like it sometimes does above a roadway on a hot summer’s day. I lifted my hand to it, moved to touch it, but hesitated.

*Koishi was* a youkai. There was no doubt in my mind. That thing entwined about her... wait no, it wasn’t a thing. *It's a part of me*, she had said. Her third eye. It had awoken that memory in my mind. But it hadn’t just been a memory. I’d relived it, just like it had happened, every emotion as new and raw as it had been the first time.

Who knew what else she could do. She could only hurt people, she’d said.
And yet.... Her arms around me, her gentle fragrance, the trembling of her tiny slender body against mine, she’d felt like any other girl. And those tears, the sorrow in her eyes...

She might be a youkai, but she wasn’t evil.

*I can’t love. I can only hurt.*

Just frightened, and in pain.

I reached out and my hand disappeared into the air. Then with a deep breath I stepped forward and my body followed it.
Chapter 3

The first thing: heat. And red light, as though I’d stepped into the core of the earth.

Perhaps I had. There was smoke in the air, and the air tasted moist, tropical. The strangest fragrance hung over it all and as I crept forward, my hands groping against the warm surface of what I guessed was a wall, I wondered what it was. It was so strangely familiar, a fragrance I’d smelled a hundred times, a thousand times before. Chemicals, and flowers, and earth.

I stepped out onto the porch of what I now knew was a shrine. But it wasn’t the one I had entered, of course. This one was huge, although like the one back home it looked as though it was no longer well-maintained.

I stopped on the porch. There was a street before me, like the street of an ancient town. Yellow-orange light flickered across the tiled roofs and the black and red lacquered walls of the buildings.

I ran down the front steps into the street. It looked deserted.

Where was I? Was this Koishi’s Gensoukyou?

I chose a direction and ran in it. I knew I should have stopped and thought things through, but I had a feeling that if I did, fear would well up and overpower me. I could feel its cold needles already pricking my heart. I ran, not to outrun some unseen threat, but to outrun my fear.

It was a strange place. Above me, the sky was dark, starless and moonless, and above the roofs of the houses I sometimes caught a glimpse of a flowing curtain of red-orange light. A waterfall, but of flowing fire. Lava?

And everywhere that odd perfumed smell.

I ran across a bridge. Beneath it, boiling water flowed, steam rising up from it like a ghostly veil. The building across the way had its front doors open and I glanced inside.

It looked like a foyer. There was a counter and wall-hangings and I saw people inside, dressed in kimono, but I couldn’t make out their faces.

I didn’t want to. They gave off the strangest, threatening aura. Youkai, I guessed. I wasn’t supposed to be here.

As I hurried past I saw a bench with a trough of steaming water before it. Ashi-no-yu: hot water for guests to rest their tired feet in.

All at once it hit me. I knew where I’d smelled that fragrance before.

Bath salts. Just like the sort I sometimes used in my own bath. This was an onsen town, but one like no other onsen town I had seen before.

I turned the corner. The streets seemed to go on forever. Soon I was climbing up a slope. Before me, above the rooftops, a great glowing sheet of fire had appeared, as though there was a volcano overlooking the city. It illuminated the dark sky and I could see the flickering tongues of light slithering across the rough surface of a natural stone wall, a wall that climbed overhead, right up to the zenith.
There was no sky, just a roof. I was underground, far underground.

A strange blue glow appeared in front of me. The difference in colour from the all-pervasive yellow-orange, black and red startled me and I panicked. I clambered up onto a porch and hid behind one of the lacquered columns.

Something glowing flew past. It was round, wreathed in spectral blue fire. Ball lightning?

A second followed and a third. The last one slowed and danced upwards, spinning, as though it was sentient.

As it turned, I saw it was no simple globe of fire.

It was a skull.

The black pits of its eyes flicked about, as though it could see from them. I started to shiver uncontrollably, crushing myself against the column, wishing it would swallow me up and hide me from this horrible thing.

Then I heard whistling.

The skull stopped swaying back and forth and flew up into the air where it hovered as though waiting for the owner of the whistling.

The whistling was so out of place. It was light and cheerful, even jaunty. But I was even more surprised when its owner came into view.

It was a cat. And a person. A cat-person, or rather a cat-girl, pushing a cart. There was a skip in her step as she propelled it along, the hem of her green velvet dress flicking about.

She wasn’t just skipping, she was dancing, the sort of light-hearted impromptu dancing of the very happy. Her long red pigtails swung about her head as her whistling evolved into a kind of wordless singing. She was right across from where I was hiding now and I could see her face in the lava-light clearly.

With her long elfin ears and her huge eyes, she was clearly unhuman: a youkai, of course. Her features were somewhat impish, but the wide smile she was wearing made her look kind, and combined with her pigtails gave her an aura of innocence. She was also very pretty.

I knew what I had to do. I couldn’t just wander around these streets without a plan. Sooner or later I would have to ask someone. It might as well be this pretty cat-girl.

I stepped out from behind the column. “Excuse me,” I said.

The cat-girl stopped pushing her cart and swung her head in my direction. I’d startled her. As she looked at me, her eyes went wide.

“A human?”

I nodded. “Yes. I, uh...”

Her hands dropped from the handles of the barrow and she took a step in my direction. I know I was the one who had approached her, but the movement was still alarming. I took a step back.

The cat-girl raised her hands like you would to an animal that was in danger of running away from you. “Please, don’t be frightened. I won’t hurt you. Are you lost?”
I shook my head. “No, I’m looking for Komeiji-san’s home. I was wondering if you knew where it was.”

The cat-girl stopped dead. “Wait. You’re looking for the mistress?”

“Hey, Orin, what’s going on?!”

The voice was loud and boisterous and came from right above me. I looked up and there, silhouetted in the light of that great veil of fire, was a huge, black shadow, its dark wings beating the air slowly. In its chest was a single, lidless and staring eye.

A devil.

The fear I’d been battling to keep contained burst out of me explosively. I darted down the steps past the cat-girl and started running.

“Hey, hey wait!” I heard her cry from behind me.

I was in a blind panic now. So this place was Hell. I ran careening around the next corner, racing past the houses with their red lanterns casting waving shadows everywhere. This was a nightmare, and I couldn’t wake up.

At the next corner I turned left. My eyes were darting to both sides, trying to find a suitable place to hide myself once I was out of the sight of the youkai, and so when the winged-one flew down right in front of me, I ran straight into her.

Her. It most definitely was a her, given the size of the boobs I ran face-first into.

I felt arms slip around me, catching me and I went limp.

“Gotcha!” said my captor. “Wow, humans can really run, can’t they?”

I struggled, but it was more from being pressed up against her breasts and being unable to breathe than my earlier fear. What kind of a devil was she?

I heard the clatter of a wooden wheel on the pavement behind me. “Okuu!” I recognised the cat-youkai’s voice. She sounded relieved. “Oh good, you caught her.”

I felt the winged youkai nodding enthusiastically. “I sure did.”

I continued to struggle, making increasingly panicked muffled pleas to be let go. Usually I wouldn’t be complaining about having boobs pressed against my face, especially ones as big and as soft as these, but I felt myself getting dizzy from a lack of oxygen.

“Okuu, you’re hugging her too hard. She can’t breathe.”

“I am?” I felt ‘Okuu’’s arms release their grip on me and I stumbled back, gasping. “Oh, I’m sorry!”

Doubled over, I let the sweet, sweet air fill my lungs. Then I looked up and got a good look at Okuu for the first time.

She was a bird-youkai rather than a devil, I realised then. With her dark wings furled at her back, she didn’t look nearly as huge as before, although she was very tall. She had dark, tousled hair and large, innocent maroon eyes that were right now blinking at me in concern. I felt my panic subsiding. Her face was gentle, and had on it an expression of naïve guilt, like a kid who’s been caught stealing snacks. Despite her size and the strange glowing gem lodged in her rather ample chest which I had
mistaken for an eye earlier, I just couldn’t imagine a bloodthirsty demon looking the way she did.

My staring seemed to make Okuu self-conscious. She lowered her eyes and rubbed at the back of her head. “Sorry. I keep forgetting that humans are very fragile.” She lifted her eyes. “You’re- you’re not broken anywhere are you?”

I shook my head.

“Oh good!” she said, clapping her hands.

Orin came up beside me. She was puffing. “You didn’t need to run away, you know. We’re not going to hurt you, although there are some youkai down here that might.”

I looked around. “Is- is this Hell?”

“Yes. Well, Former Hell actually,” explained Orin. She leaned back against her little cart while above her the glowing skulls ceased their flying about and hovered. “It got too crowded so they moved all the damned souls to New Hell. Now this place is ruled by our mistress, the lady Komeiji Satori. But you already knew that I guess, since you’re looking for her.”

I shook my head. “I’m looking for her sister, Koishi.”

Okuu blinked at me. “Koishi?” She turned to Orin. “Does the mistress have a sister?”

Orin look confused, shook her head. “I- I’m trying to remember. I think maybe she does.” The cat-youkai sighed. “Well, we’d better take you to Satori-sama to get this all straightened out.” As she moved the cart off the street she said to Okuu, “Do you think you can carry the two of us?”

Okuu’s head bobbed up and down. “No problem!” she said. Then her forehead furrowed. “But can’t you fly, Orin?”

The cat youkai blushed. “Any excuse to get cuddled, I suppose.”

Before I knew it, I’d been swept up under Okuu’s arm and was being wafted up high in the air over Former Hell. Below me the maze of streets with their rows of glowing lanterns and the buildings with their bright windows slipped away. I dared to look up, my heart in my throat.

There, perched close to the cavern wall with its huge flowing lava-falls, was a great palace. Beneath its turrets and domes, plate-glass windows glittered with every colour, so different from the yellow and red of the somewhat-gloomy town it overlooked.

“Chireiden: The Palace of the Earth Spirits,” said Orin from under Okuu’s other arm. “The capital of Former Hell and the home of our mistress.”

Soon I felt Okuu’s wings shift beside me as she dove down to land in the courtyard of the great palace. Unlike the rest of Former Hell, it was well-lit, with a cheerful yellow glow coming from sconces on every corner surface. Rainbow light also spilled up from underneath us; great square sections of the floor were translucent, decorated with multicolour geometric patterns like the plate-glass windows and lit from beneath by flickering flames.

Okuu let go of me and Orin and fussed at her wings, straightening the feathers that had fallen out of place. I looked about, amazed at the eerie beauty of the place.

Suddenly, there was movement all around us in the shadows beyond the bright light of the courtyard. Things were coming out from inside the palace.
A great feline head appeared out of the shadow and I took a step back. A leopard! There was no mistaking it.

