(Not Quite) A Christmas Carol
by listenforthelove

Summary

In which Nezumi gets some very strange visitors late at night who have some things to show him.

Post-canon holiday fic very loosely based on Charles Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol', written for Holy Celebration Week on restructuralcommittee on tumblr.

Notes

I'm sorry, I don't actually hate Nezumi (that much), I promise. Very loosely based on a Christmas Carol, because No. 6 doesn't celebrate Christmas (as Nezumi will be quick to point out), though I do have four ghosts in total. Just all in one night. Sorry about your night's rest, Nezumi.

Nezumi was absolutely, one hundred percent positive he had not had nearly enough to drink for this, this – whatever 'this' was, really. Words didn’t usually fail him, but it was late, he was tired, he just wanted to go to sleep, and he sincerely did not have the time for… well, this.

For starters, there was no mirror in this room, and he had just left the bathroom to change out of his stage clothes. He had locked the door behind him as he’d come in, after triple-checking he had not been followed.

There should be, in short, no reason why he would come face to face to Eve in his scarcely-lit
bedroom, casually leaning against the closed door, apparently waiting for Nezumi to reappear. Not that Nezumi cared about the how or why here. “Get the hell out.”

“Oh, I won’t be long.”

Nezumi flinched for the shortest of seconds, because that was his voice. In a higher register to accommodate for his stage persona, somewhat strange to his ears as he wasn’t used to hearing himself speak as an outsider, but undeniably his own voice.

He really had no time for this. It was truly a pity he didn’t have his knife on him right now, but the right words in the right tone usually did wonders.

“You have two seconds to get. The hell. Out.”

“Oh, but I need just a little longer than that.” With a graceful movement, Eve slid away from the door, closed in on Nezumi with a sudden surprise only one person had managed to overtake him with so far, and that was decidedly not Eve, if not in the least because Eve did not actually exist, damn it. “I just came here to pass on a message.”

“What, if I don’t flee this town before midnight I will face my impending doom?”

“Close.” Eve smirked, and shit, this was getting more than a little eerie. “You see, I am here to announce you will get three visitors tonight.”

“Like hell I –” Eve’s smirk had grown, and something clicked. Something to do with it being the end of the year, and a certain book Nezumi had… oh, no way. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” That was the last time he’d accept a toast after the final performance of the year, no matter how expensive the drinks. What the hell had been in that champagne?

“Too cliché for you? Pity. And that while you appreciate your classics so much.” Eve shrugged and backed off a little at last. “I even went through the effort of appearing as Eve, you know.”

Nezumi snorted. “This city doesn’t celebrate Christmas. Nor do the others, to the best of my knowledge, so save yourself your terrible pun.”

“Ah, yes, and you’d know all about those other cities, wouldn’t you. Or perhaps just the one?” Eve pointed a finger right at his chest, so straightforward that Nezumi should have felt the nail pierce his shirt, but – nothing. A brush of cold air, and a fingertip that disappeared against his chest.

Champagne or a dream. Nezumi decided he preferred the latter.

Eve smiled. “You can think this is a dream, if you want. Ghosts don’t exist, right?”

“Of course they don’t.”

“You’re absolutely sure? No ghosts haunting you in those very dreams you accuse me of being? Ghosts don’t have to belong to the land of the dead, of course. Though I guess in your case…”

“Shut the hell up and get out of here before I make you.” In any other situation, Nezumi wouldn’t even have let it come to this point; he’d have lashed out, located a weapon or used his bare hands if he had to. Long-time reflexes, worn down by now after months in relative safety, but still very much in place. Now, however, he’d given up on solving this the normal way and more or less accepted his brain was playing very much unwarranted tricks on him.
“Not to worry, I have delivered my message. Don’t forget – three visitors.” A whisper, a name long out of use blown in his ear like the chilly wind of winter, and then Nezumi was alone again.

He exhaled the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, closed his eyes for a moment. He was still alone as he opened them again.

Right. Delirious dream. They usually weren’t this vivid, but then again, Nezumi didn’t usually drink right before going to bed, even though he’d thought he could hold his liquor pretty well. Better than a certain someone, anyway.

He sighed without his own volition this time, let himself fall backwards on the bed. How long had it been now? Almost four years. He really should have learnt to put it in the past by now, not remembering those small moments at every given opportunity. It was no use, it would only hold him back.

That’s what he’d been thinking, anyway.

Talking about food for thought… Three visitors. Heh. He smirked to himself. Delirious indeed.

He hadn’t even read Dickens in a while, as books were unfortunately a luxury he couldn’t quite afford himself these days. Acting earned him a living, but not much more than that. He barely made enough to set some money aside every month, though he still made an effort just in case. In case of what, he never quite answered to himself. Possibly because he very well knew his answer already.

He must have fallen asleep again at some point, because the next thing Nezumi became aware of was that he was opening his eyes, blinking against a faint light that lit up the dark room. It didn’t come from the window, and besides, he was certain he’d closed the curtains.

No, there was a new presence in his room, smaller than the previous one but still looking strikingly familiar. Nezumi wasn’t looking at himself so much this time as… No. This had to be another dream, a nightmare. He’d had nightmares about them before, of course. None of them had been quite like this, but it was nothing new.

