



The Oni's Heart: Mated to the Monster: Season 3

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She's the illegitimate daughter of a powerful Yakuza leader and a prostitute, raised in the shadows of a violent world. With only a partial payout from her estranged father, who recently died in a "gang war," her future feels uncertain. Her half-brother, locked away for life, can offer no help. In search of a new beginning, she returns to her mother's homeland overseas, hoping to find purpose and a sense of self.

There, she meets a monk—a man who seems different from the peaceful figures she imagined. Like her, he is the son of a prostitute, his father a drunkard whose fists solved every problem. Desperate to escape his family's violent legacy, he turned to the monastic life, but his inner demons were harder to escape than he ever realized.

When he crosses paths with her, a fiery, rebellious woman who challenges everything he thought he knew about honor and life, he's torn. What he believed would be a lesson in discipline becomes his greatest temptation. She's everything he's been taught to avoid, yet everything he desires. As their paths intertwine, she pulls him deeper into a dangerous world of forbidden longing, leading him down a path he never intended—a path that might destroy them both. This story takes place in the same world set in *Echoes of Eternity*.

This book is part of the *Mated to the Monster* multi-author monster romance series. All books can be read as standalones.

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Shadows on the West Coast

MOMOI TAKEHIDE

The first time I saw my father was through a cracked motel window, the kind of dirty glass you only find in places where people don't bother to look too close at what's really going on. I was seven. Maybe eight. I'd been staying with my mother at a seedy hotel on the West Coast, the kind where the walls smelled of cigarettes and cheap whiskey. She'd just finished with a client, a man who looked as if he'd been born in a bar and had spent his whole life there. My mom wasn't much of a person to look up to, but that night, she'd made a decision to call him.

"Stay in the room, don't answer the door," she told me, her voice rough from a long night. "And whatever you do, don't make a sound."

She thought I'd listen. But I didn't.

I cracked the blinds open just enough to see him—my father—leaning against the back of an expensive car. I could barely make him out in the dark, but I could tell from how he carried himself that he was someone who didn't need to be seen to be feared. He wore the kind of black suit that made you wonder if you were looking at a man or the shadow of something darker. The way he stood there, one hand in his pocket, as if the world belonged to him... I felt the air shift, thick with something dangerous.

I don't know why I felt that way. Maybe because he had the same eyes as me. Dark, cold, like he knew what it meant to live without mercy. My mom always said that he wasn't someone to be bothered with. But I couldn't stop staring. The piece of me that didn't belong to him was curious.

He never saw me. That night, I watched him for a long time, until he disappeared into the shadows with my mother's last words in my head, "Don't make a sound."

From that moment on, everything I did was to escape what I was born into. A legacy built on violence and betrayal. It wasn't just him, it was the whole damn thing—the crime, the power, the blood. It suffocated me from the inside out, like something I could never outrun, no matter how far I went.

By the time I turned sixteen, I was already a product of that world. I was raised in the kind of streets where loyalty is something people sell, and love is a commodity. My mom's addiction was my babysitter. My father's empire was the shadow I couldn't escape. I didn't even know who I was outside of it—other than the girl, no one cared to notice, no one cared to help.

I could've left. I should've left. But the life we lead—it's a sticky thing. It wraps around you and doesn't let go until you're so tangled in it that every attempt to get free just makes it worse. So, I stayed. And I learned the ropes. How to survive. How to make myself invisible when I needed to, how to fake smiles, how to make people forget that I was anything more than a ghost in the room.

Then he died.

I was now in my twenties.

My father, the big shot Yakuza boss. Dead in some gang war—one of his so-called business rivals getting the best of him, so the news said. The world was supposed to

be mine, they told me. The inheritance, the connections, the power. But all I got was a partial payout and the cold emptiness of knowing that no matter how much money I'd get from the bloodshed of others, I'd never be free.

Bitterly, I didn't even want it.

It was a slap in the face. A reminder that I was his daughter, but I didn't matter. My half-brother, the one who would've taken over if he hadn't been locked up for life, was useless to me now. He was still there, stuck in some prison cell while I was left to pick up the pieces of a world that wasn't mine to begin with.

So, I decided to leave.

I packed what little I had left of my life and bought a one-way ticket to Japan—the land my mother came from, a place that felt as foreign as the idea of peace. I didn't know what I was looking for. I just knew I had to leave California, leave the crime, the filth, the ghosts.

What was I supposed to do? Stay there, surrounded by the same people who tore my family apart? Or worse, end up just like them?

But there was one thing that the world never told me: there is no running from yourself. No matter how far you go, the shadows always follow.

Broken Bonds

MOMOI

I should've known better than to think that my mother's homeland of Japan would save me. It wasn't about escaping—it was about forgetting, or at least trying to. But the thing about trying to forget is, the more you run, the faster it catches up to you. And I wasn't even running that far.

The moment I stepped off the plane, the air felt different—thicker, colder. There was a taste of something heavy in the wind, as if I was stepping into a world that didn't care about my past, but sure as hell had a way of dragging it back into the light. The streets of Japan, at least the ones I saw first, were quieter than the ones I'd grown up in. But quiet wasn't always a good thing. Sometimes, it just meant the storm was waiting.

I took what money I had saved up over the years through deals on the street and other unsavory activities... and yes, even the partial payout. Despite my feelings on the matter, it would have been stupid for me not to. My mother, much to my reluctance, also shoved some money at me to help me relocate from the only life we had ever known. Any other person in my situation would have been grateful for the extra income I would be taking with me. But culturally? All I felt was guilt and shame for my decisions—for my decision to leave my mother alone and vulnerable, still loosely involved in a dark, underground world.

I rented a crappy apartment in a building that smelled of mildew and cigarette smoke. It was the kind of place that made you want to scrub your skin raw, but I didn't care. I didn't come here to find comfort. I came to find something else— what exactly, I had no idea. A fresh start. Maybe. Or maybe just a place to disappear.

The problem was, I didn't know how to disappear. The landlord made sure to remind me of my past by offering me a discount on the rent if I gave him monthly access to my body. All he did was laugh as I glared daggers in his direction, imagining how I would peel the skin off his face and feed it to him while he was sleeping.

I tried calling my half-brother, Kaito, after I landed, hoping for something— anything . A little support, maybe. Some kind of reassurance that he'd help me pull some strings, even if we never really had a brother-sister bond. He was still locked up, serving a life sentence for a dozen different things that didn't matter much to him anymore.

Tonight, I caught him on a rare moment when he'd been allowed to call outside. I could hear the murmur of a guard's voice in the background, his tired, resigned tone mixing with the tinny static of the phone.

"Momoi," he said. "You left?"

"Yeah," I said, staring at the peeling paint on the wall. "I'm here. Japan."

There was a long silence on the other end, and for a moment, I thought he hung up. It wasn't unusual for him to do that, to just disconnect. To pretend we weren't connected by anything other than blood.

"You need more money or something?" His voice was empty, flat.

I leaned back against the wall, my hand tightening around the phone. I wanted to

scream at him, to demand something, anything. I deserved reparations, didn't I? But if my mother's life taught me anything, it was that I was a mere speck in the grand scheme of things. With a sigh, I ran a hand through my dark hair. I already knew that Kaito wasn't the kind of person who'd help. Not anymore.

"No," I said, swallowing down the bitterness rising in my throat. "I don't need more money. I need to get out of here. Out of this life."

Another pause. He always did this, as if he had to think about every word before he said it. Like every ounce of emotion I threw at him was too much to carry.

"Well, you left," he finally said. "Maybe that's all you need. A clean break from the States. Hell, it's not as if I could help you anyway."

His words hit harder than I wanted to admit. His indifference was a punch to the gut, but it wasn't the first time. It was just easier to feel nothing than to face the truth of who we'd become under the cloak of our family's darkness.

"Right," I muttered. "I get it."

"You'll be fine," he added, his voice as dry as dust. "You always have been. Just—don't get caught up in anything stupid. You're not a part of this world anymore. Not like me."

I wanted to tell him how wrong he was. I wanted to scream that this world had my name on it, that I couldn't escape it even if I tried. My mother's last attempt at escaping her living hell was to make sure I took his last name as proof... in case anything happened to her. But my brother didn't need to hear what he already knew. He was too far gone, locked behind bars and trapped in his own mind, somewhere far away from the mess of our lives.

“You’re right,” I said, hanging up the phone before I could say something I’d regret.

Kaito didn’t care anymore. He’d stopped caring a long time ago. And me? I was just another name on a list of people who’d been abandoned by their own blood.

The days blurred together. I tried to find some semblance of peace—walking through the streets, avoiding the mess of emotions that kept flooding back every time I thought about my father’s death, the shitty payout, the broken promises. But peace wasn’t something you could find in a foreign place when you were running from the ghosts of everything you’d ever known. I spent most of my time alone, drowning in thoughts of what I was supposed to do with this life.

I should be looking for a job, creating some new connections, but it was as if there was a strong invisible barrier taunting me with each mental attempt, reminding me of my tainted past and bloodline and the fallacy of normalcy.

Every night, I went to bed, hoping that tomorrow would be different. But the next day always felt like the same old nightmare, just dressed in different clothes. Depression, the slithering old serpent with its fangs poised to strike whenever I dared to believe I might escape the mental prison I had inherited, the weight I continued to carry from home.

I spent hours wandering the streets of Sanya, trying to forget who I was and what my actual ambitions were. Sometimes, I stood at the edge of the city, watching the lights flicker against the dark sky. But no matter how far I walked, no matter how fast I moved, there were always shadows watching me.

Turning down a narrow alley, the air grew thicker, the flicker of streetlights just a distant hum. And there they were. A group of men lounging against the brick walls, their eyes locking onto me with the same tired, predatory look I’d seen a hundred times before. Nothing new here. Just another set of vultures circling, hoping for a

weak moment.

One of them stepped out in front of me, that greasy grin spreading across his face in an attempt to make him look dangerous. "Where you going, sweetheart?"

I was lucky my mother always spoke to me in Japanese when I was growing up, so adjusting to the language here wasn't much of a challenge.

I didn't break my stride, didn't even glance at him. "None of your business," I muttered, my voice flat, bored.

Another man laughed, his eyes running over me as if I was some kind of prize to be claimed. "A pretty thing like you shouldn't be walking these streets alone. Ain't safe out here."

I shrugged, not slowing down. "I'm not here for your opinion."

They chuckled, but it didn't faze me. I was used to this—used to men in the States who thought they could own every street, every woman, like the world revolved around them. These guys were no different. I knew the game. They knew the game. And I wasn't playing.

The first guy stepped closer, blocking my path. "You're gonna want to listen, girl."

I stopped then, dead in my tracks, locking eyes with him. The chill in my gaze was enough to make him hesitate. "You really want to keep talking?" I said, my voice as cold as the night around us. Did they see the dead look in my eyes? The haunting past that spoke of a woman who'd seen death plenty and wasn't afraid of it? "Because you can. But I'm walking away either way."

For a second, he seemed to consider it. But then, they always did. They always

backed off. They weren't the ones with nothing to lose.

I pushed past him without another word. The men fell silent, but I could feel their eyes boring into my back. I didn't care. This wasn't the first time. It sure as hell wouldn't be the last.

Memories of my mother's grimy motel rooms and the men whose stench lingered in the fabric of everything around us flickered in my mind as I wandered the streets, a ghost in this place—just another apparition in the slums.

It was the bright yellow and red against the drab grayness that yanked me out of my thoughts. Then I saw him—a monk. His calm stance and the polite bow, all caught me off guard, twisting my face into a scowl.

You didn't see many monks where I came from in the hood, but you heard about them. And here was one, right in front of me, in the flesh.

I stood there for a moment, awkward, studying him. There was something in his eyes—something familiar—but I couldn't place it.

He gave a small, serene smile before another bow, walking past me. I didn't bother responding, just turned back to my own path, the weight of my own returning thoughts pulling me back down—the bitter aftertaste of something I couldn't shake.

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No Escape

MOMOI

I wasn't looking for answers. I wasn't looking for anyone. I was looking for a place to breathe.

This city, with all its lights and sounds, felt like a cage I couldn't escape, no matter how far I ran. I thought if I wandered long enough, maybe I'd stumble upon some kind of escape—a door hidden somewhere that would lead me out of the mess my life had become, a portal to another realm far beyond this one. But there wasn't.

Every day was reminiscent of a countdown. A countdown to what? I couldn't tell you. Maybe a breakdown. Maybe something worse. I didn't know.

I wandered deeper into the city, the streets thinning as I moved away from the hustle. That's when I found it—an unassuming izakaya tucked away in a quiet corner. A narrow door, framed by the warm glow of paper lanterns, beckoned. The soft murmur of voices drifted out with the steam rising from the kitchen.

The moment I stepped inside, the smell of grilled fish, soy sauce, and sizzling tempura wrapped around me. The air was thick with a sense of comfort as if the whole place was made to forget the world outside. The walls were lined with faded wooden panels, the low murmur of patrons blending with the clink of ceramic cups. It was simple, humble, and familiar in a way that felt almost like home—except it

wasn't.

I slid onto a stool at the bar, giving a small nod to the bartender, an older man whose wrinkles seemed carved by years of serving the same tired faces. He didn't ask what I wanted, just placed a small wooden cup in front of me. A shot of shochu, smooth and biting all at once. The kind of drink that didn't need words.

I took a sip, letting the warmth spread through me, feeling the tension slip away, just a little. The flicker of lantern light caught the edges of the room, casting long shadows across the faces of the other customers. A pair of salarymen laughed too loudly at a joke, and a group of older women sat at the back, chatting softly over shared plates of sashimi. No one paid me any attention, and that was exactly what I needed.

The sounds of the place—the soft hum of conversation, the clink of glasses, the rhythmic tapping of chopsticks on plates—began to blend into the background. I leaned back, staring into my glass, watching the light dance in the clear liquid. It was familiar in the way that everything else in this city felt foreign. But for a moment, I didn't care. Here, I could just be another anonymous face in the crowd, no past, no future. Just here. Just now.

The bartender nodded at me, sensing my thoughts, and refilled my cup without a word. The warmth in my chest spread further, quieting the storm inside, even for a little while.

I took another sip, the burn of the shochu cutting through the haze in my head. The warmth helped, but it was only temporary. The frustration was still there, lurking underneath—a constant hum that never quite stopped.

I stared at the small glass in my hand, feeling the weight of it, the weight of my thoughts. I couldn't afford to keep drowning in this haze, wasting time in places such

as this.

I had skills—skills I'd spent years sharpening in the underworld of my previous life. But what good were they? I could read people, move through a crowd unnoticed, and make quick decisions when the stakes were high. I knew how to handle myself in tight situations, in places most people wouldn't dare step into. I was good at the underground—dealing with things in the shadows. That's where I thrived. But it wasn't the kind of life you built a future on. It wasn't normal. And it sure as hell wasn't sustainable.

I tried to picture myself in some office, sitting behind a desk, typing away at spreadsheets or answering calls. The idea was laughable. I was the type to take risks, to work the edges where most wouldn't dare. I didn't belong in a modest dress, in the kind of world where you punched in at nine and punched out at five.

I downed the last of my drink, feeling the familiar burn in my throat, but it didn't clear the fog in my mind. I wasn't stupid. I knew I needed to start somewhere. But where? Could I just walk into a normal job and pretend I didn't know how to hustle, how to survive? Even I couldn't elaborate on my non-existent resume that well, and I knew it.

The thought made me restless, made the tightness in my chest worse.

I set the empty cup back on the bar with a soft clink, the noise somehow sounding final, as if it was marking the end of something.

"Another?" the bartender asked, his voice low but expectant. I could feel his eyes on me, sizing me up. Was he judging me? The thought gnawed at me. A twenty-three-year-old woman, alone, drinking by herself—my thoughts were probably written all over my face.

Screw it. It didn't matter what he thought. It didn't matter what any of them thought.

I shook my head. "No. I'm done."

I slid off the stool, my legs stiff from sitting too long. The familiar weight of uncertainty pressed against me, but I didn't know where to go from here. No destination. No plan. Just the pull to move, to escape, to keep walking.

Exiting, the cold night air hit me like a slap. It didn't feel any better out here than it had in the pub, but it was something. I stepped into the streets, blending back into the shadows, the flickering neon lights painting the path ahead.

Maybe I'd find something. Maybe not. But right now, I just needed to keep moving. I wasn't used to silence, but that's what I found in Japan. Silence in a world that was waiting for me to make my move, but no one was going to tell me what that move was. The noise I'd come from—the streets of California, the endless echo of sirens, the violence—I didn't hear it here. I didn't hear anything. It was worse than I thought.

I should've been grateful for the quiet. Should've taken it for what it was—a break from everything I knew. But all I felt was restless.

My feet carried me without direction, each step leading me deeper into streets I hadn't seen before. The city blurred around me—neon signs, flickering streetlights, the low hum of the nightlife—but none of it reached me. I walked, my mind half-focused, my thoughts a tangled mess of what-ifs and could-bes.

Somehow, I found myself in front of something unexpected. A tall stone gate, ornate and weathered by time, stood in front of me. The air here felt different—quieter, almost reverent. I looked up, my gaze tracing the intricate designs of a structure that looked as if it had been pulled right out of a history book. It felt out of place in this city, like a forgotten relic from another time.

A temple, or maybe a shrine? The architecture was beautiful, with wooden beams curving high above, each corner adorned with carvings that told stories I couldn't read. The atmosphere was thick with an ancient stillness, and yet, something about it called to me.

I stood there for a moment, caught in the mix of confusion and curiosity. What the hell am I doing here? Something inside of me—some pull, some whisper—nudged me forward, urging me to go closer, to see what lay beyond the gates. But the nagging voice at the back of my head reminded me that I didn't belong here. I didn't know what I was walking into. I wasn't the type of person who wandered into sacred places, especially not in the middle of the night.

But still, my feet moved. They seemed to know something my brain didn't.

I crossed the threshold, entering the quiet space. The air felt colder, charged with an energy I couldn't quite place. The path was lined with stone lanterns, their light faint but steady. I paused, unsure, my heart thumping louder now, as if to tell me to turn back. But I didn't. There was something here, something drawing me in despite my better judgment.

I continued down the path, each step feeling heavier as if the ground beneath me was alive with something I couldn't understand. I glanced around, half-expecting someone to stop me, to tell me to leave, but there was no one. No one but me and the quiet, ancient stones.

The quiet started to feel oppressive, as if the weight of every mistake I'd ever made was pressing down on me. The temple, this place—I couldn't escape the feeling that it was watching me, judging me for my past, for the things I'd done to survive. Every step I took seemed to echo back at me louder than before. My chest tightened, and I felt a sudden wave of panic rise in my throat.

What am I doing here? I froze, the cold creeping into my bones. The temple was condemning me, wasn't it? It knew what I had done, what kind of person I was. I wasn't worthy of this peace, of whatever calm this place promised.

I turned, my feet moving faster now, my breath shallow as I walked back toward the gate. I needed to leave. I shouldn't have come in the first place. I was a ghost, a shadow of what I should've been, not someone who belonged here, surrounded by this stillness.

And then I ran straight into a hard chest.

I stumbled back, catching my breath as I looked up into his calm, furrowed brow. His eyes met mine, wide with confusion, as if he hadn't expected to find anyone in this sacred space at this hour.

The monk from the other night.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. I just stood there, heart racing, feeling exposed—similar to a kid caught stealing from the cookie jar. His gaze softened, but there was something steady in it, something that made me feel... shame. It didn't make any sense, but it was there, blatantly. How many more times was this man going to be witness to my failings as a human?

"You seem lost," he said softly, his voice like the rustling of leaves in the wind.

I swallowed hard, wanting to throw a snarky retort to cover my embarrassment, but the words stuck in my throat. "I... I shouldn't be here."

His expression didn't change, but he tilted his head, his presence oddly calming. "Why do you think that?" His voice held no judgment, just a quiet curiosity.

“I don’t belong here.” My words came out more sharply than I intended, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of guilt that clung to me. “I... I’ve done things. Things I’m not proud of. This place—it’s judging me.”

The monk studied me for a long moment, as if weighing my words before giving a small, knowing nod.

“The temple doesn’t judge,” he said softly. “It only invites. It is we who judge ourselves.”

I felt a knot tighten in my chest, unsure if I wanted to hear more. I took a step back from him, wanting to shake off his warmth. I didn’t deserve it. I was the daughter of a prostitute and a Yakuza with no ambitions, no dreams but the hope of some sort of escape. Heck, at this point, I wasn’t even sure what I was escaping anymore.

“I’m not someone who deserves peace,” I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper. “I don’t deserve... any of this.”

He didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he reached into his robes and pulled out a small, folded piece of paper, offering it to me. “Everyone deserves peace, even if they don’t believe they do.”

I stared at the paper for a moment before taking it from his hand. My fingers brushed his for the briefest second, sending an unexpected jolt through me.

He gave me a small, serene smile and bowed, his movement graceful and deliberate. “Take it or leave it. But know that peace is always available if you choose to see it.”

I wanted to say something—apologize, explain, or ask how he could be so sure—but the words didn’t come. Instead, like a coward, I ran past him.

4

Cigarette Ash

MOMOI

The night swallowed me whole as soon as I crawled into bed, and I didn't even get a chance to pull the covers up before the dreams hit, the drink I had earlier taking its final effects on my mental state.

The dark pulled me under, the same kind of nightmare I had too often. The ones that felt too real. The ones that tasted like cigarette ash in the back of my throat. It always started the same way—my mother's motel room, the stench of cheap whiskey and desperation clinging to the air. The muffled voices of men who had no business being there when they didn't have an appointment... the sound of their laughter bouncing off the walls.

“Well, what do we have here?”

I scooted back in the closet, trying to get as far away as I could, away from the scent of his wretched breath. My gaze flickered to my mother, who was lying lifeless on the bed, still naked. He drugged her, didn't he? Some of them do when they trick her into becoming a plaything to their group while only paying for a single service.

I could still feel it—the rough hands, the cold breath, the thick, suffocating air. I fought back, every muscle in my body screaming in protest as I slapped and kicked, trying to break free. But their laughter—God, it was the worst part. That mocking,

taunting laugh. It echoed in my ears. I was trapped in the same moment over and over again.

In the dream, I was younger—barely more than a child—and I fought like I had no choice. I screamed, I pushed, I bit, and I tore myself away. But no matter how hard I struggled, they always came back, always found me. I could never escape. The fear, the helplessness—it clawed at me, raking deep into my skin, until I thought I might choke on it.

I was there in the moment, yet removed as if watching it all play out from a distance. But why could I still feel them on my skin?

Get them off me! Get away from me!

And then, as always, it shifted. One moment, I was fighting—pushing, kicking, screaming—and the next, the room seemed to melt away. The men were gone, their taunts fading into silence, and I was suddenly wrapped in warmth.

I froze. My muscles, still stiff from the phantom blows, went rigid in disbelief. My breath caught in my throat. This... this was different. The air was thick, but it wasn't suffocating. It was safe, warm—a comfort I hadn't known in years. But my body tensed, every nerve on edge. No. No, this wasn't right.

There was no such thing as safe. Lies. It was all lies!

I tried to pull away, but something held me there. His arms, strong and steady, tightened around me, as if he was keeping me from falling apart. I fought against it—against him—but the warmth only deepened, wrapping around me like a heavy blanket.

It was wrong. This was wrong.

But the weight of it—this softness, this care—it felt real in a way I didn't understand, in a way that terrified me.

The embrace caught me off guard, and by now, nothing should catch me off guard—that was what I was afraid of, an unknown to a girl who lived the life I had. But beyond reason, beyond my comprehension... it felt safe, a shelter, as if someone had finally pulled me out of the storm. For a moment, I wanted to sink into it, let the warmth drown out the nightmares. But then I registered something—his hands, his arms around me. Strong but gentle, as if he knew exactly how much pressure I could handle.

My heart skipped a beat. No.

I jerked in his hold, the sudden realization washing over me like ice water. I twisted, trying to break free, but he held me firmly.

Let me go! It was as if the scream was lodged, my mouth unable to pry open.

I forced myself to look up, to face my perpetrator head-on and possibly gouge his eyes out. But what I saw made my breath catch in my throat—the monk. His eyes were soft, too soft, and they held a kind of care I'd never known. The kind of care I didn't know how to handle. My body tensed once again, my mind screaming at me to pull away, but my legs wouldn't move. His face was closer now, his expression filled with something—something too tender for someone like me to even comprehend.

"I'm here," he murmured, his voice a balm to my raw, battered mind. "You're safe."

Safe. What did that even mean?

I recoiled at the word. It didn't fit. Safe was something I'd never had, something I didn't know how to want. I didn't trust this warmth, this soft comfort he was offering

me. The only thing I knew was the cold distance I'd kept from everyone and the bitterness that came with it. This kind of care? It made my skin crawl.

But why? Why did it feel... different? What was wrong with me?

I pushed harder, pulling at his arms, feeling the heat of his touch like a branding iron. The monk didn't budge, didn't let go, and my heart pounded faster, erratic, until I couldn't stand it anymore.

I woke up with a start, the sheets tangled around my legs, my skin slick with sweat. My breath was shallow, my chest rising and falling in frantic bursts. The shadows of the nightmare still lingered in the corners of my vision, but they were fading. The warm embrace, the monk's eyes, the care—it all lingered too, but now it felt wrong. Too soft. Too much.

I sat up, rubbing my face with both hands, trying to clear the fog from my mind. The room was still dark, the hum of the city outside muffled, as if the world was holding its breath, waiting for me to figure out what the hell was going on. My head throbbed, the remnants of the nightmare crawling under my skin, and I couldn't shake the feeling that something had shifted—something I wasn't ready for.

What was that?

I could still feel the lingering sensation of his arms around me, the warmth of it, the care that didn't belong in my world. The monk... why him? He was the epitome of out-of-bounds. He was a figure of peace, of serenity, something I couldn't wrap my head around. Something that existed outside the underground universe.

And yet, there it was. That damn softness in his eyes, in the way he'd held me.

I couldn't understand it. I couldn't even explain why it bothered me so much. I'd

spent years fighting back against men who wanted something from me. Men who saw me as nothing more than an object to claim, to use, to abuse. But he wasn't them. He was forbidden to be like them because of who he was.

And that, that was what unsettled me the most. That men like him even existed. That our worlds would collide—light and dark.

I threw the covers off, trying to cool my body down, staring out the window into the cityscape. I couldn't let myself get caught up in this dream—this thing —because it didn't make sense. I couldn't trust it. It wasn't real.

I shook my head violently, forcing myself to focus as I turned over and pulled the sheets back over me. I had to shake it off. Nightmares have been a dime a dozen since my youth.

But his phantom touch wouldn't leave me, and I hated myself for even letting it linger. Guilt, shame, disgust, and self-hate washed over me as my fingers traveled between my legs.

What would the monk think of me now? If he caught me in this position, punishing myself like this? The men who paraded through my mother's motel stole my innocence from me. When she was passed out from her addictions, the only way to protect her was to let myself be used. They all knew my weakness. It wasn't that hard to figure out when I would whimper, dissociating as their filthy hands crawled all over me while I kept my eyes on my mother's limp body, making sure she was alright, making sure they kept their word.

Over the years, I learned to defend myself, learned the art of the blade, and much more. But I never showed my hand, not when I could count on my fists if I had to. By sixteen, I roamed the streets as my mother made her living. It was for both her sake and mine as I began to develop a hidden rage that couldn't be quenched.

My mother and I got into plenty of spats when my anger would cost her customers.

I chuckled against the pillow at the memories. Look at me now. My fingers slipping between the apex of my legs as images of a stranger—a monk of all things—flit through my mind.

They say monks worked on their physical strength, agility, patience, and resilience most of their lives. It made sense. Everything about him felt as if it belonged to a life of discipline and rigor. There was a stillness in him that seemed carved from years of training, and his calmness had an intensity to it, like he could endure whatever the world threw at him without flinching.

But I couldn't help but wonder...

Spreading my legs further, I dipped my finger inside, my arousal making it easy to enter. He had the posture of someone who had spent years sitting in meditation, muscles honed not through brute force but through stillness, precision, and control. I bet I could crack his carefully crafted facade. The thought made me hot, knowing how bad I could be if he wanted me to. Heck, I could show him things he never thought possible.

I wondered about the scars beneath his robes, if any. Every monk had their own story etched into their body—whether from the hardships of life or the discipline of their training. I panted against the pillow as my fingers moved faster, teasing me with just the right amount of friction while still holding my growing pleasure at bay. After all, there was no fun in falling off the cliff within a few minutes.

I was used to the torture. I learned to crave it.

How long would a woman with my skill be able to edge a monk? I licked my lips at the thought. Would he be stoic as I licked his scars, traveling downward toward the

promised land? A moan slipped as my hips began to undulate with my strokes.

Would he be able to continue to hold himself still without a sound when I sucked down his hard cock, licking the underside and its pronounced veins?

“This is so wrong...” I whispered, my fingers moving faster as my other hand kneaded my aching breast.

There was something about him that made my curiosity flare. It was strange, wanting to imagine him beyond the robes, beyond the serene calm. Why? Why was I thinking about it at all?

And why was my body responding with so much fire the more I reminded myself that he was out of bounds?

I bet I could make him break his stoicism. I bet I could make him moan and beg for more as I sucked down his cock down to his balls and watched his eyes roll to the back of his head in surrender.

My muscles tensed as I fought back against the impending climax, wanting my self-imposed punishment to last a little while longer.

But I couldn't stop it. That question lingered, trailing through my mind similar to an itch I couldn't scratch. What would it feel like to make him lose control? To naughtily make him break his vows at the tip of my tongue? To watch his own guilt and shame hum through his veins as I drank every last drop he gave me?

“You're dirty, Momoi. You're such a slut,” I breathed as I began to tease and pinch my clit until my head became light right before I cried out in ecstasy through one of the biggest self-induced orgasms I ever had.

I shook my head, trying to push away the thoughts. I couldn't understand it, and that made me want to run even faster.

Instead, I found myself bringing my arousal-coated fingers into my mouth, humming around it, wondering what it would be like to sit on his face to clean up the mess he left behind.

Behind the Mask

TATSUYA IKEDA

I moved methodically through the temple grounds, the rhythmic sound of my broom sweeping across the stone floor a steady companion. The morning air was thick with the scent of incense and the faint chirp of birds from the trees surrounding the temple. The stillness was familiar, grounding—exactly what I needed to start the day. The temple was my refuge, a place where I could disappear into the silence and the endless cycles of chanting and worship. Every sweep, every prayer, every quiet moment felt like a small act of atonement, a way to stitch the pieces of myself together.

I sat in front of the altar, lotus position, bowing my head as I began my morning worship. My hands pressed together, fingers aligned in prayer, and I recited the mantras—soft, steady, each word a thread binding me to something greater. The vibrations of the chant reverberated through my body, each syllable connecting me to the present moment, to the teachings I had spent my life absorbing.

Over the years, I had steadily climbed to second rank as a Dai-s?zu. It was a position I had earned through diligent work, discipline, and unwavering dedication, or at least that's how I tried to see it. But the truth was, every step felt more akin to a test, and each advancement felt as much the same as a burden as an accomplishment.

The Dai-s?zu rank was a marker of progress, strength, and mastery. But sometimes, I

wondered if I was still as broken as the day I had first set foot in this temple. The past—the boy I had been—didn't disappear just because I wore these robes, and I still couldn't shed the weight of my imperfections. But I had to keep moving forward. I had to. To fall behind, to stagnate, would be to let that past consume me once again.

I often thought about the future—the next rank, the path that awaited me. Risshi, the rank above me, was the true test of everything I had been working for. Reaching that level meant mastery of the teachings, the rituals, and perhaps most daunting of all, the ability to lead others. I wasn't sure if I was ready for that, but it was the direction my life had been set on from the moment I had taken the vow.

I couldn't afford to falter. I had to keep my focus. The expectation weighed heavily on my shoulders, and I often wondered if I would be able to reach the pinnacle of what I had committed to so many years ago. Would I continue to rise, or would I remain trapped in my own flaws, my own doubts?

It was a question I had no answer to yet, but I couldn't stop pushing forward. I hoped that, like the lotus, my flaws would eventually fade as I worked toward enlightenment. But for now, all I could do was keep moving—one step, one chant, one breath at a time.

"Ah, Tatsuya," a voice interrupted my thoughts.

