Elusive

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Elusive

by zenonaa

Summary

"Mermaids, though elusive and indisposed to interact with those not of their kind, are greatly sought after for their magical properties. It is thought that their scales are key ingredients in successful love potions but very few cases of the creation of such potions have ever been documented due to said rarity of the species, and furthermore these records are so old and obscure that their credibility must be taken with a pinch of salt. However, I am of the personal belief that there might be something to this."

Touko Fukawa discovers a mermaid.

Notes

A bday fic for my friend Maddie!!! I have no idea how long this will be, but I want to include other characters. No idea on other ships though.
Mermaid AU. B )
Standing on the edge of the cliff that her cottage sat upon, Touko Fukawa squinted down at the flecks of brown strewn over the beach. Last night's storm washed up an abundance of driftwood. There would be more than enough to replenish her stock, recently depleted from botched summoning spells that she only realised she had been casting incorrectly after nearly all of her driftwood had been used up. The page of ingredients that she referred to for the spell bore many smudges from the previous owner of the leather bound book and trial and error on the blurred text turned out for the worse.

During the few years so far that Touko lived in the cottage, she had only managed to obtain a single book specifically tailored to witches such as herself and that was only because an actual witch wrote the book and passed it onto Touko before her untimely death. Touko lived a life of seclusion, away from the town somewhere behind her that she could only view from her cottage through polished lenses or at the onset of night when windows and lamps glowed, transient, snuffed out hours later when regular people were inclined to fall asleep.

She didn't mind.

Two paths led to the beach but Touko always chose the same one unless weather advised against it, being that the path which would get Touko there sooner also happened to be the most dangerous. The narrow dirt path wound down the side of the cliff in descent and to ensure that she didn’t set her foot down in a misstep, like her mentor but one year ago, Touko averted her eyes away from the promised driftwood in the distance and focused on pressing close to the cliff until dirt tapered out and her feet sank into sand.

Rays of unashamed Sun broke the wispy clouds in the bright blue above the horizon, an almost mirror to the foam remnants in the sea. Touko unfastened her satchel and took out a small bottle of lilac liquid. Though the page detailing this potion had not been spared from spillages and time’s progression, Touko had helped the author enough times in concocting the potion to not need to rely heavily on the book. Once she procured enough driftwood that met her standards, she would cast a levitation spell and float her produce the long way up the cliff. She picked her way over to the trunk of a particularly large tree and took a swig of lilac potion.

Her lips tingled. In a mutter, she cast her spell. “V-Volare...”

The log trembled as it rose. It lifted gradually and she glanced down as she waited for it to reach shoulder height.

A pair of eyes stared at her from the water.

Touko flinched, concentration fractured, and the log thumped back onto the sand. Her chest clenched and she raised an arm in front of her, bending it at the elbow and holding it out horizontally in front of her.

No eyes stared at her from the water.

Taking a deep breath, Touko adjusted her round glasses and directed her attention back to the log. It rose again like before and she floated it back to her cottage.

*the sea has hands and they grab,*
grab, grab
at touko’s
ankles,
knees,
and thighs.

clammy and slimy, more work their way up, seizing her arms and neck until a palm slaps over her mouth.

she vomits bubbles that morph into stars on the creased ceiling, and the hands drag her
d onto
w n to the
dark.

Touko woke up. Realising that she experienced another nightmare, she opened her bedside drawer and grabbed her notebook out of it. Scribbling furiously, not caring about staying on the guidelines printed onto the pages, Touko penned a reminder to scavenge for seaweed for a protection spell and flopped her head onto the pillow. Sleep came quickly.

Seaweed required not a levitation spell but a bag that Touko was willing to carry it in. The skirt of her linen dress fluttered as she strolled along the coastline and gathered seaweed into her basket. She wondered if she looked like an ordinary teenager on a picnic. Ordinary like the girls in the town that Touko was forced to visit for shopping trips, where she bought her straw hat and her dress and her sandals and most of the outfits in her closet.

Crouching down, she scooped more seaweed into her basket. Touko’s mentor had been skilled at many things. Brewing potions. Casting spells. Allowing a soaked, bedraggled girl to live in her cottage without asking too many questions about why this girl was alone. Unfortunately, like her apprentice, she lacked when it came to socialising. The witch had trekked to town every morning unaccompanied, leaving Touko behind to tidy up the cottage, and no one but Touko mourned her death. Most likely, only Touko knew about the tragedy that befell the witch.

Waves lapped at Touko’s ankles. She shivered in the heat. Though Touko grieved over the witch’s demise, no one would when Touko died.

More seaweed fell into the basket. Touko turned her head toward the sea.

A pair of eyes stared at her from the water.

She twitched and turned the rest of her body.

No eyes stared at her from the water but in those valuable seconds before the eyes vanished beneath
the sea’s surface, she had got a better look at them. Last time, she only noticed the eyes and not who
they belonged to. The eyes seemed to glow with a bright blue and this time, she saw hair, blond hair,
and she saw a face, a human face.

Touko sprinted back to the cottage.

Five days later, Touko headed down to the beach with a book and lay out a towel to sit on. She wore
the same straw hat that she wore almost a week ago and had to nudge it out of her vision whenever it
drooped too far forward. As she attempted to read, she couldn’t help glancing toward the sea for
those eyes several times. Those bright blue eyes.

The sea rumbled. Seagulls crowed. Touko had seen those eyes five times now, once a day, and it
would have been six times if she hadn’t stayed in her cottage for the entirety of a day.

She shut her book, tossed it aside and walked over to the coastline. Her feet squelched a little in the
wet sand until she stopped completely, only her eyes moving as she searched the sea. The locals
knew to go to the other stretch of beach if they wanted to spend a day by the sea. Travellers were
told after arrival to the town not to bother with the secluded bit of sandy area by the cliff with the
haunted cottage on the peak. Whatever explorers or disbelievers that knocked on the cottage door
always ended up cursed.

Biting down on her lip, Touko seized handfuls of skirt.

“T-If you’re here,” she said, trembling a little, “y-you better come out.”

Touko jerked up her chin, fire behind her eyes.

“I mean it!” she said, louder than before. “Y-You’re some kind of pervert, aren’t you? Spying on
me... I’ll turn you into a slug... o-or a... a...!”

A figure broke through the surface of the water, exposing only the top half of their naked body.

She jolted back, arm raised, recognising their eyes. Colour drained from her face; she hadn’t actually
expected them to comply with her demand. Her gaze flickered between their face and their equally
aesthetically pleasing torso and she suddenly grew conscious of her comparatively small and inferior
frame. And the fact that she didn’t know how to turn people into slugs.

The stranger glared at her.

“What do you want?” asked Touko in a small voice. “W-Who are you?”

“I’m Byakuya Togami,” said the person. “Tell me your name.”


Byakuya Togami swam closer, bobbing up and down in the water. His legs stayed submerged and
his face stayed stern.

“Teh Touko Fukawa?” he repeated.

“Touko Fukawa,” she quickly amended.

“Touko Fukawa,” she quickly amended.

“I understand,” he said. Touko had no idea what that was supposed to mean. “You made wood fly.”

“H-Huh?” said Touko. “You mean d-driftwood? That was a few days ago.”
“Dreh driftwood?”

She buried her hands in her hair and bowed her head forward. “S-Stop making fun of my stutter!”

“Stutter,” repeated Byakuya as if tasting the word.

Touko peeked at him. “I... I mean it! I’m a witch so I can really turn you into a slug with my m-magic, and I’ll feed you to the birds, and then I’ll... I’ll...”

Byakuya swam closer. As he did so, a tail coated in silver scales whipped upward, past the surface of the sea. The tail plummeted down again as he reclined so he lay on his back, and the tail soon returned to the surface.

Only it wasn’t really ‘the tail’. It was ‘his tail’. A tail where his legs should have been.

He peered at her, bored, arms folded over his chest and his tail swishing.

She shifted a foot back, unable to form words. Even thinking words proved a struggle for a moment. Her chest tightened and she finally blurted, “You’re a mermaid.”

“I am,” he replied.

Touko shuffled forward, wringing one of her braids. She swallowed.

“You said you’re a witch,” remarked Byakuya.

“S-So?” she mumbled, turning her head away.

Byakuya looked up at the sky, brow furrowed. “You claimed you were going to transform me into a slug.”

A squeal popped out of Touko’s mouth and she waved her arms. “I... I lied! A-Are you satisfied now that you called my bluff, y-you fish butt?”

“Fish butt?”

Touko clapped her hands over her mouth.

“Fish butt?” he said again.

She shook her head, keeping her hands over her mouth and muffling her voice. “I m-mean... Your bottom... is like a fish’s.”

His tail swayed. Its silver scales glistened. “That’s true. Does this mean that you can’t change me into another creature?”

“... Not right now, I can’t. I’m still a beginner at casting spells...”

Byakuya sighed and batted his eyelashes.

“W-What’s with that kind of reaction?” She tensed. “Did you really want me to make you become a slug?”

He deepened his frown. “Don’t be ridiculous. I was interested in whether you could change me into a human.”
Touko straightened up. “A... A human? Why?”

“If you’re incapable of such spells then I see no point in explaining myself.” Byakuya swished his tail again. “Perhaps I will find another witch with more experience. You might well end up turning me into a slug by accident, anyway.”

Her nostrils flared. “I’m... I’m sure it’s possible. My spell book might contain a suitable spell that meets your requirements... Also, for your information, witches are rare these days. Most of them...”

A chill ran down her back.

“... were sentenced to death upon being discovered. I’m... one of the few still alive.”

He quirked his brow.

Touko tilted her head forward.

“I have little choice then,” he said. “Touko Fukawa, you will learn how to turn me into a human. I will come here each day to check on your progress, at approximately this time.”

She looked up. “I don’t...!”

Byakuya had vanished.

That night, Touko pulled her bedcovers over her legs and flipped to the index of her spell book. Her finger skimmed down the page until it brushed over the word ‘mermaid’. The book contained several pages regarding mermaids so she started on the lowest numbered page.

Mermaids, though elusive and indisposed to interact with those not of their kind, are greatly sought after for their magical properties. It is thought that their scales are key ingredients in successful love potions but very few cases of the creation of such potions have ever been documented due to said rarity of the species, and furthermore these records are so old and obscure that their credibility must be taken with a pinch of salt. However, I am of the personal belief that there might be something to this.

Her finger stroked over the word ‘love’.

The other mentions of mermaids proved of little use, referring to various incomplete recipes for love potions that involved scales or even blood. A shiver scuttled down Touko’s spine at the thought of having to obtain blood, of having to weigh it and add it to a potion that she would need to then drink. Shaking her head in a twitch, trying to budge the weight that settled within it, she reminded herself with an inward glare that she was getting ahead of herself. Of more importance than creating a rare love potion was finding a way to turn Byakuya into a human, so he would give her a scale as a reward for her services.

In the morning, she padded around her room and prepared for the afternoon. Byakuya had said that he would check on her progress at approximately lunch time, which gave her a few hours to prepare. Touko packed a picnic of sandwiches, apples and water, and she scribbled a note in her notebook to remind herself to go to the town market later to restock her larder. She slipped the spell book and her notebook inside the picnic basket along with lunch and after she tidied her hairline so it didn’t zigzag too much, she dressed herself and headed out.

As she shut the door behind her, she turned her head toward the cottage and her gaze met with a pair of eyes.
A strangled yelp burst out of Touko and she jolted back. Soon realising that the eyes that startled her belonged to a drawing on a poster, her breathing returned to normal and she began to read its bubbled text.

**Mono. Bros. Travelling Circus!!**

**Hope’s Peak Fairgrounds!!**

*Everyday, 21-28th March!! Bi-daily, 1pm and 7pm!! Admission is only two gold coins!! Upupupu!!*

Whoever created this thing clearly needed to consult a guide on writing because the excessive exclamation points really weren’t necessary, and the faults of the poster didn’t end there. No. A tubby ringmaster occupied the centre of the poster, depicted as a bear in a red waistcoat. Its fur was half white and half black, divided down its vertical middle as if the artist couldn’t decide which design to go with. Even the eyes were different colours, with a raisin on the white half and a red slit on the black half.

Worse than the poster itself was the fact that someone taped it to her door. Someone trekked up her cliff, taped it to her door and went on their merry way. The culprit must have been someone who worked for the circus and never listened, because everyone but a fool knew not to come here.

Gritting her teeth, Touko tore the poster off her door and stuffed it into her basket.

She descended the cliff and at the bottom ran across the sand with her sandals slapping against the naked soles of her feet. Byakuya hadn’t arrived yet so she sat cross-legged on a smooth beach boulder, out of the tide’s reach. While she waited, she dipped her hand into her basket for her notebook so she could write. Initially, Touko had intended to write her own book of spells and potions, following in the footsteps of her mentor, but she found herself more often than not doodling and writing stories until the notebook lost its original purpose. In the corner of an empty page, she drew a flower, giving it a winding stem and shaded petals.

“Touko Fukawa,” came a voice. His voice.

Looking up, Touko saw Byakuya swimming closer to the shore. She pushed herself forward off the boulder, snatching up her basket and treading over.

The sea licked her ankles. Sand squelched beneath her feet.

“Togami,” she tried, never one for honorifics, though she had suffixed her mentor with a ‘-san’.

His wet hair reminded her of sand and his eyes matched the sea. He said, “Give me a status report.”

“Oh,” said Touko with her basket handle around her elbow. The basket pressed into her side as she stiffened. “I... I haven’t been able to find a potion that will change you into a human. Y-You see, these spells were written by a human, and she never thought of turning animals into humans. The other way around, yes, but not... what you want...”

“Animal!” Byakuya scoffed. “Can’t you invent spells without this mentor?”

“It’s... not easy.” Touko found it easier to talk to the horizon, with its tints of blue and large mouth that couldn’t talk back. “You have to use the right ingredients, and then find a suitable word, and you have to practice the spell first to make sure you get it the way you want...”

“You spoke of a spell book yesterday. Let me see it,” he said.
She reached into the basket and retrieved her mentor’s spell book. The cover was brown, made of leather, discoloured and creased.

Byakuya swam closer and when the water around him became shallow, he dragged himself across the wet sand by crawling forward with his arms. As he wouldn’t be able to stand, she sat down and waited for him to wade over. He lay on his chest and stared up at Touko, who opened the spell book to a random page.

“H-Here,” she said, showing him. “This is my mentor’s spell book.”

His brow furrowed as he studied the exposed pages with narrowed eyes.

“This object tells you how to perform these spells?” he asked.

She nodded.

“You’re able to decipher this?” he asked, looking from the book to her face.

“Yes.” Touko paused. “D-Don’t you know how to read?”

“Read?”

He couldn’t read.

She cast him a curious look and said, “Th-That’s...! You mean to say you can understand what I’m saying and you know how to talk, b-but you can’t read?”

“I’ve listened to people from afar and was taught your language by someone,” he explained. “That’s how I learned to communicate verbally. Never have I... read-ed, however. At least not in this language. What uses does this reading thing have?”

Touko felt scandalised. She fitted a fingernail between her teeth, biting back a judgmental remark, and said, “R-Reading and writing is a way of communicating ideas... like my mentor wrote down her spells, and I can read them and know how to cast them.”

“Can a lot of humans read?”

“Y-Yes. People are usually taught at a young age.”

“You will have to teach me how to read then,” he decided. “Read and.. writ?”

“Write,” she said, wiggling her toes.

He shook his head, mostly at himself.

“If you haven’t any spells to turn me into a human at this time, you can teach me to read instead,” he told her, folding his arms over and propping himself up on the sand.

“Huh?” went Touko.

“If I’m going to be a human, I’ll need to assimilate into your society,” he explained.

That made sense. Touko inhaled. Byakuya’s constant staring crept goosebumps across her skin, and the sensation settled in a warmth in her cheeks. Never before had she seen eyes like his. Eyes that could be so cold yet within that chill emit a steady heat.
She nearly forgot herself. Not forgetting, not quite, she inhaled and said, “I’ll... I’ll teach you, but you have to give me something as payment.”

“Payment?” He considered her words for a moment. “Yes, that’s reasonable. What do you have in mind?”

Touko had no idea if there was a proper way to phrase her request. She said, “O-One of your tail scales.”

“My...?” Byakuya visibly tensed. “A... scale?”

“I mean, they grow back, don’t they...?”

“Yes, but it will be obvious for a long time which one is new,” he said in a cold tone. “Why do you want one of them?”

She fidgeted. “For... a potion.”

He glared. “A potion. You want to disfigure me for a potion? Unless it’s a potion that will make me human, I refuse.”

All she had to do was lie and say, ‘Yes, it’s for a potion that I’m testing that could turn you into a human.’ Lying came easily to wicked girls. To wicked witches, like her. Those sorts of people needed to lie if they wanted to continue to live, and Touko was having this conversation because she knew very well how to lie. She opened her mouth, and she meant to lie right then and there, but Byakuya’s eyes melted her words in her mouth.

Touko swallowed syllables of saliva. New words grew from her tongue, blooming into an honesty like that in him.

“It’s for a love potion,” she admitted.

“Love potion,” repeated Byakuya quietly. His voice gained volume. “Do you plan on using it on your enemies?”

“W-Why would I want my enemies to find love?”

“Love is a shameful thing,” Byakuya told her, his hot gaze freezing over. “There can’t be another reason that you would want a poison that would impair an individual with such a condition.”

Fairytales alway gave the impression that mermaids were romantic. Touko jerked her head forward in agreement, even if she had no idea what exactly she was agreeing to, and returned the spell book to the basket. While her hand was inside, she rummaged around for her notebook.

“I’ve never taught anyone before,” she forewarned, finding two adjacent blank pages to write in. When she bought food for her larder later, she would do well to buy a few extra notebooks. Writing everything in just one was too disorganised.

“You’ll find me more than capable,” Byakuya assured her. “Don’t you worry about that.”

Touko relaxed. His blunt way of saying things, rather than dancing around matters with carefully chosen words, appealed greatly to her. She picked out a pen from the basket and neatly wrote down two letters. One was in uppercase and the other in lowercase, but both were the first letter in the alphabet.
“A. Ah,” she said, rotating the notebook so he could read it the right way up. “O-One word that begins with this letter is apple. Apple.”

She reached into the basket and pulled out an apple.

“And, he said. He stroked his fingers against its curved, red surface.

Touko’s lips quivered and she glanced away. “Y-Yes...”

Byakuya held the apple while she wrote the word under ‘A a’.

“This is how apple is written,” she told him.

He looked from the apple to the new word.

“The first ‘a’ is used at the beginning of a word if it’s at the start of a sentence or if it’s at the beginning of a name,” she said.

“I understand.”

Teaching wasn’t as hard as she anticipated. Breathing out, Touko fixed her glasses with one hand and briefly turned the notebook toward her so she could write the next letter of the alphabet.

“B is what your name starts with,” she commented, printing his name under ‘B b’. “Even if Byakuya is in the middle of a sentence, its ‘b’ will always be a capital letter.”

She tapped her finger against the uppercase ‘A’ and ‘B’.

“B. Beh,” said Touko.

“B. Beh,” repeated Byakuya with absolute seriousness.

Her quivering lips stilled into a small smile. “Th-That’s right. Do you know any words that begin with the letter ‘b’?”

“B. Beh... Boat?”

“Y-Yes,” she said with a light laugh. “Let’s go onto the next letter.”

Byakuya set down the apple and watched her write.

“C. Keh,” Touko said, positioning the notebook toward him again. “S-Sometimes it makes a ‘ser’ sound. Crab begins with a ‘c’ and so does...”

She tried to locate something that began with a ‘c’ that created the second sound. Not sand, not basket, not sandwiches and, she squinted, not the poster someone stuck to her door that advertised - her eyes widened - no but yes, the-

“Circus,” she said, flattening the poster that had crumpled inside the basket. “Th-That starts with a ‘ser’ kind of ‘c’...”

“What’s a circus?” he asked.

“It’s,” she frowned, “a company that puts on a performance with different acts. Some people juggle, others walk on a length of rope...”
Byakuya looked at the bubbled text. “What does it read?”

“Mono. Bros. Travelling Circus,” she replied slowly, drifting her finger from word to word as she read aloud. “Hope’s Peak Fairgrounds. Everyday, 21-28th March. Bi-daily, 1pm and 7pm. Admission is only two gold coins.”

Touko ignored the undignified ‘Upupupu!!’

“What about that?” asked Byakuya, not ignoring the undignified ‘Upupupu!!’ and pointing a finger at it.

“That’s a nonsense word,” she told him with perceived truthfulness. “S-Some hooligan defiled my door with this poster this morning.”

“I’ve never been to a circus.”

“Neither have I.” She fidgeted. “What’s it like... being a mermaid? Do you sleep at the bottom of the sea? Do you age like humans?”

“Let’s continue the lesson.”

More of those blasted posters were dotted around the town market. This circus must have been desperate for customers to put up so many. Evidently, attending wasn’t worth the effort, not that Touko ever considered going. She trudged through the market, reading over the shopping list in her notebook. According to Byakuya, mermaids ate fish, shrimp, seaweed and various other things in the sea. He had tasted an apple and a sandwich and pronounced them agreeable, and she thought he might want to try other foods tomorrow.

Touko bumped elbows with someone walking in the opposite direction to her.

“W-Watch it,” she said with a glare and she stomped off.

The person that she bumped into was a woman with lavender hair and purple eyes, who stopped and turned her head to watch the braided girl’s receding back.

A shorter male wearing a sepia brown trilby joined the woman’s side. “Are you all right, Kirigiri-san?”

Kirigiri’s lips curled into her mouth, pressed together in thought.

He followed her gaze. “Who was that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think that’s her?”

“It’s too early to say for sure.”

“Did you get a chance to see your reflection in her eyes?”

“I didn’t,” said Kirigiri, eyes still trained on the distant girl.

He bit his lip. “Could that be her, you think...?”

Kirigiri didn’t reply.
It took Byakuya three days to learn each letter of the alphabet. That involved being able to recognise the letter, whether it was presented in written or verbal form, as well as being able to pronounce the letter and the sound it created. True to his word, Byakuya proved more than capable and so on the fourth day of these lessons, Touko printed several short words into a notebook for him to decipher.


“Sky,” corrected Touko without looking up from her spell book.

“Sir-kai. Sky,” he repeated. He said nothing else, presumably in thought, perhaps about how three letters encapsulated the expanse of clear blue overhead. Despite what he may have been thinking, he fell silent and moved onto the next word, sinking his teeth into an apple and crunching sporadically.

With him preoccupied, she skimmed through her spell book for any page that caught her eye. Though Touko had been granted unrestricted access to the book an entire year earlier, she still occasionally stumbled upon new knowledge that had slipped past her on prior perusals, such as a spell that now made sense or a code that might hide a secret.

Being a witch involved a lot of secrets. Touko gripped the spell book tighter.


On the next page of Touko’s book was a transformation spell that, though only tested on inanimate objects, could possibly work on living beings if appropriately adjusted. Her brow creased as she read on. The spell required myrica, located not too far from the beach, in fact the sea was visible from where the shrubs grew, and they would bloom in May. With March more than halfway over, that left not too long a waiting period.

“Is it hat or not?” asked Byakuya in a sharp tone that had Touko straighten her back with a jolt. He set down his half-eaten apple. Sand muffled its thump.

“Yes, it is. Th-That’s right,” Touko said, allowing herself to slouch a bit and gesturing toward her lopsided hat. “Hat, l-like the one on my head.”

His hands squelched into sand as he elevated his upper body, arms supporting his weight. “You’re reading your spell book.”

Touko nudged up the rim of her hat so she could shoot him a glare. She disliked many things and interruptions ranked highly. “Am I distracting you by existing?”

Byakuya, squinting at her, pressed his lips together in indignance.

“You’re meant to be focusing on me,” he said.

The hair on the back of her neck bristled. “A-Are you questioning my teaching methods? Out with it.”

“Yes, I am. These random words that you wrote bore me and that will impede on how quickly I learn.” He motioned toward the notebook, keeping his eyes on her. “Give me coherent sentences,
useful sentences, practical sentences, instead. Ones that are relevant to me. Also your hat.”

“My hat?” she repeated, reaching for it as if he could at any moment wrench it away from her.

“My eyes are quite sensitive to light, more than those of regular humans, so I require its shade.”

Touko’s glare reignited. “Regular humans? Talk like that won’t do you any favours...! You need me so you should watch your tongue.” Her eyes widened for a moment. When she narrowed them again, a smirk tingled on her lips. “That’s right. You... need me... if you want to become a human...”

Anger flashed in Byakuya’s eyes and he averted them quickly, face flushed. As a consolation prize, she handed him her hat that he now reluctantly placed onto his head.

Satisfaction bubbled in her chest. Touko dropped the spell book onto her lap and whipped out a pen tucked behind her ear. “Th-That’s what I thought. Give me your notebook and I’ll write you something, if it’ll make you leave me alone...”

She snatched the notebook away from him and flicked to a blank double page, in which she penned a circle onto the margin of the page on the right. Biting on her bottom lip, she searched her brain for all those stories and games of make believe that she chiseled over time during sleepless nights and while hidden in ship cargo or hay. To her frustration, all had fled when the pen nib came into contact with the paper, and she couldn’t coax any of her ideas out of her mind’s dark recesses.

Her wrist trembled, the rest of her body stiff.

After a while, Byakuya asked, “Well?”

A glance up confirmed her suspicions. Byakuya was unabashedly staring at her, but not with the sort of emotions that she was accustomed to. Emotions like disgust, or pity, or fear tainted other people’s stares, those adjectives sometimes solitary but often amalgamated and never pure, forming judgemental gazes. His staring, Byakuya’s staring, contained impatience and nothing more. No feigned feelings glazed over the truth in his eyes, no tricks or deceit, just as evidenced by his blunt manner of speaking.

Touko inhaled quietly and looked down, fighting back a smile with origins that she didn’t want to think about. Remembering the circus poster yet to be thrown away and still in her picnic basket, she took it out and extended it toward him. “I-If you need something to read in the meantime... here.”

She felt, not saw, Byakuya pull the poster out of her loose grip. When she held onto nothing, when her forefinger directly touched her thumb, her hand sagged to her lap and she poised her pen again.

Byakuya started his task but unlike her, did so aloud. “Hop... Hope-sir... Hopes Pe-axe... Hope’s... Peak... Fae-rer...”

Though Byakuya had asked Touko to write him sentences applicable to his life, mermaids were shrouded in mystery and lived in a totally different place to her with a totally different lifestyle. What was relevant to her wouldn’t be the same as what was relevant to his life, and her first attempt at asking him about mermaids had been shut down.

So far, she knew that for one thing, apparently mermaids couldn’t read. That was a major difference already. Touko flicked her pen nib back and forth, scratching black ink onto the ghost white page striped grey, and she scrunched up her face as she tried to block out Byakuya’s voice.

“Be-! No, bi, bi-dae-lie. Bi-daily...” He paused. “Oi, Fukawa.”
“What is it?” asked Touko.

“I was wondering about you being a witch,” he said.

Touko glanced away, jiggling her pen absently. “It’s... no stranger than being a mermaid...”

“When you cast that floating spell last week, you drank a potion prior,” he said with a frown. “Is that what enabled you to cause the driftwood to depart from the sand?”

She stopped jiggling her pen and said, “Yes.”

“What part of that requires you to be a witch? Is it the creation of the potion? Access to instructions on what to do? Is it possible for someone who isn’t a witch to cast a successful spell?”

“No.”

He tilted his head to one side, very slightly.

“Explain,” he said.

Touko tucked her pen into the dip between the two open pages and then shut the notebook around it. She laced her fingers together on the front cover. “Anyone can concoct a potion but only a witch can activate the spell. That’s... basically how it works.”

“I see,” he said. “That’s all for now.”

Byakuya went back to reading the poster.

Letting out a soft sigh, Touko opened the notebook and attempted to think of a few sentences to write down. She soon decided that Byakuya’s appearance could act as a starting point. His hair was blond. Also shaggy and damp, a bit like seaweed, but not such a muddy and muted colour. Not quite. Sneaking another glimpse at him, she noted that his skin glowed with a faint tan. The list of his physical attributes grew gradually, with letters binding together into words and herding with others to form sentences.

None of what she wrote could be too long nor too complicated. At some point, she would have to teach him punctuation, but for now she spent approximately five minutes filling the page with basic descriptions.

With a flourish, she jotted down the final full stop and looked up.

Initially, Byakuya seemed to still be reading the poster, but his gaze wandered too much in different directions for him to be going through the text. No, he was studying the pictures.

“These other images, are they of performers?” asked Byakuya, jabbing a finger at the poster.

Touko hadn’t gone to the market since Monday and the copy of the poster in her basket hadn’t captured her interest enough for her to take it out again until today, so only now did she see that the bear mascot in the centre wasn’t the only picture. In the top right corner, flying over the word ‘Circus’, was a cheerful girl whose legs were hooked around a trapeze. Below her was another picture of the bear but in this one, he stood beside a box with a rabbit mascot’s head sticking out, this creature half pink instead of half black and sweating unrealistically large globules at the chainsaw that the bear wielded.

“That’s a trapeze artist and that’s a stage magician,” said Touko, waving half-heartedly at the images
as she mentioned them. “Th-The rabbit is the magician’s assistant, I would assume.”

Byakuya’s eyes widened a fraction. “Stage magician?”

She nudged her glasses up her nose.

“It won’t be real magic,” she said, lowering her eyes from his face to the poster and glaring at the grinning girl in the corner. “Th-They just perform tricks and prance around in tacky costumes.”

“So they won’t be able to change me into a human?” he said.

“Of course not.”

He looked at the poster with lingering interest.

“I s-still don’t understand why you want to want to be a human,” she said, slotting a fingernail between her lips. “Don’t you like the sea? D-Don’t you have friends there?”

Byakuya brushed his hand across the bottom of the poster. His fingers curled into an almost fist.

“No,” he said, and she didn’t know which question he was answering or if he was answering both of them.

“No as in...?” She trailed off.

He didn’t complete her sentence and she didn’t pursue it further.

As with the previous lessons, the two of them parted ways when the sky started to darken. Touko rose first and Byakuya caught her message, leaving for the sea and disappearing beneath the surface. Putting away the poster, the notebook, her spell book, the pen and several apple cores, she carved footprints across the sand on the way to the cliff. She hiked up it carefully and though fading daylight smoothed shadows across the craggy path on its face, she knew it well enough to not be too disadvantaged, and she reached the top with no accidents.

Gradients of blue coloured the open sky, casting a lightly glowing film over where it met the sea and growing darker higher up. It reminded her of that dream she had recently, where the sea pulled her into its murky unknowns and bubbles studded the receding surface like the stars that freckled the sky. Only now the sea was the sky and the sky was the sea. Touko turned her back on the view and flinched.

A girl was standing at the door of Touko’s cottage. She carried a lantern in one hand, its orange flame an imitation of the tiring Sun, and she flashed teeth in a smile when she saw Touko in the corner of her vision.

“W-Who are you?” asked Touko, not getting any closer.

“My name is Celestia Ludenberg,” said the girl in a voice that reminded Touko of wind chimes.

Touko’s eyes drifted to the door, where she spotted a familiar poster.

“Did you leave that there?” asked Touko.

The sea rumbled below, like several voices blended together into noise that Touko couldn’t understand.

Celes’s smile tightened. Pale lips closed over her teeth.
“Yes, that was me,” said Celes. “I’m one of the performers in the circus that this poster is advertising.”

“I don’t care,” replied Touko, grinding her heel into the ground, ready to flee.

The smile on Celes’s face persisted. She entwined her fingers over her heart. “Will you perhaps be coming to watch one of the performances?”

“N-No, I won’t be, and stop taping that trash onto my door,” snapped Touko.

Celes gasped, still smiling. Fire twinkled in her eyes, probably that hue because she wore contacts as fake as her black twin drill pigtails, or perhaps the lantern dyed them that colour. “Oh, what a shame. Our company travels across the land to put on these performances for audiences all over. We’ve earned quite the name for ourselves, you know.”

Touko didn’t know nor did she care to know.

“I feel like I’m not welcome here so I guess I’ll be leaving,” said Celes, curtseying before moving away from the door. She took a few steps before stopping. “My act involves magic, by the way.”

The poster had depicted a stage magician but the magician had been a bear in a top hat and a bow tie, not a girl dressed in a black loita dress with white lace, though of course the magician couldn’t actually be a bear. Either way, spell casters had been almost completely wiped out so even if she was the stage magician or their assistant, nothing about Celes’s act could tempt Touko into wasting her time or her money.

“It’s just smoke and mirrors,” mumbled Touko, hugging herself to keep warm.

“Perhaps,” Celes said.

Celes resumed walking. When she sank out of Touko’s vision and her high heels could no longer be heard, Touko stormed over to the door and ripped off the poster. Grumbling to herself about the nerve of this Celestia Ludenberg, she unlocked the door and tugged it open.

Inside, Touko crumpled the poster into a wrinkled ball and tossed it at the waste basket. It bounced off the rim and tumbled to the floor. She shuffled over and bent down to pick it up but as she did so, she glimpsed a silhouette in the window. Shaped like a cat, it seemed to be staring at her, but it vanished when she blinked in surprise.

Touko put her picnic basket on the dining table and approached the window, peering outside. There didn’t seem to be a cat anywhere nearby, assuming that she hadn’t imagined it. No, she couldn’t have imagined it, because Touko without a doubt remembered seeing its red eyes.
The cat didn’t make an appearance for the rest of the week and by the following Thursday, it still hadn’t shown up again. Much to the annoyance of Touko, the cat lingered in her thoughts as if to compensate for its absence. Nothing about the cat, or cats in general, deserved to occupy her attention. Just because she was a witch, that didn’t mean she liked them. In fact, because of the stereotype, she purposely abstained from adopting a cat even if one might have been good company. Cats couldn’t talk, for one thing, and good company didn’t talk.

“Tell me how legible this is,” demanded Byakuya.

She shot a quick look at the scores in the sand. “It’s fine,” she said dully, and she returned to her notebook. So far, the pages it was open to contained scratches of ink and a dense spiral that she had drawn in the margin. No actual text.

“You judged it in a remarkably short time,” Byakuya noted.

“Hm,” she went, scribbling petals onto a circle that she just doodled.

“What did I write?”

Touko tensed. She craned her neck so she could read the scores in the sand. “It’s fine,” she said dully, and she returned to her notebook. So far, the pages it was open to contained scratches of ink and a dense spiral that she had drawn in the margin. No actual text.

“You judged it in a remarkably short time,” Byakuya noted.

“Hm,” she went, scribbling petals onto a circle that she just doodled.

“What did I write?”

Touko tensed. She craned her neck so she could read the scores in the sand, but then came the issue of discerning what was an indentation and what were shadows. The lantern resting beside her on the boulder that she had seated herself on did a sufficient job of illuminating her notebook so she was able to see what she was writing, but the range of its orange glow fell short of the markings that Byakuya created.

Too much time passed. “Your name?” she guessed.

“Yes, but it is as I suspected.” His nostrils flared. “You didn’t bother checking the first time. You only have one student. It shouldn’t be difficult to pay attention to me.”

She fixed her eyes onto her notebook. Having given Byakuya a twig so he could practice writing in the sand, she should have meanwhile worked toward other things such as altering transformation spells so they could safely be used on living creatures, or even making up a short story to improve her writing skills. Over the course of the afternoon, no inspiration came, no breakthrough or even a deus ex machina. Instead, an invisible weight had settled at the pit of her mind that prevented progress from sprouting.

Since the beginning of the arrangement between herself and Byakuya, Touko had discovered one transformation spell that might work and she would have to wait until May before she could test it, and it wasn’t even guaranteed to work properly. Her attempts at crafting a story proved just as unsuccessful, constituting of basic descriptions pertaining to her student’s appearance and their current location, along with vague ideas that she couldn’t catch in her net woven from definitive words. Other than rudimentary drawings, the biggest outcome of the past five or so days was that she refreshed herself on the contents of her spell book.

Things had gone downhill after she met that Celestia Ludenberg woman and the stray cat. Touko wondered whether the cat was the sole cause of her recent bout of inactivity. Perhaps the fault lay with Celestia Ludenberg and her smile which didn’t quite fit her pallid face, and the image of the cat twisted itself with Touko’s memory of Celes, into a leering, red-eyed feline that hushed all other thoughts. Something about both Celes and the cat didn’t sit right with Touko, and Touko had learned
to trust that feeling whenever it arose.

“The quality of your teaching has declined over the past week,” Byakuya said, his voice wafting past like the evening breeze. Touko left her notebook and pen between her legs and clutched at her upper arms, but the cold crawled goosebumps across her skin anyway and she shivered. Perhaps she started wearing summer dresses too prematurely into the year. He spoke again. “Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, hunching her shoulders, having neglected to tell him about her encounter with Celes and not in the mood to tell him either. He probably wouldn’t have understood why thinking about the cat and Celes made her feel so uneasy, especially when even Touko herself didn’t understand.

“That’s a lousy answer,” Byakuya told her.

“Well, th-that’s what it is,” she snapped. Her throat tightened but she continued speaking anyway. “Why the hell should I explain myself to you? Do I have to rationalise everything I say and do?”

“It would help,” said Byakuya, too calmly to be natural. He put down his twig and from the plastic container near him, took out his first orange. Keeping his gaze on her, he bit into the orange, peel and all. “Your conduct is having a negative impact on my learning.”

Touko flung up her arms. “M-Maybe you not being as clever as you think you are is having a negative impact on your learning! But if I’m d-distracting you...” She slipped off the boulder and gathered up her things. “… then I’ll remove myself from your fragile presence, so easily affected by outside forces.”

Byakuya inhaled deeply through his nose. “That would be for the best. It’s getting dark anyway.”

Her fingers twitched and she almost sat down again to spite him.

“I suggest you get some rest,” he said. “A lack of sleep could be causing your erratic behaviour.”

Almost. Touko almost sat down again to spite him. She had gone out of her way for Byakuya. Everyday, she helped him learn how to read and write, and she fed him food that a mermaid wouldn’t have been able to obtain by themselves. Apples, sandwiches, even chocolate. Today, she brought a variety of different fruits, though he chose to eat the apples from the plastic container that she packed them in, breaking the chain with an orange only once there were no apples left. He hadn’t even guaranteed her that he would trade one of his scales for her services.

People always used other people for their own interests, their own needs, and mermaids seemed to be the same. Just the same.

“I’m not going to get some rest,” Touko said, sticking up her nose. She sifted through her mind for something else that she could do, and the cat’s eyes flickered from the recesses of her mind. “For... For your information, I’m going to the circus and you can’t come because you don’t have any legs.”

“Whose fault is that? I only have no legs because you’ve failed to figure out a spell that will give me them,” he said.

Touko opened her mouth but no rebuttal formed, so she shut her mouth and gave a low whine.

“My intelligence is rotting just by listening to you,” she said. “Also, y-you’re supposed to peel oranges before you eat them!”

She flounced off and didn’t look back even once.
Her mood failed to brighten by the time she arrived at the fairgrounds hosting the circus, and she had even stopped by her house first to collect her purse and a shawl. The circus tent towered over her and the red and white candy cane stripes on its fabric were thick, thicker than she was wide, tapering into a point at its domed top. Touko tugged her shawl over her shoulders more and took tentative steps forward, careful not to gain the attention of any of the clusters of people trickling into the tent. Before she reached the tent entrance, she came upon a ticket booth that looked like it had been given a fresh coat of red paint in the last day or so, and she fished out two gold coins from her purse and laid them onto the counter.

“Just one?” said a voice from inside the booth.

“O-Obviously, or I would have given you more money,” she replied, and she folded her arms over her chest.

“Hey now, it’s a totally valid question. Usually people go to the circus with their families, ‘right?” the voice explained and a face appeared on the other side of the half-open window separating them. Large, spiky hair framed his face. He cupped a hand around his unshaven chin. “So that’s one ticket you want... A’ight! You can sit anywhere in the B section.”

The man snatched up the coins and bit into each of them. They seemed to satisfy him because he lowered his hand and she heard metal clink against metal. Moments later, he held out a paper ticket, and Touko pinched it out from between his thumb and middle finger.

“Oh... by the way, even though I’m selling tickets, I’m going to be in tonight’s show,” the man said, smiling and rubbing his knuckles against his chest. “Got my own act and stuff.”

“Okay,” said Touko, and she headed toward the tent entrance.

“W-Wait, don’t you want to know what I’m gonna do?” asked the man. “I’ll give you a hint if you... Are you even listening to me?”

His voice died away, replaced by chatter inside the tent. Rows of seats bordered most of the performance ring, with a gap at the far end that was a walkway which Touko assumed would be travelled through by the performers as they swapped to other acts. She turned her head slowly, scanning the interior for some indication of a ‘B section’, and saw that each cluster of seats had a poster with a letter on the back wall. Each section was divided by stairs that led all the way up to the chairs at the back, and the letters ranged from A to C.

Touko ascended a flight of stairs and plopped herself down on a chair at the end of a row roughly halfway up. A lot of the chairs were unoccupied. For a moment, she wondered if she was simply early, but she supposed that it might have been because there were only four performances after this one and a good number of people must have attended an earlier show.

She propped her chin in her palm, her elbow digging into her lap, and barely registered the person shuffling sideways into the row in front of her. With no one in the performance ring for her to focus on, Touko dropped her eyes to him in the meantime. He was wide and where his neck should have been was a plump ring of flesh, and he sat down heavily, slouching and depositing items onto the seats either side of him. They were all snacks, with several cartons of popcorn on the chair to his left and a tray of lidded plastic cups to his right.

The sight of food formed a heaviness that sank to the bottom of Touko’s stomach. Breakfast had consisted of eggs mixed with rice and at lunch, she ate two triangles of chicken and carrot sandwiches as well as an apple, and this was six or so hours ago. Most of the time, Touko could ignore the emptiness in her stomach and other times, she endured hunger pangs with ease. She
breathed in and forced herself to look at the performance ring. If she was still hungry by the start of the intermission, she would buy something then. Even if the food was overpriced and gross.

After what Touko guessed to be five minutes later, the audience area dimmed. Spotlights burst into use, illuminating the performance ring. Touko squinted and nearly shut her eyes entirely as more rays of lights meandered through the audience area. Out of sight, a wind band performed classic circus music. It was obnoxiously upbeat with a fast tempo. She pulled a face.

On the other side of the walkway attached to the performance ring, a set of curtains drew apart. In the poster advertising the circus, the ringmaster was depicted as a black and white bear, and the poster had told no lies about the figure that emerged from the curtains. A bear waddled out and crossed through the walkway, faithful to the poster’s artwork right down to the golden trimming on its red waist coat and its mismatched eyes.

Touko stared.

When the bear reached the centre of the performance ring, it stopped and raised its stubby arms. The music waned into an excited hum and the audience area darkened.

“Greetings!” went the bear in a raspy voice, though what kind of bear resembled this one was beyond her. It surveyed the audience with a permanent grin. “Welcome one and all to the Mono. Bros. Travelling Circus. I’m not bragging when I say - ah, what am I saying, I am bragging when I say this circus is unlike any other. Upupupu!”

The bear hid its mouth behind its paws.

“But if you knew what was coming up, I bet you’d do the same. Only I won’t bet because that’s something our Celestia Ludenberg does. Where is she, anyway?”

Touko’s breath caught in her throat. She leaned forward, balling her hands into fists against her thighs.

“Ho?” said the bear, holding onto one of its ears as if listening to a hidden earpiece. “Oh, that’s right, she’s just one of the talents we have in store for you humans. Why did I say humans like that, you wonder? It’s because I’m a bear, ya know.”

It paused.

“... Monobear.”

Any wait until Celes was brought on was welcome. The shoulders of the guy in front of Touko drooped, and hers did as well, but his seemed to because of disappointment while hers did so with relief.

“Don’t you worry, you’ll see all the acts by the end of the night,” Monobear promised, and the guy perked up. Touko gave a grimace. “Let’s kick things off with the Death Cage, shall we? Please, let me and my assistant amuse you while we set up our first act of the night.”

The curtains that Monobear entered through drew open and a rabbit roughly Monobear’s height shambled out and headed over to the ring. Touko recognised the rabbit from the poster as well, where it was shown with its body in a box that magicians used to saw their assistants in half. It stood itself next to Monobear, visibly trembling.

Next, a line of people trooped through the walkway, donning helmets that resembled Monobear’s head that covered everything from the shoulders up. They started to assemble what looked to be a
spherical metal cage, but Monobear’s voice pulled Touko’s eyes away from them.

“Hey, Monomi,” said Monobear, and it gestured toward the area in front of it. “We’ve got a huge crowd here tonight, don’t we? We sold all of our tickets within the first five minutes. This is the biggest night yet.”

“Awah,” said the rabbit, Monomi, with an obvious lisp. It used a paw to shield its eyes from the spotlights above. “You’re tryin’ to twick me again somehow, awen’t you?”

“I wouldn’t do that to my precious only sister. See for yourself and you’ll see that I’m right,” said Monobear.

Monomi cast its beady eyes toward the curving auditorium.

“It’s not full at all!” Monomi said. “I can see lwots of empty seats.”

“Look closer,” said Monobear.

“I don’t need to,” said Monomi.

Monobear clenched one of its paws into a fist and proffered it to Monomi. “Your eyes must be on the fritz from all that manga you read under your blanket. Here, use my paw as a telescope, dear sister.”

“Yah! Don’t announce things like that so fweely. I don’t read manga under my blanket. You’re teasing me again,” insisted Monomi, but it let Monobear position its curled paw against its eye.

“Well?” said Monobear.

Monomi withdrew its head. “I don’t see anything.”

An ink circle was stamped around Monomi’s eye and several chuckles erupted from the audience.

“Wh-What’s wrong? Why are they laughing?” asked Monomi tearfully.

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing you don’t know,” Monobear assured her. “They’re all laughing at how blind and incompetent you are.”

Touko put her hand over her mouth, unable to help herself from smirking.

Monomi bristled. “I’ll have another go but I’m telling you, it’s not gonna work. I’ll even use my other eye.”

For a second time, Monomi pressed its face against Monobear’s fist and closed its exposed eye. Monobear raised its other paw, winked into the distance and smacked its paw into its fist.

The smirk on Touko’s face vanished and her hand slumped onto her lap to join her other one. Everyone else laughed as Monomi wailed and staggered this way and that, clutching the eye that Monobear punched, and it crashed into the barrier enclosing the performance ring. Monomi tumbled onto its back, legs flailing.

“What a silly wabbit,” said Monobear once the laughter from the audience petered out. It shook its head, paws on its hips. “I reckon that killed enough time. Well, folks, I hope ya enjoy the show. Put your buttery hands together for the Oowada Brothers and their motorcycles!”

Applause rang out that Touko didn’t contribute to. Monobear waved at the audience and kicked at Monomi’s fallen form, rolling her out of the performance ring and down the walkway as they
vacated it together. The lights beaming onto the performance ring dimmed and changed colour, from a neutral light to blues that focused on the now fully constructed caged sphere. All but one of the employees who set it up had since exited the ring, fleeing once the lights changed colour, and a solitary figure stood by an opening in the sphere that had a ramp which led up to it.

Music played again, louder, different from before. This was techno, with constant thumping that rattled between Touko’s ears and an eerie plucking noise that tapped invisible fingers down the back of her neck. Mere seconds after Monobear and Monomi disappeared through the curtains, someone riding an unnecessarily loud vehicle burst into the walkway. It was like a bicycle and was green with a purple seat, the body painted with stars on stripes the same colour as the seat. Touko had never seen a motorcycle before and stared at it with a mix of unease and curiosity.

Like the employees who built the sphere, the rider also had on a helmet resembling Monobear’s head, except with a tinted visor at the front. They lapped around the perimeter of the performance ring six times before steering the motorcycle through the opening that led into the inside of sphere.

Staying at the bottom of the sphere, they drove the motorcycle forward and backward in small movements. The employee by the opening walked up to the top of the ramp and reached into the sphere so they could grab the hatch and pull it down, closing the sphere and trapping the rider within.

Inside the sphere, the rider surged forward and turned their motorcycle, proceeding to drive around horizontally. An awed ‘ooh’ droned from the audience and Touko winced, pinching at her arm as she continued watching. After half a dozen lopsided rings, the audience quietened, and the rider changed direction to vertical, upside down on the ceiling of the sphere for brief moments. Another noise of admiration grumbled, quieter this time, almost quiet enough to mistake for one’s imagination, easily lost in the pounding music.

The motorcycle slowed to a stop, rocking back and forth at the bottom of the sphere. Touko thought the act might have ended but a second growl joined the one already resonating from the sphere, and out came another motorcycle, identical in appearance to both the vehicle and rider of the first one. She remembered that Monobear mentioned the ‘Oowada Brothers’. Plural. Of course there would be more than one. Obviously.

Like the first rider, the second one circled the sphere, and the employee opened the hatch again. The second rider was admitted into the sphere and closed in, and the pair began driving at the same time. They followed each other, riding in a rough horizontal until they gained enough speed to travel vertically, always on the opposite side to their companion. Then their routes changed so from where Touko sat, they created the shape of an x, perfectly timed so they didn’t collide.

Touko rested her chin in her hand. After thirty seconds, the x regressed into vertical circuits and finally horizontal ones. She wondered if this might be the end of the act but Monobear marched back into the performance ring, dragging along behind it a rope tied around Monomi. Monomi squirmed, its attempts at breaking free of the rope all in vain.

“Let’s make this more exciting,” said Monobear with its voice amplified so all could hear. “Fortunately for you guys, Monomi has volunteered to stand inside the Death Cage while the Oowada Pack try not to hit her too much.”

Had Monomi not been gagged with a rag, its objections probably would have been intelligible. Despite the ferocity Monomi shook its head with, Monobear ignored its partner, or sister, or whatever they were, and opened the hatch. It threw Monomi in and sealed the only exit. With difficulty, Monomi wiggled upright and stood at the centre of the bottom of the sphere. The two brothers waited for Monomi to rise fully and then resumed driving.
Why people clapped was beyond Touko. Monomi wasn’t even shaking now, past that stage, not so much as flinching when the motorcycles’ horizontal loops became a steep x that twitched inward whenever a rider got close to Monomi. Touko didn’t care about the rabbit but she derived no pleasure from seeing it confined evidently against its will. Meanwhile, Monobear had climbed to the top of the sphere and started to dance, shimmying its hips.

Thankfully, the brothers stopped not too long after and the employee released the hatch, and Monomi hopped out as quickly as it could, like being too slow might mean it would be punished with another round. Monobear remained on top of the sphere, where it swayed its body to the music, and the audience cheered in appreciation of Monomi’s petrification that was mistaken for bravery.

The rest of the act provided nothing different to what had been presented previously; the riders zoomed around some more in a range of formations and finished at the bottom. Neutral lighting was restored, supplanting the ghostly blue, but the music carried on to Touko’s dismay.

“Weren’t they so cool?” asked Monobear as the employee opened the hatch and the two riders drove out and left through the walkway. It toyed with one of its golden epaulettes. “While we clean up this mess for the next act...”

Touko hoped there wouldn’t be another double act.

“... our resident seer will entertain you all.”

Monobear slid forward, off the sphere, and looked around. It spotted Monomi, who was hopping up against the performance ring barrier in what appeared to be an attempt to flee. Laughing to itself, Monobear strutted over and seized the loose end of the rope tied around Monomi. Monomi lost its balance and tipped onto its back, with no choice but to let Monobear tow it along the walkway.

As they passed through the curtains at the end, someone else strode out who, like the others, was wearing a helmet resembling Monobear’s head. Below, they had on a white suit and a red bowtie, and they swaggered into the performance ring with their arms stretched upward. The music paused and changed to the tune that played at the beginning of the show.

“Yo,” said the person in a voice that Touko thought she had heard before. “It is I, with the all-seeing eye, the Seer. To be precise, I’m a clairvoyant, but that’s a pain in the rear end to pronounce, ‘right?’”

The person sat in front of Touko removed their backpack and rummaged through it.

“Don’t try to say that if you’re not sober. Trust me,” the Seer said.

He had barely introduced himself yet Touko had already lost interest like the person situated ahead of her. She decided to focus on that person instead, if only to give her something to do until the next official act commenced. The guy’s body quivered and she leaned to the side, peering down so she could see why, and it turned out he was drawing in his sketchbook.

“I can see any place at any time,” bragged the Seer. “I’m so confident in my abilities that I’m happy to go around and tell some fortunes.”

Touko rose slightly off her chair to improve her view of the person’s sketchbook, and she supported herself by gripping the armrests. He had drawn a mannequin stepping forward, with one leg trailing behind the rest of its body, and he added in more details. A flat collar with rounded edges, connected to a blouse with frills, worn under a jacket and above a skirt with tiers of fabric fringed with ruffled lace. She furrowed her brow.

“Are you enjoying the show?” came a voice to her right. Touko dismissed it, thinking the question
wasn’t aimed at her despite the proximity that the volume suggested, but then a hand landed on her shoulder. Her body jolted and she whipped her head around, cheeks hot at getting caught off guard.

The hand belonged to a woman with lavender hair and purple eyes narrowed into slits. A male was stood behind the woman, wearing a narrow-brimmed hat and a friendlier but more obnoxious expression.

“How are you finding the show?” asked the woman, as if changing how she phrased her question might get Touko to answer.

“Who are you?” said Touko, leering at the gloved hand on her shoulder.

“I asked my question first,” the woman replied calmly. Touko decided that the woman was the most obnoxious of the two intruders after all.

“Maybe we should introduce ourselves first,” the male piped up. “My name is Makoto Naegi and this is Kyouko Kirigiri.”

He held out his hand toward Touko. She didn’t take it. His hand hovered for a few more seconds before dropping to his side.

“... Why do you want to know who I am?” said Touko, fidgeting.

“We’ve heard rumours about you,” said Kyouko, unclear on whether she was answering Touko’s question or something else. “No one in this town knows much about you. They say you live in a cottage by yourself and have no friends. You’re shy. Quiet. Withdrawn.”

Touko wrapped her arms around herself. She couldn’t meet Kyouko’s intense eyes. “So what? L-Leave me alone, you wretch!”

“She’s certainly not quiet, is she?” said a voice. The guy in the other row had heard the confrontation and swivelled around to spectate.

“You leave me alone too!”

“Oh ho! Such violence... I’m pegging you as a tsundere,” the guy said, scratching his chin.

“Gesundheit,” came another voice.

It was the Seer.

“You’re not fighting, are you?” asked the Seer, eyeing the four of them with caution. “Because, uh, I’ll have to call security if you are and that’s just inconvenient for everybody, ‘right?”

“We’re not fighting,” Makoto assured the Seer.

Kyouko stared off to the side.

Touko glared at the Seer. “I knew I recognised your voice... Y-You’re the ticket salesman...!”

“During the show, I’m known as the Seer,” replied the Seer. “Now, if you’re not fighting or anything, let me tell you all your fortune.” He faced Touko. “Let’s start with you.”

She pushed herself against the back of her seat, legs thrashing as she tried to somehow go further into it. “I don’t want my fortune told!”
The Seer put his hands on his hips. “I’ve got one for you.”


“And you’ve had a hard journey but don’t you worry, you’re on the way to somewhere good,” he said and with one finger, tapped her on the nose. Touko didn’t know how to react to that and ended up motionless. “Who’s next?”

“Please, allow me to receive your next reading of the precognition kind,” said the guy in the other row.

“Hey, it’s you again, Yamada-chi,” said the Seer. “Can’t get enough of our show, huh.”

The Seer pressed his fingertips against Yamada’s forehead, something that he hadn’t done that to Touko. Not that she was complaining.

Yamada clasped his hands together.

“Still the same as last time,” said the Seer. He retracted his hand. “And the other times.”

“A-Are you positive?” asked Yamada, sounding like he was pleading.


The Seer averted his eyes and stiffened. Touko and the others turned to see what caused the Seer’s reaction and they saw the two motorcyclists standing at the end of Touko’s row. Monobear had called them the Oowada Brothers.

One of them extended their hand forward, pointing a finger.

“That’s them,” said the Seer, his tone guilty.

They stormed into Touko’s row and she sprung her legs to her seat. She cowered, hugging them against her body. The Oowada Brothers ignored her, however, and passed by her, and they grabbed Makoto and Kyouko roughly by their upper arms.

“H-Hey!” went Makoto, struggling. Kyouko writhed but she couldn’t escape either.

“I’ve told you,” said the Seer as the Oowada Brothers hauled Makoto and Kyouko down the stairs. “Your greatest danger is the one you put yourself in while searching for it.”

The Seer descended the same flight of stairs and the lights in the audience area dimmed as Monobear pranced into the performance ring. Even though Touko could only see the Seer’s silhouette now, she watched him until the darkness swallowed him whole.
“I a-synonym-for-hope you all got a chance to stretch your legs and buy our modestly priced food,” said Monobear, reminding Touko that she had not done either of those things.

She wrinkled her nose. In her satchel, she had a few oranges and a banana, but she wasn’t in the mood for them. Not here, at the circus where there were hotdogs and popcorn and burgers on sale. Disgusting, salty, and fatty though those foods were sure to be, she was sure that she was those adjectives as well and wished that the first proper interval would occur soon so she could eat something filling. Yamada’s banquet didn’t help with its greasy smell, and his smacking lips and squelching saliva made her squirm.

Monobear continued speaking. “You folks might have realised that I said a-synonym-for-hope and not just the word ‘hope’ by itself.”

Touko noticed, but she hadn’t cared. Still didn’t.

“Well, that’s because hope is a very disappointing word.” Monobear tilted its head to one side. “I hope you have a nice day. I hope you passed that test. I hope you get a job. I hope he was dead when we got here. Don’t you agree that’s so empty? What am I supposed to do with it? Cash in your hope? Cash for hope? Are you just trying to get on my good side?”

For a few seconds, Monobear did not move.

“All right, the next act is ready,” announced Monobear. Touko glanced up, having not seen anything of interest on ground level, and caught sight of two trapezes hanging from metal frames far above the performance ring. These trapezes were on opposite ends of the performance ring, pulled aside and pinned to different raised platforms with rope. “Upupupu, keep your eyes on the daring, bordering on reckless Aoi Asahina!”

The daring, bordering on reckless Aoi Asahina burst out from the curtains that led into the walkway. All the way to the performance ring, she waved her arm as the wind band blasted cheery music. Unlike the others in the circus, Aoi lacked a Monobear helmet and so her radiant smile could be viewed by all. She wore a leotard that fitted Monobear’s colour scheme, half black and half white, split vertically down the middle. Monobear twisted around, first toward her as she entered the performance ring and then the other way as it watched her climb up a rope ladder attached to one of the platforms.

Yamada crunched on some popcorn. Touko’s left eye twitched but she didn’t look away from Aoi.

After Aoi ascended the ladder, she gave the audience another wave. The lights went out. Darkness filled the tent, dotted with pink and green glow sticks held by members of the audience, and Touko hugged herself, the music too loud all of a sudden even though the band hadn’t started playing at a bigger volume.

Indeed, it was so dark that Touko didn’t see the two figures that emerged from the curtains, not until they were halfway up different ladders with spotlights focused on them. Both wore Monobear helmets, and tights and leotards as well, cosy leotards that showed off their muscular bodies, but Touko didn’t find either of them attractive. She preferred slimmer bodies, still toned, but slimmer. Like Byakuya’s.

Touko hummed, cleared her throat, wiggled in her seat, and then she hummed again. Boy, was she
thirsty. And hungry. Her face contorted into a grimace at the thought of food.

The two people that Touko presumed were also trapeze artists were now on a platform, and they turned to face into the ring. Aoi unpinned the trapeze closest to her and stood at the edge of the platform, tightly gripping the bar.

She didn’t step off the platform, at least, Touko didn’t see her do so, but she seemed to glide forward as though pulled by an invisible string. Back and forth, back and forth, Aoi and the trapeze swung, several times, her body flimsy.

On the other platform, the trapeze artist unpinned the trapeze nearest to them and tossed it forward. It swung back and forth, back and forth, the trapeze, with the trapeze artist aiding its movements by pushing it away every time it was within their reach, to keep momentum.

Once the bars of the trapezes were near each other, as fluidly as she left her platform, Aoi let go of the bar of her one and flipped in the air. The audience let out an awed sigh as she caught the bar of the other trapeze and swung on that one instead.

Touko stared upward. Pinpricks of white light shone down, planted in the ceiling’s shadowy breath, and her throat constricted. Her head spun. Aoi swam above her. Those spots of lights on the creased ceiling reminded Touko of bubbles that morphed into stars, and she felt small and heavy like hands had grabbed, grabbed, grabbed at Touko’s ankles, knees, and thighs. Clammy and slimy, more worked their way up, seizing her arms and neck until a palm slapped over her mouth.

Yamada slurped his drink.

Unlike in her nightmare, the hand over Touko’s mouth belonged to her. Touko jolted to her feet and slipped out of the row of chairs that she was sat in. She forced her legs to carry her down the stairs, through the entrance area, not caring if anyone wondered what had possessed her to leave during an act, and she stumbled into the open air.

The music inside could still be heard but it was muffled. Panting, she rummaged through her satchel, dropping to her knees within seconds. The grass felt moist and cold. A rush of nausea surged through Touko and she heaved, gagged, but nothing came out. Slowly, her vision stopped spinning.

Her hand hit against something hard inside her satchel and she took out. It was the plastic container with the leftover fruits from earlier. She opened it and used her thumb to make a crack in an orange so she could peel it. With difficulty, for her hands were shaking, Touko succeeded in what she set out to do and she ate an orange slice. The orange had to be thoroughly chewed before it could slide down her throat.

“Are you okay?” asked a voice.

Touko coughed and jerked her head up. Makoto and Kyouko peered down at her, both with furrowed brows but only Makoto with any concern on his face. The lights around the tent barely lit up their features. Her skin tingled. Despite being escorted out by the Oowada brothers, they had come back. How irritating.

“I told you to leave me alone,” said Touko in a low tone, remaining on the ground and expecting them to laugh at her for being in such an undignified position.

Makoto opened his mouth but Kyouko cut in before he could speak.

“We only want one thing from you,” she said.
“W-Were you waiting outside for me?” asked Touko. She buried her hands in her hair. “It wouldn’t surprise me if you were exhibitionists too…”

“No, we’re not!” Makoto yelped.

Touko hunched her shoulders.

“Once we obtain a single piece of information from you, we will be on our way,” said Kyouko.

That was a tempting offer as well as the best option available, and Touko relaxed ever so slightly. “What do you want?” she asked, suspicious.

“If you have nothing to hide, you will allow us to see into your eyes.”

“H-Huh?” Of the things that Kyouko could have said, Touko hadn’t expected that. She touched two fingers against the bit of skin by the outer corner of one eye. “My... eyes?”

“We’ll happily leave you alone if you oblige,” Kyouko added, cinching the deal.

“Please,” Makoto tacked on for good measure. Touko shot his face a quick look. He seemed like the kind of guy who didn’t know how to change his expression like they were masks, foolishly letting his face show his true emotions. She couldn’t keep her eyes on him for too long, for fear that he would blind her with his blinding honesty. The only other person that she saw that in was Byakuya, yet Byakuya was someone she could gaze at for as long as he maintained eye contact.

“... Fine.” Touko reluctantly rose. Her head throbbed only a little. She balled her hands into fists, keeping them either side of her body. “D-Don’t try anything funny though...!”

Kyouko stepped closer, almost pressing their noses together. Touko felt her face burn at the close proximity. Thankfully, Kyouko withdrew a moment later, thin lipped, but then she shone a torch at Touko’s face, which proved almost as uncomfortable.

Instinctively, Touko shut her eyes.

“Open them,” ordered Kyouko.

Touko normally wouldn’t listen to someone who spoke to her so rudely but she obeyed now, without thinking. She squinted and opened her eyes wider as she adjusted to the torch’s light. Her chest clenched.

Some time passed.

“... It’s not her,” said Kyouko, and she switched off her torch and walked away.

Only for three seconds was Touko too stunned to respond.

“W-What was that?” said Touko. She stamped her foot, not just against the ground but against her temporary surprise too, shattering it. “Why did you look at my eyes? W-What were you looking for?”

Kyouko stopped.

“You don’t need to know,” she said, without turning around to face her.

Makoto’s eyes darted back and forth between the two girls. He looked on the verge of saying something but ultimately didn’t utter a single word.
“You’re a regular girl who keeps to herself,” said Kyouko, hushed. “Withdrawn. Perhaps... not shy and quiet like I presumed... but still a lonely girl with no friends. You stutter for some reason, but not an important reason that I care to pursue.” She raised her voice. “I have no need for you anymore. We’re wasting our time here... What a nuisance.”

Her words landed a punch on Touko’s gut. Touko’s eyes sprang wide open. What Kyouko said shouldn’t have meant anything to her. People talked about Touko behind her back all the time, with incoherent mumbles that tickled the back of her neck. Everyone did, they must have done.

“Kißirí-sa-n,” murmured Makoto, eyes just as large as Touko’s. “That’s... That’s harsh, even for you.”

“I only wished to check our reflection in your eyes. Never mind why,” said Kyouko.

“N-Never mind why?” repeated Touko, eyes narrowing into a heated glare. Kyouko began to walk away again. She flung up her arms. “What sort of explanation is that?”

Kyouko continued walking instead of answering. Makoto threw an apologetic smile at Touko before following after his companion.

Touko tugged at the strap of her satchel, adjusting its position on her shoulder. She was tempted to chase after them and demand they explain themselves. They couldn’t just go up to her and use her, discarding her afterwards like she was something disposable. They weren’t her parents. Why, she was tempted to chase after them and turn them into a... a... a slug.

Her rapid breathing fell to a calmer pace. Neither of them were worth any more of her time. With her lips pursed, she reached her hand into her satchel and ate the rest of her orange. As she chewed, she moved away from the tent and surveyed the surrounding area. In addition to the tent where the circus was taking place, there were trailers beyond a metal fence, and the trailers looked like black blocks from where she stood. By now, Kyouko and Makoto had gone, and Touko refused to give them any more acknowledgement than that single passing thought. Touko let it drift past her, like the breeze, and she wrapped her arms around herself, staring at the trailers.

She still had her eyes fixed in that direction when she spotted a figure approaching from over there. At first, she saw only the light that the person was carrying, bobbing like a firefly. It grew larger as it drew closer, now an expanding star ready to explode, and Touko dropped to a crouch on the ground by the side of the tent and waited for whoever it was to go away.

The figure came to a stop at the back of the tent. Touko heard a rasping sound and the music from within the tent became louder. Light stained a puddle in the grass by the figure’s high heels.

“Those mutts are to leave through the main entrance,” came a voice familiar enough to cause Touko to shiver. Celestia Ludenberg. She stood just outside the tent, holding a lantern in one hand and fanning her face with her other hand, and the lantern’s glow fortunately fell short of where Touko was hidden relatively out in the open.

“Yes, yes, I know,” said who sounded to be Monobear. Though Touko couldn’t see Monobear, she could see that Celes’s eyes were trained on the tent. “Asahina-san’s act will last several more minutes and then you can set up your act during the interval.”

“Hm, that sounds like a lot of effort. That simply will not do,” said Celes.

“Well, if you refuse to let the Oowada brothers do it, and my noodle arms can’t move all your stuff around, then you’re outta options. You’re yanking my cotton ball tail into a sausage, Celes-san.”
Touko held her breath, lest it fill the silence and give her presence away.

Celes let out a fake, cheery laugh. “Oh, it’s just that I can sense whether those two have been touching my things and it unleashes violent impulses knowing that I’m in contact with the same things. What about Hagakure-kun? And if that Yamada-kun is here tonight, I’m sure he would be more than happy to lend a hand. He is very bold to directly approach me as he does.”

“Sure,” said Monobear indifferently. “Why not? If you’d like to come in, you can take a seat backstage. Monomi will serve you some tea.”

“Royal milk tea, I would hope,” said Celes with her free hand curled into a fist over her mouth.

“Yeah, yeah. We wouldn’t want a repeat of yesterday.” Canvas scraped and Celes disappeared into the tent. “What about food?”

“I’ll eat after the show, as usual. But I wouldn’t say no to some fruit. Grapes or avocados, perhaps. I could leave out any leftovers for the Oowada Brothers to eat.”

“Upupupu, it’s almost hilarious how you casually talk about killing them in such a pretty voice.”

Celes giggled.

Touko slowly got up. By now, she had recovered enough to return to her seat in the audience area, but she tiptoed over to the back of the tent. After all that had happened so far tonight, she had forgotten for a while about the peculiarity that was Monobear. It couldn’t be an actual bear. Yes, there were creatures which existed that could shapeshift, but for one to be here? She doubted it - most likely, Monobear was just a short guy in a costume - but she seized the opportunity to make sure and sneaked over to where Celes had spoken to Monobear.

At the back of the tent was a tear that, on closer inspection, Touko discovered to be at the edge of a door flap. This door flap quivered, not billowing in the wind due to velcro. Unfastening the flap would make too much noise so Touko peeked in through the tear.

On the other side was the area behind the walkway, lit up by lanterns in each corner of the room and Celes’s lantern, placed on a small table. She sat with one leg crossed over the other as she sipped tea. Narrowing her eyes, Touko tweaked at the door flap, widening the gap a bit.

Monobear had its back to them and faced the shut curtains that led into the walkway. Even backstage, it wore its ridiculous costume. It said aloud, “Don’t you want to watch Asahina-san be tossed around like a ragdoll?”

“Urgh,” went Celes, hard to hear over the music in the performance ring. “I can smell their pungent stench from where I am, so please forgive me for declining your invitation. I simply can’t stand dogs...”

“Suit yourself.”

Touko inhaled through her nose but couldn’t smell anything that Celes might have been referring to. The audience clapped for a few seconds.

“Do you know what I like the most about Asahina-san and those Oowada guys?” said Monobear, paws clasped behind its back.
“How they draw in a crowd?” suggested Celes.

“... Okay, but the second thing I like the most about them is how loyal they are,” said Monobear.

Celes’s cup clacked against a saucer.

“Those Oowada brothers don’t know any better and Asahina-san is only loyal to you for one reason,” commented Celes. “You are aware of that, right? Even after all these years, as soon as she locates her skin, she will go back to the sea.”

Touko bit on her bottom lip. To many people, what Celes just stated would be nonsensical. Not to a witch though, not to someone who had a buzzing at the back of her mind that alerted her she had previously read something pertaining to this.

“Aw, you don’t think she has warmed up to me? I have a great personality you know. Really,” said Monobear, turning its head to look at Celes, and Touko flitted to the side for a moment.

A pause occurred.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” said Monobear, and Touko dared put her eye back to the gap. Fortunately, Monobear was facing forward again. Its shoulders quaked with amusement. “I hid it somewhere she’ll never find it, upupupu...!”

Having seen enough, Touko crept away and pulled out her spell book. First, in order to be able to read anything, she found a ground light and positioned her book close to it. She flipped through, skimming across every page until she found the one that she wanted. The page was titled ‘Selkies’.

Selkies have two forms, one for the land and one for the sea. In the sea, they live as seals, but should they shed their skin, they shall transform into humans. They are beautiful but otherwise do not seem very different to us, and can only make short trips to land before they are compelled to don their skin and live in the sea once more, often for years at a time. There is a way to capture them. If one was to steal their seal skin, the selkie will be under their captor’s control and may only return to the sea if they find their skin. Their hair is a key ingredient in mind control spells, with blood being an ingredient for a more permanent spell, but those sorts of spells are incredibly dangerous. Not to me but to the possessed, so I guess it doesn’t matter.

Touko shut the book. If Monobear and Celes were speaking the truth and Aoi Asahina was indeed a selkie, then there was a chance that the rest of the circus weren’t exactly human either, and that meant Kyouko and Makoto may have been onto something.

As she had anticipated, the available foods were all overpriced, and not only that but the cheese on the burger hadn’t totally melted. The top layer of the burger bun flaked in Touko’s hands too. She walked into the main area just as the majority of the audience were spilling out, the equipment for Aoi’s act being disassembled and the interval just beginning. On her way in, Yamada nearly barged into her on his way out, and she glowered at him.

“Yamada-kun!” sang Celes’s voice, clearly audible without the wind band playing.

He halted immediately and whipped his head around. His pudgy face rumpled, and it rumpled more as he cracked a toothy grin, so distracted that he missed the look of disgust which Touko aimed at him.

“Yes, Celes-sama?” he said, skipping over to the performance ring.
Touko scoffed and returned to the same seat as before. The space that Yamada had occupied contained empty drink cups and foam boxes smeared with ketchup, fingerlicked clean.

Disgusting. She jutted out her chin.

Neutral lighting had been restored, meaning Touko could easily read in here. After she took one bite and then nibbled away half of her burger, she set her food down onto the empty seat next to her and sucked on her fingers until they were acceptable enough to touch the pages of her spell book. Evidently, Makoto and Kyouko had past encounters with this circus, and their request to examine her eyes could only be because they thought her to be someone else. Or something else.

While she searched her spell book for clues, though really it seemed more like a journal than a spell book, Yamada and the Seer trooped back and forth, from the performance ring to the back area and so on as they lugged out wooden boxes and chests that a pirate might store their treasure in. During this, Celes watched, sitting on one of the chests, drinking tea.

“Phew!” went the Seer, helping Yamada carry a table into the performance ring. He raised a hand to wipe sweat from his forehead, only to knock his knuckles against his helmet. His hand wilted. “Hey, can I take this off now? I can hardly see anything with this on.”

Celes simpered. “Monobear stipulated that we all keep to the dress code and your zany helmet is included in that. My hair wouldn’t fit in one of those so I have to go without.”

“It’s not like my hair fits that well...”

Yamada, responsible for most of the table’s weight while the Seer was distracted, piped up, “Celes-sama, you are from the Philippines, yes?”

“That is a random statement, but yes,” she replied in an uninterested tone.

He nodded eagerly and tapped himself on the nose twice. The Seer quickly focused on lifting the table. “I, ah, I remember you telling me yesterday,” said Yamada. “Prey, if you would grace me by answering, what brought you to this country?”

Her face was neutral.

“I’m afraid that is too personal a question for me to answer,” she said.

Yamada nearly dropped his end of the table. “Ah! I was presumptuous! I apologise... I have not completed enough of our route to unlock your backstory. What a bad piggy I am. But... But may I know if you enjoy it here?”

“You will have to be more specific, dear. Here as in this country or here as in this town?”

“This country,” he blurted. “But you have piqued my curiosity! Please, how do you judge this town? How many approval stars does it get?”

Celes giggled. Yamada’s smile widened.

“Spoilers,” she said.

His smile drooped but it didn’t die away completely.

“It is a shame that you only perform in the second show of the day,” he said wistfully. “Your act is by far my favourite.”
“A shame indeed, but I like to sleep in, you know,” replied Celes.

Touko impelled herself to continue sifting through her book. She could still hear the hum of their conversation and so screamed inside her head in an attempt to not hear them, which meant she didn’t get very far through by the time the interval ended. Yamada sat himself in front of her again and a minute later, the audience area darkened and the performance ring brightened.

Monobear stood in the centre.

“Well, you can’t waste any more time plumping this chapter up. I’m delighted to hand you all over to Celestia Ludenberg!”

Touko narrowed her eyes. Yamada clapped the loudest out of everyone as the curtains drew apart. Celestia Ludenberg strode down the walkway. Her rosy lips curled and her fingers wiggled in a small wave, her other hand carrying a beige purse, and her red high heels might have clicked down the walkway but any noise was swallowed by that from the audience. In this lighting, Touko could see that Celes’s eyes were indeed red, bright red, and she wore the same loita dress that she had worn at their first meeting.

“Welcome back,” it said, talking into a microphone. “I trust that you’re all enjoying yourselves here tonight.”

The audience emitted a mumble of assent.

“Upupupu, let’s not waste any more time plumping this chapter up. I’m delighted to hand you all over to Celestia Ludenberg!”

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“It’s a pleasure to be performing for all of you tonight,” said Celes. Going by how Yamada vibrated in his seat, he was experiencing the most pleasure out of everyone present. Touko pulled a face, repulse clumping almost painfully in her chest. “First, I need someone to keep my purse safe while I carry out my first act of magic.”

Celes held up her beige purse.

“Can I have a volunteer?” asked Celes.

“No!” yelled Yamada, jumping up and stamping his feet.

She ignored him and gave the purse to a young woman in the front row, on the opposite side of the performance ring to Yamada. He slumped back in his seat. Touko lifted her chin, lips pressed together in a satisfied smile.

“And what’s your name?” Celes asked the girl. The girl nudged at her red glasses and mouthed something. “Samidare-san, please take care of my purse and make sure nothing happens to it.”

Celes returned to the centre of the performance ring.

“Now, I would like another volunteer.” She scanned the audience, index finger positioned across her eyebrows, and Touko realised that she was going to be selected a mere second before Celes pointed her out. “You, with the braids and large glasses. Also, if you can, please bring a gold coin along with you.”

A beam of light struck Touko and had the Seer not also popped up beside her and gestured wildly toward the performance ring, Touko would have remained seated. With everyone’s eyes on her, she had no choice but to join Celes, bringing along her satchel. Her face felt hot under all the spotlights and people’s scrutiny. She fidgeted, throat dry.

“Your name is...?” said Celes, trailing off.
Touko swallowed. “M-My name is Touko Fukawa.”

“Lovely. Now, see this?” Celes flicked her wrist. A piece of paper poked out from between her fingers. “I would like you to sign your name on this.”

She flicked her other wrist, revealing a pen from between two fingers. Touko reluctantly took both items and signed her name, her signature shakier than usual.

“Now crumple it around your coin, if you would,” said Celes and after Touko plucked a coin out of her purse and crumpled the paper around it, Celes walked over to one of the chests and picked out an envelope from inside of it. She handed the envelope to Touko. “Put it in here and seal it. Thank you. Now, I’m going to give you a chance to win your coin back. Simply choose the right envelope.”

Celes slipped her hand beneath her blazer and got out two additional envelopes, identical to the one that contained Touko’s coin. Touko watched carefully as Celes shuffled the three envelopes.

Keeping track wasn’t hard.

Ten seconds later, Celes stopped and said, “Which one is your coin in?”

After Touko pointed at the right envelope on her first try, Celes beamed and wandered over to one of the chests. This time, she got out a lighter, and with the other two envelopes tucked into her armpit, she set fire to a corner of the envelope that Touko had chosen. The fire devoured most of the envelope but before it could burn Celes, she swiftly lowered it to the floor and snuffed it out with her foot.

Not even the coin remained.

“Oh dear,” said Celes. “You were incorrect, Fukawa-san. Furthermore, I forgot to clarify that the envelope which you chose would be set on fire.”

Celes pulled out the other two envelopes and they shared the same fate as the first one.

“Do not look so forlorn,” said Celes, grinding the remains of the third envelope under her heel, “perhaps I can give you a consolation prize. Please wait here while I retrieve my purse from the lovely Samidare-san.”

Touko stood incredibly still as Celes fetched her purse from the young girl.

“Did you tamper with this?” asked Celes. The girl shook her head and Celes walked back over to Touko. Celes delved her hand into her purse. She lifted out a piece of paper and gave it to Touko, who unfolded it.

A scribbly drawing of Monobear’s face greeted Touko’s eyes, its tongue sticking out.

“Oh, don’t look like that, darling,” said Celes, tittering, and she reached her hand into her purse again. The paper that came out this time was scrunched up. Touko knew what was in it before she opened it up, and the coin that she found inside of the paper ball proved her right. It even had her signature on it.

Celes waved at the audience.

“Ta da!” she went. “Now please give my lovely assistant a round of applause.”

Touko scampered to her seat, refusing to look at anyone in the audience area in case she accidentally made eye contact. Yamada sat down, for he had stood up to clap, and he huffed as she settled in her
“It warms my heart to know that you all enjoyed my first bit of magic;” said Celes. Her audacity in calling her trick ‘magic’ made Touko clench her jaw. That hadn’t been magic. Celes must have hidden the paper and coin in her sleeve. The act was an insult to all actual magical people on a global scale. Celes raised her voice. “This next act of magic is one exclusive to this circus. Monobear-san?”

Monobear ploughed its way across the walkway with Monomi staggering after it, wearing a leash. Calmly, Celes opened the hatch on a vertically tall magician’s box. She wagged her arm in it and once she deemed that the audience had been given enough time to marvel at its emptiness, she stepped inside.

“Bye, bye!” said Monobear, and it slammed the door of the box shut. The box bore no holes, no windows, hiding Celes completely from view. Monobear finally stopped moving around so much, and Touko could see the fake curly moustache it now possessed. Also, it wore a red cape. It rapped its knuckles on the door of the box and said, “Hocus pocus, dangan ronpa. Abra kadabra, Willy Wonka!”

Never before had Touko felt this offended and she knew Byakuya. Monobear wrenched the door open. What hopped out of the box was not Celes but a cat. A cat with red eyes. The cat with red eyes that Touko hadn’t been able to stop thinking about.

“Huh?” Monobear tilted its head to the side. It blinked twice. Then it thrashed its limbs. “Monomi, you marshmallow! You turned her into a cat!”

“Wha’?” Monomi said. “N-No, that wasn’t me!”

“Now you’re lying. You know what that means!”

“Gah! Pwease no!”

Monobear removed its cape and threw it away. The cape landed on the cat. Extending its arms upward, Monobear said, “Naughty little sisters get sawn in half!”

“Gah!” Monomi said again, digging its heels into the floor, but Monobear was stronger and succeeded in towing Monomi over to a horizontally long box. Monobear shoved Monomi inside and hauled out from one of the chests a ridiculously large saw that looked like it belonged to a cartoon villain.

The red cape that Monobear had taken off began to twitch and the lump under it, the cat, inflated, and then Celes stood up with the cape on her shoulders, a cat no more. Yamada smacked his palms together in fresh applause, as did everyone apart from Touko, who could only gawk at what had just transpired.
“She transformed into a cat? Right in front of you? Without the use of a potion?” asked Byakuya, lying on his stomach and facing out to sea. Because he was resting his chin in the palm of his hand, propped up by his elbow, his upper body was elevated and so skid marks in the sand were visible beneath him from where he had swiveled himself around with little but noticeable difficulty.

Touko flung another stone into the sea. It disappeared with a plop, sinking without bouncing a single time.

Byakuya rolled his head toward her so his cheek, not his chin, rested in his palm. Though she didn’t turn her head, she could see him watching her on the edge of her vision, albeit blurry because he was positioned in a blind spot of her glasses.

“Well?” pushed Byakuya.

“Yes,” said Touko, shoulders hunched. “That woman transformed into a cat.”

The sea was motionless to the average eyes. The sea was motionless. She nudged her glasses up a bit.

“You said that stage magicians couldn’t perform real magic. It must have been a trick, hm?” Byakuya remarked.

Touko lowered her hands to her lap, and her fingers pulled at her skirt as she balled them into fists. The sea was blue. Blue, blue, blue. She only needed to think of that.

Her grip on her skirt relaxed. The tightness in her chest crumbled, sinking to the recesses of her lower gut.

“Well?” he demanded.

She glanced at him. “I don’t know,” she admitted quietly.

Byakuya frowned. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

Touko’s grip strengthened. The cracks in her outer walls closed up, suffocated, and the tightness in her chest returned.

“I meant exactly what I said,” she replied, louder. She tore her eyes away from the sea and glared at the strip of shade that his, Touko’s, hat, cast over Byakuya’s eyes. “That woman transformed into a cat and then changed back into a human or whatever she is. W-What else do you want me to tell you? How to clean your ears out?”

“You don’t need to take that tone with me,” he replied coldly, adopting a similar tone. “I’m trying to help you. I’m as curious about this as you must be.”

To be honest, she felt dread more than she did curiosity.

“What about that talking... bear? Couldn’t it have performed a spell?” suggested Byakuya.

“It’s unlikely. The words that it spouted were all nonsense words,” she scoffed. “‘Dangan Ronpa’... What’s that even supposed to mean?”
“It’s a talking bear. That in itself is unusual. It performing magic shouldn’t be out of the question.”

She picked up a stone from the pile next to her and tossed it at the sea. Like its predecessors, it plunged into blue depths that of the two people here, alone on the beach with a basket and a closed notebook for company, Byakuya had only explored. Living by the sea, perhaps she should have learned how to swim, but that would involve stripping. Exposing her ugly body to the world.

Worse, it would involve submitting herself to the sea’s sinister clutches that had captured her mentor a year ago. Its waves were clawed hands that grabbed and tugged and its taste buds were seaweed, caressing her ankles as it determined whether she would be its next victim or not. Walks across wet sand satisfied her plenty.

“It’s not just that,” she said as she delved her hand into the pile of pebbles that she had gathered that morning while waiting for him to arrive. She searched for a particularly flat one. “I met Celes for the first time last Saturday and not long after she left, I saw the same cat peering in through the window of my cottage. I've looked through my book for shapeshifters, and she might be a bakeneko...”

Touko lifted her empty hand out from the pebbles. They clattered against each other but she didn’t care. She buried her fingers in her hair and slouched forward.

“Th-Then, at the circus, those guys I told you about... Naegi and Kirigiri,” she said, grinding her hands against her head, “they were searching for someone and asked to look into my eyes, and the trapezist is a selkie, a-and...”

Byakuya threw up one hand and cut in. “Let’s focus on those guys for now, shall we? Otherwise you will just ramble on,” he told her.

She trailed off completely.

“What information could they obtain from studying your eyes?” asked Byakuya.

Touko’s fingers tried to drag down, out of her hair, but caught on knots. Tangles cradled her digits.

“There is... one thing,” she said, not meeting his eyes. Looking at the brim of her hat instead.

“Hm?” he went.

The tangles in her hair gave way and her hands slumped to her lap.

“Have you ever heard of Genocider Syo?” she asked.

A pause.

“No,” he said. “What is Genocider Syo?”

Touko turned back to the sea and reached for a pebble to toss, but her fingers curled into a fist against the top of the pile, preventing her from picking up anything. The sea was blue and she drew back her hand. She swallowed before speaking. Bitter saliva burrowed its way down her throat.

“Some... people call her a vampire, others refer to her as a werewolf, but whatever divisions that exist, everyone is unanimous in thinking of her as a monster.” Touko’s voice had taken on a distant, distracted quality. “Genocider Syo targets men and though no one can work out a connection between her victims beyond that, she always strikes at night, crucifying prey with homemade scissors and leaving a signature at the murder scene.”
“And the eyes?” asked Byakuya.

“Red,” replied Touko, feeling his gaze. It spread chills across the chills already prickling her body. “Red like the b-blood that she uses to write her signature before she disappears: ‘Bloodstain Fever’.”

Byakuya remained silent for a few seconds. “How do they know what her eyes look like? How do you know what her eyes look like?”

He spoke like he was interrogating her. Touko flinched. She swept her eyes away from the blue sea and saw the colour in his eyes, dimmed by shadow. In her chest, her heart thumped, like waves that on stormy nights crashed against the cliff where she lived.

“I’ve... met her,” said Touko. “Most people don’t survive the encounter but I did.”

“Did she leave the message? Any scissors? Why would she spare you?”

“Ugh... I don’t like thinking about it, and now you’ve dug up all these unpleasant memories...!”

Touko grimaced, body shaking a bit. “I don’t know! I’m not in her target audience, am I? B-Besides, this has nothing to do with Celes turning into a cat. I came to this town to escape from those kinds of things.”

“Hm.”

Whatever that meant as a response, he didn’t follow it up with anything else and simply let his gaze trail across creases in the sea that Touko’s eyes couldn’t discern. Touko didn’t think to count the amount of time that elapsed after this, where neither spoke. Byakuya, having been out of the water long enough for the Sun to have dried him, eventually wiggled around and grabbed the notebook. He opened it to the first page and started reading from there. Some of the pages had greyish marks from where he seized the notebook too prematurely on earlier occasions, eager to learn. She averted her eyes away from him and sorted through the pile of pebbles. Finding one that appeared promising, she pitched it into the sea and watched the water consume it in one swift gulp.

Touko let out a defeated growl and whacked the back of her hand across the pile of pebbles. The pile collapsed. Pebbles scattered across the sand, spreading out, and she pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs.

“Don’t tell me that you’re just going to give up,” said Byakuya with a hint of disappointment, lying on his back as he read.

She hugged her legs tighter. “It’s not my fault! It’s... It’s the surface that’s wrong, the texture, or the tension, or-”

“Surface tension has little to do with what you’re trying to accomplish.”

“Huh? Did you learn that at fish school? Which is for fish?”

Byakuya didn’t grace that with a response. Rather, he tossed the notebook to the sand and rolled onto his stomach. He hoisted himself up, weight on his elbow, and he used his other hand to select a pebble from the rubble that her frustration had created.

“The stone generates lift by pushing down on the water as it makes contact with it. You need to find the correct angle between the stone and the surface of the water in order to make it bounce,” he told her, squinting at the water and readying his hand. “Meanwhile, the rotations undertaken by the stone stabilizes the force of lift being applied to the back.”
He threw the stone at the water. It sank immediately.

“Heh,” went Touko.

That, he took offence to. “Let me attempt that again.”

Byakuya tried with another stone. The stone rebounded three times before disappearing into the water. He stole the smirk that she had been flashing at him and beamed it back at her.

Touko shut her mouth and turned her head away. “B-Big deal... You can skip stones. Why don’t you make a profession out of it?”

“There’s no need to throw a temper tantrum,” he said smugly. “You won’t learn anything with an attitude like that. Here, why don’t you have another try? I’ll even teach you. Consider it payment for your lessons in teaching me to read and write as well as for your work toward turning me into a human, regardless of your slow pace...”

She stuck up her nose. “Weren’t you paying attention? I just implied that skipping stones is a useless skill...”

He threw another. Two rebounds. The end of his tail swished and her eyes locked onto the movement. His tail wasn’t forked like in a lot of drawings that depicted mermaids. It was long and tapered to a point and a fin started halfway down the back of his tail. On first sight, his fin looked like a column of hairs. Really, these hairs that couldn’t be hairs but resembled eyelashes greatly, that resembled needles, they were all connected by a translucent film and created stripes on the fin that ran all the way down to the separate fin at the tip of his tail. This fin at the end was shaped like an oyster shell.

The front of his tail was usually hidden against the sand but she remembered it to have a fin at the top, vertical, that looked like a long whisker that had split in half with shorter, feathery hairs-that-weren’t-hairs attached to it, all above another fin that stretched down to the end of his silver tail. His silver tail, silver with scales, large scales...

“You should pay me back with something useful,” she said, remembering the love potion.

“Like a scale from my tail?” Byakuya asked, as if reading her mind. He heaved out a sigh. “If you can turn me into a human, I may give you one of them if you desire to inflict a love spell onto someone.”

His willingness took her by surprise. Her shoulders jerked up for a moment. “Really?” She fitted a fingernail into her mouth. “You would... seriously give me one?”

“That’s what I said, but only after you produce a reliable spell.”

Byakuya threw another stone. Five rebounds.

“Have another go,” he said, passing her a pebble.

Touko didn’t feel like throwing one but let him press the pebble into her palm. She rolled it between her fingers, studying it, and spotted a hole in it. To see whether the hole went all the way through to the other side, she held up the stone and peered at it. The hole did go all the way through.

“You know,” she said, “some people think that if you find a stone with a hole that you can see through, and if you throw it into the sea, you can make a wish and it will be granted.”
“That’s illogical,” said Byakuya the mermaid.

“It probably is,” she admitted, but she threw it into the sea anyway.

Soon, he returned to his notebook, and Touko, tired of stone skipping, pulled out her spell book from her basket and began to read through it. The Sun had already peaked and now stooped gradually toward the horizon, but due to how infrequently she glanced up, it’s movements seemed more abrupt.

“Hey,” said Byakuya, lounging beside her. “Fukawa.”

She straightened. “Y-Yes?”

“How did you realise you were a witch?”

“What?”

He looked at her fully. “You told me that to perform a spell, you needed to drink a potion before you could cast it. If that is true, how did you find out that you had that potential in the first place?”

Touko shifted a bit, avoiding eye contact.

Byakuya kept his eyes on her and said, “What made you discover this part of yourself?”

She breathed in shakily. “Witches can perform... very minor spells without potions. Perhaps... even more advanced spells, but it requires a lot of control... not even my mentor could cast many spells without the use of a potion. When I was younger, I sometimes set things on fire by losing my temper, or I would make something fly across the room. My parents thought I was a freak and would try to...”

Her lips moved but didn’t make any noise.

“Strain the magic out from you,” he said, reading her lips. She stared at him and managed to nod. He smirked. “It’s a good thing that you got away from them, wouldn’t you say?”

Touko nodded again.

For the rest of the afternoon, she couldn’t completely rid her mind of thoughts pertaining to Genocider Syo. Though she had succeeded in eluding the people that brought her into the world, her parents, Genocider Syo seemed unable to truly leave her alone. Thoughts of Genocider Syo scratched at the back of her head until sunset, when she had come to a decision.

“I’m going to find them. Makoto Naegi and Kyouko Kirigiri,” she told Byakuya, standing on her feet and hugging herself.

“Because you suspect they are searching for this Genocider Syo?” said Byakuya, lying on his back, not far into sea. It licked at him in its furthest roars onto the sand. He interpreted her lack of response as a ‘yes’. “I thought you said that had nothing to do with Celes’s transformation.”

“I can worry about more than one thing,” she explained. Her face felt stiff. Her throat felt full. “What if Genocider Syo is here? What if she kills someone? I... I don’t want to take that risk, even if she hasn’t killed anyone recently. How am I supposed to sleep with this knowledge? I might not be lucky this time, and something must have brought those two here.”

Byakuya clicked his tongue. She wondered what he was thinking about. Then he said, “I won’t stop
you, but do take care, all right? It would be bothersome if something was to happen to you.”

Touko smiled. Usually her very existence was bothersome, and her faint smile lingered after he had disappeared into the sea. In his own way, he had encouraged her, and she decided to stop off at her cottage before going into town so she could leave her hat and basket behind. She judged it early enough in the evening to safely take the short route up the cliff and climbed up the dirt path. At the top, she instinctively moved toward her cottage and didn’t look at it properly until her right foot landed for a third time.

Her body froze.

The door of her cottage was off its latch.

Controlling her breathing, like someone might overhear and pounce, she tiptoed over to her cottage and peeked inside. For a few seconds, everything seemed in place, but then she spotted an opened drawer beside her bed. Then a window cracked ajar that should have been closed and bottles on shelves with their labels aimed in the wrong directions. Like the lights of the houses in town that popped up one by one in the evenings, all within a relatively short time frame, these details came to her attention. Someone had been here. Touko’s lips quivered. Makoto and Kyouko must have been here. They still suspected her.

