### The Bureau Files: Series 2

The Bureau Files: Series 2

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/4740785).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M, Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Neko no Ongaeshi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Baron Humbert von Gikkingen/Yoshioka Haru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Baron Humbert von Gikkingen, Yoshioka Haru, Toto (Neko no Ongaeshi), Muta (Neko no Ongaeshi), Renaldo Moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Sequel, Drama, Adventure, Action, The Bureau Files</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 2 of The Bureau Files</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2014-08-22 Completed: 2015-09-06 Chapters: 16/16 Words: 125296</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**The Bureau Files: Series 2**

by [Catsafari](http://archiveofourown.org/works/4740785)

**Summary**

Haru's back with the Cat Bureau, but juggling her two separate lives is proving trickier than she thought. It would be a lot easier if certain people didn't go wandering into other worlds too...
The clatter of épées echoed across the hall, punctuated only by the squeak of shoes on the smooth wooden flooring. The room was filled with duelling couples, completely garbed in white, their faces hidden behind a meshed helmet.

The instructor walked through the pairs, assessing her students’ progress, occasionally barking out orders and correcting moves as she went.

“Advance with your lead foot, your lead foot, Ito! Heel, toe – not like some flat-footed buffoon! Saito, parry! Don’t just attack – and, Yamada, don’t forget to move from time to time!” She paused by one of the couples and swept her sharp gaze over her students. “Alright, people! Lower your weapons and head to the showers; today’s session’s over! Yoshioka, a moment, please.”

While most of the students relaxed their stances and headed for the door, the nearest individual turned to their teacher. The helmet was pulled off to reveal dark, short-shorn hair and equally dark eyes. Her face was glistening with sweat.

“Yes, miss?”

“You’ve made some astounding progress in the last few months, Yoshioka, but you’re still jumping too high in your lunges.”

The young woman bowed her head. “I know.”

“If you jump too high, you’re not putting as much distance into your lunge – and if your opponent is a longer-limbed individual, then that’s going to give you a definite disadvantage.”

Yoshioka nodded again. “Yes, miss.”

The older woman smiled. “But, apart from that, your fencing has come on in leaps and bounds. You should be proud of yourself. Now, I think you better follow your fellow students and head to the showers.”

The brunette grinned. “Yes, miss.”

Upon exiting the sports centre, Haru Yoshioka was greeted with a face full of lacrosse stick, and a second later was pulled into a hug from a familiar shorter brunette.

“Haru! How’d the fencing go? Heh, your hair’s still wet...” Her friend ruffled Haru’s shorter locks into spikes.

“Get off, Hiromi.” Haru was beaming though as she shook off the other woman, barely avoiding a close encounter with the lacrosse stick. She passed a hand through her hair, smoothing it down into something less resembling an electrocuted hedgehog. “Fencing was fine. How was your practice?”
“Oh, it was fantastic!” Hiromi swung the lacrosse stick round in her enthusiasm and Haru had to sidestep to avoid its netted edge. “Although there was a bit of a mishap and I did almost take out Mayu’s teeth – heh, oops...”

Haru swiped the stick off her friend before antics could leave their mark on her, and muttered, “You’re so crazy.”

“Oh, I’m crazy? I’m not the one who signed up for fencing lessons and, like, three different defensive martial arts–”

“Only two, actually...”

“You wouldn’t even be able to afford the lessons if Michael hadn’t lent you his old fencing gear... Seriously, though, why the sudden interest in this fighting and stuff recently?”

“Well, maybe after you got attacked by Griffin–”

“Who?”

“The crazy customer who put you in hospital, remember him?”

“Oh, come on; I wasn’t that bad.”

“You crashed down a set of stairs and blacked out.”

“Just a bit of bruising...”

“Anyway, maybe after that incident, I decided that this city isn’t quite so safe and that perhaps knowing how to defend myself might just come in handy.” This wasn’t exactly a lie; it was true that after the Griffin incident she had begun to consider taking lessons, but she failed to mention the fact that she was involved in a little Bureau business that had a habit of getting her into Trouble. Trouble like Griffin. Like Balthazar. Like the Doctor.

Trouble that meant being able to throw a decent punch back every now and then and then wouldn’t go amiss.

Haru registered that Hiromi was still talking and finally tuned back in to her friend’s endless chatter.

“...but the strange thing is that I was sure he wasn’t human...”

Haru’s brain took a little longer than her ears to kick back into gear, and all she really took notice of was that somewhere along the line, she had missed the conversation. She butted in with an intelligent, “What?”

“The guy who attacked me – I think I believed that he was half-bird or something at the time...”

Hiromi laughed at the absurdity of her own words. “To be honest, I don’t remember much of that incident – only a lot of running and screaming and falling and then waking up at the hospital. The doctors did say that the fall might have given me concussion, but – really... Half-bird?”

Haru laughed, but she couldn’t quite be as easy about it as Hiromi. For, unlike her friend, she remembered Griffin very clearly. She knew it wasn’t just a figment of her imagination – Griffin really had been half-bird, half-human... and so very mad and dangerous. Hiromi was probably better off not knowing about it.

Hiromi laughed alongside her friend, missing Haru’s unease, and added, “Crazy, huh? Hey, did the police ever catch him? He seemed to suddenly disappear from the news, but I don’t remember ever
reading anything about him being brought to charges...” Hiromi shivered. “Just imagine if he was still running loose.”

Haru’s smile was bittersweet. “I don’t think he is, Hiromi.”

Griffin was buried beneath the very dovecot he had hidden away in. With Balthazar and the other birds’ deaths, they had returned the bodies to the Bird Kingdom, back to where their families and homes were. But Griffin was different. Neither fully human, nor fully bird, he didn’t belong in either world. But he had longed to be human, and that, Baron had concluded, was what mattered. Buried beneath the dovecot seemed like an appropriate middle ground.

She remembered that day; the rain had pattered through holes in the roof and they had stood before the wooden grave marker below which lay the body of Griffin. The half-creature who yearned to be more. Who had refused to be saved. And they hadn’t been able to make a damn bit of difference.

Haru’s phone rang, breaking her from her thoughts and Hiromi from her continuing conversation. She checked who was calling, motioned for Hiromi to quieten, and answered. “Heya, Mum... Yes, I’ve just come out of my lesson... No, no it’s fine, I can come over... Now? ... Yeah, why not? I have time. Alright, I’ll see you later...” She hung up the call and shrugged to Hiromi. “My mother wants me to come round and pick up my father’s stuff. Sorry, I’ve got to dash.”

“Sure, but why...?”

“She’s clearing out the spare room, and that’s where most of Dad’s stuff is stored. I mean, she’s not throwing out all of his stuff, but she thought I might want to go through whatever she is jettisoning.”

“Oh. Good luck with that.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, Haru!”

The taller brunette, who was already jogging off with her sports bag swung over one shoulder, paused and looked back. “What?”

“Are you free this weekend?”

“Should be. Why?”

“Tsuge asked me out for a date, and I was just... well, wondering if you could make it a double date?”

“Hiromi, you’ve been dating the guy for over a month now...”

“Yeah, but this is the first time he’s actually called it a date-date. Like, properly.”

“And what about all the other times you’ve seen him?”

Hiromi had the decency to blush. “Well, it’s been more like we just keep on bumping into each other...”

“So now you’re nervous and you want back-up?”

“Yes, please.”

Haru rolled her eyes. “Does it make any difference to you that Michael and I aren’t officially
“dating?”

Hiromi’s eyes widened. “You’re not?”

“No. We’re just good friends.”

“Yeah, but you like him and he obviously likes you so I don’t see the problem–”

“Hiromi, we’re nothing official, alright? When it is, then you can go shouting it from the rooftops, but not before ...” Haru trailed off, disturbed by the dangerous glint that had just entered her friend’s eye. “What?”

“You just said when it is.” Hiromi’s smirk was frustratingly triumphant. “Not if.”

Now it was Haru’s turn to blush. “You’re impossible.” She turned and ran down the road, but not before she heard Hiromi’s replying cry of, “You didn’t deny it!”

ooOoo

Naoko Yoshioka was busy with her patchwork patterns when her daughter arrived. Haru let herself in, pausing only to glance back at the well-kept front lawn before stepping inside. It hadn’t always been well-kept; one day, ten years ago, cattails had magically sprung up in a single night. She smiled wanly at the memory. That had been one weird day.

“Mum? Are you in?”

“Here.”

Haru slipped off her shoes and padded her way to the dual kitchen/lounge, where her mother sat, immersed, as she had always been, in her work. All too familiar with the setting, she sidestepped the discarded patches and edged her way to her mother.

“How’s it going?”

Naoko waved away her daughter’s question, only half-hearing the words. “Fine, fine. How was practice?”

“Good.” Haru leant on her mother’s shoulder, peering over at the pattern. “Where’s Dad’s stuff?”

“In the spare room. The boxes near the door are either going to charity or to the dump, so help yourself.”

“Thanks.”

The spare room had always been a mess. For as long as Haru could remember, it had been a clutter of the old and broken, the forgotten, the stuff that didn’t quite have a use anymore but that they just hadn’t quite got around to throwing out. Most of it was her father’s stuff, kept since his disappearance when Haru was only a few years old. She had no memory of him.

An old writing desk stood in one corner, almost hidden beneath books. Across from it stood an ancient wardrobe, pre-dating the Second World War, elaborate carvings decorating its face. A full-sized mirror was draped in a white sheet, but a dusty corner still peeped out. Several large, faded paintings rested against the wardrobe’s doors. And then there were the boxes.

From the little she knew about her father, she knew he had been an antique collector, fascinated with the old and the odd, and the room seemed to echo that sentiment. Just by going through the boxes
marked for release, she found books with writing almost illegible through age and scrawled handwriting, tin pots and kettles with strange markings, small figurines moulded from a golden metal, and handheld mirrors with carvings woven about the framework. Everything was just so old and odd, but nothing seemed to be the personal effects of her father.

A small music box still worked, despite its age. Haru opened its lid and instead of a ballerina figure she was expecting, a dancing couple sprung up instead. She wound the key and watched the couple slowly spin on the spot, their forms strangely blurred. However hard Haru tried, she couldn’t define the features of their faces.

She bit back a yawn, her eyes feeling heavy. It had been such a long day – after working at the pet store, and then the fencing lesson, and then coming all this way and...

The crash of pans hitting the kitchen floor jolted Haru awake. Her hand brought the music box’s lid shut, killing the haunting melody as she spun to face the door. She sighed and shook her head. The pans had always been precariously balanced in the kitchen cupboards; even now – ten years later – they still fell out every time the cupboard door was opened...

She dropped the music box beside the rest of the items she was taking back with her. Among that pile there was one of the old-fashioned tin teapots, a grand little ship-in-a-bottle, a handheld mirror, and a beautiful fan marked with little paintings of hurricanes and whirlwinds. When she paused to look over her selection, she was surprised at the strange collection. She supposed she had inherited her father’s love of old things.

“Haru! Are you nearly done?”

“I think so!” Haru called back to her mother. She carefully arranged her collection into her bag and bounced back into the kitchen, feeling ridiculously pleased with her selection. Her mother was setting out two plates of food and prompted Haru to join her. Haru took a seat, but not before she said, “Mum?”

“Hm?”

“Did Dad ever leave a message explaining why he left?”

Naoko shook her head and brushed away a few wayward patches that she had failed to clear for dinner. “No, he just left one day and never came back. He was always coming and going – sometimes he would leave for weeks at a time and come back with a new selection for his collection.” Naoko smiled wanly to herself. “A couple of times he would disappear into his office— the office was what the spare room had originally been —and come back a few minutes later as if he hadn’t seen me in days. Your father was the oddest man.”

“But you loved him?”

“Yes, we were very much in love.”

Haru chewed on her food in silence, her mind running through the gears. “So why did he just disappear?”

“I don’t know.” Naoko’s gaze softened. “Are you okay, Haru? You’ve never spoken much about your father, but if it was upsetting you, you should have said something about it—”

Haru shook her head abruptly. “I’m not upset,” she said, and it was the truth. She had no memory of the man her mother had fallen in love with, and maybe when she was younger it had been a source of sadness, but years had gone by now. Over two decades had passed since his disappearance and
Haru doubted he was coming back. And yet, despite his absence, Haru had somehow fallen into the habit of calling her father Dad. It had always been Dad’s office, Dad’s stuff, Dad’s gone... “I just think it’s odd, that’s all. I mean, he obviously loved all his old stuff, so why leave without it?”

“I don’t know, Haru. Maybe... Maybe he couldn’t come back. After twenty years, perhaps the truth is that he’s gone.”

Yes, the answer that explained the most was that Daichi Yoshioka was dead. Perhaps he had left for one of his trips and something had gone wrong. Perhaps he was an unmarked body in an unknown grave, halfway across the world.

“If I had known that picking up his old stuff would have caused such unease, Haru, then I wouldn’t have asked–”

“Mum, it’s fine. I’m not upset, I’m just... curious.”

ooOoo

Hiromi was slouched in front of the TV and eating her way through a bowl of popcorn when Haru returned. For all Hiromi’s sport and fitness, her sweet tooth was her Achilles’ heel. The lighter brunette heard the door open and leant her head back to stare at Haru. “So how’d it go?”

Haru dropped her keys into the bowl beside the door and dropped her bag off her shoulder as she came to the lounge. “Fine. What are you watching?”

“Oh, just some chick-flick, I think.”

“You don’t know?”

“Hey, it was on TV.” Hiromi turned her gaze back to the screen and then flicked her attention back to Haru. “Eh, some post arrived for you, by the way.”

Haru was already heading back to her room. “What? When?”

“When I came back or so.”

Haru had paused by the door, but there was nothing lying on the mat. “Where is it?”

“Oh, it’s in your room.” Hiromi abandoned her movie entirely to twist to face her friend. “It didn’t come through the letterbox. I came back and was making dinner when there was a kerfuffle from upstairs. I thought perhaps you had arrived and I hadn’t noticed, so I went to your room and...”

“And? And what?”

Hiromi shrugged. “And there was a note on your bed. Who’s it from?”

“How should I know? I haven’t even seen this mystery letter.” Haru bounded up the stairs two at a time. That wasn’t strictly the truth... She knew only one group of people who would leave a message like that. She bounced into her room, dropping her bag onto her bed and scooping up the paper. Her name was on the front; she turned it over.

There was only one word.

Come.

Haru grinned, shaking her head a little at her friends’ tactics. Really now, they needed a better way to
communicate... Hiromi had to be burning with curiosity over this little antic and she wasn’t entirely sure how she was going to explain it. She hastily changed into something fresh and emptied her bag. She set her father’s old antiques across her desk, pausing when she came to the fan.

It was an old-fashioned, lady’s fan, but it wasn’t quite the style of a Japanese fan. The paintings, while old, were a different make too, looking almost Western in design. She ran her fingers over the little whirlwinds painted into the fabric...

“Haru! Who’s the letter from?”

Haru jumped and dropped the fan back onto the desk. “Just a friend!” she shouted back down the stairs. She had already picked up her shoes and was running back down the stairs so she didn’t see the fan glow. She didn’t see the little pictures light up for a mere second and then settle back down into faded glory. Perhaps if she had, she wouldn’t have left it there.

But she didn’t, so she was rounding the stairs, pulling on her shoes and already reaching for her keys.

“Hey, Haru, wanna watch this movie with me? I have plenty of popcorn.”

Haru only grinned. “No thanks. I’ve got to see a friend.”

Hiromi leant back over the sofa, one arm resting on the back. “Why? What’s happened?”

“Haven’t the foggiest.”

“Wait, Haru–”

The door slammed shut.

Hiromi sighed and settled back to watch her film, shaking her head silently. “Oh, Haru. You and your secrets.”

ooOoo

The world is full of little secrets and mysteries. The universe is much more varied and bizarre than most humans give it credit for, but occasionally – only occasionally – a human will stumble into a little portion of that strangeness and sometimes – even rarer – that human will find themselves drawn back to that strangeness again and again...

Haru’s taste of strangeness could be found in a little world that was almost, but not quite, part of this reality. It was small, but special, housing the helping organisation called the Bureau, which Haru had stumbled into ten years ago. But, most importantly, it was the home of the Creations.

Haru entered through the archway, back into the strange little world that she had found a second home in. She walked up to the pillar in the middle where a stone crow rested and tapped against its side.

“Evening, Toto.”

The crow gargoyle shifted into animation, its feathers rippling into soft, ebony blackness and its eyes glittering with the glow of life. It rolled its head from side to side, ruffling its wings as it woke. Its beady eyes focused on the young woman. “Hello, Haru. I see you got our message.”

“Yeah, but perhaps next time you could go for something a little more inconspicuous? I do have a
“We’ll keep that in mind.”

“Now, why was I summoned in the first place? Is something amiss?”

Toto cawed a gentle laugh. “Far from it. In fact, we have a bit of a surprise for you.”

Haru’s eyes lit up. “You do? What is it?”

“Now, now, Haru; if I told you then it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“I could still act surprised.”

Toto laughed again and shook his head. “Baron’s been working on this for the past week; I think he’s earned the right to tell you.”

Haru’s eyebrows shot up, now thoroughly intrigued. “Okay, now I’m really curious. Is Baron in? Is it okay if I go into the Bureau, you think?”

“Haru, we asked you to come. Of course it’s alright.” Toto was trying to hide a grin – and failing – as he flew to the open balcony windows. “I can’t wait to see your face.”

Haru raised an eyebrow and knelt down by the Bureau doors. This was going to be good. She knocked and a very familiar voice called for her to enter. She had to shuffle her way through the doors and take a precarious seat on a chest, for the Bureau – like all the houses in the Sanctuary – was noticeably doll-sized.

Baron stood by his desk, managing to look pleased and surprised by her appearance, despite the fact that Toto must have just told him that she had arrived. “Ah, Haru. Glad to see you got our message.”

Haru grinned at the foot-high half-cat figurine. She would be lying if she said Baron wasn’t half the reason she enjoyed working with the Bureau. “I guessed only one person would leave a message like that, Baron. Toto said you have a surprise for me.”

Baron looked to his fellow Creation. “Toto, it was supposed to be a surprise.”

“He didn’t tell me what it was,” Haru hastily promised. “Only that this was going to be good.”

“Honestly, Baron; would I ruin your surprise?”

“So what’s the big secret?”

The Cat Creation brought out something small and silver from his desk and approached Haru. “Open your hand, please.”

Haru did so, and Baron dropped the small silver thing into her palm. She was just about to inquire as to what exactly this was meant to be when it grew in her hand. Suddenly she was holding a beautiful necklace with a butterfly charm in the middle. Its wings were made from a glassy material and inside rested a strange sort of powder. She looked to Baron, mildly aware she was gaping, and then carefully placed it around her neck. “It’s beautiful, Baron,” she started, “but why–?”

She stopped.

She was looking Baron in the eye.
At his level.

There had been no feeling of shrinking or even that the world had abruptly grown; one moment she was towering over the Bureau and the next she was only a foot high. The change caught her by surprise and she released a screech, stumbling backwards over the large chest as her balance abruptly went to pieces. She remained sprawled on the floor, her head leaning an awkward angle against the wall behind her and staring numbly at the suddenly life-sized Bureau. “Wow,” she eventually mumbled, “this place looks even cooler when you fit it...”

Before she had too much time to ponder the change or the fact that her neck was going numb at the strange angle, Baron was pulling her back to her feet. He did, she notice, look a little sheepish. “I’m sorry, Haru; if I had thought this would be such a shock to you, I would have warned you...”

“No, it’s fine, it’s... it’s completely... fine...” Haru tried not to stare, but it was a little difficult. For one, she had never been the right size to fully appreciate the Bureau, and secondly... secondly, it had been quite a while since she had managed to look Baron right in the eye. It had been even longer since she had seen him eye-to-eye in a less-than-life-threatening situation.

Haru grinned, hoping she didn’t look as foolish as she felt. “How did you do this? What... What is this?”

“The powder comes from a special kind of mushroom found in another world,” Baron explained, “but its effects are usually short-lasting and unpredictable. I had to alter its effects so when you wear this necklace you will shrink to this size whenever you enter the Sanctuary.”

“And when I leave the Sanctuary?”

“You will return to your normal height.”

“Fantastic!”

“Geez, Chicky, so you’re smaller – so what?” Muta had been so quiet – it looked like he had been sleeping – that Haru had almost missed him slouching against the red sofa. Now, however, he was back to being his usual vocal self. “What’s so great about that?”

Haru stuck her tongue out at the fat white cat. “You’re such a spoilsport.”

Baron turned to the young woman. “Haru, are you happy about this? I can understand if changing sizes makes you uncomfortable...”

“Baron, didn’t you hear what I said earlier? I think it’s brilliant.” Haru laughed and spun on the spot, admiring the Bureau from her new vantage point. “I mean, this way I can actually have a whole cup of your special blend instead of just a mouthful.”

Baron smiled at her reaction. “Very well, Haru. In that case, would you like some tea?”

Haru grinned back. “I would love some.”

ooOoo

Another day came to an end at the Paradise Pet Store and Haru was clearing away the last of the cages. How strange, she pondered silently to herself, that she should be working in the very same place that she once had to defend herself against a mutated eagle. For some people, that would put them off staying somewhere, but it had almost done the opposite for Haru. She finished with the last cage and detoured into the office where a young, dark-haired man was doubled over the accounts.
“We had a good haul today, huh?” She leant on his shoulder and bore down at the numbers scrawled across the page. She wrinkled her nose at the prospect of accountancy and was very glad she had opted to close up shop instead. “How’s the numbers looking?”

“Well, we can carry on paying you, if that’s any relief.”

“Be still my beating heart.”

The man glanced up from his work to grin to the brunette. This time, Haru’s heart really did give a happy flutter. “I’m almost done here, so afterwards would you want to stay for dinner? You’ve been working here all day, so the least we can do is offer you a warm meal before we send you on your way.”

“Oh, I really couldn’t impose, Michael...”

“I insist. Grandpa has made vast quantities of pasta bake, so we’re in serious need of extra mouths. He also made apple crumble for pudding,” he added enticingly.

“Mmm, well your grandfather’s apple crumble is to die for...”

“Is that a yes?”

“That’s an affirmative.” Haru dropped her head against Michael’s, sighing comfortably at the small slice of normality that this part of her life permitted. There was something to be said for keeping at least this side of her life blissfully ordinary – instead of running headlong into perilous situations, as was more often the Bureau’s way.

“That was a big sigh,” Michael remarked. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” Haru said – and she meant it. “I’m just... just happy, that’s all.”

Michael grinned. “That’s good to hear.” He yawned and pushed the accounts back into their drawer, stretching his limbs in the same motion. “Alright, let’s head to the main house and see about food. I suppose you’re hungry?”

“Starving,” Haru answered. She kissed him on the cheek and headed out the door. Michael made to follow her, and then stopped. His brows furrowed. He watched the happy brunette leave, and something wasn’t right. He had seen Haru go through that door countless times while working with her, but today... today something was off.

Was she... taller?

ooOoo

“Haru! Haru, you in?” Hiromi dropped her keys into the bowl and peered round into the lounge. The lights were off, the TV silent. Her light brunette hair which she had grown out longer – even as Haru had had hers shortened – was pulled out of its ponytail, which was how she usually kept it during her shifts at the Lion’s Head Hotel.

She detoured into the kitchen, which proved to be as empty as the living room.

“Haru?” she called again, and – again – to no answer. She listened out for any signs of life in the apartment, before shrugging and making her way to the fridge. She flicked the oven on to pre-heat and switched the kettle on to boil. “Guess she must still be out. Not that that’s a surprise anymore...”
A thump from upstairs sent the young woman almost jumping out of her skin – and, as things stood, she did spill a handful of frozen peas across the floor. She frowned and glanced above her. That had come from Haru’s room...

“I swear, if it’s another mystery message, I’m going to shake the answers out of Haru.” She kicked the defrosting peas in the general direction of the bin – she promised herself she would clean them up later – and drifted towards the staircase. She paused, one hand on the banister as she glanced onto the floor above.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

“Haru, this better not be a practical joke. You know I don’t scare easily!” All the same, she hoisted her trusty lacrosse stick from the stand and tiptoed her way up the stairs. “Haru?” she called out again, this time from beside her flatmate’s bedroom. “Last chance to come clean! One... Two... AHA!” She flung the door open and jumped into the room to face... nothing.

Hiromi frozen, lacrosse stick poised for combat and shoulders tensed, for nothing. The room was empty. She lowered her makeshift weapon, shifting her feet and knocking her toes into something. At the rattle, she looked down to see that the initial noise had simply been a precariously-balanced teapot that had dropped off the desk.

She propped the lacrosse stick on her shoulder and gingerly reclaimed the fallen teapot from the floor. It was old – old and tin – and small pictures were marked along the outside. She flicked a switch and lifted the tiny images to the light. Miniature top hats and teacups were indented into the metal, and a faded line could just about be seen along the bottom. Hiromi squinted.

"Why... is a raven... like a writing desk?"

Her frown deepened. There was something undeniably familiar about that line.

But now something else caught her eye. On the desk were a collection of other items – all old, like the teapot, and almost... otherworldly – but her gaze was drawn from the teapot to a Western-styled fan. She carefully set the pot down and picked up the beautiful creation.

It was made from silk or finely-crafted cotton – age had made a quick distinction rather difficult – and the wooden ruts of the fan had faded the carvings lining its side. On the fabric small paintings of whirlwinds and tornadoes spun across its crimped canvas. The blue of the wind had a sort of... glow to their paint.

But Hiromi didn’t see any of this – or, at least, she wasn’t expecting to see the unearthly glow, so to her eyes it wasn’t there – but even so, there was something alluring about the fan. She flicked it open and started to cool herself with it, taking on the airs and graces of how she imagined nobility to act.

“Oh, tea at the Earl’s mansion? Why of course! How simply spiffing!” She executed an unpractised curtsy, hiding her face behind the fan’s ever-fluttering folds. With every breath of wind the fan called up, the painted pictures glowed brighter, and an unworldly breeze started to ripple across the room. “Dance with the Viscount? Why, I’m honoured, but I simply can’t! I promised this dance for the Prince, you know! I do rather think he’s somewhat sweet on me, I think!”

She laughed, but now she finally took notice of the fan’s eerie glow. “What the...?” She dropped the fan, but the breeze didn’t die away. The painted whirlwinds grew brighter – almost blindingly so – and the air whipped around Hiromi. She tried to step away from it, but the wind just buffed her back into its centre, becoming tighter and faster until a sheer column of air circled her.

The wind died away, the painted whirlwinds faded back to their dull, aged colours, and silence descended on the flat. Only the gentlest of breezes stirred the empty, empty room.

ooOoo

Teaser: “AHH! I'M SHRINKING! I'm – I'm... Oh, I'm hyperventilating.” / Michael glanced back and, even with Haru a few steps below him, the young woman was still at eye level. “Are you wearing high-heels?”/ She hobbled away from the bins, kicking herself loose from the black bags and vegetable peelings with what was left of her dignity. / “Baron... I'm scared.”
“Hiromi, I’m back!” Haru shrugged off her coat and dropped her scarf onto the banister. The flat was heavy with silence; still and empty. “Hiromi? You in?” She kicked off her shoes and wandered towards the kitchen. “Huh. Guess she must be out. Or sleeping. One of the two.”

She switched on the light, her feet kicking into something as she went. Defrosted peas scattered across the room, bouncing along the tiled floor and coming to rest against the cupboards. But, otherwise, the room was still.

“I stay out a little longer for a small dinner with the Banners, and I come back to an empty flat,” Haru muttered to herself. She flicked the kettle on as she went, adding, “Even so, I’d be surprised if she’s already headed to bed. Perhaps her lacrosse practices recently have caught up with her.” She turned back around and butted her head against the upper cupboard.

She reeled back, groaning.

“Ow... that’s a first. Never done that before.”

She grimaced up at the cupboard door, frowning. It was true – she had never walked into that before; she had always been that little bit too short for it. She shook her thoughts away and moved back to making her cup of tea. The remnant happiness from her dinner with the Banners faded as a newfound tiredness swept over her and she slowed in her movements. Hand against the kettle, she swayed where she stood; blinking back the sudden fatigue.

“Oh, that... that is new.” She winced, blinking again and trying to steady herself.

The kettle’s whistle rose to a crescendo and suddenly the hot metal side was burning against her skin. She yelped and staggered back, whipping her hand away from the pot. Her shaking hands found the sink and turned the tap handle. Ice cold water ran over her scalding palm.

“Oh... Ah, ow... Ow, stupid... Stupid person...” She bit back her hiss of pain as the water stung at her skin. She withdrew it and flexed her fingers. The skin was red and tender, but nothing lasting.

She’d had worse.

She dropped her hand to her side, cradling it against her as she abandoned her half-made cup of tea and drifted out. As she went, she forgot to duck beneath the open cupboard door. She passed with a good inch between it and her.

Ever since joining the Bureau, Haru would suffer the occasional nightmare. Not just the usual nightmare – nothing nearly so tame – but dreams that whispered from remnant wisps of memory; of
past Bureau cases that had brought her to the edge of her sanity and safety. The nightmares didn’t come often, but they *did* come.

And when they did, they left her screaming.

That night, monsters chased her through her sleep. Half-animal, half-human, with eyes that were so very sentient and teeth that were so very sharp. And as she ran, she passed walls of mirrors, and in those mirrors, an animal stared back.

She stared back.

Her... It... They were the same...

She shot up in her bed, the scream already on her lips. Sweat was running along her face, mingling with the tears as she scrambled to remember who and where she was. She was human. She was safe...

Her fingers finally found a switch and the room was flooded with blinding light – light that coloured the world in echoes of afterimages and blurred the world into a sea of colour. Light that chased the nightmares away. The dream was one of her more common nightmares – the returning memory of her hazy time in the Doctor’s world; from a time where she only had the barest whispers of recollection. In her sleep, her dreams filled in the gaps.

And the nightmares coloured those gaps scarlet.

With one hand running through her hair, her other dropped to the chain around her neck. Her fingers curled around the charmed butterfly, and drew reassurance from it. She was home. She was human.

She was safe.

As her eyes became accustomed to the light, she calmed and her breath began to slow. She couldn’t quite slow the breakneck speed of her heart though. Not just yet. She closed her eyes, counted to ten, and swung herself carefully to her feet.

Hiromi usually came running whenever Haru suffered from one of her nightmares. Strange; this evening she hadn’t even stirred. But she supposed it saved another awkward explanation; Haru could never tell Hiromi the real reason her dreams were haunted by monsters, not if she wanted to be considered sane.

And she hated lying.

She yawned uneasily and padded over to her door, still running her hand through her short hair. The best thing for her nerves would be some of Baron’s tea but, considering the circumstances, her own blend would have to do. While Baron had once promised (and she had never forgotten this) that the Bureau’s doors would be open, be it day or night, she had decided against repeatedly putting the latter option to the test too often. Even Creations needed their sleep.

She came to the door and her hand reached for the handle automatically in her half-awake mode.

Her fingers curled around empty air.

She blinked.

Her hand reached out again and brushed against the door, but found no handle. Her eyes shot open as her hand splayed against the wood.
The door handle was a good foot above her estimate.

The Bureau had taught Haru many things in her time there. Never get between Muta and Toto’s fights. Always accept one of Baron’s new blends with caution. And never panic.

So she didn’t panic when she saw just how high the handle had jumped. Instead, her brow dipped in sleep-deprived confusion and it slowly dawned on her that maybe it hadn’t grown, but that she had shrunk. She slowly lifted her hand to the tip of her head and marked her height against the door jamb.

It was hard to gauge just how much height she had lost when she was estimating with her own hand, but she still received the uncanny impression she had indeed lost height. She glowered at the appointed height on the wall and then carefully stepped over towards her desk.

This time there could be no mistaking it. The desk was standing at a noticeably higher point to her... She had indeed shrunk.

 Abruptly, her mind kicked into overdrive and the initial calm that she believed was trained control from her time with the Bureau turned out to be nothing but sleepiness. Now that semi-unconsciousness was swept away and her head lurched into freaking-out mode. The very same one she had perfected in her original arrival in the Cat Kingdom upon discovering her change to half-cat.

“AHH! I’M SHRINKING! I’m – I’m... Oh, I’m hyperventilating.” Her words came out as ragged wheezing, accompanied by the smallest of awkward laughs at her predicament. “Okay... Okay, this is embarrassing,” she gasped as she was forced to double over to regain her breath. “Paper bag... Paper bag... No, of course I don’t have a paper bag to hand... Just... Just calm down Haru... Come on, get a grip... You’ve been through much worse than this...”

One hand had gone back to running itself through her hair, while her other had found reassurance once again in the charm around her neck. Eventually she took note of this latter item.

“Wait – it’ll just be the necklace gone wrong or something – all I need to do is take it off and I’ll be fine! If I can just...” Her fingers trailed up the chain on both sides, searching for the latch to release her. Her fingers clashed at the back of her neck, with no latch in sight.

Haru froze.

She may have uttered a short sharp word, but by that point she really wasn’t paying attention. She snatched up the handheld mirror that she had found in her father’s boxes, and lifted it up to inspect the chain in question. By rotating it around her neck, she confirmed what she was already afraid she knew.

There was no latch.

ooOoo

The Bureau didn’t have ‘office hours’. That is to say, it was never officially closed. All the same, there was the general assumption that after a certain hour, clients weren’t going to turn up. At least, the ones with more minor problems; huge, life-threatening problems usually turned up in the Sanctuary at some forsaken hour of the morning, but these were generally rare.

Still, the Bureau’s doors were always open.

And Baron almost always slept – or whatever the Creation equivalent was – at the Bureau window. He was always the first to see a new client – or, almost, anyway. He was usually the first to awaken.
And, indeed, he was the first to awaken at Haru’s distressed arrival – but only after she had flung open the Bureau doors, stormed inside... and shaken the Creation awake.

Needless to say, he was more than a little surprised to see Haru’s face in his at three in the morning.

“Get. It. Off!”

Creation’s minds can often switch between sleeping and awake with relatively more speed than the average person (and certainly the average cat) but even Baron had to take a few moments to compute the situation at hand.

He blinked.

“I’m sorry?”

“This!” Haru snatched the butterfly charm and lifted it into the light. “Get it off! It was your magic that spelled it, right? Get it off!”

“Miss Haru, I’m afraid I don’t quite–”

“I’m shrinking!” she shrieked. “I’m shrinking – and I don’t just mean here – I lost almost two feet just in the journey here! It’s out of control!”

Finally, his mind kicked into gear – or, at least, enough to understand the danger of the situation – and he snapped awake. His hands shot up and grabbed Haru’s shoulders, the mere abrupt action alone almost enough to jolt the brunette out of her panic, and something uncannily close to fearful seriousness laced through his eyes. “Haru, calm down.”

“How can I calm down? I’m shrinking–”

“I said, calm.”

Haru opened her mouth to argue.

“Calm.”

Haru closed her mouth.

“Good.” Baron released a low sigh and distracted repeated, “Good...”

“Baron?” Haru whispered.

“Yes?”

“What’s going to happen to me? I mean... what is happening to me? Will I...?” Haru swallowed and began again. “Will I shrink into nothing?”

“Haru, look at me.” Baron’s hands were still around her shoulders and were noticeably keeping her close. So very, very close to those emerald eyes. “Look at me.” Haru couldn’t quite drag her gaze from those angular green orbs, even if she had wanted to. “Have you shrunk since entering the Sanctuary? No, and you’re not going to. But you have to stay calm. Fear will only accelerate the process. But not here. Here, you’re safe.”

“What’s happening?”

“An unseen side-effect. The charm I used is specifically designed for Creations, but I thought I had
taken that into account with my calculations.” Baron paused, and shame flooded his features. “Evidently not,” he added quietly. “While you’re in the Sanctuary, the Creation magic is enough to counteract the side-effects, but I fear that once away from the magic of this place, the side-effects will continue. I assume you’ve tried removing it?”

“Do you think I would have run all this way if I could have just taken it off?” Haru snapped. She caught herself and blushed. “I’m sorry. I’m just...”

“Scared. I know. But I promise you, Haru; you’re safe here.” Baron leant forward and took the chain in his hands, running his fingers over the charm. A frown burrowed itself into his brow. “Just what I was afraid of. Until I find the right counter-spell, you won’t be able to remove it.”

“What do I do until then?” Haru asked. “I can’t just stay here – I have a life, I have a job. Hiromi will start to wonder where I am... and Michael...” She reddened and continued with, “I can’t just disappear without notice.”

“Miss Haru, you will only alter size if you allow your emotions to get the better of you. As long as...” Baron hesitated and released the necklace, stepping back in the same moment. Haru felt that distance. “As long as you retain control of your emotions, you should be able to continue life as normal until I have found a solution.”

“How... long is it likely to take for you to find a solution?”

“I will spend every waking moment working on this... but it is likely to take a day or so,” he admitted.

“So... I just have to remain calm until then?”

Baron nodded. “Do you think you can manage that? You are more than welcome to stay here until then.”

Haru shook her head. “No, I can manage that. I do have a job to get back to, after all.” She smiled shakily. “But... is it okay if I crash on your couch for tonight? I’m not sure I’m... I’m steady enough to head home just yet.”

“Of course.” Spark crept into his smile. “But I think we can do one better than the couch. Come along, Miss Haru.” He turned and lead her towards a door at the back of the Bureau’s room that she had never seen before.

Haru hesitated, standing before the green doorway before her. “I’ve... I’ve never seen that before... Has it... always been there?”

“The Sanctuary is magic, Miss Haru. Creation magic, especially.” His smile brightened and Haru’s stomach did a flip. “It creates what is needed.” He pushed the door open and stepped aside to show her in. “Welcome, Miss Haru.”

Haru stepped into a room that was both oddly familiar, and oddly new. The colour scheme followed that of the Bureau, cream and green, but the layout came from another time. From her childhood. A patchwork quilt lay across the bed, of faded ruby and emerald, while further diamonds patterned the curtains. A selection of familiar books were lined across the bookcases – all books that she had read over the years, books she had forgotten she had forgotten and books she would always remember – and walls were set with old family photos. And then there were odd elements that had crept in from her current residence – the desk was the same as the one from her flat, and the blank notebook and sketchbook were the same makes as the ones she had left in her room earlier.
“How... How is this possible?” she breathed. She stepped inside, and the overwhelming feeling of coming home flooded her. Here, she knew, she was safe. Here, she could belong. “It feels... like home.”

Baron stepped in beside her, a gentle smile lighting his features. “There’s a reason this place is called the Sanctuary. It saves what it can, and that includes memories too. Memories you thought you had forgotten, memories that you had left behind, the Sanctuary protects them. It is a refuge for even memories. When we needed an extra room, the Sanctuary reached into your recollection of ‘home’ and fashioned a room from it.” Baron looked across the space. “This room probably encompasses a little of every place you’ve ever considered home.”

Haru sighed and ran her fingers along the familiar book titles filling the case. “A little of my childhood home,” she murmured. “A little of my flat. And a little...” She glanced back to Baron, a tiny smile twitching at the corners of her lips. “And a little of the Bureau,” she finished.

Baron nodded his head in acknowledgement, but Haru saw the same smile tickling his lips. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you please, Miss Haru. This room may come and go, but it will always be here when you need it. You are part of the Bureau now; the Sanctuary will protect you as one of its own.”

“Thank you, Baron.” She yawned, stopping to lean against the bookcase, and glanced to the cow clock resting on the bedside table. “I suppose I should get some sleep before work.” She laughed. “This will be a little difficult to explain to Michael otherwise! Goodnight, Baron.”

“Goodnight, Haru. Sleep well.”

ooOoo

“Good morning, Haru.”

“Good morning, Michael!” Haru swept into the empty shop, pulling off the coat and scarf in the same motion as she went and dropping into the store room. “What’s today’s plan?”

The familiar dark-haired young man stepped into view, sleeves rolled up and an ink stain spread across his chin. “Open shop, sell enough to stay out of the red, close shop. Perhaps even have enough to make a profit.”

“Very funny. Have you already been working on the accounts?”

“Had to do a store-check, actually. Why?”

“You’ve left half your writing on your face. Come here.” Haru leant up and rubbed at the ink trailing along his chin, bringing their faces so very close. “You’re such a mucky pup,” she teasingly reprimanded. “Can’t you even tick a few boxes without making a mess?”

“If I made such a mess of everything, then I wouldn’t have you.”

Haru grinned back and mockingly tutted. “Keep your mouth still; I can’t clean this off if you’re yabbering.”

“Yes, dearest.”

“What did I just tell you? Shush. And I saw you roll your eyes – don’t make that face at me.” She rubbed at the last blurring of ink, doing her best to focus on the task at hand and not on the dark eyes that threatened to fill her vision. “Done. Now you look like a respectable gentleman.”
“Can I move now?”

“Only if you promise not to paint yourself with ink the next time you pick up a pen.”

“Good.” He covered the small distance between them and covered her lips with his own. She kissed back until he pulled away. “I’ve been dying to do that since you walked through that door.”

“I’m flattered.”

He slipped her coat and scarf out of her grip and went to hang them up. “Now, Miss Haru Yoshioka, I’m going to have to ask you to feed the animals while I bring out the new stock. And... is this a new coat?” He hesitated with the clothing still in his hold.

Haru reddened; she had forgotten the borrowed attire. She had rushed out in such a panic last night – especially upon realising her shrinking stature – that, while she had remembered to change out into day attire, she had forgotten to pick up a coat or suchlike. Baron had insisted on lending her a jacket upon learning of her dilemma that morning. Luckily it, along with herself, had grown back to normal size upon leaving the Sanctuary.

“Oh, it’s not mine. A friend lent it to me.” She grinned and stepped back into the main shop. “I forgot a coat while walking here; I met him on the way here and he insisted I borrow his jacket since he wasn’t too far from home. Have to say I’m relieved he did; it’s ruddy freezing out there. Call this October? It’s more like January!” She walked right into one of the bird cages and set off the animals into a round of chattering and twittering. “Yeouch!”

Michael’s voice floated from the next room. “What did you do this time?”

“Just hit my head – have you lowered the bird cages since yesterday?”

“Haven’t touched them.”

“Oh,” Haru hesitated in her wincing and glanced back up to the rattled cages. She grimaced. “Right,” she murmured. “Control of my emotions. I can do that.” She rubbed her forehead and continued on to the desk. She noticed how it felt significantly lower than normal. “This is going to be one long day.”

ooOoo

“Lunch break!” Michael turned the sign from ‘Open’ to ‘Closed’ and locked the door behind him. “Haru, you look like you need it. You’ve been propped up against that desk for the past hour.”

Haru grimaced and kept herself decidedly slouched against the desk. “Feeling a little rough,” she lied. It was a lot easier to look less gigantic if she stayed sitting, she had decided. It didn’t help that every time Michael made her laugh, she gained a few extra inches. Even the occasional wave of panic that brought her down now and then couldn’t quite overcome it.

“Do you want to call it a half-day?” Michael asked worriedly. “I’m sure I can manage the shop for the rest of the day.”

Haru gave a slanted smile. “I’ve taken enough days off over the last few months,” she said, painfully aware of the truth of her words. When working with the Bureau, a normal life was often pushed to the backburner. Sometimes it didn’t even give her time to call in sick; it just... happened. “As long as you don’t ask me to do any heavy lifting, I should be fine.”

“If you’re sure. But if you need to go home, don’t hesitate to say.”
“I’m fine,” Haru repeated. She attempted to give an encouraging smile. “Now, what was that about lunch?”

“Well, I think Grandfather left some of yesterday’s dinner in the fridge, if you’re okay with cold pasta?”

“I’ve been a student,” Haru replied flatly. “I’ve eaten worse.”

Michael raised his eyebrows and merely motioned for Haru to follow him to the house. Haru hesitated and slowly rose to her feet as soon as his back was turned. Now, even she couldn’t miss how she had to duck beneath the hanging bird cages. After she had overcome her shock, she finally tuned back into Michael’s conversation.

“–and, as usually, he’s made enough to feed an army – I don’t think he’s quite realised that I’m not a growing teenager anymore. So I hope you’re hungry and...” He glanced back and, even with Haru a few steps below him, the young woman was still on eye level with him. “Are you wearing high-heels?”

Haru shuffled her feet, trying to hide her shoes beneath her trousers. “Yes...”

Michael frowned. “Were you earlier?”

“Yes.” She rolled her eyes in what she hoped was her usual manner. “Obviously you weren’t paying enough attention. Honestly, Michael, sometimes I don’t know why I’m dating you,” she teased.

“I thought it was obviously for my good looks and fantasy financial prospects.”

“Oh, dang it! You’ve caught onto my devious plan!” Haru snapped her fingers, shaking her head with mocking disbelief. “I was planning to marry you and then bump you off as soon as the will was fixed in my favour. Now what am I going to do?” Haru hit her head on the low ceiling above the staircase and bit back a curse.

Michael, quite unaware of the inch’s growth, only laughed and continued up the stairs. “I think you should have chosen lower heels, Haru. You’re a danger to yourself at that height.”

Haru rubbed the back of her head and gingerly stepped after the young man. “Yeah, don’t I know it,” she muttered. “Do you, um... Do you mind if I just powder my nose before lunch?”

“Sure. You know where the bathroom is. I’ll get the food out while I’m waiting.”

“Thanks.” Haru rushed through the kitchen and disappeared into the bathroom adjacent to it before Michael could really take stock of her ridiculous height. She slammed and locked the door after her, almost knocking herself out when she spun round and hit the light. “Ow! Flipping, freaking...” She bit off the rest of her words before she could slip into anything coarser.

“Haru?” Michael had evidently paused by the door upon hearing the brunette’s distress. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine!” she called. “I’m fine...” She caught sight of her doubled-over form and muttered, “I am so far from fine...” There was no way she could now explain her new size to Michael within reason. She sank down to the tiled floor, leaning her head back against the door. A moment later she heard Michael take a seat on the other side of the door, and release a soft, tired sigh. A gentle silence settled between them, broken eventually by Michael.

“You know... I was planning on asking whether you were free this evening, but I think I’ll put my
plans on hold... at least until you’re feeling better,” Michael remarked softly, the door between them muffling, but not suppressing entirely, his words. She heard his sigh. “My grandfather and I were planning on going to the theatre to see a Shakespeare, but when he called in ill this morning, I was going to ask whether you wanted to come instead...” He trailed off quietly, letting the silence fall over them. Then he added, “I guess I can probably ask to exchange the tickets for another day—”

“No, I’d...” Haru blinked, her mouth responding before her head had. “I’d like to go. If I’m feeling better by this evening, I’d love to come...”

“Haru, you’ve spent the last ten minutes locked up in the bathroom,” Michael gently reminded her. “I don’t think you’re about to get better any time soon. I’m calling off your work for tomorrow; unless you turn up tomorrow morning literally jumping off the walls, I’m not going to let you anywhere near the shop.”

Haru bit back a laugh at the familiar streak of over protectiveness she tended to find in her guys. Even Baron was guilty of it – although the Bureau business was unduly dangerous from time to time – but, even so, it was always nice to be looked after. “And if I do turn up at the door, jumping off the walls? What then?”

“Well, firstly I would confiscate all coffee in the building,” Michael started, “and then I would find something to sedate you with...”

“Do you have anything to sedate me with?” Haru asked cautiously.

“Horse tranquilisers.”

“You don’t!”

“We’re a pet store,” Michael reminded her. “So... yes, we do.”

Haru giggled. “You’d have to catch me first.” Her legs slid against the shower door as they grew; Haru’s shoulder smacked against the door handle with an uncomfortable thud and the longer she stayed around Michael, the taller she was becoming.

She was going to have to find the Bureau. Without alerting Michael.

This was going to be difficult.

“Actually, I could do with some food,” she ventured. She could almost hear Michael snapping to attention. “Although I’m not sure if I’ll be able to handle pasta... Could you make some... toast?”

“Toast?”

“Just butter. I mean, if that’s okay...”

She heard him scramble to his feet, and she almost audibly sighed from relief.

“That’s fine – that’s great, if you can handle some food, then I’m more than happy to make something...”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m not going anywhere,” Haru lied. She waited for Michael’s footsteps to fade into the kitchen before picking out a pen and notepad from her bag and scribbling out a note explaining how she had had to leave suddenly without notice. She eased the door open, and instantly saw the problem – in order to get to the front door, she had to go through the kitchen first.
Where Michael was.

She gently pulled the door shut, pushed the note beneath it, and regarded her situation. Perhaps Michael wouldn’t realise this little inconstancy. In searching for an alternative route of escape, her attention shifted to the window.

It was an old-fashioned window, with an iron latch and a wide breadth. Wide and large enough, she gauged, for her to be able to fit through it, even at this size. She unlatched it and pushed the window up, bringing the brisk autumn breeze into the room and under the doorway. Quite what Michael would make of it when he found this, she might never know.

Grumbling about the general indignity of it all, she stepped onto the toilet seat and pulled herself onto the ledge. She sat there for a moment, watching the urban world busy and lit across its landscape. Below, the building bridged the distance between its neighbour by a dimly-lit alleyway that housed the Banners’ bins. She twisted herself round and lowered herself down, her huge, dinner-plate hands curled around the windowsill. The ground was only four feet or so below her own feet thanks now to her grown size.

She still hit the bins with a crash.

“Dratdratdrat.”

She hobbled away from the bins, kicking herself loose from the black bags and vegetable peelings with what was left of her dignity. She could only be thankful that the charm had the grace to grow her clothes alongside with herself, otherwise her dignity would be in a seriously more endangered state. She came to the end of the alleyway and then stopped.

Right. Midday. Lunchtime.

Busy streets.

Lots of people.

She turned away, and then back to the opening of the alleyway. People distracted by their phones and food barely spared the staggering tall stranger a second glance – if a first glance at all. Haru pulled her coat collar up and stared out across the sea of heads... At this level, it really could be described as a sea, all bobbing and shifting and weaving between one another; a patchwork quilt of browns and blacks and yellows, occasionally speckled with hoods and hats pulled close.

Haru took a deep breath and took a long stride into the current of the crowd. Each step out-strode the people around her and brought her closer to the Bureau. But every time she jostled past someone or stepped a little bit too much into their line of sight, she sensed their gaze turn to her and stay.

She upped her pace, breaking into a brisk – and fast, considering her long strides – run. She wasn’t just tall – she was a small giant. She began to notice friends elbowing one another as she passed, and lingering stares from passersby. She hastened, and broke into a sprint across the Crossroads, her heart hammering away inside her. If she met someone she knew... she was never going to be able to explain this.

Turning another corner, she came to the alleyway that marked Muta’s route to the Bureau. There were other routes, true, but none quite so fast as this. At her current height, she could take the window ledges almost two at a time, jumping onto the garage roof with a resounding clatter. The route was almost easier at this height... until she came to the final alleyway.

She very nearly ran straight into it, but caught herself before she hit the wall. She staggered back and
realised that she was too big to fit into the narrow way.

Something akin to a whimper slipped past her lips and she sank to the ground. The Sanctuary was only on the other side of the alleyway... and yet she couldn’t reach it. She pounded her huge fist against the wall, hoping against hope that someone from the Bureau would be able to hear her.

“Baron! Muta! Anybody! It’s me, Haru!! She slowed and let her head fall forward against the wall, her eyes flickering shut. “Please... help.” To make matters worse, the spitting rain split into full thunderstorm mode, drenching the young woman almost instantly. Haru glanced up. “Thanks. The pathetic fallacy’s appreciated.”

Thunder rolled across the sky.

Haru shifted to a sitting position and tried to calm her frenzied heart by dropping her head against her tucked knees. One of these days, her exploits with the Bureau were going to come to light, at least with her friends, but perhaps – for now at least – she could maintain the illusion of normality. Perhaps she could have at least one part of her life that wasn’t centred around staying alive long enough for the next client, or tempered by the fear she was going to lose a dear friend.

The raindrops were growing larger now, falling onto her eyelashes and weighing them down. She blinked them away and looked up. The sky was mottled with the rain... large rain. She blinked again and a frown crossed her features. She raised her hand and watched the drops scatter over her palm. Instead of the pin-sized rain that she had felt earlier, this was larger.

She rose to her feet and turned round on the spot, inspecting her surroundings. She moved to the alley and slowly leant her hands on either side, swaying slightly in the rain. Her face split into a grin and her laugh echoed down the passageway.

“I’m... back. I’m back to normal. I can’t–” She hesitated and shifted her hands’ grip against the walls. The frown returned. She didn’t normally have this much space. In fact, her arms were almost stretched just trying to reach either side.

“Oh, no...” She stumbled into a walk, horribly aware of the panic welling up inside of her.

Being with the Bureau meant she had learnt to control her panic. It didn’t mean she felt panic.

“No, no... No, no, no, no...” With every new stab of panic, the alleyway loomed ever yet taller about her. Her fingers could only brush the sides now. “This is not happening to me. I won’t let it!” She came to the step at the end of the alley and her new height became ever more apparent to her. Now with the Sanctuary’s arch in sight, she ran.

“Baron!”

“Ah, Miss Haru, I was just–” The Cat Creation stopped in the doorway as he saw the near-hysterical young woman underneath the arch. “Haru?”

Now inside the Sanctuary – and guaranteed to stay at Baron’s height – Haru could only numbly stare down at her feet. At the rain as it fell all about her. “I shrank... so fast...” she murmured. Hands gently gripped her shoulders and she looked up into comforting green eyes. “Within seconds I was... so small.”

“Were you afraid?”

Haru swallowed back the memory from the alleyway and only nodded. “When I realised I was shrinking, I panicked,” she admitted. She looked away. “I was wrong. I couldn’t control my
“Few people can, Miss Haru. But that is what makes you human.” Baron hesitated, and then drew Haru into his arms, trying to still the shivers that was still plaguing the brunette. “You’re safe here, Miss Haru. You won’t shrink any further in the Sanctuary.”

“I know. That’s why I... I had to come. To see if you had found a solution.”

“I think I have found a solution or two. If we can find a way to return you to your original height—” Haru scoffed and gave a little hiccup. Baron ignored it and continued.

“—then I have a spell that should unlatch the necklace and release its control over you. The problem is, Miss Haru, that the original spell I used was intended for Creations. Without Creation magic, the spell backfires, as you saw...”

Haru gave a small, humourless laugh. “So this is my fault for not being a Creation, basically.”

“It is not your fault, Miss Haru. It is mine for not realising the error sooner.”

“I’m just glad to hear there is a solution.” Haru paused, and then glanced to the open archway. “This does, of course, mean that I have to go back out there again,” she said. She looked back to Baron. “I have to leave the Sanctuary in order to return to my normal height.”

“The spell was made to return you to your human height upon leaving the Sanctuary,” Baron reminded her. “Just trust me.”

Haru tightened her resolve and nodded. “I do. Let’s do this.” She turned back to the archway and marched towards it, hesitating only as she came to the threshold. She sighed. Took a deep breath. And stepped onto the other side.

When she opened her eyes, the rain was still falling in big, heavy drops. She flinched as one struck her shoulder.

She spun round to face Baron, who looked as confused as she did. “It’s not working!” she hissed. “Now, Haru, stay calm...”

“How can I? If I don’t grow, then I’ll never... and what if I keep on shrinking, never growing?” she demanded. “What if I shrink until there’s nothing left to shrink? What if I shrink into nothing?”

“HARU!”

She jolted out of her panic as his hands were suddenly clamped around her shoulders. She shivered and looked up to him – significantly far up. Half an inch was already lost from her height.

“Baron,” she whispered. “I’m scared.”

“I know. Of course you are. Anyone would be,” he soothed. His hands were still about her shoulders, tight as if he thought he could hold her from shrinking. “But you’ve got to trust me on this. The moment you give into fear, it takes over. It will consume you. Don’t give it that chance.”

“I’m afraid... I already have.” She dropped her gaze to the ground, but Baron’s hand curled around her chin and brought her eyes back up.

“No, don’t you dare. Don’t you dare, Haru, give up hope for one single second. I am not losing you.
Concentrate on me. Only on me.” Now she could feel his grip shaking as he held onto her tiny shoulders. “You’ve faced monsters and kings and mad scientists and one day... one day I might lose you on one of our adventures, but not today. Not because of a stupid mistake I made. Not because of my own spell.”

Haru’s eyes were as large as saucers – or whatever the equivalent was at that height – and she slowly raised her hand to clear the single tear Baron had shed. She stared at it, and then at the size of her tiny hand against his cheek.

Baron saw the panic renew itself seconds before the hyperventilating hit. His hand flew to Haru’s against his cheek and now his whole hand could wrap itself around the tiny woman’s. “Haru!” He had to kneel down now to keep at eye level with the shrinking brunette, and with every gasp of the panic attack, more millimetres was shaven from her height. “Haru, please, listen to me!”

“I’m... shrinking... I’m shrinking into nothing...” she whispered between gasps. “I’m going to disappear...” She looked up and now even Baron’s gaze wouldn’t reassure her. “I’m sorry, I can’t... I can’t stop feeling fear...”

“Then we’re going back to the Sanctuary.” He scooped up her tiny body – and it was more of a child’s size compared to him now – and retreated back into the Refuge. But the shrinking wouldn’t slow. Baron could feel her becoming smaller in his arms. Instead of stopping, he ran straight on into the Bureau. He lowered Haru onto the sofa – it dwarfed her now – and turned, like a man possessed, to his books.

“It’s gone too far,” he muttered as he tore through the pages. “Not even the Sanctuary magic can stop it anymore... I need a spell, any spell!” He glanced back to the brunette, cursed, and continued through his volumes. “Please, one spell, just one spell...” He stopped, stared at the page long enough to memorise the words, and then spun back to Haru. His hands curled around hers, and they felt like a baby’s hands in his own now.

“Please... please let this work...” He felt the flow of the magic through the words of the spell and felt his energy drain as Haru was slowly returned to Creation height. He never released her or stopped the spell for a single second. “Haru?”

“How...?” She glanced about herself with disbelief. She finally focused back on Baron. “How are you doing this?”

He smiled grimly. “Magic. But I can’t stop the spell or you’ll revert back to your previous tiny height.”

“Could you–?”

Already knowing her question, he shook his head. “I can’t return you to your true height; the spell and my magic aren’t strong enough to do that. But I can maintain you at this height for a short period.” Already his limbs were shaking from the strain of the magic. “Enough time to find a solution, perhaps.”

“Is there a solution?”

“There’s always a solution.”

“Is there a solution which we can find before your strength gives out?”

Baron smiled bitterly. “Ah, now that’s a question I cannot answer.”
“There must be a way. Perhaps… a positive emotion?”

“It’s not that simple anymore. The fear you felt was so potent that you continued to shrink even inside the Sanctuary; for you to grow, you’d have to experience a positive emotion so powerful that it would overcome even the Sanctuary’s magic.”

Haru looked down, to the shaking hands that were curled around hers. “When you put it like that,” she said quietly, “you make it sound as if the bad emotions are stronger than the good. Is that true?”

“No. No, not at all. It’s just the good emotions, like happiness, joy, hope… can only be found, not felt on demand. The greatest moments are often the ones we least expect.” His grip tightened. “The bad emotions are opportunists; they strike when you are at your weakest. That’s what makes them so powerful.”

“So what can we do?”

“I don’t know. If you were a Creation, this problem would never exist, but…”

“But?” Haru echoed. She brought her gaze to meet Baron’s, watching his eyes fade out of focus with thought. “But what?” An idea struck her. “Can you make me into a Creation?”

Baron shook his head. “No.” He focused back to the young brunette, and a tired smile flickered across his face. “And even if I could, would you want to?”

Haru opened her mouth to argue back, and then hesitated. That would mean leaving behind her mother. Hiromi… Michael. It would mean leaving behind her human life – giving up her whole being to being at the Sanctuary. Even if she did manage to see her friends and family again, even in her Creation form, things would never be the same. There would be no more quirky Christmases with her mother, no more girly movie nights with Hiromi, no more relaxed working days with Michael. All the little things she took joy in during her daily life… they would all change.

“No,” she admitted.

Baron’s soft smile never wavered. “I know. Haru, I have an idea, but it will either work or it could possibly destroy you.”

Haru smiled back. “That sounds about normal. So… what do we have to do?”

“You’re agreeing?” Baron asked. “Without even knowing what my plan is?”

“I trust you,” she answered. “I always have.”

“Then perhaps… just perhaps… this will work.”

“What do I have to do?”

“All I want you to do is close your eyes.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“And…” Although Haru already had her eyes closed, she could almost see the hesitation flickering across Baron’s face. She tried to push back the fear and remind herself that she could – and would – trust this Creation who had saved her more times than she could count. (Then again, he was more often than not the reason why she was in such situations nowadays.) “And,” he repeated, “just remember that this is an attempt to save your life.”
“I don’t...”

“Please, just trust me.”

Was she just imagining things, or did Baron sound unusually close? “I do.”

Heavy silence hung between them, and then she felt his lips pass briefly – fleetingly – over her own. It was nothing more than a whisper – a breath. A murmur. A promise. Haru felt something flow into her, something fill her veins and snap her eyes open. She only realised she was holding her breath when she took the first ragged gasp; the air rushed painfully into her raw lungs and sent her shuddering.

She looked back to the Cat Creation and watched as he leant slowly away from her. His face was strange; it shifted as she watched it. His face was nothing but painted wood, but fur and life rippled back into place as he put distance between them. The change moved from one side of his face to the other, passing over one eye and bringing the shine back, while the other was still nothing but paint and wood.

Both eyes closed and the change passed over his right side; when the eyes opened, neither were wood anymore. Haru glanced to the rest of him and noted the way he was flexing his fingers back into life, cracking the wooden remains away.

“What... What did you do?” She started to move towards him, and then caught herself. Whatever he had done, it was linked to her. She didn’t dare approach, at least not until he was returned fully back to flesh and fur. Her voice hardened. “What did you do to yourself?” she growled.

“I cannot change you to a Creation, but I can pass on a little Creation magic,” he murmured. A long sigh rolled through him, as if he was remembering how to breathe again. “Just enough so that the charm will work as it’s ought.”

“What about you?” Haru demanded. “Don’t you need that magic?”

A tired smile flitted across the Creation’s face. “I can spare a little. I’m only...” His eyes flickered, and for a moment they were wood again; Baron blinked them away back to normal. “I’m only relieved to see that the magic took to you. Artisans who create Creations are not imbued with any special sort of ability or magic, only the love of their work, but even so... the magic that the Creation gains is linked to the artisan. Magic can as easily be rejected as blood or organ transplants.”

“And... if it had?”

“If it had... it would have destroyed you from within.”

Haru grinned weakly. “Then thank goodness it didn’t.”

“Indeed.”

“But... what about you? What about... this?” She made to motion to the eyes that flashed between life and wood, and then stopped, as if afraid that just by reminding him, he would change back. “Is this permanent?”

“The magic will rejuvenate and eventually balance itself out. These effects will only last the night.” Even as he spoke, the rippling calmed and finally his eyes ceased their shifting mediums. Still... he looked so tired from the day. “Haru, can I offer you a cup of tea?”

Haru released an exhausted laugh. “Tea,” she remarked; “your great cure for everything. How very...
British.” She shook her head. “But no thanks. Not tonight. Tonight... I don’t think I could manage any.” She leant against Baron and glanced to him, biting back the beginnings of a yawn. “And I don’t think you have enough energy to even try making a cup either.”

He smiled back. “I think you could be right.”

Silence descended over the Bureau, interrupted only several hours later by the arrival of Toto and Muta. The former from his rounds, the latter from his sleeping spot at the Crossroads. Upon finding the slumbering forms of Baron and Haru, they took their arguments elsewhere, leaving both Cat Creation and human to recover from the day. The only sound to break the peace was the unheard, unheeded ring of Haru’s phone as Michael’s call went unanswered.

ooOoo

Next Story: The Lost Princess

Teaser: Professor Pipt was not unaccustomed to strange occurrences. In a world where a belt could grant wishes, or shoes could transport their wearer across worlds, strange was to be expected. All the same, some surprise was unavoidable when a woman appeared out of thin air and landed on top of dinner. / “I’m not in Japan anymore...” / “Of course. Who did you think brought the post?” / “Oh no... Not another one.”

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by: Alice in Wonderland. Written by Lewis Carroll.

References:

The Lion King. By Disney.

One Week Earlier

Professor Pipt was not unaccustomed to strange occurrences. In a world where a belt could grant wishes, or shoes could transport their wearer across worlds, strange was to be expected.

All the same, some surprise was unavoidable when a woman appeared out of thin air and landed on top of dinner.

The initial response was uproar; Margolotte Pipt – the Professor’s wife – was distraught over the wasted meal, while Tip – their son – was already creeping forward to investigate the inanimate form strewn across the table and Professor Pipt was yelling for him to stay back. A moment later the portal overhead spat out a lacrosse stick and then dissolved into nothing.

Tip yelped as the stick whacked him across the head, and receded away from the young woman.

“Told you,” his father reprimanded.

His son grunted and moved away. “Now what do we do?”

The mop of brown hair stirred and dark eyes blearily blinked. An aching groan passed through her lips and she pushed herself up. Her hand knocked against the netted stick and her fingers curled instinctively around it. “What... what was that?” She looked about her and took note of the changed surroundings. “Come to that, where am I?”

The Professor nervously stepped forward and bowed his greeting to the stranger. “You are in the country of the Munchkins.”

The brunette swung her legs over the side of the table and glanced at the middle-aged man who stood before her. Her mind was grudgingly offering up some recollections of sorts. Something about green cities and tornadoes and girls in blue dresses. “I... thought Munchkins were meant to be smaller.”

“Munchkins?” Mrs Pipt’s words were more an indigent squeak than anything else. She was the grand height of five feet and she puffed herself up a few inches taller with her words. “Do we look like Munchkins to you?”

The stranger bit back the remark that she had actually assumed the diminutive woman to be a tall Munchkin, and smiled weakly. “Evidently not...”

“What my wife is trying to say,” the Professor interceded with a hasty bow – the young woman had just appeared out of thin air, after all, so who knew what powers she had; “is that we are Ozites, who moved to Munchkin Country several years back.”

“O... Ozites?” the stranger echoed curiously.
“Of course.” Professor Pipt beamed. “From Oz.”

*The Present*

“Yes – yes – I know – yes...” Haru sighed and rounded the room with the phone raised to her ear. She motioned to the Bureau that she was nearly finished, and continued with the call. “Yes, I know, Tsuge, but I haven’t seen—” She groaned and shook her head, despite the fact that Tsuge couldn’t see her. “Alright, I’ll check round at home when I get back... Bye, Tsuge. Bye.” She ended the call and collapsed down on the sofa. Now Baron had lent her a little Creation magic, she could wear the size-altering charm without risk, so she finally had the benefit of enjoying the Bureau at its proper height. “I’m sorry about that, but Hiromi...”

Baron nodded and set a steaming cup of tea down before her. “Is missing,” he finished. “We know. Haru, I will send out queries to all informers I have in the city—”

“That really isn’t necessary, Baron,” Haru told him. She nonetheless gratefully took the tea. “Hiromi once spontaneously booked a fortnight away and forgot to tell everyone, including her work. She’s always had an unpredictable streak. Still...” She hesitated. “It’s unlike her to not even leave her boyfriend a message. Me, I could understand. Her work, I wouldn’t be surprised. But, Tsuge...” She shook her head and glanced back to the Cat Creation. “She’s been mooning over him for too long to risk their relationship in such a move so... could you ask round anyway? Just to be on the safe side.”

“Geez, Chicky, the girl’s a grown woman.” Muta had been in a bad mood since before Haru had arrived at the Bureau, irritably glancing to the window and then cutting himself another slice of cake. Haru hadn’t even remarked on the early hour of his cake consumption. “She can look after herself.”

“I haven’t heard anything from her in a week. Not even a text.”

“Perhaps she’s lost her phone.”

“Hiromi would never lose her phone,” Haru replied bluntly. “Look, I’m her best friend – I know I’m supposed to worry about her, but I actually am worried about her now, seriously worried. Even if she has taken a sudden impromptu holiday, everything’s still in her room. Even Teto.”

The rest of the Bureau exchanged lost glances. “Who is Teto?” Baron asked.

“Her cuddly fox squirrel,” Haru answered. “She takes it everywhere. It’s still in her room.”

“I take it Miss Hiromi left no note?”

“No note, no text, no nothing. I don’t like it.” Haru sighed and leant back into the sofa, shifting her gaze to the ceiling above. “After all my time with the Bureau, I know what is out there. She could be in danger. She could be hurt.” She dropped her gaze to her friends. “I need your help.”

“Then we will help,” Baron promised.

“Ah! At last!” Muta leapt – or, at least, as much as he was able – to his feet and sped towards the Bureau doors. Haru sat up and glanced after the round feline, eyebrows raised as he disappeared into the courtyard; curious and just a little miffed. “What’s got his tail in a twist?”

“It looks like Jules is here,” Baron remarked.

“Jules?”

“Of course. Who did you think brought the post?”
Haru looked back to Baron. “Who *does* bring the post?”

“You’ll see.” Baron rose to his feet and started towards the door. “Come along, Miss Haru. Jules will be a valuable resource in our search for your friend.”

Haru scrambled after him. “So... who exactly is Jules?”

“Toto’s sister.”

Haru hesitated. “...Sister?” she repeated. She picked up her pace, almost running after the Cat Creation. “Toto has a sister? How is that...? He’s a Creation, so how... I mean...”

“Family runs deeper than blood.”

“Yeah, but he was *created*...”

“Created with a sister.” Baron opened the Bureau door and showed Haru into the courtyard. “Miss Haru, meet Jules, our postbird.”

Haru stepped outside and stopped. Standing beside Muta’s chair – and Muta himself – was a Magpie Creation, slightly smaller and slighter than the crow perched on the window ledge above. Strapped to her back was a silver capped cylinder that she kept out of Muta’s reach while she berated the fat cat. “Well the next time you want your post, *you* can travel across the worlds yourself, lardball! I’d like to see you try the daily routine I do!”

Haru raised her eyebrows. “Okay, maybe they are related.”

“Are you dumb, pigeon? I’m not the postcat; it’s *your* job to bring the mail, you birdbrain!”

“Oh, give me a break! You’ve been using that insult ever since I’ve been delivering here. Find some new insults, or don’t try at all.”

Baron politely coughed and somehow managed to gain the attention of the magpie from his single action. “Before this discussion is lost to physical violence, may I introduce you to our newest member of the Bureau? This is Miss Haru Yoshioka.”

Haru abruptly found herself at the scrutiny of a magpie larger than her whole being – now that her whole being was the size of a doll – and almost stumbled back into Baron at the sudden intrusion. Baron only chuckled quietly and caught her shoulders to reassure her that everything was under control.

“Careful, Jules; she’s not quite yet accustomed to this height.”

The magpie only stared at Haru down her beak, and then looked to Baron. “She’s human.” She glanced back to Haru and then hopped about the tiny brunette. “She’s... small, but she’s very definitely human.” Her black beaded eyes – so very similar to Toto’s gaze – switched back to Baron. “I thought you said that you would never take on a human in the Bureau,” she said, almost teasingly. “You said they were disconnected, inattentive beings who wouldn’t be able to find the Sanctuary if they ran straight into its arch.”

Haru twisted to look around to Baron. “Is that true?” She tried to bite back a grin as she saw Baron redden with embarrassment. It wasn’t often he got caught out so easily.

“That, Jules,” he said stiffly, his gaze focused stonily on the bird, “is something I said a long time ago, and certainly does not apply to our Miss Haru.”
“Oh, I’m sure it doesn’t,” trilled Jules. “But... just out of curiosity... what makes you so sure?”

“Not all humans are as blind to the fantastical world as past experiences have led the Bureau to believe,” Baron answered. “Miss Haru found her way here, after all.”

“Well, I followed Muta, really,” Haru muttered.

“The Sanctuary is part of another world, Miss Haru,” Baron reminded her. “Only those with an open mind will find it. That is why the Bureau is not overrun with curious humans every hour of the day. If you had followed Muta without that quality, you would have found a dead end where the entrance to this world is.”

“Oh.” Haru tried not to think what would have happened had she been a little less open-minded. She might still be in the Cat Kingdom, for one. Perhaps even married. She shivered and tried not to think too hard about it. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“Does that answer your question, Jules?” Baron asked.

“It does. Right then. Good to know.” The magpie gave a knowing wink to Haru – although Haru wasn’t quite sure what she was supposed to know about.

“Jules, enough games.” Toto came sweeping down from the balcony and landed alongside his stone sibling. “You said there was an urgent matter – or so you told pudding-brain when he asked about his absent post.”

“Oh! That’s right!” The Creation hopped from foot-to-foot in abrupt excitement, almost causing Haru to back away into Baron once again. “Toto, I’ve finally found Doctor Nikidik!”

“What!? But he’s–”

“I know!”

“So he’s not?”

“The whole thing was faked!”

Haru blinked and almost missed the entire exchange. “I hate to be the ignorant one, but who’s Doctor Nikidik?”

Jules hopped round to the miniature brunette. “He was our Artisan!”

“Wait... So he was the person who created you?”

“Doctor Nikidik disappeared over two and a half decades ago,” Toto explained, a little bit more ruffled than normal, but a whole lot calmer than his sister. “At the time, we feared for the worst... The Nome King was causing chaos aboveland, so when news came of his absence, we assumed he had fallen to Roquat’s forces...” He looked back to the magpie. “What happened?”

“He faked his death. He and his wife – and child – escaped and started a new life in Munchkin Country and... well, I only found him because of the second piece of news I have...” The Magpie Creation looked to Baron. “I think this is something that will interest the whole Bureau, Baron.”

“Yes?”

“There are rumours that the lost princess has been found.”
One Week Earlier

“OZ?!”

“Now calm down, miss; there’s really nothing that bad about Oz. Granted we have the occasional spat with the Nome King...” Professor Pipt reasoned collectedly.

“Nome King?!”

“...and the Wheelers,” he added, perhaps not quite noticing the level of stress in the young woman, “and Mombi, the witch, and Princess Langwidere–”

“Just... stop, okay,” Hiromi interrupted. “Can you do that? Just... stop talking for a moment.” She paused, using the momentary silence to utterly reject the concept of Oz being real. And her. Being there. “No,” she said after that moment was finished. “This... isn’t possible. I can’t be in Oz; it’s not real.”

The Professor glanced down to the floor beneath his feet. He tapped his toes against the tiles. “Seems pretty real to me.”

“Oz. Is. A. Children’s. World,” Hiromi clarified, so very slowly and so very painfully. “It’s just a story.”

Mrs Pipt gave the first auditory response since her previous insult. “Just a story?” she echoed coldly. “Well, if you’re going to be like that, I’ll sweep you out of this house and story and all.”

“Margolotte...” Her husband set a steady hand on her shoulder, carefully holding her back from physically assaulting the brunette – who still sat atop their table. “Please, this young woman is our guest. It seems that she is from another world and so is unfamiliar with our ways. It is possible that she is from a world that has never even considered the concept of travelling between worlds.” He turned back to the stranger. “Where do you hail from?”

Hiromi was just easing herself off the table and back onto her feet as the question was raised. She hesitated. “I... don’t hail from anywhere...”

“He means, where do you come from?” This was spoken by their son, who had been almost silent since her appearance. “You’ll have to forgive him; he does love his words.”

“Well... Japan?”

“How strange. I’ve never heard of this ‘Japan’,” mused the Professor. “Is that your world?”

“No, it’s just a country. Our world is called Earth.”

“Could you describe this ‘Earth’?”

“Well, it doesn’t have Munchkins, to begin with.”

“I told you, we’re not Munchkins,” Mrs Pipt muttered murderously.

Hiromi wisely ignored the woman’s words and continued. “And it’s not like we travel between worlds, or that we even think that there is life on other worlds...” She tried to recall what she could from the few slices of Oz movie she had seen. “We don’t have magic or anything, but we have technology.”

“And what other kind of intelligent beings do you have beside humans?” the Professor asked

“Um, no, no and I can safely say I’ve never had an intelligent conversation with a tree so... no again.” Hiromi smiled weakly. “I mean, we have dolphins and elephants, but... humans are the only beings that I’ve actually ever... talked to.”