I straightened up, setting my palms flat on the cool stone. It was my superior, an older monk whose face was etched with the wisdom and weariness of many years. His robes were a deep brown and mustard, the fabric heavy with the weight of experience. He stood there, watching me with those knowing eyes that always made me feel as though he saw through every facade I tried to maintain.

"How is the worship going today?" he asked, his tone light, but his question heavy with the weight of expectation.

I swallowed, forcing my voice to remain even. "The morning chants are complete. The temple is in order."

He nodded, his hands folded into the sleeves of his robe. "Good, good. We must keep the balance, as the lotus blooms only when the mud is tended to."

The old Buddhist idioms. They never ceased to remind me of my own imperfections. I nodded politely, not wanting to question his words, but internally I felt the familiar stir of discomfort. The lotus blooms only when the mud is tended to. It always seemed to imply that there was something beneath the surface that needed to be cleaned, to be fixed. But what if the mud never went away? What if there was no way to clear it from my own heart?

"I hope the young monks are learning the lessons well?" he asked, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, looking out toward the small group of novices sweeping the outer courtyard.

"Yes," I said, forcing a smile. "They are diligent. It will take time, as always."

He studied me for a moment, and I could feel the weight of his gaze. His eyes were sharp, as though he could see the turmoil within me. "Remember, Tatsuya, patience is the path to enlightenment, not haste. You must let things unfold as they are meant to. The mountain does not rush to meet the sky."

His words were a balm, but they also stung. I had spent years in this temple, trying to embody patience, trying to walk the path without looking back. But the past followed me in the nature of shadows, no matter how far I ran. I was the mountain, I realized, and I had not yet learned how to meet the sky. I had not yet learned how to reconcile the boy I had been with the monk I was supposed to be.

"Thank you, Dai-risshi," I said quietly, bowing my head. "I will reflect on your

words."

He gave a slow, almost imperceptible nod and, without another word, turned to leave. His footsteps echoed down the long hall, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I stood there for a moment, breathing deeply, trying to clear the weight from my chest. The quiet felt heavy now, the sounds of my own breathing filling the space around me. I swept the broom a few more times, my movements automatic, but my mind was elsewhere.

It had been a few days since I'd run into her—the girl. I didn't catch her name, but her image still lingered in the back of my mind, a memory I couldn't quite shake. I had only seen her for a brief moment or two—just long enough to catch the edge of something unsettling in her eyes. There was a wildness to her, a sadness that radiated even through the briefest of interactions. The way she'd brushed past me, the way her eyes flicked over me as if she couldn't quite decide whether to trust me or not—it unsettled me more than I cared to admit.

Who wouldn't trust a monk? I asked myself, trying to convince my thoughts. But beneath that fragile confidence, an old, serpentine voice slithered through my mind, whispering that she saw right through me.

Perhaps I was thinking too deeply into it. Old demons trying to pull me back into a world I no longer belonged to. I had been trying to ignore it, trying to focus on my duties, but I couldn't help it. She haunted the corners of my thoughts. I wondered if she was in trouble and if that was the reason for her visit to the temple.

There had been something in her, a desperation or perhaps a kind of restlessness, that made me wonder if she needed help. I had seen many souls the same as hers pass through the city, people who tried to outrun their pasts, or their mistakes. They often found no solace, no place to hide. And it made me wonder if I could offer her

something, if only for a moment.

I found myself turning toward the door of the temple, my hand lingering on the edge of it.

Don't go looking for her, I told myself. Focus on your path. Let go of distractions.

But the thought of her sorrowful eyes lingered equivalent to a weight I couldn't shake off, pressing down on me with every step. No matter how much I tried to push it away, it crept back, relentless, comparable to a losing battle I couldn't win.

Without another word, I stepped out into the crisp morning air, the smell of incense still clinging to my robes, grounding me in the familiarity of the temple. For a brief moment, my mind felt clear—just the cool air and the soft rhythm of my footsteps. But then, like a persistent shadow, there was a pull in my chest. A gnawing feeling that I had to find her.

I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe it was something deeper, a flicker of responsibility I couldn't explain. But as I walked, the tug only grew stronger. She lingered in my thoughts, and I couldn't shake the sense that there was something about her I needed to understand.

Maybe I was fooling myself. Her guarded eyes showed a glimpse of a past she couldn't escape and it haunted me. I had seen that look before. I'd seen it in myself.

I was the son of a prostitute. My mother, who spent her nights with men who paid for her company, had never been able to protect herself—or me—from the darkness that consumed her life. My father was a drunkard, the type who never saw me as anything more than a mistake to be ignored or beaten into submission. When her life was stolen by the very man who should have protected us, I was left with nothing but the weight of a childhood soaked in blood and pain.

That was when I had been brought to the temple. I was just a boy, trembling and scared, too broken to know how to live and too lost to know how to survive. The monks took me in, and I began my new life, trying to escape the echoes of my past—the violence, the shame, the fear.

The temple offered me a sanctuary, but it didn't erase the scars, the feelings of worthlessness that followed me with disconsolateness. I thought I could outrun it, that through prayer and discipline, I could bury it deep. But now, standing in the middle of the city, I could feel that same heaviness again.

I wasn't sure what I was hoping to find by looking for her, but I couldn't stop myself. I need to understand what she's carrying, I thought. What kind of burden is she hiding behind those eyes?

Maybe she was similar to me, someone who had been left to fend for themselves in a world that didn't care. Maybe she was just a soul lost in the same way I had been. But even as I told myself these things, something in me wanted to believe that finding her again could mean something else—something more. I wasn't sure what, but I couldn't ignore the pull.

The fight inside me raged. I knew I should focus on my duties, on my path, and on the temple's teachings. But her face—the brief flicker of pain I'd seen in her—kept coming back to me. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something she needed, something I could help with.

I had been searching for peace for so long, but what if helping her was the path to find it? Or was I simply losing my way again, drawn into something I wasn't prepared for?

The city loomed ahead, a sea of strangers, and I found myself moving toward it without knowing where I was going. I was already too far from the temple, from my

past, and yet here I was—still trying to escape the same ghosts that haunted me.

And I couldn't help but wonder—was she the one who needed saving, or was I the one who still needed to be redeemed?

The Smell of Desperation

MOMOI

I walked the streets with a purpose, my feet hitting the cracked pavement harder than necessary. My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten anything since yesterday, but I ignored it. I had more important things to focus on than hunger. I needed to find work.

The city was alive with the hum of busy people, all moving with purpose, their footsteps a constant rhythm that seemed to mock my own aimless wandering. I was an outsider—just another face in a sea of strangers, but one that nobody wanted to deal with. Each step I took only seemed to remind me how invisible I was, how I didn't belong. Every shop I entered, every business I walked into, was the same—blank stares, polite refusals, and a slow, tightening knot in my chest.

“No experience?” Their voices were polite, but the subtle condescension there was undeniable. They didn't even bother to look at my face. They were just checking a box, making sure I didn't fit their criteria, as if it was something they could measure by looking at my resume, something I didn't have.

“Yeah, that's right,” I answered, my voice tight. “But I'm willing to learn.”

Another pause, then a glance at their clipboard or phone screen, a quick evaluation of whether I was worth their time. It didn't help that my clothes weren't the kind usually

seen in the city, more reflective of Western culture, much to my detriment.

“Well, we’re looking for someone with more experience. Sorry.” The statement sounded almost rehearsed. Their eyes would shift over my shoulder as if the next person waiting in line was the one they were really interested in. I wasn’t even a blip on their radar.

The frustration bubbled up in me, but I forced myself to nod, a practiced smile on my face.

“Right. Thanks,” I muttered before turning on my heel, making my way out of the shop as quickly as I could without looking close to physically running away from rejection.

But it didn’t stop. It was the same everywhere I went. The same polite dismissal, the same underlying judgment that I didn’t have the right credentials, the right look, the right... whatever it was they needed to see to trust me.

By the time I walked into the third shop—a small cafe with a couple of tables inside, the scent of freshly baked goods wafting through the door—I was on the edge of breaking. My stomach was growling louder than my thoughts, and I hadn’t even noticed how badly I needed food until now. Maybe if I could just grab something simple, I could sit down for a minute and clear my head.

I walked up to the counter, doing my best to keep the exhaustion from showing.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” I said, trying to keep my tone light, trying to not sound desperate, even though I felt it deep in my bones. “But are you hiring?”

The woman behind the counter glanced at me briefly before picking up a glass to wash it. “No, sorry. We’re all set for now.”

I frowned, resisting the urge to ask, Do you not anticipate having a lot of customers? What are you going to do during rush hour?

“Right. Thanks,” I muttered again, turning to leave. I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflection of the glass door, and I hated what I saw. My hair was messy from the wind, my clothes probably more revealing than they should be, and I couldn’t tell if my face looked tired or just... lost.

As the door shut behind me, I leaned against the wall outside, trying to steady my breathing. I should’ve known it would be like this. I’d been through this routine before—over and over again, in a different city, in a different life. The same rejection. The same feeling of being invisible. The same gnawing emptiness that followed me wherever I went. It was all too familiar, how people looked past me, not worth a second glance. That was what led me down the path of shady deals under the cover of night. Back then, I didn’t care. I was just trying to survive, to fill the void in whatever way I could. The money, the thrill, the chaos—it all felt as if it could drown out the hollowness, even if just for a moment.

But now, it was different. I didn’t want to go back to that. I didn’t want to crawl back into the shadows of that life. I wanted to stand in the light, to be seen as more than just the girl who made desperate choices. I wanted to have a real life. A normal life. One where I wasn’t constantly looking over my shoulder, where I didn’t have to hide who I was or what I did. I wanted to try, to finally live the same as everyone else, without the weight of my past holding me down.

I felt as if the city was laughing at me, mocking me for thinking I could ever be a part of something normal. Each rejection was a reminder of how far I’d strayed from that dream. But I couldn’t give up—not this time. I had come too far, across an entire ocean, to start again. I had to keep pushing forward, even if it felt like every step I took was just another nail in the coffin.

I'm not going back to that. Not again. Not ever.

But the doubt crept in again, as it always did, gnawing at my resolve. Was it even possible to start over? To erase all of the things I had done, all of the choices I had made? I wanted to believe it was. I needed to.

I gritted my teeth, muttering to myself. "You're fine. You're fine. Just keep going."

But I wasn't fine. And I knew it.

I tried to calm my racing thoughts. Okay, just one more. One more shop. You can do it.

I looked down the street, where a small gift shop stood, its window filled with trinkets and hand-crafted knick-knacks. Maybe they would need someone. Maybe it wasn't so hopeless. I was already dressed in the nature of a typical foreigner, wouldn't that make visitors feel more welcome?

I wasn't sure if I was lying to myself, but I pushed myself forward anyway, dragging my feet, trying to fight the frustration clawing at me.

The bell above the door jingled as I entered, and I was greeted by a middle-aged woman who looked at me with a polite but reserved expression.

"Hello," she said, barely glancing up from her counter as she arranged some small ceramic statues. "Can I help you?"

"I was wondering if you're hiring," I asked again, trying not to let the desperation in my voice show. "I can do anything, really. I'm willing to start with whatever you need. I don't have much experience, but I'm a fast learner."

Her eyes skimmed over me, blatantly evaluating whether I was worth her time. Her hands stopped moving for a moment, and there was a pause.

“No, sorry,” she said, her voice flat and disinterested. “We’re fully staffed.”

I stared at her for a moment, feeling like I’d been punched in the gut. It wasn’t that I expected her to drop everything and hire me on the spot, but the quickness with which she turned me away, without even offering me a second thought was another blow I wasn’t ready for.

“Right,” I said, trying to force a smile, but it felt too tight. “Thanks for your time.”

I turned and walked out, this time not even bothering to hide the frustration in my steps. My mind was buzzing with anger, self-doubt, and a gnawing sense of rejection that was starting to swallow me whole. I could feel the tears threatening to rise in my throat, but I refused to let them show.

I didn’t care.

I can do this. I’ll just keep going. I’ll find something. I will. I have to. You don’t have to go back to the darkness.

With my head down and fists clenched, I stormed onto the street, running right into someone.

Someone who smelled familiar.

I barely registered his figure until I had already knocked into him, my body jerking back as I tried to steady myself. I glanced up, expecting the usual serene, calm expression. But there was a hint of surprise in his eyes as he steadied me with his hands.

The monk.

“Sorry,” he said softly. “I didn’t see you there.”

I didn’t have time for him, not now. Not with everything boiling inside me.

“Yeah, well, maybe you should start paying attention,” I snapped, the words flying out before I could stop them.

His calm expression didn’t falter, but his eyes softened just a little. “Are you okay?”

I scoffed, my frustration spilling out in a way I couldn’t control. “Yeah, I’m just great. Perfect, actually. Another rejection. Another dead-end job search. You know, the usual.”

He didn’t pull away, didn’t step back, just stood there, quiet and patient, his expression unreadable. But there was something in his eyes—an understanding, a patience—that made me want to scream even more.

Why would someone as untainted as him need to worry about anything I was going through? The temple likely provided everything he needed—food, shelter, support—through offerings. He had no reason to understand, no reason to care about the mess that was my life.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” he said, his voice calm, almost too calm, akin to speaking to a child throwing a tantrum.

“Well, maybe you should stop asking dumb questions, then!” I shot back, my words sharp and biting. It wasn’t even about him anymore; I was pissed at everything, at the world, at myself. And he was standing there as if he could just fix it all with a couple of kind words. How naive.

His expression didn't change, not even a little. He just kept looking at me with that steady gaze, and something about it made my skin crawl. He didn't react to me. Unfazed by my anger, making me feel even worse. Like I was the one out of control, the one who was too much.

"I'm not trying to upset you," he said, softer this time, but still firm. "I'm just trying to understand."

I felt my temper flare even higher. Understand? "You don't need to understand anything about me!" I nearly spat the words at him. "I don't need your help or your sympathy, alright? Just leave me the hell alone."

His eyes softened, as if he didn't take it personally. Like I wasn't ripping into him with everything I had. It only pissed me off more. I didn't want his pity, and I certainly didn't want his concern.

"I'm not pitying you," he said, his voice still steady, that damn calmness not wavering an inch. "But you don't have to do this alone, you know."

"You don't know me," I snapped, louder this time, taking a step toward him. My voice was on the edge of breaking, but I was too furious to care. "You don't know anything about me, about what I've been through. So don't act like you do."

His gaze didn't change, and that was the problem. Why was he so calm? Why wasn't he getting angry back?

"I'm not pretending to know," he said quietly. "But I know what it feels like to carry something heavy. To be weighed down by things you can't change. You don't have to carry that burden by yourself."

The words hit me harder than I wanted them to. For a moment, everything inside me

froze. My anger started to dissolve, but I wasn't ready to let it go. I couldn't. No one gets to make me feel like this. No one gets to get through to me.

"I don't need this, alright?" The words came out in a rush, desperate to push him away, but there was no conviction in them. "I don't need anyone. I'm fine."

But he didn't seem to be buying it. He took a step closer, and I wanted to scream, to tell him to stay the hell away from me. But his voice, calm and gentle, still cut through the noise in my head.

"You don't have to pretend to be fine," he said, his tone soft but firm, as if he wasn't going to back down. "You're allowed to ask for help. You're allowed to let someone in. It doesn't make you weak."

I stood there, my chest tight, suffocating under the weight of his words. His presence, calm and steady, was suffocating me in a different way. But I couldn't escape it. I couldn't escape him.

"I'm Tatsuya Ikeda," he said, breaking the silence between us. He gave a small bow, akin to some kind of ritual. "If you ever need anything, even if it's just someone to talk to, I'll be around or at the temple."

The words hung in the air, and I felt something in me twist. I hated it. I hated that he was being so... kind. I didn't need kindness. I didn't need him.

I wanted to argue, wanted to snap at him, but I couldn't. I couldn't find the words, and even if I could, I wasn't sure I wanted to say them anymore.

Without another word, I turned and walked away, my heart pounding in my chest, the remnants of my anger still smoldering under the surface. But his words, his presence, lingered in the back of my mind. You're allowed to let someone in.

And it made my stomach churn with something I couldn't quite name. Something that made me afraid of myself.

The Audacity of Fools

MOMOI

I was still furious. Rejection after rejection. I wasn't even given the chance to prove I could do anything. Just "no experience," "not what we're looking for," the same tired excuses, the same dismissive faces.

So, I ended up in a bar. Another dive, another place where I could lose myself in a drink and pretend for a few minutes that none of this mattered. I didn't want to think about anything anymore, least of all the crushing weight of being nothing in a city full of people who could've cared less.

At this rate, my money was going down the drain faster than I wanted, making me feel even worse.

The bartender, an older guy who looked as if he'd seen too many wasted souls pass through, slid a glass in front of me without asking. I didn't say a word, just took the drink and knocked it back like I was drowning in it.

"Rough day?" he asked quietly, not wanting to push but still offering a friendly ear.

I stared at the glass, taking a few moments before answering. "What gave it away?" I muttered, barely caring. The last thing I needed was someone trying to play therapist, but I didn't care enough to send him away. Maybe the silence was better than trying

to pretend everything was fine.

He didn't press. Good.

I watched quietly as he refilled my cup before walking away to tend to other customers. I threw some cash on the counter and took a sip.

I sat there for a while, the low hum of the bar around me fading into the background as the alcohol took over. It wasn't enough, but it was something.

But of course, some guy decided he needed to ruin the moment.

"Hey, pretty lady," he said, his voice dripping with confidence, or maybe arrogance. I didn't look at him, but I could feel his presence right next to me. "Mind if I sit here?"

I didn't bother turning my head. "No, but you're gonna do it anyway, right?"

He chuckled. A sound that immediately made my skin crawl. "You got that right," he said, sliding onto the stool beside me as if he owned the place. "How about I buy you a drink?"

I didn't want anything from him. "You can keep your drink, I already got mine," I snapped, my patience already running thin.

"Come on, don't be like that," he insisted, leaning a little too close. "What's your name?"

I could feel his breath, the subtle intrusion of his presence, and it pissed me off. "I'm not interested."

He didn't back off. Instead, he leaned even closer, trying to act all charming as if I

didn't already see through it. "Don't you want to have some fun?" he asked, his hand brushing against my arm.

I froze for a second, the audacity of this guy burning a hole in my patience. Flexing my free hand into a fist, I took a few deep breaths.

"You don't get it, do you?" I snapped, spinning toward him, my hand gripping the glass tighter. "I'm not looking for whatever bullshit you're selling."

He looked surprised, but then his grin came back. "Oh, come on, no need to be so cold."

And that was it. I'd had enough. Without even thinking, I grabbed my drink and threw it in his face. I slammed the glass onto the counter with satisfaction as the ice and whiskey splashed all over his shirt, his face, and his smug little expression wiped clean away.

"You're an idiot," I muttered, standing up and turning on my heel.

His hands went to his chest as he sputtered. "What the hell's your problem?"

I didn't stick around to hear the rest. I pushed through the crowd of the bar, heading for the door without a second glance. I could hear his footsteps behind me, fast, angry, and I just hoped he'd stop. But of course, he didn't.

"Hey, bitch!" I heard him yell as the door slammed behind me. "You're gonna pay for that!"

I kept walking, fast now, the thudding of his footsteps behind me getting closer. He was following me. Great. I quickened my pace, my heart pounding harder as I heard his voice cutting through the air.

"You think you can just do that and get away with it?" His voice was venomous now, each step that echoed behind me pushing me further into a panic. I probably knew what he wanted, but I wasn't sticking around to find out.

I glanced behind me, his face twisted in rage, eyes dark with anger. He wasn't going to stop. He wasn't going to let this go. He wasn't used to rejection.

I could feel the fear creeping up my spine, but I shoved it down. I wasn't going to let some asshole ruin my night. Not tonight. Not again.

I turned a corner, trying to lose him, but he was still on my tail. My breath was quick now, my head spinning with the weight of my anger and the desperation to escape.

"Get the fuck away from me!" I screamed, turning around to face him, but he didn't slow down. He was right there, towering over me now, his anger mixing with something else—something ugly.

"You can't just treat people like shit and walk away!" he spat.

Something inside of me broke. The same fury that had been simmering all day came pouring out of me in a burst of energy. I shoved him back, hard, but he just grabbed my arm, jerking me toward him, his grip too tight, his breath foul and hot on my face.

"Let go of me!" I yelled, panic creeping into my voice.

He sneered, pulling me closer. "Make me."

That's when everything inside me exploded.

With everything I had, I kned him right in the gut. His eyes widened in shock as he staggered back, gasping for air, his grip loosening just enough for me to pull away

and elbow him in the face. Another swift kick, and he was knocked on the ground.

I didn't wait. I turned and ran, done with the day. My legs moved like they had a mind of their own, dodging through the crowd, weaving around people. I didn't care about anything but getting away from him and back to the solitude of my apartment.

My heart pounded in my chest, a steady rhythm that matched my hurried steps, but the thudding of his footsteps behind me, heavy and relentless, pushed me harder. I could feel the adrenaline still coursing through my veins, the rush from the earlier scuffle urging me to keep going. The streets blurred around me as I darted between alleyways, taking turns I'd memorized, pushing myself past every obstacle in my path.

I could hear him behind me, getting closer, but I refused to look back. I had to keep moving faster, harder. It was all instinct now.

When my arm was yanked backward, I jerked and instinctually twisted, spinning around, ready to fight.

But another figure stole my attention. Standing between me and the man who had grabbed me, was Tatsuya.

I froze for a second, my breath catching in my throat. He looked different now—his face still calm, but there was a steel in his gaze that wasn't there before. His body was positioned protectively between me and the man who had dared to lay a hand on me. I could see the slight tension in his posture, the veins popping out the side of his bald head, prepared for whatever came next.

The man who had grabbed me scoffed, still holding onto my arm, but his eyes flickered between Tatsuya and me.

"Mind your business, monk," the man sneered, his grip tightening on my wrist, pulling me closer toward him. "This doesn't concern you."

But Tatsuya didn't flinch. His voice was low, almost serene, but it held a quiet authority that made the man hesitate. "It does concern me. Let her go."

The thug scoffed again, his grip on me tightening. "And what? You're gonna stop me? I think you've got the wrong idea, monk."

Tatsuya didn't even blink. "You're the one with the wrong idea."

He stepped forward, closing the distance between him and the stranger, moving with the calm precision of someone who knew how to handle conflict without making a show of it.

I didn't have time to process what was happening. One moment, the loser was pulling me toward him, and the next, Tatsuya had moved in a flash, grabbing the man's arm and twisting it behind his back with a practiced move. The stranger gasped, letting go of my wrist in an instant as he staggered to the side, clearly shocked by Tatsuya's swift action.

"Let me make something clear," Tatsuya said, his voice unwavering. "You will not touch her again." His grip tightened on the guy's arm, and the man yelped in pain, his body starting to go limp as he realized there was no way out of this situation.

I stood there, a bit impressed, trying to make sense of what was happening. I hadn't expected Tatsuya to step in like this—not after the brief interaction we had before. He was a monk, after all. This kind of thing was the last thing I imagined him getting involved in. Weren't monks about peace and all?

Realizing he was outmatched, the guy from the bar cursed under his breath. "This

isn't over," he spat, and with a final, desperate jerk, he tried to pull away from Tatsuya's hold. But the monk didn't budge, keeping him in place with ease.

"It is now," Tatsuya said, his tone cold but resolute.

The stranger growled, stumbling backward as he finally gave up, retreating into the night, his pride bruised but his life intact.

I watched him go, my heart still racing. The adrenaline from the fight was starting to wear off, and I was left with the eerie quiet of the night around us. I turned to face Tatsuya, my mind still trying to catch up with what had just happened. No one had ever interceded for me before, let alone a male. In the past, the males usually joined in with whatever they had planned for me.

For a moment, neither of us said anything. I could feel the weight of his presence next to me—a calm in the middle of the storm. He was standing there, unmoved, as if he had no trouble with the confrontation at all.

Finally, he spoke, his voice softer now, but still steady. "Are you all right?"

I blinked, taken aback by the concern in his voice. It was strange hearing it, and even stranger that he seemed genuinely concerned about me—the girl with an attitude problem because she couldn't process her emotions earlier, and he happened to be the closest casualty. I wasn't used to this—I wasn't sure how to feel about it.

People like him, people who seemed so untouchable, didn't care about someone like me. Not in this way.

I didn't answer yet. Instead, I looked away, pushing down the gnawing feeling in my chest that told me to distrust this moment, to keep my distance. I wasn't used to this kind of care, this kind of protection. I was always able to take care of myself on the

streets.

“I’ll be fine,” I muttered, my voice rough, not meeting his eyes.

Tatsuya didn’t push. He just nodded, his gaze lingering on me for a moment longer before he stepped back, his presence still a calming anchor in the chaos of the night.

“Stay safe,” he said, and guilt began to eat away at me.

“Momoi.”

“What was that?”

With a deep breath, I fought every survival instinct I grew up with. “My name. It’s Momoi.”

He didn’t need to know my last name.

I felt something shift in me, something I wasn’t ready to acknowledge, and I turned away before I could feel any more of it. I wasn’t ready for this—whatever this was.

Without another word, I walked off into the night. I couldn’t make sense of him. But one thing was clear—he had just saved me, in more ways than one. And that thought stayed with me, heavy and uncertain, as I disappeared into the shadows of the city once again.

A Drop of Rage

TATSUYA

The next day, I pretended she didn't exist. I moved through the temple grounds as if nothing had changed, as if my mind wasn't a battlefield, struggling to make sense of everything that had happened the night before. As if I hadn't just seen that look in her eyes—the one that reminded me of the rage I'd buried long ago. The one that told me she, too, was fighting a battle that no one could see.

I went through the motions—bowing, chanting, performing the mundane chores of the temple. The monks didn't ask questions. They never did. They respected the silence I had built around myself, the wall I had carefully constructed over the years.

But that silence? It wasn't enough.

I tried to center myself. To find peace again. The familiar incense, the quiet rhythm of the chants—none of it worked. My mind kept returning to her. To the way she moved, how she had fought back against the man last night. There was something in her, something fierce, something that made me think of my younger self.

I pushed the thought away, trying to focus on the calm I'd worked so hard to cultivate. But the harder I tried, the more the memories of my past clawed their way back to the surface, the more I was reminded of how much I hadn't escaped after thirty-eight years on this planet. I had thought the temple would be enough to bury

my old self, to bury the rage. But I was wrong.

I was still that angry kid, the one who had watched his mother be beaten and abused, the one who had stood by, helpless, as his father took what he wanted from her. I had been so small, so powerless. I had watched him drag her around the house by her hair, her face swollen and bruised, while I stood frozen, too terrified to move. I'd seen his violence, heard his drunken rages, and as much as I hated him for it, I hated myself even more for not doing something about it. When she died at his hands, I let him drag me to the temple as a sacrifice. Or, as he put it, surrendering a useless boy to a higher purpose away from him.

I stayed at the temple, letting him walk away from my life forever. I had chosen discipline, a life of order, as my escape. But in truth, it wasn't a choice, though, not really. It was survival. It was the only way to drown out the pain, to forget the blood, the shame, and the helplessness that came with growing up in that house. But when I saw her last night—the way Momoi fought, the way she pushed him away—I had felt that rage again. The one I thought I'd buried deep within the robes of the monk I had become.

It wasn't something I could hide anymore. Not from her. Not from myself. And that failing gnawed at my mind like a ravenous, clawed beast, scraping its jagged nails against the very walls of my skull. Each scratch echoed, reverberating through my thoughts, dragging me back into the murky depths of my past. The beast whispered in the darkness, taunting me with every misstep, every failure, turning every fleeting hope of peace into another stumbling block in my path—a never-ending, suffocating cycle I couldn't escape.

“Tatsuya,” a soft voice cut through my thoughts.

I turned sharply, pushing the memories of my mother and Momoi aside, forcing myself to focus. The monk who had spoken was an older man, his face calm, a slight

smile on his lips, his hands folded in the traditional gesture of respect.

“Is something troubling you?” he asked, his eyes searching mine with quiet concern.

I quickly composed myself, slipping on the practiced mask I had worn for years—the smile that was serene, measured. “No,” I replied, my voice calm, even. “I’m fine.”

But he didn’t buy it. I could see it in his eyes. He didn’t press further, though. And for that, I was thankful. The last thing I needed was someone asking me questions I didn’t have answers to. The last thing I needed was to start explaining the chaos inside me.

“Well,” the older monk said, his tone suddenly turning thoughtful, “the lotus blooms most beautifully from the deepest and dirtiest mud.” He chuckled softly as if this were some kind of reassurance.

I nodded mechanically, masking the frustration that began to rise in my chest. Lotus. The damn lotus again. I had heard it a thousand times, a thousand different ways, but it never seemed to help.

“The world is full of suffering, Tatsuya,” the monk continued, eyes growing distant, “but one must be like the bamboo—strong but flexible, rooted yet swaying with the wind.”

Inside, my teeth clenched. I could hear the words, feel the weight of them, but they only made me angrier. How could he speak of the lotus and bamboo so easily when he hadn’t lived what I had? When he hadn’t watched his mother die at the hands of a monster?

I kept my face neutral, nodding once again, my voice tight. “Yes, of course.”

The older monk gave me an understanding nod, clearly thinking his words had soothed me. But I didn't feel soothed. I felt suffocated. The calm I tried to cultivate felt more akin to a prison with every passing day.

As he turned to walk away, his words echoed in my mind. The lotus blooms from the mud... The bamboo bends, but it doesn't break.

I wasn't a lotus. I wasn't bamboo. I was just a man trying to outrun a past demon that never seemed to let go.

The rest of the morning dragged on, every step feeling heavier than the last. My mind kept circling back to her—the girl who had fought, the girl who had reminded me so much of what I had left behind.

And, despite all my attempts to focus on my duties, despite everything I had tried to push into the back of my mind, I couldn't stop wondering what had happened to her. Where was she now? What was she going through?

I wasn't supposed to care. I was supposed to let go. But I couldn't help it.

I needed to know more. I needed to see her again.

I wasn't sure why.

And for the first time in a long time, I was afraid of what that might mean.

Later that afternoon, I found myself by the river. It was a place I came to often when I needed to clear my head. The current was swift, cold, and relentless, and it reminded me of the things I had left behind—my father's drunken fists, my mother's absence, the constant chaos of my youth. I didn't come here for peace. I came here for the noise, for the rush of water that drowned out everything else.

I sat on the edge of the bank, watching the ripples, my mind a tangled mess of memories I'd rather forget.

And then I saw her again.

Momoi.

She was standing by the water, just a few feet away, her back to me. The wind tugged at her long, dark hair, and she looked lost in thought, or maybe just lost in herself. I could almost hear her bitterness in her stance, in how she clenched her fists at her sides as if she was ready to fight the world all over again.

I should've turned around. Should've walked away and left her to her self-imposed misery. But something inside me—the same something that had dragged me to this point in my life, to the temple, to the monk's path—pulled me toward her.

I couldn't explain it. And I didn't want to.

"Do you come here often?" I asked, my voice calm, neutral, the same tone I used for everyone. But even to me, it sounded empty. Forced.

She didn't turn at first, but then slowly, she faced me, her eyes narrowing. "What are you doing here?" Her voice was sharp, like a blade drawn too quickly.

The words I wanted to say—the ones that would make her leave me alone—stuck in my throat. I was supposed to be above this. Above her. But I couldn't stop myself from stepping closer.

"Just trying to find some peace," I said, offering her a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes. I had to pretend it was fine like it always was.

But Momoi didn't buy it. She never did. Her eyes scanned me with that same skeptical look, as if she could see through every bit of me.

"Peace?" she scoffed, arms crossed. "You're as full of shit as I thought."

The words hit harder than I expected. A wave of frustration, of anger, simmered beneath my calm exterior. The old me, the one I buried for so long, stirred. I wanted to snap, to let her know I wasn't some kind of joke. I wasn't playing the part of the monk for fun. I wasn't him anymore.

But I swallowed the impulse, clenching my fists to keep it down. Control. Calm. Calm.

I exhaled slowly, my voice betraying none of the turmoil that roiled inside. "You think I'm full of shit?" I asked, keeping the edge of my anger out of my words. "I'm just trying to talk to you, Momoi."

Her eyes hardened even more, her lips curling into a sneer. "Talk to me? What, so I should just be grateful? Should I thank you for playing the white knight? For saving me from some random creep? I don't owe you anything."