She sprinted away from her cottage, soon slowing to a jog, walking when she reached the edge of town, basket hanging from her elbow and her hat on top of her head, shielding her from rays of fading sunlight.

Gravel crunched underfoot as she wound through the town’s streets, the sound stopping abruptly whenever Touko hesitated, unsure where to go next. If Makoto and Kyouko came from a distant place, then they would have to be staying somewhere. Somewhere like an inn. The town boasted a single inn, Towa Inn, that Touko visited once when she first arrived at this town, and she had been promptly sent on her way because she couldn’t afford a room. It was tucked away on the other side of town, a building with mismatched bricks, reds and greys faded by weather and time, topped with a dark grey roof streaked with white. Towa Inn was as unwelcoming now as it was back then on that stormy night when she dripped water all along its scuffed carpet.

With great reluctance, she pushed open the front door and was almost swept away by a wave of heat. Inside was dimly lit, not much brighter than outside. Her nose wrinkled at the sharp stench of beer and though her ears didn’t curl at the gruff voices all around her slim frame, part of Touko wished that her ears would. Most of the travellers seemed to be men with features like orcs, noses red and skin either grey or sallow. Touko crept over to the bar that doubled as a reception desk, feeling as small as she did a few years ago. Laughter reverberated. Possibly aimed at her. There were too many people to keep track of to be sure. She cringed as she stepped forward and met the eyes of the man stationed behind the bar.

“Huh? You don’t have a room here. You want one? What’s a girl like you doing here by yourself?” said the man, tall with straggly black hair that passed his shoulders. His hair was untidy, like he combed through it with his fingers a few times before giving up.

“I’m trying to find some people,” she muttered. She lifted the front of her hat so she could see him better. Despite having only been in here for a minute or so, her face already felt uncomfortably hot. Whoever designed this place should have incorporated more windows.

“What?” said the man, scrunching his face a bit.

“I’m trying to find some people,” said Touko.
The man cupped his ear. “Huuh? You’re gonna have to speak louder, darling.”

Oh, she did. “D-Don’t call me ‘darling!’”

He winced, flashing yellow teeth.

“I’m trying to find some people!” she shouted. Her voice pierced through the inn’s buzz of drunken merriment and silence fell. Heads turned. Staring became less subtle.

“H-Hey, there isn’t any need for you to scream and you guys don’t need to be an audience to nothing,” said the man, flapping his hand. Someone coughed. Conversation started to return, though a few beady eyes stayed on Touko. He lowered his voice and shielded his mouth with his hand. “You’re not an undercover cop, are you?”

“What if I was?” she asked unnecessarily, just because she didn’t like this man.

The man showed Touko his palms. “Are you playing hard to get? Hang on, let’s get things straight. How old are you?”

She punched the counter, making him twitch. He almost physically jumped back as he recoiled.

“M-Makoto Naegi,” she said. The man stared at her blankly. Touko clenched her fist tighter and fought to keep her voice steady. “Makoto Naegi and Kyouko Kirigiri... do they have a room here?”

He pulled a face. Though it might have been because of the poor lighting, his eyes seemed to be the same colour as his teeth. Yellow. His irises were lavender but they might have been hazel in daylight. “You’re a noisy one, aren’t you? Not my type at all. Anyway, I don’t think you’re in any position to be demanding things just like that. Though I can think of a few positions you could be in where I might be generous...”

“Useless!” Touko spat. “You’re completely useless. I’ll find them b-by myself!”

Touko stomped over to the door and wrenched it open with enough force that she stumbled backward. She remained upright, barely, and shoved the door shut behind her. Away from all those voices and all those eyes, she realised that subjecting herself to that place, to those people, had given her a headache. The fresh air outside did little to soothe her burning face.

As she marched away, she took pleasure in considering what spell she ought to use on that bothersome man, wavering between striking him down with sickness and setting fire to his precious inn. A chuckle slipped out from her lips. Touko stopped for a moment but finding herself alone, gave another dark giggle and entered the market square. To her relief, no one else was there. Good. Her trip to the inn had involved enough socialising to last Touko a week at the least.

Wanting to make doubly sure, she checked the plaza again, looking again from left to right but more slowly and more carefully. By now, the heritage lamp posts dotted around the perimeter of the plaza shone, and their glowing orbs stretched her shadow across the plaza’s stone chest. Touko’s eyes drifted toward one of the lamp posts and there, she caught sight of a shadow wrapped around its length. Thinking the shadow was a poster advertising the circus, she strode over to it. The circus left after the next day’s performances, if she remembered correctly.

Perhaps she had been too hasty about Makoto and Kyouko. They could have been here on other business. Yes. Other business. Business unrelated to Genocider Syo. As for her cottage, she might have been misremembering things. That had always been a problem with her.

Her shadow flickered.
She jolted to a standstill.

It wasn’t a poster for the circus on the lamp post. In big letters at the top was the word ‘WANTED’ and underneath, in slightly smaller writing, was ‘DEAD OR ALIVE’.

Touko’s hands trembled as she reached for the poster. A picture, bordered in a square, occupied the centre of the sheet, maybe slightly off-centre, a bit closer to the top than the bottom. The illustration was of a gangling creature, standing on two legs, staring at her with the only touch of colour on the poster.

Red eyes.

Red like blood.

She clawed at the poster, struggling to breathe, like the long, thick tongue which belonged to the creature in the picture was stuffed down her throat.

“No, no, no,” babbled Touko, persistently scraping her nails up and down the poster. The poster clung to the lamp post but after a minute of scratching, she managed to drive a finger through the piece of paper, creating a hole, and then she tore down it. Touko peeled as much of the poster off as she could. Screams raged in her head, hammering against her throbbing mind, trying to burst out of her mouth.

None of this made sense. Genocider Syo couldn’t have murdered anyone here. If she had, Touko would know. She would know...

Shreds of paper lay scattered at her feet. Most of the poster was on the ground and the rest was on the lamp post, looking like something had broken free from behind it and escaped into the outer world.

Every breath tugged at her chest.

Genocider Syo was here. Active. Glimpses of text that Touko caught on the poster before she destroyed it were branded onto her mind. Murderer. Five. Five people dead.


Circus. Makoto and Kyouko had been to the circus. Perhaps they were at the circus. Right now. The circus was performing this evening. They could have been there. They had to be. She started walking. She broke into a run. Hopefully it was the cold stinging her finger tips and not blood. She gagged but kept running.

By the time the lights of the circus came into view, the surge of adrenaline in Touko had faded, leaving fear and dread to pound down their pegs and pitch themselves in her straining body. Touko could hear the drone of the wind band. The show must have been in full swing. In a daze, she wandered around the outside of the tent, regretting that she hadn’t brought a shawl. Winter ended not too long ago, with more influence than summer on this March evening. Her teeth chattered.

Touko completed two laps, neither yielding any results, before she came to a stop around the back of the tent. Of course Makoto and Kyouko wouldn’t be here. Not after the Seer and the Oowada brothers had forced them out.

She was about to leave - she swiveled around on her heel, even, facing away from the tent, with no real idea of what to do next - when a voice called out to her.
“Are you lost?” someone said in a voice that reminded Touko of wind chimes.

Celes stood somewhere behind her.

“W-What do you want?” asked Touko, refusing to turn around.

“That’s what I ought to be asking you, my dear,” said Celes.

The wind band beat away the silence.

“It’s n-none of your business,” snapped Touko, chest still heaving from running all the way here. She raised her hands to shoulder height and clenched them into fists, body tense.

“Hold on a minute... Didn’t you come to the evening show yesterday?” asked Celes, but she didn’t wait for an answer. “Yes, you did. I recall you helping me with one of my tricks.”

“... You turned into a cat,” said Touko in a small voice.

“Would it be patronising if I complimented you on your ability to retain a piece of information for nearly twenty-four hours?”

Touko glared at Celes from over her shoulder.

Celes’s red eyes stared back.

The strings of light draped over the tent shone, giving Touko a sufficiently clear view of the area.

“I would love for you to entertain me but I’m due to be performing soon, so you will have to be swift and outright with what you desire from me,” said Celes.

As much as Touko wanted to look away from Celes’s eyes, she couldn’t. She couldn’t move.

“How...” Touko needed a moment to muster up enough breath to talk. “... d-did you turn into a cat?”

“Oh!” Celes let out a laugh and laced her fingers together. “Is that what you wanted from me? You had me feeling uneasy for a second there. Sadly I cannot reveal something like that to you. It would be breaking the magician’s code. Now, is that all?”

Touko’s eyes flitted to the ground.

“Good. I’ll be off then,” said Celes, too assumptious for Touko’s liking, and she pivoted on her heel.

“That was no trick,” Touko blurted. Celes paused. Now she had her back to Touko. “You’re... You’re a shapeshifter. A bakeneko, perhaps. A cat who can transform into a human. A-And that Asahina, she’s a selkie...”

Red was a colour associated with warmth but when Celes twisted around, her red eyes were cold and emotionless.

“Who are you?” asked Celes.

Touko wouldn’t answer.

Celes wouldn’t leave.

The tent rustled behind Celes and from the door flap at the back emerged the Seer without his helmet
“Celes-chi, you’re supposed to be...” He didn’t finish the rest of his sentence, eyeing Touko warily. “H-Hey... Celes-chi, isn’t that the girl who those two detectives were talking to yesterday?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Celes.

“What kind of buffoon do you have to be to not remember something that happened a day ago?” said Touko without thinking.

“... Yep, that’s her,” said the Seer.

“That explains everything. You’re working with that meddlesome duo,” said Celes. She separated her hands and placed one over her heart.

“I’m not!” insisted Touko, disgusted at the idea.

Celes opened her mouth, presumably to reply, but closed it without saying anything. Disgust seeped into her features. The tent rustled again, this time as two figures wearing domed helmets emerged through the door flap.

Expression pained, the Seer pointed at Touko, “E-Escort her out... please.”

“Get a backbone, Hagakure-kun.” Celes jutted out her chin. “Oowada mutts... Kill her.”

“What?” yelled the Seer, horrified, his exclamation almost drowned out by the snarls of the Oowada brothers as they charged forward.

Touko’s arms shot up, as if to block. Against the two of them, who towered over her, and without an opportunity to cast a spell, she didn’t stand a chance, but she raised her arms anyway.

Gunfire rang out. She counted three shots in quick succession. One of the Oowada brothers stumbled and fell and then the other did too, both howling and clutching one of their legs, both writhing in agony.

“Are you all right?” shouted Makoto, out of sight.

Still on the ground, one of the Oowada brothers removed their gloved hands from their leg. A dark patch grew under the fabric of their trouser leg, some sticking to the palms of their hands. Blood.

They were bleeding. The patch was blood...

It...

Touko’s eyes...

was...

rolled back...

blood...

and she collapsed.
I wake up with a pounding headache. Stories aren’t supposed to start with the protagonist waking up because those kinds of beginnings are considered unprofessional. ‘You’re meant to start riiiiiigggghhhht as the important stuff pops up’, claimed some writer guy probably. Actually, I used to know a ‘some writer guy’. Not counting all those dumb detours that he took, it was a ten minute sprint from his favourite cafe to the alleyway that I murdered him in. Just thinking about our frolic makes my heart race, and I’m not talking about an ‘exhausted myself by running around’ kind of heart race. Hell no, I’m talking about something much more passionate. Despite not being a writer myself, not like that some writer guy or even Gloomy, I am a pure romantic at heart. Like dear old Gloomy, I suppose.

Not that it matters or nothing. How and where I start, I mean. Not once have I ever thought of myself as a writer and I’m quite the cute rulebreaker anyway, you know, so I can start this whatever way I want. Gaahaaheehaa!

Besides, that is literally what happened. I woke up and it felt like both sides of my head were playing ping pong. Never played it myself but I have broken into plenty of nice homes that have a ping pong table. Doesn’t that count? Look, I know what you’re thinking. How can such a cutie pie be a rule breaker ramen too? What a discordant dish! Ah, well, you’ll have to read about that in my biography when it comes out. Will they let me have a copy of the book in my cell, you think? They better. But let’s ignore that for now because I don’t even know who will write my biography. It’s irrelevant.

Just like all that talk about breaking into nice homes wasn’t relevant because this time I didn’t wake up in a home. Not even a cramped one like Gloomy’s, on a cliff far away from everyone else. Shall I tell you where I woke up? Guess. Go on. Oi, I’m serious. You won’t be able to get to the good stuff until you guess.

Guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess, guess,

FINE. BE THAT WAY. I sit up and the thing that I’m sitting on sinks under my butt. It’s a bed, way nicer than the one at Gloomy’s and with a thicker, more comfortable mattress too. A blanket, the colour of rusted iron, falls off the upper half of my body and folds over on my lap. Yes, I know, a bed. Beds imply a bedroom which implies a home. Let me finish, geez. The mattress creaks and cracks and snaps at every movement regardless of how slight it is. That distracts me for a few seconds but me being the vigilant girl that I am, I move on and start to inspect the rest of the room.

What catches my interest first... no, scratch that, snip it out during the editing process because my interest continues to swim, uncaught, free like a man on a nudist beach as he stares over the horizon at the sunset, chest thrust forward and hands on his hips. What I notice first is the weak glow that fills the room. Imagine rousing early morning in a room with no candles or nothing and the only light originates from a window obscured by drawn curtains. This is the level of dimness that I’m talking about. To be honest, I’m relieved because that means I don’t have to adjust to some full on blaze of colour.

“You’re awake,” comes a voice to my left, and I turn my head. I meet the dull hazel eyes of a guy with cheeks that I really want to pinch. You ever see a piece of fruit that you want to drive a knife into and see the fullness of it ooze? It’s maybe like that. Personally, I prefer flesh in my similes, but not everyone does for some reason.
“Who are you?” I ask the stranger, feeling suspicious. “You’re not a police officer, are you?”

He flinches at two simple questions. No idea why because I didn’t ask for anything personal like his circumference.

“I’m... Makoto Naegi, and no, I’m not,” he says.

I waggle my tongue, staring him right in his forgettable eyes. “You don’t sound so sure there, bud. You ain’t lying to me, are ya?”

For good measure, I flick my tongue twice, moving it up and down so it slithers, and I let it resume hanging out of my mouth after.

“N-No,” he promises, looking the most unsure since we first met about a minute ago. He averts his eyes, glances back, then away, and then he forces himself to maintain eye contact. What a chump, am I right? I’m right. It seems unlikely that he is a police officer, even one that’s undercover. “I’m telling the truth, I swear. It’s just... your voice sounds lower and I told you my name yesterday... or the day before.”

“You did?” I say, squinting. I slouch. He wears a brown v-neck jumper over a white polo shirt. If he told me that his mother dressed him, I wouldn’t be surprised and when I called him forgettable a little earlier, I wasn’t lying and I seriously don’t recognise him at all.

Speaking of clothes, I don’t know what I’m wearing so I look down to find out. For a start, I am indeed wearing clothes. I’m not naked. The blouse belongs to Gloomy, this I’m absolutely sure of, as I’ve worn it on other occasions though not too often because Gloomy hates having to wash blood out of it. Gloomy would describe the state of the blouse as ‘like roses blooming in snow’ even though they aren’t roses, they’re patches of blood, and it’s not snow but plain old fabric. The blanket over my legs hides my legs from view but not for long. I toss the blanket to the side. Worth noting is that the blanket, which I think is made partially of wool but mostly of acrylic, feels too high quality to be owned by a police officer for their hostage to use.

Mako-kun’s eyes follow the blanket in its descent to the floor, then he springs his gaze back up to me.

A long floral skirt encases my legs. Neither side has a vertical slit and I make a mental note to fix that later. The base colour of the skirt is sky blue, with pink flowers on it that have winding stems. I bend over and pull the skirt up to my knees. No tights. No socks or stockings, but no sandals either. My feet are bare and I wiggle my toes. This outfit hints at summer weather but the faint chill over my arms suggest it not to be summer quite yet.

Motato-spud shifts. I turn my head toward him. His fists clench, not because he intends to punch me in the near future but so he seizes two handfuls of his trousers, one in each hand. At this point, I notice that he is sitting on a stool, and as I peer at his legs, I realise that he’s shaking.

“You cold?” I ask.

The tremors in his body contaminate his voice. “Your voice... Your tongue... Your body language... It’s like... you’ve become a completely different person all of a sudden...”

If he is going to ignore my question, I’m going to ignore anything he says that’s unrelated.

“What’s the date today?” I ask because right now, I don’t really care about what he’s talking about.

He frowns but goes along with the topic change. “Y-You were out for some time but not more than a
“Not what I asked, bucko. Give me a number.”

Mako-Pako wiggles in his seat. “Midnight wasn’t that long ago so the twenty-seventh.”

I sniff loudly. It makes him sit up straight with a jolt.

“Month?” I say.

“It’s the same as-”

“Month?” I repeat.

“M-March.”

Do I need the year? Might as well ask while I’m here.

“Year?” I say.

His lips twitch and he gets a number out on the third try. The year is what it was the last time I checked. I’ve nearly got all the answers that I need so I can be on my way soon.

“Are you feeling all right? You must have hit your head very hard when you fell. Your tongue looks really swollen. I’m surprised you can talk,” he says.

“What are you blabbering about?” I ask.

“It’s just that your behaviour is so different to what it was earlier,” he explains, referring back to what he had been talking about before I asked for the date.

“Eh?” I pause and think about what he said. When I work out what he is trying to get at, I straighten up and grin. “Oh! I see what has happened. You think I’m Gloomy.”

“Gloomy?” he repeats.

“Touko Fukawa,” I clarify. I shake my head, grinning a lot. “Classic mistake. It’s because we share bodies. Throws people off every time.”

He widens his eyes.

“Where are we?” I ask and I begin turning my head this way and that, in a bunch of different angles. This place resembles a bedroom far more than it does a holding cell. A candle burns on the bedside cabinet next to the bed. Opposite me is an open window, framed generously with brown wood, that gapes black through its glass. It must be night time. I bet I could beat Nico-Nico-Nae in a race to the window and he doesn’t seem brave enough to jump out after me.

“We’re in a room at the local inn,” he says, still uneasy. “After you passed out, we took you back to-”

“You’re doing it again. That would have been Gloomy who fainted. I don’t know what she gets up to while she fronts,” I say.

“Then who... are you...?” he asks, tensing.

Because of Naeg-on-toast, I know everything I need to know so I can humour him. I twist my body...
around and lean forward, going right up close to his face. His body shakes as he waits for me to identify myself. A spotlight on us wouldn’t be out of place but none exists. The next few seconds crawl by, deliberately suspenseful, then I beam so hard I might puncture my cheeks if I were to beam any harder.

“I’m Genocider Syo,” I say.

“G-Genocider Syo?” he repeats.

“Yup. The serial killer diva with a bloodstain fever.”

Mako smiles weakly, on the brink of laughter. “You’re Genocider Syo...”

“Bingo.”

This guy sure ain’t the brightest. It takes him several seconds to process what I said. He yelps and lurches back so much that he falls off his stool. Breathing ragged, he scrambles away on all fours until he reaches the wall behind him.

To think that a few minutes ago, he could barely look at me. Now he can’t not do that.

“Fukawa-san,” he says, arm out in front of him and positioned like he is wielding a shield, “is this a-?”

“Oi, I already said that I’m not her,” I interrupt, finishing the sentence with my teeth bared. Thanks to Mango-to, my tolerance has become as thin as the mattress in Gloomy’s cottage. I hate that mattress so much that I always curl up on the floor to sleep. Gloomy does a good job keeping the place free of dust so I don’t have to worry about sneezing when down there, though it also means she doesn’t sneeze much either.

The door to the room suddenly thuds shut, meaning it had opened without my knowledge, and I whip my head around. A woman stands by the door, just inside the room, with a complexion as pale as Mako-Mako-chan’s face but I think she is usually that pale. She regards me with narrowed eyes, trying to play it cool.

“Who are you? His girlfriend?” I ask, not buying her act.

“Do you reveal your name to anyone who asks?” she says in what isn’t an answer in any shape or form.

“Huh?”

“You claimed to my partner that you are Genocider Syo,” she explains, and she folds her arms over her chest.

“Can you blame me?” I say. “I don’t get to talk to my fans very often, you know.”

She raises her chin and glares down at me. “Someone who takes part in clandestine affairs, like Genocider Syo, really shouldn’t be casually giving out personal information like that.”

I twist the rest of my body around so it’s aligned with my head and sit nicely, legs crossed.

“Why not?” I ask. To be extra cute, I prod myself on the cheeks and tilt my head to one side.

“You have a bounty on your head,” she explains.
Ah. My lips flatten and extend outward. She stares, not standing as tall as a few seconds ago.

“You’re right,” I say and before she can react, I jump up, spin around and land next to Naked-toe who is still on the floor. I delve my hand under my skirt, flashing my leg at the woman, and by the time I crouch down beside Mako-ko, I have taken out a pair of scissors from the holster I wear on my right leg. Watching the woman closely, I open the scissors and hold the intersection to his neck.

The woman doesn’t move from her spot.

“I have trigger fingers,” I warn her in a light tone but I don’t smile anymore. “Now, apparently you guys brought me here. What did you do while I was sleeping? It was something naughty, wasn’t it?”

Mako-kin makes a weird strangled gasp.

“You must be confused,” she says calmly.

“You bet your perky hooters I am,” I reply. She shivers and I think she was about to cover her chest with her hands, going by the spasms in her arms, but she managed to stop herself. “So you’re friends with Gloomy or what?”

They answer at the same time. ToMaKo wheezes, “Kind of,” and the woman says, “No.”

“The two of you better get your story straight,” I say, closing the scissors a teeny bit. He squeaks.

“We met Touko Fukawa at a circus recently,” says the woman. “We don’t have further business with her... at least, we didn’t until this revelation that came out of the blue.”

“Out of the blue? You’re acting like some kind of main character. The world doesn’t revolve around you. Stuff happens when you’re not there,” I reply.

If I shut my scissors any more, I will draw blood.

She stays quiet.

“Is this Towa Inn?” I ask. As well I should. I have a habit of waking up in unconventional places though admittedly, a room in an inn isn’t what would come to mind if I was trying to think of a good icebreaker between me and a guy bleeding to death nearby. Like me and some writer guy.

“That’s right,” says the woman. “Fukawa-san fainted and after we escaped, we came here.”

“Escaped?” I ask.

“We got into a fight with some people that Fukawa-san unfortunately got caught in the middle of.”

So they didn’t take me out of town. Good, because if I have to escape, I know a lot of shortcuts and alleyways that I can utilise here.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Kyouko Kirigiri,” she says. “Genocider Syo, I’m only going to lift my hand to sweep some hair off my face. Don’t hurt him.”

I nod. The nod could just be me indicating that I heard her, Kyou-chan doesn’t check to make sure, but I decide to not be awkward so long as she only does what she promised. She raises her hand and tucks some hair behind her ear. Her arm folds over her chest again immediately after.
My guard stays up but I’m more willing to hear them out. I even open my scissors wider in case Maki-chan wants to contribute to the conversation.

“To confirm, you don’t know what Touko Fukawa does while she is in control,” says Kyouken.

“You score ten out of ten for that,” I reply. “We don’t share any memories that took place after I was born. The only things we share are our body, bra-size and strong feelings on certain matters! We can pine for the same guy but while I like bathing in blood, she gets woozy at a papercut.”

“Fukawa-san can’t stand blood?” asks Kiki.

“Yup.”

“That explains why Fukawa-san lost consciousness,” she says, and I bet she internally shrugs as she says it. She fits into the cool girl role so well. It almost ticks me off.

“K-Kirigiri-san,” Mango pipes up. “Is... this...?”

“Genocider Syo?” I put forward.

“... her?” he says.

Gloomy’s mattress is very, very thin.

“Of course I’m Genocider Syo!” I say, threatening to surpass the recommended volume that one should speak in if they don’t want to draw the attention of people outside of the room. My arm, the one that doesn’t hold a pair of scissors to Miko-kin’s neck, waves in short, sharp movements. “You want proof?”

“I wouldn’t recommend giving us any but I won’t decline the offer,” Kyouko replies, undeserving of any nicknames. “Whether or not you are Genocider Syo is irrelevant for the time being, but you have revealed information that only the murderer themselves or certain people investigating the case would know. What I’m saying is that you are not the reason why we came to this town.”

Makoto, who doesn’t deserve a nickname either, speaks next, and I gaze at him sidelong as he talks. “But... the tongue, the tongue is like the vampire’s, right?”

“Gloomy’s a witch, not a vampire,” I say.

Kyouko opens her mouth but seems to forget what it is that she planned to say. She closes her mouth, furrows her brow and then opens her mouth again.

“We can talk about that later. Genocider Syo,” she says, because apparently Gloomy has earned herself an honorific but I haven’t, “does have a unique tongue, but it isn’t the one that I remember.”

“Oi, oi. I know I’m barging into your infodump prematurely, but you ain’t the kind of person who would be in my target audience,” I say. My face warms. “I kill cute guys who turn me on! Not moderately attractive women. I’d only kill them if I had to, but I haven’t had to yet and I don’t leave victims all willy nilly.”

“The tongue resembled a proboscis,” Kyouko adds. “And Genocider Syo is correct... I do not fit into the demographic of her victims.”

This story is ending up to be more interesting than I anticipated. For their own safety, they better be
telling a story that is true. I withdraw the scissors from Makoto’s neck but don’t stop squatting next to him.

“The creature that I saw was a lot thinner,” says Kyouko.

“Are you calling me fat?” I ask.

“... and taller,” she goes on. “And when I saw myself in the creature’s red eyes, my reflection was distorted. Fukawa-san’s eyes did not do such a thing and Genocider Syo’s wouldn’t if she wasn’t the creature that we’re after. Genocider Syo, would you...?”

I understand and leap onto the bed. Kyouko takes a few strides forward and manages to stay calm as I bring my face to hers. She examines my eyes. My heart flutters like it does when I drive my scissors into my victim’s body, as I pin their corpse to the wall so I can show off my handiwork.

“... No,” says Kyouko, and she steps back. “It’s definitely not them.”

Since I have proven to Kyouko what I needed to prove, I could join Makoto on the floor again but when hearing someone tell a story, it’s more appropriate to occupy a bed than to sit on the floor so I remain on the bed.

Behind me, Makoto catches up on all the breaths that he didn’t take while I was down there with him. He sounds like he’s dying.

Kyouko talks. “I am a freelance detective and my partner writes for the local newspaper where I live. We are investigating a string of murders that involve the victims being removed of their heart and lungs. Not only that, but there are cases where children have transformed into bits of plants overnight and die not long after. The reason we are here is that it appears that many of these incidents occur not far from the circus that is in town. We’ve been following them around the country for some time now but we’ve yet to get very far in our investigation. The perpetrator is either a member of the circus or someone that follows it around and uses it as cover. Many people think that you are behind all of these deaths, but I am positive that you aren’t.”

“Yeah,” agrees Makoto, and I briefly look at him over my shoulder. “No one believes us... Kirigiri-san tries to tell people but we’re never taken seriously. People just say we’re wasting their time with make-believe stories and absurd theories. But you and Fukawa-san share a body, so you must believe...”

I full on glare at him. “Shut your mouth hole!”

Makoto slams the back of himself against the wall, terrified. He can attempt to pass through the wall all he likes. It won’t work. Normally I would laugh but now I just want to stab him with my scissors over and over again.

“We’re not some kind of possession case. We’re not ghosts or something like that. We’re the result of what a society that people like you and Purpley are part of does,” I say coldly, which is a feat because everywhere else on me burns.

“S-Sorry,” he wrings out of himself.

“Syo-san, I can only ask you to forgive my partner for his thoughtless assumption but you must believe in the supernatural,” says Kyouko in a gentle voice. I turn my head forward again. “You said Touko Fukawa is a witch... so you can believe in this sort of thing, isn’t that right?”

At first, I don’t reply but then it dawns to me that Kyouko is desperate for someone to believe them.
Her fist clenches over her heart and the longer I don’t say anything, the harder she bites into her bottom lip and the more likely she is to give herself permanent wrinkles. Something about the case resonates with her and I know, I know know that she is running out of leads.

“‘Syo-san?’ I quote. My scissors drop onto the bed and I wrap my arms around myself. “You really want to get in my good books, don’t ya?” I laugh. “Yeah, I believe you. Witches, vampires, people who talk without thinking prior... I believe it all.”

Kyouko frees her bottom lip from her teeth and exhales.

“I could probably help you too,” I add as I put my scissors away. “Gloomy owns an encyclopedia that has all sorts of information about spells and creatures and blah blah blah in it. I bet you could find the one you’re after in it.”

“That’s brilliant!” says Makoto. “Do you know where she keeps it?”

“Nope.”

His smile wilts.

“Fukawa-san did have a basket with her last night but I’m afraid that we left it behind in our escape,” says Kyouko bitterly. “If it was in there, then it’s unlikely that we will be able to find the basket now.”

All traces of a smile have been wiped from Makoto’s face.

“Perhaps we should ask Fukawa-san,” he says.

“No!” I blurt. Their eyes dart over to my face. I say quickly, “Quit acting like I’m a party trick. I’ve been inactive since January so there’s no way that I’m swapping over. If you want my help, you have to get it all from me. There’s a chance that she didn’t take something so important with her, but if you want to know her hiding places, you’ve got to do things on my terms.”

Kyouko looks wary. “What are your terms?”

“You’re not going to turn me in,” I say.

Makoto inhales but Kyouko raises a hand.

“Will you kill anyone else if we don’t turn you in?” she asks. He gawks at her.

“You know, I don’t feel like killing anyone at all,” I say, and this is completely and utterly true. So completely and utterly true, in fact, that I hesitate. The more I think about it, the more confused I get, and my tummy flips over as I continue to think about it so I stop thinking about it. A creeping sensation breaks out across my skin. I force myself to grin. “Nope, no urges here. I’ve barely killed anyone since I moved here a couple of years ago. But if I do, then Chunsoft’s your uncle and you know to turn me in.”

“Why not? I hate this mystery killer as much as you. Whoever you’re after is murdering for despicable reasons. C’mon, picking on kids? That’s not noble at all. Not like me! Like there was a guy, who was a writer, and even though he was married, he-”
Kyouko motions for silence so she can talk instead. I will save my tale for a rainy day.

“There have been very few murders committed by Genocider Syo in this location. Certainly none recently, not counting the ones that have popped up during the past week as they were committed by the creature that I mentioned earlier, not Syo-san,” says Kyouko. “I should know... I worked on Syo-san’s case for a short time with the most elite detectives that our city’s police headquarters could recruit. I was the youngest on the team.”

“Huh?” I blink twice. Blink, blink. “You’re way too young for a big job like that, aren’t ya? Did you recently graduate from a high school for detectives? Do those exist? That’s nearly as unbelievable as a school that gets people with different talents together...”

“I come from a family of detectives,” Kyouko explains. “My family comprises of many talented detectives that don’t like to showcase our talents. I thought that you might have a connection to this creature, as you travelled like it does, but you travelled less frequently and we’ve established there is no connection. In order to get noticed by my city’s police force, I had to publicly tout my abilities.”

Apparently the thought disgusts her because she shudders. Kyouko recovers almost entirely but can’t get rid of her grimace. She bounces her head once.

“It’s best we get moving soon,” she says, changing the subject. “The Sun should rise in an hour or so, which gives us plenty of time to get ready. Fukawa-san’s cottage is where her encyclopedia might be, correct?”

I stick up my thumb and wink. “Yup!”

“I will search the circus grounds for the book. There is a slim chance that they left it behind. Naegi-kun, you accompany Syo-san to her cottage,” says Kyouko.

Makoto gestures at himself and feebly says, “M-Me?”

“Yes,” says Kyouko.

He peeks at me out of the corner of his eyes.

“You’ll be fine,” Kyouko assures him. “When you’re both done, come back here. If you’re not here by two o’clock, I will assume the worst and I will ensure that Genocider Syo is executed by the end of the month. Don’t forget you have a gun and a cattle prod as well, Naegi-kun.”

His face is at no more ease than before. I expect him to argue or whine or for him to recite his will even though I don’t plan on killing anyone until this imposter is gone. The nerve of that knock off, coming onto my turf and putting me in danger.

To my surprise, Makoto’s features harden and he gives a curt nod.

“Will you be okay?” he asks. “If those guys see you again, they might... hurt you.”

“I won’t let them see me,” she promises.

They exchange smiles.

We don’t leave Towa Inn yet. The two of them pack their things into suitcases as they talk in a hum that I can’t decipher. I sit obediently on the edge of the bed and swing my legs back and forth, trying to understand what they’re saying, but all I can understand is ‘check out’ and ‘Harmony Spire City’. Harmony Spire City is the closest place to this town but is still some distance away. Then Kyouko
and Makoto escort me out of the room, locking the door behind them, and guide me down a corridor with stained walls. Walking with a person either side of me makes me feel important, like I’m a member of royalty, and I skip a little in the boots that Kyouko lent me. They accelerate to keep up with me.

One would think we would go out now but those two chumps delay us more. Kyouko sits with me in the bar area of the inn and we stay there while Makoto disappears for what feels like an hour. A few people are present and glance at us more than once, but they stop after Kyouko glares at them. She doesn’t try to make conversation and I preoccupy myself by admiring my surroundings, feet tapping, so neither of us have spoken when Makoto reunites with us with a paper bag that contains sandwiches.

He gives me one.

“You were gone for a while,” I say as I take a slice of bread off my sandwich. “You weren’t messaging anyone about me, were you?”

“N-No, I had to find somewhere that was open,” he explains.

“We agreed that we would not turn you in if you helped us,” Kyouko reminds me.

I allow his excuse. “Good, then I won’t have to kill you,” I say, and I start to pick apart my sandwich.

Kyouko stares off to the side. Makoto doesn’t say anything for some time.

“So, Syo-san,” he says, watching me lick the cheese off the cut of ham in my sandwich, “you’ve, uh, lived here for a few years?”

“Hmmm,” I slowly respond. I think that I’ve licked away all of the cheese so I sprinkle sugar onto the ham.

“... Right,” Makoto says.

Once we’ve eaten, though the other two don’t eat much and store their leftovers in Makoto’s paper bag, we finally separate. Kyouko goes off by herself, wearing a hooded cloak, while I lead Makoto to the cottage. He has one hand in his pocket at all times. His hand creates a bulge in there that doesn’t fully explain the size of the bulge. It must be the cattle prod or gun that Kyouko recommended he bring. Geez, they still don’t trust me.

“That place sells high quality nuts,” I say because it looks like I have to strike up conversation with these two for some reason and not the other way around. My finger is pointing at a hardware shop.

“You want to stop off on the way and get some better ones?”

“I just want to find Fukawa-san’s book,” he tells me, eyes trained forward. His paper bag of leftovers scrunches up, carried in the hand not in his pocket.

“Suit yourself,” I say and I don’t talk to him for the rest of the journey.

He heaves his gaze along the ground as we trudge to Gloomy’s cottage but it’s not my problem if he feels uncomfortable. Makoto doesn’t want to talk? Fine. Whatever. I don’t care. I talk to myself. I remind myself of all the shops, chattering about where old shops used to be but where new shops are now and I discuss what has changed and what has stayed the same. He can’t block my voice out even with his head swimming with thoughts so he listens wordlessly, occasionally bobbing his head. That might just be how he walks though, not because he is paying me any attention.
We arrive. Gloomy’s cottage hasn’t changed much, definitely not from the outside. It has grey stone walls and a blue tiled roof dusted brown. In the past, the roof was more blue, but over the years has blended into the scenery. The building has one floor with two rooms: a bathroom and a room for everything else. When Gloomy’s teacher was still alive, it was really cramped. We had to sleep on a mat on the floor because the old lady would sleep on the bed.

Makoto stands back as I go in and root around for her book. Really, Gloomy doesn’t have a hiding place for her book. I said that so I could form some kind of agreement with them that didn’t involve them reporting me to the police but as time goes on, I stop feigning a big search and begin to genuinely scour the cottage because I can’t find the book. Not by her bed, not in her bedside drawer, not on the eating table and not under her pillow or under her bed.

“Is it not in here?” he asks.

“Ah, you know Gloomy, she’s majorly paranoid,” I say, flapping my hand, but he doesn’t know Gloomy. Not like I do. Me and her, we haven’t spoken in years, not since she stopped answering the notes that I left her, not since she realised I was going to scratch a tally mark into our thigh for every person that I killed, but I know her. And I know that her book isn’t in here.

An hour passes. Another approaches its death. I don’t care about how roughly I pull out papers from her desk or if I throw things and don’t put them back after.

“I don’t think it’s here,” says Makoto softly.

“Huh?” I hit my hand against the side of my head as I cup my ear. “I didn’t hear you!”

He speaks louder. “I said I don’t think it’s here. We should go back to the-”

“Beach,” I say, and I loosen my grip on a jar of green powder. It clunks against the floor but doesn’t break. “She could have left it on the beach.”

I don’t wait for him to follow and barge past him. There are two routes that one can take to the beach from the cottage. One involves climbing down the steep cliff face, where a wrong step could send you falling to your death, while the other involves going down the cliff in a gradual decline away from it and then going all the way back to the beach on ground level.

Naturally, I choose the first route, and I take off Kyouko’s boots before I drop off the edge.

“Syo-san!” Makoto yells from the top of the cliff.

“If you’re too chicken, you can go the long way!” I shout back. I land on a bit of path that juts out and I hop down, down, down. Makoto retreats and I assume he is too chicken to go down this way. He is definitely a chump.

The ground becomes more level and the dirt beneath my feet becomes sand. Arms spread out either side of me, I soar, running toward the water. When I reach it, I jump around and splash and laugh. I don’t want to go back to the inn. Even the sand wants me to stay, sticking to my feet. Salty air shoots up my nostrils and I taste it on my tongue too.

My eyes squeeze shut. Sunlight accepts me.

“No one ever comes to the beach apart from me, Gloomy and my future victims. I stop prancing and open my eyes. Someone swims over to me. He has blond hair and a glimpse of blue eyes. Because
he called me by that name, he must be a friend of Gloomy’s, but she doesn’t like making friends.

Keeping my eyes on him, I hike up my skirt, intending to get out a pair of scissors.

“I’m aware that I’m early today but I wish to know what happened yesterday,” he calls out to me.

Something silver flicks out of the water behind him but the sea eats it up before I can discern what it is. The mystery hovers over me for a couple of seconds. It clears as he rolls onto his back and swims over to me that way, floating whenever possible. My eyebrows rise. That silver something that I saw was his tail. He has a tail where his legs should be.

“Well?” he says, coming to rest on wet sand.

I stare down at him. My heart beats faster.

“Fukawa?” he says. “What’s with the gormless expression?”

He expects an answer so I take a deep breath. “Hello, handsome,” I say with a wide grin. No idea what happened back there. Must have been a brain fart.

His brow wrinkles.

“You’re not Fukawa,” he states.

“Smart and handsome,” I say and I smack my hands against my cheeks. The corners of my lips stretch toward my ears. My tongue squirms. “You’re right, I’m not your darling Fukawa. I am Genocider Syo, the one and only! S for Supreme, Y for Young, O for Obviously not Touko Fukawa!”
The mystery guy doesn’t respond right away. Kyouko was right in that I could believe in things like witches and vampires. Gloomy is a witch, after all, and so was her old mentor. I saw the old lady perform magic. She would gulp down a potion, say a random word and ignite the wick on her candle without the use of a matchstick. But a man with a fish tail? Or a fish with a man upper body? That’s pushing it.

Well, I can’t exactly refute their existence while one lies right in front of me, existing. For a while, he just stares at my flushed face as he tries to make sense of what I said. What is there to get? Like... I introduced myself pretty clearly. It takes him a lot longer than it should to process my words. How long? Definitely more than ten seconds, and counting.

I grit my teeth and the longer I wait, the harder I clench my jaw. My extremities begin to tingle too. The smile that I slapped on a minute ago sets in an ache that makes my eyes twitch. If I had any scissors out, I would be snipping the air impatiently, though I definitely prefer to cut things up like paper or hair or skin but maybe I wouldn’t have to snip the air.

His eyes narrow.

“Genocider Syo...” He trails off and falls silent again, left to ponder the aftertaste of my name on his tongue. Makoto had given a hilarious reaction to the revelation of my true identity, flailing his limbs and screaming and stuff, but this guy, when he parts his lips, he doesn’t shriek or beg for his life. No, he seems intrigued. “You look just like Fukawa, apart from the inflamed tongue.”

Mystery Guy continues to glare at me as he turns his head to one side. A faint crease taints his brow.

“You’ve possessed her body... or shapeshifted,” he says, watching my face for a hint.

Indignance rolls up my body and escapes through my mouth in a loud huff.

“For the last time, I’m not a freaking ghost.” As I talk, I flap my arms, and the first movement causes him to flinch. “I know nothing about magic. Don’t just resort to ‘it’s magic’ for things you can’t explain. I am Genocider Syo and I just happen to share a body with Gloomy.”

So far, whenever I have said something, a delay has preceded Mystery Guy’s reply and this instance is no different. At least he’s handsome. He has that going for him.

“Gloomy is Fukawa, right?” he asks.

“Yup,” I say. I lower my arms and fold them over my chest.

“I see,” he says slowly, though he probably doesn’t see. “But...”

See that ‘but’? I told you that he doesn’t really see. Still, he elicits a small smirk from me.

“... If you have the same body, why was Fukawa afraid that you might kill her...?” His eyes widen for a moment. A few seconds later, he narrows them again, but they don’t narrow to the same extent as before. “She wasn’t afraid of you coming after her. She was afraid of you killing again.”

He answered his own question. That saves me the effort but doesn’t quite compensate for the amount of time that he wasted by asking in the first place.
“We don’t see eye to eye on some things,” I reply with a shrug, but he got me curious. I clasp my hands together over my heart. “Has Gloomy been gossiping about me to you? I’ll never understand her. She coops herself up so people don’t find out about me and what does she go ahead and do? Talk about me to the first cute face that she sees, apparently.”

“C-Cute...?” He blinks and shakes his head until he looks serious again. “Fukawa neglected to tell me that you share a body. Do you not know who I am, then?”

“No,” I say, and I rap my knuckles against my head. “We don’t have access to the other’s memories. Now, it’s my turn to do the interrogating.”

I rub my hands together and listen to the rasping sound that doing this makes, but I don’t do it for very long and soon whip up the index finger on one hand. My other hand sinks down to grip my hip.

“What’s your deal?” I ask.

“My deal?” he says. “Do you mean my agreement with Fukawa?”

That catches my attention but I tell myself quickly that I can get back to that. I waggle my index finger and say, “You’ve got a tail where your legs should be, fishboy. What’s that all about?”

He wrinkles his nose at some aspect of what I said.

“I do have a tail where my legs should be, which is why Fukawa and I have an arrangement that I will stop having a tail and have legs there once she learns an appropriate spell. Now, that’s enough idle chatter. I am done with you now,” he tells me briskly. “If you do share the same body as Fukawa, then change over so she is in control. I want to discuss important things with her and have no use for you.”

Oh. Oh, oh, oh. A puffed-up kind of feeling swells in my chest and I bend forward, positioning my body so it creates a right angle and so his face is directly in front of mine, upside down in my vision, and I push one foot forward through the sand, bringing my toes up to the top of his head. My lingering smirk stretches outward and pinches at my cheeks, but not in a smile anymore.

“I am getting real tired,” I say, “of people telling me to buzz off.”

Like I said, the guy is handsome, but he doesn’t have any legs and he is lying on his back in shallow water. He would need to do a lot of slithering to submerge himself in a depth that he can swim fast in.

Gloomy would thank me later. Friends have never got Gloomy anywhere. I wrench up my skirt and reach for my scissors. The first thing I do when I slip my thumb and finger through my scissors is use the tip to rip a slit down one side of my skirt. Now I can proceed.

Before I can act, though, a loud pop rings out, sounding from my neck but it’s not my neck that creates the noise, at least not by itself on its own accord. Something else, something metal, shaped like prongs, pressed against my neck does. My body suddenly tenses. My muscles suddenly contract. I can scream and I do scream. Consumed in raw pain, I fall down. Spasms surge through my entire body. The sensation doesn’t affect my mind, but with my body cramping all over and its erratic movements out of my control, being able to think clearly is no help.

End scene.
“What did you do to her?”

“You’re a... a... m-m...”

“Explain yourself!”

“This is incredible... You’re really a mermaid...”

“If you’re just going to stand around babbling, you may as well go ahead and spare me the wait and use that stick on yourself now and die too. You have five seconds to explain yourself before I-”

“What? N-No! I mean, this is just a cattle prod. She’s not dead. It’ll only incapacitate her temporarily.”

“A... cattle prod...?”

Touko’s arms soon felt squashed underneath her body so despite how sore and heavy her limbs were, she thrust the heels of her palms into the wet sand that she lay on and heaved herself into a kneeling position. Once upright, she adjusted her glasses, which had at some point been knocked askew, and she blinked behind smeared glass.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” came a voice that seeped in far quicker than the mild morning’s warmth, one of the two voices that she heard upon gaining consciousness and who she recognised to be Makoto.

She plucked off her glasses and wiped the lenses against her lap, against the fabric of her skirt. As she did, she shifted a bit, and then she realised that her skirt now had a cut down the right side. A pang throbbed in her chest and she remembered how to think. Trembling, she fixed her glasses onto her face and cast her eyes downward.

There, a short distance away from her, just as she expected, just as she feared, were a pair of Genocider Syo’s scissors.

“No, no, no,” said Touko. She buried her fingers in her hair, shut her eyes tightly and tucked her legs against her body.

“Syo-san?” said Makoto timidly. “I’m sorry, but I had to-”

“W-What did you call me?” she asked shrilly, chest uncomfortably tight, and she pulled on her hair harder. Not hearing an answer, she asked again, albeit louder, “What was it that you called me just now?”

Makoto’s hum had a quaver, as if he was afraid.

“It seems like she’s Fukawa again,” said the other voice. Byakuya’s. At least he was there too. His voice sounded close, like he was right next to her, but Touko wasn’t ready yet to open up from the ball that she had curled her body into.

“I think the cattle prod made them switch or something,” said Makoto, a bit more confident than before. “Uh... Fukawa-san? Is that you?”

She ignored him, unable to understand what he was saying.

“M-My life is over!” Touko wailed. “I’m going to be burned alive! No! They’ll torture me s-slowly, tearing off my toenails individually first and then they’ll bend my fingers back one rotation, and...”
“Fukawa-san!” Makoto said, audibly queasy. “Hold on! No one’s going to do that to you.”

Touko could partially decrypt what he had said, but that didn’t mean she was any more inclined to retreat from her self-imposed ball. Her body shook with the grating laugh that she let off.

“Y-You’re just relishing in this, aren’t you? Your empty words mean nothing and you know it.” She tensed violently. “Y-You know that the two of us... me and her... we cohabit the same body. When the law enforcement that you contacted swoop in to capture me, they’re going to execute both of us. Not just her!”

“The police don’t know that you’re Genocider Syo,” Makoto promised.

“I’M NOT GENOCIDER SYO!”

No one said anything.

Touko panted, throat raw and body trembling.

Makoto allowed a couple of seconds to pass. “Sorry. I meant that no one else knows that you have the same body. Genocider Syo has a deal with us. If she helped us find someone and didn’t kill again, then we wouldn’t hand her over to the police.” He paused. “But she did try to arm herself with her scissors against this... guy...”

“It’s Byakuya Togami,” said Byakuya, who had been wordlessly observing the conversation between the other two with disinterest.

“Mermaids have surnames?” said Makoto.

“Besides, Genocider Syo didn’t kill me, did she?” said Byakuya, ignoring that remark. “Therefore she didn’t go back on her deal.”

“That’s true, though I imagined you would be a lot more angry about what happened,” said Makoto, faltering.

“Fukawa is the only person who can assist me so I have no choice but to depend on her,” said Byakuya. “Oi, Fukawa. You’re to keep a better eye on what your body gets up to, you hear? No more of this nonsense.”

Touko had the feeling that Byakuya was shooting a glare at her.

“T-Togami-kun!” said Makoto, shocked. “It’s not her fault that Syo-san does what she does.”

“I know,” Byakuya replied. “But she will still be held accountable for Syo’s actions. Fukawa, for your own good, you’ll listen to me.”

She pulled a face but as harsh as he was, she actually appreciated what Byakuya had said in that blunt way of his. They hadn’t known each other long. Only for a little longer than a week, to be more precise, but she at least trusted him to mean what he said and deep down, she agreed with his sentiment.

That, along with the fact that Makoto and Kyouko had been sworn to secrecy because of a deal, which Touko could believe, meant her breathing could start to slow to normal.

Touko stayed in her ball but willing to cooperate, she said, “Where... am I?”

“On the beach, where we always meet,” said Byakuya, and she realised in hindsight that it had been
Byakuya paused.

“He says he’s called Makoto Naegi and he claims to be a friend of yours,” added Byakuya, tone slightly accusatory.

She froze.

“F-Friend...?” she said, mostly to herself, and she lifted her face from her knees. Her heart thundered in her chest. As she had suspected, Byakuya was indeed right next to her, lying on his back, but Makoto wasn’t in sight. Touko turned her head the other way and spotted him crouching on her other side, not as near to her as Byakuya was. Makoto must have called Touko his ‘friend’ during that minute that Byakuya mentioned.

“You must be confused. I know I am,” said Makoto, too gently, and she immediately became suspicious of him. It felt like her stomach flipped over.

“Of course I am confused!” she snapped, squinting harshly at him. He jumped a little. “Why am I here? Why are any of you here?”

Makoto glanced at Byakuya. “Well, Togami-kun said he knows you...”

“S-So what if we know each other?” She averted her eyes, face hot. “Big deal. I’m more interested in why you are here.”

“You are friends then,” said Makoto, like he had doubted that a mermaid and a witch could be friends.

Touko flinched at the usage of ‘friend’ again. Byakuya peeked at Touko but didn’t correct Makoto, which surprised her because she thought they weren’t really friends. Just two people who wanted something else from the other. She fidgeted.

“What’s your point?” she asked, and she forced her eyes back onto Makoto. “Is it so hard to believe someone like me could have a friend?”

“No! It’s nothing. Forget I said anything.” Makoto coughed into the back of his hand. “So... uh... what’s the last thing that you remember?”

She frowned and tried to recall what had happened prior to her waking up. To put her mind at ease, she had intended to find Makoto and Kyouko so she could confirm if they were here to find Genocider Syo. How she would have got that information out of them, she hadn’t quite worked out the details, but that never came to fruition in the end. Her search had led Touko to the circus, to Celes, to the Oowada Brothers and to their blood.

Just the memory of the wound caused Touko to gag. She slapped her hand over her mouth and retched.

Makoto grabbed her shoulder. “Fukawa-san!”

His touch was like barbs being stabbed through her skin.

“Don’t touch me!” she barked. He jerked back his hand immediately. “W-Where’s that cattle prod
you used on me?”

“In my pocket,” he replied.

“Put it on the sand,” she demanded.

Makoto pulled it out of a side pocket in his trousers and laid the cattle prod down onto the sand, placing it between him and Touko. Keeping his movements fluid and not abrupt, he raised his hands so there was one at either side of his head.

She focused on her breathing and by the time she spoke again, though her heart still pounded, she felt calmer. “I... I remember being at the circus, and you and the other half of your meddlesome duo was there. Then there’s a gap. How long was... she... in control?”

There was a moment’s hesitation as Makoto worked out which ‘she’ Touko was referring to.

“You passed out at the circus last night so we took you back to our room at the inn and when you, I mean, when Syo-san woke up, she was there,” explained Makoto and he wrapped his arms around his legs. Touko watched him warily. “Me and Kirigiri-san, my partner, are searching for the culprit of a series of murders. Whoever it is has the ability to suck out someone’s heart and lungs, and they kidnap children and replace them with hunks of wood.”

“Genocider Syo doesn’t do those things,” Touko blurted.

“How would you know?” Byakuya raised his eyebrows at her. “You have no knowledge of what she gets up to while she is in control.”

“I’ve lived with her since the day she was born,” Touko replied. She pushed her shoulders back and raised her chin. “Yes... I’m very sure that she isn’t behind those things.”

“Yeah, me and Kirigiri-san don’t think that she did it either,” agreed Makoto, nodding. Then he stopped, focused on Touko. “Syo-san told us that it might be a creature behind all this that appears in your encyclopedia. Fukawa-san, about your encyclopedia...”

Touko frowned and adjusted her position so rather than having her legs tucked against her chest, they were crossed over on the sand. She folded her hands on her lap and after that, barely moved.

“So you know about my book?” Touko glowered. “That blabbermouth... What else did she tell you?”

“Um... She told us that you’re a, uh, a witch,” said Makoto apologetically.

Great. Superb. On top of that, Syo had also somehow led Makoto to Byakuya, who Syo shouldn’t have even known about. This always happened whenever Syo fronted. She would go around doing whatever she felt like doing, and Touko would wake up later with lots of unanswered questions and answers to questions that she didn’t know about yet.

“My spell book,” Touko muttered as she retraced through her memories of last night. Before she went to the circus, she went to the inn that she thought Makoto and Kyouko had been staying in, and before that to her cottage so she could drop off her things.

Only, she hadn’t dropped off her things. Her stomach lurched.

“My basket,” she said. She widened her eyes at Makoto. “It... It was in my basket.”
Makoto started to mouth an answer but vocalised it when he realised he wasn’t making any noise.
“We didn’t take it with us... Syo-san suggested that you might have left it either here or in your
cottage, which is why we came here in the first place...”

Touko dragged her hands down her face and yowled.
“You must have read it plenty of times. I’m sure you can remember the bulk of it,” said Byakuya.

She continued whining.

“Shut up with that annoying sound immediately,” demanded Byakuya.

That annoying sound tapered off. Touko chewed on her bottom lip. Byakuya shut his eyes.

“I can’t think of a creature like Naegi described off the top of my head,” she said. “We’ll have to
locate my spell book. Then, if I know what it is, I can work out a way to help you.”

A thought struck her. She glared at Makoto.

“H-Hey, how do I know that you don’t plan on stabbing me in the back once I’m no longer of any
use?” she asked.

“S-Sorry?” said Makoto.

“After you capture your monster, what is stopping you from turning me into the authorities
anyway?” she asked.

He showed his palms to her. “We’re not going to go back on our deal, I swear.”

Touko wasn’t totally convinced or, really, convinced at all. She took a deep breath and fixed her
eyes onto Makoto’s wide pair. Before he could think to do so himself, she seized the cattle prod that
Makoto had surrendered and brandished it at him.

Makoto yelped and wobbled, so much that he overbalanced and fell backward.

“I’ll go get it,” said Touko. The weapon that she had just acquired breathed bravado into her voice.
“My spell book.”

“Kirisu-san has already gone to the circus to look for it,” said Makoto, but Touko stood up anyway.

“Don’t try to demoralise me. I need it back and you’re coming with me so I can make sure you don’t
try to sneak away and call the police...” Another thought occurred to her. “But what if Kirigiri is the
one who has gone to contact them while you’re just a distraction? And you’re hiding my book so I
play along?”

Makoto wet his lips. “I... We’re not...”

Touko forced herself to smile, even if she could only muster one that didn’t show teeth, and
flourished the cattle prod. “You will have to be my hostage...”

“What?” His mouth fell open. He shook his head and then became still, staring at her imploringly.
“Fukawa-san, we’re not going to double cross you. And I really need that back.”

“You’re wasting your breath, Naegi. She’s incredibly stubborn,” said Byakuya. “I’d just do what she
says, if I was someone like you.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Makoto.

She darted behind Makoto and jabbed her finger into his back, causing him to flinch hard enough that both of his feet left the ground for a moment.

“Hurry up,” she hissed. “And don’t even think about fleeing. You said you took me back to your room at the inn after I fainted, so you can’t judge me, you filthy kidnapper.”

Makoto winced. “That’s not exactly what happened. We rescued you.”

Touko prodded him harder. He gasped and threw a desperate look at Byakuya.

“Am I to understand that there will be no lesson today?” asked Byakuya, who as always had his priorities in order. Unfortunately, his order didn’t necessarily match anyone else’s.

“If I return and there’s time to spare, I will teach you,” replied Touko, who continued to poke Makoto’s back.

“You don’t need to poke me,” said Makoto.

Touko and Makoto headed toward the cliff, Makoto marching with Touko close behind him. Byakuya rolled onto his stomach and propped himself up on his arms so he could watch them better. He remained where he was and as he was until they were specks in his vision, after which he twisted himself around and shimmied his way into the sea.

From the other end of the beach, Touko watched him, though her eyes flitted frequently over to Makoto in case Makoto was attempting to sneak away. To her relief, Makoto gave no indication of rushing off, even while her attention strayed from him for seconds at a time. Which was good, because she didn’t know how to use a cattle prod. She had thought Makoto too cowardly to use the cattle prod, but he had proven her wrong. Seeing him with someone as imposing as Kyouko must have exaggerated his submissiveness with the contrast.

“That Kirigiri better not be leafing through my spell book with her grubby hands,” threatened Touko as they arrived at the bottom of the cliff.

“Kirigiri-san nearly always wears gloves,” said Makoto. He tilted his head back. “We’re not going up this way, are we?”

“We are. It’s faster. Stick to the path and you shouldn’t fall,” said Touko and as a reminder, she waved the cattle prod.

Makoto sighed and started to shuffle along the narrow path that zigzagged up the side of the cliff.

Touko, following him, sniffed. “Her gloves are probably disgusting anyway.”

“Huh?” went Makoto.

“‘Nearly always’,,” quoted Touko. She stared out to sea. “Kirigiri ‘nearly always’ wears gloves. You said those very words...! What does that mean? Does she keep her gloves on while she eats? While she goes to the toilet? While she kidnaps people?”

“We didn’t kidnap you,” Makoto said firmly.

“You did!” Touko spat. “And that’s the lesser of your crimes. W-Who knows what you did while I was unconscious...”
Makoto spluttered, “Nothing! We didn’t do anything!”

Touko clicked her tongue but chose not to pursue the subject for now.

The rocks that littered the path dug into the soles of her bare feet, all the way up the cliff, and as she took her first few steps across the top of the cliff where her cottage was, she was all too aware of the sand and dirt that clung to her feet. She tugged on her braids and said, “You let her walk around with no shoes on, didn’t you? Like a spectacle... urgh, you’re not better than my mothers...”

Not far from her, Makoto stopped walking and looked at Touko from over his shoulder.

“You were wearing some sandals but we thought your feet might hurt if you wore them for too long so we lent Syo-san a pair of Kirigiri-san’s boots, and she took them off somewhere around here,” said Makoto. His gaze drifted and then, spotting something, his eyes widened and he pointed at something on the ground. “There they are!”

Near the edge of the cliff that overlooked Touko’s secluded section of the beach were a pair of boots that were dark purple, knee high and had an unnecessary amount of buckles on them. Touko approached the boots and picked them up. She inspected them for scuff marks and other damage, in case she would be pressured into buying replacements.

Syo had little regard for Touko’s things, which was still more regard than she had for everyone else’s things.

“I’m going to get changed,” Touko decided aloud. The skirt that she was wearing had been one of her favourite skirts. Had been. Not anymore. “You will have to come inside too...”

“H-Huh?” went Makoto.

“Don’t get any sick ideas!” Touko glared at him. “You will face the wall at all times and if you try to spy on me, I’ll turn you into a mole.”

He recoiled, springing back onto one foot and nearly tipping over. “You can do that?”

“Yes,” lied Touko. She motioned toward the door of her cottage with the cattle prod. “Now go in.”

Touko followed him inside but as soon as the room came into her view, she stopped, standing in the doorway. Yesterday, only a few items had been out of place, but since she last saw it, someone had ransacked her cottage. The papers that were on her desk were now spilled across the floor, along with jars and books that should have been on shelves.

Kyouko’s boots fell out of her hold. She began to whine.

“Syo-san kind of made a bit of a mess while she was searching for your spell book,” explained Makoto.

Her whine powered on.

“I can help tidy up,” he offered.

Touko’s whine was as strong as before.

Makoto’s eyebrows lowered.

“Please, Fukawa-san, it’s all right,” he said.
Her whine persevered.

He edged toward one of the walls and turned to face it. “I’ll just stand like this until you’re done.”

Touko finally stopped and cleared her throat.

“Y-Yes, just like that. Don’t move,” she said. She wandered over to her set of drawers for something that wasn’t too dirty. Because she didn’t socialise much, she hadn’t got into the habit of regularly washing her clothes or even herself, as performing those chores was tedious, and back in her hometown, her parents avoided spending time with her so they often weren’t there to harass her about getting clean.

Stink acted as a deterrent, and it meant that she didn’t have to see the scars on her thigh either. The scars on her left leg, shaped like tally marks, one mark for every person that Syo murdered. Touko shuddered. She unbuttoned her blouse and wiggled her skirt down her legs.

Her eyes burned into the back of Makoto’s head. “I bet you’re getting all sweaty and excited over there. I know what Man’s Greatest Ambition is...”

“I’m not going to-” Makoto started to say, but Touko interjected loudly.

“Don’t move!” she said.

“I wasn’t going to!” he insisted.

Touko pulled out a black tunic dress embroidered with white flowers and fake diamonds from the waist up. She shoved her head through it, almost getting stuck in the dress in her haste, but she managed to slip it into place without having to ask Makoto for help. Before she decided on footwear, she retrieved a towel draped over the door knob to the bathroom and rubbed as much sand and dirt off her feet as possible. For shoes, she opted for a pair of maroon loafers, worn over white ankle socks, rather than Kyouko’s boots.

Now that Touko was appropriately dressed, Makoto could turn away from the wall, but she didn’t tell him to and instead gathered up some of the jars that Syo had strewn over the floor. Some of the jars contained ingredients while others contained potions for certain spells. None of them were broken, thankfully, so she wouldn’t have to trouble herself with cleaning up broken glass. Her satchel couldn’t fit as many things in it as her basket, but with her basket lost, Touko had no choice but to use it. She reached over the desk to the back wall where several empty vials were slotted into some racks, and she poured a bit of the liquid from a few of the jars into different vials.

“I’m ready,” said Touko as she fastened her satchel, vials plugged up safely inside it, and she positioned the strap over her shoulder.

Makoto faced her again. “Are you sure you want to come? Last night was really dangerous.”

“I said I’m coming,” Touko snapped, and she ushered him out of her cottage by making shooing motions with her hands. She stepped out last and closed the door after her.

Rather than set off immediately, she turned back to the door.

“H-Hey,” she said quietly.

“Is something wrong?” asked Makoto.

Touko trained her eyes on the door. “Yesterday, some of my things were out of place. Did you or
that Kirigiri snoop around my cottage?”

“What? No, we didn’t. I promise,” he said.

She turned to him. Makoto was still there.

“... Whatever,” she said, not meeting his eyes. “Let’s just go. Y-You can fill me in on what Syo experienced along the way.”
“We promised Kirigiri-san that we would wait at the inn for her,” Makoto told Touko, repeating himself almost as many times as his feet met the ground in a step toward the town. He glanced over his shoulder. The beach where he first laid eyes on a real mermaid had since ducked out of view, and even Touko’s cottage blurred into a smudge on the sky.

Touko huffed. “I knew you weren’t taking me seriously!”

“Huh?” he said as he turned back to her.

Her face twitched. “If you were, you would remember that I’m my own person! Though you might have made a promise with Kirigiri or... her, you did nothing of the sort with me!”

He shrunk away from her.

“Yes, that’s true,” he admitted. “But if we’re not at the inn at two o’clock, Kirigiri-san is going to call in backup.”

Touko stopped walking altogether.

“W-What?” she shrieked, and the volume of her outburst induced a flinch in Makoto that forced him into a halt. Her satchel, filled with vials of potions for spells, clattered as they were knocked against her leg as she flailed. She rounded on him, fingers curled, like she was about to pounce on him and attack.

The cattle prod was still in her custody.

Makoto waved his hands frantically. “It was as a safety measure!”

A howl rose out from Touko’s lips, though it was already dying when it first left her body. Still, it didn’t reach the point of death, and hissed through gritted teeth.

“We’ll get your book back, honest.” He patted the air. “I know it’s important to you.”

Her howl dissolved into gargling that she snuffed out in seconds, but her throat still itched and burned. Makoto didn’t understand just how vital it was that she got it back. It contained all sorts of information and without it to reference, she could barely consider herself a witch. Her research into spells, like the one for Byakuya, would be put back potentially years, and he might decide to go elsewhere, abandoning her.

Not only that. No, the situation was much more dire than that. Potentially, whoever had it could hand it over to the authorities, who could lead a witch hunt against her, or the thief could find her and blackmail her into doing whatever they wanted. Celes knew where she lived, so it was only a matter of time. At least if she had Makoto and Kyouko with her, she stood more of a chance of getting it back. She could use them to her advantage.

“We can meet Kirigiri at the circus,” Touko said in an attempt at some kind of a compromise, fidgeting her hands and shuffling her feet on the spot.

“Fukawa-san...” Makoto started, but he shut up when she fired a glare at him.

“W-What?” she asked. She separated her hands and thrashed them around in fists. Not only did her
throat burn, but her face felt aflame too. “Just a m-moment ago, you were claiming to know my spell
book is important to me, yet you think I want to twiddle my thumbs at that depraved inn...!”

Touko groaned and held onto either side of her head, trying to contain the pounding within it that
might burst and splatter her brain across the ground. Makoto reached toward her shoulder but seemed
to change his mind, as he withdrew his hand before contact had been made.

“Knowing Kirigiri-san, she probably has it by now,” he tried to reassure her. “The sooner we get
back to the inn, the sooner you will have it back. Okay? Kirigiri-san left for the circus some time ago,
and she’s really stealthy so we should go to the inn.”

It certainly wasn’t okay but they resumed their trek to town. Touko was still scowling when they
arrived at the inn, and the memories that she associated with the place did nothing to chip away her
expression. In fact, her scowl became more evident. They sat just inside, by the door, just the two of
them. No Kyouko.

“She’ll be here really soon,” said Makoto with no real authority, seated opposite Touko. “Are you
hungry?”

Touko averted her eyes. She had lost track of time but the rumbling in her stomach that emerged in
waves, just infrequent enough that she thought each rumble would be the last, suggested that it was
around noon. A time close to it on either side, though it wouldn’t surprise her if they hadn’t fed Syo.

“I don’t have my purse,” she said.

“I’ll pay,” he replied.

She drew in her gaze and frowned at him.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” she said.

He had been scratching his chin, looking away, but now he stopped and stared back at her. “... Huh?”

Of course she would be the one who would have to say it. That would be the perfect way to
humiliate her. Touko leaned forward a bit and said tersely, “This isn’t a date.”

Makoto jerked his head back. “Ack! No! I mean, I did think that you might not have any money...
but I want to do this because we’re fri-”

He cut himself off as soon as she threw up her hand.

“Get me some salmon and cucumber sushi rolls,” she said. She drew in a deep breath. As she
released it, she felt slightly calmer, and she could even make eye contact with him. “That, or
something similar. I-It has to be packaged.”

Makoto directed a nod at her, rose from his chair and left through the door. Touko remained seated,
with nothing to do while she waited for him to return but roll the cattle prod over in her hands as she
sneaked looks at the other people in the bar area. Four cloaked figures sat at the bar on stools, all in a
line. One of the figures in the middle raised a flask to their lips and took several draughts from it.
Each noisy gulp induced a shudder in Touko but because she refused to communicate with them, she
grinded her teeth together and rocked back and forth in her chair until the person smacked their lips,
a noise that caused her to double over and scratch her nails against her table.

“So, where are you heading off to?” asked the bartender, who Touko recognised to be the employee
that she met on her last trip here. She glowered.

A cloaked figure at one end of the row accepted a pint of frothy beer from the bartender.

“Business,” croaked the same cloaked figure. All wore matching hunter green cloaks, impeding on Touko’s ability to distinguish them, so she resorted to simply giving each a number based on where they were positioned. The one that last spoke would be Four, the person furthest away from her.

The bartender rested his elbow onto the counter and quirked his brow. “Business, huh? What business?”

“Got some buyers,” said Four, still with a raspy quality to his voice. “Got a good deal on some wool and medicinal herbs. Then we’re taking to the sea.”

With all that surplus wool, they ought to have been able to fashion themselves less gaudy clothes. That was what Touko thought to herself.

“Well, watch out for pirates,” said the bartender. “You don’t want to bump into the Pirates of Hope.”

“Please. They’re not real,” scoffed One.

“If you say so. Anyway, you have fun with that,” said the bartender. “Do any of you guys want to buy another round of drinks?”

They shook their heads. The bartender sighed as he turned his head, he spotted Touko.

“What about you?” he asked, peering over at her. “What are you doing?”

She tightened her hold on the cattle prod. “L-Leave me alone!”

Her exclamation turned the heads of the cloaked figures. Five pairs of beady eyes, including those of the bartender, drilled into Touko, who seized her braids and tugged on them.

“Hey, if you’re going to loiter here, you should at least buy a room,” said the bartender coldly.

“I’m only here because the person I’m with has a room here!” she snarled. “I d-don’t want to talk to any of you, so you better shut your mouths before I... I...”

The bartender rubbed the back of his neck, grimacing. “Noisy...”

However, Cloaked Figures One and Two looked on with smirks.

“Go on, what do you plan to do?” asked Two.

Threats of transformations into slugs and newfound predispositions to bad luck bubbled in her mouth, but none could be allowed to spill out. At best, they would think she was bluffing and at worse, they would realise she was telling the truth and she would be chased out of town or burned alive for being a witch.

With unorthodox outcomes like that, she pressed her lips firmly together, resulting in her face getting more and more hot and pink.

“Well?” goaded Two. “What’s a girl like you gonna do?”

“I h-have a cattle prod,” she warned and so they knew she wasn’t lying, she brandished it at them. The cloaked figures recoiled, despite being sat a safe distance away.
“And I have the number for the local police,” countered the bartender. He jabbed the air, pointing at the door. “Get the hell out of here before I prove that I’m not bluffing like you are. Go on, beat it.”

Touko squeaked.

“Tch. Women,” said One, rolling his eyes. Murmurs of agreement reverberated. She jolted to her feet and stormed over to the door. A bell jingled over the door as it opened and slammed shut.

In Touko’s head, a sensation like static from a radio buzzed. When Makoto walked up to the inn, he stumbled upon Touko squatting outside, next to the door.

“Um…” Makoto went, pinching shut the top of three paper bags.

“You took your time,” she sneered. She rose to a more dignified height and noticed that she was a good few centimetres taller than him, which brought a small smile to her face. As soon as he tried to copy it, though, she wiped it off her features and stared off into the distance, hands tucked beneath her jaw. “What time is it?”

He pulled up his sleeve, revealing a wristwatch that she didn’t know he owned.

“A bit past noon,” he said. “Kirigiri-san must be on her way back... Shall we go in?”

“Let’s eat outside,” she replied quickly. “Though someone like me belongs hidden in a dark corner, I want to be out in the open so everyone can see what kind of person you are... but I bet a coward like you wouldn’t dare trying something dodgy where people can see you.”

The market square, located nearby, branched off into many streets, some that contained benches, so Touko flounced off in that direction. Kyouko could wait for them now. It would serve her right.

“But Kirigiri-san,” said Makoto, and he reached a hand toward Touko, but she was too far away now and she put more distance between them with every step. He sighed and chased after her.

Last night, at the market square, the plaza had been barren, only a ripped poster giving it any sort of colour, but today, on this Saturday afternoon, it was packed for the farmers’ market that took place once every two weeks. Makoto fell into an awkward jog to keep up with Touko as she powered through the throng of shoppers and wound through the rows of stands selling goods. One stand boasted black bamboo bread, infused with charcoal, that contrasted greatly with the brightly coloured fruit, vegetables, and fish predominantly present.

As they walked past the stand with the bread, Makoto slowed, but Touko didn’t so he reluctantly continued on. Touko knew that the only seats were beside a catering trailer owned by a mother and son duo who had matching beady eyes and chubby cheeks.

“What about there?” asked Makoto, holding one paper bag in one hand and two in his other hand, but he had prised away a finger from the lone bag so he could point toward the four tables just in front of the aforementioned catering trailer. One table was free.

“I already have food,” said Touko.

“Oh, do you have to buy something to sit there?” asked Makoto.

“Obviously,” she replied. “Besides, I’m not going to sit there so that swine son can leer at me as he conjures up images of me inserting food into my mouth without my permission...!”

How fitting it was that painted on the trailer was a pig garbed in a chef’s attire. She stuck up her nose
and led Makoto, or rather, he followed her across the plaza to a street of storefronts but more importantly, to an empty bench with hardly any people around as a bonus.

A few people passed by as they sat on the bench, not giving the pair anything more than a quick glance that might have been meant for the bench itself. Makoto left a small space between him and Touko. Not enough that anyone could fit between them, but enough that it was unlikely he planned to make a move on her.

“Here,” he said, holding out one of the paper bags toward her.

Touko bit on the inside of her cheeks as she took the bag from him. She set it onto her lap, along with the cattle prod, and spread the opening of the bag slowly, a knot in her stomach. Inside, she found a plastic container with sushi rolls in it. A sheet of nori was wrapped around each one. Within the dark green outer layer were grains of white rice, and in the centre of all that were orange, almost pink salmon pieces and shreds of cucumber.

Just like she wanted.

That had been all he bought for her. No longer needing the paper bag, she crumpled it up into a ball and held it in her fist. Beside her, Makoto dug into his bento, which at a glance, appeared to consist of marinated salmon, steamed white rice seasoned with sesame seeds and dark green vegetables with hints of orange and red.

She gazed down at her lunch, gripping the plastic container.

“H-Hey,” she said. “Naegi.”

He turned his head toward her. “Yeah?”

“Do you think I should save a roll for Togami-kun, or would feeding him one be cannibalism? B-Because they have fish in them...”

Makoto didn’t reply. She allowed ten seconds to elapse before deciding that he wasn’t going to answer by himself, and then she lifted her chin to investigate.

His cheeks were puffed out, very much like he was trying not to laugh.

Heat flushed into her face. “W-What’s so funny? Are you making fun of me?”

He gasped, panting a bit. “N-No, Fukawa-san. It’s just... what you said is pretty funny.”

“What?”

“I just...” Makoto shook his head and swallowed down his laughter. “Never mind.”

She did mind though. A lot.

“But I don’t think it would be cannibalism,” he added. “Fish eat other fish, and he’s not a fish. He’s a... mermaid.”

Touko clicked her tongue but didn’t say anything and opened her plastic container, leaving Makoto to fill in the silence that grew between them.

“So, uh, how did you meet Togami-kun?” asked Makoto.

“H-He approached me,” she paused, counting in her head, “a week and a half ago.”
It felt like longer.

She suddenly squinted at him.

“Why are you so interested?” she asked, feeling suspicious.

Makoto itched himself behind one ear.

“Being friends with a mermaid must be really cool,” he explained to the witch that might as well have been an extra crack in the pavement, from Touko’s perspective. “It’s a shame that you can only meet up at the beach... Togami-kun’s really missing out on the action. Not, ah, like that’s a bad thing...”

The plastic container that still had her sushi in it crackled in her tightening grip.

“Cool,” she mumbled to herself. “How... j-juvenile...”

Makoto either didn’t hear her remark or elected to ignore it, because he checked his wristwatch, rolled up the top of his paper bag and jumped to his feet. She, meanwhile, remained seated, looking up at him with her face slightly scrunched.

“I refuse to eat in that inn,” she said, guessing that was what he was going to propose they go do.

“Can’t we at least eat outside of the inn if you don’t want to go inside?” said Makoto. “Kirigiri-san will be back soon and... you know...”

“I know, I know,” interrupted Touko. She closed her plastic container of food, not bothering to click its lid securely into place, and opened up the paper bag that she got it out from, that she had compressed into a ball. It was significantly more wrinkly than before once she flattened it out but that didn’t affect its purpose, so she slipped the container into it and stood up.

Kyouko wasn’t outside of the inn to greet them when they arrived and though Touko allowed Makoto to take them back there, going inside again was something that she absolutely refused to do, even if she couldn’t go in anyway due to her indefinite ban. Touko slumped down by the door, into a similar position to the one that Makoto had found her in before.

He didn’t crouch down with her, instead leaning against the wall, still standing up.

After a few minutes spent picking out grains of rice from one of her sushi rolls and nibbling on its nori, Touko asked, “W-What time is it?”

Makoto tugged up the sleeve of his jumper. “Almost two o’clock.”

Touko squirmed a bit. The back of her throat ached and her stomach felt unsettled, as if the heaviness in it was stirring.

“Kirigiri better find my book,” she said, too worried to make it sound more like a threat. “It’s o-one of a kind, you know.”

“Really?” asked Makoto.

“Yes, really!” Touko jeered.

He turned his head away. She winced.

“It... belonged to my mentor,” she added, not as vehemently. Makoto didn’t respond. Touko thrust
her fingers through her dry, brittle hair and bowed her head forward, and spoke no more.

Though she didn’t have a clock or a watch and she had no desire to regularly query Makoto on the exact time, they didn’t have to wait long until Makoto stepped away from the inn. His movement caught Touko’s eye and she followed his gaze instinctively, to one end of the street. She nudged up her glasses.

“Kirigiri-san!” Makoto called out. A large smile spread across his face, far bigger than any that he aimed at Touko.

Hearing her name, Kyouko hastened over faster to them. Touko stood up.

“My book,” said Touko as soon as Kyouko reunited with them, unable to see it on Kyouko’s person. “W-Where is it?”

Kyouko scanned Touko’s body, down then up, and finished her examination on Touko’s narrowed eyes.

“You’re back,” said Kyouko.

“Don’t change the subject! Where is my book?” asked Touko.

“I investigated the grounds but it appears that someone has picked it up,” said Kyouko with a shrug. Makoto noticed Touko’s mouth open and said quickly, “Please don’t panic, Fukawa-san.”

The whine that he anticipated did not come out. A shorter growl did.

“I need my book back,” said Touko. She held up the cattle prod.

Kyouko’s eyes darted to the object.

“Why does she have that?” asked Kyouko sharply.

Makoto cringed and lifted a finger in what made for pitiful defence. “It’s a long story...”

“Exactly!” Touko said in rare agreement. “Y-You just didn’t search hard enough... In fact, I bet you just n-napped...”

“Fukawa-san,” Kyouko said, but Touko continued rambling.

“... It’s going to be there, it has to be there...”

“Fukawa-san,” said Kyouko, louder this time, enough to distract Touko. Kyouko cleared her throat. “As I was saying, I suspect someone picked it up. In all likelihood, it was either Celes or the Seer, and there is a good chance that they took it back to their trailer. I investigated the backstage area thoroughly and it wasn’t there.”

“S-So we just need to break into their trailers, right?” asked Touko, hands wrung together with the cattle prod in the middle of them.

“Right,” said Kyouko. “The best time to do this would be during their last performance, when most of them will be in the circus tent.”

“We need to plan it thoroughly,” said Touko. “That Celes, s-she refused to be near the Oowada Brothers, so until it is her slot, she’ll stay in her trailer, and she only performs in the second show of
each day... and then when she does perform, those bikers have to leave through the front entrance. I overheard them...”

Makoto widened his eyes.

Kyouko cupped her chin.

“In that case, we will have to wait until Celes has left the trailers before we go in,” said Kyouko. She hesitated. “Thank you, Fukawa-san.”

Up until this point, each time Touko had flushed around Makoto or Kyouko, it had been an uncomfortable kind of flush that caused her skin to prickle, but this one felt like warm hands pressed against her cheeks.

“W-Wait,” said Makoto, cutting the moment short. He punched his palm. “There’s a show going on right now, isn’t there? The advertisement said they perform twice a day, and today’s first show began an hour ago.”

“That’s right,” said Kyouko.

Touko’s eyes protruded and it took a good deal of restraint not to pull on her braids. She just flung up her arms. “T-Then why did you come back without bothering to go to the trailers?”

“It’s too light,” said Kyouko. “It’d be best to do it when it’s dark. Besides, you said that Celes would have been in her trailer.”

That was something which Kyouko hadn't known though.

“Y-You realise this is our last chance, don’t you?” asked Touko, not calming down.

“I do,” said Kyouko.

“If you m-mess up...”

“I won’t,” said Kyouko. Her usual coolness faded away. “I will retrieve your book and discover what the monster is, and I will use that information to find out who the monster is and I will not only solve this mystery but ensure that the culprit will harm no one ever again!”

Kyouko nearly shouted the last sentence and Touko stared at her with no idea on how to retort to any of that. Even Makoto bit his lip, eyes fixed on Kyouko as well. Touko shivered and purposely looked off to the side.

“You’re... very determined, aren’t you?” said Touko. It didn’t seem like Kyouko intended on punching Touko or committing an alternative act of violence, so an inopportune smirk spread across Touko’s face. “A-Acting so hot and bothered... You have a lot of pride, is that it? Or are you in it for that thrill you s-so desperately crave? Euphoria...?”

Makoto whirled around, meaning to leap to his precious Kyouko’s defence, but Kyouko got in first.

“I met the monster long ago,” said Kyouko. Touko’s smirk weakened. “I was young, five years old, and it looked right at me before it left my house, leaving me unscathed. I remember seeing my reflection in its red eyes... my reflection was upside down. And though I was unharmed, my mother, however, was less fortunate...”

Kyouko didn’t cry, but her solemn face gave the impression that she already had, at several points
buried in shallow ground in her past.

“Even if it takes me until the end of my life, I will pursue that irredeemable monster,” she whispered. “But I will never forgive myself if I let this opportunity slip through my fingers.”

And so, later that day, Touko stood looking at the circus tent with its red and white candy cane stripes, lit up in patches from string lights but stained grey by the night where the glow from string lights didn’t reach.

Like on her other visits here, it was night time, like on that first night and the previous night, but she wasn’t alone. To her left was Kyouko and to her right, Makoto. Kyouko broke away from their almost huddle first. A few steps in, she paused and glanced over her shoulder, flapping her hand and beckoning them to follow.

Familiar music by that of a wind band screeched inside the tent, within the dome of rough fabric. Touko skimmed her palm across the tent for a few paces. The music was cheery though for some reason, it made Touko feel queasy. She retracted her hand and clenched it into a fist over her heart.

“That is the act by the trapeze artist, Aoi Asahina,” said Kyouko in a gruff voice between whispering and talking.

Now Touko remembered. During Aoi’s act, she had needed to pop out to get some fresh air.

“Celes arrived at the tent during this act,” said Touko.

“So that means she’s either in there or getting ready to go over?” asked Makoto.

Kyouko nodded. “We should confirm where she is before going over to the trailers.”

Because it was dark, the ground lights had been activated so the three of them cast shadows against the tent. When they had crept some way around the back of the tent, Touko carefully removed her satchel and laid it on the ground so the vials inside wouldn’t clink together.

The flap at the back of the tent was harder to spot on this occasion not just because Celes wasn’t there like last time to disappear through it, which would give a clear indication where the flap must have been, but also because, once they inched some way around the back of the tent and discerned it, they found it had been properly fastened shut. There was no gap to spy through and loud music pulsed, concealing any individual voices backstage.

Kyouko tugged on Makoto’s arm and the pair slunk a short distance away from the tent.

Though not invited, Touko followed, cold hands clasped together under her jaw.

“Did you hear her?” asked Makoto in a low tone. Kyouko shook her head. He turned to Touko. “Fukawa-san, you’re a witch, right?”

Touko gave him a wary look. “I am. D-Don’t tell me you forgot!”

“Couldn’t you cast a spell that lets you see through the tent?” said Makoto. “You brought some vials with you in your satchel, didn’t you? What sort of spells can you do?”

Her face twitched in surprise but hardened seconds later. She separated her hands and tucked a thumb underneath her jaw. The rest of the fingers on that hand curled against her chin.

“There’s one spell that I remember which could help us,” said Touko, and she padded over to her
discarded satchel.

Once there, she dropped to one knee beside it and browsed through the vials as best she could, relying on the ground lights more than the string lights on the tent to see what she was doing. Touko held up each vial individually so she could read the small writing they had on their labels. The fifth vial that she raised didn’t go back into the satchel like those that preceded it, but stayed in her hand.

“... This one,” she said, mostly to herself. With some effort, she tweaked off the lid, and then she positioned the vial to her lips but she didn’t drink from it.

She stared at Makoto and Kyouko, who were watching her closely.

“I might need assistance afterwards, so be ready for that. And don’t leave my satchel behind or there’ll be hell to pay,” Touko told them. Not waiting for them to agree or even for them to react, she said, “P-Pepitus,” and tilted the vial so its contents spilled into her mouth.

As she drank, she focused her mind on an image of the circus tent, of the back of it with its flap and the orbs of light dotted on and around the structure. A burning sensation like flames licked at her eyes that she quickly closed now. Her face crumpled. Only when the feeling felt more like an annoyance than pain did she open her eyes again.

For a few seconds, a haze hung over her vision, but her fiery gaze swiftly disintegrated it. Touko stood up, trembling faintly, and directed her eyes toward the back of the tent. Like the haze, the back of the tent fell apart, but this was only in her vision, not in reality. The back of the tent seemed to succumb to flames, and on the other side, Celes and the Seer played a game of cards at a small, circular table. The same one that Celes drank tea at, to be precise.

“They’re in there,” said Touko. She touched a hand to her forehead. “C-Celes... The Seer... I can see them...”

Makoto gasped at a foolishly risky volume. Any reaction from Kyouko was nonverbal.

Still holding her forehead, Touko stumbled backward and waved an arm, signalling for assistance. While the scene happening backstage was incredibly vivid, the rest of her surroundings had gone almost completely white.

“What language was that?” asked Makoto. Someone grabbed onto her arm and she presumed it was him. It could have been Kyouko, but the direction that his voice came from matched up.

“A lot of the spells that my tutor created aren’t in Japanese,” explained Touko. “S-She thought that having them in another language would make it harder for most other people to notice them, and it would help focus the caster’s mind on the spell...”

Touko’s headache throbbed harder.

“But that doesn’t matter right now,” hissed Touko, wiggling.

“Fukawa-san’s right,” said Kyouko, not as loud as Makoto, so she was either further away, sensibly talking quieter than Makoto or both. “I have your satchel, Fukawa-san. Let’s go.”

Touko wrenched her arm away from Makoto so she could hold onto his arm rather than the other way around.

“It takes a few minutes to wear off, so you’ll have to lead me,” she said. “Don’t get any funny ideas though, because all of my other senses are perfectly intact. H-Heightened, even!”
As a unit, they ran across the fairgrounds, over to the metal fence where on the other side lay the trailers. The side effects of the spell still lingered in Touko’s eyes but she managed to not fall over, even if she staggered the whole way.

They stopped with a lurch.

“W-What is it?” asked Touko with a yelp. In her lurch, her knees bumped into something hard. Something metal.

“You’ll need to step over the fence,” said Makoto. “Do you need help, Fukawa-san?”

“You don’t have to rub it in,” she snapped. Touko released Makoto’s arm and reached forward. At first, her hands came into contact with thin air, but then she lowered them, bending her knees as she did so, until her hands pressed into the short metal fence that while she could climb over it with little trouble, stumbling upon it would have resulted in a number of bruises.

She gripped the top of the fence tighter and swung her leg over the top, stepping over. The thuds that she heard nearby indicated that Makoto and Kyouko had done the same.

“Isn’t there a gate?” grumbled Touko.

“Probably,” admitted Kyouko. “Fukawa-san, how are your eyes doing?”

Touko’s face pulled into a pout. The white expanse that had filled her vision melted away like snow and though it left behind solid darkness, it was darkness that others could see too. Still, she hugged herself, shivering.

“We’ll be inside in a moment,” said Makoto, as if the temperature was what was wrong.

No light so much as peeked out from the drawn blinds of the trailers and though her vision had been restored, Touko seized Makoto’s sleeve and stuck close to him as they followed Kyouko to the closest trailer, Kyouko holding Makoto’s other arm by the hand.
They investigated the trailer closest to them first. It was locked, and Touko expected one of them to request another spell from her, but Kyouko let go of Makoto’s arm and wordlessly fumbled with the door. Touko released her hold of Makoto as well and tried to peek over his shoulder to find out what Kyouko was doing, exactly, but Touko could only see the back of her.

Roughly two minutes later, Kyouko made another attempt to open the door and this time succeeded. She filed in first, followed by Makoto and then Touko. As soon as Touko stepped inside, her nose wrinkled and she gagged at the stench of wet, decaying rubbish. Of rotten eggs and dead fish. Touko buried her nose in her elbow, so her nose was instead stuffed full with the musty smell of her dress sleeve. In her next step, she crushed an empty paperboard carton under her foot, a box the size of that which cereal came in.

Her cottage wasn’t the tidiest of places, with clothes that needed washing not always put away, with books, some written by Touko, some written by others, stacked against walls or with papers on and around her desk. This place, however, was a different kind of mess. It was a nauseating mess, rather than a cluttered mess, and didn’t have a vase containing lily of the valley like her cottage did to try to offset its surroundings.

“Close the door,” demanded Kyouko, who also sounded like she had hidden her nose in her elbow to defend herself against the smell.

Spoken in such an authoritative yet soft tone by Kyouko, Touko shut the door before she could think to complain about being ordered what to do. Clothing rustled and moments later, light burst out from Kyouko’s hand.

More specifically, the torch in her possession.

“Y-You could have done that the whole time?” Touko whined.

Kyouko whipped her finger up to her lips and shushed Touko, who again obeyed before she could think about whether or not she wanted to oblige.

“I didn’t want to draw attention to us,” explained Kyouko calmly. She started aiming the bulb of her torch at different places around them.

Inside was not spacious, with there being only two rooms and because all of them were still quite near the door, so Kyouko’s elbows bumped and brushed against Makoto as she adjusted her angle. He moved back to give her space and came too close to Touko, almost squashing her against the door.

“I-It’s not my fault that I hate the dark,” said Touko but to her chagrin, Kyouko and Makoto opted to disperse and rummage through the trailer rather than actively listen to her. If she got the cattle prod out from her satchel, then things might have been different, but she simply huffed for the time being.

To their right was a low table with a sofa seats around three of its sides, ahead of them was a small kitchen area beside a bit of the wall that jutted toward them, with a door to what must have led to the bathroom, and further to the left, a bunk bed and more sofa seats around a table smaller than the one on the right side.

Touko gulped and raised her hands as fists, her mind on how much she despised the dark. “M-My mothers used to lock me in closets or throw me down wells t-to see-”
The light stopped flickering, for Kyouko had focused her torch on one spot. On the low table to Touko’s right, Makoto and Touko, the latter of whom decided to cut short her explanation, shuffled up to Kyouko and peered over at what grabbed her attention.

A pile of chunky bones rested on the table, all marked with pinks and reds and shades that could have been either of those colours. Touko flinched and yelped.

“Gack!” went Touko. She slapped her hands over her eyes. “G-Give me a warning next time!”

“They’re not human bones,” remarked Kyouko, like that made it any better.

Touko spread apart her fingers, keeping her hands on her face, and saw that the other two had bent down a little to investigate. Neither of them successfully blocked her view of the bones. Even though Kyouko claimed the bones weren’t from a human, Touko still averted her eyes as she sidled over to them.

“Those are beef leg bones,” said Makoto once Touko was standing right behind them. “I used to have a dog and we’d give him those to chew. You’re meant to remove them when they’ve been chewed down into small chunks, otherwise the dog might choke... but these ones don’t seem to have got to that point yet.”

“You think they’re for a dog? S-Shouldn’t there be a dog here then?” asked Touko through her hands.

“None of the acts in the circus involved a dog,” commented Kyouko. “But I trust Naegi-kun on this and I am inclined to agree... These bones were likely for a dog. Someone must be supervising the dog while its owners perform in the circus.”

“Owners?” repeated Touko.

“There’s a bunk bed here,” replied Kyouko.

“Whatever,” said Touko with a roll of her eyes. “I d-doubt that this trailer belongs to Celes, and she’s the most suspicious out of everyone here. Let’s find out if this is the Seer’s trailer and then go... I’ll throw up if I’m subjected to this place for much longer...”

“Weren’t the Oowada Brothers there as well?” said Makoto suddenly. “They could have taken your book.”

Touko tore her hands off her face and rounded on him, but realising that he had put forth a valid point, she didn’t shout, just squeaked. Somehow, Touko had forgotten about their presence at the incident where she, no, where Makoto and Kyouko lost her book, and thinking back, Touko remembered that Kyouko had not listed the Oowada Brothers as candidates to who could have taken her book.

She whipped her head toward Kyouko now.

“I doubt they took it, but I suppose it’s plausible,” said Kyouko in an infuriatingly indifferent tone that Touko bared her teeth at. Kyouko paid her no heed and rubbed her chin in thought. “There must be more clues as to who the owner of this trailer is. Let’s continue our search, but we can’t linger here long.”

Makoto signalled his understanding with a nod and sifted through the rubbish on the floor nearby. Meanwhile, Kyouko lumbered over to the kitchen area, stepping on Touko’s foot on her way.
“H-Hey!” said Touko, even though it didn’t hurt. Still, the principle.

“I’m leaning toward this being the Oowada Brothers’ trailer,” said Kyouko, her back acting as a shield against Touko’s glare. She walked over to the bunk bed and pinched the mattresses, studying them by the light of her torch, and the blankets were found to be tattered and shabby too. “There is a bunk bed, with both bunks appearing to be in use, and of all the performers that we’ve seen, this would make the most sense for them other than Monobear and Monomi.”

Touko scoffed. “You remembered the names of those things.”

“They’re not hard to remember,” said Makoto, and the cheek of what he said earned him Touko’s glare. He raised a wilting finger and added meekly, “W-We’ve been to their shows several times.”

She turned her head away sharply, frowning.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if this dump belonged to the Oowada Brothers,” said Touko, and she jerked her head. “Celes compared them to ‘mutts’ a few times, and didn’t even want to be near them...”

It could have been because Celes hated dogs and as the Oowada Brothers owned a dog, they smelled like one too, but maybe... maybe there was more to it. Her eyes widened and her hands flew up to her heart.

“W-What if...?” Touko trailed off.

Kyouko, by the kitchen counter, stopped moving. Makoto stared at Touko.

“What if they don’t have a dog?” Touko said, wringing her hands together. “W-What if they... are...”