There was a long silence between the Pipt family. Hiromi began to wonder where she should have just lied and claimed that they were overpopulated with sentient Christmas puddings or something equally bizarre. But then...

“So you’re from the Human World!” The Professor was beaming. “We haven’t had a guest from that world since... well, since that girl. Why, that was over a hundred years ago!”

“That’s... nice,” Hiromi ventured. “Then do you know a way I can get back to my world. I don’t know – do you have ruby slippers or something?”

“Do you mean sliver shoes?”

The brunette hesitated. “If they get me home, then yes?”

The Professor shook his head. “They would but... Nope. Sorry. There’s been no word of such shoes for... oh...”

“Let me guess,” Hiromi offered flatly. “A hundred years?”

“Indeed. However,” he hastily added upon seeing Hiromi’s face fall, “I’m sure we can find another way to return you home. Why, I have a library of books in my office; there’s sure to be something there in the manner of portals.”

A scream from outside broke the conversation and Hiromi instinctively tightened her grip around her lacrosse stick. It was, after all, the only thing she had left of her home. It also served as a decent weapon in a pinch. “What’s that?”

Mrs Pipt’s full five feet form had paled to a sickly white. “Wheelers,” she whispered. She dragged her son away from the window who, as he was in his mid twenties, didn’t look too enthusiastic by his mother’s worry. “Quick! Lock the doors and bolt the windows!”

Hiromi glanced to them and then, in the action of the morbidly curious, drifted cautiously over to the window. She pulled the curtain aside to see a small village occupied with equally small people – almost mistakable for children, except that children don’t normally go about their day in suits and uniforms. As they scurried back to their houses and the clatter of bolted doors became a harmony all of its own, the sound of wheels scraping on the brick road rose up.

Creatures that Hiromi could only assume to be the Wheelers came spinning down the road. With their arms as long as their legs, their long limbs ended in wheels instead of hands and feet, and on these wheels they rode the road. They made a cacophony of noise as chaos as they went; banging against the locked doors and knocking over the stalls that had been lining the ordinary quiet road and taking mouthfuls out of the wares left there.

One of the Munchkins had been attempting to repaint his house before the creatures had come along; the Wheelers had now found the abandoned bucket of paint and were taking turns dipping their wheels into the dye and scooting stains over the road.

Hiromi abruptly found herself pulled away and the curtain hastily snapped closed. “Are you crazy?”
“Do you want them to see you?”

“Isn’t anyone going to do anything?” Hiromi demanded back. “They’re causing chaos out there!”

“They’ll move on. They always do.”

“But why doesn’t someone stop them?” Hiromi looked back in the direction of the darkened window, where she could still hear the whir of the wheels. “It’s not like they have claws or fangs or anything – they haven’t even got hands! What can they do to you?”

“They scare people,” the Professor spoke up. “That’s what they do.”

“Well then, it’s about time someone scared them back.” Hiromi’s mouth set itself into a grim line and she shifted her grip on her lacrosse stick. “After all, today can’t get much worse, can it?”

“Wait–”

“What are you–”

Before they could stop her, Hiromi had pushed past the family and unlocked her way out of the house. The clear, crisp sound of the door swinging shut behind her was enough to make the Wheelers pause in their graffiti, and look up. No one had ever interrupted them before. Certainly not a bedraggled young human woman with a strange netted stick.

Hiromi entertained a wan smile. “Hello, boys.” She raised her lacrosse stick and gave the battlecry that all girls who have ever attempted the sport are familiar with; nothing could bring the warrior out of the schoolgirl like a competitive game of lacrosse. And Hiromi knew it.

The Wheelers, however, did not. All they saw was a deranged woman screaming a bloodthirsty war cry with her stick raised liked it was the deadliest of weapons. They exchanged hasty glances and quickly established that no level of raiding or graffiti was worth this wrath. With some less-than-complimentary language and the panicked squealing of wheels, they turned tail and drove back down the road.

Hiromi stopped once she saw they had got their wheels well and moving. Feeling that she deserved some kind of last word on the subject, she shouted, “And stay out!”

She looked back behind her to see the Pipt family watching her through carefully held curtains. “See?” she asked. “Said all they needed was some scaring.” She began to notice that she had gained much more attention than just that of the single Ozite family. Windows and doors all along the road were being opened by curious Munchkin faces and tiny Munchkin children – even tinier than the adults, more like dolls – crept out. One of them cannonballed into Hiromi and fiercely hugged her leg.

“You made them leave! Thank you!”

Hiromi was nonplussed for several seconds, wondering whether she should peel the kid away from her and prompt it back towards the parents, but several other youngsters were also approaching now. They were all raising their voices in thanks and questions.

“You made them leave! Thank you!”

“Who are you?”

“You’re so TALL! Can I sit on your shoulders?”
“Cool stick! I want one!”

“Is the stick magic? Does it magic the Wheelers away?”

“Get off it! I saw it first – it’s mine!”

Hiromi carefully peeled her sports gear away from the miniature children, trying not to step on anyone as she tried to back away. “It’s mine, actually. And I’m not from around here... I sort of fell in from another world.”

Now some of the adults were beginning to listen and ask questions too. “Another world?” asked one. “Which one?”

“The... uh... Human World, so I’m told.”

More of the adults tuned in. Hiromi could almost feel their attention tangibly sharpen in the air.

“But... it’s been such a long time since anyone has...”

“A hundred years or more...”

“What is someone doing here from that world now?”

“Wait, wasn’t the lost princess taken away to the Human World all those years ago?”

“It was over twenty years ago–”

“So she’s about the right age...”

Hiromi picked up enough of the mumbled, confused conversation to understand something gamechanging was happening. “Sorry, about the right age for what?”

One of the taller Munchkins beamed. “To be the lost princess.”

_The Present_

“About a week ago, a girl from the Human World was found in Munchkin Country,” Jules explained to the captivated Bureau. They had now moved inside and the magpie was perched alongside her brother on the balcony railing looking down on the rest. Baron was making tea. “Or so the rumours go. She’s the first human since... well, Dorothy. Apparently, she took down a whole pack of Wheelers with nothing but a stick, chasing them clean out of the Munchkin village. Then the Munchkins began to claim that she was the lost princess.”

“I’m sorry,” Haru interrupted. “Lost princess? Who’s this lost princess?”

“Princess Ozma. She was the only living heir of the king when he passed away and so the witch, Mombi, set out to destroy the baby princess so she could take over Oz during the chaos of its lost royal family. However, Mombi never found the princess; Princess Ozma disappeared without trace and Mombi has been looking for her ever since. Some say she’s still in Oz. Others say she was spirited away to the Human World for safety...”

“And this human girl is about the right age range?” Baron asked.

“I’d say so, yes.”

“If she has been in Munchkin Country for a week, what has brought about this sudden onslaught of
news?”

Jules scowled. “Mombi found her. I only heard the alleged rumour myself yesterday and I didn’t dream there was anything true in it. I thought I would investigate anyway and that’s where I found Doctor Nikidik.” She glanced round to Toto. “He did fake his death and he’s now living as a Professor Pipt. By the time I arrived at Munchkin Country, Mombi had already come and gone – she had taken the rumour on its word and come straight for the girl.”

“So... this princess...?” Haru prompted.

“Still free,” Jules answered. “She escaped, thanks to Doctor Nikidik, and she’s now travelling across Oz with his son and one of his Creations. But we haven’t got much time. That’s why I came here, Baron. If this girl is the princess, then she has the power to unite Oz and bring Mombi down, but she’s not going to manage it alone. Will you come?”

“Of course I want to help,” Baron assured her, “but there is one other matter we must attend to.” He turned to Haru, who was quite surprised at the sudden attention. “Miss Haru, you came here with your case first; we will gladly look for your friend before we focus on Oz—”

Haru shook her head tightly. “Of course I want to find Hiromi,” she said, “but we’re talking about a whole world here. Anyway,” she added in a small, broken voice, “if something did happen to Hiromi last week, it’s probably far too late now.”

A gloved hand covered her own. “Miss Haru, we will find Miss Hiromi. Our search will start upon the moment we return to the Human World. I have sent messages out to the Bureau’s friends across the city; if she is here, she shall be found.”

Haru smiled weakly. “Thank you, Baron.” She hesitated, her mind finally pinpointing why Munchkin Country had sounded so familiar throughout the conversation. “Wait... Munchkin Country? Isn’t that...?”

“Yes indeed, Miss Haru.” Despite the multiple predicaments weighing down on the Bureau, there was the faintest of smiles on the Cat Creation’s face. “We are going to Oz.”

ooOoo

Haru was vaguely familiar with the world of Oz. She had, after all, seen the movie. Many years ago. What she did remember were hazy images of green spirals and yellow brick roads backed with squeaky music.

So it was safe to say she did not know what to expect.

Upon stepping through the portal, however, she was abruptly acquainted with the hanging ceiling light of someone’s kitchen. Against her better nature, a pain-motivated curse slipped through her lips and she had to bend double to avoid smacking the ceiling.

“Oh, not again...”

Baron stepped through behind her and lost his hat to the overhanging light. “Well, Miss Haru; what do you think of Oz?”

“I was expecting something a bit bigger,” she answered truthfully.

“Ahh, yes... It looks like the portal has, once again, miscalculated and has dropped us off at the wrong house. A Munchkin house, to be exact.” He swept his hat back onto his head, even if he did have to
duck to keep his whole height within the room, and smoothed his action with a polite bow to the poor Munchkin family who had suddenly found their kitchen full of portals and human-sized cats. “My apologies, good family, for dropping in on your meal. If you wouldn’t mind, which house is Professor Pipt’s?”

One of the Munchkins pointed shakily outside. “Turn left at the door, second right, can’t miss it.”

“Thank you, my good man.” Baron’s gloved hand curled around Haru’s. “Come along, Miss Haru. No time to waste. Jules, Toto, that goes for you too!” He sped out of the room, but not before Haru heard the familiar complaint of, “Geez, forget the cat, why don’t you?”

“Baron, you’re kinda...” Haru’s mouth flapped open, a little nonplussed even now – plus a little breathless due to the pace Baron had set. “Well... human-sized,” she finished. “Did I miss something?”

“Considering the importance and nature of this case, I felt that being at a height grander than my usual one-foot size would be advantageous. I used the remaining powder and spell that created your charm to enable my own size alteration.” He glanced back and grinned. “Do you approve?”

“Well – I – well...” She blushed and tried furiously to reclaim control over her stuttering mouth. She pursed her lips tightly shut and then tried again. “Well, at least I’m not in danger of stepping on you for this case. Now, tell me about this Professor Pipt or whatever his name is. Did he really create Toto?”

“He has made many Creations,” Baron answered. “When he was Doctor Nikidik he was hailed as the creator of the Powder of Life – a recipe that can bring any inanimate object to life.”

“I thought you told me that Creations are made when someone makes something with all their being,” Haru reminded him, a tad accusingly.

“It varies between worlds,” Baron replied. “But even with the Powder of Life, a person must put part of themselves into the creation for it to work. And every artisan leaves a little of their heart in every creation they make.”

“I suppose so.”

“That spark of heart or soul combines with the powder to bring the object to life. So I wasn’t necessarily objectively trying to mislead you, Miss Haru; I merely felt that a simplified explanation was in order. There are some Creations who are created in worlds where the Powder of Life is not necessary.”

“Oh.” Haru tried to find a way to tactfully phrase her next question, and then decided that it would be better to just be honest. “So what about you? Were you made with the Powder of Life?”

“I was originally carved in a world where it was not necessary,” Baron answered. Which, Haru felt, wasn’t quite answering her question, not in so many words. She decided against asking again.

“If this professor created Toto then... just how old is he?”

“Old,” Baron answered simply.

“How old?”

“Older than any human.”
“But isn’t he–?”

“He is an Ozite. In Oz, individuals will often live much longer lives. Do not concern yourself with ages, Miss Haru; you will soon learn that appearances can be deceiving and that all time is relative.”

“Oh.” Baron was just full of his half-answers today. Haru moved the topic onto something she hoped would yield more conclusive responses. “Will he help us find this princess? Can he, even? Jules said that the princess had fled, so how will he know–?”

“If we wish to find this young woman, we must start at the beginning,” Baron answered. “The good professor will do his utmost best to point us in the right direction. After all, his own son went with the princess; hopefully he will have some inkling of where they have headed.”

“This sounds a lot like improvising,” Haru noted.

Baron grinned. “When is it not?” He came to a halt outside a house that was notably larger than its neighbours and blessedly human-sized. “Ah-hah. Here we are.” As he knocked at the door, Toto landed carefully on his shoulder; Haru jumped when, a moment later, Jules followed suit but on the young brunette. Muta was still complaining as he caught up with the taller individuals.

“Give a cat a break, why don’t you? I haven’t got long legs like you lot.”

“Shush, Muta.”

“If ya keep running off everywhere, how am I supposed to keep up?”

“Muta, please; refrain from your objections while we meet our host,” Baron requested smoothly. “Your bellyaching at the Bureau is one thing; during a case is quite another. Ah, Doctor.” Baron tipped his hat respectfully to the man standing in the doorway. “Or professor, I believe it is now?”

The middle-aged man squinted past his small, round glasses at the furred face of the Baron. “Do I... know you?”

“Nikidik, do you remember me?” Toto hopped from Baron’s shoulder to his arm without warning, almost causing the Cat Creation to drop his hat from the sudden weight. “It’s Toto. You created Jules and me together – do you remember?”

The dark eyes widened in surprise and started to flicker between Jules and Toto. “Toto? But... it’s been years. I heard that you had found a refuge for Creations somewhere adjacent to the Human World. How...?” He focused on the magpie resting on Haru’s shoulder. “Did you bring him here?”

“When I found you, I had to tell him,” Jules admitted. “Doctor, these beings are from the Cat Bureau – they’ve come to help with finding and saving Princess Ozma.”

The man turned away, his eyes darkening and crinkling in unease. “Wrong...” he muttered, more to himself than to his visitors. “It’s all gone wrong... It was never meant to happen like this...”

Baron stepped into the house, catching the Ozite’s wrist. “Professor, we can help. Please, if you can tell us where the princess and your son went, we can lend our aid. It’s what the Cat Bureau is dedicated to.”

“They were never meant to find her here...” he continued to mumble, almost unaware of his guests now. “That’s why we came to the Munchkins... To keep her safe...”

“You’ll get no sense out of him today.” A smooth, beautiful voice floated through the dimly-lit room.
The glitter of glass caught the sunlight and then shifted. “He’s been muttering like that ever since the witch came through.”

Haru stepped inside, grimacing into the darkness to where the voice was coming from. “Why? What did the witch do?”

“Oh, she did nothing.” Something moved along the floor of the hallway, prowling in the shadows. “It’s the grief of losing a child which has half turned his mind. Come into the kitchen; it’s lighter there.”

The door ahead was pushed open by some unseen force and the Cat Bureau exchanged questioning glances.

“Are you coming or aren’t you? I have better things to do, you know.”

Baron shrugged his shoulders to his companions and followed the mysterious voice. All the same, Haru noted that his hands glimmered with the same sort of light magic he had shown before; if they needed light quickly, he was ready to provide it.

Regardless, the kitchen was lighter than the hallway, but not by much. The lights flickered weakly in the recesses of the room, and the curtains were drawn. As Baron passed the lights, he passed his palms over them, coaxing their feeble light to brighten. Jules flew from Haru’s shoulder and tugged the curtains open to let the natural light of the day spill into the room.

“Here we are,” Baron remarked. “In the kitchen. Now, may we have the pleasure of addressing the voice?”

“You may.”

Upon the table sat a most remarkable cat. It was made almost purely from the clearest, clean-cut glass, so clear that the cabinets behind it could be seen straight through. Though its head was transparent, its brains could be seen in the form of delicate pink balls, almost jewel-like in their form, and the glittering emerald eyes that were trained on the visitors. The only other source of colour came from the cold, red ruby that lay, inanimate, in its chest; its stone heart.

The cat smirked at the stares of the individuals and it gave its spun-glass tail a content flick. “I am quite beautiful, no?” she asked teasingly. “I am the Glass Cat, one of the Professor’s finer accomplishments.”

Haru leant towards Baron and whispered, “I still like Toto better.” The twist of a smile from her friend indicated that he whole-heartedly agreed.

“What did you say?” The glass tail coiled irritably. “Are you trying to discredit my claim?” She stood, spun-glass tail held high as she stalked away across the table. “If you’re going to be like that then I see no need to tell you what happened here...”

Within a matter of seconds, Baron had smoothly intercepted the feline’s proud progress. “Please, Glass Cat, my companion didn’t wish any insult. We only wish to help the Professor and the Princess. You wouldn’t hinder those who want to help your Artisan, would you?”

The Glass Cat stopped and looked her fellow Cat Creation up and down. “I am quite beautiful, no?” she asked teasingly. “I am the Glass Cat, one of the Professor’s finer accomplishments.”

Haru leant towards Baron and whispered, “I still like Toto better.” The twist of a smile from her friend indicated that he whole-heartedly agreed.

“What did you say?” The glass tail coiled irritably. “Are you trying to discredit my claim?” She stood, spun-glass tail held high as she stalked away across the table. “If you’re going to be like that then I see no need to tell you what happened here...”

Within a matter of seconds, Baron had smoothly intercepted the feline’s proud progress. “Please, Glass Cat, my companion didn’t wish any insult. We only wish to help the Professor and the Princess. You wouldn’t hinder those who want to help your Artisan, would you?”

The Glass Cat stopped and looked her fellow Cat Creation up and down. “You speak finely...” she began, “for a hybrid. It’s a shame,” she added, and she rose to her transparent paws again and prowled away from Baron. “You wouldn’t have looked half-bad if you’d been created a full cat.”

Jules landed heavily on the table, just before the Glass Cat. “Bungle, tell us what has happened since
my last visit or I swear, on our Artisan’s life, I’ll drop you from the town belltower.”

“I’d like to see you try, thief.”

“Don’t look now, Bungle, but I think you’re missing a brain marble.”

“Don’t call me Bungle!”

“What would you rather I called you then, brainless?”

“I have brains!”

“Oh, you mean those pink marbles? I’m sorry, but the lights are on and nobody’s home!”

“Twinkle toes!”

“Christmas bauble!”

“Overgrown pigeon!”

Haru joined Baron’s side. “Remind you of anyone?”

“I never thought I’d see the day...” Baron murmured back.

“Let’s see if I can get any answers out of her,” Haru offered. “You know, girl-to-girl.”

Baron tilted his head, evidently curious by this approach. “Good luck.”

Haru advanced upon the bickering duo and, without warning or apology, hoisted the Glass Cat up by the scruff of its transparent neck. It struggled for a moment, and then stilled when it realised Haru was holding it above the tiled floor. “Where. Is. The. Princess?” Haru’s question came out completely calm, and only the stinted, deliberate pause between her words indicated that it would be dangerous to make things difficult. “Tell me now and tell me quickly.”

“Alright! Alright! Put me down and I’ll tell you – just stop that!”

Haru, uncannily gently after her icy words, returned the Glass Cat to her previous position on the table. The feline ran a see-through paw across her glassy fur, glowering at the brunette. “Don’t do that again. The indignity of it almost killed me.”

“Don’t be a drama queen, Bungle,” Jules cawed. “Just tell us what you know.”

“I don’t know much, okay? No one does – not since Tip, Jack and that girl went running off,” she said huffily. “We received word that Mombi was coming from the neighbouring Munchkin villages – she was terrorising the villages in an attempt to find this mysterious girl who had just dropped out of the sky. So the Professor told her to run, and to take Tip and that useless scarecrow with her. So they did.” The Glass Cat stretched lazily, obviously enjoying the sharp attention of her listeners. “That was a day ago; since then no one has heard from them. They haven’t passed through any of the other Munchkin villages, or we would have heard the rumours.”

“So... what’s happened?” Haru asked.

“Do I look psychic to you?” the Glass Cat snapped. “They’ve disappeared. Poof. Some people say that the Wheelers got them, or they’ve been caught by the Nome King and turned into inanimate objects, but the only people who could answer your question would be themselves.” The feline smirked at the stupidity of the question. “And, as you can see, they’re not here.”
The door banged open and a youth of Haru’s age stormed into the kitchen, closely followed by an animate scarecrow. “Father, the girl, she’s been—!” He froze in the doorway, suddenly aware that no such father was there; only a strange crew of birds and human-sized cats. “Who... are you?” His eyes rested on Haru and he groaned. “Oh no... Not another one.”

ooOoo

Teaser: “Have we... met?” / “My name is... was... Adeline...” The redhead paused, shook her head, and started again. “Wait, that’s not right... Maybe it was... Hiromi...” / “You should be careful, Creation,” she said, her voice soft but direct. “Using up so much magic in one go will cost you... How long will it be before you’re nothing but wood?” / “Baron. Don’t do this. Not for me.” / “It doesn’t matter where you’ve been all these years,” Mombi growled. “You’re going to be blasted into nothing right here and now!” / “Just a dream, Haru? Get real.”
The Bureau Files: Series 2

ooOoo

Episode 4: The Lost Princess (Part 2)

The Day Before

There was a dangerous storm on the horizon. Hiromi had been watching the purple clouds gather throughout the morning, an uneasy feeling sinking in the pit of her stomach. Days had gone by and still the Professor hadn’t found any information in his private library on how to return her home and now there was the storm rolling her way.

Some of the Munchkin children spotted her at the window and started to laugh and wave at the young woman. Hiromi summoned a weak smile and waved back; no matter how many times she tried to correct them, they still called her the lost princess.

“Let them believe,” the Professor had said when she had voiced her concerns. “There has been so little to lend hope in recent years; a little wishful thinking won’t do them any harm.”

“They seem so sure, though,” Hiromi had replied. She had glanced over to the man as he poured over his books. “Do you think I’m her?”

The Professor had paused in his task and looked up to the human, blinking as he tore his gaze away from pages of scrawled writing. “I think...” he had said, slowly and carefully, “that you’re a lost young woman who wants to go home. Anything else is just conjecture.”

“That’s not quite the simple answer I had in mind,” Hiromi had pointed out.

“That’s because the truth is stranger than you could imagine it.”

Hiromi sighed and rested her head against the cool glass as she recalled the past few days. The Munchkins wanted to believe that their lost princess had returned that they held onto their belief with fierce passion. She had heard them so many times that even she was beginning to question it.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind – as it was beginning to do with alarming frequency nowadays – she snorted and leant away from the window. “Me? A princess? Get real.” She got to her feet and retreated to the kitchen where Tip and a friend were raiding the cupboards.

Well, Hiromi called Jack a friend. She wasn’t sure how else she was meant to refer to a walking, talking, pumpkin-headed scarecrow. After overcoming her initial wariness (which had nearly resulted in the scarecrow – and the rest of the house – going up in flames) she had come to think of Jack as just another one of this world’s oddities. After all, the world outside was filled with Munchkins and Wheelers, and inside she had already met the Glass Cat. Really, a talking scarecrow was no stranger.

Hiromi took a seat and watched as Tip started to slice bread. “If Jack eats that,” she said idly, “is it cannibalism?”
Her question made the two individuals jump; they had been so interested in the food that they had completely failed to notice her entrance. Hiromi would have been insulted, if she hadn’t been more amused by their shock. Tip turned around, the loaf of bread balanced precariously between a wedge of cheese and his fingers. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I was just thinking that Jack’s made of straw, and straw comes from cereal crops, and bread is made out of flour, which comes from cereal, so...” Hiromi let her sentence hang, shrugging nonchalantly at her logic.

“Is it cannibalism when you eat chicken or beef?” Jack asked curiously.

“Well, no, but–”

“But that’s meat.”

“Yes, but–”

“And you’re made of meat.”

Tip was trying – and failing – not to smirk at Jack’s infallible logic. He turned back to the food at hand, but not before Hiromi caught his remark of, “In future, don’t ask such stupid questions.”

“It wasn’t a stupid question,” Hiromi fumed. “I was just curious!” She brought her legs up to her chair and sat, cross-legged, on the seat while she stared furiously at Tip’s back, as if her stare could send more than just metaphorical daggers.

Tip was a strange individual; tall and long-limbed (looking taller still for time spent around Munchkins) he regardless carried a kind of wiry strength that seemed almost too delicate for a young man. The eyes didn’t help either; they were large and round and deep, and altogether quite beautiful. Overall, coupled with his disagreeable nature, Hiromi knew even less what to make of him than Jack.

“If you would stop glaring at me, that would be great,” he remarked curtly, somehow sensing Hiromi’s look without ever needing to turn around. He glanced back, giving Hiromi the briefest of eye-rolls. “You huff when you make that face, that’s how I know. Now, give it a rest before the wind changes and your face is stuck like that.”

Hiromi reddened at the admonishment that she hadn’t been told since she was a child, but looked away all the same. Tip was the same age as her; he had no reason to act as if she was the kid here. If anything, Jack was the youngest; he had only been Created a few months ago.

The concept of something being Created and brought to life was another matter Hiromi hadn’t tried to get her head around too far. Some things didn’t make sense, and others she wasn’t even going to try to get her head around. It was easier that way.

However, before Hiromi could pick up a comeback line, Margolotte Pipt, the nervous wife of the Professor, whom Hiromi had struggled to like, burst into the kitchen, arms laden with groceries. By the wild look in her eye, Hiromi suspected she had no idea she was still carrying the bags. “The witch! She’s after you!”

The other three occupants stood in stunned, confused silence for several stinted seconds, and then Tip dropped the half-made sandwiches onto the sideboard and rushed to his mother’s side. “Sit down, Mum. Which witch? How soon do we have?”

“M-Mombi,” Margolotte whispered. “She’s... She’s been seen coming through the other Munchkin
villages. She’ll be here by the evening.” The woman dropped her groceries and clutched at her son’s arms with terror. “You have to get away! She’s heard the rumours – she knows that Princess Ozma is here–”

“She’s after me?” Hiromi screeched. She jumped to her feet, almost falling off the chair in horror.

Both Pipts glanced to the young woman in duel surprise; almost as if they had forgotten she was there. Tip’s confusion cleared first. “Hiromi’s right,” he said. “Mombi will be coming for her; she’ll have heard the rumours.” He knelt down by his mother, who had shakily taken a seat at the table, reassuringly taking her hands. “I’ll take her – Jack and I will go – and we’ll head to my uncle’s. We’ll be safe there. We can travel all day and be there by the evening – and then we’ll send a message back to you so you know we’re fine.”

“Good... Good...” Margolotte muttered distractedly, her face still lined with worry. “You’re always so practical-minded, Tip, not like your poor mother.” She smiled wearily, almost amused by her own show of hysteria from earlier. “Go, now; you haven’t got a moment to lose. Please... stay safe.”

Tip smiled sadly and kissed his mother’s brow. “I will.”

ooOoo

So it was many hours later – when only that morning she had been blissfully bored and safe – that she was trudging through a thick wood, lacrosse stick, as ever in her hand, while the storm she had watched earlier now raged above. They had been walking for so long that evening was drawing near and the sky – already darkened by the canopy of leaves above – was growing dusky.

Needless to say, Hiromi was miserable.

Alive and kicking, but miserable.

She booted a few boughs of bracken aside and stomped after the fast walking pace of Tip. Even Jack, with his height and lanky build (literally, he was built tall and thin) walked uncomfortably fast for Hiromi. Hiromi couldn’t help but wonder whether Tip was walking at such a pace just to spite her.

“Isn’t there a yellow-brick road or something?” she complained, pushing overhanging branches away that, regardless, still managed to tangle in her hair. She was beginning to be envious of Haru’s recently-cut hair. She wouldn’t have had this problem.

“Where do you think we’re going?” Tip demanded. “The Emerald City? Not a chance. Anyway,” he added, voice curt with irritation, “the Yellow-Brick Road is far too open for us to travel on. We’re much less conspicuous travelling through here.”

“Yeah...” Hiromi shivered and picked up her pace, trying to bridge the gap between her and her companions. “What did you say this place was called again?”

“The Wayward Wood.”

“And... why is it called that?”

“If you wander off the path, you’ll get hopeless lost.” As opposed to Tip’s apathy, Jack’s voice was bright and upbeat, annoyingly upbeat in light of the matter at hand. Whoever had Created Jack had forgotten to install any anxiety, apparently. “But, don’t worry!” he reassured. “As long as we stay on the path, we’ll be fine!”
“So, long story short,” Tip interrupted, “don’t wander off.”

“Pfft,” Hiromi snorted, shuffling ever faster to keep up with the others. “Not a chance.” She shivered and pulled her borrowed cape closer around her. “Wander off?” she mused aloud, feeling a little better for the reassurance of her voice in the hollowness of the forest. “You’re not going to see me wander off. Not in a million years. Not in a month of Sundays. Not–” She came to an abrupt halt as she came face-to-face with the icy gaze of Tip.

“Just... stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Talking. Stop talking or I’ll tie you to a tree and leave you for the Nomes to find you.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Hiromi hissed back.

“Oh, really? Why not?”

“Because I’m the princess.”

Tip’s laugh came so abruptly and so without warning that Hiromi jumped back at it. She had never heard Tip laugh around her – she had heard him while with Jack – and she had never heard the full-throated, hoarse laugh he gave now. When he had recovered, he gave a few last chuckles and muttered, “Yeah... let’s be honest. You’re not the princess and you know it.”

Although Hiromi had thought as much from the very beginning, a little bit of her pride was prickled at Tip’s response. “You don’t need to make it sound so impossible,” she mumbled, red-faced.

“I know it’s impossible,” Tip answered. But he must have felt a little guilty at the hurt he had caused, for he added, quietly, “I’m sorry, but it’s true. Things are... complicated, but perhaps later you’ll understand.”

“Er, Tip?” Jack’s voice, for once, managed to sound vaguely concerned. “What was that about Nomes earlier?”

Tip sighed and turned to his straw-filled friend. “I was just saying that to make a point. I don’t think there ever are Nomes in this–”

Hiromi decided she didn’t like the abrupt end to the sentence, and she slowly turned too, fearing the worst.

Nomes, it turned out, weren’t the foot-high creatures she had imagined. True, she had imagined them ugly and stony – which, it appeared, they were – but tall as a human? Not on her list. She stared, agog, at the creatures which stood before her. Their skin was of rock, ragged and lined as if carved out straight out of a mountain, angular and sharp. Their eyes were only little pinpricks of colour in their face, flickering only when they blinked. As they shifted, their muscles – or whatever term could be applied to such mineral monstrosities – clanked and scraped, like nails on a blackboard.

“Well, well, well, lookie what we have here,” one of the Nomes said. Its face was like flint, its cheeks worn smooth and shiny by the elements. “A couple of lost humans and a scarebird. What are softskins like you doing in a place like the Wayward Wood?”

There was the hiss of metal as Tip drew the blade hanging by his side. It was worn and old, and to Hiromi it looked more like a family relic than an active weapon. “It’s none of your business, Nomes.”
Deciding she wasn’t just going to hang back, Hiromi stepped forward, beside Tip, with her ever-trusty lacrosse stick in hand. Munchkins, by nature, were not aggressive, so there had been few weapons in the village to choose from before leaving. In the end, Hiromi had opted for what she knew best. “He’s right,” she said, in a tone that sounded a lot steadier than she felt. “Just let us pass.”

Tip glanced over to her and his brow furrowed into a frown at the weapon she held bared. “Seriously?” he muttered from the side of his mouth. “You’re going up against them with that?”

“Hey, yours is hardly more than an over-glorified knife,” Hiromi hissed back.

“Maybe, but at least this has an edge.”

“I’ll have you know this stick has knocked many teeth out in its time.”

Tip looked back to the amused Nomes, who had paused to watch them panic. “Do you think it can knock out their teeth?” he asked sarcastically. Glancing back up, Hiromi could see he had a point; the Nomes didn’t have teeth so much as rocks.

“Well, it’s always worth a try. So... what do we do now?”

Jack leant forward, almost completely forgotten in this exchange. “If I may add an idea...”

“Go for it,” Tip sighed.

“I was going to suggest running?”

Tip and Hiromi exchanged glances. Hiromi shrugged. “I like the sound of that.”

“Me too.”

All three turned on their heels and fled down the path. There was the splutter of indignation from their would-be captors, and then the loud thuds of very heavy footsteps. Fast footsteps.

“Just... out of curiosity...” Hiromi panted as she struggled to keep up with the others, “how... fast do... Nomes run?”

“Far too fast for sacks of cement!” Tip shouted back. “Hurry up!”

“I can’t help it! I’m shorter than you!” Again, Hiromi felt a pang of jealously for Haru, but this time for her height. Some things in life just weren’t fair. She felt a stony arm wrap itself around her wrist, jolting her back. She spun round and whacked the creature over the head with her lacrosse stick; funnily enough, this didn’t achieve much.

“I’ve heard of a human in this part of Oz,” the Nome wheezed; this creature was the colour of sandstone, with a grating voice to match. “Heard whispers that she’s the lost princess... I wonder what the witch would pay to have the pretty little princess in her grasp?”

“Keep wondering, rocky!” Hiromi snapped, and this time she turned the stick around and directed its blunted end in the direction of its sharp little eyes. It howled in pain and released her; Hiromi immediately picked up running again and found that – to her surprise – Tip and Jack had paused for her. Tip looked even a little impressed.

“Quick thinking,” he remarked.

“Yeah, well, I’m full of smart ideas,” Hiromi wheezed, still far too out of breath for her own liking. “Here’s another one: running?”
“Running sounds good.”

As Hiromi staggered into a sprint, she managed to gasp out, “You know... I’m surprised...”

Tip raised one eyebrow but didn’t ask her to elaborate. Perhaps he was being smart and reserving his breath for actually running, instead of chitchat. Still, Hiromi continued.

“After all the stick you’ve given me since I’ve arrived, I thought you’d crack out a remark about women fighting,” she admitted. “You know, something along the lines of a women’s place?”

Tip’s other eyebrow joined its companion and a snort escaped past his lips. “That’d be ironic,” he muttered. “Anyway, since when have I made any such joke about your gender?”

Never, that was true enough, Hiromi realised. He had mocked her for her height and build though. The more she spent time with this strange individual, the less she knew what to make of him. And still she carried on running.

The Nomes must have found a shortcut, because in that moment her way was blocked by more of the stony creatures. She screamed, stumbled off the path and skidded into a nearby tree.

Tip turned to find the Nomes separating him and Jack from the young woman and drew his sword. “Stay on the path!” he shouted.

“Isn’t staying alive kinda more important right now?” Hiromi yelled back. She took another step away from the path as more Nomes blocked her off from her companions. She raised her lacrosse stick in semi defence, but her legs were already preparing to run. She met the others’ worried looks – Tip would never be able to fight his way through so many; his glorified dagger would barely be able to take down one – and summoned a reckless grin. “I’ll see you later!” she shouted, and sprinted off into the woods.

Tip took a half-step after the young woman, but she had already disappeared between the trees, her form giving way to the shadows of the forest. He froze, watching after where she had last been. And then he ran back along the path.

The Present

Tip finished his recount to his family and the Bureau, and slumped forward in his chair, his face resting against his palms. “I’ve failed,” he moaned. “I was meant to keep her safe, and now she’s lost. She shouldn’t even have been in this world; she had nothing to do with this place...”

“But she’s the princess,” Haru reminded him. “Why shouldn’t she have been here?”

There was a heavy pause resting between all of the Pipts; the Professor and Tip exchanged a tense glance before the elder finally broke it.

“Maybe,” he said. “We never conclusively prove that she really was the princess. She might have just been a very lost young woman.”

“Do many people find their way here accidentally?” Haru asked.

“Very few, but it does happen.”

“What I don’t get is why you didn’t go after the kid,” Muta demanded. “You could’ve run after her, easy.”
“No, I couldn’t,” Tip answered, his face pale still from the memory. “The Wayward Wood is full of magic; only by staying on the path are you sure to be going in the right direction. If you stray from it, the wood’s ways suddenly become twisted; they turn back on themselves and run in circles. You could walk all day in one direction off the path, and you all you might end up doing is coming back to where you started. If I had run after the girl, there was no guarantee that I would even be running in the same direction as her. After that happened, I decided we had to come back,” he added. “The journey’s taken longer because we had to rest before we could go on.”

Baron, meanwhile, had noticed a discrepancy in Tip’s account. He sat at the table, his jaw resting on his crossed hands as he stared down at the table’s surface in thought. “All throughout your explanation,” he remarked, “you’ve made no reference to this young woman’s name.”

“Oh.” Tip looked a little embarrassed by the omitted detail. “I guess... I just didn’t call her by name very often. Well, at all...”

“Hiromi,” the scarecrow spoke up. “Her name was Hiromi.”

There was a long, long pause from the Bureau; the Pipt family was silent from the nearly tangible aura of a building eruption coming from a particular Bureau member. Haru asked, so very calmly and tightly, “This... Hiromi... Describe her.”

“Short,” Pipt offered.

“Light brunette,” said the Professor.

“Brown eyes,” his wife offered.

“And she carried this funny netted stick,” Jack offered. “She refused to let it leave her sight.”

Baron glanced over to Haru, a questioning look in his gaze. Did this description match her friend? Haru nodded.

“I’m sorry... Did you know her?” Jack asked.

For her answer, Haru stormed to Tip and, curling both hands around his collar, hoisted him to his feet. Her breath had become ragged, her eyes glinting with joint terror and anger. “Why... Why did you leave her? You could have gone after her, but instead you ran. You ran to save your own skin! You coward! You miserable, selfish, callous, COWARD!”

A gentle hand rested on her shoulder, bringing her reeling back from her anger and back into her fear. The shock that she had been fighting back resounded through her, jolting through her every cell and sending her reeling. She released Tip, stepping back and trying to keep what little control she had left. To her relief, she found Baron’s arms drawing around her, stopping her from attacking Tip again.

“We’ll find her,” she whispered, more to herself than to anyone else in the room. “Hiromi’s strong; she would never just give in. She has to be out there somewhere...” A little of her strength returned, and with it a fierce determination. “That’s what we do, that’s what the Bureau is here for. We’ll find her.”

“If she’s still alive, perhaps we can,” the Professor supplied. “After all, there are very few humans in this world; a dowsing spell wouldn’t have that much problem differentiating between her signature and the few other humans here.”

“A... dowsing spell?” Haru echoed. She glanced back to Baron, whose grip around her hadn’t
loosened, even though she was no longer in danger of clawing Tip’s eyes out “Is that like what you used to find Griffin?”

Baron nodded. “Professor, do you have something of Miss Hiromi’s to use for the spell?”

“We have these.” Bungle, the Glass Cat, stalked into the kitchen, a pair of brightly-colour socks held disdainfully in her mouth. She dropped them onto the table and made a face at the taste. “Couldn’t the girl wash her feet once in a while?”

The slightest of pained whimpers came from Haru.

“Haru?” Baron whispered.

“Those... are Hiromi’s socks alright,” she whispered back. She choked a half-laugh. “How could I possibly mistake them?” They were multicoloured, with yellow ducks patterned at regular intervals. Strictly speaking, they weren’t protocol for working at the hotel, but Hiromi always hid them between her boots and long trousers. She used to claim that having something a little spunky, even if it was hidden, made her feel more confident.

The Professor gave an apologetic smile. “Then I suggest we continue on with the dowsing spell.”

ooOoo

Haru had already seen the process carried out once before, but the memory was blurred by the adrenaline of the events surrounding it, so in reality she remembered very little of it. She remembered bright lights and shimmering images and that was about it. Now, as she watched the Professor repeat the process, titbits of memory were floating back, along with the less-than-happy memories of that case. Hiromi had become involved in that one too; thrown down a flight of stairs by an anger and fear-driven Griffin. Had it been her involvement in the Bureau that had brought Hiromi into this danger?

She watched as the Professor’s magic sowed stars of light in the fabric of the duck-patterned socks; his fingers moved over the material as if he was conducting an orchestra. The stars rose up from the footwear and wove together to form the same crystal ball that Haru had seen before. The image in it darkened and shapes could be seen in its swirling depths, but it didn’t sharpen.

“What does that mean?” Haru demanded. Her gaze snapped to the man. “Why can’t we see her?”

“It’s struggling to discern between Hiromi’s signature and yours,” the Professor assured her calmly, although beads of sweat were rolling down his brow. “You’re both humans, you both come from the same world; with you in such close proximity, it’s straining to tell the difference. Please... if you would just step back.”

Haru glanced to Baron; he gave the slightest of nods to indicate this reasoning was indeed sound. She reluctantly stepped away, and with each inch of distance put between her and the magic, the image cleared a little. Her back hit the kitchen wall, but she had gone far enough; the image was coming into focus.

The picture remained dark though, and it quickly became clear that this wasn’t because of the magic, but because the location on show was dark and dingy in itself. In the corner of this dark and dingy space was curled a familiar form, knees tucked up to her chest and her light brown hair flowing over her hunched shoulders.

“Hiromi!” Without thinking, Haru rushed over and the image blurred again, but it was enough. She had seen enough. Her fingers trailed over the surface of the hovering ball of light, gentle fizzes of
complaints coming from the magic where her skin touched. “You’re alive...”

She glanced behind her to the rest of the room’s occupants, her eyes quickly focusing on the Ozites in particular. Something in their expressions made her fear the worst. “What?” she demanded. “What is it?” She pointed back to the blurred image. “Where is this?”

The Pipt family exchanged glances that Haru quickly decided she didn’t like. Eventually Professor Pipt decided to fill her in. “It’s... Well, from the looks of things, she’s... in Princess Langwidere’s dungeons.”

“So?” Haru felt like she was missing something vital in her understanding. “It’s just a dungeon. We’ve busted our way in and out of lots of dungeons in the past.” Not strictly true in Haru’s case, but she was pretty sure the Bureau had had their fair share of dungeons before she joined their ranks. That was good enough for her. “What’s so different about this one?”

There was another pause that felt impossibly long; even longer than before. Even Jack, the scarecrow, had the sense to hold his tongue this time.

“Princess Langwidere is... an enchantress,” the Professor explained. “She’s renowned... for taking the heads of her prisoners for her own.”

ooOoo

There was the clank of bolts being drawn open. The sound, so incredibly heavy in the empty air, echoed across the stone walls. Hiromi shifted in her corner, sitting up so to meet the eyes of her captor.

“So what’s the plan?” she called across the room. She took comfort in the way her voice sounded strong, echoing back on itself to double the effect, when in reality she felt no such strength at all.

“Am I just meant to chill out here from now on or is something exciting about to happen? Not that I’m complaining or anything but... this place isn’t exactly installed with HD TV or anything...”

There was the shadow of a form entering the dungeon. A beautiful, silky voice floated across the darkness. “Oh, you are such a little terrier, aren’t you? All bark and no bite...”

Hiromi scowled. “Come any closer and I’ll show you just how much bite I have,” she muttered.

Footsteps took their slow, measured way towards her, coupled with the out-of-situation sound of rustled skirts. A young woman, tall and haughty with curls of bronze shine stepped into the light. “Such a pretty face... Shame you have to mar it with your unsophisticated tongue.”

Hiromi raised one eyebrow. “Was that an insult?”

“Perhaps it was beyond your simple understanding but, yes, it was hardly a compliment.”

“Now that, I know, was definitely an insult. Do you do any other tricks apart from delivering backhanded slurs?” She smirked. “Or are you just all bark too?”

“Oh, you want to see a trick?” The woman moved closer, her perfectly manicured fingernails running through her bronze curls. “I’ll give you a trick.” Her fingers curled around her hair, tightening around the strands and pulling them tight. She twisted them to the side and her head followed through with the action; a cutting click snapping through the air as something gave.

Hiromi scooted back, afraid the woman had just wilfully broken her neck. But then the eyes opened and a thin-lipped smile tightened across her features. The hand started to pull yet tighter on the
bronze locks, dragging the head up with it.

And then it came loose from the neck.

Hiromi screamed then – it was all she could do – and pressed herself against the wall. But no blood came spurting from the open wound, only a mass of open arteries and windpipe grossly exposed to the world. The headless woman moved forward, fingers still curled around the hair in hand and the eyes – the impossible, alive eyes – snapped open.

“How’s this for a magic trick?”

“What...? What are you?”

The woman moved back, bringing her head back onto her shoulders and clicking it into place with the same bizarre motion. There was no sign of this reattachment, except for the brief moment in which her eyes blinked in and out of focus. “I am Princess Langwidere, owner of thirty heads, every one unique.” She looked down at her prisoner, assessing her facial features. “True, you’re no stunning beauty... but you do have a simple prettiness about you.” She paused, her lip pouting in a way that seemed at odds with her tone and mannerisms. “I could always do with an ordinary head. And... yours would be the first head from the Human World I’ve collected.” She smiled. “Yes, yours will do.”

“Mine will do for what?” Hiromi asked, already knowing the answer.

“As one of my thirty.” The smile widened. “My thirty heads.”

ooOoo

Haru crept through the undergrowth to join her companions, coming into view of a towering castle built of shining white marble. It had taken over half a day of unwavering travelling to get this far, and there was no guarantee that Hiromi was still okay. Her mouth dried. “And... you’re saying Hiromi is in there?”

“That is where Princess Langwidere is,” Tip answered.

“And... you said that this Princess...”

“Langwidere,” Jack finished helpfully.

“Yeah, her... you said she’s an enchantress?”

“A powerful one at that,” Tip supplied.

“Naturally.”

The Ozite looked over to Haru. “I hope you’re not getting cold feet.”

“Not a chance.” The brunette paused, glanced up at the building and then back to the group, specifically Baron. “So... do we have a plan?”

“Find a backdoor?” Toto suggested. He landed on Baron’s shoulder, ebony wings shuffling nervously. “There’s usually one about.”

“That’s true,” Baron agreed. “There are rarely additional guards for the servants’ entrance. Trust me, I’ve done it many times before.”
Haru grinned. “Would one of those ‘many times’ be in the Cat Kingdom?”

“Naturally,” he echoed.

“Haru?”

An unfamiliar female voice spoke up from the pathway. “What are you doing here?”

Haru tensed and turned about. A strange young woman, short with a mess of fiery red hair and grey eyes stood behind them. And yet, although Haru knew she had never seen that face before, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she recognised the person from somewhere. She glanced to her companions; they were just as mystified as she was. She gave a brief shrug to indicate she knew no more than they did, before turning back to the stranger who seemed to know her name.

“I’m sorry, but... do I know you?”

The woman’s grey eyes widened in shock. “Haru, don’t you—? No...” She glanced down at herself. “No,” she repeated, “I guess you wouldn’t.”

Baron stepped forward, a gentle hand resting on Haru’s shoulder. “Haru... do you recognise this young woman?”

The brunette shook her head, and then hesitated. “No, but... I don’t know... Maybe.” She leant forward, eyes narrowing in concentration at the stranger. “Have we... met?”

The woman smiled half-hearted. “No. Well, yes... Well, sort of.”

“Excuse me,” Baron interrupted, “but in which way have you ‘sort of’ met Miss Haru before? Who are you?”

“My name is... was... Adeline...” The redhead paused, shook her head, and started again. “Wait, that’s not right... Maybe it was... Hiromi...”

“Hiromi?” Baron echoed.

“What?” Haru snapped. “No – you’re not – you can’t be...” Something choked in her throat as she finally realised what it was that had been familiar in the first place. While the woman’s face was new, the rest of her body and clothing was that of Hiromi’s. She recalled the Professor’s words from earlier.

“She’s renowned... for taking the heads of her prisoners for her own.”

Haru’s legs gave way beneath her; she sunk to the ground, both hands raised horrified to her mouth. “Where’s the rest of her?” she whispered. “Where’s Hiromi’s head?”

The stranger – Adeline or Hiromi, Haru couldn’t quite understand which way to think of her – knelt down beside the brunette. “Princess Langwidere has her head. My head. I...” She frowned, the knot in her brow so similar to the way Hiromi’s face would scrunch up when struggling with a concept. “I don’t know how to talk of her. She took Hiromi’s head and exchanged it with Adeline’s; she always keeps thirty heads, so she swaps the heads of her victims with one of her current thirty.”

Toto flapped over to Haru’s side, staring up at the woman made up of Hiromi’s body and Adeline’s head. “So... which person are you? Hiromi or Adeline?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m a mixture of both. Or perhaps I’m neither.” Her grey eyes met Haru’s. “I
have memories of both. I remember you, Haru.” She tilted her head, as if running through the memories like another person might run through a film. “Just how many secrets have you been hiding? All the disappearances, all the strange notes... Is this where you’ve been the entire time?”

“You wouldn’t believe the truth if I told you,” Haru murmured. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. “Hiromi... if you’re in there somewhere... I am so sorry if my involvement with the Bureau dragged you into this. I promise you, I will find a way to return you back.” She pushed herself back to her feet and looked across at her companions. “So... where’s this backdoor you were talking about?”

ooOoo

“This... is a backdoor?” Haru stared up at the embossed, ebony-black door towering over her.

Tip could only snort. “You should see the front one. Come on.” He pushed it open and slipped inside. The Bureau, Jack and the Hiromi-Adeline hybrid followed after him. The corridor it led into was dark and narrow, but high, the ceiling disappearing up into the darkness even though Haru could easily reach each side of the corridor with her hands at her sides. She felt Baron’s hand slip into her own.

“Are you steady?” he asked.

“What exactly do you mean by that?” Haru returned, although she knew the answer. With the walls so close about her, claustrophobia was just begging to start clawing at her chest. Her breath quickened and she couldn’t help but slow so that she was closer to Baron as her grip on his gloved hand tightened. “Okay, I’m a little nervous,” she admitted. “Okay,” she amended, “very.”

“You’re doing well.”

“Thanks.”

Voices could be heard up ahead; women’s voices, loud and stressed, and painfully familiar to Haru’s ear. She stopped so suddenly that Baron almost walked straight into her. “What? What is it?”


“Princess Langwidere must be wearing her head then,” Tip concluded. “This is going to be a lot harder than I thought. Especially if she’s not alone.”

“It doesn’t sound like they’re on particularly good speaking terms though,” Toto remarked. “Perhaps we can use that to our advantage.”

“Perhaps,” Tip said. “Perhaps not. It all depends on the individual. Come on – I think this way should lead us to them.” Through the dim light of the corridor, Tip could be seen working his way along the passageway, weaving ever closer to the source of the voices. Eventually the corridor split open, revealing a balcony circling round a large great hall. The creeping company edged against the wall, hiding in the shadows while watching the situation below.

Two women stood in the middle of the room, their posture and stance indicating a stand-off raging between them. One was tall and all in white, but with the face of a young – familiar – woman. The other was an old hag, crooked and bent but with power radiating from her being.

“You let her go?! Did you have any idea who the girl was?” the hag snarled, waves of power radiating out with every word. Haru could barely imagine what it must be like to be standing right before the source, as the other woman was doing. “For years I’ve searched for the lost princess and...”
when she wanders straight into your grasp, what do you do? You take her head and leave the rest of her to go!"

“How was I to know her true identity?” the taller woman demanded – her voice was Hiromi’s, but it was taking on tones that Haru had never heard from the usually-excitable brunette. “She was nothing more than a stupid girl, a lost head who came wandering into my grasp. Perhaps if you had kept me informed of what was going on—”

A sharp wave of power snapped away from the hag; it was so cutting that even Haru, in the balcony, felt its breeze. “You are not my responsibility!”

Haru leant over to Tip and Jack. “Is that...?”

“Mombi,” Tip answered grimly.

“You should have known of Princess Ozma’s return to Oz!” Mombi continued. “I should have no need to send out word of something that the entire realm knows! And now she is gone! Lost in the Wayward Wood – maybe forever, maybe to come back and haunt me again.” Haru could hear the contempt growing in the witch’s voice. “Maybe I should take that pretty little head and be done with it.”

“There is nothing left of the princess!” Langwidere snarled. “The being that has her body is a nobody – neither the princess, nor fully the person to whom the head originally belonged to. The being that once was this girl is gone. You should be glad.” Hiromi’s lips twisted into a cruel smile. “I’ve done you a favour. Well, I would have done...” The woman shrugged and turned away. “If this girl was indeed the one you were looking for.”

“What do you mean?”

Princess Langwidere turned back to the witch; Mombi was no longer radiating the almost paralytic waves of power, but they still simmered about her in potent ripples. “I’ve searched through this girl’s head – tore apart her memories like I do with every mind – and there’s nothing here of Ozma. This is not the Princess.”

At Baron’s side, Haru stiffened. Her eyes blazed. “Monster,” she whispered. Her chest was heaving; Baron gently curled his hand around her wrist to stop her from doing anything too foolish.

“It still may not be too late,” he murmured.

“Even so, to rummage through another’s memories like they were... nothing,” Haru muttered, physically shaking. “To discard them as if they just junk. That’s... inhuman.”

Baron pulled Haru into his arms, feeling the rage that was shivering through her slight form. He felt the gaze of the Hiromi-Adeline hybrid watching them and glanced up. Sure enough, her grey, slate eyes were on them, lost and fearful. She had heard the princess’s words as well as anyone.

A nobody.

“The being that has her body is a nobody.”

Baron opened his mouth, trying to find words to right things, but none came. Because, in the end, they would have to try to get Haru’s friend back. And that would mean removing Adeline’s head to return Hiromi’s. Which would mean the end of her.

Sparks of magic shot across the room, exploding mid-air like acidic, angry fireworks. The invaders
moved closer to the wall as the confrontation between the enchantress-princess and witch grew vicious. The air became violent hues of colour as magic clouded the great hall. A clap of thunder split the air and then the place cleared.

As the magic faded, the witch stood over the kneeling form of Princess Langwidere, suddenly looking all the taller for it. Mombi lowered her hand to the side of Langwidere’s half-conscious head and then struck; a blur of magic accompanied the movement and the enchantress slumped to the ground.

A whimper escaped Haru’s lips. Baron held her closer.

Mombi straightened, becoming even taller than before; now she was about the same height that Princess Langwidere had been when standing. Without turning around to face the people on the balcony, she said, “You may come out now.”

The group exchanged glances, suddenly afraid to move or speak upon the witch’s words. A hollow, humourless laugh rang through the hall and Mombi spun on the spot to face them. “I said, you may come out NOW!” Her movement was accompanied by a wave of potent magic that sent the balcony breaking from the wall and collapsing down onto the floor below. “Eavesdroppers,” she hissed. “Hate them.”

She stalked over to the remains of the balcony where the intruders had fallen, the majority of the fall broken by the balcony itself. Baron was the first to stand, helping Haru back up to her feet beside him. Baron’s rather unusual appearance made the witch pause and look over the newcomers. Her eyes glanced over the form of the Hiromi-Adeline hybrid, the various other Creations – Jack and Toto – the fat white cat trying hard not to exist, and then Tip.

Haru pushed herself forward, out of Baron’s grip, to stagger towards the prone form of Princess Langwidere. She stopped after a single step upon seeing Mombi before her.

“Oh, don’t worry,” the witch sighed. “She’s alive. I just needed to teach the meddling enchantress a lesson.” Mombi tilted her head at the young woman, her eyes travelling over her. “Another human? My, my, Oz is just full of you lost girls today. Perhaps you’re the one I’m looking for.”

“I’m just here for my friend,” Haru growled. “Let me past.”

“Right age too,” Mombi continued.

“She’s not the Princess,” Tip said. His surety caught Haru a little off-guard; he spoke as if he really knew such things. Haru was pretty sure she wasn’t the lost princess, but there was no way Tip could be so certain.

“Maybe,” Mombi agreed. “Maybe not. Still... it wouldn’t hurt to remove all possibility... just to be sure.”

She moved forward, her magic in hand, so quickly that all Haru could do in that moment was to stagger back.

Baron was quicker.

One arm curled around Haru’s waist, the other was raised before them and the whole brute of Mombi’s attack was absorbed into the limb. His form shook, but he remained on his feet and standing. “Not on my watch.”

Mombi drew back, more curious than defeated. She observed the couple, a thin-lipped smile curling
at her mouth as her head tilted again in an enquiring fashion. “You should be careful, Creation,” she said, her voice soft but direct. “Using up so much magic in one go will cost you. I’ll reckon you can’t do the same again.”

Haru tried to squirm away from Baron’s grasp, terrified that Mombi was going to strike and knowing that – if she did – Baron would take the blow again. And Mombi would keep hitting again just for fun. Just to see how much damage the Creation could take. But Baron’s grip kept her close, even as she saw his arm had temporarily reverted back to wood with the abrupt excess of magic. Just like he had done the day he passed on Creation magic to her.

Mombi struck again, and Baron blocked but this time the woodening effect spread across his arm, travelling to the tips of his fingers and along his shoulder. Mombi laughed.

“How many hits do you think it’ll take to use up all your magic?” she asked. “How long will it be before you’re nothing but wood?”

“Baron.” Haru fought to free herself but again his grip remained strong. “Don’t do this. Not for me.” She glanced up to his face and saw his emerald eyes grim even as his right began to flicker to wood. Lifeless.

“Not a chance, Haru.”

“How... sweet. It’s nauseating,” the witch mocked. “What are you going to do when you’re just a dead figurine, Creation? What then?” Her question was raised to a bellow as she struck again and this time the woodening spread across Baron’s chest and Haru heard the crackle of wood as it travelled across him.

“ENOUGH!”

Tip stepped forward, stepping away from the unconscious form of Princess Langwidere. He held something long and silver between his fingers – something that looked uncannily like a wand. Like the staff Mombi held, it sparkled with potent magic. It was Princess Langwidere’s. It had to be.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Tip growled, and there was a quality to the voice the others hadn’t heard before. A more natural tone that made it seem that everything else Tip had said had been forced in a voice he wasn’t familiar with. “She’s not the princess. Neither was Hiromi. None of them are.” His voice changed entirely now, dropping to a soft, feminine voice. “I am.”

Mombi looked over at the young individual, and then let out a barking laugh. “You?” Her face turned to a scowl the moment the laugh had passed. “You disguised yourself as a boy?”

“We knew you would always be looking for a girl,” Tip answered evenly. “When the Wizard stole me away to keep me from you, he hid me with the Professor to be raised as their son. Doctor Nikidik ran to Munchkin Land with his wife and became Professor Pipt. Princess Ozma was never sent to the Human World; she stayed here all along.” Tip – or Ozma – raised the wand in the direction of the witch, the eyes that had seemed so delicate on a boy’s face suddenly hard and sturdy in the face of a young woman. “Right... under... your... nose.”

“It doesn’t matter where you’ve been all these years,” Mombi growled. “You’re going to be blasted into nothing right here and now, regardless of your hiding place. Finally your line will come to an end!”

The same blast of magic was fired again, but this time in Tip’s – Ozma’s – direction. The young princess deflected it with a deft flick of the wand. The redirected magic embedded itself into the
ceiling.

“Oh, just because you have a bit of magic now, you think you can stand up to a seasoned witch?”
Mombi demanded, holding back laughter at Tip’s expense. “You must be even more foolish than I
had first thought.”

“Your tyranny ends here, Mombi. I’ve had enough of the terror you inflict on my people and I will
stop you.”

“That’s quite a backbone you’ve grown there.” Mombi made no effort to continue her attack, content
to circle around the announced princess with her magic simmering just below the surface. “You’ve
certainly grown since I last saw you. But then, you were just a babe then. And that’s all you ever
would have been,” she growled, the magic spiking around her form in angry angles, “if that wizard
dASN’t come meddling in Oz business!”

Haru felt Baron’s alive arm around her tighten at the mention of a wizard. Unease crept into her.
“Who was he?” she asked. She had to know now. “Who was this wizard?”

“They called him wonderful,” Mombi growled; “all the foolish little idiots of Oz. He was nothing
more than a boy,” she spat. “A boy with nothing more than a mere inkling of magic. And yet, they
called him wonderful because of the world he came from and the stories he could tell. It was the first
time any outsider had come from another world; Oz was spellbound. Even after he left, and he came
back years later – grown and older and yet no more powerful – Oz celebrated his return. And yet, if
he hadn’t interfered, the whole royal family would have been extinguished!” She straightened; half a
smile visible from where Haru stood. “Not that it did him any good.” She tilted her head back, her
smile directed to nothing more than the ceiling. “I hope he enjoyed the curse I left him with. I hope it
haunted him. I hope it hurt.”

Baron’s grip around Haru tightened yet again; it was unmistakable and yet only furthered Haru’s
confusion.

“Anyway, enough of this chatter.” Mombi shrugged back her shoulders, bringing her magic back
into crackling life. “It’s nothing personal, Princess; it’s just you’re in my way. This whole affair
would have been a lot less painful if it had been dealt with when you were just a babe. But the die is
cast. As are you.”

The witch swept her magic back around her, refining it into a whip-like extension of her arm; it flew
through the air, almost spiralling in slow motion, before it lashed out at Tip. The wand was brought
up again and the whip was deflected, but the shield shivered in air and dissolved into pieces.

“Langwidere’s pathetic magic won’t keep me at bay for long, Princess,” Mombi growled. The whip
circled about her, stopping any of the others from approaching her as it sparked with something akin
to deadly lightning. “Even you must see that all this is just delaying the inevitable.”

“Well, we all die in the end,” Tip – Ozma – retaliated, “even you. We just spend our lives delaying
it.”

“Then let me cut your waiting short!” The whip struck out and the shield from the wand barely
deflected it this time. Another lash was directed at her and it broke through just enough to leave an
angry red welt running along the Princess’s arm. She jolted back in shock and the wand was
dropped.

“You’re mine, Princess!”
A black blur sped through the air and struck at Mombi’s head tilting her next attack off-kilter and sending its lash towards the ceiling instead. Toto rounded away before she could catch him with her magic.

“Blasted bird! Blasted Creations!” Mombi turned to the Bureau and now the whip receded to arm length, shifting to an irate red that flickered and raged. It spread to her other arm until both were engulfed in flames that fed off her consuming anger. “I should have removed you when I had the chance! No more games, not even for you, Creation.” Her eyes locked onto Baron, whose arm was still mottled by the lining of wood, even now. Her fire jumped to the ground and sprung up, blocking anyone from interfering. “I would have loved to see you fade to wood, but I just don’t have time for it today. I guess I’ll just have to see you burn instead. You and your pretty little human.”

The fire along the ground jumped forward until a second circle was formed around Haru, Baron, and Muta – who was entangling himself in the others’ feet in his attempt to back away from the fire. The flames were as tall as Baron, and thick with an intensity that betrayed any attempt to jump through would be fatal.

“MOMBI!” Tip’s shout echoed across the great hall and through the flames Haru could just about see the witch turn to face the young monarch. A flash of magic struck the hag in the chest and the power that radiated from her froze. The effect travelled out from Mombi in a wave, extinguishing the flames of her fire wherever it went until the trio were no longer on the verge of burning.

Haru took a half-step out of the circle, stepping over the scorch marks where Mombi’s flames had sprung up, to see the witch covered in head to foot in stone. Her form was solidified where it had stood; her head half turned to Tip, her mouth turned up in a mocking smile. All stone.

Tip was standing off to the side, her arm still outstretched with the wand even as her other hand nursed the welt running across her skin. She was breathing hard.

“Only an idiot would turn her back on an opponent,” she muttered.

She looked away from the petrified form and took note of the others. Her face split into a tired, honest grin. “That’s that then.”

“Not quite,” Baron said quietly. He turned to look to Haru, who had escaped from his arms and was kneeling down beside the unconscious body of Langwidere – and, more importantly, the head of her friend. His gaze moved back to the Hiromi-Adeline hybrid, who was standing off in a quiet, lost manner. “We still need to bring her back,” he said softly.

“I know,” she whispered. “But... I don’t want to go.” She swallowed back the lump that was forming in her throat. “I’m not Hiromi. And I’m not Adeline.” Tears were springing up in her eyes. “I’m me. All these mixed memories – Hiromi’s, Adeline’s, even Langwidere’s... they’re not mine. I want to make my own. I want to live. I know I haven’t been around long and I’m not... not complete, but I want the chance to become a whole person.” The tears were rolling down her cheeks. “Like you guys.”

“Baron, we can’t force the girl,” Toto remarked softly, landing on the cat’s shoulder. “She’s become her own person.”

“But then what about Miss Haru’s friend?” Baron asked. “Can we justify leaving her for the sake of... of another?”

The redhead started to back away. “I won’t just disappear – I don’t want to. I can’t–” She groaned and suddenly doubled over, leaning over her stomach in obvious pain. “What’s...? What’s
“You’re rebelling against your very being,” Ozma said gently. “Sometimes, with the right magic, a body can hold two souls, but yours has added a third. The magic wasn’t made for that, especially as you’re coming into your own person. You’re separating from the souls of the two you were made from.”

The woman’s grey eyes looked up to Ozma, obvious fear filling her gaze. “So what will happen to me?”

“There’s nothing more to connect you to the body you reside,” the Princess answered. “The body recognises foreign souls as easily as it recognises disease. It’s rejecting you.”

The hybrid sank to the floor, her legs giving way and her knees knocking hollowly against the tiles. Ragged gasping tore through her body and the gagging started. Wisps of grey mist spluttered from her, gathering together in a glistening stream of silver. Another cough shook through her and this time the silver stream disconnected itself from the body entirely. It hovered, lost and disorientated, from where it had been emitted.

Ozma knelt down and scooped the being softly into her hands. “My father... Professor Pipt, I mean, has been working on a Patchwork Girl for some time now; it’s empty and it should be perfect host for her soul.” She looked up to the others. “She isn’t going to disappear after all.”

Haru, still sat by Langwidere – and her friend’s head – watched the proceedings with bewilderment. “How...? How is any of that possible? It should be impossible.”

“Maybe in your world,” Ozma answered. “But the rules are different here in Oz. Now, I think it’s time we restore your friend.”

ooOoo

Hiromi stretched herself awake, shifting and almost rolling off her bed in the process. She yelped and threw her arms out, just about stopping herself from a sudden re-acquaintance with the ground.

“Hiromi?” Running feet hurdled down the hallway and Haru’s face appeared round the doorway. “You’re awake!”

“Yes, I appear to be–” Hiromi was cut off as she abruptly found herself in a tight embrace. She chuckled nervously and patted Haru gingerly on the back. “Hey, I thought I was the huggy one... Why all the feels?”

“Oh, you don’t remember?”

Hiromi gave her a strange, measured look. “Remember what?”

“The accident. You fell down the stairs and knocked yourself into a coma – you woke up yesterday so they released you from the hospital,” Haru said, the lie coming far too easily to her lips. “I’ve got a doctor’s note and everything... You’ve been unconscious for the better part of the week...”

“That long? Does work know?”

“I rang in and explained everything.” Haru had the grace to look sheepish. “I... kinda forgot until yesterday to contact them, so they didn’t even realise anything was wrong until then. Sorry.”

“No, I... I’m just surprised.” Hiromi smiled weakly. “Stairs, huh. Seems a little mundane.”
“The doctors said you might have some weird dreams from that time, but they should fade. Do...?”

Haru hesitated. “Do you remember any of them?”

Hiromi smiled widely. “Well, I had some awesome dreams about Oz, if that counts. Can’t remember a blasted detail from them though.”

Haru laughed and patted her friend on the shoulder. “Well, I’m just glad you’re okay. No running on the stairs in future though, alright?”

“Alright.”

Haru left, detouring into her room to pass the news onto the Bureau. Ozma had warned that, thanks to the head-swapping, Hiromi may remember nothing about her time in Oz or even just pass it off as a dream. Most people from the Human World seemed programmed to do that. Haru couldn’t help but feel slightly relieved by the turn of events. If she kept Hiromi out of the Bureau business, perhaps Hiromi would stay safe. No more wondering into other worlds again.

As she thought this over, a slight frown buried itself into her brow.

Come to think of it, just how had Hiromi got to Oz anyway?

Back in her room, Hiromi rose unsteadily to her feet and staggered over to her desk. She ached, her body moving as if she were unfamiliar with its feeling. She leant over to the mirror and raised a hand gingerly to her neck. Sure enough, there was a faint red line spanning the width of her throat. Unnoticeable, if someone wasn’t looking for it.

A bittersweet smile rose to the woman’s face.

“Just a dream, Haru? Get real.”

ooOoo

Next Story: The Game

Teaser: “But... if he and Baker couldn’t handle... whatever it is,” Haru said slowly, “how can we?” / “Geez, Chicky; why do all your friends keep on getting dragged into other worlds?” / “Who’s Dawson?” Darcy Baker smiled. “Did I kill him?” / “Tell me, Miss Haru; do you enjoy games?” “What kind of games?” “The deadly kind.”

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by: The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. Written by L. Frank Baum.

The Marvellous Land of Oz/Ozma of Oz/The Patchwork Girl of Oz. Written by L. Frank Baum.

The Hobbit. Written by Tolkien.


The Host. Written by Stephanie Meyer.
In the silence of the Bureau, Haru sat slumped against the sofa, one of Baron’s many books in hand while the Creation in question worked calmly at his desk. The brunette paused in her story to glance up at the ceiling, enjoying the peace, and then turned her gaze to Baron. “You know, I had forgotten there were times like this in the Bureau.”

“What times?”

“Quiet times.”

There was a familiar shout from outside, followed by the sound of something smashing and then a volley of verbal abuse.

“Relatively speaking,” Haru amended. She dropped her attention back to the book, until another thought struck her. “Do you guys ever take holidays?”

“How can we?” Baron replied. “At any moment a client may arrive and we have to be present to help. Even in quiet times like this,” he continued, “there’s no guarantee when that peace will be broken.”

“I know, but… sheesh, it’s still kinda rough, don’t you think? Don’t you ever wish you could take a break… see other places?”

The quiet chuckle from Baron told another story entirely. “We see plenty of worlds while on our cases,” he said.

“That’s not quite what I meant.” Haru put her book to one side and sat up. “Wouldn’t it be nice to visit a place and not be running for your life through it? You know, relax.”

“If I did that, Miss Haru, I would spend my entire time worrying about the Bureau,” Baron replied.

“I can’t really argue with that.” Especially since arguing with it would have made her sound heartless. All the same, she couldn’t help feeling a little miffed at how quickly her remark had been shot down. Even if his answer made sense.

“Miss Haru, if you wish to take a break from Bureau business to pursue a more ordinary life—” Baron slowly started.

“No! I mean,” Haru added, trying to reclaim her composure, “that’s not what I meant. It’s just… you lot are always working. For instance, what are you doing now?”

Baron looked up from his desk, a little surprised from the question. “I am trying to create a tracking crystal – it will only work across worlds, but if we get a distress signal then we should be able to open up a portal to that world. Unfortunately, I doubt it’ll be specific enough to be of use for this world, but at least it’ll get us across to any interworld calls for help.”
“Baron, this is what I mean. I’m not saying that what you’re making won’t be useful – actually, it sounds vital – but you’re always working. And I’m not whining – I’m really not – I’m just worried.”

“I know, and I thank you, Haru. But the truth is, the Bureau is my life. I enjoy its work.”

“You must have had a life before the Bureau,” Haru reasoned.

“I did.”

Haru waited for him to elaborate, but knew he wasn’t going to say anything more. The same barrier had sprung up whenever Haru tried to ask about his history. She knew everyone had secrets, but, not for the first time, she was frustrated by his continuing silence. “The boy,” she said. “The one from Oz – the wizard Mombi cursed...”

Baron’s gaze didn’t move from his work. In fact, it froze. She could see the tension running through him, his motions so very still. “What about him?”

“You... knew him, didn’t you?” It would make sense; after all, who knew how long Baron had been around for – even if the boy was gone, Baron’s lifetime far surpassed that of humans. “Who was he... to you?”

“Someone I lost a long time ago.”

The crystal he had been working on crackled angrily against his fingers; he gave a sharp hiss of pain and dropped it against the desk. It smouldered against his notes, blackening the paper.

“I’m sorry for asking but... I just know so little about you.”

“Some things, Miss Haru, would do better to remain in the past,” Baron replied stoically. “I would thank you to remember that.”

“...Sorry.”

Another crackling sound broke the silence between them, but this time it came from the old-fashioned record player established in the corner. The needle jumped from its cradle and leapt onto the blank vinyl record. A distorted, crackling voice could barely be heard past the interference.

“...Baron, we need...” The voice was lost, only to continue a few seconds later with, “... Darcy has... please, you must... before it’s too late... I can’t... I can’t... remember... anymore...Please... help...”

The connection died and the needle fell still.

“I know that voice,” Haru said.

“Dawson.” Baron was already on his feet and heading over to the gramophone. “Doctor James Dawson; companion of Darcy Baker. Something’s must have gone terribly wrong for him to contact us.”

“But... if he and Baker couldn’t handle... whatever it is,” Haru said slowly, “how can we?” She remembered the siren detective as well as anyone. Tall, domineering, and lethal with any weapon, Haru failed to see how they could possibly help if Darcy Baker was in over her head.

“I don’t know, but something has to be done.” Baron had turned back to the crystal he was previously working on, flexing his magic through its angular surface. “Dawson failed to impart any
co-ordinates or world identification, so our best hope may be my little project.”

“How far off are you to completing it?”

“Another few hours should suffice. Miss Haru, you should head back to your apartment and gather together whatever items you’re going to need. I fear this may be our most taxing case as of late.”

Haru’s stomach did a little flip of combined nerves and exhilaration. “Really?”

“As you queried earlier, what case is beyond even the prowess of Baker?”

ooOoo

As Haru packed her bags, Baron’s last question buzzed loudly round her head. After almost losing Hiromi – the events of which were several weeks in the past now – in the deceptive world of Oz, Haru had realised just how perilous the Bureau’s work was. She had realised this long ago, probably even before Doctor Moreau, but it always served as an uncomfortable reminder. One of these days, she might not come back.

As these thoughts were circling round her head, the ring of the doorbell vibrated through the apartment. Haru picked up her head and glanced towards the hallway. Hiromi was out on a date with Tsuge and, anyway, when had she ever rung the doorbell? It was also too soon for Baron to have finished on the travel crystal, unless there had been an unexpected breakthrough. And, again, the Bureau were not of the doorbell-ringing type. All-in-all, it was a mystery.

She wandered downstairs and unlocked the door to greet the familiar face of Michael Banner; her co-worker and employer at the local pet store she worked at. When she wasn’t being dragged into Bureau business, of course. She grinned automatically before she realised what a clash his presence would be, especially if the Bureau turned up soon.

“Michael, what a... surprise. Is everything okay at the shop?”

The young man grinned back, as if amused by the question. “No, everything’s fine. Or aren’t I allowed to see you outside shop hours?”

“I just... wasn’t expecting this,” Haru answered back truthfully. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, firstly you left this behind yesterday...” He brought a phone from his bag and passed it to the brunette, “and secondly, I thought you might be a little lonely, since Hiromi’s out.”

“How do you know about Hiromi’s date?”

Michael laughed gently. “She came into the shop during your shift, remember?” he said. “About her boyfriend asking her out for a date – she was just so excited, she couldn’t wait for you to get home, so she ‘dropped by’ instead.”

“Ah.” Haru looked noticeably sheepish. “Sorry about that. I’ve told her that the shop isn’t a gossip corner, but she never listens. She’s a force of nature all by herself.”

“Hurricane Hiromi,” Michael agreed. He glanced over at Haru, taking in this time the backpack she had slung over one shoulder. “I’m sorry – were you about to go out? Is this a bad time?”

Haru hesitated. On the one hand, she didn’t like risking the chances of her Bureau life and ordinary life getting mixed up, but on the other... Baron had said he was going to be working on finalising his travel crystal for several hours. She had time to kill, and it was going to be no fun waiting around
until then.

She grinned to her friend. “No, course it isn’t. I might be going out in an hour or so, but it’d be great to have you around until I do have to go.”

“Where are you disappearing off to at such a time?”

“I’m meeting up with some old friends,” Haru answered. “It... was kind of a last-minute arrangement.”

Michael looked over her and smiled. “And I’ll bet you haven’t even eaten a warm meal today.”

“How did you know?”

“I know you,” he said as he ambled towards the kitchen, “and I know you’ll forget about food the moment something more interesting comes up. Come on – if we’ve got an hour, we can probably cook something simple before you go.”

Haru laughed and followed after the young man. “You know me too well.”

He only laughed back and said, “Oh, I beg to differ, Haru. You’re full of mystery.”