The words came out like venom, sharp and jagged, and they pierced through me more than I wanted to admit. The frustration, the heat building in my chest—it wasn't supposed to be like this. She didn't get it. She was the one who refused to accept help, refused to even consider that I was trying to do something good for her. It wasn't supposed to feel like this.

"I'm not asking for anything," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "I didn't stop that man to get anything from you. I did it because it was the right thing."

"Right?" she hissed, her face twisted with anger. "You think you're the right thing?"

You think I'm just supposed to swallow whatever good intentions you throw my way, and be grateful?"

Her words kept cutting into me. The old, bitter anger from my past—my father, the abuse, the abandonment—rose like bile in my throat. Was this how I had felt when I was younger? Every act of kindness, every small favor, always felt as if it came with a price, with the expectation of something in return. Just like him.

I clenched my fists tighter. "I didn't ask you to be grateful. I didn't do it for some kind of thanks." My voice grew colder, harder, unable to stop the words once they left my mouth. "But you don't get to accuse me of something I didn't do. I'm not asking for your gratitude. Not from you, not from anyone."

She opened her mouth to snap back, but I could feel my anger growing more volatile, the familiar rage pushing against the walls I'd built around myself. She didn't get it. No one did. She didn't know what it was like. She didn't know how it felt to grow up, never knowing when the next betrayal would come.

"I'm not asking for your thanks," I repeated, my voice quieter but more forceful. "But don't mistake me for someone else. I'm not him, or whoever it is you're thinking about."

Her glare was unrelenting, and the silence between us felt thick, charged with something I didn't quite understand. I should've walked away. I should've stayed calm. But instead, I could feel the walls of control cracking, the anger seeping through.

"You don't have to fight me on everything," I said, frustration creeping into my voice. "I'm not asking for anything from you. I just?—"

"Enough." Momoi cut me off, her voice sharp. "I don't owe you anything, and I'm

tired of people thinking they can do things for me and then act as if I owe them. That's not how it works."

The words stung, more than I cared to admit. It wasn't the first time I'd been accused of wanting something in return for my actions. It wasn't the first time I'd been reminded of how broken people saw me. How broken I still was. I took a breath, but the air was too thick to fill my lungs.

"I didn't say you owed me anything," I said, my voice tight. "But you don't get to make me out to be some kind of villain for trying to do something decent."

She stood there for a moment, eyes cold and hard, daring me to say more. I didn't. I couldn't.

I couldn't change her. And I couldn't change what I was feeling either.

"I'm not here to fight," I said quietly, forcing the words out as the monk's teachings echoed in my mind. Control. Discipline. Inner peace.

She just laughed, the sound bitter and harsh. "Then why are you here?"

I didn't have an answer for her. I didn't have an answer for myself.

"I don't know," I said, my voice low. "I don't know why I'm here."

And maybe that was the truth. Maybe I hadn't found peace. Maybe I had never really escaped.

Maybe I was just as lost as she was.

The Shadow of the Past

MOMOI

I should've known better.

I should've known that no matter how far I ran, no matter how many oceans I crossed, my past would follow me like a tethered corpse. The Yakuza wasn't something you could leave behind—not easily, anyway. And no matter how much I hated it, or how much I wanted to forget it, the moment someone found out about me, about who I was, everything would come rushing back.

I learned that the hard way.

It was a cold slap in the face that morning when the envelope slipped through my door, the familiar, grimy handwriting scrawled across the front. The Yakuza. Even now, even here, they found me. My stomach twisted as I stared at it, the letters burning into my retinas. There was no escaping them. There would never be a safe place. Not even in this city full of strangers, hidden behind the facade of a new life.

I dropped the envelope onto the kitchen counter, unable to bring myself to open it right away. The anxiety clawed at me, pulling me into the familiar, suffocating fear I thought I had outrun. The words inside would be simple, calculated—just a reminder that they hadn't forgotten about me. A warning.

But I didn't want to open it. I didn't want to know what they wanted this time. The longer I stared at it, the more I wanted to walk away. Just ignore it. Pretend it didn't exist.

But it did. It always did. I couldn't outrun it. Not really.

I inhaled deeply, my chest tight, and grabbed the envelope. The letter inside was short, just a couple of lines, but it was enough to make my heart race. The message was the same as always: Your loyalty belongs to us.

There it was. The past reaching out from the shadows, clinging to me like a parasite.

I tried to shove it all down, to bury it deep inside where it wouldn't hurt, where it couldn't touch me anymore. But I knew, deep down, that there was no forgetting.

I threw the letter on the table, my hands trembling. I could feel the anger rising, a tide that never receded. I couldn't go back to them. I wouldn't go back to them. Not after everything I'd worked for. Not after everything I'd tried to leave behind. But the fear lingered, suffocating, because I knew it wasn't just my life they'd come after.

It probably meant my mother was dead.

It probably meant they wanted me to take her place.

My mind flashed to all the things I'd done to survive, all the times I'd been forced to make choices I could never take back. The things I'd been willing to do—things I couldn't wash off, no matter how much I scrubbed at my own skin. The stain was permanent. I was permanent.

You can't escape your past, Momoi, I told myself, the words cold and harsh in my head. You're never going to be free of it. Not here. Not anywhere.

I squeezed my eyes shut, the familiar ache in my chest threatening to break through. I thought of the monk, Tatsuya, and how he had tried to pull me out of my dark spiral. The memory of his calm gaze, his words, seemed so far away now—like something that had never really existed.

I wasn't even sure what I wanted from him. His kindness—it felt akin to a cruel joke. A foreign thing, something I didn't deserve, and yet... I couldn't stop thinking about him. Every time I did, a knot tightened in my chest. He was so damn different. Too different. His calm, that steady presence—it irritated me more than it soothed. He seemed to have it all figured out, a man who lived in the light while I was drowning in shadows. And it made me angry.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. I wasn't supposed to care. But here I was, staring into the distance, my thoughts wrapped around him with an old, familiar ache I didn't want to acknowledge. He made me want something for myself—a life untouched by my past, a future where I didn't have to keep running.

But that was the problem. It was unattainable .

What right did I have to want peace? To want normalcy? Every part of me screamed at the thought, every scar on my body a reminder of how far from normal I really was. Men like Tatsuya—they didn't understand. He had the privilege of a clean slate, a life built on discipline and calm. Me? I had nothing but the wreckage of my choices and the bitter taste of regret.

And that's where my anger festered. He made me want something I couldn't have, something that would always be just out of reach. Every time he looked at me with that damn calm in his eyes, it was as if he was telling me I could have it too. But I knew better. I knew what I was. I knew where I came from. No amount of kindness, no matter how genuine, could erase the dirt that clung to my skin, the stain of everything I'd done just to survive.

So, I buried the thought down deep where it couldn't rise up again. It made me sick to even think about it. The idea that I, of all people, could have something pure and untarnished was laughable. I had been shaped by my choices—by every wrong turn, by every dark alley I had wandered down. And to even imagine that I could be part of that world, the world where Tatsuya belonged, made me want to scream.

I pushed the thought of him away. It wasn't worth it. Nothing about him or his world was worth the pain it brought me to even entertain the idea.

But now, the idea of getting caught in the storm of my past, of being dragged back into that world, felt even worse.

My phone buzzed on the table, breaking me out of my thoughts. A message from an unknown number. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

I opened it, and sure enough, it was a threat. Simple, direct. The same handwriting. Time's up. We'll be waiting.

I let out a shaky breath. So this was it. They'd come to collect. They always did. I wasn't exactly sure what they wanted this time, but it didn't matter. I could feel the old dread creeping back into my bones.

I had two choices: confront them or run.

And I wasn't sure which one scared me more.

With a deep breath, I grabbed my keys and left the apartment, the walls pressing in on me indistinguishable from a suffocating vice. The silence in the room felt thick, as though the air itself was alive with whispers of destruction, curling around me with cold fingers, each breath I took more labored than the last. Every crack in the walls, every shadow lurking in the corners was watching, waiting for me to break. The floor

seemed to shift beneath my feet, and for a split second, I wondered if I was walking on solid ground at all—or if I was just sinking deeper into the nightmare of my own making.

I could feel the echoes of my past rising from the dead, clawing at my skin, whispering promises of pain and chaos, telling me I was going to be caged as a plaything to them all, left to starve and crave the scraps they threw my way. The weight of everything threatened to crush me, but I couldn't stay in the apartment. I couldn't breathe under its oppressive silence any longer.

I left. But as I closed the door behind me, I felt the darkness shift. It followed me—slowly, quietly, always just behind me like a reanimated skeleton that refused to die.

The evening started normal enough. I wandered the streets of the small town, trying to feel as if I belonged, soaking up what little freedom I had left. The locals here still didn't know me. They didn't know my name, my history, or the blood that ran through my veins. They only saw a woman—a stranger who had appeared out of nowhere, lost and looking for something she could never find.

But there's always someone who asks the wrong questions.

I'd gone to the market, trying to blend in, trying to buy something normal—fruit, vegetables, anything to feel close to a normal person. It wasn't long before I noticed the eyes on me, the whispers that had followed me ever since I first arrived. I'd ignored them at first. You couldn't let the stares get to you. Not when you were like me.

But today felt different. The tension in the air was palpable, thick with something darker.

I tried to keep my head down as I moved through the market, but there was a feeling crawling at the back of my neck. I was being watched.

I turned the corner to head down a narrow street, my pace quickening, my mind racing. My instincts had always been sharp. Too sharp. I could feel it now—something was off.

"Hey!"

I froze.

I didn't need to turn around to know who it was. The voice was too loud, too familiar in its tone. I felt a pit of dread open in my stomach, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

When I finally turned around, I saw them. Two men—one of them the same stranger from the bar. He just couldn't let it go, could he? But it wasn't just the familiarity of his face that froze me; it was something darker in their eyes. A cold certainty that made my stomach twist. It was more than arrogance—the kind of confidence that comes from knowing you have backup, knowing you're untouchable.

I felt my pulse quicken, a chill crawling up my spine as I recognized it. That unmistakable air. The same look I'd seen in the eyes of Yakuza men back home—the kind of men who ruled by fear, who didn't hesitate to make their presence felt. The kind of men who took what they wanted, no matter the cost.

Had I missed the signs? How was this man—this stranger—connected to them? They positioned themselves so casually as if they planned to watch me squirm... It hit me. This wasn't a coincidence. The man at the bar—he wasn't just some random creep. He was part of something bigger. And now, I was in it.

I could feel the blood in my veins running cold.

"Yeah, you." The one closest to me smirked, his teeth yellow, his face dirty and unshaven. He was dressed like a man who spent too much time under the sun, too much time in the streets, with nothing to keep him in check. "You're not from around here, are you?"

My heart hammered in my chest. I swallowed, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'm just passing through."

His grin widened, and there was something predatory in his gaze. "That so? You sure you don't have any ties to those, uh... boys from the city?" His words were slow, deliberate. He glanced at the other man, and they both chuckled, as though sharing some private joke that wasn't funny at all.

I didn't move, didn't blink. I could feel the adrenaline surging through me, my body on high alert. My instincts screamed at me to leave, to run.

But I wasn't stupid. I knew where this was going.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, forcing my voice to stay level, but the tremor in my throat betrayed me.

"You sure about that?" the second man asked, stepping forward. His eyes narrowed. "You don't look like someone who just passes through. We don't like strangers around here. Especially not you."

I felt my chest tighten. That was it. The words. The way they said it.

They knew.

My hand instinctively went to my side, to the knife I kept hidden in the folds of my jacket. I wasn't stupid. I knew how to protect myself, how to survive. But there was something about these men in how they were circling me, as if my time was running up.

"You should get out of here," I said, my voice low but firm. My mind was racing, looking for an escape, but the narrow street left me no room to maneuver.

The first man laughed again. "Oh, I don't think you get it, sweetheart." He took another step closer, his breath stinking of alcohol. "We know who you are. And you're not leaving until we get what we want."

My pulse quickened, panic surged, ice water flooding my veins. But I forced myself to stay calm, to think through every step. Panic was a luxury I couldn't afford. I had to keep my head clear, or else this would end before I could even make a move.

I glanced at the two men, sizing them up. One was stockier, his body built like a wrecking ball, the kind that relied on brute force. The other was leaner, quicker, probably the type to fight dirty. I can take them, I thought. I have to.

My fingers tightened around the hilt of the knife tucked in my jacket. It felt solid in my grip, a comforting old friend. But I didn't want to use it. Not yet. The streets were crowded, people were around, and making a scene would only draw attention. I had to be smarter, get them away from my apartment first—away from any place I could get cornered.

I could lead them toward the alley on the right. It's narrow enough to trap them for a second, giving me just enough time to slip past. But they might catch on. They might. I could lure them toward the park, too—there's an abandoned shed behind it. It's dark, isolated, but it's risky. I'd have to move fast, too fast for them to react.

I clenched my jaw. There was always the option of running, trying to lose them in the crowd, but I wasn't sure I could outrun these two. They were already closing the distance. Every second mattered.

Focus. Think. The familiar adrenaline surged through me, sharpening my senses. I had to use their overconfidence against them. They were too sure of themselves, too relaxed as if they thought I was just going to crumble in front of them. That would be their mistake. That would be their downfall.

If I could get them just a little further down the street, a little farther away from my place... then I could make my move. The knife would be my last resort. I'd only pull it out if I had no choice. But if they didn't follow me into the right spot, I would be ready.

I took a breath, feeling the weight of the knife, the weight of the situation, pressing down on me. I couldn't let fear take over. Not now. Not when I had a plan.

10

Fruits Are Good for You

MOMOI

"Get away from me," I said again, my voice steadying, but the fear was still there, burning in my gut.

The second man stepped closer, his eyes cold and calculating. "You think you're untouchable? You think we don't know what you really are? You're Yakuza, aren't you? The illegitimate daughter of some big shot in the city, just a broken-down whore's kid who thinks she can escape. Well, guess what?" He smiled, the grin spreading wide across his face. "No one escapes the past. No one."

I didn't wait another second.

I pulled the knife from my jacket, the cold steel heavy in my hand. The first man lunged, thinking he could overpower me, but he underestimated me. I stepped to the side, and with a swift motion, I slashed the blade across his arm. He yelped in pain, stumbling back, clutching at the blood pouring from the wound.

But I didn't stop there. I couldn't. Not with them. Not with how they looked at me as if I was on the menu for tonight.

The guy from the bar lunged at me, and I leaped back, swinging my grocery bag into his skull. He stumbled but quickly recovered and threw a punch at my shoulder,

sending pain up my neck. I gritted through it and swept my feet under him while pulling out an orange and throwing it directly at his partner's head.

The second man's eyes widened in shock, but it was too late. While the stranger from the bar was still getting to his feet, I jabbed the knife forward into his stomach. He gasped, his hands instinctively reaching for the wound. He staggered back, clutching at the blood, but I was already moving.

I didn't look back, but I could hear their footsteps behind me, heavy and determined. I turned down an alley, ducking into a small convenience store to lose them in the maze of shelves and tight aisles. My heart pounded in my chest, but I didn't slow down. I couldn't. Not now.

The store was small, cramped, and the fluorescent lights flickered overhead as I darted through, knocking a can off the shelf with my shoulder. The sound of it hitting the floor barely registered as I rushed past rows of snacks and drinks, trying to find an exit. I burst through the back door into another narrow alley. The air was thick with the stench of the city, but the momentary escape from the chase didn't last long.

I heard their voices now, closer, angrier. "You think you can run forever?" the man from the bar shouted, his voice cutting through the night.

I didn't answer. My pulse raced faster than my feet could carry me. I turned another corner, weaving between dumpsters and old boxes, desperate to shake them off. Every breath was sharp in my chest, but I pushed harder, ignoring the ache in my legs and various places.

It didn't escape my notice that the locals weren't even batting an eye at what was unfolding. It was as if this kind of chaos, this violence, was just another part of daily life in the slums of Japan. They were all so used to it.

I thought I'd lost them. I really did.

But then, they were there. The first man, blood still dripping from the gash I'd given him, stepped into the alley ahead of me, blocking my escape.

"You think we're done?" he growled, wiping the blood from his arm.

I stopped dead in my tracks. They had me cornered. The adrenaline was starting to fade, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

The second man appeared behind me, grinning through the blood and pulp of the orange I'd thrown at him. "You made a mistake running. You should've stayed put. In fact, all of this could have been avoided if you'd just let me buy you a drink."

I felt trapped. My knife was still in my hand, but I knew it wasn't enough. These men weren't scared. They weren't backing down. They knew exactly who I was. Or at least, they thought they did.

Just when I thought I might have to fight my way out with everything I had left, I heard it. A footstep. Then another. Slow. Calculated.

I turned instinctively, my hand tightening around the knife. My body tensed, ready for more of the same.

But it wasn't them.

It was him.

Tatsuya.

He stepped into the alley as if he owned it, his posture straight, his eyes locked on the

two men. His presence was a wall of calm, and for a moment, it took everything in me not to drop my guard. I didn't understand how he got here.

Was he with them? Was this all a setup?

Without a word, Tatsuya moved in a blur. One fluid motion, and he was on the first man. The strike was quick—graceful, even—but lethal. The man barely had time to react before Tatsuya's fist collided with his jaw, sending him crumpling to the ground. But that wasn't all. Tatsuya moved again, fluid as water, grabbing the second man by the arm, twisting it with a crack that made me wince. The man howled in pain, and in the same breath, Tatsuya spun him around, locking his other arm in a painful hold.

I stood there frozen for a second, watching as Tatsuya effortlessly dismantled them. I had never seen someone move like this—so precise, so controlled, a body honed and made for this kind of violence. But it wasn't mindless. It was calculated. He wasn't just fighting for survival; he was in control of everything around him.

“You really think I'd allow you to touch her?” Tatsuya's voice was steady, low, but full of authority. There was no hesitation in him.

A chill ran through my spine at his choice of words. Allow? Who the hell did he think he was?

The second man, still writhing in pain, spat blood at him. "Who the hell are you?" he growled.

Yeah, Tatsuya... We'd all like to know.

Tatsuya didn't answer. He didn't need to. Instead, he tightened his grip, forcing the man to his knees with a look of disdain.

I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't stand there, watching him handle it all effortlessly. "No one asked for your help, monk," I snapped, my voice raw.

Tatsuya turned his gaze to me, his expression unreadable. He didn't say anything for a long moment, just stared, as if measuring me, as if he understood something I didn't. His eyes flicked back to the two men, now on the ground and struggling to get up.

"Doesn't matter," he said quietly, his tone holding a finality that made it clear this wasn't up for debate. "You're not alone."

For a split second, I felt something stir inside me, something I didn't want to feel—something akin to relief. But I couldn't let that show. I wouldn't, not after everything.

This has to be a trick, right? He was probably working undercover for my father's men. It was probably his plan all along to make me let my guard down. Why did we keep running into each other? Was he assigned to follow me? And to disguise himself as a monk, of all things? Isn't that sacrilegious?

Pfft. It's the Yakuza. They'll go to any lengths to get what they want. But what could be so important about me?

With a sharp motion, he let go of the second man, sending him sprawling to the ground. The man groaned in defeat, barely able to keep himself upright.

Tatsuya's eyes met mine again, and there was something in his stare—a quiet, almost unspoken question, as if asking if I was okay, if I could bear whatever this was. I didn't have an answer. I didn't even know if anything between us was real or if it was all built on a foundation of lies too deep to see.

Without a word, I turned and walked away, but the weight of his presence followed me. I didn't need to hear him speak to feel it—his silence hung heavy, suffocating the space between us. It was enough.

I walked faster, my steps quickening as the tension between us thickened. I could feel him behind me, close enough now that I could almost sense the heat of his presence. Then, without warning, I felt his fingers brush against my arm.

The touch was light, but it sent a jolt of panic through me, my survival instincts kicking in before my mind could catch up. I spun around, eyes wide, heart racing. My body instinctively took a step back, ready to flee.

Tatsuya froze, his hand still outstretched, and for a moment, there was only the thick silence between us, pulsing with something neither of us seemed ready to face.

I couldn't look at him. My throat tightened, and I forced myself to breathe evenly, as if the air could calm the storm swirling inside me. But I couldn't ignore the feeling of his fingers lingering in the space where my skin had met his.

"I..." My voice faltered. I wasn't sure if I was angry, scared, or just completely thrown off balance. "Don't."

The word hung in the air, fragile and sharp, and I saw something in his eyes flicker—regret, maybe, or confusion. But it wasn't enough to stop him from stepping forward again.

And again, I took another step back, my instincts warning me to stay out of reach.

I saw it then—something dark flickering behind his eyes, something wild, something chaotic. A storm was brewing in there, a turbulence that pulled at the edges of his calm. For a second, it was as if I was staring at a mirror, seeing the very thing I'd

tried so hard to hide—my own rage, my own desperation, the mess I never let anyone see.

The realization punched me in the gut. The familiarity of it, the rawness of it—it scared me. I wasn't sure what was worse: the fact that I recognized it or the fact that it was in him.

“Don't you dare,” I snapped, my voice rising before I could stop it. “Don't you dare try to play some game with me, Tatsuya. You think I can't see through this? You think I'm just going to sit here and let you mess with my head?”

I took a step forward, my chest tightening with anger. “I don't need your help, and I don't need whatever the hell this is! You don't get to drag me into your mess. You don't get to touch me and pretend this means anything.”

His expression faltered, but I didn't care. I was too angry now. Too afraid.

Without thinking, I turned and ran. My feet slapped against the pavement as I pushed myself faster, harder, trying to escape the suffocating weight of everything that was happening. But no matter how far I ran, I couldn't shake the feeling that something inside me—the part of me that I hated—was still there, lurking in him.

Drowning in the Dark

TATSUYA

I could feel the tension in my chest, the weight pressing down on me harder than I ever expected. I had been training with the monks all morning, yet it was like none of it was sinking in. The usual calm I felt within these walls—the peace that had always eluded me outside—was slipping away from me, leaving nothing but frustration. The other monks had begun to notice it too, their eyes following me, their silent whispers trailing behind me reminiscent of sticky ichor.

"Something is off with you today, Tatsuya," one of them said, his voice gentle but laced with concern.

I didn't answer. How could I? What was I supposed to say? That I couldn't stop thinking about her? About Momoi ? My mind kept replaying the moment she looked at me, her eyes full of anger and confusion.

I needed to get away. The walls of the temple were closing in on me, suffocating me. I needed space, air, anything to clear my head. So I slipped outside, making my way to the small garden that bordered the temple. The sight of the quiet pond and the swaying bamboo should've calmed me, but instead, the more I breathed in the cool air, the more I felt my anger gnaw at me.

I couldn't stop thinking about her. God, Momoi —what mess had she gotten herself

tangled in this time? Every thought of her sharply twisted a blade in my gut, a reminder that I hadn't been able to protect her—not the way I wanted to. Her survival instincts kicked in, and she lashed out like cornered prey. I had seen it plenty growing up around my mother's friends. What little friends she was able to have in her line of work.

But I had gone to save Momoi, hadn't I? At least, that's what I told myself. But the moment I reached out to touch her, to offer some sort of comfort, she pulled away as if I was the enemy. Her eyes threw daggers in my direction. Anger. Fear. Confusion. All mixed into one violent storm that I couldn't understand.

Why was she angry at me? At me —the one person who'd been trying to help her, to keep her safe from whatever nightmare she had woven around herself? She turned her back and fled like I was the last person she ever wanted to see.

I hadn't been able to control myself. I'd just wanted to touch her—comfort her—but the moment my fingers grazed her arm and her immediate reaction, a fuse had gone off in me. My rage flared up out of nowhere, the anger I'd spent years trying to suppress surging to the surface. It was as if all the walls I'd built around myself had crumbled in an instant. And she had ignited it. Her rejection, her fear—it was all too much.

I couldn't make sense of it. I was supposed to be in control, always. That's what I'd been taught, what I'd drilled into my own mind. But in that moment, none of it mattered. I had lost control—lost control of my emotions, lost control of myself.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. I clenched my fists, and took a sharp breath, trying to calm myself. But the more I replayed the moment, the more my anger flared akin to wildfire. And worse... there was a part of me that wanted to feel that way. There was a part of me that didn't want the anger to stop, because underneath it all was something else—something that terrified me.

I craved her presence. I wanted to feel her near me again despite everything. It didn't matter how she looked at me, blaming me for all her problems. Even though she ran from me as if I was some kind of threat. I hated it. I hated how she made me feel things I had no business feeling.

I wanted to scream, but instead, I stood there, hands trembling at my sides. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I just let her go? Why couldn't I just focus on what I had to do here, what was important?

But all I could think about was Momoi. And it pissed me off. She was a distraction I couldn't afford, yet she was everywhere, lodged in the back of my mind, clawing its way to the surface, making me lose focus, making me... angry.

The monks were probably right. Something was wrong with me today. But I didn't know how to fix it. I didn't know how to shake her off—how to forget the way her skin felt under my fingertips or how her eyes flashed with something I couldn't name before she ran.

I gritted my teeth, frustrated with myself, frustrated with her, frustrated with everything. But no matter how hard I tried to push it away, the desire to see her again, to be near her was a magnetic pull beyond comprehension.

And that thought scared me more than anything.

I took a deep breath, grounding myself, forcing my body to relax with each inhale. I lost track of time, staring into the distance. The cool night air filled my lungs, and I let it sit there for a moment, savoring the stillness of the garden. One breath at a time, I pushed the chaos of the day— her —to the back of my mind. The anger, the confusion, the burning need to just... touch her, to make her see something I wasn't sure I even understood myself.

I focused on the rhythm of my breath on the way back to the temple. In. Out. In. Out. The monks taught me to find peace in stillness. To quiet the mind and separate myself from the world. It had worked before—calming the storm inside me, letting the darkness fade away into silence. But tonight, the peace seemed farther out of reach than it had ever been.

The distant temple bells tolled, signaling the evening's quiet. I stood there for a long time, letting the silence wash over me, waiting for it to settle. But it didn't. My thoughts swirled relentlessly, tangling themselves with the memories of my past—the blood-soaked nights that defined me, the violence I could never escape.

I clenched my jaw. No. I wasn't going to let that take over tonight. Not again. Not when I had worked so hard to bury it. So I pushed the thoughts back, took another breath, and forced my feet to move.

When I finally returned to the temple, the monks were already preparing for rest, the dim candlelight flickering as I passed them in the halls. I didn't look up, didn't acknowledge their subtle glances. I didn't need to. They could see the storm inside me. They always could.

The quiet of my designated quarters did little to ease the heaviness in my chest. The room was small and simple, a futon spread out on the floor, the walls adorned with only the barest necessities. I sank down onto the tatami mat, my hands trembling as I undressed, my mind too unsettled to even focus on the simple task. The dark, empty space around me felt suffocating.

I closed my eyes, hoping sleep would find me. But sleep, like peace, evaded me.

The moments I tried to escape into the stillness were fractured by flashes—violent, haunting memories of a life I couldn't outrun. The bloodshed. The screams. The cold, ruthless reality of being born into a world I never asked for, a world I hated with

every inch of my being.

I could still hear the sound of my father's fists hitting flesh, his rage, and his drunken roars reverberating through the walls of the dingy apartment we called home. He was never home much, not when he was sober, but when he was, he'd stumble back in from the bar, swearing, his anger looking for a place to land. And that place was always me if he couldn't find my mother.

He never failed to remind me of the one thing that had defined my existence—my blood was worth nothing. Every time he looked at me, there was a kind of disgust in his eyes, condemning me as a mere image of her, a byproduct of a world I had no place in.

And the worst part? I didn't know any better.

I was just a boy back then, powerless, trapped in the cycle of violence that seemed to define the men around me. His anger was a constant storm, and I learned early on that there was no escaping it. There was no shelter from the fists, from the words that cut deeper than the beatings. And my mother? She was a shadow, always too far gone in her own world to protect me from his wrath. She was never the mother I needed. In the end, she was just as much a ghost as the man who called himself my father.

The violence. The hatred. The chaos. No matter how hard I tried, or how deep I buried it, it was always there, just beneath the surface, waiting to break free.

And now, as I lay here in the dark, trying to escape the memories of the past, they refuse to let me go. They merge with the more recent pain—pain I'd tried to keep buried. Momoi's face flashes in my mind again, her eyes full of anger, full of fear. When she pulled away from me... it felt too damn familiar.

It made me question everything. All the years of control, of training myself to

suppress my rage, to bury the monster I'd once been—was it all just a lie? Would I ever be free of this darkness? Or was I destined to drag it with me? The longer I allowed it to hold me down, the heavier it became.

I turned over, trying to shake the thoughts from my mind, but it was useless. Every time I closed my eyes, I was back there—back in that apartment, with my father looming over me, his fists raised in anger, his cruel laughter echoing in my ears. The sound of blood. The smell of sweat. The cold, suffocating realization that I was never meant for anything more than to become a reflection of the monsters around me.

And as much as I wanted to forget, as much as I tried to escape it, the truth always came back to me: I was the son of a prostitute, raised by a man who couldn't see me as anything more than a burden. And no matter how far I ran or how much I tried to bury it, that blood, that history, would always be a part of me. Always.

I forced my eyes open, gasping for breath as the nightmares lurked just beneath the surface.

But then, everything shifted.

12

I Was Poison

TATSUYA

M omoi's delicate face cut through the chaos of my mind between sleep and wakefulness. Her eyes were wide with fear, her breath shallow, her body flinching away from me as usual. The rejection burned in me again, more fierce than before. Her anger... her confusion... it all wrapped around my chest like a vise.

She didn't understand. She couldn't.

I could feel the heat of her skin, her body had tensed when I reached for her. The touch had sparked something deep inside me, something I couldn't control, something I didn't want to admit. I had saved her, tried to help her, and yet, she had pulled away—it hadn't been just fear. It had been anger .

And I couldn't get past it. Couldn't get past the way she made me feel out of control, the way she made me want to lose control.

Maybe no one had ever shown her a gentle touch. More than anyone, I could see the pattern in her reactions. If only she knew that kindness existed, that not everyone was out to harm her. I could be the one to show her what real gentleness was.

Images I shouldn't have flashed through my mind, and I nearly choked on the weight of them. My hand trembled as I dragged it down my face, trying to steady myself, to

find some semblance of calm... but it wouldn't come. My own mind was at war with me. The moment I let that demon of temptation gain any ground, it seized control, intent on dividing me, breaking me down piece by piece.

Despite her flinch, the softness of her skin didn't escape my notice. It was just as I imagined it would be when I looked at her face.

Her reactions to my presence were justified—a woman like her should want nothing to do with someone like me. Even in another life, I wouldn't be deserving of her affection. My past would only tarnish whatever light she had left.

But my inner demon refused to release its grip as more images of forbidden touches flooded my mind, relentless and consuming.

Would she pant quietly beneath my touch or would she be bold and vocal in seeking her pleasure. Momoi, with her inner fire, seemed to be one who would demand what she wanted and that thought alone made my cock stir.

Would she force herself on me if I told her to stop? Would I even have any logical thought left to say such lies if she was straddled on top of me, trapping me in place?

The sheets around me grew damp as my body tensed. My skin, slick with sweat. My breath came faster, more shallow. The room was closing in around me.

I could almost feel her close to me again. Her scent lingered in my nares. Her eyes continue to burn through me.

I hadn't realized it before, but I wanted her. Badly. Her anger, her fury and accusations, all of it.

Two flames, stoked to ignite, burning each other into oblivion.

Without realizing it, my hand slipped beneath the waist of my pants.

There, in the silence of my quarters, I gave in to the thought that had been gnawing at me since the moment I touched her. I wanted her—wanted to feel her against me, to lose myself in the pull between us, to bury myself in her presence.

My hand stroked faster against the veins with a level of friction that made me grit my teeth in both pain and forbidden pleasure. I could almost feel her silky, black hair sliding against the skin of my chest, how her soft breaths would send shivers down my spine.

But I couldn't have her. I wasn't allowed to.

I turned over in shame but continued to fist myself in punishment.

I had spent years suppressing everything, fighting the bloodlust, the rage, the urges that ran through my veins. All my training was for naught if I easily fell into temptation like this. But she wasn't just anyone. She was Momoi . And she was the one person I couldn't have without betraying everything I stood for in this temple.

Tatsuya...

I groaned at thoughts of her whispering my name against my ear as she grinded herself against me, seeking pleasure with or without my help. Thoughts of her fully naked tortured me as my breathing began to speed up, my muscles tensing with each hard stroke and twist against the crown of my cock.

I could feel myself weeping down there, the same way I wanted to weep, knowing she was so close yet so far.