“... the dogs?” finished Kyouko, reaching the same conclusion. She straightened up, withdrew her hands from the ripped food packaging on the kitchen counter and spun around. If someone like Kyouko seemed to be considering this as a possibility, that meant Touko had to be onto something.

Touko grinned, shivering though not with fear or due to the cold.

“Celes transformed into a cat too,” added Touko, bouncing her heels as she spoke. “Not just at the circus. She transformed outside of my cottage. It’s not an act. She’s a shapeshifter of some kind... I thought she could be a bakeneko, but what Naegi described didn’t sound like them.. M-Maybe the Oowada Brothers are some kind of shapeshifters too.”

Makoto’s mouth stretched out first in shock and confusion, but then his lips formed a smile. Kyouko nodded along with the rises and falls in Touko’s voice.

“Let’s hold onto that thought for now,” said Kyouko, becoming the last person to smile. “I don’t think your book is here, Fukawa-san. Shall we go onto the next trailer?”

Touko arrived at the door first and fiddled with the handle until she swung the door open and poked her head out. No one seemed to be nearby. She hopped down onto the grass and took a few steps forward so the other two could leave as well. Kyouko took charge again, torch shooting light at the area just beyond her toes, and she led them to the next trailer. Like the previous one, it was locked, but like the previous one, Kyouko unlocked it.

“We need to pick up the pace,” said Kyouko as they entered in single file. This trailer was nowhere near as squalid as the Oowada’s Brother trailer. On the contrary, nothing was lying around or seemed out of place.
They spread out to investigate. There was also a bunk bed here, though the bottom one was bare while the top bunk was fully made and had been fitted with bed posts, wooden and carved and tipped with replicas of Monobear’s head. No such bed posts existed in the Oowada’s Brothers’ trailer. Touko turned around and sighted a metal cage on the low table on the left side of the trailer, near the bunk beds. It sat on top of what appeared to be thick grey pelt of an animal that Touko refused to look at for long enough to recognise it, its arms and head still attached, almost black, tinted brown. Straw covered the floor of the cage.

Curious, Touko approached it.

“Is there anything in that dog crate?” asked Makoto.

Touko shook her head. Then she said, “No,” in case Kyouko’s torch didn’t light her up enough for him to be able to see her.

Kyouko strode over and opened the cage door, which was unlocked. Frowning, she slipped her hand into the straw and proceeded to search through it even though Touko had said there was nothing in it.

“W-What are you doing?” asked Touko with disgust. “It probably has droppings in it...!”

Probably because of what Touko said, Makoto shrunk away from the cage, shoulders pulled upward. Kyouko retracted her hand from the straw and held up what at first glance seemed to be a toy wand, but on closer inspection, it turned out to be a wooden spoon painted pink with a paper star glued onto the shallow bowl.

“Is that a magic wand?” said Makoto.

“Of course it isn’t!” snapped Touko. “Wands aren’t magical. The o-only thing I can think of that a ‘wand’ could do is help you concentrate on visualising spells. And look at it!”

She jabbed at the air with her finger.

“I-It’s so pink and fairy-like and stereotypical! Obviously it’s a fake made by some wannabe,” she said, feeling sick by being in the same room as such an offensive thing. Touko pressed her hands either side of her head, distressed.

“Whatever it is, it was hidden well,” said Kyouko, twirling it between her fingers with more dexterity than someone wearing gloves would be expected to have.

Makoto’s brow creased. “If it’s not a real wand, then why hide it?”

Kyouko stopped twirling the wand and looked at him seriously.

“Naegi-kun, why do people hide things?” she asked.

He blinked but soon recovering, he suggested, “So... other people don’t know about them...?”

“That’s right,” she said with a small smile. “I believe this is Monobear’s trailer that it shares with Monomi, and Monomi hid this toy in the straw so Monobear would not find it and take it away.”

Remembering Monobear’s treatment of Monomi during the show, Touko said, “S-So... Monobear neglects and abuses that rabbit offstage too...”

“It’s consistent, at least,” said Makoto.
For a moment, Touko could only stare at him. Then she began rubbing her palms against her ears, having not lowered her hands from her head since she raised them roughly a minute ago.

“Eeugh, are you seriously complimenting the bear on that?” she asked. Makoto cringed. “Don’t... say things like this...”

Kyouko cleared her throat and stowed the wand back in the straw, ensuring that it was not visible before she closed the door to the cage.

Next, they checked the cabinets across the back wall, either side of the door to the bathroom, as well as the wardrobe beside the sink in the kitchen area, all of which didn’t have Touko’s spell book in them. One cabinet did contain a whip but Touko left it alone, and she ended up gravitating toward Monomi’s cage. She could barely see because Kyouko had directed her torch’s light at the cabinet that she was rifling through, so Touko wrapped her fingers around a bar of the cage and waited for either Makoto or Kyouko to announce something.

They didn’t.

“A cage,” Touko mumbled to herself, and a sudden surge of anger flushed heat through her body. Her face tightened and she tugged on the cage. It didn’t budge, so she shook it harder, moving it out of its original position.

Makoto, almost a monotone silhouette next to Kyouko, froze. Kyouko stood up and aimed her torch at Touko, which lit up more of Makoto’s details.

“Everything has to be how it was when we found it before we can leave,” said Kyouko. She headed over to Touko, who attempted to amend the position of the cage before Kyouko came over and did so herself.

To work out where the cage had been originally, Touko examined the grey pelt for any scuffs, but she didn’t get very far before she faltered. Kyouko had drawn close enough with her torch that Touko could see the pelt better. It had hairs, roughly a centimetre and a half long that, when Touko forced her twitching hand to stroke its sagging head, she found to be soft.

“T-This pelt,” said Touko.

Kyouko shot a quick look at the grey pelt. “I don’t see a lump, so your book won’t be in there.”

“It’s from a seal,” said Touko, and she withdrew her hand from it.

“Poor seal,” remarked Makoto.

Touko’s jaw clenched.

“It’s a selkie’s skin,” explained Touko. “It belongs to the trapezist.”

All Makoto could offer Touko was a blink.

“A selkie...?” Kyouko cupped her chin. “I remember reading about them in a story book. They are seals that can shed their skin and become human, but if someone stole their skin, the selkie would be under that person’s control.”

“That’s correct,” said Touko, fidgeting.

“We can’t just leave it here then,” said Makoto. He motioned toward the selkie skin. “Holding
someone captive like that... It’s not right! She deserves to be free and to belong to no one but herself.”

Kyouko furrowed her brow.

“If we took it with us, then Monobear would most certainly notice,” she said.

For the first time since the three of them met each other, Makoto was being the smarter member of the duo.

“Shut up. We’re taking it,” Touko hissed through her teeth, and she wrenched the skin out from underneath the cage.

Well, she tried to, but she wasn’t strong enough, so Makoto pulled on it alongside her. Despite their teamwork, they still couldn’t get it out. Kyouko reached forward, lifted the cage and set it down unceremoniously on the floor nearby. Touko opened her satchel and stuffed as much of the selkie skin into it as she could, which wasn’t as much as she would have liked. She couldn’t close it and a lot of the skin hung out from her satchel’s opening.

“Is that everything?” asked Kyouko.

“One more thing,” Touko said, and she went back to the cabinet with the whip. For a few seconds that they shouldn’t have been wasting, she studied the item, its pale red strip and all, and then she reached in and grabbed it. She crammed the whip into her satchel as much as she could. A bit stuck out of the opening. “Let’s go.”

Makoto gestured toward her satchel. “Fukawa-san, why are you...?”

“So Monobear can’t use it anymore,” Touko spat, and Makoto didn’t pry any deeper. Him and Kyouko trooped out of the trailer after Touko.

After Touko had taken a few strides away from Monobear’s trailer, she heard a loud clicking noise. It sounded like the ticking of a clock.

Everyone froze.

“W-What’s that?” asked Makoto, grasping Kyouko’s arm.

The sound started to get quieter.

“... Whatever it is, it’s travelling further away,” said Kyouko. She flapped her hand. “It must have been an insect... perhaps a deathwatch beetle. Let’s just move on.”

Touko snorted. “D-Deathwatch beetle? We’re outside, so there aren’t any floorboards or walls for a tell-tale heart to hide beneath... or do you think binbōgami’s here with his attendant?”

Kyouko picked the lock of the third trailer and they hurried in, even if the sound might have just come from a random insect. Nothing crunched under Touko’s feet, which was a good sign, and Kyouko aimed her torch around the interior. Next to the door for the bathroom hung a framed portrait of a castle on top of a steep cliff that encapsulated the typical setting in a vampire novel. As Kyouko swayed her torch, Touko glimpsed a black chandelier, a black tablecloth on the low table to their right, fraying at the edges, and red rose heads dotted all around the trailer’s interior walls.

“This must be Celes’s trailer,” murmured Touko, chest tight. She laced her fingers together and stroked her knuckles anxiously.
Ahead of her, Kyouko turned left, toward the bunk bed. The mattress where the top bunk should have been was not there and the unit had been converted into a canopy bed bearing the colour most commonly found in the trailer: black. Touko crowded Kyouko from behind as much as she could without initiating physical contact. At the top of the wall which Celes’s feet would be by when she slept was another painting, this one of a woman garbed in loose red fabric, surrounded by fire and locusts, silhouettes bowing by her feet and presenting her gifts of wheat and jewels. Red rose heads like the ones elsewhere lined the edge of the bed, and Kyouko crouched enough so she could twiddle one of them.

A few seconds later, she let go of it. With a frown, Kyouko flicked the back of her index finger against the rose head.

“Paper,” she said. Kyouko stood up and Touko, who had leaned forward to watch Kyouko, had to jump back to avoid them bumping heads.

Behind them was a low table decked with a black tablecloth, like the other one on the opposite side of the trailer. Touko collided into it. She fell backward over it and shrieked, cycling her legs through the air as she overbalanced. Thankfully, because the back of her head thumped against the sofa seat by the table, she didn’t hurt herself in her fall.

“Hm?” went Kyouko. After a short delay, Touko sat up. Kyouko’s noise was not of concern for almost injuring Touko. Though Touko hadn’t expected it to be one of that nature, she still felt offended that it wasn’t, but the burning indignation in her chest was extinguished by the sight of Kyouko pulling a book out of Celes’s pillowcase. Quickly, Kyouko fixed the torch’s light onto the book. Recognising the cover, Touko let out a roar of laughter.

“My spell book!” Touko said, smiling widely. Her grin weakened for a moment while she demanded, “G-Give it to me!” but her smile returned as soon as Kyouko passed the book to her. More hoarse laughter followed. She relaxed onto the sofa seat, giggling.

Makoto looked relieved, happy and concerned all at the same time.

“We should go,” said Kyouko and Makoto, who hadn’t moved far from the door, whirled around and opened it so they could leave.

He yelped. Touko’s laughter turned silent, her shoulders continuing to tremble. Kyouko stiffened.

“Hello,” came Celes’s voice from just outside of the trailer.

“C-C-C-!” Makoto didn’t finish the word and slammed the door in Celes’s face. He pushed his weight against it, in case Celes tried to open it.

For about maybe ten seconds, nothing happened. Touko, hugging her book and who had not yet risen from the sofa seat by the table closest to the beds, stared at Kyouko, while Kyouko stared at the door.

“Don’t let her in,” hissed Touko as Kyouko rushed up Makoto, to help him keep the door shut.

“I wasn’t going to,” said Makoto, sounding mildly offended.

“Fukawa-san, now that you have your book back, you can look up what that monster is,” said Kyouko, her back against the door, torch aimed at Touko.

“H-Huh?” went Touko, squinting in confusion and at the light shining in her face, but it wasn’t long before she apprehended what Kyouko had said. “Now? W-Wouldn’t you prefer I cast a protective
spell? Or that I return the cattle prod? S-Surely those are more important...”

“Just do it!”

Kyouko hurled the torch at Touko, who nearly tossed her book at the ceiling in her surprise. Nearly, because she only ended up bringing her book up to her face, so the torch hit against that and saved Touko from injury. She scrabbled around for the torch, which had fallen to the floor, book resting in her lap, and once she was in firm possession of the torch, she straightened up, nodded and opened her book to its last section.

Celes thumped on the door at a faster pace, but Kyouko and Makoto managed to prevent her from coming in by pressing their bodies against the door.

“Quickly,” Kyouko said to Touko, nearly shouting, which only prompted Touko to be able to think half as clearly as before, and given their current situation, she hadn’t had much clear thought in the first place.

Not knowing what sort of word to search for in the index pages, Touko started flipping backward through it.

“Oh, you mean that scruffy old book that I found?” asked Celes, slightly out of breath, referring back to Kyouko’s command from a minute or so ago. Now wasn’t a time for counting seconds. “My dear, I’m afraid that you’ll find it not as useful anymore.”

All Kyouko got out was a noise of puzzlement, because Touko started screaming. Kyouko and Makoto both froze. A page of Touko’s book had been torn out. One near the middle, almost at the beginning of where the entries for different creatures and beasts started.

“W-What is it?” asked Makoto, almost as afraid as he had been when he opened the door and found Celes on the other side.

“She ripped out a page!” Touko wailed. She checked the rest of the book. The first index page was missing too.

Peals of laughter rang out from outside of the trailer, and Celes stopped banging against the door.

“Whatever page she ripped out, it’s likely that it is a page about her,” said Kyouko. “In her attempt to protect her identity, she gave herself away. If you could find it...”


“I would apologise, but you must admit that it would be completely idiotic for someone to think that I would keep the page intact,” explained Celes.

Shivers, stronger than before, scampered through Touko’s body and she howled, cold, imagining Celes’s fingers tearing out one of her book’s pages. One of her book’s internal organs.

“So you are that creature,” said Kyouko.

“Are you that desperate for even a small victory?” asked Celes. “Creature... Monster... Though I am not human, those are all harsh words, don’t you think?”

“You admit it then,” said Kyouko, pushing harder at the door.

“Only because, darling, you’re not going to live much longer.”
A terrifying growl rumbled from outside that though it didn’t totally quell Touko, it certainly shocked her closer to silence. Her whines weakened into whimpering pummeled at by chattering teeth. The growl outside tapered off into a familiar ticking, ticking that Touko and the others heard before entering this trailer, a ticking that Kyouko dismissed as a beetle. It was barely audible, even after the thumps on the door abruptly stopped.

Makoto whispered, “Is she... g-gone?”

“I doubt it,” said Kyouko, not as quietly.

“F-Fukawa-san, have you found anything?” Makoto asked, nearly choking on his own words.

Touko lifted the book closer to her face. Her other hand aimed the torch light wonkily at the exposed pages as she tried to focus her eyes on a single line. With every wayward movement, another pang tore through Touko’s chest. The words danced, thrashed, refusing to let her read them.

“I... I c-can’t,” she stuttered.

Then the window to the right of where she was sat shattered. A long, thin arm, with pale flesh stretched across it, slid through the fractured hole in the remaining glass that hadn’t scattered across the floor or onto the table directly in front of Touko.

Kyouko leaped toward the centre of the trailer and pointed a pistol at the window. Touko shone the torch in the same direction. She could see not just the arm now, but a skull-like face. The skin had a green tinge to it, and the creature’s fangs were bared, gums on show. No lips. Its bobbed, black hair was more wiry than Touko’s, and its eyes were red but not like Touko’s. More like Syo’s.

Just like Celes’s.

“You did it,” said Kyouko, and she tried to cock her gun, but her arms quaked too much for her to be able to lock onto her target. She gripped her pistol with both hands, but that failed to steady her aim.

The creature didn’t speak. It clicked like a furious muttered mantra and heaved the rest of its body into the trailer. Due to its height, it needed to slouch, doubled over, in order to fit. While it was incredibly long, it was incredibly thin, with its torso the same width as its arms and legs.

Touko couldn’t even scream.

“I remember,” said Kyouko. Her voice got louder, highlighting how much it was quavering. “It... was certainly you... Celes, you... you did it...”

Celes, the creature, the monster, the monster in the trailer with them, the monster from the poster, opened her mouth, and a red, wet, slimy proboscis protruded out of it.

Kyouko pulled the trigger and shot the roof. Though she missed Celes completely, Celes looked up, giving Touko an opportunity to escape.

If only Touko’s body would cooperate.


In those few seconds that somehow were only a few, Touko thought. The thoughts that she thought bombarded her, all at once, all telling to do and feel different things, but then a voice, calm, drawling, arrogant, cut through them.
“Don’t tell me that you’re just going to give up,” Byakuya’s voice rang out, skipping across her scattered thoughts like a flat stone skipping across water.

Touko sprung off the sofa seat and stumbled over to Kyouko, and then to Makoto, who was by the door. Just as she reached him, he propelled himself away from the door and next to Kyouko, unarmed and foolishly brave and bravely foolish.

“A... A...” Touko babbled as she stood by the door, willing herself to come up with the rest of the word. Her mind was thrown off by another gunshot, but she pressed her back into the door and stared at the ripped page again. It was between the apsodo tortoise and ato-oi-kozō, so it had to start with ap... aq... ar... as... or at... one of those.

She had read through the pages for shapeshifters in the past. The name was on the tip of her tongue.

Kyouko and Makoto continued backing away from Celes.

With a clearer mind and a calmer body, Touko might have been able to recall the creature faster. Touko noted the page numbers that were missing and skipped to the index, eyes skimming through the index pages for the same numbers, to see if after she knew some more facts about it, she could realise what page was missing.


Heart thumping, she raced to the page with a section on ghouls.

There are discrepancies over what exactly a ghoul is. Some think of them as evil creatures that eat flesh, though others describe them as spirits or undead monsters. What people can agree on, at least, is that they definitely eat human flesh. They are similar to vampires but are rather limited in the spells that one could potentially use them for, and those spells are best created using other creatures. Aswangs can be used for certain protection spells, though -

Touko stopped there, eyes wide.

“Aswang,” she said, and she remembered its short entry that consisted mostly of various sketches of what one might look like.

Celes, who was in plain sight, slowly turned her head toward Touko. Her head melted away to reveal Celes’s human face, and she stared at Touko, who trembled and tried not to drop her book and the torch. Touko wedged her book against her armpit so she had one arm free to feel for the door handle. She opened the door and stepped back into the cool air outside. Though Celes didn’t take any steps toward her, her body leaned in Touko’s direction.

“T-There’s a saying that goes ‘better an aswang than a thief’,” said Touko. “Because aswangs never kill their neighbours... They travel for their prey so as to arouse less suspicion.”

“Mas mabuti ang aswang kaysa sa isang magnanakaw,” replied Celes in a human voice.

Touko made sure that her torch’s light didn’t stray from Celes’s face.

“You’re a strange little girl,” mused Celes, and she tilted her head to one side. “I heard rumours about you when I arrived to this town, about a shy girl who kept to herself and had no neighbours in her shack on the cliff. You can’t blame me for being curious. I thought that you, perhaps, were an aswang like me.”

“I’m n-nothing like you,” Touko sneered, some distance away from the trailer by now.
Celes stooped her head and sauntered out of the trailer. She released a sigh and said, “That’s what I concluded.”

The flesh on her head frothed, changing back into the skull with translucent skin. A gunshot rang out and Celes’s body seized up. It didn’t last, though, and she relaxed and started walking toward Touko.

Touko backed away some more and bumped into another trailer. She pressed her back against it, trying to make herself as flat as possible, though that did nothing to help her escape. Celes crept closer, proboscis at the ready, and Touko scrunched her eyes shut.

“D-Don’t come any closer!” screamed Touko, and a wave of heat racked through her body. Her eyes snapped open in time to see Celes fly backward, as if shoved. The warmth remained in Touko’s body. She strode toward Celes, feeling her braids dance and slither through the air as if in the clutches of a strong wind.

As she scrambled to her feet, Celes’s head reverted to its human form, just so she could ask, “W-What are you meant to be?”

“I am a witch,” said Touko, and with her head held high, she dropped the book so she could raise that hand, filled with energy. Her other hand controlled the torch. Celes rose onto tiptoes, and then into the air, and despite how much Celes thrashed around, she couldn’t escape her invisible binding.

“F-Fukawa-san?” said Makoto as he and Kyouko emerged from the trailer, keeping a safe distance behind Celes.

Touko’s face twitched. “I... c-can’t hold this forever...”

The spasms in her arms suggested that she couldn’t hold it for very long at all.

“How do you defeat aswangs?” asked Makoto, assuming that Touko both knew and was in any position to make conversation.

She tried anyway. “G-Ginger... wards them off... and a stingray tail does too... and they’re killed by decapitation? My book didn't go into much detail...”

“Upupupu, ain’t that a stinker?” came a familiar voice. Touko looked away from Celes and saw Monobear, the Seer and Aoi.

Kyouko aimed her pistol at Monobear, who gave a hearty laugh, holding its tummy.

“W-W-What...?” went the Seer, nearly dropping his torch. His helmet prevented anyone from seeing his face. He pointed his torch at Celes. Well, in her rough direction, because his hand shook too much for it to stay directed at a single spot. “What is...?”

“It’s Celes-san,” said Monobear.

The Seer recoiled, juggling his torch and cowering on one foot. “C-Celes-chi?”

“I’m surprised too, you know,” said Monobear. “But at something else. You ran away from home seven years ago and you never noticed that you were the only human here.”

“Seven years?” repeated Makoto in disbelief.

“W-Wait a minute,” said the Seer, wobbling. He set his foot down and held up both of his hands.
“You mean...?”

Monobear pointed at Aoi. “Selkie.” It pointed at Celes. “Aswang. Even the Oowada Brothers are
cynocephali.”

“What’s that?”

“Dog people,” said Kyouko.

The Seer shook his head. “This is... You’re just playing a prank, aren’t you? Let me guess, you’re going to tell me that you’re actually a talking bear.”

There was no reaction from Monobear.

“No way!” yelled the Seer. “I thought you were just a short guy really committed to staying in character!”

Kyouko slapped herself on the forehead.

Monobear flaunted its paw. Claws sprung out. In a dark voice, it said, “Now, let’s get to business, shall we? I have a little trap set up for my trailer and you broke the circuit, which rang a bell over by the tent, so I sent Celes-san over here to investigate. You’ve been nosing through my stuff, and that makes me a very, very unhappy bear.”

Touko dropped to her knees and doubled over, too weak to use her power anymore. Celes soon hit the ground.

“You must be Fukawa-san,” said Monobear and though Touko heard it approach her, she didn’t look up. “You’d be an excellent addition to my circus. As for your two friends, they can be Celes-san’s dinner.”

Celes twisted around to face Kyouko and Makoto.

“I’ll n-never join your freakshow,” hissed Touko.

“Oh? Didn’t you notice yourself doing telekinesis back there? You’d fit right in,” said Monobear. It cupped Touko’s chin and tilted her head back. They locked eyes. She bared her teeth at Monobear, who resumed talking, undeterred. “Anyway, you’re acting like you have a choice. There isn’t any ‘yes or no’ in this. If you don’t do as I say, I’ll just leave an anonymous tip to the local police and have them take you into their custody instead.”

“N-No...”

“Oh, yes,” said Monobear. “I know everyone’s weakness and they all wear them like a leash that I have gripped in my paw. Asahina-san’s pelt. Hagakure-kun’s next paycheck. Even Celes-san can be tamed by a flick of my whip. I’m in control here. I’m the mastermind.”

Touko gave a small grin, one small enough that Monobear didn’t seem alarmed by it.

“That book Celes confiscated is going to be real handy in helping me recruit new performers,” said Monobear. It tweaked Touko’s chin and smirked. “You got anything on kappa?”

She jerked her head away from its paw and tugged the selkie skin out of her satchel. The whip that she stole earlier came out with it. With one foot on the pelt, she picked up the whip, rose to her full
height and cracked the air with her new weapon.

Celes, on her way over to Makoto and Kyouko, flinched, rendered immobile by the noise.

Monobear realised what happened and waved its arms as it backed away. “H-Hey! Where did you get that? Asahina-san, take it from her!”

Aoi nodded and walked toward Touko, who raised the whip and hoped it was as easy to use as she thought.

“Wait!” said Makoto. He stumbled around Celes, one arm out. “Asahina-san, we have your skin! You don’t have to do whatever Monobear says!”

His words brought Aoi to a stop, though she had only taken a few steps toward Touko. She turned to him and said, “What did you say?”

Touko kicked the selkie skin. As soon as Aoi saw it, she laughed and rushed over to scoop it up. Aoi hugged it against her chest and then, without warning, pulled Touko into a hug.

“You can have your pelt back! Y-You don’t have to kill me!” Touko said, writhing.

“It’s a hug!” said Aoi, squeezing Touko tightly, and they were so close that Touko thought that she intended to kiss her, but she instead released Touko and turned to Monobear, fists raised, pelt under her arm. “If you want to get to her, you’ve got to get through me first!”

“Fine with me!” said Monobear. “Celes-san, go through her!”

Celes, with her back to them, craned her neck around but another crack from Touko’s whip had her cowering.

“Oowada Brothers? No, I left them with Monomi. Uh... Hagakure-kun?” Monobear said, sweating profusely, but the Seer just took off his helmet. His dreads puffed out, resembling the Sun.

“No can do,” replied Yasuhiro. He shook his head, as if to let air pass through his hair.

Monobear stamped its feet in a rage. “No, no, no! Stupid, stupid-! You’ll all pay! I’ll go back even further in time and kill your parents! I’ll, I’ll-”

There was a loud thump and Monobear shut up. It teetered with the most blissful expression on its face, and then fell forward, unconscious.

“T-That’s for evewything, you jerk,” said Monomi, behind Monobear, wielding its homemade wand like one would a baseball bat, and it kicked Monobear’s unconscious form.

Makoto and Kyouko jogged over to Touko and Aoi. The Seer soon followed and the five stood together, staring at Celes. Aoi held onto Touko’s shoulder.

Monomi seemed content with just kicking Monobear over and over again.

“So,” Celes’s head morphed into that of a human, and she slapped on a smile, “it seems that we’re finally free. Thank you so much for your help. We’ll be on our way now...”

Kyouko snatched the whip from Touko. She strutted toward Celes, whacking the end of the whip against her open palm, and said coldly, “You still killed my mother.”

“Ah, yes, well,” Celes said, smile gone, unable to move, wincing at each slap of the whip, “there
aren’t any hard feelings, are-?”

“Why her? And why did you spare me?”

“Why?” Celes paused. “Well... I know you’re expecting a deep answer, but really, I just wasn’t hungry anymore and the circus relocated the next day. And quite frankly, I didn’t realise that you would chase after me...”

“You damaged my book,” said Touko, which didn’t sound as serious as what Kyouko went through, and she followed after Kyouko. Aoi’s hand fell away from her shoulder. “I-It’s one of the only things I have left of her, and y-you...”

“Her?” repeated Celes. “Do you have a sob story about your mother too?”

Touko’s eyes welled up with hot tears and she flung her arm forward. Celes arched her back sharply and screeched, limbs twitching, involuntary movements only possible. The heat that Touko experienced in her eyes earlier, when she somehow, without a potion, cast a spell that prevented Celes from moving, burned inside of her once more.

“N-Not my mother,” said Touko. Not either of them. Her tears caused her face to feel stiff. “B-But she was the closest thing I had, even if she didn’t love me!”

Then again, no one did. Touko gradually lowered her arm and Celes sank to the ground with it, head bowed, face against the grass, neck exposed. She kept her hand toward Celes, eyes wide and unforgiving.

Kyouko gritted her teeth and hurled her arm forward, striking Celes’s neck with the whip.

There was blood, and then there was nothing.
i'll try to update this more often...

the first half of this fic is pretty fu-centric, rather than tofu-centric, but the next parts will allow for togami to be present more.

“You should have seen it!” I yell, waving my arms so that even if Byakuya manages the impossible and blocks out my voice, he still sees me animated.

Oh, that makes my extremities tingle and makes my tingling extreme.

The guy with the fish tail that Touko blabbed our secret to? His name is Byakuya. Byakuya Togami. He lies on his stomach and watches my little jig with caution. He’s free to slip a few wads of cash down the front of my black dress.

If he gives extra, I wouldn’t mind doing a more intimate dance for him. Actually, I would do it for free.

Kyouko finds me entirely uninteresting, apparently, so screw her, and instead studies Byakuya with her chin cupped like she’s trying to decide which toilet paper to buy. All in all, it’s a boring reaction, not like this different guy who has dreadlocks that stand erect like the rays of the Sun in a children’s drawing, who yelped and stared and stared at Byakuya.

“Are you for real?” a young woman asks him, wearing a white vest that must be really long when flat, because it goes all the way over her breasts and meets the waistband of her jean shorts. “You shouldn’t be surprised anymore after last night...”

“Who are these people?” says Byakuya, throwing everyone a glare in turn. He finishes on me. What an honour.

“Hell if I know,” I reply. “They were there when I woke up.”

And what an adventure that was. I woke up in the arms of Kyouko and Ms. No-Name, in a field. Fields aren’t exciting places to wake up in, and though there had been a circus very close by which might have been cool if an act went wrong, the show already ended so I spent the rest of the night in Ms. No-Name’s trailer with Kyouko and Ms. No-Name herself. Then, in the morning, after I stayed awake during most of the night because I was positively buzzing, we all popped to the beach near Gloomy’s cottage where Byakuya waited for us and was introduced to everyone by Makoto.

Okay, wow, that summary lasted way too long. Time to move on. I slap my hands against my cheeks, tongue squirming. Everyone tries not to gawk but they can’t stop themselves from glancing. My eyes gleam. I can’t see them gleam because me and Gloomy are the only people in the whole world on the other side of these eyes, but I feel them shine. Like water in a cup left out on a hot day. That is how my whole body feels, not just my eyes.

“You should have seen it! Blood! Decapitation!” I wiggle my hips. “And this weird rabbit got a whip and snapped a bear’s head clean off! Ah, it makes me want to kill someone!”
Kyouko inclines her head forward and says sternly, “Remember our deal.”

What a mood killer.

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, flapping a hand in Kyouko’s direction. “You better stick to yours, Bub-giri, or...”

To demonstrate what I mean, I snip at the air with a pair of scissors, whipped out super quick from the holster on her leg. Also, I decided to let her have a few nicknames now, at least out loud. They kept Gloomy safe, which is my job, and that also meant they kept me safe, which is even better, so they’re all right by me.

Still, nothing wrong with keeping them on their toes a bit. Even someone like Kyouko has sweat peppering her forehead, and not just because it’s almost noon in the Summer.

“Huh? What’s this about a deal?” says Mr. No-Name, with a hand cupped around his ear.

“Let me guess, you told those two your life story,” Byakuya says to me.

I beam at him. He huffs out his nose.

“It’s bad enough that Naegi took you all here,” he complains.

“Y-Yeah, she did... tell them,” says Makoto, and he rubs the back of his neck. “But they’re not going to tell anyone, not about you or Syo-san.”

Ms. No-Name nods, but Mr. No-Name extends a hand, palm upward, and twitches his fingers in a groping motion.

Everyone stares at his hand.


Ms. No-Name goes scarlet and Kyouko coughs into her knuckles, brow furrowed and face slightly pink. After a few seconds delay, Makoto says, “W-Wait a minute,” and Mr. No-Name flails his arms and yaps about slander. Byakuya looks puzzled.

Heh. Loser.

Mr. No-Name lowers his arms. “I’m going to be out of work for a while so I’m going to need some money to live off.”

“Money?” says Byakuya.

“Yeah,” Mr-No Name replies with nod, and he puts his hands on his hips. “Money. The currency I accept is gold coins, not clams or whatever mermaids use, ‘right?’

“What do you mean by ‘right, money and currency?’”

“Right is just how I talk, and money is what you use to pay for stuff. You give coins to someone, usually if they did a job for you or you’re buying something from them, and get something else in return. Different places use different money. Here, you have to use gold coins to buy food and crystal balls. That’s the currency of this place. So, for example, someone can you give money in exchange for keeping a secret.”
Byakuya ponders this and then says, “Wait there.”

He starts toward the sea and I skip along beside him, very slowly, because he travels very slowly.

“... You don’t have to come,” he says.

“Aw, ya don’t have to be shy!” I tell him.

His handsome face screws up. “You tried to kill me last time we met.”

Oh! I clutch my stomach and laugh.

“That was all a big misunderstanding, darling! I think I had a bit of gas back there. Hey, do mermaids fart? How do you use the bathroom anyway? Or do you not need to?”

“I don’t care to know what you’re talking about,” he says. He waddles into the sea.

My body jerks. “You’re leaving me?”

“Ideally, I would,” he remarks, knowing how to play with a sweet maiden’s heart.

Byakuya swims along the coastline and a minute later, returns with a stone striped dark blue, yellow and white in no pattern. He drags himself back to the others, me sticking close to his tail. His fish part starts before a butt would on a human so he doesn’t have a human butt.

Overall, his lower half is a massive disappointment.

When he reaches everyone, he holds out the stone for Mr. No-Name to take.

“Here is your money,” says Byakuya.

Mr. No-Name presses his palm against his forehead and says, “That’s just a stone, Dude...”

“It’s a special stone,” says Byakuya. “It grants luck.”

“Mermaid luck...?”

“Sure.”

Kyouko rolls her eyes.

“In that case...!” Mr. No-Name swipes it from his hand and lifts it up. “Genocider Who?”

I notice Makoto open his mouth but Kyouko grabs his shoulder. They lock eyes and she shakes her head. His shoulders slump. He nods and keeps quiet.

“If that’s everything, I think we should be off,” says Kyouko. “Monomi disbanded the troupe... It seems Monobear was blackmailing his employees so they had to work for him, and with him gone, everyone can now return to their homes. However, the Oowada Brothers were kind enough to offer to drive us all the way back to our home town, and they’re waiting on the main road for us.”

“It was nice of them to do that,” Makoto pipes up, and Kyouko nods.

Mr. No-Name pulls a face. “I’d have understood if they never talked because they were dogs, but they know how to... that was a stab in the heart...”

Kyouko doesn’t linger for farewells. She spins on her heel and she marches off. Makoto jogs after
her and gives a small smile as he waves at us.

“We’ll write, I promise!” he says.

“Don’t forget me!” Mr. No-Name chases after them. He stumbles when he reaches them and adds, “Dibs on Daiya-chi’s sidecar.”

They leave the beach, and so remains me, Byakuya and Ms. No-Name in a threesome.

“Aren’t you going with them?” asks Byakuya, who must want to be monogamous too.

Ms. No-Name turns to him, bouncing her heels. “Nope! I have family somewhere else.”

She turns away and sweeps her gaze toward the vast sea. Her lips curl into a grin and she clasps her hands together.

“It has been absolutely ages since I last saw everyone. Yuta... Sakura-chan...” Ms No-Name stops twitching and straightens up, eyes brimming with tears. “T-Thank you... I... I don’t know how I’ll repay Fukawa-chan, but I will. I swear.”

Then she gets out a grey pelt tucked between her arm and her side and - get this - she puts it on, stepping into it, tugging it up her body, and she disappears into the sea as a seal.

“What the heck?” I say.

“Dear Fukawa-san and Togami-kun... I hope you’re doing well. It has been months since we last saw each other. It’s a shame that it had to be under such extreme... cer... um... stances.”

Byakuya paused, shooting a quick look at Touko, who, sat on her usual boulder, nodded. He returned his gaze to the letter. The sunhat that he borrowed cast shadow over his eyes, worn on an almost daily basis now they were a third of the way through Summer.

Over the past months, he had gone from reading and writing phrases to reading letters and short stories that she wrote, and afterwards she liked to test him by questioning him on the content. Because he read aloud most of the time, it wasn’t that necessary, but admittedly she liked to see how he interpreted her narrative and plots.

“Since my last letter, me and Kirigiri-san have still been focusing on smaller cases though it’s unlikely anything that we solve will be as big a mystery as confronting an actual aswang. I’m not complaining though!”

For the last word, Byakuya shouted. Touko jumped but the only grumbling afterwards came from the sea. She lowered her hand from his chest and despite the scare, couldn’t help but smile as he persevered through the remainder of the letter.

At first, she had misgivings when she heard that Makoto promised he would write. She expected him not to bother, or send one letter, but so far they had followed through, sending a letter every fortnight.

The letters were also addressed to Byakuya, even though Makoto only met him twice and Yasuhiro, Aoi and Kyouko once. At least, that was to the best of her knowledge, because she hadn’t present at Makoto’s second visit to Byakuya. Syo had been, and the day after Celes’s demise, Makoto apparently introduced Yasuhiro, Aoi and Kyouko to Byakuya, and Syo later told Byakuya what happened when she saw most of them off on the main road, and he in turn told Touko late morning.
two days later when Syo sneezed, which triggered a switch between alters.

Byakuya had started talking again, so Touko sat up straighter and paid closer attention.

“We’ve not had any luck with finding another witch who could help you guys out. I hoped it would be like when you learned a new word that you didn’t know before and then all of a sudden, you see it eve... everywhere. That doesn’t seem to be the case here.”

She held in a sigh of relief. He paused again to mull over the words. The furrow in his brow lessened but didn’t totally disappear.

“Anyway, as soon as we get a new lead, we’ll write to you. I think I’ll send the next letter through telegram so you can read it sooner, but it won’t be as in depth. Hagakure-kun and Kirigiri-san wish you well.”

Here, Byakuya hesitated, skimming through the next part of the text without reading aloud.

“The way the letters look has changed,” he informed Touko, “I assume that someone else is writing it now. Whoever it is, it’s easier to read than Naegi’s writing.”

He read on.

“Togami-chi, I showed my mah... mah? Fukawa, what does that word mean?”

Touko leaned to the side so her head was next to his, and quickly scanned the letter for the section that Byakuya reached. Byakuya pointed.

“Ma,” she said. ‘It’s a short way of saying ‘mother’. Hagakure must have written the next part.”

For all the time that they had been together, which totalled almost three months, Byakuya never spoke about his mother. Or about his family. Him having a surname suggested that mermaids lived in some kind of family system, and when he resumed reading the letter aloud, she deduced that the concept of a mother was something he was familiar with.

“I sent my ‘Ma’ the stone you gave me and she told me that it’s just an ordinary stone. That’s way too cruel. Instead of using it to bring luck, she’s using it to scrub at the callouses on her feet, so it’s not all doom and gloom, ‘right? You still owe me though so expect a visit from me in the next few weeks, okay?”

Byakuya stopped to alert Touko that the handwriting from this point on resembled Makoto’s.

“When we next get time off work, we’d all love to visit you. Where we live isn’t near the sea and I could bring my sister. I’m sure she won’t tell everyone about Togami-kun being a mermaid, but I’ll def...in...ight...”

“Definitely,” Touko cut in.

“... definitely make certain of that before I tell her. Yours sincerely, Makoto Naegi.”

He studied the letter some more. Touko couldn’t tell if he was actually reading through it again, but if he was, he couldn’t have reread all of it in the short time before he passed the letter to her. She accepted it and he rolled onto his back. By doing so, he upset the angle of his hat, and he tugged it forward to obscure his eyes.

“It really has been several months,” he remarked.
She peered down at him curiously. “Do mermaids use the same units as humans for everything?”

“You’re greatly underestimating the wealth of knowledge available to us mermaids,” Byakuya replied. He swished the end of his tail. “Though we don’t have reading and writing, we can still communicate, and before, we listened and even spoke to humans. Mermaids can live for centuries so they have a lot of information that they can impart onto those younger too.”

“C-Centuries?” repeated Touko. Her stomach dropped. “H-How old are you?”

“Twenty years,” he replied.

“That’s the same as me.”

Thank goodness. She breathed out loudly.

He didn’t say anything, so she had chance to review what he said, and a frown pinched at her face.

“You said that mermaids communicated with humans ‘before’,” she said slowly. “Does that mean they stopped?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Why? Did you fall out? Go to war?”

A scowl darkened what could be seen of his features.

“We have not always been on good terms,” he said, and then added quickly, “I imagine it’s like how witches and humans don’t get along.”

Touko turned away and stared out to sea. She tucked her legs against her chest and wrapped her arms around them. ‘Don’t get along’ was putting it lightly. Most of the information that she knew about witches came from her mentor and the rest from books, which focused more on their murders than as people but then again, to regular humans, they weren’t people. They were freaks. Threats. Monsters. Born to magical parents or as some kind of mutation, freak accident, like Touko, to parents who threw her into a closet when her untapped powers began acting up.

When it came to Touko, ‘freak accident’ referred to more than one thing. She smirked to herself, even if she didn’t find the thought funny.

Byakuya rose from his nap or self-imposed silence or whatever it was around lunch time. Noticing, Touko dragged the basket between them and unloaded an oval-shaped metal container of sandwiches as well as miscellaneous fruits. Next, she carefully lifted out a flask of lemonade, and was in the process of taking out two cups when Byakuya nabbed half a lemon and took a bold bite out of it.

He dropped it, gagging, juice dribbling down his chin.

“That’s for the lemonade!” she told him, releasing the cups and crawling over to him. Byakuya’s tongue hung out of his mouth as he winced, and she hesitated, distracted. Most of the time, he seemed so serious, even when saying things she found ridiculous, but in this rare moment, she glimpsed a different side to him.

When most people did something like that, she would roll her eyes and think of them as idiots, and the contrast here was stark, yet her heart fluttered.
It scared her.

“You should have told me that first,” he said, face scrunched up. His head snapped forward and he spat onto the sand, shoulders shaking.

Touko’s stomach lurched as she regained her senses. “I d-didn’t tell you to eat it...”

She picked up the lemon half and started preparing the lemonade. Byakuya needed a bit of time to recover but soon lay on his back in usual spirits, grimacing at the sunshine, and tugged Touko’s hat over his eyes like before.

Remembering him mention his eyes were sensitive to light, she said, “I can m-make you some glasses that protect your eyes, if you want...”

He frowned.

“Do your glasses have that property?” he asked.

“No,” she said, truthfully, also suspecting that if they did, he would have demanded them for himself. Byakuya wore her hat more than she did these days. The only times he didn’t wear it was when it was overcast or raining, when they settled under an umbrella even if the rain didn’t bother him much.

Because he lived in the sea, getting wet wouldn’t bother him, but it bothered notebook pages that he tried to write on or read.

“I have some smoky quartz in my cottage and if I shaped them right, you could wear them over your eyes and everything wouldn’t be as bright.”

Byakuya pushed his hands against the sand and propped himself up, lifting a hand only to nudge back the hat so it didn’t completely obscure his vision.

“You do that and I will write a reply to Naegi,” he said, and he delved his hand into the basket for a pen and some paper.

Touko snatched up the basket once he had what he wanted and hurried up then down the cliff, returning from her cottage with a stick under her armpit and in the basket, a stopped vial and a lump of smoky quartz that her mentor procured on one of her travels once upon a time.

Her mentor actually bought some specifically for Touko, mentioning that it could be used for healing and emphasising how it could eliminate insomnia and nightmares. Since then, Touko slept with some by her bed. It didn’t really help, and Touko didn’t know if that was because her mentor had been wrong or if Touko’s negativity was stronger than the positive energy that the quartz had the potential to radiate.

Byakuya was absorbed in writing and hadn’t made a start on lunch yet. Touko decided to remind him later, rather than disrupt him, and sat a short distance opposite him. She got out the vial and examined the yellow liquid within. Following her final confrontation with Celes, she on different occasions tried to exercise magic without using a word or potion, but she failed to even cause her hair to flutter.

It seemed that whatever happened back then had been a fluke. Impossible to recreate. Touko held the stick, which definitely wasn’t a wand, like one would hold a pen, and pointed it at the quartz.

With her other hand, she brought the vial to her lips and drank a few droplets.
“Secare penna,” she said, concentrating on the tip of the stick. Her fingertips burned. So did her eyes. The stick’s end glowed white, and she set about grooving a circle against the surface of the quartz. More of the stick shone. Touko chewed on her lip and drove the stick into the crystal, all the way through, cutting out a cylinder. She raised the rest of the quartz, leaving a cylinder nestled in her lap.

Only needing what she cut out, she tossed the crystal with a hole in it aside for now, and sliced the ends of the cylinder off so they were flat and level. Then she chopped two pieces off in addition to that, creating what would be the lenses.

Not long after, the effects of the spell faded, and her hands lowered in temperature and her eyes did as well. All that remained to do was fashion the frames from a suitable material and they would be ready to wear.

There had to be something that she could use...

“Did you make your glasses?” asked Byakuya.

Touko flipped the quartz pieces over in her hands but looked up, meeting his eyes.

“No. M-My parents bought them a long time ago,” she said, and she reached up to stroke one end piece with a single hand.

“Why don’t you buy the glasses for me instead of making them?” he asked.

She glowered. “Y-You’re not the only one without a job, you know. I have to be strict on what I buy... My only funds are what my mentor left behind.”

Of all that she said, he picked out, “Job?”

“You don’t even know what a job is...? Mermaids don’t have jobs, then? How does it even function as a society?”

Now came Byakuya’s turn to frown. “Obviously I know what a job is. That’s not exclusive to humans, and I even know what currency is. It just slipped my mind that you aren’t being paid money for teaching me. That’s all. Even before I met you, I knew a lot of things about your kind.”

Touko stopped playing with the quartz pieces. Usually, he didn’t want to talk about the lifestyle of a mermaid, which she supposed wasn’t surprising as he was adamant about becoming human. He preferred learning about humans. She decided not to let the opportunity pass.

“You learned about humans from older mermaids, right?” she said.

“You were listening,” he stated. “Yes. A lot of what I know came from my butler, Pennyworth.”

“B-Butler? You have a butler?”

His eyes widened for a moment, but then his expression slackened and his eyes went dull, and she had the feeling that he changed his mind on what he originally planned to retort.

“Yes,” he said. He lifted his chin, trying to glimpse the quartz in her hands. “What about the rest of the glasses? The bit that connects the crystals into one unit?”

“Huh?” she went. She remembered what they had been doing and licked twice at a fingernail. “For the f-frame, ideally I would use some kind of metal, but I don’t know which would be best. It’s all your fault that I have to get out of my comfort zone in the first place...”
Byakuya scoffed and lifted his upper body off the sand. One hand peeled the lid off the container containing sandwiches and he took out the one on the top, which happened to have slabs of cheese in it, and bent the arm he was pressing a hand against the sand, lowering himself back onto his stomach. He scooped up his pen and resumed his unfinished letter, chewing slowly, in deep concentration.

Touko nibbled on a sandwich, eating half of it, before she muttered that she would be back soon, to which Byakuya might have hummed at but if he did, he did so quietly.

She embarked on another trip to her cottage, coming back out of breath but with two wire coat hangers, a tube of glue and another vial of potion. This potion was activated by the word ‘fortitudo’, and caused her hands to throb.

Her tongue poked out of her mouth as she bent the wire hanger around the circumference of the lenses, moulding it into the right shape. The gluing could wait until the spell wore off, or else she risked pinching a hole in the tube when she squeezed it, so until then, she reclined on the boulder, laying the prototype glasses and tube of glue nearby.

Heat from the Sun sprawled across her. She shut her eyes, ready to melt and become one with the boulder.

Dulled thumps knocked Touko out of her approach toward a nap. Touko forced her eyes open, fixing the position of her glasses as she sat up slightly, leaning back more than sitting. Byakuya grasped the boulder and, wiggling, hauled up the top half of his body, so he could better see the finished product.

“Hold on,” she said.

“I’m already holding onto the boulder,” he informed her.

She didn’t reply to that and twisted her body toward him, putting her weight on one arm. With her other hand, she dragged the glue and glasses closer to her and then sat up fully. Her hands didn’t twinge anymore, so she adjusted the position of the lenses bounded by wire and squirted two circles of glue. The trails were shaky but she avoided getting glue on her skin, and she screwed the lid onto the tube and used that to try to shift as much of the glue onto the sides as possible.

“Is it ready?” he asked as she admired her creation.

“The glue only needs ten or twenty seconds to dry, but it’ll be a day until it’s completely dry so be careful. I also wouldn’t get them too wet either,” she said sternly, and she slanted toward him so she could hook the ends of the temples around his ears.

Once she did that, Touko realised how close they were, for she had brought her face forward along with her hands, and blushed, quickly pulling back.

Byakuya fidgeted with his new sunglasses, lips puckered. His lips likely contracted in thought, not for a reason that many would consider romantic, but the interpretation didn’t get past Touko and she squirmed.

“Well? How do I look?” he asked.

She turned her head away sharply. “Good.”

‘Goofy’ would probably involve her having to try again, anyway, and that should have been the answer. Besides, even if he was handsome enough to make it look ‘good’, that was completely
objective and didn’t mean anything.

All mermaids were probably blessed with beauty.

“Everything’s darker. This will impede on my vision,” he remarked. Touko peeked at him. He was surveying the area.

“All sunglasses are going to be like that,” she said as she watched him get used to his new eyewear. Byakuya patted the sand and then raised a hand to study it against the blue sky above. He slowly reclined, keeping his arm elevated and turning his wrist one way then another, until his back made contact with sand.

The hat moved so it no longer covered his eyes, but he didn’t correct this, instead fiddling with his sunglasses. Touko didn’t know if he had finished his letter. Not wanting to bother him, she slid off the boulder and padded over to where he abandoned it.

**Dear Naegi, Kirigiri, Hagakure and Hagakure’s Ma.**

*We got your last letter. Hagakure. Luck can not be controlled, let that be a lesson to you for believing that. Naegi. Keep looking. Fukawa is failing too.*

He didn’t get any further.

Her stomach jolted at the last sentence. She hunched her shoulders and cast her eyes over to him.

“W-Why did you tell them I was failing?” she asked.

“It’s true, isn’t it? You haven’t succeeded in creating a potion to transform me into a human.”

“I-I’m still working on it,” she hissed, pulling at opposite ends of the letter but not enough to tear it. Not quite. “I had to wait until May for the myrica to bloom, and now I have to get the spell just right. It’s not meant for living creatures, especially ones with human-like intelligence, and unless you want me to test it on you now rather than work out the kinks...”

He coughed. “No, no. Let’s not rush it.”

She put down the letter and laced her fingers together, lips tingling. “T-That’s what I thought... Now, you can start your letter again, only this time you can omit that part.”

“After I’ve eaten,” he promised, with no indication of eating anymore.

Makoto and the others had no way of knowing what Byakuya wrote in his first draft, but Touko bristled at the knowledge that it existed with no revisions. She collected the basket from the top of the boulder and sat down with her back against the side of it, close to where Byakuya was relaxing. He didn’t acknowledge Touko, so he might have shut his eyes and not noticed her. The glasses made it hard to tell.

So far, Byakuya seemed to just have eaten a cheese sandwich. If she fed him something else, he would start writing again sooner, so Touko peeled him an orange and pressed a segment against his lips.

“Say aah,” she said.

Byakuya opened his mouth but he also jerked his body and yelled out. She sprung back, dropping the orange on his chest.
“W-What?” asked Touko, bent backward on all fours.

He stared at her, wide-eyed, fingers of one hand just below his lips. “Explain yourself!”

His voice thundered. The world around them went up in flames.

“Please don’t hit me!” she begged, cowering, arms over her head and throat tight. Metal bars that only she could see formed a dome around her, a birdcage. She forced herself to say, “Sorry, sorry sorry. I was bad, sorry sorry-”

“What’s happening?”

“- sorry, sorry, sorry... Please don’t hit me... I’ll be g-good!”

“I’m not going to hit you. I’m not a brute. Fukawa, what is this hot yellow... thing?”

Her fingers clawed at her hair. “Bad, bad, bad...”

“Fukawa!” Byakuya grabbed her hand. “I said I won’t hit you. Snap out of it!”

She couldn’t. ‘It’ could only be eased out of, even if he grabbed her shoulders and unhelpfully shook them. All they could do, and had to do, was wait, and his hands grew still but stayed firm.

Her pounding heart slowed its pace, her shuddering weakened to trembling and apologies no longer flung themselves out of her mouth but arrived at her lips as sobs, and the metal bars caging her crumbled into sand and the sky dyed itself blue. The sea rumbled. The fire extinguished. Byakuya stopped calling her name.

He let go of her shoulders and crawled back.

“What just happened?” he asked. “You were like that for a while... and we were surrounded by hot light.”

Touko shrugged.

“Were you possessed?” he tried.

“I... just panicked,” she said. “It’s... over.”

“So you know, I wouldn’t hit you,” he replied. “Even after what you just pulled, I wouldn’t sink so low. I consider that an insult.”

Touko nodded, hands limp on her lap.

“Now, explain what compelled you to assault me,” he said, back to business.

“Assault?” She lifted her head. “No! I... I... w-wanted to feed you an orange, and-”

“Feed me?” Byakuya spotted the orange, which had rolled off him and landed on the sand. His surprise succumbed to a glare. “You can’t just do that! Even indirectly, what you did...”

“I just wanted to feed you so you finished your lunch quicker,” she explained, trembling, but as she believed that Byakuya wouldn’t hit her, she dared add, “I don’t see why you’re fussing so much.”

“I’m not fussing,” he fusses. He allowed himself a few, deliberate breaths, calming slightly as he met her eyes. “In my culture, touching lips is an act of intimacy.”
She found the act of breathing to be easier now. “L-Like a kiss?”

“A kiss?”

“You don’t know what a kiss is?” she said. Warmth spread across her face. As heavy as the entirely of her body felt, her lips curled into a smirk. “It’s when someone touches their lips against something else... Usually, they touch against someone else’s lips. Most of the time, it’s a show of affection. T-That must be scandalous, right?”

“Right,” he said.

He turned his head away.

“I will let you off this once, but you aren’t to disappoint me again,” he told her. “Or else...”

Byakuya trailed off, features cold.

She slipped the end of her thumb into her mouth, no longer finding this amusing, and mumbled, “Or else what?”

“... I won’t give you one of my scales,” he said.

Touko pulled her thumb out of her mouth.

“It won’t happen again,” she promised.

He kept looking out to sea.

“Get me another orange,” he said.

She did and after she sat down again, she tried to concentrate on her notebook, on the pages that had ingredients for her latest work in progress, many scribbled out, but her eyes kept straying to him eating his clean orange slice and rewriting his latter.

Her thighs rubbed together as she felt a weight coil in her stomach.

If he found another witch... would he not need her anymore?
Two weeks brought an unsatisfying telegram. Touko read it several times on her way from the post office to the beach. No luck on finding another witch. The rock that Byakuya gave Yasuhiro, who then gave it to Hiroko, turned out to be given to its final recipient a few days before her birthday which he had forgotten about, so Yasuhiro, on Makoto’s advice, decided to waive their deal.

She paused by the edge of the beach and took off her leather loafers. Knowing the telegram off by heart, she slipped it into her basket before walking across the sand, toward the sea, with bare feet, shoes in her wicker basket.

Then, as she rounded the cliff to their private place, she spotted a figure on her usual boulder. Initially, she assumed it was Byakuya, but after a few more steps, she realised that it wasn’t him. He never sat on the boulder like Touko could, and he didn’t have feet that he could tap the heels of against the boulder, and his skin, though tanned, wasn’t that dark, and he didn’t have a brown ponytail.

Touko froze.

The person caught sight of Touko and waved an arm, other hand resting on the grey pelt on her lap. “Hey, Fukawa-chan! Over here!”

“W-What are you doing here?” asked Touko. She broke free of icy surprise and could walk again, so she positioned herself next to the boulder. “It’s Asahina, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” said Aoi, voice as bright as her smile. Touko averted her eyes and caught sight of Byakuya, who was lying on his back nearby. He pointed his face at her, wearing his sunglasses that at the end of each day, he passed to Touko to put on the boulder rather than take them into the sea.

Either he scrambled onto the boulder to retrieve them or Aoi handed them to him, but Touko didn’t care enough to find out.

Aoi had skipped past Touko’s first question so Touko said again, “What are you doing here? Asahina?”

“She said she wanted to talk to you,” Byakuya answered instead.

Touko narrowed her eyes.

“You do...?” she said to Aoi.

“Uh huh,” Aoi replied with a lively nod. “Okay, so, like, after you saved me, I searched for my family...”

“What happened? Were they all dead?” asked Byakuya.

Aoi flinched. “W-What? No! We’ve been apart for five years and it took me a while, but I managed to find them.”

She threw him a puzzled look that didn’t last long and then balled her hands into bouncing fists.

“So I stayed with them for a couple of weeks and told everyone what I got up to, and they were all really happy to see me. Being with them made me the happiest I had been since... well, since I was
last there, but then I realised that I wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t for my dear friend, Fukawa-chan.”

“D-Don’t label me so carelessly,” said Touko. Friend, she could barely tolerate as they had spoken once, sort of, but ‘dear’ friend pushed it.

Aoi continued talking, unperturbed. “It’s selkie code that you’re not allowed to make contact with a human again for seven years, but my girlfriend, Sakura-chan, who is like, the most honourable person in the world, told me that if I wanted to come back before then so I could repay you, then that would be okay.”

Byakuya and Touko stared at her, and at the same time, said, “Girlfriend...?”

She nodded.

“What’s a girlfriend?” asked Byakuya. Touko nibbled on a fingernail.

“It’s a girl who you have a romantic relationship with,” said Aoi.

“Romantic...” Byakuya thought about this. “Is that like romance?”

“Yup!”

“Fukawa sometimes lets me read romance stories,” he told Aoi. “I didn’t realise that romance existed in real life.”

“Of course it exists in real life!” Aoi scoffed, but her eyes glowed softly with something like sympathy. It probably was sympathy.

Touko squirmed and said, “W-Whatever! You came all the way here on your own free will because you want to do me a favour? Weren’t you worried that you would turn into foam if you came back here? Or that you would get arrested?”

“Huh?” went Aoi.

“Never mind,” grumbled Touko. She hauled herself backward onto the boulder, dropped her basket onto the sand and wrung her hands on her lap. “S-So what? You came here just to repay me?”

“Uh huh,” said Aoi, perking up.

Byakuya dragged himself over to the basket and rummaged through it. Lunch today was bought rather than hand-made but it was still a simple meal, consisting of rice, miso soup, a chicken patty and salad for the both of them, in two metal containers that she brought from home and packed the food into after she paid for them. He didn’t pull one out, for he discovered the telegram first, and he dropped his stomach to the sand to get comfortable while he perused the message.

“... How?” asked Touko.

Aoi looked away from Byakuya. “What?”

“How do you plan to repay me?”

“Oh...” She tapped her chin. The absence of a reply allowed them to hear Byakuya mutter the contents of the telegram. Just before Touko could ask if Aoi managed to forget the question in such a short amount of time, Aoi said, “What do you need?”

Again, before Touko had the chance to speak, she was interrupted. Byakuya lifted his head sharply.
“Someone who can turn me into a human.”

Touko froze.

“A human?” Aoi frowned. “Wouldn’t you miss all your friends in the sea?”

“I do not have any friends there and even if I did, I wouldn’t care,” Byakuya said, most likely not grasping the concept of a ‘friend’ fully, which when Touko thought back to when he didn’t correct Makoto on him thinking Byakuya and Touko were friends, hurt. She hugged herself as her stomach puckered tighter.

“But being a mermaid isn’t a bad thing,” said Aoi. “Sakura-chan’s a mermaid, you know.”

Byakuya and Touko flinched. When Aoi mentioned having a girlfriend, Touko had assumed that Sakura was another selkie. Before Touko thought to think about saying something, Byakuya whipped around toward Touko with lightning fast reaction time.

“You promised me that you would help me in exchange for one of my scales,” Byakuya said. “You’re not allowed to get one of her scales instead. We have a deal.”

Touko closed her mouth and opened it again, but she didn’t get to say anything again, interrupted this time by Aoi.

“I can’t ask Sakura-chan for something like that. Knowing her, she would want you both to keep your sides of the deal,” said Aoi. Then she hesitated. “B-Besides, I don’t think she would be happy after...”

Aoi folded her arms over her chest and didn’t finish her troubled thought. She started another.

“Well, whatever, I don’t owe you anything,” she told Byakuya. “I owe Fukawa-chan for granting my freedom. Unless you want a scale, Fukawa-chan? If I ask really nicely, Sakura-chan might give me one for you. Then you won’t have to put up with Mr. Attitude over here.”

“My surname is Togami,” said Byakuya coldly.

Touko hardened her features and scowled at Aoi. “No, I don’t want one of her scales. Now let me get this straight... You’re willing to become my slave because I freed you from Monobear...? Isn’t that what you escaped from? You can’t be that stupid.”

“I wouldn’t be your slave,” replied Aoi. “This is something I get to choose if I do or not, and I’m choosing to help you out. So... what do you want? I could be your maid. Here, let me have a go at it right now.” She jerked her hands around. “‘Hello, would you like some tea, honey?’”

“H-Huh?” Touko wobbled and kicked her legs and flailed her arms to steady herself. “T-That’s not what a maid says at all, you dunce!”

“Then what do they say?”

“What does it matter? I don’t want you to be my maid!”

Even if bossing Aoi around and maybe humiliating her wasn’t completely repulsive. It could even be fun. For Touko. Some of her monochrome clothes would do for a maid outfit.

Aoi puffed out her cheeks. “It was only a suggestion, Fukawa-chan. I mean it’s not like you’re coming up with anything.”
Touko broke out of her daydream and slouched forward, placing her hands either side of her thighs. Whatever. Having Aoi around so much would grate on her nerves anyway, and as a maid, she would touch Touko’s things and move them around.

The teeth in Touko’s upper row pinned down her lower lip in thought.

“Fukawa and I have an agreement,” he said, glaring at Touko but talking to Aoi. “She would teach me to read and write and she would turn me into a human, and I would give her one of my scales. I have already mastered the first thing, so she just needs to turn me into a human.”

There was silence. Touko looked away from him, tilted her head back and met Aoi’s eyes. Grimacing, Touko averted her stare and said, “I need time to think about it. Come back later.”

“How much later?” asked Aoi.

“I don’t know!” snapped Touko. Aoi twitched. “Come back in a week! I need time to think!”

“Okay, okay,” said Aoi, patting the air as she got off the boulder. She started backing away, heading toward the sea. “A week, got it. I might be a few days off, because we don’t have clocks, but—”

“Whatever!” interrupted Touko.

Aoi whirled around so she walked forward into the sea. With the water lapping at her knees, she unfolded her grey pelt, slipped into it and threw herself forward. Her body rocked as she swam further out, keeping her body streamline, and when she was far enough, she plunged her whole body in.

For a while, neither Byakuya or Touko said anything, which Touko welcomed. She didn’t know if she would be able to talk, what with how constricted her ravaged throat felt. Words would have to be squeezed through, and the effort might bring out tears from her burning eyes.

Byakuya finally grew bored of the telegram and returned it to the basket. Touko listened to him rummage through the basket until he found something he wanted, and going by the two clicks that cracked the air, he had chosen one of the metal containers. She peeked at him, head bowed forward. He didn’t seem to be paying her any attention, so she felt safe spying on him as he placed the lid to one side and inspected the contents of the container. The miso soup was in a black bowl sealed with a lid of the same colour, the rice in its packet and needing to be heated up with her magic, and the salad and patty were in bowls, ready to eat.

After some deliberation, he started nibbling on the patty.

Her brow creased as she watched him. For as long as she could remember, she couldn’t stand being near other people when they ate. Just thinking about them slurping, and their wet tongues, and the sucking and chewing and gulping made her shiver. The actual thing itself was worse. Yet with him, she didn’t have to fight the impulse to scratch her arms, rock back and forth or pinch herself because there was no impulse. Not only could she look at him as he ate, but she would hear him too and still feel okay.

She clenched her fists.

He glanced up. Touko didn’t look away quick enough.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she croaked.
Byakuya squinted. She thought he might ask what was bothering her, but he lowered his eyes and sorted through his salad for something.

Unfortunately, she didn’t get off completely.

“Why won’t you let her help you find another witch?” asked Byakuya a minute later, but Touko already had an excuse handy.

“I told you, most of them are dead,” she replied icily. “It would be a waste of a favour. That’s why I don’t want her precious Sakura’s scale either... I’ll be getting one from you anyway. I’ll get the most out of this if I use Asahina for something else.”

Yes. That was why.

He gave a vague nod and crunched on a curl of seaweed.

Rain pattered against Touko’s umbrella. The sky had taken on a glum grey, matching her umbrella, though the sky was tinged very faintly with blue. Everything seemed darker, from the dirt path that she had to take, not wanting to risk journeying down the cliff face, to the sand and moss that she came to later, even though it was noon. She kept her sandals on and much like a little more than a week ago, hesitated when she saw a familiar figure in the distance.

“Fukawa-chan!” Aoi yelled from the boulder, waving the entirety of her arm.

Touko’s heart sank and for a few seconds, her lips mashed together uselessly. A blink didn’t cause Aoi to disappear. Unfortunately. First, Touko took a deep breath, and then she hurried over, trying to hold her umbrella steady. Her braids writhed like snakes behind her until she stopped by the boulder and they swung into her back.

“You,” said Touko, and she shot a glare at the boulder. Byakuya’s sunglasses were still there, in the same spot where he left them the day before, unclaimed. He wouldn’t need them in this weather, but he wasn’t near the boulder either. Thinking back, she hadn’t seen him as she approached. She only saw Aoi.

Her gaze lingered on the sunglasses.

“Don’t you want to sit down?” asked Aoi.

Touko glanced at her. “No. It’s damp. It’ll look like I wet myself when I stand up...”

Aoi, sat on her grey pelt, frowned, and Touko’s expression remained sour as she turned away.

That was when Touko saw Byakuya waddling over from the sea. He must have been waiting for Touko to arrive before he came out even though he would have had Aoi for company, which sent a jolt through Touko that tickled in her chest like fire that licked. Her lips twitched into a small smile.

When he reached the boulder, he said, “Umbrella.”

Touko crouched down beside him, umbrella in the hand closest to him, and he wiggled so his head was underneath it. With more wiggling, he rolled over and sat up next to Touko, his back pressed against the boulder. She passed him the basket held in her other hand.

There was nothing special in it today. Just sandwiches, fruit, a flask, pens, a notebook and Touko’s spell book. Byakuya inspected the contents but didn’t take anything out.
“So...” Aoi trailed off, outside of Touko’s vision.

Touko hunched her shoulders. “I still don’t know what I want-”

“You’ll never guess what,” chirped Aoi as if Touko hadn’t been in the middle of saying something, but before Touko could hiss at her, she added, “I think I know someone who’ll be able to help you!”

Fumbling with the umbrella handle, Touko said, “W-What?”

The bottoms of Aoi’s bare feet slapped against the sand as she slid off the boulder. She squatted down under the umbrella, facing them. Fitting two people was difficult enough but three involved a proximity far too cramped for Touko’s liking, and Touko curled herself into a ball, an action that Byakuya couldn’t achieve so rain splattered onto his silver tail.

“What are you talking about?” asked Byakuya slowly, like he didn’t want to get his hopes up.

“I found another witch,” said Aoi, cracking a wide grin while Touko’s heart cracked. “Well, I didn’t find her, exactly. Or at all. After I left you two last time, I told Sakura-chan about everything you said and like I thought, she said she wouldn’t give Fukawa-chan one of her scales because she doesn’t want to intrude on your deal, but she did tell me that her boyfriend, Kenichiro, got really ill shortly after they met...”

“W-Wait, you said she was your girlfriend,” Touko cut in, desperate to find an inconsistency as if that would mean the rest of what she was saying was wrong too.

“Yeah. We are. We’re girlfriends and they’re boyfriend and girlfriend.” Aoi pouted and glanced away. “I met him once... He’s okay. Anyway, he got healed by a woman who could make all sorts of magic potions and he went travelling after. Sakura-chan hasn’t seen him for ages but like me and her, they have this bond where they can go long times without the other. Last time they met, they agreed to have a friendly fist fight.”

Touko didn’t see what was ‘friendly’ about a fist fight, but her parents sometimes hit each other and they used to beat her a lot, so it must have just been a common thing in relationships.

Byakuya flapped his hand. “I don’t care about any of that. This woman that you mentioned... so you think that she might be able to transform me into a human?”

Aoi shrugged. “Maybe.”

He rubbed his chin.

“Take me to her,” said Byakuya.

Touko tensed.

“It’s not that simple,” replied Aoi, wagging her finger. “If you paid attention to my whole story instead of not caring about most of it, you’d know that Sakura-chan met Kenichiro, not the potion making lady. And this was years ago, so maybe he won’t even be there to tell us where to find her. I don’t know when he said he would be coming back.”

Byakuya stared at her. “It might be the only chance that I have. Tell me where he lived.”

“I’d have to ask Sakura-chan.”

“Then ask Sakura-chan!”
“Oi, I don’t like your attitude!”

Touko pressed her hands against her ears and growled, “Shut up!”

Both of them shut up. Byakuya looked as though she had just slapped him. They waited for her to talk, but she just planted her face against her knees. The umbrella sagged and some rain rapped against the back of her neck, but she didn’t care enough to fix its position. Aoi didn’t move, even though she was getting rained on, while Byakuya shuffled and soon pressed into Touko’s arm.

“H-Hey, Fukawa-chan,” said Aoi, sounding uneasy. “Is something wrong? You’ll get to meet another witch who must have lots of stuff to teach you, and you can turn Togami into a human, and he’ll give you one of his scales. That’s good, right?”

That was right. He said he would give her one of his scales. Touko peeled her face away from her knees and said, “In that case... I’ll have to come too!”

Byakuya snorted. She turned to him and saw him roll his eyes. “Only now you realise that? Obviously, you will be coming with me.”

“Really?” she said with a flutter in her chest.

He leaned against her more heavily. “Firstly, I want to make sure you don’t try to get a scale from Sakura. Secondly, I won’t be able to go on land, so it will be up to you to make contact with this woman. I trust that you will go, because I won’t be giving you a scale before I know for certain that I will become a human, and I am a mermaid of my word.”

“Or you could go together because you’re friends,” pointed out Aoi, resting a cheek in her palm.

Byakuya wrapped an arm around himself.

“How long will it take for you to obtain directions from this Sakura person?” he asked.

Aoi lifted her head and dropped her hand.

“Not long,” she replied. She hesitated. “But it might be far away from here and not only that, Fukawa-chan’s not like us. She can’t swim the whole way, being a human and all. Well, a witch. But witches are humans, right?”

They were, but Touko didn’t tell her that. Touko wrung her hands together and didn’t mention that she couldn’t swim at all either. Instead, she turned her head away from Byakuya and pulled a face at empty space.

“So Fukawa can’t come?” said Byakuya.

Her heart missed a beat.

“Sure she can! She just needs a boat, then she doesn’t have to worry about getting tired or drowning,” said Aoi.

“A boat,” repeated Byakuya.

Touko’s stomach lurched just at the mention of a boat. Her head twitched but she didn’t turn it. “Don’t tell me you don’t know what a boat is.”

“I know what a boat is,” he snapped. Touko’s shoulders hunched. In the same tone, he said, “Do you have a boat, Fukawa?”
“No.”

“No. Then we will have to buy one with money,” he said.

She slowly swivelled her head around. He didn’t look angry, like she feared, but rather consumed by another emotion that narrowed his eyes and raised his chin. If she was to guess, she would say it was determination.

“A boat would be expensive,” Touko told them, throat tight. The sinking feeling in Touko’s stomach only grew worse the more she talked. By the last sentence, she was mumbling. “And I wouldn’t be able to control it by myself anyway... I don’t know how they work. It’s more reasonable to have someone take us there.”

“That would be awkward,” said Byakuya. “I can’t let myself be seen by sailors.”

Fearing that he would insist he make his own way there, Touko blurted, “I don’t trust you!”

No comment on whether or not that was actually true.

Byakuya jerked at her volume.

“We... We have to go together, or else you might sneak away!” Touko said. “You only know about this from Asahina because I helped her, s-so you owe me.”

He didn’t say anything.

Touko shook her head and emitted a forlorn whine.

Aoi’s face creased with concern. “Fukawa-chan?”

But Touko had no intentions of acknowledging Aoi. Picking up on this, Aoi fixed her eyes onto Byakuya, who was staring at Touko with confusion.

“Well, I’ll be off then,” said Aoi. “I’ll try to be faster this time. Phew, I must be breaking all sorts of selkie codes. So, like, while I’m away, try to get hold of a boat, okay?”

Byakuya glanced at her and nodded once, which was far more than what could be said about Touko, who mashed her heels against the sand and met the gaze of no one.

One week elapsed and Aoi hadn’t returned with a destination, or at all. A warm, cloudless morning marked the first day of August. Touko approached the harbour not because she intended to hire a boat, but because she wanted to take a look at where she would have to hire a boat from and gauge what sort of people worked there.

From a distance.

She had been on a boat before, many years ago, but as a stowaway. The boat had been huge, which made it easier to sneak on and hide in the luggage. It had been dark, and cramped, like the closet at her first home. Remembering it made her heart hammer against her chest like on the boat, when every creak and bark of laughter could be someone about to stumble upon her and send her back home, and Touko needed to kneel and take several deep breaths to puff out her clenched chest.

Slowly, she stood up. The pavement stopped wobbling under her feet as much and she continued to the harbour.
To the best of her knowledge, passenger boats didn’t come to shore in this town. Just those of fishermen and other trades. She hadn’t arrived here on a boat but at another town. Not wanting to live exactly where the boat brought her, as that would make it easier for Touko’s parents to find her, she had used some of her savings on a carriage to take her somewhere else.

Towa Town.

However, Touko wasn’t sure if she had needed to. Either she fled far enough that her parents came to a dead end, her parents didn’t know how to go about finding her or they never tried.

Her lips disappeared into her mouth.

From her cliff, the boats specked her vision. Up closer, when she and them were on roughly the same level, they stretched toward the sky, slumping sails looking especially off-white compared to the scattered clouds above. Touko contented herself with eyeing the boats. There were several men pottering about, some on the pier that was flocked by boats on all sides. One of the men, a muscular man with skin as dark as Aoi’s but with short, dark greenish grey hair, seemed to notice Touko and held his hand up to his forehead.

She squeaked and scuttled off. The man didn’t give chase, which he had no reason to, but after a minute, Touko checked over her shoulder anyway. Finding herself alone, her shoulders slumped and she allowed herself to slow her pace. Perhaps when Aoi came back with a destination, Touko could get her to organise and negotiate and whatever else with one of the sailors.

At the beach, Byakuya was already equipped with his sunglasses and craned his neck as soon as he sighted her. Touko set down the basket without him needing to say anything. He rooted around for a letter or telegram, but finding none, opted for a cheese sandwich.

They listened to the sea.

“I have a question,” he said after he ate half of his sandwich, his chin propped in his palm as he lay on his front on the wet sand.

Touko glanced at him. “What is it...?”

“How far can you swim before you get tired?”

She looked away.

“Well?” he persisted.

Her eyes trailed over to him. “... I can’t.”

“Can’t?”

“Can’t swim.”

“You can’t swim?” asked Byakuya loudly.

No one heard him as there wasn’t anyone else nearby, but Touko still flailed her arms.

“So what?” she said, wiggling on the boulder and glaring down at him. “Why should I have to know how to swim?”

He frowned. “I just thought, seeing as you live next to the sea...”
She jabbed her finger at the air.

“W-Well, I didn’t tell you to think that!” she snapped.

There followed a brief silence.

“If you’re going to be on a boat for some time, then you should know how to swim in case you go overboard,” he pointed out.

“O-Overboard?”

Touko hugged herself tightly.

“I will even teach you,” he offered. “As a mermaid, I’ve spent most of my life in water.”

“Y-You don’t have to worry about drowning though,” she huffed, looking away. She hesitated, and then her eyes flitted back to him. “F-Fine… I’ll try.”

He gestured toward the sea and said, “Lie down with your head toward the water, on your back.”

His request didn’t make much sense to her, but Touko obeyed, positioning herself where his finger was pointed. Byakuya crawled over and flopped onto his back next to her. The Sun shone down on them, causing Touko to squint and Byakuya to shade his eyes with one hand. He was wearing sunglasses so that took away some of the Sun’s intensity, but as mermaids apparently had eyes more sensitive to light than regular human’s, she wondered if his sunglasses weren’t strong enough.

Touko opened her mouth, about to ask him, but then a small wave washed over them. She sat up with a lurch, coughing and spluttering, eyes squeezed shut.

“You have seaweed in your hair,” he said.

Her hands patted down on her hair, fingers combing through it, but she didn’t find anything before Byakuya rose up and pinched at the supposed seaweed. Though her eyes still stung a bit, she managed to open them.

“It brings out your eyes,” he commented as he cleaned his sunglasses.

“W-What?”

He pulled out the seaweed. “This.”

Touko glared at the lumpy strand between his thumb and index finger, dangling down, olive green and slimy and repulsive. She scowled and twisted away from him. Water streaked her glasses so she removed them and rubbed the lenses.

“Your violet eyes stand out next to it,” he elaborated, still holding the seaweed against her, and Touko turned back a bit.

A small smile grew on her face. Touko put her glasses back on, took the seaweed from him and placed it against his hair. He stared at her, his eyes a deep blue that unlike the sea, invited her in. Closer... Closer...

“So you never learned to swim?” he asked.

She realised she had stooped her head and started slowly leaning toward him. Her face burned and she straightened up.
“No,” she said.

“Even though you live by the sea?”

“I haven’t always lived by the sea,” she reminded him. “Before, I lived in a rural village.”

“Rural?”

“An area or countryside outside of a town or city,” she said. He opened his mouth and she quickly explained, “Lots of grass, usually, and not many people.”

Byakuya nodded. “Yes, I remember you bringing a few... blades... of grass to show me.”

She didn’t have anything to add to that, so didn’t.

His lips flattened against each other. “You told me that you came to this town to escape Genocider Syo, but that can’t really be the reason. Is it that you were worried about people suspecting you of the murders and fled here for a fresh start?”

Touko shrugged one shoulder.

“No, that’s not the only reason,” he said. “You told me that your parents thought you were a freak and would try to ‘strain’ your magic out of you. Could it be that too?”

She squeaked and stared down at her feet. He nodded.

“I’m right. Well, Fukawa, there’s nothing you can do about being magic, though wanting to give up your magical ability would be completely illogical. It’s an incredible power.”

Her eyes flitted to him. Byakuya looked completely serious. Completely sincere. Touko felt the compulsion to lean toward him again, only this time, she restrained herself better, even if when he batted his eyelashes, it was like they were waving in greeting. Inviting her.

Blushing furiously, she donned her prickly shell, scrabbled to her feet and marched over to the boulder.

“Where are you going?” asked Byakuya.

“To eat,” she said, though she didn’t know if she could fit a sandwich in with the knots squirming in her stomach.

While the concepts of ‘romance’ and most likely ‘love’ had been alien to Byakuya and he probably didn’t understand them still, Touko knew them. She felt love toward her pet, Kameko, a stink bug that lived in her room in her parents’ house and then here too, who disappeared for periods of hours, days, sometimes weeks, before returning to her out of the blue. Then there was her childhood friend, her old milkman’s son who used to be in her class at school, who smiled and laughed at her quips until he pinned her love confession to the notice board the day before he moved to another town, where he would become Genocider Syo’s first victim. Touko woke up on the back of a carriage, surrounded by hay, and if it hadn’t been so dark, she would have fainted at the blood on her hands.

After that boy, there were others, older boys and men who smiled at her, or rubbed her shoulders and had hot breath, but Genocider Syo committed them to the same fate. They just needed to show a bit of niceness and they lit up Touko’s world. Fortunately, with time, she had got better at resisting their charms.
Byakuya wasn’t like that though. Never had been, like all those before him. He was cold, and snappy, with few friends if any, and he didn’t trust others easily... Touko hesitated, unsure if she was describing him still.

She cringed, wishing she could shake herself. This wasn’t romance. After all, she wanted him to stay with her so she could get his scale for a love potion. That was for romance. Love. And then she wouldn’t need him anymore.

With that settled, she relaxed a bit, but her face hadn’t cooled by the time Byakuya heaved himself over to the boulder. He multi tasked, resuming his sandwich and getting out a pen and a piece of paper from the basket.

When he finished writing, Touko decided to carry out a quality check and snatched the piece of paper away as soon as he put down his pen.

“It’s for a telegram,” he informed her.

Touko skimmed through what he wrote. Byakuya had asked Makoto if he could operate a boat. She doubted that Makoto could, but she accepted the note, folded it in half and set it down at the bottom of the basket.
It was a wicked thought but Touko considered not sending the telegram. However, she knew Byakuya would interrogate her and she would have to lie and say that the others just hadn’t replied, but she found it hard to lie to Byakuya’s eyes. He would be angry if - or more likely, when - he found out what she deceived him. After weighing her options, Touko sent the telegram. She didn’t think Makoto would be able to help anyway, and Byakuya would have no reason to doubt her if they received confirmation that they wouldn’t be able to help them with the boat.

Sunday came and went. So did Monday. On Tuesday morning, before Touko went to town, she heard shouting when she left her cottage. It sounded like someone saying ‘Togami’. Touko peered down the cliff and saw Byakuya swimming to shore, but he hadn’t been the person that she heard. Not wanting to lean over too far, she hurried to the beach via the longer route and spotted Aoi on her boulder. Byakuya had left the sea, and the two seemed to be talking together, with him lounging on the sand nearby.

Up until now, Touko thought that Byakuya only came at noon. Morning was unprecedented. Perhaps they wanted to gossip about her. A scowl darkened her features.

Even after a few seconds passed, they showed no signs of noticing her yet, so pressed close against the cliff, Touko crept nearer so she could approach them without them realising. She hid so they wouldn’t be able to see her, but by doing so, she made it so that she couldn’t see them either. All she had to gauge their emotions with were their words and tone of voice.

“... just like platinum arowana,” said Aoi lightly.

“Only mermaids belonging to the Togami line have these tails,” he replied, seeming bored. “My scales are much more valuable than those of your girlfriend. Oogami are common...”

“Hey, Sakura-chan is one in a million!”

“I’m right though, aren’t I?”

“Well, yeah... but that’s not saying much. Sakura-chan told me what happened.”

Silence. Touko held her breath.

“Do you miss them?” Aoi finally asked.

“Not individually.”

Needing to breathe, Touko exhaled. She thought that she didn’t do it loud enough that they would hear her, but Byakuya muttered something indiscernible and then Aoi jumped off the boulder. Well, it had to be Aoi because Byakuya couldn’t jump.

Shortly after, Aoi confirmed her suspicions and popped into Touko’s field of vision.

“Touko-chan!” Aoi greeted, wiggling her fingers. “Hi!”

“... Hello,” said Touko through the lump in her throat, whose stomach felt as unsettled as Aoi’s
quivering digits. She wrapped her arms around herself. “You’re here...”

“Yup,” said Aoi with a shrug.

“And loud.”

“Was I?”

Touko nodded.

“Sorry,” said Aoi, not sounding sorry. “I didn’t disturb you, did I? It’s just I saw Togami lurking around and that kind of thing gives me the creeps, so I thought I’d call him over so I could see if he was doing anything funny. Come on, let’s go!”

Aoi grabbed Touko’s hand and led her around the rest of the cliff. As soon as Touko entered his sight, Byakuya fixed his gaze onto her. Touko let herself be taken to the boulder, where the two girls sat together.

“I wanted to wait for you before I talked about what I found out,” announced Aoi. She clapped her hands and kept them together after. “So, Sakura-chan told me where Kenichiro lives and how long it would take to get there... Swimming, it would take about three months, but I reckon if you got a good boat, it’d be a lot sooner.”

Byakuya raised his upper body, balanced on his hands. “So we can leave now?”

Touko nibbled on her nail.

“It depends,” said Aoi. “Do you have a boat?”

“Not yet,” admitted Byakuya. “I wish to travel with the boat, but at the same time, I don’t want to expose myself to strangers... especially sailors.”

Which was just as well, because Touko hadn’t been able to work up the nerve to ask anyone at the harbour whether they would be willing to take them somewhere. Even if Byakuya decided to reveal himself to a crew, if no one was going in that direction, they might have to pay extra to arrange a detour or an entirely new trip. A lot extra, potentially.

“Oh,” said Aoi. She shrugged. “Well, we can sort out a boat today and head off another time. And like... as much as I love being back at sea, they don’t have any donuts, so I could get some while I’m here...”

“Donuts?” said Byakuya.

Aoi stared at him. “You don’t know what a donut is? We definitely have to get you one.”

She turned to Touko.

“They’ve got to sell donuts in town,” said Aoi.

“Maybe at the bakery,” mumbled Touko. Her eyes flickered. “S-Shouldn’t you know if they do? Didn’t you get any while you were here with the circus?”

“Nope. I’ve only had them once, years ago, but I never forgot the sweetness that washes over you, and then the soft eggy dough that fills you up...”

It seemed like an incredibly vivid memory, as it was strong enough to make Aoi’s stomach gurgle.
"You can get whatever those are while you go to the post office," said Byakuya. He directed his attention to Touko. "You haven’t been there yet, have you?"

Touko shook her head.

Aoi lifted her chin sharply.

"This will be fun!" Aoi said. She tied the arms of her pelt around her middle, hooked her arm around Touko’s elbow and pulled. "Lead the way! Town is this way, yeah?"

"I can’t lead if you’re doing it already!" Touko hissed. "B-Besides, we have to go to my cottage first so I can get my basket and purse!"

The last person, and the only person for a long time, that Touko had walked to town with was Makoto. While he hadn’t been great company, or even good company, he didn’t talk as much as Aoi, and he didn’t walk as quickly as Aoi either. Theoretically, this would mean that Touko and Aoi arrived to town sooner, but the faster pace and obligation to talk meant Touko became out of breath halfway there because Aoi was insistent that Touko keep up with her ridiculous, upbeat pace. Aoi ended up having to carry Touko on her back for the rest of the way or else leave Touko lying on the ground, and when she finally lowered Touko in the town square, Touko still had a cramp in her stomach.

"Where to?" asked Aoi, stretching her arms above her head and tilting her body from one side to the other.

"We might as well get your donuts," said Touko.

They visited the bakery that as Touko suspected, did sell donuts, in metal trays on two lines of shelves. The smell of cooking wafted over them, causing Aoi to grin and Touko’s stomach to rumble. Aoi sniffed, looked around, and catching sight of the donuts, rushed over to them, coming to an abrupt stop by the display and almost overbalancing and falling face first into them.

Touko padded over and glanced at Aoi’s drool. Falling face first into the donuts wouldn’t have been a bad thing to Aoi.

"Pink? Chocolate? Shiny? Sprinkles?" said Aoi. She beamed and clasped her hands together. "There’s so many to choose from... You’ll have to buy them all, Fukawa-chan."

"What?" said Touko with a start. "Me? Why should I buy them?"

Aoi reached into her shorts’ pockets and turned them inside out.

"I’m not buying that many," said Touko. She tugged on her braids. "I didn’t even want to buy any in the first place..."

"Please," said Aoi, pouting.

Heat flushed through Touko’s face. "D-Do you have no self-awareness? Argh, you can choose six. Two for each of us."

"Just two?" asked Aoi.

"How much does your girlfriend pamper you?" Touko retorted. Aoi glared. "You can have two of mine, you greedy pig. Just choose!"
Nearby, a stout baker watched with confusion and unease, but the sight of Touko’s purse brought joy to his face. Touko picked out coins while Aoi whizzed up and down the stretch of shelves, deliberating on what donuts to select. The next three minutes felt like ten, and by the time they left the bakery with a paper bag, Touko felt ready to crawl into bed.

When they stepped outside, weird mumbling came from Aoi as she tried to say something, but Touko couldn’t understand her. Not when she already started eating a donut glazed in a translucent sickly white. The attempt at talking sprayed crumbs.

“W-What?” asked Touko, raising an arm to defend herself and freezing into a tense statue.

Before trying again, Aoi chewed and swallowed. Touko pulled a face.

“I said, ‘So we’re going to the post office now?’” Aoi clarified.

“I suppose,” replied Touko.

Fortunately, the post office wasn’t packed with people. On first thought, Touko wished that there was only staff there, but on second thought, she changed her mind, as then the staff would all have nothing to do but scrutinise her. Touko breathed in and out a few times before she marched over to the counter. She gave her name and waited for the woman opposite her to sort through envelopes. The first two times that Touko came here, the person serving her mentioned that they could have a delivery boy go to her house to give her the telegram, but Touko declined both times, even if she hated the extra walking.

Her cottage was no one else’s business.

A few minutes later, the woman passed Touko an envelope. Touko took it without a word and she and Aoi stepped outside.

“Open it,” said Aoi excitedly.

“Hush,” snapped Touko, but she opened it.

Aoi rested her chin on Touko’s shoulder. “What does it say?”


Later, Byakuya read it aloud, and Touko followed along with his words while Aoi hopped around nearby, dancing in the warm, swirling sensation that her donut gave her.

“They didn’t say they couldn’t operate a boat. Does this mean that they could help us with the boat?” asked Byakuya. He read the letter aloud again and added, “They could have said more.”

“They charge you for the first nine words and then extra for anything additional,” said Touko. “That... might be part of the reason why they didn’t go into more detail. How cheap...”

“Aw, turn that frown upside down,” said Aoi, coming to a stop beside Touko, who was sat on the boulder. “We’ll send another explaining and they’ll get back to us. In the meantime, we should prepare. We’ll need a lot of food. Like donuts.”

Touko rolled her eyes. “Donuts wouldn’t last more than a day or two, you dummy...”

“Unless we make our own... but anyway, there’s always fish,” said Aoi. She looked at Byakuya.
“You don’t mind, do you? Togami?”

His eyes flitted away from the telegram. “Why would I mind?”

“Some mermaids don’t like eating fish.”

He curled his lips. “I don’t mind, no.”

“I mind,” said Touko. “I’m not eating fish for an entire month…”

“We’ll have donuts for the first two days,” Aoi pointed out.

Touko huffed.

“Anyway, we can plan all that later,” said Byakuya. “Tomorrow, you will send another telegram demanding a proper answer. Now, Fukawa, do you have anything for me to read?”

She rooted around her basket for a notebook, taking out one that contained a story about a girl invited to attend a school that recruited those elite in their expert field, and handed it to him.

Byakuya opened the notebook and flicked to the last page that had writing on it. He muttered short excerpts, working backward until he arrived to a page with text that he remembered reading. While he was capable of reading silently, which Touko knew, he preferred to read aloud so she could check his pronunciation. At first, it had been grating, because his voice sucked her concentration away from her own work as he always wanted her to pay attention to him, but she warmed to it. His voice. It was pleasant to listen to, even. Low, with a slight drawl, punctuated by occasional hums and clicks of tongue.

“’This heart-thumping feeling of distress, it’s just as if salmon suddenly started assaulting people. Like I said…’ Fukawa?”

Touko could listen to it for hours.

“Fukawa?” he repeated, louder.

She jolted. “Huh?”

“You were looking more gormless than usual,” he commented. He glared at her. “Focus. Then afterwards, we will have another swimming lesson.”

Until this point, Aoi had been preoccupying herself with her second donut, but the mention of either swimming, lesson or the two words together prompted her to stop dancing and fix her eyes on Byakuya.

“You mean you’re giving Fukawa-chan swimming lessons?” asked Aoi.

“What, do you seriously think it might be the other way around?” he retorted with disdain. “I’m teaching her to swim.”

Aoi frowned and tilted her head to one side. “Um… No offence, but why do you think you’d be a good teacher for her?”

His face darkened. “Why wouldn’t I be? I live in the water.”

Touko felt a spike of offence on his behalf.
“Fukawa-chan has legs. You don’t. You’re not going to be able to teach her how to use them when she swims,” explained Aoi with a surprisingly valid point.

Byakuya focused his gaze elsewhere.

Aoi swallowed the rest of her donut. She sucked the ends of her fingers before talking again. “Lucky for you, I have legs and can swim really well. I’ll take over for you and you can continue reading your story.”

He turned his head away, louring.

“Whatever,” he said. “Fukawa, today’s session will be run by Asahina. I’m going to be over here, if you desperately need me.”

Touko lifted a hand. “W-Wait, don’t you need me to listen...?”

“Like I said before, you bastards are often called “the world’s hope”,” he read aloud.

She stared at him.

“So what has Togami taught you so far?” asked Aoi. “Fukawa-chan?”

“I’ve just walked around in the water,” replied Touko, taking her eyes off Byakuya. Touko squeezed her hands together and added in his defence, “We’ve only had a few lessons...”

Aoi nodded. “Well, today, we’re going to practice kicking and floating on your back.”

“W-What?” Touko shrieked. Any shred of desire to go along with Aoi’s scheme disappeared at the thought of lying on her back in the water, so Touko tried to walk backward on her heels, tried to flee, but Aoi grabbed Touko’s wrist and as she was stronger, Touko’s act of resistance proved futile.

“Hm,” went Aoi after a dozen or so steps, other hand up against her forehead to shield her eyes against the Sun as she inspected the surrounding area. “Hey, do you have a bath?”

“Are you saying I stink?”

“No, I...” Aoi sniffed in Touko’s direction, and seemed to change her mind about what she had been about to say. “I think a bath would be better for you to practice kicking, because it’s shallow and you could sit on the edge of the tub. Monobear had one that he sometimes let me lie in as a treat.”

She sighed and slapped her thigh.

“Oh well,” Aoi carried on. “I’ll just keep you afloat myself and you can practice your kicks in the sea. Let’s go.”

“I prefer the bath idea,” said Touko, but Aoi didn’t appear to be listening and tugged Touko by the arm toward the sea. Byakuya watched them, lips pinched together. Touko raised her voice. “I-Idiot! I’m not dressed for the water! I don’t even own a swimsuit!”

“Take your clothes off then.”

Touko’s voice raised in pitch. “I’m not getting naked!”

“I didn’t say to get naked! You’ve got like... underwear, right?”

“White underwear. A-And the colour doesn’t affect my aversion,” Touko snapped. She hesitated.
“What about you?”

“Mine are white too.”

“No! What? No...! Why do you even still have clothes?” Touko shook herself free and squinted.
“Your clothes look dry. Don’t they get wet when you’re in the sea?”

“Nope!” Aoi said with a smile and half-hearted shrug. “Nothing gets through my selkie skin, not even water. When I first came to shore - not here, somewhere else, I was naked, but Sakura-chan told me before that I would have to wear clothes, so I borrowed some from someone’s washing line. I left my pelt at the beach but then Monobear found it... and that’s how I ended up working for him.”

This was a lot to process. Touko’s mind sorted them into an order.

“Not only were you a nudist, but a thief too,” mumbled Touko. She rubbed her hands against her hair and shook her head.

Aoi locked her hands into fists. “I was going to give them back, but then the circus relocated and Monobear didn’t tell me to return them. So I didn’t.”

Touko twisted her body away from Aoi and said nothing, giving Byakuya the chance to speak up.

“What’s underwear?” he called out.