Time passed quickly with Michael’s presence. No sooner than they had arrived in the kitchen did it seem before they were both sitting down to a hastily-prepared hot dinner, Haru sharing some of Hiromi’s more outrageous antics. “...so then she sets up a blind date without warning me, and the first I know of it is when I wander into the kitchen and there’s a guy sitting at our table!”

“She actually did that?”

“This is Hiromi we’re talking about,” Haru reminded him. “She’d met the guy at work and discovered he owned a small pub further into town – this must have been before I started working at Paradise Pet Store, because I think she was hoping I could sweet-talk my way into a job...”

“I take it you didn’t?”

“I might have done,” Haru insisted, “if Hiromi had given me fair warning. As things stood, it was one of the most awkward moments of my life. Anyway,” she added, “if I had, I wouldn’t be here, talking to you.”

“I guess I should thank Hiromi’s lack of foresight then. Anyway, Hiromi told me a few stories about you during her frequent visits to the shop.”

“At this rate, she should just buy a pet with all the time she spends there,” Haru muttered. “So what did she tell you?”

“Well, it would seem she’s not the only one with a tendency for the crazy...”

Haru laughed. “Are you calling me crazy?”

“Maybe. She told me you almost killed yourself for a cat.”

“She still remembers that?”

“ Mostly because you broke her lacrosse stick,” Michael answered with a grin. He sneezed and took
the tissue Haru offered. “Thanks. But, seriously – a cat?”

“Says the person who owns a pet shop,” Haru retorted. “And I survived, didn’t I?”

“Barely, according to Hiromi.”

“If the world was ‘according to Hiromi’ it’d be unrecognisable.”

Michael sneezed again and had the grace to look apologetic. “Sorry... I think I’m coming down with something...”

“So... when you came visiting,” Haru said slowly, “it was just because you wanted to spread the germs?”

“Not a chance!” He made a face and sniffled. “Okay, so maybe I was a little miserable and needed to see a friendly face.”

“What about Daniel – I mean, your grandfather?”

“He’s put up with my miserable self since we closed up shop this morning. I took pity on him.” He stifled another sneeze and looked apologetically to the hostess. “Well, now that I’ve spread my cold good and well, I should probably point out that you said you had friends to meet around now?”

“Oh, shoot!” Haru jumped to her feet and started dumping the washing into the sink. “I’ll... leave a note telling Hiromi I’ll clean up later... Sorry, Michael, but I’m going to have to throw you out – I still need to pack and I don’t need any distractions.”

“I’m a distraction?” He looked quite proud of the label. “Really?”

“Really, really.” She shooed him onto his feet and started prompting him out of the kitchen. “Shoo, Michael; go and spread your disease elsewhere, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I’m feeling a little bit unwanted... Are you getting that impression, Haru?”

“I’m giving that impression.” Once at the doorway, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “That make things better?”

“Much. Alright, Haru; I’ll see you at the shop on Monday?”

“Sure. I’ll be there.” As she closed the door, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was being truthful or not. While most cases took a day of terror and (lots of) running, sometimes they took longer. Sometimes she had to excuse herself from Bureau business because she had already missed too many days at work. And Hiromi would start to wonder where she disappeared to all those times. Living with a flatmate made a double life that little bit more difficult to hide.

She started rummaging through her backpack, making one last check that she had everything she was going – or thought she was going – to need. But with such little knowledge on the world they were imparting to, packing suitably was more guesswork than anything else. A knocking on the window of the lounge brought her attention to the Bureau hovering outside her flat. She welcomed them in.

“Is it ready?” she asked. “Will the crystal work?”

“I believe so.” Baron hopped off Toto’s back onto the carpeted floor. He looked smaller than ever when compared to the human-sized flat around him. “Are you ready?”
Baron looked to the young woman, his head tilting curiously. “Are you nervous, Miss Haru?”

“A little bit,” she admitted.

“That is understandable. However, do not fear; the Bureau has tackled many challenging cases over the years with limited mishap. I have no doubt we shall do the same again.” He smiled. “After all, we pick our members with pride.”

Haru tried not to glow with pleasure at the compliment, but, all the same, she had to smile at Baron’s words. Sometimes it was hard to imagine exactly what issues the Bureau had dealt with when none of the original members reached beyond her knee. But, considering what they had all gone through together, she wasn’t about to remark on it. They had saved each other more than once during their cases.

Baron had turned his attention to the tracking crystal and had established it in the centre of the lounge, magic twisting through his fingers like a woven web; Haru could sense the supernatural potential flowing through the room. He stepped back, the slowness of his movements implying just how magically costly the process had been. Not for the first time, Haru wondered if he pushed himself too far a little too often.

“The portal it will open will not be like the portals you are familiar with,” Baron said, his remark mostly directed to Haru. “Because of the roughness of the magic – if I had more time, I would have refined it, but time is not a luxury we have – it will not be a passive portal. When it opens, it will draw all living individuals into its depths. So make sure you’re ready.”

Haru nodded.

Baron stood before the crystal carefully set down on the floor, magic streaming from his gloved fingers to the stone. It slowly built up, coming together to form a tension throughout the room.

The front door opened.

“Hey, Haru! Just realised I’ve forgotten my keys – I hope you don’t mind if I just–”

Michael froze in the doorway of the lounge. His eyes passed over the unusual assortment of animals and then, finally, over Haru herself. Even he could feel the magic in the room, although he only sensed it as a strange, otherworldly atmosphere.

“Haru...?”

Haru dropped her gaze to the cat Creation. “Baron...”

Baron was shaking with the exertion of the spell. “I can’t stop it now – the crystal has taken in too much magic–”

A blinding light flooded the room with tangible force; it swept past the occupants with a current like a raging river and dragged them into its portal depths like whirlpool will do to swimmers. The room tilted and gravity gave way and all Haru felt was the unrelenting pull of the portal. She sank into the light.

ooOoo

“Geez, Chicky; why do all your friends keep on getting dragged into other worlds?”
“I don’t know, Muta. Why do you keep asking stupid questions?”

Haru rose unsteadily to her feet, a little dizzy after any portal travelling but especially so after this one. She quickly took to leaning against a greying wall for support – it was that or sinking back to the ground again.

“Where... Where are we? Haru.” Michael’s voice floated through the post-portal haze. “Haru, what...? What just happened?”

Baron rose to his feet, now at human-height but still tawny and furry, and glanced about at their surroundings. The grey walls of an alleyway crowded around them; the pavement beneath them scattered with weeds breaking through its surface. “This feels like an empty world,” he murmured, although not in direct response to Michael’s questions. “It’s so... still.”

“Baron...?” Haru called out gingerly to the Creation. “We still have an extra party member,” she reminded him quietly.

Baron turned abruptly on the spot – an action he looked like he regretted a moment later when the residual dizziness rose up again – and stared over at the young man. He looked over at the individual, recalling what he could from Haru’s referencing to her human life. He had seen him only a couple of times, enough to know the relationship that was arising between him and a certain member of the Bureau. “So you must be Michael.”

Michael stared back, his dark eyes wide and his legs still too unstable to stand. “What... are you? And how do you know who I am?”

“My name is Baron Humbert von Gikkingen.” The Creation tipped his hat momentarily to the newcomer. “And I am a good friend of Miss Haru, with whom I believe you’re acquainted.”

“These... were the friends I was talking about,” Haru supplied uneasily. “The ones I was going to meet today. I just... omitted a few details.”

“You don’t say.” Michael’s gaze strayed over the ordinary-looking duo of Muta and Toto, but his eyes, inadvertently, were drawn back to Baron. It was difficult not to when the individual in question was tall, furry, and wearing what looked like a morning suit. His next question wasn’t one the young woman had been expecting though. “Haru, I don’t... I don’t understand how... you got involved with this... craziness.”

“Did he just call us crazy?” Muta’s irate question cut through the air. Michael only glanced to the podgy feline, but his eyes continued to widen.

“See what I mean?” he asked. “It’s a talking cat. It’s a cat. That talks.”

“That is usually the definition of a talking cat,” Haru muttered.

“No. Helping. Seriously, Haru; how did you become part of this... world?”

“It’s a long story.”

“One, I fear, that we will not have time for at the present,” Baron interjected. He turned to the brunette. “Haru, we still have the issue of Darcy Baker...”

“I know,” she murmured back, “but we have to do something about him. He has to go back.”

“If I use the crystal now, it will have the same effect as before. If he goes back, we all go back. As
the one manipulating the portal, I **certainly** will be drawn back to the Human World,” Baron reasoned, “since I will be too close to get away in time.”

Haru hesitated. She had seen the drain on his magic; repeating that twice in such a short period wouldn’t go without penalty. “He can’t hang about here though,” she returned.

“I’m staying.”

The couple jolted from their conversation and looked back to Michael, who had unsteadily rose to his feet in their whispered discussion. “But, Michael–”

He gave his head a quick shake. “No buts. If you’re staying, then so am I. Anyway,” he added with a smile, “you might need the extra hand.”

“While it would be best to get on with the case,” Baron said, “I didn’t state that you would be helping us. Considering your inexperience, it will be for the best if you stay hidden, at least until we have established the situation.”


Haru grinned. “Running, mostly.”

“Hey, Baron?” Toto had flown to the exit of the alleyway and now hovered in the space before it. “Haru? You might want to take a look at this.”

Both moved towards the crow, leaving Muta and Michael standing at the far end. Muta looked up to the young man. “Don’t worry, kiddo. You’ll get used to this eventually.”

“I just... can’t believe she’s been hiding all... well, all *this* for so long...”

At the alleyway’s entrance, Baron and Haru caught up with the crow Creation. Both stopped and stared over at the empty city before them. Haru gasped.

“... Whoa...”

A greying city so familiar – so like the ones she knew from her home – lay before them, spreading across the land to give the recognisable horizon of skyscraper outline. But the world was silent. Not a car horn, not a footstep, not a voice rose from the buildings. It was a dead city.

“What... What happened here?” Haru whispered.

“What brought Baker and Dawson here?” Baron asked.

A gunshot snapped through the air.

“What was that?” Michael ran to join the others, with Muta plodding after them. “Is everyone okay?”

“That was close,” Haru muttered. She looked to Baron. “Could it be...?”

The Creation nodded. “Baker.” He looked back to their extra individual. “Sir, I would advise you to stay back during our work but, if you feel the need to join us, I cannot stop you. However, we cannot guarantee your safety if you choose to.”

“I understand.” His attention flickered to Haru, more than a little confused at how the warning had only been directed to him and not the other human also. “Haru, are you... familiar with such situations?”
Haru grinned. “Well, everyone needs a hobby.”

“Are you guys going to chinwag all day or are we going to find Baker?” Muta demanded. “What?” he retorted when the Bureau glanced down in surprise at his apparent eagerness to get on with the case. “If we leave these two talking any longer, they’re going to start flirting, I just know it.” He wrinkled his nose in disgust at the two humans. “Can we go?”

Haru grinned over to Michael, blushing a little at Muta’s blunt words but not being able to refute his claim. “It’s an amazing world out there, Michael. And there isn’t just one – there’s hundreds, and they’re out there for the taking. How can I stay home when there’s all this to explore?” She started off along the silent street. “Come on, guys; I think Baker needs some backup.”

The further along the streets they travelled, the more apparent the unearthly emptiness became. Cars – so very much like the ones from their world – sat abandoned in the roads, rusty and dusty through the elements of the weather. The traffic lights flickered inanely where they stood, directing traffic that was long gone. Haru slowed down to walk alongside Baron.

“Any idea what caused this?” she murmured.

“I’m hoping Baker will be able to give us a better insight into this world’s history,” Baron replied.

“In other words, you don’t know.”

“In other words, there are many possibilities, but it’d be fruitless to go through them all until we have more evidence to narrow down the options.”

“In other words,” Haru repeated, “you don’t know.”

Baron sighed dramatically. “I suppose you had to realise one of these days that I’m not omniscient.”

“Don’t worry, Baron; I never had such delusions.”

At the back of the small party, Michael walked alongside Muta, watching the woman and Creation walk up ahead. “Just what exactly is he?” Michael asked.

“Who? Baron?”

Michael nodded. “Hm.”

“Eh, long story short, he’s a fancy doll.”

“What?”

“If you create something with all your heart, blah-blah-blah, it gets a soul. Well, it takes a few other things as well to really get it working, but he’s basically an animated figurine. A Creation.”

“Like... a wind-up-toy?”

“With a soul. Oh, and magic.”

“I... don’t understand this world that Haru is so drawn to,” Michael murmured.

“Trust me, kiddo, no one really does. I don’t think Baron fully understands how a Creation is made, and he’s one of them. But he’s a good one.”

“And just how long has Haru been with you guys?”
“Ah, we’ve known her since she was a schoolkid; Chicky turned up after a little incident with some cats asking for help, and after that she stayed around for a little while.” Muta paused. “Then she left for university or work, or whatever drew her away, and we didn’t see her again – not until the bird incident.”

Michael remembered a particular incident with an oversized eagle breaking into the shop. “I think I remember that too,” he said. “So after that...?”

“She started visiting again,” Muta finished. “Yeah. And then she started helping with Bureau cases and things... just happened.”

Michael was silent, trying to get a better understanding of what he had just been told. Eventually, he moved onto the topic that had been plaguing him since his arrival. “And... Haru and this... Baron...” he began slowly, trying to find a tactful way to work around his query. “Is there... I mean... are they...?”

A shout from up ahead broke his concentration. On the brow of the street before them, a lone individual stood, outlined by the setting sun behind them. Haru was waving to the person, evidently recognising them.

“Baker! Thank goodness! We heard the gunshot – thought it might be you – what’s happening? What was Dawson’s message about?”

The individual stepped towards them, and now could be seen to be a beautiful young woman, stunningly so, with a finely cut face and dark, gleaming eyes. Two long swords rested at her hip, one on each side.

“Who’s Dawson?”

The Bureau froze.

Darcy Baker smiled. “Did I kill him?”

“Who...?” Haru breathed.

“Only it’s so hard to keep track of my kills sometime,” Darcy sighed. Her beautiful eyes glittered. “It’s not like I keep a list.”

“Baron, what...?”

The Creation to her side tensed, every muscle quivering and alert. “Haru,” he said slowly, “we should run.”

“Isn’t this–?”

“It’s Baker,” Baron confirmed. “But not as you know her. Now... RUN!”

A blinding flash of light covered their tracks, thanks to Baron’s magic, giving them a few seconds leeway to flee. Baker screamed and staggered back at the light that flooded her sight, but they wouldn’t have long.

“Not as I know her?” Haru shouted to Baron as the whole Bureau – and Michael – took off along the street. “So have you known her like this?”

“Once!” Baron shouted back. “Enough to know she’s deadly!”
The road gave way to a highway bridge, long and thin and uneasily old in places. Behind them Baker was coming for them. As they fled across it, there was a snap and the barrier beside Haru gave way. She slipped and fell from the bridge. She dropped like a brick onto the road below.

“Haru!”

The brunette didn’t move for a moment and then a shuddering breath ripped through her. She pushed herself up onto her feet and unsteadily looked up to the Bureau above her. “I’m okay!” she shouted back. Somehow she had indeed landed without any lasting injury. She glanced along the bridge and motioned for the others to go. “Run! I’ll meet you guys up later!” Before the others could argue – or Baron could jump down to join her – Haru turned and fled along the road she had landed on.

“Wait – you’re not going to just leave her, are you?” Michael demanded. He grabbed Baron’s arm before he could start running again. “On her own?”

“Miss Haru is fully capable of looking after herself,” Baron replied sharply. “Our best chance is to escape and meet her later, as she said.” His emerald gaze met Michael’s dark eyes. “I have faith in her. Don’t you?”

“Faith is one thing. Assuming she can handle a crazy homicidal maniac is another!”

“Technically she’s a half-siren,” Muta supplied.

“Not. Helping,” Baron muttered.

Baker had made it to the bridge and was rapidly reducing the distance between them. Her swords were out of their sheaths now and were raised for attack.

“Sir, you can either argue with me now and definitely get us killed, or you can run and live to see Miss Haru another day!” Baron snapped. “This is not the time for ethical issues!”

Michael scowled, but nodded his defeat. “Alright.” He began to run and added, “But if this kills Haru, I’ll kill you!”

Baron’s eyes glittered. “I would never allow such a fate to befall Miss Haru,” he growled.

The sound of Baker’s footsteps stopped and, now on the other side of the bridge, the Bureau paused and glanced back to their pursuer. The half-siren was stood in the middle of the bridge, right at the point where Haru had fallen. She raised her head and inhaled the air. She looked back to the frozen Bureau, and smiled.

“Just how I like it... I’ll pick you off one-by-one...”

“What?” Baron hissed.

“Hey, no!” Michael began waving his arms, jumping up and down for the woman’s attention. “Over here! We’re over here! Come and get us!”

“Speak for yourself,” Muta muttered.

Baker only grinned. “Sorry, boys. But it’d be no fun if I took you down all at once. I’ll see you around.” She leapt from the bridge, landing on the road below with uncanny agility and starting straight into a run. Straight in the direction Haru had gone.

“See what’s happened?” Michael snarled. He started along the street, working to find a route down
to the road below. “Now that madwoman is specifically after Haru – you and your stupid plans are going to get her killed!”

“No, they won’t.” Baron started along the road, but taking a different direction to Michael. “We won’t let that happen. But first... we need some backup.”

“And just who on this forsaken world is going to help us?”

“Doctor James Dawson.”

Haru had heard the shouting from the bridge; she hadn’t looked back though. While she may not have broken any bones in the fall, she was still bruised and aching – it took all her willpower to keep running. She would find the Bureau again.

She always did.

But then there came the sound of footsteps following in her tread. Long, experienced footsteps, well-paced and measured and almost certainly gaining on her. Her time with the Bureau had taught her to run, and run well, but real experience took time. Which was something which her pursuer had had lifetimes to gain.

“Why is it always me?” she muttered. She sped down more empty roads until her path suddenly gave way to a park. She continued along it, the space around her suddenly widening into green lawns and old fountains; the lawns were overgrown with weeds and the fountains had turned green with algae and still the emptiness of the city hit Haru. “Why, for once in the Bureau’s cases, couldn’t it be any of the others who get chased by an insane ex-client? But, no, it has to be me!”

A gunshot rang through the air.

Haru froze, half expecting tendrils of pain to bullet through her from an impact. But no such pain came. Another gunshot rang and Haru had the nerve to glance back.

Baker had no gun in her hand – in fact, her only weapons were the twin swords – but she had frozen too. Not from any wound – she didn’t seem hurt in any way – but with her eyes trained on an individual standing beyond Haru. Haru turned back around and saw a man standing before her. A shotgun was aimed in Baker’s direction as he approached the pair.

“Next time I shoot, it’ll be through the head,” he growled.

Baker only gave a funny little smile, nodded to the man, and ran in the opposite direction. It wasn’t the run of someone fleeing danger, though; it was the run of someone who had grown bored with the game and was looking for something else to amuse them. Haru took a half step forward upon realising who her next potential targets would be.

“Baron...”

“Hold your horses, little missy.” The man dropped a heavy hand onto her shoulder. “Are you sure you want to be going after her? After all, that fiend would have had your head on a plate if I hadn’t interceded.”

“I have... friends, out there...”

“And you have no energy to go running off again. I know this city – at least let me give you a warm
meal and then we can go searching for your friends.” The man’s bushy face smiled, his sharp eyes tilting sympathetically. “After all, it’s been so long since I saw another person, save for that hunter.”

Haru eyed the weapon which the man had casually slung back over his shoulder. He was about medium height, but sturdily built, with not only his shotgun, but also two knives and a pistol at his side. Certainly not casual wear for average cityfolk. But, that said, there was nothing average about this city.

“What... happened here?”

“Let me get some warm food in you first, and then I’ll tell you. In case you hadn’t noticed, you’re still shivering from the shock.”

Haru realised this was true, but it probably wasn’t just the shock. Fear, for her friends, was probably a major player, as well as the various side effects of portal-travelling. All the same, here was an occupant of the world who was willing to fill in some noticeable gaps in her knowledge – and who had just saved her. The wisest thing would be to accept.

She nodded. “Alright. Let’s go.”

ooOoo

“I don’t believe you have any idea where this alleged ‘doctor’ is,” Michael said for what seemed like the umpteenth time since their search had begun. He was still worried sick over Haru’s continuing absence, and the returning cold wasn’t helping either. A hacking cough split through him. “He could be anywhere in this city – anywhere in this world, even.”

“Dawson is in this city; that I can guarantee.”

“And how can you be so sure?”

Baron glanced back to the young man the Bureau had unwillingly acquired. “Baker is here,” he said simply. He looked back across the city, his gaze taking in the high-rise buildings and empty streets surrounding them. “If we’re lucky, the portal shouldn’t have dropped us too far from Dawson’s location; all we need to do is find him now.”

“And just how much help is this man going to be? Will he help us find Haru?” Michael paused. “This Dawson... he is a man, isn’t he? He’s not another... whatever you are?”

“He’s a human, like you,” Baron answered. “And ‘this Dawson’, as you so eloquently put it, is our best hope. He may the only person who can reason with Baker.”

“Halt! Who’s there?”

From the shadows of a skyscraper in the setting sun, the form of a man stood. A pistol was raised in both hands, each aimed directly at the wandering party.

“Speak of the devil,” Baron murmured. Regardless of the man’s warning, he stepped forward. He tipped his hat to the individual. “Doctor James Dawson. It’s so good to meet you again.”

The man didn’t lower his weapons. “How do you know my name?” The guns hitched a little higher, at least one aimed to Baron’s head now. “Who are you?”

Baron slowed and the first real signs of unease crept into his form. “Doctor, it’s the Cat Bureau. We responded to your distress signal, do you remember that? You called for us.”
“I remember no such thing.”

Baron’s hands eased to a reassuring motion, calmly raised before him in an attempt to soothe the contradictory man. “Okay, okay... James, we’re friends. Please, you have to trust us on this. We have another friend out here who was separated from us, and we need your help in finding her.”

The guns didn’t lower, but as the Doctor’s curiosity took over they relaxed just a little. “I don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“Do you remember Darcy Baker?”

This time the weapons dropped to his side entirely. “Of course I remember Darcy.” The emotion in his voice was suddenly taut. “How could I forget?”

ooOoo

“This world was once a thriving world, a busy world, populated by people across the globe.” The man – General Zaroff, as he had introduced himself – sat at the table, his gun still slung across his back. He hadn’t made a move to remove it since entering the high-rising building that he called home. All the apartments were empty, save for his space, which overlooked the city the same way a bird of prey would. “It wasn’t without its faults but, then again, no world is. But then the disease came.”

“What disease?” Haru asked.

“I don’t know what the official name was; it struck so fast that the media barely had time to cover it. It had many names. Forget-me-do, Lethe’s Breath, Nepethe... They all stemmed from the unusual effects of the illness.” He leant forward. “You see, the disease doesn’t kill you – not outright. It’s the effects up here—” he tapped at his head “—that make it lethal. It strips away your memories, forcing you to relive your past even as you forget them. Over time, more and more is forgotten until there’s nothing left. You have no idea who you are, only that you’re scared and alone in a world full of strangers. Brother turned on brother, sister on sister, as fear struck the world. Humanity fell apart.”

“How did you stay sane?” Haru whispered.

“I found a way to keep my remaining memories.” The General sat back, smiling as he watched his guest. “Eat up. We have more to discuss before the day is done.”

ooOoo

Doctor James Dawson motioned for the group to take seats. His base appeared to be a small restaurant and so they carefully perched at a table lining the windows. While the Doctor had holstered one gun, the other stayed by his side and the distrust was still bright in his eyes.

“So you’re saying you’ve met Darcy before?” he asked. While his caution was still up, he appeared to have no difficulty with dealing with the half-cat individual seated before him. That was a slight reassurance in itself.

“The Bureau came to her aid when she first discovered her heritage.”

Dawson smirked tiredly. “Looking good for your age then.”

Baron smiled back. “Creation.”

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting one of your kind before.” Dawson hesitated and
then gave a forced chuckle. “Although I really don’t know; there is so little of my past I remember that we could have been childhood friends and I wouldn’t know any better.” The Doctor smiled wanly. “Somehow I doubt that though.”

“We hadn’t met too many times before,” Baron answered honestly, “but we did know each other. We trusted each other. Now, I think some explanations are in order – or to the best of your ability, anyway. I take it that there are considerable gaps in your memory?”

“Not as many as there could be.” Dawson passed across a helping of cold, salted meat to his guests that he had raided from the restaurant’s larder. Even if the electricity had gone a long time ago, the frigid temperatures of the basement had kept the food good. “From the records I’ve managed to find, I’ve been able to piece together this world’s history – and the symptoms of my illness.”

“Symptoms?” Michael repeated. “You’re sick?”

“I’m afraid the disease that has plagued this world has caught me too. To make matters worse, it appears it can be caught by any individual with even a semi-human physiology.” Dawson glanced to Baron. “Even you, sir.” He looked back to the others. “Even Darcy.”

“Of course...” Baron breathed. “A disease that riddles the mind,” he realised, reasoning his thoughts aloud when his words heralded the attention of his companions. “The disease affects the memory, does it not? In what way? Episodic memory loss or significant chunks of the past?”

“Effects seem to vary depending on the individual,” Dawson answered. “Some people – myself included – seem to forget fragments of our past but remember other parts. For instance, I still remember Darcy, although I have no idea where I grew up or who my family was. I can remember my doctor’s training, although I don’t remember receiving it.” He dropped his gun onto the table. “It certainly seems I learnt how to shoot, somewhere along the way.”

“What about others?” Toto cawed. “Because we’ve met Baker, and...”

“And she’s gone crazy,” Muta interceded.

“Muta!” Baron hissed.

“Hey, I’m just saying how it is.”

Dawson’s expression sobered. “Darcy has... one of the more common variants of the disease. Instead of minor, random episodes of the past disappearing, she’s reverted back to an earlier stage of life. To her right now, she thoroughly believes she’s just come into her siren powers and...” He shuddered. “And the bloodthirst is taking over.”

“Is the disease fatal in itself?” Baron asked, carefully but deliberately prompting answers. “Are we working to a time limit?”

“Oh... No. Not exactly.” Dawson shivered and reeled in his control. When he met the gaze of the Bureau, he was – relatively – steady once more. “From the records, it looks like after the initial setback, a person will stay stable living with the memories of their past self. After a period however – it could be a week, it could be months – the process continues and they lose more and more of their memories until they have nothing at all; just a blank slate. It drives most people mad.”

“Most people?” Toto pressed.

Dawson smiled grimly. “If the others don’t kill them first.”
The General dropped a bag onto the table.

“What’s this?” Haru could see food packed inside and, on the very top in pride of place, a knife. Conversation had dried up between them as Haru had ate her way through what she was assured was freshly-caught rabbit. But now the meal was over and it appeared that the General had an alternative agenda on his mind. Her muscles tensed in readiness.

“Tell me, Miss Haru; do you enjoy games?”

“What kind of games?”

“The deadly kind.”

“I have seen too many dangerous situations to set into one willingly,” Haru answered steadily. “Least of all for the sake of one trivial game.”

“Who said it was at all trivial?” His shotgun was hefted off his shoulder and aimed at Haru. “I live for this.”

“You’re mad,” Haru whispered.

“No, the other humans went mad,” Zaroff growled. “As they forgot more and more of their past, they became scared; they had nothing more to hold onto, nothing more to keep them sane. Memories – knowing who you are – keeps you sound. I know who I am. I’m a hunter.”

“A hunter of humans?”

“The most dangerous prey. As more of my memories slipped away, I remembered my time in the jungle – the time I spent abroad, hunting the wild animals of the world – and I clung to that. But merely hunting the animals here – the stray pets that remain, the deer that have moved in – soon became a matter of survival. It lost the joy of the hunt. So I had to find new prey. More challenging prey, if I wanted to keep hold of what little I remembered.” The shotgun shifted so that Haru was staring down its dark barrel. “Human prey.”

Haru kept her gaze steady, even as her heart pounded out of control. “What’s the game?”

“You take this bag, with its food, knife, and hunting clothes, and I’ll give you a single hour’s head start. After that, I come for you.”

Haru eyed the gun, her gaze flicking momentarily to the knife she had been given. “One knife against you? How am I meant to win?”

“If I don’t kill you within three days, you’re free to go. Go where, though, I don’t know.” The General smiled. “Beyond the city’s walls are nothing but feral grounds. Without the inference of humanity, the wild animals, the carnivores, have moved ever closer to the borders. Only a residual fear of humanity keeps them at bay. One day they will lose that fear entirely and come after the prey – the deer, the strays... the last humans – that live here, but for now... the city is your safest bet. Anyway,” he added with another wan smile, “you won’t be leaving for the woods. You still have your friends to find.”

“Even if I do survive for three days, how do I know you’ll keep your promise?” Haru asked. “How do I know you won’t come after me still?”
“Because I’ve kept all previous promises. The woman – Baker – played this game also. As you can see, she won. Now I will only raise my gun to her if she stands as a threat.”

Haru’s gaze flickered to the bag, and then back to the weapon raised to her head. “If I refuse...”

“You’ll die outright. I have no patience for time-wasters.”

Haru’s breathing shallowed. “Three days, right?”

“Yes.”

She grabbed the bag and rose to her feet. “Alright, General. The game is on.”

ooOoo

Teaser: Dawson approached the young woman. “Miss Haru, what is the year?” Haru frowned. “It’s 1999.” / “We’re all strangers to her.” His voice broke a little at the thought. All they’d gone through, all their adventures... gone. Undone. Unwritten. “She doesn’t know us.” / “I’m not interested in your offers!” Baker sped forward, almost too fast for the human eye to trace, and stopped before the Doctor, blades raised to Dawson’s neck.
Episode 6: The Game (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Bureau Files: Series 2

ooOoo

Episode 6: The Game (Part 2)

Haru ran through the empty streets, her breathing ragged, her movements staggered. A bloodied knife was wielded. She glanced back in fear and stumbled as she went. Her hand reached out and brushed a nearby wall; just enough to renew her balance and keep her going. She rounded another corner and ran into a familiar feline.

Baron embraced her instinctively, drawing her to him with an unbidden sigh of relief. “Haru... You’re okay, you’re...” He trailed off as he saw the blood trickling down from her leg, even as she pressured the wound with her left hand. In her right, the stained knife was shaking. “You’re injured. What happened? Was it Baker?”

Haru shook her head. “No. Baron, we have a problem.”

She groaned and, now the adrenaline was beginning to wear thin, the agony in her leg redoubled. She sank to the ground, nearly collapsing if it hadn’t been for Baron. He swept her up into his arms. “Come; you can tell us the situation when you’re safe and rested.”

ooOoo

As they came back into sight of the restaurant, Michael was the first to see them. He came running out. “You’ve found her! Wait, what’s wrong with her?”

“Hopefully nothing but a flesh wound,” Baron said, although his voice wasn’t as steady as usual. He continued past the young man into the relative safety of the building, where he lowered Haru onto one of the sofas that ran along the wall. She had almost dozed off in his arms, but the knife was still help firmly in her grip; Baron gently tried to remove the bloody artefact.

She jolted awake and her grip tightened. Raw fear blazed through her eyes.

“Haru, you’re safe,” Baron soothed quietly. “Please...”

His chest went tight as he saw the fear prolong a second longer, her gaze moving over him and, for a brief moment, she showed no sign of recognition. Then she blinked and the moment passed. She released the bared weapon.

“Thank you.” He dropped the blade to the side, not even wanting to consider what had just happened. “I need to take a look at your wound, see how deep it goes.” He tried to avoid looking at her hands for too long; both were bloodied – her left with the pressure of stopping her wound and the right with the backsplatter of blood from the knife.

“Geez, Chicky; what the heck have you done to yourself?”

Muta waddled up to the pair and sat to the side, watching the process with morbid interest. Haru
reached over and tickled behind his ear, carefully using the tips of her fingers to avoid trailing him with blood.

“I didn’t exactly do this to myself, Muta,” she said. She was conscious enough to make a slight eye-roll to show her thoughts on the inane question.

“So who did?” Muta leant up and placed his paws on the side of the sofa to whisper to her, “Because you’ve got two guys who are going to rip the head off whoever’s responsible.”

Haru glanced across to Baron, carefully tending to her wound, and then to Michael. The latter was watching Haru’s wounded state with tense alertness. It was a seriousness she hadn’t seen before in Michael. “Please, Muta; neither of them are violent,” she said.

Muta snorted. “You should have seen the way they worried.” He grinned, and then added, “So? What happened?”

“Let me guess.” Dawson had joined them and, along the way, had picked up the discarded knife. “General Zaroff.”

“How did you...?”

“Because he struck a similar deal with Darcy.” The Doctor dropped the knife back onto the table, its blade leaving drips of blood where it fell. “When Darcy realised she was losing her memory, she left. She was too afraid of what she might become – of how far back the memories might take her – to stay, so she left our first base the very evening we arrived.”

Baron glanced sharply to the man. “The disease can take hold that quickly?”

“Again, it varies between individuals. Some people were naturally immune – as there will be with most diseases – but when the rest of the world went mad, they soon became causalities. A few remained and we caught their distress signals.”

“Between worlds?” Michael asked. “How does that work?”

“In the same way the Bureau’s does. Magic enables us to pick up cries for help across the globe, across worlds,” Dawson answered. “Sometimes the distress calls are directed to us, other times they’re just messages the magic picked up. This one was the latter.” The Doctor sighed. “It was a distress call from one of the remaining immunities, but we were too late. The General got to them before we did.”

“Who is this General?” Baron growled. He glanced back to the man, emerald eyes blazing. “What did he want with Haru?”

“He’s a hunter. Whether General Zaroff is his real name, I don’t know, but it’s the title he goes by. He found a way to cling onto his remaining memories – memories of his time as a hunter – through the thrill of the hunt. Only,” Dawson added, his voice sober as his gaze travelled to Haru’s injured state, “hunting beasts isn’t enough for him anymore. It doesn’t stop the rot of memory loss. So he resorted to the most dangerous animal of all...”

“Humans,” Baron finished.

Dawson nodded.

“What about the ‘deal’ you mentioned?” Michael asked. He approached the others, his eyes constantly flickering back to Haru. “You said he struck a similar deal with Darcy. Does that mean he
has an arrangement with Haru?"

The Doctor’s hands travelled back to the knife, playing along its hilt. “I’ve seen such a weapon before. It’s the same kind that the General gives to those he plays his sadistic little game with.”

“Game?” Michael echoed sharply. “What game?”

“A game to the death.”

ooOoo

With Haru sleeping off her injuries, the remaining individuals took seats across the restaurant as darkness fell outside. Michael uneasily took a chair at the table Baron sat at. “Can we talk?”

Baron had had his hands crossed, his fingers entwined as he rested his lower face against them, his gaze unfocused as he stared into the depths of the table. His mind was another world away. But he blinked and turned his attention to the young man standing before him. He only nodded his acceptance.

Michael glanced back to the slumbering Haru. With the blood washed off her hands and leg, she looked stronger now, but there was still a shiver through her as she slept. Muta had curled up beside her and her fingers were sunken into his fur for comfort. He looked back to the strange individual. “You’re worried about her too, aren’t you?”

With Michael’s actions, Baron’s gaze had also been drawn to the brunette, but his eyes lingered a little longer before moving back to focus on Michael. “Of course.”

The young man gave a small smile. “Good. No matter how little I understand about your or how little we share in common, at least we share one thing.” His eyes slipped to Haru. “Her.” He looked back. “I don’t know what there is between you, whether I should be jealous or worried, but now getting her home safely should be our main goal.” He offered a hand. “Truce?”

Baron smiled wanly. “A truce for what, sir?”

Michael smiled back just as wanly. “I’m very sure that what we share is not something we wish to. But we haven’t got time for petty rivalries yet.” The smile twitched a notch. “I’m sure we can jostle for her attention later, if you so wish.”

Baron’s smile didn’t move, except for a new edge of amusement hidden in the corners of his eyes. He took the offered hand. “Truce.”

“Hey, Baron! Kiddo!” Muta’s voice broke the uneasy silence between the two males and brought them both to their feet. “Looks like Sleeping Beauty’s waking up!”

Haru slowly stirred, rolling over onto her other side as she gradually returned to the waking world. “Mum, I’m getting up...” she mumbled. “Just...” She yawned and continued with, “Just give me a moment...”

As Baron and Michael moved over to the young woman, Dawson caught the Creation’s shoulder. “It might not be wise for her to see you just yet,” the Doctor murmured.

“Why not?” Baron snapped. He had to see that she was alright; that her skirmish with the General hadn’t left her with more untended injuries. Dawson’s grip didn’t leave his shoulder.

“I’ve been checking her vital signs, Baron,” the Doctor said quietly. “I know the symptoms.”
“The symptoms for what?”

Dawson didn’t answer, but his gaze said everything.

“How bad?” Baron whispered. He didn’t look over to Haru; he couldn’t. “Is it episodic or is it full reversion? How much does she remember?”

“I don’t know.” Dawson met the Creation’s gaze head-on; he had already gone through a similar process of loss with Darcy. He had to know the pain Baron was feeling. “All I know is that she has it. We won’t know what stage it is until she talks.”

Michael, oblivious to the taut conversation going on further back, knelt down beside the awakening brunette. “Haru?” he whispered. “How are you feeling?”

“I don’t want to go to school, Mum...” Haru mumbled. She rolled over to face her friend. “Can’t you just call in sick–?” Haru screamed and shot up, knocking a rather disgruntled Muta to the ground. “What are you doing in my room?” she shrieked, kicking out at him with her right leg. “Get out – get...” She trailed off as she took a proper look at her surroundings. “This... is not my room...” she realised slowly.

Dawson patted Baron’s shoulder sorrowfully and approached the young woman. “Miss Haru, what is the year?”

Haru frowned. “Is this a joke? Is this some sort of prank? Have I been drugged?”

“Please, Miss Haru; just answer the question.”

“It’s 1999.”

Dawson glanced back to her friends. Michael shook his head. “I’ve only known her for a year,” he admitted.

Baron shook his head also from where he stood in the shadows. “That was at least two years before we met her,” he confirmed. “We’re all strangers to her.” His voice broke a little at the thought. All they’d gone through, all their adventures... gone. Undone. Unwritten. “She doesn’t know us.”

“Now, seriously, what’s going on?” Haru leant forward, swinging both her legs over the edge and giving a yelp of pain as she tried to put weight onto her left leg. She pulled her trouser leg up to reveal the bandages Baron had applied earlier. “What... the hell? What happened?!?”

“Haru, it’s me, it’s Michael.” His hands caught Haru's, trying to calm the hysterical young woman. “Do you remember me?”

Haru shook he head. “Should I?” Her gaze slipped away from the young man, moving to inspect her new surroundings. “Just... where are we?” Her eyes found Toto, evidently found the whole thing strange, moved onto Muta, who was reclaiming his dignity after his recent fall, and then picked out the dark shape of Baron in the shadows. She froze, half in the process of rising to her feet before she remembered the pain from her last attempt. “Hello? Who’s there?”

Baron tensed, but didn’t move into the light. His breath hitched. “Do you remember me, Miss Haru?”

“Who are you?” A half-hearted smile twitched at her lips as she leant forward. “I can’t even see you from here. Come into the light.”
“That... might not be a good idea, Miss Haru.”

“Why not?” A frown crossed her features, wiping away the previous humour. “What are you hiding?” She rose unsteadily to her feet, trying not to put too much pressure onto her left leg, and staggered half a step forward. Her strength gave way and her leg crumpled.

Before Baron knew what he was doing, he had stepped to her aid and had both hands around her waist to support her, while her hands were shivering as they clutched his arms.

“Kingdoms above, Haru,” he muttered, “how did you run in this state?”

He moved to help her back to the sofa, and finally her eyes lifted to meet the Creation. The fear – the lack of recognition – he had seen earlier, only for a moment, flared up, and she pushed herself away. She stumbled back to the sofa and sank onto its padded surface. Her breathing was coming fast, her eyes wide and whole form shaking. “What...? What are you?”

“He’s a friend, Miss Haru,” Dawson calmly assured. “A good friend of yours.”

Haru choked back a laugh. “Oh, damn... you’re serious, aren’t you? This isn’t a joke at all. I really am... Where am I?”

“You’re in another world, Miss Haru,” Baron said softly. He didn’t move to approach the brunette, but he couldn’t bring himself to walk away either. His legs had frozen; something had broken inside him. “You’ve caught a sickness that affects your memory; while you think you’re in the year 1999, you’re no longer the young teenager you believe yourself to be. Years have passed.”

“How many?” Haru breathed.

Baron motioned over to the window; with darkness outside and the flicker of candlelight inside, the glass served as a mirror of sorts. “Take a look.”

Haru watched the Creation with overt distrust before turning around to face the window. Her reflection stared back: a young woman with her dark hair shorn short and maple eyes that met her own, terrified gaze. “I’m... old,” she whispered. “Oh... Oh, God, I’m an adult. I’m grown up.” She looked back to the onlookers, her eyes working between the people. “Who did you say you were again?” she asked to Michael.

“Michael. Michael Banner – I’m a work colleague of yours.” He looked like he had more to say with regards to their relationship, but ended with, “We work at a pet shop that my grandfather owns. The Paradise Pet Store.”

“And we’re... friends?”

Again he hesitated. He could feel the others’ gaze on him, waiting for his answer. “Yes.”

“Just friends?”

He smiled weakly. “As things stand, yes.”

She turned her attention to the other human. “And you?”

“Doctor James Dawson.” The man nodded his greeting. “We’ve only met once before. I work on cases much like the Bureau.”

“The... Bureau?” she echoed.
“That’s us, Chicky.” Muta wound his way back to the sofa and jumped onto the soft material. “The Cat Bureau. Me, Birdbrain, and Baron.”

“And you,” Baron added softly.

Haru stared sideways to the talking white cat by her side, swallowed, and decided to forgo mentioning it. After all, there was a furry, semi-humanised individual in a morning suit standing before her. Things had already surpassed that level of weirdness. “Me?” she asked. She laughed nervously. “I think you’ve got something wrong. I’m not... I mean, I don’t...” She choked on her words. “Am I?”

Baron nodded.

Haru gave a long, guttural sigh and dropped her head into her hands. “I’m sorry, but I don’t...” She was shaking, a mixture of fear, confusion, and tears muddling her up. “I can’t do this. I don’t know who you think I am, but I am not her,” she sobbed. “Other worlds... Talking cats... This isn’t my life. Please... just take me home.”

“We’re going to need time do that, Miss Haru,” Dawson said evenly. “But you should sleep a while; it will help you deal with the current situation.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly sleep, not even if I tried,” Haru returned. “I wish I could, but I’m just... terrified...”

Dawson gave a half-hearted smile and leant down to her level. “Don’t worry, Miss Haru; I have just the ticket.” From his hand, he blew a crimson dust into her face. The moment the particles touched her, her eyes fell shut and her muscles loosened. Dawson caught her as she fell, and carefully lowered her onto the sofa.

“What did you do?” Baron demanded.

“Relax, Baron. It was merely a little poppy dust from Oz; enough to send her into a dreamless sleep until she’s strong enough to cope.” Dawson straightened up and, even though his words had carried a calming note in its tenor, his expression was deadly serious. “Anyway, we need to talk. Matters have just complicated themselves.”

ooOoo

“What I don’t understand is why we can’t just take her back to our world and have her treated there,” Michael insisted. “We have hospitals, science back there – the doctors will have to be able to find a cure–”

“And, until then?” Dawson snapped. His tone had turned irritable in the ensuing conversation; Baron didn’t doubt that all this only served to remind him of Darcy. “Take her back and you’re opening up your world to the same fate as this one. From the records, this place appears to have been just like yours, same science, same technology, and it still fell to the disease. You can’t go back, not now that she’s infected. You’re all carriers, at least.”

“So what are our options?” Baron asked levelly. His own voice was even, but even he couldn’t stop his eyes from flickering to the slumbering Haru and back every few seconds. Like Michael, he was worried sick. “There has to be a way we can help her – and Darcy too.”

“I’ve been working on a cure – there are science labs, as part of a nearby university – but it would only work if I had something to base it off. If I could find someone who was immune. But the last immune individuals were shot down by the General and his sick game,” Dawson growled.
“That’s it, then?” Michael asked. “We wait around until... what? You discover a cure that a whole world couldn’t, or we also become infected and all lose our minds? Somehow, that doesn’t reassure me.”

“It’s the only chance Haru stands right now,” Dawson retorted. “Believe me; I don’t like it either, not when...” He shook his head before he could finish the thought. “Just... don’t question my resolve. I have as much to lose as you do.” He looked to Baron. “We have to be careful around her. She’s a ticking bomb now.”

“Why?” Muta asked. “What’s so dangerous about Chicky?”

“She’s scared.” This time it was Baron who answered. He didn’t meet the eyes of any of his companions as he spoke. “Scared people are dangerous.”

Michael glanced back to Haru. “Not her. If you know Haru at all, you’d know she’d never hurt her friends.”

Baron smiled wanly, although it looked like the smile cost him his heart. “Exactly. To her young mind, we are nothing more than strangers,” he answered. “She doesn’t remember you. Any of us.”

“To be fair, she does have the mind of a teenager right now,” Toto interceded. “How much trouble can she be?”

“She’s a scared little girl, far away from home,” Baron answered. “Now, tell me that isn’t dangerous.”

“Yeah, but this is Chicky we’re talking about... Hey, I’m sorry about Baker,” Muta said, directing his apologies to Dawson, “but the truth is, she was kind of violent to begin with. But... Chicky? Come on – she doesn’t have that kind of history.”

“She’s never been in this situation before.”

“Sure she has. What about the Cat Kingdom? She got whisked off to another world there and she didn’t turn into a homicidal maniac,” Muta insisted.

“With no memory of how she got there?” Baron asked. “However... unusual the situations she’s got herself involved with, she’s always known how that happened. She’s always known who she was. But now...” Baron sighed and looked away. “Dawson’s right. We need to be careful.”

ooOoo

“Is he...?” Michael glanced to the cat Creation and then back to the fat feline. Despite appearances, Muta seemed to be the one most likely to give a straight answer – most of the time. “Is he alright? It’s just... he reacted so strangely back there.”

“Bad history,” Muta grunted. Night had fallen and although the group had curled up to sleep on various sofas across the restaurant, Michael could see Baron and Dawson in the corner, still in deep conversation. Since Michael couldn’t sleep either – and he was pestering Muta with his questions – it seemed like the only ones to sleep tonight were Haru and Toto.

“What kind of bad history?” Michael pressed. The more he understood the Bureau and all its strange occupants, the better he could understand the world that had drawn Haru into its depths. The better he could understand her.

“Look, kiddo, this ain’t really my story to tell...”
“Whatever happened, it’s enough to make him fearful of Haru,” Michael responded between gritted teeth. He glanced to where the individual in question was talking with Dawson, assured that the Creation wasn’t about to come interrupting their conversation any time soon. He looked back to Muta. “I can see it in him. And I don’t think that’s something to be taken lightly. So what happened?”

“A job got messy,” Muta muttered. “Baron gained temporary human form for a case and got separated from the rest of us, ending up trapped in caves with a bunch of scared humans.” He looked away. “They turned on him.”

“Was he... hurt?”

“He recovered. But it took time. For a period, he was wary even around Chicky.”

Michael paused to consider this. Muta’s phrasing – even Chicky – spoke of Haru’s importance to the Bureau. More significantly, to Baron. “So... what happened?” he repeated.

“He recovered,” Muta echoed. “Chicky broke him from it.”

“How?”

The fat cat only smiled wanly. “She threatened to leave.”

ooOoo

“But why are we leaving all the food?” Muta whined. He sat on the ledge between the oven and the cupboards, the remnants of what had once been a busy kitchen now dusty and forgotten. Once upon a time, there would have been a hysterical chef throwing out the cat from their workspace; but now they were gone and there was no one to reference health and safety. He pouted to the group before him, even as they rummaged through the cupboards for anything of use. “This place is great – food, comfort, security... food...”

“If you could think without your stomach for just one moment, butterball...” Toto retorted.

“Hey, a cat needs food, right?”

“The General struck a deal with Miss Haru,” Dawson explained calmly from where he searched through the cupboards. “A game, so he called it, where he was the hunter and she was the hunted. He knows where I have chosen to reside; it will only be a matter of time before he comes to search for her here.”

“If he knows where you are,” Baron asked, “then why hasn’t he struck a similar deal?”

Dawson paused, his motions suddenly heavy. A moment of tense silence passed. “Baker had a few conditions on which she played the game.”

“You,” Baron breathed.

Dawson nodded. “He agreed to leave me alone for as long as I stayed out of his way. But if he finds I’m hiding Haru, that truce will quickly be broken. We have to move before he turns on us.” The Doctor hurried into movement, dragging out a selection of knives from a drawer and bundling them into the bag. “He believes himself to be a man of honour; he’ll consider Haru’s decision to refuge with us a case of bad form. He’ll be even more dangerous than usual.”

“So we have to go,” Baron finished. “Before General Zaroff finds her.”
“Who’s General Zaroff?” In the kitchen doorway, Haru stood. One hand was passed over her eyes as she rubbed away the traces of sleepiness, biting back a yawn as she recovered from the effects of the poppy dust. “Why is he after me?”

“It’s a long story, Chicky.”

Haru scowled; the motion wasn’t something Baron had seen from the brunette. This scowl was the scowl of a teenager; pouting and just a little bit petty. Yet another reminder of her mental state. “Everything’s a long story to me,” she complained. Her eyes caught the knives that Dawson was packing. “Are we really going to need those?”

Dawson was hesitant. “Just as a precaution. It’s a dangerous world out there and we plan to protect you.”

Haru’s eyes flickered over the group, and Baron didn’t miss the way they flickered over him for just a millisecond longer of doubt. He had no illusions that she believed he could protect her. Perhaps she even wondered whether she needed protecting from him. “Protection?” she echoed. “From who? This General?”

“Yes.”

Haru was quiet for a moment. She had slept soundlessly through the night, and her continuing presence here seemed to have convinced her that this wasn’t some crazy dream that she might wake up from. While she wasn’t about to scream upon seeing Baron again, she wasn’t exactly warming up to him either. She moved to the side, closer to where Michael was searching through the cupboards. “So... when do we leave?”

“As soon as we’re done,” Dawson answered. “It shouldn’t be long now.” He glanced over to Baron. “I think I’ve found some suitable flats across the city – they’re not too far away and they’re still pretty close to the university laboratories. I can continue to look for a cure.”

Baron only smiled weakly. “Thank you, Watson.”

“Dawson.”


“I’m not only doing this for you,” the Doctor replied honestly. “There’s more than just her life at stake here.”

Gunshots shot through the air; their echoes ricocheted off the surrounding buildings and reverberating through the restaurant. The sound of the bullets came from outside, but every occupant of the room jumped as if the gun had been fired from their side.

“What was that?”

Haru’s voice was young, far too young, tightened by the restrain of fear.

Dawson turned slowly to face the door. “That... I believe... was General Zaroff.”

“Haru! Oh, Miss Haru...!” Laughter accompanied the gruff, sing-song voice. Even as its source was outside, the voice echoed easily into the small restaurant. “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Haru retreated back into the kitchen, coming alongside Michael. Her hand slipped into his.
Baron noted the action even as he tried to ignore it.

“What do we do?” Haru whispered. “He’s coming for me, isn’t he? What do we do?”

“Relax, Miss Haru.” Baron stepped forward, his hand shifting its grip on his familiar cane. “We’ll protect you.”

“With a cane?” Haru hissed.

There was a click of a gun being cocked, and Dawson stepped forward, a heavy black pistol raised in the direction of the restaurant front. “With whatever means necessary. Miss Haru, I suggest you go with the Bureau – boy, the same goes for you.”

“Boy?” Michael echoed. “Is that me?”

“Is there another?” Dawson glanced back to the young man. “You’ll be safe with the Bureau. Baron, there’s a back door to the place – get the Bureau and the humans out. Head to the university laboratories – your best chance of finding a cure lies there.”

“What about you?” the Creation asked.

Dawson only smiled wanly. “You need a decoy, don’t you?”

The two individuals met the other’s gaze; they held it for several elongated seconds. Baron eventually found his answer in Dawson’s eyes, and nodded his acceptance. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. And, Baron...?”

Already in the process of motioning the two humans and the rest of the Bureau towards the back exit, Baron paused. He glanced back to the Doctor. “Yes?”

Dawson’s eyes were fixed on the door, gun still raised, but the slightest flicker of his attention waned to the Creation. “Be careful.”

Baron only nodded once and herded the remaining individuals towards the door. Haru glanced back to the Doctor. “So we’re just leaving him?” she asked. “Is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll meet us at the laboratories if he is,” Baron answered quietly. “Anyway, Dawson learnt from the best.”

“And who would that be?” Michael queried, catching up with the Creation and young woman.

“Baker.”

Michael paled. “That’s the woman who tried to kill us earlier, isn’t it?”

“That’d be her.”

Haru slowed and slipped a hand into Michael’s palm, gripping onto him like a lifeline. “So there’s more than just one madman out there?”

“Heh, don’t worry, Chicky,” Muta grunted. “Only one of them is exclusively interested in you. Baker will just pick off any stragglers.”

“Oh, now I feel much better,” Haru muttered.
Baron glanced back irritably to the round feline. “Muta, please.”

“It’s the truth.”

As they opened up the backdoor and left the small restaurant behind them, gunshots rang through the air. Haru tried to up her pace, only to wince and stagger to a stop. Baron stopped and glanced back; for a moment it was like he had gone back in time – Haru was gasping for breath and leant over just like the first time she visited the Cat Kingdom. Except, this time, it was an older Haru, with a limp in her limb and blood seeping through the bandages.

She tried to take another step forward, and her injured leg gave way. Even with the distance between them, Baron bridged it before she could hit the ground, faster than even Michael could react.

“It’s no good,” Toto said. “She can’t run like that.”

It took Haru several moments to realise just who had caught her, her gaze reluctantly moving to meet Baron’s, but this time she didn’t push him away. “I’m fine,” she lied. She tried to lean more weight onto her feet, only to wince and hold tighter to Baron. “Okay, maybe not.”

Despite everything, the smallest of smiles crossed Baron’s face. There was the Haru he knew. That said, she wouldn’t be going anywhere with that injury. “Do you want some help?”

Want, not need. She obviously needed the help; the only thing was, would she accept it from him?

“What... did you say your name was again?”

“Baron Humbert von Gikkingen. But you just call me Baron.”

Haru hesitated, and then her grip tightened. “Okay. Yes, please.”

With a smooth flurry of movement, Baron swept her up into his arms. Just like at the Cat Kingdom. Haru initially froze at the contact, but then...

‘Why... does it feel like this has happened before?’ she silently wondered. ‘Is it possible he was telling the truth? Do we really know each other?’

Michael watched the Bureau walk away, and then glanced to the white feline by his side. “Well, looks like Baron got over any fear that Haru was dangerous pretty quickly,” he scoffed.

Muta chuckled. “Maybe, maybe not, but if there’s one thing you can count on, it’s that Baron will do whatever it takes to keep Chicky safe. He can’t help it; it’s just the way he is. Come on!” Muta started into an ungainly lope after the others. “I don’t want to get caught by Zaroff or Baker any time soon!”

ooOoo

The university campus looked like it had once been well-kept and cleanly-maintained, but now it had fallen into disuse and disrepair. Towering blocks of student accommodation still edged the campus, but the paths had become overrun with grass and the cafes that had once made a mint out of selling to hungry students now lay open and forgotten. They walked further into the centre of the university, where the academic buildings rose up, all with unhelpful names of dead scientists instead of labels to indicate their use or department.

Michael caught up with the cat Creation; Haru had since fell into a silent sleep in Baron’s arms and Michael was doing his best to not feel too jealous. But at least he could trust Baron to look after
Haru, even if he was almost certain the gentlecat’s feelings went deeper than mere friendship. “So...” he started casually, “where exactly are we heading?”

His hands full, Baron could only indicate with the direction of his gaze. He looked to one of the tallest buildings centreing the campus that they were coming to. “From Dawson’s directions— evidently Baron and Dawson had foreseen this turn of events and discussed their meeting place “—the laboratories should be in that building.”

“And then what?” Michael asked. “We just walk in? As far as I know, laboratories are usually locked, aren’t they?” They rounded the corner and came straight up to the building’s uninviting entrance. Michael tested the door, rattling at the handle. “See? Locked.”

Gunshots rang through the city, unsettling the party. “We don’t have time for this,” Baron muttered. “Excuse me.” He eased past Michael and, even with the slumbering Haru in his arms, examined the lock that barred their way. He took a step back, steadied himself, and then applied a swift and brutal kick to the door. Something snapped, and the door swung open.

“See?” Baron returned. “It’s open.”

Michael stared at the broken entrance, even as the Bureau entered.

“Come along, Mister Michael,” Baron called. “You don’t want to be left out in the cold!”

“Yeah, but I don’t really want to go wondering in the dark, either,” the young man muttered, but he reluctantly followed after the others. And it was dark; the building had few windows and the lights that had once lit up the interior were now long dead. Eerily enough, the cat Creation’s emerald eyes shone in the darkness, just like an ordinary cat’s. However, the immediate darkness subsided as an orb of magic and light grew at the Creation’s fingertips. He released it and it floated up to head height.

“Hey, Baron; didn’t Dawson mention something about a side entrance?” Toto cawed.

“I forgot.” The inside of the building appeared to be a sort of reception at the entrance – a stopped clock rested over a desk that, once upon a time, would have been the first port-of-call to any newcomers. Now it lay empty and mouse droppings littered the surface. Baron found one of the sofas that were still substantial, and lowered Haru onto its pillows. One of the bags was dropped beside her. He glanced back to the other human. “How are you feeling?”

Michael, embarrassingly in the middle of blowing his nose, paused and looked up to the Creation. “Fine. Mostly. Why?”

Baron’s gaze flickered to Haru. “She came down so quickly with the illness, that’s all. Are you sure you’re healthy? No missing memories, no blank spaces?”

“Well, if I were missing memories, how would I remember that I was missing them?” Michael criticised. He shrugged and stowed away the tissue in a pocket. “As things stand, I’m hating this cold right now, but my memory’s fine. Better than hers, anyway. Is she okay?” As always, his attention was drawn back to the one root of familiarity in this strange world. “She’s been so tired recently...”

“It’s the disease,” Baron sighed. “That, and shock and injury. She’s gone through a lot recently. Too much.” He brushed away a strand of hair away from the brunette’s face and she stirred at the contact, but didn’t wake. She looked so peaceful; things could almost be normal. Except, when she woke, he would still be a stranger to her. “Dawson will meet us here when he’s finished; until then, we better make ourselves comfy.”
“That’s it? We just wait?”

“Mister Michael, do you have any knowledge on medical science?” Baron asked icily.

“No, but I thought—”

“I know how to tend to wounds and broken bones, but my knowledge is not nearly enough to combat something like this disease,” the Creation retorted. “If I did, I would not be standing around as such; I would already be working on a cure. No, for now we hold our position.”

“Oh, really?” A voice echoed down from above. Laughter followed. It was beautiful laughter – like bells or running water – but it was cold and curt too. Light flickered as something above them moved. The floors ran up on either side, but in the reception area, the two sides were linked by bridged corridors so that the roof would – under normal circumstances – be visible from the ground floor of the reception. “And how long do you think you’re going to last while I’m here?”

Michael and Baron both backed up against the sofa where Haru lay, instantly moving between her and the shifting form. Something landed with a thud on one of the higher floors, and then again on the next floor. And the next. Until, finally, the landing could be heard on the corridor directly above them.

“I hope you have a plan,” Michael muttered. He looked to the Creation. “You do have a plan, don’t you?”

“As much as I usually do.”

“That means no, kiddo.”

“Oh. Good. Great. Just what I wanted to hear.” Michael glanced down to the kitchen knife they had salvaged, then to Baron’s cane, and felt that, in general, they were woefully unprepared for combat. Something more gun or sword related would have been reassuring. He glanced up. “Um... shouldn’t they have reached us by now?”

“She’s playing with us,” Baron muttered.

“Why?”

“Because that’s what she does. She plays with her prey.”

“I’m not feeling too good about being referred to as prey,” Michael murmured.

“What would you rather be referred to as?” Baron asked. “Victim? Kill? Quarry?”

“No... Prey works fine. So this is definitely the half-siren we’re up against?”

Something landed behind them; Michael felt the ground shake from the impact.

“Oh, please. I do have a name.”

They turned about to see Darcy Baker rise steadily up from her landing, shake her dark hair from her face, and grin to the individuals before her.

“Let’s see... Two humans, two Creations, and one fat cat... Hardly what I’d call a fair fight.” She approached the sofa that lay between them, the same one that Haru was sleeping on, as her hand rested gently against the top. “For you, that is.”
Both Baron and Michael bared what weapon they had – a cane and a knife, respectively – at Baker’s casual approach to Haru. Baker only laughed.

“You plan to take me on with those toothpicks? Oh dear, what an embarrassing oversight on your part.” There was the hiss of steel and the glimmer of metal as Baker unsheathed both of her swords. “Now, these are more fitting, don’t you think?”

To Michael’s amazement – and horror – Baron lowered his cane. “Baker, we’re not here to play games.”

“Really? I am.” She leapt forward, over the sofa and the other two had to back away to avoid the kick of her boots and the swing of her blades. She grinned at the other individuals. “How about we see who lasts the longest? I like the sound of that game. I’ll even give you a head start.”

“Baker, this isn’t you—”

“It’s all I remember,” the half-siren snarled. “Coming into this power, into this... bloodlust; don’t tell me things have changed in the years I’ve forgotten!”

“What about Dawson?” Toto asked. “Have you forgotten him too?”

“Just who is this Dawson you keep talking about? I know no one of that name!”

“I beg to differ.”

Dawson, limping but still moving, stood at the doorway. His gun was held limply by his side.

“Really, Baron? You had to kick the door down?”

“It was in the way.”

The Doctor returned his gaze to his companion. The sorrow in his eyes was unmistakable. “Baron is right, Darcy. This isn’t you. Maybe it was once, but not anymore. I know it seems impossible now, but you come to terms with what you are; you learn to control the hunger for death. Things do get better. I promise.”

“Why would a promise from a breakable piece of human dirt interest me?” Baker demanded. “Tell me why I would listen to you.”

Dawson gave a bitter smile. “Because you normally do. If you allow us, we can help return your memories to what they once were.”

“I’m not interested in your offers!” Baker sped forward, almost too fast for the human eye to trace, and stopped before the Doctor, blades raised to Dawson’s neck. The Doctor didn’t react though; he didn’t even move.

“You forget, Darcy; I know you.”

“You told me of your past. I know the memories that haunt you. I know you.”

“Shut up!” Dawson tilted his head to one side and regarded the half-siren. “You told me as much; once I start running, the adrenaline will kick in. Once I start running, every other thought will disappear from your mind. And I still have more for you to
“SHUT UP!”

The blades flashed as they moved and the others looked away, believing the worst had happened before they could intercede. But when they looked again, Dawson was still standing and Baker had merely shifted her hold on her weapons. Now she stood further back, uncertainty flickering in her form as she held her swords at arm’s length bared at the Doctor. “If you won’t play my games,” she hissed, breathing heavily with every word, “then I’m sure one of the others will happily oblige.” She turned her blades to the Bureau, looking over the strange individuals gathered. “I can smell the fear rolling off them.”

She grinned, flashing her uncannily sharp teeth at them as they reacted with their own pathetic weapons raised. Her gaze flickered to the unconscious form behind them. Haru. “So foolishly brave... I can’t help but wonder if your fear is for the one you protect...”

When the Bureau – and Michael – only gathered closer to Haru, Baker only laughed. “Why, thank you, for confirming my suspicions. And to you...” She turned back to Dawson, who still held his gun limply at his side. “For lacking the guts to shoot. Whatever feelings you harbour, they make you weak.”

“We just want to help.”

“I do not care for what you ‘want’. But since you’re obviously not going to be any fun, and you can’t bring yourself to shoot, I don’t see what you’re still doing here.” That same teeth-filled smile. “If I were you, I’d leave, while I still had the chance.”

“Not until you’re back to the Darcy I know.”

“Aw, isn’t he sweet?” Baker cooed. “I wonder whether you’d still say that if I shattered both your legs. Although I doubt you’d be saying very much of anything if that were the case. No... I have much more interesting matters to attend to.” She looked back to the Bureau. “Such as what idiots would take on me with nothing more than a stick and a glorified butterknife.” She tutted. “Really, what were you thinking? Even if you tried to attack me, you’d achieve nothing.”

She blurred into a run and dashed right past all four individuals, leaping over the sofa to stand beside the slumbering Haru. She laughed at the horrified faces of the others at her sudden proximity to the brunette. “Oh, yes; this is definitely your weak point.”

The others didn’t dare move, didn’t dare approach, while Baker stood so close to the defenceless Haru. Within a moment’s notice, Baker could plunge her blades into Haru long before they could stop her. Baker leaned forward and ran a slim finger along the brunette’s face.

“She’s pretty... I guess. I don’t see what all the fuss is about though. You could find another like her without doubt...”

“There isn’t another woman like Haru in all the worlds,” Baron growled.

“Sweet... but not true. People are simple to replace. The world is just full of them. Or the world I remember, anyway,” Baker added with a bitter smile. “And people break... so easily...”

Baker withdrew her fingers from Haru’s cheek just as a flurry of movement flew from Haru’s hand. Her fingers had slipped into the bag that Baron had left beside her, and withdrawn a knife – she had lashed out fast enough to send Baker back, not fast enough to catch her. Baker only laughed.
“At last! Something other than fear or sorrow. At last, a little bit of good, old anger. What are you going to do, girl? Take another pot-luck swing?”

“Just... leave me alone!”

Baker tilted her head to watch the young woman. “Oh, angry and afraid, very afraid. That’s good. I like a nice mixture. She should have had the gun,” she laughed, glancing over to Dawson. “I have a feeling she would have had the courage to use it.”

Dawson had approached her, gun now fully stowed away. He seemed to have accepted that he couldn’t shoot Baker, not after everything they had gone through together. “That’s because I know that the only way to get you back is not through violence. What good would shooting you do?”

“Perhaps you might survive a smidgen longer,” Baker taunted.

“Darcy, although you can’t remember it, you’ve lived many years over... You should know as well as any that time is of no consequence. It’s how you spend that time that really matters.”

“And how exactly would you spend your time then?”

“With you.”

Confusion flashed across the half-siren’s face. She took an involuntary step back as the mocking smile flickered. “I don’t... I don’t understand.”

“No, you never did. But... I think you were learning.” He stepped forward and bridged the gap between them, and delivered a brief kiss. “Now tell me you don’t remember who I am.”

Baker stumbled back. “Dawson?”

There was a dull thud. The half-siren’s eyes rolled upwards and she collapsed into a heap. Michael stood behind her, with a pilfered cane from Baron still raised. “What?” he demanded. “For all we know, she might have been about to skewer you. Now, let’s tie her up or something and get working on a cure.” Michael lowered the cane and turned about to Haru. “And, just for the record, just how long were you awake during that confrontation?”

The young woman shrugged innocently. “Probably most of it. What? You don’t think I’m that heavy a sleeper, do you?”

Dawson, who was kneeling beside the unconscious woman, glanced up to the rest of the party. “Is everyone else okay? Haru, how’s your memory?”

“Still lacking the entirety of my adult life,” Haru retorted.

“No noticeable change, good. Baron?”

The Creation’s gaze was being drawn back to the two other humans; Michael wielding the cane he’d stolen off the feline, and Haru was still gripping the knife as if she intended to use it if more trouble arose. “A few momentary lapses, but nothing concrete,” he answered.

“I was expecting that. Boy?”

“What’s with this boy business?” Michael grumbled. “I’m fine – I told Baron this earlier. I mean, apart from the cold.”

“Perhaps he’s naturally immune,” Toto offered.
“Perhaps,” Dawson said doubtfully. “Still... are you sure you’ve suffered no memory loss?”

“As far as I know.”

The Doctor sighed. “Come on – boy, you come with me into the lab; Baron, you stay out here with Haru and keep watch. I injured Zaroff, not killed, so there’s a chance he may come back.”

Muta trotted out after Michael, much to the human’s surprise. “Are you coming too?” Michael asked.

“Meh. It’s not often a cat gets a chance to look round laboratories – for obvious reasons. Might be interesting.”

“Oh, I’ve got to see this,” Toto laughed. He flew out along with the feline. “You, in a lab? I’ll bet you’ve never read a page of science in your life!”

Haru watched the others disappear through a set of double doors, and then she glanced back to the cat Creation. “I guess that just leaves you and me... and her,” she added, looking to Baker’s unconscious form. Baron had already found something to bind her, and was securely tying her wrists and ankles, as well as removing her swords from her reach.

“I guess it does.”

She watched the Creation finish up, her young teenage mind desperately trying to recall anything more recent than her schooldays. Obviously she was quite a bit older than that, and a lot could have happened in the intervening years... like meeting the Bureau, it would seem. “So... we really do know each other, huh?”

A faint smile crossed Baron’s features. “Indeed we do.” His gaze flickered to the knife she still hadn’t released. “Are you afraid of me still?”

“No. I mean, if you were going to hurt me, you’ve had plenty of opportunity before now.” ‘And I can’t shake the feeling that I trusted you before. How can a single gut feeling be so strong?’ “Am I really...? Am I really part of the... Bureau? Part of this craziness?”

“We wouldn’t be able to beat you away even if we tried,” Baron answered. “Miss Haru, I know you think you’re young and that this is all too much to handle, but the person you’ve grown into is so much more stronger than that. You’re stronger than that.”

“But I’m not the Haru you know.” The brunette paused. “If – when – my memories return, how much of this do think I’m going to remember? I suppose everything in the past hours are going to be wiped clean.”

“What makes you say that?”

Haru gave a funny little smile. “A feeling. So, just between my fleeting memory and you, just how strong are the feelings you harbour for my older self?” The smile twitched in amusement at Baron’s surprise. “I can see that Michael cares for me, and I’ve seen the looks you two have exchanged. My older self must be blind not to see the signs.”

“I expect she knows,” Baron murmured. “But I turned her down a long time ago. She would do much better with the boy anyway.”

“I think that’s her decision.”

“She made her decision.” The Creation wouldn’t meet her eyes. “She chose to keep her normal life
and her Bureau life strictly separate right from the start.”

Haru chuckled. “Yeah, looks like she did a real good job of that.”

Baron chuckled too. Haru decided she liked the sound. “I suppose things have got a little convoluted recently.”

The brunette glanced to the windows where dulled sunlight was drifting its way through the murky glass. She turned her face onto the little warmth, closing her eyes in quiet thought. “I guess, that when the time comes for my memories to be returned, this version of me will disappear. I think... that’ll be okay though.” She smiled gently to Baron, suddenly looking like the Haru he knew. “It’s good... to know... what I grew up to become.”

“Haru...”

“We’re always changing, Baron. My transition just happens to be much more abrupt than your average alteration. But few people get the reassurance of seeing what they become.”

“How can you be so sure that this future is what you want?”

“I guess I can’t,” Haru replied honestly. “But I can see who I become through the people I surround myself with. And all this... craziness, as I put it... I still can’t handle it. But since I’m here, I guess the person I become is someone who can. And don’t say we’re the same person, we’re not – not yet. But, given time, we would be.” Her smile saddened. “It’s been good knowing you, Baron.”

“You too, Miss Haru.”

She looked back to the musty windows, where the light was slowly being lost as the sun sunk over the urban horizon. For a moment, just a mere moment, the light flickered. Haru rose to her feet, grabbing at whatever lay in the bag to her side. Her fingers curled around a knife’s handle and she pulled out a wicked blade.

Baron jolted back; his back was to the window and so all he had seen was Haru grab the weapon and jump to her feet. Haru was watching the city beyond that, for several stinted seconds she failed to realise the shock she had impeded on the Creation. When she finally allowed herself to breathe, she noticed the wary way he was watching her. She sighed and lowered the blade.

“Sorry, I just... I just thought I saw...” She shook her head. “I guess I’m just jumpy.” She laughed, albeit unsteadily. “Look at me – jumping at shadows now!”

Gunshots rang.

ooOoo

Teaser: “I could take her place.” / “Shoot me now, if you like, but I won’t play to your rules.” / He spun the gun round and smacked Baron unconscious with the butt. And the General was still smiling. / The tawny feline looked to the brunette with mild confusion. “And who are you?” / “Oh... not you too.” / “I should have just killed you long ago, without the game. You’re nothing but a monster.”

Chapter End Notes
A/N: The case that Muta references to Michael in this episode (if you don’t recognise it) is ‘Red’, from the first series, episodes 9-10. The last case with Baker and Dawson was, ‘The Hound of the Bureau’, episodes 5-6 from series 1.
Glass shattered. Haru felt something whistle past her. She spun around to see two bullets embedded in the wall behind her even as her mind slowly processed this near miss. Soft, mindless laughter bubbled aimlessly from her lips, but while her body swayed, her feet were solidly unmoving. Somewhere along the line, her mind had disconnected from her legs and she wasn’t going anywhere. More nervous laughter dropped from her.

“Baron, would you look at that...? That was close...”

Something slammed into her and moments later another double-set of bullets shot into the wall where she had just been standing. The paralysing shock was knocked out of her system and she rolled back to her feet and, staying low, scuttled to hide behind the reception desk. It took her a few more seconds to realise that what had knocked her from the bullets had been a who – and that the who in question was Baron. She looked to the Creation as he joined her behind the desk. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Baron was in a quiet state of shock himself; he had forgotten Haru’s memory loss and had assumed she would move the moment the bullets missed. The Haru he knew – the one whose instincts had been honed by time with the Bureau – would have reacted instantly. But this Haru had fallen prey to her shock – and he almost hadn’t realised this fast enough.

One second later. That’s all it would have taken.

Haru must have read some of this in his face, for she dropped her gaze and looked away. “Sorry... about that. I should have moved sooner.”

“No, it’s my fault. I’m practiced at this; I should have helped sooner.”

“Well then, if you’re so practiced, what do we do now?” There was a teasing note in her voice, something even almost close to the Haru he knew, even if it did sound somehow younger coming from her now. She was, after all, a teenager at heart right now. She glanced back across the room, seeing now how the evening light flickered as someone approached the door. Her grip on the knife tightened. “Well?” she repeated, the previous teasing note fast disappearing. “Any bright ideas?”

“I always have a few in reserve.”

“Any of them likely to work?”

“A few,” Baron admitted, “although it depends on your definition of ‘work’. ”

“One that preferably doesn’t get us both killed,” Haru clarified.

Baron made a face. “Now, you see, that rules out half my ideas. Like this one, for example.” Before Haru could question or even react, Baron just grinned and swung himself out of their hiding place.
and into full sight. Haru thought she heard a whispered, “Stay here,” from the Creation, but it was so light she could have just imagined it.

Miraculously, Baron’s reveal wasn’t coupled with a splattering of gunfire and blood – or whatever Creations bled – but a strange sort of silence. The kind of silence where two parties are curiously sizing up the other. Haru considered moving to see, but that whisper kept her hidden. After all, it was her this Zaroff was hunting.

Baron walked away from the desk, rounding the counter to face whoever had entered.

“I hear you’re looking for someone,” he said.

“And I hear you’re hiding them,” the stranger replied.

“A fair assumption, I suppose,” Baron answered easily. Haru started to wonder how many situations he’d tried to talk himself out of in the past if he honestly thought he was going to get anywhere with this. She didn’t want to wonder how many times it’d worked though. She could hear footsteps – the heavier march of the stranger and the lighter, almost inaudible footsteps of the Creation – as they approached one another. Haru didn’t dare glance to see just what was happening.

“In all my memories, though, I have no recollection of a being such as yourself,” the other remarked, his words weighted by the sound of his footfalls. “Have I really forgotten so much that I don’t know what you are, or are you something new entirely? What corner of this world were you dredged up from?”

“No world that you will ever see,” Baron returned. “But, excuse my manners; I haven’t introduced myself.” In the momentary silence that followed, Haru gained the distinct impression he was bowing; she struggled to believe it was anything sincere though. “My name is Baron Humbert von Gikkingen, founder of the Cat Bureau and general busybody. I take it you are General Zaroff.”