From another direction came a lion, shifting his shaggy mane. From behind him a chihuahua came skittering up and I blinked in surprise.

There were cats, and dogs, and rabbits, and birds, and mixed in with them more exotic creatures such as llamas and crocodiles and even a huge, sleepy panda that came lumbering out to join the others.

They all moved with a calm grace. None of them fought, or indeed showed any hostility either to us or each other. They just seemed curious. They milled about, sniffing and nuzzling us. Some quickly grew bored and slumped onto the ground and began to preen themselves.

“Satori-sama’s pets,” explained Orin.

“It’s dinner time,” said Okuu, stroking the muzzle of a huge bear that bent down to receive her caressing hand.

“You take care of that,” said Orin. “I’ll take our human friend to see the mistress.”

Okuu nodded and gave us a jaunty wave as Orin took my hand and led me through the milling animals and down a corridor. The high ceilings and the gorgeously ornamented windows thrilled me with their strange and magical beauty. Who knew that Hell, well Former Hell, anyway, would be so beautiful?

It was a huge place, grand and majestic but somehow lonely. A few of the animals had decided to follow us and we encountered the odd other lying on some steps or walking down a corridor, but mostly we were on our own.

I knew now why Satori would want to keep so many animals here. Such a huge place, and so few living in it.

I thought maybe I’d started to understand just a little about why Koishi was the way she was.

“Why is it so quiet?” I asked Orin as corridor after corridor proved to be deserted.

The question seemed to take Orin aback. “Well, our mistress seldom receives visitors,” she said. “Not that she wouldn’t like them, though. I suppose many are frightened of her.” Orin’s face became eager. “But they really don’t need to be. She’s such a kind person.”

I was expecting to be taken to a throne room or something similar but instead there we arrived at a little door that seemed no different to any of the others we had passed. Orin knocked on it and a girl’s voice came from the other side.

“Is that you, Orin?”

“Yes, mistress,” said Orin. “You have a visitor. A human. She’s asking to see your...” Hesitation for a second. “...your sister?”

The door opened into a little study. There was a roaring fire and books lining the walls. A rug had been thrown on the ground and a panther was lying on it, and as Orin and I stepped into the room it lifted its head to look at us. I noticed then that it was curled around a border collie who was fast asleep.

A young girl stood up, then, from where she had been sitting at her desk. With her short purple hair
and her lacy Victorian dress and the third eye wrapped about her arms and legs there was no mistaking her. It must be Satori, Koishi’s sister.

But where Koishi’s face had been so glassy and expressionless, Satori’s was alive. She looked me over in surprise and for a moment I was worried she was angry at me. Then I noticed the third eye squirming near her chest. Unlike Koishi’s, its lids were wide open and it turned to me, drawing my gaze to it. I couldn’t stop myself from staring into the glowing depths of that strange, invasive eye, and I felt naked, far more naked than I ever had in my life. It was as if I had been stripped of everything in an instant, stripped right down to my soul.

As quickly as it had enveloped me, the sensation passed, and with it the tension on Satori’s face. It was replaced with a strange expression, a mixture of relief and confusion and sorrow and delight, as though all four emotions were contesting with each other and had coalesced into a strange new one.

“Thank you Orin,” said Satori. “Would you go and make us some tea?”

The cat youkai, as confused as I was at the look on her mistress’ face, nodded and left, closing the door behind her.

Satori indicated a little chair next to the rug with the panther on it. I looked at the animal nervously, but sat down all the same.

“None of my pets will harm you,” said Satori, sitting in the other chair. She was smiling now, and seeing the expression on a face so similar to Koishi’s made me ache to see it on her sister’s face as well. “So, you’re Koishi’s friend.”

I nodded. The little chair was very comfortable and the room was very warm. If I hadn’t been so nervous I was sure I could have easily fallen asleep in it. I began to try and explain myself. “I came to see her. We... we had an argument?” It was the wrong word, but I didn’t really know what to say. What exactly had happened? What had I done wrong?

Satori saw the confusion on my face. “Please, you don’t need to explain. I know what happened. My sister... well, she is a difficult person to get close to.”

“You read my mind?”

Satori shook her head. “No, merely your emotions.” She sighed. “You’re in love with my sister, aren’t you?”

I swallowed, nodded.

“It’s so strange,” continued Satori, running her fingers across the panther’s head. “Usually, no one can see her except for animals or small children. Even I have trouble seeing her. She could be standing right behind me now and I wouldn’t be able to register her presence.” She looked at me. “How is it that you can see her?”

I just looked back at her. I had no idea.

“Her mind is shut off,” explained Satori. Clearly she hadn’t expected an answer to her question. “Closed. She chose to do it, a long time ago.” Satori’s eyes slid from mine down onto the animals lounging on her rug. “Even before that she found our ability too painful. She’d always been sensitive, ever since she was small. And so what we experienced hurt her, wounded her at a deeper level, down to the very core of her soul, I guess you could say.”

“What happened?”
“People were frightened of us,” said Satori. “Are frightened of us. Humans and youkai. It’s why we came to live down here. We thought that in Hell we would be accepted. After all, we were called monsters and demons in the upper world and I suppose the label stuck to us. But we weren’t exactly welcomed here with open arms.” She frowned. “Youkai hate having their feelings and minds read as much as humans do. But at least here we were tolerated. No one tried to kill us. And when the Yama moved the damned souls to New Hell, we stayed behind here. And now this is our home.” A smile flickered across her face. “I know that Orin would have told you we don’t often get visitors down here. In fact, you’re the first human to have come down here for many, many years.” She chuckled. “The last ones who came here tried to exterminate us, but I never expected the next time a human would come would be because she’d fallen in love with my sister.” Satori sighed. “I’m actually jealous.”

I blushed. My reaction seemed to please Satori. “Does she know how you feel?” she asked.

I nodded. “I told her, but then... I’m not sure what happened. I touched her and then... I had a flashback, like a memory replay, of something that happened to me.”

Satori considered me. “It was an unpleasant memory, wasn’t it?”

I nodded.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s a defensive thing, a way we satori protect ourselves. Sometimes it just happens instinctively.” She placed hand on my shoulder. “Please. I would like to see what happened. May I hypnotise you?”

I was so surprised I didn’t think and just nodded. Satori’s third eye levelled itself with my own and found myself falling into it, drowning in the light that flowed forth from it.

I lived through those moments with Koishi outside the shrine again, although this time I thankfully did not experience my encounter with Rika and her friends. Satori, an interloper in my memory, sat on the roof of the shrine the whole time, watching.

And then I was back in former Hell again. Satori slumped back into her chair. The panther, alarmed, opened its eyes and looked in her direction, but it quickly closed them again.

Satori placed slender fingers between her eyes, rubbed the spot as if in pain. “The mask. Of course. I knew it was going to be trouble.”

“The mask?”

“It’s something that Koishi stumbled upon, a mask that bestows the emotion of hope upon whoever holds it,” explained Satori, shaking her head as if to dispel an unpleasant thought. “It wasn’t hers, but she took it and now she doesn’t want to give it back.” She sighed. “I can understand why. After an eternity of feeling nothing, to have hope again so suddenly thrust upon you must have been intoxicating. Poor Koishi suffers for it, now.”

“But what’s wrong with having hope?” I asked.

Satori looked at me, her heliotrope eyes critical. “As a human you shouldn’t have to ask me that question. I know that you have felt the delicious sting of hope and suffered at its hands as well.”

I blinked. She could see all that? But then, her third eye. It was wide open. Hadn’t I felt myself stripped of everything, down to the bones of my soul? Surely she had seen everything.

It made me fear her then, this strange little girl who sat stroking the head of that puma.
Satori’s voice was sad and for a moment it reminded me of Koishi’s. “Many forget that hope is not a promise. After all, one may hope for something that is impossible. And with the disappointment of that desire, the suffering is all the greater for their having had that hope in the first place.”

I found her words hard to hear, but hard to disagree with. Hope. What had I hoped to accomplish by coming here, chasing after Koishi?"

Satori answered my question for me.

“You came here to try and save her, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“You really do love her.” Satori’s finger rubbed at the armrest of her chair. Her eyes seemed suddenly distant. “But I’m afraid that love is not enough. She’s been lost too long. I fear that what you saw was just a ghost of who she used to be, a shade made animate by hope, awoken merely to relive pain.” She looked up at me, her eyes brimming. “I’m sorry. I really am. Many have tried, and by trying have made things worse. I’ve tried to find her and bring her back myself. But after so long being alone, of having her gaze turned in upon herself, I’m afraid she’s forgotten who she was. At night I hear her footsteps in the corridors, like a restless ghost. And that’s all she is now. A ghost.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, but the tears flowed anyway from the corners of my eyes.

“So... all I saw, all I talked to, that smile. It was a memory? Of who she was? A ghost?”

Satori nodded. “And now probably even that ghost is gone, frightened back into the empty place where it knows it can’t be hurt again. That is the dreadful irony of hope. As much as it promises, it just as quickly snatches away.”

Anger and frustration welled up in me and I cried out. “But it wasn’t my fault!”

Satori considered me with deep pity in her eyes.

“No, no, of course not. But you cannot help her. She can only help herself. And maybe one day she will. Maybe. But not today.”

The door opened and Orin came in with the tea service.

“Will you stay and have tea?” Satori asked.

I stared at the tray dumbly. The whole beautiful silver thing and the dainty cakes surrounding it suddenly seemed a horrible affront. I shook my head.

“I want to go home,” I said.

Satori nodded and rose to her feet. She turned to Orin. “Please escort our guest back to the surface.” The cat-youkai came and took my hand and I stood up. I felt numb all over, cold despite the comfortable warmth of the room.

“I’m sorry,” said Satori. “Just because I have turned away from hope doesn’t mean others should. Perhaps there is hope, for those able to see it. But here in Hell, it’s something that’s always been in rather short supply.”

I nodded dumbly. “Thank you for your hospitality,” I said.

“Goodbye,” said Satori. “And thank you again for caring for my sister.”

The words were final. I knew she never expected to see me there again.
Orin led me from the room. She smiled at me, but the cheerfulness was forced. She could feel the despair roiling off me in waves.

Satori’s words had fallen like leaden weights around my neck. She’d known her sister for how long? And I’d known her for three days. If she said here was no hope, then there wasn’t.

Just being who I was, telling her I loved her, had driven her away. The pain in my chest at the realisation was as though my heart had been replaced with a jumble of broken glass.

Sometimes it hurts to live.

We walked through the deserted corridors. With neither of us speaking, there was no sound, just the slap of our shoes on the stone. Slap, slap.

Clop.

I stopped. There was something else walking nearby. I waved Orin to a stop, which she did, her eyes curious.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Shh,” I said.