Aoi looked confused for a moment but then wagged a finger. “Right, Togami doesn’t wear anything! See, Fukawa-chan?”

She prodded Touko’s chest with that finger.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed,” said Aoi.

Touko’s face heated up. An image, crystal clear, of Byakuya surfaced to the forefront of her mind, of him sprawled on his back, light hitting his abs like butter melting on a hot surface. Yes, he was naked, but he didn’t have anything indecent to conceal like humans. At least, none that Touko remembered seeing, so he had no need to wear clothes.

Her image of him faded and she dragged her gaze over to the real Byakuya, who was lying on his stomach, chin propped in the palm of his hand.

“Well?” he said. “What is it? Underwear?”

He said it so casually! Touko fidgeted. “It’s certain clothing you wear under other clothes...”

“Why? Is it for extra warmth?”

She curled her lips, thinking over his response. “Partly... but also for privacy and hygienic reasons...”

Byakuya seemed to accept this as an answer and returned his attention to the notebook.

“Okay, we’ve wasted enough time,” said Aoi. She thrust up her fists. “Water. Swim. Now!”

Touko gave sweeping arm gestures. “I told you that I’m not going to swim!”

“If you’re worried about sinking, I’m going to keep my hand under your back so you stay up,” Aoi assured her. “And we won’t even go far in... like, waist high, maybe.”
“I’m not-” Touko only got that far before Byakuya cut in.

“Do it,” he said.

She tensed. With a glower, Touko hunched her shoulders and pivoted on her heel so she faced away from the sea. “Fine. I’ll... do it. I’ll be back... soon... with something to wear.”

Maybe.

“And I’ll come with you in case you try to run away,” piped up Aoi.

Touko didn’t own any swimsuits, but at her cottage, she rummaged through her rather limited wardrobe for something that wouldn’t be awkward to move around in if wet. In total, she had five blouses, four skirts and half a dozen dresses. When she ran away from home, she didn’t bring any extra items of clothing with her. She didn’t bring any extra anything. Only a stale piece of bread, because once that had been eaten, she wouldn’t have to carry it anymore, and her stink bug, Kameko, who came and went as he pleased over the years, sometimes even changing his appearance. His smell.

Her fingers slipped against the shoulder straps of the dress in her hold, almost dropping it.

Aoi hummed from the bed. “Anything?”

“Nothing ideal,” replied Touko.

“We could go to town and get you something,” Aoi suggested.

Touko slung a glare at her. “I’m not making another trip...”

“I’ll go,” said Aoi. “I’ll be really quick. I’ll run the whole way.”

Knowing Aoi, she would and could.

“Do whatever,” said Touko dully, and she turned her head forward again.

“You can count on me,” said Aoi.

A few seconds passed.

“So... how do I know how many coins to give? And to who? And... uh... which shop sells them?”

Aoi going by herself had been too good to be true.

Touko felt tired already. “We’ll go tomorrow.”

Okay, off you go,” Aoi said the next day, following a trip to the post office and then to Touko’s cottage. Touko was on Aoi’s back, dressed in a plain, navy one piece swimsuit and black shorts bought at town. Her basket rested on the boulder, left there by Aoi where it would be safe from the sea’s clutches.

It was Aoi’s fault that Touko had to cling to her back, because Aoi walked too quickly and insisted on pulling on Touko’s hand whenever Touko didn’t move fast enough. Even after Touko took her time getting dressed in her cottage, she had threatened to be on the verge of collapsing, though
Touko’s slower pace there might have been influenced by the knowledge of what would happen after she got changed. Just as stubborn, Aoi had gathered Touko into her arms once Touko opened her cottage door, shorts covering the scars on her left thigh, and Aoi carried what was basically dead weight to the beach.

When Touko didn’t let go and made no indication that she planned to do so, Aoi bent her knees slowly and slightly tilted her body to the right.

Rather than slide off, Touko gripped onto her harder. Aoi sighed and jerked her shoulders, bouncing Touko into a steadier piggyback ride. She positioned her hands against the back of Touko’s thighs.

“Okay, I’ll carry you to the water.” Aoi took a few steps toward the sea but long before she could reach it, Touko slumped off and lay down on the sand. Frowning, Aoi straightened up and shook her head at Touko. “Now’s not the time to take a nap. We’re just going to practice kicks, okay? Like yesterday. No floating on your back for the time being.”

That was one good thing, at least.

“Fukawa knows how to kick,” said Byakuya on his stomach, situated on wet sand. He hadn’t waited for them by the boulder, which was where they left him before they went to town, but he was where the sea could feebly toss itself at his tail. “You spent an hour walking around and splashing yesterday.”

Aoi folded her arms over her chest. “That was to help her get used to the water. How it feels and stuff... but if you think we’re done with that, we’re going to submerge ourselves and blow bubbles today.”

What Aoi just said sounded nothing like floating on backs. Somehow, she said something far worse. Touko sat up sharply.

“Ah, are you ready?” asked Aoi. “H-Hey, Fukawa-chan... the sea’s the other way!”

Byakuya blinked but otherwise stared at Aoi, who caught up to Touko and dragged her into the sea. Mercifully, Aoi didn’t lead her into a depth that submerged anything above the knees, but that didn’t stop Touko from wiggling and fussing.

“See? Everything’s fine,” said Aoi.

Touko wrenched her arm out of Aoi’s hold and shoved the tip of her thumb into her mouth. She didn’t run away though... yet.

“F-For now... but what if a large wave suddenly swoops down on us?” Touko asked with a glower. She pulled on her shorts to try to cover more of her left leg.

“Then we’ll help you up,” promised Aoi.

Byakuya swam out and rolled onto his back, drifting along near them. Touko’s heart skipped a beat as the idea that he wanted to be able to help her like Aoi claimed entered her mind. Even if she was just more useful to him that way. Alive, that was.

“Are you going to drag this out for as long as possible?” he asked. “I want Fukawa to listen to me read.”

Aoi gave him a dirty look. “This is way more important... You can read to Fukawa-chan after.”
He snorted.

“I’m aware this is important, but you are taking things needlessly slow,” he said.

“Who’s the teacher here?” She waited, but he didn’t answer. “That’s right. It’s me. Not you.”

Their bickering delayed Touko having to actually swim, which she couldn’t complain about. Touko waddled around slowly. She had to admit that this wasn’t terrifying like she initially thought, but then again she wasn’t too far in. Too far would involve the water level being above her mouth, her nose, where bubbles popped over her head until there was no more air and darkness cloaked her.

Touko hugged herself.

“You ready?” asked Aoi while Byakuya swam back to shore, presumably because of something that Aoi said to him.

“No,” said Touko.

“Aw, I bet you are,” said Aoi. “It’s easy. You just dunk your head in for five seconds. I’ll do it first.”

Aoi dropped to her knees and thrust her head into the water. Touko didn’t consider this to be a good way to encourage her. Seals couldn’t breathe underwater and presumably, neither could selkies, but seals could hold their breath from several minutes up to an hour or two, depending on the species.

The reason Touko knew that was because she read it in a book once at the local library in her hometown.

After the promised five seconds, Aoi threw her head back, spraying water.

“Now you try,” said Aoi before spotting Touko in the distance, fleeing toward the boulder. “Fukawa-chan!”

Though Touko let Aoi drag her back, if only because Touko knew that she would be overpowered, Touko didn’t make it any easier for her. Showing a good deal of patience, Aoi led her into the sea again, just far enough that the water reached their thighs. Aoi held Touko’s hands and guided them both into bending their knees.

“Remember, close your eyes and breathe bubbles out of your nose,” said Aoi.

“I know, I’m not an idiot,” Touko said, staring down but not doing what Aoi said.

“Just get on with it,” came Byakuya’s voice. He didn’t say it particularly loudly, but the back of Touko’s neck tingled and she plunged her head into the water. Numbers screamed in her head and she threw her head back after five seconds, gasping, nose stinging from when she breathed in just before she raised her head. Her hair felt like seaweed.

Aoi punched the air. “Way to go, Fukawa-chan!”

Touko looked over her shoulder, and swore she saw Byakuya smirk.

On the next Monday, almost a week since her first swimming lesson with Aoi, Touko woke up to loud knocking. She lifted her head, eyes almost shut. Slowly, she rose, assuming Aoi had been too impatient to wait for her to come down. Dread weighed down Touko’s feet. It took until yesterday
for Touko to try floating on her back, only for her to sink. Aoi did have her hand against Touko’s back to try to prevent this from happening, but Touko thrashed out of Aoi’s hold and screamed and got water in her mouth because of these actions, and the lesson ended abruptly.

Worst of all, Byakuya saw and remarked that Touko needed to stop messing around, and that stung. After he said that, Aoi didn’t say anything, not even pretending to disagree. She just sighed and let Touko scuttle back to the boulder. For the rest of the day, Touko’s face burned.

Those two lived in the water. They didn’t understand her hatred of it. Not only did it mean people might see her scars, and not only were its depths dark, but in some places, they tested if someone was a witch by submerging them in water. Witches floated. Others sank. Even though it wasn’t an accurate test, both led to death. How ideal for the accusers.

Touko opened the door and to her surprise, she opened the door to Makoto, Kyouko, Yasuhiro and two men with canine heads. The last two made her flinch. Even when she realised they were the Oowada Brothers, she didn’t relax. Last time they met, they had been bounding toward her, ready to attack. Ready to kill.

“We didn’t wake you, did we?” asked Makoto, looking just like Touko remembered.

Her lips quivered. She straightened. “Y-You did...”

He winced. “Sorry, Fukawa-san.”

The Oowada Brothers didn’t seem like they were going to kill her.

“I don’t think we’ve formally introduced ourselves to you,” said one Oowada Brother. “I’m Daiya, and this is my little bro, Mondo. When we’re not wearing our helmets, you can tell us apart easier... I have darker fur and Mondo has an orange tuft.”

“Don’t call it a tuft!” said Mondo.

“Anyway,” said Daiya. “We’re sorry about... you know. Trying to kill you.”

“Yeah,” said Mondo. “Our bad.”

“Why are you all here?” Touko asked, wary nonetheless.

Yasuhiro propped his arm onto Makoto’s shoulder and waved his other hand. “You got our telegram, didn’t you?”

“I did,” she said. “You just asked why we needed to know if you could operate a boat...”

Touko stared at Makoto.

“Don’t tell me you can operate a boat after all,” she added.

“I can’t personally but together we can, and we’d be happy to be your crew,” he told her.

Her forehead wrinkled.

Finally, she asked, “Why...?”

His smile wilted. “Why what?”

“Why are you so eager to help me? Is it because of what happened at the circus?”
“Well, yes,” Makoto admitted, “but during that time, we became friends, didn’t we? And friends help each other.”

A pause.

“Also, I kind of owe some nobles money,” said Yasuhiro meekly. “So, uh, I’m kind of hoping if we come across some treasure or anything, I could have a share of it.”

That made more sense. Touko smirked. “I see...”

There was some silence.

Kyouko cupped her chin. “Togami-kun ought to be involved in this conversation, especially as the trip is for his sake. If it’s a long journey, we’ll need to stock up on food that won’t go off quickly, unless there are multiple stops on the way.”

“Y-You’ll have to ask Asahina about that,” said Touko. “She has been coming here daily to torture me with swimming lessons.”

Yasuhiro’s head gave a minute jerk. “Asahina-chi? I thought she’d have cleared off to the sea for the next seven years...”

“Asahina’s an anomaly,” muttered Touko.

Before she led them the long way to the beach, she tried to catch a glimpse of either Aoi and or Byakuya from the top of the cliff, but she couldn’t see them. That didn’t mean they weren’t there, because from her spot, the boulder and the surrounding area were obscured. As they walked, she explained Aoi’s visits, and the opportunity that Aoi bestowed without being asked.

Byakuya and Aoi were indeed there, stationed at the boulder, an occurrence that didn’t sit right with Touko. She hadn’t got the impression that they had become friends, but there was the possibility that they got along secretly when Touko wasn’t there. They could have talked about her while she was absent, laughing and smiling behind hands and leaning toward each other, eyes sliding shut...

“Are you feeling all right, Fukawa-san?” asked Makoto. “You look unwell...”

Touko clenched her fists. “Shut up.”

His face fell and he turned his head away from her. Kyouko shrugged at him.

Yasuhiro burst forward and sprinted over to the boulder, waving his arm. “Asahina-chi! Togami-chi! Yo!”

Byakuya craned his neck. Aoi cupped her hand against her forehead.

“Hagakure?” she said in disbelief. She saw the others behind him and grinned widely. “Everyone! It’s really you?”

“Yep,” said Yasuhiro.

“You’re here,” stated Byakuya with a lot less enthusiasm as he looked at them in turn.

“Well done,” said Kyouko.

Byakuya glared at her.
“We thought rather than tell you that we were coming, we’d surprise you,” explained Makoto. His expression became a bit more serious. “So you think this potion maker could turn Togami-kun into a human?”

“That’s what we’re thinking, yes,” replied Byakuya.

Yasuhiro rested his arm on Makoto’s shoulder. “All we need is a boat and some provisions, and we’ll be set to go, ‘right?”

“We’re right by the sea so there’s gotta be a boat around here that we can use,” said Mondo, making Touko jump. That was the first time she heard him talk. It sounded gruff, but human.

Everyone laid their eyes on Touko.

“There’s a harbour not far from here,” admitted Touko.

Kyouko pulled out a piece of lined paper from her jacket pocket and unfolded it with one hand. “I’ve put together a list of provisions that we’ll need to buy from the market. Hard bread... butter... meat... side pork...”

Yasuhiro offered Touko a grin and held up his thumb. “See? We’ve got it. You’ve got your crew, we’ll get a hold of a boat and the food... and we’ll be at sea in a week. Have no fears, Fukawa-chi!”

He winked.

Touko didn’t smile back.

Chapter End Notes

i need a proper update schedule, but that would involve having more free time and motivation.
“Are you sure they’ll be all right?” Aoi asked as she helped a redheaded boy lift a box of hard bread that, if what Aoi had said earlier was true, weighed the same as an eleven year old. An eleven year old like the redheaded boy, for example, who despite all his huffing, wasn’t doing much of the work.

It wouldn’t seem that way to an onlooker. If they saw how the boy’s face glowed and shone, and how Aoi didn’t seem to have broken a sweat, they’d think that he was doing the majority of the lifting. Still, the effort was there, and the son of the owner of the Daimon Corner Shop did more than Touko, who fidgeted by the back wall of the alleyway with outward silence and watched everyone else load provisions into the wagon.

Noise buzzed in Touko’s head. She winced, wishing she was back at the beach with Byakuya instead of in a dirty alleyway. He was probably reading, or writing, and she could have been reading or writing too, or even just observing him passively. That wouldn’t be bad either. Her face warmed even if her stoic expression didn’t change.

The alleyway could barely fit the carriage, wagon attached, in its width, but they made do. ‘They’ consisted of Touko, Kyouko, Aoi and two Daimons, who on such a big purchase, had been more than happy to lend a hand in loading the wagon that would be taken to Touko’s cottage. Heck, they even opened up shop on a Sunday just for them.

“That’s a hell load of bread,” remarked the Daimon son when the bag that he and Aoi had carried together had been placed down in the wagon.

His father frowned from the side entrance of the shop. “Oi, watch your fucking language, Masaru.”

Touko squinted and started to maneuver her tongue so as to point out the hypocrisy of the father’s scolding, but she got distracted by Masaru darting past to grab more provisions from inside of the shop. In hindsight, this was just as well, because the father might have curbed his generosity upon being told off and left them to do the rest of the work. Or spat in the potatoes.

“Naegi-kun and the Oowada brothers will keep an eye on him,” Kyouko said nearby, glancing back and forth between the checklist on her clipboard and the wagon.

Aoi pulled a light grimace and walked over to the corner shop’s side door. “I guess...”

“You said Hagakure-kun was a good haggler,” Kyouko said.

Kyouko didn’t get an immediate answer because Aoi disappeared into the shop, but Aoi soon returned with Masaru, both carrying another box of hard bread between them.

“I said he was an experienced haggler,” Aoi corrected. The box thumped onto the wagon. “Like, he used to do it a lot. During our circus days, he’d pop to the market and bring back all sorts of random things. He never talked about his past much, but I think he joined the circus because he ran away from home after a deal went wrong.”
Touko quirked her brow. “W-What, and it never occurred to you to ask him to get you a donut?”

Aoi’s eyes widened for a moment. Then she relaxed them and shook her head. “I never got enough money for that, and Hagakure’s like, really stingy... also, Monobear had me on a strict diet.”

Her toned figure supported this. Touko snorted and turned her head away. Aoi paid her no mind and wiped sweat from her forehead. As she did, she gave a minute shake of her head, causing her ponytail to squirm.

“How much more have we got to go?” Aoi asked with her hand still raised.

Kyouko dragged her finger down her clipboard as she skimmed through the list. “I’d say we’re roughly halfway through.”

“You say ‘we’re, but it’s not really ‘we’,’” said Aoi. She shot a pointed look at Touko. “Fukawachan, you can fetch the coffee in a couple of trips, can’t you? I mean, we are kind of doing this all for you... and you’re just standing there. You must have built up some strength from our swimming lessons.”

It hadn’t even been two weeks since their first daily session. Almost two weeks, but not quite, and Makoto and Yasuhiro and the others made her swim worse whenever they watched, which ended up with them being pressured into going to town for a few hours while Aoi and Byakuya stayed behind.

“Eh?” went Touko. She cupped her ear. “Yes, I do remember freeing you from captivity.”

Aoi scrunched up her face but didn’t pursue the matter further.

“Where are you off to?” asked Masaru but he didn’t wait for an answer, scampering into the shop. This time, he brought out eight packets of sugar, piled up in his arms. However, after he dumped them into the wagon, he did pause and look up at Aoi.

“It’s a port town across the sea,” replied Aoi, who then went and retrieved another box of hard bread. This would be the seventh one to be placed into the wagon. After she put it in there, she stretched her arms upward and arched her back. “It’s like, really far, so that’s why we’re emptying your shop.”

“You would have to buy more to do that,” remarked Masaru’s father with an unashamed grin, trying to secure another big purchase.

“Can I come?” said Masaru. “When are you leaving?”

His father barked out some laughter and walked over to Masaru. He reached for Masaru’s head. Masaru flinched, but his father only ruffled the boy’s hair. The tension didn’t totally leave Masaru’s body and he peered up at his father with what Touko recognised as unease even though she had felt it more than she witnessed it.

“I need you here, boy,” said Masaru’s father, and he took his hand off Masaru’s head. His bright, flinty eyes followed Masaru into the shop. When Masaru disappeared from view, he aimed his stare at Aoi. Not at her face, but the area slightly below, though he made eye contact after she angled her chest away from him. “Please excuse my son. Masaru doesn’t know when to button his lip sometimes.”

Aoi shrugged. “It’s fine! He kind of reminds me of my little brother.” When Masaru returned, she added, “And we’re leaving tomorrow if all things go to plan.”
All this family talk was nauseating. Touko slunk off to the entrance of the alleyway. It opened up into a wider space, paved in stone and within sight of the market place. Only a few stalls dotted the plaza. She squinted and thought at one, she could distinguish boxes, most containing shades of green, others red and one with orange. Keeping her gaze pointed in that direction, she pressed a shoulder against one of walls at the alleyway’s mouth.

No longer were there wanted posters for Genocider Syo. After Celes’s execution, Kyouko and Makoto made a big deal of telling the local press that Celes was Genocider Syo’s secret identity. Syo must have hated someone taking the credit for her work, but she must have tightened her lips and kept quiet about the truth because no one barged into Touko’s cottage to arrest her.

“Whatcha thinking about over there, Fukawa-chan?” asked Aoi.

Touko straightened, keeping her back to them. “N-None of your business.”

“Oh, don’t be like that...”

“Be like what? Myself?” snapped Touko. Aoi didn’t reply. Touko hunched her shoulders. “I’m going to buy some fruit...”

“Good idea!” said Aoi as Touko started walking away. “We don’t want to get scurvy, right?”

“You know, we sell fresh fruit too,” piped up Masaru’s father, but Touko ignored him and continued on.

“Lemon juice is on our list,” added Kyouko, whose words also failed to bring Touko back.

A handful of other people were drifting around the plaza. Coming over to them, Touko glimpsed the other stalls but they didn’t contain anything of interest so she shuffled over to the fruit stall, refusing to meet the gaze of the vendor. The fruit wouldn’t last past a few weeks, but according to Aoi, it would take three months to swim to their destination, so they wouldn’t need them for much longer than a few weeks if they went by boat.

Touko bought enough oranges and lemons to fill her basket. Reminded of how Byakuya used to eat them, she bit down a smile and moved on. Even though she knew the other stalls lacked anything she wanted, she wandered near them anyway in order to prolong her meander.

As she had decided a few minutes ago, the fish at one stall, the gaudy clothes at another and the candy in a cart were things she didn’t require for the time being, and in some cases ever.

“Hey,” said the candy vendor, whose wagon was a mess of sweet scents, some vanilla, some chocolate, some others. “This isn’t a library.”

Yeah, a library was something that Touko would enjoy, though perhaps not so much the one in Towa Town, which Touko read everything of interest in a long time ago. Touko flounced off to the stall selling ugly clothes, which made her feel prettier in comparison, and she was peering at the pattern on a tunic when a finger prodded her shoulder. It was a small, seemingly innocent touch that made her scream and spin around.

“Easy, easy,” said a guy roughly a head shorter than Touko, but he didn’t look younger.

Her eyes flickered and after she took in the most striking part of his appearance, which was his brown pompadour that leaned to the left, her mouth shut and she jerked her shoulder back.

“G-Get away from me,” she hissed, and she stepped away. She could see the exact same hairstyle in
the distance, on the pig painted onto the top of the Hanamura family’s catering trailer.

“Is that any way to greet somebody?” asked the Hanamura son. He grimaced and itched his chin. “I merely wanted to say hello. You’re a feisty, aren’t you? Not that it has to be a bad thing. In the right dish... ohoho, it’s the zest that makes the meal memorable!”

He was a cook. Touko knew that already. The Hanamura son didn’t need to make a big deal of it. She dragged her foot back and raised her arms so her fists hovered level with her chin.

Picking up on how she didn’t plan on responding to him, he said, “I don’t believe we’ve ever introduced ourselves to each other, though that doesn’t mean I haven’t seen you before. You know, if you wanted to be more inconspicuous, lurking on the sidelines isn’t a good idea. Because by being on the outside, everyone can see you as you’re located where everyone else isn’t.”

She tugged on her satchel, bringing it around and forward so she could see into it as she rummaged through it.

His smile widened as he settled his eyes on the movement. “Oh ho, are you whipping something out? To be fair, I should do the same...”

The sight of the cattle prod did nothing to quash his glee. Quite the contrary. He waved his fists around either side of him and gave a thrust of his pelvis. Somehow, his almost comically small chef hat, which was the size of a muffin, didn’t topple off his head.

And all this from seeing a cattle prod. Then again, he probably didn’t know that it was no ordinary cattle prod. Most had just a high enough voltage and low enough amperage to urge cows to move along with a shock, but as Syo found out first-hand and Touko heard afterwards, some cattle prod could be adjusted to inflict more pain. More damage.

With a smile so stretched out that it might have burst his chubby cheeks if it got any wider, he said, “Impressive, but I’ve seen bigger. Do you want to see?”

Touko’s stomach became rock hard. The Hanamura son tilted his head forward and fiddled with the bow on the front of his red half apron. Thinking fast, she lurched up to him, and he didn’t have the chance to react beyond lifting his chin. His white chef coat didn’t leave much skin exposed, and he barely had any neck, but she jabbed him where she thought his neck would be and activated the cattle prod.

He screamed. After a few seconds, he dropped to the floor, losing contact with the cattle prod. Touko stepped back, jaw clenched in a frosty expression.

Footsteps thundered over.

“Fukawa-chan!” It was Aoi, beside her now. “What...?”

Footsteps trudged over.

“Fukawa-san.” This was Kyouko, somewhere behind Touko and eating at the distance with every step of her highheeled boots.

“What did you do to him?” said Aoi, staring at his motionless form.

Kyouko, caught up with them, answered for Touko. “She used my cattle prod on that guy. Fukawa-san, when I let you keep it, that was under the impression that you would only use it if the situation called for it.”
Touko glared down, her hands trembling. Without having to look around, she could feel the half a
dozens shoppers who had been drifting through the mediocre market staring at her, along with the
vendors.

“Is he going to be okay?” asked Aoi, sounding like she had a finger between her lips.

“It can’t kill. It can only paralyse, and the effects should disappear shortly after the individual is no
longer in contact with the cattle prod,” replied Kyouko.

“But it knocked Syo out,” Touko said, and she felt winded after saying just those few words.

Syo’s existence had to stay secret, but as it was a common name, there couldn’t be any harm in
mentioning a ‘Syo’.

“Well, it can knock someone out if they hit their head after being shocked,” said Kyouko. Touko
turned to her, regardless of how stiff her neck felt, and saw that Kyouko had cupped her chin in
thought.

“B-But it was at the beach,” Touko pointed out. “I can’t remember seeing anything that would knock
her - him out.”

“If he fell in a certain way, maybe. I can’t say for sure, but if I were to guess...” Trailing off, Kyouko
let go of her chin. Then she shook her head and held her chin again. “Never mind. I’ll tell you later.
Please, sir, get up.”

The Hanamura son didn’t acknowledge her.

Aoi covered her mouth. “He must have bumped his head and lost consciousness!”

Kyouko crouched down beside him and picked up his limp wrist to check for a pulse. Before she
could find one, he grabbed hold of her hand. She widened her eyes, but only for a moment, and her
features had hardened by the time he lifted his face and smirked at her.

“I accept your hand, my sweet,” he said in a husky voice. Touko wasn’t jealous or anything, but he
hadn’t used that tone on her.

Unaffected, Kyouko wrenched her hand away from him and stood up.

“What were you doing with Fukawa-san?” she asked coldly.

Touko jerked her arms around before jabbing a finger toward him. “H-He was about to flash me!
He’s a pervert!”

Aoi frowned. “That’s a big accusation to make.”

“Nah, she’s right,” said the candy vendor, a woman with a strawberry bland bob stood next to a tall
man with with narrowed eyes. She folded her arms over her puffy pink coat that wasn’t appropriate
for the summer weather at all. Her attire was brightly coloured except for a pair of black gloves.
“That’s Teruteru Hanamura. He runs the stinky fast food shack over there with his mama.”

The vendor unfolded her arms so she could point. Kyouko and Aoi turned to see where her finger
was directed at. Touko glanced but having seen it too many times before, her eyes soon flitted over
to the vendor, who stood by a candy cart. On the canvas roof of the cart was a sign that in black font,
outlined in white, said ‘Ruruka Andou’s Candy Haven’. Different colour macarons had been painted
around the name and ribbon bows stuck to the top of the sign.
“Stinky? Fast food? Shack?” Teruteru flushed red and bolted to his feet.

“Huh? Didn’t you hear me?” She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Stinky! Fast food! Shack! I’d say I wouldn’t be caught dead there, but that’s what I’d be if I was there. Your mama’s cooking sucks.”

Her male companion chuckled. Aoi’s eyes kept shifting between them. Meanwhile, Touko had chosen whose side she was on and snickered.

“Shaddap!” barked Teruteru, looking ready to rip his ears off.

“Did I strike a nerve?” asked Ruruka, and she rolled her eyes. Touko assumed that to be her name. She supposed that the vendor’s mother or grandmother could have been called that. “Why don’t you run back to your mama? Scared of slipping on some grease when you get in?”

The ends of Touko’s lips creeped higher.

According to the nameless passersby around them, this was a common occurrence, because they resumed doing what they had been doing before the incident. Even the clothes vendor sat down and read a newspaper.

“Ya dunno whatcha blabberin’ ‘bout!” raged Teruteru.

Ruruka giggled behind her hand, which did a poor job hiding her smile.

Teruteru took a deep breath, relaxing slowly, before he whipped out a comb from under his hat and started using it on himself. His voice started shaky, almost cracking. “Though my catering trailer is modest, I assure you that the quality is top notch. It’s fine dining for the everyday man, woman and all those not defined by either of those terms.”

She flapped her hand. “Whatever you say, Tiny. Everyone knows people only like your food because you put some kind of drug in them.”

He gritted his teeth and pointed not at his catering trailer, but at Ruruka.

“You’re projecting your insecurities onto me, Andou-san. My meals don’t need anything like that when they taste so good, but can the same be said of you? I cannot make any promises.” Teruteru paused. Ruruka was glaring at him. He went onto say, “My, my. That was big talk from someone who claims to be a confectioner.”

“Everything must seem big to you,” she countered, and she prodded her temple. “And what do you mean, ‘claims’? Is your brain tiny too? Of course I’m a confectioner. It says my name in big letters right above me...”

Ruruka gestured upward.

“... and just look at all the candy I make,” she finished. She swept her arm from one side to the other, motioning to the jars lined up neatly on the tiers of shelves in the cart.

Despite the vibrant colours spread through the range of jars, and the chocolates and the gums, most eye catching were the pastel animals on sticks poked through holes in the top shelf.

Aoi spotted them and wiggled her fingers. “Ooh, those are so cute!”

That drew out a smirk from Ruruka, who lifted her chin and waved at the animals. “These? You
want to buy one? If there isn’t an animal already there that you care for, me and my Sonosuke can
shape one up for you. We just need to heat up the candy ball and form it into whatever shape you
want.”

Sonosuke gave a nod. Like his partner, he wasn’t appropriately dressed for the season either, in a red
trenchcoat. In fact, he was arguably worse, because while Ruruka’s shorts meant most of her legs
were bare, he wore trousers and boots. He had the common sense to leave his trenchcoat unfastened,
so he wasn’t a complete fool.

“How long does it take to shape them?” asked Aoi, gawking at the candy animals.

“Well, something like a rabbit only takes half a minute,” replied Ruruka. “It has all gotta be done fast
before it hardens.”

Teruteru nodded along. “You make it seem almost difficult.”

Ruruka snorted, tossing her head back. “Shows how much you know, Piggymura. It’s not just the
heating and shaping, which you wouldn’t have the pain endurance for, but preparing the ingredients
too. Sonosuke’s a blacksmith, so he’s used to it, but I can take the heat too. That’s how tough it is.
And the glutinous rice and potato powder have to be boiled down to just the right texture, and then
pulled and kneaded. If an amateur like someone who works in a dingy trailer tried it, it’d go all
wrong.”

Touko expected another outburst from Teruteru and indeed, his eyes bulged in preparation, but
Kyouko spoke.

“That’s enough now,” she said in that infuriatingly cool way of hers. “We’re wasting time... We
need to finish loading the cart.”

Aoi pouted. “Can we at least get some candy animals on a stick first? We’re almost done anyway,
and Masaru will be picking up our slack.”

Kyouko turned her gaze to the animals one display. Rabbit. Cat. Dog. Gecko.

Normally, as fun as this sort of thing was to spectate, Touko would agree that they should move on
and besides, Ruruka and Teruteru felt like characters from another story, not her story, but after this,
they would be at sea for months, and after that lay events that clenched Touko’s stomach.

“What else can you do? Badgers? Other four-legged animals?” asked Touko.

That ignited a gleam in Ruruka’s eyes. She huffed and thrust out her chest, hands on her hips. “Oi,
don’t insult me like that. My mother was an amezaiku and people travelled for days to view and taste
her creations, and she taught me everything I know. Give me any animal, and we’ll make it. Go on.”

“Oh!” Aoi bounced her heels. “Make me a cute cat!”

Though there were already cats made, Ruruka darted around to the back of her cart, got a clean stick
from there, and then bent down by a box and a metal basket on the ground. Sonosuke followed her
and stood over Ruruka. She passed him the stick. Kyouko, Aoi and Touko tried to gather around
them, but Sonosuke glared and revealed a metal blade between two of his fingers. Aoi threw up her
hands and the three girls backed off, coming to stand by Teruteru, who by this point had wandered
over too.

In the metal basket was some charcoal, already lit and burning, but it didn’t give off any smell. That
could have been because the candy’s aroma overpowered it, but also because of the type of charcoal
they used. Some didn’t emit any odours. From the box, Ruruka took out a white ball and held it over
the charcoal. When the ball was soft enough, she plucked away some of the now pliable mass, biting
her lip but not letting out so much as a hiss of pain. Even with her gloves, it must have been hot. She
dropped the larger candy lump into the box with the rest, rolled the smaller lump into a ball and
poked the stick into it. Sonosuke grabbed some pliers from his coat pocket and began pulling,
twisting and clipping the candy ball into the shape of a cat.

Forming the cat took roughly thirty seconds. Ruruka stood up with the candy cat on a stick and
strode over to the back of her cart. Where the sticks were kept were also pots and paintbrushes, but
the pots didn’t contain paint. They must have been holding food colouring, as Ruruka dipped a clean
brush into one with orange liquid and she coloured the cat’s ears in it, as well as gave it a stripy tail.

The skin by Ruruka’s crinkled with her smile. She walked back to Touko and the others and
proffered the candy cat.

“Wow, thanks!” said Aoi as she took it. Her eyes were round in awe. “I don’t think I can eat
something this cute!”

“Well, you’ve got to,” scoffed Ruruka. “Like you’ve got to pay up the three gold coins it costs.”

Aoi went, “Oh!” and turned to Touko.

“What?” said Touko.

“I need to borrow three gold coins,” replied Aoi.

“I never said I would pay!”

“Please, Fukawa-chan!”

Touko wiped a hand down her face.

Ruruka glared at them. “Hey, you better be able to afford this.”

Sonosuke rose, the blade of a knife glinting between his fingers. Fortunately, Kyouko fished out her
purse from her handbag and retrieved the necessary number of coins, and she handed them to
Ruruka.

“Thank you,” said Ruruka, suddenly as sweet as her candy.

Teruteru studied the candy cat as Aoi, despite her earlier claims of not being able to eat it, sucked on
its head. “I could give people something tastier to nurse on, you know... You just have to ask.”

No one asked.

His smirk fell off. “I expected you to do more of the work, Andou-san. Your boyfriend did all of the
fiddling. Also, I'm not sure it's wise to let a blacksmith touch your goods like that... His hands must
be filthy.”

“He always washes his hands first, and I don’t need to hear this from someone with an oedipus
complex,” sneered Ruruka.

Touko’s shoulders jumped. She clasped her hands together, with the cattle prod in the centre. “W-
What? They have that kind of relationship?”

Aoi’s candy cat popped out of her mouth.
“Geez, Touko-chan, get your mind out of the gutter. It’s his mother,” she said, not knowing about the complicated relationship between Touko and her father.

As taught, Touko’s mouth kept shut about any of that.

“Me and Sonosuke work as a couple, but I could totally shape a candy by myself if I wanted to,” said Ruruka. “Who’s next? Come on, I’ll show you all I’ve got...!”

Yes, at a price.

Kyouko still had her purse out. She wiggled her finger inside of it. “So your partner is a blacksmith?”

Ruruka nodded once. “Ever since he was little. Right, darling?”

“That’s right,” Sonosuke said.

“I see,” said Kyouko. “What about a bear?”

Touko and Aoi looked at each other and pulled a face at the same time.

“Bear!” Ruruka beamed. “Got it!”

She repeated the same procedure as last time. When it came to forming the shape of the bear, Sonosuke reached toward it with his pliers.

“Let me do it!” Ruruka piped up. He backed off immediately.

Beads of sweat pricked Ruruka’s face as her hands worked, sometimes fumbling. She pinched ears onto the candy lump and pulled out limbs and a snout. To the relief of the other three girls, she didn’t paint half of it black or give it a menacing red eye, but coated it in a dark purple that might have been meant to be black. A pink spot made up its nose.

Ruruka gave the candy bear to Kyouko, who paid three coins and started eating it.

“What about you?” Ruruka asked Touko.

“N-No thanks... The smell is sickly enough,” said Touko.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Touko hugged herself. “Just the smell... makes me feel like my teeth are rotting...”

“Is that why your face looks like that?” said Aoi.

“W-What are you saying?” snapped Touko, rounding on her.

Aoi’s hands shot up in front of her, one fist loosely around her candy stick.

Ruruka pushed out her bottom lip and picked out a red macaroon from a jar, which she flicked at Sonosuke. He caught it in his mouth.

“Aw, c’mon,” said Sonosuke, talking for the first time and sounding nowhere near as intimidating as he appeared. “They’re dewlicious.”

“Dewlicious’...?” repeated Aoi.

Sonosuke swallowed. “Yeah.”
“Didn’t you hear her?” asked Teruteru, popping up in front of Touko but facing Ruruka. “She doesn’t want something sweet. She wants something filling... meaty...”

“Fukawa-san, you have permission to use the cattle prod again,” Kyouko deadpanned.

Touko smirked and wielded it again. “M-Maybe I will if this little piggy doesn’t shut up...”

Teruteru yelped, spun around and laced his fingers together in front of him. He shook them pleadingly. “That won’t be necessary! Tell you what, let me cook up something for you free of charge! Your smile will be payment.”

The corners of Touko’s mouth immediately uncurled, destroying her smirk. Teruteru sprinted to his trailer and jumped headfirst through its front hatch. Touko didn’t know if he expected her to follow, but even if she knew that was his intention, she would have stayed put regardless.

“That shrimp’s finally found something he’s too big for. His boots.” Seething, Ruruka marched forward, but Touko only paid her proper attention when Ruruka shoved her face right up to Touko’s. She grabbed Touko’s blouse and said, “Give me something to make candy of.”

“I d-don’t-!” Touko squeaked.

“Here. It’s free of charge,” said Ruruka with a edge of hostility. “Come on, empty your mind and tell me the first thing you think of.”

Ruruka’s close proximity accomplished the task of emptying Touko’s mind.

“We don’t have time for this,” Kyouko said, partway through eating her candy bear. “The guys are probably waiting for us, and Togami-kun is going to complain...”

“A mermaid,” blurted Touko.

Kyouko and Aoi flinched.

“A mermaid?” repeated Ruruka.

“I want... I want a mermaid!” Touko announced. “Like... a m-merman...”

After a few seconds, Ruruka released her. She gave Touko a funny look as she walked back to the charcoal and heated up a wad of candy. The look lingered, ending only when Ruruka and Sonosuke began modifying the candy’s shape. Touko tucked her hand under her chin as she watched them.

While Ruruka’s previous two creations required half a minute to be formed into the right shape, this one took longer. Not much longer. An extra minute, and then Ruruka brought it over to the pots of food colouring.

“Any requests for colours?” asked Ruruka, swishing a paintbrush absentmindedly.

“I didn’t get asked that,” Aoi remarked.

“Blond hair,” said Touko, ignoring her. “And blue eyes...”

“On it,” said Ruruka, ignoring Aoi too, and she got to work.

When Ruruka finished colouring it, she turned around, about to walk over to Touko. At that moment, Teruteru stumbled out of his trailer through the back door and not from where he hurled himself in through. He carried over a platter and presented it to Touko.
“Salmon, glazed with mustard-rosemary, accompanied by fennel and leeks!” barked Teruteru. “Free of charge.”

Ruruka shoved herself into him sideways, knocking Teruteru out of the way, and waved the mermaid on a stick at Touko.

“Ta-da!” said Ruruka. “A mermaid, exactly how you requested it.”

Teruteru puffed out his cheeks and sprung between them. Both girls hopped back to avoid collision with him.

“I only use the freshest ingredients,” bragged Teruteru. “Try it... Fukawa-san, wasn’t it?”

“Fukawa-san wants something sweet,” snarled Ruruka. She set her free hand against the top of Teruteru’s head and pushed down. “Take it, Fukawa-san!”

Touko let Ruruka thrust the candy into her hands.

“Don’t listen to her! The reason she has so much candy on display is because everyone knows she charges a ridiculous amount,” said Teruteru as he escaped from underneath her hand. His face glowed pink.

“Three coins isn’t that much,” said Aoi without any real concept of money in the first place.

“And yet she still charges too much!” said Teruteru.

Ruruka grabbed his head again. “I’d have way more customers if you didn’t scare everyone away from here and give them all food poisoning!”

Teruteru’s eyes bulged. “Faz’s not true! It’s peacocks she ‘as mind control serums in her food!”

“Shut up!”

“What was that?” asked Aoi, staring at Teruteru.

“Hey, guys,” came not Teruteru’s voice, or Ruruka’s, but another.

Ruruka and Teruteru continued squabbling, but Touko, Aoi and Kyouko turned away from the scene. Yasuhiro and Makoto were there.

Kyouko cocked her head to one side. “I thought we were going to meet at the port?”

“That’s what we thought,” said Makoto. “We got worried because you still hadn’t come... We thought something might have been holding you up.”

“Nope! We’re fine,” said Aoi, and Makoto earned a small smile from Kyouko.

Just then, Masaru ran over. He slapped his hands against his thighs when he arrived and said, “Everything’s ready to go!”

Yasuhiro wiped his finger against the underside of his nose. “Awesome! And so are we... They drove a hard bargain, but we managed to convince them to upgrade us to a better boat. As long as we come back with enough treasure, we should be able to pay it off quickly! The Oowada brothers and Togami-chi are checking it out now.”

“So is that everything?” asked Aoi.
Makoto nodded and then rubbed the back of his head. “We didn’t get any extra crew, so we could do with a cook, but I think we’ll manage.”

Kyouko itched her chin and cast her gaze over to Ruruka and Teruteru, who were circling each other and shouting. Sonosuke stood nearby, looking ready to intervene if things escalated any further.

“A cook, you say...?” murmured Kyouko.
Four knocks sounded on the door in quick succession.

Touko unfolded her legs and slipped off the bed. As expected, upon opening the door, she was greeted by the faces of all those who would be accompanying her on a ship the next morning, and she stepped back and to the left so they could enter.

“Is that cinnamon that I smell? Or citrus? Or both?” asked Teruteru at the front of the procession, looking around like a tourist as he wandered in. Candles dotted around the room provided sufficient lighting.

“I think that’s the incense.” Yasuhiro motioned to the table that in most homes would have been a dining table, but here, it was covered in books and papers so could not adequately serve that purpose. Near the edge of the table was the incense, in a small, cleared area.

At a push, the table could seat six for a meal, four without it being cramped, though Touko had never had that many guests over and neither had her mentor. Or any guests, really, if one didn’t count Makoto and Aoi, who never stayed over to eat. When she lived with her parents, Touko never ate at the table if she could help it, because they would chew loudly and ridicule her or tell her that they couldn’t stand the sight of her, at least when they decided to feed her, and her mentor never required Touko to join her at the table, and so Touko would either eat on the beach or in the small garden outside of her cottage, bringing a blanket or an umbrella with her if the weather demanded it.

“I think it smells delicious!” Aoi said. “When will it be ready to eat?”

“Um, Asahina-san, you don’t eat incense,” said Makoto.

Kyouko folded her arms over her chest, smiling.

Ruruka drank in her surroundings with narrowed eyes and a nose drawn upward. Behind her, the Owada Brothers filed in, bringing up the rear of the group that started to spread out, and one of them shut the door behind them. They wore the same clothes, and their builds were the same in Touko’s eyes. Muscular. More muscular than Byakuya, and the white vests under their leather jackets emphasised their chests. Touko flushed and looked away.

The best way to distinguish between the two was if they weren’t wearing their helmets. Daiya’s fur was just black, while Mondo’s appeared to be a dark brown, but most notably, Mondo had an orange streak from the top of his forehead to the back of his head. However, because they were wearing their helmets, she couldn’t work out who was who.

“Did you forget we were coming over or something?” asked Ruruka. She brushed her fingertips across some papers on the table. “You better not expect us to take our shoes off. I’d cut my foot on something sharp... or get bitten by a rat.”

“It’s not that dirty!” Touko said. “And t-there haven’t been rats here for years!”

“What even is this stuff anyway?” Ruruka picked up a random piece of paper. “‘Early morning, the Sun had barely risen. Neither of the two wanted to go out to meet. Had it not been for the promise of a great spell.’”
Touko snatched the paper away, face burning. “That’s private!”

“Private?” Teruteru’s eyes glinted and he reached for a different piece of paper. Before he could grab it, Touko swatted his hand and seized it for herself.

“Fukawa-san, would you mind moving some of your papers off the table? We will need more space,” said Kyouko.

“I do mind,” Touko replied, holding the confiscated papers to her chest.

“Will you do it anyway?”

Touko glared, but she gathered all of the papers into her arms, not just some. She waddled over to her desk and dropped them off there, placing them on top of notebooks and more sheets of paper, many where the corners were folded together.

“Thank you.” Kyouko tucked some hair behind her ear and watched Touko turn around. “How many chairs do you have, Fukawa-san?”

Even though Touko knew the answer, she counted anyway. “Two. Three including the armchair.”

Only one of the two dining chairs were at the table. The other one was by Touko’s desk. Her desk was even more weighed down by papers than the table, with not just more papers as on top of that, there were books and racks containing potions on it. As for the armchair, that was in a corner of the room, stained with ink and tea.

“I don’t mind standing,” Aoi piped up as Yasuhiro retrieved the chair from the desk.

“We’ll stand too,” offered one of the Oowada Brothers. “Won’t we, Mondo?”

So that one had to be Daiya.

Mondo gave a thumbs up. “And if there are three chairs, then three of you girls can sit, right?”

“Why us?” asked Kyouko.

“Why them?” asked Yasuhiro.

Makoto frowned at Yasuhiro, but Yasuhiro didn’t notice.

“Manners, isn’t it?” Mondo rubbed the back of his neck.

Daiya gave Mondo’s shoulder a squeeze and with his other hand, gave a thumbs up.

“Geez, if they want to stand, let them stand. The table isn’t big enough for us all to sit at it properly anyway,” said Ruruka. She pulled a face and added, “How long is this going to take?”

“As long as we need,” Kyouko replied.

“If you were just going to give such a vague answer, you may as well not have said anything,” sneered Ruruka. “You three can have the chairs. Sonosuke, darling,” her tone lightened considerably, “please get on your knees.”

Sonosuke dropped onto his hands and knees at an unoccupied side of the table. Ruruka beamed and sat on his back.
“I didn’t consent to seeing this!” Touko whined. She bent her fingers toward the base of each finger joint, turning them claw-like.

“Is that comfortable?” asked Makoto with a frown.


She rubbed her eyes and gave exaggerated yawn.

Two of the chairs were already at the table, tucked in on adjacent sides. While Aoi and Kyouko claimed one each, Mondo hauled Touko’s armchair over from across the room and stationed it opposite where Aoi was sitting. Touko climbed onto the armchair from the side and crossed her legs underneath her.

Kyouko took out a manila folder from her satchel and placed it onto the table. Makoto and Yasuhiro stood behind her, one on each side, while Teruteru and the Oowada Brothers positioned themselves across from them. At a glance, Kyouko and Teruteru looked like they were accompanied by bodyguards, Kyouko with Yasuhiro and Makoto, and Teruteru with the Oowada brothers, but whereas Kyouko appeared calm, Teruteru occasionally peeked at one of the two men beside him, licking his lips and pulling on his chef scarf.

Teruteru had either come straight from work, didn’t own any other clothes apart from his chef outfit or liked to remind people that he was a cook at all times.

“Why are you two gentleman wearing that headgear still?” asked Teruteru.

“Horrific scarring,” replied Daiya.

“Oh.” Teruteru hesitated. He gulped and let a smile creep across his features. “You know, I’m sure we would all be able to sit if we moved to that bed in the corner over there... It’d be a squeeze, but I think we’d manage and there’s no harm in trying.”

“What’s the matter with the table?” asked Touko. “Do you want to sit so your height seems more similar to the grown ups?”

“I’m not that short,” Teruteru replied, head clearly visible. He cupped his chin and added, “Besides, I’m big where it counts.”

Aoi tilted her head to one side. “What does that mean?”

His eyebrows rose with the corners of his lips. “Oh, are you a taker, then?”

Daiya cracked his knuckles while his brother set a firm hand onto Teruteru’s shoulder. The smirk drained off Teruteru’s face, as did the colour.

Kyouko slammed her palm down against the table, causing the jar of incense to jump. Everyone whipped their heads toward the noise, Touko clutching her chest, and even Mondo and Daiya, with their muscular builds and jagged teeth hidden within their motorcycle helmets, gave her their attention.

“We have two cooks,” said Kyouko quietly, and her lowered hand balled into a fist, “but we can easily have one, and that one will be the person who acquires any new ingredients at our destination and does business there.”
“Ah, I was just teasing!” Teruteru said. He waved his hands. “But I will save some anecdotes for the trip... Stale jokes are almost as bad as stale food, after all...”

“If you don’t want to be thrown overboard, you won’t bring any at all,” Daiya warned him. “Got it?”

Teruteru mimed zipping his mouth. Mondo turned to Daiya, who nodded, and Mondo lifted his hand off Teruteru’s shoulder.

Kyouko pinched the bridge of her nose and shut her eyes for a few moments.

“So what’s in that thing?” asked Aoi.

“Thing?” repeated Kyouko, and she opened her eyes.

Aoi pointed at the manilla folder.

“It’s a file containing all the information that we will need,” said Kyouko. She opened the folder and extracted the documents from within it. “There are several things we need to go over before we set sail tomorrow. In the morning, we will bring the supplies over to the harbour and transfer them onto the ship, along with any belongings that we wish to take.”

“What’s this ship like?” asked Ruruka. “If I hadn’t had to stay at my stall, I would have come and checked it out with you earlier.”

“It’s quite unfortunate for you, then, that you didn’t have any customers for the rest of the day in the end, isn’t it?” said Teruteru.

Her nostrils flared. “That’s only because you spouted a bunch of lies about my candy in front of everyone! Besides, you didn’t have any customers either! Which is nothing new, so you had no excuse to stay behind.”

Aoi pouted and rested her cheek in her palm. Everyone else pulled a face too.

“Can’t you guys not bicker for five minutes?” asked Yasuhiro with a grimace. He crossed his arms over his chest and turned his head to one side. “If you keep this up, someone’s going to end up killing the other...”

“Why is he here, anyway?” Ruruka pointed at Teruteru. “You told me that I was going to be your chef.”

Teruteru blinked several times. “They what? You must be mistaken...” His eyes narrowed, almost entirely disappearing from his face. “Kirigiri-san pulled me aside and told me that she wanted me to be their chef, which makes sense because I am actually a chef.”

Both of them looked at Kyouko for an explanation.

Kyouko placed her elbows onto the table, laced her fingers together and rested her chin on them.

“Fukawa-san, do you have any tea?” asked Kyouko.

Touko flailed a bit at the sudden address. She caught her breath and straightened up. “L-Let me guess... You want me to serve you all like a maid?”

“Well, you wouldn’t let me be your maid,” Aoi reminded Touko.

“Hang on, you didn’t answer us!” Ruruka piped up.
“If you have the ingredients, then I’m sure Naegi-kun would be happy to brew some for us,” said Kyouko regardless.

“I don’t have a gas stove,” grumbled Touko. “I’d have to light a fire and boil the water that way...”

Yasuhiro rubbed the underside of his nose with the length of his index finger. “That won’t be hard for someone like you, ‘right? I mean you can use mag-!”

He yelled out and started to hop, clutching one foot while hissing.

“Let’s skip on tea then,” said Kyouko, wearing boots with high heels. “Besides, we may finish faster this way. I’ve attended meetings where people are made to stand during them, so they don’t dawdle and get it over with as soon as possible.”

She stretched her neck out and then rested her chin on her hands again.

“We thought that we could have two cooks on board,” she finally acknowledged. “You would both have skills that would come in useful, but if either of you want to drop out now, then you may leave.”

Ruruka and Teruteru stared at each other, but neither rose.

“In that case, we will continue.” Kyouko separated her hands and stroked her hair with one of them, not looking at anyone. “We have been lent a helmsman, so we don’t need to worry about that.”

That was all news to Touko. “Who?”

“An elderly gentleman,” replied Kyouko. “But very good at what he does, apparently. Izayoi-kun, you are a blacksmith, correct?”

“That’s right,” he said from beneath Ruruka.

“How are you with general maintenance?” asked Kyouko.

“Pretty good,” he said. “I’m used to working with metal... wood’s not my forte.”

Kyouko frowned.

“Hey, if you need carpentry, than we’re your guys,” offered Daiya. He slapped his brother on the shoulder. “You don’t think Monobear built and put together everything you saw at the circus, did you?”

Aoi nodded, cheek in her hand. “Yeah, our ringmaster made us do everything...”

“That will do nicely,” said Kyouko. She smiled slightly but then again, that seemed to be the most she could smile. “Thank you. Now, I believe I should be the quartermaster.”

“What’s that?” asked Mondo.

“They’re the second-in-command, responsible for distributing rations and punishments,” said Kyouko.

Teruteru smirked at her. “I can think of no one better to give out punishments.”

“... Thanks.” She quirked her brow but wisely decided not to delve any deeper into it. “That leads me to the first-in-command. The captain. I was thinking that Naegi-kun should be captain.”
“Him?” Touko glared at him while he focused on Kyouko. “He doesn’t have the spine for it... You’re only volunteering him because you’re secretly dating... T-That’s it, isn’t it?”

Kyouko gave her a blank look and held in a sigh.

Yasuhiro hit the table with a fist and raised his other hand. “I’m the oldest, so I should be captain!”

Makoto picked up the jar of incense in case the next time someone struck the table, the vibrations proved strong enough to send the jar over the edge.

“Are you sure, Kirigiri-san?” asked Makoto. He scratched at his cheek. “I mean, if anything, you should be the captain...”

“I am serious. Being the captain isn’t about ruling with an iron fist.” Kyouko bowed her head. “It’s about keeping order, which I know you can do, Naegi-kun... You have a wonderful talent of getting along with almost anyone. No, I think I would prefer to work by your side, dealing with the jobs that require someone sterner.”

She met his eyes. Her cheeks turned rosy. Makoto flushed too and kneaded the back of his head.

“Why don’t we vote for it?” suggested Yasuhiro.

“Fine.” Kyouko’s small smile disappeared completely. “All those who think Naegi-kun should be captain, raise your hand.”

Predictably, Kyouko raised her hand. Mondo, Daiya and Aoi raised theirs next. Kyouko counted aloud. “One, two, three, four...”

Touko’s hand shot up in favour of the least biggest idiot.

“... Five,” said Kyouko. “Five against three.”

“I have no idea what either of you are like, so I don’t have an opinion,” stated Ruruka.

“But you guys know what we’re like!” Yasuhiro said to those who voted for Makoto.

“Yes, and that’s why we voted the way we did,” said Touko.

Yasuhiro seemed to deflate. Makoto gave him a smile and reached up to rub his shoulder.

“What can I do, Kirigiri-chan?” asked Aoi.

Kyouko paused in thought. “You, Hagakure-kun and Fukawa-san can help around with maintenance...”

Touko huffed but didn’t explicitly object.

“Any other questions?” asked Kyouko.

“Where will we sleep?” asked Ruruka.

“In the crew’s quarters, on hammocks. The captain gets their own cabin.”

“What?” said Touko. “All of us... t-together?”

Kyouko nodded.
Touko curled her fingers on one hand, raised her hand to her mouth and scraped her teeth lightly against the length of the index. “With... people of another gender...?” she mumbled.

“A cabin for the captain... who is secretly dating the quartermaster...” Teruteru bared his teeth in a grin. “Oh, ho, ho...”

“We’re not dating,” Makoto said.

Ruruka leaned forward and jabbed her finger toward Teruteru, but she glared at Kyouko. “Are you mad? Share with him? He’s a pervert!”

“I am sure the Oowada Brothers would be more than happy to throw him overboard if he tries anything,” said Kyouko calmly. “We already have another cook, so it would not be a detrimental loss.”

“Now, wait a moment here!” Teruteru hit the table with both hands. Makoto glanced at the jar of incense in his possession. “Pervert, I will accept, but now you’re just sullying my name! I’m not a monster! I would not lay a finger on anyone... without consent.”

“Don’t listen to him,” said Ruruka. “He’s as slimy as the grease he cooks with.”

“If he lays a finger on anyone, you can be the one to push him overboard,” offered Kyouko.

Ruruka wavered. She sat up straight, looked off to the side and tapped her chin.

“... I guess he can come,” she relented.

“H-Hold on!” Touko said. “I’m... I’m not sleeping near anyone else!”

“What makes you so special?” asked Ruruka. “I bet everyone here wants their own private cabin, myself included.”

“I... I need light to sleep,” explained Touko, fidgeting. “And... And space for my books... and my jars... and...”

And nothing to remind her of memories that shaped her and Syo. She gripped her braids and pulled at them.

“I don’t mind giving up the captain’s cabin to Fukawa-san,” said Makoto.

Touko stopped tugging. Her eyes drifted over to him.

“... Really?” she said.

“Yeah.”

He smiled.

She bit her lip and looked away. “... Thank you.”

Makoto might not turn out to be a complete failure of a captain. Still a pushover, but one that Touko would condone.
Even though the ship hadn’t departed yet, Touko’s stomach already felt unsettled as she shut the door to the lower decks of the ship behind her and approached the rail on the upper deck, having just come from a quick refresh of the ship.

Wooden boards creaked around Touko as the rest of the crew carried the provisions on board. Touko gave a furtive glance as Aoi, carrying a box of hard bread, passed her on the way to the door that Touko had just come out of - a door flanked on both sides by ascending staircases that led to another section of the ship higher than what Touko currently stood on. In contrast, at the opposite end of the ship, a pair of short staircases descended to a lower area, where a whaleboat was propped upside down on skids and bound securely with rope.

After the door to the companionway shut behind Aoi, Touko turned her head forward, so she faced the old, wrinkled sea, and cast her eyes downward.

“You can ride in the ship with us!” Touko called down. “There are four decks, and there’s enough space for you in the living quarters... You w-would share the captain’s cabin with me, rather than share with the idiots...”

Touko suppressed a shiver at the thought of a handsome, technically naked person in her bed and had to wrap her arms around herself to keep herself together.

“I’ll be fine!” Byakuya shouted up, head tilted back.

She rubbed her upper arms, even though she wasn’t cold. “Won’t you get tired...?”

“Tired?” he repeated. He squinted. “You mean... bored?”

“Yes, but...” Touko chewed on her lips for a few moments. “I mean... resting! Sleeping! Otherwise, we’ll have to hoist you up and lower you into the water on a regular basis!”

Before Byakuya could answer, a particularly loud creak behind Touko caused her to jump. She spun around.

Makoto flinched.

“... You,” she said, relaxing slowly.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he said. “Sorry for startling you... Um... It might be a good idea if Togami-kun comes onboard. Like you said, he’ll get tired and the others might catch him as we’re moving him in and out of the water. Also, once we set off, the sea might be too noisy to hold conversations over...”

She hissed, “Y-You’re too noisy! And mind your own business, okay?”

“Even if I’m agreeing with you...?” Makoto asked.

“There’s no need to concern yourself about that... Mermaids don’t require sleep!” Byakuya shouted up.

Touko turned away from Makoto and raised her eyebrows. “You... don’t sleep?”

“You didn’t know that?” asked Makoto.

He received another hot glare from her.

“Did you?” she asked.
Makoto winced. “Ah, no, but you’ve known each other for some time now, haven’t you? I thought something so important would have cropped up in conversation by now.”

“I just assumed! We’re never together during the night, so I didn’t have reason to think otherwise,” Touko snapped, reminded of how little she knew about Byakuya’s life. Whenever she thought she understood him and his kind, another fact about him would come to her attention and she would feel like she was standing on the edge of a canyon, toes hanging off.

“You should make an effort to not assume things about me,” Byakuya chided. “If I am to become a human, then it’s not important to know what the inner-workings, strengths and weaknesses, of a mermaid are.”

Touko pulled a face but didn’t scold him. Had someone else said that to her, she almost certainly would have, but when she stared down at him, with his narrowed eyes, wet blond hair swept to one side, and his pale lips, downturned at the ends, she felt something roll over in her stomach and any anger spread through to the rest of her body and faded with a hot prickling sensation.

Anyway, do you have everything you need in your living quarters, Fukawa-san?” asked Makoto warmly, acting like he didn’t hold a grudge against Touko for snapping at him several times that morning. And the day before. And the previous week. And basically ever since they first met.

“Yes,” she said. “Books... certain potions and ingredients... Kameko...”

“Kameko?” repeated Makoto.

“Kameko is a stink bug,” Byakuya informed him. “I’ve seen it several times. It is kept in a small cage and stays in Fukawa’s cottage unless she brings it down to show me. It’s not very interesting.”

“He’s my friend,” Touko defended. “He eats plants and doesn’t take up much space...”

Makoto patted the air with one hand. “That’s fine, Fukawa-san. Well, if you’ve got everything, why don’t you help transfer the rest of the provisions to the store room?”

“Why don’t you, Captain?” she retorted.

“I’m busy keeping an eye on things.” He waved Kyouko’s clipboard at her. “But you just seem to be relaxing, Fukawa-san...”

“Where’s this backbone suddenly come from?” Touko jeered. “Did receiving that title suddenly give you a less passive personality? Listen, I d-don’t have the stamina for carrying heavy things and going back and forth.”

“And I can’t walk,” Byakuya added.

“I know,” said Makoto. “I didn’t expect you to help, Togami-kun...”

Byakuya jerked his head back. “There’s no need for that attitude,” he said with some attitude. “It’s frustrating being confined to the sea. I’ve never even been to Fukawa’s cottage...”

Touko twitched a bit. “D-Do... you want to...?”

“I may visit,” he said.

Images flushed into her head. Of him in her bathtub, and then them together in the bathtub, and then them in the same bed, though here, he had human legs and he could slip one between hers, and he
still had his human hands, which he cradled her face in as he pulled her closer...

“Um... Fukawa-san?” said Makoto.

White blots of ink or a substance like that splattered across her vision of Byakuya’s lips about to touch hers, and soon she reappeared on the ship, gripping herself tightly in a hug.

“... Huh?” she said, wondering where her bedroom went.

Makoto opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again once he thought of something else to say. “Well, okay then.”

“How long will it be until you set sail?” asked Byakuya.

“Kirigiri-san reckons we’ll be at sea by noon,” said Makoto. “As long as Hanamura-kun, Izayoi-kun and Andou-san aren’t late...”

Byakuya clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth.

A few seconds later, Yasuhiro climbed aboard the ship with the Oowada Brothers, both carrying a barrel each while Yasuhiro dragged a sack that had ‘dried peas’ printed on it in incredibly tidy handwriting.

“Let me help, Hagakure-kun,” Makoto offered, and he rushed over. He grabbed the other end and lifted it, and together, they carried it to the door that Aoi had gone through earlier, which led to the lower decks of the ship.

Touko pushed up the sleeves of her cardigan and rubbed her upper arms.

“Fukawa!” Byakuya called out.

“Hm?” she said.

“It is quite annoying having to raise my voice!” Byakuya informed her. “Come down here and bring a story with you!”

“Of course!” Touko clapped her hands together. “W-Wait there! I’ll be right down!”

She hurried off the ship and soon sat on the pier, legs dangling and her feet a fair distance above water. Byakuya was still below her, and still unreachable unless she dove in, but being even slightly closer was better than staying where she had been previously.

“You won’t be able to read along,” she pointed out. “And the book will get wet if I pass it to you...”

“I know, and I’ll survive,” he replied. “You will read to me. Is it one of your stories, or a book written by someone else?”

“It’s one of mine... I don’t think you’ve read this one. And I thought... while we’re travelling... I would write something new. It’d pass the time, and make a good distraction...”

He nodded back.

She straightened, pushing her shoulders back, and started to read. “‘As the wagon plodded through the grassy landscape, Haruka stared out and imagined herself sprinting alongside the vehicle, free and ferocious unlike reality, where she could do little but go wherever the wagon was taking her...’”
Byakuya listened with no interruptions. Every time she turned the page, the pair fell deeper into the narrative, but halfway through the second chapter, just as Haruka awoke on her first morning in her aunt’s manor, Aoi shouted, “Sakura-chan!”

Touko jolted, snapping her head up. She spotted someone swimming toward them from the distance, but they disappeared under the surface before Touko could focus on them. Heavy footsteps thundered behind Touko. Fearing collision, Touko turned her head, and saw Aoi to the side of her just before Aoi leaped off the pier and dove in.

Aoi swam a short distance and when she emerged, someone else did too.

“Sakura-chan, Sakura-chan!” said Aoi. She bobbed in the water and then rose as she wrapped her arms around who could only have been Sakura, a tall, wide, imposing mermaid who no doubt could have swatted Aoi back onto the pier with ease if she wanted, but she didn’t.

What Sakura wanted to do was support Aoi with one arm and return the hug with her other, and that she did with a smile softer than Touko anticipated or thought possible from someone like that. Striking white hair that resembled seaweed clung to Sakura’s dark skin and from where Touko sat, she could barely distinguish Sakura’s irises because they were such a pale blue-grey, and Sakura’s furrowed brow made her eyes appear smaller. A jagged scar started on the left side of her forehead, crossed over the bridge of her nose and tailed off on the right side of her jaw, and similar scars decorated Sakura’s right upper arm like someone, or something, had swiped at her with claws.

Touko did not and would not take her gaze off her, and it barely had anything to do with the fact that Sakura wasn’t wearing a seashell bra or anything of the sort.

Or anything.

“So you’re Oogami,” said Byakuya.

“And you’re Togami,” replied Sakura in a deep voice. She gently prised Aoi’s arms off her.

Getting the message quickly, Aoi climbed off, and Sakura swam closer to the pier, giving a clear view of her tail. It was navy and specked with white spots, at least on the back.

She was much bigger than Byakuya and Touko thought to herself that if Sakura could theoretically squash Aoi, she could do far worse to someone thinner like Touko.

“You must be Fukawa,” said Sakura.

Sakura reached up a hand. Touko pushed herself back.

“I only wish to shake your hand,” Sakura told her. “You rescued my Aoi, so I am in your debt as well. What you did was so noble and so kind... to think that I thought my Kenichiro was the single exception when it came to humans...”

There was more to what happened than Sakura probably knew but again, Touko didn’t reply. Sakura slowly withdrew her hand, and Touko didn’t come any closer.

“Fukawa-chan’s usually not so shy,” remarked Aoi.

Touko scooted back a bit more. “I’m... not shy...”

“Do I scare you?” asked Sakura, to which Touko didn’t answer. She nodded once and smiled again. “I see... You have no reason to be afraid. As long as you do not harm my Aoi, then I will not lay a
finger on you.”

“... Okay,” said Touko, keeping that in mind.

Aoi hummed. “Now that you’re here, Sakura-chan, we just need to finish getting everything on the ship and wait for the others to arrive.”

She laughed a bit.

“Hey, can you give me a boost up?” she asked Sakura.

“Of course.” Sakura picked up Aoi, holding her in one hand, and cocked her hand back. Then, she unfolded her arm out in front of her as she threw Aoi up onto the pier.

Aoi soared upward, achieving a height way over Touko’s head. When Aoi started to fall, Touko shrieked and lurched sideways, falling onto her arm, but she needn’t have bothered because Aoi landed a short but safe distance from Touko.

“Thanks!” said Aoi. She looked over her shoulder, turned the rest of her body around and blew a kiss at Sakura, who touched two fingers to her lips before pointing them at Aoi. This elicited a giggle from Aoi.

Byakuya scrunched up his nose.

“Come on, Fukawa-chan!” Aoi grabbed Touko by the arm and dragged her across the pier, pulling her away from where Byakuya and Sakura were. “If you help too, we’ll leave sooner!”

Touko dropped the book that she had been reading to Byakuya.

“I-I can walk!” Touko insisted, and she tried to get up, stumbling.

Byakuya stayed where he was.

The door to the top deck rasped as Touko pushed it until she could slide through the gap and close it behind her. She hurried over to the barrier of the ship, uncaring of how the ship croaked, and stared into the distance, chest heaving. Sky blended into sea and rather than view the black expanse around her, she chose to study the black expanse above her, where there were stars and a full moon. Most of the light came from the lantern that she gripped in one hand, other hand clinging to the rail. Some light from above kissed the sea, but no one living there would be able to appreciate it.

“Fukawa.”

Except one person.

Touko twitched and peered down, barely able to see the figure swimming along on his back. Thankfully, the sea was as dormant as the rest of the crew, so she could easily hear him. The ringing in her head was louder than the sea’s rolls. “T-Togami-kun...!”

“You’re awake,” he noted aloud. “Don’t you need to sleep?”

She caught her breath and gulped.

“I’m not tired.” Touko tore her hand off the rail and placed it over her heart, clutching her
blouse. “I... j-just woke up, actually...”

“You sound out of breath,” he said. “What happened?”

Touko shook her head. “You wouldn’t understand. I... needed some air. I h-had a bad dream.”

“Dream?” he repeated, as she thought he would.

“While you’re asleep, you’re unconscious...”

“... I know that already...”

“... and sometimes you see images in your mind. Fake images, but you believe in them.” Touko gripped her blouse harder. “This one, I’ve had many times before. I... was d-drowning... and the sea had hands that grabbed me and pulled me down...”

“It must have been someone in the water, because the sea doesn’t have hands.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense!” Touko tensed. No one came out, but she spoke quieter regardless. “If you don’t sleep, then you’ve never dreamed... not once...”

“That’s right,” he said. “I have never dreamed.”

“You’re twenty years old and you’ve never dreamed,” she said. She stretched out her fingers individually, making sure that a few stayed curled around the wire handle of her lantern at any one time, and looked up. “There are so many stars out tonight... Do you know about them?”

“I’ve seen them. I can see them,” he said. “While my eyes are sensitive to sunlight, it enables me to see the stars well. When I was younger, my butler would take me to the surface and tell me stories about them.”

“Can you tell me one?” she asked, in need of a distraction.

“They were children’s stories about mermaids shooting arrows into the sky and them exploding into the patterns that you see now,” he replied. “But I’m twenty, as you said. I’m not a child anymore and neither are you.”

She bit her lip. “We have stories for them too... H-Hey, Togami-kun, when is your birthday?”

“Birthday?” He tasted it on his tongue.

“It’s the anniversary of the day on which you were born,” she explained. “You were born, weren’t you?”

“My kind hatch from eggs.”

Touko snorted.

“What?” he asked coldly.

She covered her mouth. “It’s n-nothing... so... do you know when you... h-hatched?”

“Beginning of May. That is when I add another year to my age. Humans do the same.”

If she had known, they could have celebrated his birthday, despite how she didn’t celebrate hers. Her parents considered it the anniversary of their greatest mistake, something that they had not been shy
about expressing, and every year marked another step closer to reaching the dreaded age of twenty-six, when she would have no chance of ever getting married like in the books that she grew up reading.

Touko let go of her blouse and held onto the rail again. “We, humans, have stories based on different constellations. Stars that we join together in our heads to make pictures.” Touko looked up. “You can’t see this one at this time of year, but there’s one that’s meant to join up into a bull.”

He followed her gaze. “What’s a bull?”

“A beast with four legs,” she said. “A common interpretation of the constellation is a story where a god named Zeus disguised himself as a bull to abduct a princess called Europa. Zeus took the form of a white bull that smelled of saffron and gave tuneful lows that drew in anyone nearby, and he hid in her father’s herd. One day, she saw the bull while gathering flowers, and she got on his back. Then, he carried her across the sea to Crete, after which he revealed his true identity.”

Byakuya snorted. “I suppose you find that romantic.”

“Zeus wanted her to bear him lots of sons. He thought she was pretty. Prettier than all the other maidens. He gave her gifts, but then...”

“Then...?” Byakuya prompted.

“Then, one day, he abandoned her,” she said quietly. “She was but one of many consorts. Zeus wanted her to give birth to sons destined for greatness... She was just the means to an end. If Hera, his lover, found out, Zeus wouldn’t have given a damn about what happened to Europa after. A pretty face only gets you so far.”

Touko swallowed.

“Everyone is born under a certain star sign, and yours is Taurus,” she said. “Taurus, the bull...”

He didn’t reply. Her heart clenched.

“I thought it would be interesting,” she said. “My mentor... had books about Greek mythology...”

“... I suppose it is interesting,” he admitted. He gave a long pause. “You know, when you recite your stories, I can’t help being interested in them.”

Touko blinked.

“Even if the story isn’t something that I care about, you use words to make it compelling. Just...” Byakuya spoke slower. “Something... or some things about you... could make almost anything... even ugly things... worth listening to.”

She felt herself blush. Her heart leaped and made her words stutter worse than usual. “Y-You’re... just... s-saying that...”

“I am, because it’s what I think,” he said, and she knew she could believe him.

Touko hunched her shoulders and tried to breathe, chest like a cage.

“I... I have more books in my room,” she said. “I even have one on Greek mythology with me... I could bring it here and read it to you.”

He didn’t reply immediately. She waited for his verdict, to find out if he would ask her to fetch the
book or if he would decline the offer, but what he said cut through the silence and froze on her face.

“Take me to your room.”

Her mind went blank. “My...? What? Why...?”

This had been something she daydreamed, not something that was going to happen.

“If I’m in your cabin, I will be hidden away and I will have your books to read whenever I wish during the day,” he explained.

“My cabin,” she murmured. Her daydream from earlier that day threatened to take over. “My... My...!”

“Quickly,” he said.

She moaned.

“Fukawa!”

Touko shook her head and then stared down at him. “B-But you’re down there...”

“You’re a witch,” he reminded her. “I’ve seen you lift things with magic.”

Her eyes widened. She hurried off and returned with a small bottle of lilac liquid. Focusing on him, and only him, she drank the whole bottle and with lips that faintly burned, she said, “Volare...”

Byakuya gasped at the first movement upward. He slowly rose from the water. Head. Shoulders. Elbows. Tail. By the time he was at the same level as the rail, his features had smoothed over, and she took several steps back and floated him onto the deck. Touko didn’t dare look away as she shuffled to where she remembered the door to the companionway to be. When she felt it, she fumbled about but succeeded in opening it.

Behind her were the stairs that led down to the lower decks. She gritted her teeth as she carefully set Byakuya down in front of her.

“Crawl over to the top of the stairs,” she said, and without waiting for an answer, she turned around and crept down the companionway.

After he did as she asked and she arrived at the bottom, she concentrated on him again, and he ascended once more. Byakuya floated down the companionway and when he was at the bottom, she guided him to the door of her cabin and opened it.

The room was easy on the eyes but that didn’t mean it was pretty. Apart from red curtains and what she brought with her, everything was some kind of brown. Touko set him down on the bed and shut the door. She groaned and fell to her knees, head pounding and body slick with sweat. While she had used that spell for longer durations, she hadn’t ever committed herself so strongly before. Dropping driftwood wasn’t as big a deal as dropping a person.

Byakuya patted the bed, his mouth slightly open as he touched the unfamiliar fabric. “What’s this?”

Touko looked at him with one eye open, breathing loudly. “A bed. It’s what most people prefer to sleep on.”

“I see...” His eyes flitted over to her. “Fukawa, I would like to be told a story.”
She forced herself to her feet and lumbered over to the pile of books in the corner.

“No,” he said as she crouched down. He patted the bed again. “From your mind. Like the story about the bull.”

“Oh!”

Touko walked back over and when he patted the bed some more, she hesitantly sat down where his hand had indicated.

“Well…” She fidgeted and glanced at him. His wet body gleamed in the candlelight. “T-The story I told you was a Greek myth... but I know a Chinese legend to do with the stars. It’s called the ‘Cowherd and the Weaver Girl’, and it’s about two lovers…”

He smirked. “I’ll survive.”

She drew in breath, shuddering, and then spoke. “Zhinu was the daughter of a goddess and in her own right, a skilled seamstress. Everyday, she would weave clouds of ethereal beauty…”

“Lie down,” Byakuya said, and before she could respond, or even think about what he said, he pulled her onto her side so they faced each other.

A strangled noise escaped her throat.

“Continue,” he said sternly but with a faint smile too, though that might just have been a trick of the lighting.

“Zhinu got bored of her duties, of living with her sisters in Heaven and always obeying the rules of her mother, so seeking excitement and true happiness, she ran away from home, and she stumbled upon a young cowherd called Niulang…”

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the sea has hands and they grab,

grab, grab

at touko’s

ankles,

knees,

and thighs.

clammy and slimy, more work their way up, seizing her arms and neck until a palm slaps over her mouth.

she vomits bubbles that morph into byakuya’s eyes on the creased ceiling, and the hands drag her down

o

w
i plan to focus solely on this until it's done.
then i want to finish a different multichapter and publish that.
then i think i will start focusing on an original novel.
Three benches surrounded each wooden table in the mess hall, leaving one side of the tables free, and there were two tables, though currently just one of the tables were occupied.

They had only been at sea for three days now, but Touko had already figured out what to expect late morning. Most of the crew were already there, with the exception of Yasuhiro, the Oowada Brothers, who had their breakfast brought to sickbay, and the helmsman - an old man called Kazuo Tengan, who Touko had only had one conversation with where he said hello and she hummed back.

Oh, and Byakuya, if he counted, but no one expected him to come to breakfast. Only Touko knew where he was. To the best of their knowledge, he was still in the sea, but she knew he was in her room. In her bed.

In her bed.

In... her... bed...

Aoi spotted Touko peeking into the mess hall first. Her face lit up, and she lifted her chin off her hand so she could wave. “Fukawa-chan!”

Touko jumped.

“Hello,” said Touko, heart pounding. She wiped drool from her mouth, shuffled over to the other table and sat down.

“What are you doing over there, silly? Come sit with us,” Aoi said.

Each bench around the other table had at least one person sat on it. Kyouko and Makoto occupied one bench, on another was Aoi, and Sonosuke was seated on the third bench. She chewed her bottom lip and decided to sit next to Aoi, albeit with some space between them.

“Did you sleep well?” asked Aoi.

“I did,” said Touko, fighting down a yawn.

Aoi swished a finger but kept it pointed at Touko’s face. “You’ve still got shadows under your eyes... Isn’t your bed comfortable?”

“It is,” said Touko. At least, it was according to Byakuya. If Touko wanted to sleep, she had to curl up on an armchair, because Byakuya’s faint whiff of sea and every graze of contact between them would shock her wide awake. “I like to stay up and read or write...”

Which, to be fair, was what she had been doing.

“You’re so lucky you get to sleep by yourself in a bed,” said Aoi. She placed her chin back in her palm. “The hammocks are so hard to sleep in! Last night, Hagakure overbalanced and he grabbed my hammock as he started to fall, so I had to grab Kirigiri-chan’s and half of us ended up on the floor.”

“And you woke the rest of us up,” said Sonosuke.

“So you can talk without Andou being nearby,” commented Touko.
Sonosuke glanced at her, then turned his head forward and from his sleeve pulled out a small knife, which he watched as he twirled it between his fingers.

“You and Andou-chan are really close, aren’t you?” asked Aoi. “How long have you been with her?”

He didn’t move his gaze. “We’ve known each other from a young age.”

“How did you meet?”

“We lived in the same town, quite near each other. She was giving candy out to the other kids, but then a bigger child stole her bag. I saw it happen and got into a fight with the thief... I managed to get it back for her, and a few years later, we became a couple.”

Makoto smiled. “Are you married?”

“If he was, he’d be wearing a ring,” Touko pointed out.

“No, we haven’t married yet.” Sonosuke shook his head. “I want to propose, but...”

Everyone stared at him. He averted his eyes and scratched the back of his neck.

“I’m waiting for the right moment,” he explained. “It has to be perfect for her.”

His lips stretched into a grin and colour bloomed in his cheeks.

“I can imagine,” said Kyouko.

Touko’s stomach gurgled, spoiling the mood. She cringed and wiggled on her bench. Sonosuke went back to focusing on playing with his knife, and the posture of the others slowly worsened.

Not much later, Yasuhiro wandered in. When he got closer, he slowed to a stop. “Did I miss breakfast?”

Everyone except Touko and Makoto shook their heads. Touko stayed silent while Makoto said, “It hasn’t been served yet.”

“Seriously?” Yasuhiro pulled a face and sat down next to Makoto. His body seemed to grow heavier as more time passed, especially his head, and he ended up resting it on the table.

Now, the only people missing were the two cooks, the Oowada Brothers, Kazuo and Byakuya.

“I’m so hungry,” Yasuhiro mumbled into the table, sat on the bench opposite Touko.

“It’ll be ready soon,” Makoto said, and his stomach grumbled. He slouched and clasped his hands together in front of him, pretending that the noise hadn’t come from him or even existed. Why he bothered was a mystery, though, because by this point, apart from Yasuhiro, everyone’s stomach had emitted a noise since they arrived at the table.

Growling sounded from Aoi’s direction. She blew through her lips, creating a noise that reminded Touko of a horse.

“It must be past eleven by now,” piped up Aoi, whose chin was still propped up in the palm of her hand. “Does anyone know the time?”

Sonosuke reached into an inner pocket of his trenchcoat and pulled out a pocket watch. “It’s twenty
minutes past eleven.”

Aoi groaned. Her arm collapsed beneath her head and her face slammed into the table, so she adopted the same position as Yasuhiro. Makoto and Kyouko looked at her with their brows furrowed in concern.

“It didn’t take this long yesterday or the day before,” Aoi mumbled, sounding tired as opposed to having a concussion.

“The quartermaster dishes out the punishments, right?” Touko asked Kyouko. “So... go into the galley and tell them to hurry up! Or... Or we’ll cook them!” She clicked her tongue. “And they call themselves professionals! Keh!”

“What did you say?” asked Sonosuke with narrowed eyes. He flicked his wrist and rolled his small knife into a proper hold.

“N-Nothing!” Touko’s stomach rumbled again. She jolted her body straight and showed Sonosuke her palms. “I was joking! I’m sorry! Don’t hurt me!”

Sonosuke quirked his brow but didn’t put away his knife.

Touko felt her body heat up and without thinking, held her breath. She realised after a few seconds and forced herself to exhale, then inhale, noisily.

Aoi touched Touko’s shoulder. “Fukawa-chan...?”

Yasuhiro lifted his head and blinked blearily. “What’s this about cannibalism?”

“No one is eating anyone,” Kyouko said. “Izayoi-kun, please put that away.”

“All right,” said Sonosuke. He twirled the knife before tucking it into his sleeve, perhaps into a hidden pocket stitched into the inner lining.

No one spoke for a minute. Even though Touko didn’t completely calm down by then, her breathing became quieter, and she no longer felt like she might self-combust. She cradled her head in her hands, wishing she brought a book with her. If she knew that breakfast wouldn’t have been ready at eleven, the time that Teruteru promised, then she wouldn’t have bothered turning up as early as she did, which had only been a few minutes before eleven.

Makoto stood up. “I’ll go check on Andou-san and Hanamura-kun...”

He strode across the room to the door of the kitchen, opened it, and stepped inside. The low voices from inside grew in volume, but didn’t become loud enough that any words could be distinguished. Ten or so seconds later, Makoto returned to the table. Though he didn’t bring any food with him, he did bring drink glasses and two bottles of a cloudy orange liquid with a ridiculous name, all on a tray.

Kyouko helped him place the items onto the table.

“I’ll have some bumbo,” said Yasuhiro. He grabbed one of the bottles and poured himself a glass of it.

“So what did they say?” asked Aoi.

“They’re just finishing off the beef.” Makoto took the tray to the other table before sitting with them again. “It takes three to four minutes per side for medium rare, and then the steak needs another two
minutes to rest.”

“Rest?” said Yasuhiro. He scratched his head. “What, is it alive...? We didn’t bring cattle on board, did we?”

“Just the one,” said Touko.

“Huh?”

She looked pointedly at Aoi. Yasuhiro followed her gaze.

Aoi met Yasuhiro’s eyes, frowned, and then noticed that everyone was staring at her.

“What?” she said.

“... Never mind,” said Makoto. “I think when Hanamura-kun said that they were letting the steak rest, he must have been using the verb as a technical term or something.”

Everyone’s stomachs warbled. They all sighed.

Finally, five minutes later, the door to the kitchen opened and Ruruka and Teruteru emerged, carrying a large slab of wood between them. On it were several plates of food. They lumbered over and set it onto the table, approaching it from the only side that lacked a bench. The beef had been heavily seasoned with salt and pepper, then carved into quarter-inch slices. Each plate had two pieces of this beef, a fried egg, finely shredded yellow cabbage and a piece of red-and-white candy.

Yasuhiro took one of the plates and pouted at the food on it. “That’s it?”

“We’ve had this twice already,” complained Aoi. With the same expression as Yasuhiro, she took a different plate. After she put the plate down, she nudged at the piece of candy with her finger, but she failed to coax it into a different flavour or into popping into some popcorn.

“You don’t want to eat too much of the salted meat right away. After a few weeks, food will start to spoil, and salted meat will be one of the last foods to go.” Teruteru curled three digits into his hand, leaving his thumb and index finger out, transforming the shape into a gun, and pointed the index at Yasuhiro. “Granted the beef doesn’t become infested with maggots, of course.”

Makoto, who had been in the process of raising and bringing a slice of salted beef to his mouth, hesitated. He slowly tore through the meat and inspected it.

“It won’t have any in it yet,” said Kyouko, lips edging onto a smile.


Touko mouthed numbers as she counted how many plates remained on the tray. Apart from her, everyone seated had taken theirs, which left six. Two would be for the cooks, one would be for Kazuo, and then another two belonged to the Oowada Brothers.

“Who’s going to take the Oowada Brothers and Tengan-san their breakfast?” asked Kyouko.

“Not me,” said Ruruka. “If they’re actually properly sick, I don’t want to get their germs... It wouldn’t do if one of the cooks became ill, would it?”

More like if the one who was actually a cook became ill. Touko eyed a blob of candy on one of the unclaimed plates. “What part did you contribute, exactly...?”
“The candy, obviously.”

“Just the candy?”

Ruruka snorted and put her hands on her hips.

“Depending on the conditions of where they’re stored, chocolate and candy can last a decent amount of time,” stated Ruruka. “Trust me, you’re going to get tired of boring old salted meat and sour cabbage after a while... My candies and chocolate are guaranteed to keep your spirits up and stop you from going stir-crazy. What we have here happens to be peppermint candy, which is meant to keep your appetite down.”

Touko looked at the same piece of candy as before. She expanded her focus to the rest of the plate, where there was food that would actually fill them up.

“Andou-san did help me a little with the fire pit,” Teruteru confessed. “I think she has the potential to be a good assistant, if she complained less.”

“I complained the right amount! It’s small and hot in there!” Ruruka snapped.

“So why volunteer to work as a cook?” asked Yasuhiro.

Ruruka rounded on him, teeth bared. Yasuhiro yelped and cowered.

“I’m sure Andou-san will pick things up quickly,” said Makoto, which only made her puff out her cheeks childishly.

Touko’s stomach rumbled. Grimacing, she stood up and retrieved one of the plates. “Are the seconds in the kitchen?”

“Your build is misleading, Fukawa-san,” said Teruteru. He rubbed one of his chins. “For someone so thin, you eat an awful lot...”

Teruteru squinted at her.

She shivered. “W-What is it?”

“... My cooking is that good, isn’t it?” He broke into a wide smile. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

“T-That’s right,” she said. She breathed out and carrying her plate in both hands, headed for the kitchen.

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“T-That’s right,” she said. She breathed out and carrying her plate in both hands, headed for the kitchen.

“Are you going to be eating in your cabin again?” asked Aoi.

“Yes,” said Touko as she stepped into the kitchen.

There wasn’t much space to move around in. In the centre of the kitchen was a line of wooden cabinets that could also be used as counters. Touko ignored the portable fire pit and the dying embers beneath the grate, just interested in the counter and only then because of the leftover pieces of beef on it, smaller than which she had been served. She piled them onto her plate.

Also on the counter were several jars, pots and baskets, and a basket of bread caught her eye. From it, Touko took three rolls, and she set down her plate so she could search through drawers in the cabinets for a knife, finding one in the fourth drawer that she checked. With the knife resting on her plate of hers and Byakuya’s breakfast, she left the kitchen and passed through the mess hall.
Touko almost reached the door.

“Hey, Fukawa-san, would you mind delivering breakfast to the others?” Makoto called out.

Her hand dropped to her side, and her shoulders hunched.

“Why did those brothers come along if they get seasick easily?” asked Ruruka. “Seems kind of stupid.”

“They’re very useful when they aren’t sick,” explained Kyouko.

Touko opened the door slowly, intending to slip away.

“Fukawa-san?” said Makoto.

So close.

“I can’t lift that tray,” said Touko, referring to the slab of wood that Ruruka and Teruteru carried breakfast out on.

“I’ll help!” Aoi offered. She jumped up, shoved the rest of her meat into her mouth and placed her plate onto the slab with the others. Leaving one of the bottles on the table, Aoi took the other and left just enough glasses for everyone who would remain in the mess hall to have one. With ease, she picked up the tray, though it probably wasn’t that heavy, and walked quickly over to Touko.

Aoi was more than capable of carrying the plates by herself, so Touko decided to help out by opening doors for her. Despite the number of objects on the flat surface of the slab, none of them shifted or slid around, presumably due to Aoi’s past work as a trapeze artist. That involved balance. As they made their way to sickbay, Touko tried to rationalise to herself why she was helping out so placidly.

They caught her in a merciful mood. Kazuo might take them on a detour if he didn’t get his food on time. Doing this would mean that they would have to do something for Touko later. Most of the people onboard were people who Touko considered friends.

Her face warmed, and she let the thought settle. She felt a flutter in her chest and gave a small smile.

Walking beside Touko, Aoi noticed it and smiled too.

Sickbay was through one of the doors in that deck’s main passageway. Touko tried to push the door open but could only get it ajar, because something seemed to be blocking it.

“Who’s there?” asked one of the Oowada Brothers, and Touko couldn’t be any more specific as she wasn’t yet able to differentiate between them just going by their voices.

“It’s just me and Fukawa-chan, with breakfast,” replied Aoi.

In the other room was movement and footsteps. “You can come in now.”

Touko pushed the door the rest of the way open. Sickbay didn’t have much in the way of equipment and lacked the smell of disinfectant that Touko expected from hospital environments. It smelled like her cabin, in that it didn’t really smell of anything, not even vomit. Hammocks hung from the ceiling, made from a stiff material that caused them to be shaped like an open casket without a lid. In one of them was Daiya, lying on his back without his helmet on. Thick ropes tied in knots suspended the hammocks from the ceiling, and below several of them were rolls of bandage and wooden buckets of...
different heights and widths.

Mondo, stood nearby and holding his helmet between his arm and side, said, “Close the door, would you?”

“Isn’t there a better way to block the door than sitting in front of it?” Aoi asked. She shut it.

“Probably,” replied Mondo. Touko hadn’t noticed before, but the orange streak on his head formed a pompadour at the front with a similar texture to a punch perm or an afro. “Maybe that guy dating Andou knows how to make a lock.”

Aoi folded her arms over her chest. “It can’t be that nice in here... Perhaps you should have the captain’s cabin?”

“T-That’s not your place to say!” Touko snapped. “Naegi said I could have it.”

“It’s fine,” said Daiya. He sat up. The hammocks here seemed sturdier than the ones that the majority of the crew slept on, and his didn’t rock. “We’ll get used to it. Back when we worked for Monobear, we could go chill in our trailers and not have to worry about keeping our appearances hidden.”

“We only had to wear these helmets when we were performing,” added Mondo. “I mean, Hagakure was the only human, and he was always off doing his own thing anyway...”

Touko just nodded.

“Anyway, thanks for bringing breakfast over,” said Mondo in a lighter tone. He took two of the plates and walked over to Daiya. Then he came back and poured bumbo into two of the glasses, one of which he gave to his brother.

Aoi and Touko left sickbay together. After Touko closed the door behind her, she darted past Aoi so she could ascend the companionway first and open the door at the top.

Summer Sun greeted them when they emerged onto the top deck, prompting Touko to shield her eyes as she took a few steps forward. Together, the pair approached the stairs that led to a higher part of the deck.

“Hello, ladies!” Kazuo called out, sighting them quickly. His face was covered in wrinkles, and the only person shorter than him was Teruteru, but Kazuo might have been capable of achieving a greater height if not for his pronounced stoop. “Don’t tell me you went out of your way just for me.”

“We don’t mind,” said Aoi without consulting Touko for her opinion first. Touko glowered but didn’t say anything. “Is it a lot of work?”

“Ah, once you know what you’re doing, it’s relatively simple. It’s nice and peaceful out here,” he replied. Aoi lifted the slab, and he took one of the plates and a cup off it. “Thank you.”

She shrugged with a smile and poured him some bumbo.

“Thank you again,” he said. He took a swig of it and smacked his lips, smiling at the distance.

No land could be seen from any directions. Touko ended up walking in a small, full circle as she investigated. All she saw was endless blue that stretched out seemingly forever. She came to a stop and hugged herself, even though it wasn’t a cold day.

“We’ll see you later,” said Aoi, and she exchanged waves with Kazuo.
While they did this, Touko headed over to the companionway, and when Aoi realised several seconds later, she jogged after her. Even with the increased speed, the plates, glasses and bottle of bumbo didn’t fall off the tray.

“So are you going to your room now?” asked Aoi.

“I will be,” replied Touko. She opened the door and let Aoi pass her. “On the way, I want to go to the storage room for some cheese...”

For the first time that day, the items on the tray twitched as Aoi jolted in excitement.

“I’ll come too!” Aoi said. “Sakura-chan would love some...”

“Shush!” Touko hissed. “Do you want Tengan to know about her?”

Aoi squeaked and flung her hands up to her mouth.

The storage rooms were on the lowest deck of the ship, each with their own purpose. Set up in a similar way to the deck that they slept in and ate in among other activities, entrances on either side of this deck’s passageway led to different rooms. One housed most of the food items, with bread being in an apartment of its own, another had gunpowder, and spare hammocks and sails were stored in a separate room as well.

They descended the stairs to the lowest deck, each step groaning beneath their feet. In the storage room, lit up by candles in holders on the walls, Touko approached the shelf where she hid a wedge of cheese last evening, winding around crates, sacks and barrels that seemed to have been placed there with no clear arrangement or signs of organisation. Alternatively, since the journey began, people had moved things around and didn’t bother putting them back. For example, a crate had been pushed toward the shelf where her cheese was, that hadn’t been there on Touko’s previous visits.

Touko narrowed her eyes at the bottles on the shelf. Her eyes flicked back and forth several times, slower each time.

“Where is it...?” she mumbled.

“Huh?” asked Aoi from behind her.

“The cheese...” Touko pulled two bottles off the shelf. “I know I left some here...”

Aoi rested the tray on a barrel and walked over.

