

“Do you want to come back?” Satsuki inquired. It has been years since he last saw her — and in the ten years lost in prison and another five in the mental hospital, Renji couldn’t say he doesn’t miss her, couldn’t say that he loathed her decision to marry Terajima Tōma, and couldn’t say anything else other than courtesy in fear of estrangement.

Estrangement.

Funny, frightening little thing.

But he appreciated the fact that Satsuki came to see him when he’s back to society again. Just Satsuki. The only person in this forsaken city.

She ushered him to an artisan eatery, where they ordered a bowl of chicken rice and a pint of beer.

“Don’t wanna, am gonna go back home.”

As much as Tōma congratulated him after the trial, he doesn’t want to go back to the organization. It was never to his taste. Had it not been for his piling debt and Kawamura Kaito, he would take the first chance he has to trample Yamada Goro out of commission. But someone else did it first.

Satō Etsuji killed Yamada Goro, and then himself. Renji didn’t know why and doesn’t want to know why, but the murder itself was the catalyst to Tōma’s rising in the underground and his marriage to Satsuki. Overall, it was a really messy business that started out with his serving time — and Renji wanted to get away from all this, because at the very least, he deserved this much.

Renji wants to go back home and bury his mother, then fulfill his promise to Mayu. Fix all the damage done after his departure. One at a time.

Satsuki slide his old phone on the table. “Thought you want it back.”

Renji pushes the phone back to her. The shaking of his head conveys his inclination to start anew, for the **third** time in his life. For a moment, they were quiet, savoring their beverage and burning the image of each other to the back of their mind.

Renji put his arms on the table, hands reaching out to cup Satsuki’s hand in his own. “You alright?” He asked, though his eyes already asked that from the moment she broke the news of her marriage. Satsuki nodded weakly, wondering if the years of weariness is as clear as day on her face.

“Great!” Renji exclaimed, “that’s all I wanna know.” A pause, then: a slight sigh of hesitation and - “I gotta go.”

He ended it with a grimace and let Satsuki’s hand go.

Just as he’s letting go of Tokyo and its travesty scene behind him. Hopefully for a long time.

The trip from Tokyo to Kōchi alone takes a total of thirteen hours, with several complications on the road — and he had to take the night bus with several people who purposefully chose a seat far from him. Along the way, he found out that the driver had five children, only finished middle school, and some other things that are far too private to tell.

The trip from Kōchi to Yasuda takes 80 minutes. He stopped by a convenience store first to take a shower, treat himself to a canned beer, and pack some bottled water and instant noodles, before willing his feet to walk to his village.

It’s night when he arrived at the village. When he looked at the sky, he could observe the moon and the stars clearly, in this place far from artificial lights. The moon and the stars are the only thing illuminating the whole landscape before his eyes and the forest he passed by to reach the village. Now if only he knows some teensy bit of astronomy, then maybe all this walking will be a bit more fun.

In front of him laid yards of empty houses and their farms. Wild grass overgrows the stone pathway and its railing and the only road in this village ends at the chief’s house. Only one house has a lantern hanging on its front.

Mayu’s house.

Before he could knock the door, Mayu already opened the door.

A momentary pause that lasted far too long for someone like Renji could usually handle. Two people on a deserted village, in the dead of the night — and silence; the heart of the village knows when to keep quiet.

Renji's mouth curled into a lopsided smile that speaks uncertainty. He wanted to speak—the only thing he's ever good at—and to hug, to touch, to make sure that Mayu really is and will be here when tomorrow comes.

But Mayu was the one who broke the silence first with:

“Been waiting for you.”

And a smile. It's been years since he last saw Mayu with a genuine, unfiltered smile.

“D'ya want to... Oh. Ya bought something. Are those for me?”

Renji nod and made his way inside when Mayu steps away from the door. As he drop the convenience store plastic bag on the table, his eyes caught the sight of urns lined up with names on them. One urn in particular caught his attention and he approached the urn to read the paper inscription: 安藤 微澜

Mayu's dark orbs follow his movement.

“She wanted cremation. That okay with you?” Mayu asked, hands busy with taking the content of the grocery bag out.

“Whatever floats her boat,” he responded, and then, “When?”

“A few months ago,” Mayu informed, bringing the instant noodle to the kitchen.

“Heat, or at least I think so. Found her on the road, brought her back here, we talked, and then... Y'know. Sorry.”

“s cool.”

Another uncharacteristic pause as Renji squats in front of said urn. The only sound in the whole house comes from the boiling pot in the kitchen. Until,

“Oi, can I bring her home? Y'know just put it in my house and—”

“Ain't it dark out there? You sure you wanna go to **your** house **now**?”

Renji's house is on the furthest side of the village, in the deeper part of the forest, the closest one to the river and the closed mine. There was a miscalculation that his Pa made when they first moved and built the house.

It will cost him the five minutes of his life, but at least he has all the time he needs now.