Clop. Clip clop.

And from around the corner of the T-junction we were approaching came a long, muzzled head. An animal. It turned to look at us with its dark, thickly-eyelashed eyes.

There was no mistaking the goofy face. It was the okapi. It looked at me, then turned and went back the way it had come.

Clip clop.

I ran up to the junction and looked to the left. The okapi was still there. It stopped and looked back at me.

I approached it and it began to trot down the corridor, faster now.

Orin came up behind me. “But the exit to the upper world is this way!”

I looked at her, my eyes pleading. “Please. I think Koishi is around here. I... I want to see her. One last time. Just to say goodbye to her.”

Orin slumped her shoulders and she nodded, defeated. “I’m sure the mistress would understand. You’ll be safe in the palace.” She indicated one of the blue glowing skulls, her constant companions. “But if you do get in trouble, just tell one of these guys and they’ll come and get me.”

“Thank you, Orin-san,” I said, bowing.

Orin chuckled. “Just Orin is fine. Now go.” She winked at me. “And good luck.”

I hurried after the trotting okapi.

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The okapi led me a merry dance through the corridors. We didn’t encounter anyone else, not even
any of the animals that seemed to fill the palace.

Eventually he brought me to a door. It was far from Satori’s room. Was it by choice, or design, that Koishi was kept so far away? I couldn’t help but think that she preferred things this way.

The door was ajar. The okapi nudged it open like a dog with its front leg and slipped inside.

I stopped, realising what I was doing. Wasn’t I stalking her, in a sense? She obviously wanted to be alone.

“Please don’t come back here again,” she’d said. It’s too painful. For both of us.

And yet... there was no way I could come this far. If only to say goodbye, one last time, I had to see her.

My heart was crashing in my chest as I knocked on the door.

“Koishi?”

There was no sound from inside. I pushed it open and looked inside.

It was a room similar in size to Satori’s and with similar furnishings, but there the similarities ended. It was extremely neat. Every book had its place on the bookshelves. There were lots of books about animals, those big photo-books you can buy anywhere. On the little table before the couch there was a book open. I saw pictures of okapis in it. It was a book intended for little kids, and somehow it made me feel sad.

There were other things in the room that reminded me of a little girl. There was a box of coloured pencils and some paper on the little desk against the far wall, a jar of sweets on the table and next to that a half-drunk bottle of yakult.

But no Koishi.

An open door. I knew it must lead to her bedroom and again I hesitated. But the okapi wasn’t in this room, so I knew he was probably there. As for Koishi?

I opened the door. It led to a girl’s bedroom as I had expected. The walls were a pink off-white and there was a little dresser to one side. On it was a jewellery box, open. The room was dominated by a four-poster bed with a lacy coverlet. Lying at the foot of it was the okapi, just like a dog would. There was a set of clothes, folded, at the top near the pillow, the little skirt and top that Koishi had worn.

But no Koishi.

I stepped inside, embarrassed. I looked in each of the corners, opened the little wardrobe. I pushed aside the frilly skirts and blouses inside. Nothing.

I really was the worst. This was no different to breaking and entering, really.

One last place she could be. I lay down and looked under the bed.

Nothing except a folded-up pair of underpants that had obviously slipped under there and been forgotten. I stood up.

Despair washed over me. So this was how it ended. I wouldn’t be able to say goodbye to her after all.
I went to leave. I was at the doorway when I stopped and turned back.

I could feel her.

I could feel her, but I couldn’t see her. But I knew she was there. I felt her presence.

She was sitting in the corner of the room.

Slowly I began to be able to see her. It wasn’t as if she was a ghost or anything like that. No, it was as if my eyes had slid off her before, as if I’d overlooked her. And now I was able to make her out.

Her back was to me. She was sitting, her body turned towards the corner. I saw the pinkness of her bare back and shoulders, the platinum-silver of her hair.

She was naked.

I stood there, uncertain of what to do. Then I walked over to her, knelt down and threw my arms around her.

She shifted, but apart from that there was no reaction.

She was sitting cross-legged, leaning forward, clutching something to her chest like a treasure.

A mask. A mask with a face like you see on those statues at Buddhist temples, an ojizousan.

And there, sitting against her chest beside the mask, was her third eye. It was closed. Even the little slit of light I had once glimpsed was no longer there.

Her skin was warm and smooth under my forearms. My hands I left hovering over her collarbone, too embarrassed to touch her. I was worried I might accidentally touch her breasts. So I knelt there, awkwardly embracing her from behind.

“Koishi,” I whispered, my voice disappearing into her hair.

Nothing.

“Koishi, I’m here.” I hugged myself against her. “I... I came to say goodbye.”

Even though she made no move, it felt as though she grew colder, some part of her receding away from me.

“I came to say goodbye,” I said. “But I know now I can’t. I can’t leave you like this. Please wake up, Koishi. Please move.”

I sat there with her for an eternity. It was like hugging a statue.

She couldn’t see me. Her eyes shut, she couldn’t see anything anymore. There was no way I could reach her. Unless...

Conquering my fear I drew a hand down to her third eye, lying limp against her chest. I ran my fingers along one of the little threads that connect it to her arm.

I swallowed. I knew that sometimes people would come out of comas because a loved-one touched their hand, or something like that.

A loved one. I knew she didn’t love me, but that didn’t matter. I wanted to help her. Maybe I was the
only one that could.

No one can help her, Satori had said.

I refused to believe that. Without hope, what was the point of anything?

My fingers drew close to the little globe of her third eye. It was still closed. She was still closed, closed to everyone.

I’d seen her open herself, for just a moment. And then that horrible memory had pierced me through the soul.

Maybe it would happen again. But I knew it was the only chance I had.

“I love you, Koishi.”

I touched her third eye. It shivered under my fingers and the lid opened.

And then the entire world turned upside down.
Chapter 4

At first, fleeting images. Light spilling down through a green canopy. The scattered sound of
tbirdsong. Her big sister’s hand holding hers, warm and strong and safe. A bear, walking at her side,
nuzzling her free hand, licking her fingers, making her laugh.

And the town, nestled down in the valley far below them, surrounded by yellow squares of
shimmering grain: little brown houses with their red roofs, thin blue tendrils of smoke rising from
scattered chimneys.

Hovering like some unseen spirit, I looked down upon them, those two little girls walking hand-in-
hand down from the mountains. Sometimes Koishi’s memories flowed before me as though I was the
audience to a play, and at other times I saw things through her eyes, felt them through her skin. I
suppose that if I’d been a satori, I could have controlled it. As it was, I shifted back and forth,
seemingly at random, now a ghost haunting her steps, now a ghost trapped within her body. But
however I saw things, the flood of emotion that poured through me was the same; such raw, violent
emotion that I could barely stand it. I struggled against it, but that just made things worse. Eventually
I let go, and somehow that was easier. But as I let go I forgot who I was and where I was, and all I
knew was the life that dragged me along with it.

Streets now instead of paths, houses instead of trees. And people where once there had only been
animals...

It wasn’t long before townspeople approached and asked them the sort of questions usually asked of
little girls who look like they’re lost. Where did you come from? Where are your parents?

The two just smiled and shook their heads. They didn’t know anything about themselves except their
names: Satori and Koishi.

It was a strange situation, everyone agreed, but like every mystery there were people who were sure
they knew the answer to it. The girls were obviously the children of hermits or wandering charcoal-
burners or of a violated nun who had fled into the mountains to hide her disgrace and had raised
them there alone. But they were such beautiful children, and so well-behaved and serious, that soon
the only question anyone asked was who was going to be the ones to take them in.

That honour finally fell to the Komeiji family, the richest family of the town, and so Koishi and
Satori, the two little daughters of hermits or charcoal burners or that disgraced nun, came to live with
them in their mansion, alongside their own son and daughter.

The sisters proved to be voraciously curious about everything around them, especially other people.
They watched and they learned, and soon it was as if they had always lived here in this little town,
the pretty and popular younger Komeiji sisters.

Fingers, drawn across a row of lacy and petticoated dresses, each more beautiful than the last;
fingers, drawn along the smooth coolness of black and white ivory, the keys of a piano, as she sat on
her stepmother’s lap, learning how to play; fingers, as she lifted a delicately iced cupcake to her
hungry mouth, gazing up at the elegantly dressed adults crowding her parent’s rose garden.

Koishi’s elegant fingers, hers and for a moment my own as well.

As the girls matured their powers slowly revealed themselves. First Satori and then Koishi developed
the ability to see into the hearts and minds of others. To begin with, it was only surface emotions that
they could read, then came flashes and scattered images of what people were thinking. The sisters
delighted in their new game, but it was a guilty, furtive one. They kept it secret from everyone but
each other, even their adopted parents, for they knew instinctively that such abilities should not to be
revealed to others.

Koishi’s powers grew quickly, catching up to her older sister’s, surpassing them.

Even more than the prestige and wealth of their adoptive family, the sisters’ ability to read minds and
emotions gave them ascendency over all the other children. But the games they played and the plans
they made were childish ones, and they were always careful to hide what they knew, giggling with
each other under the covers late at night as they shared the secret shames and hopes of their friends
and enemies.

“Tetsuko was staring at your new dress, Koishi. Red was pouring from her like fire. She hates that
mom bought the last one for you. She was saving up her money for it.”

“I won’t wear it around her anymore then, onee-san.” A giggle. “Hey, hey. Akihiko likes you,
doesn’t he? He wants to marry you. It’s all he thinks about when you’re nearby.”

Satori gave an annoyed snort. “I know. It’s gross. He’s such a little kid. Did you see what he was
imagining we would do? Holding hands in bed?”

She grabbed Koishi’s hand, making her gasp.

“Oh no, no!” squealed the younger girl, struggling to pull herself free. “Onee-san, don’t! I’ll get
pregnant!”

They quickly became even more popular than they had already been. Everyone in the town spoke of
the Komeiji sisters as blessed and destined for greatness, even those who envied them.

As they developed into adulthood and their adolescent emotions grew in intensity, so too did their
powers. It was then, alongside the other changes in their pubescent bodies, that their third eyes
appeared. The two girls were horrified at first as the little round organs pushed their way out of their
chests from where they had grown nestled embryonic beside their hearts, the eyes’ slender tendrils
lifting from their limbs and twisting lovingly around their wrists and ankles: but horror was quickly
replaced by joy and exhilaration at the effortless with which they could now read even the long-
forgotten memories of others and make them see whatever they wished.

The Komeiji sisters knew then, truly, that they were different from everyone else.