I twisted in the sheets, the heat in my chest rising, my body aching in a way I hadn't

felt in years. My mind flickered back to that moment when I reached out to touch her, when I saw the fear and anger flash in her eyes. It made my blood boil, made me want to tear through every wall I had built around myself. I wanted to possess her, to break through the walls she had so carefully constructed, to show her that I wasn't the enemy.

I could fuck the hate out of her eyes if she'd let me. I could bury myself so deeply inside of her that she'd never think of anyone else again but me.

Lightning shot through my spine as I spilled against my hand, still stroking myself in torture through the aftershocks of my pleasure. My fist was coated with my release, years of build up and self denial.

The demons inside my mind taunted and laughed at my weakness and a sigh of resignation escaped me.

I was nothing but a broken man with nothing to offer.

But that didn't stop the craving. And that's what pissed me off the most.

I quickly cleaned up and returned to the futon, arms crossed over my chest, staring at the ceiling, the weight of my failure pressing down on me. Trouble wouldn't let go. The demons in my mind whispered, reminding me how easily I'd slipped, how easily I'd abandoned everything I'd fought for. Every rule I'd sworn to live by—every ounce of discipline I'd built—crumbled the moment I let my thoughts betray me.

I was supposed to be a monk. I was supposed to embody restraint, peace, control. And yet, here I was, consumed by desires I knew I had no right to entertain. I had been the one to step across that line. The man I'd become, the violence, the temptation, the rage—how could I ever call myself a monk again?

I clenched my jaw, disgusted with myself. I had failed, and worse, I had allowed myself to fall back into the very darkness I'd worked so hard to escape. Every inch of me was a betrayal—of the vows I'd taken, the peace I was meant to embody, of the life I'd chosen.

More stumbles were coming, and this time, I feared I wouldn't be able to get back up.

I turned over again, eyes wide, staring into the dark, sweat cooling on my skin. Sleep never came. And somewhere, in the quietest part of my mind, I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't be able to shake her from my thoughts.

13

If I Die Young

MOMOI

I t was easier to numb the pain than to face it.

I stumbled out of the bar, the world spinning in dizzying circles, the neon lights from the signs above blurring into streaks of sickly pink and yellow. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt sober, and at that moment, I didn't give a damn. Every time I let myself think about it—the men from earlier, the threats, the weight of the past creeping back into every corner of my mind, making me choke on air.

So, a few days after the incident with the two strangers and Tatsuya, I drank. Because if I was to die young, I might as well die living it up while I still had my freedom. In fact, I was wearing one of my favorite shirts I bought from back home. It had the words "Life Fast, Die Pretty" across the chest.

The night started with a little whiskey at my apartment. Just enough to keep the darkness at bay. Just enough to stop my hands from shaking. Just enough to forget. I probably should move. But then again, they'd only find me again the same way they crossed an entire ocean to find me.

I knew what could happen when you start down this road, when you let the bottle take the edge off. But I never listened. Because when you're alone, when you're abandoned by everyone you thought you could trust, that dark, poisonous liquid is the

only thing that never leaves you. The only thing that doesn't judge.

I didn't know where I was going. I didn't care at the moment.

The narrow streets twisted in on themselves, becoming more desolate with every step. I kept moving, trying to shake off the unease, trying to drown the thoughts that rattled in my head. I didn't want to think about the danger I was in or the memories of men similar to the ones I'd encountered earlier, circling me, waiting for me to make a mistake.

I wasn't ready to confront that yet. I couldn't.

So I kept walking.

But there was a pull now. The familiar gnawing feeling in my gut, the tightness in my chest. I was slipping—no matter how many drinks I had or how many blocks I walked, the feeling wouldn't leave. I was being hunted again, and I couldn't outrun it.

I didn't know where I was going until I saw the flashing neon sign through the haze of my drunken stupor—another dive bar tucked away in an alley just off the main street. I should've kept walking. I should've ignored the pull. But the bar was too inviting, too promising in its dim, quiet comfort.

I pushed open the door and stumbled inside a bit. Awkward, but it is what it is.

It was dark. Darker than the other places I'd been. The air was thick with the smell of cigarettes, stale beer, and the unmistakable odor of people who used the night to escape their demons. The flicker of a broken jukebox in the corner was the only light, casting an eerie, sickly glow over the crowd.

I didn't care.

I slid into a booth in the back, ignoring the few patrons glancing over at me, sizing me up. They didn't matter. None of them mattered.

"Whiskey," I muttered to the bartender, my voice hoarse.

He raised an eyebrow but didn't question me. He poured the drink, and I drank it down in one go. The burn in my throat was sharp, but it felt good. The first drink helped to numb, but the second and third—they made the world blurry enough for me to forget everything.

The people around me were similar to ghosts—half-living, half-dead—and I was just like them. I wasn't different. I wasn't better. We were all just trying to outrun something, something that always seemed to catch up.

My thoughts were muffled by the alcohol, my hands trembling less. But the bartender was eyeing me now, giving me that look. The kind of look people give when they know you're past the point of no return.

"I think you've had enough," he said, setting the bottle aside and shaking his head.

I looked up at him, the words slow to form. "I'm not ready for enough."

He frowned, but he didn't argue. Just backed off.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there, nursing my glass. The bar was quieter now, the chatter of voices fading into the background. I was starting to feel the weight of my choices pressing down on me again. The alcohol wasn't doing its job anymore. My head was clearer, and that was the last thing I wanted.

I needed more.

I stood up, unsteady. “Another,” I said, my voice firm this time, as if I had control over anything at all.

The bartender hesitated, then poured me another. I grabbed the glass and downed it with a wince, ignoring the heat rising in my chest.

I didn’t know how I’d gotten here. I didn’t know how I’d gotten so far away from who I thought I was. But here I was, again, drowning in the only thing that made me feel anything at all.

I left the bar with the liquor sloshing in my stomach, feeling sick but not caring. I wandered the streets aimlessly, barely noticing the time slipping away. The cool night air stung against my flushed skin, and for a moment, I thought maybe I was starting to sober up.

Maybe.

But the moment I thought I had it under control, the world tilted again.

I didn’t see him at first. He was too quick, too quiet. But then I felt his presence—close behind me, just enough to make my skin crawl.

"Hey, girl," the voice was rough, too close. I didn’t need to turn around to know what kind of man he was. The kind I hated. The kind who could smell fear. "I’ve seen you before."

I froze. The words didn’t make sense at first. I turned slowly, the dizziness settling in my head as I tried to focus on the figure standing a few feet away.

He was tall and scruffy, with dark eyes that didn’t belong in this part of the world. His lips twisted into a grin when he saw me recognize him.

“You’re the one, huh?” His grin stretched, his voice turning sly. “You’re the Yakuza girl . That’s what they’re calling you, huh?”

I felt the knot in my stomach tighten again. My head was foggy, my heart pounding, and I couldn’t think straight. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I slurred, trying to step around him, but he matched my movements, keeping me cornered.

The man laughed, low and mocking. “I think you do. Don’t play dumb with me, sweetheart. You think you can just waltz into this town, pretending to be some innocent little thing, but I know what you are.”

I reached for the knife I always kept in my jacket, my fingers brushing the cold metal, but the haze of alcohol clouded my thoughts. My hands shook, trembling not just from the liquor but from the cold grip of panic creeping up my spine. The fear was different now—raw, intense—and the alcohol couldn’t dull it anymore.

But it didn’t matter.

The man was already moving toward me, his hand outstretched, fingers curling as if he already knew the outcome. I couldn’t escape. Not this time. The thought lingered, cold and heavy— Maybe I should let him kill me . It would all be over then. No more running. No more paranoia. I wouldn’t have to look over my shoulder anymore, wouldn’t have to keep up this charade of survival. It seemed so easy.

But as his hand reached for me, something shifted.

In the instant, his fingers grazed my arm, something deep inside me snapped. It was the same thing that had kept me alive all these years, the thing I’d tried to bury in the darkness. It ignited, setting my muscles into motion before my fogged brain could catch up.

I twisted, my body moving with practiced precision despite the alcohol clouding my senses. His hand gripped my wrist, but I shifted, pulling free and spinning away. My other hand shot up, the cold, familiar feel of the knife now steady in my palm.

The fear, the panic— they didn't matter anymore . My training kicked in, the raw, instinctive survival I had learned over the years rushing back. I wasn't just some helpless thing to be preyed upon.

He lunged at me again, too eager, too confident in his own strength. But I was faster. I sidestepped, the knife coming to life in my grip as I slashed it forward. It wasn't meant to kill—not yet. But it was meant to send a message.

The man staggered back, his eyes wide with shock as he registered the blade that had come dangerously close to his throat. Blood leaked from the shallow cut across his arm, staining his sleeve.

For a moment, I just stood there, chest heaving, the adrenaline pounding through me. I could feel the tremors in my limbs, but they were no longer fear. They were the remnants of a fight, a reminder that I was still here, still alive.

I took a step back, the knife still raised, my breathing ragged. His gaze darted between me and the blade, and I could see the realization dawning in his eyes—that I wasn't going to go down without a fight.

I wasn't going to let him win.

Not like this. Not ever again.

The man hesitated, his own breath shallow. But I knew the moment he made the wrong move, this time, there would be no hesitation.

14

Between Fire and Ash

TATSUYA

I should've kept walking.

The moment I saw her stumbling through the alley, her eyes too wild, too unfocused, my first instinct was to turn around and disappear into the night. There were enough people in this town with problems, and I'd already had my fill of them.

But she wasn't just any drunk girl stumbling home from a bar. She was one of the temptations, a demon placed in my path to make me stumble, to make me fall away from everything I vowed to be.

I tried to ignore the tightening in my chest, the nagging pull that urged me to step forward, to step in, to do something. I despised that feeling. Detested the way it always seemed to drag me back into the mess I was so desperately trying to avoid.

But she wasn't like them. She wasn't like any of the women I'd seen before.

I kept my distance, leaning against the corner, watching her fight to stay on her feet, the wild look in her eyes as she scanned the empty street, searching for something I wasn't sure she even knew. Her lips parted as she muttered something, too slurred for me to make out, before she nearly tripped over her own feet.

That's when I knew she wasn't going to be okay.

I approached cautiously, ignoring what I assumed was a drunk or homeless person on the ground. I kept my feet light, not wanting to alarm her more than she already was. She didn't hear me at first, her focus too consumed by the blur of the world around her. When I finally spoke, her head snapped toward me, and I saw the flash of recognition—at least, I thought I did—before it faded into confusion.

"Hey," I said, keeping my voice low, trying not to startle her. "Are you alright?"

For a moment, she just stared at me. And then, as if it had taken her this long to process the question, she let out a low, mocking laugh.

"Do I look alright to you?" Her words were slurred, but there was something sharp in them. Something dangerous.

I hesitated, my eyes scanning her for any signs of real danger. She was barely holding it together, but she wasn't out of control yet. And part of me—too much of me—wanted to step in.

I shouldn't have. I knew I shouldn't have.

"You're drunk," I said, a flat observation. But it was more than that. I could see the wreckage in her eyes. The kind of wreckage that came from years of being drowned in things worse than alcohol.

Her lips twisted into something bitter. "No shit. You got any better insight, Tatsuya?" She staggered closer, her words dripping with disdain, but there was something underneath it all. Something I couldn't quite place.

For a moment, I just stood there. My instincts screamed at me to walk away, to leave

her to whatever mess she was caught in.

But then something inside me—something I didn't want to acknowledge—shifted.

I took a step forward. "You need help."

She scoffed. "Help?"

There was a fire in her eyes now, flickering and burning with more intensity than I'd expected. And yet, despite the bitterness in her voice, I couldn't ignore how she was leaning into me now, as if drawn to me, her breath coming faster. The space between us was shrinking, and it wasn't because of the alcohol.

It was something else.

"I'm fine," she muttered, her body swaying, but her voice held a strange sharpness. "I'm always fine."

I clenched my jaw, torn between keeping my distance or doing what I couldn't seem to stop myself from doing—helping. It was the one thing I hated about myself. The thing I never wanted to feel again. The thing I had promised myself I'd never do.

"You're not fine," I said, my voice low. My fingers twitched at my side, desperate to do something—anything—besides stand there and watch her spin further out of control.

For a moment, there was silence. Then she grinned—a sad, twisted smile.

I watched her sway on her feet, the alcohol clearly taking its toll. Her eyes were unfocused, a mix of anger and something darker swirling in them. As she took another shaky step, I instinctively reached out, my hand hovering near her arm, just in

case she lost her balance.

But I didn't expect what came next.

In a split second, she jerked away, her hands shooting up, punching me back with surprising strength. I dodged, but her fist hit my shoulder. She staggered forward, her movements erratic, but before I could step in to steady her again, her elbow swung toward me, narrowly missing my jaw.

"Hey—" I started, my voice calm, trying to defuse the situation before it escalated.

But she wasn't listening. Her eyes were wild, her body tense, ready to strike again. I felt the sting of her words still echoing in my mind, but I had no time to focus on that. I needed to focus on her, on stopping her from going any further down this path.

"You're right. I'm not fine. I'm fucking broken." Her voice cracked through the air, and for a brief moment, I could hear the pain beneath the venom. It cut deeper than I thought it would, and my chest tightened in response. "But I don't need a damn monk to fix me."

The words hit me harder than anything physical could. They were sharp, full of resentment, but beneath the anger, I could feel the rawness of her vulnerability. The hurt she wore like armor, hiding whatever fragility she kept locked away.

Her next move came too fast for me to react. Her fist connected with my chest, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make me stumble back. I kept my distance, trying to avoid escalating it, trying to avoid getting caught up in a physical fight I didn't want.

"Stop," I said, my voice low but firm, reaching for her again, but she was already stepping back, preparing for another hit.

She was clearly struggling, and though my instincts screamed to protect her, to stop the violence before it got any worse, I couldn't let myself get lost in the fight. Not in this way. Not with her.

But then, those words. She didn't need a monk. She didn't need anyone, especially not a broken man who warred with himself. And that realization, more than her fists, cut through me.

"I'm not trying to fix you," I said, forcing my voice to remain steady. "I'm just trying to keep you from hurting yourself."

But she wasn't hearing me. Her next punch came faster this time, and I had no choice but to block it, catching her wrist in my hand and holding her there for a moment. I could feel the heat radiating off her skin, the tension in her muscles, and for a split second, the fight between us was almost palpable as if it wasn't just her fists that were striking out—it was everything she was holding inside, everything she was too afraid to face.

"Let go of me!" she hissed, trying to break free, but I wasn't about to let her get herself caught up in something worse.

"I'm not letting go," I said quietly, the words a promise I wasn't sure she'd ever understand. "Not until you calm down."

Her breath was ragged, her chest heaving as she struggled against me, and for a moment, I saw the storm in her eyes, the confusion, the pain, the frustration that she tried so hard to keep buried. And as much as I wanted to pull away, to leave her to whatever mess she was determined to make of herself, I couldn't.

I couldn't walk away from this. Not from her.

"I'm not your enemy," I added, softer now, the words carrying the weight of something I wasn't sure I had the right to say. "But I can't stand by and watch you destroy yourself."

Her fighting didn't slow—it only intensified. She pushed harder, faster, more determined now, as if every punch was an effort to break something within me, to make me feel the fury she carried inside. The moment her fist connected with my chest, I felt the heat of her anger, the raw desperation in her every movement. It wasn't just physical anymore; it was something primal, something fierce.

I had no choice but to block her hits, dodging as her blows came faster than I expected. She moved like a storm—wild, relentless, her body a weapon, and the force behind her strikes almost made it impossible to avoid them. I could feel the burn in my muscles as I shifted and parried, but no matter how much I tried to deflect, she kept coming, her eyes wide with rage and something darker.

Her body was closer now, her breath ragged and sharp, each movement a mixture of fury and something else—something I couldn't name, but I could feel it in the way her chest brushed against mine when she threw a punch too hard. The tension between us was thick, suffocating, and I knew that the fight we were having wasn't just physical. It was everything we had been avoiding, everything we couldn't say.

I caught her wrist again, my grip firm, trying to hold her still, but she wrenched free, her other hand flying at my face. I leaned back just in time to dodge, the edge of her knuckles grazing my jaw. I could feel the heat of her skin, the fury in her veins, and something dark twisted in my gut. Her rage was consuming, but there was something about how she moved, how he didn't back down.

Her eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that took me by surprise. I didn't know if she was trying to kill me or tear me apart in some other way. My heart pounded in my chest, every instinct screaming to fight back, to show her how badly I wanted her to

stop and calm down.

But I couldn't let myself get lost in the heat of this. The last thing I wanted was to give in—to let this dangerous pull between us turn into something I couldn't control.

"Stop," I growled, but my voice cracked under the weight of everything. "This isn't you."

"You don't know me," She growled.

She didn't stop. She was a whirlwind, her anger now matched by something else—something hotter, something more desperate. She took a step closer, raising her fist, and before I knew it, she was right in front of me, our faces inches apart, her breath mingling with mine.

The rage, the tension, the heat between us—it was impossible to ignore now. My grip on her wrist tightened, but I didn't pull away. Instead, I met her eyes, and for a brief moment, the world outside of us vanished.

Her lips parted, her chest rising and falling quickly as we stood there, too close, too tangled in everything unsaid. My pulse raced, and the space between us charged with something raw, something I couldn't deny.

"Let go of me," she spat, her voice trembling with something darker than just anger.

I should have released her. I should have stepped back, walked away. But I couldn't. Not now. Not when she was this close, not when every part of me screamed for her to let me in, to stop hiding behind the rage.

But I wasn't sure I was strong enough to hold on much longer.

Before I could respond, she suddenly lurched toward me. The shock of her sudden movement caught me off guard, and for a moment, I thought she was going to headbutt me or maybe scream at me again.

But then her lips were on mine.

It was brief. A quick, unexpected collision of warmth and alcohol, of desperation and something more. Her body pressed up against mine, not gentle but urgent, reflective of trying to drown herself in something that wasn't the void she'd been living in. It wasn't soft. It wasn't a kiss of affection.

It was something else entirely.

I froze. My brain scrambled for something—anything—to say, but my grip on her loosened and she immediately grabbed the fabric of my robe, pulling me against her.

I couldn't push her away. I didn't want to.

In that moment, everything I had worked so hard to suppress, everything I had denied, started to crack open. The line between helping her and wanting her blurred. Her kiss—unexpected, fiery—tore through the walls I'd spent years building around myself.

I could've stepped back, walked away. I should've.

But I didn't as the demons in my head cackled with mirth and wicked satisfaction.

15

Ashes in the Wind

TATSUYA

When she pulled away, her breath coming in shallow gasps, her eyes were wide, her chest heaving, as if she couldn't believe what she had just done. Neither could I. My heart raced, my pulse hammering in my ears.

"I... I shouldn't have done that," she said, her voice strained, but there was a flicker of something else there—regret, confusion, maybe even something more vulnerable than she was willing to admit.

I didn't know what to say. What could I say? She was drunk, and this—this moment—was nothing but a spark in the dark, an impulse.

But I couldn't ignore how she'd looked at me after. She hadn't pushed me away when I caught her. She had leaned in as if she couldn't keep herself from it.

For a long moment, neither of us moved. The space between us had closed, but the tension—raw, thick, undeniable—hung in the air, waiting to break. Her breath was shallow, her body tense, and all I could focus on was how close she was, the heat of her skin almost searing me.

"You don't get it, do you?" she whispered, her voice trembling, a mix of frustration and something darker. "You don't get what you just walked into, monk. I'm not who

you think I am."

Her words cut through the air, and I could feel the sting of them—an accusation, a warning. And maybe she was right—maybe I didn't get it. But the truth was, I didn't need to. I could feel the weight of everything unsaid between us, the volatile mix of emotions bubbling beneath the surface, and all I wanted was to push through it. To close the distance between us, to understand why everything had shifted so suddenly.

But as I stood there, so close to her, I could feel the regret, the ache of a kiss we shouldn't have shared, of a moment that had never been meant to happen. It was wrong— all of it —and yet, I couldn't shake the memory of her lips against mine. The heat. The desperation. That moment should have been the end of it, but instead, it had become a poison that kept creeping back into my thoughts. I hated myself for wanting more. I hated that I couldn't turn it off, that my body still burned for her, even though I knew I had crossed a line that I should never have crossed.

"Maybe I don't," I muttered, my voice low, my chest tight. "But I'm starting to think I don't care."

She recoiled, as if my words had physically struck her. "You think you don't care ?" Her voice shook, fury replacing the uncertainty, her hands clenching into fists at her sides. "You have no idea what it means to care about someone like me."

I took a step forward, a breath catching in my throat, my body heat rising with her proximity—a living flame.

"And maybe I don't need to," I said, the words harsh, but they weren't all truth. "But what I do know is that this—" I gestured between us, "— this changes everything."

Her eyes flashed with something dangerous, something sharp, and before I could stop it, she stepped into my space, her chest brushing against mine in a way that made my

heart race, but also made my stomach twist in a knot.

“Don’t tell me this changes things,” she hissed, her voice low and dangerous. “You kissed me back. You kissed me like I was someone you could have—like I was something you could just take.”

Her words struck deep, and I couldn’t deny it. She was lashing out, shifting blame in the form of manipulation. But I had kissed her back, and I had wanted it just as much as she had. But now, facing the consequences, facing the weight of it all, I hated myself for it. I had no right. I had no place in her life, no place in her world. I was a monk. I was supposed to be above this. Above her.

But the truth was, I wasn’t.

“I shouldn’t have,” I growled, the regret and guilt rising to the surface akin to bile. “But you— you made it impossible to walk away. The way you fought me, the way you—” I cut myself off, too furious, too conflicted to finish. But the anger, the frustration, the hunger—it was all spilling out now.

She laughed bitterly, the sound cutting through the tension. “You think I made you do anything? You’re fooling yourself, monk. I didn’t make you do anything. You did that.”

I shook my head, fighting the surge of emotion, the magnetic pull between us that seemed to be drawing us closer instead of pushing us apart. It shouldn’t have happened. I shouldn’t want her. But the truth was, I did. And in a small way, like her, I blamed her for it.

“I can’t pretend it doesn’t matter,” I admitted, my voice quieter now, edged with frustration. “But I can’t be the one you need either. Not after... You don’t need a monk. You need?—”

“What?” She cut me off, her eyes wild, her chest rising and falling with every breath. “What do I need? Someone to fix me? Someone to save me? Is that what you think I need? Because if that’s it, then your observation skills suck.”

I couldn’t answer. The words stuck in my throat, because the truth was, I didn’t know what she needed. But I knew what I wanted. And that was the part that terrified me the most.

For a moment, we just stood there, the space between us crackling with the weight of everything we couldn’t say. I could feel her body still trembling, could see her eyes flickering between anger and something else—something dangerous, something forbidden .

I wanted to step back, wanted to keep my distance, to let the walls go back up. But I was already too deep. The kiss was still there, branded on my lips.

And as much as I told myself I should walk away, my body wouldn’t let me.

Every inch of me burned with something I couldn’t control, and it was drawing me closer to the danger I knew we both had no business stepping into.

But then the voice of my father echoed in my mind, that voice I’d fought so hard to bury. It whispered in the dark, reminding me of the toxic lessons I had learned from him. Push her. Make her angry. It’s the only way to make her walk away. If she’s angry enough, she’ll leave you alone. Leave you to your peace.

That was what I needed, wasn’t it? Peace. Distance. I couldn’t have her. I shouldn’t have her. I was a monk, sworn to a life of detachment, of suppression. But with every breath she took, with every inch she closed between us, I felt the hold of that promise slipping away.

I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders. It wasn't just anger I needed to stir in her. I needed her to feel disgusted . I needed her to push me away because I couldn't stop myself from craving her.

“You're right,” I spat, my voice low and cold, laced with bitterness. “You don't need anyone. Not me, not anyone. You think you can handle this world on your own? Keep pretending you're untouchable. But you're not.”

Her body tensed, but she didn't back down. Good. She was already angry. I could feel her pulse quickening, her fists clenching.

“Keep at it, monk. I knew the truth was going to reveal itself,” she growled, her eyes flashing with fury. “You think you can just come in here and lecture me like you've got the answers? You're just as fucked up as the rest of us. But you hide behind that monk crap, don't you? You think you're better than everyone else, as if you're above it all.”

I stepped closer, letting my words hit harder. “I don't hide behind anything. I know exactly who I am.” I sneered. “But you? You pretend to be this tough person who doesn't need anyone, but you can't even see how much you're falling apart. You can't see that you're just afraid to let anyone close enough to help.”

Her chest heaved, and I could see the fight in her eyes, the rage a tempest about to break. “You don't know the first thing about what it's like to live in my skin. You can't just come in here, act like you know me, and tell me what I need .”

Her voice was shaking with emotion, and I knew I had her where I wanted. The anger had taken over—just as I'd intended—and now it was only a matter of time before she'd walk away, too disgusted with me to stick around.

“You're right,” I said, my voice turning colder, my words sharper. “I don't know

what it's like to be you. But I do know one thing. You'll never change. You'll never let anyone in. You'll keep pushing everyone away until you're left with nothing but that shell of yours."

The words hit their mark. I saw the flicker of hurt in her eyes before she masked it with more rage. The storm in her had reached its peak, and I knew it was only a matter of seconds before she exploded.

"You're fucking pathetic," she snarled, her choice of words slapping me across the face. But it wasn't just the words—it was the weight of everything I had pushed onto her. I was the one who had made her this angry. I was the one who had pushed her to this point, and now it was too late to stop it.

Her body shook with fury, her hands raised as if she might strike me. But before she could, she spun on her heel, storming away from me, each step a silent declaration that she had had enough of me. Enough of my judgment. Enough of me.

And in that moment, I felt the hollow echo of victory. I had done it. I had used the very thing I hated about myself to make her walk away. I had manipulated her, pushed her into a corner, made her feel as if she had no other choice but to leave.

But it didn't feel like a victory at all.

It felt like failure —like I had betrayed everything I stood for. And I hated myself for it. Hated that, even in my effort to push her away, I still craved her. I still wanted her.

The anger was still there, lingering beneath the surface. But there was something else now, something darker. Regret.

I had used my father's manipulative tactics against her—made her feel small, unworthy, angry—so she would leave. So I wouldn't have to face what I was

becoming. But the moment she turned her back on me, I felt the walls I had so carefully built around myself begin to crumble.

I couldn't run anymore.

But as I stood there, watching her walk away, I realized I had already lost.

16

The Weight of Regret

TATSUYA

The morning after felt like a waking nightmare. I hadn't slept. Not really. Every time I closed my eyes, her face was there—her eyes full of fire, her mouth on mine, her body pressed against me in a way I hadn't known I wanted. The kiss burned into my skin, a mark I couldn't wipe away, no matter how hard I tried.

And the guilt? The guilt was suffocating.

I had promised myself I would never fall into this kind of mess. I had trained myself to keep my distance from the world, from temptation. I had vowed to be different from my father, from the demons that had haunted me for so long. I was supposed to be a monk, a man of discipline, of peace.

But the moment her lips touched mine, all of that—everything I had worked for—came crashing down.

I stood at the edge of the small temple garden, watching the early morning sun filter through the trees, its light too harsh, too clear. It made me feel exposed, raw, as if I was standing under the weight of all the choices I'd ever made.

I'd given in. I'd let her kiss me. And now, I couldn't get her out of my head.

My hands shook as I clenched them into fists, my knuckles white with the pressure. I couldn't stop the thoughts, the images, the sensation of her lips, of her presence, flooding my mind.

She had been drunk, out of control. She hadn't meant it. She couldn't have.

But I had kissed her back.

I had wanted it. And that was something I couldn't ignore.

Though most of my life had been devoted to this righteous path, life had forced upon me lessons no young man should ever learn. Some of my mother's so-called friends had preyed on my innocence, drawing me into a world that would have sold me without hesitation the moment I became expendable.

The rustling of footsteps behind me broke my thoughts, and I turned to find her there—standing in the doorway of the temple, her eyes sharp as ever, unaffected.

“You look like shit,” she said, her voice laced with that same sarcastic bite I'd come to expect from her.

I didn't know what to say. What could I say? She hadn't even seemed to care the night before. And where was her rage now? Why was she here? For vengeance against my actions?

I opened my mouth, but no words came. I felt the weight of the guilt settle deeper, heavy in my chest. She had walked away from me that night after I pushed her to her limit.

Yet here she was now, acting as if nothing had happened.

“You don't look as if you care much about anything,” I managed, my voice tight, though the words came out more bitter than I intended.

She shrugged, unconcerned. “Not much to care about,” she said, pushing past me with a casual air. “I didn’t ask you to make it a big deal.”

I watched her move away, my insides twisting with frustration. She didn’t get it. She didn’t understand the chaos she had thrown me into with that single moment. She didn’t understand the turmoil she had sparked in me, the fire running wild inside—something I couldn’t control.

I wanted to call out to her to demand an explanation. But I didn’t. I was too afraid of what that would lead to. Too afraid of how she might look at me if I told her how badly I was falling apart.

I wasn’t supposed to feel this way. I wasn’t supposed to want her. I was supposed to be strong, to be above all of this.

“Are you just going to stand there, or are you actually going to help me?” she called over her shoulder, snapping me out of my spiraling thoughts.

I swallowed hard, trying to steady my breath. She made it seem so simple, so casual. As if everything about our interaction had been just another drink, just another meaningless moment.

I hated how much it hurt.

“I’m not your... what do you think I am?” My words felt weak as they slipped from my lips, filled with more frustration than I’d meant to show.

She turned, arching an eyebrow as she shot me a look. “I don’t know. What are you?

A monk? A fixer? Make up your damn mind.”

I didn’t know what I was anymore. And that was the problem.

I wasn’t the man I wanted to be. I wasn’t the person I’d spent years shaping myself into.

And she... she didn’t care, not about any of it.

I clenched my jaw, turning away from her as I ran a hand over my shaved head, trying to regain some semblance of control. The guilt— that weight—pressed down on me, suffocating me more than anything else ever had.

She had kissed me.

But I had kissed her back.

My mind screamed at me, told me to pull away, to stay distant. To remember who I was, what I was supposed to be. But every time I tried to push her out of my head, the memory of her warmth, her defiance, her wildness crept in again.

And I couldn’t shake it.

She was already moving down the path, her silhouette fading into the distance as if the tension between us had never existed. She didn’t even look back, as though she had already forgotten the chaos we’d just unleashed. But as if sensing my eyes burning holes into the back of her head, she casually raised her hand, a silent command.

I froze, instinctively hesitant, like an animal sensing a trap. The warning bells in my head screamed for me to stay back, to remain hidden in the shadows where no one

could see me falter. I could already hear the voices, the whispers of judgment from the monks if they caught me leaving the temple. But she called again, louder this time, and I knew I couldn't pretend I didn't hear it.

"Are you coming or what?" she called, not even glancing over her shoulder as she kept walking.

My body tensed, every muscle screaming for me to run in the opposite direction, to retreat to the safety of the temple walls. I closed my eyes, a sharp breath escaping my lips as I tried to calm the storm inside me. The fury, the desire—familiar and unwelcome—threatened to overtake me. I had sworn to control this, never to let myself fall into the kind of hunger I felt now.

But I wanted her. And that truth gnawed at me, relentless, twisting my insides in ways I couldn't fight.

I knew this was wrong. I knew it could destroy everything I had worked for. Yet, my feet moved before my mind could catch up, the distance between us closing with every step, even as a part of me screamed to stay away.

But it was too late. She had already lured me out, and I was helpless to resist.

The further we walked, the heavier the weight of my decision pressed against me. Every step was walking toward my own damnation. I could practically hear the monks' voices in my head, condemning me, judging me for stepping outside of the path I had sworn to follow. I wasn't just leaving the temple; I was leaving everything behind, a vow I could never take back.

What would I say to them if I was caught? How would I explain this to the others? I was just helping a woman fix something, I imagined myself saying, but it would be a lie. I wasn't helping. I was following. My mind raced with the questions I'd be asked,

the way they'd look at me with disgust. I wasn't just betraying my vows; I was betraying everything I'd been trained to stand for.

Momoi, blissfully unaware—or maybe uncaring—of my inner turmoil, walked ahead with that same casual arrogance, her figure swaying as she led me through the streets. It was as if she knew exactly what she was doing to me, toying with me, pulling me deeper into whatever game she had in mind.