“Hello.” The voice was female, soft-spoken, familiar in a way that couldn’t be because he’d never heard her speak, not at that age.

Nezumi sat up immediately, startled that something had gotten into his room without his notice this closely. His instincts usually never let him down like that, despite the change from a hostile into a more peaceful environment in recent months. “Who are you?”

The apparition radiated its own light, and it was because of that light that Nezumi could make out its – her features. The apparition had taken the shape of a girl, young woman almost, and she was clear enough to make out her face: piercing eyes, a finely sculpted nose, and thin lips pressed together in a sad smile that broke the picture of beauty. “You don’t remember me.” And then a quiet huff, a name he hadn’t used in years and hadn’t heard in just as long, that strange occurrence of earlier that night not taken into account. Of course he did remember her. Just not like this.

“Nezumi,” he corrected the name, barely even realizing what he was saying until the word was out.

“Okay, Nezumi it is,” the apparition conceded, and she had now moved to stand next to his bed. She hovered more than she walked, her feet invisible under her long dress. “I believe my presence
here tonight was announced?"

Nezumi sighed. “One of the three visitors? Let me guess, you’re going to show me my past to teach me a lesson about how terrible a person I have become? Trust me, I don’t need any lessons from supernatural entities to remember my past, I’ll pass.”

The apparition slightly shook her head and put her hands around Nezumi’s, though there was no physical presence – just the light hovering over Nezumi’s skin, passing through where she would have grasped him had she had a physical body.

The light grew more intense, and Nezumi closed his eyes in reflex. When he opened them again, he was out of bed, still in pajamas, but very much no longer in his room.

It was a forest, the forest. He hadn’t been here since that day – there hadn’t been much to return to, after all, never mind the memories connected to this place. But here it was, trees reaching as tall as back then, scenery green as far as the eye would reach.

Nezumi then realized it wasn’t just like back in the days; it was back in the days. It was easy enough to work that one out when he saw a little boy rushing past whom he only knew from the mirror. He didn’t seem to notice the grown Nezumi; it was as if he was a ghost here himself, invisible to the time.

The apparition of the girl was still with him, and she gave him a sad smile as he looked over his shoulder to face her. “That was you indeed.”

“I thought I just told you I didn’t need to remember my past.”

“Oh, you don’t? Or do you just not want to?” she asked, sounding very sincere considering the question she was asking. “It is one thing to not want to cling to the past, Nezumi. It is another to repress it completely.”

“I didn’t repress anything.” If anything, he’d fought all those years to get his avenge for what had happened. So many years that it had become his reason for living, and when he was finally close to accomplishing it… Well, things had happened, but that too was in the past, a more recent past.

“It may be so.”

“I still have the nightmares. Don’t think I’ve forgotten a single thing.”

“You remember the loss, but do you remember what you lost?”

“Don’t give me this. I don’t care if you’re a dream or a ghost or whatever, you shut up right now.” Nezumi clenched his wrists, fighting off the urge to use them as he’d figured by now that wouldn’t help much. Of course he knew what he’d lost. Everything. He really did not need the reminder, to go through losing everything again. Especially not with an apparition that looked like she could be her had things not ended this way.

She didn’t even flinch at his words. “Look around, Nezumi. Once, this was your life – a life you then took for granted. Of course you did, as we were so young.” Another sad smile. “Isn’t it you who always says that you cannot take tomorrow for granted, that you should make no promises for the next day? This is why, isn’t it? You learnt these lessons young. You yourself are the only person you can trust, isn’t that true?”

Nezumi didn’t grace that question with an answer, rhetorical as it was. It had been the words he’d heard for so long, the words he’d repeated to himself for so long.
“I’m not saying you’re wrong,” the apparition said, “I just want you to look.”

Look? Look at what? The little boy rushing through the fields to find his mother, a face he sometimes wasn’t sure he really remembered as much as that he’d constructed an ideal in his memories? The boy learning a song, the little boy looking out over his newborn sister, knowing how it would all turn out in not too long?

Don’t show me that. Not again.

The apparition gave him a weak smile. “I think we were happy, weren’t we? It could have been a good life.”

And that was the last drop. “Shut up! You’re not even here, you don’t exist anymore! You died, burnt with the rest of them!”

He knew it would happen before it hit him, next. The flames.

The flames were flaring up all around them all of a sudden, and even though he knew it was a vision or a dream, Nezumi would swear he could feel the heat.

The apparition took pity on him and tried to shield him, but she was as intangible as ever. Her arms around him were like the smoke, visible and fleeting. “You lost so much,” she whispered. Her word seem to mingle in with the roaring of the flames, as Nezumi had shut his eyes in an attempt to shut it out. “You had to cling to what little you had left. You never forgot, or we couldn’t be here now. Nezumi, listen. The dead cannot return from the past, but their memories are with you. But as some stories close, for others there could still be a future.”

And as abruptly as they had started, the flames died out.

Nezumi blinked and looked around, finding himself in absolute darkness, but the apparition in front of him and emitting her own light.

“I am the ghost of the past,” she said, “I belong here, you know that. But I believe you also know that not all that has passed should be severed. You can run, of course. Sometimes you have to in order to move on, to learn your lessons on your own. But some things are meant to be faced again in a new light. Remember that.”