“So you’ve heard of me?”

“I’ve heard of your game.”

“Well then you must know that you are standing between me and my quarry.”

“I don’t believe I am.” Baron’s tone was so light it would have been easy to mistake it for pleasantries, had it not had an icy undercurrent running beneath it. “You’ve come here in vain; the woman you seek is not here.”

“Come, come, Baron; I am a patient man, not stupid. I know who I fired those warning shots at.” The General’s solid footsteps started to approach Haru’s hiding place, but he was forced to stop as Baron intercepted him.

“I told you, she’s not here,” Baron growled. “The woman you agreed to your little ‘game’ with is no longer here; like yourself she succumbed to the virus and has no recollection of much of her past. She has no memory of the agreement struck between you two. So I would look elsewhere for your hunting grounds, if I were you.”

“I would, but opportunities arise so rarely now.”

Haru was pressing herself against the side, her heart hammering so hard she could swear it was making the desk rattle. She glanced down to her injured leg; it wasn’t serious but she wasn’t going to be running anywhere anytime soon.
“Please, Baron; I insist. This is not your fight.” A dangerous tone entered the General’s voice.
“Move aside.”

“What about an exchange?”

Zaroff’s curiosity piqued. “What do you have in mind?”

“Miss Haru is injured – she won’t be much of a challenge anymore. Really not worth the time of a seasoned hunter like yourself.”

“True... but I take what I get.”

“I could take her place.”

Haru’s breath hitched and her legs locked. She became deadly aware that she should move – get up, do something – to stop him making this deal. She was sure that was what her older self would do. But she wasn’t her. She was Haru Yoshioka, school student, young teenager. She wasn’t Haru Yoshioka, the Bureau member, the adventuress. And so her legs still wouldn’t move.

“Now, why would I agree to something like that?” General Zaroff’s tone was humoured. “It would be far simpler for me to finish what I’ve started here and come for the rest of you later. I don’t like to leave a game unfinished.” He started to walk but found his way blocked by Baron again. “Don’t get in my way, sir; I’m sure that whatever you are, a bullet will do you no good.”

“Of course, you’d have to hit me first.”

Their discussion changed from conversation to action so fast that Baron’s half-hearted laugh was cut short by a flurry of movement and – a heartbeat later – the jolt of a gunshot.

Haru yelped at the shattering sound, and edged to the side to see the two individuals tussling with the gun kicked to the side. Luckily, the bullet appeared to have gone wide and missed Baron entirely. The discarded gun was only a metre away from Haru’s hiding place; if she could only edge over to it without being seen...

Zaroff crashed past her after a well-aimed blow from Baron’s cane, tripping past the gun and stumbling against the desk. Haru withdrew behind it, now only with a single bureau between her and the General. She glanced round just enough to see Baron following after Zaroff, but he caught her eye as he approached. He quickly came to the same conclusion that she had – that the General was far too close to her for either of their liking. A fleeting moment of fear for her safety flashed across his face, distracting him for the merest second.

Zaroff saw the inattention and took it. He pushed past the Creation, grabbed the gun off the floor and rounded it to smack its butt into Baron’s head. Unprepared, unaware, the feline went down. Haru screamed and her limbs buckled into movement – finally. She rose up, forsaking her hiding place to see Zaroff change his grip on the weapon and aim the barrel at the downed Creation.

“No...” she whispered.

Gun still aimed at Baron, Zaroff turned to look at the young woman. A tight smile curled at his lips. “So there you are...”

Haru dropped her gaze away to see Baron. He was blinking away the pain from the hit, and only now focusing on her. A faint trickle of blood ran down from his forehead and his brow creased at seeing her standing there, so stupidly vulnerable. “Haru...?”
“I won’t let you sacrifice yourself to save me, Baron,” Haru murmured. “I can’t, not when I know that my older self wouldn’t be able to live with herself knowing that. I may not know you, but she does.” Haru smiled weakly. “I can’t quite decide whether it’s selfish or selfless to do something for a future version of myself...”

Baron started to get back up, but Zaroff shifted his gun to aim it directly into his heart. If eyes really could send daggers, the General would have been dead in a matter of mere seconds.

“This is none of your business anymore, Baron. Your agility took me off-guard the first time, but not even you can move fast enough to avoid a bullet from this range. While you, Miss Haru,” he added, glancing to the young brunette, “are a different case entirely. You won’t be moving too far or fast with that leg. It won’t be much of a game unless you run.” That same tight, humoured grin. “I’ll give you thirty seconds to put some distance between us.”

Haru didn’t move. Her nerves hummed through her, buzzing through her system like a shot of coffee.

“Let’s see... starting... now.”

Haru still didn’t move. General Zaroff stared at her, and then hoisted a second gun, a small pistol, from his side and aimed it towards her head.

“What are you doing, girl?”

She opened up her palm and the knife she had held onto for so long slipped out and clattered to the desk. “What does it look like?” she asked. “You wanted a game. I’m not giving you it.” She met his gaze. “Shoot me now, if you like, but I won’t play to your rules.”

One gunshot rippled through the air, and then a second. Haru winced, eyes instinctively closing at the close proximity of the shots, but felt no pain. She opened her eyes to see that Zaroff had changed the angle of his gun at the last moment and peppered the wall with another bullet. He seemed dissatisfied by her lack of reaction.

“If you won’t run for me, then maybe you’ll run for him.” He dropped the pistol back into its holster and returned all his attention to the shotgun barrel staring down into Baron. “I’m sure a few well-aimed bullets would stop whatever constitutes for a heart in this creature.”

“How do I know you won’t just kill him the moment I start running?” Haru whispered.

“You don’t. I can only give you my word.”

“And I’m supposed to trust that?”

“You can trust that I will definitely shoot him if you don’t, as opposed to I may only maybe shoot him. His chance of survival depends on what you do. So... will you run?”

“I have no choice, do I?”

“Oh, you always have a choice. It just depends on how... you look at it.”

“You mean whose life I value more; his or mine?”

Zaroff smiled. “Isn’t that the choice we have to make every day? Should I do what’s best for me, or for others? How far will we go to help others before the cost is too much? What is the point where our own needs overtake that of all others?” That smile tightened even as the humour brightened.
“So... will you play my game?”

“I’ll play.”

“Oh, one last thing before you leave...” He picked up the knife and tossed it to Haru. She just about managed to catch it by the handle and not the blade. “Stay in this building. Go wherever you like in it, but don’t leave. If I see you so much as step outside, then I’m coming back for him—” he pointed to Baron “—to finish the job off. It’ll be more fun this way.”

Haru glanced down to the knife, and then back up to the General. “If you say so.” She met the eyes of Baron, who was still unable to move without coming into contact with the gun’s barrel. His eyes were pleading, begging her not to agree to this.

Too late. She already had.

“Thirty seconds, did you say?” She attempted a humourless smile. “Let’s say a minute. To give me a sporting chance.”

Zaroff almost seemed amused by her request. “Alright. A minute. If you think that’ll make any difference.” He spun the gun round and smacked Baron unconscious with the butt. And the General was still smiling.

“Start running.”

ooOoo

Baron woke grudgingly from the realms of nothingness. He winced as pain trembled through his skin as he attempted to open his eyes. His left one opened willingly, but his right felt sealed shut. He groaned and attempted to clear away the problem, but quickly found that his arms weren’t going anywhere, tied behind his back as they were. He glanced over his shoulder and discovered that his tied hands were joined to someone else’s.

He had forgotten her in the chaos, tied up and unconscious as she was. He stilled his actions, suddenly very aware that he was joined with a potentially unstable, and definitely dangerous, half-siren. By the looks of things, she was yet to wake.

Although, when she did, the last thing he wanted to be was in close proximity.

She was going to be very angry.

He glanced upwards, to where the corridors bridged above and a murky shaft of sunlight filtered down through the building. Everything was silent.

“Please, Haru... be safe...”

ooOoo

Haru’s minute’s grace had long gone. As she crept through the upper floors of the science building, she was all too aware that, somewhere behind her, General Zaroff was stalking after his prey.

It would have been all too easy to find a hiding place, camp down, and hope for the best, but a basic survival instinct stopped her. If she was found, she would have nowhere to run.

Game over.

As for running, Zaroff had made it plenty clear that Baron would reap the punishment if she tried to
flee anywhere beyond the building. And she couldn’t run forever – even though her older self was stronger and more toned than she remembered being in her teens. She had kept herself in shape, and she had no doubts that this was the influence of the Bureau. After all, circumstances like this meant she had to be.

Then again, even in shape, it was hard to run when one leg shot up with pain with every step.

No, she couldn’t keep running.

And that left just one option.

To fight back.

She was bitterly sure her older self would have ideas – heck, her older self probably knew how to fight – but her current mental self, her young teenager self, didn’t. Still, that didn’t mean she couldn’t try.

She had found her way to a corridor of offices, presumably once filled with scientists busy with their research and composing lectures for the students who passed through the university. But now they were empty, left in various states of abandonment. As quietly as she could manage, Haru peeked into the ones she passed in vain hope that something that could have weapon potential was just lying around. Some of the rooms were in pristine condition, as if its resident professor had just gone for the day and was still coming back; other rooms were in disarray with their filing undone and their papers scattered. It looked like, as they lost their memories, some of the professors had resorted to tearing apart their office for clues into their own past.

Haru quickly went past those rooms.

She passed by many of these offices, each as empty and useless as the one before it. There was still no sign of Zaroff, but he wouldn’t be far behind. She picked up her pace, the carpet mercifully muffling each hurried step. She reached the end of the corridor and found herself standing in the doorway before the bridge that passed over the reception.

She hesitated there, glancing down to the repeating bridges below. It didn’t matter that she couldn’t see anyone; if she tried to cross it then she would be utterly out in the open. The rooms behind her – and all others that edged the opening – had windows that faced out to the bridges. Zaroff could easily be watching from any of them.

She was about to turn around and head back the way she had come – climb yet another set of stairs in pursuit of a weapon or device more convenient than the knife – when she realised something.

On the other side of the divide, on the other side of the bridge, were the laboratories; one on each floor.

Haru hadn’t been in many laboratories – in fact, the only ones she remembered were the small classroom ones she had used in school, and they were really just glorified desks with gas taps attached. But, still, there would have to be something she could use. Chemicals, scientific apparatus, perhaps just a well-aimed laboratory stool would do the trick.

She would have to risk it.

She let the door swing softly shut behind her, listening hard for any sign that the sound had been heard. She took one gentle step across the bridge – and froze when the footstep flared up into an echo in the empty, open space.
The sound bounced off the walls and came back down upon her – this time coupled with the new sound of another door – somewhere – opening. She jolted into action – and she ran for the laboratory.

Every step that her injured leg took sent shivers of pain shaking through her. She gritted her teeth. She kept going. It was move or die – and the survival instinct was winning. She was running, but it was agony. Through ragged gasps, she threw her gaze everywhere across that open space – trying desperately to see where Zaroff was coming from. To see from where he would shoot.

She turned too sharply and put too much weight on her injured side. It gave way and she wheeled to her left.

A bullet hit where she had been but mere moments ago.

She glanced upwards and saw that Zaroff was leaning out of one of the office windows, his gun aimed and quickly readjusting for her new position. Their gazes met. From the way he was watching her, she knew he was waiting for her to move. He’d shoot her down the moment she got back up to run.

So she didn’t.

She shot forward using her right leg, propelling herself towards the laboratory door but not rising like he had been expecting. His second bullet struck too far up and jammed itself into a patch of floor a metre before Haru.

With his double-barrel gun now exhausted of bullets (Haru hoped, although she was no gun expert – she assumed) she pushed herself up using the same momentum in which she had started forward, and ran the remaining half-dozen metres to the laboratory.

The entrance wasn’t locked and so she easily pushed one of the double-sided doors open, but had to pause and glance back to the General.

He was still watching her, but the gun was no longer raised in her direction. And instead of irritation at his miss, he was smirking. Her little trick had amused him and he was starting to think that she might be more interesting to hunt than he had first assumed. But he wasn’t worried – interesting she might be making this, but he didn’t honestly believe she would win this.

She was no threat.

Haru jolted inside the laboratory and slammed the door shut behind her.

ooOoo

Baron had watched the proceedings with horror; he couldn’t see the exact events very well from his viewpoint on the ground floor, but he heard the gunshots. After the first one, there was a silence in which time seemed to slow down. The shout for Haru died in his throat as all the breath went from him. As every long, tortuous second ticked by – a second in which he was without Haru – the guilt flooded him. He had brought her here – had let her go on alone after that fall from the bridge, had inadvertently put her in the path of Zaroff and let this crazed game go ahead.

The second gunshot started time again.

A second bullet needed meant the quarry was still kicking. Even as the thought crossed Baron’s mind, he heard the echo of Haru’s footsteps pound across one of the bridges and, then, silence again. It was shorter this time, but every second where Haru was silent was a second where Haru could be
gone. But then there was a quick succession of steps and the slam of a heavy set of doors banging shut.

She had put a door between her and Zaroff – for now.

Baron started to pull anew at the binds that held him, but they remained steadfast. He glanced round to the laboratory doors on the ground floor – the ones where Dawson, Michael, and the rest of the Bureau had disappeared into. If they hadn’t come out running at the sound of the gunshots, then they probably hadn’t heard the gunshots at all. The laboratory doors were thick, after all; sound and precious else travelled well through them. No; right now he was on his own.

He started to struggle again, but with a new task in hand. He curled his fingers down to the bottom of his gloves and attempted to grip on them. At such a small action, it was surprisingly painful; his fingers almost entirely flattened against his palm at an acute angle that wasn’t intended. But his little and ring finger snared the hem of his glove on his right hand, and he tugged off the white gloves in jerky, awkward movements. They dropped to the floor behind him.

He flexed his fingers, running the tips over his nails – or, more accurately, his claws – and reassuring himself that they were sufficient. They weren’t long – otherwise they would have ruined the gloves long ago – but they were sharp, and they were strong.

He twisted his hands around, acutely aware that the binds that restrained his wrists were the same ones restraining the unconscious Baker’s. If he moved too quickly, too sharply, he could jolt her awake. Instead he managed to bring his hands angled so that he could score at the bindings with his newly-freed claws.

At first he thought it was the awkward angle, but he was tiring quickly. He was having to blink back the exhaustion, not helped by the headache that was threatening to rise up. For a moment there was an overwhelming feeling of disorientation when he didn’t know where he was – why wasn’t he at the Bureau? His memory snapped back into place a moment after that, but it was enough to know.

Enough to know the disease was creeping over him. Perhaps he had already lost some memories but, unable to recollect them, was unable to know what he was missing.

He started to cut at the bindings again.

ooOoo

It would take Zaroff a while to catch up to the laboratory, Haru knew, but it was only a matter of time and she needed every second to count. She needed time to prepare her returning attack.

She turned back to the laboratory and surveyed the damage before her. This was one of the places touched by the madness; perhaps scientists had even been in here trying to find a cure when their memories decayed into nothing. Petri dishes and beakers lay smashed across the room; on the work benches Bunsen burners stood like the last line of soldiers, still at attention even as all else had fallen apart.

She snatched up one of the burners and secured the metal neck between both handles of the double-doors. It wouldn’t last for long – a few good shoves and it would come loose – but it would be enough to delay Zaroff for a few seconds longer. More importantly, it would act as an alarm for his arrival.

She ran through the laboratory – there was no point in stealth now; he knew exactly where she was – and began to hoist open every cupboard she could find. Weight scales, tweezers, test tubes and test
tube racks scattered across the floor with her ragged search. Petri dishes, some with agar, others without, fell from another cupboard; the ones with agar were now coloured with the invasion of fungi and bacteria. Haru almost broke her toes when another cupboard revealed a microscope that toppled out onto her foot.

Along the long wall of the laboratory, fuming cupboards stood – large, glass-fronted cupboards with vents at the top to minimise the risk of dangerous gaseous chemicals extending into the rest of the room. Inside some of these, intact bottles of chemicals still remained.

Haru pushed one of the cupboard windows upwards to open it up and leant forward to examine the bottles. All had long, chemical names that she didn’t understand, but some of the labels were aided by warning signs. One had [a picture of something] with the convenient definition ‘corrosive’ added beneath it.

Haru quickly decided she like the look of that one.

She grabbed a cloth from the side and used that to pick up the bottle – anything labelled as ‘corrosive’ wasn’t something she was going to be handling with her bare hands – and set it onto the work bench behind her before searching through the rest for equally-dangerous labels. More began to join the first and she started to feel a little bit more prepared. Although she would have to get close enough to him to throw the bottles’ contents over Zaroff, but she would cross that bridge when she got to it.

The rattle of the Bunsen burner lodged between the doorhandles put a hasty stop to her searching. She froze, looking back and seeing the intimidating form of the General in the frosted glass windows of the doors. She grabbed a couple of the closest ones and – instead of running away like every instinct told her to – ran towards the doors.

The Bunsen burner gave way and the General slammed into the laboratory, but Haru was already at the entrance. She was ready. So when Zaroff appeared from between the doors she threw the contents of one of the bottles over him.

There was a pause. A long one where a whole lot of nothing seemed to be happening, only a rather confused duo; Zaroff in trying to understand Haru’s action and Haru in trying to understand just what had gone wrong. She glanced down at the now-empty bottle.

The angry black cross symbol that she had taken to be a good sign of toxicity was indeed present on the bottle, but that there were also tiny words imprinted below it. She could just about make out ‘poisonous to ingest’ She groaned.

A slow, humoured smile spread across Zaroff’s face. “Is that really your best shot?” He raised the gun and aimed it towards the stricken brunette. “Honestly, after your previous little display I had hoped for something a little bit more impressive. You disappoint me.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Haru threw out the contents of the second bottle over the man and this time there was a definite reaction. He screamed. The gun was dropped and he attempted to wipe away the corrosive liquid. Some of the splashback from the attack had hit Haru – not much, just a few spots – and she was aware of a searing pain digging into her hands. And the General had had a much more generous dose.

She took the opportunity to kick the gun away from Zaroff; she overshot and it slid across the polished floor, through the open doors, and toppled off the bridge between the gap beneath the railings. She heard it hit the floor many metres below.
She started to run, but Zaroff wasn’t letting her go that easily. Even in utter agony, his hand found her wrist. Her momentum meant she slammed into the wall and then her injured leg gave way beneath her. It had finally had enough.

She tried to push herself back to her feet, but all the strength that had been holding her up had sapped from her. She could feel that the fall had opened up the wound and it was bleeding again beneath the bandages.

Before her, Zaroff was still reeling; he was trying to find his gun but, with his disorientation, hadn’t discovered that it was gone yet. Slumped against the wall and suddenly lacking the strength to get up again, Haru watched Zaroff spin on the spot searching for his weapon. He grew frustrated quickly and drew out a knife from his side.

Haru dimly recalled that she had had a knife like that too – what exactly had she done with it? Ah, there it was... on the work bench with the remaining harmful chemicals she had managed to find. Far, far out of reach.

She looked back to the General and he was staggering his way towards her. He was slow – still dizzy from Haru’s attack – but Haru wasn’t going anywhere. She kicked feebly out with her feet, hoping to aim for his shins when they came within reach. She turned her head to the side and screamed out for the one person she trusted to save her.

Even if she remembered nothing about him.

ooOoo

How long had he been at work at this?

Come to that, what was even going on? He knew he was in a situation – but that covered most, if not all, of Bureau work. That practically encompassed all of it, come to think of it. The real question was just how much of a situation it was and where exactly everyone else was. He hoped they were safe.

Because the real inconvenience of memory loss, Baron felt, was the lack of context. Especially in situations like this. He was going to break free any moment now – the bindings were almost falling off him now thanks to his work – but, after that, what then? Should he be running away or running towards? And just what was there to run to or from anyway?

This would be a whole lot easier if someone else could fill him in on the gaps. Especially since the last thing he remembered was settling down to deal with the paperwork after a particularly harrowing case [reference].

He couldn’t even ask Baker, who was well and truly unconscious.

The last fibre of the rope gave way and his wrists came free. He moved his hands out from behind his back and massaged the feeling back into them. He picked up his gloves and pulled them back on. There. Everything was back to normal except... ah, there was his cane. Kicked out under the sofa.

He stood slowly up, the muscles in his body telling him he had been sitting down for quite a while and had kind of settled into place at the inactivity. He gently moved Baker so that she was leaning against one of the sofas, now she no longer had him to rest against. He rolled his shoulders, expecting the ache that came at the movement, and finally swept his cane off the floor.

Now all there was, was to find the rest of the Bureau and work out exactly what was going on. He knelt down by Baker and tried to nudge her awake. Even when friendly, it was best to wake sirens with the utmost care. Muta had almost lost his tail a few times that way.
Baker winced and the beginnings of consciousness trickled back into her being. Her eyes slowly blinked open and then focused on Baron. “Who—” she started, and then, upon seeing his appearance, changed it to, “What are you?”

A small smile settled over Baron’s features. Only Baker would change the politer ‘who are you?’ into the blunt ‘what are you?’ with conscious thought. But her question indicated that he wasn’t the only one with the memory loss.

“I am a Creation, Darcy Baker; at your service.” Since he was kneeling, he resorted to a quick tipping of his tophat. “I take it you remember as little as I do as to how we ended up here then?”

The half-siren groaned, wincing as she gradually woke up further. “No, no...” she murmured. “I remember a little.” Her eyes narrowed and she glared at the feline. “Who hit me?”

Baron smiled again and gave a little shrug. “Unfortunately, that is beyond my knowledge right now. I had hoped you would be able to fill in the blanks as I do not remember even coming to this world.”

Darcy Baker watched Baron carefully, her eyes narrowing as if to try to perceive if this was a trick. She must have found her answer, though, for she murmured, “You’re serious... You were telling the truth earlier – something really is stripping people of their memories.” Her face soured. “Don’t expect me to help you though. Maybe a lot of time has passed and I really did change in those years, but I don’t remember them. I don’t remember you.”

Baron paused. A few things clicked into place with Baker’s words. “How... little do you remember?” he slowly asked.

“Last time I checked, I was back in my hometown.”

“So if you don’t remember me, then... you’d only discovered you were a siren at the time,” Baron murmured. “Which means...” He remembered what their initial meeting had been like and it wasn’t pretty. In fact, it had been their most dangerous case to date at the time.

Something of his thoughts must have visibly passed over his face, for the half-siren snorted and said, “Oh, relax. I’m not about to butcher anyone – not yet, anyway.” All the same, she fidgeted as she spoke, as if physically having to restrain the bloodlust. It didn’t do much to install confidence into the Creation.

At that moment, something fell from one of the floors above and smacked into the ground between them. Both individuals paused, and glanced down to the gun that had apparently just fallen out of the sky.

Baker was the first to move, casually picking up the weapon and looking down the barrel of the gun to see the damage. “Not too bad; it might even shoot still...” She glanced up to the floors above. “But where...?”

“BARON!”

The Creation’s head shot up. That voice... he didn’t think he recognised it, but the owner definitely knew him. And it sounded like she needed help. He started into a sprint towards the stairs, just hoping that he could get there in time. To his surprise, the half-siren caught up with him. “Baker! What... are you doing?”

“Hey, it sounds like something’s going on up there,” Baker replied. She gave a fanged smile. “There’s not a chance I’d miss out on action like that.”
Baron just had to hope she wouldn’t end up shooting a friend.

Even if he couldn’t remember this particular friend.

ooo

Instinct kicked into Haru at the last moment. The last residual trace of survival energy propelled her into action as the knife came down. She pushed off against the wall. As she rolled away, the blade hit the plaster; she turned back and kicked into Zaroff’s legs. He staggered back and Haru dragged herself to her feet, supporting herself on the nearest workbench.

Zaroff grabbed her ankle and stopped her in her tracks. She kicked back at him again, clinging onto the edge of the workbench and dragging herself back. Her fingers brushed one of the bottles; it spun on the spot, tilting towards her for a moment before falling past her grip and smashing onto the floor.

She winced and recoiled as the liquid spilt onto her jacket. Her fingers passed over the bottles and snagged on the knife she had so carelessly left on the surface. She slashed back towards the General, missing him but forcing him to retreat back. He released her and she scooted further back. Where was Baron?!

Using the scattered stools, she hauled herself away and limped towards the door. Zaroff kicked at her and she collapsed forward just as the double-doors opened and she fell into the arms of a familiar Creation. Despite everything, she blushed.

“B-Baron?”

The tawny feline looked to the brunette with mild confusion. “And who are you?” He couldn’t deny she was a fetching young woman, but he wasn’t aware that he knew her. She blinked up at him, gears slowly whirring.

“Oh... not you too.”

There was the sound of movement from behind and she remembered the situation at hand.

“But... let’s perhaps talk about this later. In case you hadn’t noticed, we kind of have a problem.” She glanced back to Zaroff, who had stumbled back to his feet and was still armed with his knife. “Tell me you have a plan...”

“Plan?” Baron echoed. “Until thirty seconds ago, I wasn’t aware what was even going on... I’m not sure I do even now.” He shifted round so that he was standing before the young woman, cane in hand. “But I’m well-rehearsed in the art of improvisation.”

“Oh really? Great.” Haru turned around and saw that they had a newcomer; the recently-awoken half-siren. “Oh, really?” she repeated weakly. “Great. Baron...?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What is she doing out here? Isn’t she trying to kill us?”

“Not right now.”

“If you’re lucky, it might even stay that way,” Darcy added, smiling with a mouth full of teeth. She raised the discarded gun from earlier and aimed it towards the General. “Right, time to see whether this beauty still works.”
“Baker, we can work this out without violence,” Baron reasoned.

“No, Baron; we really can’t. Move, General, and I blow your head off.”

The man froze, glaring at the half-human through his blistering skin. “I should have just killed you long ago, without the game. You’re nothing but a monster.”

“So I’ve been told,” Darcy replied. She shot him through the head.

Haru screamed and Baron simply tensed at the gunshot. “I told you there was no need for violence,” he said quietly.

The half-siren lowered her weapon. “And I disagreed. Anyway, the matter’s over now.”

Haru couldn’t tear her eyes away from the body as it slumped forward and finally collapsed onto the polished floor. The entrance wound of the bullet was only the size of a penny, but the exit was a gaping hole in the back of his head; a mass of red mess that pooled over his hair and onto the ground.

“We should go,” she whispered. She dragged her gaze away, trying to look anywhere but at the corpse. Was this something that she regularly dealt with when working with the Bureau? Perhaps when Darcy Baker was involved, but by the way Baron had reacted, she doubted this was commonplace. “Dawson will still be working on a cure.”

ooOoo

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of your acquaintance since my memory loss.” As the trio sat in the ground floor laboratory, reunited with their companions, Baron addressed the young woman. “My name is Baron Humbert von Gikkingen–”

“Yes, I know who you are.” Haru sat on one of the tall laboratory stools, her toes only just brushing the floor as she leant precariously on the seat. She watched the toe of her boots trace patterns in the dust. “You introduced yourself to me after I lost my memory.”

“And how exactly did you get entangled with this fiasco?”

Haru shifted her gaze up to the Creation. “According to what you told me earlier, I apparently work with you guys.” She nodded back to where Muta and Toto were racing each other around the laboratory. With the General gone and the Doctor working steadily on a cure, the atmosphere had somewhat relaxed. “I’m part of the Bureau,” she added when the feline didn’t react immediately.

“I see.”

Haru’s face fell a little. “Do you really not remember me?”

“Have we known each other... long?”

“I... I don’t know. I can’t remember.” ‘But I had thought... hoped... that something might remain... I could see the love you held for my future self – can it really have just disappeared without a trace?”

“But we met once when I was in school. You told me that you rescued me from an unwanted marriage...” She trailed off as she sensed some final spark of realisation trickle into the Creation. “What?”

“What... did you say your name was again?”

“Haru. Haru Yoshioka.”
Baron blinked several times over the span of a single second. The gears were whirring. “Haru? But you’re... I mean...” He shook his head. “How many years have I missed?”

“Well, I apparently graduated and left home a good six years ago,” Haru said, “so you must be somewhere between that and... about a year ago?”

Baron hesitated. “You came back.”

“What can I say?” Haru shrugged. “I guessed I missed you.”

“AHA!”

Both individuals leapt out of their seats as Dawson gave a cry of triumph.

“Have you done it?” Haru asked. “Have you found a cure?”

“Almost,” replied the Doctor. “I’ve definitely worked out why Michael was immune. Have you heard of smallpox?”

Haru shook her head. “It sounds like a disease.”

“It is,” Baron answered. “A very nasty disease that, fortunately, has been eradicated since the eighties.”

“And that was because an English physician and scientist, Edward Jenner, discovered that people who caught cowpox didn’t suffer from the much-worse smallpox. He introduced the first successful vaccine in known history.”

“Well, that’s great and all, but unless this is the rebirth of smallpox, what’s your point?” Haru asked.

“Well, Michael here helpfully came with a cold,” the Doctor replied, unaffected by the brunette’s blunt words. He probably faced retorts like that on a daily basis when working with Baker. “A cold that seems to carry much the same effect on the disease as cowpox did on smallpox. Of course, it’s going to take a good few hours before I can create anything that would work but... well, after that we’ll be cured.” James Dawson grinned to the group. “We can go home.”

ooOoo

“So...” Michael sat at the desk of the closed pet store and gave a long, low, and thoughtful whistle. “That’s what you do in your spare time. It would explain our first meeting.”

Haru smiled ruefully. “I’m sorry.”

“I guess this also explains why you suddenly disappear from time-to-time...” Michael’s voice trailed off as he recalled the unintended adventure he’d gone through that day, absent-mindedly stroking a purring Muta who had, unabashedly, invited himself in after the duo. “Haru... should I be worried for you?”


“I’ve seen the world you operate in – and it’s a long way away from the mundaneness of a little town pet store,” he said, motioning to the shop around him. “It’s dangerous – back there today, you could have gotten yourself killed – you almost did! On several occasions!”

“To be fair, she only gets herself nearly killed about once on your average Bureau case,” Muta added from the sidelines. “Anyway, Baron would never let anything like that happen.”
“I’m just aware that Baron won’t always be there for her,” Michael retorted. Given the events of the last day, he seemed to have got over his shock of a talking cat and was taking the whole thing in his stride now. He even seemed to enjoy the feline’s presence. Michael looked back to Haru. “You may not remember it, but there were several times when you were on your own.”

“I can handle myself.”

“No, I saw that,” the young man answered honestly. “Under normal circumstances – but today was evidently not normal. Haru, you thought you were a teenager, you had no recollection of the Bureau, and you had no idea how to defend yourself in that state. What about the next time something like that happens?”

“Again, to be fair,” Muta repeated, “that’s the first time that’s happened.”

“I’m not giving up my Bureau work,” Haru warned him.

“No, I’m not asking that. I can see you... well, you enjoy it. And I can’t ask you to give something that obviously means so much to you up. All I’m asking is... well... be careful.” Michael smiled softly. “And tell me when something is going on. I know I probably can’t help – I haven’t got the experience like you do and I’m not about to jump into another world any time soon – but I do appreciate knowing what madness is going on in your life. It won’t stop me worrying, but I’d rather know you were in... Atlantis swimming with the sharks than knowing nothing at all.”

“Michael, I... I wasn’t expecting that.” The young woman grinned, not afraid to admit she was completely surprised by his answer. “Thank you – for understanding.” She leant forward and kissed him. “I was so afraid that if I let my two lives combine, I’d risk losing one. And I don’t want to lose you.”

“Well, don’t be afraid. I’ll always be here, in the world of sanity and normality,” Michael returned happily. “Whenever you need me, my door will always be open.”

Muta got up and scarpered out of the shop. “I’m getting out of here. This mush is bad enough back at the Bureau...”

ooOoo

Next Story: Wonderful Thoughts

Teasing: It was something of fairytales, something of myths and legends – but the stories had never spoken of such wide jaws or such long fangs. / “Ah... Captain Hook, I take it.” / “Stop muttering and walk the plank!” / Where are we, birdbrain?” “If I wanted a safe bet, I’d say in trouble.” / “I’m guessing you would just hate to lose your furry friend here...” /

“Wonderful thoughts,” she whispered, and stepped off the plank.

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by:


A/N: Yes, this became a three-parter, but I just couldn’t fit the entire story into two episodes without it becoming super-ridiculous-long. So I split it up.

And, yes; after several requests, I decided to bring Baker and Dawson back for this case. They were my favourite OCs (bar Michael) from the first series, and I hoped you enjoyed their return.
In the flickering light of the fireflies, in a world far from this one and many years ago, a young apprentice finished up the last of his work. He placed his tools away and shooed the glowing flies back into their nest before grabbing a set of pan pipes from a nearby shelf. He dodged past his aging master, waving the instrument after him.

“Bye, Master Miyazaki! See you tomorrow!”

He ran out into the street, narrowly avoiding a horsecar that was running along the street-rail, and continued along the cobbled road. He ignored the hoarse shout of the driver and scampered out of the glass-domed market street, out into the city. The young boy took a quiet side-alley, jumping up onto the low roofs along it and sprinting across their tin coverings.

Eventually he took a perch on one of the cathedral arches, sitting in the middle and letting his legs hang off the edge. The slipping sun was edging over the city’s horizon, bathing the houses in a crimson sunset that turned his white shirt and tawny waistcoat golden. There, sitting in the last remnants of the day’s light, he retrieved his pan pipes and set to a chirpy little tune. His music bounced off the stone architecture of the cathedral, echoing off itself and spiralling down onto the people below.

A young neko girl – half-feline, half-human – paused in her way to spot the boy. She tipped her head back, holding onto her wide-brimmed hat with a slim hand, and grinned to the apprentice. “It’s so pretty. What is it called?”

The boy grinned back. “Wonderful Thoughts.”

In the flickering light of the TV, in an ordinary world and an ordinary time, a young brunette was curled up on the sofa of her flat. Evening was drawing in and Haru had resorted to a microwaved meal after a long day’s work at the pet store. A ring at the door jolted her out of her thoughts.

“Hiromi! Someone’s at the door!”

“I’m in the shower!” her flatmate shouted back. “Get it yourself!”

“I’m not expecting anyone,” Haru murmured, but she rose to her feet. The doorbell continued to ring. “Alright, alright! I’m coming!” She pushed her half-finished readymeal back onto the coffee table and headed out into the hallway. Upon opening the door, she came face-to-face with a young man who she could safely say she had never met, but who still looked familiar.

“Um, hello?”

He was well-dressed, with his dark hair combed under control as best as he could manage, and a half-wilted bunch of flowers in his hand. A few realisations kicked into gear and she worked out why he had seemed kind of familiar – although she hadn’t seen him in the flesh since her schooldays.
“Tsuge?”

“Uh... is Hiromi here?”

“In a fashion,” Haru answered. She leant back into the flat and shouted up the stairs, “HIROMI! Your boyfriend’s here!”

Hiromi squealed and spewed out some expletives that they could hear even from the doorway. Haru looked back to Tsuge as the hum of the shower came to an abrupt halt. She raised her eyebrows. “She’ll be down in a moment. Were those flowers for her?”

The young man grinned sheepishly. “Originally, but... well, they sort of got caught in the rain. I don’t suppose you have any idea how to...?”

“I can’t do much about the flowers, but...” Haru motioned for him to follow her into the kitchen, and she started opening up the oddbob drawer to withdraw a binding of red ribbon. She cut a length off and wound it around the flowers’ stems, finishing it off in a loose bow. “Well, that’s an improvement. Don’t worry – she’ll be too flattered that you brought flowers to really notice,” she reassured. “Are you taking her out tonight?”

“Yeah, hopefully. I know I’m a little bit early...”

Haru waved it away and returned to the lounge. Picking up from where she had left off with her decadent readymeal, she sank into the sofa and motioned for her best friend’s beau to take a seat also. “It’s fine, really. Hiromi just... takes a little while to get ready. Trust me, you’ve got at least half an hour before she’s finished.” Haru knew she had to look a sight, dressed in old jeans and a comfy t-shirt, but she hadn’t been expecting any guests any time soon. Hiromi hadn’t even mentioned that her boyfriend was picking her up.

“Anyway, long time no see, huh? I can’t believe you’ve been dating her for nearly a year and we haven’t even crossed paths during that time,” Haru nattered. She continued to eat at her meal, not really caring about her lazy appearance. After all, she wasn’t dating him. “What do you do now?”

“I’m a journalist,” said Tsuge. “Hiromi and I met when I interviewed her about the Griffin incident. You probably don’t remember it – it was a good year ago~”

Haru laughed abruptly. “No, I remember it.” How could she not? It had been a big case with the Bureau, one that had ended messily. Haru quickly sobered. “So, after that, you just... started dating?”

“Well, I suppose I just kept on finding excuses to go back to her and ask a few more questions for the interview. There was something... different about her.”

Haru smiled to herself. As far as she was aware, Hiromi was still the same good-old Hiromi she had been at school. But there wasn’t another girl like her. “Yeah, Hiromi’s one of a kind. So how’s the work going now? You chasing any interesting stories?”

“Oh, there’s something about a haunted house on the edge of town, but that’s about it.”

“Oh.” Haru picked up in interest. “I guess you’re in to the more supernatural news then?”

Tsuge gave her a strange look. “There was nothing supernatural about the Griffin case.”

“Oh,” Haru repeated. “Oh, I guess... well, Hiromi was talking about his strange appearance, so I just assumed... there was something... unusual about it. At least it’s all over now.”
“They never found the man.”

“Yeah, but if he was still at large, I think we would have heard about it, right?” Haru bluffed. Griffin wasn’t coming back; she knew that. He was buried beneath the old dovecot out of town, where no one but the Bureau and a few birds knew. She returned to her meal, sheepishly trying to ignore her little slip-of-the-tongue.

Tsuge fished his mobile phone from his pocket and flicked its screen on, muttering something about a message, although Haru hadn’t heard it ring. She was just pleased the topic of conversation had safely moved on. After several moments of meddling with the touch-screen, the phone gave a shrill, high ring that made the brunette jump.

“What was that?”

“Sorry. It was just an app sound.” Apparently satisfied with something, he pocketed the device and turned his attention back to his hostess. “So, Hiromi’s mentioned you during our dates – you’re Haru Yoshioka, aren’t you?” He grinned ruefully. “Sorry, I suppose I should have asked you that earlier. How long have you been living with Hiromi?”

“Over a year, or so,” Haru answered. “I was moving back into the area; Hiromi needed a flatmate; it all just worked out.”

“And, talking of work, what are you doing now? Anything interesting?”

“Oh, just a bit of shop work. I help down at the local pet store near the Crossroads,” Haru said, motioning pointlessly in the direction of the city centre, “and it might not be much, but it pays the bills.” She decided against adding that she was, more or less, dating the grandson of the owner. She was more than certain that Hiromi would mention it to him sooner or later, anyway.

“Anything exciting happen there?”

“Well, we had a giant rogue eagle flying through last year,” she said, thinking of Balthazar, the golden eagle from the Bird Kingdom, “but that’s really about it. Most of the time, the most exciting thing is when the mice get loose.” She grinned. “Excitement’s not really what I’m looking for in a job, anyway.” She had enough with her part-time with the Bureau.

“Hey, Tsuge!” The other resident of the flat, a spruced Hiromi, stood in the doorway, looking stunning in a deep green dress and navy leggings. “You’re early.”

“I thought I’d surprise you.” The young man rose to his feet, moving to embrace his date. “And may I have the pleasure of being the first to tell you that you look drop-dead gorgeous?”

Hiromi blushed, but that was as far as her modesty went. “You certainly may.” She curtsied, bobbing her head in a quick nod, and snatching away Tsuge’s hand in her own. She spotted the red-ribboned flowers that the man had badly-hidden behind his back. “Oh, you shouldn’t have!” she squealed, stealing them away and burying her nose into their blossoms. “You’re a star!”

Haru shook her head at her friend’s shameless show, and rose to her feet to dump the remains of her (now-cold) meal into the kitchen bin. As she passed Tsuge, she patted him companionably on the shoulder and said, “Nice to meet you again, Tsuge. I’ll see you around.”

“You too, Haru.”

The flat was strangely quiet once both had left, and Haru was the only one remaining in the otherwise-empty rooms. She drifted through the lounge, attempting half-heartedly to find something
decent on the TV before finally giving up. She ascended to her bedroom and collapsed on the sheets, grabbing her phone from the side and dialling Michael’s number. He answered almost immediately.

“Hello, Haru. No Bureau duty tonight then?”

“No. I told you before; we don’t actually have that many cases.” It was true too; it had been two weeks since their last case, and three since the adventure with Darcy Baker and Doctor James Dawson. Three weeks since Michael had discovered her supernatural little secret. “Tsuge turned up to take Hiromi out on a date tonight, so it’s an exceptionally quiet night tonight.” She tried to hold back the sigh; it was quiet and boring. Perhaps she should have dropped by the Bureau.

“Have you met the guy before?”

“No. I hadn’t really met him while at school,” Haru admitted. “Hiromi crushed on him, but... yeah, he wasn’t really my type. Still isn’t. But Hiromi likes him, so...” She shrugged, despite the fact that Michael couldn’t see her.

Michael just laughed. “So it’s just as well, really. Heaven forbid the two of you ever fall for the same guy.”

“I’m sure our friendship would stand it,” Haru laughed back. “I don’t think the guy would though.”

“World War Three, coming up!”

Both laughed, and then simmered into silence. Haru shifted her position and her gaze moved to the painting she had leaning against the corner. She pushed herself to her feet and padded over to the framed picture.

“Haru? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I just... Hang on, a moment...”

She dropped her phone onto her desk and tapped it onto loudspeaker. That done, she picked up the painting and hung it onto a wayward nail. It was a beautiful painting, one she had picked up from her father’s stash. It was of an ancient, old-fashioned ship, reeling in the waves of a full-blown storm, while an island rose up in the background. The artwork was magnificent, so finely-done that Haru had to squint to believe it was a painting. There was something just... magical about it. As she evened it out, the waves seemed almost to move.

She paused.

Now she was looking at it – really, looking at it – she couldn’t deny there was something... different about the painting. Something alive. The water glimmered in a way that was more than just the paint catching the light, and was it just her imagination, or was the boat actually heaving?

“Haru? Is everything okay?”

“Yes...” Haru replied slowly. “But, I... I think I’m going to have to call you back later... Something’s come up...”

“Bureau business?”

“Maybe...” She leant forward and brushed her fingers against the painting. Her skin came away wet. She sniffed at her fingers. Salt.
“Definitely.”

ooOoo

Haru had become a common sight at the Bureau nowadays. She was, after all, an accepted Bureau member, even if the Sanctuary wasn’t her home. Still, Baron was more than just a little surprised to see a shrunk Haru come through the Bureau doors with a brown, dripping package under one arm. Regardless, he showed her to the sofa and turned on the kettle.

“Miss Haru. And for what reason do we owe the delight of this pleasure?”

“I have a problem.”

“And would that problem be linked to the soaked package you have there?”

The brunette grinned at the feline Creation. “Did you work that out all by yourself?” She started to unwrap the brown paper, scrunching it up and dropping the remains into a nearby bin. “This... belonged to my father.” She knelt down to the floor beside it, and propped the painting up against the skirting board. “It was in his antique collection and it had never done anything like this before, but suddenly...”

She ripped the last of the brown paper packaging off and leant back to see Baron’s reaction.

The painting was still the same as last time – the same heaving ship, the same swirling waters, only now seawater was dripping down from the edges, lapping at the picture frames like tiny waves. At her touch, the waves became aggravated, rolling off the paper in rivers now.

“Baron? What’s wrong with it?”

The Creation knelt down beside her, so close they were almost shoulder-to-shoulder. He reached out to the painting and his grey gloves came away darkened by the moisture. “I’ve never seen anything quite like this,” he murmured, rubbing his fingertips together to examine the mysterious liquid. “Salt water,” he muttered, coming to the same conclusion the brunette had from the beginning.

“The picture is coming alive,” Haru whispered.

“So I see.”

“Should we be worried?”

“I don’t see why,” Baron replied. “It’s causing a bit of a mess, but it’s not going at a rate to flood the Bureau just yet.” His fingers passed over the picture, to no apparent change. “It seems stable, for the time being.”

“Are you sure? It’s just that it seemed to...” Haru gasped as, at her touch, the picture burst into animation. The ship which had, up to that point, only been swaying in the storm, was really reeling now, throwing itself into the brute force of the current. “I’m not imagining it,” she hissed. “It is me!”

“In that case, I suggest you restrain from further contact...” Baron started, but Haru’s last touch had stirred something new into the mixture. Baron caught Haru’s shoulders in his gloved hands and helped her back to her feet, even as something different started to fly from the painting. Waves crashed against the painting’s front and flowed straight out into the Bureau, carrying with it the sparkle of white portal magic. Baron’s arms found themselves around Haru, keeping them together even as they tumbled through the waves and into the portal.
The Bureau occupants now absorbed into the painting, into the new world, the magic died away almost instantly. The waves sank away, soaked up into the carpet and then disappearing entirely, until the Bureau interior was empty and dry and quiet, once again.

ooOoo

Haru tumbled through into deeper waters, her feet losing track of the Bureau carpet as the portal pulled her and Baron through, and suddenly she was in an eerie world of blue and green mist. Baron’s arms had released her, but his hand was tightly around her arm. Treading the water, he glanced upwards and motioned for them to swim towards the shimmering light of day. Haru nodded back, finally breaking from the initial travelling shock, and allowed the Creation to prompt her up towards air and oxygen.

She broke the surface, gasping as oxygen rushed down her windpipe. Unlike the painting, the water here was calm, rippling gently with her movements. She trod the water, glancing back to Baron. “What-?” She coughed up water and tried again. “What was that?”

“A portal, Miss Haru.”

“Thank you, Sherlock.” The brunette bobbed in the water, glancing towards the island that rested a good distance away. Her heart sunk at the thought of swimming all that way. “I had worked that much out for myself. So where are we? What was that painting? Can paintings even be portals?”

“Many of the Childhood Worlds have portals linking to them by physical objects,” Baron explained. “A looking glass, a tornado, a wardrobe...”

Haru paused, and then decided this was a conversation for another, drier, day. “So,” she repeated, “where are we? Atlantis?” It wasn’t all bad, she decided; there was a kind of music in the air that she found really quite beautiful. When Baron didn’t answer her, she nudged him. Or as well as she could manage when she was attempting to stay buoyant.

“Hey, Baron? ...Baron?”

He wasn’t listening to her at all. His eyes were glazed and now the music that had previously teased at the edge of her hearing was rising in beautiful, dreadful harmony. A sense of horror crept over the brunette now, an eerie uneasiness at the unnaturally beautiful music.

“Baron?”

His grip on her arm had loosened and released her entirely and it was her turn to take a tight hold on his wrist, treading water to face his feline face. Something was swimming below in those blackened depths; mere shadows against a darker background. “Baron? Snap out of it!”

A ship – the same ship in the painting – was careening their way, but it was coming too slowly. Something else was coming for them, and it was coming now. She forced herself to make eye contact with the Creation, but found that his gaze was still glazing out, his attention more waned than Haru had ever seen it. “Baron? Baron, please...” She glanced back to the ship, and started to scream for help.

And then Baron disappeared beneath the waves.

He was ripped out of her grip, torn from her hold and dragged into the depths by the same shadows as before. Haru dove down after him and instantly the music that had filled the air now engulfed the water. It pounded against her ears; a low, beautiful melody that whispered to enchant her and drown her.
The water quickly swallowed up what sunlight penetrated into its depths, and so every foot that the bewitched Baron was dragged, the more he disappeared into the murky waters. Haru propelled herself after him. Only his face, his wide, emerald eyes, and a limp white glove could still be seen. She reached down. Her fingers brushed against his. She pushed herself further. Her hand swept past his and her fingers found grip around his wrist.

Baron’s disappearance into the deep stopped. The shadows fled further into the water, but the music continued to haunt her, louder than ever. Haru kicked back up towards the surface, terrified by the unseeing eyes of Baron.

A clawed hand curled around her ankle. Her ascent was halted. She lashed out at her captor and something webbed, scaled and human swam straight past her. She froze, the half-memory of what she had just seen whirling round in her short-term mind. It was something of fairytales, something of myths and legends – but the stories had never spoken of such wide jaws or such long fangs.

Her burning lungs prompted her back into movement and she kicked herself free from the sharp grip around her ankle, pushing upwards to the sky. They both broke free from the water, Haru retching and Baron spluttering into a gasp. He was breathing, blinking – but the focus was still lacking. He still had no idea what was going on around him. In fact, if she didn’t know better, she would say his look was one of... lovesickness.

Another hand tried to drag her down but she jerked herself loose and clung onto Baron, who was obliviously bobbing buoyantly at the surface. If only he would snap out of it... The siren-like song continued to rise and flood them and Haru was still struggling to keep herself and Baron free from the inhuman creatures that swamped the waters below them. An idea trickled in. A crazy, desperate, last-measures idea. And as another creature tried to drag her down, she threw all caution to the wind and took that chance.

Her fingers found his lapel, tightened around it, and brought her face up to his. Her lips covered his, her eyes fluttering shut with all the embarrassment of self-consciousness but, even so, time slowed down for just that moment. Just for that fleeting kiss. She moved away, her eyes opening and her cheeks reddening, but her hands still holding onto his jacket.

He blinked. Focused on her.

“Haru?”

Haru’s reddening cheeks turned yet more scarlet. “It worked,” she whispered. “I... wasn’t expecting that. Welcome back, Baron.”

She was relishing the blush that had crept over the Creation’s face when a clawed hand – two, in fact – caught her leg. A scream was jolted from her lips before the water rose above her head and drowned her voice. This time, Baron was dragged down along with her, and they came face-to-face with scaled, human faces, mutated by unearthly large eyes that took up far too much of their heads.

But not of the fairytales.

Baron was fighting back and now the siren-song had no further effect on him; the music turned sharp and vicious, tearing at their ears with unspoken but understood threats. Haru had to kick and writhe to keep the mermaids at bay. Their mouths opened far too wide, and far too many rows of teeth tried to gnash at her vulnerable skin, and blood was easily drawn. It spiralled from her torn skin in thin tendrils of red.
Just as she was beginning to despair, something spilt the water. The mermaids scattered, but not far, and Haru merely floated weakly in the ocean’s current. A weighted rope had seemingly dropped out of the heavens. She paddled weakly through the water to the line and wound her less-injured hand around it. After all, what could they lose at this point?

As if sensing her tugging on the rope as she attached herself to it, the line began to rise back out of the water. She panicked and reached out for Baron, but he had already reached her and was curling his torn gloves around the rope also. They broke back out of the water and into the bright sunlight. The rope was attached to the ship she had seen earlier, finally come to their rescue, and the line was hauled over the edge and onto the deck.

Haru collapsed onto the wooden floor, shaking and gasping and just generally glad to be alive. Baron landed on the deck beside her. He was the first to move, pushing himself up to inspect his companion. “Haru? How are you faring?”

Haru simply stared up at the sky, chest still heaving from the oxygen debt. “Why does this always happen to me? First sharks, now mermaids...”

“It’s enough to give anyone hydrophobia,” Baron chuckled lightly. “How do you feel?”

The brunette glanced down at herself, steadily becoming aware of all the aches and pains and cuts and bruises from her marine adventure. But then Baron was just as injured, his gloves torn and blood trickling down across his suit. She tried to chuckle back. “Probably as well as you do.” She pushed herself up and finally took note of just who had taken the liberty of saving them. “Although that might not last...”

ooOoo

Back at the Bureau, Muta and Toto weren’t sure what to make of the feline Creation’s abrupt disappearance. Toto had merely gone for an evening flight, Muta to scrounge off a few naive humans, and they had both come back to an empty Bureau. Not even a note, which was unusual for Baron.

“Well, it certainly smells of portal magic,” Toto remarked, hoping down from the balcony rail and into the heart of the little house.

“What would you know, you overgrown pigeon?” Muta snorted. “Anyway, he’ll be back. He always is – and it’s not like he’s not independent or anything, right?” He collapsed down onto the sofa, knocking into the waste paper bin that Haru had used earlier. Its contents of brown paper packaging spilt across the floor.

The fat feline looked at it once and then swung his hind paws onto the coffee table. “I’ll clear that up later.”

“Hey, fatso – did you leave this here?” Toto nudged at the painting that Haru had left leaning against the skirting board. “Nah, you can’t have. It’s far too sophisticated for your primitive tastes.”

“At least I don’t have a birdbrain!”

“You already called me that, you idiot!” The crow lowered his beak down to inspect the painting, and then gave an abrupt wince and retreated. “It stinks of magic. Something happened here.”

“Yeah?” Muta sank into the sofa, resting his head on his paws. “That’s nothing new. So... what’re we gonna to do? I mean, unless you know how to open a closed portal...”
Toto hopped over to Baron’s expansive bookcase, nudging a few tomes loose with his beak. “Maybe. Get off your fat behind and help me find something to help. I have a feeling Baron has once again got himself in over his head…”

ooOoo

A selection of gleaming, wickedly sharp blades shifted into view of the half-drowned Bureau members. Haru laughed humourlessly and pushed herself into a sitting position, regardless of the half-dozen bared at them. “Of course. Save us and then spear us. How original.”

She caught Baron’s gaze, whose expression was enough to convey the need for tact. “Play nice.”

“Nice? I’m always nice. I’m not the one holding sharp pointy objects at us.”

“No. They are. Hence, play nice.”

“I hate it when you’re right.”

“Silence.” A strangely educated, articulate voice cut through the air, uncannily out-of-place among the ragtag pirates surrounding them. A tall man in a scarlet coat parted the crew, dark ringlets spiralling down from the tricorne hat and surrounding piercing blue eyes. “Pray, what strange binge rats have the Neverwaters spat out today? And we get so few visitors to these waters nowadays…”

“Can’t imagine why with this welcome,” Haru muttered as the Captain circled his two captives. She watched the strange man walk, one hand curled behind his back and the other lightly playing over a star-shaped, glass vial around his neck. He ignored her side comment.

“With belief so scarce in the Human World, it has all but become impossible to pass back into that world… so how did a pair of misfits such as yourselves cross over?”

“Who’s to say we’re from the Human World?” Haru demanded.

“Dear girl, this world is small and not prone to visitors; I know all who reside in this place,” the Captain answered. “The pirates, the Indians, the Lost Boys… Do you not think that I would recognise a stranger when I saw one? And you are certainly a visitor from the Human World, although I am not familiar with your companion.”

“Lost Boys?” This time it was Baron who spoke, quietly echoing the pirate’s previous words. His tone was dulled and reluctant, as if unwilling to make the realisation. “Then this must be…”

“Indeed.” The Captain swept off his hat in a mocking bow. “Welcome, good sir and lady, to Neverland.”

If even possible beneath the tawny fur, Haru reckoned that a substantial proportion of paling occurred across Baron’s features; enough to warrant worry on Haru’s part. “Neverland?” she echoed numbly. “Like… happy thoughts and pixie dust?”

“The very same,” the Captain said, “save for precious few happy thoughts left in Neverland nowadays.”

“Again, with a welcome like this…” Haru muttered once again. And, once again, the Captain breezed past her under-breath remarks.

“But still, the question remains as to how and why two strangers like yourselves found their way to our little world.” The pirate halted before them, piercing eyes acutely studying the two captives.
“We’ve had few and far guests into this land in the last two-score years.”

“A stray portal,” Baron answered curtly. His full colour had still to return. “We plan to stay here no longer than necessary; if you would drop us off at the island and we’ll find a way back–”

A round of sharp, almost humourless laughter cut the Creation off. The Captain leant into his face. “If you can find a way back, you can take us all. The belief is gone, the magic is gone, and the fairies are gone. You’ll find no passage back to your home from here.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to give up. Please, we’re of no use to you–”

“Now, now, sonny,” the pirate said, although Haru could barely imagine an individual less fitting to the term ‘sonny’ than Baron, “we never said you wouldn’t be worth something. Novelty is rare in Neverland now, and I’m sure there’s more to a couple of strays like you than meets the eye. We could always do with an extra hand about the deck. As for your pretty companion,” and now his attention turned to Haru, “well... it’s been a long time since a woman walked in Neverland.”

Instinctively, Haru lashed out with a slap, but something cold and metallic cut into her skin before her palm made contact. The arm that had been so casually resting behind the Captain’s back had swiftly cut through the air to intercede her and was perfectly ordinary in every fashion except that it didn’t end in a hand.

It ended in a hook.

The curving metal lightly rested around Haru’s wrist, applying not enough pressure to draw blood, just enough to threaten, and more than enough to make the brunette realise who she was dealing with. “Ah... Captain Hook, I take it?”

Hook’s hand shifted away from the vial around his neck and twisted around the front of Haru’s jacket, dragging her to her feet and unceremoniously shoving her against the mast. Haru could see Baron raising to her aid, but was quickly cut off by a layer of assorted weapons. “Young lady, I think you’ll soon find that behaviour like that is not tolerated here.”

“Defending my dignity, you mean?” Haru spat. Her free hand shot out and twisted around the vial’s cord, snapping it from Hook’s neck before he could react. She slipped out of his grasp, sliding with the curve of the mast to put it between her and the enraged pirate. Inches from her head, the hook splintered into the wood of the mast.

She jumped away, feeling abruptly foolish when she realised the entire crew were armed and dangerous and it was far from just the Captain she had to avoid. And the ship only supplied a rather limited amount of space to run.

The backs of her legs hit the ship’s side, signalling the end of her brief flee.

“Get her, but don’t damage the dust!”

“This dust?” Haru called over to the irate Captain. Weaving one hand around the rigging, she leapt onto the raised edge of the ship and held the cord of the glass vial over the side. Her actions halted the pirates.

“You drop that, missy, and I’ll quarter yer guts for the mermaids!” the Captain roared, his carefully articulated voice splitting into roughened rage. He lunged for her. Haru loosened her grip and a little more of the cord slipped between her fingers. Hook froze.

“I haven’t dropped it yet,” Haru answered levelly. “But I will. Unless you guarantee us safe and free...”
passage to the island.”

“The moment you drop that will be the moment you’ve lost your leverage.”

“True. But it will also be the moment you lose your precious little... dust into the deep blue.” Haru let her fingers play along the coarsely-woven cord, savouring the nervous energy just seeping off the pirates. “After all, if I’m going down, I might as well do a little damage.”

“Who says you’ll be the only one going down?” the Captain growled. His attention turned deliberately to the still-captive Baron, who couldn’t move without decapitating himself on a blade. “I’m guessing you would just hate to lose your furry friend here...”

Haru’s gaze met Baron’s and for the first time she realised how frustrating it had to be whenever the roles were reversed. Even if Baron told her to forget him and take the chance on freedom, they both knew neither would leave without the other – preferably both intact and relatively un-maimed at that. Baron’s gaze returned to her, brow furrowed with the task of composing a viable solution advantageous to the both of them. Haru’s fear receded a smidgen; if she could believe in anything, it was that they would always make it through – together.

“Hey, look at the dust! It’s glowing!” The pirate to point it out was soon accompanied by other men seeing the same strange occurrence as the first. Haru broke her look from Baron to see that, indeed, the dust had taken on a sapphire-blue shine. Her attention waned entirely as she turned over the glass vial in her hand.

“What the...?”

“Impossible,” Hook breathed.

In her lack of attention, rough hands dragged her down from the ledge and snatched the glass vial away from the side. She was kept tightly in place as the Captain walked before her, reclaiming the dust from one of the crew.

“That was a foolish endeavour on your part, young lady,” he admonished, “but not one that was entirely without fruit.” The glass vial was lifted into the light, bringing the dust into clear focus. Only, where the dust had once been grey and lifeless, now it was a brilliant shade of beautiful azure. “Pixie dust... awoken to its true form. I haven’t seen the like in... years.” With surprising dexterity given his hook, he emptied a few grains into his open palm – but at the contact, the dust dulled and returned to its greyed state.

“Of course...” he muttered bitterly. The smile that spread across his face and directed to Haru was equally so. “Only in the hands of a believer will it work, in which case... you’d better show us what you’re capable of. Get rope and bring out the plank!” he ordered to his crew.

Haru abruptly found herself rough-handled to the other side of the ship, where the side dropped away for the useful placement of a plank.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me...”

Her words trailed off into a sudden yelp as one of the pirates grabbed her wrists and bound them tightly together; the end of the long rope was lashed to the bottom of the mast. It noticeably long enough that, upon the inevitable drop off the plank, she would have plenty of rope for her to sink into the sea.

“Isn’t that kind of superfluous?” she asked dryly.
“We just don’t want our new little believer flying off when she gets the chance,” the Captain answered.

“Well then, I have to tell you that I get horribly airsick.” Behind her, Haru could hear the plank being attached and could only summarise that she had about thirty seconds before she was going to be walking it. “In fact, I don’t think I have a flying bone in me. Yep, we should just call off the whole plank thing and save me from a nasty dipping.”

“Oh, I see we have a joker on our hands.”

“Only in tight spots. Or planks.”

“Well, I wouldn’t worry your pretty little head about it. You’re a believer.” The Captain uncorked the glass vial and shook but a few grains into the brunette’s face. Haru sneezed and made a face. Even though she couldn’t see much of the dust, she could see the azure light they emitted; as she waited, the light faded and a pleasant feeling spread across her skin.

“Hate to say I told you so, but...” Haru shrugged. “The light show died, just like before.”

“I think you’ll find that the dust sank into you,” the pirate returned. “So you will be flying tonight.”

As Haru found herself pushed back and stepping onto the unsteady surface of the plank, she asked, “And what if I don’t? What if I drown?”

“You won’t drown.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me this dust grants water-breathing abilities too, huh?” Haru asked flatly.

“Not at all.” Hook smiled, and the smile reached his eyes “The mermaids will get you long before that.”

With several blades prompting her, Haru edged her way along the plank. “Honestly, blooming pirates,” she muttered under her breath. “I’ve survived animal hybrids, crazy scientists, and head-taking princesses, and now I’m about to be killed off by the most cliché death ever imagined on the high seas.”

“Stop muttering and walk the plank!”

“Don’t you pirates ever come up with anything original?!” Haru yelled back.

Hook shrugged nonchalantly. “Originality isn’t our strong point.”

“No, I suppose the only strong point you have is the one at the end of your hook,” she snapped back. Her gaze was cast down to the rolling sea beneath her, where dark shapes shifted below the waves. It wasn’t sharks, but monstrous mermaids that waited for her to sink into their grasp. The first twinge of real fear bit into her.

“I’m really not going to fly,” she said, addressing the hoard of pirates waiting expectantly at the ship’s edge. “I mean it! I don’t know how to.”

“Oh, it’s simple. Think wonderful thoughts.”

“It’s a little hard under the circumstances,” she murmured. The sea still lapped hungrily against the ship’s bow, watching. Waiting. Ready. She raised her gaze and this time found Baron held in place.
This was one situation where he wasn’t going to get them out of. She took another step back and saw the building fear in Baron’s eyes.

Wonderful thoughts... Wonderful thoughts...

Every time she thought of the times she had shared with the Bureau – with Baron – then the memory of Michael arose. And when she thought of Michael, Baron sprang to mind. Both were precious to her, both were worlds she wanted to keep; it was impossible to choose between them.

Her heel found the edge of the plank. She halted, her path now limited to sinking... or flying.

A memory trickled in. An old one, long before the Bureau. Long before Michael. In a time before life was complicated and childhood promised to stretch out before her. She smiled sadly to herself and met the gaze of Baron.

“Wonderful thoughts,” she whispered, and stepped off the plank.

ooOoo

In the light of the Bureau’s lamps, the spark of magic abruptly flared up. Toto gave a cry of triumph and hopped away from the pile of old tomes. “It worked! We’re replicating the last portal to occur in the Sanctuary!”

“I still don’t see why we couldn’t just wait for Baron to get back,” Muta grumbled. “I mean, how bad of a fix can he have got himself into? He’ll find his way out. He always does.” The round feline dropped his paws off the coffee table and lumbered to his hind legs. His paws padded on moist carpet. He grimaced and curled his bottom paws in disgust. “Hey, birdbrain, I think you missed something... You sure you didn’t do a rain dance by accident?”

“What are you – oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.”

“Where is that water even coming from?”

“How the flipping blazes should I know?” Muta demanded. “Just stop it!”

“I don’t know how – the spell only says how to open portals, not shut them.”

Suddenly the water from the painting rolled out in huge, engulfing waves and swallowed the duo up, like it had stolen Haru and Baron away. Both cat and crow were dragged into the depths of the swirling waves and the Bureau floor disappeared beneath them. The features of the Bureau – the grandfather clock, the crimson furniture, the cabinets and bookcases – dissolved with each smash of the waves until both individuals were drifting free in sparklingly clear water.

Toto bobbed to the surface first, followed a moment later by Muta. He floated on the surface like a particularly buoyant marshmallow, aided by his rather abundant fat.

“Where are we, birdbrain?”

Toto drifted on the surface, floating with significantly more dignity than his friend. He glanced up at the vines and jungle that was set before them, and then the crystal-clear oasis waterhole that they had arrived at.

Between the trees of the jungle, eyes watched them.
“If I wanted a safe bet, I’d say in trouble.”

ooOoo

Teaser: “How can I unbelieve something?” she whispered. / “It can’t die...” the youth growled and the arrow turned to Haru, “but she can...” / “Once the nightmares have a grip on their prey’s heart, they never release it.” “Then they’ve never met me.” / Haru smiled. “So you know what that means.” “We’re going back after the pirates,” Baron finished. / The hook slammed into the wall, curving delicately close to her bare neck. “Like I said,” the pirate growled; “you’re in over your head.”

One, Two,

They’re coming for you,

Three, Four,

Lock up your door,

Five, Six,

Pick up your sticks,

Seven, Eight,

Set the bait,

Nine, Ten,

Say amen...
“Wonderful thoughts,” she whispered, and stepped off the plank.

Soft, beautiful music floated from beyond the door. The memory was faded, blurred around the edges by the erosion of time, but the music still remained sharp. A tiny hand reached out and pushed the door open, tottering into the workshop. Gentle glowing light flickered from the fire in the grate, shedding amber shades across the room. She padded towards the form bent over the desk and tugged at the nearest piece of trouser.

“Daddy...”

The wind stopped whistling around her and she eased her eyes open. Even as she hung onto that trickling memory, she floated back to the level of the ship’s side, where the pirates watched agog.

“Well, what do you know?” she murmured. “I can fly.”

Hook’s eyes glowed with the gleam of greed. “Excellent. Alright, boys! Haul her back in!”

The rope, which had originally seemed so superfluous, was now reining her back into the grasp of the ship’s deck. Her feet found the plank and the bubbling energy of flight faded from her as quickly as it came. “No. No!” She tried to jump away and was uplifted by flight for a few seconds before she was pulled back to the ground.

The nearest pirates were unsheathing their swords, breaking patience as she fought against their grips. Seeing an opportunity, Haru grinned. “Fools.” She ran straight towards the nearest armed pirate – much to his surprise – and used her momentum to loop the rope around the blade. When they tried to pull her back by the rope, it merely tightened around the sword until the sharp edge cut straight through the restraint.

Now with the end loose, Haru pulled the knot apart and snapped her hands free. She raced towards Baron, who had been kept cornered on the other side of the ship, and her hand found his. Fingers curling around a familiar glove, she leapt up onto the edge, looked back, and grinned.

“Just trust me.”

Her feet seemed to find steps in the air as she ran straight off the side. For Baron, there was no such support, but she kept her grip tight around his, bringing him up into the air as she flew. She laughed to the sky as her bounding leaps took them ever further from the pirate ship and towards the island that so echoed the one in the painting.

Her feet eventually found ground again as they landed on the sandy shores of the island, and Haru stumbled as her legs abruptly struggled to support her. Baron steadied her before she could fall.

“Careful, Haru. Don’t overdo yourself.”
“Overdo myself? Baron, I flew!” Her laugh spiralled into the air but was muffled by the onset of tiredness. “I actually... I actually flew...” Her legs gave way entirely now and Baron caught her as she collapsed.

“You’re not accustomed to this magic and you flew with an extra passenger; all-in-all it’s a large strain on you.” The Creation smiled. “But, yes, you flew. You did very well, Haru.” The irate – and somewhat colourful – shouting of the pirates brought them back to the situation. “But, for now, I suggest we move before they can catch up with us.” With that, he swept her up into his arms and proceeded into the tangled jungle ahead.

Haru briefly considered arguing against being carried, mostly on principle, but her legs had certainly given way earlier and, when all was said and done, all that mattered was getting away quickly and getting away far. “Where are we going?”

“To find a friend.”

Haru perked up. “So you’ve been here before?”

The Creation paused in his answer, taking a silence that stretched to several footsteps. “It’s complicated. She’s a friend of a friend.”

That still didn’t answer her question.

ooOoo

“This is all your fault, birdbrain.”

“My fault?” The crow hopped to the side of his swinging cage to deliver the retort to his fellow captive, held in an equally uncomfortable and roughly-made cage. “I can hardly see how that’s possible when you’re the one who made a wave the size of a small tsunami when you hit the water. It’s surprising that you didn’t bring every creature in the swamp on us.”

“You’d probably make a good snack.”

Toto sniggered. “The only good thing about being stuck with you is that you’re sure to be eaten first.”

“Says the appetiser!”

Their cages were abruptly banged together by the youth carrying them. “Shuddup, unless you want them to find us.”

“Who, kiddo?” Muta demanded. He scratched at the top of the cage, trying to claw through to the vines that the boy held them with; their captor had taken care to keep his fingers out of the reach of any claws or beaks – a wise and infuriating decision.

“Who do you think?”

“We don’t know,” Toto said. “That’s the problem.”

“Boy, you two really must be new to the island,” the youth scoffed. “Hopefully you won’t ever have to know.”

“I don’t like that sound of that.”

“What’s the problem; you a scaredycat?”
“Yeah, well you’re just a big chicken!”

Their young captor sweatdropped. “You’re trying really hard to make this not worth my while... but if they come, I’m leaving you to their appetite first. Just keep that in mind if you’re going to wake every nightmare from this place.”

“What does it matter?”

“Our fate, kiddo. It matters. So... where’re we going?”

“To someone who might be interested in a talking duo like you.”

ooOoo

“We’re going into there?” Now finally judged to be stable enough to walk, Haru stepped towards the river that split the forest in two. While the forest they had come from was shallow and light, the one beyond the river carried a carpet of fog and shadows – instead of light – spiralled down from the trees. The trees themselves were closely-knitted with gnarled bark that almost seemed twisted into hideous, mutated faces.

“It’s our best chance,” Baron answered.

“But it’s so...” Haru broke off and shivered to betray what words could not. “I don’t like it.”

“I know. Neither do I. But it’s where we’ll find her.”

“Who exactly is this mysterious ‘her’ you keep talking of?” She shivered again with feeling. “This doesn’t seem like the place any ordinary person would choose to live out their days.”

“She isn’t any ordinary person,” Baron returned in response. He stepped up to the rippling water’s edge and started along the bank. “She’s a fairy. I fear that she is long deceased, however.”

“Was it really that long since you last saw her?”

Again, Baron paused, and Haru got the distinct impression that he was choosing his words carefully. “It has been over seven decades since I last heard of her presence; many things could change in that time.”

“So... we’re going into that place on a whim?”

“If she does indeed still live, then she will be our best chance of discovering a way back. With so little knowledge of the portal that brought us here, I don’t know how to replicate our way home.”

“It didn’t sound like those pirates thought such a thing were even possible.”

“And yet, here we are.”

Haru smiled weakly. “I’d rather we were there – there being home in this case.” She followed after Baron as he followed the river’s path, coming to a halt where the river shallowed. On closer inspection, it was apparent they had found a ford, for the shallowing was man-made by square bricks to create an artificial pathway.

“Wait a moment... Hook said all the fairies had gone.”
“This one is a little different.”

“How so?”

“You’ll see.”

Haru wrinkled her nose and made a face at the forest before them. “Just for the record, I still don’t like the look of that place.”

“Noted.” Baron offered a hand back as he began to cross, which Haru took without question. Regardless of what Haru could say, she couldn’t deny that they had survived thus far. She expected they would go on surviving for a while yet. Even so, the fog was as cold as she had assumed, if not colder still, and she pulled her coat close around her as they entered into the forest. Something on the edge of her hearing teased at her ears; half-voices that almost whispered words.

“So... where exactly are we?”

“In the Forest of Forgotten Dreams. It centres the island and draws in belief.”

“Forest of Forgotten Dreams,” Haru echoed. “Sounds... kinda sad.”

“This is a sad place,” Baron agreed. “Neverland is not only a childhood world, but also a fairies’ world; such worlds require belief to thrive, but with the growing scepticism of the Human World, places like this are dying. They take what little belief they can. The best Neverland can find is the discarded dreams of those who no longer want them. That... and a few other... kinds of belief.”

“How do you know this?”

“We receive news from other worlds. Even worlds as cut-off as this can be watched from afar; Jules brings us stories of such places. Seventy years ago, this world was the Neverland found in the books, but time – as so often does – changed that. The Human World changed that.”

“I guess people are becoming more sceptical,” Haru admitted. “But it can’t be all that bad, can it?”

“Your science has led you to believe in only what you can see and record. In facts and figures. Your world is curious, but it is all too consumed by the desire to label the unknown and pin it onto a board.” Baron paused, perhaps sensing the sudden quiet from his companion. “I’m sorry, Haru. I did not mean to insult your kind. I have just been around long enough to see the world change.”

“No, it’s fine. I suppose all things must alter in the end.” As they wandered deeper into the forest, the voices grew clearer until Haru could almost believe the words were audible. She paused. She shallowed her breathing to remove anything that might dampen her hearing.

“I wish...”

“There,” she breathed. She turned to Baron, who had halted to see what had caused her to stop. “I’m not imagining it – there really are voices in the fog!”

To her surprise, Baron only looked away and continued to move.

“Baron?” She hastened to catch up with the Creation. His triangular ears – which must have been sharp enough to hear the voices that Haru could only strain to – were flattened against his head, as if to cover them from the sounds. “What is it?”

“They’ll become clear enough for your hearing soon,” he answered flatly. “And then, I think, you’ll
understand."

And so the two walked on in silence, save for the ever-growing voices. They strengthened the deeper they wandered into the forest, still becoming no more than a whisper – but the whispers gained clarity.

“I wish...”

Their sighing voices trailed off into hopeful, lost breaths that, the clearer they became, the sadder they sounded. Haru swallowed back her nerves as the first beginnings of painful heartbreak plucked at her strings.

“I wish... I could escape...”

“I wish... for home...”

“I wish... they would stop arguing...”

Haru stopped, and this time when Baron turned around, there were tears rolling down the brunette’s cheeks. Shuddering sobs thudded at her throat as she fought the sorrow that whispered all around.

“They’re just... so sad,” she whispered.

Familiar arms drew around her, pulling her close to him. Baron held her tight as the sobs began to take over. “Forgotten dreams so often are,” he murmured.

“Now... I understand... why you closed your ears to them.” Haru buried her head into his vest, gulping back the sobs that kept coming back. “I can’t... I don’t want to...”

“I wish... he would see me...”

“I wish... to dance...”

“I wish... they would just listen...”

“They’re just going to become stronger the further in we go, aren’t they?” she murmured into his jacket. The tears, now silent and devoid of sobs, rolled mutely down her face. “I can’t listen to all these dreams that never happened... They hurt.”

“I know, but for every dream that didn’t happen, another one did. These dreams only find their way to Neverland because even discarded dreams need somewhere to go and Neverland needs belief. It takes what it can get. I’m sorry, Haru, but we have to keep moving.”

“I know. I know.” She chuckled humourlessly as she wiped away yet more tears. “You must think me so... soft to fall apart like this over dreams I don’t even know.”

“Not at all,” the Creation assured. “It only proves you’re human.”

Haru looked up to him and, even as his gaze moved away to inspect the misted forest surrounding them, she saw his eyes shine with the gleam of unshed tears. She smiled weakly to herself. “That makes two of us then.”