But with their new powers came pain. As children, playing childish games, they’d never experienced
serious negative emotions. Now, as young adults, in an adult world, such thoughts pressed in upon
them from every side. A child who loses a friend will cry, but a young woman who loses a lover will
hate. The old games they used to play, the old plans they made, became more serious, the dreams
and thoughts they read darker.

It was Satori’s relationship with the son of the family that brought about the crisis. The two had been
close ever since they’d been children, and recently that closeness had developed into intimacy. The
relationship was discovered by their friends long before their step-parents knew anything about it.
Even with her powers, Satori could not keep it secret, could not make jealous hearts bless their
relationship, especially not the jealous heart of her little sister.

The emerald-green macaw shivered his feathers and leaned down to preen a wing. Koishi tried to
tempt him with a fly she’d caught, but he ignored her.
“Onee-san?”

“Mm?” Satori was in front of the mirror, slender hands playing with her ribbon. It was a nervous habit of hers. Koishi had started to hate it. It always meant one thing.

“Again?” whispered her sister.

Satori sighed, but didn’t turn around. She untied the ribbon for the umpteenth time.

“We’ve talked about this,” she said.

Koishi looked into the dark eyes of the macaw. It opened its beak in a yawn. She let go of the fly, which spiralled away.

Satori, hearing no response, turned on her little sister. “You hate him, don’t you?”

Koishi shrugged. She put the macaw back on his perch and sat down on her bed next to her tortoiseshell cat, Tama.

“I can feel it,” said Satori.

“No you can’t,” whispered Koishi. “I know you can’t. I don’t let you.”

Fingers, trailing across the soft fur between the cat’s ears. The pain in her chest, not from her heart, but from her third eye, hiding there, buried within her.

“Tetsuko loves him, you know.”

Satori spun around, her eyes flashing. “Never mention that bitch’s name to me again!” She spat the words, half-bitten, from her lips.

“She hates you,” said Koishi, staring at the wall. “She hates me, too. Lots of people hate us.”

Satori’s fingers were trembling as she lifted the ribbon to her hair again. “I hate them, too,” she whispered. “I hate them, too.”

The popularity the two girls had always enjoyed began to sour. People began to speak again of their strange origin and shared stories of the unusual events that always seemed to happen around the two girls.

It was hardest for Koishi. She had been so small when they had come to the town, been so dependent on her sister, and on the love of others, that now that love had ceased to flow, or worse, been transmuted to hatred and fear, she was overwhelmed. Hurting, she found she could no longer shut off her ability. Every negative thought and emotion speared into her as if she were surrounded by a forest of blades that cut her in whatever direction she moved. She grew fearful, and angry, and slowly withdrew from everyone, including her sister. She stayed in her room, played with her pets, lay on the bed and stared up at the ceiling hour after hour, trying to shut out the tide of emotion that poured into her from every direction, like the beating waves of an incessant sea.

Their step-parents, being rich and powerful, did their best to shield the girls from the worst of the hostility and to keep the worst of the rumours under control. For a long time they were successful.

Then one winter they died from a mysterious illness that was spreading throughout the town. Many died from it, even those who were healthy and strong. One day it claimed the eldest son as well. He died in Satori’s arms.
Satori and Koishi were the only ones in the village not affected by it, their immortal youkai bodies immune from the trifling maladies of humans. No one spoke now of the Komeiji sisters as being blessed. Rather, they were shunned.

They inherited much of their step-parents wealth, but it did little to help them. It only made their situation worse, as it raised the anger of the younger daughter. She had long resented the two girls, especially after Satori and the older brother had become close. In those final hours of his life it had been Satori’s name her brother had called, Satori’s hand he had held. The resentment festered into hate.

Satori, heartbroken, fell back again into the arms of her younger sister and the two withdrew from everyone else. They no longer left the house, instead spent all the time with their beloved pets, from whom love spilled endlessly and in whose hearts there was no bitter taint of envy or hate.

They never found out who set fire to the house in the end. Was it Tetsuko, the girl whose heart Satori had so often broken? A fearful towns-person? The step-sister? Whoever it was, one night the mansion was enveloped in a conflagration. Satori woke to find the house filled with smoke. She roused Koishi and the two fled. But their pets had been left behind and Koishi, ignoring the shouts of her sister, plunged back into the house even as the facade collapsed behind her.

The smoke was acrid in Koishi’s mouth and eyes and tears flowed not only from her eyes but from her nose and mouth as well. She was almost blind, her sight a jumble of black and grey, all seen through a haze of boiling tears. The house she had known almost all her life, the rooms she had played hide-and-seek in, had become a maze of hideous smoke and heat.

As she ran she stumbled over something unseen on the ground and threw her hands out to stop herself from falling. They touched a wall. Hot as a stove-top it burned her and she screamed.

She jerked her hands away, scrubbing them together, crying at the pain. She felt the skin lifting off from her palms, the pain intensifying, and something wet, spilling from her as the tears did. And yet she could do nothing else but rub, even though the pain got worse, as she stumbled onwards through the billowing smoke.

There. The yowling of a frightened animal. Her cat, Tama.

She rushed headlong into the grey nothingness. Breathing burned her now. She thought Tama must be in the corridor that led to her room, but she couldn’t make it out. She turned a corner - or was it doorway? - and blinked at the angry red and orange light that splashed immediately over her, light that carried with it unbearable heat.

Fire. She was surrounded by fire.

She thought she saw the flicker of a shadow, a tail, a panicked silhouette glimpsed against the flames on the other side of the room.

“Tama!”

She ran after it headlong, not caring, ignoring the waves of heat that had become the unseen walls of this new hellish maze.

She burst into her room. It was like stepping into a grotto in hell itself. Smoke blossomed from the broiling carpet, sheets of flame hung where the curtains had been, the walls behind them undulating like the skin of a snake being boiled alive.

There. On her bed. A bristling shadow. Her cat, screeching, his tail straight up in the air.
She forced herself through the heat to him. Panicked, he leaped from the bed straight into the flames that were coursing over the walls.

“Tama!”

Sobbing in despair, she turned to flee, but there was nowhere now that wasn’t a cage of heat. She stumbled forward, blind, the tears in her eyes steaming.

Something flew past her head, a fireball of green and orange.

Her macaw, on fire.

It was too much now. She felt her skin lifting from her. The heat had transmuted beyond heat and into something else, some other grotesque sensation, reaching right around reality to a glacial coldness.

Screaming. It was her voice. Powder was falling onto her chest. Her hair.

For a moment the smoke cleared. She saw something strange on the wall before her. A cross of living red light, like a cage, the squares between it glistening like water.

It was a window. The metal pane incandescent; the glass, molten. Behind it, escape.

She reached out for it and the glass spilled over her hands like a liquid.

Then the universe collapsed, all sound and light gone in an instant.

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The next day, as rain finally extinguished the fire, Satori found the body of her little sister among the smouldering ashes, surrounded by the bodies of her beloved pets she had tried to save.

Satori lifted her up. Koishi had always been small, but now she weighed barely anything at all. She carried her through the township, the townspeople watching in silence. I felt their fear, as Satori must have, washing over her, a fear mixed with hate.

But far worse than the fear was the triumphant joy surging in the hearts of many.

Following the same road that the two girls had come down so many years ago, Satori carried Koishi up into the mountains. Lions and bears and tannuki and other animals came out of the forest and began to follow her, a little funeral procession.

Eventually she came to a meadow fed by a mountain stream. There she stopped and with her bare hands began to dig a grave for her sister.

As she dug, a deer approached Koishi’s body and licked her face. She coughed.

She wasn’t dead.

It took weeks for Koishi’s body to regenerate. With every day her body grew stronger, but her mind remained closed. Only the animals seemed to be able to reach her inside the prison she had made for herself. She would stroke them and murmur to them as they anointed her burnt and broken body with their affectionate tongues.

And all the while the horrible injustice of it all fermented in Satori’s heart.
One day, in the little town, a strange thing happened. Satori came walking down from the mountains, just as she had all those years earlier. This time, however, she was alone.

Night had fallen. The rain that had begun the morning after the fire had still not abated. Everyone in the town was inside their homes, fearful of the dark skies and of the shadows of the mountains in a way they had never been frightened before.

They felt her before they saw her. Something out in the wet darkness. The braver came to the windows of their houses, peered out into the rain.

They knew it was her, the tiny figure that walked so calmly through the rain-filled streets. She looked straight ahead, not stopping until she came to the town centre. There she stood, the rain falling about her like a halo.

The bravest of the townsfolk came out, then, but they were still too frightened to approach her. They stood ringed around the square, watching, waiting.

Lightning flashed, and it was then that they saw Satori’s third eye for the first time. It squirmed from inside her blouse, its tendrils writhing. Ever hidden until then, its appearance caused panic.

But it was too late for any to escape. The eye opened, the light that spilled from it as bright as if a star had descended upon the town.

The gates of hell opened along with it.

Such was the vengeance of Satori. There was no one now who doubted that she and Koishi had been youkai. Many were driven mad by the hideous things that they saw that endless night and ran raving into the wilderness. Even those who survived with their minds damaged but unbroken soon joined them, taking what little possessions they could carry and abandoning the town as cursed. They fled in every direction and took with them the story of the terrifying satori, the youkai who knew everyone’s secrets and could make real the darkness hidden in people’s hearts.

From then on Satori and Koishi lived together in the mountains with their animals. They soon encountered the other youkai who made the wilderness their home: the tengu, oni, kitsune and tanuki, and quickly established a peaceful though cold relationship with them. Youkai no more than humans desire to have the secret language of their hearts read, after all.

And Koishi. After the fire she was no longer withdrawn; she was simply no longer there. The whole of her body had regenerated but her third eye remained shut. Having had her ability to read minds taken from her as she healed, Koishi had felt a peace she had never felt before, the peace of the death of the ego. She clung to this nothingness, as once she had clung to her sister, and her eye never reopened.

She began to wander the forest, spending long periods by herself in some unknown place. Out of view from Satori, she simply ceased to be. She was a ghost, an invisible one, silent except for the soft footfalls that Satori sometimes heard late at night deep in the forest.

I saw other things, then. Their migration to Former Hell, their taking over of the Palace of the Earth Spirits, the crisis with Okuu and the arrival of the intruders from the upper world. But it was hard to make any of it out. Koishi walked through it all as if in a dream. Instead of the blazing emotions I had felt at the beginning, there was just nothing. It was a cold, alien feeling, like being encased naked in ice, a waking, living death. I began to panic, fearing that I would never escape it, that I was doomed to be stuck forever here until I, too, faded into a ghost.
Terrified, I struggled desperately against the freezing darkness, clawing my way out of it as from a funeral-shroud. My conscious mind slowly ebbed back and at last I woke, sweating and shivering, to find myself crouching in a room somewhere, my arms around a cool, smooth body.