A flash, and Nezumi briefly spotted another past, less distant but still some years ago. A storm, one little boy in an open window and another boy on the ground before him.

Then the light went out.

When Nezumi opened his eyes again, he was in his own bed, finding his sheets halfway kicked off and one of the two pillows on the ground.

It had been a nightmare. Of course it had been, what else could it have been? There was no such thing as ghosts, and certainly not ghosts that had aged since they had perished as innocent little sisters, too young to even know what was happening to her.

Nezumi left out a deep sigh, trying to control his breathing which was rushed and irregular. He felt awake, though, as if he’d slept through a full night already. That couldn’t be: it was still entirely dark behind the curtains, which didn’t really do their job very well as Nezumi always woke up with the first rays of sunlight.
There was no sunlight streaming in through the curtains, but there was something else.

Nezumi groaned and buried his head in his remaining pillow, cursing himself and this dream within a dream, as clearly he still had to be asleep.

He knew this apparition too.

He had seen her only once before, but she was hard to forget for many reasons. She was looking at him with large dark eyes, as if waiting for him to speak up, to let her know he recognized her.

Of course he recognized her, even though he didn’t even know her – not really, anyway. “You’re the girl – Safu.”

She offered him a sad sort of half-smile. “That is my name, yes. We meet again, Nezumi.”

“But you’re…” Dead, gone. The Facility burnt and you were in it. Flames again. Figured.

“Ahh, indeed. It doesn’t make much sense for me to be here, does it?” That half-smile again. “Yet here I am.”

“Shouldn’t you be mad at me?” Nezumi asked, half out of genuine curiosity and half to just – say something, fill the silence, pretend this was normal and a dream, because he knew these dreams, had been dealing with them for years. “I dragged Shion out of there, away from you.”

Safu shook her head. “That’s not what I’m mad about,” she said. “I loved Shion, I still do. I didn’t want him to die with me, I wanted him to live.”

He didn’t miss the way she’d phrased that first part. “Then what are you mad about?”

“You’re here,” Safu simply said. “You’re not with Shion.”

“Heh. You’d think that second part would upset you more.”

Safu shook her head. “No. Well, yes – but I cannot afford to be envious of the living, can I?”

“I don’t know, I’m not the ghost expert here.”

“Really? Because I know I am scheduled as your second visitor, so you must have met at least one before me. That is more than I can say. You would be the more experienced one out of the two of us.” She didn’t even crack a smile, as she seemed entirely serious about this matter. “I have gathered that you are quite smart, so I assume you know who I am in this appearance.”

“The ghost of the present.” Nezumi figured that No. 6 had never known Christmas traditions, and from what Shion had told him, the elites hadn’t been big on literature. Any Dickens reference was probably lost on Safu.

“Quite so.”

“But that doesn’t make sense – you died. You are in the past.”

“A recent past,” Safu clarified, “but yes, that is true. Still, that past continues into the present. Promises have been made, after all.”

Promises. Yes, he had made one – but what about Safu?

“Let me show you.”
Safu had not approached him the way the previous apparition had, but the feeling was very similar. Only this time, Nezumi suddenly found himself on a balcony he didn’t recognize, in a street he didn’t recognize in a city he only vaguely recognized.

It was raining, and the window was open.

“You haven’t been here in four years,” Safu said, which was the most superfluous comment she could have made. Even though Nezumi hadn’t exactly marked the days, he knew how long he’d walked, how much distance he’d put between himself and this place.

No. 6. Only it wasn’t quite No. 6 anymore, now that the wall had fallen.

“This is the present, Nezumi. You have not yet fulfilled your promise, but he is trying his best to fulfill his own.”

And as this was Safu and her voice had just the slightest edge to it, there was no doubt about whom she meant by ‘he’, if the open window hadn’t been enough of a hint anyway. Really, who else could it be?

Shion. The one connection they shared. Shion, who had promised Safu to rebuild this city after she had passed him the message through Elyurias that she left everything to him.

Everything, huh. Not a small burden to be left with, as if he hadn’t had enough to shoulder already by that point.

The curtain moved, and Nezumi had only a fraction of a second to process what he was about to happen before it did.

Shion appeared, and though Nezumi had expected to see him, it was still a shock to see him again after so long. He’d changed – of course he had, it had been four years. Nezumi himself had grown up as well. Shion had gotten taller for one thing, almost Nezumi’s own height. His hair was still white, a stark contrast with the dark curtains and the night sky outside. He looked tired. If this was real time, as Safu’s apparition had said, then it would be late in the evening if not night at this point, but Shion’s dark circles were too pronounced to just be caused by staying up late tonight.

The most unnerving part was Shion’s eyes looking out over the balcony and seeing straight through Nezumi, as if he wasn’t there. It shouldn’t be a surprise, as there was no way Nezumi could be here anyway. It was a vision, a dream. Still, having Shion so close, completely glossing over Nezumi’s existence… It wasn’t quite – right, somehow. Something stung inside him.

Shion kept staring for a while into the night sky, looking at the stars so intensely that Nezumi couldn’t help but follow his look for a second. When he looked back, it was to see Shion sighing and leaning against the open window. He hesitated for a moment, his hand resting on the handle of the window.

Ten, twenty seconds passed before Shion’s arm slacked at last and he went back into the room, closing the curtains as he stepped back.

