

Kintsugi

There had been a part of me that had hoped Junko was lying, and that Genocide Jill had simply decided to go along with the ruse. The first step we took outside Hope's Peak proved otherwise. We had been fed stories of total chaos and desolation. What we found wasn't pristine and untouched by the perils of the world, but it wasn't the Hellscape we'd all prepared ourselves for, either. Buildings stood battered but mostly unbroken, tall and grim like soldiers on death-watch. Plumes, half dust and half mist, swirled across streets and settled deep in our lungs on each inhale. For once, even Byakuya was struck into silence. Even though the time that had passed felt like mere weeks to us, the truth was right there in front of our faces—for the world, it had been two long years. There had been people here numbering in the thousands, creating a bustling city that never slept. Looking out at it now, it was cold and dark and wounded, but something told me that even like this it never closed its eyes. The promise of a vigilant watch had been comforting once, but here we knew it as a threat. Kyoko, always the first to gather herself, had wasted no time rallying the troops and finding us suitable shelter and rations. There was, according to both she and Hina, no logical reason to let the food, water, and other necessities that existed within Hope's Peak go unused given the outlook. There were still pockets of unhostile civilization left, by Junko's own admission. Our job was to stay alive long enough to find one.

That first step into the disheveled world had been nearly two months ago. Even with almost sixty days under our belts, we hadn't gotten far. Without anything but crude fire-pits and abandoned buildings to stave off the bite of winter, traveling any large distance was completely out of the question. Surviving the Killing Game only to be murdered by bandits would be laughable, in its own way, so we'd quickly decided it was safer to sleep in pairs. Toko refused to leave Byakuya's side and Kyoko wasn't keen on bunking with Hiro, so the pairs more or less fell into place without conversation. Without mattresses, we had made what Hina affectionately referred to as 'nests' wherever we could find the most shelter from the wind and snow. I pulled the covers tighter around myself, waiting with dwindling patience for Kyoko to return. All three girls had left early that morning to track down supplies. We had learned not to question their safety. Street thugs weren't much of a match for them between Kyoko's quick assessments, Hina's athletic nature, and Genocide Jill's precious scissors. We also learned not to question where they'd gotten the supplies, how, or why the bags they brought back were sometimes covered in dark stains. We learned it was easier not to ask than to receive answers we really didn't want to hear.

It was well into the night before she returned, slipping off her boots and settling down beside me with a tired sigh. She wouldn't sleep until she was sufficiently nestled under the blankets. Sometimes it seemed like she used them as a sort of shield, like little kids do to keep the boogeyman away. I knew better than to say that out loud, though. I valued my life. Still, there was something that had bothered me from day one. At first I hadn't had the courage to ask her outright. Even after everything that had happened, even though we'd both taken the fall for the other at some point—both literally and figuratively—she still proved to be incredibly intimidating at times.

Gathering what little nerve I could find, I chanced the question. "Did you always wear your gloves to bed? Before all this, I mean."

"No, not when I'm alone." If I had caught her off-guard or if she was irritated at my asking, she didn't show it. I vaguely wondered if she and Celeste had been friends before this, and if one had shown the other how to perfect their poker-face.

"If you'd be more comfortable, take them off. I don't mind any," I said. Realizing how it probably sounded, I hastily added "Of course, it isn't me that matters. If you feel better keeping them on then that's fine, too."

"There's no need to worry about me, Makoto." She shrugged her shoulders as if to dismiss me.

"I know! It's just that, with what Junko said, and the jokes she made, I—"

"It's fine," she spoke over me as best she could without actually raising her voice "I don't particularly care what other people have to say about my hands. That isn't why."

I frowned at her. "Then why? I mean, I don't mean to be nosey or anything, but..." She looked down at her hands and I could see her weighing her options, debating whether or not it was a mistake to say anything more. She shook her head and I thought that's where the conversation was going to end.

The lull lasted a few minutes, and when she spoke up again her voice was softer. "I was young—well, younger—when I received the burns," she explained slowly. "My grandfather took full responsibility for what happened, saying that he should have been more careful, more mindful of me since I was just beginning to learn the ropes as a detective. From then on I've only been able to feel pressure, not detail or texture. It was bad enough that they all saw me as the little girl whose father abandoned her, but to have to watch their faces wrinkle up in pain and pity when they saw my hands was too much. It hurt them, my grandfather especially, to be reminded of what they saw as their failure to protect me. I don't hide them for me, Makoto. I keep them covered because I see no reason to cause those dear to me undue pain."

"I don't know about your family, but I promise you that your hands don't bother me. So just, do whatever makes you comfortable, I guess?" Any argument I might have had no longer sounded logical to me, and I was certain she would have felt the same.

To my surprise, she held out her hands. "Clearly you *are* bothered, but in an entirely different way. So here," she said "take them off if it means so much to you." I blinked at her in confusion as I processed exactly what was happening. She was bluffing—she had to be. There was no way she seriously intended for me to take her up on her offer. It was then that I realized that was exactly why I should. I barely brushed her palms as I took her hands, carefully sliding off one glove and then the other. Her guarded expression gave way to something that looked close to disbelief, yet she kept her hands steady. She was a woman of her word, even when she had miscalculated.

"I guess there's a reason for people to pity you," I ran my thumbs over her fingers, tracing the tracks the flames had left there, "but personally, I don't see why. Each of us has a story, and scars exist to tell that story. Of course, a lack of scars tells a tale all its own, too. We used to fix broken pottery by filling the cracks with gold. We called them beautiful, unique. Why are scars any different? I understand why you cover them, Kyoko. I'm not saying you're wrong to do it, just that it's your choice to make either way."

For what could have been a small eternity, I sat with her hands held loosely in mine. Neither of us spoke and neither of us moved. We both knew better than that. There weren't many chances for any sort of peace or any sort of quiet existence in this new world in which we'd found ourselves. So we sat, scarcely wanting to breathe for fear the quiet moment would be shattered. I half-expected Monokuma's grating voice to break my thoughts, even though I knew good and well he would never move again without Junko there to pull the strings. When it failed to happen, I mentally breathed a sigh of relief. Kyoko gently pulled her hands away, wrapping the covers around herself again to bed down for the night. I followed her lead and settled in on my side of the nest. We slept as we always did, with our backs to each other, her gloves still laying on the blankets between us.