She started to move away from Baron when a sudden tremble quivered through her. “Oh, shivers!” She did her best to grin, even with the broken dreams still flitting about her ears. “Feels like someone just walked over my grave.” She glanced down to her hands, which were still resting on Baron’s arms, and noted the definite, unexpected shake in her limbs. “Oh...”
Her heart skipped a nasty beat – several beats, in fact; stopping long enough to make her gasp and stagger back. And then, upon starting up again, it continued at double the pace of before. She sank to the ground, gasping for breath.

“Haru? Haru! What’s wrong?”

The brunette clutched at her chest even as her racing heart left her dizzy. “I... I don’t know. But... I’m scared.” She looked up to her friend’s face, which blurred in and out of focus even as shadows appeared to lengthen from the forest around them. Tears squeezed past her eyes, but this time they were tears of fear. “No... more than that – I’m terrified.”

“Terrified?” Baron repeated. “Of what?”

“I don’t know! It just... It just set in...” She doubled over as her heart continued to pound, but then raised her head just as quickly. Her eyes scanned the forest – there was something out there; she just knew it. She could feel it. But she couldn’t see it. “W-when I was a k-kid... I used to think that there was something o-outside my bedroom window,” she stuttered, the words tripping over one another in a way Baron had never heard Haru struggle. “Just against the glass, just w-waiting for me to o-o-o... open the curtains and let it in–”

“Shut up. Shut up NOW.”

Between the trees, a young man – verging on the cusp of adulthood and yet still marked by his youth – was aiming a bow squarely in the direction of Haru. To his side, two cages had been dropped with a familiar pair of animals. Baron rose to his feet, swiftly moving between Haru and the newcomer.

“What do you want?”

“The nightmares have caught her,” the youth said roughly. By the tautness of the bow’s string, it looked like he would shoot through Baron and then into Haru if the former insisted on standing in the way. “They wind their way into people’s hearts and send them into such a terror that they remember their childhood monsters and, in remembering them, bring them to life. They’ll go for her, but they won’t be picky. They’ll tear us all apart.”

Baron slowly approached the stranger. “Calm down, young man–”

The other only responded by raising the arrow to aim directly at the feline’s head. “I will shoot.”

Baron, tactfully, decided to stay where he was. “I believe you. But I don’t believe you need to resort to such desperate measures. If we can only calm her down–”

The young man gave a bitter, barking laugh. “You really think it’s that simple? Once the nightmares have a grip on their prey’s heart, they never release it.”

“Then they’ve never met me,” Baron growled. He turned and knelt back before Haru, who was on the verge of hyperventilation and tears were, once again, freely rolling down her cheeks. He cupped her face in his hand and brought her wide-eyed stare to meet his eyes. “Haru... Haru, listen. Please... listen. These nightmares, they must feed off belief – like everything here. Your belief in your childhood monster is fuelling them–”

The brunette blinked and weakly focused on the Creation before her. “How can I un-believe something?” she whispered. Her eyes shifted to the forest beyond their clearing and, even as the heartbeats sped by, something shifted in the undergrowth.

The youth heard it too and moved away from the trees. His bow quivered but the arrow remained
steadily pointed in Haru’s direction. “Her nightmare is going to kill us all,” he hissed. Baron didn’t move, staying between Haru and the young man. If he shot, the arrow would go through the feline first. “If she dies, it will die too.”

Baron snapped his eyes to the redhead and sharply rose. “Nobody,” he growled, “harms Haru.”

“Better for one to die than for all of us–”

“I said nobody!” the Creation roared.

The youth fell silent, but the rustling trees didn’t. He glanced behind him, his heart accelerating as Haru’s fears become more and more substantial. He tried to push back the thoughts of his own childhood fears; any sort of belief in Neverland was a powerful thing. Even without the nightmare, thinking – and believing – too much in his own fears would make them as real as Haru’s. His hand rose to his neck, instinctively and nervously covering his bare throat.

“One, two, they’re coming for you...”

Baron knelt back before Haru, his own nerves simmering despite the rage he’d thrown at Rufio. The kiss had worked the first time because of the shock and because Haru was aware enough of him. She wasn’t anymore, her eyes rolling, her form shivering, and her blood pumping so fast through her that Baron could feel the beat even as he placed one gloved hand around her shoulder.

“We’ll get you out of this, Haru. Don’t you worry.”

“Baron...” Toto spoke up from the cage he was caught in.  He was nervously watching the trees. “I think it’s coming.”

“Three, four, lock up your door...”

“Then that leaves us with only one option.” Baron rose to his feet, shifting his grip on the cane and readying himself into a defensive stance. “We fight.”

The shadows roared.

Or, to be more precise, the creature within the shadows roared. It didn’t make much difference. Something was clearly coming for them. For Haru.

Baron took an instinctive step back. Tightened his grip on the cane.

“Five, six, pick up your sticks...”

“For goodness sake, someone deal with the boy before I do,” Baron growled. The youth’s whispered rhyme – almost a prayer in the fervent, desperate way he said it – was quickly grinding down on the Creation’s nerves.

“Seven, eight, set the bait...”

Baron turned on his heel to face the youth, and at the same moment something huge leapt out of the shadows. The whole party fell back. Baron almost dropped his cane, but a moment later, he steeled himself and took a deliberate step between Haru and the... monster.

Monster was the only word that came to mind; it was the monster of childhood terrors, with its body out of proportion in the way that small children draw; too-long arms with too-long claws tipping the end, and a jaw that took over half of the face. Jagged, uneven and razor-sharp fangs filled its mouth.
“Nine, ten,” Rufio whispered. “Say amen.”

In the same instant the creature lunged, Baron hooked one arm around the frozen, shivering Haru and leapt them both out of the way. The monstrosity slammed into the ground where they had just been.

“Do you want me to try to distract it?” Toto offered, ready to make a racket if it would help.

“No use,” Baron said. “It’ll go for Haru, no matter what.” Even as he watched, the beast pushed itself back to its feet and orientated itself to the brunette by Baron’s side. “Our only option,” he said as he slowly lowered Haru to the ground, “is to finish it. I hate fighting to kill, but it’s never going to stop.” He changed his grip on the cane, twisting the shaft from the handle. It came loose and a thin, sharp blade was pulled from the cane.

Muta looked to the needle-thin sword and then to Baron. One eyebrow was raised. “It’s been a while, Baron...”

“Like I said,” the Creation answered, “I dislike death.” But this was different. This time, nothing short of a definite death would stop the monster. And he wasn’t going to risk losing Haru. He took a deliberate, slow step between Haru and her nightmare. Something shifted in his stance, giving his movements an almost predatory air. The feline side slipped into his steps and his smile, and he swung the blade experimentally through the air.

“Come and get me, you beastie...”

The monster leapt at the same moment Baron did. They swirled through the air, Baron twisting his jump across the ground and slipping beneath the nightmare’s unnaturally long claws. One gloved hand landed on the earth, while the blade-wielding one sliced up through the beast’s belly. His momentum carried the sword along its stomach, slitting it open from nose to navel.

He landed back on his feet, flipping to a stand with uncanny agility. He was breathing hard; the only sign that betrayed at all the toll the jump had taken on him. The sword was lowered to his side. His usually immaculate suit was stained with dark, shadowy blots – spray-back from the attack – while the beast lay slain.

“Baron... are you okay?”

He was still breathing hard. “I’m fine,” he murmured. He sheathed the blade, hiding it back inside the innocuous cane, and his form relaxed. He turned to the questioner. “Haru...”

The brunette gave a weak smile – almost as weak as her stance – and her eyes trailed down to the cane by his side. “I’m okay. Baron, I wasn’t aware that that could... I mean, I’ve never seen it used...”

She didn’t miss the way his grip tightened or how he moved the cane away, as if wary of it. “I prefer non-lethal methods,” he said. “I’ve seen too much death over the years.”

Haru opened her mouth to speak – there was obvious sorrow locked away – when her eyes caught sight of something. She froze in his grip, staring at something over the Creation’s shoulder. The words dried up and were replaced by stuttering. “N-no... That’s not – not possible...”

Baron turned.

The sunken form of the nightmare was shifting. The blackness that had served for blood and guts were being sucked back inside, the gaping hole pulling itself back together and knitting the break
closed. The limbs twitched, its giant paws flexing and slowly pushing itself up. Its head lolled to one side. Its neck cracked as it awakened life back into its body. A body that was now larger, deadlier than before.

“It’s unkillable,” Haru whispered.

“Of course it’s unkillable,” the youth hissed. He had temporarily lowered his bow upon the beast’s apparent demise, but now it was raised again and his own fear was clear in his bright eyes. “You can’t kill fear. It just creates more. No matter what you do, it’ll just get up and keep on coming. It’ll never die.”

“We don’t need it to die,” Baron said. “We just need it to stop.” Still, his mouth was turned down at the corners and his form wasn’t so indomitable as before. He had placed everything on that last attack; it wouldn’t work twice. His hand curled around the cane’s curved top, but didn’t draw it. He turned his gaze to the youth; the feline eyes narrowed. “Lower your weapon, boy, lest you want to further lessen your chance of survival.”

“Like I said,” the youth growled, “it can’t die. But she can.”

“As can you.” Baron bared the cane before him, the sword still sheathed but armed.

Muta rattled the bars of his cage, yowling out for attention. “HEY! We’ve got bigger problems, morons!” he yelped. “Tall, dark, and ugly, remember?!”

The pair had completely forgotten the beast; it pulled itself together, shaking life back into its limbs as Baron and the youth faced off each other.

“By letting her live, you condemn us all to death,” the stranger snarled. He lunged forward, shifting the bow and arrow to one hand and unsheathing a dagger from his side. He dodged round Baron and struck forward to Haru. Baron twisted round, looping an arm round the boy’s and jerking the knife loose. The youth retaliated with a sharp elbow to Baron’s stomach, wrenching free from the Creation’s grip.

He moved for Haru, but even though the woman was still shaking she threw herself out of his way. He went for her again; she kicked out and sent him to the ground. Something dark and heavy rushed his way.

“Look out!” she screamed.

The youth rolled to one side just as the nightmare hit the ground he had been lying on. He scrambled out of the way, but he shouldn’t have worried – the monster had eyes only for Haru. It spun to her, towering over the young woman. She scrabbled backwards, and the monster followed. It didn’t even bother to run anymore, as if it knew she wasn’t fit for fleeing. Its long claws clattered over the ground as it approached.

“Haru!” Baron leapt towards them, but the nightmare only flicked its tail into his side. He was thrown across the clearing.

Haru pushed herself to her feet and started to run. The uncannily long arm smacked into her. She was thrown to the forest floor and the stretched paw pinned her down. She screamed and kicked against its hold, but it merely leered and the huge fangs lowered towards her. “BARON!”

Light filled the clearing. The monster yelped and recoiled from the sudden blast of brightness and Haru was release. She rolled over onto one side, shivering and blinking back the stars of light floating behind her eyes. Something touched her shoulder and she lashed out.
Baron caught her wrist before she could reach him. “It’s gone, Haru.”

The fight left her and her muscles abruptly loosened with relief. She fell into his embrace, breathing slowly as his arms surrounded her. “Thank goodness,” she whispered. “What was that light? Was it you?”

“No. It was me.”

Haru picked up her head and her eyes widened. She rose unsteadily to her feet, aided by an almost equally-tired Baron. Haru’s gaze moved over the shining form hovering in the clearing, small and bright and shimmering. “You’re a... a fairy...” she stuttered, for there was nothing else it could be.

The tiny figure bowed, her golden wings fluttering behind her. “The last fairy of Neverland flies before you, at your service.” The glimmering head tilted to one side and the fairy flew over to Baron’s face, examining the feline Creation. “Baron?”

He tilted his head in a similar greeting. “Tinkerbell.”

“You’re... different to the last time I saw you,” the fairy said. “Of course, that was before...”

“I know.” Baron looked to Haru, who was struggling to understand the conversation. “Miss Haru, this is Tinkerbell. Tinkerbell, this is Miss Haru.”

“A human?” Now it was Haru’s turn to be closely inspected by the twitching light. She gulped and did her best not to recoil back at the close proximity. The fairy emitted a tinkling, bell-like laugh. “What are you doing all the way out here – with a human? What is a human doing in Neverland?”

“I run a Bureau for those who need help now – the Cat Bureau – and Miss Haru is part of the Bureau.”

“And your other friends?” The fairy turned to the cat and crow still caged across the clearing. With a snap of her fingers, the cage doors swung open and the two stepped out. Toto flew to Baron’s shoulder.

“We’re part of the Bureau too,” the crow answered.

“And him?” Tinkerbell turned to the stranger, whose hold on the bow had gone slack and mouth was gaping open in shock. “Please tell me that gormless idiot isn’t with you.”

“My friends are not in the habit of wielding arrows in our direction,” Baron said frankly. Regardless, now attention had been drawn back to the stranger, the Creation tilted his hat in the youth’s direction in the appearance of a greeting. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure of introductions. We are the Cat Bureau, and you are...?”

The youth’s hand played over the bow by his side, cautiousness creeping back into his gaze even as he snatched wordless looks to the fairy. Upon deciding that even if he did try to attack, he wouldn’t get very far before someone probably tackled him, his grip loosened. He warily watched the cane that was innocently held at Baron’s side. “Rufio,” he said. “The name’s Rufio.”

“Rufio. Well, Rufio, what were you doing with Muta and Toto?” Baron’s cane tapped the side of the open cages. “Not, I expect, for the engaging conversation.”

“Hey!”

Rufio ignored Muta’s outcry. “I... I thought the pirates might be interested in ‘em,” the boy muttered.
“They like to know what’s come and gone. Thought they might even pay for ‘em.”

“Pay for them?” Haru echoed. “Pay with what?”

“Pixie dust,” Tinkerbell answered.

The youth numbly nodded. “Since all the fairies went and the belief dried up, there’s no dust left.”

“Except for Hook’s dust,” Haru finished slowly. “But what’s so special about a little bit of pixie dust?”

“It’s magic,” Rufio said. “It’s the only magic this place has. Why, someone with pixie dust could... could even create a portal out of this forsaken world.”

“So... why hasn’t Hook yet?”

“Only a believer or fairy can awaken or use pixie dust, remember?” Baron said, recalling their last encounter with the pirate captain. “Which means... Tinkerbell and yourself are the only ones in Neverland able to open a portal.”

“No pressure then,” Haru murmured. “If only we had known that when we were with the pirates, we could have returned home there and then. So you know what that means.”

“We’re going back after the pirates,” Baron finished.

“Pirates that weren’t exactly ecstatic to see us go,” Haru said.

“Hold up, hold up.” Muta waddled into the conversation. “We’re going after pirates?”

“We sure are.”

“Pirates?” the fat cat repeated. “Walk the plank and feed ‘em to the fish, pirates?”

Haru tried not to think about just how accurate Muta’s description was. “Come on, Muta; I thought the Bureau has tackled pirates before,” she teased.

“Yeah, but we don’t usually go willingly after them.”

“Well, this time we can actually plan instead of just impromptu running.” Haru raised an eyebrow to Baron. “However great we may think we are at improvisation.”

“It’s got us this far, hasn’t it?” was Baron’s sole response to that.

“We were nearly eaten by mermaids.”

“But we weren’t,” the Creation replied with exaggerated patience.

“It was a close-run thing.”

“While this banter is all very entertaining,” Muta drawled, “I thought we were in a hurry.”

“Like you’ve ever been in a hurry for anything except food, butterball.”

“At least I don’t eat worms!”

Baron smoothly interjected into the conversation, turning to face the youth. “Rufio, are you coming with us?”
“Do I have a choice?”

“Of course,” Baron answered. “But, whatever you choose, we are going after the dust.”

“So it’s not really much of a choice,” Haru admitted.

“But it is still a choice,” the Creation insisted.

“Only barely.”

“I’m coming,” Rufio said. “That is, if you have a plan.”


The feline smiled. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

ooOoo

Life as a pirate was surprisingly dull. Especially on a world where the Jolly Roger was the only ship about and there weren’t any rich merchant ships passing through and there certainly weren’t any exciting ports to stop by.

Noodler was a none-too-bright pirate. In fact, his biggest claim-to-fame were his hands, which were fixed on backwards although he had never explained quite how this had come about. The other pirates had come up with many – far more interesting – stories anyway to fill in the gaps. The problem with backward hands, however, was that many things were made for... well, ordinary hands. He always had to put that little bit of extra effort to get the simplest of tasks done.

And the problems only multiplied when he was inebriated.

Noodler tottered about the deck, a bottle in his backward hand as he swigged from the rim. The Jolly Roger was safely moored off the coast and the rolling mist almost made the island of Neverland invisible. He liked it that way; it was easier to forget about the world they were eternally stuck on. The alcohol was moonshine really; a brew originally learnt from the local Indians (who had disappeared with the waning belief years ago) which didn’t taste much like proper rum, but did the job.

Something sounded from overboard. It sounded suspiciously like a splash. Noodler waddled over to the side and peered into the mist.

A face appeared from the fog, a face with large brown eyes and soft brown hair, and Noodler just about had time to express his surprise before a hand curled around his jacket and pulled him overboard. He landed with a hard thud in the wooden keel of a small boat.

“What’s happening to me?” he gurgled.

Something smacked into the side of his head and he slipped into oblivion.

Haru floated down to the small boat, raising an eyebrow at Rufio. “He was practically unconscious already,” she said.

“Yeah, but who’s taking chances?”

“Is the deck all clear?” Baron asked.

“Looks like it, but the sea fog is so thick that it’s difficult to tell,” Haru replied. “Seems quiet. And,”
She added, nudging the unconscious pirate with the edge of her boot, “it doesn’t look like they’re up to much.”

“They don’t have much to do nowadays,” Rufio said. “There’s no reason for them to be alert.”

“If all the pirates are as wasted as this one, we could cartwheel in and they wouldn’t even realise,” the young woman remarked optimistically, but with a sure feeling that it wouldn’t be that simple. It never was with the Bureau.

“Regardless, proceed with caution,” Baron warned, evidently thinking the same thing. “Haru, can you take us up to the main deck?”

“Independently, I expect so.”

“Good. When we’re up on deck, it’ll probably be wise to split into groups; Haru, you go with Tinkerbell and Muta; Toto, Rufio, you’re with me. The dust will most likely be with the Captain or in his quarters, but keep out of his way if you can manage it.” He was addressing to the entire group, but his attention seemed to focus particularly on Haru. “Make no mistake of it; he’s deadly and I don’t want anyone skewered by his hook.”

The rest nodded, and Haru picked up Muta from the keel of their small rowing boat, flying up to the main deck to deposit the fat cat there. Her next passenger was Rufio, and then Baron; Toto and Tinkerbell made their way up independently. “Are we so sure splitting up is such a good idea?” she murmured to Baron when their whole party stood on the fog-flooded deck. “It just seems a bit... Scooby Doo-ish to me.”

“Scooby what?” Baron asked.

“You know, split up and look for clues – never mind.” She moved to join her appointed group, but Baron briefly caught her wrist before she could go.

“Haru, please... be careful.”

The brunette gave a soft smile. “Aren’t I always?”

“Could we get going?” Muta hissed. “The longer we dilly-dally, the more likely some drunk pirate’s going to fall over us.”

“Of course.” Baron nodded to Haru and walked towards Toto and Rufio, but glanced back to the others. “Remember what I said. No unnecessary risk-taking.”

“We know.” Haru watched the other three disappear into the thick fog before turning to head in the other direction. The sea fog was so deep that they couldn’t even see to either end of the deck – or to any hostile (or drunk) pirates hidden in their depths. “So, Tinkerbell,” Haru started as they crept along the ship, “Hook said that all the fairies were gone. How come you’re still around?”

“Is this really the time, Chicky?” Muta interceded.

“You’ve been curious about this for a while, haven’t you, Miss Haru?” the fairy simply asked.

“It just doesn’t make sense. Baron did say you were different from other fairies, but I don’t understand...”

“He was telling the truth. Miss Haru, do you know how fairies are born?”
“The question never really occurred to me,” the human admitted.

“A fairy is born from the first laugh of a baby and are linked to that same child throughout their life,” the fairy answered. “However, with belief waning, not all first-laugh produce a fairy, not all fairies find their way to Neverland, and those that do, don’t last long. It’s not just belief that is waning though; the natural, innate magic of humans is as well and so few humans have the potency to support a fairy nowadays.”

“But the human you’re linked to...?” Haru prompted.

“He took on the name of Peter Pan, although it was only a temporary name. He had magic in his fingertips and he came to Neverland. I wasn’t born from his first laugh, however; instead he found a forgotten dream in the forest and gave it what every dream needs.” The golden light hesitated, hovering in the air. “Hope.”

“You were a forgotten dream?”

“Once. In the very heart of the forest, the forgotten dreams are so solid and stable that they almost take on tangible forms. He took me in and nurtured me until I shone like the fairies. I was not born like the fairies of Neverland, but I am like them in every other way.”

“And... Peter Pan?”

“Fairies die when their human dies or loses belief or childhood wonder, so I believe that my ongoing existence means that he still lives. He left, many years ago, and although he returned once I have not seen him since.” A wistful, lonely note crept into the fairy’s voice. “Even back then, belief was waning, but Peter had a magic so different and potent that... it was clear he didn’t come from the Human World.”

“They called him wonderful, all the foolish little idiots of Oz. He was nothing more than a boy. A boy with nothing more than a mere inkling of magic. And yet, they called him wonderful because of the world he came from and the stories he could tell...”

For some reason, Mombi’s words returned to Haru. She shook them away before she could ponder their relevance. There would be time for that later. “Do you really believe he still lives? He’d be an old man by now.”

Tinkerbell looked back in the direction that Baron and the others had gone. “I don’t know. Something tells me that he has changed, but isn’t gone. Anyway,” the fairy added, her beautiful voice chiming with the words, “I cannot help my faith. I am made of belief, so I have to believe in something. And if I’d believe in anything, I’d believe in him.”

Haru was quiet. She recognised a similar feeling concerning Baron.

Out of the mist, a wooden barrier appeared. It took Haru a moment to realise that they had reached the far end of the boat and were staring up at the galley. Inside, the orange glow of lamplight denoted life. Tinkerbell flew over to a window, her gleaming golden wings blending in with the light from within.

“It’s empty,” the fairy whispered.

Haru and Muta exchanged glances. “Baron told us to be careful...” Haru slowly reminded the cat. The large feline only shrugged and grinned.

“And we will be.”
“This is not being careful.”

“I know...” Muta smirked. “You’re going to go in anyway, aren’t you?”

Haru returned the smirk. “Of course.”

The door to the inside galley was unlocked, and so all three individuals crept into the room with various levels of stealth. Muta was, by far, the least subtle.

“Well, would’ya get a load of this place? Talk about your upper classes.” The round cat leapt onto an old, but well-kept and expensive, chair and curled up into the cushions. “I don’t care what Baron says, we’re taking this back.”

Haru raised an eyebrow and moved to the desk by the line of windows. “Only if you drag it through the portal when we’re done.” She shuffled through the maps and notes scattered across the table. “Hey, Tink,” she said, motioning for the fairy to come closer, “what do you make of this?”

“It looks like the old codfish is looking for something in Neverland.”

“Any idea what?”

“My, my, so nice of you to drop in.” The door from the cabin below swung shut and a red-coated pirate stood elegantly by the doorway. The Captain tipped his tricorne hat to the intruders. “You could have at least knocked though,” he admonished. He smiled as Haru’s eyes flickered to the glass vial around his neck. “Oh? Were you looking for this?”

“I think the question is, what are you looking for?” The brunette picked up the nearest map, marked out with crosses and notes. “You’ve been in Neverland for a long time, Hook.”

“Yes, and all that time I’ve been searching for a way out,” the pirate growled. He swung towards her with his human hand. Haru jumped back, but his fingers curled around something else instead. Something shimmering and golden. Tinkerbell. “All that time I’ve been hanging on to the last remaining handful of pixie dust, unable to awaken it but now... now I must thank you, young lady, for bringing such a rare treat into our midst. I admit, I had thought all the fairies had died...”

Tinkerbell, grasped by her wings, spewed out a torrent of unladylike words and threats as she struggled to tear herself from Hook’s hold.

“...but I see this one is alive and kicking.”

“Chicky, perhaps we should get Baron...”

“You go. Someone needs to make sure he doesn’t get away,” Haru growled.

Hook threw the fairy into a glass bottle and snapped on the lid. Tinkerbell raged from within, but now her words were silenced by her cage. The Captain casually turned to Haru and unsheathed a curved sailor’s sword. “Really, young missy? And who would that be? You?”

Haru glanced around. Usually, in such circumstances, there would be a convenient ornamental sword or lie-about weapon close to hand. Both were notably absent in this case.

Right. Just as well she had been taking self-defence lessons.

“I feel awful about fighting on such unfair grounds,” the Captain apologised with a looping flick of his blade.
“If you felt so bad, you could give me the sword instead,” Haru suggested.

“I don’t feel that badly about it.” Hook swiped forward with a slow strike that deliberately gave Haru enough time to jump back. It was enough to set the brunette’s heart racing, all the same. “I like winning, after all.”

“How do you feel about losing?”

Hook shrugged. “Not so keen.”

“You better get used to it quickly then.”

“Keep dreaming, girly.” Hook lunged forward and this time there was real speed in his attack. Haru leapt back, knocking into the desk and spinning away from the blade’s edge just in time. Her hand shot out and grabbed his wrist, twisting the weapon from him. The sword clattered to the ground. Haru ducked down to sweep it into her hand; she spun round only for another blade to meet with her new weapon.

Hook leered at her. “Looks like you’d forgotten the hook, m’dear.”

Haru growled and lashed out again. The hook blocked her path again and Hook’s hand grabbed her arm. She tried to pull free, but found herself caught.

“What was that about losing?”

Haru grimaced. “I’m just... taking my time...”

Hook leant towards the young woman, his lip curling in contempt. “It looks like you’re in over your head, m’dear.”

“I’m taller than I look.” Haru kneed him where it was bound to hurt, and slipped away. Her feet skipped over the ground and then, with a recapturing of the happy memories, her feet missed the ground entirely. She floated in the air, grinning down at the surprised pirate. “You shouldn’t have spared that pixie dust, Captain.”

He swore, long and colourfully.

Haru raised an eyebrow. “Tut, tut, now; that’s hardly the kind of language to use around a young lady.”

“I should ne’er have wasted good dust on an ingrate like you!” The hook lashed out at where Haru’s midsection would have been, had she not scooted backwards just in time. She kicked out, knocking the hook away.

“That’s what I just said, isn’t it?” Haru swished the pilfered blade from side-to-side, testing its balance in her hand. It was heavier than expected, and weighed her wrist down, but it was sharp and that was really what mattered. She flew down, the weapon bared, but Hook caught it once again with his replacement hand and threw her round. Even her ability of flight could not combat the momentum. She was smacked into the wall. Hard.

She dropped several feet down, now only with inches separating her toes from the ground. The hook slammed into the wall, curving delicately close to her bare neck. Pinning her in place.

“Like I said,” the pirate growled; “you’re in over your head.”
Haru gasped, desperately attempting to remain flying to stop herself from sinking down into the blade’s edge. Happy thoughts were more than a little elusive and she started to dip. The hook bit into her skin.

“Then you haven’t met my friends,” Haru whispered.

The door slammed open and a collection of familiar faces stormed in. Toto swooped into and struck into the Captain’s head, knocking the hat loose and drawing blood. The pirate swore and swung the hook round in Toto’s direction. Haru sunk gratefully to the ground, drawing in long, ragged breaths.

“You’re cutting it a bit fine,” she gasped as Baron helped her back to her feet.

“We came as soon as we heard.” The Creation grabbed Haru’s hand and the sword held in it, and twisted it upwards to block the Captain’s incoming attack. He raised an eyebrow at the pirate.

“Really, Captain; can’t you see we’re talking here?”

“You and all your clever words can’t save you now,” Hook snarled. He knocked away the sword and attempted to strike again. Baron ducked away while Haru reclaimed the happy thoughts from earlier and rose above the attack. Both delivered a swift, synced kick that sent the pirate reeling back.

Rufio caught Hook’s arms behind his back, capturing him in place. “Good to see you again, Cap’ain.”

Haru flew over to Tinkerbell’s jar and released the fairy. The small sprite dove in front of Hook’s face and began to berate the captured pirate with words that no fairy should know. Haru raised an eyebrow to Baron. “Looks like we’re all done here,” said the Creation.

“Almost.” Haru marched up to the Captain and tugged the dust-filled vial from his neck. “I’ll be taking that, thank you very much.” She smirked. “How does it feel to lose?”

Hook scowled and fought against Rufio’s hold, to no avail. “Give me half a chance and I’ll gut you every way,” he promised with a low growl. “Or are you too afraid to face me without your boys?”

Haru smiled sweetly. “I think you’re taking me for a gullible fool. Goading me isn’t going to get you anywhere.” She turned away, and then paused, as if remembering something. “Oh, and one more thing...” She spun round and punched the pirate into several realms of unconsciousness. “M’dear,” she growled.

A small smile flickered at the edge of Baron’s lips as the brunette stalked past. “Are you feeling better for that?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” She grimaced at the Creation and cradled her fingers in her hand. “But, oy boy, punching someone hurts. They make it look so easy in the movies! I think I’ve broken something.”

Baron chuckled and prompted for the pixie dust. “I think it’s time to go home, Haru.”

“Right.” Haru poured out the remaining dust into her palm and watched as it returned to a brilliant azure blue. The dust shone like tiny sapphires. “So what do I do now?”

“It’s simple,” Tinkerbell said, flying to the woman’s side. “Just believe.”

Haru looked to Baron. They shared a quiet smile. “That sounds familiar.” She blew the dust free and as it spiralled into the air, it shimmered. The light sharpened and a portal broke out in the galley. Haru gave a sigh of relief. “We can go home...”
Baron stepped to Haru’s side, a hand gently dropping onto her shoulder. “Indeed.” He looked back to Tinkerbell and Rufio. “You’re welcome to join us, if you so wish. The Bureau will always be open to you and we have plenty of empty houses to make your own.”

“Thank you... for the offer,” Tinkerbell said, “but I don’t think I can leave this place. While I am like a fairy in many ways, I need the belief – the world – of Neverland in order to exist. Take me out of this world and my existence is no longer possible.”

“The Sanctuary might be able to prevent that—” Baron began, but the sprite shook her tiny head.

“No, sir; I must stay. If for no other reason, than to help those remaining in Neverland. I have hidden for too long and kept my head too low; if I had perhaps been more willing to help the Lost Boys, fewer would have fallen to the nightmares. Perhaps I will be able to find a way to make travel to and from this world a little more available.”

“What about you, Rufio?” Haru asked, turning to the young man. “Will you come back? It’s what you wanted, after all.”

The youth stared at the portal with longing eyes. “It’s been... fifty years since I was brought here. I think. The world must be a very different place to the one I left.”

“Things have moved on,” Haru admitted.

“I think... I would be even more lost in your new world than I am in Neverland,” Rufio murmured. “I have fought so hard for so long to get back to the Human World that I never... I never really entertained the idea of it becoming a reality.” A forced chuckle dropped past his lips. “But now I find the option open, the decision is... unexpectedly difficult. My family... they will be gone... or old. My sister... she will be an old woman by now.”

“Rufio, we can take you back, find a way to help you back into society,” Baron offered, “or you can stay with us, in the Bureau.”

The youth looked over at Haru, whose clothing were another era away from the fashion he was accustomed to. His gaze moved over the whole Bureau, strange individuals that they were. “Miss Haru, the Human World must seem so very dull after your time in Neverland,” he remarked eventually. “How do you manage day-to-day life?”

“Until recently, it was the only life I’d known.”

“For the past fifty years, Neverland has been my life.” Rufio sighed, but this time there was something final about it. Something that was part of a relief. “I suppose I should thank you for the chance, at least, to return; otherwise I might have spent the rest of my long life dreaming of home. Now, however, I see that I have already made a home. In Neverland.”

“Here?” Haru echoed. “With the nightmares, and the pirates, and the mermaids—”

“As opposed to the Human World, Miss Haru?” he responded. “With your jobs, and mortgages, and taxes? No, I think the adventure I want to live is right here.”

“Very well, Rufio.” Baron offered a gloved hand to the youth; Rufio took it in a solemn handshake. “I hope we meet again.”

“I hope so too. Oh, and Miss Haru?”

Haru, on the verge of stepping back through the portal, paused. “Yes?”
“Did I ever apologise for nearly shooting you?”

The brunette grinned. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve had worse.” She saluted once to the fairy and Lost Boy, and disappeared through the portal.

ooOoo

Haru reappeared in the Bureau amidst a flood of seawater and seaweed. She picked herself off the floor and squelched to one of the sofas, sitting on the armrest to avoid the worst of the portal flooding. The painting of Neverland was steadily oozing out waves of seawater that swept out Toto, Muta, and finally Baron.

Baron splashed his way to his desk and looked over the soaking Bureau. He sighed, in a manner that suggested this was not the first time the Bureau had been treated to a small tsunami, and collected a several mops from a cupboard. “Well then. We’d better get started.”

As Muta clambered ungainly onto one of the drier sofas, he let out a sudden yelp. “Hey! We forgot to bring back the captain’s chair!”

ooOoo

Next Story: The Haunting of Fenland House

Teaser: “Now, remember what I said – this is my weekend away, so I don’t care what happens here – unless it’s end-of-the-world material – I’m not to be disturbed,” Haru reminded him. “I need at least two days where I’m not worrying that I’m about to be called back for a journey into Middle Earth or Narnia…” / “I don’t understand it. He was right here--” “There’s nobody, miss. Nobody at all.” / “And I know it was a ghost because... because it was my father.” /

Baron turned his face and stared down at the young brunette. His mouth curved into a smile, and then kept going. It cracked apart face and fur, fixing itself like a Cheshire Cat’s grin. Within the smile, rows of long, sharp teeth gleamed down at her.

“Hello... Haru.”

Chapter End Notes

ooOoo

Inspired by: Peter Pan. Written by J. M. Barrie.

Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas. Produced by Dreamworks. Directed by Tim Johnson and Patrick Gilmore.

Pirates of the Caribbean.

Once Upon A Time, Series 3.

The woman fled through the building. The others had gone – no, been destroyed – and now only she remained. She was the last one standing. She sped past the uniform doors, along a corridor where the lights dipped in and out of brightness and only her hard footsteps echoed off the walls.

She fumbled at the lock of a door that only differed from its neighbours in the number it bore at its head, cursing viciously under her breath. Her fingers found their way and the handle yielded. She stumbled into the room.

She slammed the door behind her. Turned the lock. Slumped to the ground with her back resting heavily against the door she had fought so hard to open. She dropped her head into her hands and tried to wipe away the memories that would haunt her for as long as she lived – although there was no saying how long that would last.

Something moved.

Something in the room with her.

She snapped her head up and stared into the darkness. The room was almost bare of personality; a lone suitcase rested against the wardrobe, a single book had made it as far as the bedside table, and a wash kit was the lone occupant of the bathroom. It wasn’t a place to live, only to visit.

She rose uneasily to her feet and started towards the shadow in the darkness. A familiar face stepped into the light.

“Oh.” The woman sighed and a small, relieved smile rose to her lips. She relaxed. “It’s just you. For a moment, I thought...” As she trailed off, realisation struck. Her eyes widened in horror. “No. No, please no...”

The familiar face stretched into a smile. The smile continued up the cheeks, tearing apart the skin until the unearthly grin reached the ears. All familiarity was gone. The eyes flashed.

The fangs lunged for her.

“And now,” Baron said with a decided note of satisfaction, “that portal isn’t going to be opening any time soon.” He finished off the final engraving of the spell into the painting’s frame and stood back to admire his work. “No more Neverland, at least not until we want to.”

Haru tilted her head as she examined the carving in the frame’s corner. “So, that’s it? That’s the binding spell?”

“That shall keep the portal decidedly closed and the portal hopefully dry. If we want to open it, all we need do is remove the symbol and re-awaken the magic.”
The brunette was quiet for a moment. Then, “That painting had been left in the spare room for the past twenty years and, as far as I know, never opened before. Why would it open now, of all times?” She looked to Baron. “You remember how it reacted – it seemed to respond to me.”

“I don’t know. It may have simply been a coincidence.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in coincidence.”

“I believe that sometimes the worlds line up strange happenings for no good reason but that it had to happen at some point.”

“It’s just as well it didn’t open any time sooner,” Haru muttered. “Goodness knows what my mother would have made of it had she suddenly been dragged into Neverland.”

“Small mercies.”

“Small indeed. We were nearly killed on several occasions.”

“Life is dangerous. You could be killed crossing the street,” Baron reminded her.

“Heaven forbid I ever die from my own inability to look both ways.” A shrill ring denoted an incoming text on Haru’s phone. She glanced at it, beamed, and grabbed her bag. “Talking of ordinary life, I need to get going.”

“I take it this is your weekend away you’re referring to?”

“Of course. Hiromi’s panicking because, as of yet, I still need to pack. Now, remember what I said – this is my weekend away, so I don’t care what happens here – unless it’s end-of-the-world material – I’m not to be disturbed,” Haru reminded him. “I need at least two days where I’m not worrying that I’m about to be called back for a journey into Middle Earth or Narnia... Anyway,” she added with a bright smile, “you managed for years without me; I’m sure two days won’t make a difference.”

Baron smiled softly as the brunette snatched her book from the coffee table and dropped it into her bag. “Heard and understood, Haru. All I have to say is this: Enjoy yourself.”

The young woman grinned and ran out of the Bureau. Baron watched her leave the Sanctuary and return to her human height. “It’s going to be a very quiet couple of days,” he murmured.

“Is Chicky gone then?” Muta appeared out of a side door – one that regularly appeared and disappeared depending on the cat’s need for a kitchen – with a freshly-baked cake already half-eaten. “Dunno why she’s so adamant about the two-days’ rest. It’s not like we’ve had a case since the Neverland incident. And that was a week ago.”

“Nearly two,” Baron agreed. “But she merely needs a few days when she doesn’t feel like she’s on call. Two days where she can simply live her human life.”

Muta grunted and took another quarter of the cake.

“Of course,” Toto said, swooping in to land on the balcony rail, “you know this means something is bound to crop up while she’s away.”

“Well, whatever it is,” Baron answered, “we’ll just have to face it. It is, after all, what we do best.”

“That, and sticking yer nose where it isn’t wanted,” Muta added.
“Haru! You’ve got your feet on my bag!”

The brunette scowled and tried to move her long legs anywhere but where Hiromi’s bag was spilling across the car bottom. “Well, maybe if you tried moving it,” she suggested, none too subtly.

“Any more complaints from you two, and I’ll turn this car around!” Michael caught Haru’s gaze in the rear-view mirror and made a deliberate act of rolling his eyes. “Honestly, you’re like children.”

“We’re best friends,” Hiromi amended. “It’s pretty much the same thing. Haru – you’re getting footprints on my—”

“Yes, I know. Look, it’s not my fault Michael’s car has about the same footspace as an economy-class aeroplane ticket.”

“Are you insulting my ride?”

“I’m making an educated observation.”

Tsuge, who was thankful to be sitting in the passenger seat and not in the back with the two girls, glanced to their designated driver. “Turn left at the next junction, and then a right five minutes later.” He raised his eyebrows at the women. “And, before you ask, Hiromi, yes, we’re nearly there.”

“I wasn’t going to ask,” his girlfriend sulked.

“No, but you’ve been asking for the past four hours.”

Haru shifted forward in her seat to get a better view of the map in the young journalist’s lap. “So, what’s so great about this hotel you’re dragging us all to?”

“Well, it’s been recently built on a drained marsh – huge building, very impressive, very lonely landscape – and it was all set to make a few bucks from tourists passing by, but for some reason or another, it’s been scaring off all its customers.”

“Perhaps the food’s terrible.”

“Terrible enough to give people nightmares?”

“You haven’t tried Haru’s shepherd’s pie,” Hiromi giggled.

“Hey!”

“Look, my point is – oh, left here, Michael – my point is that this hotel is, according to the locals, haunted.”

“Haunted?” Hiromi scoffed. “How can it be haunted if it’s only just been built? I thought only old buildings got that kind of history.”

“All I’m repeating is the gossip,” Tsuge said. “Anyway, my editor said I should take a look at the place, and with the rapidly-dropping prices of the rooms, the expenses were enough to cover all of us.”

“So this is work, not a holiday,” Haru said slowly.

“Aw, come on, Haru! It’s not every day that you get to go on an adventure!”

Haru caught Michael’s eyes at Hiromi’s excited outburst. It looked like he was biting back laughter
at the other woman’s misplaced judgement. “So what kinds of stories are there?”

“Oh, there’s stuff about strange people walking the corridors at night, people going missing, things like that. But who’s to say that isn’t just rumour?”

Again, Haru caught Michael’s eyes. There was a question in his gaze, to which she shook her head. No, the Bureau wasn’t getting involved with this place. Heck, they hadn’t even heard of such a hotel. That now thought, Haru started to wonder if it wouldn’t be a bad idea to contact her friends. She shook the thought as quickly as it had come – after all, it could be just stories. She had spent over a year with the Bureau and now she was seeing monsters everywhere!

“Have people gone missing?” Michael asked calmly.

“Some people have apparently just left without warning, but it’s not as if any bodies have been found. It’s probably just a case of people getting scared and leaving on the spur of the moment, but, whatever the reason, the hotel is pretty much empty now. In fact, I think we’re its only guests.”

“That sounds creepy,” Hiromi whispered. “Imagine being the only people in a huge hotel...”

Haru had had worse.

“We’ll book into double-rooms,” Michael reassured her. “You girls can take one, and Tsuge and I will take another. That way we won’t be alone.”

“What if there are ghosts though?”

“Then if I die and it’s your fault, you’ll be the first one I come back to haunt,” Haru said to her best friend. Hiromi stuck her tongue out right back. Haru rolled her eyes and shifted her feet, doing her best to avoid kicking Hiromi’s luggage while relieving the cramp building up in her muscles. She sighed, long and low.

So much for an ordinary holiday.

ooOoo

Fenland House, as the hotel was known, jutted out uncomfortably from its surroundings of semi-natural mire. It rested near enough to the main road to be one of few places easily accessible to tourists, and yet far enough away that, save for the small, winding road leading to the building, there was near no sign of civilisation or the outside world. Even the noise of the road was silent.

As Michael pulled up the car in the deserted car park, all these thoughts flittered past Haru’s mind in a rushed jumble. Whoever had built the hotel, had been striving for ancestral mansion exterior, with what looked like thick stone walls, but she was private sure were just an exterior show, and even an attempt to tempt ivy to climb its front. It was large and sprawling and altogether quite creepy, standing alone in the middle of the moorland.

Haru recalled the last time she had been in moorland – her first case with Darcy Baker and James Dawson – and seriously hoped that nothing of the sort would happen here. But moorlands had that quality to them that simply promised mystery. Mystery and danger.

“Hey, dreamer, wake up!” Hiromi was already halfway to the main entrance – huge suitcase behind her and her bag over one shoulder – while Haru stared up at the hotel. “We’ll leave you out here otherwise!”

“No fear,” Haru muttered. She took her suitcase, passed by Michael, and started after her friend.
“Creepy, right?” Michael asked, softly.

“I’m glad I’m not the only one getting that vibe.”

“And here I was, hoping this weekend away would help you escape from the creepy and bizarre.”

“For your information,” Haru whispered back, “the Bureau is not creepy and bizarre.”

“I’m not saying they are. I’m just saying that the cases you go on are nuts.”

“Michael—”

“Oh, come on – you said you went to Neverland last week. Neverland. You almost got eaten alive. By mermaids.”

“It’s only happened once—”

“And don’t get me started on the hunter and his deadly game – for goodness sake, Haru; he was going to shoot you. For fun.”

Haru paused for a moment. “When you put it like that, our cases do seem a little twisted.”

“Yes. Yes, they do.”

She beamed to the young man. “Which is why I’m enjoying a relaxing weekend with some of my closest friends. And, yes, before you ask, I did tell the Bureau that I’m not to be disturbed. This weekend is all about my human life.” Haru glanced out across the moor. “I’m just not entirely sure what I’ve signed up for.”

“Oh, come on, Haru; ghosts? You can’t believe there’s an actual haunting going on here.”

The brunette turned to her boyfriend, completely deadpan. “Michael, I’m friends with a living figurine, a breathing statue, and a talking cat. What wouldn’t I believe?”

There was a long pause. “Touché.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, hurry up, guys!” Hiromi lingered impatiently at the hotel doors. “It’s cold out here! Get inside so we can sign in!”

“She does know she could just wait inside, right?” Michael whispered to Haru.

“This is Hiromi we’re talking about.”

“I’ll tell her you said that.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

ooOoo

“Right, it looks like we have a couple of hours before they serve dinner; do we want to meet up before then or do people want a chance to rest before dinner?” Tsuge asked to the group as they received their room keys.

Hiromi made a face. “I don’t know about you stinky boys, but I need to shower. See you at dinner.”
She started into a run for the lift. “Bagsy first use of the shower!”

Haru’s expression bulged in disbelief and she started after her friend. “Hey! No fair! You take forever to wash!”

“Too bad you were too slow then, snail!”

Michael and Tsuge exchanged glances. Until today, they hadn’t had the pleasure of meeting one another, but Hiromi had insisted that Haru be allowed to bring her boyfriend, just to make things more equal. There was the awkward silence of two near-strangers realising that they would probably be spending time around each other for the next two days.

Michael smiled weakly. “Do you mind if I grab the shower first?”

“No. Go ahead.”

“Thanks,” he answered with deliberate politeness.

While Tsuge and Michael were tiptoeing around one another, Haru was exploring the twin-bed hotel room that would be home for the next two days. The room was large and modern, and the window overlooked the lonely moor. She stood by the ledge, staring out as she tried not to recall the last time she had been on heathland. She paced away and picked at the map of their hotel. If it weren’t for the unruly rumours running wild, she suspected the place would be making a tidy sum. A library dominated the east wing, a large pool and conservatory in the south wing, and several lounges and bars dotted throughout. The buffet bar ran along the top floor, looking out also onto the bleak surroundings.

She banged on the door to the bathroom. “Hiromi! How much longer?”

All she received in return was the loud, oblivious singing of her best friend. Haru groaned. She lived with this woman; she knew that Hiromi would happily spend the best part of an hour in the shower. She had a while to wait. “Fine, fine. Suit yourself.” She rolled her eyes and dragged a fresh jacket from her semi-unpacked bag.

Time to find that library.

The hotel was a maze of lookalike corridors, tastefully decorated but with the same impersonal touch of a place visited, but never truly lived in. As she rounded a corner, map tightly in hand, she very nearly walked straight into someone.

“Sorry – oh, Michael.” Her face brightened. “Did you decide to go exploring too?”

For several seconds, the young man made no reaction. Then, very slowly, he blinked. He opened his mouth, as if to answer.

“Miss? Miss, what are you doing out here?”

Haru turned to face the woman, who was the receptionist who had given them their keys earlier. “I’m sorry, I was just looking for the library – and then I saw Michael and–” She pointed back to where her boyfriend had been, only to see an empty corridor. “What?”

The woman glanced to the corridor and then back to Haru. “There’s nobody there, miss.”

“I don’t understand it. He was right here–”
“There’s nobody, miss. Nobody at all. You should go back to your room now.”

“But...”

“Please, miss. Go back.”

Haru opened her mouth, closed it, and then simply shook her head. “I think I’ve been travelling too long today. That’s what it must be. Travelling tiredness...” As she returned back towards her room, she couldn’t remove that image of Michael from her mind. She was sure she had seen him — but if that were the case, where had he gone?

ooOoo

“Hey, Haru. Haru! Hello?” Hiromi swung into her friend’s view, waving a friendly hand before Haru’s face. “You in there? We need to get going for dinner.”

Haru blinked and tore her eyes up from the book. “What? Now?”

“Unless you want to starve, yah.”

Haru’s stomach growled in response. She bookmarked the page and set the novel by her bedside table. “Alright, alright. I’m coming. Did Tsuge say it was buffet dinner?”

“Yes. We just pick up what we want. Apparently it’s all in the hotel fee, so we haven’t got to worry about how much we take.”

“Which is perfect for you.”

“I know. All you can eat buffets were made for me.”

“Uh-huh.” They bumped into the boys as they exited, at which point Hiromi wove her arm around Tsuge’s and abandoned Haru completely. This was the reason the lighter brunette had insisted her friend could bring Michael along. The other young man smiled sympathetically and slowed to Haru’s pace as Hiromi skipped ahead.

“So are you settled in and unpacked yet?”

“Not a chance. I think I’m going to be living out of my case for the next two days. Say, Michael,” Haru abruptly asked, “where did you go earlier?”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s just that I saw you earlier, and you disappeared so suddenly that you gave me a shock—”

“Haru, I haven’t left my room once since arriving,” Michael said slowly. He gave a weak smile that failed to pass across any humour in the least. “Tsuge and I were struggling to get the wi-fi working. Where did you say you saw me?”

“Just... in the corridor.” Haru shook her head. “I must be more tired than I thought. Fudge, I’m so embarrassed; I actually thought... I was so sure I had seen you...”

“Are you in the habit of hallucinating?”

“No. But, then again, I suppose my usual life is so bizarre that my mind can’t come up with anything stranger than Bureau business,” she said, attempting wit.
Michael's raised eyebrow indicated she hadn't wholly succeeded. "One of these days, your Bureau work is going to get you killed."

"Life is dangerous, Michael. I could get killed crossing the street," the brunette said offhandy, mimicking Baron's remark from earlier that day.

"Yes, but in ordinary life, you're not normally in danger of also being eaten alive by mermaids or attacked by your own nightmare."

"I'm really starting to regret telling you about Neverland."

"No, I'm glad you did. It means I can imagine just what kind of gruesome death you're facing whenever you disappear away."

"Oh, you think you're so funny."

"Am I not?" Michael stole a quick kiss from her, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "You're smiling."

"And you're cheating," Haru whispered, but now the smile was infectious. She kissed him back. "You're not allowed to kiss me into submission."

"It works, doesn't it?"

"Michael Banner, you're a cheater."

"Hey, guys, less on the PDA, please." Hiromi stuck her tongue out at the couple. "You're embarrassing me."

Haru simply stuck her tongue out back at her friend. "It's payback for all the years you put me through. Anyway," she added, rolling her eyes to the dining hall, "who, exactly, are we embarrassing you in front of? This place is a ghost town."

Even the kitchen staff were gone, having finished setting up the food and now leaving the only guests to their meal; apart from the small group of four, the room was utterly deserted. Even the bright, modern lights couldn't quite banish away the feeling of emptiness.

Michael gave a low whistle; it travelled across the breadth of the room, unhindered by any other noise. "You weren't kidding when you said they were struggling to get guests, Tsuge. Looks like people took the stories seriously."

"It's strange," Haru murmured.

"It's so cool!" Hiromi – who worked at a hotel-pub, and so was familiar with deserted dining areas at the end of a shift – skipped into the middle of the room, laughing up to the high ceiling. "It's like a feast set out just for us."

"Which is kind of what it is," Haru reminded her friend, but Hiromi was past caring.

The smaller brunette danced in the centre of the room, enjoying the echo of her laughter coming back to her. "Oh, come on, guys; you have to admit it's cool. I feel like a VIP here. And the space... It's so roomy here..."

Reassured by Hiromi's enthusiasm, the others quickly pushed any doubts back about the quietness of the dining room and started to pick at the dishes. Hiromi shamelessly took advantage of the space and spread out her food across half a table, playing with the decorative candle centring the table.
“You’re going to burn yourself,” Haru warned idly as she joined her friend.

Hiromi flicked her fingers closer to the open flame, playing with how close she could get to the fire without touching. “I think I’ll risk it.”

Haru shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“You know, you can put your finger right through the flame, if you do it right,” Tsuge remarked, taking a seat beside excitable brunette. He passed a finger through the top of the flickering flame without any apparent injury.

“Thanks, Tsuge,” Haru said with a groan. “Now she’s going to burn herself for sure.”

“Hey, you’re right!” The girl in question had discovered the truth of Tsuge’s comment and was putting it fully to the test with much ooh-ing and ahh-ing. “So cool...”

“You can deal with her when she burns herself,” Haru muttered to the young man. Her attention waned, shifting to the room about them. One side of the room was a huge panel of windows that looked straight over the moor, now dark with the set sun gone; they rose up to a high ceiling that was painted with a spiralling, beautiful fresco. The building really was beautiful – but all that couldn’t overcome the general air of unease. Haru’s eyes moved down to the other side and froze as they came to the far-side door.

Somebody stood in the doorway.

The light from the corridor beyond outlined their form and only a darkened silhouette remained. But it was enough for Haru to recognise the form. They were human-sized, true, but Haru knew those feline ears, the top hat resting between, and the long tail swinging gently.

She backed out of her seat so suddenly that she broke Tsuge from the story he was telling. Hiromi and Michael both looked to their friend with worry.

“Haru?” Michael gently touched her elbow. “What’s wrong?”

Haru’s breath had shallowed; she dropped her gaze to meet that of her boyfriend’s. “Nothing, I, just...” She looked back up, but the form was gone now. She cursed and started running towards the door she had seen Baron standing in. She spun into the corridor, red-faced and angry. She stalked down the hallway. “Dammit, Baron, you promised. You promised,” she muttered to herself. “No Bureau business, not today, not tomorrow.”

Someone’s hand curled around her elbow; she lashed back.

“Are you finding this funny?!”

Michael blinked once in her abrupt rage. Then, slowly and seriously, “No, Haru. I’m not.”

Haru deflated, glancing once back along the otherwise-empty corridor. “Sorry, Michael, I thought... I thought you were someone else...”

“Baron?” he offered.

“He promised me he wouldn’t bother me with Bureau business while I was here,” she growled. “He promised.”

“Where did you see him?”
“Just... back there.” Haru waved towards the doorway that lead back into the dining hall. “Didn’t you see him?”

“I wasn’t looking.”

“So... I might have been imagining it?”

“And you might not.” Michael’s brow furrowed. “That said, from what I’ve seen of him, I don’t think it’d be in Baron’s nature to play hide-and-seek, is it?”

Haru shook her head. “At least, I hope not. If this is his idea of a joke, he’d better hide well.”

“Come on; I think it’s time we headed back.” Michael sighed. “I suppose you really need a break from the Bureau if you’re imagining him wherever you go.”

“I guess you’re right.” Haru attempted a grin. “If I’m not careful, I’m going to start imagining monsters soon too.”

“Just as well we’re not in Neverland then, huh?”

She shivered, recalling the nightmare that had nearly killed her. “That’s not even funny. Come on; I think it’s about time I try to excuse my newfound craziness to the others.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard; everyone knows you’re a few tomatoes short of a salad.”

Haru dug her elbow into his side. “You’re trying to be funny again.”

“I’m sorry. Well, I’m not, but it seems like the right thing to say, so...”

“I’d stop if I were you, before you dig yourself any deeper.”

“Right. Stopping now.”

“Good.”

“I mean, I’ll try my best, but it’s just so hard to keep my good wit quiet–”

“Michael?”

“Yes?”

“Shush. You’re being a menace.”

“Hey, Haru!” Hiromi waved to Haru once she reappeared in the dining hall. “What happened back there?”

“You looked like you had seen a ghost.” Tsuge said with a twitch of his lips.

“If I saw anything, there was probably more the gravy than the grave about it.” Haru answered as she took a seat. “I’m not feeling too good; I think I may have eaten too quickly or something. Actually, I think I’ll head to bed early tonight.”

“Aw, come on, Haru; stay a while!” Hiromi whined. “We’re making hand-shadow animals by the candlelight and then were going to go explore this place – don’t you want to stick around for that?”

Haru smiled weakly, thinking of the strange occurrences that had been happening since her arrival.
“No, thanks. I think I’ll just call it a night. Enjoy yourselves, though. Do your best to avoid getting in too much trouble.”

“Course we will.”

ooOoo

As the night came sweeping in and the clock struck eleven, Hiromi returned to her and Haru’s shared room. She waved good night to the two boys, who had been dragged along for her exploration of Fenland House. As they disappeared into their room, Hiromi turned back to the task of finding her keys.

When they weren’t immediately located in her right-hand pocket, she started to rummage through her other pockets, and then through her bag. She rattled her handbag noisily by her ear, attempting to hear the telltale jingle of loose keys.

A shadow passed over her. She glanced up to see a form by the boys’ door.

“Did you forget something too?” she lightly asked. She dropped her attention back to her bag. “I’m so stupid – I can’t even remember where I put my room keys – do you think Haru would hate me forever if I woke her up now?”

At the form’s continuing silence, Hiromi looked back to it. “Hey – say something. Tsuge, if this is your idea of a joke–”

They stepped into the light.

Hiromi screamed.

There was a crash, and Haru burst from their room, fire tongs in hand and lethally bared. “What? What is it?”

Hiromi jabbered and shakily pointed to the empty corridor. “I saw – I saw–”

A moment later, Tsuge and Michael appeared in the hallway, both dishevelled and halfway ready for bed.

“What’s all the screaming about?”

Tsuge’s eyes found the tongs Haru bared. “Someone’s on high alert.”

“I thought something was attacking her,” Haru said gruffly, and lowered the makeshift weapon.

“Like what?”

Michael moved to the smaller brunette, gently taking Hiromi’s arms in his own and looking into the terrified woman’s eyes. “Hiromi, what did you see?”

“It was a – a ghost!”

“What did it look like?” Haru asked, thinking of the Bureau. If Baron had mistaken Hiromi for Haru and scared her friend witless, there would be words. “Did it look... human?”

Tsuge gave Haru a strange look. “What kind of ghost are you expecting?”

“I’m just asking.”
Hiromi swallowed and weakly nodded. “It... It was human. And I know it was a ghost because... because it was my father.”

“Your father?” Haru echoed incredulously. “But he’s... he’s gone, Hiromi.”

“I know,” her friend hissed. “Why do you think I screamed?”

There was a stagnant pause, only filled by Hiromi’s rapid breathing. Haru sighed and put a gentle arm around the other brunette’s shoulders. “Come on; I think I saw a hot water dispenser in the dining hall – we can probably plug it back up if needs be. It looks like you need a warm drink.”

ooOoo

“Do you think it’s linked?” Michael moved beside Haru as she emptied a sachet of hot chocolate into a mug. “That and... what you saw earlier?”

“How can it be?” Haru asked. She stirred the chocolate powder viciously into the milk. “Baron’s not dead.”

“I know, but... even so... it’s too much coincidence. First that, now this?” Michael placed a calming hand on Haru’s, slowing her furious pace before she spilt the drink. “It’s put you on edge.”

“Hiromi nearly screamed the building down; of course I’m on edge.”

“If there is a link – if something is out there – what do we do?”

“How should I know?”

“You’re the one working with the Bureau,” he softly reminded her.

“Yeah, well I’m not with them right now,” Haru snapped. “I don’t even have a way to contact them – I never thought I would need to while here. I’m alone.”

“No, you’re not. You have us.”

“Us?” Haru echoed. She looked across the room; even with its modern lighting, the place looked desolate and spooky with the midnight air drawing in. Hiromi sat slumped in a chair, with Tsuge beside her, attempting in vain to reassure the frightened young woman. “If there is something out there, we’re not prepared for it. None of us are.”

“Haru, I know you’re scared–”

“Scared?” she repeated tensely. “I’m furious – with myself. I should have set up some kind of back-up in case something like this happened – not been so adamant that the Bureau stay out of this–”

“Because you don’t think you can handle this without them.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

The brunette raised an eyebrow, but the usual playfulness that accompanied the action was notably devoid. “If it were just myself here, fine. Maybe I would be okay. But, the crux of the matter is that it isn’t. Hiromi’s a shivering wreck from seeing the apparent ghost of her father, Tsuge has no idea monsters even exist and you...” She trailed off, reddened, and then began again. “You’ve seen how dangerous our cases can get. I need people who know what they’re doing.”
Michael smiled faintly, and cupped Haru’s chin. “Now, that doesn’t sound like the young woman who fended off a mutant eagle with nothing but a chair and umbrella.”

“She’s seen just how dangerous the world can get,” Haru whispered. “There have been cases where I nearly didn’t come back.” She dropped her gaze. “I don’t want to lose any of you.”

“Guys, if you’ve finished with the hot chocolate, I think Hiromi needs the drink.” Tsuge appeared between them to ease the mug from Haru’s grasp. “What’s all the whispering for, anyway?”

“We’re just trying to work out what actually happened,” Michael said lightly, as if monsters and ghosts hadn’t been on the agenda. “Perhaps we shouldn’t have spent so long exploring this place; it’s obviously unsettled us.”

“But what if Hiromi’s right?” Half a smile flickered on the edge of Tsuge’s lips. “What if this place is haunted?”

“Hiromi’s father would be one of the last ones to come back from the grave,” Haru said tightly. She reclaimed the hot chocolate and stiffly moved to where her best friend was sitting. “Hey, Hiromi,” she murmured in tones far gentler than the ones she had used to address Tsuge. “How are you feeling?”

“A little foolish, if I’m to be honest.” Hiromi attempted a faltering smile. She tiredly sipped at the warm drink, regaining a little of her spirits for the sweet taste. “Was I being stupid? Is it possible that I imagined the whole thing?”

“Maybe. But maybe my arrival scared it away.”

“Is it,” Hiromi echoed, thoughtfully. “You don’t really think it was my father, do you?”

“Hiromi, I remember your father. He was gentle and kind and I can’t imagine him ever trying to scare his little girl.”

“Maybe death changes people.”

“I imagine it does,” Haru muttered. “But, until we’re sure, let’s not assume that your father is back from the grave. Whatever it is, it is possible that it’s dangerous.”

Hiromi’s eyes widened. “You believe me. You believe me when I say I saw something. Did you see it too?”

“No... but I know something scared you back there.” Haru smirked, and was relieved to see her friend manage a watered-down version. “And you’re far too spunky to go jumping at shadows.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Haru smiled, but once again she spotted someone standing in the doorway of the dining room. She slowly stood to her feet. Relief flooded through her. “Baron...”

“I’m sorry, Haru?”

“Nothing.” She waved it away, but was already heading to the door. “Just... stay here. There’s something I need to see.”

Baron’s silent form regarded her, and then his silhouette shifted into the corridor beyond. The movement was deliberate: Follow me, it said.
Haru had to resist letting her feet buckle out beneath her in happiness. They had found her – the Bureau were here. She didn’t have to face this alone anymore.

“The Refuge is filled with Creation magic; sometimes, that magic enables it to pick up distress calls,” Baron had told her a year ago. “Especially from those who have been to the Refuge before.”

She came to the doorway and glanced along the dimly-lit corridor. At the end, a familiar feline silhouette stood. “Baron,” she breathed, half whispering, half sobbing his name. She started towards him. “I know I told you to stay away, but I’m so happy to see you, I’m not even angry anymore.” With his back still to her, Haru reached out and gently touched his elbow. “That said, I’m not appreciating the hide-and-seek games you’ve been playing. If you were here, you should have just said. You scared me.”

Baron didn’t speak. He didn’t even turn.

Haru’s grip on his elbow tightened. “Baron. Say something.”

The Creation turned his face and stared down at the young brunette. His mouth curved into a smile, and then kept going. The smile cracked apart face and fur, fixing itself like a Cheshire Cat’s grin. Within the smile, rows of long, sharp teeth gleamed down at her. “Hello... Haru.”

ooOoo

Teaser: “It could be anyone. Hiromi, Tsuge... you...” / “Haru... why are there two of you?” / The creature dissolved into green smoke, spiralling up and dashing towards Michael. It materialised behind him and sunk its shark teeth into his shoulder. “NO!” / Her fingers slid down to his throat and tightened. / A hand shot out, grabbing her forehead and smacking her head onto the hard floor. / “What about me, Haru?” Baron asked. “Would you kill me?”
This is not Baron.

The inconvenient truth hit her like a bag of wet cement, momentarily knocking the breath out of her. She didn’t need breath though; she didn’t need to scream, only react. With a snarl, she lashed with a high kick to the creature’s side. It buckled and she fled down the corridor. She smacked into Michael, who had sensed that something was off from the moment she had left.

“Haru? What–?”

“No time. No time to explain.” She glanced back, and the form of Baron was doubling over, staggering back to its feet even as she watched it.

“Isn’t that–?”

“I don’t think so.”

The monster’s head snapped up and Baron’s green eyes glittered. They glittered, and the whole form dissolved away in a cloud of green smoke.

“Holy–”

Haru grabbed Michael’s hand. “Run!” She pulled him along the corridor, but the cloud of smoke followed them. Overtook them. It gathered itself before them and Baron’s form came back into being.

“Haru – it’s me, can’t you see?” It even had Baron’s voice. He approached the couple, gloved hands outstretched reassuringly to Haru. “What are you so afraid of?”

She flinched back, backing away into Michael. “You’re not Baron,” she whispered. “You can’t be.”

“How can you be so sure?” The creature gave a smile that was so similar to Baron’s smile that Haru’s stomach did a nervous flip. Its hand lifted to Haru’s face and caressed her cheek. “Haru, don’t you see? I knew something was wrong here and so I came. I would never let anything happen to you...”

The smile spread and once again the cheek began to tear in the Cheshire Cat grin.

Michael yanked Haru back as the creature struck. Its long teeth ripped into empty air that Haru had moments ago occupied. It hissed in frustration and dissolved into the green gas; it rose into the air and disappeared.
“What... *in the blazes*... was that?” Michael demanded.

Haru gasped and wheeled away from where the Baron-creature had been. She slumped against the wall, breathing heavily and sweating. “I... I don’t know.”

“Haru?” Michael dropped to her side. “Are you okay? Did it get you?”

“No, but...” A sob of delayed shock shivered through her and she allowed Michael to pull her into an embrace. “Oh God, if you hadn’t been there... I mean, I just froze. I just... I *so* wanted it to really be Baron.”

“So you saw what you wanted,” Michael finished numbly. He hugged her closer and then gently eased her back to her feet. “You have nothing to be ashamed of; you were scared and unprepared. Just... be wary of who you trust from now on.”

Haru pulled away from him, something unreadable in her gaze. “If.... it really did take on the form of Hiromi’s father, then it can turn into whoever it likes,” she said slowly. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “It could be anyone. Hiromi, Tsuge... *you*...”

“Haru, I can assure you that I am not a murderous shapeshifting monster,” Michael said with a half-smile.

The brunette found a small smile slipping onto her face, despite everything. “Of course, that’s just what a murderous shapeshifting monster *would* say.”

“Well, what *wouldn’t* a murderous shapeshifting monster say?”

“I wish I knew. Come on; we need to check on the others.” She wobbly set back in the direction of the dining hall. “They need to know what’s going on.”

“And how do you expect we do that?” Michael asked. “Me, I’ve seen the craziness you live but they – they won’t believe you. How are you going to explain to them that there’s some kind of dangerous creature stalking round the hotel?”

“Michael. We’re wandering round a huge hotel, alone, in the dead of night.” Haru grinned. “I’m planning on the setting doing half the work for me. Anyway, Hiromi is convinced she saw her father–” She froze as she came to the doorway.

There was a third individual in the room.

Without a word, Haru hoisted a fire extinguisher off the wall and approached the trio, Michael close behind.

“Hiromi?”

The lighter brunette looked away from the third individual to Haru, and then stared. “Haru? But you’re...” She looked to the stranger, mouth ajar. “But that’s... that’s not possible...”

The third person turned.

And it was like looking into a mirror.

“Haru... why are there *two* of you?”

“You don’t want to know, Hiromi. Just walk slowly towards me – you too, Tsuge.” She hefted the fire extinguisher up into the air. “I don’t know what you are, but take one step closer and I’ll bash in
whatever you have for brains.”

The pseudo-Haru stared at her, and then slowly tilted its head to one side. Its eyes blinked strangely, too rarely to seem natural. Sure enough, when it opened its mouth, rows of shark-like teeth filled its maw. “What’s wrong, Haru?” it asked. “Are you afraid of your own shadow? Or, should I say, our shadow?” It laughed at its own joke.

“Haru... What’s going on?”

“If I knew, Hiromi, I’d tell you. Right now, all I can say is stay away from it.”

“It? It?” The other Haru raised an eyebrow playfully. “What am I, a thing? You wound me, Haru. We’re the same.”

“We are so not the same. I know what a dentist is.”

It ran a tongue over the rows of nasty teeth. “Touché.” Now with Hiromi and Tsuge standing behind the extinguisher-wielding woman, the creature backed down. “Well then, I guess you won this round. I’ll see you around...” It dissolved away and the green mist dispersed into the floor. Haru gasped and lowered the fire extinguisher, her arm killing from the weight.

“What... was that!!”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care,” Haru answered shortly. She turned to her friends. “Pack up your bags; we’re going.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Tsuge stepped forward, notebook in hand as he furiously scribbled down the encounter. “Did you see that creature?”

“Yes, yes I did. Far too close, for my liking, and that’s why we’re leaving.”

“Think of the mystery this holds~”

Haru angrily snatched the notebook from him. “Look, Tsuge, I’m as intrigued by mysteries as the next person, but that thing is dangerous and I will not risk my friends over a possible story for your column or what-have-you. That monster could kill us, do you understand?” She slapped the notebook painfully back into his palm. “Pack your bags. We’re leaving.”

As they exited the dining hall, no one pointed out that she was still armed with the fire extinguisher.

ooOoo

“Do you really think it’s that much of a threat?” Hiromi asked as Haru threw the books she had unpacked back into the suitcase. “I mean, it didn’t hurt any of us.”

“Not for lack of trying,” Haru growled. If she closed her eyes, she could still see the moment that the pseudo-Baron lunged at her, teeth bared and dangerous, and she had been too stupid to see past the trick. She had had Michael with her, but there was no telling that the next attack would be less successful. “Hiromi, trust me, what you saw wasn’t your father. It was that thing posing as him. I know you want to believe that he’s here, but...”

“But what if I really did see my father? What if he’s trying to warn us?”

Haru slowed in her packing. “Hiromi...”

“I can’t help it! I want to believe it’s him!”
Haru pulled her friend into a tight embrace. “That’s what it does, Hiromi. It takes the people we trust and want, and uses our love for them to make us blind to the truth. It takes the people we want to see.”

Hiromi pushed away, staring at Haru as the cogs whirred. “That’s what made you run out of the dining hall earlier, isn’t it? You saw it. Who did it look like to you?”

“I...” Haru’s mouth went dry as she vainly searched for a lie. Baron. It had used Baron against her, not once, but twice. He was her blind spot. He was the person she believed she needed.

“Haru! Hiromi! Tsuge’s gone!” Michael stormed into the room.

“What? Why?”

“He remembered he had left his notebook and went back to get it—”

“Alone?” Haru hissed.

“He didn’t give me much warning before disappearing.”

The taller brunette grabbed a jacket, pulling it close around her and slipping into a pair of practical shoes. Why did it feel like there was going to be a lot of running for this case? “In that case, we go after him. Together.” She raised an eyebrow when Hiromi seemed surprised by this decision. “Whatever it is, it looks like there’s only one of it; if we stay together, then it can’t fool us by taking the form of one of us – we’d see through the deception immediately if suddenly there turns up to be two Michaels.”

“So we just need to be wary of anyone else who turns up then?” Michael offered sceptically. “What if they’re just innocent bystanders?”

“Be sensible, Michael; who else is going to be wandering round this hotel at night?”

“Perhaps they needed a midnight snack.”

“Guys, this is all very entertaining, but my future boyfriend is missing, possibly about to be eaten, and we haven’t got time for this,” Hiromi stressfully interceded. She pushed past the others, coming into the hallway. “Which way did he go?”

Michael pointed down the corridor. “To the dining room, like I said.”

“Wait!” They had barely walked a minute through more corridors of hotel sameness before Haru tugged her best friend to a halt. She nodded to a nearby door. “I think I heard someone in there.” She moved to knock, but Michael caught her arm.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? What if they’re asleep?”

“They don’t sound asleep.”

“What if it’s that thing?”

Haru hefted the fire extinguisher before her. She had yet to put down the useful canister. “We can manage it. Anyway, perhaps they know something – perhaps they heard Tsuge go past earlier.” She rapped at the door with her knuckles, stepped back, and waited.
She didn’t have to wait long before the door was flung open – and the end of an umbrella, filed to a point, appeared bared at her throat. A woman, in her mid-thirties and wild-eyed, stood in the doorway. “Move, and I’ll rip your throat out.”

“And then what?” Haru retaliated. She didn’t like being threatened, and particularly not with umbrellas. It would make a very embarrassing death, to say the least. “You’re going to take down my friends with that?”

The woman’s eyes moved over the other two – who were even more surprised by the unorthodox method of intimidation – and her gaze flickered between relief and suspicion. “Quick – your teeth. Show me your teeth!”

Haru shrugged to the others and bemusedly complied. Her friends dubiously followed suit.

The stranger’s eyes lit up. She lowered the umbrella and backed inside. “Quickly now – get inside before it sees you!”

Haru, who sensed fear but not much aggression anymore in the elder woman, followed her into the hotel room, raising an eyebrow when Hiromi and Michael hesitated. “Are you guys afraid of a little umbrella?” she teased.

They moved into action, trailing after the Bureau member.

“Lock the door after you – be swift about it, boy; you don’t want the puca to find us!” The woman rounded the room, moving through the organised chaos to flick a desk lamp on. The table was filled with a variation of thick, tightly-written and tightly-bound books, most open and heavily noted on. “I’d offer you tea, but... well, you can see the problem...” She motioned to the mess she lived in.

“We weren’t thirsty anyway,” Haru said. She took a seat on the corner of the bed. “Who are you?”

“The name’s Samantha Grey. Among many things, I am a folklorist.”

“And I take it from all this,” the brunette said, motioning to the room’s state and the sharpened umbrella, “that you know what is going on?”

“Know? No – that would imply I had any control over the matter. I came – with a group of other experts – to investigate the occurrences happening here.”

“Experts?” Hiromi asked. “Experts in what?”

“In the supernatural, of course.” Samantha Grey smiled. “Although so little is really known on the matter that it doesn’t take much to be considered an expert. That said, the others were more familiar with working in the field – I am much more of a behind-the-scenes individual, but they said they needed someone who really knew their facts to help identify the being here.” Samantha’s expression dropped. “Of course, they’re all gone now.”

“Gone?”

“The puca got them.”

Michael, who was tiredly rubbing at his temples, gave a long sigh. “Alright, let’s start from the beginning here. What is the creature out there and what can we do about it?”

“The creature is a form of fairy called a puca – one of a particular species that inhabits swamps and moorland. It is the same creature responsible for will-o’-the-wisps – you know, jack-o’-lanterns,
hobby lanterns, hinkypunks – the lights you see on the moor,” the folklorist explained. “They’re tricky creatures, as are most fairies, and have a tendency to lead travellers astray. They can also take the form of people from a person’s memory, enabling them to scam wanderers into trusting them. They can be indirectly dangerous, but we’ve never heard of them turning physically violent before.”

“Until now,” Haru said.

Samantha nodded. “We believe that, when Fenland House was built, it destroyed the home of just such a puca.”

“And it wants revenge.”

“I don’t know if it is revenge, exactly; I believe it’s more of an instinct. Swamp pucas are intensely territorial and now Fenland House has taken over that territory. From the puca’s point of view, we are all living in its home. Unfortunately, this puca appears to be sadistic, even for fairy standards.”

“Great,” Michael muttered.

“So how do we defeat it?”

“Puca’s aren’t anymore indomitable than the form they take. A puca in human form could, theoretically, be killed by a bullet or blade.”

“So why did your companions fail?” Haru asked seriously. From the sound of it, Samantha was well-versed in her knowledge; she couldn’t help but feel that the field experts should have been equally skilled. So how did such a creature defeat them?

“We... misjudged,” Samantha answered quietly. “Not all of our crew were taken by the creature.”

Hiromi gasped. “They killed each other?”

“They mistook other members for the puca in disguise. And then others hesitated too long when they encountered the real puca, too scared to make the same mistake, and the puca destroyed them.”