Shion was waiting. Nezumi didn’t think any points would be rewarded for guessing whom he was waiting for, even though it had been four years now.

“Nezumi.” It was Safu’s voice, but she sounded distant somehow, detached from everything, like how she’d sounded in the Facility. No wonder: that was the only time Nezumi had met her, after all. “We were young, all of us were. So much happened in such a short time, so many ideas and
realities got thrown upside down that day. No-one blames you for leaving, and certainly not Shion. You left, and you had to. But at what point does leaving turn into fleeing?"

"Who says it did?"

"Nobody. I’m just asking the question, that is all. It is for you to answer. Maybe you’re right to stay away from this city, from Shion. Or maybe your return is already overdue. I cannot answer that for you. I am the spirit of the present; I can just show you what is happening right now, and this is it."

"Because of all the things that are going on in the world, all you can show me is a white-haired boy on his balcony?"

Safu smiled, and it was genuine this time. “Surely you’ve figured out why that is,” she said. “Maybe ghosts aren’t real, and you are indeed hallucinating or dreaming. In that case, the answer should be simple.”

"Or maybe Shion is that important to you. And he’s all we have in common.”

“But if that is why, you will either have to admit ghosts are real, or that your brain provided you with my image specifically for that very reason.”

Nezumi twitched. “You are very annoying, you know that?”

“You think so? A pity. I feel that perhaps we could have gotten along quite well, given some time.” Her big eyes got that sad quality to them again, the knowledge of being too late. “I could show you more things. I could show you how the city is doing, thanks to Shion. He has indeed been keeping his promise, you see. The path he has ahead of him isn’t easy, but he is doing his best. I could show you how your friends are doing, who are quite well. Inukashi visits Shion and his mother quite a lot, actually.”

Nezumi scoffed. “It all comes back to Shion, doesn’t it.”

“Yes.” Safu made no effort to deny this, and the sadness was replaced by a shimmer in her eyes. “If that is how you feel…”

“My life does not revolve around one person, thank you very much.” Okay, so maybe that wasn’t the entire truth. More accurately, Nezumi wouldn’t have a life without Shion: he’d have died years ago.

“Your life doesn’t have to revolve around a person to make them important to you.” Safu backed away from the balcony now, and their surroundings started to fade as she did. “This is the present, Nezumi. That is all I came to show you.”

And with that, they were left in the darkness, though Safu radiated her own light much like the first apparition had done. “It’s time I brought you back. You still have a third visitor waiting for you.”

“I think I’ll pass, thanks.”

Safu softly laughed and closed her eyes. The light dimmed as she did.

Nezumi only partially opened his eyes before he pressed them shut again. He was back in his bed alright, but there was still a light next to him. A light very definitely not coming from the window
Nezumi groaned and hid his face in his pillow. “Fuck off.”

It was worth a try, though he didn’t actually believe it would work. No, his brain would just insist on finishing this whole ridiculous scenario according to the book. Past, present and what was yet to come.

He didn’t particularly care for that last one if it was going to be according to the written word.

The new apparition stupidly did not take Nezumi’s suggestion, and instead moved closer to his bed, judging by the movement of the light.

Nezumi sighed. “I said, fuck off. Are you deaf as well as dead? Shitty deal you got yourself there, then.”

“Well, I don’t think I can be dead if I don’t technically exist. Not like this, anyway.” The voice was male and unfamiliar, which threw Nezumi off enough to raise his head and turn towards the light.

There was a new apparition alright: a boy, this time, a gawky teenager with an awkward smile on his lips, as if he didn’t particularly enjoy being here but had to go with it anyway. Nezumi could relate to that at least. “I’m your last visitor.”

“Well, I don’t think I can be dead if I don’t technically exist. Not like this, anyway.” The voice was male and unfamiliar, which threw Nezumi off enough to raise his head and turn towards the light.

“No, you really don’t.”

Unsurprisingly, Nezumi found himself out of bed two seconds later, an apparition by his side and a now familiar balcony in front of him. Fantastic.

“I’m Shion,” the new ghost now said.

Nezumi raised his eyebrow. All the kid had going for him was the fact that he looked about the same age Shion had when they’d met for the second time. “You’re not…” He stopped his own sentence when he noticed the eyes. They weren’t Shion’s, indeed, but still familiar, and resembling Shion’s enough for the click to make in Nezumi’s head. “Oh. I see. That brat Shion dumped on Inukashi, isn’t it?”

The boy smirked back at him. “Yeah, Inukashi told me you were a rude jerk.”

“Such a way with compliments. Well, spill it. You’re gonna make me wait on this balcony too? Make me watch your older namesake open the window again and pine for me? I saw that one, it’s getting old.” This was – easier to deal with, somehow. Make it into something almost ridiculous.

This Shion shook his head. “Not quite. Today is September 7. Look.”

A storm was gathering behind them: the clouds had darkened, a strong wind had started to blow.
Nezumi found he wasn’t affected by it at all, not even the faintest swishing of clothes or hair, which was disorienting to say the least. He briefly wondered if he wouldn’t feel the rain, either, once it inevitably started pouring.

He focused on the window now – it was closed. Which made sense, as Shion (his Shion, his brain helpfully supplied) probably wasn’t home yet. Nezumi’d rather hope he’d wised up enough in however many years had passed to close his freaking window when he wasn’t home, at last.