We reached an apartment, a nondescript building nestled between others in a quiet part of the city. She glanced back at me, her smirk twisting the pit of my stomach. I hated that smirk. It was a silent acknowledgment of my weakness. You're here because you want to be, her expression seemed to say. And maybe, just maybe, that was true.

I shouldn't be here.

This is a trap.

Why was she doing this to me?

I stepped inside reluctantly, the familiar scent of incense and old wood greeting me. But there was nothing comforting about it. The moment I crossed the threshold, I knew I had crossed into forbidden territory, a place where I no longer had control. I could already feel the pull of temptation thickening in the air around us, and I couldn't tell if I was already lost or if I was still fighting.

As I stood there, my hand hovering at my side, trying to find some semblance of composure, Momoi turned toward me with that grin still on her lips.

"I need you to help me with something," she said, her voice deceptively sweet. "Something broke inside. You're the only person I know who might be able to fix it."

Well, you're the only person I know."

I blinked, not understanding at first.

"Fix... what?" My voice came out sharper than I meant, a mix of confusion and frustration.

She didn't answer right away, instead, she let the silence stretch between us, her eyes watching me carefully. She knew how this would affect me. Knew I'd hesitate. Knew the struggle I was waging in my own mind. She enjoyed it. And that made me furious with myself for letting her have this power over me.

"The lock on my door," she said casually, as though it was a simple, mundane request. "It broke this morning, and I've tried everything. You're the only person I can trust to actually fix it, and I really don't want to call someone else. Monks are sworn to do good, aren't they?"

I could hear it—the manipulation. It was in her words, in the way she made the task sound so trivial, as if it was a necessity, as if I was the only person capable of doing it. She knew damn well what it would cost me to refuse.

And yet, as much as I wanted to lash out, to call out her lies, I found myself nodding, my mouth working before my brain could catch up.

"Fine," I muttered through clenched teeth, my voice laced with bitterness. "I'll help you."

I took a deep breath, reminding myself of the Buddha's words: "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves." It was a warning, one I ignored as I stepped deeper into the chaos she had invited.

I hated her for pushing me this far, for making me question my vows, my sense of duty. I hated that I was willing to help, that I was letting her drag me deeper into this mess, despite every ounce of my being screaming for me to walk away.

But I couldn't. Because if I refused her now, I'd be admitting that I was weak. I'd be giving up the last bit of control I had. And, despite the anger that raged inside me, I couldn't allow that.

It would be wrong to leave her hanging, I told myself. But I knew it wasn't about right or wrong anymore. It was about something darker—something I couldn't fully grasp.

Momoi raised an eyebrow, her smirk widening as if she knew exactly what I was thinking. She probably did.

"You're a good man, Tatsuya," she said softly, the words carrying more weight than I could ever admit to her. "But that doesn't mean you won't do what you really want to do."

I didn't answer her. Instead, I moved to the door, already regretting this decision, already loathing myself for stepping into her game. But I was in it now. And there was no turning back.

17

A Broken Mirror

MOMOI

I'd been watching him for a while now.

It was almost amusing how much he tried to hide it—his struggle, his guilt. Once I calmed myself back at the apartment, I immediately recognized the tactic he used on me and chastised myself for falling for it. I mean, it was probably the alcohol that made me not think on my feet at that moment. But now that I knew, I found the monk all the more amusing.

And where would a monk learn such toxic behaviors found in the underworld? There was much more to Tatsuya than meets the eye.

I could see the tension in his shoulders and how his jaw tightened when I was around. But he didn't say anything. He never did. That calm, collected facade of his never wavered. It was a damn good act, I had to admit.

But I wasn't fooled.

I leaned against the stone wall of the temple, arms crossed, watching him as he stood near the altar, deep in conversation with one of the other monks. He looked tired, detached, yet too rigid—it told me everything. I could see the battle waging inside of him, the conflict tearing him apart, and for once, it wasn't me struggling with the

weight of my own fucked-up choices.

For once, it was him.

I could barely hold back the snicker that bubbled up in my throat when I saw who I assumed to be his superior shoot him that look—as if Tatsuya had done something wrong, something unholy, though his face remained the same serene mask. I could see through it, though. The way his eyes flickered for a split second when the man spoke to him, his gaze too strained, too desperate to seem unaffected. It was so obvious it almost made me want to laugh out loud.

It was pathetic how he thought he could hide it from me. From anyone, really. He didn't want to be around me, I could tell. He hated how much I unsettled him. But here he was, spending more and more time around me. And that fact? Well, it made my stomach do something strange, something I didn't care to analyze too much.

But what made it even better—what I couldn't stop finding hilarious—was how much it bothered him. How much he tried to deny it.

It was funny. Watching him struggle. Watching the ever-present calm, he had been so proud of crack just a little bit, day by day. A part of me enjoyed it. A rippling satisfaction at seeing him slowly unravel. Because honestly? For once, I wasn't the only one in pain.

I wasn't the only one who had a damn storm inside.

I hadn't expected him to be so... human. When I first met him, I figured he was just another quiet, distant monk who wanted to avoid the mess of the world. The kind who buried himself in rituals and prayers, too high and mighty to care about people like me. But I was wrong. Tatsuya wasn't above anyone. No, he was just as messed up as the rest of us.

It was almost... satisfying, in a twisted way.

I caught his eye for a moment as his superior turned and walked away. There it was—the flash of hesitation, the thing he couldn't hide, the flicker of something darker underneath all that calm. I wanted to walk up to him then, to remind him of that moment—of how much he was failing to hide the fact that he wanted something from me, something dangerous.

But I didn't.

Instead, I just let my lips curl into a sly grin.

“Don't strain yourself too much,” I said, loud enough for him to hear as he moved toward the side entrance, still pretending nothing was wrong.

His eyes snapped to me, and I saw the sharp inhale he took as he struggled to keep his composure. He opened his mouth, probably to tell me to mind my own business, but something stopped him. A flicker of hesitation, just enough for me to savor.

“Everything alright, monk?” I asked, my voice laced with amusement.

He didn't answer at first. Instead, he gave me a look—one of those looks that were full of suppressed frustration, the ones he kept hidden beneath his stoic demeanor. The look that told me I was getting under his skin, and I revelled in it.

And the more I watched him squirm, the more I realized how much it entertained me.

There was a part of me—one I didn't want to acknowledge—that felt a twisted satisfaction in seeing him struggle, in watching him fight with the pull I seemed to have on him. I couldn't help it. There was something delicious about it. I was watching a perfect mirror crack, piece by piece, and seeing what was hidden

underneath.

He wasn't this perfect, holy man he liked to present himself as. No. He was similar to me.

And that... that made me feel a little better.

I pushed myself off the wall, stretching lazily, pretending not to notice how he shifted uncomfortably, still struggling to decide whether he was going to walk away or say something. He didn't, though. He just stared at me, his mouth tight, as if he was holding back whatever it was that had been eating at him for so long.

I took a step closer, narrowing my eyes at him.

"You know," I said, my voice dipping low with mock sympathy, "it's okay not to have everything together. Some of us don't. Believe me."

He didn't respond right away, but his gaze locked on mine, dark and conflicted. I could see the wheels turning in his head, wondering whether it was worth it to engage with me.

But the truth was, I didn't care.

I was enjoying this.

For the first time in ages, I wasn't the one breaking apart. It was him.

And it felt so damn good.

I smiled at him, sharp and unrepentant, before turning away, leaving him to stew in whatever confusion and guilt was eating away at him.

I didn't need him to say anything. I already knew what he was feeling.

The same thing I'd been feeling for years.

18

What Plays in the Shadows

MOMOI

The sun was too bright for this kind of day, glaring down with a personal vendetta against me. But I didn't care. I kept my pace steady, walking toward the bank like I was just another woman going about her business. But I knew better than to believe it was ever that simple.

I stepped inside the cool, air-conditioned lobby, the sterile scent of freshly printed bills and polished marble greeting me as I approached the teller. There was no line, which meant I didn't have to wait long. I pulled out my check register from my bag, flipping through the pages with practiced precision. The transaction I was looking for came up quickly—my most recent deposit.

It should've been fine and exactly what it was supposed to be. But something was off.

I frowned, the familiar wave of unease creeping up my spine. The numbers didn't add up. I wasn't an accountant, but I had kept track of my finances too closely to miss a small discrepancy. It was barely a fraction, a minuscule difference—just a few hundred yen. Nothing to anyone else, nothing that would raise alarms.

But I knew. I felt it.

The Yakuza. They were sending me a message. Another subtle warning, one only I

would recognize. They were getting bolder, more direct. I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or terrified that they were now sending these reminders through finances. It was a game, and I was still in it—whether I wanted to be or not. They were watching me, always watching me.

I shoved the register back into my bag, my hands trembling just slightly, betraying the calm exterior I was trying to maintain. I could hear the low hum of the bank's air conditioning, but my mind was elsewhere, racing through possibilities. There was no way I was going to ignore this. The difference, no matter how small, meant they were telling me something. And I'd been through enough to know that ignoring a message from the Yakuza was a mistake that could cost you more than money.

I forced myself to stay composed as I turned to leave, but the moment I stepped outside into the harsh sunlight, I felt it. The feeling of eyes on me. It wasn't just the normal paranoia I'd learned to live with—it was different. More immediate. More personal. I was being watched.

I knew it before I even looked around. I didn't let the panic rise, but I couldn't ignore how my heart started to beat faster. Every instinct screamed at me to be careful. To stay aware.

I paused for just a moment, scanning the street through the reflective glass of the bank's front door. The street was busy with pedestrians going about their lives, but I didn't trust any of them. The crowd was always a perfect cover for those who wanted to stay hidden. I knew the game too well.

I waited for a beat, then turned to walk in the opposite direction, down a different street, trying to shake off the feeling of being followed. If I was imagining things, I would calm down soon enough. But if I wasn't...

I didn't get far before I knew.

The footsteps behind me. The subtle shift in the rhythm of the footfalls—one or two people following just a bit too closely. Not quite in sync with the crowd, but enough to blend in if anyone was paying attention.

I kept walking, my pace measured, trying to control the panic creeping in. A quick glance over my shoulder told me nothing. No one looked suspicious. No one looked out of place.

But something unseen stretched over my skin. They were still there. Following me.

I couldn't afford to be caught off guard, not again. I had to lose them.

I ducked down a side street, my heels clicking rapidly against the pavement as I changed direction, trying to be as discreet as possible. The alley was narrow and dim, a winding path that should've taken me out of sight. But the footsteps behind me didn't fade. They grew louder, closer.

Someone was definitely tailing me.

I cursed under my breath and quickened my pace, taking a sharp left at the next corner, ignoring the burn in my lungs. I didn't dare look back. If I turned around, I would give them exactly what they wanted. I had to stay calm and in control.

I made another turn, then another, weaving through the narrow streets and alleyways, always one step ahead. The tension in my neck was unbearable. The pounding of my heart was deafening, but I couldn't let it control me.

I was running out of options.

I turned onto a larger street, hoping the more crowded area would make it harder for them to follow. But just as I took that turn, I felt the unmistakable presence behind

me again. A shadow was looming. A body too close, steps too deliberate.

I knew this game too well.

I reached for my phone, my fingers trembling slightly as I pressed the emergency contact. My thumb hovered over the screen, ready to send a quick message to the one person who might be able to help—just in case things went south. My brother was able to smuggle a phone into the prison, and despite the barriers, he still held some power. But before I could hit send, the footsteps stopped.

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

I didn't dare turn around. But I could feel the presence of someone, maybe more than one, just beyond the threshold of my peripheral vision.

I was trapped, for now. And I had no idea how this was going to play out.

But I wouldn't let them take me without a fight.

The air around me thickened with tension. My heart slammed against my ribs, and every nerve in my body screamed for me to react, to be ready. But I kept walking, pretending I hadn't heard the subtle shift in their movement. My hand brushed the inside of my jacket where my knife was tucked against my side. It was small, efficient, nothing fancy, but it was all I had.

The silence stretched, and I could almost hear their taunting smirks. They were playing with me, letting me think I could outrun them.

Then, a voice broke the quiet, gravelly and filled with venom.

"Thought you could escape, huh, princess?" The voice was low, mocking. "You never

learn, do you?"

I curled my lip at their pet name. There were two of them. I'd counted four steps before they closed in on me, just enough to make sure I was surrounded.

"Not so tough without your little knife, are you?" the second voice added. "You know, I'm sure the Yakuza would love to see how you bleed... in more ways than one."

I didn't turn around. Not yet.

But I felt the cold steel of their weapons shift, the distinct sound of metal sliding against fabric. One of them, the one closest, had a crowbar. The other—a knife, a larger blade that could easily cut through my skin.

I could almost hear the grins in their voices as they taunted me.

"You know, you should've stayed home, sweetheart," the one with the crowbar sneered. "You're just a broken toy, easy to fix. But tonight? Tonight, we'll see just how broken you really are."

I had no choice. The moment I heard the clink of metal on metal, I spun, moving faster than they expected. The crowbar swung in an arc toward my face, and I ducked just in time, my knife flashing in my hand. But I wasn't fast enough.

The crowbar caught me on the side of my upper arm. A sickening thud echoed in my ear. Pain shot through my body, and for a moment, I couldn't breathe. I staggered back, almost falling, but I caught myself against the wall.

"Didn't see that coming, did you?" The man with the crowbar laughed, the sound grating against my nerves.

I ignored the pain and forced myself to stay upright. I wasn't going to let them win. I couldn't. My knife was in my hand, but I needed to be smarter than just swinging it blindly.

I pivoted, aiming for the man with the crowbar's midsection, but he was ready. He twisted the crowbar in his hands, knocking mine aside. The moment of distraction cost me. The man with the knife lunged, his blade flashing through the air. I barely had time to react.

The cold steel sliced across my other arm, just above the elbow, leaving a deep, stinging cut. Blood welled up, dark and hot, as I barely dodged another strike.

"Come on," the crowbar guy taunted, "this is supposed to be fun."

I fought to keep my breath steady, to force my mind back to focus. The pain was overwhelming, but I couldn't let it control me. I couldn't show weakness. I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me break.

The crowbar swung again, this time aimed at my legs. I barely avoided it, but not without the bruise of it scraping against my calf. My vision blurred slightly, but I forced it back into focus.

I couldn't keep dodging. I had to fight back, had to make the first move, had to hurt them before they hurt me more.

I leaped forward, aiming for the man with the knife. My knife slashed through the air, narrowly missing his neck. The man laughed again, taunting me.

"Is that all you've got?" he mocked.

I gritted my teeth. They were bigger, stronger. I was faster, and I had to use that

speed.

I spun away, dodging another swipe from the crowbar, but the man with the knife was quick, too. He closed the distance faster than I expected, his blade catching my side. I hissed as it sliced through my jacket and into the surface of my flesh.

But it was a mistake.

I could feel the rage building in me, a blinding fury that cut through the fear. They were underestimating me. They thought they could break me with their words, with their weapons. They were wrong.

I attacked again, my knife slashing down and finding its mark this time. The man with the knife cursed as I drove it into his shoulder, the blade sinking deep into his muscle. He staggered back, clutching at the wound, and I didn't give him a chance to recover.

But the crowbar man was still there, and he swung it wildly, knocking me back again. This time, I didn't have time to recover. I hit the ground hard, my head slamming into the concrete. Everything went blurry for a moment, the taste of blood in my mouth.

"Pathetic," the crowbar man spat, his voice mocking.

I felt the blood soaking through my clothes, the sting of the cuts, the bruises, but I wasn't done. I couldn't be done. They were playing with me, toying with me. But I wasn't their prey.

I gritted my teeth, my body screaming, but I pushed through the pain, rolling back onto my feet. My vision was tunneling, my breath coming in short, sharp gasps. My knife felt heavier, but I didn't let it drop.

"You want to break me?" I snarled, my voice barely a whisper through the blood in my mouth. "You'll have to do better than that."

The crowbar swung again, but this time I was ready. I dove forward, crashing into the man with the crowbar, sending him stumbling back. My knife found its target in the chaos—his side, his ribs, deep enough to make him yell out in pain.

But they weren't backing down.

19

The Inevitable

TATSUYA

I shouldn't have been there.

But something in me—some dark, impossible pull—dragged me along. My mind was a battlefield, but my body was already moving before I could think it through. I told myself it was the right thing to do, that she was in danger, that I had to protect her, but deep down, I knew it wasn't that simple. There was an obsession growing inside me, something I couldn't shake, something I couldn't explain.

I was supposed to be above this.

But I wasn't.

And that made the rage burn hotter.

I followed her, keeping to the shadows, careful not to make a sound. She didn't know I was there. She never did. But I couldn't help myself. She was a magnet pulling me closer, and I hated myself for it. Every time I told myself to leave, to turn around and go back to the temple, I couldn't do it. My feet were rooted to the ground, wanting to follow her with a compulsion I had no control over.

The thing was, I didn't know why I felt this way. Not exactly. All I knew was that

there was something about her—something that both terrified and attracted me. It was a bond I couldn't explain, a connection that was pulling at the very core of my soul.

And it wasn't just the physical attraction. It was the darkness I could sense in her. The same kind of darkness I had tried to bury in myself.

I kept my distance, watching her from afar.

That was, until I heard it.

A scream.

A woman's voice.

Momoi.

It felt like a dagger was piercing through my flesh. My heart thudded painfully against my ribcage. Without thinking, my body reacted before my mind caught up. I ran, faster than I ever thought possible. My legs carried me with a power I didn't know I had. I could hear the distant echo of her scream in my mind, urging me on, spurring me into action.

When I turned the corner, the sight of her stopped me dead in my tracks.

Two men had her cornered. One with a crowbar, the other with a knife. The fear in her eyes—barely hidden under the bravado—was enough to set my blood on fire. The men were taunting her, getting closer, and she was fighting back with all her might, but she was outnumbered. Outmatched.

And in that moment, I felt a switch flip inside me. The rage that had been simmering beneath the surface erupted in an instant.

I saw red.

Every breath felt was fire in my lungs, and all I could think about was destroying them. Protecting her wasn't enough. I needed to hurt them. I needed to make them feel every ounce of pain they had inflicted on her.

I was no longer thinking. I was moving on pure instinct.

I didn't even hear the words they shouted at me as I rushed toward them. The man with the crowbar swung at me first, but I was already on him. My fist connected with his jaw, sending him stumbling backward. The crack of bone under my knuckles was satisfying, but it only fueled the fire inside me.

The man with the knife lunged at me, but I grabbed his arm, twisting it with a sickening crack. The knife clattered to the ground, but I didn't stop. I threw him to the ground, kneeling him in the stomach before turning my attention back to the first man.

I was already moving before my brain could catch up to my instincts. Every inch of me screamed at me to turn around, to walk away, to keep my vows of peace. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't stand there and watch them threaten her.

My fist connected with a jaw with a sickening crack, and I felt the rush of satisfaction, the heat in my chest burning hotter, fiercer. But it wasn't enough. Not by a long shot.

None of it was meant to be this way. I wasn't supposed to enjoy this, but when his body staggered back, and his breath hitched as he tried to recover—it felt right in a way I couldn't understand.

I turned toward the second man, who had rushed to close the gap. He swung a crude

punch, but I ducked, spinning around and landing an elbow to his ribs. I heard him grunt in pain, but it wasn't enough to stop him. They weren't backing down.

And neither was I.

I wasn't even trying to protect her anymore. It wasn't about her anymore.

It was about me.

The next few moments blurred into a haze of violence. My body was moving without thinking, my hands striking, my fists landing with bone-crushing force. I didn't hear their screams. Didn't hear their pleas. All I could hear was the blood pounding in my ears, the thrum of fury that surged through me. I wasn't thinking about anything. I was consumed by the rage.

I heard the crunch of bone, the wet slap of flesh hitting the concrete, the sound of their broken bodies hitting the ground. It was primal, savage, and I didn't care. I wanted to hear it. I needed to hear it.

My hands were covered in blood. My robes were soaked with it. It was everywhere. The men's bodies were barely recognizable as they lay in pieces on the ground. I had destroyed them. Crushed them. The rage had taken over completely.

I stood over them, chest heaving, hands still clenched in fists, blood dripping from my fingers. I didn't know how long I had been standing there, but when I looked down at the bodies, I couldn't even recognize what I had done.

And then it hit me.

I looked down at my hands, covered in blood. The red liquid was smeared across my skin, dripping down my wrists. I wiped my hands against my robes, but the blood

wouldn't come off.

But that wasn't what made my breath hitch in my chest.

It was the feeling. The power coursing through me.

I lifted my hands to my face, trembling, as I felt the heat radiating off my skin. My fingers felt longer, thicker. My nails sharpened into claws. The veins beneath my skin were swollen, dark, pulsing. The very air around me seemed to crackle with the power I could feel surging inside me.

I stepped back, and that's when I saw it.

The reflection in a broken piece of glass on the ground.

It wasn't me.

It was something else.

The face staring back at me was distorted, monstrous. My eyes—no longer just human—glowed with an unnatural intensity, the pupils elongated into slits. My skin had a dark, unnatural tint that reflected my insides. I was something that no longer belonged in the world of men.

I stood there, my fists still clenched, my body trembling with the aftermath of what I had just done. The rage inside me hadn't gone away. It wasn't gone . It was still there, still gnawing at me, still hungry for more.

And the worst part was, I didn't know how to stop it.

I wasn't supposed to be this man.

I wasn't supposed to be the one who threw punches.

But in that moment, I realized I'd become exactly what I hated.

I hadn't just fought them.

I had become something else.

I had become an Oni.

The rage that had consumed me, the anger I had tried to bury for years, had twisted me into this. Into a monster.

An Oni.

The legend of the Oni had always been just that—a story. A cautionary tale whispered to children, a myth, a creature of nightmares. A demon born from rage and violence, its only purpose is to destroy, to slaughter, to feed on the misery of those unlucky enough to cross its path. The Oni was said to be a once-human warrior who, overwhelmed by their own fury, gave in to their darkest desires and became a beast. No longer bound by the rules of man, the Oni's blood ran hot with an unquenchable thirst for destruction.

The eyes were the first sign—eyes that glowed with an unnatural, fiery light, their pupils like a beast's, narrow and predatory. The skin would change, darken, and take on an inhuman texture of a hardened shell of a demon. But it wasn't just the outward transformation. The Oni's true power lay in its rage—the primal, unstoppable force that coursed through their veins, making them nearly invincible, tearing through anything and anyone in their path without thought or remorse.

I had always believed the Oni were just a myth, an exaggeration. A tale meant to

scare children into behaving. But now, as I looked down at my own blood-soaked hands, my trembling fingers, the unnatural glow in my eyes, I realized the truth. The curse wasn't just a story. It was real.

And I had crossed that line.

My body still trembled from the violence, the bloodlust, the primal urge to continue, to destroy. The feeling was intoxicating, a rush I had never experienced before. The adrenaline was still pumping through me, my heart hammering against my chest, but it wasn't just from the fight. It was something deeper, something more dangerous. Something that fed on the chaos I had unleashed. I could feel it inside of me, crawling under my skin like fire, threatening to burn me from the inside out.

I had embraced it, let it consume me, and now there was no turning back.

I wanted to scream in frustration, to tear my own skin off to rid myself of the curse that had claimed me. But all I could do was stand there, breath shallow, hands covered in blood.

The Oni was no longer a legend. It was me.

And in that moment, I had become a thing of terror, a monster that would never again be allowed to walk in the light. I would never again be able to claim the peace I had fought so hard to protect.

I was no longer Tatsuya.

I was something else. Something far darker. An Oni.

And I was trapped in the very thing I had feared most.

20

No Time like the Present

MOMOI

I couldn't breathe.

The sight of him—Tatsuya—transformed into something out of a nightmare... It shook me to my core. His eyes, glowing with an unnatural intensity, his skin darkened, veins visible beneath the surface in some twisted reflection of a demon. His whole body was pulsing with raw power, and the air around him seemed to vibrate with an energy that wasn't human.

But even then, despite the horrific transformation, I knew it was him. I saw everything with my own eyes. He was still there.

I could feel it in my bones.

The pull, the connection. Something inside of me still recognized him. The man I had cursed, the man who had somehow found his way into my thoughts in ways I didn't want. But now, seeing him like this—seeing him become something I could barely understand—my instincts screamed at me to run. To get away before whatever was inside of him completely overtook him.

But then I saw the fear in his eyes. It was fleeting, a brief crack in the monster he had become, but it was there. And that made my heart stop.

He was struggling. And he didn't deserve to be trapped this way.

I wasn't sure why I cared. I wasn't sure if I was even in my right mind anymore. But the thought of leaving him out here to be hunted—by the authorities, or worse, the Yakuza—was too much. I couldn't do that.

I just couldn't.

Without thinking, I rushed forward, grabbing his arm, my fingers gripping his flesh as if my life depended on it. His hand twitched, almost as if it was going to lash out, but then I pulled him hard, dragging him with me.

"Come on," I whispered fiercely, my voice shaking with a fear I was trying desperately to hide. "We need to get out of here, now."

I could hear the sounds of sirens in the distance, the distant murmur of voices. If the authorities or anyone from the Yakuza caught wind of what had just happened—what Tatsuya had become—they wouldn't hesitate. They'd be after him.

And they wouldn't care if I got caught in the crossfire.

I couldn't let that happen, not after everything that had happened between us. I couldn't let him become another casualty of this messed-up world we were both stuck in.

He stumbled behind me, his body still shifting in the aftermath of his transformation, but his mind was still there. I could feel the resistance in his steps, the confusion in his gaze. The primal anger still churned beneath the surface, but there was something more. Something I couldn't quite pinpoint.

I had to get him somewhere safe. Somewhere where we could figure this out before it

was too late.

I knew of a place. A warehouse, abandoned, tucked away in a part of the city where even the Yakuza rarely ventured. I didn't know how that knowledge suddenly resurfaced in my mind, as if it had been lying in wait for this exact moment. I didn't have time to care what it meant. It was the only place I could think of where we might have some time to breathe.

I glanced around quickly. No one seemed to be watching, but I wasn't taking any chances. Keeping my grip tight on Tatsuya's arm, I led him down a series of side streets, staying in the shadows, avoiding the main roads. Every step I took, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. My skin was crawling. I could sense eyes on us.

I knew I wasn't just paranoid. We were being followed. I could feel it.

I tugged Tatsuya into an alley, pressing my back against the cold, graffiti-covered wall. We stopped there for a moment, my breath coming in quick gasps.

"I think they're after us," I said, more to myself than to him.

Tatsuya didn't answer, but I could see the storm brewing behind his eyes. The rage, the confusion, the fear. He was slipping away again. I could feel it.

Without wasting another second, I started moving again, dragging him behind me.

We rounded a corner, and there it was—the warehouse. Dark and unassuming. The kind of place people went to disappear. I grabbed Tatsuya's arm again, practically dragging him up the narrow, rusted stairs. His steps were heavy, and I could feel the weight of the change in him. He wasn't fully himself, but at least he was still with me, still listening to the small bit of humanity inside him.

We reached the door, and I shoved it open, the creaking of the old wood sending a shiver down my spine. I pulled Tatsuya inside, his new monstrous form a bit too wide for the door itself. With effort, we slipped in, slamming the door behind us. The darkness of the place seemed to swallow us whole, but I knew we didn't have time to waste.

I found a spot near the back, tucked between crates and dusty old machinery. My fingers shook as I set my back against a cold, rusted beam, taking a moment to breathe, to steady myself. The adrenaline still buzzed in my system, and I couldn't quiet the pounding in my ears.

Tatsuya stood in front of me, his posture stiff, his body still radiating that terrifying energy. He was a man on the edge of losing himself. I could see it in his eyes—the struggle. The inner battle between the man he was and the beast he was becoming.

I stepped closer, my pulse racing in my neck.

“Tatsuya...” I whispered, barely able to form the words. “You need to calm down. You can't let it take over.”

His chest rose and fell with each heavy breath, his fists clenched, but he didn't answer. His eyes flicked to me briefly, a flash of recognition, but the intensity in his gaze made me step back.

I couldn't fix this. I couldn't fix him. But I had to try.

The seconds ticked by, dragging on like hours, and I knew we didn't have much time before someone found us.

I had to keep him calm.

But how?

Before I could speak again, the door to the warehouse creaked. I froze, my heart leaping into my throat. I protectively stood in front of Tatsuya and walked backward, pushing him further into the shadows. Footsteps echoed outside, growing closer with every passing second.

I held my breath, pressing my back harder against him. The air seemed to thicken with tension, and I cursed under my breath.

Then, a voice called out in the distance, muffled but clear enough to make my pulse spike. “We need to sell this place soon—before it loses any more value. If we wait too long, it’s not gonna be worth anything.”

There was a faint response, too soft for me to make out, followed by the sound of a door opening and shutting with a soft thud. Their footsteps started to fade, and for a brief moment, I thought we might be safe.

Without warning, heavy, non-human hands landed on my shoulders, the touch cold and unnatural. The weight of them sent a shiver down my spine, and the air around us seemed to grow thicker, heavier. A new fear gripped me. I didn’t know if this was the man I had come to know, or if it was something far darker that had taken control.

His hands weren’t gentle. They felt monstrous, unyielding, and when I glanced up at him, his eyes glowed with an intensity that was nothing like before. The rage simmering beneath the surface was still there, coiled tight, ready to snap.

And that’s when I realized—this wasn’t just fear of being caught.

I wasn’t sure if this monster was friendly... or hungry.

Playing with Fire

MOMOI

The weight of Tatsuya's hands on my shoulders felt suffocating, as if the air was being squeezed out of me. Every instinct screamed at me to break free, to get away from whatever the hell he had become, but my body was frozen. I was terrified. Terrified of him and terrified of myself for not running.

What possessed me to back him up against the wall that way? What was my little body going to do? If anything, Tatsuya was fine on his own, but logic had already fled the scene long ago, and I might as well ride the wave toward insanity. What option did I have left?

"What the hell are you doing?" I snapped, my voice shaky but fierce, the anger surging in me like a tidal wave. It was my go-to coping mechanism after all. I jerked my body away from his grasp and faced him head-on. "You're acting like some damn animal. Snap out of it!"

He didn't respond. Not a word. Not a single flicker of recognition in his eyes. Just that monstrous glow, that demon-like rage burning in them, and it only made the knot in my stomach tighten.

"Answer me, Tatsuya!" I shouted, stepping forward, my heart pounding against my ribs. My voice was louder now, more frantic, but it was useless, as if I was shouting at

a wall.

I couldn't stop myself. My words came out sharper, laced with venom. "What the hell did you think would happen? You're just gonna turn into a demon, and I'm supposed to just—what—follow you into the dark? This is insane!"

And that's when I saw it. The growl. The low, guttural sound that rumbled from deep within his chest. It wasn't human. It wasn't even close. My blood ran cold as I realized it was a reaction to my words. When I said his name, it seemed to irritate whatever demon had taken over him.

"Tatsuya..." I said his name again, testing the waters, but my voice faltered.

His lips curled back slightly in a snarl, and the growl deepened, vibrating through the air. My stomach churned as I realized this wasn't a person anymore. This... thing was a predator.

I took a step back, watching him move as if on the hunt—it made my pulse spike. It wasn't just his hands, drenched in blood, the very blood that was still dripping from his fingertips. He prowled toward me, each step purposeful, predatory, and filled with an unsettling hunger.

I stumbled back another step, my heart hammering in my chest. My eyes couldn't stop drifting to his hands—those massive, bloody hands, the claws that had ripped through men as if they were nothing. I could almost see the remnants of their blood splattered across his knuckles. It was so much blood... I didn't even know how he hadn't collapsed under the weight of it all.

Beneath the dim shadows of the warehouse, I took in his transformed appearance. Four jagged horns sprouted from his skull, sharp and ominous, while his skin had taken on the hue of raw fury—a deep, fiery red, synonymous with the very

embodiment of rage itself.

There were strange symbols and patterns along the exposed flesh of his chest. The flesh on his shoulders was ripped and torn, as if a small piece of Tatsuya was still holding on during his transformation, only to become a casualty. Beneath the tears were blackened skin that reminded me of charred flesh. And his eyes— God , his eyes—glowed with a haunting yellow light as if they were mirrors to the fires of hell itself. From his gums, large fangs protruded, a clear warning that this monstrous form was armed with yet another deadly weapon.

I forced myself to keep my voice steady. "Tatsuya... Come on. You have to hear me. You're still in there. I know it. You ... are still in there."

But as I said it, I realized how hollow my words were. Was he really still in there? Or had I been fooling myself this whole time, hoping that the man I thought I knew was somewhere beneath the surface of this... thing?