“You say it can be killed while in human form,” Michael persisted, “but when we’ve seen it, it has simply dissolved into mist. What’s to stop it from doing that when – if – we attack?”

“While in contact with a human, it is unable to change into anything other than a person from their memories,” Samantha explained. “Have it in your grasp, and it will be caught in a mortal persona. That will be your chance.”

“Hey – are we planning on taking down this... fairy?” Hiromi abruptly asked, realising Michael’s direction of questioning. “Can’t we just find Tsuge and run?”

“If we do that, the puca will keep on attacking other people,” Haru said, rising to her feet and flexing her toes. “Now we know how to defeat it, we should try.”

“We should leave it to other people – you know, people who know how to deal with this kind of thing–”

Haru laughed suddenly. She winked to her friend as she retrieved her makeshift weapon. “Just trust me, Hiromi. I know what I’m doing.”

Hiromi tilted her head curiously at Haru, with just a spark of awareness. “You know what? I thought you’d say that.”
Haru laughed and headed to the door. “Thank you, Samantha; we’ll try to put your knowledge to good use. Do you wish to come?”

The woman smiled nervously. “Thank you, but no. I’ve already had enough encounters with this particular puca to last me a lifetime.” She shifted her stance, and Haru noticed a deep set of teeth marks driven along her arm, reddened by dried blood. She spotted Haru’s attention and pulled her sleeve over the wound. “I mistook the puca for a friend once before. I don’t want to make the same mistake.”

Haru nodded somberly, and unlocked the hotel room to the corridor beyond. “Hiromi, if you want to wait in here too—”

“Are you kidding me? I need to find out what’s happened to Tsuge first! Anyway,” she added as she playfully jogged Haru’s elbow, “I can’t let you have all the fun.”

“Thanks.”

They started along the corridor, only pausing when – five minutes later – they came to a crossroads in the hallway. They glanced down the left and the right option with the faint aura of confusion. “Anyone remember which way is to the dining hall?” Haru asked eventually.

“Sorry.”

“Hey – I think I can see Tsuge down that way!” Hiromi cried, and she disappeared to the left.

“Hiromi, wait!”

“Haru.” Michael’s hand fell on her shoulder, stopping her from running after the other woman. “Something’s moving down that corridor. Could be the puca.”

As Haru looked, she too saw something that resembled green smoke curling along the right corridor. “If we get that, then the danger will be over,” she breathed. Still, she hesitated. If Hiromi had seen Tsuge, then there was nothing to worry about...

She ran to the right.

ooOoo

Hiromi rounded a corner to run straight into Tsuge. She gasped in relief and hugged the young man. “Thank goodness! You’re alive! Haru was talking about fairies and pucas and I was starting to think... well, never mind.”

“Haru? Where is she? Where’s Michael?”

“Oh, they’re back that way...” Hiromi waved to corridor behind, but was internally a little surprised at her friends’ lack of appearance. Surely they should have been right behind? Haru was, after all, a damn fine runner nowadays.

“Can’t you hear that?” Tsuge abruptly asked. His eyes scanned the corridor Hiromi had gestured to. “There’s something coming.”

Hiromi couldn’t hear a thing, but she wasn’t about to say so. “It’ll probably be just Haru and Michael–”

“I don’t think so...” the journalist muttered. “We should go – now!”
They ran.

ooOoo

“Just a security light,” Haru growled as she ran back along the corridor. “Just a damn green safety light – and now we’ve lost Hiromi!” They came back to the junction, but Hiromi had disappeared. She followed the corridor her friend had taken, but that hallway simply split up into more and it was impossible to tell her route.

“Now what?” Michael asked. “Has she got her phone on her?”

Haru shook her head. “And even if she did, I don’t think she’d have any signal here.”

“We could split up–”

“That’s what got us into this mess in the first place,” Haru retorted. “We’re not splitting up. I only hope she really did find Tsuge and not more trouble. For now though... I suppose we should work methodically through these corridors and hope we find them soon.”

“Before the puca does.”

“That’s what I meant.”

ooOoo

“I think we’re far enough now.” Tsuge slowed to a stop along an empty corridor, his eyes scanning his surroundings nervously. “Tonight has been far too difficult for my liking.”

“Still,” Hiromi said, attempting to see a silver lining even here, “I guess this means you’ll have your story, right? It can’t be every day you come across a face-changing fairy.” She grinned. “I mean, I assume this isn’t your everyday routine.”

“There isn’t always this much running,” Tsuge admitted.

“Hiromi, look out!”

The brunette turned around to see another Tsuge standing at the end of the corridor. Beside him, Samantha was armed with her sharpened umbrella.

“Wait, what?”

She spun round to see the Tsuge closest to her lunge out at her with a mouth of vicious teeth. She leapt back just in time and joined her less-lethal friends.

“Don’t let it bite you!” Samantha shouted.

“Gee, thanks.”

“No, I mean it. It can cause an infection that fills you with puca magic and steals you away to a fairy realm,” the older woman retaliated. “I was lucky once, but don’t take any chances.”

“What’s so bad about a fairy realm?” Hiromi asked.

“It has creatures like that.”

“What are you even doing here? I thought you were going to stay back there.”
Samantha puffed. “He turned up,” she said, pointing to the young man by her side, “and I decided I couldn’t leave you to get yourselves taken in by the puca.”

Tsuge – the real one – joined Hiromi’s side. “Did you really think that that thing was me?” he asked sceptically as his lookalike split its face into the Cheshire Cat grin and its eyes flashed a hollow shade. “Should I be insulted?”

“To be fair, it wasn’t cosplaying Jaws at the time,” Hiromi retorted. “So now what do we do, guys?”

“And can we do it quickly?” Tsuge added. “My face should not look like that.”

“What are you afraid of, Tsuge?” The puca kept Tsuge’s voice, but the tone was unduly playful for the situation at hand. “Don’t you like your smile?”

“If I smiled like that, someone would probably have punched me by now,” Tsuge growled.

“Now, now, that’s no way to talk to yourself. What would our mother say?” It laughed – and then jumped for them.

Samantha yelped and pushed the other two aside. It missed Tsuge and sunk its long teeth into Samantha’s shoulder. She screamed and jolted back, lashing back with the umbrella and sticking its point into the puca’s arm. The puca yelped and released her and the older woman sunk to her knees. She raised a hand to her face. “No... Please, no–”

The tips of her fingers began to dissolve away, slipping away into nothing. It moved down her arm and raced across her chest. She staggered to her feet only for her left leg to fade away. She screamed again, but when she collapsed, she disappeared entirely and nothing – not even her umbrella – was left.

Tsuge – who had found a closet and located some heavy-ended brooms – paled.

Hiromi was a little more vocal in her shock. “She – she’s gone!”

The puca rolled its head and flexed its fingers. It started towards the two survivor, but stopped as a flash of pain ran along its arm. Samantha’s umbrella had struck good and true and blood was seeping down from the wound. The puca cursed and stepped back.

“I’ll be seeing you later.”

It evaporated back into the green smoke and sank into the ground, disappearing into the floor below. Hiromi ran after it and then stared at its last-known spot. She looked to where Samantha had also vanished. “She wasn’t joking about the biting thing, was she?” she whispered.

Tsuge joined her side. “Where are the others? I think they’re going to need some back-up.”

ooOoo

“This looks like the library to me.”

Haru swore. “Then we’re at completely the wrong end of the hotel for the dining hall. This is the east wing. We should be looking for the top floor of the north-side.”

“You memorised the map?”

“I memorised where the library is,” Haru replied.
Michael grinned. “Ah, the important things in life.” He glanced up to the tall bookcases rising all the way to the balcony above, creating a maze of pulp and pages. “Hey – there’s a door up there – perhaps that’ll take us to the right floor, and then it’s just a matter of finding the north-facing side.”

He peered round the nearest towering bookcase, spotting the top of a spiralling staircase leading to the balcony. However, between them and the staircase were half a dozen walls of books.

“Did you memorise the library layout as well, by chance?”

“I’m sorry; was the hotel layout not enough?” Haru swung the fire extinguisher to her side and started along one of the bookcase-lined walkways. “Come on – it’s a library; how difficult can it be – oh?”

“Oh?” Michael doubtfully repeated. He came to where Haru had abruptly stopped, browsing the shelf at her head-height. “Haru, this is not the time to give in to your inner bookworm.”

“Oh, ye of little faith...” The brunette pulled out a volume and turned the cover to face Michael. “It’s about fairies. It might have something useful.”

“And I don’t think we have enough time for this.” He moved to the nearest wall and flicked a switch. Apart from the few automatic lights that had glimmered on upon their entrance, none of the larger lights came into being. “Great. It looks like you need to have a skeleton key to turn on anymore of the lights...”

“Uh-huh...”

“Perhaps the library desk will have a landline or something we can use...”

“Sure...”

Michael rolled his eyes and disappeared towards the centred of the room. Haru flicked through the book, finding her way to the respective page on puca. A minute later, Michael reappeared at the corner of the bookcase. “Hey, Michael, listen to this – according to this book, shapeshifting puca actually read the minds of their victims in order to convincingly turn into replicas of people – I suppose that’s why it took Baron’s form... I’ve been thinking about him so much that I guess it was all too easy to take his shape...”

“It would also explain why Hiromi saw her father,” Michael said.

“Yeah... Hey, was the landline working?”

“No, it’s down. Of course.”

“Of course,” Haru echoed. She shelved the book and turned to face her boyfriend. “So – what’s the plan? I mean, what if Hiromi didn’t find her way to the dining hall? What then?”

Michael placed his hands on her shoulders, reassuring holding the brunette together. “Haru, stay positive. Hiromi’s best chance is if we keep a cool head and carry on. She’s a smart girl. After all, she managed in Oz, didn’t she?”

“She lost her head,” Haru retorted. “Literally.” Her brow furrowed as something seemed off-kilter. “How–?”

“Haru! Get away from it!”

Another Michael appeared at the corner; he had been the one to yell upon seeing his lookalike. Haru
pushed herself free from the first Michael. He offered no resistance as she stepped away.

“Thank goodness I got here in time – Haru, you need to get away from that creature!”

“Don’t listen to it – it’s just trying to fool you, Haru.”

“This is just like the encounter with Baron—”

“Except this time, the puca’s got smarter,” the first Michael snapped. “Appearing second to make it look like you’re saving her – very clever. Not clever enough though.”

“Stop it – both of you, just stop it!”

Both Michaels silenced. The second Michael stepped forward, but halted when Haru raised the fire extinguisher in his direction.

“I mean it. Don’t come closer, either of you,” she growled. She looked to the first Michael. “You too.”

“Haru – if I were some kind of... murderous shapeshifting monster, wouldn’t I have attacked you back there when I had the chance?”

“You didn’t get a chance, that’s why,” the second Michael interrupted. “I returned too soon.”

Haru’s heart was beating out of control. Two Michaels. Both apparently identical. And neither about to own up to their puca identity. Samantha’s earlier comment returned to Haru, and she slammed upon an idea. “Show your teeth.”

“What?”

“Why?”

“Never mind the details – just do it!”

Both Michaels complied, but neither had the telltale teeth. The first Michael closed his mouth and gave a dirty look to his twin. “Of course – the puca’s learnt how to hide its fangs. That would make things too easy, wouldn’t it?”

The second Michael widened his eyes. He looked to the brunette. “Haru, tell me you’re not buying this creature’s lies. I’m the real Michael.”

Haru smiled sadly. “Isn’t that just what the puca would say?”

He paled. What had originally been a morbid joke was now painfully relevant. “Okay, so you don’t trust me – you don’t have to – but, please, don’t do anything rash; not until you’re sure which of us is the real one.” His eyes flickered to his doppelganger. “Because one of us will tear you apart if you’re wrong.”

“But how can I be sure?”

“You could ask us something – something only the true Michael would know,” the first one offered.

“The puca can read minds – that’s what I was trying to tell you when you arrived,” Haru said miserably. “Whatever I know, so will the puca.”

The first Michael gently touched Haru’s arm, making her recoil back at first but then she hesitated.
Her heart skipped a faint beat at the familiar contact.

“Haru... can’t you tell it’s me? After everything we’ve been through together, all the adventures and times, how can you think for a moment that that,” he whispered, looking to the second Michael, “is me? I had hoped... no, believed, that you would be able to tell the difference...”

“Haru, please–”

“Shut up, puca,” he snarled to his double. “Haven’t you caused enough damage already? Haru–”

She edged back, but the sorrow in his eyes slowed her pace. “Michael, please, just give me space–”

“And let that monster steal you away with its words?” he whispered. “Never.”

Haru turned her head away. “Michael...”

“Please... just trust me.”

Haru’s heart gave a very definite skip at the murmured words, breathed so softly into her ear. She snapped her head back to the young man, eyes wide and staring. “What did you say?”

“I said, just trust–”

The fire extinguisher smashed into the side of his head. He dropped like a bag of cement.

“Haru!” The other Michael ran to her side, staring down at the unconscious duplicate. “How – I mean, what made you so sure–?”

She lowered the makeshift weapon while her breathing was still coming out in shallow gasps. She was shaking. “Emotional blackmail? It’s not your style. There were a few other clues too, but that fixed it.” She nudged the prone form with her toe, moving its arm into the light; blood from an earlier injury was seeping through the shirt. “He also mentioned Oz.”

“It exists?”

“Exactly.” She smiled weakly. “The puca’s mind-reading abilities are apparently not all-knowing; otherwise it would have realised that I hadn’t told you about that little case–”

“You went to Oz?”

“I’ll give you the full story later, but yes, I did.”

“What’s it like?”

“Not like the movie.” Her eyes narrowed and she gave the puca a harder prod. “There was one other fatal mistake. It should not have used Baron’s words.”

The first Michael opened his eyes, but they were now a bright green.

Baron’s eyes.

“But, Miss Haru, Baron’s the one you really want here, isn’t it?” Baron’s voice asked. “Not him. Not that mewling human. Everything would have been a lot easier if it had been the other way around tonight, wouldn’t it?”

“You’re not Baron,” Haru hissed. “Don’t try and sound like him to confuse me.”
The puca blinked and the dark irises of Michael returned. “What about me, then?” Michael’s voice asked. “Will you listen to me? Or are humans too boring for you now you’ve tasted the world of adventure? Of spirits and magic and... Baron?”

“Can we shut it up?” Haru turned away. “It’s making me sick.”

“I’m open to ideas.” Michael caught Haru’s eye and smiled half-heartedly. “Although, it’s kind of surreal to contemplate hitting myself, even a fairy doppelganger version.”

“I’m glad you see the humour in the situation.” That said, Haru sensed that the puca’s words were as unnerving to him as they were to her. “Do you want to do the honours or shall I?”

“I think I’d like that pleasure.”

“Ooh, trying to look tough in front of the lady, eh?” the puca mocked. “Trying to be the shining knight?”

“No. I just like the idea of hitting you.” Michael drew back a foot, planning to deliver a swift kick that would knock the lookalike unconscious, when the puca gave a wide grin.

“Too slow, boyo.”

Unhindered, the puca dissolved into green smoke, spiralling up and dashing towards Michael. It materialised behind him and sunk its shark teeth into his shoulder.

“NO!”

Haru tackled the puca to the ground, pinning it and keeping it from shifting back into smoke. She watched as the real Michael staggered to the ground, his legs collapsing under him. His form flickered in and out of being. “What did you do to him? What did you do?” she screamed.

The fairy twisted to see the shifting form of Michael. “Looks like the bite didn’t quite go deep enough,” it remarked, as easily as it might remark on the weather. It snickered; the laugh was an ugly, hollow sound. “But eventually he’ll disappear for good. That’s the magic of the puca. He’ll disappear and he won’t come back,” it hummed in a sing-song voice.

“Undo it!”

“I can’t.” Its grin split its face in two. “The only way to stop the magic now is to stop me.”

“What?”

The puca, with a sudden show of strength, pushed Haru away and flipped them round to turn the tables on the brunette. Blood dripped from its temple as it pinned Haru; the blood ran down its face and trickled across Haru’s cheeks. “You heard me. The magic will only stop infecting him if I die. You’ll have to kill me, Haru.”

“Fair enough,” she snarled.

She kicked out, trying but failing to twist free from its grasp. The puca smirked.

“Oh, really? Tell me, Haru; are you so sure that you could kill a friend?” The Cheshire Cat grin sank away until only Michael’s scared face stared down at her. “Could you, Haru? Would you kill me?”

Haru’s arm scrabbled helplessly for the fire extinguisher, but it lay just out of reach. Beyond that, she could see the real Michael fading in and out of reality. “You’re not Michael,” she hissed to the
doppelganger. “You’ll have to try a little harder than that.”

Michael’s eyes blinked away, momentarily giving way to hollow irises, but they were quickly replaced with emerald green. Tawny fur flowed over the skin and whiskers broke free from its cheeks. “What about me, Haru?” Baron asked. “Would you kill me?”

Haru froze. Her heart beat irregularly against her chest. “Oh, you fight dirty,” she whispered. It was easy to remember that the puca wasn’t Michael – the real one was collapsed in the background – but it was much harder to banish away the doubt with Baron’s eyes filling her vision.

She closed her own eyes and slammed a knee into his chest. He gasped and loosened his grip. Haru pushed herself away and staggered to her feet. “It still won’t work,” she whispered, “because I know you’re not really him.”

The puca uneasily rose to its feet, the open wound at its forehead still bleeding although the blood had begun to dry along its face. It matted the fur an ugly red. “Oh, really?” Baron’s voice turned, shifting to a guttural tone. “We’ll just have to see about that.”

It lunged for her, ripping off the white gloves and extending out the feline claws. Haru knocked away the first hit, shifting round her balance to sweep the puca’s feet from under it. The defence lessons were finally bearing fruit. The puca grabbed her ankle and brought her down with it. She slammed onto the floor, rolled over and kicked out against her attacker.

It jumped away and leapt to her side. A hand shot out, grabbing her forehead and smacking her head onto the hard floor. She cried out and stars swam across her vision. She could make out the blurred, upside-down face of Baron as sharp claws dug into her wrists. He sat behind her, holding her hands in place while his wound dripped blood onto her face. “What are you going to do now, Haru?”

Half a smirk twisted one end of her lips. “Improvise.”

She rocked backwards, shifting her weight onto her shoulders to kick out directly behind her. Her feet slammed into the air above her head, hitting nothing but jolting the puca back with the shock. It was enough for her to twist out of its grasp and turn the tables. She spun round, kicking it behind the knees and sending it to the ground.

Breathing heavily, Haru sat on the puca’s chest and subsequently pinned it down with her weight. “Undo what you’ve done to Michael,” she growled.

“Oh what?” it cackled. “You’re going to kill me?”

Haru’s gaze flickered back to Michael. He was completely prone and unmoving now, and with every lapse of existence the time it took for him to return was taking longer and longer. Her eyes moved slowly back to the puca, pausing only on the fire extinguisher. It was too far to reach – she’d have to move off it and then – without the physical contact – it could easily dissolve into smoke and then it would be lost.

Her internal dilemma must have shown on her face, for the puca cackled again. It was the same uncomfortable, uneven laughter as before and it sent new waves of shivers running up Haru’s spine. “Looks like you’ll have to kill me with your bare hands, Miss Haru. And I don’t think you’re up to it. Well then, that only makes one of us.”

The puca’s bare hands – Baron’s hands – shot out and secured around her throat. She gagged, but found that the air would not pass through to her lungs. In defence, she slammed a hand down into Baron’s face.
Her fingers slid down to his throat and tightened.

She shifted her weight, bringing a knee straight into his chest; her grip loosened just enough to let the gasp of breath escape Baron’s lips. He tried to keep his hold on her neck; it had weakened after the last hit, and so she twisted away enough to snatch another life-saving gulp of air.

Michael disappeared. Five agonising seconds ticked by. He finally faded back into being.

Time was running out.

The puca changed its tactics as its grip shook too badly to stop Haru’s desperate gasps. It released her neck. Haru dragged in several long, shaky breaths, tears squeezing out of her eyes in relief. The claws went for her face now – she recoiled far enough back that it missed her eyes and ran straight down her cheek instead. She kneed it again and the tears stung as they trickled into her raw wounds.

The puca was growing weaker now as its oxygen-starved body began to falter. The hands no longer had the energy to reach to her face; the next desperate attack scratched along her arms and dug long scars into her skin.

Pain hissed through Haru’s lips, but she still refused to release.

Baron’s hands dropped to her wrists and scrabbled against her grip. It was a pathetic attempt, the claws barely drawing blood anymore. They slowed and now only had the strength to gently grip around her hands. Almost affectionately.

Baron’s eyes stared up into hers as his lips moved vainly to draw more breath to his dying body. Shudders began to shake throughout him, his chest spasming as it rebelled against the oncoming death. New tears spilled from Haru’s eyes; she blinked them back and tightened her grip. Her fingers trembled.

Baron raised one weak hand, but it only rested lightly against Haru’s cheeks. The shivers gave way to a stillness precluding death, and Haru’s tears ran over his bare, tawny fingers. She saw the eyes begin to fade out of focus; his lips parted and mouthed words that she read all too easily.

“Haru... please...”

The eyes glazed over and the same hollow shade flooded into the irises. The head rolled back and the hand dropped from her cheek. Unwillingly, Haru caught it in her own and held the familiar hand between her fingers. As the first sobs wracked her body, she released it and pushed herself away from the dead body. She shuffled back until she hit a wall and there the floodgates opened.

A gentle hand came to rest on her shoulder. She recoiled back, but Michael drew her into his arms and held her there until the worst of the weeping subsided. She looked over his shoulder and saw that Baron’s body had been replaced with the corpse of a gnarled and shrivelled fairy form. She buried her head into Michael.

“It... It was like actually killing him...” she murmured. “I know it wasn’t, but...”

“I know.”

“I didn’t think I could... that I had it in me... I’ve never intentionally killed someone, but I couldn’t – I wouldn’t – let it hurt you...”

“Shush, I know. I know.”
The library doors banged open and Hiromi and Tsuge ran in, both armed with broomsticks. They skidded to a halt as they came to Haru and Michael’s location, staring at the scene set out before them. Michael raised his eyes to the pair. “You’re too late,” he said quietly. “The danger is over.”

ooOoo

“So much for a quiet holiday,” Hiromi said as she passed out hot chocolate to the group. After many quiet hours of travelling, they had returned home and the whole party had unanimously decided to stay around Haru and Hiromi’s flat for a while. After the events of the night before, it seemed safer to stay together.

“Agreed,” Michael sighed as he took the proffered drink. “If I ever complain that life is boring, remind me how stupid I’m being.”

Haru said nothing. She couldn’t easily say that she had experienced worse, but there was a good chance she would soon be walking into similar danger. She caught Michael’s eye and she was more than sure that something similar was going through his mind.

“That said, we all survived,” Tsuge remarked. He smiled. “Relatively unharmed, too.”

“Excuse me while I just stitch up my scars,” Haru said sarcastically.

“That’s why I said relatively.”

“You’re not the one who looks like you got into a literal catfight,” Hiromi pointed out.

Haru wasn’t about to mention just how accurate her friend’s comment was. She shook her head as Hiromi offered a hot drink to her. “No thanks.”

“Let me guess: you need tea right now.”

Haru smiled gently. “In fact, I think I do.” She rose to her feet, much to the others’ surprise.

“Haru? Where are you going?”

“I think there’s a friend I need to see.”

ooOoo

Baron put the finishing touches to his new blend of tea as a form stepped into the Bureau. He didn’t hear her enter at first, but Haru silently watched the familiar Creation at work. Alive. Breathing.

He finally looked up and saw the brunette standing there. His face split into a smile – his familiar smile, no Cheshire Cat grin included. “Haru,” he said; “what a surprise.”

She smiled unsurely back at him. “I know.” She crossed the room and hugged the feline, breathing in the homey scent of tea and mint.

Baron hesitated and then slowly returned the kettle to the cabinet. He drew his arms around the brunette. “Miss Haru, has something happened?”

Silent tears ran down her cheeks and bled into his waistcoat. She buried her head into his shoulder, hugging him tighter to reassure herself that he was really here. Inhaling his scent and savouring the feel of their embrace. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw the moment the light faded from Baron’s. The moment he died.
“Baron, I’ve got a story to tell.”

Next Story: The Three Barons

Teaser: The top hat spinning on the ground was a velvet black. Familiar white gloves picked it back up and placed it on an unfamiliar head. Bright blue eyes stared at the brunette. “Haru?” / “Let’s just say there were a few cases I hope haven’t followed laughing-boy here, Chicky. Otherwise we’re in a whole heap of trouble.” / “I swear, if we find one more Baron, we’re going to have to start up a self-help group...” / “Are we expecting anyone?” “No... Why do you ask?” There was a crash from outside. “Because we’ve got company.”

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by: Super Robot Monkey Team Hyper Force Go! Episode: “Night of Fear”. Directed by Fumio Maezono et al. Written by Baz Hawkins et al. (Originally. Things sort of... got out of hand.)

This case is dedicated to Tsuruya Pines, who helped install a love and appreciation of the creepy and eerie that was invaluable for the past two episodes. This was, by far, one of my favourite cases in this series (the readers were right; I am evil!) and I could not have done it without you. (Even if you didn’t realise you were helping!)

References:

A Christmas Carol. Written by Charles Dickens.
It all felt like a perfectly ordinary morning when Haru came swinging into the Sanctuary. As she walked through the archway, her form shrank down to its cat-size, and she fished out the book she had borrowed from Baron last week. She was busy pulling her hair out of its ponytail – she really would have to cut it back soon before it became a hindrance in cases – when she walked into someone.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the flash of a top hat and coattails and immediately assumed it to be the well-dressed Creation.

“Sorry, Baron – hey, I have the book you leant me – it was great, although H. G. Wells writing reads far too much like rich chocolate and I can never manage more than a few chapters a night, but–”

She froze.

The top hat spinning on the ground was a velvet black. Familiar white gloves picked it back up and placed it on an unfamiliar head. Bright blue eyes stared at the brunette.

“Haru?”

She nervously smiled and took a deliberate step back, holding the book tightly to her chest in misplaced defence. The striking to a particular feline was uncanny. “Who...? Who are you?”

He stepped forward, but paused when Haru purposely matched his stride backwards. Confusion clouded his features, tainted by something that looked suspiciously like hurt. “Haru, it’s me. It’s Baron.”

Haru placed another step between them. “No... it isn’t.”

Uncharacteristic frustration vented through him and he tried to step closer to the brunette, only to acquire the same results. This time Haru brought out a collapsible umbrella and pulled it to its full length. She bared it between them. “Keep back, sir. I’ve had enough of faux Barons to last me a lifetime.”

The strange Baron frowned, and then a little confusion cleared up. “The Fenland House puca,” he murmured in understanding. His eyes moved over Haru’s arms and the scratches on her cheeks that were slowly healing. “How long ago was that?”

“Why does it sound like you’re going to be surprised by the answer?” Haru asked. “How do you even know about that? Who are you?”

“I’m Baron.” Tears welled up in the unfamiliar blue eyes and this time Haru didn’t recoil away when he placed a gloved hand on her arm, too fascinated and horrified by the response her presence had
caused. “I can’t believe it’s you,” he whispered. “I thought... I thought I had lost you...”

The Bureau doors clicked open and another Creation stepped into the courtyard. The Sanctuary glowed with what Haru knew to be Baron’s welcoming show. “Welcome to the Cat Bureau. I am Baron Humbert von Gikkingen and I can see you have already met...”

Baron’s greeting dried up at seeing the newcomer. Haru glanced back and was almost speechless with relief to see the Baron she knew. She attempted a smile. “Yeah. I think that welcome speech is going to be a little redundant.”

The dark-furred Baron released Haru and stepped away from her. His blue eyes moved to the Creation who was so alike in build and form and voice – only the external colouring differed. “You’re...”

“Me,” Baron whispered.

The grey Baron looked to Haru, eyes tired and confused and more than just a little sad. “Something’s gone wrong.”

“I’ll say.” Haru’s Baron stepped towards his lookalike and the two circled each other carefully. To Haru, it was like watching two real cats pace. Where her Baron was a tawny ginger with green eyes, the other was dark grey with blue. His suit was black, his waistcoat yellow, and his bow tie not just blue, but also speckled with white spots. Otherwise, they were identical, right down to the top hat and cane.

“What are you doing here?”

“A portal went wrong,” the other Baron answered. “We received a distress call and tried to reach them, but instead it brought me out here. I thought at first that it had simply dropped me back in the Sanctuary, but...”

“But this isn’t your Sanctuary.”

The darker Baron stole a glance to Haru. “Apparently not.” He dropped his gaze to the ground.

The familiar Baron didn’t miss the look. “Who are you?”

There was a sad smile. “I am you.”

“Really?”

The stranger tipped his hat in the same reserved manner; he kept his gaze on his lookalike as if afraid to steal a glimpse of Haru again. “Baron Humbert von Gikkingen. Owner and founding member of the Cat Bureau, Creation, and all-round busybody. Sound familiar?”

“You don’t look... like Baron,” Haru eventually ventured. “Well, there are similarities, but you still... look different.”

The two Barons had stopped pacing and were silently staring at one another. Trying to measure the meaning of the other’s appearance. Finally, the familiar Baron breathed slowly out in a decision. “If we are indeed the same person, then one explanation makes the most logical sense.”

The darker Baron nodded. “Parallel worlds.”

“With apparent differences.”
“And an evident time lapse.”

The tawny Baron raised an eyebrow. “Time lapse?”

“In the world I come from, the Fenland House incident was a year ago.”


“Each world is slightly different; that is what sets them apart,” her Baron replied. “In the world that this Creation came from, his artisan decided on a different colouration and so while we have probably had a similar past in many ways, there will be things we do not share.”

The other smiled sadly. “It appears we have at least one thing in common though. It is good to see you, Miss Haru. Evidently, this Baron also has a discerning taste in friends.” He bowed and placed a quick kiss on her hand.

Haru blushed a little – and also at his choice in words. Usually the term Baron used was ‘Bureau member’ when referring to her; it was something new for ‘friend’ to come before that. She silently wondered what had happened in the past year.

Baron placed a hand on the dark-furred Creation and firmly moved him out of his bow. “It is a pleasure to meet... you, but I believe we now have the dilemma of returning you to your world? This is not your Sanctuary.”

Haru started at the uncharacteristic abruptness of the Baron she knew, surprised by his unusual behaviour and yet unable to account for it. “While we’re working on this problem, perhaps we should break out Baron’s fresh batch of tea? His batch,” she added, suddenly realising the naming issue they were about to run into, and pointed to the tawny Baron.

“Sounds like a capital idea.”

Haru saw the lips of her Baron twitch in silent amusement at the other’s choicely vocabulary. As she walked past him, she whispered, “Don’t laugh. You’re as bad as he is.”

“Are not.”

She raised an eyebrow and disappeared into the Bureau.

The two Barons regarded each other with wary caution. The resident Creation motioned slowly to the Bureau doors. “Guests first.”

The other smiled. “As you wish.”

Upon their arrival to the little house, Haru had already started on the tea. “Baron, I’ve already begun your cup – I assumed the usual – so... other Baron,” and she reddened at the awkward reference, “what would you like with yours?”

“The usual. Lemon, please.”


“I take it that the usual is something different here?” the darker Baron sighed.

“It’s milk,” Haru said, almost apologetically.

“I should have known that there would be other small differences. It makes sense. Thank you, Miss
Something outside crashed – it sounded suspiciously like the plant pots all over again – and two familiar forms dropped into the Bureau. Toto flew in from the window and landed on the balcony rail, while Muta burst in through the doors, waving a podgy fist at the crow. “Overgrown chicken! Flying rat! Ruddy birdbrain! Eh, hello Baron.” He flopped down on the red couch, moving his gaze over the grey-furred Baron entirely. “What’s for dinner?”

“Trust you to only think with your stomach,” Toto mocked. “Hello, Haru. Who’s the client?”

The strange Baron rose from the chair and turned to the newcomers. “Toto? Muta? You’re here too?”

“Oh, yeah...?” Muta shifted his feet from the coffee table and raised a dubious eyebrow at the well-dressed feline. “Who are you? Baron’s long-lost cousin?”

“It’s... a little bit more complicated than that,” Baron said. He stepped forward, moving between the other Baron and the Bureau members. “This... is Baron. He’s me.”

“From a parallel world,” Haru supplied.

“Great. Just what we need; two show-offs.”

“It seems you are the same as ever, Muta,” the other Baron said with a slight smile. As Haru passed the finished cup of tea to him – lemon, not milk – he nodded his thanks. “All of this is... a bit overwhelming. If you don’t mind, I think I need to have a moment’s peace outside.”

With the second Baron gone, the familiar Creation turned to Haru as she gave out the other tea. “Haru, are you okay?”

“Okay?” she echoed curiously. “I’m fine.”

“It’s just that, after the Fenland House incident–”

“That’s different. For one, the puca looked like you, not him,” she said with a grin. “Secondly, all I see is a frightened Creation who’s a long way from home. In fact, one of us should probably talk to him.” She started towards the Bureau doors, only for Baron to move after her.

“I’ll come.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Look, Baron, you’ve hardly been a barrel of laughs with him around; I need to talk to him without the lot of you tiptoeing on eggshells. It’s disconcerting.” She smiled with a slight air of bemusement.

“What is it that you’re so afraid of?”

Baron was silent as Haru left the Bureau. Toto hopped down to his side.

“Baron... are you jealous of yourself?”

“No.”

ooOoo
Haru sat down on the cobbled courtyard against the stone pillar, beside the quiet form of the strange Baron. She waited for him to make the first word.

“Things are a little strange right now, aren’t they?”

Haru smiled sympathetically. “Yeah.”

The blue eyes glanced round to her, a warm smile filling his features before he seemed to remember something and drop his gaze to the ground. A long sigh travelled through him. “I’m sorry about this. Everything... Everything is so complicated.”

“Don’t worry – Baron will find a way to get you back to your home. Well, by Baron, I meant...”

“Your Baron,” the other finished.

“I wasn’t quite meaning to put it that way...”

“No. But it’s accurate, isn’t it?”

Haru was silent. Overhead, she saw Toto fly out from the Sanctuary and disappear out into the town. She turned their conversation onto other matters. “You said you were going through a portal when it went wrong,” she said. “What was the case?”

“We had received a distress call from a girl called Aurelia in the Roman times.”

“What?”

The strange Baron looked to her. “Right. Your Baron hasn’t tried to move through time yet.”

“You know how to travel through time?”

“In a limited manner. If we receive a distress call from the past – and this is the first case that it has happened – then I believe we can track it to the person; yes, even through time. Of course, we have yet to succeed in this endeavour – instead we ended up here, but I’m sure that the next time we will achieve our aim...”

“What about the rest of the Bureau?” Haru asked. “Did they come through the portal as well? Are they out there somewhere?”

“I... went alone.”

“Why?”

“Toto and Muta thought it a foolish risk. Travel through time, they said, it’s never been done in the Bureau.”

“What did I say?”

Baron gave her a wordless glance. He abruptly rose to his feet in a flurry of top hat and cane and started back towards the Bureau. “You weren’t there,” he muttered.

Haru started to go after him, but at that point Toto flew back into the Sanctuary carrying a familiar white cat. He dropped Muta into the Sanctuary. “Hey! Baron – look what I found at the Crossroads!”

The resident Baron appeared from the Bureau, closely followed by... the first Muta. Haru recalled, at
this instant, that only Toto had left the Sanctuary – which meant the other cat was not from this world. She sped to the blue-eyed Baron’s side. “I thought you said you came through the portal alone,” she accused.

“I did,” he answered. “And that is not my world’s Muta.”

“Well, he ain’t ours,” Muta grunted.

Baron and Toto exchanged glances. “But that means…”

“Another parallel world is at play here. Muta, what are you doing?”

Their Muta was prodding his doppelganger with remorseless abandon. “Are yer sure it’s me? It sure looks like me, but I don’t remember being a mute.”

“There was a time, Muta, when you were quiet,” Baron reminded him.

“Sure – I mean, sure, but that was... you know, eons ago. That was…”

“When you first joined the Bureau,” Baron finished. “Twenty years ago.”

“Oh, Lord; if that’s the case, we’re not going to be getting any sense out of him,” Muta snorted.

“What makes you so sure?” Haru demanded. She pushed him away from his lookalike, giving him a deathly glare when he made to start prodding at the silent feline again.

“He’s me, Chicky. ‘Course I know what’s going on in his head.”

Haru unlatched her necklace from around her throat and promptly returned to her full height. She scooped the other Muta into her arms, with not even a complaint from the cat. “There are far too many cats in the Bureau today; look, I’m going to head back to my flat and get dinner – and if I know Muta – even this Muta, which I don’t – then he’s probably starving too.”

The resident Muta rubbed up against Haru’s legs, purring pointedly. “Are you going to be serving cake then?”

“Are you inviting yourself to my flat if that’s the case?”

“Of course.”

The brunette sighed. “Alright, then. But we’re taking the stairs to get to the apartment, not the lift.”

“What?”

Both Barons watched the two cats and young woman go, the Muta trotting alongside Haru yowling at the effort of taking stairs when an elevator was more than adequate. “Even now, I sometimes forget that she’s quite something,” the strange Baron murmured. His gaze was sad; when Baron looked to him, the other dropped his gaze, smiling wanly. “I’m sorry. She so like my Haru that sometimes I forget she’s yours.”

Baron coughed awkwardly and looked away. “She’s not mine.”

The other merely chuckled. “Give it time.”

ooOoo
Over a bustling city, a Creation flew through the night. He and his mount soared over the sparkling lights of the human settlement; street lamps and car lights, gleaming windows and flashing signs. But he was searching for quite a different place – a little world of its own that bordered beside the mundane.

He tilted back his dark top hat and continued his hunt for the Sanctuary.

ooOoo

“There we go... Three slices of angel food cake, as requested.” Haru set the plates down before the two felines, smiling apologetically to the other Muta, who only sniffed suspiciously at the offering. “Well, it’s what this lardball requested, anyway,” she grinned, throwing a thumb in the direction of the Muta she knew. He was already digging into the slice.

The other Muta took a nervous bite; his ears flickered to and fro with what Haru hoped was approval. This was quickly proven when he ploughed into the cake with sudden abandon.

Haru laughed.

“See, Muta; perhaps you are more alike than you think.”

“We all had to start somewhere, Chicky.”

“Haru! HARU! There’s a furball in the hallway!”

Haru groaned and got to her feet. “Oh, good grief; Muta, tell me you didn’t–”

“HARU!” Hiromi shouted, more urgently than before. “GET. IN. HERE!”

The brunette glared at him. “We’re going to have A Talk when I get back.” She disappeared into the hallway to calm her irate flatmate. “Geez, Hiromi; it’s just a furball. It’s not going to bite.”

“It’s nasty.”

“It’s just fur and slobber... and when I put it like that, yeah, it is nasty.”

“I stepped on it.”

“You’re wearing shoes.”

“Really nice shoes!”

Haru gave a long-suffering sigh and started towards the cleaning cupboard. “I’ll clear it up, Hiromi. Now, go shower and freshen yourself up; you’ve come straight from lacrosse practice and you smell.”

“Wow, you’re really underplaying the best friend role.”

“No more than you do.”

“But my – my shoes–”

“You’re a drama queen and your shoes will clean,” Haru retorted flatly. She raised an eyebrow. “Go. And stop squealing like a five-year-old; it doesn’t suit you.”

Hiromi stuck out a tongue, but sped upstairs regardless. Haru rolled her eyes and began to remove
the unsightly mess from the entrance. When she returned to the kitchen, Muta was in full swing of a one-sided conversation.

“–and there’s birdbrain, which is a classic – never let it die, even if the birdbrain himself mocks you for using it. My other personal favourite is overgrown chicken, but really you can mix and match your words–”

“Muta? What are you doing?”

The fat cat grinned. “Giving myself a bit of advice in advance. I’m bumping up his vocab.”

“You mean Toto insults?” Haru translated flatly. She scooped up the finished plates, dumping them into the sink and glaring at the round feline she knew so well. “The poor cat hasn’t even said a word and you’re bombarding him with... useless knowledge?”

“Useless? I’ve used them many times over the years.”

“Don’t you remember what you were like fifteen years ago? You must have been like him at some point.”

“Well, yeah, of course I was as mousy as him once,” Muta grunted. “Don’t remember it so well though.”

“Why not?”

“Eh, shortly after Baron took me in – and I was quieter back then anyway – and then things kinda happened, so–”

“What kind of things?”

“Meh, I think we had a huge case that went south...” Muta trailed off, abruptly looking back to his doppelganger. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Haru repeated doubtfully. “Why ‘oh’?”

“Let’s just say there were a few cases I hope haven’t followed laughing-boy here, Chicky. Otherwise we’re in a whole heap of trouble.”

“Lovely.”

Something tapped at Haru’s kitchen window. She started to motion for her Muta to shush when she spotted a familiar top hat bobbing just in sight. She chuckled, and opened the window. “Baron, why didn’t you take To–” Her question came to an abrupt halt as she spotted their newcomer.

The hat that Haru had mistaken for Baron’s was a darker shade than usual, a light brown instead of light grey, and was tilted precariously between orange ears. At least his fur was the same colour, but the waistcoat was a deep green and the bowtie red with orange dots. The strange Creation grinned up at the young woman and tried to respectfully tip his hat to her – a rather difficult feat with one hand gripping his cane and the other clinging on to the window sill.

“I’m terribly sorry about this, but I believe a companion of mine is residing here...” He scrabbled for purchase and raised his golden eyes imploringly to Haru. “If you wouldn’t mind, I could do with a hand.”

Haru sighed. “You better come inside.” She scooped the figurine up and set him carefully down on
the kitchen table. The newest Baron stared at the two Mutas, which Haru simply waved away. “Yeah, I know. This is where it gets complicated.”

The new Baron pulled himself together – which quietly impressed Haru – and finally tipped his top hat to the woman. “I apologise for intruding on your home, miss, and for any confusion caused by my appearance. My name is Baron Humbert von Gikkingen–”

“I know who you are. Goodness knows we’re flooded with enough Barons to occupy a small country back at the Bureau,” Haru sighed, interrupting what she knew was going to be a grand and lengthy introduction. There were only so many times it was amusing and she had discovered it tired very easily on the third.

He looked a little disappointed in his uncompleted greeting. “Do you know what a Creation is?”

“We have at least three of them back at the Bureau, even if two of them are alternative versions of the same one.”

“Oh.”

“Truth be told, I think you’re the one who needs some filling-in,” Haru said with a grin. She motioned to the more talkative of the white cats. “This is Muta. Say hello, Muta.”

He simply grunted.

“He’s like your Muta, except with a bigger mouth.”

“Hey!”

“Case in point.”

The new Baron seemed to be putting the pieces together, albeit slowly because, unless Baron was a secret sci-fi fanatic in his past, parallel worlds was not an automatic assumption to make. “Are you implying that your Muta and my Muta are one and the same?”

“Almost. Except your Muta – and yourself – come from a parallel world set further back in the past. About twenty or fifteen years in the past.”

“Twenty...” Baron numbly echoed. His golden eyes latched back onto the brunette. “I take it from your casual acceptance on the existence of Creations that you have had some dealings with myself in the past?”

Again, Haru grinned. “Baron, have you found the Sanctuary yet? Because I think there are a couple of people you should meet...”

ooOoo

“Miss Haru, we were not expecting you back so soon.” The resident Baron exited the Bureau to greet the returning brunette; behind him, the dark-furred Baron followed out and watched the reunion.

Haru hugged her Baron and then looked back to the white cats that flanked her. “Well... there’s a kind of reason for that...”

The third Baron wandered into the Sanctuary, hand to hat as he stared at the surroundings. “Fascinating... It’s practically identical to the Refuge in my world...”
“Another me?”

Muta grunted and pushed his way into the Bureau. “I swear, if we find one more Baron, we’re going to have to start up a self-help group...”

The newest Baron dragged his eyes from the tiny village and approached his lookalike. Unlike the second Baron, this one had the same shade of fur as the resident Baron, which only made the entire scenario even more surreal. They looked each other up and down while the dark Baron stayed his distance.

“So, you’re me, are you?”

“It would appear so.”

The third Baron was quiet while he regarded his other self, eventually saying, “The waistcoat is a bit blinding, isn’t it?”

“Funny, I was going to say the same thing about your bowtie.”

“O-kay.” Haru bustled between the two Barons before their verbal appraisals could escalate into anything more damaging. She glared at the Baron she knew. “Really, Baron; are you going to stand here and quibble about your fashion sense?” She pointed icily to the Bureau. “Go inside, do what you know best, and make yourselves a cup of tea. All of you.”

She glared until all three Barons trudged mutely inside.

A cackle rang overhead and she looked upwards to see Toto watching the scene with obvious mirth. A small smile started across Haru’s face and eventually spread into a wicked grin. “I feel like I just sent them all to bed without any supper.”

“And you absolutely loved it.”

“Would I be a bad person if I said I did?”

The resident Muta padded out of the Bureau – Haru got the impression that the Bureau was getting rather full – opened up the post-box and started to ruffle through the day’s newspaper only to discover his usual seat had already been taken – by himself. He started to raise his voice at his parallel self, only for the other Muta to shift away and fall asleep. Haru and Toto exchanged glances.

“Looks like it’s turning out to be a strange day for everyone,” she said, and entered the Bureau.

To her relief, the three Barons were stood around the kettle and seemed to be getting along when she arrived. Then she heard the accented, very strained attempt at politeness being batted between the three.

“No, no, my dear cat, you simply must agree that milk is the only complement with tea–”

“But au contraire, lemon is by far superior in taste and smell–”

“You’re both sadly wrong, my dear friends. Honey was the first addition to tea, so it is the only–”

“Really?” Haru stood behind them with her arms firmly crossed. She was pleased to see that all three jumped and looked suitably guilty. “You’re arguing about tea?”

Her Baron turned to her. “Haru, we are simply discussing the pros and cons of the various additions that can be made–”
“It’s tea, Baron. It’s not a life-or-death situation.” She shifted past them and started to make her own cup.

Toto chuckled. “How many Barons does it take to make a cup of tea?”

“None, because if there’s more than one, I have to,” Haru answered. Even though she wanted to put milk in, she decided against adding anything to the drink at all – she had a feeling it would just stir up more discussion. Luckily, it was one of Baron’s sweeter blends anyway. As she turned away, the newest Baron approached her.

“I don’t believe we ever properly introduced ourselves,” he greeted. “I am Baron Humbert von Gikkingen, and you are?”

“Haru. Miss Haru,” she added after a moment’s notice.

The third Baron took her free hand and raised it to his lips. “It truly is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Haru.”

“Paws off,” the other Barons chorused. The third just looked affronted.

“I was merely being polite—”

“We know.”

Haru tugged her hand loose and, smiling lightly, started for the door. “Well, I can see that you three have a lot to discuss – after all, two of you have to be getting back to your own world – so I won’t keep you.”

The dark Baron caught up with her before she reached the door. “Please, Miss Haru, stay.” His blue eyes flickered back to his two parallel selves. “I think we’re going to need someone to... oversee our discussion.”

“I never thought that Baron would get along so... irritably with himself,” Haru whispered.

“We can’t help it. After all, we’re used to being the only Baron in the room.” He sighed. “I suppose Muta is right. We are show-offs.”

“And, if I’m not mistaken, a bit of a flirt in the past.” Haru grinned conspiringly. “Am I correct?”

Even with the dark fur, this Baron very definitely blushed. “I’ll admit that we are perhaps too suave for our own good sometimes. More so in our youth.” The blue eyes shifted to the ground in embarrassment, and then returned to Haru. “So, Miss Haru, will you stay? I have a feeling that whatever we discuss will have to be repeated to you anyway; better you hear it firsthand.”

“All right. But if your arguments come to a physical fight, I’m bringing Toto and Muta to split you guys up. I haven’t got the time or effort to deal with your egos.”

He smiled back. “I would have expected nothing less.”

ooOoo

It took ten minutes alone for all three Barons to have made and approved their teas – taking considerably longer than usual due to the existence of only a single kettle – but at last they were all seated and ready to talk. Since they had all wanted to take their usual desk seat, Haru had declared the chair off-limits and forced them to share the sofa. She took one of the armchairs, glaring at them
It was like herding cats.

Or small children.

“So how did you get into this mess?” Haru asked the newest Baron. She had to point and gesture to each one as she talked, because otherwise it made referring to them by name too difficult. She wasn’t even going to suggest that they took on nicknames, because they would all unavoidably want to be called Baron. With Humbert and Gikkingen as the other options, she didn’t blame them, but still...

“A spell went wrong,” the third Baron answered in response to her query. “A dowsing spell that should have taken me straight to the Creation I was searching for.”

“Who?”

“The Duke.”

There was the rattle of china and the dark-furred Baron abruptly lowered his teacup. His gaze was down, only spared for a momentary look to the resident Baron. Haru didn’t miss the exchange, but she didn’t comment on it either.

“And the spell...” her Baron replied, his voice a little hoarser than usual. “It brought you here instead?”

“Yes. I don’t understand what went wrong, but the portal swallowed myself and Muta up and spat us back out here – I landed in the middle of the Crossroads and tracked Muta to Miss Haru’s home, where I discovered just how wrong it had gone.”

“That’ll be it,” the blue-eyed Creation murmured. “That’s what brought us here.”

The newest Baron chuckled bewilderedly. “I think you’re overestimating my ability to err. True, the portal may not have gone according to plan, but I doubt that it was strong enough to pull yourself from your world to this.”

“We’ll see.” Baron rose to his feet and started to clear the teacups back to the sink. There was an unspoken terseness in his actions, even as he attempted to appear casual. “This Duke, why are you searching for him?”

“You said you were future versions of myself; you tell me.”

“We are from different parallel worlds,” the darker Baron reminded him. “Our pasts may not be as alike as you think. We’ll ask again; why are you looking for the Duke?”

In response, the golden-eyed Baron merely gave a low, uneasy laugh. He rose to his feet, paced away from his other selves, and glanced back to them with hollow eyes. “Our pasts cannot run that differently and I doubt very much that you would have forgotten why I would be searching for the Duke. I look for him because he stole Louise.”

Toto hopped into the Bureau. “Hey, Baron?”

All three responded in chorus and Toto sweatdropped. “I’ve gotta get used to that... Are we expecting anyone?”

The resident Baron stepped forward. “No... Why do you ask?”
There was a crash from outside.

“Because we’ve got company.”

ooOoo

Teaser: “All that running away you’ve done, you’ve hidden from the truth for so long that you’ve really forgotten what happened. What happened the day you were created.” / “We could make this an easy trade.” The stolen gold eyes narrowed. “The Baron for the girl.” / “Me? Why, I was once Baron...”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In case you guys hadn’t worked it out yet, the three Barons all come from Studio Ghibli media. Our Baron – of course – is from The Cat Returns, the second is from the manga the film was based upon (Baron: The Cat Returns – well worth a read!) and the third is from Whisper of the Heart (as is the other Muta).

Also, I had thoroughly intended for them all to get along, but... well, their egos kinda got in the way.
Episode 13: The Three Barons (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Bureau Files: Series 2

ooOoo

Episode 13: The Three Barons (Part 2)

Upon the crash that rattled the Sanctuary, the occupants of the Bureau ran out to the courtyard. All three Barons tossed their top hats to their heads and scooped their canes up. Haru fought back a chuckle – what with the given circumstances – but could not resist the murmur of, “Show-offs,” slip past her tongue.

When she exited the Bureau, the laughter died in her throat.

For in the courtyard, another well-dressed feline stood.

This, however, wasn’t just another of the Baron’s lookalikes, a parallel self confused and dazed. This feline was different in shape and form, a loose black coat billowing about him and a bowler hat to replace the Baron’s usual top hat. His fur was dark brown, save for a strange purple-black spot on his left ear. He too held a cane, twirling it idly between his fingers as he regarded the three Barons.

To his side was a mechanical beetle, as large as Toto and bright red. It hopped away from its companion and scuttled towards the stone crow. Bird and beetle arched their backs, flew in the air, and warily circled each other. The strange cat ignored his companion’s actions and approached the three Barons.

“Well, ‘ow do you, lords and gentlecats?” The stranger gave a mocking bow, tilting his rounded hat to them. The accent was definitely English, but was rougher and more urban than the upper-class accent Haru was familiar with the Baron using. “Have I dropped in to a family reunion, perchance? Wasn’t one Creation not enough for the artisan?”

While the newest Baron tensed, it was the blue-eyed and green-eyed Barons who stepped forward, moving between Haru and the newcomer. To her side, the usually silent Muta was hissing and Toto was perched alertly on the Bureau balcony. She watched as both Barons shifted their hands to their canes, but neither drew the blade free.

“Duke,” Baron growled.

“Oh? I take it we’ve met then, guv’? No need for introductions, I s’pose, but I think I’d recognise such a face as yours. And who do I have the pleasure of meeting today?”

“Does it matter?” the dark-furred Baron answered. The cane was raised in the Duke’s direction and subtle rage shook in his grip. “All you should concern yourself with is that you are not welcome here.”

“Oh, pish-posh.” The Duke knocked it away with a sweep of his own cane and moved past. He kept a good few metres between them, but that didn’t ease the tension of the Sanctuary. His yellow eyes moved over the Barons, pausing over Haru and then halting completely upon seeing the third Baron. “Ah, so we meet again, Baron.”
The newest Baron started to move forward, but the other two pointedly held him back. The Duke only smiled indulgently at this reaction.

"Where is she? Where is Louise?"

"Far away, my dear Baron. Far away and none of your concern."

"YOU TOOK HER FROM ME!" The other Barons had to tighten their grip just to keep him from physically assaulting the Duke. "You stole her," he snarled, "and spirited her away to another world and I swear on all that is good that I will rip you limb from limb for what you did."

"My, my, what fire. But I think you’ve got it wrong, guv’. I stole no one away." The Duke leant in, a wicked smile across his lips. "She ran away with me."

"You lie."

"As God is my judge, my word is my oath."

"Then I’ll tear the words from your lips!" The third Baron knocked his other selves away and lunged at the Duke. The other two yelled and the dark-furred Baron interceded before he could connect; he was elbowed away and the dark-furred Baron went falling into the Duke.

The Duke grabbed the Creation and a very strange thing happened.

A jolt of something akin to electricity ran through the second Baron and into the Duke. The previously yellow eyes shifted to a light blue and the baggy coat morphed into a long, tailored trenchcoat.

Baron slammed into the pair, kicking the Duke away and bringing his lookalike free. The dark-furred Baron staggered, energy suddenly gone from his limbs and his cane abruptly needed to support him up. Haru came to his other side, helping him stand.

"What the...?"

The Duke looked down at himself, twisting to get a reflection of himself in the Bureau windows. "Well, the coat’s an improvement, I’ll say. Looks like I’ve lost a bit of weight too – I knew draining from that fatso was a mistake..." His voice had lost a little of the cockney to sound only mildly middle class now, but it didn’t reassure Haru.

"Baron... What just happened?"

"I drained your feline friend, my dear..." The Duke tipped his hat, and then tipped his head, as if listening to an inner voice. That same wicked, knowing smile flittered across his features. "Haru, I mean."

The hair on Haru’s neck rose. "I don’t remember telling you my name.... and it’s Miss Haru to you."

"He doesn’t just drain physical features," Baron murmured to the brunette. "He takes memories too."

"Oh, yes indeed." The smile grew and this time it didn’t fade. Haru could almost see him sorting through the memories that the second Baron had given him. "Oh... so you’re all Baron; what a... most pleasant surprise. I shall have some fun with this... But not here, no we’re going to play on my terms."

"Whatever game you’re playing, whatever you’re up to, we’re not interested," Baron retorted. "So I
suggest you leave.”

“Leave? But I’m just getting started...” The Duke smiled and slowly stepped away, stepping back towards the neighbouring house of the Bureau, a brown-stoned tower with silver gates and at the Duke’s touch they sprung open. He whistled. “Enough of your fun, Chistery; time we were away!”

The red beetle broke its circling flight and flew to the Duke; the feline leapt onto its back and disappeared through the open doors that melted into a swirling portal. The portal grew in strength and sucked the Bureau members into its marbled depths. Haru was momentarily aware of a familiar pair of arms closing around her before the world faded into nothingness.

ooOoo

“One of these days, the portals will drop me out the right way.”

“I thought cats landed on their feet, fatso.”

Haru opened her eyes to find her gaze staring into a wooden surface, large and rough, and she got the distinct impression that she was looking at an ordinary wooden surface but at the size of a figurine. She groaned and pushed herself up; a white-gloved hand fell from her shoulder.

She turned and saw that Baron had caught her before the portal had dragged them through. As she looked over to the rest of the Bureau members, she had to admit it was far better than the alternative.

The other two Barons were each somewhat squashed by the two Mutas – and neither white cat looked particularly bothered to move – with Toto caught up in the strings of a hanging puppet. Haru swung her bag from her shoulder – something she always kept with her and made a habit of keeping Useful Stuff in it for just such occasions – and fished out a small penknife. She started to cut Toto free while the others slowly roused themselves.

She cut the last tangling string and Toto dropped to their level; the puppet itself dropped off the ledge and smacked onto the ground below. Haru peered over the edge and saw that what seemed like a small cliff plunged down below them. She hissed in shock and backed away. “So... where are we? This can’t be the Sanctuary.”

Baron joined her – for the other Barons were still extracting themselves from beneath the two Mutas – and gazed out across the setting. Now Haru was looking up and not just down at the drop, she could see they were in a room of sorts, standing on a shelf that housed a variety of dolls and figurines and looked remarkably like a dollmaker’s workshop. Baron inhaled a sudden, short breath.

“What? Where are we?”

“We’re in your past?”

“No. No, we’re still in the Sanctuary. Haru, do you remember when the Bureau created a room for you, when you needed a place to sleep? This is merely that, but on a much grander scale.”

“The Sanctuary created all this?”

“The buildings of the Sanctuary are empty places,” Toto said, hopping to the edge. “They are nothing, but because of that they are full of potential. When the Duke entered, he was able to shape the building to fit his purposes. I suppose this is what he meant about playing on his terms.”
“It’s... bigger on the inside,” Haru marvelled.

“Let’s just say magic and leave it at that.”

“We must be careful,” Baron said. “The Duke was the first to enter and use this potential to his advantage; he will be able to shape and mould this building to his liking and so we are at a definite weakness. Trust nothing.”

“Oh, goodie,” Haru muttered. “As if I didn’t have enough practice back at Fenland House.” She turned to the Creation; at the back of the ledge, the other Barons were finally free from the unmoving Mutas. “Baron, who is Louise?”

Baron didn’t look to Haru, and a long silence drew out between them. Then, “She is... was the Creation I was created with.”

Haru glanced to him, one eyebrow raised. “And it took a sucking parasitical madcat and three of you for her to crop up in conversation?” she asked.

“You never asked.”

“Not in so many words, no. So. Who is she?”

“She... was my fiancée...”

“Oh.” Haru was silent for a moment, and then circled her arms around her friend. “Oh, I’m sorry. What happened to her?”

“The Duke stole her away.” The golden-eyed Baron had joined them and was staring out at the room with narrowed eyes. “I don’t know where or how, but I will find her.”

Haru glanced to her Baron. Twenty years on, and she saw no evidence that he had found his missing fiancée in that time. Or, if he had, that the result had not been good. She looked away and saw the dark-furred Baron failing to make eye contact. It looked like he had had no more success than her Baron.

“Things are,” Baron said quietly, “a touch more complicated than you may think.”

“Look, if you really are me, then you know I will never stop looking for her.”

“Never is an awfully long time,” he murmured back.

A buzz filled the air and the conversation died away. Haru stepped back from Baron. “What’s that...?”

The red beetle flew down from the roof and grabbed the third Baron up in its spindly legs. There was a yelp and he was scooped up into the air. Without thinking, Haru ran and leapt after them. There was a shout that sounded remarkably like the two Barons and then her hands gripped around the beetle’s wing.

“HARU!”

Baron jumped onto Toto’s back and rose into the air; the blue-eyed Baron leapt after him, landing behind him. “Don’t think you’re leaving me behind.”

The two Mutas watched as the others flew off. “But you’re fine in leaving us here, I see,” he grumbled. He padded over to the edge and glanced down. The silent Muta followed him and raised
an eyebrow pointedly.

“Whatcha looking at, dumbo?”

The silent Muta’s gaze flickered behind him and then widened. Muta returned the raised eyebrow and followed his twin’s vision.

Something moved.

A porcelain doll stretched a limb and unsteadily rose to its china feet. Behind it, rows of finished figurines and dolls stepped up like puppets pulled on strings. Muta tiptoed back. “Holy mackerel...”

The golden-eyed Baron was unceremoniously dumped, hitting the surface and nearly rolling off the round table. The beetle landed beside him and the Duke casually stepped off from his mount. He walked over to the Creation, ignoring Haru as her numb fingers dropped her from the beetle’s wing. She collapsed onto the table with a groan.

“Well, Baron; it’s so good to see you again. We have lots to talk about.”

The ginger cat staggered to his feet and unsteadily faced the Duke. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Good. So you can listen.” The Duke stepped to him and hoisted the Creation up by his throat, staring into the golden eyes. That same transferring power shifted and the Duke’s eyes returned to their yellow, and then intensified into gold. The Duke’s form became sleeker and taller and the resemblance to the Barons became striking. “I never stole Louise, my dear Baron; she ran away with me...” The accent was nigh identical to Baron’s now, but sharper. “All that running away you’ve done, you’ve hidden from the truth for so long that you’ve really forgotten what happened. What happened the day you were created.”

Baron’s eyes widened. “What...? What are you saying?”

He never heard the answer, for at that moment, Haru slammed into the Duke. The dark feline released the Creation and the ginger cat landed ungainly onto his knees. The strange transference of power had faded but he didn’t look like he was about to get up any time soon, his breath still coming out in short, sharp gasps.

The Duke regained his balance with alarming agility and spun on pointed shoes to look back to Haru. His eyes moved over the young woman who now stood so firmly between him and the golden-eyed Baron. The Duke raised an eyebrow. “It seems you are even more indomitable than the Haru from the Baron’s memories.” A hand moved to his cane and started to twist the sword loose. “I... have a feeling that you’re going to be... a nuisance.”

Haru only grinned. “Better get used to it.”

“I will only ask this once, so take note: Please move.”

“Not a chance.”

“Please, Haru.”

“I thought you were only going to ask once.”

The sword was pulled free from the cane. “I was being nice. Trust me, Haru; you don’t want to cross
“I told you, it’s Miss Haru.”

“‘The other Baron doesn’t call you that. The dark-furred one. I’ve been into his mind; I’ve seen the memories he harbours and the feelings he holds—’”

“Whatever he feels, it’s for the Haru in his own world,” Haru returned stiffly. “I think you have your cats crossed.”

The Duke smirked. “How long have you been waiting to use that?”

“Who are you?” Haru swiftly decided she was tiring of this conversation and snatched the golden-eyed Baron’s cane from the floor. In that same movement, she twisted the hidden sword free and bared it between them. “The other Barons, they…” They seemed almost scared of this strange creature. She swallowed back the sentence and started again. “Who are you?”

“Me? Why, I was once Baron.”

ooOoo

Toto circled over the spot where the beetle, Duke, the other Baron, and – most importantly – Haru had disappeared through into a portal, which had promptly fizzled out of existence following their leap. The crow looked back to his two passengers.

“Kinda feels like the first time Haru was kidnapped, doesn’t it?”

“Except this time she willingly went,” Baron reminded his friend. His eyes scanned the dollmaker’s room but could see no evidence of the sparkle of a portal’s trail.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“Haru is strong,” the dark-furred Baron said. “But the Duke… He is another thing altogether.”

“She will have to be stronger then,” Baron replied. “You have your Haru; if she’s anything like ours, then you know that she has a way of surviving what comes her way.”

The other Creation looked away. “Let us hope your Haru always will.”

Baron opened his mouth to ask when something large and wooden leapt at them.

The puppet with the broken strings.

It lumbered through the air, awkward and cumbersome and yet still moving with eerie grace. Toto wheeled away, spiralling down to avoid being smacked from the air. The dark-furred Baron tightened his hold on his hat and cane and shifted his seating on Toto.

“I think I could re-open the Duke’s portal!” he shouted to his fellow passenger. “Can you keep the toys distracted?”

Baron grinned. “Distractions are our speciality.”

“Good.” With a tip of his hat, the elder Baron leapt from Toto’s back and landed where the portal had vanished.

“You heard him,” Baron said to the flying Creation. “Time for us to play decoy.”
There were two ungainly yelps, followed by an avalanche of hissing and bad language, and the two Mutas appeared running desperately along the shelf – the shelf filled with wooden dolls and carved toys, all creaking to life. Baron did not envy them.

“I hate...” Muta puffed, struggling to shout and run at the same time, “this job!”

Toto looked to his current passenger. “Before you ask, Baron, no; I can’t carry them both. What do I look like to you – a winged Solomon?”

“I know. I wasn’t going to ask.” He didn’t add that it had crossed his mind. “Muta – and Muta – get to where the other Baron is!” the Creation called. “We’ll keep the toys occupied!”

“Then get on with it!” Muta shouted back.

“I say they both jump,” Toto chuckled. “What’s the phrase about flying pigs?”

“Hey! I heard that, birdbrain!”

“It’s a shame you’re not a birdbrain!” the crow retorted. “Otherwise you could just fly out of there!”

“Really, Toto; is this the best time?”

“When is it not?”

Baron decided to ignore this and leapt from Toto onto the shelf, cane in hand already. He landed between the fleeing – somewhat waddling – Mutas and the onslaught of juddering toys. They lurched as they moved, as if unfamiliar with the concept of walking. They probably were, when Baron thought about it.

“I suppose we should count ourselves lucky that he didn’t imagine up anything more dangerous,” he murmured to himself as the creepy dolls lumbered towards him. That, however, didn’t make the whole situation much better. He leapt back as the nearest doll – a soft, fabric thing with button eyes and a stitched mouth – leered towards him. In doing so, he moved into the reach of a wooden figurine that made a snatch for his cane. He twisted it out of the silent figurine’s grip and sent it tumbling over the edge.

A cry of success indicated that his other self had succeeded in reopening the portal.

“We’ve got to go through another portal?” Muta was heard to loudly complain.

“Do you have any better ideas, lardball?”

“Toto!” Baron shouted, fending off another doll and stepping back towards the shelf’s edge. “If you wouldn’t mind breaking off your dispute at this moment in time...!” Another dulled, unseeing doll staggered towards him and he was being surely pushed further towards the edge. It was uncannily difficult to fight back when his assailants just absorbed the blows like the soft toys they were.

“NOW.”

“Coming!”

There was the swoosh of wings and Baron leapt straight off the shelf, landing with practiced ease onto Toto’s back. “Next time, try not to cut it so fine.”

“I’m sure I could cut it even finer–”

“Please don’t.”
Haru’s step faltered. “What? Baron? But that’s impossible – you come from the same world as him.” She pointed back to the Baron that was so alike her Baron, and tried to recall whether it had ever been explicitly stated that the Duke came with him. She started to doubt. “You can’t be – I mean – you’re not – you’re not Baron!”

The golden-eyed Baron rose back to his feet, his limbs still shaking from the Duke’s previous attack. “How... How could you be me?” he hissed.

The Duke smirked. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

The third Baron growled and charged towards the other cat. Haru screamed for him to stop, but the Duke merely ducked the Creation’s blow, elbowed him in the back and sent him sprawling to the ground. The tip of the Duke’s sword hovered before the Baron’s throat.

“The anger makes you foolish, Baron,” he tutted.

“As does your overconfidence.” Haru stood behind him, the cane-sword she had taken from the Baron raised to back of the Duke’s neck. “Remember me?”

“How could I forget? But kill me, Haru, and you’ll never escape from this place.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

The Duke twisted round and struck out with his blade; Haru brought hers up and metal clashed against metal. Their faces were only inches apart and now the brunette was struck with how golden the Duke’s eyes had become – stolen gold, from the Baron’s eyes. She snarled and pressed forward, forcing the cat a step back.

“How can you be Baron?” she demanded. “You’re nothing like him!”

“Nothing like the Creation he is now, maybe...” The Duke suddenly sprung back, causing Haru to stumble forward and drop the sword. He spun round and grabbed the front of her jacket, hoisting her over the table edge. “How much do you know about the Baron, Haru? He’s always been a bit of a closed book, hasn’t he? You can’t help but wonder exactly what kind of skeletons he hides in his past...”

“He’s not the one threatening me,” Haru hissed.

“He and I are the same. You see, Haru, when a Creation is first brought to life, it is full of potential. A bit like the houses of the Sanctuary; this place was empty until I came, and then it was moulded by what I wanted. In creating something, an artisan places a little of themselves and their expectations inside it, but a Creation is most easily moulded by its outside influences during the first few years of its ‘life’.”

Haru struggled against his grip, her toes trying to regain contact with the table but she was still paddling through air. “If this is a sob story, spare me the details.”

“I promise you that you’ll want to hear this. You too, Baron.” The Duke looked behind to where the ginger was trying to sneak up on him. “And don’t try anything hasty. You might have sentimental attachment to this human, but I do not. I will have no qualms with dropping her.”

Haru caught the Baron’s gaze and a sliver of fear fluttered in her heart. It was her Baron and the other one who knew her; this Baron had no such history with her. Not yet. Not for a good few years.
And she saw the hesitation move across his face – and then solidified into defeat. He stepped back.

“The same goes for you as well.” The Duke looked to where a portal had reopened and two Barons and Toto flew out – followed by the thud as two Mutas landed heavily on the table. The Duke only smiled as the newcomers assessed the situation. “So good of you to turn up, Baron and Baron. You know the truth of what I am, don’t you? I can see it in your eyes.”

Baron – Haru’s Baron – stepped towards his golden-eyed twin and placed a gentle but restraining hand on his shoulder. He too saw the internal conflict raging in the other Creation. “Trust me,” he murmured, “she’s worth it.”

“Well, now that I have an audience, perhaps I should finish the story.” The Duke smiled thinly at them. “When I – when the Baron – was created, we were born into a world of war. We awoke to a reality where our artisan had abandoned us, the world was split by conflict, and shortly after Louise and I were separated. Our lives fell apart before they even started. Of course, Baron,” he looked to the Baron from his world, “you remember so little of this.”

“You took Louise away; I remember that,” the Creation spat. Haru’s Baron tightened his grip on his lookalike’s shoulder warningly.

“No. No, you remember nothing.”

“We changed,” the dark-furred Baron said quietly. “The fear and hatred of the war seeped into us and changed us from the inside out. We became filled with fear and hatred.”

“And so we found a way to release it,” Haru’s Baron picked up, equally as quietly. “We released that fear and hatred and you were born. A half-being made only from the emotions of the war, and you disappeared. We forgot what had happened from fear and shame, while Louise – half a world away, bought by another owner – gave into the hatred.” He looked to the other ginger feline he held back. “He’s right. Louise was not stolen away. When you found her again after the war, she willingly rejected you.”

“How could you be so sure?”

“Because we are you,” the other two Barons replied calmly. The dark-furred one added, “We have already been through this once with our own version of the Duke. We know that nothing good will come of pursuing Louise.”

The Duke only smiled. “Now do you believe me?”

“What do you want?” Baron asked tightly.

“You know what I want! I want to become a full Creation! None of this... this emptiness, this hole inside me!” he snarled. “From the day I separated from him,” he pointed to the third Baron, “I’ve been half a being, half a person, half a Creation. The only way I’ll manage that is if I drain him dry.”

The two Barons moved between the third Baron and the Duke. The Duke laughed.

“Come, come; don’t make this difficult. I have someone you want and you have someone I want. We could make this an easy trade.” The stolen gold eyes narrowed. “The Baron for the girl.”

All three Creations paused. The third Baron looked to the other two, especially to the one holding him back. He had felt the resident Baron tighten his grip, his body still. “No.” His voice came out a hoarse whisper. “No, you can’t... Whatever this girl is to you, you can’t...”
“We’re not going to,” Baron said, but his voice was equally strained. “We’ll think of something.”

“You better think fast then.” The Duke moved his grip to Haru’s neck and the skin contact sent icy shards down her back. She jerked back, her toes dancing through the air as pain jolted through her entire being. She opened her mouth to scream, but instead released silence. The pain shifted and something nudged against her mind. At first it was gentle, experimentally prodding against her thoughts, but suddenly it sharpened and pierced through into her head.

Her memories opened up and fell limp before the intrusion. Like a book, she felt the Duke rifle through the images of her past, not caring what he read or what emotions he dragged up.

The Barons watched Haru twitch against the Duke’s hold, her eyes glazed and unseeing. “What about now?” the Duke roared. “Is this enough? Or will you watch her die before you admit defeat? He’s just another Baron; not even from your world. Isn’t Haru worth more than an echo of yourself? Give me the Baron and I’ll leave. I’ll go back to my own world.”

“And why exactly should I trust you?” Baron retorted, but he wasn’t so sure.

“You’re thinking about it,” the third Baron whispered. “You are. You’re considering his offer.” He pulled himself free and stepped away, his golden eyes fearful and wide. “Just who is this Haru to you? What’s so special about her?”

“You’ll understand in time. But, no; I have no intention of taking his... offer.” Baron’s eyes were fixed on the silent, unseeing form of Haru. Noiseless tears welled in her maple eyes and streaked down her cheeks, her lips mouthed silent words.

“You’ve given up searching for Louise, haven’t you?” the ginger feline hissed. He looked between the two other Barons, his eyes seeing clearly what his heart had refused to. “You’re twenty years ahead of me – so where is she?”

“We never gave up looking for her,” the dark-furred Baron growled. “But there are some scenarios in which even we can’t win. In our time, she’s gone. That is all you need to know.”

“We don’t have the time to argue about this. Haru–”

“She’s your Haru,” the third Baron snapped. “Not mine. She’s nothing to do with me–”

Baron hoisted his lookalike off his feet before he could even finish. “Yes, she is my Haru, and perhaps, if you’re lucky, you’ll meet your own someday. Perhaps then you’ll understand me a little bit better. But if you let my Haru die, will you ever be able to look her in the eye?”

Inside her head, Haru heard nothing of the Barons’ conflict. As the Duke tore through her memories, she was forced to watch through the scenes of her life she would rather forget. He scoured through her for weakness, and so turned his eye to the worst of their cases. It was like her nightmares, tenfold.

She was facing a mad, human Muta, torn between animalistic rage and fear... She was pounding against the rockfall that had separated her from Baron, terrified that he would be dead before she could reach him... She was staring at a half-human, half-feline reflection of herself at the mercy of the Doctor... She was shrinking into nothing... She was seeing the Adeline-Hiromi hybrid and, for a moment, believing she had lost her best friend for good... She was losing Baron to the sirens as they dragged him under... She was strangling Baron, again...

And then the fear gave way to anger.
She had seen all this before. She had lived through it – through her nightmares. But this wasn’t a nightmare; this was the Duke reading through her life – through her worst moments – like she was simply a book. Mentally, she kicked back, and she felt the Duke’s hold jolt in surprise.

‘*You want my memories?’* she mentally snarled. ‘*Fine. Take them. Take them all.*’

She released her hold on the memories and flooded him with the memories he hadn’t picked up. The memories that reminded her why she was still here. She was flying through the air in Neverland... She was reuniting Akairo with her daughter... She was taking that whispered kiss from Baron as he transferred his Creation magic into her... The memories blurred between her adventures and the ordinary, day-to-day life she shared with the Bureau and her mundane life. Seeing Michael at the shop... The decadent movie nights she and Hiromi had... The feeling she had every time she entered the Bureau and saw Baron there...

They weren’t simply the happy memories – no, these were spiked with something much more potent. Belief, hope, kindness... *love*... She relived them over and over again and felt the Duke recoil from them; she let the emotions buoy her up and fill her being until they overflowed into him.

The book of her mind slammed shut and she was blinking into the golden eyes of the Duke. “Didn’t...? Didn’t your mother ever tell you it’s rude to pry?” she whispered hoarsely.

The Duke snarled and his fingers lost their grip around her throat.

“*HARU!*”

Her hands caught the table’s edge and she swung crazily from the side, her feet dancing over thin air. There was an ungainly scream ripped from her lips and she scrabbled for purchase. She slowed when the thin blade of the cane entered her vision.