Someone appeared in front of the window now on the inside, and it took Nezumi more than a couple of seconds to recognize him, despite the familiar mop of white hair. It was Shion, older than he’d ever seen him – in his thirties, maybe. Had to be, if the kid by his side was a baby when they’d last parted.

There was something entirely off about Shion, something listless. He barely even spared a glance to the outside world as he reached for his curtains and closed them. He never even seemed to consider opening the window.

So much for saying you’d always open it, huh. But the sarcasm had lost its bite. Nezumi hated to admit it, but this hurt, maybe even more than seeing the previous Shion throwing open his window, an edge of desperation to him that Nezumi knew he had himself to blame for. This Shion – he had given up. It was September 7, there was a storm brewing, and Shion had shut his window to the outside world.

“You haven’t returned,” the younger Shion by his side said. “Shion doesn’t believe you will anymore. This is the future where you haven’t fulfilled your promise yet, the future you’re heading for if you keep being this stubborn.”

“And now what?” Nezumi said, his words as sharp as he could make them. “You’re gonna show me how Shion became a tyrant, rules this city like that guy before him, and how it is all my fault?”

“Oh, no. He kept his promise, you see. The new No. 6 is far from perfect, but I have been told that it is so much better compared to the old city that it might as well be.”

Of course it was. Safu had said so, hadn’t she? Shion had been well on his way in the present to fulfill his promise. Nezumi guessed that made one of them.

The Shion next to him had fallen silent and didn’t show any inclination to leading them back, which meant Nezumi probably had to say something.

“Not really Christmas-y, is it? And here I was thinking I’d learn something profound about myself here.”

“Ah, that.” The boy smiled. “Shion read me that story when I was a bit younger. He has quite some books, though he stopped collected them years ago.”

“Oh no, the memories were just too painful?” Nezumi was being snarky on purpose now, but really, after all that Shion had been through, him giving up on books was about the last…

“Oh, I don’t know about that. He switched to digital books, said he loved paper books but wanted to preserve nature as much as possible.”

“How noble.”

“Yes, you should see the forests here.”

He sounded entirely sincere, as if it was such a shame Nezumi couldn’t see those forests, that
Nezumi couldn’t help himself but raise both eyebrows. “Really? So why not show me those instead, then? Now I’ve just been visited by three ghosts that are all telling me to get back to Shion and that’s it for the big supernatural plan? How pathetic.”

“I don’t know. Is that what you took away from those visits, that you should go back?”

“Haven’t had much choice, considering all two out of three have shown me was him waiting. Doesn’t he have anything better to do?”

“He has, and he does. Waiting is just one part of him, like your traveling is one part of you.”

Nezumi quickly decided he preferred the older Shion over this brat. Probably not entirely his fault, if he had been raised by Inukashi. “So now what? Aren’t you supposed to show me my own burial and all, how I’ve died miserable and alone?”

“Oh, if you insist, I could.”

Nezumi tried not to flinch as this brat wasn’t even denying he had in fact died in his early thirties, and decided to believe he was just messing with him. And of course, it was all a dream anyway, just his brain working overtime due to that rotten champagne he really shouldn’t have had. To think that just a couple of hours ago, he’d thought that coming face to face with Eve was the weirdest thing his brain had ever come up with. Ha.

His surroundings started to fade now, but not into complete darkness. The night sky was still dyed in blacks and blues, with a faint light coming through the clouds that seemed to be the moon. The outlines of trees were starting to get visible in the distance, as were some rocks closer by. Rocks that were shaped rather distinctly, rocks that seemed to bear inscriptions.

“No promises for tomorrow, you always said.” Shion’s voice seemed to come from very far away all of a sudden, and sounded less and less like it was coming from a teenage boy. “But if you can look at the past, and shape your present, why not have hope for tomorrow? Hope can be powerful.”

The rocks started to fade away into the darkness, and the trees seemed to multiply, though it was hard to tell in the night. There was a sudden gust of wind, as if someone had opened a window and let in the storm.

“The future is not set in stone, Nezumi. You were right in saying one can’t know what will happen tomorrow – you can’t know for sure this future is what will become your real future. You now know the present and the possibilities of what is to come, and you were reminded of the past. It’s up to you what you do with it.”

The last sentences were spoken in threefold, two female voices mixed in, a raw mix that sounded more ethereal than any of the strange dreams he’d had so far this night.

When everything faded into darkness once again, Nezumi instinctively knew for sure it’d be the last time that night.

The window was open.

It was a cold winter’s night; it wasn’t exactly storming, but a cold wind was blowing and sucked the curtains outside every now and then, and a stray snowflake was fluttering down and surely
Nezumi took a deep breath as he climbed over the balustrade, then easily stepped onto the balcony and stared at the window in front of him. Four years, Shion. Four damn years, and you still…

He cut his own thoughts short. He could scold Shion, sure. He could silently accuse him of not being able to let go of the past, but really, how much had he done so himself? How much had he told himself over the past years that Shion was a person of the past, that he had to move on and put those shackles behind him? Yet here he was, almost but not quite soaked from the snowfall that had started as he’d made his way through No. 6, what had formerly been Lost Town.