I wasn't sure anymore.

He was getting closer now, moving with an unnerving grace. Every part of me screamed to run, to leave this nightmare behind and never look back. But something inside kept me rooted to the spot. I couldn't stop myself from watching, from seeing just how far gone he was.

And I knew, deep down, I'd made a mistake by being here. I was alone in this warehouse with an Oni. A demon. And no matter how often I told myself I could handle it, the truth was clear: I had bitten off more than I could chew.

I took another step back, but this time, he followed, the sinister pull of his presence too strong to ignore. He was still Tatsuya, or at least, part of him was. But what had I done by dragging him into this?

He didn't answer, just kept coming, his growls growing louder, the tension in the air thickening. I realized, as my back hit a crate, that I had no more room to retreat.

I was cornered. Trapped.

Fear clawed at my chest, but something else surged inside me—a surge of anger so raw, it felt like the very blood of the Yakuza running through my veins. I was tired of being everyone's chosen victim. What was it about me? I was just a girl trying to start her life over who somehow found herself face to face with an Oni of legend.

I was angry at the cards life had dealt me.

But I could use this anger to my advantage. If I was going to die here, then I might as well die fighting. My voice cut through the tension, sharper than I meant it to be.

"Stop." I spat the word, the weight of it carrying more than just command. There was power in my tone, born from years of surviving their world.

To my surprise, he did, narrowing his eyes.

I narrowed mine right back.

"Tatsuya, get on your knees," I ordered, pushing all the control I had into the words, as if they were weapons themselves.

The demon before me hesitated, his monstrous form towering over me, but I didn't flinch. I stared up at him, eyes burning with the same fury that had been drilled into me over the years.

I didn't know how to save him. Hell, I didn't even know if I could save myself. But right then, I realized something—I didn't have to be weak. If I could command a

demon to stop, I would.

And I wasn't about to let him tear through everything just because he was lost in his own rage.

I stepped forward, my voice laced with ice. "Listen to me, Tatsuya. You owe me for getting you out of your mess. If you don't do what I say right now, I swear I will make you regret it."

My eyes locked onto his, and I could feel my pulse quicken, but I didn't back down. "Get on your knees. Now. "

I didn't know if my anger was enough to break through the demon he'd become, but I'd be damned if I didn't try.

The ground trembled beneath me as the Oni suddenly dropped to his knees, the force of it shaking the very foundation of the warehouse. My eyes widened in surprise, my breath catching in my throat. The sheer power of his transformation—the raw force—made my pulse race in a way I hadn't anticipated. And yet, somewhere deep within me, I couldn't deny the strange thrill that surged through my veins, as if I were standing on the edge of something dangerous, something dark and titillating.

I hesitated, uncertain whether to retreat or step closer. But something, perhaps the adrenaline or the strange connection between us, pushed me forward. Slowly, I took a step toward him, my eyes lingering on the terrifying, demonic face before me.

With tentative fingers, I reached out, my hand hovering just above his face before finally making contact.

The moment I touched him, he snarled, a deep, guttural sound that sent a chill down my spine. But I didn't flinch. Instead, I smirked, the edge of defiance never leaving

my lips.

“Well, aren’t you a little obedient demon?” I teased, my voice laced with sarcasm. “Didn’t know you’d be this easy to break.”

He growled again, but I ignored it, stepping closer. My hand, surprisingly steady, cradled his face, fingers grazing the sharp lines of his jaw. The contrast between his rage and the strange tenderness I felt at the moment was unnerving, but I couldn’t help it. There was something about him—about this situation—that twisted me in a way I couldn’t quite explain.

His eyes, glowing with that eerie yellow fire, locked onto mine, and for a brief moment, I almost saw something beneath the demon. Something human.

But then I quickly shoved that thought aside. This was the Oni, the monster who had torn through men without hesitation.

Still, my hand rested against his skin, the warmth of it almost comforting, despite the danger he represented.

“What the hell are you?” I murmured, more to myself than to him. But I didn’t pull away. Not yet.

The Oni’s eyes burned into mine, glowing with an intensity that could have shattered the air between us. His lips curled into a twisted snarl, revealing the sharp, deadly fangs, and his voice rumbled from deep within him, like thunder in the distance.

“You think you can control me?” he growled, the words heavy with malice. “You think you can order me around? You’re nothing but a mortal, and I will destroy you if you push me.”

The threat sent a rush of adrenaline through me, but it didn't scare me. If anything, it ignited something more. I wasn't backing down. Didn't he know I had run into plenty of demons in my life since birth?

I had pushed him this far, and I wasn't about to let him think for a second that he could intimidate me into submission.

I took a slow step closer, my fingers still grazing the cold, demonic flesh of his face, never flinching. My voice was steady, dripping with sarcasm.

"Oh, I think I can control you just fine." I leaned in just a little, watching as his eyes flickered with rage. "After all, you've been on your knees for me, haven't you? Seems like I'm the one with the power here."

He snarled, a violent sound that vibrated the air, and for a second, I thought he might snap. But he stayed frozen, his body taut with fury, yet not acting on it.

I smirked, feeling my heart beat in time with the tension building between us. "You threaten me with what, exactly? You're nothing but a big, angry demon who's been reduced to begging. And yet, you're still standing there about to blow a fuse and doing nothing about it. So, what's the deal, huh?"

The room felt suffocating, the air thick with both anger and something I couldn't quite name. But I wasn't backing down. I wasn't scared of him for some reason.

"Come on, if you're going to be all 'dangerous' and 'powerful,' show me what you can really do." I narrowed my eyes, feeling the heat of the moment. "But from where I'm standing, all you're doing is growling and threatening. That's not power, Tatsuya. That's a tantrum."

I could see the twitch in his jaw, his body shaking with the fury he was barely holding

back, and in that moment, I knew I had him. He was as much a prisoner of this rage as I was. And I wasn't about to let him forget that.

I stood there, unflinching, letting my words sink in, daring him to challenge me. When it looked like he was about to let out a roar of rage, revealing our location to the Yakuza, I leaned in and kissed him.

22

Torn Between Shadows

TATSUYA

The moment she touched me, something shifted, and the battle began—inside and out.

My body was a battleground, a split-second of chaos where my mind and the demon inside me fought for dominance. Her fingers against my skin had ignited something deeper, something twisted, and now it was as if we both claimed the same space, both fighting for control of this broken, raging vessel.

Tatsuya's thoughts, memories, feelings—they collided with the raw, primal force of the Oni, the rage and hunger gnawing at me. Every inch of my being wanted to claim her. Every instinct screamed that she was mine, that she belonged to me. But the Oni, it wasn't just a creature of desire—it was born of fury. And right now, it was clawing at me from the inside, wanting to tear her apart just as much as it wanted to consume her.

The two of us, entwined, were battling over her. Her touch, her kiss, it had woken something inside me, something so vile and powerful that I couldn't keep it contained.

" She belongs to me, " the Oni growled, voice deep, laced with hunger. The demon was asserting its dominance, roaring from the core of my being. " No one else

touches her. No one else gets to claim her. She will bow to me. "

But the voice that answered wasn't the Oni's—it was mine. "No," I hissed. "She's not some prize to be taken. You can't just?—"

" I can do whatever I want ," the Oni snarled, cutting me off. " I'll break her and remake her in my image. She is nothing but prey. She will be mine, whether you like it or not. "

I felt the anger boil inside me, a white-hot rage, which was only intensified by the Oni's presence. The two of us clashed, and the battle between my human self and this demon inside me played out in my very soul. My chest heaved in the effort to push it down, but it wouldn't listen. It wouldn't relent.

Momoi stood there, watching us, eyes wide, a strange amusement flickering behind her gaze. She was fascinated, and that infuriated both of us. The Oni was driven by its hunger, its need to possess, while I... I just wanted her to stop this madness, to stop playing this game.

" You think this is a game? " the Oni growled at her. " You think you can play with me like this? " Its voice was a deep rumble of fury, but she didn't flinch. She never did.

"Game? No," I muttered, the tension thick in my chest. "This isn't a game. You're not playing with her, and neither am I. Just... just leave her out of it."

But the Oni just laughed, the sound dark and cruel. " You can't stop me, boy, " it sneered. " She's already mine. She doesn't even know it yet. Let me have her. "

The force of the two of us fighting, our wills clashing, surged through my veins, and I couldn't keep the demon back anymore.

Momoi stepped closer, her eyes glinting with mischief, and I saw how her gaze flicked between the two of us as if she could sense the war going on inside me. She tilted her head, as if she was watching some grand performance unfold. It made my blood boil.

"You know," she said softly, almost teasing, her voice laced with an amused edge. "I'm starting to think both of you are really bad at this."

The Oni growled louder. "Shut up," it snarled, but even that command couldn't stop her from provoking us. "You'll learn your place soon enough."

"Well, that's rude," she huffed, crossing her arms. That was when I noticed her torn clothes, the bruises blooming on her skin, evidence of the violence those men had done to her.

My stomach churned, a visceral reaction to the image of her hurt, and a tide of fury swelled within me. It was a deep, suffocating rage that gripped my chest. I hadn't been able to stop those men from laying their hands on her, and that fact was eating away at me. The demon, the Oni inside me, fed off that rage, its hunger intensifying with every bruise on her body.

I clenched my fists harder, the muscles in my arms straining as I fought to suppress the overwhelming pull of the demon. But it wasn't enough. The fury I felt on her behalf was too much. It twisted inside me like a beast gnawing at its cage, urging me to break free, to destroy everything in my path. My breath came faster, chest rising and falling with the effort to regain control, but the demon only laughed, pushing against my every restraint.

"You couldn't protect her, but I can. I'll make them pay," the Oni growled inside my mind.

I felt its influence creeping closer, the darkness pressing against my thoughts. The lines between Tatsuya and the Oni blurred, and it was becoming harder to tell where I ended and the demon began.

Her bruises—her pain—stirred something in me that was both protective and violent. I wanted to shield her from all of it, but the more I thought about what they did to her, the more the rage threatened to consume me. And the Oni? It didn't care. It was only fueled by it.

I gritted my teeth, trying to push the demon back, trying to hold on to my humanity, but the pull of the darkness was getting stronger with every breath I took.

If I couldn't stop this, if I couldn't find a way to keep the demon in check, I wasn't sure what would happen next. But one thing was clear: I wasn't the only one fighting for control anymore.

"You don't get it, Momoi," I said, my voice strained, battling the demon's influence, trying to keep my focus. "You're not some... game. You don't belong to either of us. You're more than that."

The Oni's voice was a roar in the back of my mind. "She belongs to whoever can take her. You're too weak, too human. I will take what I want."

Momoi's smile grew, and she tilted her head again, her gaze almost challenging. "Is that so? Well, I guess I'm just going to have to enjoy watching you two fight for my attention, then."

That did it.

I don't know what broke inside of me, whether it was the demon or the desire to make her understand just how much this wasn't a game, but a wave of frustration

washed over me. I wanted to break free of this, to push away from this battle, but instead, it intensified. I could feel myself slipping further into the madness, the darkness wrapping around me like a shroud.

Momoi, though... she was still watching, her amusement a flame dancing just out of reach, taunting me. She hadn't run. She wasn't scared. She was feeding it. She was feeding the demon inside me, and I couldn't stand it.

"Stop it," I hissed through clenched teeth, my voice a mix of human desperation and demonic rage. "Stop watching. This isn't?—"

But it was already too late. The demon inside me didn't care what I said. It only wanted her.

Before I could even fully process the situation, the Oni surged forward, pulling me toward her with an intensity that left me breathless. My hands, no longer my own, gripped her arms tightly, forcing her into my chest. The moment our lips met, a dark, hungry part of me that I'd tried to bury came to life, taking control with a brutal force.

She gasped, but before she could pull back, I deepened the kiss, my lips claiming hers as if I had every right to. Every rational thought vanished in a rush of primal hunger. Her warmth, her pulse, the scent of her skin—it all consumed me. My body wasn't mine to command anymore. It was as if the demon had marked her as his own.

I could feel Tatsuya, the man I had once been, screaming inside me, raging with jealousy and fury. He hated this—hated that I was taking what should never be mine. But the demon didn't care. It only wanted more, dragging me deeper into the kiss, its power pushing against every shred of control I had left.

I was caught between the man I used to be and the beast that wanted her, being torn

in two. Tatsuya was screaming, furious that the demon was claiming her— his woman. But the Oni? He wasn't concerned with Tatsuya's feelings. He reveled in the sensation of her closeness, her vulnerability, her surrender.

Her hands pushed weakly against my chest, but she didn't break away. And that, more than anything, infuriated me. She wasn't fighting, not like I expected. Instead, she was letting it happen, even if only for a moment.

The sensation of her lips against mine ignited something darker inside me. And that little voice in the back of my mind —the one that belonged to Tatsuya—screamed, Stop. This isn't who you are. This isn't what you want.

But the demon only growled, the words thick with hunger. She's mine. All mine.

A surge of rage mixed with jealousy overwhelmed me, but I couldn't stop. My hands, the demon's hands, tugged her closer, forcing the kiss to deepen. The line between Tatsuya and the Oni blurred more with every second. This wasn't a kiss. This was a claim.

Somewhere deep inside, I knew this was wrong. This wasn't who I was meant to be. But the demon? It was taking everything I had to hold back from devouring her completely.

I wasn't sure how much more of this I could take.

Between Fire and Flesh

MOMOI

I could feel it—the heat, the dark thrill of the kiss. His lips were brutal, demanding, but underneath all that, there was something else. Tatsuya. I knew he was still there, hidden somewhere beneath the surface, torn apart by the beast the Oni had become. It should have been wrong, and yet... I couldn't stop myself from sinking into the kiss, letting the wave of fire and fury overtake me. It felt like the collision of two worlds, two versions of him battling for control.

And I loved it.

I shouldn't have. I knew I shouldn't. But as his hands gripped me tighter, pulling me deeper into the kiss, there was a spark, a thrill of something forbidden, something dangerous. I felt the pull between the man I knew and the monster that took over. Both of them—Tatsuya and the Oni—fought for my attention, and somehow, I was caught in the middle.

Was it wrong for me to want them both? To feel that strange pull toward both sides of him? The tenderness of Tatsuya's broken soul and the raw, consuming hunger of the Oni were at odds with one another, but something about that tug-of-war sparked a fire inside me.

I finally pulled away, breathless, my heart racing. The world seemed to stop for a

moment as I tried to regain control of myself. His eyes—those eerie yellow eyes—burned into me, and I could see the internal struggle in them. He wasn't just fighting to control the demon inside. He was fighting me, too.

“Enough,” I whispered, my voice shaky but commanding. I stepped back, putting a small distance between us, though the tension in the air was palpable.

The Oni's breath was ragged, and his fangs glinted in the dim light. But I could see the flicker of confusion in his gaze. And beneath that, a surge of anger.

I crossed my arms, steeling myself, knowing I was playing with fire but unwilling to back down now.

“If you really want to keep me,” I said, my voice a bit firmer, “then you're going to have to figure out how to get us both out of this mess because I can't go back to my apartment with you like this. Not when they're still looking for me, not with you in this form.”

I could see the demon's rage bubble up, but I pressed on, knowing it was the only way to reach him.

“The Yakuza will find us. They're already close. And right now, the last thing I need is to be caught between you and them. They'll think you're some kind of threat... and they'll come for you, for both of us.”

The words left a bitter taste in my mouth, but it was the truth. I had to face the consequences of my choices, and so did he. I didn't want to backpedal now, not when things had escalated this far, but I had no choice. This—whatever this was between us—had to stop before it destroyed us both.

“You think you can protect me? Protect us?” I raised an eyebrow, my heart pounding

in my chest. “Then prove it. Because we’re not safe. And you heard the guy earlier; he’s about to sell this little hideout of ours.”

He stared at me, a low growl vibrating in his chest, but for once, I didn’t flinch. I wasn’t afraid of him. Not yet.

“Figure it out, Tatsuya,” I added, my voice softening, but still firm. “You owe me. Now, it’s time to return the favor.”

I stood there, waiting for his next move.

The tension between us hung in the air, thick and suffocating. His yellow eyes burned into me, his chest heaving with every breath, but I could see the internal conflict brewing beneath the surface. The Oni raged, clawing for dominance, but Tatsuya... Tatsuya was still there, still fighting to break free.

“Do you think you can just command me?” he growled, his voice a dangerous mix of Tatsuya’s usual restraint and the raw edge of the demon that had taken over. The Oni’s claws flexed, the knuckles cracking with a bone-chilling sound.

I didn’t flinch, though part of me knew I should. But this wasn’t the time to back down.

“I don’t need to command you,” I snapped, taking a step forward, refusing to let the monster intimidate me. “But if you want to keep me alive—and not just drag us both into your own personal hell—you’ll listen. This mess is bigger than your pride. So fix it.”

His fangs glinted as he bared them, a silent promise of violence. I could feel the weight of his presence, the danger of the situation pushing against me, testing me. But I wasn’t backing down. Not now. We were stuck together, and he, they, knew it.

The Oni stared at me for a long moment, his face a twisted reflection of both rage and something else—something I couldn't quite put my finger on. But in that flicker of time, I saw a vulnerability buried deep within the beast. And it made something in my chest twist just slightly.

For a moment, the fury seemed to ease.

“Where are we going?” His voice was softer now but still threaded with anger, still dangerous. The demon's influence wasn't gone. Not by a long shot. But Tatsuya was trying to take the reins again, just barely.

I swallowed hard, trying to push past the rush of adrenaline that still surged in my veins. “We need to disappear. Lay low until we figure out what the hell to do next. And that means no more running from the Yakuza. No more being caught off guard.”

The anger flared up again, and he shook his head, his claws curling into fists. “I don't run.”

“You don't get it, do you?” I shook my head, exasperated. “This isn't about pride. This is about survival. If you don't want the Yakuza to find us—and if you want to keep yourself from being hunted—you need to stop fighting your damn self.”

There was a long pause. I could see the battle raging inside him. The Oni wanted to rip everything apart; Tatsuya wanted to protect what little was left. But both of them had their own way of doing things. And neither of them were willing to let go.

“Fine,” he growled after a moment, stepping back. “We lay low. But we're doing it my way.”

I smirked, feeling a strange mixture of relief and frustration. “Your way. Of course.”

“I don’t like being controlled,” he warned, his voice low and rumbling with that same growl from earlier. But he stepped back further, the fight draining from his form, for now.

“Then get used to it,” I said, my voice almost teasing. “Because whether you like it or not, we’re in this together now.”

The silence that followed was almost suffocating. There was so much I didn’t understand about this situation, him, or us. But for the first time, the monstrous tension that had been coiling between us seemed to relax—just a little.

For now, we had to survive.

“Let’s move,” I said, the first flicker of command in my voice. "You lead, I'll follow."

He turned, moving with the same grace and lethal elegance that I had come to associate with Tatsuya, even if it was now twisted by the presence of the Oni. He was predatory—dangerous—and yet, there was still something...human. Something I couldn’t shake.

Despite everything, despite the monster he had become, I knew he wasn’t gone.

Not yet.

And for the first time in this madness, I wasn’t sure whether that was a blessing or a curse.

But as I followed him out into the shadows, my mind was already racing ahead, trying to figure out the next steps. We weren’t out of danger. Not by a long shot. But for now, I needed to keep us both alive. And that meant trusting him—or at least hoping the demon wouldn’t get the best of him.

The Yakuza were still out there. And they were coming for us.

24

Flesh and Fury

TATSUYA

The Oni thrummed through my veins, pulling at the very essence of who I was, clawing for control. Inside, Tatsuya and the demon fought tooth and nail—one trying to regain humanity, the other reveling in destruction.

I could hear Tatsuya's voice in my head, strained, frustrated. "We can't just tear through the Yakuza without thinking. We need to plan, Oni. Plan." His words felt distant, as if they were coming through thick fog.

I felt the demon's grin stretch across my face, savage, wild. "Plan?" I growled. "We've never needed a plan. We just need to take what's ours."

Tatsuya's voice surged again, sharper, more desperate. "We can't keep doing this. Not this way. You're going to get us both killed."

But I was beyond caring. The blood boiled in me, rage clouding my vision. It wasn't about survival anymore. It wasn't even about the Yakuza. It was about her. The pull of her—the heat of her touch, the fire of her defiance—it was everything I wanted.

"She's mine," I hissed, ignoring Tatsuya's protests. "She wants this."

The argument raged inside me, a storm tearing at the fabric of my mind, but I wasn't

listening. The Oni wanted nothing but chaos, destruction, and Momoi. Nothing else mattered.

In the distance, there was a rustling, faint but unmistakable. Footsteps. My senses locked onto them, a predator with a fresh scent. I could feel the shift in the air, a tangible thrill running down my spine. Finally, something to rip through. Something to destroy.

Tatsuya's voice was strained, panicked. " Don't. Don't let the rage take over. We need to think. We need to be smart, or we'll lose everything. "

But it was too late. The Oni wasn't listening. It was always too late. It was a hunger, a need that burned too bright to be ignored.

I surged forward, my body moving with a mind of its own. There was no hesitation. The door of the building ahead creaked, swinging open just as the figure emerged. A man, casual in his walk, unaware of the beast about to pounce.

I couldn't stop myself. The rage was too much.

The Oni roared inside me, demanding release.

Before Tatsuya could say another word, I was already upon him. The world around me blurred as my claws reached out, tearing into the man's flesh, rending him apart without a second thought. The blood sprayed across the floor, a hot, thick spray that soaked my skin. The satisfaction was immediate, primal, and absolute.

But even as the life drained from the man's eyes, there was a flicker—a small voice in the back of my mind. Tatsuya.

" What have you done? " His voice was shaking now, full of disbelief and disgust. "

We were trying to control this, trying to stop. "

I wiped the blood from my claws, my grin stretching wider. " This is control. "

I could feel Tatsuya retreating further, his words growing weaker as the Oni pushed him back. And for the first time, I felt the demon in me fully in charge. There was no trace of humanity left.

But as the blood pooled at my feet, something inside me—the small part of Tatsuya that still existed—shifted. I felt it. The doubt. The confusion.

"This isn't us," Tatsuya whispered, and I wanted to ignore him, but his words gnawed at me. "This isn't what you promised me you would be."

But the Oni didn't care about promises. It cared about hunger, desire, and rage. And right now, the only thing it wanted was her.

The moment I thought about Momoi, a twinge of hesitation ran through me. The battle between Tatsuya and the Oni shifted again, both of us struggling for control. But I wasn't ready to let go. Not yet.

" We need to go to her, " I growled.

" Not like this, " Tatsuya shot back, but it didn't matter. The Oni had already decided.

I didn't give him a chance to argue. I was already moving. I needed her.

As I stalked through the streets, the bloodstains still dripping from my claws, I could feel the tension building, the pull of the demon's rage swirling in the air. Each step was heavy, the weight of the world bearing down on me.

And then, through the haze of adrenaline and bloodlust, I heard it—her voice.

"Tatsuya? What do you think you're doing?"

The sound of her voice, sharp and unexpected, stopped me dead in my tracks.

Tatsuya surged forward again, his voice now louder than ever. " You can't go to her after this. You can't let her see you. It'll ruin everything. "

"We can't keep leaving a trail of dead bodies behind, it will lead them right to us!" she continued.

I didn't know how long I could keep this up, how long I could hold onto Tatsuya's humanity before the Oni completely overtook me. But for now, for this moment, I knew one thing for sure, if I was going to keep her alive, keep us both alive, I had to control the monster inside me.

"I don't care how hungry you are, demon! We have things to do!"

Somehow, I was going to have to find a way to get us all out of this mess.

But even as I promised myself I would do everything to protect her, I could feel the rage growing again, threatening to burn it all down.

The air between us was thick with tension—my hands clenched into fists, my mind struggling to stay focused as the demon's presence clawed at me from within. I can't lose control.

Momoi's words echoed in my head. We had a choice: continue this madness or find a way out before we became just another pile of bodies to be forgotten.

The Oni's rage was a living fire burning inside me, but it wasn't all-consuming—not yet. Somehow, in the back of my mind, Tatsuya remained tethered to the body, holding on by a thread, desperate for control.

I won't let him win. I won't let this destroy us.

I glared at the bloodstained floor, thinking of the dead men outside, the Yakuza closing in. I couldn't let this spiral further. I had to think of a plan, something—anything—to get us out of this.

Without preamble, the Oni surged inside me, its deep growl shaking my core.

" I'm hungry, Tatsuya. " The voice rumbled from within, a bone-chilling sneer dripping with malice. " I want to taste their blood. "

"I don't care how hungry you are, demon!" I snapped, my voice tight, teeth gritted. "We have things to do. People to protect. We can't keep killing. If we don't stop?—"

" Stop? " The Oni's voice interrupted, low and guttural. " You don't control me. You never did. You think you can hold me back? "

I felt the rage rising in my chest, but I knew I couldn't let it explode. Not yet. Not with Momoi standing there, watching us, waiting for us to figure it out.

" You think I care about your plans, your control? " the Oni hissed, dark satisfaction dripping from its tone. " I care about blood. I care about power. "

The demon's voice was overpowering, but something in me—something that still felt like me —fought back.

"If we kill them all, we'll be hunted. All of us." I clenched my fists tighter, trying to

suppress the monstrous side that clawed at my skin. "Momoi won't survive this if we keep going. You heard her—she's not just in this for the thrill. She wants out. She wants us out."

The Oni fell silent momentarily, the dark presence within me pulling back just enough for Tatsuya to take a breath. I used that moment to push back, forcing my thoughts into clarity.

"We need to think, demon." I ground out, knowing I had to find some way to reach the twisted side of me. "If we keep running, we'll only lead the Yakuza to us. We need to stop them before they figure out where we are. But I can't do it alone. We have to work together—for her. You understand? For her."

The Oni growled in frustration, but there was a shift, a flicker of something I recognized as agreement. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

"You speak as though you still have control." The Oni's voice sneered, but there was a touch of interest now. "Tell me, then. What's your brilliant plan, human?"

I could feel the demon's disdain, but I knew this was the moment we needed to find common ground. I forced my mind to stay sharp to focus on the task at hand.

"We'll go after the Yakuza. But we need to do it quietly." I didn't care that the words were clumsy. I was trying to put the pieces together while I still had a semblance of control. "No more blood on the streets. We find out where their headquarters are. We hit them fast, cut them off, and make sure they don't have time to retaliate. We get in, we get out, and we keep it clean."

The Oni was silent for a moment, and I thought for a second that I had lost it—that I'd failed to find any ground with this beast inside me.

But then it spoke again, a dark chuckle in its voice. " You're asking me to play nice? "

"I'm asking you to stop being an idiot," I spat back, the frustration rising in my chest. "If we're going to survive, we need to think this through. We can't afford any more chaos. Momoi is in this mess, and we owe her. I owe her. You understand?"

There was a strange pause, an eerie quiet before the demon's voice spoke again, less mocking, more contemplative.

" Fine. " The word was heavy, laced with the twisted amusement that always came when the Oni had its way. " But remember, Tatsuya... I still want what's mine. And I won't forget. Not after what you've put me through. "

The demon's words were a warning, a promise. But for now, it seemed to have agreed to my plan—perhaps out of necessity, or perhaps because it too understood that this was the only way to get out of this alive.

" We'll do this your way, " the Oni murmured, its tone shifting, dark but compliant. " But when the time comes, we'll settle the rest. "

And with that, for the first time, the two of us—demon and human—had come to an uneasy agreement. The plan was set, and I had no idea whether it would work. But I knew one thing for sure: if we were going to escape this hell we'd created, we'd have to rely on each other.

25

The Quiet Before the Storm

MOMOI

I couldn't help but be taken aback by how quickly Tatsuya had shifted into action. One moment, he was this monstrous, terrifying Oni; the next, he was pulling himself together, his voice calm and controlled. It was akin to watching two people share the same skin—his demonic side constantly clawing for dominance and the human part of him desperate for control.

But I wasn't going to argue about it. Not when he was somehow managing to hold it together enough to make a phone call—though, how he knew the shady people who had apartments for rent, I couldn't say. There was no way I was going to ask. Not when the reality of what we were dealing with sank in. His mind was always shifting, unpredictable, and I wasn't sure whether to be impressed or terrified by how quickly he adapted to a situation.

It was a gritty, old part of town—one that reeked of neglect and crime, the kind of place where only the most desperate or dangerous would end up. And Tatsuya... well, he was a magnet for danger.

We'd moved into a nondescript building, a decaying structure that seemed as if it had been abandoned for years but somehow still had a purpose. The hallway smelled of dampness, the floorboards creaking beneath our feet, but it was a place to lay low, and I supposed that was all that mattered.

He had found the place quickly, knowing just who to contact and making sure to keep his voice low and steady, no trace of the demonic growl in his tone. It worked, and by some miracle, we had an apartment. One of those "random" ones he mentioned, which could stay indefinitely, if necessary. And right now, we both needed a place to breathe, even if it was just for a few hours.

As soon as we got inside, Tatsuya dropped onto the couch with a sigh, his body still tense, the demon lurking in the background, but he looked... calmer. He had his moments where I thought he was himself again, and then there were times when the weight of what he'd become almost crushed him.

I paced the small apartment, trying to steady my own racing thoughts, but everything felt... wrong. It had only been a day, and yet it felt like we were on the edge of some inevitable collapse, as if, at any moment we would run out of time.

"So, what now?" I finally asked, breaking the silence. My voice was steady, but there was a tinge of unease that I couldn't mask. The adrenaline was fading, leaving me with questions I couldn't push away.

Tatsuya didn't answer immediately. His hands were clasped in front of him, his gaze distant. And just as I was about to repeat the question, he finally spoke, his voice strangely calm for someone who had just become an Oni.

"We handle it." His eyes met mine briefly, the weight of those words settling between us. "You stay here. Out of sight."

I stared at him, my mind racing. Stay out of sight? I was in this mess just as much as he was. I couldn't just sit back and wait while they made decisions for us. But he didn't offer me any more details. His expression hardened, that familiar wall he put up whenever something bothered him.

"Handle it?" I repeated, crossing my arms. "What does that mean? You're not going to—" I didn't even want to ask the question, but the way he looked at me, I knew the answer wasn't going to be good.

Tatsuya looked at me, weighing his words carefully. "The Yakuza will come looking for us. We'll deal with them. And you stay here. It's the safest thing for you right now."

My eyes narrowed, and I couldn't quite keep the suspicion from my voice. "And what, you think I'm just going to sit here and wait for you two to finish this mess? You don't even trust me enough to tell me what's really going on, do you?"

He didn't flinch. "It's not that. It's that you've already been through too much. We can't risk putting you in danger again."

There was something about how he said it—so calm, so composed—that set my teeth on edge. I wanted to argue, to demand answers, but something in me told me not to push it further. Not yet.

I peeled the clothes I had on away from myself. "I'm going to need a few things..."

The Oni's nostrils flared, and I narrowed my eyes. I could tell, Tatsuya quickly took over again after that slip.

I lowered my arms and stepped toward him, standing there silently for a moment before speaking again. "The Yakuza are not one to be messed with or easily taken out, you know this right? They're the same as roaches, infested everywhere even if you can't see them... but they can see you."

Tatsuya didn't respond at first, but then he sighed deeply, running a hand through his demonic form's long, black hair. "You can't change what's already been set in

motion. But if we handle this the right way, we can end it. Without it coming back to bite us."

I still didn't feel great about the situation. But what else could I do? He wasn't offering me any other choice. And the longer I stared at him, the more I realized I didn't just want answers—I wanted to believe in him. To believe that, even in this twisted situation, he would find a way to protect us both.

Look at me, healing and crap. Who would have thought I would ever learn to trust again. A real life Oni demon at that.

With a final glance at the door, I nodded reluctantly. "Alright. I'll stay out of the way. But this better not be some sort of trick, Tatsuya."

He didn't answer me right away, his focus shifting somewhere distant. But I could see the wariness in his eyes. He wasn't telling me everything.

But then again, I wasn't exactly being honest with him either.

The silence between us grew, heavy and thick. I had no idea how we were going to make it through this alive. The Yakuza wouldn't stop coming, and Tatsuya... the Oni ... was more dangerous than I could've ever imagined.

I just had to hope that somewhere in that chaotic, raging storm inside of him, he would find a way to save us both.