“Maybe someone took it?” suggested Aoi. She shrugged one shoulder.

“M-Maybe...” Touko admitted, and she looked again. Just as unsuccessful at finding it as before, she balled her hands into fists. “Argh, wasn’t it obvious that someone put it aside for themselves...? What sort of idiot would think that it was theirs for the taking?”

“It’s not like it had your name on it or anything,” said Aoi. She put one hand on her hip.

Touko rounded on her. “So you took it?”

“No!” Aoi threw up her hands and stepped back. “I just mean... maybe someone didn’t realise and thought someone put it there because there was a bit of space on the shelf?”

“Like you?” Touko rose onto tiptoes.
“Not me! Look, I’ll find you some cheese, okay? It can’t all have been eaten already... Please calm down...”

A long, grating whine caused Touko’s lips to buzz. Aoi scrunched up her face and started to search for the wooden container that the cheese was contained in. The sizzle emitted from Touko petered out, and Touko began to help Aoi. Neither lifted anything heavy. Just small barrels and sacks, for now.

“Maybe the cheese was moved to the kitchen?” suggested Aoi after a minute of sifting that produced no results.

Touko straightened up.

Aoi wiped her hands on her bare thighs, which inspired Touko to examine her own. Dirt stuck to the sweat on her palms. Touko rubbed them onto a crate before remembering that was where the dirt came from, so she cleaned them on a sack of potatoes.

“Someone needs to tidy this place up,” grumbled Touko, looking at the items around them, strewn around in a haphazard fashion.

“Why don’t we do that now?” said Aoi. She flexed her muscles, struck an extravagant pose like a superhero and came out of it to lift up a barrel like it weighed as much as a small bag of sugar.

“Some of us haven’t eaten yet,” Touko told her, but Aoi didn’t stop, continuing to move things around.

“We’ll put all the rum over here first,” said Aoi. She plopped two barrels into a clear space before waddling through the piles of provisions in search of more.

Seeing as Aoi not only helped load everything onto the wagon but unloaded it after the wagon transported the goods to the ship, Touko could trust that Aoi had a good idea of how many barrels of rum were onboard. Touko wouldn’t be able to lift much, and even if she could, she didn’t want to risk inhaling any dust that might make her sneeze, so she decided to look after the tray, which had Aoi’s plate, empty except for a piece of peppermint candy, Touko’s and Byakuya’s breakfast on a single plate, and the glasses for the bumbo along with the bottle of it.

Well, those were the things that the tray had on it when Aoi put it down.

“Where’s the bottle?” asked Touko.

Aoi had been holding up a barrel, trying to find where Yasuhiro was supposed to have written onto each container in paint what was inside of it, and turned toward Touko. “What’s wrong, Fukawachen?”

“The bottle of bumbo...” Touko stared at the tray, but she hadn’t overlooked the bottle. “It’s... gone.”

“Gone? It can’t be gone,” said Aoi, and she trudged over. “Hey, you’re right!”

“Of course I’m right,” replied Touko, shooting her a icy look.

“Did it fall off?” Aoi wondered aloud. She pushed crates aside as she slowly worked her way deeper into what, quite frankly, was a mess.

Touko stayed behind and watched, wringing her hands together. Aoi started to lift a crate, but as soon as its base left the floor, a yell came from inside of it. A similar yell escaped Aoi and she
dropped the crate.

Clutching her chest, Touko said, “What is it?”

Slowly, Aoi removed the lid.

“No, who,” said Aoi. Touko shuffled up behind her and peered over Aoi’s shoulder. Inside the crate, clutching the bottle of bumbo, was a tanned boy with fiery hair and a scruffy face that both women had seen before.

At the same time, Touko and Aoi said, “Daimon...?”

Kazuo steepled his fingers together and stared at Masaru, who was seated opposite him and who had cast his eyes down to his fidgeting hands. There were two other chairs in the captain’s cabin, one of which Yasuhiro sat on backward, straddling it, and Touko sat on the other. Everyone else stood. Other than the table, the only place that could be sat on was the bed, which Touko had drawn a curtain around as soon as she rushed into the cabin first.

“Well, we can’t exactly turn back, can we?” said Ruruka. “That would put an extra week onto our journey.”

“Your father must be worried about you,” remarked Kazuo.

“Nah, he said I could go,” Masaru said quickly.

Kyouko quirked her brow. “Really? I recall your father saying that he needed you to help with his shop.”

Masaru squirmed. “He’ll be all right... I’ve run away a lot of times. Besides, all he does is shout at me and... stuff.”

‘Stuff’ could mean a lot of things, but judging by how he fidgeted constantly, the bruises on his knees, his cut lip and the fact that he ran away from home a lot, Touko could guess what he meant by ‘stuff’.

“I bet the kid’s got his mind on treasure,” said Yasuhiro with a grin.

“Huh? Treasure?” said Ruruka.

“Nobody mentioned anything about treasure,” added Teruteru. “You all only said you were going across sea to visit someone.”

“We are,” said Makoto. “There’s no treasure...”

Yasuhiro winked at him. “That’s right.” He lowered his voice and leaned toward Makoto. “I think they bought it.”

“But I’m serious...”

Kazuo slouched even more forward and despite the fact that he didn’t say anything, everyone fixed their eyes on him except Masaru, who must have felt the urge to but fought against it, hunching his shoulders and biting on his lip, lashes quivering.

“Young man, do you know about the dangers that lurk at sea?” asked Kazuo in a low voice.
“You mean like sharks and stuff?” Masaru forced himself to reciprocate eye contact.

“Sharks?” Kazuo raised his eyebrows and very slightly tilted his head to one side. “Oh, no. I would be much more worried about falling sick than of being attacked by a shark. The sea is full of unknown things. Isn’t it strange that we know as much about it as outer space, yet the sea is so much closer than us?”

“Oi, you’re scaring him.” One of the Oowada Brothers, who Touko thought was Daiya, folded his arms over his chest. They needed to wear different helmets. Both wearing the same black ones helped no one. Touko only thought it might be Daiya because he seemed a bit slimmer. “What use is scaring the kid going to do?”

Masaru wiggled in his seat. “I’m not scared...”

Kazuo’s mouth opened up into a smile where the teeth reminded Touko of tombstones.

“Sometimes, being a little scared is a good thing. I’ve spent the majority of life on a ship, yet there are some things that get me on edge.”

“Hey, now...” Yasuhiro raised his hands. “Don’t say things like that so seriously...!”

“What, so you would rather be ignorant?” asked Touko.

Ruruka rolled her eyes and scoffed. “Who cares what’s in the sea unless we’re trying to catch it to eat? The old man’s just trying to scare us to get his kicks.”

“It’s not just what lives in the sea,” said Kazuo. “But also what lives on the sea... Tell me, have any of you heard of the Pirates of Hope?”

A beat of silence.

“The... Pirates of Hope...?” repeated Aoi.

“They’re not real,” Teruteru said.

Kazuo turned toward him. “It sounds like you’ve heard of them.”

Teruteru would not look anyone in the eyes. He twiddled his thumbs for a few seconds.

“Who are they?” asked Kyouko.

“I told you, they’re not real!” insisted Teruteru. “When cargo ships go missing at sea, people blame them for it. These... make-believe pirates. Some of our ingredients are imported from other towns, and whenever our supplier doesn’t have them in stock, they bring out the scapegoat!”

He ground his toes against the floor and turned his body this way and that.

“Oh, you want bouquet garni?” Teruteru said to himself. “Well, the price has increased due to the supposed risk of these... these non-existent pirates! Mesclun? Orange flower water?”

Teruteru stopped writhing.

“It’s the same damn excuse each time!”

“I’ve heard of them too,” Sonosuke said. Ruruka nodded. He continued. “Because they never leave survivors, no one knows what they look like. Crews will stumble upon the ships of their victims,
now devoid of life and stripped of possessions, with only lifeless bodies left. Men... Women... No one is spared. All are slain in various, gruesome ways. Slit to the throat...”

Makoto’s lips quivered.

“Burned alive...”

Touko gripped her knees harder.

“Heads crushed...”

Yasuhiro covered his ears.

“Limbs removed, either to be kept as trophies or eaten...”

Aoi slapped a hand over her mouth.

Kazuo hummed. “There are never any children found aboard... It’s impossible for me to say why, but perhaps the pirates took them in as cabin boys... or fed them to the sea.”

Masaru gulped.

A chuckle rumbled from Kazuo. He stood up with his usual hunched over form.

“Ultimately, what happens to you is up to the quartermaster and the captain,” said Kazuo.

Makoto rubbed the back of his neck. Kyouko cupped her chin in thought.

Byakuya chose now to swallow some of his breakfast, behind the curtain around the bed. Everyone looked at Touko, because her chair was closest to it.

“Yes, Fukawa-san?” asked Kyouko.

“I...” Touko shuddered. “If he wants to stay, then let him stay.” She dropped her gaze to the floor.

“We can’t... go back now...”

“It’s not that far back,” said Makoto.

“Please,” said Masaru. “Don’t... send me back. I’ll do whatever you want...”

He aimed a wide-eyed stare at Kyouko, hands together pleadingly.

“... Fine,” said Kyouko. She turned her head away. “Hopefully, Daimon-san will be forgiving if we offer some kind of payment as a consolation.”

“Assuming the Pirates of Hope don’t get us first,” said Daiya.

Teruteru flushed. “They’re not real! They’re... They’re myths! As real as mermaids, they are!”
Touko set down the last playing card onto a pre-existing pile of six that were spread out vertically, overlapping so they resembled a column. With the last card put down at the bottom of the column, only a strip of the other cards were visible. Consequently, the column now consisted of seven cards. Unlike the cards that it sat upon, the last card she placed was face up. To the left of it was a similar column, though it had six cards, not seven, where the card at the bottom of the column was face up too. The next column along contained five cards, the one beside that one had four, and so on, decreasing in number until on the far left, a face up card was by itself.

As for the remainder of the cards, those had been stacked and placed above the lone face up card. All of the cards were on Touko’s bed where the pillows usually were. Byakuya peered down at the cards, upper body propped up by his arms that he had folded beneath him. Touko sat on a chair next to the bed.

“There,” said Touko. She straightened up and admired the columns that formed a right angled triangle, with the right angle being in the top right corner of the layout and the hypotenuse having ridges like a staircase. “Each card belongs to a certain suit. There are four: hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades. In Solitaire, the initial objective is to try to reveal as many cards as you can and make chains of them that decrease in number and alternate in colour, but the main objective is to collect them above the columns in a certain order, separated by suit. However, you can only move cards under certain conditions...”

Byakuya studied the layout. His body shifted as he adjusted one of his arms, putting a hand against his chin which he rubbed in thought, careful not to move too much and ruin the cards’ setup.

Touko wiggled. “You will learn the rules quicker if you watch me play, rather than listen to me explain it. First, we can move this ace to over here...”

She picked up an ace of diamonds, which had been face up at the bottom of the column of two cards, and placed it above the column of four cards. Afterwards, she flipped over the remaining card in the column that once had two cards in it.

“Let’s try to uncover as many cards as we can before we draw one from the stockpile,” she told him.

Other than drawing a card from the stockpile, Touko could place the four of spades in the far left column onto a five of hearts, and she could also place a three of hearts, currently next to the five of hearts, onto the four of spades. Touko stroked her thumb against a loose bit of skin on her upper lip as she considered her options, but she decided for now to not move those cards and just draw one from the stockpile. She flipped over the card on top of the stockpile, setting the card down directly to the right of the stockpile.

The card was a ten of spades, which she couldn’t use, so she flipped over the next card in the stockpile, putting it on top of the ten of spades. This continued until she obtained an eight of clubs, which she put on a nine of diamonds.

By the time she worked her way through the stockpile, she had found an ace of clubs, which she put next to the ace of diamonds, and a two of diamonds, which she put on top of the ace of diamonds. Touko also made other moves with other cards.

After a few minutes, many of the cards had been uncovered, and satisfaction rushed through Touko as she completed the piles for each suit in the right order. At the end of the game, there were four
piles of cards, each with a single suit in them.

“Is that the game?” asked Byakuya, not as enthusiastic as she would like.

“N-Not every game is possible to win, and if you want a greater challenge, you can draw three cards at a time rather than one...”

Byakuya pushed back his shoulders. “I wish to play now,” he announced. “Refrain from trying to play the game for me. I will win by myself.”

Touko gathered all the cards together and shuffled the deck with the riffle method, where she separated the deck into two units and, while pushing them together, flicked the corners up so that the cards intermingled, letting her slide them together to form a single pile. For good measure, she then shuffled them by repeatedly cutting the deck and reordering it before setting the cards out.

Fast as he was at picking up most skills, Byakuya required longer than Touko to complete the game. A few times, she had to remind him of the rules, and he would place the card back where he retrieved it from. As the game progressed, these mistakes became less frequent.

What did become more frequent, however, especially when he paused, trying to figure out what moves could be made, were how often her eyes drifted away from the cards to the side of his face. He barely moved when this happened, giving only minute jerks of his head as he turned to focus on a different part of the arrangement.

She smiled.

At one point, his pause became too long to be confidently classified as that word. Byakuya seemed to have got stuck, but of course, he continued examining the cards, not wanting to ask for help. Touko took in breath.

“Have you run out of moves?” she asked him.

He skimmed through the cards more than once.

“I seem to,” he conceded.

“Let me double check...” Touko leaned closer, ignoring how her heartbeat fluttered. Nothing in the stockpile could be taken out, and none of the cards in the columns could be arranged to reveal new cards. She checked what was in the piles above the columns and looked at the rest of the cards again.

The corners of her lips shot upward as she took a seven of hearts from the pile of cards containing only the heart suit, and she placed it on top of an eight of spades. That let her take a six of spades from the stockpile, and so a five of diamonds could be transferred over from another column, allowing the game to continue.

“You can take cards from there?” Byakuya asked.

“Yeah,” she said quietly.

“I didn’t know.”

This trick proved key in allowing him to finish the game. Three minutes later, four kings sat triumphantly on top of each pile.

Touko clasped her hands together, grinning. “You did it, Togami-kun!”
To her surprise. Byakuya grimaced.

“Togami-kun?” she said, confused, her grin slipping.

“I only won because you made a certain move,” he said. “If you hadn’t intervened, I would have assumed it was impossible to win and would have given up...”

“But you didn’t give up!” Touko pointed out. He hunched his shoulders, his expression no brighter. “And... getting help sometimes... isn’t a bad thing.”

“It’s weakness.”

“I thought that,” she said. She gripped her knees. “I used to think that. But... if I didn’t get help on some things... I wouldn’t have been able to learn or do some things, like learn how to cast spells, or even learn to read, and I wouldn’t be able to get across the sea. Without Naegi and Kirigiri, I wouldn’t have got my spell book back, and I would have...”

Like the outcome, her voice died. Touko coughed.

“But I’m not just helped. I can help others too,” she carried on. “I can use my magic for others, I can teach you to read and read for myself, and I helped Kirigiri catch her mother’s killer. This is how... things get done.”

Byakuya turned to her, eyebrows raised.

“Maybe not next time, but there will be a time when you can win the game by yourself,” she said.

He stared at her. In a low voice that she almost missed, he said, “Fukawa...”

Her skin tingled.

“Quite right,” came a voice from behind Touko.

The pair whipped their heads toward the door, where they saw Kazuo.

Touko’s stomach hardened, verging on painful. For the next five seconds, no one stirred, and Kazuo just waited, but then Touko’s senses kicked in and she wrenched at the blanket that Byakuya was lying on. She couldn’t pull it out from underneath him, which didn’t matter because she didn’t intend to.

Byakuya yelped as she tried to wrap him up in the blanket.

“I’m... I just...” Her words tripped in her throat. She climbed onto Byakuya and sprawled on top of him. “It’s my body pillow...”

Kazuo laughed.

Caught off guard by that, she hesitated.

“If you want me to play along with that, I don’t mind,” Kazuo said. “Has he been in here the whole time?”

“Since the first night,” admitted Touko. Byakuya freed an arm and flailed it around.

Touko watched Kazuo plod over. She felt Byakuya squirm underneath her and reluctantly slid off him. Byakuya popped his head out and uncased himself, face flushed. He eyed Kazuo with a mixture of wariness and hostility.

“Hm...” Kazuo usually didn’t have his legs straight and now was no exception, but he bent them more, bringing his face closer to Byakuya and studying him with a twinkle in his eyes. His head tilted to one side, hands resting on his thighs. “Hm... Incredible. I haven’t seen one of you in decades... You must be almost extinct now.”

“Almost,” Byakuya echoed.

“And he speaks our language too!” said Kazuo. “Don’t mermaids speak their own language? Did the young lady here teach you it?”

“We do. It involves hand gestures and what would just seem like whistling and tongue clicking to you. As for your second question... No. My butler taught me.” Byakuya probed Kazuo equally with his gaze. “Why are you here...?”

“Yeah. Shouldn’t you be at the helm?” asked Touko.

“I left the brothers to do it while I went on a stroll,” explained Kazuo.

Touko squinted. “They know how?”

“I’ve been teaching the rest of the crew, though I doubt you realised, what with how much time you’ve been spending in here according to the others. It’s Solitaire that you’re playing, isn’t it?”

“Were you eavesdropping?” asked Byakuya.

Kazuo chuckled and straightened his legs slightly. “I was on my way to the kitchen to see if I could get a hint on what we would be having for dinner tonight, and I heard voices but could only recognise one of them. So, do you know any other card games?”

Byakuya shook his head.

In the wrinkles on Kazuo’s face, a smile could be discerned. “Well, how about I teach you to play Cheat?”

“I’m sorry, Fukawa-san, but...” Kazuo raised a finger. “... I’ll have to call your bluff on that one.”

Touko revealed the two cards in her hand that indeed weren’t sixes. Only one of them was. Those cards, along with the crooked pile that had been building on the table, were taken into her custody, and Kazuo was free to put his last card down.

“Three,” he said, eyes glittering.

Over the past four days, neither Byakuya nor Touko had been able to beat him at this game. His laugh rumbled in his throat as he laced his fingers together. Touko dropped her cards onto the table while Byakuya’s lips met in a faint press, and he half-heartedly tossed his five remaining cards onto the table, his cheek resting on the fist of his other arm as he lay on his side near the edge of the bed.

“Oh, there’s no need for the pair of you to look so sour,” said Kazuo. If he had been smirking, it would have been understandable, but his smile lacked any conceit or smugness. “I’ve played this
game many times over the course of my life.”

“I’m not sour.” Byakuya gathered everyone’s cards and tried to riffle the deck. The two halves wouldn’t mesh together properly, so he changed to cutting the deck repeatedly in order to shuffle it.

When he deemed the deck sufficiently mixed, Byakuya wiggled a bit closer to the table, which Kazuo and Touko had dragged over to the side of the bed like on Kazuo’s previous visits, and Byakuya flicked a card toward the others in turn, dropping a card in front of him whenever he gave himself a card.

However, before the game could begin, the door opened.

“There you are!” came Daiya’s voice.

Touko grit her teeth in his direction. “Does no one here knock?”

“Sorry. I was looking for Tengan and Andou told me that she saw Tengan slope off here, so I thought I’d find out the reason for that kind of duo.” Daiya closed the door behind him and walked into the room. He spotted Byakuya after a few steps and hesitated. “Only it turns out there’s three of you. When did you get here? Togami, right?”

“Oh the first night,” replied Byakuya. “And yes, that is my name.”

Daiya let loose a low whistle. “I’m impressed. It has been... what, a week and a half? What are you guys doing in here anyway?”

He walked the rest of the way over and answered the question for himself.

“Cards?”

“Yes,” said Byakuya. “Do you know games with them? So far, I only know Solitaire and Cheat.”

“Hell yeah, I do,” said Daiya. “We played them all the time back at the circus... Me, Mondo and Hagakure. Hey, you guys wouldn’t mind if we sometimes played with you? We didn’t think to bring any cards with us.”

Kazuo waved a hand. “The more the merrier, I say!”

“T-That’s not your place to say!” said Touko.

After a minute’s deliberation, Yasuhiro closed his eyes, creasing a line between his eyebrows. There hadn’t been enough chairs in the captain’s cabin to seat everyone, and the benches in the dining room couldn’t be brought here, so Mondo, Yasuhiro and Daiya had to resort to sitting on towers of books, after swearing an oath that they wouldn’t wiggle too much and damage them.

“Hit me,” Yasuhiro said.

Byakuya reached over and punched him in the arm.

“Hey! What was that for?” asked Yasuhiro, rubbing the spot where Byakuya dealt his blow.

“You said to hit you.”
“That just means give me another card!”

“That just means give me another card!” Byakuya told him.

Daiya handed Yasuhiro a card from the top of the deck. Yasuhiro accepted it, joined it into a fan with the others already in his possession and counted the overall total of the numbers on his cards. His features slackened and holding in a sigh, Yasuhiro set his cards face up on the table, revealing that he had achieved a score that exceeded twenty-one.

“Bust,” said Yasuhiro dejectedly.

After him, everyone else had their turn, finishing on Kazuo, who announced, “Stand,” before placing his cards face down onto the table.

“Okay, so what does everyone have?” asked Daiya.

Touko showed everyone the cards in her hand, which came to a respectable twenty. Byakuya fell slightly behind her at nineteen, Mondo had gone ‘bust’ at twenty-three and Kazuo, though not disqualified, lost with eighteen.

“Fukawa wins,” declared Daiya. “Pay up, guys.”

Yasuhiro, Kazuo and Mondo all pushed a piece of candy toward her, dragging them across the table. The candy that Byakuya passed to Touko originally belonged to her, but because Touko didn’t care much for them, she gave most of them to him to eat. Besides, Ruruka was more than happy to give people her candy, so obtaining more wasn’t hard.

“It’s a shame we don’t have money to bet,” Yasuhiro remarked as he extracted two candy pieces out of his shirt pocket.

“Ain’t money the reason why you ran away from home in the first place?” scoffed Mondo.

“Well...” Yasuhiro scratched his cheek with a finger.

“What brought you to that circus anyway?” asked Byakuya, causing Yasuhiro to wince.

“It’s not an interesting story,” said Yasuhiro. “Wouldn’t you rather hear about the time my burger was abducted by aliens?”

Touko felt her face pinch. “No one wants to hear your make-believe stories.”

“It’s not make-believe!” Yasuhiro insisted.

Mondo nudged Yasuhiro in the side with his elbow.

“Tell them the story of why you joined the circus,” said Mondo.

Yasuhiro looked around but found no objections in the expressions of those around him, so he sighed. A few seconds later, he lifted his chin and started his story. “Ever since I was a lad, I had the power to predict things and thirty per cent of the time, I would be correct.”

“That’s less than a third of the time,” Touko noted.

“It’s nothing to turn your nose up at though.” Yasuhiro pointed at her. She glared and his finger sagged. He folded his arms over his chest and let his chin dip forward and slightly to the right. “So I decided to use my talent for good, ‘right? And in order for me to keep doing so, I had to charge
people.”

Touko could see where this was going, and based on Byakuya’s narrowed eyes, so could he.

“One day, I met a female client who had a lot of money, so I thought I’d give her some extra services, ‘right?” said Yasuhiro.

“E-Extra services?” Touko spluttered.

Yasuhiro yelped and waved his hands. “You’ve got the wrong idea, Fukawa-chi! Get your mind out of the gutter! I mean different kind of readings! Palms, tea leaves...”

His shoulders slumped.

“Moving on,” said Yasuhiro, “apparently the girl had connections to some bad, bad people, and I had to go on the run when they tried to get their money back. I stumbled upon the circus, Monobear offered me a job and protection and here I am. Was. Yeah.”

The others gave him several seconds of silence.

Touko tut-tutted. “You’re a moron...”

“Indeed,” agreed Byakuya.

“But he’s our moron,” Daiya said cheerfully. Mondo squeezed Yasuhiro’s shoulder.

Byakuya frowned. “Oowada Brothers... why did you join that circus?”

Daiya and Mondo both tensed at the same time. They turned toward each other, then briefly toward Kazuo, then they looked back at each other, and in the end, Daiya was the one who told their abridged backstory.

He shifted in his seat, his high spirits yanked down. “We lived in some woods that were being cut down, and Monobear... found us and recruited us. At the time, it sounded real good. Food... Shelter... Safety... I wanted that life for us, so I was prepared to do whatever Monobear asked of us to keep things that way.”

“That must have been tough,” remarked Kazuo.

“What about me?” asked Yasuhiro.

“What about you?” retorted Touko.

“How about we play the next round?” said Mondo, mostly likely because Yasuhiro looked ready to cry.

Daiya gathered up all the cards and shuffled the deck before giving out two cards to everyone else.

The next few rounds proceeded with little to no interruptions. Byakuya won, then Mondo won, and then Byakuya won again. Touko let herself relax on her chair, so much so that when the door burst open, she twitched and could have had a heart attack.

Everyone turned toward the door, where Aoi stood, blinking.

“So that’s where you guys are all hiding,” said Aoi. She craned her neck. “Hey, is that Togami? How’d he get in here?”
“Magic,” said Daiya.

Aoi clicked her fingers. “Oh right. Duh.”

“He’s been here for three weeks now,” said Mondo.

“Seriously?” She gawked at Byakuya.

Touko whined and shook her head, hands over her ears. “Why does no one knock? While you’re all at it, shall we get Kirigiri and Naegi in here too? Why not everyone?”

“Got any fours?” asked Makoto.

Kyouko smirked. “Go fish.”

With a loud groan, Touko rolled her head back.

“What?” said Daiya.

“When I said to invite everyone, I didn’t mean it,” she grumbled.

“I didn’t invite everyone,” he said. “Just those two. Relax, Izayoi can handle the helm by himself for a bit... It’ll give him something to do.”

“By the way, you don’t have to wear that helmet,” said Kazuo to Daiya. “Trust me, I’ve seen stranger things in my life than anthropomorphic mammals. Canine, is it?”

“How did you know?” asked Daiya.

Kazuo tapped his nose. “I smell wet fur. I’ve been around wet dogs before.”

“That’s incredible,” said Aoi as Daiya took off his helmet. Mondo followed in example. “Do me next!”

Touko face set aflame. “B-Be careful how you say things!”

“What?” asked Aoi, confused.

Chuckling from Kazuo distracted the pair. He sipped some tea from his cup and did not say anything until he placed it onto the table.

“Oh, I’ve seen many unusual things in my life,” he said, holding his cup in two boney but steady hands. “I used to be the headmaster of a school, but later, I decided to go travelling, and I have dedicated myself to the sea for the past forty years. I never married, let alone had children, but I feel like I can find a family in my crew, no matter how mismatched they all are, so I don’t regret it.”

“Do you think you’ll retire soon?” asked Mondo.

Kazuo studied his reflection in his tea. Touko shivered for some reason.

“No...” His reflection shook its head. “I can see myself doing this until my last breath.”
Byakuya lay still on his stomach as he watched Kameko crawl up his arm. Touko sat on the bed with Byakuya, by his tail, her eyes also following the stink bug, though Kameko didn’t move much. At a glance, someone might have mistaken him for a large mole before they noted the yellow and grey that flecked his brown body. Kameko was roughly two centimetres long and equally as wide, shaped like a shield.

“He doesn’t like it when it’s cold,” said Touko, even though it was well into the summer. A month had passed since they started their journey, and he hadn’t been very active. Touko chewed on her lip.

“For a creature called a stink bug, he doesn’t smell particularly bad,” commented Byakuya. “No worse than you, anyway.”

She reached her index finger toward Kameko, being careful not to move suddenly, and maintained the position of her digit. Kameko turned a few degrees toward it.

Coos vibrated on Touko’s lips. Then she stopped and explained, “The name refers to how they release an odour when they’re hurt or afraid, to defend against predators.”

Touko tried to stroke Kameko’s head, but Kameko seemed to have other plans. He unfolded his wings and took flight. As she jerked back, intending to keep track of Kameko, she glimpsed Byakuya’s face, and she saw that he wasn’t looking at Kameko. His gaze was directed at Touko. Her stomach jolted. She let Kameko explore the room without her supervision and met Byakuya’s eyes.

Byakuya averted his gaze.

“Togami-kun?” she said.

He reconnected eye contact. “What?”

She touched the fingers on her right hand to the left corner of her lips. “I-Is there something on my face?”

Before he could answer, she scratched lightly at her mouth, trying to scrape off any pepper kernels that might be there and gather them under her nails.

“No,” he said. “I was looking at your smile.”

Touko stopped. “My smile? I was smiling?”

“You have smiled a lot more since we first met,” he informed her. “The smile that you were giving Kameko was soft... I liked it.”

He... liked it?

“W-Well, I am happy... Kameko makes me happy, and so do you, so that’s why...” Touko fidgeted. For a few seconds, she stared down at her lap, but then she peeked up. “You liked it?”

Her stomach felt like a dozen stink bugs were flying in it.

“I prefer it to you scowling,” he said, face unreadably blank. With his arms, he pushed up the top half of his body and dragged himself over to a pile of pillows so he could sit against them. “Where did Kameko go?”

Touko surveyed the room. “He’ll be around here somewhere... Kameko always returns to me.”
Byakuya frowned but didn’t say anything. He looked around the room, though Touko thought that he might not be doing so because he wanted to find Kameko, but more likely because he wanted something in general to do. Her suspicions were confirmed when he leaned toward the side of the bed - the side not up against the wall - and reached for the notebook on the bedside table.

It was out of his range, so she went to grab it for him, but he said, “I can do it.”

She sank back into the bed. His fingers closed in on the notebook but his fingertips couldn’t even brush against it, though he was nearly at that stage, so he gave a lurch to try to gain that extra distance that he needed.

He lost his balance and fell to the floor.

“Togami-kun!” Touko sprung off the bed and crouched down beside him.

Judging by the groan that he gave into the wooden flooring, he hadn’t lost consciousness. If he had landed a bit further, he would have thumped onto the rug instead, but Touko didn’t know whether that would have been any better. While the rug wasn’t thin, it wasn’t particularly thick either. She bit her lip and touched his arm.

“I can get up by myself!” Byakuya snapped.

Touko shuffled back to provide him with more room. Byakuya rose and picked up the notebook from the bedside table so his attempt to acquire it wasn’t a complete failure. He pressed his hands against the floor, lifted up his lower body and then used his hands to rotate his body so he faced the bed. Without a word, he gripped the blanket in one hand and wrenched at it, trying to heave himself onto the bed, but he ended up just pulling the blanket off the bed. Gritting his teeth, he tossed the blanket onto the bed and this time grabbed onto the top edge of the mattress.

She stood up and stepped back, with little to do but spectate. During the months preceding the voyage, when Byakuya ventured onto land, he had to drag his body along, so she didn’t rule out that he had the strength to climb back onto the bed.

Still, she wished he would let her help.

Rapping on the door broke her out of her thoughts.

“Fukawa-chan?” came Aoi’s voice from just outside of the room. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine!” Touko said as Byakuya struggled but managed to place his arms over the bed. He started pulling himself up.

“I heard a loud noise. It sounded like you tripped over,” explained Aoi.

“It wasn’t that loud,” Touko said, both to clarify to Aoi and also to reassure herself. “And I d-didn’t trip over... A stack of my books toppled over.”

“Oh, then let me help you clear it up!” Aoi said brightly, and before Touko could even think to tell her that would be unnecessary, Aoi burst in. Half a dozen paces away from the door, Aoi spotted Byakuya slumped over the bed, tail hanging off it, and hesitated.

“Don’t just gawp! Close the door!” Touko ordered.

“Togami?” said Aoi, staring.
“Door!” Touko repeated.

Aoi darted back to the door and closed it, staying in the room with them. She turned toward the other two again, brow wrinkled, and approached slowly. Byakuya hauled more of his body onto the bed, enough that he could wiggle the rest of the way on and flip over onto his back.

“Why are you here?” asked Touko.

“I got lonely,” explained Aoi.

“What about Oogami?”

Touko’s question caused Aoi’s body to droop. Aoi lowered her arm and held her hands together in front of her.

“I told her that Tengan knows about mermaids and won’t hurt her, but she still doesn’t trust most humans. You and Kenichiro are the only ones she can trust.” She sighed, but not in irritation. Her eyes shut for a moment and when she opened them again, she stared over her shoulder at the door. “But you can’t blame her. At least I can throw food into the sea for her to eat...”

Byakuya clicked his tongue. Touko glanced at him.

“Why?” asked Touko.

“So she can have something different than usual to eat,” explained Aoi.

“What? No.” Touko focused on her. “I mean... why doesn’t she trust humans? Is this to do with how mermaids fell out with humans?”

Aoi glanced at Byakuya. He didn’t move.

“Well,” said Aoi, about to say more, but then Byakuya flung up a hand for silence. She stopped talking and wrapped her arms around herself.

“In the past, mermaids and sailors got along.” Byakuya placed his raised hand onto his chest and did not look at either of them as he relayed information. “Mermaids would aid sailors, telling them where land was, and in exchange, sailors would impart knowledge to the mermaids or give them human creations like cuisine or tools. As long as the sailors promised to keep their existence secret, mermaids would continue to help sailors. I suppose... you could say that they were friends...”

Touko wringed her wrist.

“But then...” The ‘but’ that she dreaded to hear came from his lips. “... sailors started kidnapping mermaids. If a sailor captured one of the mermaids, then you would never see that mermaid again. I don’t know what the humans did with the mermaids, but it won’t have been pleasant.”

Wide-eyed, Touko turned toward Aoi.

“What?” went Aoi.

“What happened to them?” asked Touko.

Aoi hunched her shoulders. “I don’t know... Sakura-chan never told me. I don’t even know if she knows...”

“Do you want Asahina to find out from Oogami?” Touko asked Byakuya.
“Knowing won’t change what happened,” he said.

“B-But mermaids can live for centuries. You told me,” said Touko. “They could still be alive. If we know what happened to them, that might help us find them.”

Byakuya’s eyebrows twitched.

“Hang on,” said Aoi, patting the air. “Sakura-chan won’t want to talk right now... Andou-chan and Izayoi are on the top deck.”

“When you next get the chance, ask her.” Touko glanced at Byakuya. He was staring into space with half-lidded eyes. She turned back to Aoi. “F-For now, you can make yourself useful by getting us some donuts. And tea.”

“Donuts?” said Aoi with a look of confusion. “I thought you didn’t like...”

Aoi noticed Touko’s grim expression, then Byakuya’s behaviour, and nodded at Touko.

“Right. I’ll be a while,” said Aoi, and she stood up to leave.

After she shut the door, neither of the two who remained said anything for a while. Touko studied the hand Byakuya had closest to her, which was lying on the bed.

“Togami-kun?” she asked quietly.

“Hm?”

“Do you have... a family?”

He didn’t look at her. “I did.”

Her breathing hitched.

“What happened to them?” she asked.

Byakuya’s lips pursed.

“... I suppose I can tell you,” he said slowly. “First, you need to know that of all the different mermaid families, the Togami line is the most powerful. We are considered royalty...”

She widened her eyes. “Y-You’re a prince?”

“You can think of it like that.” He rolled onto his side and propped his cheek in the palm of his hand, facing her. “Mermaids, though they can live for centuries, as I am sure that I have told you previously, are not immortal. We just age slower than humans. Anyway... While my father ruled our kingdom, throughout his reign, he fertilised the eggs of chosen mermaids.”

“Chosen?”

“Only mermaids that met certain criteria, and of certain lines, qualified. When the eggs hatched, not all the mermaids would have scales like mine. Those with the same as me proceeded to the next round, while those who didn’t were ostracised.”

Touko’s head spun. “What was the next round? Where were they ostracised to?”

“I will tell you once you cease talking,” he said. He paused, and when greeted by silence, he spoke
again. “They were ejected from the kingdom. They lost their family, their support network and resources, and had to find somewhere else to reside. We would never see them again. A little over twenty years ago, my father decided that he would not fertilise any more eggs. Mermaids born with the scales that my tail has were trained for a competition where the victor would take over as king. My father would fall back and be the advisor for the next few years... by then, he was extremely old and not expected to live much longer.”

Byakuya was stony-faced.

“I was the youngest, so no one expected me to win. I didn’t have as much life experience, and I was not as strong as others, but my mother and the butler assigned to me, Aloysius Pennyworth, a swordfish mermaid, worked hard on me. Everyday, I would study. I would exercise. I would grow. Then, when I was thirteen, the trials began. We were tested vigorously and constantly. We swam through obstacle courses. We solved puzzles. We were set challenges with deadlines. It got progressively harder, and every time, those who failed would be...”

“Ostracised?” suggested Touko.

“Killed.”

She gasped. Her face frosted over. “Killed...?”

“In front of all of us, yes,” Byakuya said, like this was commonplace in one’s childhood. “At the start, there were one hundred of us, but then it was narrowed down to sixteen.”

Touko stared. “And... you let them all die?”

“What would you have me do? Get disqualified by trying to save them and have the same fate as them?” He shot a glare at her. “I didn’t know any of them personally. Some tried to escape, but they were caught and executed. Others accepted their fate and went to their deaths with no resistance.”

“So...” She twiddled her thumbs. “What... happened with the last sixteen?”

“We were taken to some ruins and were forced to kill each other. Weapons were provided and the only rules were that we were not allowed to leave.”

Her chest clenched. “Did you... kill anyone?”

Every second that passed without an answer, Touko’s heart pummelled her chest.

“No,” he said. “I waited and the last casualty died from their injuries. Then I was accepted as the successor to my father.”

Touko’s lips rubbed together. Her head buzzed.

“But... But that doesn’t make sense,” she said. “If you took over for him... If you... are his replacement... then... why would you become a human? Don’t they need you?”

“No.” Byakuya spoke in a dull tone. “They’re all gone.”

She blinked. “Gone...?”

A spasm on his face contorted his features into a raw, even ugly expression. “What could it mean but one thing? They’re gone. I’m the last mermaid of my kind left.”

“But... how?” Touko shook her head. “Don’t you live at the bottom of the sea? It would be
impossible for humans to go that deep…”

“You are correct. Therefore...?”

Byakuya trailed off. Touko bit her lip and peered down at her lap. When he didn't talk again after thirty seconds, she lifted her chin. He wasn't looking at her or at anything in particular, his brow furrowed.

She gulped. “That could mean... they were kidnapped somewhere else... or who did it wasn’t human...”

“In this case, it is the second thing that you suggested.” Byakuya relaxed his face slightly and cast his eyes over to her face. “This will sound like one of your story books, but the day started with no outstanding qualities. It was a few years ago. I spent a large part of the day visiting other kingdoms with Pennyworth. The mermaid population had been declining at a concerning rate, and with how few of us there are left, it was especially important to find out why. Even my kingdom only had three hundred mermaids in it, and mine was bigger than all others. We had no success, so returned to my kingdom...”

A pause.

“... and there was no one there.”

“They were kidnapped?” asked Touko.

“I thought that at first.”

Touko’s mouth was dry.

“Hundreds of mermaids had vanished,” he carried on. “Even the eggs... even my eggs... We searched for a while but could only find a single mermaid wandering around. She said that she had been away scavenging and didn't know what happened. We considered expanding our search beyond my kingdom’s limits, but as we were leaving, we learned what happened.”

“What happened?” she murmured.

“We were confronted by a monster,” he said. “It resembled a fish, but bigger than any that either of us had seen before. Pennyworth called out to it, but it roared and lunged at us with its mouth agape, either not understanding or not caring. Arms broke out of its body... eight in total... ridged, long and flexible, with pincers on the ends. It caught the female mermaid between one of these pincers and sliced her in half. When a mermaid dies, they turn to foam that disappears rapidly. That was the fate of my kingdom. It... slaughtered all of them.”

She hugged herself. “Togami-kun...”

“Pennyworth faced it in combat, but his sword couldn’t penetrate its shell,” said Byakuya, ignoring her. “He said he would hold it off while I escaped... and like a coward, I swam away.”

Byakuya’s pupils danced in his eyes.

“... I never saw either of them again,” he said softly.

Touko’s face puckered up.

“Togami-kun...” Her voice drew his eyes to her. “People... do care about you. I-”
A thud from the door interrupted her. Touko waited to see if the person would announce themselves, but an eerie silence steamed the room and no one entered. She turned toward Byakuya, whose eyes were fixed on the door, and she rose slowly. With no clue who was there, she initially opened the door just a crack.

The visitor turned out to be Kazuo.

“Tengan?” she said. Kazuo didn’t answer. He seemed to have zoned out. Touko wondered if he fell asleep standing up with his eyes open. She supposed that could be something that old people did, though he had done so rather suddenly. “Did... you come to play cards?”

For a few seconds, Kazuo just stood there, and then he fell forward. Touko jumped back before he could land on her and screamed.

Only the hilt of the knife imbedded in Kazuo’s back could be seen of the weapon, surrounded by blood-stained fabric.
The room seemed to tilt as Touko stumbled backward, gagging. Her surroundings lost definition, colour draining away and leaving behind white, blinding space that fizzed with static. She fought down vomit and covered her mouth with a trembling hand, determined not to pass out.

Blood’s stench, disguised as the odour of old coins, shot up her nose, and she slapped her other hand over the first, making sure to shield her nose as well.

“He’s bleeding,” Byakuya said.

“H-H-He’s dead!” Touko rasped, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Sharing a body with a serial killer, Touko was not unfamiliar with corpses. Often, she would regain consciousness at Syo’s crime scenes, where she would discover her alter’s victim and flee, head whirling, before someone could find her there and arrest her for what Syo did.

However, those times, she knew what happened, and she couldn’t be one of Syo’s murder victims. Touko knew that Syo toyed with them using her handmade scissors until she grew bored and let them bleed out or, if she wanted to hurry things along, sliced them in the right places. Then she would sneeze, or maybe she knew another way to change who fronted, whatever, and Touko would deal with the aftermath.

On this occasion, Touko didn’t know the identity of the killer, but whoever it was most likely was still on the ship. She forced herself to open her eyes, not fully, but enough that she could see the doorway, and that was where she caught sight of a short silhouette.

“Aw, didn’t you like the surprise?” All that could be seen of the person was the hunter green cloak that smothered them, but judging by the lilt in their voice and how they entered the room, hopping childishly over Kazuo’s body, they were quite young. They seemed to have shortened their cloak by hand because the bottom edge was jagged and uneven, ending near their ankles where the bottoms of black boots could be seen, but the sleeves had been left unaltered, longer than the arms within.

The stranger pulled back their hood. A pink-haired girl, who couldn’t be older than twelve, grinned at them. She appeared to be in the process of growing out of her chubby cheeks, and she wore a darker pink headband with two horns glued onto it. Strapped to her face was an eyepatch the same colour as her headband, hiding her left eye from sight.

“Oh, is that a mermaid?” The girl rose onto tiptoe. Her eyebrows rose and she gasped. She patted her cheeks. “Oh, oh! Could it be...? Togami-san, right? Your scales are way prettier than that other mermaid’s. I bet Big Sis would give me a thousand kisses for them!”

Byakuya’s left eye twitched. “Who are you? And how do you know my name?”

“Duh! Everyone knows about Togami mermaids. Well, just the one now. As for me... Ahoy! My name is Kotoko Utsugi!” She raised her hands above her head. Her sleeves dropped down, revealing skinny, pale arms. “In our pirate crew, I play the cute love interest! But I can get real mean, so you better watch what you say!”

“P-P-Pirates?” said Touko, somehow still standing despite the smell and knowledge of blood.

“Yup!” Kotoko turned away from them, bent down and wiggled the knife out of Kazuo. It made a disgusting slurping sound. “Wow, that was so easy!”
Another wave of nausea overcame Touko and she hugged herself, pointedly keeping her gaze above Kotoko’s bloodied hands.

“Ew, gross! I’m going to need to take a bath,” whined Kotoko. “Don’t worry, I’ll say I’m eighteen, so then it won’t be as bad, right?”

Touko’s chest tightened. “Y-You can’t be a pirate... You’re too young.”

“I can’t take that as a compliment from a middle-aged hag like you. You think everyone is young,” said Kotoko, wagging the knife in Touko’s direction. Touko sucked in her cheeks and gulped. “But I am totally honestly a pirate. I’m an official Pirate of Hope, sworn to serve Big Sis and Fat Sis.”

“Pirate of Hope?” Touko muttered, recognising the name from one of Kazuo’s stories. Also, she thought that she recognised the large cloak that Kotoko was wearing too, but she couldn’t remember where from, and she struggled to think clearly in the claustrophobic atmosphere.

“Oh great, is your hearing going?” asked Kotoko. “You’ve gone way past your shelf life... I bet you’re crusty and full of dandruff.”

Byakuya’s voice cut through the fog in Touko’s mind. “So those pirates that Tengan mentioned... were in reference to you?”

Kotoko smirked and prodded her thumb against her chest.

“I dunno what he said about us, but if he said we were the Pirates of Hope, he meant us! There’s me, Shingetsu-kun, Kemuri-kun, Monaka-chan and our good-for-nothing servant, Servant. Oh, and of course, there are our big sisters, but they aren’t pirates. They just take care of us.”

“You’re a child...” Touko shook her head. She backed away and bumped into the bed, which she flumped down on. “You’re a stowaway... or were kidnapped... or are a bastard child...”

“Cool words like that don’t sound cool when you say them,” Kotoko complained, and she stamped her foot. “We’re all kids! Just not Servant and our sisters, but our sisters are okay and no one cares about Servant.”

“That’s... not right,” said Touko. She grabbed a nearby pillow.

“Are you calling me a liar?” Kotoko puffed out her cheeks. “You’ve really got a death wish, don’t you?”

Touko picked at the pillow, regretting that she hadn’t stored her potions somewhere convenient, like on the table. Some vials were under her bed, while others were in a chest on the other side of the room and had come with the cabin.

She needed more time. “I’m not s-scared of a brat like you...”

Kotoko breathed in and tried to make herself look as big as possible. “Don’t think I won’t stabbity stab you too! You’re just as bad as old men who smell like sweat and tobacco!”

As far as Touko was aware, there were three things that could cause Syo to front. She could see blood or use the cattle prod under her mattress, but going by her experiences with those so far, she would be unconscious for at least a minute, and she couldn’t afford at least a minute. Her stubby fingernails pinched and scratched at the pillow, until her efforts were rewarded by a feather that she managed to extract from it.
“Togami-kun...” Touko lifted the feather to her nose.

“What?” he said.

“I...” The ‘L’ of the four lettered word she wanted to say tripped on her tongue, and she held it back, in the end, because she would be able to tell it to him later.

Without finishing her sentence, she tickled her nose with the feather and sneezed.

My nose wiggles, alerting me that Gloomy just sneezed. I open my eyes and unclench my fists. A feather, which I had been holding, apparently, flutters onto the pillow on my lap. Presumably, the feather came from the pillow. Did it come loose somehow? Was Gloomy in a pillow fight? Did someone throw a pillow at our face?

The mystery of the feather can wait, though, because now I see someone I don’t recognise in front of me in a place that I don’t recognise either. Across the room stands someone small, maybe twelve, with light pink hair drawn into two bunches and wearing pink horns that clash with an ugly green cloak way too big for her.

“Who are...?” I start, but then my eyes land on an old man lying on his stomach on the floor, his shirt all bloody. My cheeks pull my lips into a grin and I smack my hands against my cheeks. “Is that a dead body?”

“Do you have Alzheimer's?” asks the girl.

“Syo,” says Byakuya, who - what would you know? - is on the bed with me, lying on his side.

Oh, ho, ho. Just what had Gloomy and Byakuya been doing before I took over? Where even am I? This isn’t Gloomy’s cottage. I briefly consider that they went to a hotel for some fun, but Byakuya doesn’t have legs and this doesn’t look like any of the rooms I’ve been to at the Towa Inn. Besides, Gloomy wouldn’t bring so many books with her.

“Darling!” I say. As much as the sight of the bloody old geezer gets my heart racing, the sight of Byakuya’s gorgeous face that begs to be snuffed out has my heart on the final sprint. “What’s going on? Is that girl over there our daughter?”

“I told you! I’m Kotoko Utsugi, Pirate of Hope!” The girl stamps her foot. Seething, she marches over, raising the knife. “And I’m going to carve your insides out!”

Kotoko breaks into a run. I jump to my feet, hike up my skirt, grab a pair of scissors from the pouch strapped to my right leg and meet her blade with my own. Metal clangs against metal and Kotoko tries to stab me again, but I parry her attack with ease. She tries to stab me lower and like before, I intercept her knife with my scissors.

“You’re way out of my tastes, but if push comes to shove, I will kill you,” I say, and I knock back her fist, the one clenching the knife. As an extra warning, I tear the sleeve of her cloak.

She staggers back. Halfway across the room, she regains her balance, and she feels her arm. Finding no blood, she brandishes the knife and charges forward again. I swat her away with no trouble and she tumbles backward.

Byakuya maneuvers himself to press his back against the wall as much as possible. The guy has no
legs so is an easy target, but if anyone is to kill someone that hot, it will be me, so I creep toward Kotoko, ready to protect him.

“Are we seriously meant to believe that you aren’t just claiming to be a Pirate of Hope to try to intimidate us?” asks Byakuya with scorn. “Someone like you can’t be so infamous and feared.”

“That’s just because we haven’t used our secret technique yet,” says Kotoko.

Before I can ask her what that means, she jumps up, spins on her heel and zooms out of the room.

“Oh, we’re playing chase, are we?” I ask, and I rush after her. She really can’t expect to try to kill me and Byakuya and leave like she just delivered the post. I want answers, dammit!

Outside of the room is a wooden passageway. Kotoko hurries up a staircase, with me not far behind. Unless we’re in a basement, then travelling upward is a really dumb idea. Like, I’ll be able to corner her, easy. At the top, she throws open the door, and disappears into the darkness that I gladly let swallow me too.

There, I discover that I’m on a ship.

“What?” I toss my head from side-to-side. Lanterns spaced out on the barrier of the ship help light up the area, and the sea splashes and frolics in movements that I can’t discern with my vision. Not only do I have no idea how long I was inactive for, but I don’t know how I ended up here. Gloomy can’t have been kidnapped. Her books being onboard indicate otherwise.

Honestly, this is why we used to talk by leaving notes for each other, or by writing on our arms.

Kotoko darts over to a cloaked figure who is roughly the same height as her, suggesting that she might not be the only kid here. She called herself a pirate, so the other person must be part of her crew. I twirl a loop of my scissors around my finger, tongue hanging out like always, and let my scissors complete a few cycles before stopping them abruptly by crooking another finger through the other loop.

“Why is that woman here?” asks the cloaked figure.

“I found her in the captain’s cabin, and she’s really strong and ugly,” Kotoko explains.

“Ugly?” I snip the air and swagger over with a slithering motion. The shrimps start walking backward, side-by-side. My teeth show in my smirk.

“But listen, in the captain’s cabin was a mermaid!” Kotoko says.

“So?” asks the cloaked person.

“He had shiny silver scales! He’s the last Togami! Former prince and now king of a population of zero!”

I stop swaggering and tilt my head to one side. They both stop reversing a bit after.

“Really?” exclaims the cloaked person.

Kotoko clasps her hands by her chest and wiggles her body. “Yes, Shingetsu-kun! I didn’t see him back then, but he’s just like Monaka-chan described! It has to be him!”

Apparently, all this time, Byakuya had been a prince or a king, yet he never told me. Oh, how that breaks my swollen heart! Even a serial killer such as myself has feelings. To be fair, we haven’t been
able to have a decent length conversation, me and him. The first time we met, he managed to strike a nerve and I sort of might have contemplated killing him, and after our second meeting, he didn’t stay long on his visits to the beach when he realised it was me and not Gloomy.

Despite this, when I think of him, my insides quiver, but it doesn’t feel the same as like when my future victim pleads for his life. It feels weird. Uncomfortable.

My brow furrows.

“How’s Fat Sis and Monaka-chan?” asks Kotoko.

As Shingetsu takes a step back, they turn their body in a quarter of a circle so they face Kotoko. “They’re still fighting that white-haired mermaid... What about the others? Are they still in the ship?”

“Yup! Kemuri-kun is supervising Daimon-kun!” Kotoko announces.

I have no clue who she’s talking about, but I list that as a low priority. Of most interest is this other mermaid that Shingetsu mentioned, who apparently has white hair. White hair either means someone is very old or they are going to die soon, and those belonging to the latter group tend to be really hot. Those are the unofficial rules.

“What are you brats doing, killing old men?” I say. I’ve done that myself, killed old men, but only three that were anywhere near the same age as the dead guy who I left behind with Byakuya.

“Ah, wouldn’t you like to know!” Kotoko cranes her neck. “What’s taking Kemuri-kun and the newbie so long?”

I snip the air with my scissors. The pair squeak, and Kotoko whimpers and clings to Shingetsu, even as Shingetsu raises their arms so they can show me their palms, like they think that their tiny hands can protect them from my scissors.

“I don’t know,” says Shingetsu, glancing between my face and my scissors multiple times. “They should be back by now... We’re going to need them to help carry the mermaid out.”

My features harden. “You’re not going to so much as breathe the same air as him.”

Shingetsu opens their mouth but before they can reply, the door behind me slams open, causing my shoulders to jut upward. I glance back.

Two people walk backward out of the door to the lower decks. One is a short person wearing a cloak but they don’t have their hood up. Even so, I don’t get much of an idea of what they look like due to their patchwork mask of ugly shades of brown that covers everything except their mouth and eyes. Beside them is a redheaded boy, who the masked person has their around around the neck of. The masked person’s other hand holds a knife to the boy’s neck. Unlike the other people who are his height, the redheaded boy doesn’t have a cloak. He wears a plain white t-shirt and brown shorts.

“Kemuri-kun!” Kotoko calls out. “Did you find anything cool?”

“Lots of food and a snowglobe,” replies the masked person, still walking backward, and they jerk their head, trying to motion toward the sack in the redheaded boy’s hands.

“Hm...” Shingetsu puts a hand on their hip. “Okay, so Kemuri-kun and Kotoko-chan, we’ll get the mermaid and then we’ll be out of here. Big Sis is going to love us so much for bringing her the last Togami.”
“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I go, feeling something bubble in my chest. Anger? If so, it would be anger... at the thought of them touching Byakuya? For a moment, I wonder if they intend to kill him later, and now the something in my chest boils and spits. “You’re not taking him anywhere!”

“That wasn’t part of the deal!” comes an indignant voice from beyond Kemuri and the redheaded boy.

The two kids shuffle backward, and three more people step out onto the deck. I recognise two of them: Makoto, whose face has gone white, and Aoi, who hugs herself and who had been the last person to talk. However, I have no idea who the third person is. He’s a short guy in a red apron, who fidgets his hands, bottom lip quivering.

Aoi shudders and tries to keep her voice steady with little success. “You said... you would take what you want... and then you would let Daimon go.”

“Well, we changed our mind,” says Kotoko brightly. “We’ll be taking the mermaid with us.”

A pang strikes my chest. I flick my tongue and open up my scissors. “You’ll have to get past me first, you brats.”

Weirdly, I discover that I don’t actually like the idea of Byakuya leaving. Weird, because that would have to include him dying too. Like, not even if he dies by my hand. Ever since I was born, I’ve always wanted to kill every hot guy I met. Yet...

I don’t want to kill Byakuya.

I don’t want Byakuya to die.

I don’t want to kill Byakuya.

“It’s not up to you,” says Shingetsu. With both of their hands, they form an ‘A’ shape by extending their middle and index fingers and placing them close together while holding down their other fingers with their thumbs. They place the tips of their middle and index fingers under their tongue, which they fold back. Their mouth closes around their digits, creating a seal, and when they blow, they release a shrill whistle.

Water crashes and moments later, a long metal arm rises from outside of the ship. The pincer attached to the end snips at the air like a pair of my precious scissors. I stare. Another arm sprouts next to it, only this one has something in its hold. A mermaid with white hair dangles upside down by the end of their tail.

“Sakura-chan!” screams Aoi.

The mermaid, who must be Sakura, flails her body, still conscious. Another metal arm slithers up and coils around her, prohibiting her movements.

“If you don’t care about Daimon-kun, then maybe you’ll care about her,” says Shingetsu. “She caused us some trouble on the way here, but she is no match for our Submarine of Hope.”

What shoots up next isn’t an arm, but a metal tube that bends over at the top. In the opening, or where an opening would be, is a tinted, circular window. It reminds me of an eye. A fourth arm rises up from the sea afterwards. Kemuri releases Daimon, but Daimon’s freedom is short-lived, because the fourth arm grabs Daimon’s waist and lifts him into the air.

My scissors bite the air. “I don’t care about her. Or him.”
When I take a step forward, Aoi grabs my arm.

“Let go of me!” I say, but she doesn’t, and Kotoko, Shingetsu and Kemuri run to the door to the lower decks. “Mako-ichi, other guy, stop them!”

Makoto and the stout guy do not. I struggle more, and Aoi traps me in a hug, pinning my arms to my sides. Neither Makoto nor the stout guy can look at me as I scream and thrash about. Aoi grunts but she possesses strength that her muscular build only hints at. I cannot break free.

Kotoko, Shingetsu and Kemuri return, hauling a net behind them that contains someone in it.

... Byakuya.

Unresponsive.

A roar savages my throat and my body jerks with a surge of power that throws Aoi off me. I open up my scissors like a predator opens its jaws as it readies itself to devour its prey, and I storm over to the brats who have Byakuya hostage.

The metal arms holding Sakura fling her onto the ship and before I can react, Sakura slams into me and we both collapse into a heap.

“Gerroff!” I say into Sakura’s flesh, my head pounding. I wiggle my head free, but that doesn’t help much. I think she dented my glasses, and all I can see is the sky. My eyes grow heavier.

“Great shot, Monaka-chan!” Shingetsu cheers. Thuds sound, and I guess that they are jumping up and down.

Sakura doesn’t stir and she weighs a lot, so no matter how much I push and squirm, I can’t slip out from underneath her. I can’t give up, though, so I persevere, even if I’m bound to fail.

“That must be the old man. Tears well up in Aoi’s eyes. I adjust my glasses. Makoto and the stout guy shuffle over.

“Fukawa-chan! Sakura-chan!” Aoi shouts. Though I can’t see Aoi, I hear her footsteps. Her face pops into view and breathing loudly, she rolls Sakura off me. Sakura is naked, but even I know now is an inappropriate time to focus on that. “Are you both okay? Oh, God, they killed Tengan... We saw the body on the way up. We thought he was bluffing, but... Oh, my God...”

My body aches and my first attempt at getting up has me stumble and fall to my knees.

“Bye bye,” says Kotoko. I look up and watch her blow a kiss, framed by the writhing arms of the submarine.

Something out of sight clanks. With my gaze aimed in the direction of the submarine’s arms, I see someone leap up from the sea and land on the deck with a delicate thud. The person, crouching, now stands. Seaweed encases her body, from her ankles to her palms to her collarbone, but she must have some kind of gaps at the back of her outfit for her wings, which have black feathers. Her hair, short and styled into a bob, is the same colour as her wings. She glares over freckles, but I can’t see what she glares at, exactly, because the entirety of her eyes are white.

Nearby, the other kids let go of the net, reach into the inner pockets of their cloaks and pull out
earmuffs. Kotoko reveals two, one which she puts on the redhead boy when the metal arm holding him lowers. Another metal arm descends low enough that they can scrabble on. It tilts and they zoom down it like on a slide, disappearing from sight. One metal arm grabs Byakuya and starts to pull him overboard too.

“Give him back!” I roar, and I stagger forward.

The woman starts to sing. It sounds like mournful wailing, like a cry for help. I achieve a few more steps before stopping. All of a sudden, the weight in my chest lightens, and my head clears. All the pain that wracked through my body after Sakura crashed into me fades, and I am numb. My anger drains out of me too.

“Genocider Syo...” Byakuya’s voice wafts over to me and wraps around my throat. It has me in a collar, and an invisible leash guides me toward the edge of the ship. He purrs. “Come... to me...”

“Fukawa-chan!” Aoi grabs my hand. I keep walking until my arm straightens out behind me and tugs.

“M-Mother? Father?” says Makoto. He jogs toward the edge of the ship. “Komaru?”

“No!” Aoi shoves me and I blunder toward Sakura. Leaving me behind, Aoi sprints up to him. When she reaches him, he has a leg over the barrier, and she enfolds him in her arms as she pulls him back onto the ship.

I can’t control my footwork and almost trip over Sakura.

“Genocider Syo,” Byakuya calls out, not from beyond the ship but right in front of me, standing on his tail that coils loosely beneath him. He cups my cheek in his hand, fingers almost comically long, chin sharp. “Let us... be together forever...”

“D-Darling...” I say, and I bring a foot forward, only to fall on my face. Byakuya explodes beneath me.

Sakura has her hand around my ankle.

“Mama?” The stout guy charges over to the barrier. “Mama! I’m here!”

“Hanamura!” Aoi sits up, still holding onto Makoto, who wiggles and claws at the barrier. With him on her lap and requiring both of her arms, she can’t do anything except watch Teruteru climb over the barrier and hurl himself overboard.

All while the winged woman warbles.

“You!” snarls Aoi. She throws Makoto away from the barrier and rushes at the woman, who sees Aoi approach and dodges out of the way of Aoi’s fist, wings propelling her.

The woman stops singing. My senses return.

“You’re not affected,” comments the woman. She takes flight, wings beating the air. “Does that mean... you’re not human...?”

Aoi doesn’t answer, eyes full of hate.

“Whatever...” The woman inhales and resumes her song.

My mind begins to go fuzzy again.
“A siren...” Sakura clenches my ankle. “Asahina, my girl... We can’t allow her to sing...”

The woman flies too high for Aoi to be able to jump up and catch her, so Aoi looks around, desperate for something to throw. Makoto succumbs to the siren’s song and stretches out his arms, trying to grab the barrier. Aoi has little choice but to hurry over, pick him up and carry him over her shoulder.

“Everyone below deck must be...” Her face contorts in realisation and unable to finish voicing her fears, she scrambles over to the doorway, Makoto still slung over her back.

Meanwhile, though I can’t escape Sakura’s inhuman grip, I can lift my head, and Byakuya materialises in front of me.

“Come to me,” he murmurs. “If you can’t be with me physically, you can be with me in spirit...”

I raise my scissors.

“Let us... never be... apart...”

They feel cool on my neck.

“Geno...”

He grins, his teeth pearly gates that beckon me in, and the woman’s singing could be compared to that of angels.

“... cider...”

I laugh quietly.

Byakuya mouths, “Syo.”

The woman lands a short distance away and stares down. Her face is devoid of all emotion even as she sings, slack, no feelings curling her lips or wrinkling her brow, as though bored. As though she has seen this happen, and it lost its appeal at some point, assuming it ever had any. Not everyone takes delight in maiming others. In killing.

My scissors close.

Some, however, do.

I launch the scissors. Byakuya shatters as they pass through him. As good as my aim is, honed over years of throwing stones at cans, the woman swerves out of the way. Her song doesn’t waver. The woman glances at the scissors that disappear somewhere behind her. They make a dull noise as they hit the ship.

She is only distracted for a second or two, which proves fatal. A knife comes out of nowhere and slices her cheek, causing her to flinch. Eyes widening, she ceases her song and touches her fingers to the blood that blooms on her face.

There are footsteps, and then two men in helmets tackle her to the floor.

“Hanamura!” shouts who I recognise to be Aoi, having just returned from below deck. She runs over to the barrier and searches the water with desperate eyes. “I’m... I’m going in after him!”

“My girl...” Sakura starts, but Aoi dives into the sea. Sakura bites her lip and turns toward the people.
that file out behind Aoi.

Of the people there, I know Yasuhiro, Kyouko and Makoto. A woman with short strawberry blond hair hugs herself, stood next to a taller man with long lashes that could rival that of Byakuya.

Remembering Byakuya, I kick my foot until Sakura finally lets go of me. I hobble over to the barrier around the ship and look down. The desire to leap into the sea has vanished. My hands grip the barrier tightly. Behind me, the others talk, but I don’t take my eyes off the sea, even if the light from the lanterns barely help me discern anything down there.

Neither Aoi nor Hanamura can be seen.

Or Byakuya...

Byakuya...

... but I can’t swim...

“You are all alive,” says Sakura. “How...?”

“You could be happier about that,” Yasuhiro grouses.

“You misunderstand,” says Sakura. “The siren’s song affects all humans. You should have all perished.”

I turn my head around at that. The strawberry blond woman jiggles earplugs out of her ears. Kyouko, with her arm around a shaking Makoto, gives a small smirk. “Then it’s a good thing that not all of us are human.”

“And that I snore,” says Yasuhiro. “Asahina-chi wouldn’t have brought earplugs otherwise.”

He fakes a laugh. Some of the others join in. Clearly, him and everyone else are on edge.

Sakura’s gaze moves from Yasuhiro to Kyouko to the men who attacked the winged woman. The men rise, one of them carrying the winged woman under his arm. Next to him, the other man slowly removes his helmet, and the head that he reveals does not belong to a human but a dog. His fur is dark brown, but he has an orange tuft at the front that no joke, resembles a hotdog.

A scream escapes the strawberry blond woman, and she buries herself in the long-lashed guy’s side. Her companion frowns, standing his ground.


“They’re dogs!”

“They’re cynocephali,” says Sakura, like that might console the woman.

Somehow, it doesn’t.

“You’ve known them for a month now,” Makoto points out, slurring his words a bit. “If... they were going to hurt you, they would have already...”

“Or they would have let us kill ourselves,” Kyouko chimes in.

Andou scrunches up her face but after several seconds, she relaxes her hold on her companion’s
“So you heard her singing from down there?” asks Makoto.

“Yeah,” says Yasuhiro. He lifts a hand to his dreadlocks, which all stand on end, and he loosely grasps a few of them. “When I heard it, I saw Ma... and she told me that she was waiting for me, and the only way we could be together is if... we... became spirits together...”

I turn back to the sea.

“We had to tie you up with rope,” the Oowada Brother without his helmet on says. “You all lost your minds and wanted to off yourselves. There was a brief break but when the music started again, you all went back at it, so me and Daiya blocked out your ears with the earplugs that Asahina has been letting us borrow.”

“Every siren has a different song, but all of them can only affect humans,” says Sakura.

“Yeah,” says Daiya, the Oowada Brother still in his helmet, and still with the winged woman tucked under his arm. “One of those kids took Daimon hostage, and he said if we tried anything, he’d slash his throat. He said they killed Tengan above deck... Daimon was there when it happened, hanging out with Tengan, and he confirmed it, so we knew they weren’t fucking around. He agreed to spare Daimon and let him go if they could steal some of our stuff, and then he chose a few of us at random to come up with them so they could give Daimon back right before they left and so we knew when it was okay to come out.”

Daiya pauses.

“Where is Daimon, anyway? And where’s Hanamura? And Asahina?”

“Who?” asks Sakura.

I clench my jaw.

“Well, Daimon is small, has red hair...” says Yasuhiro. “Big blue eyes...”

“Daimon-kun went with the intruders,” says Makoto. “Togami-kun too... And... Hanamura-kun jumped into the sea, so Asahina-san went after him...”

“Togami-kun?” says Kyouko. For a moment, her calm mask slips to show surprise. “He had the curtain drawn around his bed so as we passed the cabin, we assumed that he was hiding...”

A short distance away, I hear splashing. Aoi bobs up, clutching Hanamura. I don’t acknowledge her, so she has to call out to get someone’s attention, and the others crowd around me. Mondo throws out a buoyancy ring tethered to the ship with long rope. She slips through the hole and Mondo, Yasuhiro and the long-lashed man pull her up.

Hanamura is laid on the floor, on his back. The long-lashed man goes over him and checks for a pulse, but soon drops Hanamura’s limp hand. He checks his neck, then feels his mouth for breath before resorting to CPR.

“Is he...?” asks Ruruka, after some time.

“Yes,” says the long-lashed man.

Makoto’s face crumples. “Hanamura-kun...”
Daiya clutches Mondo’s shoulder with his spare hand. Mondo punches himself on the palm.

“What are we going to do?” asks Aoi in a small voice. She chokes. “They... They took Togami too... Fukawa-chan, I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry... I didn’t want the others to get hurt, and now...”

“What the hell kind of question is that?” I say loudly. I straighten my back and glare at them all. “What are we going to do? We’re going to rescue my darling, and that chicken lady’s going to be the one who takes us to them.”
Mondo kneads his fist in his other hand, teeth gritted. Like everyone else, he scrutinises the winged woman strapped to a chair in the captain’s cabin. I sit on the edge of the bed next to Aoi, and behind us, Sakura lies on her side. Sakura rubs slow circles onto the back of Aoi’s hand. The others stand. In the light of the cabin, we can see the winged woman better, also because she can’t jump around now that she has been restrained. She has no colour on her face, or in her eyes, and very much resembles a corpse.

That comparison applies to her skin only. Her eyes are just weird.

My scissors open and close slowly so the blades offer some resistance or friction or whatever. If I don’t look at them, I can almost pretend that I’m cutting something, like the finger of a freckled bitch.

“Well?” says Mondo. Next to him, Daiya holds a scrunched up sock with some of the winged woman’s saliva on it.

Apart from the winged woman with a death wish, I know all of their names. Kyouko told me on the way down because no one else really felt like talking, and I have a hunch that no one wants to talk now either, but they have to if they want to push forward and prevent others from dying.

“Well...?” says Yasuhiro with a quirked brow, twirling one hand, stood on the other side of Mondo.

The winged woman stares straight ahead. “I said I will take you to our lair, like you originally asked.”

“R-Really?” says Mondo, sounding like he was the verge of letting out an uncomfortable bark of laughter. “You’re serious...?”

He hesitates.

“What is your name, anyway?” asks Ruruka, saying what is on everyone’s mind.

“It’s Mukuro Ikusaba, and yeah.” The winged woman shrugs. With her arms, legs and wings tied firmly to the chair, she can’t move much more than that. “On one condition.”

Everyone exchanges cautious looks. Even Aoi glances away from Sakura’s hand, her cheeks wet.

Makoto tries and fails to swallow. “What’s your condition?”

“You take me with you,” says Mukuro.

“Oh!” He laughs nervously. “I mean, we can do that. We could swap you for Togami-kun and Daimon-kun... That’s a fair trade, isn’t it?”

Her expression doesn’t change.

“Assuming they’re still alive,” says Ruruka.
My stomach tightens. The scissors in my hold shake slightly. Aoi’s lips wobble and Sakura squeezes her hand. No one squeezes mine. No one pays me any attention. But I don’t care. No one ever has cared about me, so none of this is anything new. Everyone always prefers Gloomy, or someone else.

“Junko-chan’s going to draw things out for as long as possible. She has been waiting for this moment for years,” says Mukuro, and we have to take her word for it. “They’ll both be alive for now. But yeah, I’ll take you. Like, for one thing, I can’t breathe underwater, so if you have a way to get me back, I’m all ears. For another thing, my sister would probably be delighted to see you.”

Kyouko raises her eyebrows and tilts her head to one side. “But would she really? Now that we know the ace up your sleeves, surely that puts all of you at a disadvantage.”

Mukuro’s gaze climbs up to Kyouko’s face. She smirks. “You won’t win against Junko-chan, and she would be thrilled at you coming over, thinking you’ll defeat her, only to fail. Trust me, she’s not going to go down without a fight. And like, any humans that go would have to have their ears plugged, so that’s not a disadvantage for us.”

“That’s right...” Makoto’s shoulders slump.

“But we don’t all have to go, do we?” pipes up Yasuhiro. “Asahina-chi, the Oowada Brothers and Ogre-chi will be enough, ‘right?”

Aoi tears her eyes away from Sakura’s hand, lifts her head and narrows her puffy eyes. She sniffs but manages a sharp tone. “Who’s Ogre-chi supposed to be?”


“Hagakure-kun, please stop talking,” says Kyouko, and he does, but she still sighs and folds her arms over her chest. “That is... a good point, however.”

“Thank you.” Yasuhiro beams.

“... I meant the fact that some of us would have to stop our ears with something,” she says.

His smile falls off.

“Or not,” says Ruruka. With everyone’s attention on her, she smirks. “I bet I could concoct some candy that would stop whoever eats it from being affected by their weird songs.”

“Really?” says Kyouko, not sounding convinced.

“Yup.” Ruruka nods. “My candy can do almost anything. Some say I have a magic touch.”

Aoi widens her eyes and punches her palm lightly. “Magic! Oh! Fukawa-chan must know a spell that could like... ward off the song. Right?”

Pain develops in my jaw as I clench it. There are a lot of things that I could say, and the words fizz on what part of my tongue is in my mouth. The same sensation clutches my heart. I don’t say anything, though, but I like to think my silence is loud enough. That my eyes are cold enough.

“Huh? Magic?” asks Ruruka.

“Fukawa-san is a witch,” explains Kyouko.

Ruruka pulls an ugly face. “And you didn’t tell us this? Mermaids... Dog people... and now a witch?
Nice to know you trust us, huh.”

“Sorry...” Makoto cringes, but he eases out of this state quickly. “Asahina-san could be onto something.”

“Or maybe she isn’t,” says Ruruka.

Aoi ignores her and turns to me.

“Fukawa-chan, could you cast a spell to protect the others from the sirens’ song?” asks Aoi. Her eyes are still watery from all the crying that she has been doing, and I find her nauseating to look at.

Therefore, I don’t. Thanks to her, everyone is staring at me. I turn my head away with a scowl and try to make sure no one exists in my field of vision. Usually, I like attention, but the only reason they’re going to me now is because they want something, someone else.

“It’s Genocider Syo,” I say coldly.

“Oh, right. Syo-chan.” Aoi pauses. “Could you?”

“No,” I reply immediately.


“I can’t perform magic.” My scissors spread its jaws. “Never could. I read Gloomy’s mentor’s spell book. Drank her potions even if I coughed them up after half the time. And I asked her mentor to teach me, and she thought Gloomy was a bit slow because I asked basic questions about things she taught months ago...”

My scissors snap shut.

“... but nothing,” I say, and my fuzzy reflection in the metal mouths the words too.

Everyone allows a stretch of silence to pass. It coils around me, and has me trapped when someone decides to speak again.

“Then we just have to get Fukawa-chi back and ask her, don’t we?” says Yasuhiro.

My tongue flickers back and forth like the tail of an angry cat, like one that saw me making a mess in the alleyway that it frequents.

“Syo-chi?” he says with half of a smile.

“You want me to let her front again?” I hiss. “I’ve been stuffed away for months and you want me to disappear already?”

I brandish my scissors. Yasuhiro yodels and hides behind Makoto, ducking behind him.

Kyouko frowns at me. “Syo-san, without Fukawa-san, we won’t stand a chance against the Pirates of Hope and we won’t be able to rescue Togami-kun...”

She brushes some hair out of her face.

“You have known Fukawa-san for a long time,” Kyouko adds. “Would you not do it for her sake? For her happiness, if not to save the life of another?”
My eyes roll. “Gloomy hates me.”

But I don’t hate her. Even if she’s boring and leaves me the arduous task of getting rid of everyone who could hurt us, I don’t hate her.

I don’t think I can.

We share very little in common. I have my own desires, and emotions, and dreams. Other than our bodies and clothes, something that we both have are the same feelings. Like... not emotion-feelings, but love-feelings, that kind of stuff. Otherwise, I wouldn’t know which guys to off. But I don’t think it was love that we felt for all those men. Attraction. Lust. A craving for more of their attention but at the same time, fear. And when I feel all that from someone, I want to remove it from myself. I want to overload on it, feel the rush but none of the attachments. However, with Byakuya... I want to be with him. Not for a one night stand, not so he can be a tally mark on my thigh with all the others that have formed scars there... but to stay with him. He isn’t like the others.

Could this be...?

My face burns.

Gloomy wants Byakuya back, so I do too. Or is it not ‘so’ I do too, but ‘and’ I do too?

Whatever. I lean over Aoi and grab a pillow from the pile beside the headboard. The last time that I saw Byakuya was when he was on the bed, but I won’t let that stay the last time. My scissors tear through the pillow with ease and I pick out a feather at random.

As I bring it to my nose, Makoto says, “Thank you, Syo-san.”

I tickle my nose with the feather, and then I sneeze.

“So Togami-kun was captured?” Touko glanced at a woman who was strapped to a chair. As hard as it was to talk with the lump in her throat, she pushed her words through it. “And this Ikusaba woman helped the kidnappers?”

Everyone nodded.

She wrung her hands together. “And by kidnappers, you mean murderous children who work for sirens whose songs cause any humans who hear it to try to commit suicide?”

Not as readily as before, everyone nodded again.

Touko took a deep breath, and she closed her eyes for a few seconds before peeling them open. All eyes were on her. She licked her lips, heart thumping. For once, it was too quiet.

“I... will be able to cast the necessary spell,” she announced, slightly shakily. Everyone continued staring at her. Ignoring them, she fixed her eyes on Mukuro. “Where is the lair?”

“You have to travel underwater to get to it, but the lair itself is in a large pocket of air,” said Mukuro, looking down.

Mondo and Daiya pulled expressions of displeasure at the same time.

“Swimming. Great,” said Mondo flatly.
“Let me guess. You’re dogs, so you hate water and can’t swim?” said Ruruka.

Daiya glared at her. “We’re cynocephali, not dogs. Have you ever seen a dog talk?”

“I’m looking at you, aren’t I?”

He rolled his eyes and turned his back on her. She stuck her tongue out.

“Before we discuss our plan, do you guys think it’s okay to let that girl listen in?” asked Daiya. He jerked his thumb toward Mukuro.

“My name is Mukuro Ikusaba,” said Mukuro.

“You have a point,” admitted Makoto, in regards to what Daiya said. He bit his lip. “But we can’t take her out and leave her unsupervised...”

Yasuhiro raised a finger. “On it.”

That hand then dipped into his trouser pocket and he took out a pair of ear plugs, which he inserted into Mukuro’s ears. She squirmed, but he succeeded in wiggling them in, and for good measure, Daiya carried her chair over to the corner of the room nearest the bed. He set her down so she faced the corner and replaced the sock into her mouth.

“So,” Daiya gripped the back of Mukuro’s chair and turned to the others, “swimming, huh? Underwater.”

Kyouko tapped her chin. “According to Ikusaba, she isn’t able to swim back due to being unable to breathe underwater, so unless we can get our own submarine or have them all come out to us, we would need a way of breathing underwater...”

“Oh, that’s easy to sort out,” Aoi piped up. “After all, we have Sakura-chan.”

Touko wiggled. “Are you suggesting we let that muscle maniac carry us all there...?”

Sakura coughed behind her. A squeak popped out of Touko and she nearly sprang off the bed.

“Even if Oogami-san is fast enough to swim us there, she would have to make several trips,” said Kyouko.

“Oh, no,” said Aoi, shaking her head. “That’s not what I mean. Fukawa-chan, don’t you know about what happens if you kiss a mermaid?”

“K-Kiss?” said Touko with wide eyes.

“Yeah. If a mermaid kisses you, you can hold your breath underwater for longer,” explained Aoi. “The longer the kiss, the longer you can hold your breath. Didn’t Togami tell you about that?”

He most certainly did not.

“Togami-kun told me that touching one’s lips was like a passionate kiss,” said Touko. She pointed at Aoi. “Y-You just want your girlfriend to steal my virginity so she can tell everyone I was terrible! Your... tricks... aren’t going to work on me!”

Sakura’s head flinched back and her mouth opened, but no words came out.

Aoi waved her hands. ‘No, no! That’s all wrong. Mermaids’ kisses let others hold their breath for
longer, honest! Though some have extra sensitive lips so it’s a common thing for mermaids to touch each other’s lips with their fingers instead.”

Touko’s spell book said nothing of the sort, but her mentor had never seen a mermaid, only read about them, so the absence of that piece of trivia was reasonable. She recalled her first meeting with Sakura, when Aoi blew a kiss and in response, Sakura had touched two fingers to her lips before pointing them in Aoi’s direction. That must have been Sakura returning the kiss in kind.

“Indeed,” said Sakura. Thinking that Sakura read her mind somehow, most likely with some other mermaid magic that Byakuya hadn’t revealed to her, Touko covered her ears, but Sakura had just been agreeing with what Aoi said. “Roughly half of all mermaids are born with sensitive lips while the rest aren’t. However, Fukawa, you are on the right lines. In mermaid culture, lip touching is typically reserved for those that you treasure.”

“And Sakura-chan treasures you a lot, Fukawa-chan! Even if you are sometimes kind of mean.” Aoi threw up her fists, grinning widely. “You saved me, and you saved our friends too. The Oowada Brothers, Hagakure...”

“That doesn’t mean I want to kiss her!” Touko hissed, and she dropped her hands to her lap. “I’m saving my first kiss for someone special.”

Yes, Touko hadn’t kissed anyone before. At least, with her consent, and with her liking it. She decided that she wouldn’t like this kiss, so if she somehow allowed it to happen, then she didn’t have to count it.

“But Sakura-chan is special!” Aoi argued. “You helped her, so we’ll help you back!”

“And you helped us too,” Kyouko said. Touko blinked and turned to her. “If you hadn’t come with us to the circus, we wouldn’t have been able to defeat Monobear and Celes.”

“Yeah,” said Makoto. “So if it’s okay with Oogami-san, we’d like to come to their lair too and rescue Togami-kun. Kirigiri-san has her gun, and as captain and a friend, it’s my responsibility to go too.”

Sakura closed her eyes with a smile.

“I suppose... if you are dear friends of Asahina, then I will grant you some of my power,” said Sakura.

Daiya slapped Mondo on the shoulder. “You can count on the both of us as well. Whatever they throw at us, we’ll hit back twice as hard.”

Yasuhiro opened his mouth but shut it when Kyouko narrowed her eyes at him.

“... I’ll come too,” he mumbled.

Touko’s lips rubbed together as she tried to find something to say. She felt her face warm and scrunched it up, to try to hide the colour behind as many creases as she could, but it still glowed on her face, so she turned her head to the side.

“W-Whatever... If it has to be done...” Her shoulders hunched. “It will be done. I’ll... kiss her.”

Ruruka snorted, drawing the glare of Touko and the stares of everyone else.

“Will you and Izayoi-kun be accompanying us?” asked Kyouko. “I would understand if you stayed
behind.”

“Oh, we are going,” said Ruruka. She stuck up her nose and folded her arms over her chest. “I’m going to prove that my candy is just as effective as whatever weird voodoo that girl can perform.”

“Are you sure? It will be dangerous,” warned Makoto.

“Don’t worry. Sonosuke will protect me, easy,” Ruruka assured them. “Shouldn’t you be focused on your magic spell? You’re wasting precious time. My time.”

Touko rose off the bed and rummaged underneath it. Her fingers brushed against the strap of her satchel, and she curled her digits around it so she could drag it out. Its weight was promising, and after she got out the satchel, sat on her bed and opened it, she smiled at the contents. In their haste to retrieve Byakuya, the Pirates of Hope either forgot to check the rest of the cabin for anything worth stealing or neglected to search under her bed, but which reason was the actual reason didn’t matter because she had her spell book.

She skimmed through the contents page. Unable to find a spell specifically for sirens, which she knew there wouldn’t be but nonetheless had hoped that she had misremembered, she flicked to the ingredients section. Strictly speaking, the book wasn’t just for spells. As well as spells, it contained information on different creatures, such as mermaids, selkies and aswang, and ingredients to go in potions. When her mentor first started writing in it, the old woman, who wasn’t old when she began it, did so because spell books were sparse after witches were almost entirely eradicated along with their texts. Everything in the book was what Touko’s mentor learned. What she discovered.

Then what Touko discovered.

“Here...” Touko dragged her index finger down the page. Everything on it was scrawled in handwriting that someone unfamiliar with it would struggle to decipher. “Honey... Rosemary... Purple betony...”

The rest of the ingredients were mouthed.

“I have all of them except honey,” announced Touko.

“We did bring some,” said Kyouko. “Andou-san, is there any in the kitchen?”

Ruruka picked at her teeth. “I dunno. Probably. But I have my own stash, so you can borrow that. If it’s so important.”

“Thank you.” Kyouko smiled at her.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Ruruka, trying not to smile back, and she left the captain’s cabin with Sonosuke.

A few minutes later, she returned with two jars and handed them to Touko, who by then had got out all of the necessary ingredients from the large chest in the cabin. Touko combined all of the ingredients with a mortar and pestle, clacking a lot because of how shaky her hands were, and what she created smelled like herbal tea. Once satisfied, she poured the concoction into an empty pitcher, spilling a bit on her lap. She held up the pitcher and shook it gently so the liquid sloshed.

“The word that you’re looking for is ‘thanks’,“ said Ruruka.

Aoi hushed her.

“What? It’s not like she’s concentrating,” said Ruruka. “And if you ask me, this all sounds really
dodgy. You didn’t weigh anything and just picked out a few ingredients from your book that isn’t even official. You’ve literally just made it up. And weren’t witches, if they were ever real, all killed off a long time ago?”

Touko narrowed her eyes. “They were... mostly... but sometimes, they’re born to parents who aren’t magic... completely by chance.” She turned to her. “If you don’t trust my potion-making skills, then you don’t have to use my potion! I’m basing this off a different protection spell, with certain extra ingredients added. It will work.”

“Oh, don’t worry. We don’t plan to use your potion,” Ruruka replied. “I bet in half an hour, I could make some candy that will protect me and Sonosuke, and everyone is welcome to have some.”

Yasuhiro scratched at the nape of his neck. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think candy’s gonna work... I’m going to go with Fukawa-chi’s hocus pocus.”

The rest of the crew all murmured in agreement, except Ruruka, who clenched her fists by her sides, Sonosuke, who remained silent, and Touko, who swept her gaze across everyone with her mouth slightly ajar.

“We believe in you, Fukawa-san,” said Makoto.

“W-Well, as you should,” said Touko, tensing her mouth to stop the corners from curling up. “It’s ready to drink now, by the way, but I’m going to make more.”

“How long is it going to last?” asked Mondo.

Kyouko inclined her head forward. “Mondo-kun raises a good point. The spells that I’ve seen you cast didn’t last for more than a couple of minutes.”

“My candy will last twenty-four hours, easy,” bragged Ruruka.

Touko shot her a cold look. “S-Shouldn’t you get started on it? We’re going to have to leave as soon as possible.”

Ruruka showed them her hands. “All right, all right. Come on, Sonosuke, darling.”

She pivoted on her heel and with her hand, beckoned Sonosuke to follow. Sonosuke followed her out, and their footsteps grew quieter until a door somewhere slammed shut. Touko waited a few seconds before talking.

“Most protection spells last several hours,” Touko explained. She grabbed a handful of her skirt. “If I was to create a bubble around us, then I would have to concentrate on maintaining it... but a protection spell like this will give us plenty of time and won’t require my constant focus. Often, my mentor would cast a protection spell on our cottage or on herself before going to sleep. I’ll cast it before we get off the ship so we get the most out of it. Does that make sense?”

“That’s great!” Makoto says. “And yeah, it does!”

She felt more assured after hearing that.

“In that case, then we just need directions to their lair,” said Kyouko, and she cast her eyes toward Mukuro, motionless in her corner. Mukuro would have been able to turn her head and could have tried to read their lips, but she had chosen not to. Though, even if she did or even if she could hear them, she wouldn’t have been able to relay any of it to her sister before they arrived.
Kyouko walked over to Mukuro and pulled out her ear plugs. Daiya took the sock out of Mukuro’s mouth, lifted the chair, rotated it and put it down so Mukuro was facing everyone again. She contorted her mouth into different shapes.

“Would you be able to guide us to your lair?” asked Kyouko. Mukuro stopped doing weird things with her mouth.

“No problem,” said Mukuro with a shrug. “It’s not far from here. I can tell you which direction to go in and then inform you when you need to swim the rest of the way.”

“Thank you. Oowada Brothers, if you would...”

Daiya gagged Mukuro with the sock, picked up the chair and carried her out of the room. Mondo caught up to him outside of the cabin, and the three ascended the companionway. Touko’s insides squirmed.

“Um... don’t take this the wrong way, Fukawa-san, but I expected you to be freaking out,” said Makoto once they were gone. “I mean, Togami-kun means a lot to you, doesn’t he?”

More than she could say. Her heart raced, thinking of Byakuya’s face, thinking of his return, even if he didn’t feel the same way about her. Even if he didn’t think she was smart, or love her honesty, or how strong and handsome she was. Even if rescuing him now would only guarantee her a few more weeks of his company, and then he would be on his way to another life without her.

No. Touko might have thought that before, when she first met him. When she first met him, she would have resolved herself to that fate, of being abandoned, but no longer was she just a stuttering woman who hid away in her cottage all day but a woman who believed in herself, who would be strong enough to save him. And if he didn’t love her, who she had grown into, she would stay by his side regardless, even if they never became a romantic couple, because she cared about him. Being around him was enough.

She squared her shoulders. “As much as I... want to panic... and scream... I can wait until I reunite with Togami-kun to lose my voice and get all snotty. Because I will get him back. I have to. There is no other option... Even a silly woman such as me can be serious when the time calls for it.”

Kyouko rested a hand on Touko’s shoulder. Touko stiffened.

“You’re not as silly as you think,” she said.

This time, Touko couldn’t restrain her smile.

“Hey,” said Yasuhiro. “Uh... if we’re going to be underwater, we’re going to get wet, ‘right...? Like our clothes.”

Makoto widened his eyes.

Touko jerked her arms and positioned them in front of her, trying to form a shield. “I’m not swimming naked!”

“Don’t worry, Fukawa-chan, I packed your swimsuit!” Aoi said brightly.

“W-What?” Spit flew out of Touko’s mouth.
Within the next hour, everyone had assembled on the top deck under a clear blue sky. In hands that faintly trembled, Touko gripped a platter of cups and a pitcher of potion. Her usual attire consisted of long skirts or dresses, which would have been impractical to swim in, and seeing as Aoi had indeed brought Touko’s swimsuit with them, Touko had put that on along with a pair of black shorts.

“I promise that they were for when we arrived at our destination,” promised Aoi, shaking her hands near her chin. “Like, for when we played volleyball and made sandcastles.”

As much as Touko wanted to complain, she couldn’t really because she would have otherwise had to borrow clothes or swim in her underwear, so she gave Aoi a glare with not much fire behind it before turning to the others. Sakura, still on the ship, was bare as usual, some of her white hair falling over her shoulders. The only people other than Aoi who thought to bring swimsuits were Ruruka, Sonosuke, Makoto with swim briefs a bit loose on him so they had to be tied at the side by one of Aoi’s hairbands to stay up, and surprisingly, Yasuhiro, who not only owned a one piece swimsuit but also flippers and a snorkel.

Makoto shifted his weight between feet. “I wish you’d asked me for my size before buying this for me, Hagakure-kun...”

“Oh, I didn’t buy them.” Yasuhiro rubbed his index finger against the underside of his nose. “I took them from Hanamura-chi’s room.”

“You-?” Makoto jerked back.

“What? It’s not like he died in them! Or has any use for them!”

“What the hell?” said Mondo, who wore his usual white vest top and underwear with a tiger print. Touko had never seen a tiger before, but she had read about them and seen pictures of them in books. His body, though hairy, wasn’t furry, and was like that of a regular human. “He just died!”

“Exactly.”

Kyouko cleared her throat. She hadn’t packed a swimsuit, so she ended up borrowing a navy t-shirt from Makoto and a pair of shorts from Aoi. Slung over her shoulder was the strap of a pouch with a buckle, but Touko didn’t know what was inside of it. Probably her gun. Almost certainly her gun.

Touko lost interest in Kyouko quickly and turned to the Oowada Brothers. This was the most naked that she had seen them, as they had to conceal much of their bodies in order to hide what they were. Daiya wore a white vest top like his brother, but he had paired it with a pair of black boxers that couldn’t be discerned with a quick glance.

The fact that they were wearing underwear implied to Touko something that she didn’t want to think about, and she refused to look at him anymore, cheeks burning.

“We don’t have time to waste,” said Kyouko. “Fukawa-san, if you would please cast your protection spell on us, then we can be off.”

“But not on us!” Ruruka piped up, and she patted the drawstring pouch tied to her waist.

“I still don’t get how you can make candy that will protect you from a siren without using magic,” Yasuhiro said. “Candy can’t do that...”

“That’s because you’re a doofus!” she snapped, acidic enough that he jumped back. “I used all sorts of ingredients that improve concentration and mood, and my own not-magic ‘magic’ touch has made it supernaturally protective!”
Makoto’s brow creased. “Andou-san, maybe you should let Fukawa-san cast a protection charm on you too, just in case?”

“I told you, I don’t need it!” Ruruka snarled. Makoto and Yasuhiro recoiled. She straightened her arms out downward, hands balled into tight fists. “We didn’t need two chefs, and we don’t need two spells. I’m going to show all of you... that you need me.”

Ruruka pulled at the puckered opening of her pouch and delved her hand in to retrieve two pieces of golden candy. Sonosuke plucked one off her palm and popped it into his mouth. The ends of his lips curved upward as he sucked on it, and he gave a happy hum as its flavour seeped into his taste buds. She slipped the other piece past her lips, and it clacked against her teeth as her tongue pushed it toward the inside of her cheek.

“How does it taste?” asked Yasuhiro.

“Who cares about that? Does it work?” said Mondo.

“The only way that we’ll know for sure is when Ikusaba sings,” said Kyouko, which Mukuro would undoubtedly be happy to do for them if it meant a break from the sock in her mouth. “After Fukawa-san has cast her protection spell on us, we can test both the spell and the candy.”

Taking that as her cue, Touko took one hand off the platter and poured a bit of potion into each cup. Aoi held onto the edge of the platter to help keep it steady.

“Everyone who wishes to be protected under the spell will need to drink this potion. A cupful will last eight hours,” Touko explained.

“That will be enough time,” Kyouko said, and she took the first cup that Touko filled.

Makoto then picked up a cup, Yasuhiro went next and Touko drank last. The potion tasted sweet but slightly bitter too, and it also had a piney flavour. Warmth spread through Touko, almost numbing. Makoto grimaced, but Kyouko and Yasuhiro didn’t seem to have any aversions to the potion. Some remained leftover in the beaker, but Ruruka had made it clear that neither she nor Sonosuke would be consuming any, so Touko tried to share the rest of it equally between herself and the other three. There hadn’t been a lot left, but they all must have acquired an extra hour or two.

“Immunis,” said Touko. She imagined Mukuro singing with a clone of herself and Teruteru jumping to his death. The warmth intensified for a moment. Everyone who had drank some of the potion all twitched at the same time. “There.”

Yasuhiro twisted his body from side to side, examining himself. He glided his hands down his sides.