In the end, he didn't go and decided to sit down doing nothing. Had he never went to jail again, he wouldn't have it in him to do and say nothing. The silence would be

unbearable and his head will explode as her voice and the ghost sensation of her touch flood his sensory — but this time, it feels nice. Just the two of them and the sound of boiling pot. Maybe she truly was lost with time and left him with the odd, jagged wounds that scritch serenity when he dug his fingers too deep into the hollow of it.

They did not say anything more when the dinner started. The silence stretched as far as the night fell. Renji slept this time, a few hours after Mayu did, in an odd silence that left the cricket to sing.

When he woke up the next morning, with white lining the dark blue sky above, Renji does not find Mayu anywhere in the house. Her bed was no longer warm and her shoes is nowhere to be found. When his foot touched the damp grass outside, it speaks of utter silence. Loneliness. His breath against the village's silent gait. He knows that he is alone, and for once, did not fear it.

He should be, however, if Mayu's letters over the years taught him anything. Her plea to end her life, to end all traces of life in this village. Renji was never alive to her to begin with. The moment he stepped foot outside of the village and set his future to be with Kana, he's as good as dead to the village.

Renji knows where to go.

The river welcomes the man as an old friend, as his lissome fingers laces in the water, and brought the crimson water closer to his misshapen features. The blood of another being on his face, and not his own. *Finally*. It sticks to his lashes, blurring his vision into bubbles of red, and he savor the image of Mayu's mangled remain on the back of his head: Mayu's face weathered from the lost years, the crack on her skull that did nothing but decorate the scene gory, and her naked body - twisted, into something unrecognizable, undesirable, but lovely all the same.

Mayu.

A pair of arm raises Mayu from her sacred sanctuary, and he laid her fractured head on his shoulder. Blood pouring out to his back, tarnishing the cherry blossom tree and the snake whose eyes cry the red of agony. With its red eyes, it saw the mountain terrace, the closed mine, and the dawn - and only then does it realize, then it has been abandoned, shoved off to the locked room of the man's mind.

But with his promise to Mayu fulfilled, there are nothing left for him to fear. The door to the locked room is wide open and all his fear crawled out to see the sun rising. The ghost of his past are crawling on his skin - and yet, it stirs him not. The short age that the cherry blossom promised did not come to fruition - and the demonic snake that he slither across his back he accepts as his sole companion: a lover, a friend, and a longlife crowd.

Even with the heaviness that occupies his mind, his steps are steady, moving to the old hospital hut where they keep the crematory.

The door to the hut is wide open, eager to receive its gift. Everything is laid out in perfect order. The firewoods and canisters of gasoline are stacked neatly next to the casket inside the crematory.

Renji hold Mayu tighter before lowering her into the casket and slams it close before his heart flopped out of his chest. Mayu believes in no higher being but the one in her head and thus, there will be no ceremony nor prayer.

With firewoods scattered and gasoline poured all over the casket and the hut, all that's left for him is to light the hut on fire - and this will all be over. He does so, with heart heavier than the weight of Mayu's remnant that ghosts on his cradle - and he watch the hut flared odd serenity, as his feet dragged him back to his childhood abode.

Home.

The walk to his house was filled with heavy steps and heavier sweet memories. The water wheel stopped working long ago, the dilapidated wooden steps reek of moss, and the door, as it's always been, opened wide to welcome any visitor. The entrance area shows no signs of ever being tinkered with; Pa's boots and his old sandals over the years are still there, the only footwear missing is Ma's, most likely cremated along with her body.

He takes off his shoes and heads to the living room. The darkened wooden floor creaks when he steps inside. The *horigotatsu* in the middle of the room and Pa's altar at the far corner is the only thing present. On the table lies a fox carcass; fresh from the hunt by the smell of it, though it's been deprived of the joy of having its head and paws intact. He skipped the sinister view, pretended he didn't see it, and approached Pa's altar, though the custom was lost with him. He kneeled in front of the altar and takes the memorial tablet that houses only one name: *Ando Hirotaka*.

He brings the tablet to his childhood room, where he spends very little time in while he was a child. The door, as it's always been and always will be, unlocked and takes minimal effort to open. The time spent inside manifests in the lack of items and decoration inside - and yet, he was not an unhappy child. The abundance of produce, great health, and lovable companies make up for the lack of everything else.

On the bed, sat his collection of baseball players card. It was his only connection to the world outside of the village. Where should he go now that the world had opened up to him? Suddenly, he remembered his collection of identities. He doesn't need them anymore, but the nostalgia washes over him like waves. The Korean girls he used to date for fun, the men in Brunei who thought he was too pale for his own good, and especially all the good times he have in Thailand—the woman, the city, and the food. Renji doesn't think twice. He never does.

When the first cargo ship to Thailand arrives in Port of Yasuda, he gave the crew the last of his money and board to the land of dreams.