The tension between us was palpable, hanging thick in the air as the hours ticked by in silence. I sat on the edge of the threadbare couch, trying to keep my thoughts from spiraling into the darkness of what might be coming next. The city outside was a distant world, muffled by the decaying walls around us, but I knew danger was just waiting to break down that door.

Tatsuya—the Oni—was pacing, the heavy footsteps of the demon echoing through the tiny apartment as he wrestled with whatever battle was going on inside his head. I could feel it, the storm brewing just beneath his skin, the two entities vying for control.

I had to admit, as much as I wanted to believe in his ability to protect us, to fix everything, part of me feared that we were already too far gone. And even though the Oni's power was something I had come to recognize—hell, even admire at times.

Tatsuya stopped pacing suddenly, his eyes locking onto mine. A brief flash of humanity flickered behind the demonic gaze, but it was gone in an instant, a shadow swallowed by the flames.

“I have to go,” he said, his voice rough but firm, as though it cost him to admit it.

My heart stuttered in my chest. “Go? Like, right now?”

“I can't be here with you,” he cut me off, his voice colder, more distant than I'd heard it since the transformation. The demon was rising again, pushing at the edges of his control. “It's not safe for you.”

I stared at him, frustration bubbling up in my chest. Since when was it safe for me? His hand reached for the door handle, and for a moment, I thought maybe I was imagining it when he paused, his back still to me. Then he spoke again, his voice a bare whisper. “I'm sorry... for all of this.”

And in the next instant, he was gone.

The door clicked shut behind him, leaving nothing but the silence of the apartment and the steady beating of my heart in the air.

“That was weird.”

I stared at the door for a long time, my emotions swirling in a mess of anger, fear, and—surprisingly—something akin to a twisted kind of longing. He hadn’t given me any assurance that he’d come back. In fact, his leaving felt more of a goodbye than anything else.

The storm was coming. And even though Tatsuya had just walked out that door, I knew one thing for sure. It wasn’t over yet.

Not by a long shot.

26

The Fractured Path

TATSUYA

I didn't want to come back here. It was a bad idea from the start, but something inside me—the Oni, maybe—insisted that I return to the temple. I didn't even know what I was looking for. Closure? Redemption? Something to hold onto in the chaos? Maybe I thought I could still belong, or maybe I needed to feel something that wasn't rage. But as soon as I stepped onto the familiar grounds, I knew I'd made a mistake.

I was walking past the main entrance when I heard the voice, low and disapproving.

"Tatsuya."

My blood ran cold. The voice, smooth and authoritative, froze me in my tracks. I didn't need to turn to know who it was. Master Oshiro—one of my superiors in the temple, the one who had always watched me closely, had always suspected there was something in me that wasn't... right. And now, he saw it. He saw what I had become.

I could feel the weight of his gaze on my back as I stood motionless, fighting the urge to turn and face him. But I couldn't. I didn't have to.

Without a word, Oshiro's presence loomed like a thick fog. I didn't need his questions or his disappointment. The look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. It was done.

That was it. That was my closure for this chapter of my life. There was nothing left here for me. No one who would understand.

So, I turned. I walked away, my mind clouded with frustration and regret. My hands clenched into fists as I felt the bloodlust inside me build. The Oni wasn't going to let me wallow in the past for long. It wanted to hunt, kill, and remind me what I was truly capable of.

And there was no better place to start than the Yakuza.

We didn't have to look hard to find them. A quick check of the area around the temple and the Oni led me straight to the first group of thugs—the ones I had been seeking. Their stench hit me. They were gathered in an alley, laughing as if they owned the damn world, unaware that the Oni had already marked them for death.

" Fools congregate together like scavenging birds ," the Oni growled, his voice a low rumble, the growl of an ultimate predator in the dark. " I'll tear them apart. I'll make them regret crossing us. "

But I held the reins, even if only slightly. I reminded him, as I had done countless times before, that we had to be careful. We couldn't leave a bloody trail. We couldn't let it all spiral into chaos.

"Don't leave a bloody massacre, Oni," I hissed, trying to rein in the fury that surged in my chest. "We have to do this clean. Efficient."

The Oni growled in frustration, but he held back for now. He was a force of nature, but even he understood the necessity of keeping things under control. He wasn't stupid, despite what I sometimes feared. He knew the longer we kept making a mess of things, the more attention we'd draw. The more of a target we'd become.

So, we moved swiftly. My body was a blur of calculated violence, every strike precise, every hit lethal. The Yakuza men didn't even see it coming.

By the time the last of them fell, their blood staining the pavement, I was already on the move again, the Oni growling in my mind.

"We're not done," I reminded him. "I need to get her something."

The Oni's mood soured at the thought. " Get her what? " he sneered, his voice dripping with disdain. " She doesn't deserve anything from us. "

I knew he didn't care for Momoi, not the same way I did. But we had a job to do, and I needed her to be safe. I wasn't about to let her be left with nothing.

"We're getting her clothes," I snapped. "She can't go around naked, can she?"

The Oni snarled. " Clothes? What need does she have for coverings? She doesn't deserve anything from me. "

"Shut up," I muttered under my breath. "She needs them. She can't just be left with what little she has. She doesn't have anything else. You're going to have to get used to it."

I could practically hear the Oni grinding his teeth in my head. He hated the idea. But he hated the idea of me leaving her alone even more.

So, we went to a store. Not a fancy one—just a small, rundown shop. The Oni, in his usual fashion, had killed the owner before even consulting me. We grabbed the essentials—some shirts, pants, a jacket. Anything that could hide the bruises on her skin or give her the illusion of normalcy.

But even as I grabbed the clothes, I could feel the Oni's resentment. He detested their scent. He despised the fact that they didn't smell like her.

I could feel the Oni stirring, his presence clawing at the edges of my mind.

“ You can't give her these, ” he growled, his voice thick with irritation. “ It'll taint her with its stench. ”

I raised an eyebrow, trying to push back against him. “It's just clothes, demon. It's not as if we're handing her a dead rat.”

He snarled, clearly not amused. “You don't understand. Her scent ... she deserves better than this mockery.”

“Right, because nothing says 'I care' like obsessing over the scent of her clothes,” I shot back, trying to keep my voice calm. Seemed I wasn't the only one confused when it came to Momoi.

“ You don't get it! ” the Oni rumbled. “ Those clothes don't smell like her... they smell like the store... like people.”

I sighed. “Okay, so what do you want me to do? Set the clothes on fire and call it a day?”

“You don't get it, ” he retorted. “ She needs to smell... safe. Smell like she's ours .”

I ran a hand over my face, feeling the weight of the situation. “Yeah, well, she's not a pet. We can't just claim her as some sort of territory. Now stop being ridiculous and let me get her something she can wear.”

The Oni growled again, clearly displeased. “ Fine. But don't think I'll forget this. ”

I shook my head. “Yeah, I’m sure you won’t... but we still have bigger things to worry about.”

But I was past listening to him.

“You don’t get to decide who gets what. She deserves better,” I said, the words harsh. “I’m doing this for her, not for you.”

The Oni simmered, quiet for a long moment. But when I stepped toward the door, clothes in hand, I felt him push against me, frustrated and seething.

“She’s going to be the death of us, you know that? ”

“Maybe,” I muttered. “But I’m not going to let her go. Not now.”

The Oni’s growl echoed in my mind, but it wasn’t as loud as it had been before. Maybe, for now, we had some semblance of agreement. And maybe that was all I could hope for.

But as I left the store and made my way back to the apartment, my mind was already racing ahead. The Yakuza were closing in from various locations. The Oni was restless. And Momoi—she was still in danger even after what we accomplished today.

I didn’t know how long I could keep this under control. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to let the storm swallow us whole. Not without a fight.

Consuming Flames

MOMOI

The darkness of the night wrapped itself tightly around me as I lay in bed, my body heavy with exhaustion, but sleep didn't offer me the escape I had hoped for. Instead, it dragged me back to the past, to the memories I never wanted to relive.

I was just a little girl again, standing in the cold of the alley, my mother's face a blur of bruises and desperation as she told me to stay hidden. The echo of shouting voices, the rough men pulling at her, their laughter cruel and cutting—it was all there. I could feel the panic rising in my chest as the smell of alcohol and sweat filled the air. I tried to run, to escape, but my feet wouldn't move. The darkness swallowed me whole, and then I heard it: the sharp slap of skin against skin, followed by the sickening sound of her voice breaking.

I jolted awake, gasping for breath, my heart pounding against my ribs as the nightmare clung to my mind. The room was silent, the night still, but then I felt it. The bed dipped.

For a moment, I froze, the remnants of the nightmare making my pulse race, but when I shifted slightly, the weight on the bed became clear. Someone was sitting beside me.

The scent of him was unmistakable—Tatsuya. I was aware of him immediately, his

presence seemed to fill the room even though the only sound was my own shallow breathing. My eyes fluttered open, the remnants of sleep still clouding my mind, and I realized I was no longer alone in the room.

"Tatsuya?" I whispered hoarsely, my voice thick with the remnants of a nightmare I couldn't shake. My body trembled, still trapped in the grip of those old, familiar fears.

A low, strained sound came from him, but it wasn't just his voice. There was something else... a growl, a rumble that seemed to vibrate in the air around us.

And then, as if I were still lost in the nightmare, the dream changed. In an instant, we were no longer in the safety of the dark apartment; we were outside, under a cold sky, surrounded by the same faceless men from my past.

"No," I whispered, shaking my head, but I couldn't stop it. The nightmare took shape, and there they were, the same men, closing in on us. They reached for me, their hands rough and cruel, but before I could move, a roar erupted from Tatsuya—no, not just Tatsuya. It was the Oni. His anger tore through the dream, violent and unrestrained.

I cried out his name, panic rising as the nightmare collided with reality. "Tatsuya!" My voice broke, desperate, as I fought to move, but my limbs wouldn't obey. The terror from the dream felt so real, the danger closing in on us, and I couldn't wake up from it.

The bed dipped further, and I felt him—his warmth, his presence—draw nearer. The sensation felt tangible, as if he was right next to me, yet the horror in my mind twisted the reality of his proximity. Was he there? Or was it just another cruel twist of the dream?

In my desperation, I reached for him, not knowing if it was the real Tatsuya or the

Oni, or both tangled together in my dreams. My hands found nothing but empty air, but I felt his breath—warm, just inches from my ear, and the rumbling growl of the Oni made the hair on my neck stand on end.

"Momoi," he whispered, but it wasn't his voice. It was deep, guttural, laced with the weight of the demon inside him. "You can't escape this... not from me."

His mouth was hot against mine, and my body struggled to escape whatever this was between wakefulness and sleep. It was as if I was under a spell, my body instantly responding to him. My hands roamed his demonic body, pulling him against me, urging him to help me escape the nightmares that threatened to drown me.

"I need you. I need this," I panted against him.

I wasn't sure who responded as the Oni growled and dragged me down the bed by the legs, situating me under him. With a gasp, I gripped his hair and pulled him down for another kiss as a hard, wet, and ridged cock pulsed against my inner thigh.

Nothing about it was human, nothing about him was human, and yet, the very idea of what was about to happen made me slick with arousal.

I could hear him inhaling deeply as he nipped along my jaw, growling in a language I didn't understand, one that wasn't from this world.

The temperature of the room amped up as our bodies slid against each other. He thrust himself against my thigh, creating a burn on my skin that made me hiss. It was a form of torture, and I was a willing victim.

Reaching down, I grabbed his cock and twisted it, listening with satisfaction as he groaned above me, his tongue traveling along the path of my bruises.

A gasp escaped me as he ripped what was left of my clothes and tossed them onto the floor beside us.

“You owe me new clothes,” I panted against his shoulder, licking the blackened exposed flesh, inviting the Oni to have his way with me despite what Tatsuya might be telling him.

“ We owe you nothing, human. It is you who owes us, ” he growled against my breast, and I smiled wickedly.

“Is that so? And how did you come to this conclusion, Oni?” I teased, wanting him to let go, wanting him to just take me and claim me as he threatened.

“Don’t push him, Momoi. I don’t think I can control him...”

I jerked his head up and stared into his eyes.

“Make no mistake. I want you too, Tatsuya. I need you to stop fighting this and stick that demon cock of yours inside of me. Now!” My voice was sharp, a command that couldn’t be ignored.

The Oni cackled before biting down on my nipple and pulling his hips back to aim himself between my legs. I cursed under my breath and widened my legs right before attempting to invade my womb with his weapon of war.

I hissed and crawled up the bed. I knew he was big, but I didn’t anticipate him being that big. The Oni dug his fingers into my hip, holding me in place.

“ Where do you think you’re going? ” he snarled, agitated at my initial retreat.

“Look here, buddy. If you want this to go anywhere, you’ll have to stretch me before

I tear. And no, before you even consider it, you don't want me to tear because then I'll kill you in your sleep," I snapped.

With a growl I knew belonged to Tatsuya, he flipped onto his back and dragged me across his body, refusing to break contact.

I cursed under my breath when I got a good look at what I was working with. The ridges along his shaft carried the same swirling patterns on his chest as if it were carved into his skin. The flesh beneath pulsed and glowed like runes the closer I brought my face to examine it.

He smelled of masculine musk and something otherworldly. It made my mouth water. Sticking my tongue out, I traced one of the runes and watched his body jump in response, much to my satisfaction.

Grabbing him, I swirled my tongue around his wicked-looking crown that was as hard as his demonic body, making sure to tease his slit. Crawling up his body, I slid his monstrosity between my legs, coating it with my arousal, watching him grimace and hold himself back.

I shouldn't be this turned on by the war in his eyes, wondering exactly how the conversation was going between the two men. With a grin, I bit my lip and shoved the head of his cock inside me a few times before slipping it out.

"Do you enjoy toying with death?" the Oni growled in an adorable threat.

Leaning over his chest, I bit his chin. "Maybe I do. What are you going to do about it? Eat me?"

"Yes. I will devour your flesh and ki ? —"

I trailed my tongue along the seam of his lips to the tip of his fang, making him lose his train of thought. “Good boy,” I praised.

Before he could figure out what was going on, I climbed up until his face was between my legs and his arms wrapped around my thighs.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, Oni. Because then, you’ll have to follow throu?—”

His massive tongue entered me so quickly I almost fell to the side if it wasn’t for his hold on me. My eyes rolled back as he devoured me like a man holding himself back from the fine line of cannibalism.

Grabbing a fistful of hair, I guided him where he needed to go, signaling to him when I needed him to slow down and when to speed up again. After all, I was also a glutton for punishment, wanting to edge myself.

I could feel my body relaxing before tensing in anticipation of the pleasure that was climbing. I didn’t know where they went today or what they were up to, but by the ravenous way he was eating me, I could tell he had some pent-up frustrations he needed to release as well.

Grinding against his face, my hands trailed up the underside of my breasts, kneading them as they had become sensitive from his torture.

“So good. So, so good,” I encouraged, undulating my hips, lost in ecstasy.

I was so lost, in fact, that I didn’t anticipate him throwing me onto my back and lifting my ass up toward his face as he brought me to a climax that hit me like a freight train. Grabbing the pillow near me, I put it over my face as I screamed in pleasure, not wanting to give away our location.

Before my climax could come down, I was forcefully turned onto my knees, the Oni grabbing both my hands from behind as he slammed himself inside of my womb, knocking the wind out of me.

I buried my face into the mattress as he aggressively had his way with me, sliding the futon against the wall. If he keeps this up, it will be my head hitting it next.

“Tatsuya!”

The Oni growled in protest, hating my use of the monk’s name. But we didn’t have time for petty jealousies.

“I would like to keep my head intact, thank you. You’re going to have to—” With a screech, I was back in the top position, his cock still inside of me, his precum sliding down between us in rivulets.

Digging my nails into his chest, I rode him hard in retaliation, expressing all the hate that had grown within me since meeting the monk. The glow in his eyes told me he knew it. With a wicked grin, the Oni came back out to play, grabbing my hips and slamming me onto his cock until I had no choice but to pant both their names.

Another painful climax hit me, and the Oni grimaced as if he was fighting back the urge to truly consume my flesh. He slammed me down once, then twice more before shooting hot jets of his release inside of me, triggering aftershocks to my climax.

I fell over his chest and whimpered as he continued to slowly pump into me with his hips, showing no mercy.

"No dying, human. An Oni's hunger demands far more than that to be quenched." I was annoyed by the cackle that followed.

But before I could respond, he flipped me onto my back again and slammed his mouth onto mine, stealing my breath.

28

The Threads That Bind

TATSUYA

The streets were eerily quiet as we stalked through the night, the soft padding of my feet the only sound beneath the hum of distant traffic. I kept my senses sharp, feeling the weight of the demon stirring beneath me, its hunger only partially sated from earlier. It wasn't just the blood that it craved—no, this wasn't something as simple as a thirst for flesh. The Oni had a hunger for control, for power, for destruction.

And I hated it.

After everything that had happened, something unexpected occurred. The hunger that had consumed me—both Tatsuya and the Oni—subsided. It wasn't an instant change, but with Momoi's touch, her presence, something in me shifted. The rage, the bloodlust—it all seemed to recede identically to the way the tide pulled away from the shore before a tsunami.

I felt my body return to its human form, a sensation as unfamiliar as it was relieving. The sharpness of my senses dulled. My skin returned to its natural color. The horns vanished. My hands were no longer monstrous claws, but human again, trembling as they held onto what little control I had left. I didn't understand why this had happened. I didn't know how long it would last or even if it would happen again.

It was an odd, fragile reprieve. I could almost pretend—if only for a moment—that I

wasn't the beast I'd become. But that thought was fleeting because the weight of everything that had happened still lingered. And deep down, I knew there was no going back.

But right now, in the aftermath, it was the only thing that kept me from spiraling into madness, kept me alive, and moving forward.

For Momoi, I had to keep going. I couldn't afford to stop. Not until I figured out how to protect her from everything coming for her. The Yakuza, the lies, whatever dark forces had her caught in their grasp—I couldn't rest. I couldn't let myself break. Not when I still had a chance to keep her safe.

Even if I had no idea how to do that.

She was everything I had left, and for the first time in a long time, I wanted to be something more than the monster I had become.

"We're close," I muttered under my breath, the Oni's senses guiding us, alert and always searching for the next threat. My mind still wrestled with the conflicting desires, the demon pushing forward as it relished the idea of tearing through anyone who stood in our way.

"Stay focused," I thought to myself, a grim reminder. It was not just about killing. It was about surviving. About controlling this madness long enough to fix things.

My mind was still trying to wrap around what happened between me and Momoi. Though I had fantasized about it in the quiet of my room back at the temple, I didn't think she would desire us after my transformation. I had prepared myself for her to be disgusted, for her to scream at me to stay away. Instead, her unpredictable nature shocked me once again, leading to our... bizarre three-way union.

A growl rumbled in my skull, the Oni still seething at the thought of sharing her with me. Tough luck. We were one in body. And to my disbelief, she had called for me too, in the heat of the moment.

The guilt and shame that would normally consume me were dulled by the Oni's raging carnal cravings. I couldn't tell if that was a blessing or a curse for me.

"Stay focused," I muttered, trying to push aside the swirling chaos inside me.

The Oni chuckled darkly, his voice dripping with disdain. " Ah, the monk speaks of focus. Like a leaf on a turbulent river, your mind is tossed by every gust of wind, Tatsuya. "

I clenched my fists, trying to ignore the mocking tone. "I know what I'm doing," I bit back.

" Sure ," he replied, his laughter rumbling low in my chest. " Like the blind man searching for a green flower in a field of red. "

The target was another hidden Yakuza faction, one I had only just recently heard whispers about in my time away from the temple. Their ties to the Takehide's overseas operation and the murky depths of Momoi's past had led me here.

We stopped in an alley, shadows swallowing us whole as I crouched beside a rusty dumpster, my eyes trained on the building ahead. I could hear voices, muffled and low, drifting through a small crack in the wall. The Oni stirred inside me, sensing the game ahead, and I knew it was only a matter of time before it would demand to make its presence known.

"Focus," I repeated, my hand gripping the stone wall beside me as I willed myself to hear what they were saying.

Through the cracks, I caught the low murmur of a few voices—Yakuza, unmistakable by their gruff tones and half-formed words.

“I heard she’s some brat related to the Takehide’s overseas,” one voice said, low and cautious.

Related? By blood? Was that why they were after her? Was she a Yakuza princess or something?

The Oni laughed, a low, rumbling sound that seemed to shake my very bones. " Oh, how the plot thickens ," he said, savoring the irony. " A hidden past, a secret bloodline, and here we are, tangled in it all. " His voice dripped with dark amusement. " You should be grateful, Tatsuya. This drama, this chaos—it’s just the kind of thing to keep things... interesting. "

I ignored him.

"Yeah, you didn’t know?" another sneered, probably the new guy. “She’s deeper in than anyone thought. They want her sent overseas in trade for more human shipments. Her name’s already crossed the radar. Supposedly, she’s the key to something. Though how they let her reach Japan still doesn’t make any sense, but what do I know?”

"Shit." The first voice sighed. "Didn’t they say she’s got a half-brother in prison? Some kid that’s tangled up in this mess, too?"

I froze, every muscle in my body going tense. A half-brother? Momoi had never mentioned him. The thought stirred something unsettling within me, but there was more—something else I needed to hear.

"Yeah," the second voice responded. "His name’s Kaito. He's in a high-security

prison. Not sure what for, but I heard rumors about him trying to take over some of the family's operation."

The conversation seemed trivial at first, but there was a pattern forming, threads connecting themselves intricately into a web. I knew where this was headed.

"And the Karura? What do they say about that?" A new voice, deep and jagged, broke through the conversation.

The mention of a Karura froze me. That was no ordinary creature—a legendary warrior of unimaginable power, a deity. The very idea of it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. If Momoi was truly connected to it, the stakes had just been raised to something far darker and more dangerous than I could have ever imagined.

The Oni inside me immediately reacted—an icy chill raced through my body as if something had sparked within me, the dark memories of old whispers rising from the depths of the past.

I leaned in closer, my heart pounding against my chest. The Karura. I had heard it spoken of before in hushed tones—an ancient symbol tied to power, to bloodlines that were older than time itself. It was more than just a myth.

"What about the dragon?" I whispered under my breath, the words lost to the night. The Karura were known to battle dragons. Their battles were legendary, like fire clashing against the storms of the sea.

But the Oni wasn't lost. The mention of the Karura and the dragon, a potent combination tied to power, brought the demon to full alert. It was an awakening, a sudden pulse of violence beneath my skin as if my very essence had been set on fire.

"Did you hear about the Karura and the dragon?" one of the Yakuza asked again, his voice low with fascination, yet there was something else—fear.

"Yeah," the other answered, "They say whoever controls the Karura controls the power of the dragon. I don't know how it all fits with the Takehide, but Momoi's involved in it somehow. She's the key. I mean, rumor has it that it was a 'gang war' that took out the head?—"

My blood ran cold.

The moment their final words hit my ears, I felt the rage surge through me like a lightning strike.

The Oni, hungry and violent as always, reacted without hesitation. He tore through my thoughts with a force that was impossible to ignore. Before I could even attempt to hold him back, he was already in full control.

" Not now, not yet... " I tried to protest, but the Oni didn't care.

I could feel the muscles in my body stretch and crack as my bones shifted, reshaping into something monstrous. The familiar rush of transformation flooded over me. Skin turning a deep, fiery red, horns breaking through the top of my skull, and those eyes—those eyes burning with a yellow fury.

The Kanab?—a spiked club—appeared in my hands as if summoned by the demon itself, a weapon made of pure fury and hunger. I was no longer Tatsuya. I was a force of nature, a monster born to destroy.

The laughter echoed in my skull, that dark, twisted sound of the Oni enjoying himself, basking in the chaos he had created.

“What fun this will be,” he crooned, his voice stronger than I had ever heard it since this all started.

I wanted to scream, to fight against him, but it was useless. His laughter drowned out my thoughts and my protests. I was helpless to stop him.

I watched, unable to control my own body, as the Oni surged forward, moving with the kind of paranormal predatory speed that only he could possess. The men in front of us never stood a chance. With each swing of the Kanab?, bodies crumpled, bones shattered like brittle twigs. Blood sprayed across the room, staining everything in its wake.

I could feel the violence in every blow, every brutal strike. The Oni’s laughter filled the air as if he was savoring every moment, every death.

"Pathetic," the Oni taunted. "They thought they could stop us?"

I wanted to stop. I wanted to pull back and regain control, but the Oni's hunger burned brighter than ever. There was no holding him back. He was in full control now, and the only thing he cared about was spilling blood and leaving destruction in his wake.

I watched as he obliterated the last of the men, their bodies broken and twisted. The Kanab? came down one final time, and the world went silent.

For a moment, everything was still. The Oni's laughter finally faded, and I was left alone with the aftermath. The room was a blood-soaked mess, the air thick with the stench of violence. I could still feel the heat of the Oni's rage in my chest, his presence overwhelming.

How could you ? —

“—and it won’t stop. It can’t,” the Oni continued, its voice dripping with venomous satisfaction, the hum of its deep tone echoing in the back of my skull.

I gritted my teeth, fists clenching at my sides. This is what you wanted, wasn’t it, Tatsuya? he mocked again, the words crawling under my skin like fire. This is what happens when you let me out. You can’t stop it, can you?

I wanted to scream. I wanted to scream and deny it all—shout that I never asked for this, that this wasn’t what I wanted. But I knew the truth. I knew the truth of how much of me was now intertwined with the demon inside me. That hunger—the insatiable, twisted need—was mine, too. As much as I hated it, as much as I cursed it, it was part of me.

I didn’t answer. There was nothing I could say to him.

The Oni’s laughter echoed through my mind, loud and dark. You see, Tatsuya, he sneered, The bloodshed, the violence... it’s all so sweet, so fulfilling. But now, what do I crave more than anything else?

I felt the words build in the pit of my stomach, the foul hunger stirring again. My hands clenched tighter, the claws underneath my skin itching to break free.

“Momoi...” the Oni purred, the name slipping from its tongue like a predator tasting its prey. She’s the only thing that can truly sate me now, don’t you think? After all this blood... the only thing that will keep me satisfied is her.

My breath caught in my throat. The idea of her... No. It twisted something inside of me, something dark and uncontrollable. I could feel it—the pull, the desire, growing stronger with each passing second. The Oni’s hunger wasn’t just his anymore. It was mine too. And I hated that. Hated that my own desires were becoming as twisted as his when it came to Momoi.

I had to fight this. I had to stop him before it consumed us both. But the more I struggled, the more I felt the line between us blur. The Oni wasn't just a separate entity anymore. He was a part of me. And that part of me was craving something I couldn't give, something I didn't want to feel.

The demon's voice coiled in my mind, insistent and vile. She belongs to us, Tatsuya. She wants us—both of us. Why fight it?

I gritted my teeth, the rage building inside of me, clashing with the shame and guilt. This wasn't who I was supposed to be. This wasn't how I wanted to feel about her.

But every time I tried to push him down, to suppress the monster within me, I felt my grip on myself slipping. Let me have her, the Oni taunted. She's already ours, Tatsuya. The blood we spilled, the fire we've ignited... it's all leading to her. She's our prize.

I clenched my fists so tight my knuckles ached, trying to drown out his voice, trying to hold on to the small piece of humanity that remained in me. But the truth was clear now. There was no turning back. The Oni wasn't going anywhere. And neither was I.

I hated it. Hated that the very thing I feared was becoming a part of me, a part of my desires. And even more than that, I hated that the one person who had the power to bring me back from the edge was the very person I now feared would be consumed by both of us.

I had to stop. I had to control this. But the Oni's presence, the hunger, the darkness—it was too strong. And the worst part was, I wasn't sure I wanted to stop anymore.

“Shut up,” I finally forced out, my voice hoarse. “You can't?—”

But it was no use. His presence surged within me, overpowering my attempts to reason. You're just as much a part of this as I am, Tatsuya. She wants us—both of us. She needs us, and I'll claim her again and again until she never forgets it.

I could feel the demon's rage boiling up again. It wanted to hunt, to claim, to dominate. The bloodshed had only fueled it further, fed the beast that lurked in me.

I didn't respond. I couldn't. Part of me, the part that was still human, wanted to protect her, wanted to shield her from this monster inside me. But the other part of me—the Oni—hungered for her in a way that twisted my very soul. She was the prize, the one thing that could both calm and ignite the fury in me.

I didn't know how long I could hold this all back.

Blood of My Blood

MOMOI

I couldn't believe my eyes when they walked in. My heart skipped a beat. Tatsuya was standing there, but it wasn't him—not the man I had been trying to understand, the one who had fought his way through his transformation and even had moments of tenderness. No, this wasn't Tatsuya. This was the Oni, fully in control.

His body was drenched in blood, the smell of it clinging to him like a second skin. His hands were covered, his chest splattered in the viscera of whatever had been unfortunate enough to cross his path. His skin was darker than before, the sharp horns jutting from his skull like some monstrous crown, and his eyes—those glowing yellow eyes—burned with that same consuming rage.

The tension in the air was suffocating, pressing down on me like an approaching storm, thick and heavy. I had seen this before, that terrifying hunger in his eyes. It was the Oni, and it had been unleashed again. And my pussy pulsed in his presence.

"You're back," I said, my voice shaky, unsure of what I was saying. My gaze flicked to his bloodied form, then to his expression—a mix of arrogance, darkness, and something else that made my pulse race. The raw, unfettered power in the room was suffocating and titillating, making me question my sanity once again.

He looked at me, his lips curling into something resembling a grin, but there was no

warmth in it.

"You didn't think I could stay away, did you?" His voice was low, the deep rumble of it sending a shiver down my spine. The words were laced with an intensity that made my skin flush, and despite my better judgment, something in me responded.

I took a step back, instinctively putting some space between us. His presence was overwhelming—dangerous, magnetic. My body screamed at me to move away, but my legs felt frozen in place. I was caught in his pull, the kind of attraction that both terrified and thrilled me.

"You've been... out there." My voice faltered again, but I pushed on, trying to make sense of it. "You lost control, didn't you?"

He didn't answer at first. He took a slow step forward, each movement predatory yet confident, making my heart race in a way I didn't want to acknowledge.

"Control?" The Oni chuckled darkly. "Control is a luxury I no longer care about." His gaze lingered on me, the fire in his eyes flickering as if it were going to consume me. "What I care about is solving our problem, Momoi. And I have the perfect solution."

I frowned, my instincts going on high alert. "What... solution?"

His grin widened, and for a moment, I wondered if I had just made a terrible mistake by asking.

"You'll come with me," he said, his voice hard and final. "To Jigoku."

The word hung in the air like a death sentence.

As if given a paranormal instant download to my brain, my heart dropped.

Jigoku—the realm of demons. A place of suffering, fire, and eternal torment. The last place I wanted to be. It was a place for the worst kind of souls, and I could feel its weight pressing on my chest.

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head. “I’m not going there. You can’t take me there, Tatsuya.”

His face twisted, anger flaring briefly before it was replaced by a cold smirk.

“Not Tatsuya. The Oni.” He moved closer, a silent threat with each step. “The world you know has no place for someone like you anymore. If you want safety, if you want to survive this... Jigoku is the only option.”

My eyes widened as he closed the distance between us. I wanted to push him away, to tell him to stop, but the words wouldn’t come. There was something about the way he moved, the overwhelming presence of the Oni, that held me still. My breath hitched, and I could feel the dangerous tension between us.

“You’re insane,” I managed to say, though my voice barely wavered. My heart thudded in my chest, panic clawing at me. “You think that’s the answer? You think that’s the only way?”

The Oni didn’t respond. He didn’t have to. His intentions were clear, and the sheer force of them suffocated me.

He reached out, his hand brushing against my cheek, and despite the blood on his skin, I could feel the heat of his touch. A shiver ran down my spine, not from fear but from something darker. Something I couldn’t control.

I stood there, frozen, my heart pounding in my chest, my body caught between two opposing forces. The Oni’s voice wrapped around me, his presence seeping into my

skin, making it hard to think straight. He offered me a solution—an escape, even if it was in the form of something far darker or more dangerous than I could comprehend.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Momoi,” he said again, his words like a poison that made my pulse quicken.

His eyes glowed with a fierce hunger in them—it was more than desire. It was an insatiable need to claim, to control. And in some twisted way, it mirrored something deep inside me, something I’d buried and ignored for far too long.

I should’ve pulled away. I should’ve run, should’ve screamed, should’ve demanded he stop. But I couldn’t. The part of me that knew better—the part of me that had seen the destruction he was capable of—was fighting against the part that was tempted to give in.