“I’m getting bored of this now,” the Duke growled; “I want an answer. The Baron for the girl. Do we have a deal or don’t we?” He looked to the three Barons and the sword tickled Haru’s chin. “I’m waiting.”

“Keep waiting then,” Haru whispered. One hand shot out and curled around the Duke’s ankle. She yanked back, dragging him down and bringing him crashing over the side. The sword lashed out and struck across her cheek, but then dropped down with its owner.

She heard him smash onto the ground below. The red beetle flew down after him and now her grip was sliding. She screamed out to the Bureau and two sets of gloved hands helped her up. Her Baron brought her into his arms and she tightly hugged him back. She glanced past his shoulder, to where the form of the Duke lay. He and the beetle disappeared in a blur of portal. Haru untangled herself from the green-eyed Baron and found her way blocked by the third Baron.

“Hey,” she greeted weakly. Her head was still spinning with the potent memories, but even she registered the hurt and confusion on the other’s face.

“Who are you?”

Haru paused. The cut from the sword’s touch was bleeding freely now; she wiped it away and gently pressed against the open wound. “I’m just a friend. That’s all; a friend and part of the Bureau.”

“So that’s all you are? A *companion*?”
The disregard in the other Baron’s voice was barely disguised. Haru narrowed her eyes and stepped forward, her hand dropping from her cheek and moving to her arms. “I’ve seen and felt and suffered more than some humans will experience in their entire lives, just by working with the Bureau. By working with Baron.” She pulled down her sleeves and exposed the scars the puca had left along her skin. “A shapeshifting monster gave me these. It took Baron’s form – your form – and attacked me. Just imagine that, being scarred by someone in the form of the person you trust the most.”

She pulled her shoe off to reveal ugly scratches that were only just healing along her ankles. “Neverland sirens did that. They nearly drowned Baron and me that day.” She pulled her sleeve further up to reveal her shoulder; old bruises and some evidence of burns marked her skin. “I don’t even remember what happened during that case. A virus wiped my memory, but I’ve been told it included a half-siren and a madman with a gun.”

She covered the scars of her Bureau work and looked back to the golden-eyed Baron. “I know you must have seen some awful things in your life, but don’t ever try to trivialise what another person has gone through. Everyone is scarred in their own way.”

A gentle gloved hand moved to her shoulder. She turned to see her Baron standing there.

“How could it not? I... saw you die that day.”

His hand moved to her wrist where the scarring lay, his fingers tracing the thin lines that so perfectly matched the size and spread of his claws. “That... monster wasn’t me. Trust me, Haru; I would never hurt you.”

“I know.” Haru pulled her wrist out of his grasp, freeing the hands that had squeezed life from the puca. “But sometimes it feels like I killed you. I’m not sure what my decision would have been if I really had had to choose between you and Michael. Let’s hope that day never comes.” She stepped away and looked to the third Baron. “I think it’s time we went back. All of us.”

“And how do yer suggest we do that, Chicky?”

“We use the portal again,” the dark-furred Baron said. “We get back to the Bureau and then we work to figure out how to open a portal to our own worlds.” His gaze moved to Haru. “However lovely the present company has been.”

ooOoo

“So, because I tried to open up a portal to follow the Duke – who is an alternative version of myself – the portal malfunctioned?” The third Baron slowly sipped at his tea, sweetened with honey, as he discussed the cause of their strange meeting.

“Exactly,” Baron replied. He sat at the armchair, Haru leaning against the armrest and drinking her
own cup of tea – with the usual splash of milk that she had missed earlier. “The portal recognised you and the Duke as the same and so crossed parallel worlds in the paradox. It brought you to a world where another version of yourself existed – me – and, due to the hazardous nature of the portal this Baron was creating –” he pointed to the dark-furred Creation “– he was, quite literally, dragged along for the ride.”

“The portal did manage to locate the Duke though,” the feline in question added, “and bring him here, like it did you.”

“Quite a remarkable story,” the third Baron summarised.

“Remarkable as it is,” Haru said, “how do we plan on getting you all back to your own worlds?”

“It should be relatively simple; each of our magic is localised to our parallel world,” her Baron explained, “and so if that magic is used to create a portal, it will realign itself to the correct world. Since they have recently travelled through such portals, they should be able to create a reverse one using a blank portal crystal.”

“Sounds simple enough...” she murmured, but she was familiar with how even the best laid plans of Creations and cats had a habit of going south in the Bureau. “Do we have a blank portal crystal?”

“Not yet,” Baron admitted. “I’ve sent word ahead to the Cat Kingdom to ask about reserve crystals.”

“Until then,” Toto said, “we wait.”

“It’s just as well we have a full batch then,” Haru concluded. She made a cup and sat just as one of the Barons – the third, golden-eyed one – rose and left the building. She pointedly looked to the others and moved to follow. “I’ll talk to him.”

The other two Barons watched her go, and the elder said after a moment, “Seems like she’s looking after us even now.”

Outside, Haru let the Bureau doors swing behind her and stepped beside the ginger feline, his golden eyes watching the darkening sky above. “Long day, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“Listen, about earlier...”

“I’m not interested in talking about it.”

“Good. Then you can listen,” Haru retorted back, equally as curt. She sighed and the silence gave her respite. Life had become even crazier with the three Barons about. “About what happened earlier... I’m sorry.”

“I wasn’t aware you were conscious at the time.”

“I remember very little, that’s true,” Haru admitted. “But I remember enough to know that the Duke tried to come to some sort of... deal with you—”

“With your Baron and the other,” he interrupted abruptly. “I was just the bargaining chip.” He turned to the brunette. “And your Baron sure looked like he was considering it.”

Haru faltered. “That... That can’t be true...”

“Then answer this: If it really came down to it, which life would he have chosen to save? Yours... or
mine?"

She was silent for a moment. “In all honesty, I can’t give you an answer.” She paced to Toto’s
column and sat down onto the cobbled courtyard, looking back to the strange Baron lookalike. “But
you are Baron – and one day you’ll become the Barons you’ve met today – and, let me tell you now;
you are the type of person who will never give up, even on a lost cause. Not even when it appears
that all your options are closed. I don’t believe that the other Barons would have let either of us go.”

“You didn’t see his hesitation.” To her surprise, the young Baron sat down beside her in tired
resignation. “He truly was scared to lose you.”

“He would be scared to lose anyone from the Bureau.”

“He cares for you. Really cares, I mean.”

The Baron’s remark was so startling, so abrupt, that Haru didn’t speak for several seconds. “I don’t
know about that.” She looked away. “I knew practically nothing about his past until you arrived. Not
Duke, not Louise... heck, I didn’t even know she existed until today...” She trailed off at the sharp
intake of breath from her companion.

“He... had never even mentioned her?”

“I think it’s a painful memory,” she said, although she wasn’t so sure why she was defending his
decision to hide the truth. “There are many years between you and him; life has happened since
then.”

“How much of his past do you know?”

“He was created by an artisan and went on to form the Bureau... and that’s it, save for the history that
has been turned over today. When I put it like that, it really does sound pathetic.”

“Your Baron really has become a closed book...”

“What else should I know?”

The ginger Baron – so alike her Baron, but marked by the golden eyes in exchange for the familiar
emerald orbs – didn’t meet her gaze at first. “Has it... occurred to you that he may wish to tell you
this in his own time?”

“He’s had time.”

The Creation sighed. “I don’t know how much of this will be strictly accurate for your Baron – we
are from separate worlds, after all – and I remember so little of my early history. What I remember
may not even be accurate. When we – Louise and I – were first awakened, the second war of the
world was just starting or was about to, and our artisan abandoned us. During the years of the war, it
blurs... and when it ended, Louise was gone and I had a vague recollection of a figure in the form of
the Duke involved.”

“And then what?”

“And then... Toto found me.” He smiled thinly. “And I found the Sanctuary. For a while we joined
forces and I suppose we started something alike to the Bureau; dealing with cases and clients, going
wherever we were needed... until I heard of Louise. I went looking for her... and the memory is so
hazy that I can only remember the Duke and Louise leaving – something which, until today, I had
assumed to be against her wishes. Something broke, after that.”
“When you say something, you mean...?”

“I broke,” the golden-eyed Baron clarified. “I retreated into my wooden state, was found by a previous owner – for I had once been sold, Louise too – and taken in. I don’t know how many years passed, but eventually a young girl visiting the shop woke me. Her imagination was so... vivid that I was dropped into her dreams and finally began to come back to life. After that, I left the place, with Muta helping me travel across the city until I found the Sanctuary again. I guess, from Toto’s current presence, that he eventually returns.”

“Returns for good, it seems,” Haru agreed. “So you started Bureau business again and then... the Duke turned up?”

“And now you’re caught up to modern day. Or my modern day, which seems to be about twenty years behind.” When Haru was silent, the Baron prompted with, “What do you think of it?”

She was silent a moment. Then:

“Muta is one old cat.”

The Baron burst into abrupt, surprised laughter, and the earlier tension diffused. “I misjudged you, Miss Haru. I mistook you for merely a pretty face.”

“You wouldn’t be the first.” Her expression changed to playful disbelief. “Wait, you think my face is pretty?”

“Hey! Get inside you two!” Muta appeared from the Bureau doors. “We’ve got the crystals – time to send ya home!”

ooOoo

The youngest Baron – ginger-furred and golden-eyes – triggered the travel crystal and stepped back as a green portal grew into view – evidently the colour for parallel world portals.

“And you’re sure it’s gonna work?” the resident Muta asked, echoing the facial cues of his lookalike. “Man, I hate portals; just glad it ain’t me going through this time.”

“I expect it’ll do,” the third Baron said. He glanced to his other parallel selves with his usual charismatic smile. “After all, all three of us agreed on this theory. We can’t all be wrong, right?”

Haru barked a sudden laugh. At the Barons’ pointed glares, she piped down. “Nothing.”

“The other fatso shouldn’t worry.” Toto cackled. “He’s so large, it’d be impossible to lose him.”

The mute Muta grunted at the insult, but added nothing more.

“Crumbs, this is boring when it’s one-sided.”

Their Muta waddled over to his lookalike and nudged the other cat.

“Perhaps, Toto,” said the familiar Baron offhandedly, “you should know better by now.”

“It’s usually just too tempting. There’s so much material to work with – and the marshmallow makes it so easy.” His remark was pointedly directed to the usual loud-mouthed feline, who bared his teeth at the insult.

“Just come and say that to my face, chicken-wings!”
“I’d try, but it’s so hard to tell what’s face and what’s fat with you, buta.”

“It could be worse. I could be just feathers and bones, like you.”

“Anything’s better than being a Christmas pudding.”

“At least I’m not a birdbrain.”

“Well, at least—” Toto halted. Frowned. “Fatso, you said that without moving your lips. Is that a new skill or are your lips so fat that they’ve lost the ability to form words?”

“Ya need to get yer eyes checked, beaky,” chuffed Muta. “Cause that wasn’t me.”

Haru’s gaze slid to the other Muta. “So, if that wasn’t you, it must have been...”

“Told ya the insults would come in handy.” The resident Muta smirked and once again nudged his lookalike knowingly. “I’m jus’ getting him ready for when the birdbrain turns up again in his world; he’s going to need a head start.”

“Regardless, I think it’s time we returned.” The third Baron stood before the portal he had summoned, cream suit ruffled by the whirling wind. “Baron... Baron...” He nodded to both his elder selves. “It’s been fascinating to meet you both, even if I question your tea tastes. And your colour coding.”

The other two indulged in patient smiles. The resident Baron shook his hand, glove-to-glove. “The feeling’s mutual,” he returned, and the smile momentarily flickered into something more teasing before returning to a serious note. “I wish you better luck with Louise.”

“Thank you. As for you, Miss Haru...” The golden-eyed approached Haru and bowed before her like their first meeting, even bringing her hand to his lips in the same manner. “I look forward to when our paths cross again.” He released her with a chuckle that indicated the resident’s Creation’s careful watch hadn’t gone unnoticed. “Relax, Baron. I meant the Haru in my world; this one is all yours.”

“I think you’ll find I’m all mine,” Haru corrected him lightly.

“Of course, Miss Haru.” He grinned, and gave a sideline wink to the local Baron that conveyed it wasn’t for lack of trying on the latter’s part. Haru missed it, but Baron merely reddened.

“I think you were just going...” he unsubtly prompted.

“I believe I am. Muta, I think we’ve outstayed our welcome.”

His Muta, already reverting back to his silent self, grunted and padded over to the portal. He stepped into the green twisting light and turned to look at his audience as it sucked him in. Before he disappeared entirely into its depths, a spark of uncanny recognition flickered across his face and he moved back towards them.

“Wait...”

The portal dragged him through and he vanished entirely, but not before Haru had seen his furry face move in disbelief and his whisper reached her ears.

He had recognised her.

But... that wasn’t possible. In his world, she would be no more than... ten-years-old, perhaps less.
She hadn’t even rescued Lune yet.

They... hadn’t met.

All confusion was knocked from her as something large and red flew past her and slammed into the golden-eyed Baron. Chistery – the Duke’s red mechanical beetle – snatched up the Creation and disappeared with him through the portal. The Duke rode atop, very much alive and dangerous as swirling green swallowed all three beings up.

Haru screamed and started after them, but her Baron grabbed her, just before the portal collapsed in on itself.

“But–”

“He’ll be fine,” Baron assured her. He looked to the last remaining Baron, grey-furred and blue-eyed. “After all, we both overcame him once. History will repeat itself and, while the Duke will survive this encounter, so will the Baron.”

“Are you sure?”

“We’ve seen it happen,” the other Baron said. “And now, I believe, it’s my turn to follow through. Where is the second portal crystal?”

Haru shrugged off her Baron and walked back towards Muta, her heart still pounding and form still shaking from what she had just seen. With the young brunette out of earshot, the dark-furred Baron turned to his other self as he exchanged the crystal for a blank one. The current one wouldn’t work, now being reprogrammed by the magic from a parallel world. “Take good care of her,” he murmured. “You never know what might happen in the future.”

“No,” Baron pondered, “but you do.”

“Please, don’t–”

“What happens to her?”

“I don’t understand–”

“Of course you do,” Baron whispered. “We both know that we are not idiots, so excuse me if I don’t give up quite so easily. I have watched you since your arrival and I have come to the conclusion that, in your timeline, Haru is no longer a member of the Bureau. You are only a year ahead of us; what happens during that time?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

“Oh, trust me,” Baron growled back, “I really do.”

“And what if, by telling you, I make it not only happen, but happen sooner?” the other retorted. “You can’t stop her, Baron; just trust me. You can’t go after her.”

“After who? Haru?”

An uneasy spark of sub-sane fire lit in the other Baron’s eyes. “Louise.”

Baron released the Creation, as if burned by the contact. His gaze glanced once back to the little village of houses about him. “No...” he breathed. “But she’s...”
“You can’t go after her,” the dark-furred feline repeated. “You know that. It’d be too dangerous – you’d be going in on her terms.”

“How long? When does it happen?”

“Recently, for me. But you... you have a year.”

“A... year...?” In all Haru’s time with the Bureau, Baron had always known that, sooner or later, she would go. Either because of her responsibilities in the Human World or... or because a Bureau case went bad. Goodness knows they had had enough close calls in the past. But somehow... he had always assumed it would be a long time from now. “Then she’ll have to leave the Bureau,” he rationed. “For her own safety–”

“You would break her heart.”

“Better that than...” Than the unthinkable.

“She won’t accept it. She knew that she was taking a risk by staying–”

“But now we know that the risk becomes a certainty–”

“We only know that it happened in my world, in my timeline. Anyway, do you really want to send her away?” The other Baron’s gaze escaped a moment to move to the young woman, caught up in conversation between Muta and Toto. “She’s a part of life here, and she won’t thank you for trying to take that away from her. Send her away and, while she might live, you’ll break what you have.”

“And what, pray tell, do we have?”

The dark-furred Baron only smiled. “I forgot how blind I was back then – or back now, as the case may be. However, there is something else that I believe is much more imminent for you. It is time that she learnt the truth.”

“Which truth?”

“The one you have been hiding ever since Oz. It is time you took her to Wonderland. You know how to get there.” He smiled and turned to the portal that had winked into life, stepping up to its green depths and glanced to the Sanctuary around him. “It has been good... to return to a time when everything was happy.”

The other three members of the Bureau returned to the portal archway upon seeing their final guest step towards the green light, utterly oblivious to the murmured conversation that had just passed. The strange Baron offered a hand to Haru as she approached. “Miss Haru... it has been, and always will be, a pleasure to meet you.”

Haru smiled, and then ignored the hand and hugged him instead. “You too, Baron. Take care of yourself.”

He froze in shock, and then returned the embrace in full force. “Thank you, Miss Haru,” he whispered. He released her and stepped back, nodding his farewells to Toto and Muta as the green portal flickered across his being.

“Be safe, Haru...”

As the portal whisked its passenger away, it was only Baron who saw the single tear shed by his counterpart. Silent and unobserved, save for him.
In a year, he would share the same Haru-less fate.

Upon the portal closing, Baron briskly turned away from the archway and stalked back to the Bureau. Haru started at the abrupt action.

“Is he... okay?”

“Eh, he’s probably just glad to have the kettle to himself at last,” Muta grunted, and turned to follow after the cat Creation.

“Hey, Muta?”

“What, Chicky?”

“Have we... met before?”

“Did ya stand too close to the portal or something?” the cat called back without looking. “Or have you already forgotten the first time I dragged your butt to the Bureau?”

“I don’t mean then. I meant... before that.”

“Before what exactly, Chicky?”

“Before the Cat Kingdom incident, Muta. Did you... know me?”

If Haru hadn’t been watching for it, she would have missed the momentary misstep, the pause in his movements. “Nah, Chicky,” he brushed it off. “I think you’d remember a fat old cat like me, wouldn’t ya?”

She watched him go, with the unexplainable feeling that she had just been outright lied to.

“In that case,” she muttered, “I guess it’s time I headed home too.”

ooOoo

Next Story: The White King

Teaser: "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but that really wasn't one of your better ideas." / "Baron... what's that? Tell me it's friendly." / "I'm really beginning to wish you approved of proper weapons right about now," Haru muttered. "A cane's all well-and-good, but - when it comes to it - it's still just a stick." / "Is this really what you want, Haru?" Baron hissed. "Turning your back on the Bureau - on all of us - for him?"

Chapter End Notes

Inspired by: Far too many conversations on the TCR forums... Many thanks go to JenthGrek710 for inspiring this idea and being open for discussing the issues of bringing the three Barons together on the forums with me. I’m not sure I did this justice, but I hope you enjoyed this. I hope one day you get to write your own version of The Three Barons!

References/Other Inspirations:

Once Upon A Time: Snow Drifts. Directed by David H. Goodman & Robert Hull. Written by Ron Underwood. (Because Hook being jealous of his past self is by far the most epic scene in that episode.)

Also, I cannot take credit for the title/name of “the Duke” for the character seen in Whisper of the Heart. He is never named in the film (Baron only says that his fiancée was ‘stolen away’ when talking to Shizuku) so I took the name that seems to be banded about this fandom. The general agreement seems to be that he, like Baron, has a title, and the Duke just seemed natural.
Through the jeering crowd, Baron and his two animal companions were hauled before the marble throne. The guards threw him to his knees. He watched his top hat fall and scatter across the ground, spin to a slow stop a yard before him. He raised his gaze to the White King, and then to the young brunette standing by his side.

She met his eyes for a moment, and then looked away.

Baron lashed out against his captors and leapt towards the woman. Before he could even attempt to bridge the gap, another set of guards blocked his way with crossed spears. He halted and glared at the former Bureau member. “Is this really what you want, Haru?” he hissed. “Turning your back on the Bureau – on all of us – for him? We’re friends–”

“Some things run deeper than friendship,” the woman answered quietly.

“And for that you’ll let us die?” Baron snarled.

“You threatened the King. There’s only one punishment for treason.”

“Haru–”

“Don’t you ‘Haru’ me!” she snapped. She stormed away from the King’s side, shrugging off the restraining hand the monarch curled around her arm. She froze with only the guards’ spears separating the two of them. “Maybe you should have thought about that before. You could have told me–”

“Told you what? All I had were theories – an idea or two, a suspicion – there was nothing concrete! Nothing sure. Is that how you’re justifying this? You can stop this...” His attention waned, shifting to the cane he always held, now grasped by Haru’s side. Her fingers played over the handle while his hat – fallen, forgotten – lay only feet from its base. His expression hardened. “Never mind.”

Muttered words escaped his lips and Haru’s expression equally turned cold. “What?”

“I was just saying that I should have known better,” Baron repeated, this time loud enough for not only Haru to hear, but the entire court, “than to trust a human.”

The slap resounded across the hall. Toto and Muta winced, but Baron only tolerated the blow. Several frozen seconds ticked by and then he raised his emerald gaze to meet Haru’s. She was breathing hard, as if not quite able to believe what she had just done, but not about to back down either.

“And I,” she rasped, “should have known better than to believe in a heartless puppet.”

She turned away, but Baron’s next words froze her in place.

“You’re nothing but a foolish girl, Haru. You never belonged in the Bureau.”
He watched her form turn rigid and her grip nearly white on the cane. Her other hand moved to the cane and twisted about its length; when she spun, the sword had been ripped from its wooden casing and was baring down on the Creation. “And you, Baron, are nothing more than an oversized, hollow doll,” she snarled. “A little busybody who sticks his nose in everyone else’s business. What good are you really, Baron? How much can you really do, stuck in your little office?”

Baron twisted away from the guards who were trying to keep him under control, and snatched out a sword from one of their sheaths. He wielded it before him, smacking the cane’s blade away. “Why don’t you test me, Miss Haru? Or are you all talk and no show?”

The brunette released a sharp laugh, her eyes narrowing at her old friend. She swung her stolen weapon through the air, bringing it back into a comfortable grip, and kicked Baron’s top hat from the floor. She caught it and flicked it onto her head, smirking. “What the hell. You were sentenced for execution anyway.”

24-Hours Earlier

“So I was just wondering, since it’s a bank holiday this Monday, whether you’d be free...” Michael trailed away hopefully on the other end of the phone.

Haru moved across the room, awkwardly trying to pack a bag with a single hand and keep the phone to her ear with the other. “Geez, I don’t know, Michael. You might have to ask nearer the time.”

Michael paused. “It’s the Bureau, isn’t it? You’ve got Bureau business—”

“No,” Haru said automatically.

Michael paused again, this time giving a very deliberate silence. Haru sighed and threw a penknife into the pile. “Okay, yes. Yes, we’ve got to go and I don’t know how long it’ll take. I might not be back until late Monday.” She gave up on the packing – she never used any of the stuff she brought with her anyway – and turned her attention to the rest of the Bureau, who were searching through the box of her father’s stuff.

“I knew it.”

“Yes, yes, we’re all so impressed, Sherlock.”

“You need to improve your sincerity; it seems to fall apart at the faintest whiff of sarcasm.”

“I can’t help it. You just bring out the very best in me.”

From the sidelines, Muta made a face. “Could you tone down the fluff a little, Chicky? I hate mush.”

“I’m sorry, Muta. I’ll try to be less loving in future,” Haru teased.

“Is Muta complaining again?”

“Does he ever stop?”

“Hey! Was that about me?” Muta demanded. “Are you talking about me?”

Haru ignored the fat cat’s whines and tuned back in to the phone. “If this case is over early, I’ll call, okay?” she promised. “What were your plans?”

“Movie, meal, something... well, normal.” She could hear the smile in Michael’s voice “I figured you could do with some normality.”
“Like you wouldn’t believe,” Haru laughed. Toto pulled a familiar mirror out of the box with an air of achievement that Haru took to mean success. “Hey, it looks like we’re going to be heading off, so I’ve got to hang up. I love you.”

In the background, Muta made a gagging sound.

“I love you too, Haru. Please, stay safe.”

She ended the call and immediately received a fast-typed text from her boyfriend.

‘Just in case the movie does go ahead: popcorn – salt, sweet, or toffee?’

A foolish smile lit up her face and she returned with: ‘Salt ’n’ sweet, plz.’

Her phone buzzed a moment later: ‘Trust you to be awkward.’

‘Love you,’ she returned.

‘I don’t blame you. Looks, money, fame... I’ve got everything.’

‘In your dreams.’

‘I have you, so I must be dreaming.’

She blushed and then, when she remembered that the Bureau were watching, hastily texted back: ‘Banter later – they’re waiting for me.’

A single kiss on the final text told her that he had received her message. She returned her attention to the others as Toto lifted the handheld mirror onto her desk. She joined them, helping Muta onto the chair as she went. “So, this is it?”

“It certainly appears to be of Wonderland make,” Baron answered.

“And Wonderland loves its mirrors,” Toto added. “It makes sense.”

Haru dropped her phone onto the desk – her mobile was usually void during cases anyway; it never got signal in other worlds – and looked down at the innocent-looking item. The handle and backing looked like it had been carved from ivory, with intricate designs woven around the edges. Being careful not to touch it, she peered at the indented images, making out carved cats and hats and twisting vines. “Are you sure? It doesn’t seem to be very...” She danced her hands about in the air to express general magickness.

“Like the other items in your father’s collection, the portal ability is dormant from lack of use; it requires the touch of a certain breed of magic to awaken it.” Baron looked to Haru with cautious hesitation. “Magic like yours.”

“I am not magic.”

“Not in the conventional sense.”

“I mean, I can’t do any of the whizzy stuff from films or even the light thing you can–”

“What do you mean ‘or even’?” Baron asked with a raised eyebrow. “Regardless, it is true that you don’t have any active magic – your abilities are of a much more passive vein. It is mostly limited to awakening portals, which is why your father’s antique collection have been displaying powers since you acquired it.”
Haru was silent a moment. Then, “So, when Hiromi somehow ended up in Oz...” she slowly started.

“You may have unintentionally woken one of the items and then, if your friend disturbed them, it would have opened a delayed portal that dragged her in,” Baron confirmed. “It would also explain why the Neverland portal opened following your contact with the painting.”

“Still, I’ll believe it when I see it.” Haru slowly gripped the mirror’s handle and – now she was looking for it – she felt the slightest jolt of power shiver through the everyday household item. She hastily lowered it and looked to her companions. “So sometimes items are given the power to open portals to their home world?” she asked.

“Yes. Although I’m not sure how true the C. S. Lewis stories are, Narnia certainly exists and we have heard of a wardrobe that acts as a doorway – the wood that it is built from is from a tree that originated from a Narnian apple.”

“Of course Narnia exists.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Haru?” Baron asked, quite missing the reason for her sarcasm.

“Never mind.” She sighed and her fingers skittered over the air just above the mirror. “Let’s do this then and see whether you were right about this portal theory. To Wonderland?”

“To Wonderland,” Baron echoed.

She picked up the mirror and, this time when she felt the spark of magic, she didn’t lower it. Just tightened her grip while the delicate carvings in the ivory took on a diamond sheen. The light intensified and then flooded out of the mirror, curling around the Bureau members and sinking to Haru’s bedroom floor like white smoke. It circled them and then rose abruptly up, sinking the group into its foggy depths.

The mist thickened until Haru could only see the oppressive white pressing against her – and then it faded into altogether nothing.

Only now, their environment had changed.

Muta padded across the soft grass, now taller than Haru and over three times her girth. “Now, why can’t all our portals be like that?”

“If you want to dabble in magic, be my guest,” Baron smoothly replied. He, like the other Bureau members, had grown to human height, although Haru started to wonder whether it was more a case of her shrinking down to theirs. She took in her surroundings and promptly concluded that the latter was more likely.

They were standing beneath a canopy of huge flowers. Haru stowed the mirror into her bag.

If that wasn’t enough, the blossoms bent their stems and their petals turned to face the newcomers. Human faces, coloured the same shade as their petals, were embedded into the centres. The nearest – a scruffy dogrose – bared its strange face at the ragtag group.

“Weeds! We’ve got weeds!”

Haru bristled. “Excuse me?”

“Only weeds could grow so fast,” the dogrose reasoned. Its neighbour, a spindly tulip leant down.
“They’re like no weed I ever saw.”

“Look at them though!” a hysterical poppy screeched. “Ugly-looking things, aren’t they? Look at the petals on that one.”

Haru moved her hands protectively to her short-shorn hair, which the flowers appear to have mistaken for petals.

“The others don’t even have petals – and that one looks like it’s infected. Just look at the size of it!”

“I’ll claw you down to size!” Muta snarled.

“I don’t think they’re flowers at all,” the tulip whispered. It leant over to its dogrose neighbour and said in a stage-murmur, “In fact, they look like the Alice weed...”

Baron took the moment to step forward and flourish his hat, which only caused shocked whispers of, “Did you see what it did with its leaf?” and “I think it must be broken!” He only smiled regardless. “Gentleflowers, it’s been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, but if you could possibly show us the way out...?”

“That way.” The tulip pointed hastily along an overgrown path. “Get going – we don’t want any trouble with an up-springing of weeds, thank you very much!” There were a few mutters of, “Here, here,” from its neighbours and Haru was unceremoniously pushed along the path. Baron caught up with her and moved them out of the flowers’ reach. Toto and Muta hastily followed after.

Once they were out of the plants’ range and had come to a larger path that split into a fork, Haru turned to the Creation.

“What,” she started flatly, “was that about?”

“I have no experience with such plants,” Baron answered honestly. “But it would appear that they are quite unaccustomed to human – or non-plant, anyway – interactions.” He turned to the fork before them and examined the signpost sitting at the junction. Unfortunately, whoever had created the signpost hadn’t made it to be of any help; a multitude of arrows pointed in every direction save for the two paths leading away.

“Here,” Baron read from the arrows. “There. Not there. Left. Right. Other left...”

“I hate mad people,” Muta grumbled.

“Then what’rya doing here?” Toto cackled.

Haru looked away from the signpost, quickly deciding that it would be of little help, regardless of the entertaining arrows. She moved to the start of the left path and glanced down to the soft ground beneath her.

A lone feline footprint was carefully pressed into the mud.

“Hey, Baron...” Her voice drained away when, upon looking up, she came face-to-face with a row of sharp, white teeth.

If they had been attached to something – say a face, preferably – then she would have known how to react (hit it between the eyes, run, and then scream for good measure). But since there was only the smile floating in mid-air, she found she froze instead. She swallowed slowly and tried to look to Baron without losing sight of the hovering teeth. She found she could only swallow again and take a
tortured step back.

“Baron...”

“Just a moment, Haru. I think there’s a place name on this sign...”

“Baron...”

The smile bobbed before her, twisting to one side as if it was tilting in curiosity. Shadows began curling behind it, faintly outlining stripes along a feline body – and the stripes hovered where they were, just like the smile. The smile hovered closer – scarily close – and Haru felt invisible whiskers brush against her cheek. She leant as far away from it as possible without moving her feet.

“Baron, if you don’t drag your furry behind over here right now,” Haru murmured in a terse sing-song voice, “I am going to make boots from your hide.”

“Oh.” She felt Baron move behind her, evidently seeing the cause of Haru’s discomfort. “Just... don’t make any sudden movements...”

“I’m hardly going anywhere, am I?”

“Just stay... very still...”

“Could you improvise a little faster?”

The whiskers solidified and something in the face area shifted. It took Haru several seconds that something – or a pair of somethings – had just blinked. When they opened, two large, amber eyes widened into existence.

The smile grew.

“Good evening, strangers.”

Haru wet her lips nervously. “It’s still daytime,” she hesitantly pointed out. She could see other features of the feline coming into view, and now took note of the large claws that idled dangerously close to her.

“Time is irrelevant here,” the rapidly solidifying cat responded.

“I’m quite fond of time, actually,” Haru said. She tried to subtly lean away from the floating feline. “Stops me from being late.”

“No, it is time that makes you late. Without time, we would never have late. Or early.”

Haru threw a desperate glance back to Baron, who took the prompt. He stepped forward, tipping his hat to the strange creature. “And you must be the Cheshire Cat.”

“Must?” the cat echoed. “There is no ‘must’ about it. I simply am.”

“Give me a break,” Muta muttered. “This riddle fiend is giving me a headache...”

“I can see why; thinking is such a foreign concept to you...”

“At least I haven’t got a birdbrain!”

Haru closed her eyes tiredly. They sure knew when to pick their arguments. Baron picked up the
conversation again, silencing the duo with a side-look. “Cheshire Cat–” He hesitated as the feline twisted away from Haru and curled round Baron’s shoulders, hovering just off the jacket. “Cheshire Cat, we are looking for someone...”

Haru’s gaze sharpened on the Creation. She knew they had come to Wonderland for some reason or another, but Baron had been deliberately vague on the subject. He had told her that they were going to try to come to Wonderland and that he believed her father’s antique collection would have something to enable a portal... but that was it.

“A particular someone or any someone?” the Cheshire Cat asked.

“A particular someone. David Drosselmeyer.”

“I know no someone with that name.”

Baron paused. “What about Oscar Diggs?”

“It rings no bells.”

“Peter Pan?”

“Again, a negative.”

Haru watched Baron, her eyes getting larger. Just who was he asking after? Was he suggesting that these three people – including Peter Pan, of all names – were one and the same? The Creation must have seen her questioning look, for he added, “He has gone by a multitude of names.”

“While I know none of these someones,” the Cheshire Cat said, spiralling through the air, slowly rotating upside-down and around the pair, “another someone might know that someone.”

“Who do you suggest?” Baron asked. He mentally passed over what he knew of Wonderland.

“Might the Caterpillar know?”

“The Caterpillar might know... and, then again, he might not...” It hovered, still the wrong way up. “However, of all the someones in Wonderland, the someone who will probably know will be the White King.”

“The White King?” Haru echoed. She looked to Baron. “I don’t remember him from the story.”

“Through the Looking Glass,” he answered. “The story introduces the chesspieces of the Wonderland world, and where there is a White Queen...”

“There must be a White King,” Haru finished.

“More than likely.”

“So, do we find him?”

Baron hesitated. “I’m not too fond of kings...”

“Me neither, but if he can help...” She turned to the floating creature. “Cheshire Cat, how do we find the White King?”

“First you must look, and then you seek–”

“Forget Baron; the next fur boots I make will be from your hide,” Haru muttered. “Which way do
we go?”

“Go for what?”

“To find the White King.”

“What about finding the White King?”

“Look here, you floating freak,” Muta growled, breaking past Haru and stalking straight up to the cat. “Tell us or, so help me, I will claw out every last tuff of fur and use it to stuff my pillow, ya’hear me? Now, which way do we go to find this White King?”

The Cheshire Cat only floated out of Muta’s wrath, either oblivious or carelessly ignoring his ire. “You will find the King beyond the Mad Hatter’s tea party, along the Pale Valley, and through the Wood with No Names.”

“But if the wood is called ‘the Wood with no Names’,,” Haru stubbornly pointed out, “then, by default, it has a name.”

“Really, Chicky? That’s what you’re going to argue over?”

“It is called that because, upon entering it, a thing will lose its name.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad,” Haru contemplated.

“Without a name, one will forget themselves.”

“Let’s not go there.” She made a face at the other Bureau members. “We’ve had that before and it’s not fun.”

“Agreed.” Baron bowed to the strange feline, tipping his hat – as always – to the cat. “Thank you for your help, Cheshire Cat.”

The feline only flicked an upside-down tail and, from the tip of the tail onwards, it started to fade. “The pleasure’s all mine. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again soon...” The stripes remained strong while the fur around the dissolved away, soon leaving only them and the grin – as large as before. The dangerous smile tilted upwards in a yet-wider expression even as the stripes finally faded.

“Welcome to Wonderland...”

The teeth vanished entirely, but not before Haru felt the whisper of a whisker brush past her. She resisted a shiver, but the hairs on the back of her neck rose nonetheless. “I guess now we start walking?” she asked after a moment’s recovery. She couldn’t quite shake the feeling that the cat hadn’t gone far.

“We walk,” Baron agreed.

“Or, if birdbrain wasn’t feeling so lazy, he could carry us there.”

“If you weren’t the weight of a bowling ball, I might offer.”

“The Tea Party shouldn’t be too far,” Baron said, swiftly breaking the opening argument.

“And they might even have food,” Haru said, realising for the first time that she was starving. She began to regret skimping lunch with just a sandwich earlier that day, as she hurried after the fast pace
of the feline Creation.

“Even I wouldn’t be so stupid to eat Wonderland food, Chicky.”


“Didn’t ya read the books? Wonderland food has a habit of... changing ya. How far are you going to be walking if yer the size of a thimble?”

Haru wrinkled her nose. “Already tried that once, so no thanks.”

“Perhaps you should try some Wonderland food then,” Toto mocked the fat cat. “You could do with losing some weight.”

“Shut up, or you’ll be losing some weight – some feather weight!”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“You don’t even make sense.”

Haru caught up with Baron, who cast a knowing smile to her. “Sometimes I wonder what the Cat Bureau must look like to newcomers,” he said. “It’s a wonder the clients trust us at all.”

“I don’t mean to offend, but I think – in most cases – we’re the last resort.”

“Were we your last resort?”

Haru took a moment to contemplate this. Then she grinned. “Well, I could hardly call the police, could I?”

He laughed and continued along the path. It wasn’t long before a building could be seen above the treeline, a tattered sail rising into the horizon like a lone soldier. Haru nudged Baron and pointed to the strange break in the canopy. He slowed. “This must be it.”

“Great. My paws are killing me.”

“Carrying that much weight, it’s no wonder, fatso.”

“Well then? Come on.” Haru pushed on ahead, following the winding path until it opened up to a man-made clearing. Towering over it was a windmill, the sails of which were what Haru had spotted earlier. Between them and the building, however, was a long table, set with tea cups and cutlery and an assortment of cakes. Haru snuck one of the scones into her bag while the others weren’t watching.

And, at the far end – and by far the strangest images in the picture – were three individuals, all soundly sleeping.

Feigning ignorance of the rest of the Bureau’s hesitancy, Haru approached the slumbering set. She paused by the one who sat at the head, a shock of white hair visible around the green top hat slanted to one side. In the ribbon, a price tag was slipped in. She looked back to the slowly approaching Bureau. “Let me guess... this is the Mad Hatter?”

“I believe the books only call him the Hatter,” Baron quietly corrected, calmly joining her side.

Haru looked to the neighbouring occupant; a furry, rabbit-like creature, clothed and rather ragged. “March Hare? And... the one in the teapot–” a lone, golden tail was limply curled over the side “– must be the dormouse?”
“So you are familiar with Wonderland.”

“I’ve seen the films,” Haru admitted sheepishly. She glanced over the snoring individuals and then back to Baron. “Question: Is there a reason that you look like you’re about to jump out of your top hat and should I be backing away?” she asked after a dubious moment.

“I am merely cautious. Our interactions in the other Childhood Worlds have proven that the inhabitants aren’t always friendly.”

“You can say that again.” Regardless, Haru didn’t move away from the three Wonderland occupants. In fact, she leant closer to the Hatter, taking a good look at his headwear. “You two should get together at some point and discuss hat fashion,” she grinned. “You look like you might have a few things in common...”

She smirked as Baron self-consciously raised a hand to his own light-grey hat. “Personally, I don’t see the resemblance.”

“Of course not.” She leant back towards the Hatter and moved to straighten the price tag.

A gloved hand twitched and slammed around her wrist.

She screamed and twisted away, but the Hatter’s grip kept her hand pinned to the table. The hat wobbled, and then rose as the Wonderland resident lifted his head. “Unless,” he said slowly, a sideways smile slipping over his face, “you plan on buying that hat, I must insist you keep your hands... off.”

“I rather like my hands to stay on, thank you very much,” Haru retorted. She gave her arm another tug and, this time, her wrist came free. The other occupants were waking now – she could see the dormouse’s tail twitching – and she edged back towards Baron, hoping his previous wariness had been just paranoia.

Now the Hatter’s attention turned to the feline Creation, and he rose to his feet in a lopsided manner. Baron moved forward, stepping between the Hatter and Haru, but the former merely swiped at Baron’s hat and hoisted it away. The Hatter examined the grey top-hat between his fingers, inspecting the cut and style of the headwear. “It’s a good quality hat,” he reasoned, quite unaware of his baffled audience, “but so last... last... last something,” he mumbled. “I can never quite remember what to call Time...”

He flicked it away and Baron snatched it out of the air.

“Hatter,” Baron addressed respectfully as he re-adjusted the hat, “we are merely passing through–”

“Passing through?” the March Hare spluttered, finally spluttering into consciousness. “Passing through what?” He leant forward, one beady eye examining Muta – the closest of the Bureau members, who just scowled back – and asked, “Are you a ghost?”

Toto cackled at the suggestion. “Him? A ghost? You couldn’t find a more substantial cat in all the worlds!”

“I heard that, birdbrain!”

“We’re merely travelling to the White King’s castle,” Baron continued, managing mostly from sheer experience to talk as if the other two weren’t on the verge of physical violence. “We don’t mean to interrupt anything.”
“Good,” the March Hare barked. “There ain’t any room, anyhow!”

“Room?” Haru echoed incredulously. “There’s plenty of room!”

“No room! No room!” the table occupants sang. The teapot – or, to be more precise, the dormouse in the teapot – gave a breathy sigh and started to hum, “Twinkle, twinkle, little bat...” Its golden tail flickered idly from side-to-side.

Baron’s hand curled around Haru’s arm and gently began to lead her away. “Well then,” he said, in tones of false cheeriness, “we must be going.” When Haru hesitated, Baron leant in and murmured, “Just keep walking.”

Muta found his arm also grabbed – but by the March Hare. The creature tugged on his fur and whispered conspiringly, “Do you know what day it is? It’s my un-birthday!”

“And mine!” the Hatter laughed. “What a coincidence!”

Muta only glared at the insane animal and obviously contemplated punching it into next week. A curt call of, “Muta!” from Baron prompted him to only shake the creature off him – somewhat more sharply than required – and follow after the others. When they had put good distance between them and the mad tea party, they slowed.

“Well,” Haru said. And then, when nothing else came to mind, she repeated it with a lost, “Well...”

“Welcome to Wonderland,” Baron smiled.

Haru opened her mouth, struggled to find something constructive to say, and floundered instead. Something seemed very odd and it was only as the path broke up to a hilltop ledge, that she realised what. She stopped. “Alice in Wonderland was written years ago.”

“Yes–”

“I mean, years ago,” she repeated with obvious emphasis. “I don’t know about the March Hare or Dormouse, but surely the Hatter would be... you know...”

“Dead?” Muta offered helpfully.

“Yeah. Does time not run here?”

“It depends,” Baron answered.

“On what?”

“The individual.” He walked to the very top of the hill, where below a valley ran down and followed a river’s thin course, and looked back to the brunette. “The Bureau has never had reason to visit Wonderland, but Jules has brought news of other worlds in the past. Wonderland is a place where... people who have regrets escape to. If someone comes here with a regret that is swallowing them up, Wonderland allows them to forget. And, because our memories of the past are evidence of time, such people no longer experience time.”

“So the Hatter...”

“Remembers nothing but his Wonderland life. Knowing our past gives us awareness of consequences and experience, and so Wonderland inhabitants who forget also tend to go quite mad. As the tea party goers proved.”
Haru paused. “Are... Are we in danger of forgetting ourselves?”

“Do you have a regret, Chicky?”

She thought it over, but Baron only chuckled lightly. “Haru, if you have to think it over, then whatever regrets you do have are not enough to make you forget. People who come to Wonderland and do forget are haunted by their regret.”

“Good. Because I remember the last time memory loss happened and it wasn’t fun.” She frowned. “Well, I don’t remember it exactly, but I remember the bruises I got from it.” She joined Baron on the ridge and looked down to the decline below. “Is this the Pale Valley the Cheshire Cat was talking about?”

“Oh ‘eck.” Muta padded over to them and glared along the length of the valley. “We’ve got to go all that way? Where’s the forest the lunatic was talking about?”

“I think...” Baron said slowly, “it’s over there...” He pointed to a distant gathering of trees on the far side of the valley. Muta visibly deflated.

“I hate this job.” He started to waddle down the hill, the ground of which was a chalky, crumbly substrate. Marble-like rocks rose from the earth in jagged, angular shapes. Haru slipped after Muta, pausing by one such formation to glance up at it. Its sides were square, rising up in sharp ascent and the top twisted into a pointed spiral. In fact, if she didn’t know better she would say it looked like a...

“A bishop chesspiece,” she muttered.

Baron stopped beside her. “Yes.”

“That’s kinda creepy...”

“This is Wonderland.”

“And that makes it better, how?”

“I’m not really sure.”

Haru ran a hand along the angular edge, circling the stone bishop while Muta and Toto continued down the valley. On the other side of the towering chesspiece, the earth beneath was disturbed and dug away to reveal a hole. She leant down and peered into its dark depths. “A rabbit hole in Wonderland...” she chuckled. “Would that be hole-ception?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Pop culture reference,” Haru airily explained. It would take far too long to bring Baron up-to-speed on recent films and, anyway, she wasn’t sure he would appreciate it. Something shifted in the darkness of the hole and Haru leant further in. “Hey, Baron, I think there’s something down here...”

The next seconds passed in a dizzy blur. The hole inhabitant lunged forward and Haru had time to take note of a wickedly sharp beak before Baron hauled her back just in time. They stumbled back, Baron’s hands keeping a tight hold about Haru’s shoulders.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but that really wasn’t one of your better ideas.”

“Actually, that’s just what I was thinking,” Haru gasped. Something was clambering out of the hole – in fact, several somethings – and both Bureau members started to slowly back away.
A beak shifted into the light, and then a feathery head snaked out. Small, sharp eyes darted across its surroundings and then a long neck followed. A relatively small body stepped out – but the legs were long and scaly and marked out by taloned feet. Tiny, useless wings flapped pointlessly at its sides.

“Baron... what’s that? Tell me it’s friendly.”

“It’s friendly.”

“Then why are we still backing away?”

“I thought that’s what you wanted to hear.”

“I wanted it to be true.”

“Ah... well that, I cannot do.”

Another creature stalked out of the hole and now Haru received the uncomfortable mental picture of the old Jurassic Park films she had seen in her childhood. Especially the velociraptors, except these creatures were feathered and beaked but still taller than Haru.

“Could you at least give me a name?”

“From the Wonderland books, there are stories of monsters,” Baron answered slowly.

“And this particular monster?” A third creature was following its companions, and now snapped irritably at the other birds in strange communication. The other uttered a strange scream, shrill and high, and Haru felt a thin sliver of fear chase through her.

“Should we meet with a Jubjub, that desperate bird,” the Creation murmured, his voice taking on the quality of recited words, “we shall need all our strength for the job...”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“It isn’t. And we should start running about... now.” They both leapt into action at the same moment the jubjubs sped after them. They raced down towards Toto and Muta, shouting and waving arms to convey the sudden need for speed to the other Bureau members. Toto took to the skies and Muta dropped to all fours. Haru risked a glance behind to see that the trio of birds were quickly closing the distance between them.

“Baron...” she puffed. “They’re kinda fast.”

He didn’t even look back; he just grabbed her hand and upped his pace, dragging her forward. But the jubjubs had legs that reached as high as Haru’s chest and so covered metres with every bound.

And then a jubjub appeared from the sky.

Haru screamed and both fell back. She swore. “They can FLY?!”

Then the second jubjub bird appeared to their left and it became clear that, even though their wings were useless in terms of flight, they could leap vast distances. Haru and Baron turned back-to-back to watch their two predators, while the third jubjub leapt after the fleeing Muta.

“I’m really beginning to wish you approved of proper weapons right about now,” Haru muttered as they twisted to keep the two birds in view. “A cane’s all well-and-good, but – when it comes to it – it’s still just a stick.”
“A very fashionable stick,” Baron protested.

“It’s a stick. Can’t you at least unsheathe the sword?”

“I don’t like using the sword. It reminds me too much of the Duke.”

The two jubjub birds, perhaps sensing that their prey weren’t about to outrun them any time soon, merely circled them, beaks snapping at the air and impatient talons scratching the ground. A shrill cry, like a pencil on a chalkboard, rattled through the air and Haru felt even Baron shiver at the sound.

“Any bright ideas?” Haru asked.

“Stay alive.”

“Anything a bit more constructive?”

“How is staying alive not constructive?” Baron queried.

“Every instinct is already screaming that concept, so I could do with a bit more than that. LOOK OUT!” They threw themselves apart as the two jubjubs leapt towards them at the same moment. Baron rolled away and brought the cane up just as one bird landed on top of him. The cane was wedged into the snapping beak and kept it at arm’s length.

The other bird went straight for Haru. She dove to her left and the jubjub overshot its mark. While she had received general defence lessons, none of them had taken into account that her attack might be a giant, flightless bird. It was too late to remedy that now though. The creature emitted that strange, spine-chilling shriek and Haru screamed back.

The bird paused. Tilted its head to one side.

“Yeah, I can shout too,” she huffed.

The jubjub gave a snickering cry and went for her again. She ducked and slammed into its long legs. In a tangle of feathers and scales they collapsed onto the ground and Haru tried to pin its lethal talons with her feet. The curved beak struck out and she grabbed the elongated neck, pulling it away from her face.

One of the feet escaped her grip and clawed across her face. She raised a hand just in time and the talons raked across her arm instead. She kicked out and slammed both feet into its tiny body. It staggered away and Haru pushed herself up, kicking it again for good measure. Baron was still pinned down by his jubjub and the wicked beak was drawing closer to his face. She left her attacker behind and slammed into the other bird.

There was a soft whumph as they skidded across the ground. The force knocked the cane from Baron’s grip and as Haru rolled back to her feet, she snatched it up. There was no time to unsheathe it as the bird leapt at her again. She spun and smacked the cane into the jubjub’s side; it flew through the air and landed in an ungainly heap.

She turned back to Baron and helped him to his feet. She tossed the cane back to him. “You’re welcome.”

He grinned. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

Haru laughed – and then disappeared in a flurry of feathers.
Her cry was cut off as she threw herself into fighting back, and Baron started after the jubjub bird
with the blade of the cane being dragged free. Before he could strike, the second jubjub slammed
into him and the cane went spinning. His sight was filled with a snapping beak and clawing talons
and it was all he could do keep it away.

And then something thudded into the jubjub’s side and the bird collapsed across him. He attempted
to push it off and his gloves came away with blood. He hesitated and took note of the arrow sticking
into the bird’s body.

The jubjub was pulled away and a young knight offered a hand to the tattered Creation. “Most
people would know better than to travel through the Pale Valley.”

“We’re not most people,” Baron answered and rose shakily to his feet, reclaiming his cane from the
side. He glanced over to see another white knight helping Haru up, her jubjub also dead now. Muta
and Toto were heading back towards them, Muta’s white fur stained by a few streaks of ruby red
blood.

“I can see that,” the young knight answered. “Where were you heading?”

“Well, I think you’ll be able to help with that. We’re looking for the White King.”

“Then you lucky indeed. We are the White Knights.”

Haru eyed the horses the knights had brought with them. “Could we catch a lift then?”

Sitting in one of the castle’s waiting rooms, Haru finally turned her attention to the scars running
along her arm. The bleeding had eventually stopped, but she was still afraid that too much movement
would unsettle the clotting. Fortunately, bandages were one of the main things she brought on cases
nowadays and so, with a single hand, she wound them about her newest wounds.

Baron joined her. “Here, let me help with that.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“You have deep scars running the entirety of your lower left arm.”

“And I’m fine,” Haru repeated. “Anyway, that isn’t the issue here. The issue here,” she said, turning
to the Creation, “is why we’re here. Who is this David... Drosselmeyer... you were asking about?”
She pinned the tight bandages into place and experimentally flexed her fingers. “Or Oscar Diggs, or
Peter Pan, or whatever his name is. Is he really called Peter Pan? I mean, the Peter Pan?”

“David Drosselmeyer went by many names throughout his life, especially while travelling through
different worlds.”

“Let me guess, he called himself Peter Pan when he went to Neverland.”

“Correct. And Oscar Diggs when he arrived in Oz.”

Haru straightened up as if she had just sat on a pin tack. “Was he...? Was he the boy that Mombi
talked about? The one who became the wizard and...” She hesitated, and then whispered, “And
Mombi cursed?”

Baron nodded.
“You knew him.”

“A long time ago.”

“So what’s changed?” She leant forward, watching Baron’s emerald eyes. “Why are you looking for him now?”

“I had no reason to, but the situation altered. And then my future self – the grey Baron – told me that it was time.”

“You’re speaking in more riddles than the Cheshire Cat,” Haru grumbled, good-naturedly. “Time for what?”

“Time for you to know the truth.”

The double doors opened before Haru could ask, and the White Knights flooded in. The young one that had saved Baron bowed his head towards their visitors. “The King will see you now.”

“Good,” Muta muttered. “And when we’re done here, perhaps you should think about putting a buffet or something into the waiting room. I’m wasting away here.”

Toto cackled. “Hardly. That would take a small millennium.”

Haru stood, patting her bandages to assure herself that they were staying in place, and moved to allow the knights to escort them. She cast a look to Baron that said they were going to continue this discussion later, and then the Bureau was ushered into the hall beyond. A huge set of double doors – stretching all the way to the already-impressive ceiling – marked the throne room.

Muta scoffed under his breath and muttered, “Geez, kings and their styles...”

The young knight turned to the visitors as the doors wheezed open. “You are about to step before the White King, lord and high ruler, so pay your respects. Speak when spoken to and not without, bow – or whatever your cultural norm may be for such situations – and keep a civil tongue. Punishment can be severe.”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it. Does this fancy-dress getup include complementary nibbles?”

The knight merely showed them in and added, “Good luck.”

“He didn’t answer my question,” Muta muttered.

“You’re such a moron, fatso.”

Haru moved ahead, keeping in pace with Baron as they crossed the throne room. The King was turned away in quiet conversation with an advisor, his face hidden in shadow. Like his title had suggested, he was all in white, dressed in a pale suit that uncannily reminded Haru of the Creation by her side. Save for the silver shoes upon his feet. As they stopped before the steps, the jolt of eerie familiarity continued to haunt her.

Eventually, the King waved away the advisor, coming to some conclusion, and turned to his guests. “Now, I hear you’re looking for a lost person...”

Haru froze. By her side, Baron did the same.

Even Muta muttered a quick curse.
“You.”

Haru’s legs went weak beneath her as she stared at the familiar face – a face she hadn’t seen in years... She staggered forward while the rest of the Bureau was still frozen in place.

“...Dad?”

ooOoo

Teaser: “Would you really kill me, Haru?” / As she turned to leave, Baron spoke. “You were right, Haru; I do want revenge. And now you’re standing in my way...” / “Can’t you see? I can’t forget.” The sword was swung lazily through the air, its cutting edge glittering in the light and pointing accusingly at Haru. “Not while you’re still here.” / The King blinked again, and then focused on the large white cat waddling towards him. “R... Renaldo?” / “I’m sorry, Chickpea...”
“You.”

Haru’s legs went weak beneath her as she stared at the familiar face – a face she hadn’t seen in years... She staggered forward while the rest of the Bureau was still frozen in place.

“...Dad?”

“David?” Baron breathed.

The White King looked over the group, light confusion shaping his features. “I’m sorry... I don’t know any of you.”

Tears slipped past Haru’s face. Her father... alive... and looking just as young as he had in his final photos. Just like he had over twenty years ago. “Dad... it’s me... It’s Haru. Your daughter...”

A heavy paw fell on her shoulder and it was Muta who had stepped up beside her. “It’s no good, Chicky. Remember what we said about regrets?”

“Regrets?” she echoed weakly. “What regrets would he have? We were happy – we were a good family...”

“And that’s just it. What more would he regret than leaving behind a wonderful kid and wife?” Muta grunted.

“I... I don’t have a daughter,” the King dubiously answered.

“How could you forget us? Don’t you even remember Mum? Naoko – you were crazy about her!” Haru broke away from Muta and – ignoring the warning shouts from the rest of the Bureau – ran over towards the monarch. Her hand curled around his – and then the White Knights were hauling her away and throwing her back to the ground. She blinked away tears to see spears looming down on her.

“What should we do with the girl, sire?”

Behind her, the Bureau was shouting but finding themselves held back by another line of guards.

The King looked to the hand Haru had grabbed, the confusion amplifying across his face. He gently took his palm in his other hand and rubbed at the spot where they had made contact. “Nothing...” he said gently. “Release her.”

The spears reluctantly backed away. Haru shakily rose to her feet. “Dad?”

“She’s your daughter,” Baron said, speaking up from behind the layer of knights. “She has your
magic – she can open portals like you did. David, listen to her.”

Haru spun round to face the Creation. “David?” she echoed incredulously. “His name is Daichi – Daichi Yoshioka...” Her expression shifted. “Did you know he was my father?”

“I didn’t know he was the King, but I was beginning to suspect that David and your father were—”

“And you didn’t mention it before now?”

“And if I had been wrong?” Baron challenged. “If I had raised your hopes for nothing?”

“Silence.” The King rose from his throne and slowly stepped down to the young brunette’s level. He was still gripping their last point of contact. Haru’s breath slowed, quite unable to believe her sight.

“Dad? Do you...? Do you remember me?”

Her father gazed into her eyes, his dark eyes matching hers and searching across her face. A single tear welled up. “My... My little girl...”

Haru threw her arms around him and breathed in the familiar, homey scent of her father. “Dad...” She could feel him shivering into her embrace.

“How OUT OF THERE!” Muta’s voice shattered her thoughts. The use of her name shook her and – more out of shock than thought – she released her father. She stepped back, glancing to the fat cat.

“Muta?”

“He’s dangerous,” the feline hissed.

“Dangerous?” she repeated. “He’s my father! He would never hurt me!”

The King was still shivering, but now the shaking was worsening, wracking his entire form. He was bent double, hands over face, and Haru inched forward.

“What’s...? What’s wrong?”

“HARU!”

Her father lunged for her, and at the same moment Baron broke free from the knights’ restrains and struck the King back. He stood between Haru and her father, cane bared and on the verge of unsheathing its blade.

Haru spun and anger flashed through her eyes. “Baron!”

“You heard Muta; he’s dangerous.”

“He’s. My. Father,” she stressed. She held out a hand, nodding to the cane. “Give me it.”

“What?”

“Give it here, before you hurt someone.”

Their gazes met for the longest moment.

He dropped the cane into her hand.
“Thank you.” Only now did she realise that she had been holding her breath. She moved back to her father’s side, who was kneeling down and gripping his waist where Baron had slammed into him. “Kn-Knights,” he choked out. “Secure the Bureau. Not the girl – not my daughter,” he quickly added. He pointed towards the other three. “Get them.”

Haru knelt down beside her father. “Dad... Please, they meant no harm. They were just worried for me. They didn’t mean–”

“They assaulted a king!” her father snapped.

Behind her, Haru could hear the beginnings of a scuffle as the Bureau resisted the restraints of the knights. “Let... Let me talk to them,” she begged. “Just let them go.”

“You can talk to them when they’re safely stowed away in the dungeons,” the King growled.

ooOoo

Through the darkness of the dungeon – the dim torchlight and dripping ceilings – Haru approached the Bureau’s cell. She held a cloak – given by her father – tightly around her and stopped by the still forms of her friends. They looked towards her – and then to the knight who accompanied her.

“We need to talk,” she said. “You promised me the truth.”

“Where would you like me to start?” Baron asked.

“At the beginning. Or perhaps why you called him David. Either will do.”

“David Drosselmeyer was his given name,” the Creation explained. “He was born on another world where he was an artisan’s apprentice. While working on a couple of figurines, he discovered that he could awaken portals and found himself spirited away to Oz. The Ozites, upon finding him in their midst, mistook him for a wizard and for a while he lived there. Later, he travelled to Neverland, and then to the Human World after being taken in by a young girl called Wendy Darling.”

“He really was Peter Pan,” Haru whispered.

Baron nodded. “He occasionally travelled back to Neverland, but upon the Second World War breaking out, he left for Neverland for good, but not before leaving the two figurines he had been working on behind in the Human World.”

“No.” Haru stepped away. “No, that’s not... He can’t be...”

“David Drosselmeyer – Daichi Yoshioka, your father – was my artisan.”

“No–”

“It explains why, when I transferred some of my Creation magic to you, it didn’t harm you – you are related to the one who made me. It explains why you had such power in Neverland that was likened to Pan’s – David’s, your father’s...”

“But... how old does that make my father?”

“In many of the Childhood Worlds, a person will not age.”

“Look at him now, Chicky,” Muta grunted. “He’s not that much older than you.”

“I don’t... I can’t...” Haru stepped away again, almost vanishing right into the shadows, but at the last
moment pulled herself back. “So he left you and Louise – then what?”

“Then, I cannot tell. Creations are endowed with the memories of their artisans upon awakening – he used stolen magic from Oz to help bring us to life – and he only awoke us before he left for Neverland. After the war, I had lost Louise, my home, all semblance of normality, and so I never looked for him, although I suspected he was still in the Childhood Worlds. Until recently – until you – I never entertained the idea that he had ever returned to the Human World after that.”

“Evidently he did though,” Muta added gruffly. “He must have come back, fallen in love, had a family...”

“And then left,” Toto reminded him. “Why would he do that?”

“I believe I know.” All attention turned to Baron. “Do you remember Mombi spoke of a curse that she put onto the ‘wizard’ – in this case, your father?”

Haru paled. “My father is cursed? How? What kind of curse?”

“Whoever he loves will eventually come to grief. Haru, by loving you and your mother, he was placing you in risk.”

“So he disappeared,” Haru finished. “He left.”

“It must have torn him apart,” Baron said gently. “Otherwise Wonderland would not have affected him so.”

“But he remembers me now – he remembers who I am–”

“And that is what makes him so dangerous. Haru, Wonderland inhabitants are mad almost by default; the man you knew as your father is gone. Instead you merely have a man who looks like someone you knew, but has carved away his memories and cares until only the Wonderland exists in him. And such people can be mostly harmless, but now he’s beginning to remember who he is... you’re pushing him into a new realm of madness. Balance won’t be restored inside him until he forgets again.”

“And if he doesn’t forget? He can’t forget while I’m still about...” Haru trailed off with a sickening understanding. She stumbled back and the White Knight caught her arm. She jolted at the contact, having completely overlooked her companion. While the knight steadied her, her gaze focused on Baron. Unspoken words flitted between them and something in the air changed.

She stormed back to them. “You must think you’re so clever, Baron, but you’re not clever enough. He’s my father and if you think you can convince me that he would ever... ever hurt me, you’ve got another thing coming! He’s not mad and he couldn’t – he wouldn’t – harm me just so he can fall back into forgetfulness!”

“Then how do you explain what happened earlier?” Baron demanded. A sharp note had suddenly dropped into his tone, something that Haru took a moment to register as hurt. She steeled herself against it.

“Explain what?” she snapped. “All I saw was you... slamming into him!” She rounded away, and then circled back with renewed ire. “I see what this is all about... You’re just angry because he left you–”

“Are you a fool, Haru? I’m worried about you!”
“No – you recognised him as your artisan the moment we stepped into that throne room, didn’t you?” she accused. “And here I was, thinking maybe you were doing this because you wanted to reunite daughter and father... when you didn’t really know at all, did you? The fact that your artisan and my father might be one and the same never mattered, did it?”

“Haru, I think you need to cool down–” Toto slowly started.

“Why should I cool down?” She turned to Baron, a snarl upon her lips. “This was always about finding your artisan, wasn’t it? This was about revenge because he left you and he stayed around with my mother for years–”

“And then he left you too!” Baron snapped. He abruptly rose to his feet, startling even Haru. She took an involuntary step back, which made the Creation hesitate. Another look at Haru and he barraged on with his words. “He abandoned you like he abandons everybody in the end!”

“He left because he loved us. Can you say the same?”

A stunned silence fell between them. Haru’s eyes widened and she looked on the verge of fleeing – or apologising.

“Geez, Chicky; that was below the belt...”

Baron held Haru’s wide-eyed stare and something silent again passed between them. To the other two, it seemed almost like an unspoken dare – a wordless taunt. Whatever it was, Haru didn’t break; in fact she seemed to strengthen.

“No,” Baron said slowly, “I can’t. I can’t say that he ever cared for Louise and me, like he cared for you or your mother. But, if he really cared for you that much,” he continued, and his voiced turned icy now, “tell me why he never left an explanation. If he really loved you, then would he have left you wondering all these years?”

“How could he?” Haru asked, but her words shook. She wasn’t so convinced either. “How could he just put down in a letter that he was leaving to protect us? We had no idea other worlds existed; we would never have believed him. Perhaps it was just easier that way.”

“Easier for you... or for him?”

“Oh, I don’t believe you,” the brunette scoffed. “You’re still trying to manipulate me? I told you that I won’t turn my back on my father – he’s not crazy! I can see straight through your lies and I won’t be twisted into your petty quest for revenge! Rot in this dungeon, for all I care.”

As she turned to leave the jail behind, Baron spoke.

“You were right, Haru; I do want revenge. And now you’re standing in my way...”

ooOoo

Through the jeering crowd, Baron and his two animal companions were hauled before the marble throne. The guards threw him to his knees. He watched his top hat fall and scatter across the ground, spin to a slow stop a yard before him. He raised his gaze to the White King, and then to the young brunette standing by his side.

She met his eyes for a moment, and then looked away.

Baron lashed out against his captors and leapt towards the woman. Before he could even attempt to
bridge the gap, another set of guards blocked his way with crossed spears. He halted and glared at
the former Bureau member. “Is this really what you want, Haru?” he hissed. “Turning your back on
the Bureau – on all of us – for him? We’re friends–”

“Some things run deeper than friendship,” the woman answered quietly.

“And for that you’ll let us die?” Baron snarled.

“You threatened the King. There’s only one punishment for treason.”

“Haru–”

“Don’t you ‘Haru’ me!” she snapped. She stormed away from the King’s side, shrugging off the
restraining hand the monarch curled around her arm. She froze with only the guards’ spears
separating the two of them. “Maybe you should have thought about that before. You could have told
me–”

“Told you what? All I had were theories – an idea or two, a suspicion – there was nothing concrete!
Nothing sure. Is that how you’re justifying this? You can stop this...” His attention waned, shifting to
the cane he always held, now grasped by Haru’s side. Her fingers played over the handle while his
hat – fallen, forgotten – lay only feet from its base. His expression hardened. “Never mind.”

Muttered words escaped his lips and Haru’s expression equally turned cold. “What?”

“I was just saying that I should have known better,” Baron repeated, this time loud enough for not
only Haru to hear, but the entire court, “than to trust a human.”

The slap resounded across the hall. Toto and Muta winced, but Baron only tolerated the blow.
Several frozen seconds ticked by and then he raised his emerald gaze to meet Haru’s. She was
breathing hard, as if not quite able to believe what she had just done, but not about to back down
either.

“And I,” she rasped, “should have known better than to believe in a heartless puppet.”

She turned away, but Baron’s next words froze her in place.

“You’re nothing but a foolish girl, Haru. You never belonged in the Bureau.”

He watched her form turn rigid and her grip nearly whiten on the cane. Her other hand moved to the
cane and twisted about its length; when she spun, the sword had been ripped from its wooden casing
and was barring down on the Creation. “And you, Baron, are nothing more than an oversized, hollow
doll,” she snarled. “A little busybody who sticks his nose in everyone else’s business. What good are
you really, Baron? How much can you really do, stuck in your little office?”

Baron twisted away from the guards who were trying to keep him under control, and snatched out a
sword from one of their sheaths. He wielded it before him, smacking the cane’s blade away. “Why
don’t you test me, Miss Haru? Or are you all talk and no show?”

The brunette released a sharp laugh, her eyes narrowing at her old friend. She swung her stolen
weapon through the air, bringing it back into a comfortable grip, and kicked Baron’s top hat from the
floor. She caught it and flicked it onto her head, smirking. “What the hell. You were sentenced for
execution anyway.”

The King moved forward from his throne. “Haru–”
She waved her father away. “Don’t worry about this. I can handle it.” She motioned for the knights to move away and, after a dubious moment where they seemed to remember that this young woman was now their princess, they parted. She stalked down to the lower area of the throne room, Baron backing away to give her space.

“Would you really kill me, Haru?”

Haru merely smirked. “Maybe. But I don’t think you could harm me.”

“Like I said earlier; you’re standing in my way.”

The White Knights moved away to give the pair a wide berth. The violence in the couple’s eyes was obvious.

“Well then,” Haru snapped back, “excuse me if I don’t move out of your way any time soon. I think you’ll find that I’m no longer the scared little girl that wandered into the Sanctuary – but you... you are still just the same nosy doll as before.”

“The same nosy doll,” Baron reminded her as they slowly circled, “that saved you from an untimely marriage.”

“I’ve grown since then.”

“More narrow-minded, I see.”

“And you, sir, more bitter.” Haru lashed out and Baron flicked her attack as one might flick away a fly – a large and metal fly, but a fly nonetheless.

“How could you hope to defeat me, Haru? I’ve had many years more experience than you.”

“True... but I’m not afraid to fight dirty.” She feigned an attack and then, deflecting a close blow, spun and elbowed Baron in the face. He staggered away, just quick enough to avoid Haru’s next attack. He ran a hand over his nose and reassured himself that nothing was broken.

“That hurt.”

“It was meant to.” Haru gave a mocking bow to the Creation. “I’m sorry? Did you think we were just playing around? Is this all a game to you?”

“Do you?”

The brunette bit back a sharp laugh. “Oh, you have no idea how good it feels to finally be able to face you like this. Do you have any idea how... demeaning it is to be seen as the damsel-in-distress of the group?”

“That’s not the way I see you, Haru.”

“Always needing to be saved, always needing to be helped? You’ve never really seen me as a true member of the Cat Bureau, have you? That’s why it was so good to face a case by myself at Fenland House – to prove that I can take care of myself, whatever you think.”

Baron’s expression hardened. “Maybe if you could take care of yourself, we wouldn’t have to worry about you,” he snarled.

“Baron...” Toto’s gaze widened from the sidelines; he and Muta were being held back by the surrounding knights. “You don’t mean that.”
“Of course I do!” Baron snapped. He looked back to Haru. “If you want to be treated as more than a damsel-in-distress, perhaps you should look after yourself, for once. Stand up and fight instead of hiding away or getting kidnapped!”

Haru’s eyes narrowed, and her next words were barely audible, hissed through clenched teeth. “Well, watch me fight now.” She spun into a new attack, barely missing Baron this time. He leapt back, only avoiding it through pure feline prowess, and slammed his sword against the cane’s blade to jar the barrage of assaults. At every turn, he blocked and Haru’s attacks were growing impatient. Her next blow rendered her hold weak, and Baron struck the cane from her grip; it flew into the air and he caught it with a deft hand.

“See, Haru? You could never beat me.”

“You’re sourly mistaken if you thought I can only fight with a sword,” she snarled, and struck out. She feigned a high hit and slammed a blow to his chest instead. As he stumbled, she lashed out with her feet and sent him tumbling. Both weapons skittered across the floor and slowed to a halt far out of Baron’s reach. Haru reached for the cane, but Baron was already up on his feet again. Before she could reclaim the sword, Baron slammed into her and they both went down.

Instinct kicked into Haru like a boot to the gut and she twisted round to pin her would-be attacker down. She landed on his chest and sat there, her weight stopping him from simply pushing her off and her hands gripping his wrists to stave off further attack.

Haru smirked. “Not looking so clever now, huh?”

“Haru... please...”

She froze. Suddenly she was back in Fenland House watching Baron die all over again... only this time it was the real Baron and he wasn’t dying – but the image superimposed itself on the one before her and the fear took over.

She jolted back, losing her grip. Baron hesitated, watching the panic borne in her gaze flare up with overt confusion. But then he spurred into action, fast enough to make any onlookers question what they had just seen. He twisted away from Haru, snatching up his cane and baring the blade to Haru’s neck.

The throne room went silent.

“Now... I suggest you tell your knights to release my friends...” Baron growled.

The King rose, but didn’t step forward. “You wouldn’t harm her. She’s your friend.”

“Does it look like we’re friends?”

“Dad... please–”

A long silence stretched out as the King and Creation wordlessly challenged the other. Baron smiled. “True, perhaps I wouldn’t harm her, but... would you really risk that? Would she ever forgive you if you risked it?”

The King looked away. “Free his companions.”

Toto and Muta joined Baron and his captive. Neither looked at Haru.

Baron bowed his head to the monarch. “Thank you. We’ll take our leave now. Muta, could you pick
up my hat? My hands are a little... full.” He backed away, bringing Haru with him as they mounted Toto. The stone crow rose into the air, picking up Muta and, with the court watching, they escaped through one of the large, stain-glass windows.

It shattered behind them, and the Bureau left the castle far behind.

ooOoo

Once out of sight, Baron sheathed the cane and Haru released a long sigh of relief. She rubbed at her neck and glanced back to the Creation ruefully. “Pathetic human?” she echoed sceptically. “Was that the best you could come up with? You should have let Muta make the insults.”

“Little busybody?” Baron reminded her. “You weren’t doing much better.”

“I dominated you in that match.”

“Only because I let you.”

She pointedly elbowed him. “Did not.” She sighed again, longer and louder and leant back against the Creation. “Sorry about what I said. I had to make it look real.” She twisted her head towards him. “Is your nose okay?”

“It’s still attached.”

“I think I hit harder than I was expecting.”

“You don’t say?”

“What can I say? I got caught up in the moment.”

“That would also explain the slap.”

“Did that hurt?”

“Well, let’s just say that I’m very glad that was all an act.”

Toto turned his attention to his passengers. “I hope you’re planning on an explanation when we land. Talking of that, where should we go? The King’s knights will be looking for us – we have just kidnapped his daughter.”

“To the forest beyond the Pale Valley,” Baron answered. “It’s big enough that we should be able to hide there for a period.” As the crow flew, the forest quickly appeared below them and the group landed in the darkness of the evening-shrouded woodland. Leaping to the ground, Baron offered a hand to Haru.

She merely grinned and slipped off without aid. “I am perfectly able to land on my own feet without your help, thank you very much.” She rolled her eyes with relaxed over-dramatics. “Still not a damsel.”

“But I’m still a gentlecat.”

“A gentlecat would let a lady win.”

“I did.”

“I won all by my own doing,” Haru laughed. “You did not ‘let’ me win anything.”
“As cute as this is,” Muta grunted, towering over the couple, “could ya fill the rest of us in? You looked like you were ready to kill him, Chicky.”

“Did I? Heck, I must be a better actor than I thought then.” Haru grinned, and then turned serious. “Look, I tried reasoning with my father and it didn’t work. It quickly became clear that if I pushed the matter too far, I was going to end up with you guys, daughter or not. When I visited you and understood what was happening to my father and why, I could have admitted that I believed you. But where would that have put me? I couldn’t let my father discover I no longer trusted him.”

“So you faked it,” Toto concluded.

“Did you really think I’d turn that quickly?”

There was an awkward silence between Toto and Muta. Haru raised an eyebrow.

“Oh my... You did, didn’t you? You actually thought I’d... I’d let you die.” She laughed nervously. “Thanks for the trust, guys. I guess it made the whole thing more convincing, but...”

“You two did seem... really furious,” Muta muttered.

“At what point did you actually make this plan?” Toto asked.

Baron and Haru exchanged glances. “We... didn’t exactly make it, per say.”


“It seemed a wise idea to make our disagreement as real as possible, so that my father – and his lackeys, the White Knights – wouldn’t even suspect we were working together. I think we were just playing it by ear until something cropped up.”

“The fight was a good idea.”

“The kidnapping was even better,” Haru told him. “That was quick thinking on your part.”

“And that reminds me...” Baron rounded on the young brunette, his expression suddenly dropping the playfulness. “What happened back there? What happened...” he caught her hand in his own even as she tried to pull away, “to you?”

“I panicked,” Haru said, trying to brush it away. “That was all.”

“You didn’t just panic,” Baron countered. “You nearly fell apart.”

“I just–”

“You were terrified, Haru. Was it something I said? Something I did?”

“Please... Haru...”

She blinked away the memory. “No,” she whispered. “It’s something I did.”