Where was I?

Then I remembered. Oh yes, I’d found Koishi.

But wasn’t that a thousand years ago?

Koishi hadn’t moved. She was still holding the mask. I hugged her closer, spoke to her, kissed her hair, but she didn’t move.

Was she dead?

Maybe she’d always been dead.

I felt ready to cry, that burning pressure in the corners of my eyes. I hadn’t cried during the reliving of her life, even at the moments of her greatest pain. My soul had cried, but not my body, which had been kept separate from it.

And even now, for whatever reason, I couldn’t. Perhaps I’d been driven too far across to the other side, across the divide that separates human experience from that bleak shore where Koishi now resided, where everything is numbness. I crumbled as though the props that kept me together as a person, as a personality, had been swept away. I crumbled, an avalanche of bleeding pity, and I crushed her to me, pitying her, loving her, wanting her to wake up from her nightmare.

My fingers fell on the smooth surface of the mask. I traced the indentations of its benevolent, monk-like features.

Hope. Maybe Satori was right. Hope was a risky emotion, and it wasn’t a promise. Only a person could make a promise to another. For hope to be true, it couldn’t just be believed in: it had to be given.

I squeezed myself closer to her, brushed the hair from around her ears.

“It’s okay, Koishi,” I said. “I believe you’re still in there, somewhere. I have to believe it. I... I just don’t have anything else.”

My fingers trembled as I brought them close to her third eye once more. Maybe if I touched it, it would take me back to her, to that empty, dark, freezing place where she had fled to. I feared that place like one fears hell, and yet I was afraid of losing her more.

Doomed to roam as a ghost with Koishi in that wasteland of her heart, forever. A living hell, but one I would share with her. With the one I loved.

My fingertips touched the cool smoothness of the eye’s skin.

Nothing.

So I was locked out, then. Forever.

It was then that I finally began to cry. I’d cried before, many times, of course, but never like this. It was like some weird catharsis, a pouring out of a mixture of tangled emotions, but it didn’t make me feel better. Maybe there was just too much inside me. Maybe there was just no end to it.
My tears poured down my face and I felt Koishi’s hair growing wet from them. I felt ashamed, then, and I turned my face away. Tears, dislodged from my cheeks, spattered on her naked shoulder.

Her skin shivered where they touched her.

I’d imagined it, of course. I swept the moisture from her with the tips of my fingers and her skin shivered again.

“Koishi?” I whispered.

My tears had stopped. Was there nothing left, or was it from my surprise? I hugged her again.

Her skin felt warmer.

I parted the hair at the back of her neck, brought my lips against the bareness there. I don’t know why I did it. I guess I just wanted to be closer to her than I was right then. My lips brushed across her skin, felt the round hardness of her spine beneath it.

She shivered again. This time I knew I hadn’t imagined it.

It was like I’d breathed something into her. I pulled away, not daring to breathe, my heart frozen mid-beat.

Koishi stirred. She turned her head and looked at me. She was crying, tears glistening in twin trails down her cheeks.

Hope. I feared it more than death at that moment.

But then her lips parted and she said something. It was the ghost of a whisper, but unmistakeable.

My name.

I cried out then and threw my arms around her neck and pulled her to me. I didn’t care then that she was stark naked, her small breasts pushing up against my chest. All I knew was that she had said my name, that she was back. Her body was no longer that pitiful, lifeless thing.


“It was raining,” she said.

I pulled away and stared at her. “Raining?”

She nodded. Her eyes, red with her tears, were wide with amazement. “It was cold and dark. Then I felt something warm around me, something wet on my shoulder, on my chest. It was so strange. I thought it must be raining.” She lifted her fingers to her eyes. “Water, falling from my eyes.” She looked at the moistened tips of her fingers and then back to me. “Tears?”

She said the word as though asking me if it was the right one.

I nodded. My own tears began again. “Yes, tears.”

Koishi brought her fingers to my eyes. “It wasn’t rain I felt. It was your tears.” She lowered her gaze, shivered. “You’re crying. Because of me. I hurt you, didn’t I?”

I pulled her closer to me. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”
“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You don’t have to be,” I told her. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I was frightened,” she whispered. “I’m still frightened.”

“I know,” I said. “I am too.” I lifted her chin, looked into those glistening green eyes. “But with you I don’t feel it quite so much anymore.”

“You came back for me,” said Koishi, disbelief in her voice. “You came all this way to find me, even after I hurt you. Why?”

All this way. I knew she wasn’t just talking about Former Hell.

“I never used to care about being alone,” I said. “Until I met you.” I stumbled over the words. All of a sudden they seemed to have lost the power to express what I was feeling. “Doesn’t everyone want to be with the one they love?”

“You... love me?” Her voice was a whisper.

I felt rawer then than any other time of my life. But I had to say it. It was a crime not to say it. We’d seen too much of each other, felt too much. Being dishonest seemed insulting, ludicrous, a mortal, damning sin.

“I love you, Koishi,” I said.

“I...” Koishi lowered her gaze. I thought she’d become suddenly ashamed of her nakedness, but that wasn’t it at all. “I’ve forgotten so much. But I think... I think I remember this feeling.”

“Koishi?”

She raised her head. Her face in the fleeting moment she had looked down had undergone a transformation. It was as if a totally different person was now looking at me.

She was smiling. It wasn’t that half-smile she’d so often worn before, or even that joyful ghost of a smile I’d glimpsed in the playground. It was her true one, revealed to me at last.

At that moment she looked beyond beautiful, the living personification of innocent happiness.

“This... this warmth.” She took my hands and placed them against her chest. “Like a fluttering bird in my chest when I think of you. It’s love, isn’t it?” Her smile deepened. “I love you, don’t I?”

I crumbled then, weeping, and Koishi held of me, lowered my head onto her bare lap. The warmth and smoothness of her body felt so safe. Her fingers stroked my hair: shy, tentative at first, but then steadier, as she remembered. Her touch calmed me. But still I cried.

I cried because I remembered what happiness was.

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After I grew calmer, Koishi helped me out of my clothes and took me into her bed. We lay there under the covers together, our bodies flush, our arms wrapped around each other, so close it was as if we were trying to meld into one. Even with her gorgeous warm nakedness in my embrace, nothing happened. Our emotions were still too raw for either of us to do anything that first time.

We clung to each other like we feared the cold.
In her arms I felt safe and loved and the pain of all that had happened this night began to seem far away. I was a little frightened, though, by the intensity of what I was feeling, and what I could feel from Koishi as well. Her third eye was sandwiched between us, but it no longer disturbed me. It was just part of Koishi, after all, as soft and warm as the rest of her, and love flowed forth from it, a love so palpable it was almost a visible thing.

The smile had not left Koishi’s face. Her eyes were still swollen from tears, her platinum hair a confused mass of locks and tangles.

She was so beautiful.

I knew then that she was asleep. I snuggled up against her and felt the sudden weight of everything that had happened begin to lift from me as it was replaced by the heaviness of sleep. I closed my eyes at last, unwillingly, wanting to look at her still, but my body would not let me.

I’d almost succumbed when I felt the mattress shift under the weight of something and felt a hot, wet tongue on my cheek.

I opened my eyes. A beautiful face, with long, dark lashes, staring at me.

The okapi.

He dipped his head and licked Koishi’s face as well, then turned and went back to the bottom of the bed, circled three times, curled up and closed his eyes.

I sighed. He loved her too.

I already had a rival.

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“Onee-san! Onee-san! Wake up! Wake up!”

It was Mia’s voice.

What was she doing down here? Had she come looking for me and somehow found her way down to Former Hell? I jerked up in bed, ready with a flood of explanations for why I was asleep down here, next to a naked girl, in her bed.

I opened my eyes. It was my own bed I was in. Koishi was nowhere to be seen.

I was home.

“Onee-san?”

“What’s the matter?” I asked, sitting up and rubbing my eyes.

“You wouldn’t wake up,” said Mia. “I was starting to get worried.” She was dressed in her school uniform. She often came to say goodbye to me before going to school.

She leaned down to kiss me and I hugged her. Then she swung her bag over her shoulder and hurried to the door, but stopped and turned back to look at me, a curious look on her face.

“Onee-san?”

“Hmmm?”
“Sorry for waking you up.”

“Why?”

She smiled. “You looked so happy. We’re you having a nice dream?”

I brought my fingers to my mouth as I felt the edges of my lips turn up in an involuntary smile.

“No,” I said. “Not a dream.”

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Mia was amazed to see me waiting for her outside her school when it finished, but the surprised disbelief on her face was quickly replaced by delight. She said goodbye to her friends and skipped up to me.

“Onee-san! You came to pick me up?”

I nodded as I hugged her. “I was bored hanging around at home,” I said.

As we walked home Mia was quiet, deep in thought. Usually, after school, there was no way to stop a flood of information from her about everything that had happened during the day. I’d always enjoyed it, since for so long it’d been the only little window I’d had out into the real world. But now she was silent.

We were passing the zoo and the shrine when she stopped and turned to me. “Something happened to you last night, didn’t it, onee-san?”

I nodded. I must have blushed as well, since Mia began to grin.

“I think I know what,” she said.

I arched my eyebrows. “And what’s that?”

There was a mischievous glint in her eyes. “You met Koishi again.”

I shrugged, embarrassed.

We started to walk again. A few moments later she said, “Onee-san, you’re in love with Koishi, aren’t you?”

It was my turn to stop then. I looked at Mia, my heart beating rapidly. “What do you mean?”

My little sister’s expression was suddenly serious. It seemed so adult and so out of place on her childish face that despite my nervousness I couldn’t help but feel my heart melt at the adorable sight.

“I know you like other girls,” she said to me, matter-of-fact. “You do, right?”

I nodded dumbly. There was no point trying to lie now. “Pretty weird, huh?”

Mia looked at me in surprise. “No. Why should it be?”

I stared at her. She was right. Why should it be?

“Well, I think Koishi is really nice,” Mia continued. “She’s a good match for you.”

I couldn’t stop the smile from appearing on my face. Mia was being so earnest about the whole thing.
But then I sighed.

“I’d like her to be my girlfriend,” I admitted. “But I’m not sure how she feels. We haven’t talked about it, yet.”

“Don’t let her get away,” said Mia, suddenly fierce. “Or I won’t forgive you.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said.

We waited at the pedestrian crossing directly across from the zoo. I was turning a lot of things over in my mind and not really paying attention, so it took me a while to notice that Mia was pulling on my sleeve.

“Onee-san” she hissed. “Look. Look!”

High up on the little hill where the shrine was, standing at the top of the series of steps that led to it, was the okapi. He was standing there, watching us.

