



Clarity of Gloom

Her body pushes against the surrounding darkness as it moves forward, but never allows it to penetrate her form. Years of coping with her own have left Sayaka Endo unyielding to the elements around her. Within her. She stops only to look at the sky above. The stars seem dim. Distant. Their light can reach no one this evening. Not that she particularly believes in such things, but they are not a great omen of the things to come.

Bullet Train.

Tome.

Mecca.

True darkness is laid out on the path she has chosen to walk. It brazenly looms over everything ahead with a twisted smirk. As if daring her to continue. A taunt that would have never given her pause in the past. She'd have walked right into it without hesitation because her destination was all that had mattered. Her will would have carried her through anything for her revenge without any thought as to what it could do to her. So, why is there a part of her that flinches at the prospect now?

Because she's no longer alone.

The pseudo-family of women that now live under her banner has become more than the tool she may have originally envisioned them as. Despite her consuming focus on vengeance at the likely cost of her life, she began to truly see those lost souls. Become fond of them even. Something she hadn't anticipated...hadn't wanted. Now, she has to worry that she's leading them into the horrors of an abyss that many have never escaped from. It's a burden she's aware she has never been prepared for.

With a sigh, she steps up to the front door of her traditional, but rustic home with a key in hand. Just as she's about to unlock, she is stopped by an uncomfortable feeling. She is not alone. Her eyes dart to the side right before the flame of a lighter flicks to life. The sound conjures memories of days long past when she would hear it constantly from whatever direction Shiori Shuko was standing from her.

Tonight it is the cigarette of Jessa Wells that it lights. The younger woman sits against the front of Endo's home in a black hoodie that adds extra shadow over her pale features. She seems to always tape her hands now in an attempt to hold them together. Endo's aware they are constantly torn up these days. Jessa's bitter visage vanishes when she releases the pressure on the lighter and the flame disappears. Back to near black.

What is she doing here? How is she here? Despite her discomfort over this invasion of her private space, she does well at hiding the mixture of feelings it brings as she talks.

Sayaka Endo: <How did you know where I live?>

Jessa takes a long drag before looking over at the silhouette of her mentor/tag partner.

Jessa Wells: <Does it matter?>

As short and blunt as always. Of all those who train under the roof of her dojo, this gruff brawler is the one her blunted heart cries for.

Bitterness.

Rage.

...Loss.

They constantly swirl within Jessa. Hang over her like a dark cloud. In many ways, she is a painful reminder of her younger self.

Sayaka Endo: <Not so much.>

She's about to follow that up, but Jessa prevents that by getting straight to the point.

Jessa Wells: <You're thinking about it too...>

It's not a question.

Jessa Wells: <How it's all circling the drain in front of us.>

A cloud of smoke is exhaled into the night. This is one of the few times Endo isn't so sure of where this is going. Jessa has been increasingly volatile as of late.

Sayaka Endo: <Are you here because it keeps you up at night?>

Jessa quietly snorts at the question.

Jessa Wells: <Like either of us sleep.>

Silence hangs between them in the cool air as they stare at the shadows of each other. Jessa's voice carries an uneven creak as she breaks that silence.

Jessa Wells: <Once the four of us board that train, there's only one direction to go.>

There will be no turning back. She's not just talking about the struggle to obtain the tome. She's talking about how the choice they are making may forever enmesh them within the distorted schemes of the Black Company and their competitors. Things Endo wasn't sure the other woman even thought about. Jessa's tendency is typically to focus on whatever fight is in front of her to the exclusion of many other things. Titles, people's feelings, and the consequences ahead often don't factor in. The bigger picture usually doesn't appear to be considered. So, why now?

Sayaka Endo: <I can tell you are not worried. So what is this?>

The cigarette is put out on her boot. A hundred tiny embers scatter before extinguishing.

Jessa Wells: <You are. You have been since I told you about what Cloud and I heard. I'm sure no one else would be able to tell. Not something you can hide from me.>

She's underestimated Jessa's ability to silently observe.

Jessa Wells: <I can't speak for the rest of the BDL, but do you really think you are responsible for what we are all getting dragged into? From what I've seen since joining, it was always going to go this direction.>

So, she really did see it? Completely. The thought doesn't exactly bring Endo comfort even if the gesture itself does.

Sayaka Endo: <Maybe it has. Still, it is not something to take lightly Jessa. This could affect the others. Lives may be lost. Destroyed.>

Jessa stands up and walks over to her mentor until they are close enough to clearly see each other in the dark.