He wasn’t all that sure anymore his dreams some nights ago had really been dreams, but if they had done one thing, it was teaching him where Shion now lived. Somewhere halfway in between Lost Town and Chronos, putting both Karan’s store and the city center at equal distance. Nezumi had scoffed unconvincingly even to his own ears upon that realization.

The windows were big, and stepping in wouldn’t be all that much of a feat, but Nezumi waited anyway. He had no idea if Shion was even at home. It was the end of the year; he could easily be working overtime, or maybe just spending some time with his mother, helping out in the store with all kinds of cakes that frankly sounded ridiculously good right about now. Nezumi hadn’t really wasted much time getting to No. 6, and thus had only eaten once or twice over the last couple of days.

Well, you’ve made your metaphorical bed now – here goes nothing.

He stepped in through the window into the mostly dark room.

Shion was home. More accurately, he had been working at home, judging from the piles of notes on his desk that served as his make-do pillow. Either it was later than Nezumi had thought, or Shion’s committee job was about as exciting as it sounded.

Nezumi had stepped in quietly, but Shion still stirred in his sleep, if he had truly been asleep at all. Sure sounded like it.

“Hmm, yes mom… the cake’s…” He yawned, raised his head slightly and seemed utterly confused for a moment as he stared at the notes in front of him. “Oh.” He blinked several times, stared at the desk lamp in confusion, which was the only thing lighting up the room. “Huh.”

Nezumi had about a thousand remarks he’d kept to himself by that point, some poking fun at Shion and some sappier than he’d ever forgive himself for speaking out loud. Instead, he waited, looking at Shion from his not-hiding place next to the open curtains. Just waited.

Finally, Shion’s line of sight shifted from the notes in front of him to the open window, and from there, it was only a fraction of a second before he noticed the unexpected (was he really?) visitor. Shion’s eyes widened, and Nezumi held his breath. Shion was looking at him – he was no longer a ghost, just looking on without being noticed. This, at last, was reality.

Time froze for a moment. Shion didn’t move, didn’t show any indication he was going to get up or run away or have any response whatsoever, and Nezumi was honestly too out of his wits to really do just about anything right now. Because this was it, wasn’t it? He had returned, fulfilled his promise. This was the thing he’d been running from, the person he’d tried to put into his past before he’d realized that, well.

He wondered in how far he’d needed those dreams to tell him what he already knew, really.
Shion’s chair clattered to the floor and time started moving again. It was barely enough time for Nezumi to register what was going to happen when he felt Shion’s arms around his neck, his face pressed against Nezumi’s shoulder and slightly higher than he remembered.

“Nezumi.” He heard his name gasped near his ear, a sound of slight desperation with a tinge of – shit, he couldn’t deal with this.

So instead of saying something, Nezumi pressed Shion closely against him, finding relief in having someone tangible to embrace, that someone being Shion.

He tightened his embrace, felt Shion gasp for air and held him even closer. You’re warm. You’re alive. You’re still here.

It took a moment before he noticed Shion was whispering something, almost repeating Nezumi’s own thoughts. “You’re really here,” he was saying. “It’s not a dream, you’re really… You came back…”

What could he say but point out the obvious? “You left the window open.” It was so soft it was barely even a whisper, but Shion caught his words.

“Of course. Always.”

Nezumi didn’t care anymore what those dreams, or visions or whatever had shown him – for that moment, he utterly believed Shion. Shion who was right in front of him, who had foolishly left open his window on a cold winter’s night, who embraced him completely despite Nezumi not deserving so in the slightest.

And so, he kept his arms wrapped around Shion, making absolutely sure that he was here, that he was real, that this was the actual present and not a dream or vision that had left him more shaken up than he’d ever admit.

It took a long time before Shion made some very half-hearted attempts to escape Nezumi’s embrace, only to lead him through the hall into the living room.

“Make yourself at home,” Shion said, touching his arm slightly as he brushed past him on the way to presumably the kitchen. “It was supposed to become your home, anyway.”

Nezumi snorted. “Bit presumptuous of you, Your Majesty.”

“Don’t lie, Nezumi.”

“Yeah, whatever.” He gave the living room a good look now, and found that it looked rather – familiar, despite clearly not having been here before. It wasn’t even because of his dreams, either, since they hadn’t shown him much beyond the balcony.

The walls were covered with books, mimicking the underground room. In fact, Nezumi thought as he walked past the shelves, he wouldn’t be surprised if the majority of these books came from that room in the first place. They were more organized here than they’d ever been in the room, however. He smirked to himself. “Hey, Shion?”

“Yes?” it came from the kitchen.

“Read any Dickens lately?”
“Who?”

“No, never mind.”

Shion returned from the kitchen now and handed Nezumi one of the two cups he had brought with them.

Nezumi smelt the whiff of coffee as he took over the cup. “No cocoa this time?”

“I thought we could have that later tonight at my mom’s,” Shion simply said, “With some cherry cake for old time’s sake.”

Nezumi had made the mistake of tasting his coffee at that very moment and all but choked on it. “What, tonight?”

“I know it’s dark out, but it’s not that late yet.” Shion smiled down into his cup. “It’s the end of the year, I promised my mother I’d come over for the evening. Inukashi and Rikiga might show up as well.”

He didn’t even ask if Nezumi wanted to come, and Nezumi liked to believe he really made an effort not to pull a face.