I excitedly grabbed Mia’s hand. “Koishi must be nearby. Let’s go find her.”

But Mia just dropped my hand and shook her head. “You go to her, onee-san. It’s you she’s waiting for.”

“But...”

Mia smiled at me. “I don’t think I have to worry about whether I’ll meet her again, now. Just tell her how you feel.” She jogged me in the stomach with her elbow. “And don’t chicken out!”

Mia turned and walked towards the bus-stop. She might have only been ten, but she was at least twice as wise as I was.

The crosswalk’s little tune began and I ran across the road and straight up the steps leading up the hill, skipping two at a time. I needn’t have worried about the okapi wandering off, as he was still there, sitting and waiting for me like a faithful dog.

“Hi boy,” I said, patting him on his wedge-shaped head.

He stood up and led me to the little clearing among the trees where the shrine was. It was almost silent there and shady, the foliage of the maples straining the gentle sunlight into golden threads which we walked through. Soon we saw the torii and the person sitting on it.

Koishi.

She didn’t see us at first. She was looking out over the treetops, swinging her legs. It reminded me of that afternoon we’d spent in the playground on the swings together, but she seemed so carefree now, the expression on her face one of childlike contentment. Then she looked down and noticed us, the sudden smile that came to her face so bright that my heart surged in my chest.

She lifted herself off the crossbar with her hands and floated down through the air. As soon as her feet touched the ground she was running to me.

I’d never seen her run before in real life. I remembered the memory I’d seen of her, in happier times, when she had been a child in that little town, chasing after her friends and her big sister.

Tears started in my eyes. I ran to meet her.
She crashed into my arms and the two of us fell to the ground. The okapi soon joined us as we laughed and dusted ourselves off, skittering this way and that like an excited dog.

We helped each other up. Koishi kept on laughing, almost hysterical. Eventually it faded to an exhausted giggle and she smiled at me shyly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s been so long since I laughed. I’m still getting used to it.”

She took hold of my hand.

“She wanted me to thank you. She says you can visit whenever you like.” Her eyes gleamed. “We could go to an onsen. There are lots in Former Hell, you know.”

“I know,” I said, grinning. “I saw them.” I turned away, my heart racing, and looked up at the sky. “Would you, uh...” My shyness had returned all at once. The warmth of her hand, her scent and her closeness had triggered it. I was reminded, too, of the sight of her naked body, the pale smoothness of her skin, the petiteness of her breasts: the thought of taking a bath with her was making me sweat. I pushed myself through it. “Would you like to, I don’t know, maybe go somewhere with me? Up here, I mean. It’s a lovely day and, uh...”

Suave. That’s my middle name.

Koishi nodded. “I’d like that.”

We left the torii behind. The okapi started to follow us but Koishi stopped and knelt by him, looking into his eyes. He turned, then, and climbed the steps back to the shrine where he disappeared into the shaded darkness.

“I can talk to animals again,” said Koishi when she saw my confused look. “It’s another thing I have to thank you for.” She trailed her fingers across her third eye, and I noticed then that it was even more open than before.

“What did you say to him?”

“I explained we were going on a date,” she said. Then she blushed, “And that three’s a crowd.”

We walked hand in hand down the steps and waited at the intersection.

“So what would you like to do?” I asked, swallowing.

“Everything,” she said, resting her head on my shoulder.

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So I took her to Tully’s, the chain-store café. Yeah, I know. Romantic, huh? But I guess in my defence I hadn’t been on a real date for years. It seemed like a safe choice, though. I knew that Koishi, like me, was probably still nervous about interacting with other people, and seeing it was a weekday the café wasn’t likely to be crowded.

Also, after years of being a shut-in, I was dying to drink real coffee again.

After we entered the café, I didn’t hesitate but walked us right up to the counter. Maybe I felt like showing off, or maybe I thought that throwing myself in the deep-end was the best way to start getting used to being a normal person again.

Normal. With Koishi beside me, the word seemed to have become pretty meaningless. Maybe it
I found myself staring at the menu while the girl at the counter smiled at us in the polite but vacuous way that girls behind the counter usually have. There was about a million things to choose from, from the ‘café Americano’ to the ‘cafe au lait crème brulée’ which seemed to me to be barely coffee anymore. I started to feel a familiar surge of panic as I traced the list on the laminated menu up and down, up and down with a trembling finger, trying and failing to make a decision, but then I felt Koishi place her hand on mine.

I turned. She was smiling at me.

Somehow, without stuttering or dropping my money, I was able to order and pay for a straight espresso for myself and a café latte for her. When my name was called and I collected my coffee, though, I let Koishi try some of my drink and she grimaced at the bitterness. So I changed her order to a hot chocolate instead.

There were a number of tables free and I picked the one next to the one furthest from anyone else.

Baby steps. It was just the first day of the rest of my life, after all.

We sat down and I watched as Koishi eagerly lifted the paper cup to her lips. As soon as she took her first sip I felt waves of pleasure emanate from her third eye. It wasn’t visible, of course; she’d retracted it within her body as she had those first times we had met. But I knew it was there, part of her, a little fragment of her soul, hiding inside her chest. And the pleasure rolling off it was intoxicating.

“What’s the matter?” Koishi’s green eyes were wide with curiosity.

I turned away, unable to look into them, my face growing hot.

“I can feel you,” I said, mortified by just how much exquisite pleasure was spreading through me.

Koishi placed her hand on her chest. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I... I’m still finding it hard to control myself.”

“I don’t mind,” I muttered. It was true. It was hard not to enjoy the feeling. It was undeniably lewd to be feeling such an intense pleasure so covertly, and all just from having her enjoying hot chocolate. The fact that there were people drinking their own drinks not far away with absolutely no idea of the sensations that were flooding my body made it even more exciting. I looked up at Koishi. She was wearing a mischievous look on her face as she brought the cup again to her lips. And soon I felt that same wave of her delight, but softer this time, muted. Yet it was all the more intimate for that, like someone brushing fingertips across yours.

No longer so distracted, I busied myself with drinking my coffee and enjoying it thoroughly. Like every NEET I love my coffee. Then I felt Koishi near me. Well, part of her, anyway. It’s hard to describe exactly how it felt. It was as if part of her soul had come out of her and was hovering around me.

I glanced at her. The mischievousness on her face had been replaced by shyness. “Do you mind if I...” Her voice became a whisper. “...um, if I share what you’re feeling?”

I nodded. I wanted her to feel what I was feeling, to know what being me was like. I’d had a taste of it myself, when I’d lived her life alongside her down in Former Hell. It had been like sharing her at the deepest level, and I found the thought of her doing the same with me intensely exciting.

I drank the coffee, the sweetness and the bitterness melding with the buttery creaminess of the milk.
Coffee has a velvety texture, good coffee I mean. I enjoyed how the inside of my mouth was coated in it, how it warmed my teeth and gums.

I knew then that Koishi was reading me. The two of us had become simpatico, and her pleasure at my pleasure was feeding back to me.

It was too much and I had to put my cup down. A warm flush coursed over me, and I felt my breath growing hot.

“Please,” I whispered, my hand gripping the edge of the table as I pressed my thighs together. “Please, Koishi, it’s too much.”

She blushed, but behind the blush was a little look of triumph. I felt that part of her slip away from me and I was suddenly lonely without it. But at least I could drink my coffee without having to worry about having an orgasm while doing it.

We finished our coffee and left the café in a hurry, like guilty children, giggling at our escapade. Koishi ran ahead of me.

“Come on,” she said, her face alight with joy. “I want you to show me more!”

We spent the rest of the day with each other, walking the streets. Koishi, like a little kid, was interested in everything and stopped every few minutes to ask me eager questions.

“I remember walking these streets,” she explained. “But it was like all that happened in a dream. Everything was grey and misty. Well, almost everything.”

She raised a hand to my face and I caught it, held it there. Her skin was so smooth and cool. After a while, I let it drop.

She took my hand, then, and refused to let it go.

I was looking at everything with new eyes as well. It had been a year since I’d been to anywhere other than my home or the zoo during daylight hours. I guess I knew a little of how Koishi felt. I’d been stuck in a dream as well, a grey place filled with mist, lost, looking and not seeing.

But someone had found me.

I guess we’d found each other.

It grew dark before we knew it. The shadowy streets and the lights flickering into life filled me with regret and longing. I knew I’d have to say goodbye.

I didn’t want to, but I had to.

“I have to go,” I said, when at last I couldn’t hold things off any longer. “My mother will be...” Oh god, it sounded so lame.

Koishi felt my embarrassment, smiled and shook her head. “No, I understand. I have to go home, too. I think my sister will have started to miss me.” She sighed. “We have a lot to catching up to do.”

In silence I walked her back to the shrine. We were climbing the steps when we heard the clip-clop of the okapi. He came down to meet us part-way. It had already grown very dark.

I grabbed Koishi’s hand, stared down at it, suddenly shy.
“I’ll... I’ll see you again soon, right?”

Koishi said nothing. She just stood there, looking shyly up at me. Then I finally realised what she was waiting for, and I stepped forward and kissed her.

She threw her arms around my neck and hung to me. Even leaning down, I was too tall for her and she had to stand on her tippy-toes. The heat and wetness of her tongue as it timidly found mine made my heart skip. Delight surged though me, and I knew she felt the same, for I could feel her third eye, open wide at last, glowing inside her chest.

It was too much. I broke away, gasping.

Koishi beamed up at me, her face and neck flushed.

“Thank you for the date,” she said. “And for the kiss, too. It was my first, you know.” Her blush deepened. “I... I hope we can do a lot more than just kissing next time.”

She fled up the steps, jumping two at a time, the okapi hot on her heels. At the top she waved to me, then turned and vanished into the darkness.

I was left touching my lips. Her first kiss. And I’d stolen it without realising.

I stood there for a long time, just staring at the direction she and the okapi had disappeared. Then I turned and walked home through the dark and lonely streets.

And yet I wasn’t lonely, for I could feel that soft, warm fluttering, just above my heart, like the stirring of a tiny bird...

... the feeling that told me I was in love.

The End
Extra Stage

Chapter Notes

This was originally intended to be the last chapter of the story, but I decided part 4 brought things to such a satisfactory conclusion that it was better to end there. This ‘Extra Stage’, while a continuation of the story, is heavy on lewdness and light on plot and seems now to be a sweet, lemony overindulgence. But don’t worry - there’s still lots of cuteness!

So for what it’s worth, please enjoy the antics of ‘faceless fujoshi OC’ and Komeiji Koishi in this Extra Stage of Eyes Wide Shut.