“I think I felt something,” he said. “A kind of... jolt?”

“I did too. Maybe that means it worked,” said Makoto.

“Hopefully,” said Kyouko. “I think it’s time that we test it.”

Mondo nodded and barked, “Oi, Ikusaba. Sing.”

Daiya turned around slowly so Mukuro, strapped to Daiya’s back, faced them, and Mondo took the sock out of her mouth. Mukuro spluttered and when she recovered, unable to muster up a glare, she tiredly pursed her lips.

After a few seconds, she still hadn’t started singing, but just as Yasuhiro opened his mouth, most
likely to prompt her to, Mukuro shut her eyes and delivered the first note.

Mukuro’s voice, dull and restrained when she spoke normally, transformed into a melancholic crone. Touko had only read her mentor’s notes on sirens, so she didn’t know what to expect. The singing unsettled Touko, but it didn’t implant any sort of desire to kill herself, and she suspected that her being uncomfortable at the song was natural. It was a similar feeling to what Mondo, Daiya, Aoi and Sakura must have experienced when hearing such an eerie song.

Yasuhiro, Makoto and Kyouko stood still, watching Mukuro with the others. Sonosuke and Ruruka also stayed where they were. Ruruka looked off to the side, hands on her hips, while Sonosuke stared at Mukuro.

“That’ll do,” said Mondo loudly once Mukuro had been singing for about a minute.

The singing tailed off. Mukuro opened her eyes and when she realised that everyone was looking at her, her cheeks flushed and she pouted a bit. Daiya turned around so he faced them all again.

“We just need to be kissed and then we can head off,” announced Mondo. “But first, does anyone want to say anything? In case... you know. We’re not able to say it later.”

Yasuhiro yelped and shot up onto one foot.

“Whoa, dude! Let’s not jinx this by saying stuff like that,” he said.

Daiya slapped him on the back. “Pucker up and relax, man. You ready for us, Oogami?”

“I am,” said Sakura, lying on her front.

Touko fussed under her breath as everyone, including her, gathered around Sakura in a wide circle. “How long does this kiss have to last?”

“Hm... I’d probably guess five seconds?” said Aoi. “So who wants to go first?”

No one immediately stepped forward. When another ten seconds dragged by, Kyouko straightened her shoulders and approached Sakura. She crouched down near her and stayed still as Sakura cupped Kyouko’s chin. Sakura gently guided Kyouko’s face closer, leaning inward herself, and their eyes closed as their lips met for no longer than five seconds, after which Sakura lowered her hand and moved her head back. The movement was small, but it was enough to let Kyouko know that they had finished.

Kyouko rose and walked in reverse for a few paces. Makoto came forward for his turn. Touko studied Kyouko’s face as the kiss went on. Even though the kiss was just so they could all hold their breath for longer, Kyouko clamped her lips together with a sullen look as she watched them.

Makoto resurfaced, face pink. “You can go next, Hagakure-kun.”

“Thanks,” said Yasuhiro, not sounding at all appreciative. He lumbered over and bent down for his kiss. Like the two preceding it, the kiss lasted five seconds, and he shuffled away as soon as Sakura pulled back.

Ruruka and Sonosuke came forward for a kiss each and returned to where they had been standing straight after. Then the Oowada Brothers prolonged the inevitable for Touko. Daiya went first, “To show you how it’s done,” and smirked as Mondo stooped down for his kiss.

“You both have a lot of fur,” noted Sakura after she kissed a very rigid Mondo, rubbing her mouth
with her fingertips.

“Yeah! I grew it myself!” Mondo squawked.

Daiya chuckled and grabbed the back of Mondo’s vest. He pulled him up and still smirking, draped his arm over Mondo’s shoulder. “You’re never going to get a girlfriend if you shout at them.”

Mondo growled, but that just made Daiya give him a noogie.

“That just leaves you, Fukawa-san,” said Makoto, watching the Oowada Brothers with a combination of concern and amusement. On one hand, they could rip people apart with their teeth if they wanted to, but on the other hand, their current behaviour seemed so playful that it was hard to believe them capable.

“I know it’s my turn!” Touko snapped, fiddling with her fingers. She positioned herself by Sakura and knelt down. It didn’t help that Sakura was naked. Her lips were dry so she moistened them. “No tongue, all right?”

“Fukawa-chan!” Aoi gasped.

Sakura creased her brow and tried not to smile. “I didn’t plan on adding any.”

Touko clenched her teeth together and remained still, so Sakura had to close the gap between them. In Touko’s stories and daydreams, kisses felt magic. Skin would tingle and her heart would spread its wings and soar as colours swirled around her and the person she was kissing. She would relax in the strong arms around her that kept her up, with the sea lapping at their ankles, sand sticking to what was wet. Even though their eyes would be closed, she would feel his warmth, his hands on her cheeks, and the frown that Byakuya had when he concentrated.

Sakura’s lips exerted impersonal pressure onto Touko’s pair. The small tremble in Touko was a result of what she imagined, not at the current situation. Touko shifted a bit and her stomach dropped as she thought that Sakura might misunderstand and think Touko wanted to deepen the kiss, but Sakura didn’t try to. She maintained contact for a second longer before drawing back, and Touko stood up quickly, face hot.

Breathing loudly, Touko looked around and said, “Stop staring!”

Everyone except Aoi turned their heads away.

“My turn!” Aoi chirped, and she ducked down to peck Sakura on the lips.

“But can’t you hold your breath for a long time already, Asahina-san?” said Makoto, amused.

“Yep!”

Makoto’s grin widened.

“Hey, Oogami. Before we go, you’d better give a kiss to Ikusaba,” said Daiya. He squatted next to Sakura and turned around. Mukuro’s features hardened but she didn’t otherwise react.

Sakura leaned toward Mukuro but before their lips touched, she stopped, leaving a width between them that meant they shared the same air.

“If we arrive and Togami has perished, your life and your sister’s life will be cut short,” warned Sakura.
Any of the others would have shown fear. Touko imagined that even Kyouko would break into a sweat at the intensity of Sakura’s glare, and Mondo or Daiya would have averted their eyes, but Mukuro gave nothing away in her face nor in her quiet voice.

“If we leave now, he should still be alive,” said Mukuro calmly, and they could only take her word for that too.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Touko took a deep breath, her bare feet rooted to the sand on a small uninhabited island that had a cave, which Mondo and Daiya steered the ship into on Mukuro’s recommendation. Ahead of Touko lay the sea in its opaque coat, creased and leathery and older than anything she knew. Full of mysteries. Full of secrets. Full of danger. And all she had to defend herself from it was a mermaid’s salty aftertaste and a bag containing a few vials of protection potions.

“It’s less than five minutes away,” said Mukuro, still strapped to Daiya’s back. “See the palm tree that leans into the beach more than any of the others? If you go in that direction off the island, you’ll come to a big rock structure, and if you go down, there’s a tunnel on that side that leads into our home. That’s where you’ll find your mermaid and my sister.”

The rock that Mukuro mentioned could be seen from the island. Touko raised her hand to her forehead. Predominantly brown, different shades of grey, light and dark, striped the rock, and it tapered to a point on the right side.

“If it’s underwater, even with an air pocket, how can you live there?” asked Touko. “S-Surely you would run out of oxygen...”

Ruruka gawked at her. “Huh? Are you telling me that the supposed witch is being scientific?”

To think that there had been a time when Touko sided with Ruruka, if only because Teruteru had been on the other side. Touko huffed and clenched her fists under her chin, elbows pressing into her sides.

“J-Just because I’m magic, that doesn’t mean I’m an idiot,” snapped Touko. “My... mentor... was a technophobe, but I’m not her. I ask again, how can you stay down there with such limited air?”

Mukuro shrugged.

“On the outside, it seems totally solid, but it’s actually like, hollow, so we can get air through some holes right at the top. But there’s also grating installed up there, so no one can fit through,” she explained.

Touko gave a queasy frown but accepted this.

“Anyway, shouldn’t you get going?” added Mukuro with mounting impatience present also in Touko’s chest, banging for freedom, to be released.

“Yeah,” said Makoto, sounding like he wouldn’t object to a delay. He gulped. “Is everyone ready?”

Nods spread around him in a domino effect.

His features hardened, and he almost looked his age. “Good luck, everyone.”

“Maybe they’ll be asleep when we get there,” said Yasuhiro at late afternoon. He wiped some sweat off his forehead before reaching into his bag, and he pulled out a crystal ball. “If they are, then we can just sneak them out and be on our way. So let’s keep our spirits up, ‘right?”
“Is he magic too?” asked Ruruka coldly.

“No, he’s just deluded,” replied Touko, and she turned her attention to Yasuhiro. “What are you doing? Are you going to try to read our future with your pathetic success rate? Thirty per cent, wasn’t it?”

“It’s not pathetic!” Yasuhiro pointed at her with his free hand, cupping his crystal ball with his other. “I’m telling you, that thirty per cent is going to wake you up one of these days.”

He grimaced.

“According to my divinations, going there spells trouble. I’m getting some majorly bad vibes,” he remarked, peering into his crystal ball.

“That’s not fortune telling. You’re just a coward,” Touko told him. “Now put that snow globe away!”

“But rubbing it is kind of calming... Do you want to try?” He lifted his gaze. “Maybe then you won’t be so grumpy, ‘right?”

Kyouko cleared her throat, and the two ceased bickering. She probably saved Yasuhiro’s life by interrupting, because Touko was sorely tempted to take his crystal ball and smash it into his thick skull.

“We’ve wasted enough time,” Kyouko said in a distant tone.

“And I wouldn’t try to sneak your friends out if I was you,” warned Mukuro. “If my sister sees you guys creeping around, then she might not be so willing to listen to your offer.”

“We’ll just be extra quiet then,” said Daiya with a smirk. “Now take a deep breath.”

Mukuro did, and Mondo rammed the sock into her mouth.

Makoto frowned. “Ikusaba makes a good point... If we wish to be treated fairly, then we should be honest with her sister. If we go in underhand, she may decide to do the same back. Now... let’s go. Good luck, everyone.”

He waddled into the sea first, the others soon following. Touko took her glasses off and passed them to Kyouko, who tucked them into her pouch. Aoi untangled the arms of her pelt, stepped her legs into it and pulled the pelt over herself, transforming into a grey seal. Having witnessed this several times by now, Touko didn’t pay much attention, while the others were more open with their staring, especially Sonosuke and Ruruka.

“Is that a costume?” asked Sonosuke, his arm horizontally out in front of Ruruka protectively. He had no authority to comment on what others were wearing, in Touko’s opinion, as he was wearing his red trenchcoat still. It was waterproof, yes, but quite frankly, Touko thought it excessive. Everyone else wore a swimsuit or underwear. And shorts, in Touko’s case.

Anyway, a seal was hardly threatening, and Touko inhaled, about to point this out, but then an image of Kotoko’s face flashed in her mind, of a deceiving girl with a mouth containing too many teeth, with lips too red and an eye too black to belong to a child, to a human. Kotoko hadn’t really looked like that, Touko was fairly sure, but she breathed out and let her words evaporate like the sweat on her skin.

“Asahina is a selkie,” explained Sakura, further out to sea than everyone else. Makoto caught up to
her and let her wrap an arm around him. Kyouko flanked Sakura’s other side and Sakura captured her with her other arm.

“Never heard of them,” said Ruruka, and she grabbed Sonosuke’s hand and tugged.

The swimming lessons that Touko had taken finally paid off, even though she needed to cling to Aoi’s back because she never got to the point where she could swim underwater properly and she couldn’t open her eyes while submerged either. However, before, Touko would have struggled to walk into the water and would have refused to put her head under, but now, though her heart thumped, she entered its depths willingly.

Unable to see, she kicked her legs like she remembered, letting Aoi guide her into the water’s depths. As they swam, the sea’s hands grabbed, grabbed, grabbed at Touko’s ankles, knees and thighs, but Aoi, constant, pulled Touko along, and ripped her out of the hold of the sea surrounding her. They descended with the occasional increase in height, and Touko concentrated on her legs rather than the thought of what may lurk around them, but not many would be able to harm her, not with Sakura and Aoi present. She tried to open her eyes but only managed to glimpse a blur, so she shut them again.

Soon, they swam more up than down, and her elbows occasionally bumped into solid rock, so they must have been winding through the tunnel that Mukuro mentioned. At this point, Touko knew they were close, and she got confirmation when the surface of the water shattered against her skull. Touko opened her eyes and though she found no resistance, no itch to close them again, she could see nothing. It was dark. She may as well have not bothered.

Aoi carried Touko over to a solid ledge, nudged her onto it and then pulled herself up as well. While Touko gasped for breath, heart beating wildly, Aoi slipped out of her pelt and tied it around her waist.

Though Aoi did most of the work, Touko flopped onto her back, exhausted, the lower half of her legs still in the water. Her first few breaths through her nose stung, overpowering any smell that might have been present, and when she breathed through her mouth, it didn’t feel like enough air was getting in. She coughed and tried again with little success. So long as it was this dark, she wouldn’t be able to escape the sensation of being trapped. No wind whispered. Water dripped sporadically. Her breathing rattled.

The others splashed as they arrived, and then she felt someone pat her thigh. A prickling sensation ran up Touko’s leg. Startled, she let out a strangled scream, sat up and kicked, striking the instigator on the chin. The person grunted but that wasn’t enough to inform Touko who touched her.

“Is that you, Fukawa-san?” asked Kyouko, within the range of Touko’s legs. “I apologise if I surprised you.”

“It’s d-dark,” said Touko, shivering. Foolishly, she hadn’t packed any potions that would enable her to create light. Even hugging herself didn’t stop her tremors, and though Kyouko had long since removed her hand from Touko, Touko’s leg still throbbed where the bit of contact had taken place. She clamped her legs together. “I can’t see... I can’t see anything...”

To her right came a rasp, and light flickered into existence. Touko snapped her head around. Fire danced on the end of a match held by Mondo. It wasn’t much, but Touko didn’t avert her eyes.

“You scared of the dark?” asked Mondo, looking at her face. He was still in the pool, but he had one arm resting on the ledge.
“So what if I am?” she retorted, nails digging crescents into her upper arms.

Mondo offered her the match. Touko blinked. After some hesitation, she took it, and Mondo lit another match.

“Don’t suppose you’ve got a cigar or something, do you?” asked Yasuhiro with a small, awkward laugh that shook his voice. He wrung his hair, trying to squeeze the water out of it.

“Nah. I didn’t bring any with me,” replied Mondo.

“I thought you stopped smoking, bro,” said Daiya with a thin but sharp edge to his tone.

“I did,” said Mondo. “I just thought...”

“Thought what?” The edge got sharper. Daiya placed a hand onto Mondo’s shoulder, showing teeth in a faint grin. Their expressions were hard to read in the light, and the dark did them no favours.

“This really isn’t the time,” Kyouko interrupted. “Fukawa-san, I’m about to give you something.”

Something crawled onto Touko’s lap, making her jump, but she didn’t flail her legs this time.

“It’s just me,” said Kyouko. She found Touko’s free hand, which Touko had balled into a fist, and peeled away Touko’s fingers so she could press Touko’s glasses into Touko’s hand. Touko blinked.

“T-Thank you,” said Touko, and she put them on. They didn’t particularly help her see any better, with the two lit matches still being their only real sources of light, but their familiar presence on her face comforted her somewhat. When she breathed next, Touko’s nose picked up a scent, faint though it was, of a strange cross between vinegar and something sweet.

Touko looked around and caught her eye on some flecks of light way above her, almost indiscernible, like stars on a cloudy night. Those must have been the holes that Mukuro talked about earlier. Unfortunately, they were too far and too small to make any real difference, so she lowered her head and focused on the smaller but closer light near her hand.

“There’s gotta be something we can use,” said Daiya. “They can’t all stay in the dark like this all the time.”

“It’s not all the time,” Ruruka pointed out. “Sometimes, they’re trying to kill people.”

Mukuro tried to say something but couldn’t due to the wet sock in her mouth. Mondo pulled it out. She gasped and coughed and dribbled.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Mondo. “What was it you were going to say?”

“There are several switches that will turn the lights on,” said Mukuro. “The closest one is near here, under a rock... If you press down on it, the rock will flip open on a hinge and reveal a button.”

“I’m on it,” said Mondo, and he started to climb out.

“Maybe you should stay in the water,” suggested Makoto quickly. “Secret lairs often have traps, don’t they?”

Mondo turned to Mukuro. “Oi. Are there any traps?”

“... Yeah,” admitted Mukuro, and then she tacked on, “but if you stay in the water, you’ll be fine. The rock’s in reach of it anyway, so we can turn the lights on after we get out of our submarine.”
With that in mind, Mondo propped an elbow on the ledge and shuffled himself along, patting at the ground. Shortly after, the others helped in his search, hitting the ground in regular thuds, and then Mondo struck something metal.

“What was that?” asked Ruruka, close enough to Touko that Touko could see Ruruka clutching Sonosuke’s arm.

Mondo tapped whatever it was, only not as hard as before.

“Whatever it is, it’s huge and in the water,” he announced.

“It’s our submarine,” said Mukuro. “I wouldn’t go in it if I was you. It’s booby-trapped.”

Touko sucked in her cheeks but Yasuhiro was the person who took one for the team and snorted.

“How old are you?” Ruruka scoffed.

“I got water up my nose,” Yasuhiro explained. “And it was kind of funny, ‘right?”

“No,” said Kyoko. “Not really.”

Mondo slapped the ground a few more times before saying, “I found it!”

Kyouko shushed.

“Sorry,” said Mondo, and moments later, the room glowed.

With Touko’s vision restored, she could soak up her surroundings. What was best described as junk lay scattered across most of the floor, densest by the walls. Bags, boxes, barrels and bits of boat were most prominent, messier than the Oowada Brothers’ trailer had been. Messier than Touko’s first home. Neither the exposed sections of the floor nor the walls were flat. Less rubbish existed by the water, with there being none immediately around it for several paces worth, and the ground there, while uneven, could be walked on with no difficulty, and she felt the blunt lumps against her backside as she shifted her weight.

As for the protrusions on the walls, those resembled sharp-featured faces screaming out for help, their necks extended and mouths gaping, eye sockets hollow, some with arms with claw-like fingers that reached for freedom.

Only, them looking like that must have just been a coincidence, or sculpted in poor taste. They couldn’t really be people, surely.

Even so, Touko lowered her eyes.

“It’s a cave,” remarked Makoto with wide eyes.

“It’s an air pocket,” added Yasuhiro. He glanced up. “Well, almost.”

“Of course it is,” said Mukuro with a minute shake of her head. “None of us can breathe underwater, remember?”

Touko turned back to the pool and flinched, catching sight of the metal thing that Mondo had stumbled upon. Like Mukuro claimed, it was the submarine, large, red and metal, shaped like an egg lying on its side. She had never seen anything like it before. The closest she had come to imagining such a machine was in one of the few science fiction novels that she read after she ran out of romance novels at the nearest libraries. On the body of the submarine were metal lumps. Touko
counted four, two on each side, but there may have been more toward the back.

At one end, it had an opening carved into it, looking like an open mouth. The fins attached to it might have served some sort of purpose, but they appeared more for aesthetics than for anything functional. Two orbs placed either side of the mouth stared unblinkingly at them all, dull and lifeless.

“Let’s get away from that thing,” said Ruruka. “It’s giving me the creeps.”

Everyone except Sakura walked away from the pool, but they didn’t venture far, staying close to where the first pieces of junk started. Sakura watched the submarine and even though it was lifeless, it returned her gaze.

“How can you get light down here?” asked Sonosuke, trying not to step on any bits of junk. Someone like Ruruka avoided them for hygienic reasons too, but the main reason would have been to avoid setting off any traps. “We’re in the middle of the sea.”

“We can thank Monaka-chan for that. She’s a genius,” said Mukuro. “Before me and Junko-chan adopted Monaka-chan, we used to live on top of this rock, and we’d get ships to crash into here and then we’d take anything from the wreckage that caught our fancy to our nest. Anyway, one time, we did it and there was a little girl who survived called Monaka Towa.”

“Towa...” Touko blinked. “As in, Towa Town...?”

“Yep,” said Mukuro, speaking louder as she delved deeper into her story. “A long time ago, the Towa Family settled down near the sea and founded a town. In the latest generation, there were two siblings. Haiji Towa and Monaka Towa. Monaka-chan was born out of wedlock and so was kept in the shadows and treated harshly by her family, who saw her as a mistake.”

A chill spilled out of Touko’s heart and froze her chest. She grimaced and nibbled on her nail.

Mukuro carried on nonchalantly. “Monaka-chan was the little girl who survived our song, and after we learned that she was like, a technological genius, we decided to let her live with us. She built the submarine and some other gadgets.”

“Gosh, Mukuro-chan, do you drone on or what?” came a voice that everyone turned toward except Mukuro, who instead faced away when Daiya moved.

The voice belonged to a woman with long, disheveled, dark red hair, which matched the colour of her wings. Like Mukuro, the entirety of her eyes were white, just like the teeth in her smile, and also like Mukuro, she wore seaweed. She strode out of a large hole in the wall, which led to another section of the cave.

Behind the woman were five short people, four in cloaks that Touko remembered Kotoko wearing, but one didn’t walk. That one didn’t wear a cloak and sat in a wheelchair, her green hair styled in a bob with a fringe, pushed by one of their companions. One of them, Touko recognised as Kotoko. Another had a face covered in patchwork fabric, another an androgynous face, and the last one had pulled their hood deliberately forward so their face couldn’t be seen.

Each of them carried a different weapon. The one who pushed the wheelchair possessed a pipe, the child in a patchwork mask had a plank of wood with a nail in it, the mystery one wielded a broken glass bottle, the person in the wheelchair carried a knife and Kotoko gripped a dented saucepan.

To distinguish between those that Touko didn’t know the names of, she thought she could give them a number from one to four, and that was when she finally remembered where she had seen those cloaks before. In Towa Inn.
“Are you Junko?” Makoto asked the woman.

“Nope, sorry,” said the woman, and she thrust out her chest, which Yasuhiro and Makoto betrayed glances at. In a haughty voice, she said, “I bid all of you an afternoon. I am Ryouko Otonashi, the third sister.”

“Third?” repeated Mondo. “There’s three of you?”

She burst out laughing and wiped a non-existent tear from her eye. “Oh, wow, you’re all really gullible! I am indeed Junko Enoshima, the beautiful, worthwhile, fleshed out and plot relevant sister that my boring plot device of a twin sister, Mukuro has surely told you about already.”

“Twin sister?” said Makoto. “You mean you’re twins?”

Junko squinted. The most obvious difference between them was their hair, but Junko also lacked freckles and her chest was bigger than her sister’s. Apart from that, their figures were the same, and their noses and lips were identical.

“Yeah. Twin sisters. In another universe, it would be more of a plot twist,” remarked Junko. She twirled a finger in her ear and swung her hip out to one side, pouting. “Here, it’s just like, so boring! Yawn!”

“But if you’re twins, why do you have different surnames?” asked Yasuhiro.

“You know, I expected to be asked this, so I answered it in my head already,” said Junko. She created a fist, stretched out her index and middle fingers and pressed their tips against her forehead. “So I am not going to answer it again. It’s a worn down road already. I am me. Mukuro is Mukuro. As long as the walls of flesh and spirit stand between us, two people can never become one.”

Touko sniffed. “You say you’re fleshed out, but you can’t even stick to a single personality…”

“Oh, but see, when I get all excited, I can’t choose just one personality!” Junko batted her lashes and wiggled her fists in front of her. “I just get so bouncy, bouncy, bouncy! And now you’re here to try to save your friend, Togami-kun, I can’t stop!”

The insides of Touko quivered. “Where is Togami-kun?”

Junko lowered her arms, lifted her chin and wet her lips.

“You mean the mermaid?” she said. Her eyes glinted. Touko’s stomach dropped. As if knowing this, Junko smirked, keeping her gaze on Touko. “The delicious mermaid with scales that would sell for a fortune, who is the last one left of his kind?”

“Del... Del...?” was all that Touko could force out. She clutched her chest and tried to step back, but her legs would not move. Near Touko, Aoi slapped a hand over her mouth and shook her head, while Makoto’s jaw dropped.

“... He’s here!” Junko warbled and she swept her arms to the side, turning her body as she did so, and gestured to the hole in the wall. “Ba, ba, ba!”

A male around Touko’s age, perhaps a bit older, emerged from the other side, pulling something along behind him as he approached. His hair was completely white, like Sakura’s, and the shadows under his eyes stood out on his skeletal face. The male offered a smile that lacked several teeth before stopping a cool distance away. He stepped to the side to reveal a wooden toy wagon with a handle on the end of an attached stick. Touko only gave the wagon a moment of her attention, more
interested in the person lying on their back in the wagon.

“Togami-kun!” Makoto shouted first.

Byakuya, tied to the wagon with rope and possessing as much freedom as Mukuro, stretched his neck forward as much as he could, lifting his head so he could see them. Something black was knotted around his mouth, which prevented him from talking.

“Y-You’re alive!” said Touko, too shocked to smile in relief.

He mumbled something and wiggled.

“For now, anyway,” said Junko, and she changed to a professional but sultry tone. “When my sister failed to return, I theorised that she was somehow unsuccessful in eliminating all of you. Knowing that she would be desperate to return and that you would want the mermaid back, I predicted that you would strike a deal with her and come here in hopes that I would want to trade the last Togami for my only sister. Am I correct?”

Yasuhiro scratched at the nape of his neck. “Uh... Pretty much.”

Daiya looked her up and down. “You... can’t be real...”

“So, where exactly is my older twin sister?” asked Junko, ignoring him. “She got awfully quiet when I arrived, didn’t she? But I know she’s here. I overheard her stalling for time by talking about dear Monaka-chan in that grating voice of hers... Geez, people will stop whatever they’re doing to hear the sob story of a child, even if the info dump is happening right near the climax. Like, I bet you could have got in a ton more paragraphs of backstory. I bet you all would have stood there until the end if I hadn’t come along.”

Everyone stared at her, struggling to keep up with what she was saying. Junko frowned and clapped her hands.

“Mukuro, please!” she commanded.

“R-Right,” said Daiya. He turned around slowly so Mukuro faced Junko, who didn’t come forward to greet her sister. Mukuro mustered up a smile a lot smaller than the one plastered on Junko’s face.

Yasuhiro elbowed Makoto.

“What the heck was that for?” asked Makoto, rubbing his arm.

“You’re the captain,” said Yasuhiro. “Don’t you have to represent us?”

Makoto winced. “Oh, right. I forgot.”

Touko shot him a dirty look that he did not perceive.

“Enoshima-san, we’re here... to make a deal,” said Makoto, and he stepped forward. Junko folded her arms over her chest. “Togami-kun and Daimon-kun are important to us, and your sister is important to you, so how about we trade? You give us them, and we’ll give back your sister. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

He finished with a smile.

Junko narrowed one eye and picked at her teeth with a long fingernail. Makoto’s smile twitched, but he held onto it.
“Interesting,” she said in monotone. “Masaru-kun, be a darling and pass me a harpoon gun. You’ll find one over there somewhere.”

She pointed to some junk near a wall and then made groping motions with her hand, arm out straight.

“Why can’t Servant do it?” asked Kotoko, and she raised her eyepatch so she could shoot a glare at Servant with two eyes. Apparently, the eyepatch was just for show, and she didn’t actually need it nor was she missing an eye.

“Because he has to stand next to Togami-kun and look pretty,” explained Junko. “Trust me, everyone wants the two hot guys next to each other.”

Touko looked at Byakuya and the white-haired male. The latter noticed and waved at her, smiling politely. Her skin crawled.

One of the cloaked people, the one with the broken bottle and their hood pulled forward, hurried over to where her finger was pointed. They dropped into a crouch by a heap of junk and sorted through it.

“Masaru?” Aoi gasped and blurted, “Daimon?”.

The cloaked person hesitated.

“Daimon-kun, is that you?” asked Makoto, reaching a hand forward.

No movement came from the cloaked person.

“They know it’s you so there’s no point pretending that they’re addressing someone else,” said the girl in the wheelchair. “So you might as well answer, Daimon-kun.”

With great reluctance, the crouching cloaked person turned their head toward Touko and the others, twisting their body around but not standing up. Two small hands rose out from sleeves way too long for someone their height, and the hands drew back their hood.

Masaru only managed a few seconds of eye contact before he stared down at their feet.

“It is you,” said Aoi. She smiled slightly in relief and when he did not return the movement, she stretched out her lips more. “Don’t worry, we’re here to save you!”

Again, he didn’t react. Aoi’s smile shrivelled away.

“Dai... mon?” she said. Her brow creased.

Junko placed a hand over her mouth and giggled. When all eyes except Masaru’s landed on her, she snorted and lowered her hand, revealing a grin with sharp corners.

“Save him?” said Junko. “Oh dear, dear, dear... I’m afraid that you’re mistaken!”

She put her fists against her hips and gave a hearty laugh.

“I recruited him, fools! He willingly joined my kingdom.” Junko turned her head toward Masaru, keeping her body facing the others, stance wide. “Isn’t that right, my follower?”

The silence gave Touko a bad feeling that was cemented by the words that Masaru finally uttered, only audible because the room was so, so quiet.
“Yes, Junko-onee-chan,” he said, and Junko’s shoulders shook in a silent laugh.

After she finished, she turned her head back to face forward, but she didn’t look at anyone in particular, her gaze instead aimed above their heads.

“Now, hasten!” she commanded, chin up. “Hasten and hand me my harpoon gun.”

Masaru resumed hunting around for it.

“Kid,” said Mondo softly, oozing with disappointment.

Junko giggled and wiggled her fists by her cheeks. “Aw,” she said in a cutesy voice, “wazza matter? Do you still not understand? Let me explain...”

Her demeanour shifted yet again. This time, her shoulders slumped, and she spoke with unchanging pitch and without intonation, all while winding a strand of red hair around her finger. She didn’t look at anyone or anything.

“The five children that you see here... I rescued them,” she said. “Monaka-chan, from a neglectful family. Kotoko-chan, from an enabling family full of perverts. Nagisa-kun, from a pushy family. Jataro-kun, from a... ah, fuck, you get the fucking idea!”

She twitched her body and stuck out a tongue with a length that Syo might have thought impressive.

“You can’t be for real,” said Yasuhiro weakly, speaking what was on everyone else’s mind.

“I’m one hundred percent fucking for real!” Junko yelled, and she jerked her head to one side, not blinking even once.

“You... You kidnapped all those kids,” said Makoto.

“Saved them!” she tried to correct.

Makoto shook his head and glared at her. “You took them... from one abusive home... to another!”

“What? They love it here,” said Junko.

“No, they don’t!” barked Mondo. Everyone around him, apart from Daiya, jumped. “I know what it’s like. Me and my bro, we’ve hopped from one bad place to another. When we leave here, we’re taking all those kids with us. Each and every one.”

Junko’s tongue retracted into her mouth. She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Found it!” Masaru stood up, holding a harpoon gun and a long, faded sack made of canvas. The harpoon gun could easily have been mistaken for a rifle. The wood on its body was scuffed, and the metal unpolished. He marched over to Junko and handed both the sack and the weapon over to her.

Still squinting at Mondo, Junko ruffled Masaru’s red hair, earning a wide grin from him that she didn’t notice.

“Daimon-kun, you don’t have to do this,” said Makoto. “We’re here to save you.”

“How do you know what I want?” Masaru shouted. Makoto recoiled. “I... I don’t need someone like you trying to be my dad! I don’t need parents! Or to be told what to do!”

Junko flashed a proud grin as she took the sack, slinging the strap of it over one shoulder, and her
teeth shone just as brightly as she accepted the harpoon gun into her hands. She studied it, rolling it over in her hands. Satisfied, she retrieved a harpoon from the sack and loaded the weapon.

“Do you know what you are?” she asked. No one answered. Junko aimed the harpoon gun at him. “You are all incredibly, despairingly predictable.”

Mondo stepped in front of Makoto without a second thought. “Hey, lady, you better put that down. You give us the kids and Togami, and we’ll return your sister.”

Mukuro bit her lip. Daiya straightened his shoulders but continued letting Mukuro face her sister.

Junko stuck out her tongue and hummed. She hadn’t moved where the harpoon gun was pointed, but because Mondo got in between her and Makoto, he had become her new target. Her finger shifted over to the trigger but before she could tug on it, though, Sonosuke hurled a knife at Junko’s hand.

A pained hiss rose off Junko’s lips like steam. With narrowed eyes, she raised her hand, pulled out the knife with her other and examined the wound. The noise that fizzed between her pursed lips died off, and silence blared.

Then, she started to cackle.

“What’s so funny?” asked Sonosuke, already holding another knife. Ruruka clinged to his left arm, face stern.

Junko twirled the knife between her fingers with expertise that rivalled Sonosuke.

“I wondered what you were supposed to do,” she said. She stopped abruptly, clenching the handle. “Not bad. Not bad at all. Well, what do you know, I’m actually singing praises about you.”

Her lips curled tightly.

“Sorry, that’s not right. I’m not singing praises... yet.”

First to react were the children, who pulled out earmuffs from their spacious pockets and put them on. The androgynous child retrieved two from their pocket and fitted one over the ears of the girl in the wheelchair who Touko suspected was Monaka. They hurried over to the submarine as Junko inhaled. She paused, holding her breath, studying the faces of Touko and the others, before she breathed out a few notes of song.

The pitch was not as high as Mukuro’s singing. However, that didn’t mean her singing was any less eerie. When Mukuro sang, the notes clearly weren’t meant to be lyrics, but Junko sang succinct words that, to the best of Touko’s knowledge, didn’t originate from another language but were simply nonsense, as convincing as Junko was.

After half a minute, it became apparent that Junko’s song didn’t have the effect that she intended, so she trailed off.

“Huh?” she went. “You didn’t give up on life. What’s going on?”

“Um...” Mukuro took a deep breath. “They... cast a protective spell... on themselves... before we arrived...”

“Now you tell me?” Junko sneered. She aimed her harpoon gun at what seemed to be Mukuro, but it couldn’t have been Mukuro because Mukuro was her sister, so Junko must have meant to shoot Daiya and free her sister. “What a useless sister you are! With a high BMI of dead weight!”
Mukuro’s breathing hitched at each insult. The remarks slapped Mukuro in the face, repeatedly.

“Ugly, smelly and stupid!” declared Junko, and by then, Mukuro’s cheeks glowed.

Servant, still guarding Byakuya, still smiled politely, though it crumbled away slightly.

Sonosuke threw another knife. Ruruka let go of his arm. This time, Junko swerved out of the way, and the knife landed somewhere behind her. He got out another from his sleeve, but Makoto grabbed his wrist, preventing him from flinging it.

“H-Hey, let’s all stop for a moment,” said Makoto. Sonosuke pressed a glare down onto him, but Makoto persevered. A spotlight joined Makoto to Junko and they locked eyes as everyone else sank into the darkness of Makoto’s consciousness. “Junko-chan, we don’t want to fight! Please, let’s exchange your sister for Togami-kun and the children.”

She tapped her chin.

“Let’s see if they even want to go with you first, shall we?” Junko said, and she clicked her fingers.

A loud screech came from the pool. Daiya stepped back, arm out like he was holding a shield, while all other heads turned. Three of the lumps on the submarine’s body, on the same side, expanded into long metal arms. Pincers bloomed out of the ends, and they planted themselves into pre-existing crevices in the ground nearby. The submarine heaved itself out of the pool, helped out by other arms that appeared from the other lumps. In total, there were eight arms, and four of the pincers, attached to the arms toward the back, flattened into feet that the submarine stood on, while it waved its other pincers threateningly. At the top of the submarine was a periscope, which twisted this way and that.

Junko flounced up to Byakuya and whisked his gag off, but he couldn’t talk. Not immediately. He stared wordlessly at the submarine.

“Surprise!” said Junko, as though she just revealed a birthday cake to him. “Is this how you dreamed your reunion would go?”

“That’s...!” Byakuya’s eyes flickered and were full of hate when they fell on her. He barely restrained himself from shouting. “It was you...”

“Kinda,” chirped Junko. “It was Monaka-chan who slaughtered your people, but all on my orders! And ever since then, you’ve been seen as a symbol of hope to everyone else in the sea... The last Togami, so fuckening elusive.”

She paused and then laughed, tone maturing into something sinister.

“But that ends today,” she said with cold glee.

Everyone started to back away from the submarine.

“Monaka-chan’s so clever, isn’t she?” said Junko, observing, and she rested her arm on the wagon’s stiff handle that stood erect. “When she was just seven, she built our submarine. Servant and the others peddle to generate power for it and to control it too. In fact, that’s how we power everything around here. Now, let’s see your knives penetrate this!”

Junko pointed forward dramatically.

“Go!” she yelled.
The machine lurched forward and everyone scattered. It swaggered up to Sonosuke, who threw a knife at it, but his weapon pinged off and smacked uselessly to the ground. His eyes widened and he backed away swiftly, Ruruka staying close behind him.

Mondo howled and charged at the submarine, crashing his fist into it. A painful crack followed. With a yell of pain, he staggered back, rubbing the knuckles that failed to dent his opponent. The periscope turned toward him and the submarine whacked him with one of its arms, knocking him into the water.

Sakura sprung into action right away and helped him to the surface.

“Thanks,” said Mondo. She nodded and examined his fist gingerly. Judging by how she grimaced, it wasn’t good, but there was little that she could do.

Knives and fists failed to penetrate the submarine’s armour, or even leave a scratch on it. Kyouko delved her hand into her pouch and retrieved her gun, but she got no further than aiming before Makoto grabbed her wrist.

“Everyone, please, stop!” begged Makoto. “Enoshima-san, we don’t want to fight you. Please... give us back Togami-kun and the children, and you can have your sister. No one has to get hurt!”

Touko gave him an incredulous look. “She has k-killed hundreds of people, Naegi. You can’t really think...”

“I’m giving you a choice,” he said, ignoring Touko. “Enoshima-san. We’ll give your sister back, unharmed if this all ends right now. Daiya-kun, could you...?”

Daiya had made it to the edge of the pool by then, but on hearing the captain, he straightened up and showed Junko his back, so Junko could see her sister clearly.

Mukuro bit her lip and offered a small, “Junko-chan...?”

Junko’s face fell stern. She performed one skip before strutting the rest of the way over to Daiya and Mukuro, but the single skip had been enough to cause everyone watching to waver. Touko’s heart gave a leap at the same time as Junko’s skip, and it hammered wildly in her chest in sync with Junko’s footsteps. The unease in the air didn’t get past Junko, who broadened her smile.

“Hey, kids,” Junko said, stroking the harpoon gun as she padded nearer to Mukuro. “Kids’ ears are...?”

“Cute ears!” called Kotoko’s voice from the submarine, distorted. The submarine had stopped chasing after its prey, and the eye in the periscope followed Junko’s path.

“Kids’ eyes are...?”

“Nice eyes!” yelled another child.

Junko stopped, leaving some distance between her and her sister. “And kids’ mouths are...?”

“Big mouths!” announced another child.

Her eyes glinted as she aimed the harpoon gun.

“And why are kids’ mouths so big?” she asked.

Now, all five children answered with mirth, including Masaru. “To gobble up all the demons with!”
Junko pulled the trigger. With a bang, the harpoon burst forward, and it speared not just Mukuro but Daiya too. Mukuro gasped and started to gurgle, hands scrabbling at the harpoon lodged where her heart was. Meanwhile, Daiya dragged a foot forward, teetering.

“Bro!” Mondo yelled. He tried to climb out of the pool, but he used his injured hand to try to pull himself up and slipped, losing his balance and falling back in. Daiya stumbled backward, gripping the end of the harpoon that had popped out through his chest, but he didn’t attempt to remove it.

Kyouko thawed out of her shock first and aimed her gun at Junko, knocking off Makoto’s hold of her wrist, but the submarine swung one of its arms toward her, so she had no choice but to spring back and leave Junko alone for now. The submarine reached for her again, but Aoi scooped Kyouko into her arms and sprinted out of its range.

“T-Thank you,” said Kyouko, blushing slightly.

Aoi shrugged with a tired grin.

Nearby, Yasuhiro picked up Makoto.

“You don’t have to carry me,” said Makoto.

Yasuhiro frowned.

Mondo scrambled onto the ledge, successful this time, and raised his hands as he stood up, not sure what to do with them. Only knowing that he wanted to help his brother.

“Stay back!” Daiya snarled and as if his words sprayed venom, Mondo recoiled.

Touko started to emit the same sound as Mukuro and whipped her head away from the scene. In far less distress as everyone else, Junko got out another harpoon from her sack and reloaded her weapon, apparently not bothered about how she nearly killed her twin sister. Initially, all Mondo could do was stare at his brother in disbelief, but a shudder enveloped him and he shook his head, bringing him back to his senses.

“You... You monster!” Mondo sprinted over to Junko, but he was so one-minded that he didn’t see one of the submarine’s arms swoop toward him and send him flying into a wall. He crumpled to the ground and did not stir.

Yasuhiro started toward Daiya, who hissed, “Go to Mondo.”

“But you’re bleeding, dude,” said Yasuhiro, and he motioned to his chest.

Daiya growled, “Go!”

“Y-Yes, sir!” Yasuhiro yelped before rushing over to Mondo, who had yet to get up.

The submarine decided to find new targets, ones that weren’t so nimble, and selected Ruruka and Sonosuke. It headed toward them and realising that it was after them, Ruruka’s eyes bulged, and she and Sonosuke shuffled backward, toward the edge of the pool until their heels crept right up to the line.

Aoi put down Kyouko. Without having the submarine to worry about now, Kyouko aimed her gun at Junko.

“I wouldn’t do that,” said Junko. “Servant?”
A low chuckle escaped Servant as he reached into an inner pocket of his tattered jacket and pulled out a knife, its blade the same colour as his skin. He bent down and placed it against Byakuya’s neck.

Whether or not she intended to shoot, Kyouko shifted her weight, and Touko screamed. Her braids rippled even though her body didn’t twitch enough to warrant the movement. Kyouko meant to only glance at Touko but ended up staring.

“Fukawa-san...?” she said.

Heat congested in Touko’s chest. “D-Don’t shoot!”

“If you want to ensure his safety for at least a while longer, I would advise you listen to your friend and drop the gun,” said Servant, whether that was his real name or not. “Right now.”

After some hesitation, Kyouko laid down her gun. She was still crouching when Byakuya jerked his body. He butted at Servant’s arm and though Byakuya hadn’t struck him particularly hard, taken by surprise, Servant stumbled. The wagon rattled as its wheels returned to the ground, and Byakuya gave a small grunt.

Kyouko picked up her gun again.

Servant turned back to Byakuya, but within moments, Aoi tackled him to the ground and wrenched the knife out of his hand. She easily overpowered him and flung the knife at Junko, who dodged it by taking flight.


Both reacted belatedly. As Touko ran over to Byakuya, Makoto said, “Maybe you should have been captain after all, Kirigiri-san.”

Kyouko furrowed her brow. Makoto ran to Touko’s side.

Touko groped at the knot in the rope around Byakuya, rubbing her fingers raw on the rough material while Junko aimed the harpoon gun at Daiya and the submarine loomed over Sonosuke and Ruruka. Yasuhiro supported a barely conscious Mondo, whose arm was slung over Yasuhiro’s shoulders, and Yasuhiro bit down on his lip as Mondo put most of his weight on him. In addition to the injury to Mondo’s fist, Mondo’s cheek was grazed, and one of his legs possessed a faint limp.

Junko’s grin almost split her face in half as she prepared to shoot at her sister again, but her plan was thwarted by Sakura, who launched herself out of the pool and hurtled toward her. In a close call, Junko flitted out of the way, and Sakura flopped onto the ground.

Sakura gritted her teeth and turned her head toward the submarine.

“Sonosuke,” breathed Ruruka, digging her fingers into Sonosuke’s arm and staring at the submarine that towered over them.

Without looking at her, Sonosuke shoved her into the water. Ruruka got dunked in, and she didn’t resurface right away. The submarine swatted at Sonosuke, and he jumped back, intending to fall into the pool with Ruruka, but the submarine dealt a blow to his side and pushed him to the ground by the pool. He rolled a few times before the submarine scooped him up, gripping him loosely between its pincers, and it lifted him above its body.

Some distance away, Touko spotted the knife that Servant had lost, and she seized it. She hurried
back to Byakuya and hacked at the rope until it unravelled from around Byakuya. Even though he had been freed, he couldn’t really move much more than before, what with having no legs, but she flashed him a watery smile.

“Togami-kun...” she said, hands trembling with the urge to touch him, to confirm that he was really, physically in front of her.

A terrifyingly gruesome crunch behind Touko obliterated her smile.

Touko spun around just in time to see Sonosuke fall from the submarine’s pincer and land on the ground in two, roughly equal-sized pieces.

“H-H-!” That was all Touko could stutter out. Her vision began to melt and she shut her eyes. It would be easy to switch over to Syo, but she was determined to stay here and save Byakuya. After all, to survive, you couldn’t always pick the easy way out. Sometimes, you had no choice but to choose the painful paths.

She heard Junko’s harpoon zip through the air but Junko hadn’t aimed at Touko. Someone retched, and she dared open her eyes.

A harpoon was embedded in Mukuro’s head.

Daiya slumped to the floor.

“You always were a useless sister.” Junko dropped down and kicked the harpoon deeper into her sister’s head. She started to mash the harpoon around underfoot and Touko shielded her eyes with one hand, but that did nothing to stop her from hearing the breaking of bone, the tearing of flesh and the screams of Mukuro and Daiya.

Or Makoto vomiting.

“I’ll fucking kill you!” Mondo roared and going by the thuds of his footsteps, he had staggered away from Yasuhiro.

Junko shrieked with laughter. Touko forced herself to look, as Junko had taken to the air again, and watched her reload her harpoon gun. Yasuhiro knelt by Daiya, hands hovering over him, clueless on what to do, and got out his crystal ball. Sakura dragged herself over to them.

Mondo had no hope of achieving the same height as Junko by jumping, but that couldn’t, that wouldn’t deter him. He grasped a human-like protrusion on one of the walls and climbed by grabbing onto others in succession, even though his injured wrist must have ached. Junko smirked and locked onto her next target.

Him.

“That was your sister!” Aoi choked out, pinning Servant to the ground by the wrists, straddling him. Tears welled up in her eyes. She shook her head and covered her mouth with one hand. “You... How could you?”

“Easily,” said Junko, and she poked her tongue out.

Kyouko lined the barrel of her pistol with Junko, but before she could shoot, Yasuhiro yelled, “Kirigiri-chi!”

He threw a crystal ball at her. Instinctively, Kyouko lurched back and raised her hands, as if to catch
it, and the submarine’s pincer cut through where she had been standing, chopping off the end of her braid. The crystal ball shattered against the pincer. Her eyes widened.

Nearby, Ruruka hoisted herself out of the pool, spluttering, and brushed her hair out of her eyes. When she first glimpsed Sonosuke’s body, she didn’t process what she saw, but then she did a double take and gasped.

“Sonosuke!” screamed Ruruka, on all fours. She crawled over to both pieces of Sonosuke and shook one of his shoulders. “Sonosuke! Sonosuke!”

Junko fired a harpoon at Mondo as he pushed off the wall. He twisted in the air so the projectile grazed past his arm as he sailed through the air toward Junko. Her wings billowed as she veered to one side, and Mondo landed clumsily on the ground. Panting loudly, he rose, and he clambered up the wall again.

The submarine threw a punch at Kyouko, who leaped out of the way, but she landed poorly and used valuable seconds getting up.


Mondo growled. “But that monster...”

“... but the submarine will kill us all,” Makoto interrupted. “If Kirigiri-san gets a clear shot, then Enoshima’s done for...”

What exactly Mondo and Aoi could do to the submarine, Touko didn’t know, but then Kyouko said, “The periscope.”

Aoi and Mondo nodded at the same time and rushed over to the submarine, which had been closing in on Kyouko. Using his rage productively, Mondo channeled it into grappling with two of the submarine’s arms, while Aoi climbed up those arms and when on top of the submarine, she wrestled with the periscope.

With Aoi no longer immobilising him, Servant stood up, wobbling, like he was about to topple over. Kyouko glanced at him but he didn’t stray from his spot.

“To be able to witness such a terrifying battle,” Servant said to himself, trailing off. “Enoshima-san’s lust for despair... is a terrifying thing...”

Servant placed the side of his hand against his forehead. A smile curled his lips.

“I wonder if you can overcome it with your hope?” he said.

“H-Hope?” said Touko, one of her hands resting on Byakuya’s arm.

“Of course we will win,” said Byakuya. Touko blinked at him. With complete seriousness, he said, “I cannot be killed... and I know Fukawa is too strong to die here too. Don’t let her frail frame fool you.”

She blushed.

“... As for the others, I trust that they can handle themselves,” Byakuya added. “Mostly.”

Aoi certainly could handle herself, up on the submarine. To prevent whoever was peering through the periscope from seeing out of it, she cupped one of her hands over its eye, and she wrapped her
arms and legs wrapped around the periscope. She rocked her body wildly, throwing her weight back and forth. Though the periscope creaked and shifted with her, it didn’t break. The submarine teetered, trying to tip her off, and she yelped, but she didn’t let go, clinging tighter, determined not to be bucked off.

Mondo mounted the submarine to join her at the top. It flailed its arms but hit no one, though one of its arms only just missed Ruruka, who was still shaking Sonosuke.

“Oi, mermaid!” Ruruka’s voice cracked. “Can’t you heal Sonosuke with your tears?”

Touko first thought that she was talking to Byakuya, but then Sakura answered.

“Mermaid tears form into pearls, but by themselves, they cannot heal,” said Sakura, over by Daiya and Mukuro. She was talking to Ruruka but wasn’t looking at her, more concerned with Aoi and Mondo.

“Then what good are you?” snarled Ruruka, her face blotchy. “I knew I couldn’t depend on any of you guys. You’re all... s-slimy... r-rats. First you don’t tell me that you’re all freaks, and then...”

Ruruka choked on a sob.

“I’ll... I’ll save him,” she said, splattering him with tears. “I don’t need any of you. All I’ve ever needed is Sonosuke.”

She grabbed a handful of candy pieces from her pouch, many of them spilling onto Sonosuke and the ground, and tried to get him to eat some, even rubbing his cheeks to get him to chew.

“My... R-Ruruka...” Sonosuke’s lashes fluttered. “Would you... marry...?”

He drew his last breath.

“Sonosuke!” Ruruka shook him again. “Yes! Yes! Sonosuke! I said yes! Sonosuke!”

Touko couldn’t bring herself to look away as Ruruka searched for a pulse on Sonosuke’s wrist. Ruruka’s eyes widened, and she reached into the pocket in his sleeve where he kept his knives. What she extracted was not a knife, however, but a ring.

Her face crumpled at the same time as a gunshot cracked the air.

“Puh-lease,” said Junko as Kyouko aimed her gun at her. “I can predict your moves before you even conceive them! But sure, go ahead. I don’t care if you run out of ammo.”

Kyouko bit her lip but couldn’t counter what Junko said. Junko adjusted her hold on her harpoon gun, wings beating their air rhythmically in one of the few things predictable about her.

“Well, anyway, it looks like you have nothing worth my while,” Junko noted aloud. “Therefore, no deal. In fact, you’re going to stay here too... as corpses.”

“You killed your sister!” shouted Makoto, hoarse. Everyone who knew him before today flinched. He gritted his teeth. “Why would you kill your sister...?”

“I had reasons deeper than the deepest ocean,” said Junko.

A pause.

She threw back her head and burst out laughing. Kyouko tried to shoot her again, but Junko dodged
as Kyouko fired, so Kyouko missed her target.

“Seriously? You’re still trying?” said Junko, at which Kyouko glared but said nothing about. Junko yawned and patted her mouth. “And I got tired of Mukuro-chan, right? Can you blame me? If she was a drink, she would be unsterilised water. If she was a sandwich, she’d be mouldy bread.”

“But you must have loved her,” said Makoto, pleadingly.

“So what if I did?” said Junko, cocking her head to the side with a pout. “That’s why I killed her, isn’t it? I was born to cause despair, so it shouldn’t be surprising that I enjoy it too. And what greater despair is there than causing the death of my sister? Who knows what would happen after?”

Junko laughed, this time in a lower tone. When it faded into a low rumble, she moisturised her lips with her tongue, cheeks pink and shoulders heaving.

Touko’s shoulders tensed. “Despair... is your f-fetish?”

“It’s my way of life!” Junko said. She pointed at Touko with a grin that she could not contain or even tried to. “Despair... keeps me engaged! Why do you think I kept Togami-kun alive? For despair, of course! When Mukuro didn’t catch up to our submarine, I knew that something had gone wrong. So I decided to keep him around a while longer so he could see you all die before I ended his life too. I wanted to see your eyes snuff out, one by one, before I slaughtered him. With his scales and pearly tears as proof of his demise, everyone at sea will give up hope, and then despair will spread...”

She aimed the harpoon gun at Byakuya, who stared back from the wagon.

“You know what? I think I’ll just scalp you and collect your tears now,” Junko said, and she pulled the trigger.

The harpoon zoomed toward them.

“N-No!” Touko screamed, face scorching, and she flung her arm forward, toward the harpoon.

It stopped in midair, hovering.

That actually elicited genuine surprise from Junko, in the forms of raised eyebrows and hesitation.

“Wha’...?” went Junko, pulling a face that would be ugly on most but on her, seemed carved out of marble. “Magic...?”

Touko’s eyes twitched, but she kept her focus on the harpoon. She tasted sweat.

“You didn’t drink a potion,” said Byakuya. “Or... say a certain word...”

“I know,” murmured Touko. Her face screwed up in concentration, incredibly hot, but she didn’t relax. Didn’t divert her attention elsewhere.

“No way!” Junko blinked, but reality didn’t change no matter how many times she reopened her eyes. “Witches can’t just... do that! None of the ones that I murdered could!”

“Fukawa-san is full of surprises,” said Kyouko. She rested a hand onto Makoto’s trembling shoulder.

Servant tilted his head back.

“Beautiful...” he said. To everyone’s surprise, a tear rolled down his cheek, but he wasn’t upset. He
Junko stared at Touko, and she only tore her eyes away when she heard shouting. She turned her head, like the others, toward the submarine, where Mondo and Aoi had managed to force the door on the top of the submarine, near the periscope, open. Mondo had the blue-haired, androgynous child and the masked child under one arm, and he had Masaru trapped under the other. Next to him, Aoi gripped a girl in each arm. One, Touko recognised as Kotoko, and the other, the girl who had been in a wheelchair, must have been Monaka Towa.

“Let us go!” demanded the blue-haired child, but his cries may as well have landed on deaf ears.

“H-Hey,” came a strained voice from Daiya.

As quiet as Daiya was, Mondo heard him, and he jumped down immediately. Sakura wordlessly took the blue-haired child from Mondo, then Masaru, and Yasuhiro accepted the masked child into his custody. No longer having to worry about restraining anyone, Mondo knelt by Daiya and rested his brother’s head on his lap. Mukuro was squashed between the floor and Daiya, but that didn’t matter because she had already died, while Daiya had not.

Yet.

“Bro?” said Mondo. It was just one word, yet he struggled to get it out.

Daiya touched Mondo’s hand, unable to hold it because he lacked the strength needed to apply pressure. Mondo grasped his hand back and squeezed.

“I love you,” said Daiya, and he shut his eyes, saying no more.

Junko aimed her harpoon gun at Mondo. Touko, having found herself capable of controlling the harpoon, decided to try her luck on the harpoon gun. She pressed her lips together and shifted her focus onto the harpoon gun. The floating harpoon fell harmlessly to the floor, while the harpoon gun shook in Junko’s hand. A rush of confidence swept through Touko, and she flung her arm to the side. At the same time, the harpoon gun flew out of Junko’s hold and crashed into the wall before falling to the ground.

Only Junko’s wings moved - the rest of her remained frozen.

“It appears that you’ve lost,” announced Kyouko, aiming her pistol at Junko.

“Huh.” Junko remained near motionless, speaking in too calm a voice. “You might be onto something.”

Yasuhiro glanced at Servant, who was squinting up at Junko. The masked child in Yasuhiro’s arms thrashed, but the weapons they had carried into the submarine were still in there, and the boy was no match for Yasuhiro.

“Should we... uh... do something about that guy?” said Yasuhiro, twitching his head in Servant’s direction.

Servant spotted him doing so and held up his hands.

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about a piece of trash like me,” he assured them. “Think of me as an onlooker.”

“You shouldn’t say those things about yourself,” said Makoto. “Could it be that you were captured
by her too?”

The smile of Servant’s face grew, and his eyes twinkled. “When Enoshima-san wrecked the ship I was on, I happened to have an ear infection, so I had gone temporarily deaf. Monaka-san wanted a servant, so I was spared... She’s terrifying, isn’t she?”

He raised a hand and curled his digits inward, not waiting for an answer. His eyes glazed over.

“I anticipated the day when the Despair Sirens would be defeated... and it has finally come. Never have I loathed and loved someone as much as her... Junko Enoshima...”

Yasuhiro turned to Makoto and twirled a finger in a circle near his ear.

Kyouko smirked up at Junko. Unlike Junko, Kyouko possessed a weapon still. “I believe you called off the deal, Enoshima, so we’ll be taking everyone and leaving.”

“You can’t!” the blue-haired child hissed. The other kids fussed too.

“Big Sis! They’re too nice. I don’t trust them!”

“I don’t want to go back to my dad!”

“That one’s got a beard! Those guys are the worst!”

“You don’t really want to be here,” said Touko, wringing her fingers. “It’s j-just a case of hostages subconsciously developing an alliance with their captors as a survival tactic... You’ll get over it.”

The children paused for a moment.

“What does that mean, Shingetsu-kun?” asked Masaru.

“That old woman thinks we’re just pretending,” said the blue-haired child, Shingetsu.

Touko’s voice jumped in pitch. “O-Old?”

“Well, that’s wrong, because we love Big Sis and she loves us,” said Monaka. Her eyes sought Junko’s. “Right, Big Sis?”

“That’s right,” purred Junko. “I love you so much, in fact, that I can’t bear to let you leave. So...”

Without warning, she erupted into song. The effect was almost immediate. While Touko’s spell protected those she cast it on, the children, without their earmuffs, fell victim to it and wailed in agony, bodies writhing.

Kyouko curled her finger but as she pulled the trigger, Servant barged into her. He didn’t weigh much, but he nonetheless sent her staggering, and she missed her target. Thankfully, the bullet didn’t hit anyone, but Servant snatched the gun from her, and when she regained her footing, he had the barrel in his mouth.

Servant chuckled and clenched the trigger. Touko stopped breathing.

The gun jammed.

She exhaled.

Sakura, Aoi and Yasuhiro, with struggling, crying children in need of restraining, couldn’t exactly
intervene, especially when the children tried clawing at their own skin and biting on their lips. Anything that would cause them pain. Suffering.

“Stop it!” Aoi shouted at Kotoko, who refused to breathe. She let go of Monaka and pried Kotoko’s mouth open, while Makoto had to take Monaka and hold her wrists to stop her from strangling herself.

Kotoko shoved Aoi, but Aoi was a lot stronger so she could not break free.

“I don’t want things in my mouth!” Kotoko insisted hysterically, and Aoi repositioned her fingers so though they still pulled at Kotoko’s mouth, they did not go past her lips.

“It’s okay, I won’t hurt you,” Aoi assured her but nothing could console Kotoko, who landed a punch on Aoi’s stomach. Aoi yelped. “Hey, be gentle!”

That had the opposite effect. Kotoko tried to rip out her pink pigtails.

“I want to go to sleep!” screeched Shingetsu. Sakura squeezed him harder to hinder his movements. “Father, I’m tired! Let me sleep forever!”

Kyouko grappled with Servant for the gun, and he ended up throwing it as far as he could. He let her push him to the ground and flashed another one of his decaying smiles before laughing. Her eyes narrowed.

“Kill me,” he whispered, eyes unfocused. “Enoshima-san will win, so there’s no point in living...”

Makoto’s lips quivered. “It must be the song doing this to them.”

“Obviously,” Byakuya scoffed.

“Is this what happened on the ship?” Touko wondered aloud.

“Not exactly,” said Sakura, using two fingers on the masked child and two fingers on Masaru to keep their mouths prised open. “When Ikusaba sang, you all became almost deliriously happy... Enoshima’s singing, however, seems to induce despair.”

Tremors consumed Touko’s hands. Her breathing was stilted. The song hadn’t affected her, yet the despair that coiled around those vulnerable to the song sank through her skin and inflicted her with a dull pang.

“Fukawa-san,” said Makoto suddenly. Touko jerked her head back. Monaka bit his hand and he jumped, but he didn’t let go of her. His face contorted in pain. “You have use your magic to stop Enoshima...!”

“Me?” said Touko, pointing feebly to herself.

“And don’t bother worming your way out of your responsibilities. We know you can do it,” said Byakuya. “I saw with my own eyes - you controlled the harpoon with your mind. You’re fully capable.”

Aoi huffed as Kotoko rocked into her. “A-And remember when you saved us at the circus? You did the same to Celes.”

“So don’t disappoint us,” Byakuya blinked as if in slow motion, and in that moment, only his face existed, “Touko Fukawa.”
A spark of energy ignited in Touko’s core and surged through her in waves, filling her up. All of a sudden, her chest felt light, and her body felt aflame. She pushed her shoulders back and made a grabbing motion with her hand, arm out straight and fingers pointed at Junko.

From Junko’s mouth escaped a croak, and then she found herself unable to breathe. Her eyes widened and she clutched her neck, starting to suffocate. No matter how hard she flapped her wings, she couldn’t move from where she hung in the air. Unable to sing, Junko wheezed, and at that moment, Touko was ready to destroy Junko Enoshima, the one who massacred her Byakuya’s kingdom.

Only, Touko never got to.

A bullet did.

The sound of gunshot rang in Touko’s ears as Junko dropped to the ground.

“Killed... by a bit character,” said Junko on the brink of laughter, and then her body went slack.

For a few seconds, Touko stared at her, breathing in the stench of blood and bodily odours, but she looked up when Aoi said a name.

“Andou-chan...?”

Ruruka, standing over Junko, shook so much that how she didn’t drop the gun was a mystery. Blood, tears, snot and dirt sullied her face, and the filth clung to her hands too.

“I was going to kill her,” said Touko, meaning to snarl, but she gagged at the blood on Ruruka and had to avert her eyes.

The children were released from Junko’s song and began to process what happened. Rather than be thankful that the person who tried to kill them was dead, they screamed, flailing their limbs.

“Maybe we should take the kids out?” suggested Yasuhiro.

“You killed Big Sis!” Kotoko shrieked, kicking her legs. Aoi tightened her hold on her middle. “Smelly, ugly, fucker bitch! You should die!”

Fresh tears streaked Ruruka’s face. She turned the gun on herself.

“Andou-san!” Makoto shouted.

Ruruka mouthed something but didn’t shoot.

“C-Come on,” said Aoi, and she dragged Kotoko toward the hole in the wall that led to another section of the cave.

Yasuhiro frogmarched the masked child out and Kyouko took Monaka from Makoto, now that Servant seemed content with just lying on his back. Sakura couldn’t lead the last two children, due to her lacking legs, and Mondo, the only other person strong enough, was frozen on the ground with Daiya’s head on his lap and Daiya’s hand gripped in one of his.

“Kimura-chan,” said Ruruka, almost impossible to hear her over the children’s screams, not just of those in this part of the cave but in the other part too.

So they could listen to what Ruruka was saying, Sakura crossed her arms over and covered Shingetsu’s and Masaru’s faces with her hands. This didn’t just muffle their voices, but also served to
obscure their vision. They bit Sakura’s fingers, or tried to, anyway, but she didn’t take her hands off them. She pressed down more firmly.

Ruruka hiccuped. Her knees knocked together.

“Kimura-chan,” Ruruka said again to no one that anyone else could see. “Why did you appear before me just now...?"

“The candy she made must have worn off,” said Makoto.

“Candy?” said Byakuya.

Makoto gulped. “Andou-san ate some candy that was supposed to cancel out the effects of sirens’ songs. It worked earlier...”

“Fine, but Enoshima stopped singing, so she shouldn’t be affected anymore,” Byakuya pointed out.

“Kimura-chan, you hate me,” said Ruruka, weighed down with burdens and regrets that no one else knew about. She smeared more blood onto her cheek. It must have been Sonosuke’s. “I hate you too... You never ate my candy... You said you were my friend but never ate my candy...”

“S-So what?” said Touko, stomach rock hard. She closed her eyes until her head stopped spinning. “That’s not a big deal...”

“All I ever wanted was to do something for you that no one else could,” said Ruruka, as if in a trance. “I can’t cure illnesses, or protect anyone, or anything like that... not like you and S-Sonosuke... I loved you, and you cast me aside like trash. Ever since, I haven’t been able to trust anyone other than Sonosuke. You could do anything I asked, and I thought you were my dearest friend. But everyone leaves... even Sonosuke.”

Hatred twisted Ruruka’s speech.

“He’s... dead,” came Junko’s gravelly voice. Miraculously, she was somehow still alive. “I can’t believe a disposable character like you... trumped the final boss...”

Ruruka shot her twice before pressing the gun against her own temple, the main character in her own story, but not in Touko’s, and the tale of her life would follow her to her grave, untold.

“Sonosuke... Kimura-chan,” she said, not as a farewell but as a greeting.

Touko closed her eyes before Ruruka pulled the trigger for a final time.

No one could speak for a while. Even the children became motionless.

Finally, Makoto said, “Should we go...?”

“Not yet,” said Mondo quietly. “Just give me a minute.”

“Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

we hit 100k words!!
also, comments mean a lot to me. <3 so do kudos, reblogs and asks on tumblr

fun fact: naegi, kirigiri, asahina, hagakure, sakura, mondo, fukawa, daiya, sonosuke and ruruka are all the crew members who go, and exactly 30% die - hagakure's success rate on his predictions.
Touko, donning a black dress over a white blouse, clasped her hands together, arms hanging down, saying nothing as Makoto and Yasuhiro carried out the second hammock of the evening between them. Like the one already on the deck, it had been sewn shut so no one could see the body inside, with a weight at each end to ensure that it would sink after being thrown into the sea. The fuller one of the two hammocks contained Daiya and the other contained Kazuo, and the rest of their fallen victims resided in the sickbay and had done so for the past few days, brought back to the ship in the submarine that Yasuhiro and Mondo managed to figure out within an hour.

They lowered the hammock next to the other one, close to a plank that extended out toward the sea. Aoi renewed her tears and curled her trembling shoulders forward. She dropped into a crouch beside Sakura, who was lying on her stomach, and Aoi let Sakura pull Aoi to her bosom and comfort her with rubs on her back.

Makoto flicked his finger again the corner of his right eye but other than him and Aoi, no one else seemed to be crying. Mondo was too canine to cry, and stony-faced and silent, he walked away from the hammocks and stood himself next to Masaru.

Out of all the children, only Masaru had been allowed to leave the captain’s cabin for the ceremony. Masaru bit his lip, determined not to betray too much emotion, but he behaved himself. Before the intimidating stature of Mondo loomed over him to keep in check, he had been inspired to stay on good behaviour by Touko, who could levitate harpoons with her mind and owned a cow prod.

“How are our prisoners doing?” asked Kyouko. The left shoulder of her faded brown cardigan had slipped down her arm a bit, and she chose now to pinch the material and drag it back up.

Makoto winced.

“Do you really think that’s the right word?” asked Makoto.

“I think it’s the right word,” said Byakuya, lying on his front like Sakura. His cheek was propped up in his palm. “We captured them and confined them to the captain’s room. Is that not what a prisoner is? They should be thankful that we didn’t do anything worse to them.”

“Yeah...” Makoto didn’t sound like he agreed though, and shifted his weight between feet. He adjusted the collar of his shirt, which either belonged to his father, his parents hoped he would grow into despite him being about twenty years old, or he had bought several sizes too big. Before speaking again, he wet his lips. “But... calling them prisoners... that makes it feel like that they’re our enemies...”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Touko, pressing her arms harder into her sides, hands still together. “It wasn’t Enoshima who killed Izayoi, and she didn’t murder Tengan. That was the work of those children.”

Masaru hunched his shoulders. Makoto shook his head.

“They’re just kids. Enoshima brainwashed them,” Makoto said. “And didn’t you say that they developed a bond with Enoshima to help them survive?”

Touko jerked her head back and choked on her breath, knocked off guard by him using her very own words against her.
Makoto knew that he had made a mark on her and added, “Without Enoshima’s influence, they’ll change. They’re still young. They’ll...”

“Shut up!” Byakuya suddenly snarled, and Makoto recoiled. The others fixed their eyes onto Byakuya, but if he had looked at any of them, they would most likely have averted their gaze. Makoto, however, stared at Byakuya, unable to move. “They killed my people! I don’t care if they were brainwashed... or if they were young... that doesn’t bring them back...”

“Togami-kun,” said Touko, but she didn’t know what else to say to him. She glared at Makoto. “You! You need to learn to s-shut up...”

“Hey, Enoshima-chi made them do it on her orders, ‘right?” said Yasuhiro, visibly uncomfortable. “If they didn’t do what she said, she would have hurt them. What choice did they have?”

Byakuya didn’t reply, but the dark cloud over his features remained.

“Don’t... talk about her like that...” Masaru’s body shook. He scrunched up his face. “She was like the big sister we never had. She loved us!”

“You knew her for less than a day,” said Byakuya coldly. “And she tried to kill you.”

“But... she said...” Masaru bit his lip, calming down a little.

Aoi tried to twist around. Sakura released Aoi from her embrace so Aoi could do so, but Aoi didn’t stand. She crossed her legs and remained sitting down.

“It’s for the best,” Aoi assured him, hands on her thighs. Her fingers dragged into fists on her lap, and her brow quivered. “I... I hate her so much...”

“You didn’t know her like they did,” said Masaru, but with less conviction than before.

“Why are you defending her?” asked Touko. “You’re not going to achieve anything by doing that. She won’t know that you’re sucking up to her... or are you worried that we’ll tattle to your new friends and say you said a mean thing about that monster?”

Words tumbled in Masaru’s mouth, producing only noises that not even a veteran of them, like Touko, could understand.

“Anyway... they’re preoccupied with Komaeda-kun,” Makoto said, referring to the other children and Servant, who turned out to have a name. “I mean it has been... what, two days since Enoshima died? They’re still going to be distraught. But at the same time, it’s not safe to let them out yet...”

“They’re not missing much,” Yasuhiro remarked. He scratched the underside of his chin. One side of his face squashed up. “Also... it’d be weird to have someone’s murderer come to their funeral, ‘right? That might anger them and their ghosts might return and haunt us all!”

“Are ghosts even real?” asked Makoto.

Everyone turned to Touko. She twitched.

“I’m not the only irregular person here!” she snapped.

“But you’re the only one with an encyclopedia on spooky things,” Aoi pointed out.

“Your face is spooky!”
“They are real,” Yasuhiro assured them. He patted himself on the chest like trying to stamp a seal of approval onto his hawaiian shirt. “I do suances all the time for customers.”

That just meant he conned more people than he had let on.

“But they were our friends. Why would they want to haunt us?” asked Aoi.

Yasuhiro’s face stiffened, becoming more symmetrical.

“I owe Tengan-chi some money from our legal gambling,” he explained. “I ran out of candy and we all said some things we regretted. I mean, if it came down to it, I could probably fight him off if he was still alive, but not if he’s a ghost...”

“Hagakure-kun, please be quiet,” said Kyouko.

“I’m joking! I was trying to lighten the mood’, ‘right?”

“It’s a funeral!” said Aoi. “You have no tact at all.”

“Can we get on with the funeral?” asked Touko. She lifted her hands to underneath her chin and fidgeted them together. “The internal organs will be decomposing now, and it won’t be long before they bloat and start foaming at the mouth.”

Makoto shuddered. She smirked at him.

“Is that something you learned from sharing a body with a serial killer?” asked Yasuhiro.

The smirk vanished. “S-Shut up!” Touko hissed.

“Alcohol will preserve the bodies for longer,” said Kyouko. “However, we need to make sure that we leave enough for us to drink.”

“Do you think we should bury the others at sea then?” asked Yasuhiro. “Instead of taking them all the way back to shore.”

“Their families will probably wanna see their bodies,” said Mondo more gravelly than usual, speaking for the first time in Touko’s presence since what happened to his brother.

Touko hadn’t gone out of her way to talk to him. In fact, the opposite could almost be said: she tried to stay away from him. If Mondo worked his brain, he could have put forth an argument that Touko was indirectly responsible for Daiya’s death, and he had legs, unlike Sakura, so he could use his muscles more effectively than her. She wasn’t too worried though. They all slept in the same room now, so he couldn’t harm her without the others seeing, and knowing everyone, they would protect her from him.

Then again, doubt flickered in her, because she didn’t really think he would intentionally harm her. He did back at the circus, but over the month that she had spent with everyone, eating, playing cards, fighting a pair of siren sisters and more, she went from refusing to sleep near anyone else except Byakuya to being willing to share a room with them.

“Uh... no offence, but Izayoi-chi was cut in half,” said Yasuhiro, jiggling Touko out of her thoughts. “I’m not sure if his parents would be thrilled to see him like that.”

“We don’t know if the families of the others would be happy with a burial at sea,” said Kyouko. “We should be able to contact Hanamura-kun’s mother relatively quickly, and Andou-san mentioned
that her mother taught her to make candy, but otherwise I don’t know anything about Izayoi-kun’s nor Andou-san’s families.”

“They were sort of a family together,” said Makoto. He bit his lip. “Still... I think we should say a few words about Tengan-san and Daiya-kun before we release them. So, um, who wants to go first?”

“Me,” said Mondo immediately.

Makoto nodded. Mondo coughed and folded his arms over his chest.

“Back at home, I attended a few ceremonies when some people in our pack died,” said Mondo, setting the sort of mood that one would expect to find at a funeral. “I never gave any eulogy though, not even at our parents’ funerals. I was too weak and angry to talk right, so Daiya spoke for us. At the time, I just wanted to find that hunter and kill ‘em, but this time, I guess I’ve gotta talk, huh?”

He kicked at the ship, scuffing his boot on it, and unfolded his arms so he could place his hands onto his hips.

“You were my only bro, but I wouldn’t have traded you away for anyone else, even when you were getting on my nerves.”

Mondo trudged over to the rail around the ship and gripped it. His head tilted forward and for a while, he didn’t say anything, but just as Touko began to wonder if he had finished his speech, he resumed talking.

“I wanna be angry at you,” he told the sea, which though it rose and fell, like a person’s chest as they breathed, it gave no indication that it was alive or listening. Maybe that made it easier to talk to. He held onto the rail harder and hunched his shoulders. “I know it’s not your fault, but... shit, what am I supposed to do now? I loved you. I dunno what I’ll be doing next, but I’ll keep living for the both of us, okay?”

Mondo forced a hand off the rail and rubbed his eyes roughly with one row of knuckles.

“‘Loved you’... I still do,” he corrected himself. “Always will.”

Touko’s insides squirmed. She glanced away. “That man was just your brother, right?”

He turned to her but didn’t say anything.

“Or was he m-more...?” she persisted.

“Fukawa-chan!” Aoi said, horrified. “That’s worse than what Hagakure said. Are you honestly going to say that sort of stuff at Daiya’s funeral?”

Touko jolted. “W-What?”

“Can’t you just... not say something mean? Some of us knew Daiya for years, you know.”

Sakura nodded. “Asahina’s right. I suggest that you keep your mouth shut.”

No one came to Touko’s defence. Touko chewed on her lips but did as told. Mondo gave her a look more confused than offended, though it was hard to tell with his facial structure, and he carried on with his eulogy, telling stories about climbing trees, falling out of trees and climbing more trees. Her
anger manifested as static in her brain, so she didn’t process a lot of what Mondo said, but by the
time he began to recount the story of how he and Daiya came to be able to ride motorcycles, she
found herself able to follow along with the story.

“So Monobear somehow got hold of these motorbikes, but no one wanted to use them. Like... they
hadn’t been around for long, so they didn’t know if they were safe. Even the people from urban
areas hadn’t seen one until then. Before, me and Daiya had been working behind the scenes, so
Monobear decided to get us trained. We almost killed ourselves a few times, but we practiced
whenever we could, and then we got real good at riding them.”

Mondo sighed and his eyes went vacant, head turned toward the sea.

“He was an awesome dude,” Yasuhiro agreed. “So was Tengan-chi... He taught me and the Oowada
Brothers how to pilot the ship if anything happened to him, and he told all these stories about being
at sea. He was just... like... a nice old guy, and that’s the way I’m gonna remember him.”

Byakuya squinted and said, “You were just saying before how you were willing to fight him over
gambling.”

“People change, Togami-chi.”

A few of the others chimed in with their thoughts on Daiya and Kazuo, of small conversations, of
things ranging from Kazuo teaching Aoi and Masaru to whistle to Daiya threatening any members of
the audience that he overheard discuss Aoi in an inappropriate manner.

As the ceremony came to a close, Makoto turned to Byakuya and Touko.

“Do you guys have anything to say?” asked Makoto.

“Nothing that hasn’t been said already,” replied Byakuya.

Makoto looked at Touko. “What about you, Fukawa-san?”

Touko fidgeted. “N-Not really...”

“Go on!” said Makoto.

“As long as it’s not mean,” said Aoi, but she didn’t seem angry anymore.

A choked gasp cracked between Touko’s lips. She narrowed her eyes at Aoi but stood up. Makoto
and Aoi flashed Touko an encouraging smile each, and Yasuhiro thrust up his thumb, the rest of his
hand balled into a fist. They all received a glance from Touko, who cast her eyes down to Byakuya.
He nodded.

Touko lifted her chin. With her fingers interlocked and her shoulders forward, she spoke.

“I... didn’t get to learn as much about any of them as I possibly could,” she admitted. “B-But... we all
spent time together, on this ship, for a month, and I couldn’t easily avoid you guys. You would barge
into the captain’s room, interrupting my time with Togami-kun, dunking your dirty noses in the
sanctuary of our room...”

Everyone frowned.

“... however, I concede... that it wasn’t a completely bad experience.”

Several people relaxed their brows. Kyouko even smiled.
“All of this happened so suddenly... It really makes you think how quickly someone can disappear forever,” said Touko. She wrapped her arms around herself but otherwise didn’t change her posture. “And sometimes... there are things you wanted to know... wanted to do... but then you wait too long, and you find that the opportunity has passed forever.”

Touko twisted her body and looked down at Byakuya. He stared up at her calmly. Her heart leaped and stumbled, and she turned her head away, feeling warmth rise to her face. The others paid close attention to her and she fought not to melt.

“That’s all,” she said, and she flumped to the deck, slightly dizzy.

Aoi whimpered, but behind her hands that rubbed at her eyes, she grinned.

All that was left to do was to send the two corpses into the sea. Yasuhiro and Kyouko joined forces to toss Kazuo’s hammock into the sea, while Mondo dragged Daiya to the edge. He hesitated, unable to see his brother through the material. His teeth gritted and with a surge of strength, he pushed Daiya overboard, and stayed there long after Daiya had vanished from sight. The sea, ignorant of what transpired, pawed playfully at the ship.

By the time night fell, Mondo descended to the lower decks with an unlit cigar, and the only people above deck were Byakuya, Touko and over at the helm, Yasuhiro. For added privacy, Touko helped Byakuya to the port, far away from Yasuhiro, and they lay next to the upside down boat bound by taut rope. Nearby was the submarine, which couldn’t fit through the companionway. Byakuya pointedly refused to face it, which meant he angled his face toward Touko. The two of them lay on their backs, side-by-side, under a sky punctured with stars. While Byakuya studied them, his lips barely parted, Touko admired the star next to her.

Beside them, the lantern that she brought out illuminated his sharp features, from the forest of eyelashes to the slope of his nose to the twin hills of his lips.

“Fukawa,” he said, but his eyes explored the sky.

She breathed in. Her tongue tripped on drool as she tried to articulate words. “Y-Yes, Togami-kun?”

Byakuya turned his head toward her, face serious enough to be giving a death sentence.

“What you said earlier, about waiting for too long...”

He trailed off.

“Togami-kun?” she prompted.

His head rolled so he stared up at the sky again.

“When I grew up, my mother was very cold,” he said, seemingly changing the subject. “As I have told you, I was the youngest mermaid to take part in the competition to decide who would be my father’s sole heir. I wasn’t a product of love, but an investment. Therefore, I used to assume that was the reason why she didn’t treat me as many of the peasants treated their children.”

Byakuya furrowed his brow.

“Never before had the youngest ever come out victorious... alive. And then, one day, after a stargazing session with a tutor, I went to find my mother to inform her of my latest progress. However, when I was outside of her chamber, I heard sobbing.”
“Was it your mother?” asked Touko.

“Yes. She was with Pennyworth, and she told him that she didn’t think she would be ready to lose me. I listened to them for a while and then I backtracked and called for her. When I reached her room again, her eyes were pink and there were pearls on her table, but she greeted me coolly. Perhaps that is why my mother never showed me any affection. She thought that if she created an emotional bond with me, it would hurt more if I was defeated. Up until then, I thought she was strong, but she had become attached to me anyway, so she wasn’t.”

Touko opened her mouth and breathed in, but Byakuya didn’t leave her enough time to formulate a rebuttal.

“However, I have realised something. Something that I only realised fairly recently. You and the others came to rescue me, and when Enoshima fired that harpoon at me, you stopped it with your mind. Could it really be that you wanted one of my scales so much, that it unlocked a new level of magical ability in you? Or could it be...?”

Her heart hammered in her chest and in her ears, so loud that when he paused again, she thought that he might snap at her to silence it so that she could hear what he had to say next. And she would silence it. She would do so much for him.

He pointed up. Their arms bumped, touching only briefly, but her arm tingled for longer. “Can you tell me another story about the stars?”

Once again, he had changed the topic, and it her heart ruptured, but she steeled herself and tilted her head closer to him.

“O-Okay.” Touko raised her arm in a similar fashion. “The constellation that I’m going to talk about contains a few of the brightest stars out there, so we’ll be able to find it. It’s called Delphinus.”

“If the stars are connected together, it makes a picture, doesn’t it?” he asked. She nodded. “Draw it.”

Touko sat up and opened her basket. Inside of it, among the used plates and cups from dinner, she found two books, both of which she pulled out. One of the books was her spell book and the other contained all sorts of information on space, including constellations. She borrowed it from Towa Library before they set off on their expedition, because she rightfully thought that it may come in useful, even if that usefulness was giving her and Byakuya something to talk about rather than using the stars to navigate.

Just in case.

And not to boast, but she wanted the chance to show off her knowledge to Byakuya.

“Here.” Touko remained sitting up but scooted back so she sat near his head, and she held the book between them so that he could see the pages that it was open on. She adjusted her hold so one of her fingers rested near the Delphinus constellation. The book rather helpfully joined the stars together with lines. “Delphinus, also known as the dolphin.”

Byakuya’s brow creased. “It doesn’t resemble a dolphin. It is just a diamond with a tail.”

“It’s supposed to be like a dolphin leaping out of the water,” she explained. She tilted her head back and searched the sky. Her eyes widened and she shot up an arm. “There!”

He followed the end of her finger and unleashed his gaze onto the unknown above them.
“I see it,” he said. “What is the story behind it?”

Touko passed him the book, which he skimmed the pages on show of before setting it down while she talked.

“Due to the constellation being incredibly old, it has roots in various different cultures. For example, the Chinese refer to it as the Black Tortoise of the North, though in some places, it is known simply as the Black Warrior. It is one of four mythical creatures in the Chinese constellations and represents the winter and north regions. It’s often accompanied by a snake that has coiled around the tortoise’s neck, and the constellation is commonly associated with longevity and wisdom.”

Byakuya’s lips flattened.

“But what is their story?” he asked.

“It protects the north of a large city and in a classic novel, it served as two generals - a snake general and a tortoise general - that worked under the king of the north.” Touko laced her fingers together on her lap. “W-What about I tell you the myths of them from Ancient Greece?”

She gave birth to a smirk.

“I think... y-you’ll find them interesting,” she told him.

“Fine,” he said coolly, regardless of her expression or sly tone.

Touko reclined and lay the back of her head against the flat surface of the ship, and as discreetly as she could, she turned her head a smidgen to the side, toward Byakuya. The upturned corners of her lips pricked her cheeks, bleeding a pink tint on her face lit up by the nearby lantern.

“In Greek mythology, it represents a dolphin,” she said, “and there are actually two stories. In one, there was a god called Poseidon...”

She imagined Poseidon, carving his white outline in the black sky that without its darkness, the white could not exist. Could not live. Black was the beginning. It was life. His hair tumbled out behind him, long, thick, and billowing like the ship’s sails. He gripped his trident and slowly tipped his head back, standing tall.

Well, she thought she imagined it, but then Byakuya inhaled sharply and snapped his head around to stare at her.

“Is that your doing?” he said.

“W-What?” she said. She blinked a few times, and Poseidon started to fade.

Byakuya shook her upper arm. “It is. Concentrate, Fukawa. Whatever happened in the cave must have unlocked some sort of magic power in you that doesn’t require potions or words.”

Touko trembled. Poseidon continued to flake.

“T-That’s...! Is it even possible?” she asked.

“Obviously.” He rolled his eyes. “You’ve done that before.”

However, she hadn’t worked out how yet. This would be the third time that she cast magic without a potion or magic word since she was young, when magic exploded out of her with extreme emotions.
“We can figure that out later,” said Byakuya. He shook her again. “For now, let us take advantage of this. It seems harmless... Continue the story.”

She swallowed then licked her lips, but she tried to continue. “S-So... where was I?”

“You mentioned a god.”

“Right! Y-You’re as intelligent as always,” said Touko, babbling a little. Byakuya didn’t deny what she said, or attempt to tone down the compliment, or even thank her. Some would have found that arrogant, but her grin opened up to reveal teeth. Honest people were her some of her favourite kind of people. “Poseidon... He fell in love with a mermaid called Amphitrite, whose beauty took his breath away, whose singing was pure, with the song of a siren’s its shadow, and whose smiles could bring about sunrise with their beauty and started each day.”

The lines in the projected Poseidon sharpened and he stopped falling apart. Near him materialised a mermaid with cropped hair, who swished her tail absentmindedly as she sang. Touko couldn’t make her sing, but music notes danced around Amphitrite.

“However, Amphitrite wanted to protect herself from others. She feared the concept of getting close to other people and exposing herself, which would be sure to reveal weakness. Also afraid that by coupling with another being, she would lose her worth, lose her strengths, she fled, no matter how her heart ached within the shell that she had developed around her to protect herself.”

Amphitrite placed a hand over her heart and swam away. Poseidon reached out for her, but she couldn’t risk even a glance back. She dissolved, and his arm fell, as did his head.

“Distraught, he recruited searchers to help him find her, and one was a dolphin named Delphinus.”

Fireworks silently erupted out of Poseidon that formed the outline of various animals. Birds. Beasts. Humans. One was a dolphin, who hopped away. In the aftermath of each bounce, it left a small explosion that dissolved shortly after, but after its final bounce, it left behind Amphitrite, who didn’t disappear.

“Delphinus found Amphitrite and persuaded her to give Poseidon a chance. She did, and she fell in love with him back, and they married...”

Amphitrite turned around and took Poseidon’s hands in her own. They leaned toward each other and locked lips. Delphinus swam laps around them.

“As a reward,” said Touko, “Poseidon immortalised Delphinus in the stars.”

The next time that Delphinus swam over them, he froze over the constellation, and the scene faded.

Her story came to an end, and she didn’t realise until then how out of breath she had become. She panted, not focusing on anyone or anything in her vision.

“Whoa! Was that you, Fukawa-chi?” Yasuhiro called out all the way at the other end of the ship.

Face burning, she scowled and hissed, “I-I’m not shouting...”

“Huh?” Yasuhiro yelled. “Did you say something? Hold on, I’m coming over!”

Yasuhiro’s footsteps thudded as he hurried over, getting louder as he got closer, and he stopped by them, almost kicking over the lantern. He mopped his brow. “Give a guy a warning next time! I was quaking the whole time that light show went on! Worse, if I let loose in my pants, I wouldn’t have
been able to get changed until I swapped shifts with Oowada-chi!”

“I don’t want to know about your fetishes!” Touko said. “D-Did you consider just being less nosey?”

Not put off by her words, Yasuhiro grinned.

“Got room for one more?”

“Physically, yes,” she said, but before she could say that didn’t mean he was invited, Yasuhiro plopped down on the other side of Byakuya and crossed his legs.

Byakuya glared at him. “That doesn’t mean that you’re welcome to join us,” he said, of the same mind as Touko, apparently. Her heart swelled at the implications. “Shouldn’t you be piloting the ship?”

He had more than one reason to object, then.

“Psh.” Yasuhiro flapped a hand. “It’ll be fine. We haven’t hung out in ages... or ever. Like, just us three, ‘right? You two have been hanging out for the last few nights, ever since Togami-chi came back... though the two of you have been pretty close for a while now, ‘right?”

Yasuhiro reached over and gave her shoulder a friendly shake. Touko jerked her shoulder away. He retracted his hand and rubbed his chin.

“Fukawa enjoys my company,” rationalised Byakuya.

“And you must enjoy it too,” said Yasuhiro.

Byakuya hesitated. “I... She’s tolerable...”

From Byakuya, that could be considered a compliment, and Touko shivered. Yasuhiro let out a laugh.

“That’s a big compliment for someone like you. You’re a funny guy, Togami-chi,” he said.

In response, Byakuya raised his hand and held it in front of his mouth, but he didn’t say anything.

Touko glared, but she couldn’t inject as much venom as usual when she was in such high spirits.

“W-What do you mean by that? Are you saying normally no one enjoys my company?”

This was only true before she met Byakuya, and maybe even some time after. Admittedly, it hadn’t been love at first sight like in the novels that she read, in the stories that she penned, but she couldn’t deny the joy that bubbled inside of her now just by looking at him. Being with him.

“N-No! Well. I mean, uh...” Yasuhiro showed her his palms. “Why don’t you do another light show?”

“You did say there were two versions of the myth,” said Byakuya quickly, also eager for a topic change. “Come on. Chop, chop.”

She let her soft glare linger a while more on Yasuhiro before she stared up at the sky. Yasuhiro put his hands behind him, reclined, and then slipped his hands underneath his head. Due to how much room his bush of dreads took up, he couldn’t lie as close as Byakuya could to Touko.

“In another version of the myth,” she said, voice shaking but gradually steadying, “the dolphin was
placed in the sky by Apollo, as a show of gratitude to a dolphin for saving the life of Arion, a musician from the island of Lesbos who was skilled with the Lyre.”

“I think Asahina-chi’s from there,” said Yasuhiro, but he was soon distracted by the changing light above them.

One star grew a body around it. Limbs stretched out, a head sprouted from the clump of light that was its body, and it became a man who created silent music notes with his lyre. A ship materialised below and around him. Yasuhiro covered his mouth and gasped. Byakuya’s lips parted, a crack in his stony face.

“During his travels, he amassed an impressive wealth, but on a ship journey back home, his crew, greedy, conspired against him,” said Touko, too invested in imagining and creating the story to continue to be nervous. “They planned to murder him and take his money for themselves.”

The other people on the ship cornered him, brandishing swords. Arion backed away until he stood at the back of the ship.

“As a last request, he asked to play a final tune, which they allowed. As he drew to the end of his piece, he jumped off the ship, preferring to depart from his life on his own terms.”

Just like she said, Arion jumped off and plummeted through the sky. He didn’t fall toward Touko and the other two, but rather, he plunged as if in orbit of the Earth.

“Howevers a dolphin, who heard his music, caught him, and took him to Greece, where Apollo immortalised the dolphin by placing it next to the constellation Lyra, which represents Arion’s Lyre.”

A dolphin emerged from the space within the stars of the Delphinus constellation, swam down faster than Arion fell and caught Arion on its back. The ship transformed into Apollo, an old man that looked like Kazuo, and he waved a staff. Everything up there that Touko conjured, including Apollo himself, disappeared, with the lines of the Delphinus constellation forming the skeleton of the dolphin being the last to fade away.

With that story over too, she could shut her eyes and focus on just breathing while she waited for her head to stop spinning. Her eyes felt hot, not like a raging fire but a piece of metal left outside on a summer’s afternoon.

“That was terrifying terrific!” Yasuhiro announced, but Byakuya’s grin was why her face glowed. Yasuhiro grabbed his shirt, hand over his heart. “You should have told us that you could do that party trick. If I could do that, I would have added it to my routine... I mean my seances, just to add a bit of flare to them. Or after those other guys went to sleep, we could have grabbed some bumbo, kicked back and relaxed and watched our favourite plays, all for free. Though we could have let the others come for a fee...”

Yasuhiro rubbed his chin as he considered the possibilities.

Touko opened her eyes. They didn’t feel hot anymore, but they felt heavy.

“It’s not that simple... What you saw... that’s the first time I’ve done something like that.” She wanted to swallow, but her throat was reluctant to loosen its weak but noticeable clench. “And I didn’t even use a potion.”

“Huh?” Surprise fluttered through Yasuhiro in a spasm. “You mean... you didn’t use a potion again? Are you sure that witches normally don’t need to and it’s just you who usually does?”
“S-Shut up, I’m sure! My mentor said! I still can’t perform levitation spells without a potion!”

“Maybe it’s just you two then...”

Byakuya pulled a face as Touko’s whine grated on his ears.

“When we meet this other witch,” he said, and Touko grew quieter, “she will be able to shed some light on what is the norm.”

“R-Right,” said Touko. Her stomach hardened.

Yasuhiro sat up and rose into a standing position. He stretched an arm above his head and tilted his body from one side to the other. When he seemed to have loosened up his muscles to his satisfaction, he gave his two companions half a grin.

“It won’t be long until we reach land, I reckon,” he said. “Then we’ve got to figure out what we’re going to do with those kids. Hopefully, Naegi-chi’s right and there’s an orphanage not too far away... and we’ll have to send a telegram to Daimon-chi’s father.”

He scratched his head and returned to the helm with slow but long steps.

Byakuya watched him for a dozen paces before turning back to the sky.

“Fukawa, you must need to sleep,” he said.

“Y-Yeah,” she said. She yawned and wiggled. Since she moved in with the rest of the crew, she had been sleeping in a hammock, and though they definitely weren’t conventional beds, they were more comfortable to lie on than the floor of the top deck. More wiggling didn’t make her any more comfortable.