Not so successfully, considering Shion’s next words which almost sounded exasperated. “Nezumi, please. You know my mother likes you, and I’m sure everyone will be happy to see you again.”

“I somehow really doubt it.” He kept his voice under control, didn’t let the panic seep in. He’d run once before – he hadn’t returned just to run again. Shion deserved better than that. He really did, Nezumi figured, as he looked at Shion’s hand which had wrapped itself around Nezumi’s wrist now. It was a weak grip, trembling.

Ah, shit. “Shion. Shion, you’re shaking.”

Shion shook his head as if in denial, but he wouldn’t quite look up to meet Nezumi’s gaze. “Sorry,” he eventually mumbled. “I’m just – I’m not sure whether I’m happy or upset right now. Four years, Nezumi.”

“I know.” Fuck, he didn’t need Shion to tell him that too.

“Four years – I almost closed my window on my birthday, I thought… I thought I was about to give up, and…” His voice broke before he could finish that sentence, and he swallowed before he started again. “I missed you,” he settled for saying, “I missed you so much, Nezumi, but I think I might have also come to hate you at least a little.”

Yeah, that makes two of us. Nezumi sighed. “As eloquent as ever, aren’t we.”

“Don’t do this, Nezumi.”

Ah, fuck. Nezumi bit back whatever snarky response he had about the tears that had started to well up in Shion’s eyes, which would have been more an old reflex than anything. Instead, he settled for seizing Shion’s shoulders, forcing him to look at him. “Shion – I know, okay? I know. But I made you a promise. I never break my promises.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t.” Shion gave him a watery smile. “I was holding out for summer, remember? Or my birthday.”
“Yeah, I figured that out.”

“So – why now?”

Explanations, Nezumi figured, could come later. Especially if said explanations included strange dreams and ghostly appearances, and if there was some meeting the family to do. This was going to be one interesting evening.

“Well, look at it this way. I’ll be sticking around for a little longer if I’m going to be here for your birthday, won’t I?”

Shion looked up at him with renewed vigor in his eyes. “I won’t let you walk away this time.”

“I don’t see any walking.”

And of course, there was talking to do. Of course there was. As Shion had so eloquently pointed out, four years was a long time. Four years they didn’t know about each other, four years in which they’d grown up into adults, in which Nezumi had travelled the world and Shion had – well, he would have to find that out by himself, didn’t he?

But maybe that was fine. Maybe it was okay to get to know each other again under more normal circumstances, now that they’d both done a bit of growing. Literally so, in Shion’s case, as they were almost the same height now, Nezumi noted with not a little dismay that his dream had been proven correct in that way, too.

“Hey, Nezumi.”

“Yes?”

“We don’t celebrate Christmas here, you know that, right?”

“Where did that come from?”

Shion weakly smiled. “I don’t know – you mentioned Dickens, and since it’s the end of the year and all…”

“I thought you had no idea who that was.”

Shion rolled his eyes in response. “Do you have any idea how many books were in that room? Of course it wouldn’t ring a bell immediately. But I was wondering why you’d mention him in particular – I then figured it might be because of the time of the year. I’m still not sure why, though.”

Coincidence, Nezumi quickly decided for himself. Plain coincidence that that was the first story Shion would think of. “Maybe I was just testing if you’d kept up your reading.” It was a weak comeback and he knew it. Shion did, too, considering the snort he got in reply.

“You’re not gonna tell me, are you.”

“Shion, I barely got back and you insist you’re going to drag me to your mother and to that mutt and the old geezer within minutes after our long awaited reunion. I think I am entitled to keep a couple of secrets here in retaliation of these facts.”

To his surprise, Shion actually laughed at that. “Oh, you’re full of it.”

He had been so sunk in thought that he hadn’t noticed (again) how close Shion had come, and
Nezumi found himself able to tell apart every speck in his eyes. He swallowed. “Such a warm welcome.”

“Tell me sometime?”

“It’s –” And Shion could really do with some lessons in subtlety, as the eager look in his eyes was anything but. “It’s nothing. Just ghosts of the past.”

“Oh!” Shion sounded a bit too enthusiastic at that. “But there were more ghosts in the story, right? And –”

“Just forget it, okay? It’s the past, not the present.” It wasn’t just the literary reference, and he was quite sure that Shion got that, too.

So maybe he wouldn’t share his ghostly encounters with Shion any time soon, if at all. He’d had quite enough of those for one, and they had plenty enough to discuss without Nezumi bringing in some figments of his alcohol-deranged imagination. He figured it must have been that, anyway.

“Oh, well. I don’t really remember the entire plot, but I liked that story – I should read it to little Shion sometime,” Shion now said, babbling on and entirely ignoring Nezumi’s own musings, perhaps intentional. “He likes reading, you know. Or, well, when I read to him – but he’s a quick student, it won’t be long before he can read for himself.”

“Don’t doubt it,” Nezumi replied a bit absent-mindedly, his head still stuck on the teenaged version of the kid Shion was prattling about now. He vaguely wondered if it’d help to see the kid the age he had now or if that would just make things more confusing.

“It might be a little late for him, but maybe Inukashi will bring him along.”

“Ugh. Do we really have to go to whatever non-Christmas party your mom is planning?”