I couldn’t sleep. It was a replay of the first night after I’d met Koishi with its feverish tossing and turning, but this time it was arousal rather than longing that tormented me.

That moment in the café, the way the touch of her skin had been broadcast, magnified, to me; her scent, that strange mixture of charcoal and clean skin; our first kiss, far more intense than any kiss I’d ever had before.

Every part of me was hypersensitive. When I’d showered earlier, just applying the bath foam to my body had made it light up in waves of delight and now, in bed, the feeling of the linen sheets against my bare neck and collar was maddening, the way the cotton of my pyjamas slid over my thighs excruciatingly frustrating.

I slipped my hands into my underwear in an attempt to lessen some of the terrible tension in my body. I’ve never been very good at masturbating, and now, in my oversensitive state, my fingers felt clumsy, hurting rather than giving me pleasure. I ran a hand across my nipples: they were rock-hard, but they stung when I squeezed them.

I lay there, tormented, in the timeless darkness until I heard a tapping at the window. At first I thought it was the wind, since in the middle of the night it tends to blow along our street and set the frame of my window rattling. I’d often spent the witching-hour awake and alone here in my room, and so the wind was an old friend.

A rattle, then tapping.

Tapping. It wasn’t the wind.

Frightened, I slid out of bed. I ran to the window and threw open the blinds.

A single eye stared in at me. Above it, past the buttoned yellow blouse which the eye was nestled against like a brooch, was a face I knew: wide green eyes, a high forehead and platinum locks, unruly under a black felt hat.

My heart leapt. Koishi!

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shameful, but she was also smiling. Her hand was splayed against the glass and I brought mine up to meet it.
There was no balcony on the other side of the window. She was floating, nine feet in the air. Did floating tire her out? I had no idea. I unlocked the window and slid it open with trembling fingers. Koishi climbed in. She threw her arms around me, her face burrowing into the crook of my neck.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I hope I didn’t scare you. I... I couldn’t sleep.”

“I couldn’t either,” I said. The warmth and soft firmness of her body was exciting me and I think I must have shivered, for Koishi looked at me, her eyes curious.

“Are you cold?”

“Uh, I... yeah,” I said. Trying to explain the truth would be just too awkward

“I kept thinking about you,” said Koishi. She hugged me closer, pressing her face against me. I realised she didn’t want me to see her face. Was she ashamed of blushing? “Please let me stay here tonight. I... don’t want to go home.”

I nodded dumbly.

We stood there, holding each other, neither of us really knowing what to do from there, only knowing that we wanted to be close to each other. I felt Koishi’s lips, then, against the skin of my neck and breath I was holding in exploded out of me. The warm softness of her lips, the hardness of her teeth, the hot wetness of her tongue made my skin ring with pleasure. I felt the sensation of flooding and I knew my underwear was already soaking wet.

I pulled away. “Koishi, please. I...”

She blinked at me, her face suddenly fragile. “You... you don’t like it?”

I shook my head. “No, no, I like it too much.”

A shy smile darted onto her face. We stood there smiling at each other. It was pretty awkward. I guess it was our inexperience showing.

“I’ll get you some pyjamas,” I said, breaking myself away from her. I hurried over to the oshi-ire and started rifling through my clothes. “We’re about the same size, aren’t we?”

“I think so.”

“I’m sorry about how lame these are,” I said, taking out a pair of pyjamas. “I guess I never thought I’d be lending these to anyone. Or have, uh, anyone see me in them.”

Koishi beamed. “I think they’re cute.”

You little liar, I thought. You darling little liar. I put the pyjamas at the end of the bed and moved towards the door.

“Where are you going?”

“You want to get changed, right?”

Koishi smiled at me. “You don’t need to leave. This is your room and we’re both girls.”

Both girls. The innocent remark made me even more excited. Koishi took off her hat and put it on the bed then started to unbutton her blouse.
I turned away, my face hot. I decided the only thing to do was to look out the window, but I hadn’t bargained on the glass acting like a mirror because of the contrast of the light inside with the darkness outside. I knew I should look away, but I couldn’t. I was weak, and my excitement and curiosity wouldn’t let me.

Koishi took the unbuttoned blouse from her shoulders, revealing the paleness of her back. She folded the blouse neatly and placed it at the foot of the bed. Her bra quickly joined it.

Seeing just the top half of her naked and from behind was even more exciting than if she’d been totally naked. Her shoulders were narrow and she had a very slim body, almost childlike, but I thought it all the more attractive for that. Her skin was pale, unblemished and I wanted more than anything to feel it smooth and bare beneath my hands.

Koishi stepped out of her skirt. She was wearing matching underpants, lime green with simple lacy edging, the sort of underwear a little kid would wear. She left these on and quickly slipped into my pyjamas.

She sat back down on the edge of the bed and began buttoning up her top. “Done,” she said.

I turned back, ashamed of myself for having watched her, the sexual tension torturing me like some divine punishment.

I turned off the light. The material of Koishi’s pyjamas whispered across the bedclothes as she slid under them. I climbed in beside her, my heart beating so hard I thought I could hear it.

We lay there next to each other, under the bedclothes, in the dark. Neither of us moved. I could feel the mattress dip down with the weight of an extra person, could feel how the bed was getting warm quicker than usual. Her breathing was fast, rhythmic, and I noticed then that my breathing sounded exactly the same. Each breath was flowing out of me in quarter-time to the rapid beating of my heart.

Koishi stirred, her hair swishing as she moved her head. Trembling, I turned to face her. There was a fragrant undertone to her breath, as if she’d drunk something sweet just recently, but there was also her own unique scent that I’d come to know as well as my own. She reached across and touched her fingers to my upturned palm and my heart leaped.

“What is it?” I asked. The question sounded so stupid in my ears, and all the more embarrassing because my voice broke as I said it.

“I want to try kissing again,” she said. “If that’s alright.”

I lay there, not moving or saying anything, suddenly petrified. It was far worse than any of the other times in the past few days when I’d been frightened: the eye at the window, the reliving of the bullying, the fires of Former Hell. I don’t know what I was so scared of.

No, I think I know. I was worried that I would turn over and Koishi would be gone and it would all be a dream.

Her hand closed around mine and I knew she could read my nervousness. It didn’t take a satori to do that.

“It’s alright,” she said. “We can just lie like this if you want.”

I shook my head. I hadn’t come this far just to hold hands in bed with her.

Straightaway I felt the fingers of her free hand touch my chin and run up along my cheek. I nuzzled
them, and suddenly all my fear was gone. Was Koishi using some ability to calm me? I don’t think she was. I think it was just the effect of her touch.

“I... I haven’t done this much,” I said. “I’ve only really had one girlfriend before.”

Koishi’s fingers quested into the hair behind my ears. “That’s one more than me,” she said. “I’ve seen it before, in people’s memories I mean, but... I’ve never experienced it.”

I remembered how my own first time had been. That strange, intense, awkward, wonderful afternoon with Chie, in her room after school, while her mother was downstairs thinking we were studying. We’d slipped into bed still wearing our school uniforms, our eager hands sliding beneath the material and running over the soft warmth of each other’s bodies, fumbling, excited, naïve. Feverish kissing left both of us with bruised, wet lips.

It was a precious memory, but a sad one, too. We were together for less than a week before we were caught. We’d been kissing behind the bleachers at the athletics track late one afternoon, too eager to wait until we got back to her house, thinking that everyone else had left for home...

I didn’t want to remember any more.

I wanted to make more memories with Koishi, happier ones. I took the hand that was at my face and brought her fingertips to my lips and kissed them. The fingers of my other hand ran across her wrist and down the smooth length of her arm.

Koishi gasped then, and grew even more excited. She’d never done anything like this before, and I was the first. It was pure, virginal skin I was touching.

It was so strange to be the one taking the lead, but I wanted her to feel good, to feel safe in my arms. I caressed her, feeling everything she felt emanate from her just like in the coffee shop. My heart pounded. Ghostly fingers were mirroring everything I did to her on my own body and I understood immediately what she liked and didn’t.

Desire flowed from her - my teasing was making her restless. I drew closer until our lips were touching and she parted hers, the warmth and delicious scent of her mouth setting my heart racing. She didn’t move, just left her lips to brush against mine.

She was teasing me now, I realised, playing the part of the timid, inexperienced virgin. Had she read that on my soul, learned my desire?

However it was, I felt myself grow hotter between my legs.

I dipped my tongue into her mouth where her own tongue was waiting. The heat and wetness that enveloped me was excruciating. It’s hard to describe exactly how it felt. It was as if every other time I’d touched someone I’d been wearing a full-body suit. I was feeling everything raw, every barrier stripped away. It was wonderful, and excruciating, and ultimately overwhelming.

I broke the kiss and Koishi looked at me. There was alarm in her green eyes.

“I’m... I’m not doing it right?”

“It’s just too intense,” I gasped.

Koishi looked guilty. “I’ll try and keep my eye shut. It’s tricky though.” Her face flushed. “When I get excited it kind of has a mind of its own.”
“Where is it?” I asked. I hadn’t seen it when she’d taken her clothes off, and we were so close together now that I should have been able to feel it between us.

“It’s inside me,” she said. “Beside my heart. You know how a cat can retract its claws? Satori can keep their third eyes inside themselves if they want to. Our bodies... they’re different from a human’s.”

“Does it feel better keeping it inside you?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s uncomfortable, actually. It’s just that... I know how frightened people are of it.”

Suddenly guilty, I said, “You don’t need to hide it. It’s just part of you, right?”

Her voice was soft, hesitant. “Are you really sure?”

I placed my hand against Koishi’s chest. I wanted an obvious way to show her that it didn’t disgust me, that I wasn’t afraid. I wasn’t, anymore.

Koishi’s hand touched mine. She undid a couple of buttons and drew my hand into the soft warmth of her pyjama top. I lay it flat against her chest, felt the firm sternum between the soft promontories of her breasts. The skin bulged out, then, as the eye pushed up against my hand. It was warm, living, and felt just like the rest of her. It really was part of her body.

Koishi slipped her top off while I kept my hand resting on her third eye. A tendril emerging from her body brushed against my fingers and I drew them along its length. Koishi shivered.

“Does it hurt?” I asked. It was a stupid question. I could feel that it didn’t.

“No, it feels... your touch feels really nice.”

It was strange to give her third eye all the attention now the rest of her naked top-half was within reach, and so I let my hand fall back onto her chest. I encountered only smooth, soft skin - no cavity. With such mutable bodies satori were indeed mysterious beings.

My fingers brushed the slope of one of her breasts and it seemed suddenly stupid to just rest my hand there. I slipped it over her breast, cupping the modest weight of it, my thumb finding a hard nipple.