Was this truly the only option left? Could we really go to Jigoku, to the depths of hell, and find safety there? Could we even survive it? My mind screamed at me to think rationally, to remember who we were before all of this—before the Oni, before the bloodshed, before this twisted bond formed between us.

The Oni stared at me with hunger, slowly slipping his hand under my shirt. He was trying to distract me after giving me the news of his plan, but it wasn’t going to work.

What did Tatsuya think of this plan? He still had a life here, didn’t he? A future, even if it was scarred and unrecognizable now. He was still human, wasn’t he? He had to be. There had to be a way for us to fight back, to find a different solution.

The Oni leaned in and took deep inhales along the crook of my neck. Gently placing my hands on his bloodsoaked chest, I tried to push him away, trying to get a hold of the chaotic emotions he was eliciting.

But even as I thought that, doubt gnawed at me. Could we really go back to a normal life? Could I go back to a life without the Oni's shadow hanging over us, threatening to consume everything? Could we outrun this fate, or was I already too far gone?

And then there was the fact that I was standing here, feeling the pull of the Oni's power. That heat in the air, the electricity between us. It wasn't just fear. It was something else—something that felt dangerous but oh-so-real. My pulse raced, not from terror but from something deeper. Something I couldn't control, no matter how hard I tried.

I could feel myself wanting to cave in, to fall into that dark abyss. He wanted me. The Oni wanted me, and I... wanted him, too. I could feel it—an undeniable attraction that twisted my thoughts and made my body ache in places I hadn't known existed.

But I couldn't forget what he was. I couldn't forget the destruction he left in his wake. I couldn't ignore the blood he had spilled, the lives he had taken. He was a demon, and nothing about that was ever going to change.

When he got on his knees and lifted my skirt, I almost lost my train of thought.

I tore my gaze away from his large form, turning my thoughts inward. This wasn't about desire. This was about survival. I had to think clearly, for both of us.

Taking a slow, shaky breath, I finally spoke. My voice was steady, even though my heart was anything but.

“We can't go to Jigoku,” I said, despite the turmoil churning inside me. “I can't. It's not just about surviving anymore. There's more at stake. Tatsuya is still here. You are still here. You're not lost to the Oni completely. We can still find another way.”

He threw one of my legs over his shoulder and invaded my pussy with his wicked

tongue, making me choke at his invasion. His dexterity and ability to control that thing should be outlawed in all realms.

“Are you listening to me?”

He nipped my clit, and I jumped, giving him the perfect opportunity to throw my other leg over his shoulder while the top half of my body pressed against the wall behind me to keep me from falling.

When he swirled his tongue around my clit in the way he had come to learn through my reactions, I knew I was a goner. My eyes rolled back as I bit my lip, trying to control my trembling body, but it was no use.

The Oni used my own body against me as a climax came crashing down, making him moan against my pussy as if I was the most delicious meal he had ever had in all the realms. And damn if I didn't revel in it.

With one last debauched lick, he slowly put my feet back on the ground and towered in front of me again.

For a moment, there was silence. The Oni's eyes glinted, his expression unreadable. But I could feel the weight of his presence—the growing tension in the room as if the very air was charged with his rage. But then, just as quickly, his anger seemed to dissipate, leaving only that cold, controlled smirk.

He probably thought he successfully made me forget the conversation at hand. He was wrong.

“We can still find another way,” I repeated, fanning myself.

"You think there's another way?" His voice was dangerously calm, but I heard the

sneer beneath it. “We’ve already passed the point of no return, Momoi. You know that as well as I do.”

I swallowed, my resolve hardening. I couldn’t give in to him. Not when I still had a sliver of hope left that we could make it out of this mess without losing ourselves completely.

“I’m not going to let you drag me into the depths of hell just to survive, Oni,” I said firmly, my eyes never leaving his. “There has to be another way. And I’ll find it. We will find it. Together.”

His gaze darkened, but there was something else in it now—something deeper, as if he was considering my words.

I knew I had to hold on to this moment. The world was spinning out of control, but I couldn’t let myself be consumed by it—not yet. Not while there was still a chance to fight back.

“Together,” I repeated, the word a promise to both of us, though I wasn’t sure either of us could keep it.

30

The Price of Control

TATSUYA

I paced back and forth in the small apartment, my mind a storm of rage, confusion, and a desperate need to find some way to control this situation. I was glad our constant union had somehow healed most of her injuries. But right now, Momoi was silent, her eyes averted. She had been giving me the cold shoulder since the Oni's grand plan, and the silence between us felt like it was smothering me. It was the one thing I couldn't stand—the quiet, the distance, the uncertainty of her thoughts.

Inside, the Oni stirred, restless. He hated the silence even more than I did, but he wasn't sure how to handle the tension.

“We'll take her to Jigoku. It's the only way,” the Oni growled in my mind, the words seeping in ichor, dripping into my thoughts.

I gritted my teeth, pushing back against the surge of dark desire that threatened to overtake me. I wasn't going to let him have everything, especially not her all to himself.

“No,” I snapped. “We can't. I'll find another way.”

The Oni scoffed, a dark laugh echoing in my mind. “Another way? There is no other way, Tatsuya. The world as you know it is crumbling around you. There's no place

for you anymore.”

I stopped pacing and leaned against the wall, running my fingers through my hair, trying to think past the rage boiling in my veins. “There are other options. You could stay far from society, somewhere no one would ever find us. The mountains. A cave, even. Something quiet, something secluded. No more bloodshed, no more enemies. Just us. You’d have your peace.”

The Oni chuckled darkly, a sound that sent a shiver down my spine. “A cave? Really, Tatsuya? What do you expect me to do there? Meditate? You really think I want to sit there, alone, away from everything, when the world could be mine for the taking?”

I clenched my fists, trying to hold onto my last shred of humanity. “It doesn’t have to be about domination. We could live away from the world, away from the violence. You don’t need to rule everything. You could be at peace. For once.”

The Oni didn’t answer right away, but I could feel his frustration building, the hunger stirring again. He wanted more. Always more. I wasn’t sure how to make him understand, how to make him see that it wasn’t just about feeding his rage. It was about surviving, about holding onto something real.

Momoi won’t even look at me. The silent treatment—she was punishing me for the things I’d done, for the things we’d done together. For the things I’d allowed the Oni to do. And the worst part? I understood. She was right to be angry, to pull away from me. I didn’t deserve her trust.

But the Oni? He wasn’t thinking about any of that. His patience was growing thinner by the second.

“She’s silent. She’s pulling away from you, Tatsuya,” the Oni murmured in my mind, his tone almost mocking. “You should be worried. Maybe she’s already slipping

away from you.”

I winced at the thought. Momoi was the one thing that still tethered me to my humanity, the one thing that made me feel as if I wasn’t completely consumed by this monster inside me. The Oni, though? He didn’t care about that. He was all about taking , about possessing . He didn’t understand the value of patience, of connection.

I turned my gaze toward her, the silence between us palpable. She was sitting on the bed, her arms wrapped around herself, trying to make herself smaller, distant. It hurt. I hated seeing her like this. Guilt gnawed at my marrows.

“I can petition for visitations to Jigoku,” I said, using my last bit of reasoning to try and calm the situation. “We don’t have to stay there. We don’t have to make this permanent. I could negotiate with the other Oni, making them allow us to return to the human realm when needed. There’s a chance to keep this... more civilized.”

The Oni’s response was instant, and the amusement in his tone was unmistakable. “Negotiations? You think I can negotiate with those fools?” He snarled, his presence swelling in my mind. “Let me make one thing clear—if we go to Jigoku, we’re not leaving until I’ve had my fill. And if you think any other Oni would respect your precious ‘visitation rights’, you’re more deluded than I thought.”

But then, the tone shifted. The Oni paused. A strange thought seemed to strike him, and I could feel a flicker of interest, a shift in his focus.

“Wait a minute... You’re right,” the Oni muttered, his voice darker now, almost calculating. “What if... what if others get ideas? What if the other Oni see her, see us, and decide they want a piece of her for themselves?”

I stiffened. My stomach churned at the thought. That wasn’t something I had even considered.

“Exactly,” I pressed, the tension in my body growing. “They’d come for her. They’d take her. And you wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop it.”

The Oni let out a low growl, clearly displeased with the realization, but there was no denying the truth. He loathed the idea of losing her, even to other demons. Even to his own kind.

“Fine,” the Oni grumbled, though I could feel his anger simmering beneath the surface. “I’ll wait. We’ll stay here, for now. But you better keep her close, Tatsuya. Because if any of those filthy demons even think about getting near her, I’ll burn them to ash.”

I didn’t respond, but inside, a part of me could breathe again. For now, the Oni had a reason to hold back. He wasn’t ready to make a move. And that was enough for me to plan the next step.

Momoi was still silent, but I could see the slightest shift in her posture, a hint that she hadn’t completely shut me out. Maybe we weren’t lost, not yet. But I knew I had to keep her safe. From everything. From the Oni. From the world.

And for the first time since meeting her, I realized that I wasn’t sure if I was trying to protect her—or if I was trying to protect myself from losing her.

I couldn’t stand the silence. Every second felt stretched into eternity, suffocating me. The air between us felt thick, charged with the tension of unspoken words, emotions we were both too afraid to voice. Momoi sat there, staring at nothingness. She wouldn’t meet my eyes. Wouldn’t even acknowledge I was there.

I knew I had to do something. I couldn’t let this fester. I had to fight for her—for us.

The Oni’s presence was suffocating, coiling around my thoughts in a tightening

noose. He seethed in the back of my mind, his hunger for domination still roaring. His voice was a constant hum, a growl that vibrated through my skull.

"You're pathetic, Tatsuya." He scoffed, the words thick with disdain. "Begging like this. How much lower can you sink?"

But I couldn't back down now. I knew what I had to do. I had to prove to her that I was still the man she knew, the man she could trust, despite everything.

I took a step forward, my knees nearly buckling from the weight of the moment. The Oni was pushing against me, wanting to take control, but I couldn't let him. Not now.

I dropped to one knee in front of her, forcing my pride into submission. The Oni snarled at the act, furious that I was lowering myself in front of her. "You disgust me," he spat, but I ignored him. This was something I had to do, even if it cost me everything.

"Momoi," I started, my voice hoarse with the emotion I was trying to hold back. "I know I've messed up. I know I've done things that you'll never forgive me for. But please... I'm asking for a chance."

The Oni raged inside me, furious that I was pleading, but I couldn't stop. I wouldn't stop.

"I know I'm not the man I used to be. I know I'm not the person you want me to be," I continued, my heart pounding in my chest. "But I need you to give me a chance. A chance to make it right."

Her gaze didn't move from the floor, but I could feel her eyes on me, could feel the weight of her judgment, her hurt. I didn't know what she was thinking, but I knew that this was my last shot.

The Oni growled low in my mind, "This is beneath you. She'll never respect you again."

But I ignored him. I had to.

I reached out slowly, my hand trembling as I placed it on her knee, just barely touching her. "I'm sorry, Momoi. I don't know how to fix this. But I'll spend every second trying. You're everything to me. I?—"

I cut off, swallowing the lump in my throat. What the hell was I doing? A coward groveling at her feet. The Oni was right. I was weak.

But I couldn't stop. I wouldn't.

Momoi's body tensed, her breath shallow as if she were holding herself together, keeping her walls up. Her eyes flickered up to mine for a split second, and I saw the crack in her armor—the smallest hint of something vulnerable.

"You're pathetic," the Oni sneered in my mind, "you're making yourself a fool. But go ahead. Do it. Grovel. Maybe you'll get something in return."

I didn't care about the Oni's ridicule. I had to try. I had to make her see me as Tatsuya again, the man I once was, the man I could be again.

"Please," I whispered, my voice breaking, "I just need you to talk to me. Tell me what you need from me. I'll do whatever it takes. Just... please don't shut me out."

There was a long, agonizing silence. And then, the smallest of movements. Her hand slowly uncrossed, fingers brushing mine. Her gaze shifted, just slightly, meeting my eyes. Her lips parted, but no words came.

It was enough. Enough for now. I wasn't going to stop.

I felt the Oni's rage flare up again, a wild, burning anger almost overtaking me, but I kept my ground. "Please, Momoi," I said again, quieter this time. "Let me fix this. Let me prove to you that I'm still worthy of you."

The Oni's voice was dripping with mockery as it rang in my mind. "You're weak. Begging her for something you'll never get." His words slithered like venom, twisting around me, constricting my thoughts.

But I wasn't going to let him win. Not now, not after everything. Not after what we'd been through.

I fought the urge to lash out, pushing my human mind against his overwhelming presence. "Stop it." I seethed. "I know what we are. But if we lose her, if we let this go, we'll be nothing. She's the reason I'm still holding on, and you know that."

The Oni snarled in the back of my mind, a guttural sound that rattled my bones. "She doesn't want you, Tatsuya. She wants power. She wants strength. And you are nothing but a weakness to her. You're nothing without me."

I gritted my teeth, pushing harder, trying to fight against the monster that had consumed my life. "I'm not nothing. And I won't let you take her."

For a moment, there was silence. But it wasn't peaceful. It was that silence where everything hangs on a knife's edge, teetering between destruction and control.

Finally, the Oni's voice came again, quieter, more venomous than before. "Fine. But you're the one who has to grovel to her. I'm not begging for anything. She's not worth it."

It was a challenge, and I knew it. My own pride felt torn in two, but I knew deep down that if we didn't act fast, we would lose her.

"You can't see it, can you?" I shot back. "She's everything. And you won't find another human like her. She's the only one who sees us. She's the only one who wants us as we are."

The Oni growled low, frustrated by my words. "I don't need her. She needs me."

I was on the verge of losing control, the tension between us thickening, but I couldn't let it get to that point. "You think I can't see it? You think I don't know what you're trying to do? You're too twisted. Too far gone. And if you keep pushing her away, we'll lose her. Forever."

The silence followed was akin to a weight pressing down on my chest. I could feel the Oni, still furious, but there was something else now—a flicker of realization. He couldn't afford to lose her, either.

"She's mine," the Oni murmured, possessive and dark. "And if you don't stop being a fool, Tatsuya, I will ensure she's never yours again."

I ignored the threat, focusing instead on the one thing that mattered. "I'm not letting her go, demon. And you're going to grovel—because if we don't fix this, she will be gone. You're not going to find another like her."

The Oni hesitated, the tension in my mind palpable. But, eventually, his voice returned, gruff and reluctant. "Fine. I'll do it. But don't think for a second that this means I'm weak. This is your fault."

I clenched my jaw, the control I had gained over the situation slipping a little. I was going to have to make this right, to humble myself. But it was for her—for Momoi.

“ Momoi, ” I whispered, my voice raw, quieter than intended. I took a deep breath, trying to find the right words. “I don’t know how to fix this, but I’m not going to give up on us. I won’t lose you. Please, talk to me. Let me make it right. We can re-examine our options.”

The Oni’s voice was still a part of me, simmering beneath the surface, but I focused on the part of me that could still reach her. "She has to hear me, Tatsuya. If you don’t make her understand..."

I didn’t need to hear it. I already knew. There was no going back now. The part of me that wanted her, needed her, was too strong. And I would make sure the Oni knew it too. If this was the only way to keep her, so be it.

“Momoi,” I whispered again, my voice trembling with uncertainty.

31

The Reckoning

MOMOI

I watched them—Tatsuya and the Oni—squirming. If it weren't so serious, I might've laughed. The two of them, usually so full of arrogance and fire, were now practically begging me for forgiveness. It was hard to ignore the tiny, mischievous spark of satisfaction flickering in my chest. Who would've thought they could be so... human?

But I also couldn't ignore the underlying tension. Tatsuya's voice, trembling with desperation, had gotten to me. I wasn't sure if it was guilt, the lingering remnants of my own desires, or something else entirely, but I couldn't keep pretending that this situation didn't have me on edge.

His words, his apologies, were a siren call. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to hell with him or run as far away as possible. Living in hell didn't sound great, but the idea of being with both of them, constantly walking the edge between pleasure and peril... it wasn't so clear-cut anymore.

I could feel them both in the room, the dual presence of Tatsuya and the Oni, both vying for my attention in their own twisted ways.

The Oni was the first to break the silence, his voice low and menacing. "You're not going to leave us, Momoi. We've offered you everything."

Tatsuya followed closely, his voice softer, almost pleading. “We don’t want to lose you. I don’t want to lose you.”

It was strange—hearing them both speak as though they cared. Their pride, especially the Oni’s, had always been a strange wall between us. But now, here they were, with their knees metaphorically on the ground.

I crossed my arms, tilting my head as I considered them. It wasn’t just their words. There was something in the way they were both acting—something almost desperate. Were they really that afraid of losing me? The thought lingered in my mind, and for the first time, I realized how it felt to be needed this way. To be seen.

But what really caught me off guard was how, despite their chaos, both the Oni and Tatsuya had managed to start healing a part of me that I never expected them to touch. A part that had always told me I was worthless, unworthy of love or care. I’d buried that voice for so long, convincing myself it was easier to be cold and distant than to face what I truly craved: connection.

But now, here they were—two beings that should have been my enemies, tearing through everything I thought I knew about myself, and they were slowly, almost imperceptibly, undoing the damage. Their actions weren’t just about power, dominance, or desire. Somewhere beneath all of that, there was something raw, something human. And unexpectedly, that human part of them was starting to mend the pieces of me I’d long discarded.

I felt the weight of it, the realization that they were doing for me what I couldn’t even do for myself— seeing me. All of me. Even the parts I didn’t want to acknowledge.

The Oni’s burning gaze lingered on me, darker than ever, but there was a trace of something softer, almost reluctant, in it.

“ You think you’re too good for me, human? ” he asked, though the words were heavy with a hint of vulnerability I wasn’t used to hearing from him.

I wasn’t sure how to answer him. How could I? But as I stood there, facing them, I realized that I wasn’t just fighting against them anymore. I was fighting against myself. The walls I’d built around my heart had been cracked wide open, which terrified me. But a part of me, one I hadn’t listened to in years, wasn’t so afraid anymore. It didn’t want to be alone in the dark. Not anymore.

I finally let out a breath, trying to steady my shaking hands. "I don’t want to be saved," I told myself.

But even as the words reverberated through my head like a broken record, I knew it wasn’t true. I wanted to be saved— I needed to be saved, even if I didn’t know what that meant just yet. The Oni and Tatsuya, with all their flaws and darkness, were offering me a chance to find something I’d given up on long ago: belonging.

I let the silence stretch between us for a moment, simply to make them stew in it a little longer.

But then, just as Tatsuya seemed to think he might have worn me down, I couldn’t help myself anymore.

"Hell, huh?" I said, my voice tinged with a bite I wasn’t sure I could hold back. "I’ve got to admit, I’m curious. What kind of life would we even have in hell? Not sure I’d love it, but... there’s something oddly tempting about it."

The Oni growled under his breath, his presence pushing against my thoughts again.

"You wouldn’t last a day." He scoffed, clearly not enjoying the direction I was taking.

I tilted my head slightly, looking at him.

“Oh? You don’t think I could handle it? You’re lying. Why else would you even bring it up in the first place, demon?” I couldn’t help but tease, the dangerous amusement bubbling to the surface. “I guess I could get used to the fire and brimstone. The demons... probably some interesting characters to chat with. Not sure if it’s my style, but I could find a way to adapt. Or not. Maybe I’d have fun being the queen of hell, who knows?”

The Oni’s anger flared, the heat of it almost suffocating. But it wasn’t just anger anymore. There was something deeper, more possessive, making him snarl with annoyance.

Tatsuya, on the other hand, seemed almost pained by my words. “Don’t—Momoi, this isn’t a joke.” His voice was strained. “We’ve been through hell and back already, haven’t we? I just... I just need to know you’re with us. I’m not asking you to go there. I’m asking you to trust me. Trust us.”

I had to admit, I could feel his sincerity. It made the edge of my thoughts wobble. But the Oni? Not so much. I could tell he was still plotting, thinking of how to assert his dominance.

I took a slow, deliberate step forward, watching both of them. The tension was palpable, but I needed answers. I needed control.

"Alright," I said finally, the amusement gone from my voice. "I’ve had enough of this charade. I want to speak to the Oni. Alone."

The Oni’s presence surged forward, a dark and overwhelming force that threatened to swallow me whole. But this time, I wasn’t afraid. I wasn’t going to let him have the upper hand just because he was stronger, because he was the demon in this body.

For a moment, there was a stillness. The Oni hesitated, a predator sizing up its prey. But then I heard his voice, dark and thick with hunger, rolling over me like smoke.

“What do you want, human?”

It was the first time he’d called me that in ages, and something about the word stung. I felt a flicker of resentment, a desire to push back.

"I want to know what’s going to happen next," I said, crossing my arms. "You think you can drag me into hell with your dark promises? You think I’m just going to follow you because you say so?" I took another step closer to him, my eyes narrowing. "I don’t care how much you want me, Oni. I won’t be your pawn. Not anymore."

For the first time, I saw something in the Oni’s eyes—an emotion that wasn’t pure rage. Maybe it was frustration, maybe confusion, but I didn’t care.

"I won’t be your plaything," I added, my voice steady, unshaken. "If you want me, you must prove you can control yourself. You won’t drag me to Jigoku, not like that. You’ll have to figure out a way to keep me here—alive, with my choice intact. Not just for you, but for both of you."

The Oni’s voice darkened, a low growl rumbling deep within him. “You’re making a mistake.”

“Maybe,” I said with a smirk, crossing my arms. “But we’ll see, won’t we?”

His eyes narrowed, lips curling in frustration. I could almost feel the rage building inside him, an inferno just waiting to erupt. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen this side of him before, but something about this moment made it feel different—more dangerous, more urgent. It wasn’t just about power anymore; it was about control .

And that pissed him off.

I could feel Tatsuya's presence at the edge of my awareness, his gaze heavy, a mixture of concern and relief painting his expression. But this wasn't about him right now. It wasn't about them, either. It was about me.

"I'll give you both a chance," I continued, my voice sharp, "but don't forget who's in charge here. You don't get to pull me along on your terms. Got it?"

The Oni's growl deepened, his body bristling with agitation. "You think you're in control? You've never understood what you're playing with, girl," he hissed, his anger building. He took a step closer, looming over me, his presence overwhelming.

Oh, so I'm "girl" now?

"You'll regret this," he snarled, his words dripping with venom.

I could see it now—the tension in his body, how he clenched his fists, the slight tremor of barely contained fury. He was a force of nature, and I could feel it in the air between us. But I wasn't afraid of him. If anything, I was bored by his tantrums. The more he raged, the more I realized how much I enjoyed pushing his limits.

"Well, we're not there yet, are we?" I quipped, not backing down. "You'll just have to wait and see what happens next."

That was the wrong thing to say.

The Oni let out a furious growl, and before I could react, he reached forward, his claws wrapping around my wrist with the force of a vice. His eyes blazed with a mixture of fury and hunger, and I could feel the heat of his anger radiating off him like a furnace.

“You really think you can control this, little human?” he spat, his voice almost a whisper now, dark and dangerous.

I had to do something, or I’d be consumed by this relentless, wild storm he was ready to unleash. Without thinking, my heart pounding, I grabbed his face and pulled him down, closing the distance between us until our lips were almost touching. I could feel the air between us crackle with tension, my pulse racing.

“Stop whining,” I muttered, before I kissed him.

The moment our lips met, everything shifted. The fury that had been brewing in him, the rage that had threatened to consume everything, faltered. He froze, caught off guard by my sudden boldness. His grip on my wrist loosened, and for just a split second, I had the upper hand.

It wasn’t the kiss of a lover. It wasn’t a kiss of tenderness. It was a kiss of challenge. A kiss of power.

He pulled back abruptly, his chest heaving with frustration. His eyes burned with more intensity than ever, but this time, I saw something else there—a flicker of something uncertain, something deeper.

“You can’t just—” he started, but I interrupted him, my lips curling into a sly smile.

“I can do whatever I want, demon. And if you’re going to be stuck with me, you’ll have to learn to deal with it.”

His face twisted in confusion, in disbelief, but I wasn’t backing down. Not this time.

“I think you’ve underestimated me,” I added, my tone low, dangerous.

For a moment, there was silence between us. Then, the Oni's posture shifted. He still seethed with anger, but it was tempered now, as if he were recalibrating. Trying to figure out what just happened.

"I don't know what game you're playing, but you'll regret this," he growled, but there was something different in his voice. Something that made me realize that, for the first time, the Oni wasn't so sure of himself.

Good.

Because for once, I was.

TATSUYA

The mountain was quiet. Too quiet. It had been our home for months now, a place to hide, to breathe, and to keep our distance from the world that wanted to tear us apart. But even the solitude was becoming suffocating.

Momoi was pregnant now—far too young to bear the burden of the things she didn't understand, the things we had dragged her into. I should have protected her from it all, but I hadn't. The Oni's rage still burned in my veins, but even as I tried to control it, he wanted her. He wanted her more now. And that fact, along with her growing belly, made everything feel... as if it was teetering on the edge of a cliff, ready to break.

We had to go to the city today.

Momoi had food cravings, and she had a way of making me feel unable to say no. I wasn't proud of the fact that we needed to go into that chaotic mess, but she wanted something, and there was no chance in hell I'd disappoint her. Not now. Not ever.

But as always, the moment we left the safety of the mountain and entered the bustle of the city, the Oni started to stir.

"Do we really have to do this?" I muttered, trying to focus on the task at hand.

"Of course we do," the Oni growled from the recesses of my mind. "I'll make sure she gets what she wants. No one stands in our way."

“You’re not taking over,” I snapped. “We’ve discussed this. We’re here for food , not bloodshed.”

The Oni’s voice rumbled darkly within me. “They think they can cross our path? I’ll tear them to pieces.”

I gritted my teeth, but before I could stop him, I felt my body shift, a dangerous growl reverberating through my chest. His power surged, and we were already on the move, eyes scanning for anyone who looked as if they might get in our way.

We found trouble, naturally.

Some men, probably thinking they were being tough, tried to approach us—probably for money or some kind of territory play. It was always the same. But this time, the Oni didn’t wait.

The moment they got too close, something inside me snapped. I felt the familiar rush of power, the dark hunger that rose like a tidal wave. My body— our body—shuddered, a violent tremor that cracked through my bones, as though my skin was being stretched, torn apart, and remade.

My spine contorted in a way it shouldn’t, the muscles in my arms and chest bulging as though something inside me was trying to break free. My vision blurred for a moment, and then everything sharpened. My fingers twisted into claws, nails extending into black talons as my body grew, skin darkening to a grotesque, deep red. The flesh stretched unnaturally over my bones, the outline of the Oni’s terrifying form taking hold of me like a nightmare emerging from my own skin.

My spine cracked again, longer and more twisted, and before I knew it, I was no longer Tatsuya . The Oni stood in his full, terrifying form—a massive, towering, hulking demon with dark eyes full of rage and hunger. A low growl rumbled deep within me, vibrating through the air.

The men, who'd been thinking of confrontation, froze, their faces drained of color. They were already dead, but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything except the satisfaction of tearing them apart.

With a snarl, I charged, every movement now a fluid, predatory action. My body was no longer mine—I was no longer in control. The Oni had taken over.

I wasn't even aware of what happened next. There was no thought, no reason, just the brutal satisfaction of ripping through the men, leaving nothing but a trail of mangled bodies and blood splattered on the sidewalk behind. I was a monster, a force of destruction, and I relished it.

The Oni's laughter echoed in my mind, mocking the fleeting remnants of Tatsuya's consciousness. "Pathetic," he hissed. "You can't stop me. You never could."

My heart pounded, guilt sweeping over me, but there was nothing I could do.

"Really?" I muttered, shaking my head. "This is the last thing we need, Oni. You always do this."

"I did what needed to be done," he responded coolly, his voice dripping with dark satisfaction. "Let them try to take what's ours again. I'll make sure they never dare."

I had no patience for his pride, but I knew arguing with him was futile. Instead, I focused on the task—getting what Momoi wanted and getting the hell out of there before we drew too much attention.

We made it to the food store after that little massacre. The Oni's rage had subsided—though only just—and I grabbed the items she craved, pretending not to notice the people screaming for their lives when they saw us approach, covered in blood. As long as I made it back to her, everything would be fine.

And the Oni? Well, he was quieter for the rest of the trip back.

“This is why we live in the mountains,” I muttered under my breath as I navigated our way back. “You can’t be trusted in the city. Every time we go near it, you start killing.”

“Sometimes,” the Oni sneered, “they need to be put in their place.”

I sighed, running my hand through my hair. “You’re a bull in a china shop. You don’t think before you act.”

He growled in response, but I pressed on, my patience thinning. "If you don’t control that rage, you’ll destroy everything, even yourself. A man who can’t control his anger is like a boat adrift without a rudder ."

The Oni’s silence hung in the air for a moment, and I could almost hear the growl of irritation building deep within him.

“I know your heart,” I added, my voice steady despite the turmoil brewing inside. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll let you run wild every time we step into town.”

“You speak too much, Tatsuya,” he grumbled, his voice dripping with disdain.

“Sometimes, words are the only weapon we have left,” I shot back. "The sword is quick, but wisdom takes time."

The Oni didn't answer, but I could feel him simmering, his desire for violence still lurking just beneath the surface.

I rolled my eyes. “The world is full of people who need putting in their place. We’re not going to kill all of them. We’ll never leave the mountain.”

“And you think that will stop me?” he taunted. “We’ll go back to the mountain when I say so. Until then, there’s plenty more blood to spill.”

The thought made my skin crawl, but I stayed silent, knowing it was better not to fuel his anger.

It was a long, quiet walk back up the mountain path. The sound of our footsteps was the only noise in the otherwise still air. But with each step, I could feel that familiar guilt building in my chest. The Oni had been right in some ways—there would always be bloodshed when he was in control. And Momoi, sweet Momoi, was still in danger.

But as we finally reached the cabin, the sight of her waiting for us on the porch with that same soft smile made all the weight feel lighter.

“I hope you got everything,” she said, voice full of sweetness.

I handed her the bag of food, letting out a long, tired breath. “You’re lucky we don’t live anywhere near civilization. If I had to deal with this on a regular basis, I’d lose my mind.”

Momoi gave me a pointed look that said she had to deal with us on a regular basis, making me scowl.

The Oni’s voice reverberated low in my skull, laughing. “Not my fault, human. You should’ve known what you were getting into.”

“Yeah, well, I’m stuck with both of you now,” I muttered, my eyes on Momoi as she eagerly took the bag and began pulling out her food. “And I’m never going back to the city.”

Momoi smiled, oblivious to the internal war I was fighting with the Oni. “I’ll make

sure you both stay here with me. I enjoy it here, surprisingly. It's peaceful."

For once, I almost believed her. But I knew the Oni, and I knew that peace would be a fleeting thing, always out of reach.

But for now, we were home. And I'd do whatever it took to keep it that way.

As I watched her eat and moan seductively with every bite, I realized something.

No matter where we ended up, she was our home. The mountain, the city, it didn't matter. As long as she was with us, that was the only place I'd ever truly want to call home.

The Oni's presence stirred within me, a simmering mix of rage and possessiveness. It was quiet now, though. Almost contemplative, if you could call it that.

He watched her with a hunger, not just for her body but for something deeper—something he couldn't quite name. Maybe it was the fact that she was the only one who had ever made him feel anything other than hunger.

"She belongs to us," the Oni muttered, his voice a low growl in my mind. "No one else can have her."

I didn't answer, not out loud anyway. I could feel the truth of his words gnawing at the edge of my thoughts, the truth we both knew. Momoi was ours. In ways neither of us truly understood, she was what anchored us, what made us... whole.

The Oni shifted, his restlessness stirring inside of me.

"Do you feel it?" he demanded, his tone shifting. "She's the key. Everything else is just a distraction. This—this is what matters. Us. Her. This... unit we've created."

I didn't know how to respond. What could I say? He was right, in a way. Maybe we hadn't asked for any of this, but here we were. And as much as I hated to admit it, there was something in his words that resonated with me. Family .

Even if it was just the three of us, even if it meant navigating this dangerous, twisted path together—it was the only real thing I had left.

And for once, I didn't feel the overwhelming need to fight him. The Oni and I were bound by this strange, terrifying bond. One that I couldn't escape, no matter how much I tried.

Instead, I just sat there, watching her, and for the first time in a long while, I let myself believe that maybe this could work.

Maybe, just maybe, we could make this dysfunctional family of ours last.