Jessa Wells: <That's why we're the ones who are going. Matsuda and Ayame have made their decision already. As have we. I need the same woman standing with me who walked out to face two other teams. We've got a piece of ancient history to destroy.>

Destroy? Her decision on what to do with the book is already made. Endo isn't entirely sure that is the best approach. While she's not one to believe in mysticism, what if the tome could help them? Be used against the Black Company? It could be a great asset. Either way, the important part is the book can not fall into their hands. Endo's steely eyes stare into Jessa's. Even in the dark, the other woman can see the hardened gaze. Her tone is gravely serious.

Sayaka Endo: <We must be the ones to claim it. Do everything you have to.>

Jessa nods before she turns and starts to walk away. She calls back over her shoulder.

Jessa Wells: <Oh and Endo-san? You lack the ability to lead me to my doom. I'm already going there.>

She continues walking off. The further she gets, the less her figure can be recognized. Soon, she is swallowed by the night.



There wasn't much light around Endo's home, but as I continue the long trek back to my apartment I find myself encountering more of it as the city seems to come to life ahead. The journey had to be made. I had to invade her personal space regardless of the fact it would have bothered me had she shown up at my Anchorage home like that. Despite her stone face, I could see the glimmer of concern in her eyes when I told her about what I'd overheard. In a different situation I would have ignored it. Not this. Not now.

I need my partner, our leader, in the right headspace when we hit this train. I'm dead sure on what needs to be done. There can be no concern for other things. I'm putting everything else on the backburner. My hatred for what Kasumi represents is not my focus. Nor is the title she walked away with. I can't think about my desperation to be saved from my personal hell by Kaede. Nor can I worry right now about her tag "partner's" jealousy of our connection. She's an anchor weighing down Iruma. It's all been shoved away for now. Our petty affairs can be resumed later.

As can my wallowing in my own misery.

I'm sorry Wes. My beloved. This is probably another in my endless series of betrayals. I can't think about you right now. Not even the heart-piercing pain this new betrayal brings. I must ignore you for the moment. Please forgive me.

I cannot allow myself to worry about what this could do to me. How it could very well push me further into the jaws of the hungry void that thrashes about within my core even now.

Fuck it.

The other threat that has hung over me for months now is the Mecca. The annoying excitement of the Kimono Twins about it. What awaits to apparently consume me there. Mecca is a future meat grinder that I can be dropped into if the bullet train doesn't crash and kill all of us in a fiery explosion.

I just have this nagging feeling this may be the most important thing I've ever done. If I want to be successful and meet this challenge, I have to be the best I've ever been. There can be no distractions.

I don't know what this tome can do. It could be a cookbook or it could be the end of the world. I just know that some really terrible people want it. That tells me enough to know it's extremely dangerous and they can't be allowed to obtain it no matter what the personal cost is for myself. If this is where my pathetic story ends...then so be it.

Though this could very well save a lot of people, I don't consider my attempt to destroy this book a selfless act. Sure, I want to help. I want to prevent assholes from making other people's lives as terrible as mine.

I also want to feel alive.

Even if it kills me.

This is a win-win for me and their future victims.

I know what must be done. This thing must be completely destroyed. I can't let anyone else get it. If my own teammates take it and think we should keep and use it...well too bad. I'll take it from them to kill it. To kill the dreams of those who want it for their own purposes. There is no debate. There is no discussion. It's gotta go.

Any opposition must be eliminated as quickly and harshly as possible. I can't get stuck in any protracted battles that could keep me from obliterating the tome. I must move quickly. I must strike hard. Without mercy.

I have to keep civilian involvement to a minimum if I can. I'd like to avoid them being hurt, but not at the expense of my goal. At the expense of moving forward as quickly as I can or removing opposition. Even if they are used as a hostage or shield. If that happens then sorry, person I don't know. I'm going through you and whoever grabbed you. It's the harsh reality of the situation we're all in.

My team also has to make it home from this. Everyone can take care of themselves, but I'd prefer if they could keep safe and maintain the pace I intend to move through this train at. Moving as a group would help us get through faster. I won't stop to watch over everyone though. I can't.

The only thing that derails this plan is if something happens that will kill everyone on the train. I have no desire to see my team and random passengers killed because of my new obsession to destroy an evil artifact. I'd have to forget the book and save the train. Please don't happen.

My plan feels solid, but I won't really know what we're looking at until we're in it.

Just let me do this one thing right.