Koishi gasped and I did too, the little jolt of pleasure relaying itself to me. It was bearable this time. I might have grown used to it, but I’m also sure it also had something to do with Koishi’s third eye being outside her body now. Maybe she had more control over it.

Koishi took my hand away. “You’re not being fair,” she said. She began to unbutton my own pyjama top.

She had a point. I helped her.

Bare-chested, we hugged each other. With her third eye perched on her shoulder out of the way, Koishi’s small breasts pressed against my larger ones. She really was such a tiny thing, like a little doll. She seemed almost too fragile to touch, but I was finding it hard to keep my hands off her now. I let them slip down her spine to the small of her back, where they encountered the waistband of her pyjama bottoms.

I kissed her and Koishi kissed back. Her own hands encircled my waist, pulling me closer to her as her tongue delved into my mouth. She was an inexperienced but enthusiastic kisser and my lips were
soon left stinging and slick with her saliva.

I slid the fingers of one hand inside the waistband of her pyjamas.

“Is this okay?” I asked.

Koishi nodded. I could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Or was it mine? The two of them seemed to be beating in time with each other now.

There was no way I was going to stop, though, no matter how nervous I felt. I pulled her pants down off her hips to her knees, where she helped slide them off the rest of the way. Impatient, I wrestled myself out of my own underwear. My hands found her waist again and my touch encountered the cool roughness of the waistband of her panties below the soft warmth of her belly. I slid my hand lower, down across the silkiness of the material and I knew straight away how hot and wet she was inside them. Heat was coming off her in waves.

We kissed again, but this time I drew the kiss into a long, half-biting, half-licking trail down her neck and across her collarbone. Koishi panted softly, but when I brought my lips around one stiffened nipple she cried out, her body squirming against mine. I mirrored her cry, but mine was muffled by the softness of the breast covering my mouth. It was strange and beautiful, experiencing another’s pleasure in unison with your own, almost as though there were three people there in that bed: myself, Koishi and the strange gestalt combination of ourselves broadcast by her third eye.

The sensations were far more muted than before. I’m sure I would’ve been able to climax from just the feedback of sucking and kissing her breasts if it had remained as intense as when we’d shared our pleasure at the café.

Koishi was getting frustrated. She grew hotter under my hand and began squeezing her thighs together. There was also a new, deliciously spicy scent rising from her, made all the more intense by the two of us being trapped together underneath the bedclothes.

I slipped down, delighting in the softness of the slight body beneath my lips and teeth. Koishi’s fingers wreathed themselves in my hair and I felt the gentle and insistent pressure of someone who knows what they want but is too shy to ask for it.

I chuckled. I didn’t want to tease her, but I was in no rush. I’d found her bellybutton and dipped my tongue into it. I was surprised by the sudden jolt of delight that sparked through me: it was obviously a very sensitive spot for her. She bit her lip to stop from crying out - in the darkness I couldn’t see her doing it, of course, but I could feel the ghost of that sharp, luscious pain in my own lip.

I liked what this was doing to her, so I took my time making love to that adorable little hollow, licking around the rim and dipping my tongue in and out of it. Soon Koishi was squirming and panting and I knew she’d reached her limit. Any more teasing would have been cruel for the both of us.

I slipped my left hand into my underwear and I was surprised and embarrassed at how wet I’d become. The front of my panties was soaked and I was swollen and slick inside. My fingers felt no resistance whatsoever as they slid into me, the heel of my palm pressing up against my most sensitive spot.

Koishi gasped with me, feeling what I was feeling.

It had gone on long enough. I took the waistband of her panties in my teeth and drew her underwear down like in a bad porno. The ripe fragrance that greeted me made my senses reel, and I lost all
control and finesse. There was no more teasing. I drew my tongue across Koishi’s sparse pubic hair and then down across her sex, greedily tasting her.

The pleasure that speared through me this time was indescribable and it was impossible to concentrate. It was also impossible to stop, and I licked again. Koishi cried out, her fingers entwining in my hair and forcing my face in between her legs. She wrapped those gorgeous thighs around my neck and clung to me as I continued to delight the both of us.

Koishi was so excited that it wasn’t long before she was shuddering and emitting a series of sharp little gasping cries. Tension was rising in her and inside me, too. She arched herself off the bed and I was forced to try and hold her still.

The whole time we’d been making love we’d barely spoken. There was no need for words. But now Koishi murmured my name, over and over again.

“Please,” she said. “Stop.”

I drew my lips from her. “What’s the matter?”

“I... I want to do you, too.”

I didn’t want to stop. “We can do it at the same time,” I said.

The position took some awkward manoeuvring. We lay side-to-side, our arms encircled around each other’s waist. With a bit of energetic wriggling helped along by Koishi I managed to get my bottoms off and started to pull at my underwear when I felt her hand touch mine.

“Let me do it.”

I swallowed. I was getting even more worked up than I already was, if that was possible. Koishi’s scent was everywhere, her taste rich on my lips and tongue, the warmth of her naked body pressed against my own making every part of me tingle.

Her fingers slipped into the waistband of my underwear and drew them down. With some more wriggling I helped her pull them down past my knees and lifted a foot so she could slip them off.

We were completely naked then. The darkness and the warmth and the strange effect of her third eye made every sensation double in intensity. My entire body flushed with heat. Koishi’s breath misted hot against my abdomen.

I made the first move. I leaned forward and drew my tongue across the ridge of her pelvic bone and along the smooth softness of her inner thigh. Koishi yelped and pressed her lips against my stomach. She was butterfly-kissing my skin, but soon she stuck out the tip of her tongue and I felt it leaving blazing trails of wetness across my thighs.

I stopped teasing her then and began to lick in earnest at the hot wetness that was the source of the delicious fragrance. Koishi gasped and pulled away, the sensations so sudden and so intense, but I threw my arms around her waist and pulled her back to me.

Her tongue was inside me then, and I cried out. Pleasure sparked up along my spine and my brain blazed with delight. I knew Koishi was feeling the same: everything we were doing to each other, whatever we were feeling, was being fused, mirrored and projected back through her. I found myself trembling, sick with desire. Koishi stiffened against me, her legs splaying out to give me more access.

I swung her on top of me, since I knew it was hard to be the one on the bottom in such a position,
and drew her back down against my lips. She leaned low and kept up her own licking. She was inexperienced, but she quickly learned to vary the speed of her flicking tongue. Her hands slid up and down my back and over my butt, exploring my body, and the tentative shyness of her touch made me melt.

I could feel myself gushing, almost spilling out. I’d never felt such an intensity of emotion before, even with Chie. Trembling, I slid one finger and then another into Koishi, my fingers enveloped by the sticky heat of her body.

Her nipples stiff against my stomach, her tongue slipping all over me, Koishi shuddered and at the same instant the shudder spread through me.

She was about to climax. The surging waves of her delight, the hunger and need that I shared flowing out of her, amplified by her, swept me up and I lost all knowledge of who I was. Was I myself, was I Koishi? Where did my body stop and where did hers start? It was impossible to know anymore.

When I reached that joyous spot it was beyond any sensation I’d ever felt. My body coursed with liquid joy, my head filling with a blinding white light. After an eternity it began to ebb and reality eased itself back, but then another surge flowed over me, then another, and another. A desperate cry erupted from Koishi and I bit my lip until I tasted the metallic heat of blood. I clawed at the body beside me, tried to envelope it, draw it into me.

And then everything I was dissolved and I knew nothing more.

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I peeled my aching hands from around the soft warm body still entwined about me. Its owner stirred, murmured, slid from on top of me, and I turned to embrace her as she splayed out across the cool expanse of the sheets. In the throes of our climax the covers had fallen away and I felt suddenly cold, the sweat that covered my body chilling in the night air. How long had passed? I had no idea.

Koishi lay face down on the sheets. I saw the length of her naked body clearly then for the first time: the narrow slenderness of her shoulders, the gentle curve of her back, the small roundness of her butt. Her platinum-grey hair, matted and tousled, lay slick against her neck. Somehow I found the energy to peel myself off the bed and slump across her, attacking the delicious spot at the back of her neck which looked so enticing, glistening with sweat in the half-light of my room.

Beneath me Koishi murmured and turned her head. The brilliance of the smile that met me pierced my heart. That girl who had once looked at the world with distant dreaming eyes, her lips a thin and lifeless line, was just a memory now.

No, the ghost of a memory.

Her eyes were shy beneath their thick lashes as she pursed her lips. I didn’t need any more encouragement and I kissed her. The kiss turned hot and her hands grab my wrists. She tried to roll me over onto my back and I let her, and soon her slender body was straddling mine as she kissed my lips and chin and neck over and over.

We made love again, but it was leisurely this time. And yet, for all that, with the melding of our emotions flowing over us, it was no less intense. Koishi explored my body as I lazily lay there beneath her, eyes closed, feeling the thin threads of her third eye brushing across my naked torso. It was strange, but not weird.
It was, after all, just a part of the girl I loved.

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Koishi’s arms were wrapped around me.

“Hey,” I said, extricating myself from her. “There’s no need to hold on so tight. I’m not going to run away, you know.”

Koishi murmured and rubbed at her eyes. “Good morning,” she said. She opened her eyes and looked around, then back at me. That smile of utter happiness, like a child’s smile, beamed forth again. I don’t think I’ll ever get sick of it. “I’m sorry. Was I in your way?”

I shook my head.

We got out of bed. Koishi began to take off her pyjamas and I threw a mischievous look at her, “Do you really want to do it again? I’m still worn out from last night.”

Koishi stuck out her tongue. “I am, too.” Then she sighed. “No, I’m afraid I should get back to Chireiden. I...” Her face grew serious. “There’re a lot of things I need to talk to my sister about. And I need to return the mask.”

“The mask. You mean the Mask of Hope, right? Why?”

Koishi leaned across the bed and kissed me.

“I don’t need it anymore,” she said.

I frowned. The thought of her leaving weighed heavily on me. “Do you really have to rush off right now?”

Koishi stopped unbuttoning her top. “I can stay a little while longer. Why?”

I smiled shyly. “There’s just one other thing I want to do.”

As Koishi and I came down the stairs, I saw Mia at the dining table eating her usual breakfast: a slice of toast and jam. My mother was at the sink, washing the rice for lunch. At the sound of two sets of feet softly padding down the steps, they both stopped and looked up. Mia’s surprise was quickly replaced with a grin but my mother froze, her eyes widening in shock. The rice-bowl slipped from her hands into the sink with a dull ring.

At the sound Koishi took a step back, but I took hold of her hand and together we walked into the kitchen.

“Mom,” I said. “I’d like you to meet Koishi, my girlfriend.”

Extra Stage: Clear

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