“Then we’ll head down now,” he said. Touko rummaged through her basket and found her vial of potion for a levitation spell. “If someone invades our ship again, I don’t trust Hagakure to be able to fight them off.”

“You don’t need Oogami or Asahina nearby... I can protect you,” said Touko. Her fatigued mind entertained her with an image of her standing next to Byakuya. The two of them were surrounded by the Pirates of Hope, and clones of Monobear and Celes, but she obliterated them into dust with a wave of an arm.

“Fukawa,” he said.

She pulled her head out of her fantasy as she pulled the vial out of the basket, not realising that he wanted to say more than her name until he did.

“When you learn to control that strength of yours, then I’ll just need you,” admitted Byakuya with absolute seriousness and conviction.

Touko almost choked on the potion.

No matter how much Yasuhiro writhed his body, he could not escape the rope coiled around him, firmly tied with a knot. While he struggled with his restraints, clad only in blue-and-white underwear, the rest of the crew gazed down at him somberly.

“Hey, Hagakure...” Aoi squeezed her hands together. “When did you become like this?”
“I’ve always been like this. My personality... Wait a minute!” He jerked his head. “What do you mean by that? My mother calls me a delight!”

“We mean when did you become tied up, you moron,” said Touko with a scornful twist to her mouth.

Yasuhiro took a break from trying to escape his rope prison. The fold in his brow flattened and he dipped his head forward.

“I got mobbed by a bunch of gremlins and you’re calling me mean names?” asked Yasuhiro in a low tone. “I’ve been like this for hours. I could have died...” He raised his voice along with his head and started wiggling again. “... and you guys are just standing around and being cruel to me! What sort of friends are you?”

Everyone took turns to blink.

“Gremlins? You mean those kids?” asked Mondo.

“Yeah!” Yasuhiro nodded fervently. “They cornered me, took my clothes, tied me up, gagged me and then went into their submarine. I tried to reason with them, but Daimon-chi must really not have wanted to go back to his dad.”

Everyone turned their heads toward the other side of the ship, which was on a lower level to them. In support of Yasuhiro’s claim, the submarine was nowhere to be seen.

“It’s gone!” Aoi gasped.

Byakuya gritted his teeth. Makoto swayed, as if the submarine might just be invisible from a certain angle, while Kyouko cupped her chin.

“I’ll go check if they took anything with them,” said Mondo, and he ran down the stairs and hurried to the companionway.

“They’ll have gone back to their lair,” said Byakuya with darkened features, not just because he had a hand over his eyes to shield them from the late morning rays. He would have worn his glasses if they weren’t in the captain’s cabin. “Hagakure, you imbecile, you’re far bigger than them.”

“They jumped me!” Yasuhiro argued. “Komaeda-chi was there too, and he’s bigger than them.”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. Don’t make me put that thing,” a sock, “back in your mouth. We need to recapture them.” Byakuya bared his teeth. “They’re not getting away with what they did...”

Kyouko shook her head. “It would take a few days and they may not even be there... There’s a good chance that they have gone to shore themselves, or made camp somewhere else.”

“Did that stop you tracking down Celes?” asked Byakuya, and Kyouko’s eyes widened - not by much, but he latched onto the telltale movement and sneered at her. “No, it didn’t. You went out of your way to locate her so that you could kill her, because she murdered your mother. Then afterwards, you could live your life as you pleased, without a chain around your neck... yet you refuse to let me go through the same thing?”

Silence cloaked them, thick and oppressive. Byakuya refused to let his expression soften, and the first of them to look away was Kyouko. She flicked her eyes, almost rolling them, and stroked her hair.
“... Are you done?” she asked.

He tensed. The others shifted like they were about to do something, like leave or speak, only to end up not. Kyouko met Byakuya’s eyes again.

Makoto wet his lips.

“Um, even I think that is cold, Kirigiri-san,” he said quietly, but the lack of a reaction from her implied that she didn’t care.

Yasuhiro’s eyes darted between Kyouko and Byakuya.

“Could you untie me now? Please?” he said, but no one paid him any mind, stuck in the web that Byakuya’s and Kyouko’s gazes combined into.

“You’re very convincing when you put forth your assumptions as analyses,” said Kyouko. She stretched out her neck for a moment, not losing eye contact with Byakuya. “But they’re just assumptions, aren’t they? You don’t know me as well as you think you do. You are judging me based on my behaviour, but I do feel in the same ways as the rest of you. It’s just my face doesn’t match my true feelings, most of the time, but I assure you that I’m not incapable of emotion.”

The smirk on Kyouko’s lips wasn’t playful.

“So w-what are your true feelings?” blurted Touko. She hooked a finger around one corner of her lips.

Kyouko glanced at Touko and then clenched her fists. Her gaze fell onto one of Byakuya’s hands, pressed against the floor.

“After I killed Celes, my chest felt lighter, but there was nothing to fill in the space that her existence had taken up. I threw myself into small cases, but even with my colleagues, who now praised me for catching Genocider Syo, and Naegi-kun, who left the newspaper he worked for to become my assistant full-time...” A sigh capitalised Kyouko’s next string of words. “... at the end of the day, I would go to my apartment, and I would brew tea, read books and bathe, and I would sleep with an emptiness in me that when I lay on my back, in bed, it made me struggle to breathe.”

She tried to blink away emotion like it was just dust in her eyes, but not totally successful with doing that, she spoke louder, with more force, to cast shadow over her face. To detract from how her eyelashes had fluttered, how her face had tried to contort in a reflection of her true feelings, only to be stopped by years of practice. Aoi squeezed Kyouko’s shoulder, but Kyouko didn’t respond to it.

“My father left me in the care of my grandfather shortly after my mother’s death, and I never saw him again. He never gave a reason, so I would wait at the window each day, thinking he might come back, until my pain grew into hate. From then on, I was determined not to depend on anyone else, in case they left me like he did. I fixated on avenging my mother, shaking off everyone who tried to get close to me, and only Naegi-kun and my grandfather stayed by my side, even if my grandfather doesn’t have the strength to travel around as frequently as me. I am glad that I know who killed my mother, and that Celes cannot do it again, but my recovery stagnated until you asked us for help acquiring a boat, actually.”

Touko, sucked into Kyouko’s backstory, gave a start, blinking. A small smile pulled at Kyouko’s lips. Though Touko wouldn’t have described it as a happy smile, she wouldn’t have described it as ungenuine or sad.

Makoto blushed faintly, failing to fight down a grin. Mondo had reappeared from below deck, but he
stopped part of the way over to them, listening intently.

“Making friends... helping my friends... moving forward... that was what healed me most,” admitted Kyouko. “When I was younger, during one of my first cases, I burned my hands after putting my trust in the wrong person. I thought I would never trust anyone again after that. That is why I always wear gloves, because it left deep scars. But all of you, Naegi-kun... you have all inspired me to open up, bit by bit, and one day, I might show you my hands.”

A smile pulled on her lips, just a small one, but when she turned back to Byakuya, it disappeared.

“Togami-kun, I can understand your anger. Your hate,” she said. “But those kids were manipulated and when given another evil wrapped up in a bow, they mistook it for goodness. Whatever you wish to do to them won’t turn back time. Enoshima is dead. That’s enough.”

Byakuya opened his mouth.

“Togami,” said Sakura. He hesitated. “After you set off for the woman who healed my Kenichiro, I will look for the children and make sure that they don’t harm anyone again.”

Sakura noticed Aoi chewing on her lower lip.

“I won’t harm them,” she assured her. “But I will make sure that they do not hurt others.”

Aoi’s lower lip sprung free.

“I’ll come too,” said Aoi.

Byakuya pursed his lips.

“Togami-kun,” said Kyouko, and though he didn’t acknowledge her, she continued speaking regardless, “the best thing you can do is find something, or someone, to fill in what your people’s demise left in you. Continuing to live...”

“... is the biggest middle finger you can give,” finished Touko.

Kyouko stared at her, at a loss for words for a few seconds. She turned her head away, just slightly, and blinked. “You could phrase it like that.”

He didn’t reply, giving no indication whether he agreed with them or intended to follow their advice, and his solemn expression didn’t give any hints either. Touko didn’t know what to say. On one hand, she wanted to support him, but on the other hand, she also wanted the best for him, and Kyouko did make some good points, so maybe to support him, she had to go against him.

After a bit, Yasuhiro said, “Guys...?”

Makoto scratched behind his ear. “We should untie him...”
“We’re finally here,” said Aoi, face lit up by the lantern that she jiggled in her hand. She swept her gleaming eyes across everyone, lingering longest on Mondo, who turned his back to her. Her smile froze on her face, melting off slowly.

“Sweet, sweet land!” Yasuhiro cried out. He fell to his knees and peppered the sand with sloppy kisses. After a few of these, he straightened up and began spitting and clawing at his wet lips, trying to scrape sand off them.

Aoi perked up enough to giggle quietly at Yasuhiro’s antics while next to her, but that might have been an act. Makoto gave a small grin. Nearby, Kyouko’s lips quivered, and she stroked her bottom lip briefly before twisting her body away to hide her expression. Her movements didn’t go unnoticed by Makoto, who tugged on her arm, and she turned back, allowing everyone to see her budding smile in the light of her lantern.

Sakura watched Yasuhiro with creases between her eyebrows, on the border between concerned and amused. She lay on her stomach near the water, carried off the ship by Mondo and Aoi. Though the beach appeared deserted, levitating them posed too great a risk regardless of the protection of the night. Touko looked up at the Moon, spying on them through the clouds, and fidgeted. The longer they stayed, the more opportunities there were for someone to stumble across them.

To the right of Sakura, Byakuya grimaced, brought onto the shore by Yasuhiro via piggyback.

“Let’s just go already,” grumbled Touko, wringing her skirt. She chewed on her lip, one leg twitching. Faraway lamp posts glowed as orbs, like the town tried to recreate the stars that studded the sky’s black coat, but they could only create the illusion if one stood on the beach, where a person would have to climb stone steps to rise to the higher level that the town and its lamp posts were situated on.

Under the night sky, the beach resembled the one near Touko’s though it lacked a cliff like the one that she lived on, instead just having a long one that overhung the beach that the town, their next destination, sat on top of like a flat cap. Also, due to it being so late, there was no one there except Touko’s group. Their ship had been piloted into harbour and with the help of a muscular man with slicked back dark hair and a goatee, they secured it and were able to disembark, taking Byakuya and Sakura off once the man left.

Touko tried to wiggle her toes in her loafers, but they fit too snugly to allow for much movement. She would have to buy a new pair at some point. Her sandals were somewhere in her luggage, which she and Aoi carried out between them, but she didn’t want to search for them in case something small accidentally fell out. Everyone else had left their things on the ship, but Touko didn’t want to be apart from Kameko, her potions and spell book.
Besides, if someone snooped through her possessions, that would spell trouble for her.

“Oogami-san, do you know where Kenichiro lives?” asked Kyouko, keeping her voice hushed lest hidden seagulls overhear and soar out to spill their secrets to the sleeping town nearby.

“I know the address,” Sakura replied, slightly louder than Kyouko. “I have not visited his residence for myself, but Asahina has. My girl,” she turned to Aoi, “do you remember where it is?”

Aoi nodded eagerly.

“Yup! I mean, I’m pretty sure. I wrote it on my palm three times... but if you want to double check with me, that’s okay.” she said. She rubbed the back of her neck and gave a titter that suggested that any reminders would be more for Aoi’s benefit than to reassure Sakura. Smiling, Aoi lowered her hand and bounced her heels against the sand. “It’s like Fukawa-chan’s cottage, only it has more rooms. Though... I only went into his main room and kitchen... so I don’t know what it’s like exactly.”

Her body became still, but her smile didn’t falter.

“Won’t he be asleep right now?” asked Makoto with a frown.

“Assuming he’s even there,” said Byakuya.

Touko hugged herself but wasn’t able to suppress her shiver.

“That’s just your nerves making you think that, Togami-chi.” Yasuhiro had removed all of the sand from his mouth by now and was standing tall. He folded his arms over his chest, brandishing a broad grin. “My divinations are telling me that this guy will be there.”

One of Makoto’s eyes closed halfway and the one that remained fully open tensed. “Don’t you need your crystal ball to tell the future?”

“With poor accuracy?” Touko tacked on.

“I’m a Jack of all trades,” claimed Yasuhiro.

She pursed her lips. “And... a master of none...”

Yasuhiro’s grin shrunk as his face crumpled.

“Low blow, Fukawa-chi,” he said, and he turned his head to the side with a flick.

Touko breathed in.

“Can we hurry this up?” Kyouko piped up before Touko could roundhouse kick a finishing blow onto him. “Oowada-kun has been awake for a long time, and I’m sure plenty of us could do with some rest.”

Mondo grunted.

“Sure!” Aoi bobbed her head. “Kenichiro won’t mind if we wake him up, anyway. We can set up camp there, get some shuteye and then head off by early afternoon. I’ll be right back, okay?” She jogged backward so she still faced them, heading toward the stone stairs that the cliff wore like a sash. “Just in case he’s not there...”

Touko rolled her eyes as Aoi spun around and shot off. Sakura shook her head but she was smiling.
“What’s Kenichiro-san like?” asked Makoto as they watched Aoi’s silhouette grow smaller and smaller.

“What?” said Sakura. “You will like him.”

Ten minutes later, Kyouko said, “They’re here.”

Everyone looked up. Touko lifted her head, remaining seated on her suitcase, and counted two far off figures sharing a lantern. They briskly made their way over to Touko and the others and when they were close enough, Touko scrutinised the person with Aoi. He had white hair like Sakura, but it only reached his shoulders. Though he had some muscle, it paled in comparison to that of Sakura, Mondo and also Yasuhiro.

He offered a small smile without showing any teeth.

“Hello, Kenichiro,” said Sakura. The man turned to her and he seemed to stop breathing. Sakura’s lips quivered and she shut her eyes for a moment, opening them again after a nod. “It is nice to see you again.”

“Likewise,” he said.

Kenichiro walked closer to Sakura, stopping in front of her, and dropped to one knee. He spread out his arms and after Sakura shuffled closer, he swooped through the gap between them and enveloped her in a tight embrace. Sakura snaked her arms around him, reciprocating the gesture, and looked up at Aoi.

In a sterner voice, Sakura said, “Asahina, you shouldn’t have made him come all the way here.”

Aoi hunched her shoulders. A gentle laugh rose out of Kenichiro. He released Sakura and pulled back. Sakura let go of him with some reluctance.

“Please don’t blame Asahina. My health has got a lot better, and I insisted that I come here to see you... It has been a really long time.” Kenichiro grabbed onto her shoulders and stared into Sakura’s eyes. His smile threatened to split his face. “You’re as beautiful as I remember.”

Sakura coloured and pouted, unable to meet his gaze. He smirked, though not unkindly, and stood up.

“I won’t hold you guys up any longer,” he said. “You’ll probably be wanting to sleep... but when we arrive back at my home, I’d be interested in hearing how you all came together. It must be quite the story... Asahina only scraped the surface of it on the way here.”

Kyouko stared into what appeared to everyone else to be empty space. “You could write a book on it.”

Yasuhiro shifted his weight between feet as he turned to Sakura and Byakuya. He scratched himself on the head.

“So... are you guys gonna be hanging out here until we get back, or...?” Yasuhiro trailed off.

“No,” said Byakuya. “It’s safer if I stay with all of you. Also, I want to see this witch for myself, and she may need to examine me.”
Touko touched a hand over her heart. “E-Examine?”

No one paid her any mind.

“I wish to come as well, if that won’t be too much trouble,” said Sakura.

Kenichiro gawked at her. “Of course it isn’t! Sakura, it has been several years since we last met.”

Aoi playfully hit Yasuhiro on the head. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough for him to pull a face. She and Kenichiro carried Sakura between them and Yasuhiro gave Byakuya another piggyback. Everyone else gathered as much of Touko’s possessions into their arms as possible, and between them all, managed to carry everything. They trekked across the sand, up the stairs, over a short fence and they set their feet down on the pavement on the other side, where on the road beside it, two horses attached to a wagon waited for them.

The wagon couldn’t fit anything more than Touko’s possessions, the two mermaids and Touko, but it sufficed, and everyone else walked alongside. Fortunately, the journey only lasted five uneventful minutes or so, and then they arrived at the door of a bungalow like one that might be present on the glossy cover of a children’s fantasy book. Kenichiro’s home metaphorically cast a shadow over Touko’s cottage and made hers seem like a photograph in a newspaper that had been left out in the rain and trodden on several times. It boasted a tiled roof that slanted down toward the front and at the front flaunted two windows, both to the right of the door. Though the building wasn’t extravagant, it reminded Touko of the kind of person who stood smugly, chest thrust out, as they waited expectantly for someone to compliment them.

A small placard hung next to the door on a nail. Touko held her lantern closer to the placard and read ‘Purgatory Retreat’.

Having defeated Touko when it came to appearance, in terms of size, Kenichiro’s bungalow outperformed Touko’s cottage that now felt like a shack. Kenichiro directed them to the living room where there was a low table with mats beside all four of its edges. The longer sides of the table could comfortably seat three people while the shorter sides only one. Sakura lay on her stomach at one of the shorter ends, facing the table, and Byakuya positioned himself across from her. Everyone else filled in the gaps. Yasuhiro, Kyouko and Aoi sat on one side, and Makoto and Mondo on the opposite. Touko decided to leave that spot for Kenichiro, as it was next to Sakura, and shuffled over to Byakuya. She sat between him and Yasuhiro, by the corner of the table.

“Does anyone want a drink?” asked Kenichiro.

“Tea, please,” said Kyouko, and heads nodded in a domino effect around her.

Kenichiro disappeared into another room. When he returned a few minutes later to peaceful silence, he carefully poured everyone a cup and sat down where Touko had left a space. Touko and the others sipped the dark liquid amber that he served them. Its taste was nuttier than other kinds of green tea that she had before, and by the time she cradled her empty cup in her hands, the warm, earthy flavour nuzzled her in a heavy embrace, and Kenichiro had been brought almost up-to-date on their adventures.

“I’ve only got one bed,” apologised Kenichiro.

Aoi rubbed her eyes and nodded, not so much to indicate that she had heard what he said but more to acknowledge that he said anything at all.

“You have it,” Sakura told Kenichiro, unaffected by the tea. Across from her, Byakuya curled his
lips at Makoto, who had slumped against an indifferent Mondo.

“You’re my guests. It’s fine, really. I can pull out some blankets and bigger mats for everyone to sleep with here.” Kenichiro raised his voice, though not by much. “So, who wants the bed?”

No one showed their hand or said anything. Yasuhiro skimmed his eyes over everyone else before elevating his hand.

“I’ll take it,” said Yasuhiro, and he finished his sentence with a yawn.

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Touko’s eyes crept open. The room was still dark, though not pitch black. She sat up slowly on the couch that she had claimed for herself and put on her glasses, which she had held in one hand by her head as she phased in and out of sleep for the last however many hours. Through the window, she saw the sky was a dull blue, in its transitional period between night and morning. A rim of light glowed at the bottom of what she could see of the sky, so if she was to make an educated guess, she would have said it was around five in the morning.

Everyone else seemed to be asleep around her. Touko peered down at Kyouko, who lay closest to her, still wearing her clothes from the night before like the others. And like many of the others, Kyouko had ear plugs embedded in her ears. Even though Yasuhiro was in the bedroom, away from the others who set up camp in the living room, his snoring rumbled like he was there with them. Kyouko’s even breathing suggested that the earplugs were fulfilling their arduous task of blocking him out, so Touko looked away to inspect the rest of the room.

Kenichiro, Sakura and Byakuya were absent. Her heart missed a beat. They couldn’t have gone far. Two of them didn’t have legs. She shakily got to her feet. The only place she could think of that they would go to was the potion making witch, and her stomach plummeted as the possibility that they left without her entered her mind.

With her heart quivering in her throat, Touko picked her way around bodies and inched open the door. She slipped into the narrow hallway and took a few steps toward the front door before a low but unrestrained voice pricked her ears and stopped her in her tracks.

“So... why do you want to become a human?” asked Kenichiro, voice muffled, not coming from beyond the front door but from behind Touko.

“There is nothing left for me in the sea,” explained Byakuya from the same direction as Kenichiro.

Touko looked over her shoulder and spotted a door that led into the back garden. Unlike the front door, this one was ajar, and she crept over to it. At first, she could only see obnoxiously white picket fencing through the gap, but when she opened the door a bit more and poked her head out, her view of the garden improved.

A straight-edged pool took up about half of the garden, with Kenichiro sitting in a striped deckchair next to it. Byakuya and Sakura relaxed in the pool on their backs but as they, along with Kenichiro, faced away from the bungalow, none of them noticed her, and she didn’t plan on changing that for now.

“I have no interest in spending the rest of my life underwater. Growing up, I was always curious about the world beyond where I lived, and after Enoshima’s massacre of my people, I decided I wanted to rebuild elsewhere,” said Byakuya in the same tone one might describe a rainy day. “Like how the sea is a mystery to humans, the same can be said about land to me. Talking to Fukawa, I
learned that there is a lot left for me to discover, like plants that seem to die during winter but are full of life six months later. I want to see these things for myself.”

“And you’ve known Fukawa for a while?” asked Kenichiro.

“That’s correct,” replied Byakuya.

Kenichiro sat up straighter.

“Well, if she saved Asahina, then she has my respect,” said Kenichiro. He waved a hand. “After Asahina went missing, Sakura was heartbroken. I offered to help find her on land while she searched the sea, and I did travel for a while, but Sakura eventually told me to stay put... We didn’t know if Asahina was even alive still, you see.”

His hand sagged to his lap.

Sakura didn’t respond. Touko bit her lip and wrung two handfuls of her skirt, the same one that she wore the previous day.

“What is this witch like?” Byakuya finally asked.

Kenichiro shifted in his seat. “She’s a lovely woman, don’t get me wrong, but she has all these measures in place to make it impossible for anyone to just stumble upon her cottage, and the guides that have to take you there can be very... tricky.”

“Guides?” Byakuya repeated.

Byakuya tipped himself upright and with his back against the pool wall, he rested his arms on the tiled edge behind him. He turned his head toward Kenichiro. A chill shot through Touko, but Byakuya didn’t appear to have caught sight of her, so her heart rate slowed and levelled off.

“In the woods where her cottage is, there are three centaurs that will take you through all the necessary steps, but you have to prove yourself worthy to them first before they’ll show you the way,” said Kenichiro. “I’ll explain it more when everyone’s awake.”

Byakuya cupped his chin. “But they would know you already, so would you not be enough to prove to them that we can be trusted?”

A small laugh preceded Kenichiro’s next bit of dialogue.

“Probably, but they also use it as a way to get something from you,” replied Kenichiro. He twitched his head and started to count on his fingers. “I’ve been three times. The first time, I bumped into the witch at the market, and she took me to her home, but the next time, the centaurs made me get them something from the market, and on the last occasion, they had me wash them.”

Touko shuddered at the mental image and shrunk back a little, keeping her eyes on them.

Sakura positioned herself upright like Byakuya had done. Her hair clung to her body. “I’m sure that I could convince them to not waste our time.”

Kenichiro twisted his body toward her and showed his palms to Sakura.

“Please don’t trouble them or yourself,” said Kenichiro. “If it’s something strenuous, I’ll do it.”

She folded her arms over her chest.
“If it is, then you shouldn’t,” she told him, but he shook his head.

“Don’t worry, my health has got a lot better, and anyway, it won’t be anything that drags on,” Kenichiro assured her. “After everything that happened so far, I think everyone will appreciate it being relatively simple. They’re harmless, honest.”

He slapped himself on the lap with both hands.

“Well, I think we should start getting ready,” said Kenichiro. “While the others are getting ready, I can pop to the market and grab us something fresh for breakfast and maybe find something for the centaurs that’ll persuade them to go easy on us. Had I known you would be coming last night, I would have stocked up.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Sakura told him.

“I’ll treat you all to make up for it,” he promised anyway. “Now, are you sure that you two want to come along? I mean, it’ll take less than a day to get there, but if you’d rather stay here...”

“I’m sure,” said Byakuya. “This witch may need to study me up close, and I don’t want to wait for your return for the verdict.”

“I wish to come as well,” said Sakura. “Will that be a problem?”

“No! You can ride in the wagon, so it’s not a problem at all,” said Kenichiro, and he rose from his seat. The eyes of the other two followed his face. He stretched his arms over his head. “I’ll be back soon, okay?”

As far as Touko was aware, no one said anything confidential, but she didn’t feel like bumping into Kenichiro and being forced into an awkward exchange, so Touko dragged a foot behind her and turned on her heel, planning on slinking back into the living room before Kenichiro discovered that she had been listening in, and she almost walked into Kyouko.

Her heart leaped almost hard enough to shatter her chest. She slapped her hand over the impact zone and while her heart failed to break through, her scream pierced the air.

In a mess of heavy footsteps, Kenichiro arrived at the back door.

He gripped the frame tightly. “Was that you screaming, Fukawa? Is everything okay?”

Touko glanced at him and then fixed her eyes on Kyouko. “How long were you standing there for?”

“Not too long,” replied Kyouko unhelpfully. They both most likely had different ideas on what was ‘too’ long. She tucked some hair behind her ear. “I apologise for startling you...”

“Whatever...” Touko scowled and wrapped her arms around herself.

Kenichiro slackened his grip on the doorframe.

“Good morning, Fukawa, Kirigiri,” said Kenichiro, as bright as Touko’s expression was gloomy. “I’m sorry if we woke you. We’ll be leaving for the witch after breakfast, which will be ready in an hour or two. Please, feel free to use my shower before we leave, but make sure there’s enough hot water for everyone.”

His eyes flickered between the two of them.

“If you’ll excuse me...”
They stepped aside to give him more room to pass through, but even so, he had to squeeze past the two women. He strode over to the other end of the hallway, arms swinging lightly.

The front door clicked shut behind him, and then there was some silence.

“Fukawa-san, do you want to use the shower first?” asked Kyouko.

Touko hunched her shoulders. “I’ve never used one.”

“Never?”

Kyouko didn’t sound surprised.

“Don’t say that with such a cold face! My cottage has a bath,” Touko snapped, rounding on Kyouko, who leaned back slightly and offered a single blink. Touko gritted her teeth and withdrew slowly. “And... And I don’t need to wash much...”

“You should,” said Kyouko.

Touko jerked back and widened her eyes. Moments later, she screwed them up as she built up a glare. Kyouko didn’t move, but if she did, she would have shrugged.

“Oi. Fukawa, is that you making all that racket? Come here!” Byakuya called out, possibly inadvertently saving Kyouko’s life from Touko’s sharp tongue. His voice lured Touko out of the house, where grass tickled her bare ankles and bowed under her feet as she padded out.

He watched her approach, his eyes narrowed, which reminded her to fetch him his sunglasses at some point. Though, proper sunglasses would probably be for sale here. Touko chewed on a thumbnail.

While she thought she could spare some change for him, summer had ended almost a month ago and thinking about it, if he became a human, his eyes wouldn’t be so sensitive to sunlight, so he might not need them so much.

“Fukawa?” Byakuya prompted.

She stiffened and decelerated, but she didn’t stop walking.

“Y-Yes, Togami-kun?” Touko took that last few steps required to arrive near him and lowered her thumb from her mouth, sparing her nail from the wrath of her teeth for the time being. “You wanted me?”

Byakuya tilted his head forward, keeping his gaze on her. Her breathing suspended briefly.

“What do you mean by a shower?” he asked.

Touko put all of her weight on one foot and clutched her wrist. She gave her lips a swipe of her tongue.

“It’s a cage that pumps water onto you, and you use it to clean yourself of dirt,” she explained.

“It also means you won’t smell as bad, if you use soap,” said Kyouko, ignoring the dirt look that Touko slung at her. “None of us have been able to bathe for a while, so we all should clean up now that we’re able to.”

“There is water here.” Byakuya gestured to the pool. “Therefore, you can clean yourself here, can’t you?”
All this, said with no shame, with a straight face. Touko’s brain whirred as her imagination created an avatar of herself, who stripped off in front of Byakuya, Sakura and Kyouko depicted as crudely drawn stick men in the background, but when Touko’s underwear, which had undergone artistic licence and gained more lace while overall shrinking in size, fell away from her body, Touko’s mind clouded like someone had dunked her head into the pool and she started to gargle.

“What? What is it?” Byakuya’s upper nose wrinkled. “Though, perhaps I don’t need to know... I feel like I will have to clean myself too.”

Touko couldn’t take much more of this. Kyouko rested a hand on Touko’s shoulder. “Come on, Fukawa-san. I’ll walk you to the bathroom.”

An unattractive snort exploded in Touko.

“I’m not showering with you!” Touko spluttered as Kyouko frogmarched her into the house. She gave a fleeting look back and glimpsed Byakuya, who disappeared under the water, and Sakura, who scratched her collarbone, neither scrabbling out of the pool to rescue Touko.

“I don’t want to shower with you, nor do I plan to,” said Kyouko.

There weren’t many rooms and they had all been to the toilet the previous night, but most of them had been practically sleepwalking by then, so Kyouko and Touko opened the door to a closet and another to a bedroom, where Yasuhiro was still asleep, before they rediscovered the bathroom with its plain beige interior.

Kyouko nudged Touko in. Touko squeaked and jumped when the door shut behind her.

After the thud of the door subsided, the room buzzed, or maybe the noise existed just in her head. Fearing that if she didn’t do a proper job of washing herself, one of the others might insist they clean her, Touko forced her feet over to the shower. The bronze frame towered over her, resembling a spine and ribcage. She glanced over her shoulder. Her skin prickled when she noticed that the bathroom door didn’t have a lock.

Touko stripped down to her underwear and grabbed a bar of soap from a shelf in the shower. It danced in her hands and for its finale, the bar of soap plunged onto the floor, so Touko had to bend down and pick it up again. Breathing fast, she turned the faucets on the spine of the metal frame, fiddling with them until the water that sprayed out from above wasn’t too hot or too cold, and stuck her arm in.

Once she had scrubbed it pink, she moved onto the next arm, and then her legs each had a go. When she got to her right leg, she rubbed lighter on the thigh, refusing to look at the scars that Syo scratched into her every time she claimed the life of another victim. After that body part, she took off her glasses, unravelled her braids and washed her hair, doubled over, head hovering in the shower water’s downpour. Kenichiro didn’t own many hair products, just two bottles of the same shampoo and one bottle of conditioner. Touko didn’t know if he had more elsewhere, so she massaged just two squirts of shampoo into her long, thick hair, made darker by the water.

She clawed through her hair to destroy any knots and clenched it in sections, hearing it squelch in her hands. The water at the base of the shower gradually cleared of foam as she rinsed her hair. For a while, she stared down even though she had been in a hurry to finish, as if in a trance, but she recollected herself soon enough and swept her hair back over her head as she stood up. Head spinning, she backed away from the shower, and she flumped down with her legs spread apart.
Long ago, when she lived with her parents, they asked a doctor how to cure her of something that they didn’t know the name of but they claimed made her act how she did, and the greasy man with calloused hands suggested frequent, intense, freezing cold showers. And sometimes, while they treated her in this fashion, her parents would touch her in places that made her stomach drop, and years later, she learned that hadn’t been normal, and now, she wanted to vomit, feeling their ghostly hands paw at her from the inside.

A sob clogged her throat. She scrunched her eyes shut and curled into a ball. The shower cried with her. With time, the pangs in her head became a tolerable ache.

Eventually, someone knocked. Her soul almost sprung out of her body.

“Are you still in there?” asked Aoi.

“I’m done!” said Touko with a crack in her voice that she could pass off as one of her stammers. She rubbed the condensation off her glasses, put them back on and rushed through drying herself before dressing herself in the same clothes that she entered the room in. A few damp patches formed on her clothes, but she didn’t care, and she didn’t bother with braiding her hair.

Touko opened the door and glared at Aoi, who gave Touko a quick look up and down.

“Your hair is loose,” commented Aoi. “And there’s so much of it, huh! It must take you ages to braid it.”

She tilted her head to one side.

“Your face is a bit puffy. Did you get shampoo in your eyes?” asked Aoi innocently.

“Yeah,” said Touko without engaging in eye contact. She pushed past Aoi, making a beeline for the garden, and though Aoi turned, she didn’t call out or attempt to reach out to pull her back.

To Touko’s relief, only Byakuya and Sakura were outside, and she plopped down near the edge of the pool, legs crossed and her back slouching forward.

“Are you feeling all right?” asked Sakura.

“Yes,” snapped Touko.

Sakura quirked her brow. “Your eyes...”

“I just had the water too hot,” Touko said. She wiped her knuckles over her eyes and folded her arms over her chest. Her nails dug into her arms.

Byakuya eyed her. Sakura seemed to sense something was off as well, but she didn’t pursue the subject, instead turning her head toward Byakuya.

“So...” Sakura looked at him seriously. “Togami, do you intend to go exploring after you are transformed into a human?”

“What about you, Oogami?” he retorted, rather than answering. “Do you plan to stay a mermaid forever, or will you also turn into a human?”

Sakura furrowed her brow.

“I have thought about it, but I haven’t come to a decision yet,” she admitted. “I trust that you have had a lot of time to think about it, so I ask how do you plan to survive? You don’t have any money.
You don’t know how the world here works.”

“I’ll be going with him,” Touko croaked. The other two blinked at her. She coughed and hunched her shoulders. Fortunately, when she spoke again, her voice didn’t sound too gruff. “What? Does it make more sense for me to stay ostracised from society?”

“No. There’s nothing wrong with that,” Sakura said, and she took the hint to be quiet for the time being.

A minute had barely elapsed before the back door swung wide open, and Kenichiro stumbled out into the garden, almost losing his footing.

“Kenichiro!” Sakura’s eyes widened. When he stopped close to them, she looked him up and down. “What is wrong?”

“You won’t believe what they’re selling at the market,” he said, and confident in his words, he whipped his hand forward and opened up his fist, revealing a silver scale that Touko had seen before.

Touko had seen several of them before. She separated her arms, set her hands down either side of her, and turned to Byakuya, where she saw several of them.

Byakuya heaved his body backward out of the pool and stared at the scale. Other than his eyes, nothing else on his face moved, and when he tried to talk, he could only get out a single word that creaked in his mouth. “That’s…”

“They’re really expensive. Really rare, according to the vendor,” said Kenichiro. He flipped it over in his palm a few times. “The guy wouldn’t let me take it away even for a moment, so I had to buy it and…”

Like when a cloud passes over the Sun, Byakuya’s features darkened.

Kenichiro’s smile drained away. “Togami…?”

No response.

“I’ll, uh, leave this here with you, then,” said Kenichiro, ready to break into a sweat. He put the scale down near Touko before straightening up and backing away, showing them his palms. “I’ll… We’ll come for you when we’re about to leave, okay?”

No one else intended to answer, so Sakura nodded for the whole group. Kenichiro hesitated by the door but Byakuya still didn’t say anything or even look at him, so Kenichiro went back inside.

“So that’s it then,” stated Byakuya once Kenichiro was gone. He reclined, hands supporting his body behind him, and didn’t stray his eyes from the scale that was out of his reach but within Touko’s. In a voice just as dull in tone as before, he said, “You have one of my scales.”

Touko’s muscles tightened but no matter how hard they clenched, they couldn’t restrain the fluttering in her chest, which was light, like a butterfly in a cramped metal cage. If he was angry, his face didn’t betray him. Maybe he passed the tipping point and blown himself out, leaving him the equivalent of an unlit lantern.

“T-Togami-kun,” Touko said. She reached a hand toward him. His gaze snapped onto her. Her face burned in his intensity. “It’s… I don’t care about obtaining one of your scales anymore.”
“What?” Byakuya’s head jolted back. Life seeped into his face. “But what about your love potion?” He raised his voice. “What about our deal?”

She cringed, but she didn’t let his voice stub her out, determination glowing inside of her.

“I’m not going to make it,” said Touko, and she balled her hands into fists. “I decided.”

Sakura opened her mouth but didn’t say anything, unable to keep her eyes on one of them for more than a few seconds before changing her target to the other.

“I don’t understand,” said Byakuya. He curled the side of an index finger against his chin and broke eye contact. “We’ve been together all this time so you could make that potion... so I could become human... and you’ve just changed your mind? You’ve given up?”

“I didn’t give up. I just don’t want to make it anymore,” replied Touko. Her heart wobbled on a tightrope. “I still intend to help you become a human. Originally, I just wanted your scale for a love potion, b-but now...”

“But what?”

“Now... I have a different motive.”

His eyes met hers and struck her with lightning.

“What is it?” he asked.

In Touko’s stories, the love confession, though it could take hundreds of pages and hundreds of thousands of words to come into fruition, flowed so easily once the story hit that beat, and they flowed so eloquently because every detail of the confession had been planned for weeks, months, years, and in that moment, stock phrases swam circles in Touko’s mind, but they splashed so much and swam so fast that she could barely think. Barely breathe. Her mind was as tangled as her hair.

“I... I lubu you, Nogami-kun!” she blurted, words tripping over each other as they weaved through the knots in her mind.

Sakura hardened into a statue. Byakuya squinted.

“What?” he said.

Touko whined and grabbed onto her head.

He blinked, otherwise staring, not understanding.

“I l-love you!” she said, holding on harder and pulling on her hair, using that word that she thought she had to save for someone special, for the One, that rolled off her tongue so easily now, and it was a word that had struck fear in the hearts of both when growing up.

It was a word that Byakuya had thought implied weakness until Touko proved him wrong. His lips parted a fraction, like he still didn’t understand. She bowed her head forward.

“Where I used to think about how everyone hated me, I think of you and I feel... overwhelmed by love, I can... barely think sometimes...” Touko shut her eyes. Her body wanted to collapse in on itself, but she ploughed through, and any attempts to stop or slow her down were thrown off by her fast-moving train of resolve. “If... If I was to take your scale, and make it into a love potion, I would just use it on you... I’m shameless enough to admit it. T-That’s not unsurprising behaviour from an
unsavoury woman like me... but... but I want to earn your love the honest way!"

She shone gleaming eyes at him.

“I wouldn’t be truly happy if we didn’t truly... love each other,” she said. Her throat constricted, but she pushed her words through. She pushed her words through. “I’ll wait forever for you to return my feelings. I... I...”

Byakuya placed his finger against her lips. Touko fell silent and stared into his half-lidded eyes. His gaze pulled her in so deep that she almost didn’t notice the flush that rose to his face.

Confusion over him silencing her didn’t last long. Sakura gasped. The significance of Byakuya touching Touko’s lips, the significance of doing so in mermaid culture, rose to the forefront of Touko’s mind, and Touko stopped breathing.

This was her real first kiss. Even though their lips didn’t touch, this was more real than anyone who had forced their lips onto hers before now.

Her face crumpled.

“Fukawa...?” he said.

She fell into him, sobbing.

“What is it? Are you crying?” he asked. “Are you sad?”

“They’re happy tears!” she assured him, burying her face into his chest.

“Happy tears?” he mumbled. He relaxed slightly and draped an arm around her. His chuckle caused a vibration that she felt. “I see that I still have a lot to learn about human culture.”
It was an incredibly tight fit, what with having to share space with an assortment of supplies as well as each other, but everyone squeezed into Kenichiro’s wagon after a picnic breakfast in the back garden. Kenichiro sat away from them, at the front of the wagon, and acted as coachman. The canvas roof curved over them, shaping the wagon into a cylinder, while flat wood at the base made for even flooring that they could relax on. Within the wagon was faintly dim, light seeping in through rectangular gaps above planks at the front and the rear of the vehicle.

Touko sat in one corner. Feeling too exposed to do any writing, she read, but even then, her skin tingled, and it didn’t help that she couldn’t get engrossed in the story. She didn’t mind how her heart raced at Byakuya, whose head hovered achingly close to her arm as he lay on his stomach, perusing a tatty romance novel once belonging to Touko’s mentor. However, Kyouko’s presence on Touko’s other side was not so welcome, and the wide, gleaming eyes of Yasuhiro by Byakuya’s tail even less.

Without having to glance up, Touko could feel Yasuhiro’s eyes boring into the side of her head. Yasuhiro had barely taken his eyes off Touko and Byakuya since breakfast. In fact, everyone had done an awful lot of staring at them during that meal, but at least they had the decency to be less obvious about it. The only times Touko and Byakuya were spared of Yasuhiro’s staring was when the wagon passed over a bump in the road, causing Yasuhiro to blink, but he would just resume staring at them afterwards.

She finally lifted her head. “What is it?”

All eyes except from Mondo, who was apparently asleep, flicked to Touko. Mondo had his helmet on and had his back to Makoto, so Touko couldn’t tell for sure if he was awake or not. He hadn’t spoken in anything other than grunts of acknowledgement since that morning. Since last night. Since for a while.

Aoi had her back to everyone too, using Sakura as a pillow, but unlike Mondo, she stirred, raising her head, and she turned around, blinking blearily as she rubbed her eyes.

In any case, Touko didn’t narrow her eyes at Mondo or Aoi, but at Yasuhiro.

“Hagakure,” Touko clarified in a tight voice.

“Huh?” went Yasuhiro.

“You’ve been gaping at me for the past hour.”

It felt like an hour.

“Do I have something on my face?” Touko masked her demand as a question, almost hissing. She scratched lightly around her mouth. “Is that what’s so amusing?”

A lot of people would have dismissed Touko’s questions with a quick, ‘Nothing!’ followed by a smirk or a guilty blush, but Yasuhiro blurted, “Did Togami-chi really kiss you?”

Everyone shifted. Apart from Mondo, of course. The only movements from him were by his head as his helmet, over certain bumps, bounced against the side of the wagon he was slumped against.

“W-What?” Touko straightened with a jolt.
Byakuya rolled onto his side and transferred his weight onto the arm beneath him. He rose, trying to make himself as tall as possible.

She dropped her book onto her lap and shook indignant fists, glowering at Yasuhiro. “Were you spying on us? During our private moment? Pervert!”

Yasuhiro yelped and waved his hands in front of him. “It was just a kiss, wasn’t it? And... um...”

“And what?” demanded Touko, to no answer, at least not from him.

Aoi hunched her shoulders. “I told him.”

Touko jerked her head.

“You-!” Touko spluttered.

Sakura bowed her head forward, but she didn’t look as guilty as Aoi, who seemed to be trying to fall into herself.

“I apologise. I told her,” said Sakura.

Byakuya threw a scathing look at Sakura. “You...!”

“So Asahina-chi was telling the truth! You did kiss!” Yasuhiro draped his arm over Byakuya’s shoulder and pulled him closer in a one-armed hug that Byakuya’s flush deepened in. “I’ve been waiting for this since your stargazing date!”

Touko’s lips collapsed on one side. “That was... fairly recently...”

She shook her head and rounded on Sakura, next to Aoi.

“Please don’t blame Sakura-chan,” said Aoi. “This morning, Sakura-chan had this glimmer in her eyes and I really wanted to know why, so I begged her to tell me while you two were distracted... and I couldn’t help myself.”

Aoi tilted her head to one side and folded her arms over her chest, gaze averted.

“I don’t know why you would want to keep it a secret,” added Aoi. “Love is a really awesome thing, you know. You shouldn’t be embarrassed to talk about what and who you love.”

“Love isn’t a word to use casually,” said Byakuya. Touko tensed.

“Why not? Why should love be something you have to use sparingly?” asked Aoi. “I love Sakura-chan. I love donuts. I love to swim. And I love all of my friends, even you, Touko-chan, even when you’re grumpy.”

Touko didn’t react, not with a cutting retort or even a glare. To the outside world, she seemed to have gone into a trance.

Aoi waved a hand in front of Touko’s eyes. “Hello?”

“What was that? Touko-chan?” Touko mumbled. Her lips twitched. A dry chuckle tickled her throat, but it lacked emotion as expected from laughter. “It has been a long time since someone called me that.”

The last person had been a man who flaunted his conventionally good looks, tricking people into
thinking that he possessed other socially desirable traits too, and he had been beautiful even in death, pinned to a wall with homemade scissors.

The confusion on Aoi’s face dispelled as Aoi’s features brightened. “Well, you didn’t have friends to call you that before, Touko-chan.”

When Aoi said it, Touko felt a nail screech down a blackboard. She balled her hands tightly.

“I can take it,” Touko said, mostly to herself. “I defeated a talking bear... an aswang... a pirate crew and a harpy... Lay it on me...”

Her face began to redden with exertion. And because she wasn’t breathing.

Aoi frowned. “Um... are you sure it’s okay? I can always hold off calling you that until later.”

Touko gasped for air and patted herself repeatedly on her lap. “Let’s.”

After that burst of conversation followed what could only have been a maximum of ten minutes of daydreaming or reading, with the occasional mumble teasing people’s ears.

“Are you feeling any better, my girl?” Sakura asked Aoi, who at the sound of Sakura’s voice, lifted her head off her knees. “You haven’t said much since breakfast, and you barely ate...”

“I just have a bit of a headache,” explained Aoi. She winced under the shade of Sakura’s furrowed brow. “But I’m feeling a bit better now. Really.”

Aoi sat up straight and pushed back her shoulders.

“I need something to take my mind off it. Does anyone have any games? What about I-Spy?” said Aoi.

Makoto gave a slight grin. “I-Spy might not be the best game to play right now. I think we’d run out of things to spy very quickly.”

“I brought some playing cards,” Yasuhiro piped up. He stuffed his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out a playing card box. “We can use the bale of hay as a table.”


They nodded.

“I’ll play too,” said Byakuya as Yasuhiro opened the box and took out the playing cards.

Aoi turned to Touko. “Fukawa-chan?”

“No thanks,” muttered Touko, who thought that she might be able to do some writing with everyone else preoccupied with their game.

Yasuhiro cupped his ear. “Huh? You’ll have to speak louder than that.”

She did now. “I said no!”

“I... I got it!” Yasuhiro cowered. He took a few seconds to relax before looking over at Mondo, who was apparently asleep. Quietly, he said, “Hey, Mondo-chi?”

Mondo didn’t reply. Yasuhiro nudged Makoto.
“Hey. Naegi-chi, give him a shake,” said Yasuhiro.

Makoto widened his eyes at him. “Why me?”

“You’re closest,” said Yasuhiro with a convenient excuse at hand.

“But...”

“Just do it,” said Byakuya, rather than volunteer to do it himself.

Rather reluctantly, Makoto lifted a hand and gave Mondo’s shoulder a light shake. His helmet hid his canine head, but it didn’t hide his muscular build, and the blankness of the shield was intimidating in a way of its own - they could not see their friend behind it.

Mondo didn’t budge.

“Come on, you can do better than that,” said Yasuhiro.

“I’m not shaking him harder,” said Makoto. “I don’t want to startle him awake. He might punch me in surprise, thinking he’s being attacked.”

“Yeah, we should leave him be. Mondo-chi probably didn’t get much sleep last night,” said Yasuhiro, the person who told Makoto to shake him in the first place. Yasuhiro cupped his chin and sighed. “I don’t blame him. I mean, having your brother die in your arms like that... it’s gotta be rough.”

Though it might just have been because they passed over another bump in the road, Mondo’s shoulders seemed to tense. Another silence threatened to consume them, but Yasuhiro beat it away with the re-emergence of his voice.

“I’ll deal,” he said, and he shuffled his deck of cards before handing some out to everyone playing. He set the rest of the cards down in a pile on the hay. “I’ll go first. Hit me.”

Byakuya knew not to punch him this time and simply observed Yasuhiro take another card from the pile. Touko watched them for a while before getting out a pen tucked into her waistband, but after writing a few words, either the road got more uneven or she reached the threshold of how much she could tolerate concentrating while travelling, because a wave of nausea swept through her. She shut her book and stared out through the gap above the planks at the back of the wagon. All she could see was the sky, in its prime at noon, and when she closed her eyes, she could see nothing, but with friends like this around her, she was comfortable enough to keep them shut.

Eventually, the wagon slowed to a stop, and all hooves and rattling ceased, but unlike the times before, less than a minute later, the back wall opened away from them, hinged at the bottom, becoming a ramp, and Kenichiro beckoned them out. Touko removed her glasses, rubbed her eyes and popped her glasses back on before she stepped out of the wagon and into the light.

She found herself on a long dirt road. On one side of it lay stretches of fields patchworked together with hedgerows, and on the other side, tall trees towered over the group, narrow but packed close together, shielding the unknown within in darkness.

Last of those with legs to step out of the wagon was Mondo but he was only last by a few seconds, and Touko wondered how much of the journey he really slept through.

“Where’s the cottage?” asked Yasuhiro, with the thumb and index finger of one hand on his forehead and his other hand on his hip.
“Weren’t you listening?” Aoi asked back with a frown. “We have to meet these centaur guys first.”

Yasuhiro swivelled his body from side-to-side, keeping his hands where they were. “So where are they? Are they hiding?”

“They’re in the woods,” said Kenichiro, and he motioned to the army of trees beside them.

Touko’s elbows pressed into her sides as she regarded the outer layer of the woods, donned in camouflage and wielding pointed branches. “Do we have to go the rest of the way on foot?”

“What did you say?” came Byakuya’s sharp voice from inside of the wagon.

Kenichiro broke into a grin that could almost be described as goofy. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“No, no. We’re getting there by wagon still. There’s a path that we can take through the woods. I just thought you might want to stretch your legs first,” he explained. “Get some fresh air, you know? You’ve all been in there for several hours, and the horses need some downtime too.”

While everyone surveyed their new surroundings, Aoi walked over to the horses and stroked one of them down the mane. She bore a small smile that wasn’t radiant enough from someone like her.

“Hey!” Yasuhiro yelled, and Touko tore her eyes away from Aoi. “Is that a cow?”

Everyone followed his gaze. He whipped a finger forward. In the distance, the fields ascended gradually, and black and white flecks were sprinkled across the grass there.

“I think so,” said Kyouko.

“Who wants to get some milk with me?” asked Yasuhiro. No one indicated that they did. “I could do with a glass of fresh milk. I’m sweating like a pig, ‘right?”

“Pigs don’t actually sweat,” said Touko.

Yasuhiro shook his head. “Oh, dear, swe... sour... um... dear, ignorant Fukawa-chi. I’m not talking about actual pigs. I’m talking about pig iron.”

Touko blinked at him.

He turned away from her. “So, who’s coming with me? Naegi-chi?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Makoto said. “The cows must belong to someone.”

As though Makoto hadn’t said anything, Yasuhiro grabbed Makoto by the wrist and led him onto the nearest field, the first of many.

Other than being a nuisance to cows, there wasn’t much else to do. Aoi stretched her arms over her head and leaned her body from side to side, avoiding contact with the horses beside her. Kyouko stood on one leg, holding a foot behind her, and after a few seconds, swapped to the other leg. Touko shifted her weight between feet several times, fidgeting and staring at her shoes. They were so close to their goal now, to the end, but it wasn’t the end, really. It was the beginning, the beginning of something perhaps too good to be true, that she almost expected to be snatched away from her.

With her head down, Touko didn’t realise that someone had managed to sidle up to Touko without her noticing until a hand fell on Touko’s shoulder.

She jumped.
“You don’t need to look so scared,” said Aoi, with that same ghostly smile that Touko spotted before. It was soft, like Touko was seeing it through a window clouded with condensation. “You’ll still get to be with Togami whatever happens, won’t you? And that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“I’m not scared,” said Touko, but she felt a bit lighter. She turned away to see what else was going on.

Kenichiro strode over to the horses. He reached into the front pocket of his baggy shirt and extracted a miniature tumbleweed made of red string studded with dark blue jewels.

“What’s that?” asked Kyouko.

“Charms,” said Kenichiro. After some fiddling, he extracted a loop of red string from the tangle. It turned out to be one necklace of several, the others still snarled together, and he put it on one of the horses. “The first time I visited, I was given these. It lets the centaurs know it’s okay to approach us. All we have to do is to go someway into the woods, and they’ll find us.”

He wreathed the other horse in a necklace and returned the rest into his pocket. Then he brought out hay from the wagon for the horses to eat, and when he went in a second time, Kyouko followed to help out. Aoi wandered over to the horses again and assisted in feeding them while Touko retreated into the wagon.

After Yasuhiro and Makoto returned, Yasuhiro with only a limp to show for his attempt to acquire some milk, they all packed themselves back into the wagon. Kenichiro claimed his place at the front. Not far ahead, the dirt path forked, part of it continuing straight on and another part advancing into the woods through a gap large enough for the wagon to fit in, and Kenichiro of course ordered the horses down the latter path, setting a slower pace than before.

Touko tucked her knees under her chin and hugged her legs, tummy as knotted and dense as the trees either side of them. Her heart raced, skipping whenever the wagon shook harder on the increasingly uneven ground.

“So we just follow the path until these centaurs come out?” asked Yasuhiro.

“Yep,” said Kenichiro without turning around. “Oh, by the way, if you want to see something cool, look out of the wagon.”

The promise of something supposedly cool may have hooked the interest of the group, but only Yasuhiro and Kyouko rose. Taking care not to tread on anyone, they approached the back of the wagon, footsteps creaking, and peered through the space above the planks.

“Well?” said Byakuya. “What is it?”

Yasuhiro hesitated. “I’m not sure, dude.”

“Let me ask the one who isn’t an idiot,” said Byakuya. He craned his neck but was far too low down to see for himself. “Kirigiri, what is it?”

Kyouko didn’t answer right away, as though still figuring it out for herself.

“They look like fireflies,” said Kyouko with less conviction than one would prefer to hear. “But it’s too late in the year for them, isn’t it?”

“It is too late in the year for them, but those aren’t fireflies,” Kenichiro announced. “They’re fairies.”
The way Makoto scrambled over to Kyouko and Yasuhiro, eager to view the fantastical creatures, made it seem like he hadn’t heard of anything as fantastical, like, for example, a witch, a selkie, two mermaids and a cynocephalus. He slotted himself between Kyouko and Yasuhiro, gasping moments later.

“Fairies?” Byakuya said.

His confusion, mixed with some curiosity, gave Touko the excuse she needed to get to her feet and trudge over. Yasuhiro stepped away so she could slide in front of him. What could be seen of the sky, recently a blue almost white, had been tinged orange, like time ran independently of that outside of the woods, and ground level would have been darker if not for the glowing flecks all around them, blue and brilliant and glimmering like glitter.

“They’re like stars,” Touko said, to herself and Byakuya and the hum of either a pregnant evening or a newborn morning.

“These woods are enchanted,” said Kenichiro, like that needed explaining. “Oxymoron Woods, she called them.”

“Why is it called that?” asked Makoto.

“Probably just to sound pretentious,” muttered Touko, but the woods’ light darkness and the gnarled branches of timeless ancient trees, like from a children’s picture book, earned it forgiveness for such a ridiculous name.

The wagon soon drew to a halt.

“Are we there?” asked Touko, peering over her shoulder. She saw Aoi sit up and Mondo shift, and beyond them, Kenichiro faced forward, sitting straight.

Out of everyone in the wagon, Kenichiro would have been the most qualified to answer, but it wasn’t him who did. A different voice, loud but not shouting, called out.

“State your business!” the stranger commanded.

“Relax, Kiyotaka-kun, it’s just me. Kenichiro,” said Kenichiro. He hopped down, disappearing from sight. Whoever was talking to him wasn’t directly in front of the wagon, presumably somewhere off to the side. Perhaps in the trees. “Well, it’s not just me. I have some friends riding in the wagon. We need to see Sonia-san.”

“F-Friends?” Kiyotaka spluttered. “Kenichiro-kun, you swore to Sonia-san that you wouldn’t divulge our existence to anyone! It was bad enough when you told Oogami-kun.”

“It’s fine, they won’t cause any trouble,” Kenichiro assured them. “As for Sakura... I mean, I had an incurable muscle dystrophy, and two days later, I got better. I had to tell her. Sakura isn’t stupid.”

“Normally, people greet others with a ‘hello’, but not Kiyotaka,” said a different voice, not as loud as Kiyotaka’s default volume seemed to be.

“Ain’t it obvious? They need some kind of magic done,” said the owner of a third voice. “That’s why you’re here, yeah?”
“Well,” said Kenichiro, “that’s the plan.”

Everyone with legs, apart from Mondo, crept over to the front of the wagon, and even Byakuya and Sakura trained their eyes on the space above the planks that Kenichiro had occupied prior to him disembarking. Kyouko took it one step further and climbed through the gap and on the other side, she got off the wagon entirely.

“Who are you?” asked Kiyotaka sharply.

“Obviously, she’s one of his friends, or else she wouldn’t be here,” said the second speaker. He - it sounded like a he - blew out a huff of air. “And you’re always acting like you’re the smartest out of us three.”

To call herself a friend of Kenichiro after such a short acquaintance might have been presumptuous, even if they both had a common friend in Sakura, but Kyouko didn’t confirm nor deny it. “You must be the guides that Kenichiro told us about.”

“I guess,” said the third speaker, who had to be a centaur. “Hey, Kenichiro, you said you brought ‘some’ friends? Define ‘some’.”

Kenichiro gave a subdued laugh. “Come see for yourself.”

A lot of stomping followed, working around to the back of the wagon, until it stopped when Kenichiro sprung into view through the gap there. He lowered the door into its ramp position and gestured to the inside. Three centaurs peeked in, completely nude but lacking any anatomy that ought not to be on show. They lacked any that Touko could see, at least.

With the same hand that he had just used to wave at the wagon, Kenichiro motioned to the centaurs. “This is...”

“If they speak the same language as us, we can introduce ourselves,” said the centaur who had been the last one to talk. “Yo! My name is Leon. Nice to meet you.”

He prodded himself on the chest. The lower half of his body, like that of a horse, boasted a blond coat, and his spiked hair and goatee were that colour as well.

“And I’m Kazuichi, atcha service... for a fee,” said another centaur, whose lower body was black, as was his shoulder length hair with a small braid hanging in front of his left ear. Kazuichi smirked, revealing shark-like teeth that Leon lacked.

“My name is Kiyotaka,” announced the third centaur, whose name had already been given. His black hair matched his lower body and he stared at them with intense red eyes, his round head bearing a pair of antlers that resembled tree branches. “What are your names?”

Everyone chorused their names, but Mondo’s silence broke the chain. Kiyotaka narrowed his eyes and clopped a bit closer to the wagon. His nostrils flared. Regardless, Mondo didn’t acknowledge him, and his helmet didn’t betray the direction of his gaze.

“You! With the orb on your head!” Kiyotaka pointed at Mondo. “Didn’t your human caregivers teach you manners?”

Mondo jerked his head up and turned to Kiyotaka. “What?”

“When you meet someone for the first time, you should tell each other your name!” said Kiyotaka, who had not done that. “What would your family say if they could see you now?”
“Huh?” It came out as an unpleasant, rasping growl. “Oh, and I guess you do that to all the fairies that you come across? Whenever you see a bird, do you scream your name at it and chase after it until it chirps your name?”

His fists clenched. Touko heard his leather gloves rustle and creak.

“And for the record…” Mondo stood up, taller than Kiyotaka, and removed his helmet. The centaurs raised their eyebrows, and though Kazuichi and Leon discreetly shuffled backward to put more distance between them and Mondo, Kiyotaka did not move and he met Mondo’s gleaming eyes with a pair of his own. “... I wasn’t raised by humans.”

Fire raged between the eyes of Mondo and Kiyotaka, too hot for anyone to dare come between.

“Y-Yeah!” Touko chimed in from the sidelines. Kiyotaka’s antlers could do some damage, but Touko had seen Mondo in action. “If someone enters your line of sight, do you barge up to them and demand they listen and do as you say? That’s... truly despicable...!”

“This isn’t some roleplaying game, Fukawa-chi,” said Yasuhiro, arms folded over his chest, but he uncrossed them so he could waggle a finger. “A hello is always nice, except when it’s the repo man or your ma on the day of your dentist appointment.”

The centaurs exchanged mystified looks. Even Kiyotaka, whose brow also furrowed. Mondo inclined his head to one side slightly, and Touko wondered if working at the circus had included a dental plan or if they just used chew toys.

“Repo... man?” said Leon. He scratched himself on the head. “Like... the grim reaper?”

“What’s a dentist?” asked Kazuichi, equally bewildered.

Touko eyed his open mouth. “You could do with one.”

Yasuhiro twitched a hand. “You don’t know what those are? Well, today is your lucky day, ‘right? If you take us to see this witch, I will give you a crash course lesson on various professions. Deal?”

The centaurs glanced at each other again. Leon spoke up first.

“We’re not wasting our favour on something boring like that,” Leon said. He lifted his chin, smirking. Touko did not like the expression on his face. “I already know what we’re gonna have you do.”

Makoto’s brow creased.

“It’s not washing you, is it?” he asked, echoing the thoughts of at least Touko.

Leon shook his head, grin still as big. “It’s real simple. There’s this water nymph who is like, really hot, and she loves music. So I want you guys to write me a song to perform to the most drop dead gorgeous babe that you could ever dream to lay eyes on. And play all the instruments and stuff!”

“A song?” said Aoi. Her face scrunched up slightly and she looked upward. She tapped her chin slowly. “Instruments...?”

“H-Hey, why do you get to choose?” asked Kazuichi, while everyone else processed what Leon wanted from them.

“Because you got Kenichiro to buy you those flowers for Sonia-san, which took all day, and it’s my
turn anyway,” Leon told Kazuichi.

Touko’s eyes flickered between the two of them. “So which one of you decided that Kenichiro had to wash you? Was it because you can’t reach behind your hind legs, which is where your-?”

“Can we please move away from the topic of bathing?” said Kyouko loudly.

Silence consented. She shut her eyes for a moment, blushing. Then she opened her eyes again and lifted a hand to brush fingers against the curve of her ear, still pink but still serious.

“Would you be lending us instruments?” she asked Leon. He turned away from Kazuichi, who pouted.

“Huh? I don’t have any instruments. Why would I? I can’t play any. You’ll have to acapella it.” Leon brandished a finger at her. Kyouko blinked calmly in response. “But not too loud, okay? My voice has got to be the standout. Sayaka has the most amazing voice, and if I want to impress her, I’ve gotta sing something romantic and stuff. She laps that kind of stuff up, but it’s not my thing, you see. So I’m going to give you until tonight to compose a song, unless you want to wait until tomorrow afternoon to give it to me, after I’ve woken up.”

“Leon-kun, you shouldn’t sleep in so late,” scolded Kiyotaka. The other two centaurs pulled faces and whisked their eyes in a half-hearted roll. He turned away from them, and to everyone’s surprise, he smiled and flicked his wrists, splaying out his hands. “I must say, I completely approve of this test! It will get your creative juices flowing, and we can all work together to reach our goal.”

Why he used ‘we’ and ‘our’ instead of ‘you’ and ‘your’ became apparent when he next spoke.

“I know how to play an instrument. The ocarina. If you permit it, I would be ecstatic to join you,” said Kiyotaka. “I can also help keep things in order and act as a quality check! It would be awful if you wrote an inappropriate song and got everyone in trouble with Sayaka-kun.”

Spoken passionately by someone who had a loose grip on tact. Mondo bared his teeth in Kiyotaka’s direction, but Kyouko bobbed her head.

“Thank you, Kiyotaka-kun. That is very kind of you,” she said, and then she directed her attention back onto Leon. “Tonight will be fine. Fukawa-san is a writer, so it shouldn’t take her too long to produce something.”

Touko twitched. “You have no right to declare something easy if you’re not going to do it. And I write novels, not songs!”

Leon began raising legs individually, inspecting his hooves.

“We could do with a full body wash, I guess,” mused Leon.

“... Tonight, you said?” mumbled Touko.

He lowered his raised leg, pressed his knuckles against his hips and beamed. “You’ll do it? Awesome! Okay, so she’s a water nymph, and she has a cute button nose...”
by voices and she could never quite relax, in fear that someone would steal her work from beneath her runny nose and owl-eye glasses. She didn’t write about a disgusting thing like herself, but about what could be, and the dreams of a young girl were always ripe for mocking, even by other young girls with hearts pierced with pins as thin as hairs.

Paradoxically, she would be both hunched over her desk and in the shoes of another, in a different dimension. Outside of school, she wrote in a notebook, sat on brick walls or on steps in front of empty houses, and at home on summer nights when she had enough natural light to not need to risk getting caught with a candle. When she lived with her mentor, and then by herself, she was able to write safely in her home or on the beach.

Ideally, she wouldn’t have anyone talking to her, but Touko’s writing conditions weren’t always optimal.

“So what have you got so far?” asked Aoi, and despite her asking, she reached to snatch away Touko’s notebook.

A squawk escaped Touko. She hugged her notebook tightly against her chest and while sitting down, pushed herself backward and struck the ground with her heels several times. “You loudmouth! I was transporting to my writing zone, but then you disrupted me and now... now I have to start again!”

“But it has been ages,” Aoi whined, making groping motions with her hands.

Makoto checked his wristwatch. “Just over an hour.”

Yasuhiro, reclining on the ramp at the back of the wagon, hands behind his head, frowned in their direction. The only person in the wagon was Sakura. Byakuya had unceremoniously been floated out of the wagon by Touko on his insistence without the use of a potion or spell, and he lay on his stomach beside her, distracting Touko too but not in a way that she could honestly say that she disliked.

“You can’t rush art,” said Yasuhiro. “Besides, would you rather be washing those guys? I’m not into horse people, but if I had to...”

He paused. No one gave him an excuse to not finish his sentence, but he just yawned and stretched his arms in an arch shape.

“It seems a bit unfair though,” Makoto pointed out. “Fukawa-san is doing all the work.”

“Not until she has written something,” said Aoi.

Touko moaned and flopped as much toward her lap as her inflexible body could manage.

“I suspect Fukawa-san is struggling to concentrate with everyone chattering around her,” said Kyouko. “What about we do something productive and prepare dinner?”

The group dispersed. Kenichiro, Makoto and Kyouko entered the wagon while everyone else, apart from Touko and the mermaids, went to gather firewood, with Kiyotaka accompanying them to make sure they didn’t get lost. It had something to do with the woods being enchanted.

After she couldn’t hear Mondo’s growling from behind gritted teeth anymore, Touko opened her notebook to a double spread of pages, which would have been blank if not for the printed lines and the curled scribbles in the margin.
She lowered her pen so the nib almost touched her notebook. Biting her lip, she glanced at her spell book lying nearby, showing a page about water nymphs.

_Water nymphs preside over bodies of freshwater, such as ponds and fountains. Due to their beauty and how the water they reside in will absorb some of their healing magic, they often attract the attention of others and find themselves at the centre of certain cults. At coming-of-age ceremonies, young adults leave locks of their hair at these bodies of freshwater, and people sometimes even sacrifice animals to show loyalty. They are usually kind-hearted, but I have been warned that they are prone to jealousy and will do whatever it takes to get what they want. Their hair can be used in healing potions or in brain control potions._

“Come on,” Touko muttered to herself, knocking her knuckles against her forehead, but no hidden ideas became unlodged.

“You have written and read about love before,” Byakuya said. “You even said you loved me this morning. Why are you struggling now?”

“In books, it was all pretend,” she said. “And… And my love for you… aren’t words. They’re feelings. And they’re mine, not that centaur’s. I don’t know anything about how he feels about her. Love is different for everyone.”

“Even when they were pretend, you could still feel the characters’ love. Is that not the skill of a good writer?” Byakuya stared at her as he spoke. “You’re talented, Fukawa. To a weaker person than I, you would leave them frightened and in awe. You can create feelings in other people, just with words. Don’t focus on how Leon may feel. Write about how you feel. Do it well enough and others will feel it and understand it too.”

Touko blinked, feeling a flush in her cheeks. Her tongue squirmed in her mouth before she nodded and touched her pen nib against one of the pages.

A minute later, she wrote the first line.

‘It’s just a four letter word, they said.’

The lantern on the haystack lit up the inside of the wagon, the sky too sombre to provide light of its own. Out of sight, hooves marched, of horses and centaurs, too loud and sharp to be mistaken for rushing water.

They heard the stream before they saw it, hearing it whirl and mutter to the right of them. Touko hugged her legs closer to her body, nestled between Aoi and Byakuya.

After a minute of the stream’s indecipherable mumbling, Kazuichi announced, “Here we are.”

One set of hoofsteps stopped first, then the others petered out and the wagon slowed to a standstill.

Kenichiro got off the wagon and not long after, he opened the backdoor and everyone apart from the mermaids trooped out, leaving the lantern inside. Fairies sufficiently lit up the area, flying in random directions above the stream. It ran parallel to the path, on a lower level and accessed by a ledge that sloped downwards before leveling off abruptly. Rocks created a mosaic at the bottom, resembling the scales on a reptile. Bits of tree branch were littered about, blackened by the dark.

“You all remember what to do?” asked Leon, flourishing a piece of paper containing the entirety of
Touko’s lyrics, ripped out of her treasured notebook.

Two-note hums and nods indicated the affirmative.

“Don’t screw this up,” Leon warned them, and he faced the stream. “We’ll need some hair. Anyone got a jagged rock or anything sharp?”

“Would scissors suffice?” asked Kyouko.

Touko squeaked. Her face burned as all eyes fell on her.

“If it can cut hair,” said Leon.

Everyone kept staring at Touko.

“F-Fine, but we’re not cutting my hair,” fussed Touko as she hiked up her skirt, unveiling Syo’s holster of scissors. She extracted one and, grimacing, held it in front of her.

No one came forward right away but following a short delay, Yasuhiro stepped toward her and bowed deeply. He didn’t straighten. Touko blinked.

“What do you think I am? A kappa?” she asked.

“I’m offering my hair, Fukawa-chi,” explained Yasuhiro. “But just cut one dreadlock, okay?”

Tempting though it was to cut more, Touko snipped off a single dreadlock and handed it over to Leon, who tied it into a knot and tossed it into the stream.

“Sayaka-chan,” said Leon. He waved an arm wildly. “Hey, Sayaka-chan! Yo!”

Moments later, the outline of a circle glowed in the stream, wide enough to fit a person in. It seemed to originate from below the surface, and pale blue light not as intense spread throughout the rest of the stream.

Someone rose from the water until they stood on its surface, surrounded by the ring of light. The person’s matted hair, uncannily similar to water weed, fell long past their pointed ears and dripped. White lillies studded their hair and where their hair connected to their scalp, it seemed to fuse with their tinged green skin, looking like protruding veins. As their thin, white dress didn’t leave much to the imagination, the others could see their skin changed to a flesh-coloured tone from the shoulders down.

“Hello, Leon-kun,” the person greeted with a practiced smile. Their eyes flickered but their smile stayed sturdy. “How may I help you?”

“Aw, you don’t need to be like that with me, Sayaka-chan. I don’t need to need your help to want to spend time with you,” Leon assured her, and he gave his piece of paper a small shake. Sayaka glanced at it. “I’m here to sing you something, a’ight?”

She raised her eyebrows and touched the fingertips of one hand against her lips. “Oh? You are, huh?”

“Yes! I’m gonna sing it to you now, if that’s okay.”

“Of course!” Sayaka raised her shoulders and squeezed her hands together. “I would love to hear it.”

Leon puffed out his chest and peered down at the lyrics, which after two hours of possessing them,
he hadn’t been able to memorise. He met her eyes and grinned. “Ready to be blown away?”

Sayaka nodded, her shoulders just as high as before. Then he directed his attention toward his backing group.

“Ready?” he asked them, not grinning as much now.

“Yes,” said Kiyotaka. He positioned his ocarina near his mouth. “I will count us in. One... two... three... four...”

Soon after Touko had finished writing the song, she had pointblank refused to contribute any further, so when the others started to trill warbles of different pitches and Kiyotaka blew into his ocarina, Touko retreated to the ramp of the wagon and sat down on it. Performing acapella came more naturally to some of them than others. Kyouko’s lips barely moved, and Mondo didn’t seem to be even singing, just clapping along, while Aoi and Yasuhiro gave it their all. Makoto and Kenichiro made more of an effort than Kyouko and Mondo, but they couldn’t match the liveliness of Aoi and Yasuhiro, though they still seemed to be enjoying themselves despite how they all made a racket.

Leon half-sang, half-shouted the lyrics.

“It’s just a four letter word,
they said
A syllable on your lips
A note, a beat, a flick of the tongue
Quick, quick, it lets slip”

The music was faster and more upbeat than what Touko imagined when she recited the words in her head earlier. She hadn’t attended their rehearsal, opting to stay in the wagon with the mermaids, so even though she wrote the song, it was almost as new to her as it was to Sayaka. Her lips contorted but she didn’t complain.

“I never thought hard about it
I always took it for granted
Yet it pulls the rug out
between my feet and I stumble
My heart hums
for freedom from this cage
I rattle the bones gratingly
Praying that you’re still waiting

Look, listen, feel between the lines
Only you can, only you
Verdict, what’s your verdict?
Evoke the four letters”

Something brushed against Touko’s hand. She jumped, but feeling warmth, she realised it must have been Byakuya’s hand resting on top of hers, and she confirmed this by turning her head toward him. Byakuya had crawled over without her noticing and he stared straight ahead. Her breathing suspended for a few seconds, and when air entered her lungs again, Touko wiggled closer to Byakuya, who didn’t object.

“One-sided conversations almost feel like two
A word so old feels so brand new
when I’m standing with you”
Aoi hooked her arm around Kyouko’s elbow and pressed close. Kyouko’s lashes fluttered and she started to sing just a little bit louder. Makoto spotted them and took a step closer, the corners of his mouth turned up.

“Look, listen, feel between the lines  
Only you can, only you  
Verdict, what’s your verdict?  
Evoke the four letters”

Touko’s heart raced, but Byakuya didn’t fracture, or vanish, remaining with her.

“Look, listen, feel between the lines  
Only you can, only you  
Verdict, what’s your verdict?  
Evoke the four letters”

On the final word, Leon adopted a dramatic pose, bowing his head into the crook of a slanted arm, his other arm pointed up and straight, parallel to the lower half of his slanted arm. The acapella continued for a bit more before finishing to silence.

“So what do you think, Sayaka-chan?” Leon adopted a more neutral pose, panting slightly.

Sayaka formed a steeple with her hands. “Did you write it yourself, Leon-kun?”

“Heh... No.” He tipped his head to one side and averted his gaze. “The humans did.”

“Actually, Fukawa-san wrote it all herself,” Makoto chimed in.

Yasuhiro rested an arm on Makoto’s shoulder. “In exchange for a favour.”

“I see,” said Sayaka, not seeming all that surprised. “Which one of you is Fukawa-san?”

“Me,” said Touko, not quietly on purpose.

Sayaka turned toward where the voice had come from.

“You don’t have to be shy,” said Sayaka. “Please let me see your face.”

Makoto’s lips twitched. “I wouldn’t call her ‘shy’.”

Byakuya took his hand off Touko’s and shifted away from her. She wanted to stay with him, but he frowned and everyone else seemed to be waiting for her, so she rose and shuffled down the ramp, unsure what to expect. Throughout the song, Sayaka’s countenance hadn’t wavered, but Sayaka stretched out her lips as Touko approached.

While Touko didn’t doubt her own abilities, people had different preferences when it came to writing, and what was boring to some could have been engaging to others, and sometimes themes and symbolism flew over readers’ heads.

“Your song was lovely,” Sayaka gushed, but Touko didn’t drop her guard just yet. “Tell me, did you write it from experience?”

“You don’t need to have experienced things to write about them,” Touko retorted. She fidgeted, feeling her cheeks get hotter. “But y-yes...”

“You should be really proud of yourself!” Sayaka said. “Now, the human with big hair said
something about a favour, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. We really need to see Sonia-san,” said Kenichiro.

Maybe it was just because she moved her head a bit, but Sayaka’s features seemed to darken.

Remembering the entry for water nymphs in her book, Touko’s stomach tightened. “W-What’s with that expression?”

Sayaka eased into a new smile.

“Whatever you need her for, I hope that she can help,” she said with what felt very much like ingrained politeness. “May I ask what it is? Or would that be too invasive?”

That would be too invasive, but she asked anyway.

“We need assistance on a spell,” said Kyouko. “A transformation spell.”

“Oh... I don’t think I would be able to help you with that,” said Sayaka. She perked up, but again, that might have been an act too. “But thank you for the song. I loved it.”

That, however, sounded genuine, and her eyes didn’t betray her.

“I really hope she can help you out! Well...” Sayaka waved. “Good luck!”

And with that, she sank, and when she was fully submerged, the stream stopped glowing.

Fairies danced as usual.

“Now can we go to this witch?” asked Mondo.

Leon pursed his lips but said, “I guess so. Okay, follow me.”
As the wagon followed after the centaurs, dragging its wheels, it heaved over the occasional bump, and when it did, the knot in the pit of Touko’s stomach bounced as high as the back of her throat before slamming down. Sonia would be the second witch that had Touko met, with the first being her mentor. Her mentor never spoke about any witches that she might have known in her past, changing the subject whenever Touko encroached on the matter. Passing mentions to the existence of other witches could be gleaned from her mentor’s entries in her encyclopedia, but not names, not individuals.

Touko huddled up tighter, clinging to her spell book.

The wagon stopped. Without anyone announcing it, Touko knew this meant they arrived at their destination.

Even so, Leon said, “As promised, Sonia-san’s cottage.”

Everyone roused and shifted, but Touko sprung up first and darted to the back of the wagon, nearly tripping over Mondo. In her stomach, the knot, the taut, rubber band sensation, snapped, slackening into a flutter that flew up to her heart.

Kenichiro lowered the ramp and let them out. Touko’s footsteps spluttered then stuttered then stopped, and she tipped her head back and absorbed the appearance of the cottage as a whole, with its dark stone walls and streaked slate roofs appropriate for a witch from a gothic fairytale. The largest section of the building had a gable roof, but the tower attached to it was capped with a cone. It existed in a clearing, though trees resumed quite close to the home from both sides, and it seemed that there was some space behind the building before there were more trees.

She dropped her gaze to an arched window on the ground floor, framed by white and glowing orange within, and felt like she had made eye contact with the cottage. Seeing as the inside was lit up, whoever lived there must have been awake.

Kazuichi clopped up the dirt path leading to the front door, curled the fingers on one hand around a bronze knocker and struck it an excessive number of thirteen times against the wood. After the final thunk, he released the knocker and backed away.

Thirty seconds later, the door cracked ajar, and Kazuichi placed a hand on his hip and thrust out his chest.

A low voice, rumbling without shouting, rolled out from the entrance of the cottage. “What business do you have with us?”

Touko craned her neck, trying to see who was talking. Ahead of her, Kazuichi’s shoulders sagged. His arm fell down only to swoop upward within seconds, ending in a raised fist.

“What are you doing here?” demanded Kazuichi.

The door opened some more and half of a grey, masculine face peeped out. Over the left eye was a scar, shaped like a lightning bolt.

“This is my abode,” said the grey-faced man. “I have dwelled in this habitat for years, as you should know by now. Did you lose track? Are you aware that if you run out of fingers on one hand, you can use the other to count higher numbers?”
Kazuichi stomped a front hoof and brought his fist further forward.

“Oi, I don’t need that kind of attitude from a two-legs like you,” he spat. “Where’s Sonia-san? Where are you hiding her?”

“I have neither the time nor the desire to witness your comedy routine, and neither does my Dark Queen,” said the grey-faced man, and he started to close the door.

“H-Hey, wait!” Leon burst forward. The grey-faced man hesitated, observing Leon with a pale grey eye. Touko couldn’t see the other. “Not so fast. We have some people here to see Sonia-san.”

Seconds plodded by and the grey-faced man had neither shut nor opened the door. Kiyotaka marched forward.

“Leon-kun is correct,” Kiyotaka assured the grey-faced man, and he crossed into Touko’s line of sight so the grey-faced man was no longer visible from where Touko stood. Facing forward still, he gestured behind himself. “They are friends of a human acquainted with Sonia-san, and they have proven themselves worthy of being in her presence.”

The grey-faced man tormented them with another pause before pulling the door open.

“My She-Cat,” the grey-faced man turned his back on the outsiders, “you have guests.”

“S-She-Cat?” repeated Touko with wide eyes.

If someone called Touko that name, she would have hissed and curled her fingers. Byakuya might have been able to get away with it, and if he did say it, she could have played along, maybe by drawing whiskers on her cheeks. She held her hands together, spell book in her arms and pressed against her chest, her trembling not just due to the cold and nerves now, and she would have explored this scenario in her imagination had she not been distracted by someone coming out of the cottage.

“Sonia-san!” Kazuichi declared, brightening up.

A woman appeared in the doorway and greeted them with a warm smile that provided them with temporary relief from the chill of the night. Her flowing cotton nightdress couldn’t have supplied her with much warmth, and hugging herself, she confirmed Touko’s hunch. While the foreboding cottage, with more chimneys seeping smoke than surely necessary, could easily be conceived to belong to a witch, and it matched Gundam’s aura, whose dark hair, shaped like a cliff, had grey cloud streaks in it, this woman’s appearance was more like that of a princess in the fairytales that Touko once read. Even in this foreign land, she seemed foreign, head narrow, cheeks not very prominent, blonde hair almost white and nose slender and straight.

Then again, those storybooks had been bias against witches among other groups, so Touko tried not to put stock in their portrayals.

“Sonia-san,” said Kenichiro as he walked over.

The woman, who must have been Sonia, raised her head at the sound of his voice. Kenichiro stopped in front of her and bent over in a long, deep bow.

Leon wolf whistled.

“Yo, Sonia-san,” said Kazuichi, ogling her with Leon. “Looking good, as usual! Did you do something new with your hair?”
Kiyotaka, Mondo and Touko threw them dirty looks that they ignored. Sonia touched her hair and Kenichiro straightened up.

“I do not think so. I’m sure that I have worn this bow before,” she said, with a gentle lilt like windchimes. The bow in question was green, studded with sequins. She lowered her hand and tilted her head to one side, focusing on Kenichiro. “Kenichiro-kun, forgive me, but I was not expecting you. Is something the matter?”

His brow furrowed.

“I’m sorry if I’m intruding, but some good friends of mine wanted to see if you could help them,” explained Kenichiro.

“Are they sick?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“It’s for a transformation spell,” he said.

Sonia’s features hardened. “A transformation spell? I will require more detail.”

Kenichiro looked over his shoulder at where the others were, and his eyes landed on Touko in particular. He didn’t turn back, like he expected something from Touko first, so she shuffled forward. Sonia’s attention flitted to Touko instead.

“W-We need a spell that can turn a mermaid into a human,” Touko said, shifting her feet about. She grasped her skirt with one hand, unable to do so with both as one had to hold her spell book, and she maintained eye contact, no matter how much she wanted to avert her eyes from Sonia’s unyielding pair. “You need to teach me... so I can do it for my boyfriend...”

At the end of her last comment, though her posture didn’t relax, Touko gave a small grin.

“Are you a witch, then?” asked Sonia sharply, with the pad of her right’s index finger pressed against one corner of her lips.

“Yes. I’m a witch,” said Touko, starting to sober.

In contrast, a smile blew up Sonia’s face. She clapped her hands together and squeezed them, slippered heels bouncing against the ground. “Oh, goodness! Are you for real?”

Touko’s remnant of a smile went stiff in surprise.

“Of course I am,” said Touko, crossing her arms over her chest and her spell book, and by the time she finished saying that, her smile had slipped off.

Sonia charged forward and before Touko’s flight or fight instincts could kick in, she grabbed both of Touko’s hands in hers. Touko’s legs buckled as she tried to keep her arms close to her so her book wouldn’t fall.

“A fellow witch? This is hella rad!” Sonia proclaimed, and she shook Touko’s hands enthusiastically. “It has been a long time since I was in the company of a witch. Please, come in! We have much to share.”

She beckoned them to follow her in, and while most of the group lurched forward, Touko remained rooted to the spot. Makoto spotted this, and then turned to Sonia.
“What about Togami-kun?” asked Makoto. “Shall we bring him in?”

“Who? Is he the mermaid?” Sonia let a beat of silence pass. “Ah, I suppose we could do that. I don’t know what water container he has been travelling around in, but I have a lake behind my house that he may wish to relax in. Gundam, dear, would you please fetch me a dressing gown? Maybe we should talk outside for a bit first.”

“Not for too long though,” said Yasuhiro, and he blew onto his hands.

The grey-faced man nodded and headed back inside, pulling up a purple scarf so it covered his mouth. As soon as he vanished from sight, Sonia dragged Touko around to the back of the cottage, while everyone else outside of the wagon was allowed to walk unaided. They crossed through a narrow passageway between the cottage and some trees, with Kenichiro reaching there last and leading the wagon through it behind everyone else.

There was a decent sized patch of land without trees behind the cottage, part of which was taken up by a lake bigger than the pool in Kenichiro’s garden. In another section was a stable, and before Kenichiro took the horses there, he stopped off near the lake and set down the ramp. Mondo and Yasuhiro carried out each mermaid, lowering them into the lake one at a time. Sakura swished her tail and Byakuya submerged himself, popping up just as Sonia began to talk.

Gundam returned and Sonia put on a pink dressing gown.

“So!” Sonia clasped her hands in front of her, standing opposite Touko. “Some standard questions, if you will. What is the most advanced magic that you’ve done, please?”

“I’ve levitated things,” said Touko, wincing at how Sonia only reacted to that with a blink. “And I’ve looked through solid matter.”

“And she drew things with light without a potion,” Yasuhiro said, lifting a finger. Touko hunched her shoulders and scowled, but she didn’t deny it.

Sonia’s lashes fluttered and she raised a hand to her mouth. “Did you just say without a potion? What about a phrase? Did you use a phrase?”

“Without a phrase too,” added Yasuhiro, before Touko had chance to. He mimed a pair of glasses with his hands and put them on. “I saw it with my own eyes.”

Touko fidgeted, keeping her shoulders up.

“Is this true?” asked Sonia.

“Yes,” Touko confirmed to her. “I created visuals for a story I was telling on the boat here. And I’ve suspended people and objects in midair unaided. I wanted to ask about that, actually...”

Now Sonia didn’t even blink, but not because she was unimpressed.

“And you meant those things to happen?” Sonia probed, her gaze almost intense enough to burn holes through Touko.

“Yes,” said Touko, and she hesitated, chewing on her lip for a few moments, but realising she was doing it, she stopped. “W-Well, sort of...”

“Incredible!” Sonia gushed, shimmying her shoulders. She stamped her foot and bent her body forward slightly. Even though Sonia wouldn’t have bumped her head against her, Touko receded a
little. “You must demonstrate! Please levitate something.”

Touko cringed.

“I don’t have a one hundred per cent success rate,” Touko admitted, but her doubt did nothing to sway Sonia, who didn’t straighten, leaning toward Touko eagerly with wide eyes and a smile curled tightly at the ends.

If only to stay on the good side of Sonia, whose help was very much needed still, Touko put down her spell book and focused on it. She tried to imagine it floating. She tried to imagine invisible hands pulling it upward. She tried to imagine it bursting into the air, but despite her efforts, nothing happened. She just frustrated herself, which resulted in creating a buzz in her head.

Sonia’s shoulders slumped. Touko’s heart jolted.

“I have done it before,” Touko blurted.

“Fukawa has,” said Byakuya, and Yasuhiro nodded. Everyone else in their group tensed their features.

“I believe you,” Sonia assured them, and then she sighed, nonetheless disappointed. “Perhaps you are too tired. No matter. You can try again tomorrow,” she injected strength into her smile, “after you have had some sleep.”

“So it is possible?” asked Touko. Her knees knocked together. “To... turn a mermaid into a human...? You haven’t said ‘no’ yet, so I assume...”

She trailed off.

Sonia gave Touko a curious look. “I apologise if this comes across as rude...”

Touko braced herself, though she couldn’t control her shivers.

“... but have you been in much contact with other witches?” finished Sonia.

That wasn’t as bad as Touko expected. She let herself relax.

“I had a mentor, but she died almost two years ago,” said Touko, rubbing her hands together. “Otherwise, I haven’t been in contact with any witches.”

“I thought so. I only asked because there seem to be some gaps in your knowledge,” explained Sonia. She inclined her head to one side. “In theory, when it comes to magic, any outcome is possible though not necessarily easy in certain cases. A misconception is that a potion and words are required for all spells for all witches - this is false.”

Touko stared down at her book.

“I suspected there was more to it,” admitted Touko. She held onto her elbows and continued to peer downward. “When I was younger, I cast magic without words or a potion, unpredictable though it was. More recently, there was the levitation and light...”

Sonia emitted a hum. Touko looked up.

“Children lack certain inhibitions and as gifted ones mature, they usually lose the ability to cast magic on a whim. There are ingredients with magical properties which enhance your capabilities or help unlock the magic within you, and they help direct your magic so it comes out right,” said Sonia. “But
depending on how powerful a witch you are, you could create a spell without those things, and if what you say is true, that you can cast magic intentionally without them, you have the potential to achieve what many witches fail to do before they wither away in death.”

She gave a pause but no one talked, listening. Listening.

So she spoke some more.

“The potions and especially the words also help focus your mind and give you the correct image and thoughts needed to channel your magic with the desired effect.” Sonia steepled her hands. “It’s actually rather psychological. If you are very well disciplined with a clear goal in mind, you don’t need to verbalise anything or even use a potion, but only a powerful witch can do that.”

Touko’s eyes flickered, but no cracks appeared on Sonia’s face. “You’re... serious?”

“Yup,” replied Sonia. Her shoulders quivered. “It’s something I’ve been trying to master, but I haven’t been able to turn over so much as a leaf without the use of a word and a potion. But I know a lot about different spells, so I’m sure we will be able to come up with a spell together tomorrow.”

“I created a spell to protect everyone from the song of a siren,” Touko recalled, brain whirring and teeth chattering. “I created the recipe for the potion, and came up with the word to activate it...”

Though ‘it’ wasn’t the potion. Now she knew ‘it’ was herself.

“If you can rationalise to yourself and have confidence in it, for a witch such as yourself, the spell should work,” said Sonia, and Touko remembered how everyone had assured her that her potion would work, how her thought process on what ingredients to use had seemed reasonable to them; how it made sense, and how they said they believed in her, trusted her, had confidence in her.

They helped make her spell work.

Sonia patted herself on the mouth and yawned.

“I won’t keep you up for any longer now. I’m quite tired myself, and I can see you all shivering. Let us sleep,” said Sonia, butting into Touko’s thoughts. “Please come inside. I have enough beds for everyone.”

She turned to face the lake.

“We will see you in the morning,” she promised, and she curtseyed. “Good night, mermaids.”

“What?” Byakuya jerked his head, body upright. He folded his arms over his chest. “You’re not just going to leave us outside, are you? Where anyone could creep up on us and kidnap us?”

Leon rolled his eyes and said, “Leon-kun is right,” said Sonia. “The land around my cottage has been charmed with a protection spell which only lets me, my husband and the centaurs be able to enter this zone without an amulet.”

Aoi quirked her brow. “But we don’t have an amulet,” said Aoi.

“You don’t, but your horses do,” said Sonia, and at the same time, everyone looked over at the horses that had pulled the wagon so far on this long journey, that wore necklaces made of red string and dark blue jewels. “Everything near and around the amulets, such as your wagon, is able to pass through a barrier that I have created. Ah, but you won’t be able to leave without an amulet or one of
my spells either... If you try, you will wander through the woods until you retrace your steps and arrive back here. It’s like a little pocket universe.”

Byakuya sniffed but seeing as he then disappeared under the water, he seemed satisfied, and so the mermaids stayed outside while the others followed Sonia through the back door of the cottage.

Kazuichi tried to troop in after them but the grey-faced man, walking ahead of him, shot a glare over his shoulder and closed the door in Kazuichi’s face, leaving all of the centaurs outside.

The interior of the house was not a surprise after seeing the outside of the house, keeping to a gothic theme, and was also very ornate. Gundam stocked the fireplace with firewood, and once it was burning, Makoto and Yasuhiro shamelessly crowded around it.

“Leave some heat waves for us!” Aoi chided. Makoto backed up a bit and rubbed the back of his neck, while Yasuhiro continued heating up the front of his body. Kyoko bent down a bit by a table to examine an green orb mounted on a bronze rod, which was resting on the table. Mondo brooded in the corner, side by side with Gundam, who hid his mouth behind the folds of his scarf.

Though the room wasn’t untidy as such, it was full of things such as pots, bookcases and cabinets containing jars as well as in one instance what appeared to be a skull.

Touko transferred her gaze to the baskets hanging from the ceiling. There were leather sofas in the room, but Touko didn’t know whether they could sit on them, and something about them made her reluctant to try, an aura of some kind, so she shuffled her feet on the spot, taking everything in.

“Would you like a hot drink before you sleep?” asked Sonia.

A few people who weren’t Touko chorused yes, though she did have some tea, and later, one-by-one, they fell asleep in the guest rooms, the guys in one and the women in another.

Eventually, the only person awake in the women’s room was Touko, who as tired as she was, couldn’t fall asleep, so she waited quietly for Aoi and Kyoko to fall asleep beside her in the double bed that they were sharing. Hearing them both breathe steadily, she reached over to the bedside table, where Kameko was in a cage, emitting a soft clicking noise. She got Kameko out, trying her best to open the cage without making it squeak, then she rose off the bed and slunk out, grabbing a blanket on the way and bringing a lantern with her.

Her eyes ached but thoughts bounced around in her head, flies in a small container, occasionally ricocheting off a wall, and Touko hoped that in the cool, night air, they would be attracted to the lights in nature and escape, disappearing into the unseeable and leaving her to sleep.

That, and she wanted to spend some private time with Byakuya.

Stars splattered the sky in familiar constellations. Wearing the blanket like a cape and with Kameko sitting on her shoulder, Touko left through the back door of the cottage and scurried over toward the lake, feeling cold grass underfoot. Byakuya was partway through swimming a lap while Sakura relaxed silently at the opposite end to where Touko was headed, possibly out of earshot. Sakura spotted her, but she didn’t acknowledge Touko beyond a glance and a nod, and Touko looked away after.

In doing so, Touko caught sight of three silhouettes. Her heart skipped as she faltered. They must have been the centaurs, and they stood still some way away, unmoving, and they didn’t say anything even though she felt sure they would have been able to see her lantern’s glow. She chanced a few more steps and still got no reaction.
“They’re asleep,” came Sakura’s voice, quiet but still causing Touko to jump a little.

“Standing up?” asked Touko, laying her eyes on Sakura, who nodded.

“Indeed,” was Sakura’s reply.

“Okay.” Touko sat down at the edge of the lake and crossed her legs. “Good.”

Byakuya swerved and swam toward Touko with remarkable speed, barely splashing. When he reached Touko, he folded his arms in front of him and placed them on the bit of ground next to her.