“Well, if you want that cocoa and cherry cake…” Shion was trying to make it sound like a joke, but his voice was so earnestly hopeful that Nezumi had a hard time to stick to his ‘no’. And screw it, Karan’s baking was amazing.

“Oh, whatever. Fine, then. Why are you so insistent on going and taking me with you, anyway?”

“Because it…” Shion avoided his eyes, which was kind of unusual. “Because then more people will know you’ve come back.” He left the words lingering in the air, but the intend was obvious. Because then it won’t be just me, and maybe you’ll feel too guilty to leave again.

“Shion.”

“Yes?”

“I made that promise to you. Not to your mother or Inukashi or Rikiga or that kid or whatever. You.” He couldn’t believe he was saying this, but at least it was just between the two of them. “I promised you we would be reunited, and here I am. I’m real, I promise. You can even punch me if you want to make sure, though please not in my face this time.”

Shion managed a watery smile, then promptly took Nezumi’s half-empty cup and put it on the table so that he could properly tackle him on the couch into a crushing embrace, possibly even tighter than that first one that night. “This works too,” he muttered in Nezumi’s shoulder.

Nezumi allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment. “I thought you’d come to hate me ‘at least a little’?”
“I can just punch you later.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that Nezumi couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, really? Is that a promise, Your Majesty?”

Shion shifted so that he could look Nezumi in the eyes, which he did so intently Nezumi felt the urge to close his eyes again to shield them. “Okay.” And then his lips brushed Nezumi’s, so swiftly that it surprised Shion as much as it did Nezumi. “Oh. Oh. I’m sorry, I…”

“Shion.”

“Sorry, Nezumi, I just…”

“Shion.” He hadn’t said the name that often in one night in years, but it felt right. It felt right to cup Shion’s face in his hands, make him look into his eyes again. “That’s not how you punch people. And I thought I taught you better than making promises like that.”

Shion gave him a confused look, then made a little ‘oh’ in understanding as a smile started blooming on his face. “Right. You did promise me once that you’d teach me – about books and fighting and…”

Technically Shion stopped talking ahead of time as he must have seen it coming, but Nezumi still felt he had shut him up with a proper kiss and not a quick peck.

Shion responded immediately, kissing him back almost desperately but also with much more certainty than before.

For a second, Nezumi felt his old fear creeping up on him. It had been easy enough to talk himself into going back the moment he’d allowed himself, but now he was actually here with Shion. Nezumi had told him back then that he was afraid of him, that he didn’t understand him at all. It still held true, not helped in the slightest by their years apart. But maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to stick around for a while, and not just to fulfill his promise.

They had talking to do, that was for sure. Shion was upset with him, he had just told him so, even if he now seemed content to kiss the living daylight out of Nezumi.

“Ehm, right. We – we should probably go,” Shion said, stumbling over his own words as he’d detached himself from Nezumi a bit at last. “My mother will be waiting, I should probably call to let her know I’ve been delayed a bit.”

Nezumi smirked. “Still insisting we go over?”

“I promised, Nezumi.”

He let the beat linger in the air before he sighed. “Okay, fine. Make me a promise in return, then.”

“What is it?”

“No Christmas Carol. I’ve had my fill of ghosts for years to come.”

Shion stared at him in wonder and amused, trying to gauge if Nezumi was serious and eventually shrugging, deciding he was for whatever reason. “Sure. I’m not even sure where my copy of it is, really.”

“Probably under the ‘D’. Seriously, Shion, those shelves are creepily organized, I didn’t see a single book out of place.”
He laughed. “You can mess them up then, as a welcome home present from me. Just make sure they’re off the ground so I won’t trip and break something.”

*Welcome home, huh.* “Generous of you.”

“It’s mostly your books, anyway.” Shion got up from the couch and took Nezumi by the hand.

“So they really are? Sounds like you have some things to explain.”

“Plenty, so you better stick around to hear it all.” Shion’s voice didn’t sound as secure as his words, and he squeezed Nezumi’s hand with some hesitation.

“Guess it can’t be helped.” He squeezed Shion’s hand in reply as he got up from the couch.

Shion gave him one last smile before he rushed off to his bedroom, presumably to get his phone as he heard him babbling excitedly seconds later. Nezumi didn’t doubt his presence would be announced and not be much of a surprise, at least to Karan.

On his way out, Nezumi noticed one book sticking out of its shelf, and he’d already pushed it back in its place by the time he noticed the title. “Just shut up,” he told his own old copy of *A Christmas Carol*.

“Sorry, did you say something?” Shion reappeared from the bedroom, cell phone still in hand.

“Nothing. Ready to go?”

“Yes. I might have told my mother I was bringing over a guest – she kind of guessed it was you, though.”

“Surprise, surprise,” Nezumi muttered, resigning to the fact immediately. He liked Karan, but he was not entirely sure how she would take his unannounced return after this many years. One way to find out, of course.

Shion had turned off the light in the living room as they went out, but Nezumi would swear he saw a flicker of light when he cast one last look behind him. Maybe if he concentrated, he’d see the outlines of a person who looked suspiciously like him minus the dress up, but he could convince himself that was just a reflection in the mirror or the window. He most certainly did not see a full apparition that put a finger to a pair of familiar lips and winked at him before blinking out of existence, for good this time.

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