“Haru, everything back there was an act – a pretence – so you have no need to feel guilty for what you said or did–”

“It’s what I did at Fenland House.” She dragged her gaze up from the floor to meet Baron’s. He was looking back at her with dawning realisation. “You understand now, don’t you? I know it was just an act back there, but the same can be said for the puca of Fenland House. It wasn’t you, but...
looked like you... it pleaded like you...” She looked away. “It died like you.”

Baron caught her as she tried to turn away. “And I am still here. There is nothing to be afraid of.”

“There kind of is,” Haru chuckled nervously. “My father – your artisan – is probably already out there looking for us, and if he finds you – any of you,” she added, looking to the other two, “then you’re in trouble.”

“He is still a danger to you,” Baron reminded her.

“Yes, but not yet. When I talked to him, he wasn’t completely rational, but he wasn’t that far gone either.”

“He nearly attacked you when we first arrived.”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” Haru groaned and sat down on a fallen tree. “So... what do we do now? He’s still my father–”

“He’s dangerous.”

“If he’s so dangerous, why did we come here in the first place?” Haru demanded.

“Because I didn’t realise it would be the case,” Baron answered. “Jules had said that a newcomer had come to Wonderland some twenty years ago and stayed – although she hadn’t realised he had taken up the position of the late king – but knew nothing more. All I had were theories and I wasn’t even sure that it was my artisan.”

“Well, now we know, what now?”

“Now, we go back. We go before he finds us again. Haru, do you still have the mirror?”

“It should still be in my bag,” she said. She started to rootle through, suddenly withdrawing her hand with a hiss of pain.

“Something bit ya, Chicky?”

“No, there’s something sharp, something broken...” She trailed off, raised her gaze to the rest of the Bureau and very deliberately gave her bag a slow shake. The tinny of shattered glass rattled in its depths. “Oh....”

She dragged her cloak sleeve over her hand and gently rummaged through the bag, finally drawing out the smashed remains of the handheld mirror, its glassy surface all but gone now. “I think this is beyond a bit of duct tape and glue.”

“Gee, ya think?”

Ignoring Muta, she passed the wooden remains over to Baron. “I’m guessing it won’t work like this?”

“I doubt it, Haru.”

“Is it possible that the King will have a portal of sorts in the palace?” Toto suggested. “After all, he must have arrived here from somewhere else and, even if it takes us to a world other than the Human World, we might be able to barter our way home.”

“My father was always a hoarder,” Haru admitted. “But that means... going back...”
“And our last visit wasn’t exactly a pleasure cruise,” Muta unhelpfully added.

“When are any of our cases?”

“So... has anyone got a plan? Besides improvising?”

“If you want to return to the palace, I would be the cat to talk to...” A familiar voice floated from the air and whiskers brushed by her cheek. Stripes rolled through the air, headed by a disembodied smile. “You could say that getting into places unseen is... right up my alley.”

Haru stepped away from the semi-invisible cat. “And why would you be interested in helping us?”

“I am just a well-meaning feline,” the Cheshire Cat purred. “Anyway, why bother asking me for a reason? As you’ve surely realised by now, everyone here is quite mad. Even yourself.”

Haru started to protest, and then admitted defeat. Madness was relative, sure, but she currently was stranded in the middle of Wonderland, with nothing but a small collection of figurines and one large cat. It wasn’t a situation many sane people would find themselves in. “I’m not sure I’d believe that this is purely out of the goodness of your heart,” she concluded, “but we need a way back, don’t we, Baron?”

“Indeed. Cheshire Cat, how exactly do you propose we return to the palace unnoticed?”

The disembodied smile just widened.

ooOoo

“Sewers. I hate sewers.”

“You hate everything, fatso.”

“I especially hate sewers though,” Muta complained. “Almost as much as I hate you, birdbrain.”

Haru pulled her scarf – something she was very grateful she had thrown into her bag, last-minute – up over her lower face, trying to fend off the all-encompassing stench. It weighed down on her, jumping down her throat with every shallow breath. “I don’t know how any of you can stand it,” she muffled through the scarf. “I thought cats had a stronger sense of smell, too.”

“Stronger stomach too, Chicky.”

“Your stomach should be strong after the amount you force it through,” Toto cackled.

“Seriously,” Haru protested, “how are you not retching right now?”

“We’ve had worse,” Baron smoothly answered.

Haru halted, and then immediately regretted it since now she was steadily sinking deeper into sewage. “Do we do a lot of this in the Bureau?”

“This?” Baron echoed innocently.


“Only when necessary.”

“I wasn’t aware I was agreeing to this when I signed up.”
“When did ya sign up, Chicky? You just sorta attached yerself to us and we haven’t got rid of you since.” Muta’s wide grin betrayed the teasing tone to his remark. Haru thumped his huge arm in retaliation.

“You’re a horrid cat, Muta.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Baron pushed on ahead to where the Cheshire Cat was floating over the sewage, his half-visible paws dancing a comfortable few inches above the muck. The semi-present feline also had the foresight for his nose to be absent, although his whiskers still feathered out from where the muzzle should have been. “Cheshire Cat,” Baron asked, “how much further do we have to go?”

“Distance is relative,” the cat sighed back to him. “To an ant, a yard is a lifetime; to an elephant, an instant.”

“Yes, but to us,” Haru stressed, her patience running low with the riddling feline, “how far is it?”

“Nearer than before, further than we’ll be soon.”

“And yet more mysteries,” Muta grunted. “The real question is how much longer we can go before I stuff his striped tail down his insufferable smile.”

Haru pushed her scarf further into her face. “Please let the exit be close,” she whimpered. “I’m never going to be able to clean the stink out of these trousers.”

“At least you won’t have to wash out yer fur.”

Haru grinned. “Yeah. That actually makes me feel better.”

“And you’re a horrid human, Chicky.”

“Aw, you really think so?” Haru’s laugh was cut short as the Cheshire Cat leading them came to a hovering halt. She walked straight through the feline’s tail and gingerly stepped back. “What? Are we there?” She glanced up and spotted a ladder attached to the stone walls. “Oh, thank goodness.” She started towards it, only to be stopped by Baron.

“Perhaps I should go first. Just to make sure that the way is clear.”

“Are you implying that I wouldn’t be able to handle a complication?” Haru asked, eyebrow raised.

“Now, I’m just offering because I’m a gentlecat and it’s wired into me,” Baron returned smoothly. As he hoisted himself onto the first few rungs, he glanced back with a grin. “Plus, any excuse to get out of the muck first.”

“You rat!” Haru laughed and swung up the ladder after him.

As he neared the top, Baron slowed. He pushed up against the sewer covering, twisting the lock free and jarring it loose. Light from above streamed down, giving the Bureau a clear view of exactly what sewage they had been wading through. Haru paled and pointedly looked away.

Baron, however, focused on the opening above. Sliding the cover completely free, he gripped the edge and pulled himself up.

“What do you see?” Haru whispered.
He glanced back down. “Just a cupboard. This seems to be the servants’ entrance into the sewers.”

“Ew. Why?”

“Who do ya think sorts out the blocked toilets?” Muta grunted.

“Ew!” she repeated, this time with amplified feeling. She accepted Baron’s helping hand and was lifted out of the sewer tunnel. She flicked muck off her shoe, accidentally splattering the fat cat (somehow) climbing the ladder behind her.

“Oi! Watch it, Chicky!”

“Sorry.” The brunette turned her attention to their new surroundings, which was filled with buckets and brushes and was beginning to smell. She wrinkled her nose against the spreading stink. “Huh. It’s just a cupboard.”

“Were you expecting something different, Haru?”

“Well, knowing our luck, I kind of expected to walk straight into trouble,” she admitted.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Baron feigned. “Trouble?” He opened the cupboard door and came face-to-face with half a dozen shocked servants. He slammed the door and he raised an eyebrow to the brunette. “I don’t know what gives you that idea. Miss Haru, I think you better arm yourself with a broom.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m already armed with a stink to knock out a horse at twenty paces.”

“Butterball can already do that, and that’s even without the sewer walk taken into account,” Toto cackled, pushing his way through the opening. “Are we in trouble?”

“Why does everyone always assume we’re in trouble?” Baron asked.

“Yes,” Haru answered for Toto. “Yes, we are in trouble. Of course we are.” She looked back to Baron. “Just get your cane and get ready. Where’s the Cheshire Cat?”

“Gone,” Muta grunted. He heaved himself into the cupboard, only after some help from Haru and Baron. “Guess he vanished at the first sign of trouble. So. What’s the plan?”

Haru looked to Baron. “Well, we can’t let all those servants spread the news of our arrival just yet.”

“They might start to wonder what we’re doing in their broom cupboard,” he agreed. “When you’re ready...”

“Ready.”

ooOoo

“If we’re in the servants’ cloakroom,” Haru said as she tied up the last unconscious maid, “then we should be able to use the back passages to get around this place. We might even be able to get around unseen.”

“A stealth operation,” Muta chuffed. “Can’t remember the last time one of those plans worked.”

Haru threw a sceptical look over their small group. “To be fair, we are hardly the most conventional of individuals.” ‘Apart from me,’ she silently added. Even with Baron’s claims that she had some sort of passive magic, she was the only one who could pass for average. “Toto, where does the door
Beside you lead?"

The crow pushed the door open with a wing. “Looks like a bathroom.”

“Oh, thank the heavens!” She tied off the last knot and rushed inside, grabbing a spare set of clothes from the servants’ cloakroom. “I bagsy it first!” There was the thud of the door being slammed and the bolt drawn heavily across. Muta leant against the door.

“You’re such a girl, Chicky!”

“And you’re such a pig, Buta!”

“I thought we didn’t have time for this,” Muta growled.

“And how do you suggest we sneak anywhere when anyone with half a nose will be able to smell us a mile off?” she shouted back.

Baron raised an eyebrow. “She does have a point.”

“Oh, of course you’d side with her.”

“I don’t know what you’re implying.”

“You know exactly what I’m implying.”

A few minutes later, Haru reappeared dressed in servant’s attire, her own clothes scrubbed of the worst of the muck and wrapped up in a plastic bag that she dropped into her side bag. “What?” she demanded. “You think I was going to get back into those clothes? They’re going to go through a proper wash first.” She brushed down at the fresh set of trousers she was now sporting. She had briefly entertained the idea of liberating a maid’s uniform, but immediately dismissed it on grounds of practicality.

She was now dressed in a white shirt, the cuffed sleeves rolled back to her elbows, rough cotton trousers and dark boots. She motioned to the open door behind her. “Anyone else want to get cleaned up?”

ooOoo

“Haru, do you know where you’re going?”

“I hope so. My father showed me round when... well, earlier, so I have a rough memory. He said something about a treasure room, so if he’s going to have kept anything useful, it might be in there.”

“Might?” Muta echoed.

“I didn’t exactly take an inventory the last time,” Haru snapped. “I was too busy trying to work out how to save your butts. Perhaps you’d like to find a way home instead.”

Baron placed a calming hand on the brunette’s shoulder. “Haru...”

She slumped. “Sorry. This place is making me... jumpy.”

“How far do we have to go?”

“Um... I think it’s just around this corner, and then we have to cross out of the servant corridors into the main passageways.” She looked back to the rather noticeable Bureau. “We’ll have to be careful...”
then, because there’s a good chance we might bump into security.”

“The treasure room is sure to be guarded too,” Toto remarked.

“Yes. A couple of guards, but we should be able to handle them.” Haru opened the door that separated the servants’ passageways from the brighter, official corridors, and they stepped into the wide opening. She took a moment to get her bearings, and then pointed to the left. “That way, I think.”

“And those impressive, golden doors,” Baron said slowly as they turned another set of corners, “would they, by chance, happen to lead down into the treasure room?”

“Yes. But...” Haru ran over to the tall double doors, hesitating before it as if afraid to get too close. “But there should be guards here. And...” The doors swung inward at her touch. “And they should definitely be locked.”

“Perhaps some idiot forgot their keys,” Muta chuckled. “Or perhaps they’re all on their tea break.”

“If we want to get home,” Baron said, “then we have to try.”

“Even if it’s a trap?” Haru asked.

“Aa, but now we know it’s a trap, then the element of surprise is gone,” he replied cheerfully.

“I don’t know,” Haru muttered as she tentatively followed after him. “I’m sure there are plenty of ways we could still be surprised.”

As Muta entered, he gave a low whistle. “Sheesh, yer old man still likes collecting oddbods,” he murmured. He flicked at a globe and watched it slowly spin round on its axis. “What is all this stuff?”

“It’s all come from other worlds,” Haru breathed. She paused to stare into the dulled eyes of an old wooden rocking horse. She nudged it and the toy rattled as it swung. “Especially the Human World. But I thought you said he wouldn’t want to remember his life from there,” she said, looking to Baron.

“I did. And he doesn’t, but forgetting something will always leave a hole. Even if he doesn’t know what is causing it, he will strive to fill it. The Hatter with his hats, the Dormouse with its dreams... They all escape to fill the hole somehow.”

Haru swallowed back the engulfing sorrow filling her. The room was filled with broken and rejected things. Things that must have fallen through to this world over time. And her father had collected whatever he could find, without even really understanding the reason why. “Will any of these take us home?”

“Maybe,” Baron said. “Do any of them call to you?”

Haru recalled her search through her father’s possessions, that day her mother had phoned. Almost everything she had taken home – the handheld mirror, the ship painting – seemed to have portal potential. Why? What had been so special about them that had caught her eye? There had been prettier things, more useful things, but no; she had taken back the things with the spark of magic inside them.

“I don’t know,” she said aloud. “There’s so much... stuff.” As she spoke, something at the far side of the room caught her eye.
The corner was shrouded in darkness, but even in the dim light something glimmered. She moved away from the Bureau and stepped into the shadows. Now her eyes adjusted to the dipped light levels and she found herself standing before a full-length mirror, draped over by a cloth – but the cloth had slipped and a corner still caught the light from the entrance.

“Haru? What is it?”

She wove a hand around the material, her mind too distracted to even take note of Baron’s wary tone. She tugged the cloth free and it drifted down in a wall of white.

Her reflection stared back at her, capturing the confident smile slowly spreading across her face. “Gotcha.”

“Haru?”

“I’ve found it!” she called back. The skip in her heartbeat told her that she was right. This was it. Something thrummed in her veins, something sharper and sweeter than adrenaline. And as she stared up at the full-sized mirror, she was sure she had seen it before.

She turned and started to run back to the Bureau, but something else now moved in the shadows.

“Hello, daughter...”

She stopped and stepped cautiously back. “Father.”

“I guessed you’d come back here... after all, how else are you going to get home?” The White King stepped into the light, silver sword in hand. Haru could see the name Excalibur carved into the blade and began to wonder just how many worlds her father had been through. He paused and tilted his head to one side. “I’m beginning to remember home now. Such a strange little place.”

“Maybe,” Haru replied slowly, “but it’s home.”

“Yours, maybe. Mine, once.” The King paused again. “I don’t... I don’t want to remember...”

“Then don’t,” she said. “Just... forget again.”

“Can’t you see? I can’t.” The sword was swung lazily through the air, its cutting edge glittering in the light and pointing accusingly at Haru. “Not while you’re still here.”

“Then we’ll go. If you just let us through...” In starting to move forward, she halted herself abruptly to avoid walking straight into the sword.

“I can’t just forget this. I can’t forget you.” He shook his head, his eyes closing but the confusion still raging behind them. “Maybe... if you’re gone... the memories will go too...”

Haru stumbled back, Baron’s earlier warning ringing in her ears. Even though she hadn’t acted like it, she had believed him then – but now it was all too real. She jumped back just as the sword swung through the air.

“DAD!”

“DAICHI!”

The White King lowered the blade. His gaze flickered with the same confusion from before, but fresh this time. He blinked, and then looked up. “I know that voice...”
Muta stepped forward. “Course ya do. How could you forget me?”

The King blinked again, and then focused on the large white cat waddling towards him. “R... Renaldo?”

“I know, I know... I look a little different since we last met but... you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

“How...? How is this possible?” Daichi rasped. “It was... years ago... Cats don’t even... live that long...”

“Perhaps I just inherited the long-life of my human self. Perhaps it’s Creation magic. I don’t know.” Muta continued to approach the monarch, who had utterly forgotten his daughter in the moment. “You don’t look so bad for your age either, Daichi. You’ve hardly aged a day.”

The King lowered his sword further and stepped back. He blinked, but this time his eyelids fluttered shut in a rapid frenzy. The sword hit the floor and he cradled his head in both hands.

“You’re remembering everything now, aren’t you? Not just your daughter – but now you’re remembering why you left her behind.”

Haru edged away from her father, torn between watching her parent and watching the cat approaching him. “Muta...? What are you talking about? How do you know him?”

“I know him, because I was there the day he left you, Chicky.”

Baron quickly joined Haru’s side. “Muta, what happened?”

“I knew Naoko – your mother, Chicky – years ago. We were friends. Daichi, Naoko, and I, we were all friends. And then Daichi and Naoko fell in love. One day, I discovered exactly why your father was so interested in antiques when I accidentally followed him to another world. He told me then the truth he never gave your mother – how he wasn’t from this world at all, but had fallen from a far-off world and, after much travelling, had settled in the Human World. Even settled, though, he couldn’t resist the lull of other worlds; he continued to travel across realms on the pretence of business trips. I accompanied him, for the adventure and to make sure he got his stupid ass back home every time.”

Muta sneered to the monarch as he cradled his head, the memories returning in full force to the man.

“And then, when you, Chicky, were only five, he overstepped his limits. He found a portal to the Cat Kingdom, and forgot to close it after us. You managed to fall through too.”

“I... I don’t remember this,” Haru murmured.

“Course you don’t. You were just a kid; the memories became nothing more than the product of an over-active child’s imagination. But I remember.” Muta’s gaze hardened as he watched the White King. “We got in over our heads and quickly realised that if we didn’t get out by the time the sun rose in the Human World, we would be stuck as cats for the rest of our lives. Including you, Chicky. So we needed a distraction.”

“So you ate all the fish.” Daichi raised his head and stared at the fat white cat. “I got out with Haru, but you... were too late.”

“Thanks to your stupidity, I’ve been stuck as a cat for the past twenty years,” Muta growled. “Your daughter can speak Cat, and you... you ran away to this forsaken place to forget it all.”
“I told you why I had to leave,” Daichi retorted.

“You didn’t have to do it the way you did!” Muta roared. “You could have explained to your wife, let your child know you still loved them! What could I do? I was powerless to help! In the end I left and became a stray – eventually meeting Baron along the way, but you just ran away and forgot.”

“Why? What did he tell you?” Haru whispered.

“He was cursed,” Muta fumed. “He told me once we escaped the Cat Kingdom. Many years before, a witch from Oz had cursed him so that he would bring ruin to those he loved. The curse nearly came true when you were almost lost in the Cat Kingdom. Before that, he wasn’t sure that the curse followed him through the worlds, but – after that – he became too scared to risk it. So he left.”

Haru started to put the pieces together. Mombi, the Ozite witch, had talked about cursing a young boy – a boy Baron had known – the boy who had been the Wizard of Oz – who Haru now knew to have been her father... Everything was beginning to fall into place. But... had her almost-cat-transformation been a product of the curse, or merely bad luck and planning? Her father had never stuck around to find out.

The sword whistled as it cut through the air, and Muta scurried back just in time to avoid a fatal blow. Daichi snarled at the fat cat. “Get... these... memories... OUT OF MY HEAD!”

He swung again, but Muta had dropped to all fours and proved to be faster than the human. He leapt around a pile of tattered books, and the tomes were struck down in his place.

Baron’s hands tightened around Haru’s shoulders, and they ran. While Muta drew the deranged King’s attack, they reached the mirror that had caught Haru’s attention earlier. “Quickly,” Baron whispered, “open it.”

“But what about Muta?” She thought of what her father had done, leaving Muta – Renaldo Moon – behind once before. “We can’t just leave him.”

“Oh, he’s coming; don’t you worry about that. But only you can open the portal.”

“I don’t even know whether this is a portal,” Haru said, fear suddenly getting the better of her.

“Yes, you do. I do, because I have faith in your abilities.” She heard the clunk of the cane being passed from one hand to another, changing its grip to a fighting stance, and then the low whisper of, “Just trust yourself.” He whipped away, leaping into the foray to aid Muta.

Haru turned back to the mirror. She ran her fingers along the wooden frame, dipping in at each elaborate carving and engraving. Sparks ran across her skin at the contact and that same surety filled her being; that sweet adrenaline that she took to be magic. She leant towards her reflection and released a sigh across its glassy surface.

It fogged at first, like any ordinary mirror, but instead of clearing it rippled instead. The ripples, like from a stone dropped into water, spread out over the entire mirror and grew. Her fingers passed over one of the waves and now her reflection was gone. Instead, the surface was white and dark.

Save for one corner where a shard of light shone through. From that sliver, an old storage room could be seen beyond, filled with wooden boxes and trinkets. Things that her mother could never bring herself to throw out.

“The mirror from the spare room,” she gasped. She turned back around. “Baron! I know where this leads! It...” She trailed off as it became quickly apparent that the fight between Baron and her father
wasn’t going so well. She grabbed something from the side – it looked suspiciously like a broken curtain rail – and almost flew across the room in her haste.

Daichi heard her coming and ducked out of her way. “I don’t want these memories,” he hissed. “They hurt!”

“It’s called being human,” Haru snapped. “Muta, Toto... I’ve opened the portal – get going!”

“None of us are leaving without you,” Baron said. He came to her side, cane battered and chipped, but still wielded between him and the King.

“And I’m coming. But I don’t know how long that portal is going to stay open and we need to start getting people through,” she retorted. “Toto, Muta – go!”

“We’ll see you on the other side,” Baron said to the other two. As they disappeared into the portal depths, Baron and Haru began edging back towards the mirror after them. Daichi struck out again and Baron brought his cane up to intercept it.

The King snarled and lashed out again; this time Haru tried to block his attack with her curtain rain, but the sword went clean through. Baron yanked her back before the sword could advance onto her.

“What the hell?”

“Magic sword,” Baron explained.

“And your cane?” she snapped.

“Magic cane,” he said smoothly. He spun them round and deflected the next blow as it came. “Get going to the portal, Haru. Like you said, we don’t know how much time we have.”

“That’s your plan?”

“Simple. Effective. What’s not to like?” Another smatter of metal against wood tore through the air. They were driven further back, but fortunately that meant back towards the mirror. Back towards home. “Go! Now!”

Haru stepped away, but couldn’t bring herself to vanish into the portal depths. His cane may be able to stop her father’s sword, but her father still appeared to be the better fighter. Or, she realised with sinking dread, Baron was afraid to hurt his artisan.

Her father had no such qualms.

The next attack sent Baron reeling back and he wasn’t going to block the next strike.

Haru’s next actions were so impulsive, she barely had time to think. She grabbed Baron’s left arm, pulling on his sleeve to spin him away, and snatched the cane from his right. In the same moment she brought the cane between her and her father, she threw Baron into the rippling portal. The sword’s impact jarred her back and her left leg gave way.

She glanced back. Baron had gone, falling straight into the portal.

“Now it’s only you...” Daichi growled.

“There’s nothing ‘only’ about me,” Haru smirked. She twisted away and tried to pull the hidden blade loose from the cane. The mechanism jammed and Haru wasn’t fast enough to avoid the next attack. The cane rose to deflect, but was knocked away.
The blade ran across her arm instead.

Haru yelped and dropped to both knees. She ripped away the bandages and discovered a new red line carved along her skin. Her other jubjub wounds had been opened up in the fight and now bled freely down her arm. She tried to push herself back up, but intense pain shot up her leg. She dropped back down. Her last fall must have sprained something, and now walking – let alone running – was going to be agony.

She knelt there, waiting for the final blow to come.

As the seconds ticked by and her life went on unsevered, she raised her eyes to her father.

He stared back at her, sword raised but unmoving. He stepped back and the sword clattered again to the marble floor. “I can’t... I can’t do it...”

“Dad...?” She tried to push herself back up, but again her ankle screamed out in pain and she fell back to her knees, shocked tears falling down her face. “Dad–”

“Please, don’t.” He didn’t meet her gaze, but he didn’t move back towards her either. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know–”

“No, you don’t,” he snarled. “I have all these memories... Memories I don’t want... Memories that hurt... and all my Wonderland side wants to do is shut them down.” His dark eyes caught hers. “Shut you down.”

“But you haven’t.”

“No... because Renaldo was right about one thing... I did love you. I loved you and your mother so much...”

“So come back with us...”

“And let your mother see the wreck I’ve become? The coward I am? How she will have aged and grown and I... I am almost no older than you... No.” He came forward and knelt before Haru. One gloved hand caressed her cheek. “It would be too dangerous anyway... What if I still hurt you? What if going back doesn’t solve anything?”

“And what if it does?” Haru whispered.

“I can’t risk that.”

“Try.”

“I couldn’t risk you before. I won’t risk you now.” Daichi stepped away, planting a light kiss on his daughter’s head. As he widened the distance between them, Haru’s eyes were drawn to the silver shoes he still wore. “I’m sorry, Chickpea...”

He tapped his heels together three times and vanished.

His crown hit the marble floor with a musical chime.

Haru stared at the crown, one hand half reaching out to take it, and then hesitated. She drew back her fingers just as someone leapt back through the portal. Familiar arms drew her up and she stared at that fallen crown as all dissolved into white.
With the strangers gone, a wide smile grinned itself into existence. Faint curdles of stripes outlined a feline form and a disembodied claw lifted the crown from the floor. And then claw, crown, and all disappeared into smoky non-existence.

Haru opened her eyes to the worried gaze of her mother. She groaned and shifted her injured arm away, pulling her sleeve over the blood. “Mum?”

“Haru? What are you doing here? I didn’t even hear you come in!”

“Long story...” She swept her gaze across the room, picking out Muta hiding behind a box, with Toto and Baron reverting to their inanimate forms. Luckily, in the oddbod collection, neither stood out. A quick glance behind her showed that the mirror looked... just like an old mirror, save for a single crack that travelled its height. She had a sinking feeling that the way back to Wonderland was closed.

She pushed herself to her feet, using a nearby table for support and gave her mother a sudden hug.

“Oh? What’s this for?”

“Nothing,” she whispered. She closed her eyes and buried her head into her mother’s fading red hair. “I just wanted you to know you’re loved.”

Back in the Bureau, Haru finally set to work cleaning the dried blood away. Baron was already fetching fresh bandages and first aid. “Well,” she said after several silent moments, “that was an adventure.”

When Baron didn’t answer immediately, she pushed on.

“What was... he like, when you knew him?”

“Knew him? I didn’t really. He left after he brought us to life,” Baron answered. “But... I had his memories, and from them, it seemed... that he was just scared. He didn’t know what he was doing. Are you going to tell your mother the truth?”

“No. I don’t think... that would do any good, unless it came from my father himself. If I start spouting apparent nonsense about other worlds...” She hesitated. “My mother might just think that I made the story up to try and make sense of his disappearance. I think all that would achieve would be her sorrow for my... illusions.” She sighed. “Did you know Muta was human?”

“There were moments I suspected, but never once did I...” Baron shook his head and started applying the new bandages. “It seems almost all of us are tangled up in the White King’s story somewhere. Did your mother ever mention Muta?”

“No, but my mother didn’t share many details about the time spent with my father.”

As if summoned by word of him, Muta squeezed himself through the Bureau doors and both fell silent.

Muta glowered at the pair. “Geez, you two looked like someone died.”
“Muta...”

“Oh, holy mackerel.” The fat cat glared at them and helped himself to a large portion of cake. “I see where this is going. I never mentioned it to you guys because I knew you’d react like this. I’ve been a cat for half my life. I’ve got used to it. As they say, there’s no point crying over split milk.” He now had the cake, but hadn’t quite started on it yet. “After the human incident last year, it became clear that this is who... what I am.”

“Don’t you wish you could be human?” Haru asked. “Be the person you used to be?”

“Ya mean with taxes and mortgages and a job?” Muta laughed and collapsed in a sofa. It groaned beneath him. “No fear.” He ruffled Haru’s hair, grinning at the young woman. “Hey, Chicky, at least I got to see you again. You’re just like yer mam.”

“Thanks.”

The last of the bandages were pinned into place and Haru flexed her arm cautiously. “I hate trying to explain this sort of thing to Hiromi and Michael. It’s even harder with Michael, because he always knows when I’m lying about the Bureau.”

“Is he still okay with you working here?” Baron asked.

“Yes, but I think that’s partly because he knows nothing other than an ultimatum is going to make me give up either life.”

“And if an ultimatum did happen?” Muta asked, shamelessly eavesdropping on their conversation. “What would you decide then?”

“I don’t know,” Haru said honestly. “I don’t really want to think about it. I mean, I assumed that... well, when things got too dangerous or if I couldn’t keep up, then I would eventually leave this life behind and have... a normal life.” Why did that thought depress her? “But I’d be back to visit, don’t worry.” She chuckled humourlessly. “Don’t think you’d get rid of me that easily!”

As she pulled her sleeve over the fresh bandages however, flickering doubt crossed her features. Michael did have a point in all his worrying; life with the Bureau was always dangerous. Today she could have died several times over. Her own father could have killed her. That kind of crazy stuff didn’t happen in your mundane, everyday life.

But then, she thought as she swung her bag over one shoulder and headed home, she hadn’t exactly chosen this life. The further down this road she travelled, the clearer it became that she had always been part of this madness.

Her father was an artisan from another world. His best friend was now a cat. She had wandered into the Cat Kingdom at the tender age of five and almost left with more than just her cat-speaking abilities. Her own best friend had nearly literally lost her head in the Land of Oz.

And Baron was...

She frowned and pushed on. Memories swam through her head – their kiss in Neverland, her fragmented recollections from her time in the Doctor’s World... the hesitation of taking that potion. The whispering kiss that had saved her from shrinking into oblivion. The words they had spoken today – the hurt, however faked, had still hurt. The poisonous images from Fenland House. The third Baron’s strange familiarity and fondness. And still, their ongoing, relentless, mutual trust in the other.

It was getting ever harder to define the thin line that their complicated friendship trod.
Inspired by: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Written by Lewis Carroll.

Alice in Wonderland (2010). Directed by Tim Burton.

Alice. The Syfy Miniseries. Directed and written by Nick Willing.

Once Upon a Time in Wonderland. Created by Edward Kitsis & Adam Horowitz.

And any other Alice in Wonderland adaptations that I’ve forgotten. Seriously, I’ve seen A LOT.
AN: After people seemed to enjoy the Behind the Scenes chapter in the last it seemed fitting to include it again. Again, this is taken from the FF.net version of the story, and so references the reviews gained there. Regardless, I thought it might be nice to include it here.

The Bureau Files: Series 2

ooOoo

Behind the Scenes

- HARU: ON THE SET -

Haru stands on the set of Oz, having exchanged her usual jacket and boot combo for bare feet, shorts, and a tank top. She looks somewhat nervous, eyeing something out of the camera’s view.

“Right... Right... Um...”

“Get on with it!” Hiromi bellows off-screen.

Haru glowers. “Don’t make me nominate you.” She sighs and starts again. “Right, as many of you probably know, a trend has started to help raise awareness and money for ASL – also known as motor neuron disease – called the ASL Ice Bucket Challenge. ASL currently affects 30,000 people in the US alone, and most patients usually die from respiratory failure within three to five years. However, we are hoping that the money raised will help fund research to tackle this.”

“Hurry up, Haru,” Hiromi whispers from behind the camera. “We’re packing up to go.”

“Okay. I’d like to thank the writer, Catsafari–” Haru glowers again “–for nominating me. She would just like to add that her grandfather fell to MND many years ago, and one of her old school teachers is currently battling against this, so she wants to assure you that this is for a great cause. It’s not something that just happens to strangers, it can happen far too close to home and it can tear families apart.”

“Nominate, Haru. Don’t forget to nominate someone.”

“I’m getting there! I’m nominating Muta, Toto, and Baron–” she grins evilly into the camera “–but since MND isn’t something that can be prepared for, this Ice Bucket Challenge isn’t going to be either. Instead of giving you 24 or 48 hours to complete this, I am going to get you three during the filming period without warning. To those of you watching, please donate to this worthy cause and help us find a cure!”

“Now?” Hiromi asks.

“Now.”
The camera is set onto a table, and Hiromi appears with a bucket. Haru tenses as her friend raises it above her head and dribbles the water and ice cubes onto her.

“HIROMI! Get it over with!”

“If you say so.” Hiromi tips the entire contents and Haru is doused with a bucketful of ice-cold water. An unearthly scream rips through the air and Haru hops desperately away, clawing at her neck.

“Ice cubes down shirt, ice cubes down shirt! COLD!”

As Haru scampers off-screen, Hiromi leans in with the bucket and a smile. “Don’t forget to donate!”

The camera switches off, but not before Haru can be seen slipping an ice cube down her friend’s back.

- HARU: AT THE STUDIO -

Back in the studio, Haru re-watches the video with a telltale smirk. She bites at her thumbnail, but her lips curve at the edges regardless. “No regrets.”

There’s a chuckle from the interviewer as he switches off the screen. “As you promised in that video, you did manage to get all three of the Bureau members over the filming period, didn’t you? What was that like?”

“I’d be lying if I didn’t say it was fun,” Haru replies. “Of course, sometimes I had to be pretty fast afterwards.”

“Why? Did some of them try to come after you?”

Haru hesitates. “You’ll have to see the videos.”

- MUTA: ON THE SET -

The camera pans across the quiet set of the Refuge; the camera is shaky, but eventually it rests on the round form of Muta. The small collection of houses are mostly empty as the crew take a break from filming. Muta has claimed his stereotypical seat before the Bureau doors, a magazine in paw.

The camera shakes as those holding it obviously are unfamiliar with the equipment, and Haru steps out before the screen. “Have you got it, Hiromi?”

“Do you think it’s filming?” Hiromi asks from behind the camera.

“You said you knew how to work this machine.”

“I said my father had a few fancy cameras when I was a kid – I didn’t say anything about me!”

Haru makes a face. “Whatever. There’s a little red button on, so let’s just assume we’re rolling and edit this out later.”

Hiromi chuckles humourlessly and the camera wobbles with the suppressed mirth. “Good luck with that. You know how awful the video editing team is for this kind of stuff. Right, get going before I drop this thing.”

The woman on-screen laughs and heads straight for the fat cat. “Hello, Muta.”
Muta keeps his head in his magazine and doesn’t answer.

“Hello, Muta,” Haru tries again.

Muta grunts. ‘Chicky.’ He spares a quick glance and then his disbelieving gaze lingers on the camera pointed his way. “What the high heck are you doing?”

“We’re doing an extra behind-the-scenes section,” Haru chirrups.

“Don’t we already have one of those? You know, the day when they dump us in that stuffy old recording studio and make us answer stupid questions? They don’t even serve good food while we wait either.”

“That’s why I said this is extra,” she replies flatly.

“Eh. Extra means optional, right? So I’m opting out.” He flicks the magazine back up, but Haru pulls it back down.

“Aw, come on, Muta. We’re just showing round what the actual filming is like. You know, the set and suchlike.” She motions to the camera. “You wouldn’t like to disappoint the fans, would you?”

Muta gives the camera a disdainful look and then, after a long pause that you could fit small continents in, lowered the magazine. “Are you going to be asking everyone else to do this too, Chicky?”

“Yep.”

“Even birdbrain?”

“Even him.”

Muta glowers. “Right. Okay, fire away. Anything that overgrown chicken can answer, I can do tenfold better.”

Haru’s face lights up. “Alrighty then. Okay, so since this is going to be aired after the full series is shown, you don’t have to worry about spoilers–”

“Aw, really? That was going to be half the fun!”

“Muta, no.”

“Could I at least give some spoilers for the next series?”

“We don’t know anything about the next series yet,” Hiromi mutters from behind the camera.

“Or even if there is going to be a third series,” Haru agrees.

“You don’t,” Muta says. “But I do. So I guess you don’t want to hear who dies–”

“You don’t know that,” Hiromi protests.

“No one’s going to die next series.”

“Not that you know of.” Muta grins evilly. “I guess you don’t know either that we’ve got a case in… um, Berk, and we have a new character called Snow White joining us, and Toto gets turned into a… a mouse, yeah…”
“Now we know you’re making this up…”

“I could tell you who dies—”

Haru rolls her eyes and reaches back to something tucked behind the Bureau doors. She upsets its entire contents over the cat, resulting in an unearthly yowl as he is soaked in water. The video breaks off, but not before Haru can be seen running for her life – with a fluffball in irate pursuit.

- MUTA: AT THE STUDIO -

Muta glowers at the screen. “I didn’t deserve that.”

The interviewer – the same individual as last time – restrains a tired sigh, and a note is passed across to him. “The writer would just like to reassure that Muta’s speculations were pure speculation and that none of his ideas should be taken as fact,” he monotones. He can be heard to mutter, “Note that she didn’t actively deny any of his ideas…”

“That’s because they’re fantastic ideas,” Muta insists. “I should charge extra for creativity prompts.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Hey, hey, you’re meant to be interviewing me, not rejecting my ideas! Actually, talking of this interviewing malarkey… I thought the note said we got complimentary nibbles?”

There is another sigh, not even restrained this time. “They’re coming.”

“Good.”

“Please, Mr Moon; the sooner we start with this interview the sooner you can leave for lunch.” There is a shuffling of papers as he sorts through his questions and notes. “If we’re being honest—”

“Oh, are we?”

The interviewer studiously ignores Muta’s comment. “–then it is undeniable that, unlike the last series, you didn’t have the luxury of a whole double-episode centred around you. Did you miss that, or was it something that didn’t really affect you?”

“Yer talking about the one where I got turned into a human last time, aren’t you?” Muta grunts. “I can’t say that I miss having to dabble in that magic, plus being a human is so dull. I’m human and suddenly I have to be dragged to the makeup and costume department, and let me tell you, they take frigging ages to get ready.”

“But your character was originally human, right?”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t.” Muta grins proudly. “I’m 100% cat. Don’t blame me for the writer’s cheesy plotline.”

The interviewer chuckles without humour. “Strangely enough, that ‘cheesy plotline’ is precisely what I was hoping to talk to you about. The fandom has long debated just how human your character is – if seen in the right light, there are clues that some fans have taken to mean that your character’s history isn’t quite as simple as being an ordinary cat. For instance, in the manga, cats are noted as being unable to pronounce the ‘ph’ sound, something which – in the manga – you have no problem with.”

“That’s what you lot are basing your theories on?” Muta scoffs. “One mispronounced sound?”
“Well, in the context of the manga, there are implications that your character is in fact a spirit – although nothing is ever confirmed. The manga also brings up the issue of your long life-span outside of the Cat Kingdom…”

The cat makes another scoffing sound and waves away his words. “Crazy fans make crazy theories.”

The interviewer chuckles uneasily. “Remember that this is all being recorded; the crazy fans will be hearing this too."

“Good.”

“Even if you don’t put much stock in the theories–”

“Have you read some of them?” Muta demands. “There’s one that Haru did get hit by the truck when she rescued the prince, and the whole story is just the delusion of her dying mind.”

“Please, Muta–”

“And there’s another that she’s a mad mental patient – although that I could believe–”

“Mr Moon–”

“And, my favourite, that the original The Cat Returns plotline is actually a metaphor for the collapse of Shizuku and Seiji’s relationship, as a kind of sequel…”

“We need to ban your wifi access,” the interviewer can be heard to mutter. “Please, Muta; regardless of your personal feelings on the subject, you cannot deny that this series added an interesting twist to your character’s backstory.”

“Why do I even need a backstory? Why can’t I just be a cat? What’s wrong with that?”

“Take it up with the writer,” the interviewers mutters between sips of his coffee. “Or with the fandom, but I wouldn’t suggest trying that. Anyway, the backstory of your character not only explains why you ate all the fish in the lake – as mentioned in the movie – but linked you into Haru’s past also.” There is a pause. “It also gave a reason for the infamous ‘Chicky’ nickname.”

“Did it?”

There is another pause, but awkward this time around. “You… did read the whole script, right?”

“Only the parts where I had to actually say something. You know, the important parts.”

“Right…”

“What was the half-baked reason the writer gave for the nickname?”

“Haru’s father used to call her Chickpea. Chicky is a shortening of that name.”

“Huh. Who knew?”

Ignoring the highly rhetorical aspect of the question, the interviewer murmurs, “You would, if you read half the material you were given,” as he shuffles through his papers again. This direction of conversation isn’t getting anywhere. “Muta, I’m sure the fans would love to hear your thoughts on this backstory. After all, your character isn’t always gruff and unhelpful–” the interviewer makes these moments sound rare “–and you have had to portray quite a bit of depth at times.”
“You’re thinking of the human episode again, aren’t you?”

“I am thinking of The Strange Case of Renaldo Moon,” the interviewer admits. “But, generally, you have also given off a rather paternal care of those around you – including Haru. Which has led to many fans – of the original movie, and this series – to speculate that you were her father.”

Muta snorts so loudly that the interviewer gives a start.

“Are ya kidding me? Look at me! I’m a cat!”

“This series has confirmed that you weren’t always one. In fact, there are many shippers–”

“Don’t finish that sentence. Just don’t.”

“You dislike shippers?” The interviewer sounds vaguely amused by this idea. “But I have been informed that you are quite the personal shipper of Haru and Baron – both in-story and concerning the actors.”

“That’s different,” Muta grumbles. “It’s not shipping. It’s more like… they really need to get over their problems and just admit the elephant in the room everyone but them can see.”

“Right… Despite all your scoffs, your character is linked to Haru’s past, and so – you could say – is a kind of uncle-like figure. Or he would have been, if he had not had become a cat. What are your thoughts on this?”

The cat scoffs again. “Of course he would have made an awesome uncle. What’s not to like?”

- TOTO: ON THE SET -

The video changes to the lower quality of the mobile camera, this time in the Oz set. Specifically, in the assigned house of Professor Pipt. As the rest of the cast move for lunch – Muta moving at an uncannily fast pace for one his size – Haru pounces on the crow form of Toto.

“Hey, Toto; can we quickly catch you for a quick interview for a behind-the-scenes extra?”

Toto hops to the table counter. “Sure, Haru. What do you want to know?”

“Well, we wanted to show a bit more of what happens on set, since, you know, the official BTS video all happens in the studio. So, which scene have you just finished filming?”

“Haru, you were just in that scene. You know what it was.”

“I know I do,” she stresses. She nods pointedly to the camera. “But the viewers don’t.”

“Oh. Is this going to be shown at the end of the series?”

“It’s probably going to be shown alongside the main BTS show, yeah. So don’t worry about spoilers.”

“Actually, I was just wondering whether the viewers would remember this episode at all.”

“Give them a little credit.” Haru turns to the camera and grins. “Just for the record, we’re halfway through filming the second case, and we’ve just finished our first scene in Oz.”

“Hey!” Hiromi protests. “The first scene in Oz was my one, Haru!”
“I meant the first scene with the Bureau in Oz,” Haru quickly amends. “Sorry, Hiromi.”

“This was the case where I actually got to go somewhere other than the main set for my filming,” the woman grumbles behind the camera. “You guys get to go to all these different worlds, and what do I get? A few scenes in our flat and some more in the town. You got to go to the Bird Kingdom in the second episode.”

“Sorry, Hiromi.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m thinking about lobbying the writer.”

“She’s doing her best.”

Hiromi continues to grumble, but her words are not particularly audible. Haru smiles sympathetically to her friend and turns back to the crow, who – while waiting for the two women to settle down – was grooming his wings. “So, Toto, perhaps you would like to give a quick brief of what your day is like while working for The Bureau Files.”

“I guess it’s much like anyone else’s,” Toto answers, but he obliges with the request nonetheless. “We start off the day with a morning briefing – what we’re going to film and where, for example – and run through the day’s script once or twice. Then we get going with the filming and try to get a scene done by lunch.”

“And when he says a scene, he can mean, like, three seconds of dialogue,” Hiromi says.

“I’m starting to think you should be in front of the camera,” says Haru.

Toto nods at Hiromi’s words. “That’s true; it can take hours to do a single three-second scene. Before any of us actors get there–”

“So many hours,” Haru murmurs with the same level of horror. “So. Many. Repeats.”

“I actually have dreams now where I just repeat the same two lines over and over again.”

“And then as soon as we think they’re happy with it, they decide that they actually wanted more extras walking in the background, and so we have to do it all over again.” Haru groans. “I almost lost my voice doing the last scene – do you have any idea how vocal my character is? She seems to spend half the script screaming at something…”

“That’s because your character keeps putting herself in danger. All for the sake of a single good-looking figurine…”

“Hiromi!”

Toto, while restraining laughter, is also looking faintly bemused. “Do you two still need me here for
this, or can I go for lunch? They promised mulberry muffins for today’s pudding.”

“Wait – wait, sorry, we just got…” Haru spares a dagger-filled glare to her friend, “distracted. In fact, we just have one last question for you…. Have you heard of the ice-bucket challenge?”

“Have I heard–?” Toto starts to echo, and then suspicion creeps into his gaze. “Why–?”

He discovers the answer to his question a moment later, when Haru retrieves a bucket from the side and dowses the bird in it. There is a cacophony of squawking, quickly followed by the sound of running and flying and Haru’s gleeful – if panicked – cries of, “It’s for charity! It’s for a charity!”

- TOTO: AT THE STUDIO -

“I could have done with a little warning,” Toto says in response to the video.

“You weren’t the only one,” the interviewer mutters. “Anyway, concerning The Bureau Files, this series was novel from the first in the fact that it expanded the backstory of almost all its characters. We didn’t just learn about Baron or Haru, but also yourself and Muta. What were your feelings on the story you were given?”

“I assume you’re talking about The Lost Princess?” Toto asks. “Well, I don’t think we have heard the whole story from Toto’s past; we now know that he was created by Professor Pipt in Oz, and that he met Baron twice – after going their separate ways once after Louise was found. But I would like to believe there’s a lot more to it than that.”

“Of course, you may be slightly biased in that regard,” the interviewer chuckles.

“Maybe. But Toto’s age hasn’t been given. I have a feeling he’s been around for a lot longer than Baron, and that sort of time doesn’t come without a story. Not to mention that if Toto was created in Oz, then somehow he ended up in the Human World, one way or another.”

“I suppose you’ll just have to hope for more in the third series, if it happens.”

“Yes.”

“There’s something else which sets you apart from the rest of the Bureau,” the interviewer adds, “and that is that Muta and Baron have both had a case which has rendered them human. There was some thought that this series might right that inconsistency, but we have finished the second series and there is still no human Toto in sight. What do you make of this…?”

“I think it all depends on whether the series calls for it. In the first series, the overall theme was humanity and so it did give the opportunity for members of the Bureau to change–”

“Something that Baron was even given the option of in the first series finale.”

“Yes. But this series had a different focus and unless the series arc gave an opening, I don’t think it seemed fitting for a human Toto to have appeared.” The bird gives an enigmatic smile. “Maybe in the next series.”

“Is that a spoiler?”

“Well, despite what people believe, we don’t know what is going to happen in the next series any more than the viewers do. Maybe I am right. I would like to see that.”

“And if you are right, how do you think your character would respond to being turned to a human?”
“Well, he would obviously react much smoother than Muta.”

“Although, considering the circumstances in which Muta attained humanity, perhaps this is unfair on your part.”

Toto shrugs. “I would like to believe that Toto would take the situation calmly… although if such a scene did happen, Toto’s reaction would be in the mercy of the writer.”

The interviewer chuckles. “So good luck with that then. The writer isn’t known for her mercy.”

- BARON: ON THE SET -

For the final time, the video shifts to the poorer quality of the on-set camera. This time Haru stands outside the makeup department, carefully placing a bucket outside the door.

“I don’t know, Haru; don’t you remember what happened the last two times you did this?” Hiromi asks. “You won’t always be able to outrun them.”

“Are you getting cold feet?” Haru teases her partner in crime.

“No. But I think you’ve got a foolhardy streak a mile long. Anyway, I’m not the one doing this; I’m just recording the deed.”

“You’re an accomplice.”

“Better than being the perpetrator,” the other woman mutters. “Right, are you ready?”

“Ready.”

Haru knocks at the door and is quickly greeted by Baron’s voice asking what they wanted.

“It’s just us,” Haru calls. “Can we come in?”

“If you so please.”

The brunette opens the door and reveals a room that is defined by the counter lining the wall, full of make-up and design products, and a large set of mirrors set straight before them. Baron stands at the far side where the sink resides. He looks up – and far from the ginger Baron they are so accustomed with, this time his fur is dyed a deep grey.

“Haru – Miss Haru, Miss Hiromi…” His eyes – uncannily blue – travelled over the camera, and a flicker of confusion passed over them. “What is going on?”

“We’re doing an extra behind-the-scenes video.” Haru chirrups happily. “You know, one that is actually set behind-the-scenes and isn’t just in the studio. It’s a bit of a misnomer otherwise, if you ask me. And we thought the viewers would like to see what it’s been like filming The Three Barons.”

“It’s been easily my most complicated case so far,” the Creation – human-sized, like he usually is while on set to make travel easier (and significantly less dangerous) as well as general practicality – says. “We obviously do not have three versions of myself at our disposal—”

“You wish,” Hiromi whispers to Haru.

Haru doesn’t dignify that with a reply.
“–so we have had to do filming through a combination of clever shots and awkward angles. Not to mention I have to go through a full wardrobe and make-up change every time they want a close-up of either of the other Barons. During this case, we quite honestly had to base which scene we were doing each day all based on which Baron they wanted to film that day.”

“The grey Baron must take the longest though, right?”

“Right.” Baron, who has been talking entirely to Haru up to this point, suddenly remembers the camera and looks to it instead. “As you can probably tell, I have to have my fur dyed when being the oldest Baron – who is also based on the manga Baron – and that will take hours. On such days, I have to be up at five am just so I can be ready by the time the morning briefing comes.”

“The younger Baron can’t be that much different – I mean, you don’t have to dye your fur or anything, do you?” Hiromi asks.

“Yes, the younger Baron is very similar in many ways, but his fur is lighter than my natural colour – almost a yellowish hue – so I do still have to come in, but it takes a little less time. I still have to deal with the contact lenses and wardrobe change.” He motions to his too-blue eyes. “Actually, if you wouldn’t mind, ladies…”

“It’s fine,” Haru says.

Baron turns to the basin and works to remove the contact lenses, suddenly bringing his emerald eyes back into the light. That done, he splashes a little of the water and washes some of the dye from his face, leaving a tawny streak of fur across his eyes.

“That’s still so weird,” Hiromi whispers.

Haru looks like she wants to refute her friend’s words, but can’t help but agree. “It must be quite weird to portray three separate characters, right? Especially since they’re all meant to be different versions of the same person.”

“In some ways, yes; in others, not so much,” Baron answers. He seems a little relieved to have cleared the worst of the dye from the fur around his eyes; a streak of ordinary Baron among the strange. “It is more the logistics that cause the headache. Haru, you had to play a mentally younger version of yourself in *The Game*, remember? And, Hiromi, you had to do a lot of doubling up in *The Lost Princess*. This series does naturally push its actors to their limits, making us portray sides of ourselves that we wouldn’t normally consider.” There is a pause. “It was easier to act than *The Haunting of Fenland House*,” he says after a long moment.

Haru does not immediately answer. “Yes. I guess so.”

The camera shifts uneasily between Haru and Baron, as if unsure of what is meant to happen next. Hiromi eventually clears her throat. “Um, Haru; I think we’ve got one more topic to cover before we go, right?”

Haru catches her friend’s eye, and something unspoken passes between them. Suddenly there is a mischievous spark in her eyes and she has backed carefully towards the door. Baron is busy trying to clear the rest of the dye off, and she uses this distraction to reclaim the water bucket.

“Hey, Baron… You look like you’re struggling a little with that dye,” Haru comments innocently. “Need any help?”

“No thank you, Miss Haru. I have everything under control.”
“Not for long,” Hiromi snickers.

Baron’s ear flickers back, picking up something of what the woman said and turns just in time see the bucket coming his way.

There is a yelp, and then the camera dips for a moment – dropping away to the floor – as Hiromi fights back the instinct to double over laughing. And then there is a squel – the crash of chairs being sent flying as Haru flees – and a bellowing of, “GET BACK HERE HARU!” The camera looks back up just in time to see Haru disappearing through the door – a backsplash of grey dye splattering her face – and, a moment later, Baron in hot chase, with the dye running down his fur in streams.

- BARON: AT THE STUDIO -

When the video returns back to the studio – this time with a shamefaced Baron trying not to watch the screen – there is an awkward silence before either spoke.

“She could have explained earlier that it was for charitable purposes,” Baron says after a moment.

“According to eye-witnesses, you were not best pleased,” the interviewer comments.

“It was not Haru’s best idea,” the Creation agrees.

“Although apparently your reaction wasn’t much better.”

“It was perhaps unfair of me to respond with covering her in dye in retaliation,” Baron agrees again. “Forgetting my unwilling ice bucket challenge, do we have more to cover in this interview? I think we’re running out of time before the group interview.”

“Indeed. Well, actually Haru has already brought up one of the topics I was going to ask about – and I don’t think we need to go back over The Three Barons – but she also mentioned something I do want to ask about.” There is the now-familiar shuffling of papers, and the interviewer quickly locates what he was looking for. “Ah, yes… about the Fenland House incident. You said that you found that case a lot harder to film than The Three Barons? Why is that?”

Baron smiles, but it lacks his usual warmth. “The three Barons were mostly variations on a theme; they may have looked slightly different but – for all their differences – they were really the same person. Yes, they may have been more knowledgeable, more hopeful, more paranoid–”

“But for some people, that’s the attraction of acting,” the interviewer says. “In fact, I had the chance to interview the cat who played the Cat King for the movie…”

“Oh, he’s a very friendly chap,” Baron says. “Quite harmless.”

“He was nothing like the role he took on,” the interviewer concurs. “But he said that he really enjoyed the… otherness of his character. I take it that you didn’t revel in the opportunity that this case gave you?”

“Miss Haru is…” Baron pauses, “a very good actor. While in the scenes, she did seem honestly terrified.” He pauses again. “I did not like the idea that I could install such fear in her, even if it was
merely an act.”

“I take it that the same applied to the notable scenes in *The White King*, where you and Haru pretend to be against each other in order to make it out alive?”

Baron shakes his head. “Not exactly. Because, even in the context of that scene, our characters were acting, it was different. We played out that scene knowing that, even in the story, there was no true malice between them. It ended with them revealing the deceit; whereas in *The Haunting of Fenland House*, it ended with the death – or murder, even – of the puca.”

“And what about Miss Haru? How did she feel about that particular case?”

“I cannot speak for her. You’ll have to ask her that yourself.”

- HARU: AT THE STUDIO -

“Honestly?” Haru doesn’t quite meet the gaze of the interviewer, her eyes suddenly sliding away from his. “It did terrify me. Not Baron – not really, although he did a fantastic job – but… I really didn’t like the final scene in Fenland House.”

“I assume you’re referring to where you strangle the puca.”

Haru nods, and then gives an uneasy laugh. “I guess I am very similar with my character in that regard. It wasn’t the fact that I seemed to be dealing with some kind of Baron monster that scared me, but instead it was the knowledge that the death scene was coming up. And we have to rehearse scenes so often that it wasn’t just a one-off scene; we spent half a day on that part.” She shivers.

“And what happens at Fenland House is something that haunts your character, isn’t it?”

Again, Haru nods. “Baron had his moment in *Red* last series, and *The Haunting of Fenland House* was much in the same vein as that for Haru. They were both in confined spaces, and they both brought out sides to them that they would rather not consider. For Baron, I guess it was the fear that he was powerless and, when everything came down to it, different. I don’t think he thinks much about how he fits in to the world; I think he likes to believe that the help he gives overrides the fact that he isn’t… normal. But, in Red, all the words he had could not hide that, and even as a human he was… powerless, in a way.”

“And Haru?” the interviewer prompts.

“I think her case highlighted what she is truly afraid of – I think she’s terrified that she will have to make a choice between Michael and Baron and… that is something that she just isn’t ready to do yet. And it’s not just the fear of a choice – it’s the fear of a choice with consequences. She’s afraid that one of these days she will have to decide who to save – Baron or Michael – and she doesn’t know who she would choose.”

“And in *The Haunting of Fenland house*, she chose Michael.”

“The puca was using a façade of Baron to hide behind,” Haru protests. “It’s not quite the same. And I think the other major thing that scared Haru was… well, the lengths she went to in that case. Suddenly she was alone, without Baron or any of the Bureau, and although she gets everyone out safely – or almost – she did have to kill the puca to do so. And… killing isn’t something that the Bureau does much of. I think she feels that things would have ended up differently if the Bureau was there.”

Haru shrugs. “I think it’s all an issue of where she belongs.”
“And where do you think she belongs?”

Haru gives a lopsided smile. “Now, that would be telling.”

- BARON: AT THE STUDIO -

“Now, before I let you go for the group interview, there’s one or two things I want to mention,” the interviewer adds. “One of them concerns a certain couple of kisses that we saw in this series…”

- HARU: AT THE STUDIO -

The brunette blushes furiously as the same turn of conversation happens during her interview. “Oh, boy, of course that would be brought up…”

“This is the first time in The Bureau Files that we have seen any kisses, let alone two,” the interviewer reminds her. “I’m guessing it was quite a surprise to see that appearing in the script read-through.”

- TOTO: AT THE STUDIO -

Toto cackles. “They both blushed all the way through the read-through. Haru wouldn’t look at Baron for the next hour after that.”

- BARON: AT THE STUDIO -

“In my opinion, neither kiss… occurred due to anything other than necessity,” Baron finally settles on. “In Curiouser, it was used to transfer Creation magic into Haru to save her life… In Wonderful Thoughts the kiss was a means to break my character out of the siren song trance.”

“However, there is a reason the latter kiss worked,” the interviewer prompts him. “If there was nothing between Haru and Baron, the kiss probably would have failed to break him from it.”

“The operative word here is ‘probably’.”

“So what are your feelings on Haru and Baron’s relationship?”

“I feel… that there is a growing… fondness between the two,” Baron says, carefully picking his words, “but that those feelings aren’t… concrete yet. But there is no… romantic relationship there yet; just a great amount of care.”

“Are you referring to your character’s feelings, or your own?” the interviewer asks bluntly.

“Miss Haru and I are merely friends.”

- HARU: AT THE STUDIO -

“Okay, maybe I would like to see Haru and Baron get together – in the story, I mean,” Haru quickly clarifies. “I am very aware that they are seen as a couple by most of the fandom, but… there is the issue of Michael.” She shakes her head. “Sadly, I feel like if Haru wasn’t part of the Bureau, she would be very happy with Michael. In fact, I don’t think there’s any question about it.”

“But she is part of the Bureau.”

“Exactly.”

“So what do you think that means for them all?”
“Michael is… a good guy – both the character and the actor.” She blushes. “Actually, he’s a terrific singer, not that you would know it by looking at him. But Haru… has tasted a world that is so much bigger than anything she imagined and she can’t just leave it behind. And Michael would never force her give up something she loves, but… he does worry. And he is much more at home in his own world. I’m not saying that makes him weak or anything,” Haru is hasty to add. “Not everyone looks for adventure. For Michael… he finds adventure in the small things in life, and so when adventure is something as large as the Bureau’s cases, well, it’s just a little… overpowering.”

“And he found adventure in *The Game*, didn’t he?”

“Not willingly.” Haru smiles weakly. “Actually, I was really surprised to see that he and Baron met so soon into the story. But I was quite pleased with the result. Even though Michael is not made for the Bureau, he is practical, he does care for Haru, and he will focus on what needs to be done to keep them safe…” She hesitated. “Even if it means working alongside someone who… he perceives to have feelings for his own girlfriend. I think that shows a great strength of character.”

“And what about Haru and Baron’s relationship? You just admitted that Baron has feelings for her–”

“I said that Michael perceives Baron to have feelings for her; it’s not quite the same.”

“Even so…”

“I like the point that Haru and Baron are right now – for now, I mean – it’s not overly complicated… or, well, I don’t know.” The brunette becomes a little flustered over her words. “They have a lot of trust in each other, and I think that’s a beautiful thing. Maybe… things are going to develop later but… for now, I think they’ve accepted where they stand. But they don’t let the complications for a romantic relationship stop them being friends. That’s what I really like about the interactions between Haru and Baron and what I hope we will see more of in the future. Whatever happens, they are always there for the other.”

- ALL -

Gathered in the studio lounge, the cast find themselves once again lacking an interviewer.

“Do ya think he went home again?” Muta asks.

“Apparently we did so well last time with the group video that they’re giving us free reign again this time,” Baron says, as he enters with a sack of letters. He places them down by the sofas. “Although they have suggested that we go through the fan letters.”

“I’ve already read through some of these,” Haru says as she starts to dig through the collection. “We’ve got some good ones this year.”

“Why did you get to read them, Chicky?”

“I asked.” Haru pauses and glances up to the camera. “First, we would just like to thank everyone who sent their comments and letters in, and we would especially like to thank everyone who asked–”

“Oh begged, pleaded, or threatened,” Muta interjects.

“–for there to be a third series,” Haru continues. “Thanks to all your encouragement and enthusiasm, the writer has admitted that she would be more than pleased to write a third series and has actually already got some ideas going. She has decided that – almost certainly – there will be a continuation of this, which will be aired next early autumn, probably around the start of September.”
“But ya got to wait until then!” Muta cackles.

“However,” Haru again continues, “if some of you would like to get involved with *The Bureau Files* – because you just can’t get enough of it! – read on to the next section of the video, where you can find out about the chance to write for the third series!”

“Haru, please stick to the schedule,” Baron gently reminds her. “We’ll get to that part in due course. Until then, we want to focus on the comments we received. We noted that we – as usual – received quite a lot of theories concerning certain mysteries this series posed, and while some of you were uncannily accurate, there were some that, unfortunately, were not correct.”

“And some of them we thought were better than the actual storyline,” Haru says.

Toto glances across to the brunette. “Remember that the writer also watches these videos,” he gently warns.

“Yeah, yeah, sure; what’s she going to do? Kill me off?”

“Don’t tempt her.”

“Anyway,” Baron smoothly says, “we wanted to pick out some of the fan theories that we really liked. Actually, I have two favourite theories, neither of which were false at all, simply unintentional.” He picks one off the pile. “Both concerns the butterfly necklace which was used to alter Haru’s height. The writer picked a butterfly merely because she liked it…”

“Because obviously her English AS-Level was wasted on her,” Muta mutters.

“But several of the viewers came up with far more inventive metaphors for the necklace. This first one is from *Baron’s Girl*—” he spares a quick glare that kills the upcoming comments; they’ve already had this debate “—and it remarks on how Haru has ‘really been reborn through all of her experiences at the Bureau, and that’s what the butterfly is unanimous for; Rebirth’, which I really like.”

“Gold star for you, kid,” Muta says to the camera, putting one paw up in an imitation of a thumbs up. “Baron approves.”

“And the other theory I liked,” the Creation says, “is one from *Day-Dreaming Writer*, who said that the necklace ‘really represents everything about how Baron tries to help and generally just invites more trouble’ which… to be honest,” he adds with a slight reddening, “is far too close to the truth to my liking. The Bureau does have a certain… penchant for getting into mayhem.”

Haru snorts.

“Is there something you want to add, Miss Haru?”

“Yes, it’s my turn to choose a theory. I had a couple as well – one quite sweet theory and one that I just like for fun.” She grins to the Creation. “The one that made me laugh was *ANYTHINGGOES31*’s letter, which was absolutely convinced that Baron was going to be the Mad Hatter after the Alice in Wonderland reference in the early episodes. Now that’s one idea that I bet the writer was kicking herself about.”

“An old-fashioned love of hats, a certain love of tea… I can see the similarities,” Toto agrees.

“Also, mad,” Baron flatly reminds them.
“And?”

“You were the one who told us that the Hatter is never actually called the Mad Hatter in the books, only the Hatter,” said Haru. “Anyway, everyone’s mad in Wonderland.”

“And what was your other favourite theory?” Baron tiredly asks.

“Oh! Yeah, I remember! It was during The Game, and several people—” she scoops some notes out of the fairytale.Love was going to be the answer to the disease. That includes Meeklish and Gemini-Victoria—”

It was Muta’s turn to snort this time around. “Like you can heal a disease with love. Get yer head out of the fairytales, Chicky.”

Haru hugs the letters to her. “Well, I thought it was adorable. What about you then, Muta?”

“Me?”

“Yes. What was your favourite theory?”

Muta gives a wide smile. “The theory that Michael was going to die.”

“I thought you liked Michael!” Haru accused.

“I do. But I like death theories even more. I love the range of emotions that come with these theories. Behold: ‘I feel like Michael is going to die soon...?’ from Waterpokemon, and ‘Please don’t let Michael die’ from Meeklish. Like, Waterpokemon sounds so apathetic—”

“That’s because it’s a letter,” Haru interjects. “It’s difficult to convey your exact message through written words. It’s why sarcasm falls so flat with texts.”

“For you, maybe.”

“You don’t even have a phone, Muta.”

“Not that you know of.”

“You have paws. You can’t even type!”

“Please, friends; try to stay on topic. Toto, do you have a favourite theory?”

“I’ll admit that I did.” The crow hops to the collection of letters and pulls out a couple of comments. “Several of our viewers thought that the painting that took the Bureau to Neverland guessed that it was a portal, but thought it was going to be to Narnia instead.”


“Exactly. And after the episode, many people still commented on the similarities between Wonderful Thoughts and The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. This includes haruxdreamcometrue 16, who said that, ‘one thing to note is that the painting reminded me of the Chronicles of Narnia,’ and Nanenna – ‘the way the painting swallowed them up reminds me of Narnia,’ – CC21, and Raye of the Sunshine, with ‘I also thought they were going to go to Narnia, with the painting reference. It was just like out of The Voyage of the Dawn Treader!’”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it. Lots of people were wanting a Narnia episode,” Muta grunts.
“You don’t sound too enthused by the idea,” Haru remarks.

“Why should I be? That would just mean we get dragged to some snowy wasteland and then we’d be freezing our butts off while we film…”

“That’s only in one book,” Baron says. “The rest occur in often much nicer conditions.” He rises and starts to make a fresh batch of tea, also locating a packet of biscuits in the processes. Muta quickly claims the latter before the others can comment. Haru still manages to scarper a few from the packet.

“Geez, how long can you survive without a cup of tea, Baron?” Muta scoffs. “You’ve been itching to start brewing since we stepped in.”

“I simply believe that tea is the perfect accompaniment to any social gathering.”

“You must be a blast at the parties.”

“Thank you, Muta.”

“I mean, do you know how many of the letters mentioned Baron’s love of tea? There’s a reason Baron argued with himself over how to serve tea.”

“That was what the story dictated,” Baron informs them. “In such a situation in real life, I’m sure I would get along much more civilly with my counterparts.”

The rest of the cast bite back grins. This doesn’t go unnoticed by the Creation.

“What?”

“Actually…” Haru admits, “we thought that the characterisation was pretty good for that case. You do quite like being the centre of attention.”

“Nonsense.”

“Yer a show-off, Baron.”

“I am simply very charismatic.”

“Yeah, we know,” Haru murmurs with a blush.

“How much time do we have left?” Toto asks, quickly moving the conversation back to the reason for them gathering there in the first place.

Baron glances up to watch someone motioning behind the cameras. “Looks like we only have time for one more letter. Who wants to choose?”

“Oh, me!” Haru cries before Muta has a chance. “I know exactly which one I want to read.” She pulls out a long letter, and Muta groans.

“You’re not going to read the entire thing are ya, Chicky? The gaffer guy said we’re running out of time.”

“Of course I’m not going to read it all,” Haru huffs. “This came pretty early into the series, and it comes from ANYTHINGGOES31—”

“We’ve already read something from them.”
“Muta, shush. I’ll make this short. They talked about themes, saying that, ‘Humanity was the theme of [the last series]. Baron and Muta also got to experience what it was like to be human as well as lose humanity—’

“All the more relevant with the fatso now.”

“—which in each case was different. Just because you look human doesn’t mean you have your Humanity.’ Literally, there’s an entire essay on this subject! I’m only gutted we haven’t got the time to cover this all.”

“I’m not.”

“Muta…”

“Okay, okay.”

“I would have to agree with the viewer on this subject,” Baron says as he re-joins the others, offering a cup of tea to Haru as he sits. “Given the issue that Doctor Moreau was causing, it was only natural that humanity was the overriding theme of that series.”

“And I suppose ya gonna tell us now that this series had a theme too, right?”

“Well, we can at least pretend the writer had an over-arching theme in mind,” Haru says. “If we’re on the subject, I’m guessing the theme for this series was… uh, probably memories.”

“Now you’re just making this up.”

“Give up, butterball.”

“Birdbrain.”

“Boys, behave.” Haru snatches the remaining biscuits from Muta and starts to snack on the leftovers. “Come on, think about it. In Oz, Hiromi is changed into a Hiromi-Adeline hybrid with the mixed memories of both, and goes on to form a new soul in that.”

“The Game was all about memories,” Baron reminds them. “That raised the question of who we are if you remove the memories that define us.”

“In Wonderful Thoughts, the nightmares fed on the memories of childhood fears and monsters,” Toto agrees. “And Haru is able to fly through her recollection of good memories.”

“And in Fenland House, the puca takes the memories of people we trust to trick us,” Haru says. She pauses. “It almost is as if the writer really did plan this through.”

“Meh, chance,” Muta grunts. “What about The Three Barons?”

“The Duke steals memories as well as physical traits,” Baron points out. “Although, now we’re talking about it, it seems a lot of villains and monsters in this series fed on memories…”

“Talking of villains, I’m kind of hoping we get to see the Duke again,” says Haru. “That was fun. Especially since he has ties to Baron.”

“Technically, the Bureau dealt with a Duke from a parallel world,” Toto remarks. “So the Duke in our world could still be around. Although that really depends on what precisely happened the last time Baron met this world’s Duke.”
“Which we don’t know much about.”

“Backstory opportunity!” Haru cheers. “Also, you know who else we haven’t seen yet?”

“Louise,” they chorus.

“Give the writer time.”

“Two series, Toto. We’ve had two series with only one mention of her so far.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s turning up next series, Chicky.”

“You’re always making up spoilers, Muta.”

“I think we’re being told to finish up,” Toto remarks, noticing some frantic gesturing behind the camera. “I think we’re running overtime.”

“Yeah, but can I just quickly point out one last letter we got?” Muta pleads. He hastily continues before anyone has time to tell him otherwise. “We actually got tips for dealing with deadly situations from CC21, if anyone’s interested. ‘1. Never look down the barrel of a gun. 2. When dealing with corrosive chemicals… aim for the eyes. 80% more effective :)’”

“Muta, we can’t go telling people that!”

“Just for the record,” Baron smoothly interjects, “The Bureau Files, and all those affiliated with it, do not condone throwing corrosive chemicals into the eyes of your rivals.”

“Don’t try this at home, kids!”

“Muta, shush.”

“Not a chance, kiddo.”

Haru sighs. “Alright. Again, before we wrap up this special Behind-the-Scenes episode, we just want to give a big shout out to all who sent in their comments – so here’s a big thank you to: Riika Duskraven, Nanenna, haruxdreamcometrue 16, ANYTHINGGOES31, Baron’s Girl, Raye of the Sunshine, loveydovey14, Waterpokemon, Suzumehime, Meeklish, CatGirlFireflare, Day-Dreaming Writer, nalu93, Gemini-Victoria, InYuJi, CC21, FantasticMisticalWonder, isaralove, JenthGrek710, Solar, Zorlia, MadUnderTheHat, Tasolae, KatzenBlut, WhisperOfWorlds. Thank you also to you enigmatic guest reviewers, Random Fan, ther is no one, and Big sis of 8. We didn’t have enough time to read out all the comments we received today, but know that every one we received made us smile and kept the writer writing!”

“Again, we want to thank you for all the ideas, theories–” Baron begins.

“Mad or otherwise.”

“Thank you, Muta. For your theories, your encouragement, and most of all the fun you had in being part of the second series of The Bureau Files.”

“Of course, if you want to have a bigger part in the third series, keep watching!”

“Haru, we’re going to film that part next,” the cat Creation reminds her.

“I know. Anyway, this is the whole cast of The Bureau Files signing off for now, but hopefully
you’ll be seeing more of us in a year’s time. Until then, remember that the Bureau’s doors will always be open to you…”

“Be it day or night.”

“And until then…”

“Trust yourself!”

- HARU & BARON -

“Hey, guys!” Haru waves enthusiastically to the screen. Baron smiles, but evidently contains his excitement. “So, we’ve finally got to the end of the second series of The Bureau Files, but – of course – we hope that we will continue on to another series this time next year. The writer has assured us that she has ideas planned… although you might want to take that with a pinch of salt…”

“What my co-star is trying to say,” Baron smoothly interjects, “is that we have plans for the next series, and we want you to get involved.”

“Right!” Haru’s head bobs excitedly. “A lot of our cases are rather singular and independent to an extent, so we would love it if some of you would write a case for us!”

“The writer does want us to add that this is not laziness on her part,” Baron comments. “She wants to get the TCR fandom more involved, especially those of you who might have wanted to write something for the fandom, but perhaps have been too nervous to. So this is a chance for you to get started. For those of you who are already writing, think of this as an opportunity to get your name more out there and perhaps get new people to read your work.”

“Free publicity!” Haru cheers.

Baron glances to the brunette. “I thought I used decaffeinated tea,” he remarks slowly.

“You did. But the biscuits were coffee-flavoured.”

“This would explain a lot.”

“Anyway, if you’re interested, please Private Message Catsafari with your idea,” Haru adds, moving on before her caffeine intake could be further discussed. “There’s no real deadline for this, but there are a maximum of two story slots that Cat says she would be happy to open up to other authors. So, first come, first served. If you want to do this, you will be asked to write a two-chaptered case (around 10K words in total).”

“If you agree to this, you can opt out,” Baron says. “Although Cat would prefer if she’s given some warning, so she can pull up a spare story to write. We all know life can get in the way and complications arise, so you won’t be signing away your soul if you contact Cat.”

“Well, probably not.”

“Haru.”

“What?”

“Anyway, if you want to get involved in this idea, please contact Cat,” Baron says, shaking his head at the brunette by his side. “And for the rest of you, please leave a comment in your review telling us whether you like this idea or not. The TCR fandom has very few collaborations but – as you’ve
probably guessed – we like to be different and experiment. Right, Haru, let’s get you a glass of water...”

- HARU -

Before the credits begin to roll, the screen lights up once more, and this time only Haru stands before the camera, scribbled disclaimer in hand. She glares to someone off-screen, evidently hastily coerced into the final role.

“All characters appearing in this work are purely fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The writer does not claim to posses the rights to The Cat Returns... although she has often said she wished she did,” Haru adds.

“Just read the darn script!” Hiromi shouts from behind the camera.

“Why don’t you come out and read it then?”

“Nah, I’m okay, thanks.”

Haru glowers, but drops her gaze to her lines. “Nor does the writer, in any way except ego-boosting, profit from this story. No animals, Creations, humans, or mythical creatures were harmed... much in the making of this production.”

She squints down at the page and dubiously continues on to the last few lines. “And, finally, the rest of the Bureau cast would just like to apologise in advance to Haru for what is about to be done...” Her eyes widen and she stares at a point beyond the camera. “Guys... What’s going on...? Why are you apologising? Wait, what are you doing with that bucket...?”

Toto swoops down from above and empties a half-full bucket of water over the brunette. She screams, but not before Muta steps before the camera and dumps another bucket. Shivering, she shakes off the worst of the water and glares dagger at the two individuals. “Is that it? Is that the worst you can do?”

“Not hardly, Miss Haru.”

A shadow looms over the young woman. As Baron steps into the light, a momentary wicked grin flickers across his face as Haru is treated to her third bucket. She yelps, jumps away and wraps both arms around her. “I hate you all.”

The rest of the cast leap before the screen. “Please donate!”

In the background, Baron briefly disappears off-screen and returns with a cup and saucer. This he offers – somewhat apologetically – to Haru. She takes it and laughs and all is forgiven.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!