Despite all the swimming that he did, he wasn’t panting or threatening to collapse in on himself, like Touko would be, and when he spoke, he didn’t sound out of breath.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?” he asked with a stern look.

His sharp blue eyes sent a jolt through her.

“I’ll be fine!” she squeaked, and her movement caused Kameko to hiss. She waved both of her hands, and then she slouched and pressed the tips of her index fingers together, a smile quivering her lips. “B-But... thank you for your concern.”

“You need rest if you want to perform to the best of your abilities,” he clarified. He blinked. Silence scraped its footsteps through seconds. Then he looked down and added, “And... for your health, too.”

She touched a hand over her heart and spoke quickly. “I tried to go to sleep, but I don’t think I’m tired enough yet, so I came out here for a bit.”

Byakuya continued staring down, in thought about something that his creased brow gave no hints to. Touko studied his face, awash in the lantern’s light, and bit her lip, but it was too late to pin her smile down. It had faded too much and just would have torn her cheeks if she tried to keep it there.

“Is the water okay?” she asked.

“Yes, actually,” he replied. He took one arm off the edge of the lake, twisted his body toward her and combed the fingers on one hand through the water. “In fact, I haven’t felt this energised for a while... or ever. This water is incredibly refreshing. Oogami claims to feel no different than before, but I think there are some magical properties in this lake. See for yourself.”

Touko was already barefoot, so she dunked a foot in right away. The shock of the lake’s low temperature tumbled through her in a shudder, and her foot shot up. Kameko bristled and Touko scooted back. Her blanket fell off her shoulders but she didn’t put it back on, choosing to sit on it instead. When she had become still, Kameko started to crawl down her arm, and Touko watched Kameko’s trek quietly. Byakuya noticed Kameko and observed Kameko as well, frowning.

When Kameko reached Touko’s wrist, she offered Kameko her finger, and Kameko nuzzled the tip, though to anyone else, it would just have looked like Kameko bumped into Touko’s finger by accident.

“How is Kameko doing?” asked Byakuya.

“She’s doing well,” said Touko.

“She?” Byakuya cocked his head to one side. “I thought Kameko used ‘he’ pronouns.”
His heavy words came so lightly from his mouth. They dropped through Touko, thumping against the pit of her stomach.

“He does. She did,” said Touko, and when she breathed in, then out, the weight in her stomach didn’t dissipate but just flopped over onto its other side. “I mean... this time, Kameko is a girl.”

Byakuya adjusted his position only slightly. Why, perhaps to see her better, or to get more comfortable, but the subtle change in shadow across his face seemed to coincide with realisation striking.

“How long do stink bugs live for?” Byakuya asked.

She turned her eyes to Kameko.

“Less than a year,” she admitted.

They stewed in nature’s noises, in the lake’s gurgling and in shrill, vibrating birdsong.

“You spend roughly a third of your life sleeping,” said Byakuya. “And you have such short lifespans too.”

Touko wiggled uncomfortably and placed a hand over her heart.

“That just means that you have to be more thoughtful with the time you have,” she told him.

“When I’m a human, I will have to sleep too,” he said. She raised her head. He dragged his fingers through the water and lifted his hand close to his face, where the light could frame him. “I will not live as long as a mermaid should, but you’re right. I will make do with the time I have... I can consider it a challenge.”

Byakuya heaved himself out of the lake and rolled onto his back, lying on the grass with his hands behind his head. Touko blushed and tucked her legs into her chest.

“We can sleep together,” she said, somewhat to him, mostly to herself. “We can share a bed...”

Something tugged on one of her braids. Touko twitched and whipped her head around. The end of her braid was woven between Byakuya’s fingers. Her face grew hotter and when he tugged again, she leaned into the movement, slow enough to not disturb Kameko, and ended up lying next to him. She pulled on her blanket and set it down over them.

Their eyes met and he opened his mouth. Her breathing hitched. There was a flicker in his face and with a faint grimace, he shut his mouth and cast his eyes out to the sky, hooking his gaze around a twinkle.

“Byakuya-sama?” she asked in a breathless rush.

“The moon is beautiful tonight,” he said.

Some words didn’t come as easily as they did to people like Touko and Aoi. She took her glasses off.

“It is,” she said, and Kameko flew away.
Touko opened her eyes, the crust of morning on her face. Slightly sore and not totally processing where she was yet, she sat up, rubbed her eyes and then put her glasses on, skin tingling where the air nipped at her.

“What are you doing here?” barked a voice behind her.

She shrieked and lurched forward, tumbling into the lake, and the swimming lessons with Aoi were given another opportunity to prove they had been worth it, as Touko managed to keep herself afloat, even if her splashing and flailing wasn’t at all dignified. Byakuya and Sakura swam over to Touko, and one of them returned her glasses to her, which had fallen off. Her glasses needed a wipe before she wore them, so she did that quickly, and with the two mermaids supporting her and preventing her from sinking, she was able to see who had startled her.

The culprit was Kiyotaka, who approached the edge of the lake, wisely leaving enough space that she couldn’t grab his leg while she was still in the water and drag him in with her.

“What were you spying on me?” Touko spluttered. “W-Waiting... Waiting to make a move?”

Touko gasped for air. Byakuya and Sakura helped her climb out of the lake, pushing while she scrambled, and as soon as she felt solid ground beneath her hands and knees, she crawled forward.

Kiyotaka took a few paces back, eyeing her cautiously.

“A move?” repeated Kiyotaka, squinting.

She elevated herself into a kneeling position, glowered and pointed at him, dripping wet. “A lewd move!” she told him shrilly, finger shaking.

His head jerked back and he slapped a hand over his heart, eyes wide.

“No! Never!” he insisted. “I wouldn’t do anything like that. I was merely curious why you were outside!”

If that was the case, he had chosen the wrong tone of voice. Touko squeezed the bottom of her skirt to get some of the liquid out, rather than trudge water into Sonia’s cottage. With how much she was seething, it wouldn’t have been a surprise if her body temperature didn’t evaporate some of it away.

“You better be telling the truth,” said Mondo.

She hadn’t realised he was here too and turned around. Nearby, Mondo was lounging with his back propped up against a chicken coop. His helmet was next to him, upside down and having its insides pecked at by two chickens, presumably stocked with feed. He peered over in their direction. Specifically, at Kiyotaka.

“Because,” Mondo flicked his head back, impressive teeth on display, “you’ve been hanging around here for at least an hour.”

Kiyotaka huffed out a snort and set a row of knuckles either side of his waist, chest pushed out.

“And what does that say about you?” Kiyotaka retorted. “You were here when I arrived.”

“I don’t gotta worry about myself. I know my own morals.” Mondo cracked his knuckles. “But I don’t know yours. If you lay a finger on that girl, I’m gonna yank your tongue so hard that the rest of your organs come out with it.”
There were good intentions behind what he said, at least.

“I may not be a human, but I’m not inhuman!” Kiyotaka said, aghast. “And I certainly don’t resort to threats and violence so easily. That’s the sort of character capable of heinous acts. How do we know that you’re not trying to trick us?”

“We have known Oowada for some time now,” said Sakura all of a sudden. All eyes swivelled toward her. She had her arms folded over her chest. “Oowada is a dear friend of ours and can be trusted.”

She smiled at Mondo, who scratched at the back of his head.

“T-Thanks,” said Mondo.

Kiyotaka looked equally flustered.

“R-Right,” he said. He cast his gaze downward temporarily, and when he lifted his head, he didn’t have the same fire in his eyes as before. “I apologise, everyone.”

Touko scowled and let go of her skirt, which had become wrinkled. “W-Whatever... One of us would break your hands anyway, or something else you could use as a weapon... I better not get sick because I’m wearing cold and damp clothes...”

“Your friendship is admirable,” Kiyotaka commented. He smiled, but his eyes seemed hollow, a duller red. “I noticed your harmony while we composed the music for Fukawa-kun’s song. It must be nice to be a part of a close knit group.”

Byakuya quirked his brow.

“What about those other two?” he asked.

“Kazuichi-kun and Leon-kun?” said Kiyotaka. He pressed his knuckles against his chin. “I don’t get along with them like they get along with each other... When we’re working, and we try to have conversations, they peter out in a few minutes, while those two can exchange words back and forth with rapid-fire.”

Mondo huffed. “Sounds to me like you’re just a stick in the mud and no fun.”

Kiyotaka flinched, like he had just been slapped, and when he recovered, he tilted forward and stabbed the air with his index finger, pointing at Mondo.

“It’s not that I’m ‘no fun’, it’s that I am the reason that things get done! I’m not a layabout, like certain deadbeats around here,” said Kiyotaka, and Mondo lurched to his feet.

“You wanna narrow that down? Give a name or two?” Mondo punched the palm of his hand, and very soon, the two non-humans found themselves nose-to-nose. “If we were harmony, you were a wrong chord, yappin’ orders all the time and acting like you were better than us.”

Touko wasn’t involved but the prospect of any fight nearby made her shudder, and it wasn’t just because it was cold. Fighting was contagious and could spread fast. It was like a tornado that ripped up anything and anyone in its path of destruction. It was like a drunk man who would grapple whoever entered his hazy red vision, so long as they had beady eyes, even if they were only four years old.

“Please control yourselves,” said Sakura, her gravelly voice barely audible above the pounding
between Touko’s ears. The quality of her words seemed to bury the noise though, and Touko, less
trapped, less consumed by the noise, remembered how to breathe. “We are friends, not foes, and to
fight over such petty matters is both unproductive and immature. Have neither of you got any
willpower?”

Unless she leaped out from the water, Sakura wouldn’t have been able to interfere with their face-off,
but Kiyotaka backed down, gritting his teeth.

“Don’t worry. I have plenty of will power;” said Kiyotaka. “Unlike some people!”

Mondo growled and their gaze snuffed out. Kiyotaka marched off while Mondo picked up his
helmet and went off in search of more bird feed.

Touko let out a sigh of relief.

“That was certainly something;” said Byakuya. “Oi, Fukawa.”

She yelped. “Y-Yes?”

“You need to stop wearing cold and damp clothes,” he said. “You’ll get sick.”

“Right! I’ll... be on it right away!” promised Touko, and eager to please, she hurried over to the
cottage.

Ideally, Touko would have snuck back in and got changed into some dry clothes without bumping
into anyone, and she did try that, tiptoeing down the hallway, but Sonia was already up by then,
humming in the kitchen, and hearing Touko’s footsteps, Sonia stepped out in front of Touko.

“Fukawa-san!” chirped Sonia. Her hands clapped. “I thought you might have been Chihiro-san, but
you are just as delightful to meet. Good morning.”

She looked Touko up and down, and then she placed a hand over her mouth.

“Oh, goodness! You’re hella wet,” remarked Sonia. “Judging by your state, you must have been
having a good time with your boyfriend.”

Touko’s face set aflame.

“W-What we get up to is none of your business!” she snapped. Sonia froze. Remembering who she
was talking to, Touko straightened and coughed lightly. Her voice turned deadpan. “I mean, I was...
until Kiyotaka startled me into the lake.”

“Kiyotaka-kun is a funny guy, isn’t he? But his heart is in the right place. Stubbornly so, you could
say;” said Sonia, and Touko thought she might have known what Sonia meant. “He doesn’t have
many friends, poor thing. Now...”

She pointed at Touko, whose heart jolted.

“... Do you want a change of clothes or would you rather cast a drying spell on yourself?” asked
Sonia.

That was an option.

“I’ll do a spell,” said Touko.

“Excellent,” said Sonia, beaming. “What would you like for breakfast? I’ve prepared a few things
already, but if you have something in particular in mind, I’d be happy to whip it up. Cooking is hella
boss.”

Sonia grasped one of her biceps and flexed it. Touko swallowed.

“I don’t usually have breakfast,” she said. Before her voyage on the ship, she often skipped out on
breakfast, starting her first meal with lunch, and during the year after her mentor died but before she
met Byakuya, what she did have could barely have been called a lunch. In order to satisfy Byakuya,
she had strived to improve the quality of their lunches, whether she bought them or made them
herself, at first to content him but then to please him.

“Breakfast, they say, is the most important meal of the day,” said Sonia without revealing who ‘they’
was. “After you’ve dried yourself, we’ll get started on it together.”

By the time breakfast was ready and Touko had put on fresh clothes, her previous outfit dirtied with
flour and various sticky substances, almost everyone was awake. Outside lacked the overwhelming
smells of Sonia’s living room, and Touko sat quietly while Kyouko left briefly to fetch Aoi. After
they returned, they all ate breakfast on a blue woolen blanket. Even Mondo joined them, though he
didn’t engage in any conversations.

“Finally!” Yasuhiro did his best not to cry. “Hot, tasty food... Flavourful food...”

At first, Byakuya stayed in the water and to show off, he had demanded they throw fruit in a high arc
for him to catch in midair, when he leaped up from the lake, but he had to stop and eat like the others
after Aoi, Mondo and Leon got bored of tossing food. Leon turned out to be able to hurl the fruits
with a pitch so fast that even if Byakuya could have intercepted them, the fruit could have believably
gone through his hand, but Byakuya gladly accepted the challenge nonetheless.

“C’mon, Togami-chi, if anyone should be doing that, it’s Asahina-chi,” said Yasuhiro. He wiped his
hand against his mouth, smearing raspberry jam.

Normally, Touko couldn’t stand the sounds of others eating, with Byakuya as an exception, but with
the hum of nature and the presence of friends, she could tolerate it.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you this lively before,” remarked Kyouko, rubbing her chin, though she
then stroked her hair instead. “But I don’t think it’s a bad thing, even if it’s quite unusual.”

“I’m telling you, it’s the water,” said Byakuya as he crawled over and settled down next to Touko.

Sonia cut herself a slice from the pancake on her plate.

“There’s nothing special about the water in the lake, but perhaps being in freshwater for a change has
something to do with it,” said Sonia. “Your line may have originally been from freshwater and
adapted to salt water, but being in freshwater would be like leaving a hot and humid room and
entering a cool and dry room where you can finally breathe clearly and relax.”

“Perhaps.....” Byakuya mused, not seeming very convinced.

“Hey, Togami-kun, you should try one of the pancakes,” said Kenichiro.

“Pancakes?” Byakuya repeated. Touko let him try a piece of hers. He chewed slowly. She squirted
some lemon juice onto another piece for him.

“These pancakes are really good,” said Makoto through a mouthful of pancakes.
“Sonia-san always makes the best stuff,” boasted Kazuichi as he grabbed a handful of raspberries. He shoved them into his mouth.

“I try my best,” said Sonia, sat opposite Touko. She sipped from her cup and said, “Duplisere.”

The food on the blanket began to multiply. Yasuhiro’s and Makoto’s faces lit up as they helped themselves to more.

“Are you full already?” Sakura asked Aoi, who had using a fork to toy with a strawberry on her plate. “That’s your first helping. Have you lost your appetite? My girl, this isn’t like you at all.”

Aoi shrugged. Even her ponytail was limp. “I guess I’m still getting over the ride here. Or maybe there are some things about me you just don’t know…”

Sakura blinked.

“It was a long journey,” said Kenichiro, and Aoi ate the rest of the strawberry in one go. She chewed it thoroughly while Sakura watched with a frown.

Sonia dabbed a napkin against her lips and set it down on her empty plate.

“Shall we get started soon?” Sonia asked Touko, who after being spoken to, dropped her spoon. Touko hadn’t eaten much, her insides squirming too much for a lot of food to have got in.

“We’re doing the spell on him now?” asked Touko, eyes growing wide.

“No, no! We still need to come up with a suitable spell, and we’ll have to practice,” Sonia replied. “Transformation of living creatures is tremendously hard. Please eat. You’ll need your energy.”

Touko wiggled uncomfortably. Next to her, Byakuya picked up Touko’s spoon and scooped up some egg for her to eat. Her cheeks warmed as she accepted it into her mouth. Thick, white and slightly salty… were the eggs.

Several people gave Touko a weird look, including Sonia, who then swept her gaze around the circle.

“I’d like to get started as early as possible,” she said. “If you have any objections, I would like to hear them.”

Touko swallowed.

“That’s fine with me,” she told Sonia, dribbling a bit. She wiped her drool off her face with the back of her hand. “But what I want to know is what we’ll be doing, exactly.”

“Oh. Well.” Sonia smiled. “First, we will have to create a suitable spell, using our knowledge and my books for reference. We’ll formulate a potion comprising of ingredients that make sense and give the right boosts, and a phrase that will act as the trigger.”

Her smile widened as she laced her fingers together.

“Once we’ve done that, we can practice,” said Sonia.

Touko looked at Byakuya. Her hair was in braids, so she she didn’t have a lot available to tug on, but she found enough in front of her left ear to pull.

Kyouko furrowed her brow and said Touko’s thoughts. “By practice, you don’t mean on Togami-
“Kun, do you?”

“And What if I turn him into a slug?” asked Touko in a strangled tone.

Byakuya, about to offer more egg to Touko, stopped and widened his eyes.

Sonia laughed politely.

“Please do not worry,” said Sonia. “First, we will practice on small objects. Then, we shall move up until you are ready for Togami-kun. We’ll do it then, and only then. A friend of mine is a shapeshifter, able to create any form, so you will be able to practice with them just before you cast it on Togami-kun.”

Touko brought a thumb to her mouth and mumbled, “Won’t I turn them into a human if we do that?”

“Oh, no, but it’s good that you picked that up.” Sonia brushed some hair off her face, tucking it behind her ear. “You won’t be able to overwrite their shapeshifting magic, and with a minor adjustment, we can make it temporary anyway. We will be using my friend in case the spell you cast comes out unstable. For example, you might cast a spell that on a normal being would make them perish before you can fix them. While my friend can reform, a normal human cannot. But I must warn you now...”

Sonia reached over and rested her hand onto Touko’s lap. Their eyes met and Sonia’s washed out olive eyes sent a shiver through Touko.

“You must be in absolute control of your emotions and thoughts when you see the shapeshifter,” said Sonia, with no grins or giggling or gleam in her eyes. “Those who go to the shapeshifter often lose themselves. Should your mind wander, should your heart seep, you may find the shapeshifter takes on a form of something, or someone else.”

The hand that Sonia had on Touko tightened. Unease stirred within Touko’s gut, and the egg did not sit well.

“How long will this take?” asked Touko quietly.

“I don’t know,” replied Sonia. She took her hand off Touko and sat back. “But you must master the spell before you try it on your boyfriend. For right now, we shall spend the morning compiling ingredients together. I have a few phoenix feathers which are for rebirth, and we can research what else would make the spell stronger and permanent.”

“How can we help?” asked Makoto. Sonia tapped herself on the chin.

“We will need some ingredients, most likely,” she said. “We’re running low on firewood too, and Gundam could do with some help tending to our livestock.”

Gundam was wearing the same purple scarf as the night before, along with a black coat, boots and gloves, all with too many buckles, and reminded Touko of an executioner. He inclined his head forward for a moment in acknowledgement.

Sonia stood up.

“Kiyotaka-kun can help Gundam with the animals.” She pointed at whoever she talked about, finger wagging as her target changed. “We have a lot of animals here and in the woods. Kazuichi-kun, Leon-kun,” they straightened as they were picked out,” I want you to get me some enchanted water from Sayaka-san, as well as some flowers. I’ll write a list for you.”
“You can count on us, Sonia-san!” Kazuichi said, while Leon pulled a face at the idea of working. Sonia turned her smile to the others, no longer pointing but holding her hands together.

“You are my treasured guests, so I couldn’t ask you to help with any chores, so please feel free to entertain yourself as you like.” Her face became serious. “I only advise that you don’t go through my things... you may end up hurting yourself, or worse.”

Yasuhiro jiggled his foot, Makoto raked fingers through his hair, Kyouko folded her arms over her chest and Aoi nodded, her gaze aimed just below Sonia’s shoulders. Sakura and Byakuya seemed unaffected, and as for Mondo, he put down half an apple and sat up straighter.

“I’ll help with the animals,” said Mondo, moving one hand around aimlessly. “You said you had a lot of animals, so you could do with my help, and I’m gonna prove to that ass,” he jerked his thumb toward Kiyotaka, “that I have willpower.”

Kiyotaka pursed his lips, but Gundam adjusted his scarf and said, “Very well. As long as you are not a nuisance and don’t disturb this place’s fauna and flora.”

Once everyone had filled themselves with food, and even Yasuhiro was patting his stomach, the group split up. Sonia strode toward the cottage and Touko got up to follow her, but she had only contributed one pace before she was called to.

“Fukawa, get me a book, please,” Byakuya said.

Touko spun around, hands clutched together.

“O-Of course!” she said, rosy-cheeked. “What book would you like?”

He cupped his chin and narrowed his eyes in thought.

“Fetch me the astronomy book, if that’s not too much trouble,” he decided.

The book was in the wagon so she retrieved it from there and gave it to him. She watched him set it down in front of him and turn to the first page, and she would have stayed there longer if Sonia hadn’t returned and grabbed Touko by the hand. Taken by surprise, Touko, didn’t object or fuss at the sudden physical contact, and she let herself be led into the cottage.

They entered the living room, where baskets of various plants hung from the ceiling, and china jugs and vases sat atop every flat, wooden surface, such as above the many bookcases and cabinets. Touko sniffed, trying to place the scent. There were a lot of different plants that combined into a unique woody fragrance, with rosemary as one of the more potent elements and mint being a strong contender. If she breathed in too deeply, she suspected she might sneeze, so she made a conscious effort to breathe through her mouth more.

“First, we’ll need to research ingredients,” said Sonia. She plucked a book off a shelf and plopped down on an armchair with it. “I’m thinking eggs and caterpillars...”

Touko yelped. Sonia’s countenance didn’t change, so Touko steadied herself and held up a fist.

“Caterpillars?” she sneered. “Do I look like I just started school? I’m not going to eat bugs.”

Sonia tilted her head to one side. “Not even for Togami-kun?”

Her mouth opened only for Touko to close it shortly after.
So maybe Touko was going to eat bugs.

An hour later, with help from Touko’s spell book and a several tatty books belonging to Sonia, they compiled a list of ingredients.

“We should be able to make a basic transformation spell,” announced Sonia.

Touko, sat in an armchair nearby, looked up from her book.

“Let us make a prototype potion,” said Sonia. She rose and retrieved a small cauldron from one of the cabinets, and she put it down on a clear spot on a cluttered table. During their research, she had written down a number of ingredients, and she held it up to read. “Let’s see. Caterpillars...”

Sonia caught sight of Touko’s face.

“It will only be a gulp,” Sonia told her.

“I’ll just not think too much about it while I drink it,” mumbled Touko.

“Oh, no, Fukawa-san. You will have to be very aware of the ingredients and their significance,” said Sonia. “It won’t work otherwise.”

Touko bit the inside of her cheeks and watched Sonia stride over to a cupboard and crouch down so she could rummage through the objects on one of the lower shelves. Glass clinked.

Soon, Touko relaxed her jaw and said, “I have a question.”

Sonia extracted a jar of brown caterpillars from the cupboard and hummed in acknowledgement.

“Who taught you so much about magic?” asked Touko.

The question made Sonia freeze for a moment, but she thawed out within seconds and stood up, keeping her back to Touko.

“Do you know a country called Novoselic?” said Sonia in a distant tone.

“No.”

“It is small and in another continent.” There was a pause, then Sonia added casually, “I was its princess.”

“A p-pr-?” Touko started, and Sonia stared at Touko from over her shoulder.

Touko shrunk back a bit at Sonia’s blank expression, the smile on Sonia’s face adding no more emotion to it than if it hadn’t been there.

“Was?” said Touko, and she gulped. “Even if I believed that... what do you mean by ‘was’?”

“You know of the prosecution of witches?” said Sonia, putting forth what was barely a question. She faced Touko properly. “My kingdom was no better. My family wished to protect our people, so for generations, we hunted down witches and publicly executed them. Unbeknownst to my family, when I was a young girl, I managed to do unexplainable things, like teleport onto tall buildings and phase through solid matter. I sought answers from my library and suspected that I was a witch. Disguising myself as a runaway, I discovered a group of witches, and they confirmed that I was indeed a witch. The first in my family...”
Sonia laughed, but it lacked warmth. Touko’s eyes flickered while Sonia’s gaze never strayed.

“Did your family find out?” asked Touko.

“I spent a lot of my spare time with these women, learning their, our history. They came from different countries, but I had grown up speaking several languages, so I could talk to them. According to Sayaka-san, these woods here are magic, and they translate what we say into the same language unless we deliberately say a word from another. It might be because witches used to gather here and needed a way to communicate, and so they cast this charm, or it might be the woods are sentient and charming us so it and its inhabitants can talk to us…”

Touko remained quiet so Sonia could continue uninterrupted.

“Anyway, the witches who took me under their wing became a second family of sorts, trying to teach me all they knew.” Sonia couldn’t fake a smile now. “One day, the inn that they used as a hideout was ambushed, but the witches managed to push me into a hidden room before anyone else saw me. I stayed there not until the screams stopped, but until I smelled smoke. I fled past bodies of my soldiers and my fellow witches, returned to my castle to pack some things and abdicated, leaving a note to explain that I wished to see the world and would return when I was ready. I travelled, met a few witches here and there, and for the last few years, I have lived here with my husband, after meeting him at a market. Sometimes, I leave this place to go to markets or on call as a natural doctor, as I advertise myself, which is also how I met Kenichiro-kun, though he saw through my facade when the centaurs turned up here unannounced. As for Novoselic, I’ve not been back since I first left.”

The air felt heavy and the silence felt too loud. Faint shouting could be heard outside, but it had nothing to do with them.

“What about siblings?” asked Sonia.

“I did, one time,” said Touko. “Two mothers and a father.”

“Did they die?”

“No. I don’t know.”

Hopefully they did.

“Do you have family?” asked Sonia.

“Fukawa-san, when we go to the shapeshifter tomorrow, I must warn you. You may see things from your past, from your nightmares, from both... You may re-experience certain events,” said Sonia, locking Touko in a stare that Touko felt queasy being in. “Whatever your mind runs wild with will be reflected back at you. To perform the spell you wish to, you must have utmost focus and resolve, but if you succeed, you will be able to perform the spell on your beloved. Are you sure that you are capable?”

Heart racing so fast it almost became a single prolonged hum, Touko nodded.

“If you want, I can cast the spell on him, but I am not as powerful as you,” said Sonia, disappointed
but not bitter.

“No, I’m going to do it,” said Touko, and she pushed up her glasses. “I will.”

The ends of Sonia’s curled to create a limp smile, as ghostly as her eyes. She clapped her hands, and Touko straightened to attention.

“For the rest of the day, we are going to practice transforming objects,” said Sonia. “Have you done that before, Fukawa-san?”

Touko blinked and after a delay, her lips twisted in thought.

“I don’t think so?” said Touko, which as the person most likely to know, and perhaps the only person who would know, couldn’t have been encouraging.

Sonia shrugged.

“Oh, well. That’s why it’s practice,” said Sonia.

The potion didn’t take long to concoct. Touko stood back and let Sonia get on with this part by herself, as Touko didn’t know where Sonia kept anything. Like with Touko and her books, to an outsider, the room seemed cluttered and impossible to sort easily through, but Sonia had no trouble finding what she wanted.

When the potion was ready, Sonia passed a vial of it to Touko.

“This will allow you to cast a simple transformation spell on objects. It’s weaker than the one we’ll need for Togami-kun, but it will suffice,” said Sonia. In the vial was a clear liquid. “To activate it, you should say ‘gjenfølelse’, which is the word we will use for the spell on Togami-kun.’ ”

Before Touko tried to say the word aloud, she went over it in her head, and when the word became a mantra in full swing, she spoke.

“Yen... third... less... sah,” drawled Touko. “Gjenfølelse...”

Sonia only cringed slightly. She placed a fork on the table, positioning it in front of Touko, and stepped aside.

“Now, drink the potion, please,” said Sonia.

Touko raised the vial to her mouth and splattered a few droplets onto her tongue. Her tongue tickled where the potion made contact, feeling as though the outer layer was dissolving, but it didn’t hurt.

“Gjenfølelse,” said Touko.

The edges of Touko’s vision blurred into a white that trembled like the sail of a ship on a windy day.

“We’ll aim to transform the fork into a knife. That should be fairly simple,” said Sonia. She hesitated. “I apologise if I sound patronising but...”

By saying that, Sonia had doomed herself to a self-fulfilling prophesy.

“... to use the spell, you simply focus on the object and imagine a knife,” Sonia finished.

Touko gave a twitch of a nod and concentrated on the fork. Heat pooled behind her eyes and within seconds, the fork began to glow white. It didn’t appear to be solid anymore, but it wasn’t a liquid or a
gas either. In this state, the fork was pure energy that wobbled, though its size and shape stayed roughly the same as the fork’s. She visualised a knife and the fork replicated the shape, its prongs merging together.

“Now relax,” said Sonia.

A sigh crashed out from Touko’s mouth as she let the image in her mind disappear. The white light vanished and in its place was a knife.

“Bravo! Bravo! Uber-cool!” Sonia bounced from foot to foot and punched the air, dangerously close to patronising. “Let’s keep the wheel rolling! I will have you change a coin into a button next. You will be ready to face the shapeshifter in no time!”

The rest of the morning kept up the pattern of transforming one thing into another, with the final spell changing a ladybird into a stink bug. By then, Touko had given herself a headache, and Sonia had left her and her new friend, the stink bug, to rest on an armchair while she prepared lunch. Touko shut her eyes, occasionally peeking at the stink bug on the arm of the chair, but she didn’t sleep. When her eyes remained closed for too long, a shadowy figure loomed out of the shadows in her mind, and she would have to open her eyes to let in light, reality, to vanquish the figment of her imagination.

That was all it was. A figment of her imagination. And as long as she didn’t let her mind wander, she told herself, she had nothing to worry about when it came to the shapeshifter.

As with breakfast, they ate it outside, and as with breakfast again, Touko didn’t eat much, forcing herself when Byakuya decided to feed her, presenting a sandwich to her lips. The only people absent were Kiyotaka and Mondo, who Gundam claimed to have challenged each other to a fruit-picking contest.

“Are you okay, Fukawa-chan?” asked Makoto, noting Touko’s slow chewing and drooping shoulders.

Byakuya wavered and moved the sandwich back a bit.

“What is it?” asked Byakuya.

Touko’s throat felt like it had puckered shut.

“I’m tired,” she worked out of herself.

“Yes, I imagine so. We’ve been working hard on our spells,” said Sonia, waving a fork that she was using to eat salad with. “It’s very important that Fukawa-san has mastered it when she casts it on Togami-kun. There is no room for error.”

Everyone exchanged looks that answered no one’s questions.

Yasuhiro vocalised the drop in Touko’s stomach.

“What happens if she hasn’t?” he asked.

Sonia put down her fork, opened her satchel and retrieved the vial that Touko had drank from earlier. She sipped from it and picked up a teacup, holding it in her palm.

“Gjenfødelse,” she said.
The teacup turned into the same white light that Touko had seen throughout the course of her training that morning, and like back then, it began to change shape. While it was still changing, Sonia shut her eyes, and the form of the teacup became more erratic. Protrusions pushed out before retracting at a rapid pace, and it reminded Touko of someone trapped in a sack, pummeling at their prison but failing to break through.

When the last mental strands connecting Sonia to the teacup severed, with the cup no longer being acted on by Sonia, it solidified into china but it wasn’t the same shape as before. Its floral pattern had become twisted, distorted, and its shape was similar to that of a water lily, only with lumpy, mangled petals of different sizes.

“At best, a mistake will leave deformities, imperfections, but those can crack,” said Sonia softly. “At worst...”

She peered at the disfigured object in her hand. It glowed white again, and it struggled again, and then, all of a sudden, it disintegrated, and Sonia cradled grey powder in her hand. Her eyelids lowered and she blew at it, and it exploded into a cloud that thinned until it disappeared entirely, like it had been an illusion conjured by a siren’s song all along.

Somehow, Touko managed to fall asleep that night, but it was still dark outside when she woke up. A candle on the bedside table closest to Touko helped light up her surroundings, not by a great deal, but enough that the room couldn’t deceive her into thinking the silhouettes of everyday objects were monsters.

Her breathing rasped as she tried to keep quiet. She put her glasses on and turned her head away from the candle.

Kyouko had her back to her.

Feeling less alone, Touko attempted to fall back to sleep, but after half an hour of restless tossing and turning, she gave up and slipped out of bed, deciding to go downstairs and pour herself a glass of water to soothe her throat. Afterwards, she could even visit Byakuya, and then retire into the bedroom. Touko rose slowly, trying not to disturb the other two, and when she was on her feet, she checked on them, and that was when she realised that Aoi wasn’t there.

The only place that Touko could imagine Aoi being was outside with Sakura. Still, she thought little of it and claimed the candle for herself. She crept down the stairs and headed over to the kitchen, stopping in the doorway.

Aoi was slouched over a counter, her back toward Touko, gasping into what sounded like her hands. Sonia kept several bottles of clean water in the kitchen in one of the cupboards. Touko steeled herself and walked on her toes to where she remembered them to be. Once there, she put her candle down on a counter. The thud, though hushed, nearly ripped Aoi out of her skin. She whirled around, clutching her chest, and stared at Touko.

“Fukawa-chan, you startled me,” croaked Aoi, and she rubbed her knuckles across her eyes. “I thought you were asleep.”

Touko’s eyes flickered.

“Were you crying?” she asked sharply.
A pause betrayed Aoi. “No. I was just...”

“You’re not being noble by lying,” said Touko. “Just spit it out. What’s the matter?”

Aoi narrowed her eyes in preparation for a glare, but the fire in her eyes didn’t burn. It melted.

“Do you think I’m a bad person?” asked Aoi.

Touko’s face hardened in confusion. “What?”

“A bad person.” Aoi stretched out her neck and balled her hands into fists, but the bigger she tried to make herself seem, the more likely it became that she would collapse in on herself. “You can be honest.”

“W-Why are you asking this all of a sudden?” asked Touko, shifting a foot back. She hovered a thumb close to her mouth. “Did you do something despicable? Is that it? Am I your confessional?”

“No! I mean...”

Aoi dragged a foot forward, expression pained.

“... It’s just... that spell that will change a mermaid into a human... it’s not just Togami who can use it, right?”

Touko tensed. “You’re thinking of your girlfriend, aren’t you?”

“The morning we left to go see Sonia-chan, you were acting funny so before I showered, I went to follow you... to see how you were...” Aoi’s body shook. “And I overheard you, Togami and Sakura-chan talking, and... and Togami asked Sakura-chan if she was going to become a human or stay a mermaid!”

Despite Aoi’s increasing volume, no one burst in to see what was happening. Not yet, at least.

Touko looked around, twitching.

“You nosy-!” started Touko, but catching sight of Aoi’s scrunched face, she bit her lip and pushed down her anger. “If you heard that, then you should also know that your dear Oogami didn’t say she was going to use it.”

“But she didn’t say she wasn’t!” Aoi flung out her arms either side of her. Her words started to trip over themselves, but she managed to stay coherent. “I always assumed that she would want to stay a mermaid. That she would want to stay with me. But... But. After hearing that... Maybe... Maybe she’ll decide to stay with Kenichiro, and I can’t stop her, and I’ll return to the sea and not be able to see her again for ages and ages. And selkies live for a long time, while humans... humans...”

Everything after that fizzed on her tongue. Aoi burst into tears.

“H-Hey,” said Touko, which did nothing to soothe Aoi, so Touko walked over, unnoticed by Aoi, and awkwardly rested her hand on her shoulder. She felt Aoi tense, but Aoi didn’t shake her off, so Touko kept her hand there. “Shouldn’t you be telling Oogami this instead of me?”

“I can’t,” said Aoi, trembling violently.

“Why not?”

Aoi shook her head.
“Because she might say she will use the spell? And you dread hearing that answer?” asked Touko, and Aoi nodded, clenching her jaw to try to prevent her sobs from coming out, but that just made her tremors worse.

Touko gripped Aoi’s shoulder tighter.

“If you want to torture yourself, go ahead... I’m no stranger to machochism,” said Touko. “B-But if you don’t like that, you should just get it out of the way. Even if it hurts. You can’t start healing before you’re hurt.”

Without warning, Aoi pounced on Touko, consuming her in a tight embrace and letting herself cry and heave freely into her friend. Meanwhile, Touko choked, arms hanging out ungainly.

“It’s...!” Touko hesitated. She had wanted to say that it would be okay, but she didn’t know if it would be, or if anything would be after this, not for sure, but not knowing was part of being alive, so she relaxed into the hug, and they stayed like that for some time.
A dirt path hung out of the cave’s mouth like the tongue of a dog on a hot day. Touko stood ahead of everyone else, wringing her hands together, skin prickling at all the pairs of eyes that she knew were trained on her. The cave’s entrance towered over her in a proud arch, and trees wearing leaves with jagged edges loomed over them all.

Today would be the day when her three weeks of training would be put into action.

Three weeks of training that involved waking early, transforming small objects into other small objects and bigger objects into bigger, less basic objects, the complexity and size of her targets steadily increasing as she proved herself over and over again to Sonia. At times, the white glow of Touko’s spell would turn an object into ash, but those blunders became less frequent until finally, Gundam permitted her to use the spell on their livestock, and she could change animals into other animals and then back.

This morning, she had cut short her session with Sonia, arriving here well before midday.

Next to Touko, Byakuya lay reclined in a cart similar to the one that belonged to the Pirates of Despair. A lantern rested on his lap, supported by one hand. Behind them were their friends, even Sakura, who insisted that she accompany them, and so she lay in a tub of water that had been carried between Mondo and Kiyotaka. The other two centaurs had stayed behind with Gundam at Sonia’s request.

“So I just go in there and meet them?” asked Touko.

“Indeed,” said Sonia, and when Touko glanced over her shoulder, Sonia nodded. “I have instructed my friend to be passive for you. When you are in there and it is time to begin, please make sure to drink the right potion.”

She wagged her index finger two times.

“The temporary transformation spell requires the silver liquid while the permanent one will require the dark potion,” said Sonia, and she squeezed her hands together in front of herself. “I have labelled the flasks for you so you do not get them mixed up. You have a lantern, so even if it gets dark, you should be able to see which is which.”

Byakuya held up the lantern. Touko took it from him and turned her head forward, staring at the mouth of the cave. She took a deep breath before using her strength to pull the cart along behind her. Its wheels rumbled.

“Ah, just one more thing!” Sonia called out, and Touko, just outside of the cave, hesitated.

Sonia had extended a hand toward Touko, even though she had no hope of touching her with such a distance between them.
“There is a Chinese saying that claims ‘honour permits no turning back’,” said Sonia, face hard like marble. Her fingers flexed and seconds later, her hand faltered down to her side. “However, neither does death.”

Yasuhiro raised a hand to his mouth, staring at Sonia in horror. “H-Hey, don’t say stuff like that at such short notice!”

“Fukawa-san’s not going to die,” said Aoi with clenched fists. Sonia looked from Yasuhiro to Aoi, who then went and undermined herself by placing her fingertip to her chin and adding, “Will she? M-Maybe... Maybe we should go with her...?”

“I can’t allow any of you to go in too, unfortunately. The more people who go, the harder it will be for everyone,” said Sonia, and Aoi wilted even more. “Over the past few weeks, I have trained Fukawa-san, and I can do no more for her. If she remembers everything so far, then she will be fine.”

Sonia paused and grimaced.

“As much as I would like to witness this for myself, it’s important that we do not complicate the situation with our attendance,” she said. She let a bit more silence pass and then forced herself to straighten, rising out of her moping, and clapped her hands. “Now, let us not hold them up any longer. Good luck, my friends.”

Yasuhiro waved his arms. “Yeah! Even if it’s dangerous... sometimes, you’ve got to keep going! That’s what we’ve learned so far, ‘right? And I know you’ve got it in you, Fukawa-chi.”

Touko bobbed her head in acknowledgement and with Sonia’s ominous message about honour and death swirling in her mind, she towed Byakuya into the cave, her satchel bumping against her leg as she plodded along. The path ahead descended and curved to one side, so as they ventured deeper in, the light from the entrance shrivelled behind them until the only source came from the lantern in Touko’s possession.

She hunched her shoulders and powered through the tunnel that carried on into endless darkness. Her skin prickled as her hairs stood to attention, but she wasn’t too concerned. Surely, they would stumble upon their destination at any moment. It was just the darkness that made it seem like they weren’t getting anywhere.

However, more and more time elapsed, and they still didn’t emerge into a clearing. The tunnel continued, stretching into depths that approached closer and closer to impossible.

“D-Do we just keep going?” asked Touko in a hushed tone, in case talking loudly might cause the cave to collapse in on them, impaling them with the stalactites on its upper jaw.

Byakuya flicked the end of his tail.

“Perhaps,” he said.

Going back wasn’t an option, at least in Touko’s mind, so she persevered, even as her arm began to ache, even as her back became sore. The wheels on the cart whined but it followed her down through the cave’s intestines.

Eventually, she stopped, but not because she was tired, though she was, but because their path forked off in two different directions.

“What is it? Why have we stopped?” asked Byakuya, craning his neck.
“There are two ways we can go,” she explained.

He narrowed his eyes and turned his head toward her. “Do you not know which way we’re meant to take?”

“Yes. I don’t know.” Touko’s shoulders drifted upward as her anxiety level rose. “Sonia just said to go in. She never mentioned how big this place was, or any directions.”

Byakuya studied Touko’s face. “Then what will you do?”

Her brow furrowed. To get through a maze, she knew that if one kept their right hand against the same wall, they would eventually find their way out, assuming the maze was simply connected, and if it wasn’t, they would wind up at the beginning again so long as they didn’t stray from their chosen wall.

“We’ll go right,” she said, and they did just that. Touko flounced forward, marching with more determination than before.

Several times, as they journeyed further in, the passageway they were passing through would diverge, offering more than one possible route, but Touko stuck to her system and kept to the right. Her lantern occasionally hit against the wall as she glided her hand across the uneven surface. She didn’t have a watch or anything that could tell the time. The best she had was the thump, thump, thump of her heart, because her breathing staggered, offbeat, and the thuds of her footsteps blurred into echoes.

After a while, she squatted down against the wall that she had been travelling alongside, her face slick with sweat. Touko opened her satchel and pulled out a clear bottle of water, leaving alone the two silver flasks in there too. Her first few attempts to unscrew it failed, mostly due to her hand being too wet for a good grip, but twisting the lid while holding her skirt in the same hand enabled her to remove it and access the water within.

“Have we gone the wrong way?” asked Byakuya.

She gulped down some water before breathing out a rush of air.

“As long as we stay close to this wall, then we’ll arrive at our destination sooner or later,” she told him.

Touko wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. He watched closely.

“Can I have some of that water, please?” he asked.

“It must be more refreshing than salt water,” she remarked as she passed him the bottle.

Byakuya drank from it before replying.

“Us mermaids absorb water through our skin, so we don’t need to drink large quantities of it. We have a gland on our gills to help filter out excess salt, and we can excrete it in highly concentrated urine,” he said.

Touko twitched and forced herself not to look at the area of him where many would have a crotch.

“What?” he asked, blinking at her.

The straight face that she slapped on began to slip, so she got up and choked out, “Let’s move on.”
“Did I say a joke?” he piped up as she drove him along behind her.

She tried to rid herself of the mental images that attempted to fade into her mind and on the whole succeeded, just about.

For the next leg of their journey, Touko counted the passing seconds in her head. Her footfall adjusted to match the beat and a few minutes in, her breathing synchronised with them. Sometimes, she repeated the same number in her head by accident, yet despite that, as the number she recited climbed higher, the tunnel didn’t change, giving no indications that they were about to stumble upon their final destination.

Behind and in front, it was pitch black.

“We’ll end up reaching the centre of the planet before we find this shapeshifter,” grumbled Touko between wheezes. She managed a few more steps before she let go of the cart handle and pressed her palms against her thighs, doubling over and having to make an active effort to not collapse.

“Could it be that we’re missing something?” suggested Byakuya, cupping his chin in one hand.

Touko fell to her knees.

“I don’t understand,” she said as she stared down at the ground, too tired and confused to muster a glare. “If getting to the shapeshifter was going to be so convoluted, why didn’t Sonia say anything?”

The cave held its tongue. Touko balled her hands into fists.

“... As long as we stay by the wall... we have stumble upon it eventually,” she told herself, but Byakuya heard.

“You’re making two assumptions,” said Byakuya. She lifted her head. For emphasis, he held up one finger. “You’re assuming that the shapeshifter is here, and for another...”

A second finger uncurled.

“... you’re assuming that they are staying still.”

Touko’s stomach flopped. He peered at her with unnatural stillness.

“What will you do?” he asked calmly.

Her lips pursed. Earlier, she assumed she had two options whenever she came across a fork in the tunnel, but there had always been others. Only one path lay directly in front of her now, but Touko didn’t have to take it. She could turn around. That had always been a possibility.

“I’ve got to keep going,” she said. Her fists tightened. “Even if it’s painful...”

“What was it that Sonia said?” asked Byakuya. Touko’s breath tripped up. “‘Honour permits no turning back; however, neither does death.’”

“The last part isn’t in the proverb,” corrected Touko, but reminded of it, the tension puckering her face lessened, though a crease lingered in her brow. “Does that mean she knew that it would be a taxing journey? That we would consider giving up?”

Had Sonia forgotten to tell them everything, or had she intentionally withheld the information, planning on humiliating Touko? She felt small, like her younger self, like she had been asked out on a date only to find out halfway through that it had been part of a dare that neither she nor Syo found
funny, even if Syo’s laughter would be the last thing that the prankster ever heard.

“We wouldn’t be giving up,” Byakuya said, his turn to set things straight. “Sonia was obviously not clear on her instructions, which is her fault, and we would be going back to her for clarification. It’s not the same thing as surrendering. Taking a pause can mean we’re saving time later.”

Her lips climbed into a smile.

“Right,” she said. She looked away, fidgeting but still grinning. “A-As expected, from Byakuya-sama.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“So I’m being addressed with ‘-sama’, now, am I?” he asked, not sounding annoyed.

Touko pressed the tips of her index fingers together and focused her eyes on the point of contact.

“Do you like it?” she simpered, feeling her cheeks cushion the curled ends of her lips.

“Other than my parents and my butler, people have always addressed me as ‘Togami’,” Byakuya told her. She met his gaze, only for him to look away quickly. “It was expected... The esteemed Togami line prided itself on their name.”

A twinge in her heart prompted her to clench her cheeks.

“So you don’t like it,” she said quietly. Byakuya shifted and faced her again.

“I will allow you to call me that,” he said. He held a fist to his mouth. “But perhaps without the ‘-sama’. As my partner, we are equal now, so I suppose I can allow this.”

Her cheeks warmed and she could smile again.

“O-Of course. I’ll save Byakuya-sama for c-certain occasions,” she said, and her face heated up even more. “S-So.. let’s go back, B-Byakuya.”

She drove the cart around, ready to take them back to Sonia and the others, but then, unexpectedly, their surroundings lit up. Byakuya sat up straighter.

What lay ahead of them now couldn’t be referred to as a tunnel anymore, for a large, open circular room confronted the pair that hadn’t been there previously, and it had no visible exits. All the surfaces, that above, that below, and those around the pair, were covered in crystal shards that showed mirrored images of Touko.

On the far side of the room stood a woman with messy aubergine hair not done up in braids, strands writhing like snakes. The woman stared back at them with pale eyes that Touko had only seen in her reflection, but they couldn’t be on her reflection as the hairstyle of the woman was too different, and the skirt that the woman wore had a slit ripped down one side that Touko’s didn’t have at all.

Touko straightened her posture and fixed her gaze on her doppelganger.

“You,” said Touko, letting go of the cart handle to grip the top of her satchel.

Byakuya positioned a hand above his eyes. “... They look like you.”

“Yes, they do,” Touko agreed. She lifted her other hand, holding up the lantern, though she didn’t need it in this lighting. “You must be the shapeshifter.”
“Well done,” deadpanned the shapeshifter, sounding just like Touko, who wrinkled her nose. “And you are the witch and the mermaid.”

“Obviously,” Touko retorted, barely restraining a snort. The shapeshifter continued frowning with her. She leveled her tone to a civilised one. “So anyway, you’re going to help me learn to transform creatures into other species.”

“With a spell, I know,” said the shapeshifter, and when she didn’t respond right away, they jerked their head back and raised their voice. “If that’s the case, shouldn’t you drink your potion instead of standing there like an idiot? Well?”

They hissed the next and final command.

“Get on with it!”

Touko flinched but did as told with a bitter lump in her throat. She rummaged through her satchel for the right flask. There were two, one with a circular sticker on it and one with a sticker in the shape of a crescent, and she drank from the latter.

“Gjenfødselse,” she said, lips tingling, and she returned the flask to her satchel. Her face felt hot as she looked from the ground to a face just like hers. “I’m going to transfigure you now.”

The shapeshifter didn’t reply. She gulped, inclined her head forward a fraction and scrunched her face in concentration, imagining the shapeshifter’s face, her face, contort and change. Byakuya had a longer nose that hooked down a little, and his eyes were blue, not violet like hers. As she compared her appearance to that of Byakuya, the face of the shapeshifter was manipulated like wet sand, molding before her eyes, glowing white.

Then, without warning, the shapeshifter tensed violently. The white light around them shattered, falling from their face in thin slices, and the face that was revealed still resembled hers.

Disappointment flickered in Touko’s chest, but she tried again. Light consumed the shapeshifter’s head, and she pictured Byakuya’s face with an intensity that could induce a headache, and almost did, but within seconds, the shapeshifter broke free of her spell like before.

Touko bit down on her bottom lip. A heaviness coated the back of her throat, thick and gripping tight like a hand around her neck. She reattempted the spell, willing them to change into Byakuya, but the white light disappeared prematurely as like the previous times.

The shapeshifter smirked, and Touko’s heart did the equivalent of missing a step.

“What’s that look for?” Touko asked them.

“Why, is something wrong?” said the shapeshifter, thinning their lips to try to hide their smile.

During her practice sessions with Sonia, the transformation spell only faltered and stopped if Touko lost her concentration, but here, the transformation spell cut off even though she was focused, like something else was disrupting it. She squinted at the smug expression of the shapeshifter, of herself, and realised, widening her eyes.

“You’re supposed to be passive,” she said. “Sonia said...”

The shapeshifter’s features darkened. Touko trailed off.

“That’s the sort of presumption an idiot would make,” said the shapeshifter.
Her shoulders jumped.

“What are you talking about?” asked Touko, too confused to be offended.

“Coming in here.” The shapeshifter gestured to their surroundings. “Thinking I’m going to be your guinea pig.”

“But... But you agreed,” said Touko, her insides set aflutter. She shook her head. “You agreed to help me with Sonia, didn’t you? You’re Sonia’s friend, aren’t you?”

Byakuya narrowed his eyes.

“Friend!” squawked the shapeshifter. “I see that a circus of idiots only attracts more idiots.”

Her voice cracked. “But Sonia said...”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that she said something,” the shapeshifter interrupted. They stretched out their neck, their eyes housing a cold glint. “Yes, Sonia did come to talk to me, but I didn’t promise her anything. She just took me for granted. If her head wasn’t connected to her shoulders, it would surely fly away.”

Touko tugged on her sleeve anxiously.

“It’s just like her to assume everyone will obey her. That’s what being a princess did to her,” said the shapeshifter, sweeping their arms in grand motions. “Friend indeed... I don’t do friends. They’re just people who use you until they find someone who can do the same that you do, and more.”

Shivers scuttled through Touko’s skin.

“So are you saying that you won’t help us?” asked Byakuya in Touko’s stead.

“If you use me, then I’m used,” said the shapeshifter, their hair squirming like wind was playing with it. Only, there wasn’t any wind. The air was dead still. “That’s what everyone does, isn’t it? Well? Why don’t you use me?”

Touko’s heart shot up and got lodged halfway through her throat.

The shapeshifter’s eyes widened with their smile, which revealed jagged teeth that Touko definitely didn’t have. When their lips stretched out to their full extent, darkness smothered the room, hiding everything outside of the pocket of light that Touko’s lantern formed.

Her breathing rasped like sandpaper. She held the lantern higher and reached her other hand toward Byakuya. Barely breathing, she felt around for him, and combed her fingers through his hair in her search for his hand. A dry sob bobbed in her, sounding like a hiccup, and she explored until she found the desired part of him, after which she grabbed his hand and felt him squeeze back.

“During your long journey to me, you touched the inner walls of the cave.” The voice was like hers, but wasn’t hers. It belonged to the shapeshifter and seemed to come from all around her. “Through doing that, I got an imprint of you. A strong one.”

On every surface, bright eyes began to pop out from the darkness, the same size as the crystal shards and the same colour as Touko’s eyes. They didn’t appear all at once, but very soon, they covered everywhere, emitting a low level of light the same colour as their irises. The shapeshifter was no longer in front of them, or anywhere in Touko’s field vision. Touko couldn’t even tell where exactly the voice came from. She glanced over her shoulder, and found that the room had sealed up behind
them. There was no escape.

“Stay... Stay back,” she warned, forcing herself to look forward.

“I chew my food before I eat it,” said the shapeshifter. “I don’t eat like you humans though, and
you’ll need a lot of work before you break down, Fukawa. I wonder what you are you afraid of.
What sort of things scare you? Have scared you?”

Several eyes blinked.

“This time, I’m going to be the monster, but I’ll tell you what.” Their voice swirled around Touko in
a cold gust. "If you can change me into your precious Byakuya-sama, then I will let you go.”

The eyes all blinked at the same time, creating a moment where everything beyond the lantern’s glare
vanished, and when the eyes reappeared, they had changed, shaped like lightning bolts and stained
red.

Across the room, a figure stood where the shapeshifter had been before, covered in the same eyes as
the walls. For a moment, she thought she could distinguish Byakuya’s reflection in them, but then the
figure shrunk to a height barely up to her knees. Their skin of eyes peeled away to reveal their new
body. Touko gasped and held onto Byakuya’s hand harder. The left half of them was black while the
right half of them was white, and the red eyes of the room, of the stout creature, shone brighter than
Touko’s dull violet pair.

“Monobear,” Touko blurted.

“That’s the ringmaster,” said Byakuya, who had never seen Monobear but had been told of it.

“Bingo!” yelled the shapeshifter with glee. They flung out an arm and crooked the other. At the same
time, they lowered their head into their crooked arm, and then they straightened up after. ‘I betcha
weren’t expecting to see me again. How long has it been anyway? I haven’t been counting. Dead
dead people don’t do a lot, y’know. Including counting.’

Byakuya and Touko stared at them. The shapeshifter raised their paws to their permanent grin and
chuckled in Monobear’s signature way. “Upupupu...”

“You’re not real,” said Touko, prompting the shapeshifter to pat themselves on the arm.

“Well, I feel real,” they mused. “What do you define as real, anyway? I mean, I was created from
your memories, Fukawa-san. I’m as real as you could ever know.”

Touko tightened her grip on Byakuya’s hand.

“You died,” she said. “Without your circus crew, you were nothing but a t-teddy bear, and if you
think you can scare me then you are wrong!”

Her lantern rattled as she threw her arm forward and pointed at the shapeshifter, her other fingers
curled around its handle. The shapeshifter sprung back, flailing their arms, and glowed white.

They shot up in size and when they attained their full height, the light faded away, and it wasn’t
Monobear who was there anymore but a tall, gangling creature with wiry black hair and a skull for a
face. Only their red eyes suggested life, and these same eyes projected onto the shards of the room.
From their mouth hung a thick proboscis that put Syo’s tongue to shame.

“That is...?” Byakuya started.

The shapeshifter staggered toward them, never lifting both feet off their ground at the same time. Touko tensed and pulled her hand away from Byakuya so she could raise her arms in front of herself, miming a shield. She shifted her footing but the shapeshifter was in front of her before she could run, or even dodge.

They swung their arm in a slap that sent Touko flying. Her lantern escaped her hold as she slammed into the ground of eyes and rolled a few times. It landed somewhere near where she first struck the ground, out of her reach.

“Fukawa!” Byakuya shouted. He scrambled out of the cart.

Pain burned white. During the clash, Touko’s glasses had been knocked off. The world existed behind a haze without them, made worse by the throbbing in the side of her head. She lifted her head off the ground, trembling, and desperately patted the ground in an attempt to locate them.

“Forward a bit,” said Byakuya.

Touko dragged herself in the specified direction but still couldn’t locate her glasses. From nearby started a stream of slaps against solid matter, and then Byakuya’s hand slid into her vision, holding her glasses. He put them on Touko for her and turned away sharply. She craned her neck to follow his gaze.

The shapeshifter stared down, leaving just enough space between them that a person could fit in comfortably, but only in theory. In reality, very few people would feel at ease with someone who looked like Celes looming over them.

A scream bounced around in Touko’s head.

“Are you scared?” they asked.

She could only breathe, but the question hadn’t been for Touko this time.

“I’m not,” said Byakuya with convincing conviction.

The shapeshifter picked up Byakuya by the head and threw him off to the side. He smashed into the ground and tumbled along, giving a strangled yell as he grazed against the rough surface around them.

His pain evoked a roar from Touko that burned her throat. Her breath couldn’t have reached the shapeshifter, but they still lurched back like she had blown on them. They weren’t tossed into the air but slanted backward, body stretching, their feet rooted to the ground. She bared her teeth and continued blasting the shapeshifter with her rage, her eyes strained wide, until the shapeshifter was forced upward with a loud crack as their ankles ripped apart, leaving their feet on the ground.

A bellow seemed to shake the room and the shapeshifter disintegrated into nothingness.

Byakuya pushed himself up with one arm. Touko panted loudly, numb to any pain.

“Did you...?” He stared at where the shapeshifter had been. “... Did you kill them?”

She swayed as she rose to stand, chest heaving. A lump bobbed in her throat.

Before she recovered enough to answer, the ground beside Byakuya began to bubble, like it wasn’t
solid but a liquid heating up, boiling. From that patch of ground emerged a tall, vaguely humanoid figure, their skin made of the same stuff as the ground, covered in eyes.

For a few moments, the figure just stood there, but then the crystals crumbled away, revealing familiar green skin.

“You’re alive,” stated Byakuya.

The shapeshifter’s body remained that of an aswang, but their head transformed into that of Celes in her human form, her face like that of a porcelain doll.

“I told you that I will only let you go if you can change me into Togami-kun. There is no room for compromise. It will take a lot more than a tantrum to destroy me, I’m afraid,” said the shapeshifter. They turned to Touko and tilted their head to one side. “But I must say, you’re feisty, aren’t you? I believe the only person who I’ve had this much fun with is Sonia-san.”

Touko clenched her jaw and caught sight of the lantern, but she didn’t go retrieve it.

“Playtime is over,” said Touko. Her heart thrashed as she fixed her eyes on the shapeshifter. “I’m not afraid of you, or Celes. I defeated her. Besides, I’ve seen worse since then...”

A beat passed where the shapeshifter just stared at her, and then a large smile split their face that didn’t suit Celes. White light encased the shapeshifter. Their body shrunk down to a reasonable height for a human, but when the light went out, wings with red feathers spread out from behind them that no human had. Where once had been a neat bob cut was now a mess of red hair, matted and much longer than the hair of Celes.

The crystal eyes all turned white. Just white.

“Yoo-hoo!” the shapeshifter crooned, wiggling their fingers on one hand and still flaunting an insufferable smile, but this time, it fit them perfectly, as slimy as the seaweed wrapped around their body. “Miss me?”

“You,” was all that Byakuya said. His face twitched, particularly around the eyes.

They placed their hands onto their hips and smirked. Touko glared and if her face puckered any harder, she might have torn something.

“You may look like Enoshima, but you’re nothing but an imposter,” Touko told the shapeshifter.

The shapeshifter drew out a long, “Huh?”

Their lips pursed into a pout.

“Weren’t you listening?” they asked, putting on a cutesy voice that could rot teeth. “Wow, you’re such a meanie dumb dumb head. I said, I’m just as good as the real thing.”

They lifted their head slightly and blew their lips out into a wide grin.

“Well,” they said, talking in a low voice, “maybe you’ll listen to this.”

The shapeshifter inhaled and trilled long notes that Touko had heard before, in a cave underwater. Their voice crawled under her skin, never pausing for breath, grating tones beginning before the previous one finished so the noises overlapped. Touko’s knees buckled. Her vision seemed to tilt, and her body too, but though she felt like she was falling, she didn’t hit the ground.
She staggered a few footsteps to try to catch herself but failed and collapsed to her knees. Each breath that she took teased the prospect of bile and was like the tide lapping at the shore.

A voice wafted over. “Fukawa.”

Touko looked up. In front of her hung Byakuya’s face. He breathed in sharply through his nose and the movement jerked his head. She said nothing, ensnared by his eyes as deep as an ocean, etched onto a disdainful expression.

“You’re pathetic,” said Byakuya.

His words froze her core. Byakuya opened his mouth again, dripping with disgust.

Then a harpoon plunged through his chest.

It had penetrated him from behind with a squeak and squelched as it emerged out the front of him. He gagged on a gravelly gasp that came out distorted, his face stretched to its limits and his eyes filled with life.

Tension left his body in one fell swoop and he flopped down.

Touko stared. He was bleeding. Tears pricked her eyes.

She tried to talk but only gargled. He was bleeding. Her chest strained, on the verge of tearing in two.

The metal on the harpoon glinted, smeared in blood that blurred her vision.

“Help... me,” Byakuya mumbled into the ground, weak. He was bleeding. One of his hands started to move. Touko’s eyes darted to it. His fingers tried to curl into his palm but only managed to twitch. “Please... Fukawa... I... I don’t want to be alone...”

She breathed in sharply. Her chest caved in. Somewhere in the distance, someone shouted, but Junko’s otherworldly singing drowned out the voice, and a thump silenced the voice completely. It felt like Touko was drowning.

“I know,” she said, the crackling in her voice louder than her words, and she grabbed the harpoon with both hands. “You won’t be.”

Touko wrestled with the harpoon, scrunching her face as she tried to unsheathe it. Her palms slipped on her own sweat and his blood, and though she was able to dislodge the harpoon, she couldn’t extract it. Every wiggle had him hiss. Snarl. Convulse. She glimpsed his blood and cringed, but she gulped and puffed out her chest, carrying on, even when she noticed the shapeshifter strutting toward them, singing still.

Along the way, they picked up Touko’s lantern and with minimal disruption to their pace, they whacked the lantern against the ground, shattering it. As swift as a heartbeat, the lantern’s inner light extinguished, but the glowing eyes around them, wide with no pupils, just white, sufficiently kept the room dim.

The shapeshifter grabbed a shard of glass and when they were close enough, they passed it to Touko, who raised the shard to her chest, pointing its sharpest end toward herself.

Her hands shook and she shut her eyes.
“I’ll be with you soon, Byakuya,” promised Touko, lips quivering. “Wait for me.”

She hesitated, then shoved the glass shard into the shapeshifter’s heart.

They cried out in pain. The song stopped abruptly and Byakuya dissolved in front of her. However, within moments, the real Byakuya crawled over to her side, having been thrown back earlier by the shapeshifter when he had shouted to her.

Breathing became easier. Touko pushed the glass in deeper and twisted it as much as she could, attempting to do as much internal damage as possible. She didn’t know who howled louder, her or them. The shapeshifter stumbled backward, clutching their chest, and she lost her balance. Both of them fell together with Touko landing on top of the shapeshifter.

Their eyes locked.

“Your song won’t work on me,” Touko said hoarsely, her hands either side of their head. “I’ve lived through despair. You can’t defeat me, and neither can Celes. I’ll... I’ll kill you as many times as needed.”

The shapeshifter turned white and changed into Celes’s human form.

“But you didn’t kill me,” said the shapeshifter. “Kirigiri did.”

“She landed the finishing blow,” admitted Touko, and the shapeshifter smirked. “But she couldn’t have if not for me.”

The shapeshifter’s eyebrows arched. White light rippled through their body, starting at the face. When their fingers and feet solidified, the face of Kyouko Kirigiri stared up at Touko.

“I didn’t trust her at first,” said Touko. “Or Naegi. Those two would stick their noses into a crack in the pavement, but I’m glad that they’re my friends.”

Below her, the shapeshifter’s face alternated, flickering between Kyouko’s face and Makoto’s in flashes of light. Every time the shapeshifter changed, the eyes on the crystals around them did too.

“And I didn’t just find friendship with them. There were others like Asahina as well,” said Touko. White light enveloped the shapeshifter. While they were hidden from view, Touko pictured Aoi and her bright blue eyes. She imagined her dark skin and her toothy smile, and her laughter and tears and pouts and grey pelt.

When the light around the shapeshifter disappeared, they resembled Aoi.

“Asahina is my friend,” said Touko. “And so is Oogami...”

Sakura, with her scarred body, with her white hair, with her hardened features holding eyes that could be as gentle as they could be ferocious at other times. The shapeshifter turned into her.

There was Yasuhiro too, whose dreadlocks framed his head in a mane. He touched his nose a lot and laughed a lot, nearly always wearing sandals and loose trousers. By thinking about him, she changed the shapeshifter into Yasuhiro, and when she thought about Mondo next, canine, big, terrifying but dependable, inhuman but so very human, the shapeshifter transformed into him.

“Not all your friends are here anymore though, are they?” said the shapeshifter. Their fur darkened and they grew slightly, still a cynocephalus, but someone else. “What about me? What about that
Andou lady, and Izayoi, and Tengan and Hanamura?"

As each person was referenced, the shapeshifter seamlessly transformed into them, bathed in pale white light, and the crystals dutifully changed colour to match their eyes. After Teruteru, they became Daiya again.

“We didn’t die by your hand, but we died for your cause, didn’t we?” asked the shapeshifter.

“Do you regret it?” she asked in response.

The shapeshifter didn’t answer right away.

“No,” they admitted.

“It wasn’t even her fault,” Byakuya butted in, watching what was happening with a look of fascination. “Enoshima and Ikusaba caused their deaths, with Enoshima the mastermind behind it all.”

He hesitated. His tongue flicked against his teeth when he said what he said next.

“... and she was the one who killed my people.”

The shapeshifter turned their head toward him. They sank into the ground, disappearing from beneath her and leaving no trace of them ever being there. Touko jerked her head up.

A patch of ground frothed nearby and a figure rose out of it, covered in eyes. Initially, they were humanoid, but then their body expanded rapidly in size. When they stopped growing, their hard casing cracked and fell away, revealing the shapeshifter’s new form.

Large, red, egg-shaped and with a gaping mouth, the shapeshifter had changed into what Junko’s crew had dubbed the Submarine of Hope.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” said Byakuya with a sneer. “You’re a fake. You’re not the same submarine that...”

White light briefly covered one of the shapeshifter’s pincers. It dimmed, unveiling a new addition. In their pincer, they held a mermaid whose white beard ran from his temples to his chin. His hair was swept back, thick and long. He stared at Byakuya with pale blue eyes, and he had the stereotypical appearance of a butler

“That’s not him,” said Byakuya. “His hair only reached his shoulders, and his moustache was thinner...”

The butler turned white, and when he reappeared, he displayed all of Byakuya’s corrections.

A tremor passed through Byakuya’s face.

“You must be really stupid if you think I’ll believe you now,” said Byakuya. “That’s not him, so don’t bother.”

Yet when the shapeshifter closed their pincer, slicing the mermaid almost in half, with only a sliver connecting the two pieces, Byakuya let out a choked gasp. Touko’s heart jolted. The mermaid reached out a hand toward Byakuya, but his arm slumped just seconds later.

“Pennyworth!” Byakuya called out, eyes wide. His face spasmed. “I... I know that’s not him! He died. He was killed. So... So stop! Stop looking like that at once!”
The shapeshifter lowered the corpse and only once the body made contact with the ground did they move their arm away. Byakuya dragged himself over to the mermaid and trembled, staring down. He barely reacted as the shapeshifter scooped him up between their pincer and lifted him into the air. Even if he had been paying attention, Byakuya couldn’t have prevented the shapeshifter from picking him up.

But Touko could have.

“Are you looking, Fukawa-san?” asked the shapeshifter in a young child’s voice. They didn’t squeeze hard enough to cut Byakuya in half but held onto him firmly. “I might not really be Monaka-chan, but this is definitely your precious Togami-san that I have here, isn’t it? Pay attention because I want you to watch. I want to see that light in you finally go out.”

Her eyes widened. She wanted to scream, but she channeled that energy into her gaze instead. The claw holding Byakuya turned white and started to change shape, flickering like fire. Before it could settle on a definitive form, she blasted a prolonged hum in her head, blocking out all other thoughts, and the claw disintegrated into ash.

Byakuya plummeted but before he hit the ground, she imagined him floating, and that he did instead of crashing into solid matter. Touko rested him gently onto the ground and stood up.

She thrust out her hand and when she stretched it out to its full length, the shapeshifter tilted backward. Her braids fluttered wildly around her by an unknown force, and she imagined the shapeshifter shrinking, imagined Monaka sitting on the ground, small, curled up, and the shapeshifter turned white and obeyed her wishes. The crystals changed to green to match Monaka’s eyes.

“This got old a while ago,” Touko told the replica of Monaka. Her stare was intense. Fevered. “Face it. Nothing you turn into will scare me. I’ve lived through it all... I’ve survived since the day I was born.”

A wave of white light engulfed the shapeshifter. They sprung up in height and gained broader shoulders, but their frame remained realistic of a human.

When the light vanished, the shapeshifter was a man with a square jaw and barely any lips, decked in a formal suit. As Touko stared at them, at their sunken eyes below dark cloud-like eyebrows, a film of white developed around their body by an unknown force, and she imagined the shapeshifter shrinking, imagined Monaka sitting on the ground, small, curled up, and the shapeshifter turned white and obeyed her wishes. The crystals changed to green to match Monaka’s eyes.

“Who is...?” Byakuya trailed off, looking between Touko and the man. He stopped on Touko. “Fukawa?”

Tremors coursed through her.

“You really thought you could get away from me, didn’t you?” asked the man too gently. His voice was like a cold hand up her blouse. He stooped down and reached toward her with fingers that were
tongues. Touko flinched and willed herself to run away, to fight back, but she couldn’t. She never could.

The man chuckled and cupped her cheek in his slimy palm. Her breathing wavered. On his shoulders, his lovers hissed. Touko tried to speak but his stench of ash and sweat wafted into her, coursing through her veins in a poison that made her rigid and clouded her mind.

“But you can’t escape me. I’m always with you,” he said. His tongue thumb slid across her lips and stopped at the centre, tasting of acid.

“Get off her!” Byakuya shouted. He dragged himself closer and tugged on Touko’s skirt.

Touko’s heart swelled painfully. Byakuya was thrown backward by an invisible force and Touko’s father merely glanced at him, unafraid, before returning his gaze to her and deepening his smile. Her father only smiled with his mouth, never smiling with his eyes.

“No one can ever understand you like I do,” he told her. His thumb pressed down on her lips. He showed all of his decaying teeth. Touko’s mothers came forward to wrap around her arms. “No one will love you like I do.”

For a long time, she had believed him. Her father had pounded that message into her, shouted it at her, whispered it to her. All the while, Touko’s mothers reinforced his words, dealing with her like she was a feral animal or a paper bag containing excrement. Long skirts hid bruises. Braids required less upkeep. Stories allowed her a brief escape that they couldn’t take from her.

Her father stroked her lips, smearing them with his rancid fluid. She retched. He grabbed onto her shoulder with his other hand and gave her a hard shake. Tears welled up in her eyes, freezing on her face.

“Be a good girl, Touko-chan,” he said. His tongue finger pushed past her lips, fighting for entrance. “Remember, no one else will ever love a rotten girl like you.”

For a long time, she had believed him. For a long time, no one else told her otherwise.

The crystals turned blue.

“... if it wasn’t for my dear friend, Fukawa-chan.”

The voice came from inside of her, swirling in her mind.

Then the crystals turned light brown.

“We believe in you, Fukawa-san!”

The crystals turned pale blue.

“What you did was so noble and so kind... to think that I thought my Kenichiro was the single exception when it came to humans...”

The crystals turned purple.

“You can count on the both of us as well.”

“If you lay a finger on that girl, I’m gonna yank your tongue so hard that the rest of your organs come out with it!”
The crystals turned blue.

“And Sakura-chan treasures you a lot, Fukawa-chan!”

The crystals turned lilac.

“Making friends... helping my friends... moving forward... that was what healed me most.”

The crystals turned light brown.

“I know you’ve got it in you, Fukawa-chi.”

The crystals turned blue.

“I know Fukawa is too strong to die here too!”

Her father licked his lips. “Remember... No one else will ever love you like I do...”

The frost on her face cracked and thawed.

“G-G-Good!” Touko wrangled out of herself and she lurched back, out of his reach, pulling herself free of the snakes, her heart beating like gunshots. “I don’t want anyone... like you... ever again! You can choke!”

She flung her arm forward and closed her hand into a fist. The shapeshifter raised a hand to their neck, clutched it and applied pressure involuntarily, squeezing themselves increasingly harder. Her mothers sprayed spit as they thrashed on the shapeshifter’s shoulders, but they couldn’t get to her. None of them could. None of them would.

“You’ll never be rid of me,” the shapeshifter wheezed.

Touko narrowed her eyes. Byakuya arrived next to her. She imagined the snakes on the shapeshifter’s shoulders getting pushed into stubs that then melted, and the same happened in real life.

“You should be grateful,” rasped the shapeshifter. “Without me... you wouldn’t be so strong!”

“No,” said Touko, and she rose off the ground, hovering a foot in the air. This didn’t alarm her, taken in stride. “The abuse didn’t make me stronger. It hurt me. Changed me. Not succumbing to it... was a show of my strength. It made me realise how strong I could be, how strong I really am.”

Her braids whipped around and her skirt flapped as energy surged through her body. The shapeshifter glowed white, and she imagined a smoother face, which could scrunch and slacken, eyes blue like the sea, which could be calm, or angry, or so many other things, and golden hair like sun-kissed sand. Sometimes, his lips puckered in a pout, or stretched in disapproval, or tightened in thought, or curled in the potential of a smile.

And she loved that smile. Touko loved his smile so much.

When he was human, when he had legs, they could travel through jungles, through towns, through deserts and through countrysides. Then afterwards, they could return home. They could walk down to the beach together, and he could come back to her cottage with her and he could slow dance with her until it was time to bathe, and they could fall into bed together and sleep together.

The tail of the figure shining white split in half down the middle, forming two legs. Their head tipped back and the light sprayed off the shapeshifter, spikes that struck the eyes on the crystals and
shattered them. Complete darkness fell, but within moments, it lifted, and the room became dimly lit in a blue hue the same colour as the eyes on the intact crystals. In front of Touko, standing on bare feet, was the shapeshifter, their top half transformed to be like Byakuya while the bottom half was that of a human.

She stared at them with her hair still waving, with her skirt still billowing. Byakuya tilted his head to one side.

“Hey. That organ between the legs?” He gestured to the shapeshifter. “Is it meant to be out?”

Touko flushed and sank to the ground, wobbling on landing but she steadied herself. Her skirt became stationary and her braids drooped, hanging down straight. She studied the shapeshifter’s form, and was inspecting the shapeshifter’s flat chest when they shifted their weight between feet and crumbled away into nothingness. The crystals changed to turn the room lifeless white.

A new figure ascended from where the shapeshifter had just stood, coated in crystals. Touko gritted her teeth and internally commanded the shapeshifter to transform. They glowed white and changed into Byakuya, tall, proud and stood in hues of blue. She managed to get a slightly longer look at them before they broke up into a cloud of dust.

Another figure replaced the previous one and again, Touko cast the spell. The same sequence of events afterwards. Light cloaked the shapeshifter, they became Byakuya, they destroyed themselves and then emerged from the ground, covered in crystals. Touko repeated the spell, thinking about Byakuya, thinking only of Byakuya, and his likeness reappeared, again and again, crystals flashing white and blue around them.

Eventually, the shapeshifter, looking like Byakuya, froze and didn’t move, not even blinking. They didn’t decompose either. The eyes on the crystals winked and when they reopened, they only showed reflections of Touko and Byakuya.

She clenched her fists.

“I’m not playing any more games,” Touko warned.

“I wasn’t playing any in the first place,” said a low voice that she didn’t recognise, seeming to come from all around her. Ahead of them, the mouth of Byakuya’s replica remained shut. “I apologise for any injuries that I allowed under my watch. I was obeying Sonia’s wishes, but I feel that I went too far.”

Byakuya’s brow creased.

“Under your watch?” he said. Touko’s head jogged back.

“Don’t try to trick me!” She jerked her hands around as she spoke, and still with no idea where the voice came from, she glared at Byakuya’s copy. “At the beginning, when you were me, you wouldn’t let me change you. You were supposed to be passive but kept changing back into me...”

Touko’s fists stopped either side of her head.

“And you attacked us!” she added in a shout.

“You’re more incorrect than you are right,” said the shapeshifter, and that admittedly caught her off-guard. Though her face didn’t ease up, she gave them a chance to elaborate. “All those you saw in here were created by you, Fukawa, even the appearance of yourself. Don’t you know? One’s mind can be their greatest enemy.”
Her cheeks hollowed. She glanced away.

“All I did was form a blank slate for you to work off. The resistance that you encountered came from you, from your self-doubt and reservations,” explained the shapeshifter. “If I was to have intervened, it would be by ejecting you from in here. However, I apologise nonetheless for the ordeal.”

Touko hesitated.

“Whatever,” she said, hunching her shoulders. “I don’t trust you.”

The shapeshifter didn’t answer immediately.

“We didn’t make a good first impression,” they admitted. Touko still couldn’t place where the voice came from and slowly turned her head, scanning the room for them, but she and Byakuya appeared to be the only people there.

Well, apart from the model of Byakuya. She gave it a wary look.

“Are you ready for the final transformation spell?” asked the shapeshifter.

Touko took a moment to register what they said and could have laughed.

“I just said that I don’t trust you,” she told them with a grimace. “A place where I’m uncomfortable... isn’t the ideal environment for me.”

“I see,” said the shapeshifter. “In that case, I will take you back to your friends.”

“Good,” she said.

“Hold on a minute,” they replied, trailing off into silence. Across the room, the wall pulled apart, revealing a passageway.

They didn’t give any more instructions, so Touko walked over to the cart and drove it over to Byakuya. She helped him into it and towed it over to the opening before the shapeshifter could change their mind.

Darkness lay ahead and she didn’t have a functioning lantern anymore.

“All we have to do is head back the way we came,” said Touko. The ache in her legs intensified in protest, but she raised her chin and was fully prepared to walk if it meant getting out of there.

“Here. Let me help,” said the shapeshifter.

Touko didn’t know what to expect. Maybe the passageway to light up. She didn’t expect the room to tilt, but that was what it did.

As an added bonus, a gust of wind rushed into Touko from behind. A shriek escaped Touko as the cart bumped into the back of her, knocking her off her feet. Byakuya grunted as she landed on him, and they hurtled through the passageway that twisted and turned, and when they gained enough speed, occasionally shot up. The final stretch was an upward slope that led into a sunset sky.

They burst through. Touko buried her face in Byakuya’s chest and wailed. Their cart flew a short distance before colliding with a cushion-like structure that shifted to cradle them, shaped like a shallow bowl.

“Fukawa-san! Togami-kun!” Makoto’s yell came from below.
Her heartbeat raced, a countdown to detonation as her heart got ready to explode. She sat up on Byakuya and turned her head, looking around.

“Where...?” she started, and the rest of her question fell apart in her mouth as her gaze met a pair of eyes with horizontal slits.

The eyes belonged to a huge, rocky toad, and the cart was resting in one of their hands.

Touko tensed.

“Who are you?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“We have already met,” said the toad in a voice she had heard but not seen the owner of. “In fact, we spoke recently. I am a shapeshifter.”

She stared at them blankly. “What?”

The giant toad lowered their hand to ground level. All of Touko’s friends gathered around. Touko squirmed, each set of eyes on her a fire poker.

“What happened?” asked Sonia, hands clasped together in front of her. “Why is Togami-kun still a mermaid?”

“W-What happened indeed!” Touko spluttered. Sonia’s features didn’t so much as tremble. “I went into that cave and that... d-dear friend of yours tried to kill me!”

“I’m not a cave,” said the toad.

Touko opened her mouth but lost her train of thought, confused. From where she sat, she couldn’t see the cave, and then she realised that this was not because the toad blocked her view, and not because the toad was settled on top of the cave, but because...

“... You are the cave,” said Touko, and Byakuya lifted himself as much as he could to see as well.

The toad’s long mouth contorted into a smirk. She whipped her head around and stared at Sonia.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Touko.

Sonia’s smile grew slightly. Touko twitched.

“That’s not an answer!” Touko snapped. “You didn’t tell me how to locate the shapeshifter, and you didn’t tell me that I was inside of them the whole time! I want an explanation!”

“Fukawa-san,” Sonia said quietly, far more effective than a shout would have been at bringing about silence. “you don’t seem to understand how powerful a witch you are. This was a final test to measure your abilities and I can say with no doubt that you are by far the most powerful witch that has ever existed. I said you couldn’t overwrite my friend’s magic due to the complexity and their size, but really, I can’t say that for certain that this is fact. As a precaution, I had to have you use a weak potion and focus your energies on a small part of my friend that they could remove and regenerate.”

By now, she no longer smiled. Sonia turned to the shapeshifter.

“Their kind have a unique interior,” said Sonia. “They gain an imprint of your memories, a connection to your mind, and use it to weaken their prey and gain energy.”
The descent of the Sun couldn’t be seen in those seconds but Touko thought that she felt it, as the evening seemed to get a little colder. Touko hugged herself and looked at her lap.

“Now, if we may move onto more pressing matters...” Sonia raised her voice, prompting Touko to look up. She pushed her shoulders back and her chest out. “... Togami-kun. Fukawa-san. If you wish, my friend can close their hand around you to form a private area for you both. It will block out all distractions.”

Touko glanced at Byakuya, who nodded, and she turned back to Sonia.

“That’s fine,” she said. The webbed fingers of the shapeshifter grew as they rose up and formed a dome around the cart, surrounding the pair with crystals that showed no reflections. Autumn’s warm, playful hues lay hidden beyond the cool pale blue shelter and in here, nothing rustled, bleated, coughed or chirped.

There was enough space on the shapeshifter’s palm for Touko to step onto. Touko climbed off Byakuya to occupy it and turned to face him.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“I am,” he said.

She unfastened her satchel and checked the labels on the two flasks in there before putting away the one bearing the crescent. The other, which had a circle emblem, stayed in her hands, gripped tightly.

“Ready?” she asked.

“I said I am,” he told her calmly.

Touko breathed and unscrewed the lid on the flask. She raised it to her lips and sucked in a deep draught of the potion. For a few seconds, she held it in her mouth, at first having difficulty initiating a swallow like something had become lodged in her esophagus, but she scrunched her eyes shut and forced herself to gulp, downing the potion with a roll of nausea.

All that was left to do was activate the spell but before she uttered the word, she opened her eyes. Byakuya’s face welcomed her. Touko’s heart skipped.

“Gjenfødelse,” she said.

An itch developed in her lips that the casual scrape of teeth couldn’t quell. With fire behind her eyes, she focused on Byakuya.

White light swathed him and he floated upward, body straight. The crystals around them, which had not been reflecting any images up until now, suddenly bore an image of Byakuya’s face. At the outset, they were hazy, but as Touko centred more of her thoughts on him, the pictures of Byakuya around her grew more distinct. All the thoughts that had run through her mind while facing the figment of the shapeshifter earlier resurfaced, flying around in her head. She thought about his face, his skin that reminded her of a summer’s day at the beach, eyes like the sea, hair like sand.

Some days, the beach was cold. Uninviting. Yet she would find somewhere to sit anyway and draw in the sand with a stick, huddled under an umbrella with a blanket around her shoulders, just to see his silhouette, to see the dents that he left in the sand, handprints on her heart. To see his face, his presence, his existence, to feel it, him. Other days, it would be lighter, softer, and when he had human legs, the sand would stick to the soles of their bare feet, and the sand would come off and be replaced by more later.
Byakuya’s white form split at the tail into two definitive legs, but there was more to being a human than that. Humans were so many things. Humans loved, hated, gained, lost, lived, died. As a human, his legs wouldn’t be covered in scales, precious scales deemed to be worth more than many could comprehend. But, he meant more to Touko. So much more.

The white light around Byakuya scattered off him in a harmless spray. His face was identical to those in the crystals around him. They stared at Touko with him as he landed gently back into the cart, and neither him nor Touko could take their eyes off the other as the shapeshifter opened their loose fist and lowered them to the ground.

Their friends drew closer, including Sakura, who had to drag herself over.

“Is he...?” asked Makoto, hushed. Aoi covered her mouth with one hand.

Yasuhiro pinched Byakuya’s leg. “Feels human to me.”

“Ow!” Byakuya swatted away Yasuhiro’s hand. “You stop that.”

“And he looks human,” mused Yasuhiro, holding up his hands in surrender. He caught sight of the area between Byakuya’s legs and squinted. “Uh... You might want to cover up there.”

In case Byakuya didn’t catch what he meant, he pointed weakly at the place in question.

Byakuya glanced down and said casually, “Oh, right. Humans don’t like being naked around others, do they?”

“It depends on the human,” said Kyouko. She took the satchel from Touko, placed it onto his crotch, then turned back to Touko, about to say something, only to stop herself.

The others followed Kyouko’s gaze, all looking at Touko’s face.

“Um... are you okay?” asked Mondo hesitantly.

Touko’s vision blurred. She could feel her face wobbling and leaped onto Byakuya’s lap, bursting into tears as she shoved her face into his chest. He stiffened and gingerly put an arm around her.

“These are happy tears, right?” he asked.

Her whole body trembled as she nuzzled into him, nodding. Byakuya relaxed.

“Will the other mermaid be wanting to go next?” asked the shapeshifter. She raised her head, tears and snot dribbling down her face.

The shapeshifter was peering over at Sakura. Touko turned to Aoi, who had frozen with her heart in her mouth, the wicks in her eyes endless moments away from being pinched and snuffed out.

Sakura bowed her head forward.

“No,” said Sakura with a furrowed brow, not looking anyone in the eyes. “I played with the idea, but I decided that I wish to stay in the sea with Asahina.”

Kenichiro smiled sadly, but he didn’t seem surprised nor hurt.

Aoi’s face flickered. “Sakura-chan...”

Before Sakura could respond, Aoi rushed up to the side of Sakura and threw herself at her, locking
her arms around Sakura in a tight embrace. The sobbing and laughter that Aoi emitted meshed together and she pushed into Sakura more, shaking uncontrollably. Someone less sturdy would have crumpled underneath such force, but Sakura shifted her weight onto one arm so she could wrap her other around Aoi.

“Very well,” said the shapeshifter. “If that’s everything...”

No one objected or said anything, so the shapeshifter carefully slid the cart off their hand and lay down on their stomach. They rested their chin against the ground and opened their mouth, which became the entrance of the cave, and then became absolutely still.

“This is hella beautiful,” said Sonia. She delicately wiped a tear from her eye that Touko hadn’t seen and so could not confirm the existence of. “I assume that you will all be going soon, now that you have transformed Togami-kun like you wanted.”

Sonia straightened up and gave a little bob.

“Oh, I shall miss you dearly,” she said, tapping her fingertips together. “Please do come visit when you can. We’ll return to my cottage and whenever you’re ready, you may leave. But there is no pressure for you to go! Stay as long as you like.”

Several people nodded, but Mondo said, “What about indefinitely?”

Everyone’s heads stopped. Kiyotaka furrowed his brow.

“Indefinitely?” said Sonia. “As in... forever?”

Mondo rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, if that’s okay.”

“Any of you are more than welcome to stay here with me,” Sonia clarified. “I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

He folded his arms over his chest.

“What’s there to be surprised about? S’not like a person with my face can get a job at the grocers,” said Mondo with a shrug. “I’ve been thinking over this for a while now. Me and my bro used to live in the woods before Monobear found us. We were nothing but thugs, and I don’t want to do that no more.”

His face didn’t allow for a great deal of expression, but as he stared up at the sky, Touko was sure he was smiling.

“I don’t wanna just cause people pain. I wanna do the opposite from now on. I’m gonna help people without resorting to intimidating and punching and stuff,” he said, and he clenched a hand around his fist, cracking his knuckles. “I’ll help take care of the animals, get you whatever needs getting from the woods, and I know some carpentry too. I’ll be making instead of breaking...”

Mondo pounded himself on the chest and raised his voice.

“... as long as you’ll have a guy like me!” he almost yelled.

Everyone had been stunned into silence. Sonia tapped herself on the cheek, but it wasn’t her that answered.

“I, for one, accept your proposal,” said Kiyotaka. He approached Mondo, beaming widely.
“Oowada-kun, over the past few weeks, you have surprised me with your ethic and your commitment to helping with chores, as well as disciplining Leon and Kazuichi when they are acting inappropriately. I thought you were a lazy, idiotic, sloppy brute who was only interested in fighting, but...”

“Okay, okay.” Mondo slung his arm around Kiyotaka’s shoulders quite forcefully. “Let’s not try pushing your luck. Not all of us can be born know-it-all geniuses.”

Kiyotaka’s face contorted. “D-Don’t confuse hard workers such as myself with natural-born geniuses! Everyone has the potential to be amazing, including you!”

Mondo blinked and then burst out laughing. Aoi smiled and turned back to Sakura. She placed her finger against Sakura’s lips, eliciting a smile. Kyouko, stood next to Makoto, brushed her fingers against the back of Makoto’s hand, and soon, they laced their fingers together. Yasuhiro rubbed his finger against the underside of his nose, looking around, while Kenichiro walked over to Sakura, beckoned over by her, and kissed her forehead.

Touko looked down at Byakuya, seated on his lap, and set her finger against his lips. A grin crept across her flushed face. Byakuya curled his fingers around Touko’s wrist and plucked her hand off him. His other hand rose up to cup the back of her head.

She widened her eyes.

He pulled Touko closer, pressing their lips together.

A breeze passed them, kicking up leaves. Touko shut her eyes and draped her arms around his shoulders. Her heart soared. His breath was warm. She was warm.

The world was warm.

Dear Kodaka-sensei,

Were you aware of our visit yesterday? It was Aloysius’s first time at your grave, though he is too young to understand that right now. Recently, Yamada painted a portrait of us three, and it hangs over the fireplace. I’m not sure how much you know, or can know. You might be omniscient, or you might know nothing at all, or your awareness might be a shade in between. You cared little for children but you tolerated me, at least, which I will always be thankful for. I hope that you would do the same for my son. Syo does. She fronted a lot during the pregnancy and still sometimes fronts, though she hasn’t killed anyone since I met Byakuya. Also, I’ve been told that she gets on well with Aloysius and makes him laugh a lot. She calls herself his aunt, apparently, and she hates children, so that’s saying something. I’m not certain what, though.

As more time passes, the less certain I am of how you would react. I suspect you would have been very interested in Byakuya for the same reason I initially was, but he is so much more than that. Byakuya has been a human for many years now, coming up to a decade. It wasn’t always easy like the blank page at the end of a fairytale. After he became human, he had to learn to walk.

Each step, in his words, shot forks of pain up him that spread like cracks under a heavy footstep on ice, but everyday, I would help him walk, even if it was just one pace forward. Sometimes, we would fall down and lie under a cloud of frustration that one day turned into a different kind of tension. The pain that walking inflicted him with faded with time, and eventually, we could walk to town and back. Even so, those trips used to drain him and when we returned, he would lay his head on my lap and ask me about what he saw. Now, he can manage the trip with ease, but he still does it
out of habit.

Then there is dancing, which requires a different sort of effort than long walks. I mentioned it to him one evening and he got curious. Neither of us were, are, very good. I remember our first time. We stumbled a lot but he twirled me, our bodies glowing by the light of a birthing fire, fingers entwined. I love him. I love him so much.

But there are others. I have friends now. I don’t see many of them often, but my feelings for them are always in me. Makoto and Kyouko Naegi only live an hour away from here, and frequently, they will bring their daughter and Makoto’s sister with them. Their daughter is a curious child and Naegi’s sister is loud and is prone to saying careless things without thinking, but what she says is never malicious and I consider her a sister of sorts. In ways, she is like her brother. Hagakure visits when he’s in the area, often bringing gifts from his travels and checking up on us. He’s still an idiot, but his heart is in the right place even if his brain isn’t. Oogami and Asahina are due to visit soon. They never did find the Pirates of Hope, but part of me thinks it’s better that way.

Occasionally, Sonia - another witch - writes to us. Kiyotaka and Oowada have grown closer, apparently, and help keep Leon and Kazuichi in check. They are an unlikely duo, but they seem to have found things to bond over. When Aloysius is older, we plan to go there again. According to Sonia, they are all eager for us to visit, and she wants to introduce us to her son.

Even if you won’t know any of this, can never know any of this, writing my feelings out has been therapeutic. After encouragement from my friends, I published some of my works and discovered that people are interested in what I have to say, and you’d be hard pressed to find someone who doesn’t own a copy of one of my books. I don’t consider my job as writing for others, but writing for myself and letting others consume my works, whether they skim them or digest them. This letter, however, is not for their eyes.

All that I have left to say to you is thank you. Thank you for taking me in on that stormy night, thank you for letting me stay with you, for teaching me magic and for making me feel less abnormal. You gave me a beginning.

So this letter is hello... and goodbye.

Your faithful student,

Touko Fukawa

Standing on the edge of the cliff that her cottage sat upon, Touko Fukawa squinted down at the flecks of brown strewn over the beach. Last night’s storm washed up an abundance of driftwood. Touko examined the open letter in her hand and after some deliberation, tucked it into the pocket over her heart.

“Touko?” came a voice from behind her.

She turned her head around, twisting her body slightly.

Byakuya stood by the door to their cottage, holding a bundle of blankets in his arms. A small, pink face poked out. His hair was aubergine like Touko’s, but his eyes, currently closed, were blue like his father’s.

“Can you see them yet?” asked Byakuya.

“No,” said Touko. She glanced back at the sea. “But Asahina said they’d be here by early evening at
the latest, and I’m in a generous enough mood to consider it afternoon still.”

Being a few hours late after a seven year period wasn’t too big of a deal.

“Shall we wait for them on the beach?” Byakuya asked. He gave their son a little bounce, which brought a smile to Aloysius’s face. “I’m sure the Naegis will know where to find us.”

Touko nodded, and together, the three headed down the cliff the long way.

They had the rest of their lives, after all.

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