

A Setting Exercise in Two Parts

Previous To and Following the "Incident" of January the Eighth

“While You Were Gone”

and

“And The Night Comes Down”

While You Were Gone

He nearly gagged on the way up the stairs, ten flights of grime and the mixed stench of too many humans living in too close quarters. The landlord had handed over the key without much question when Aki had explained that he was a school mate of Asako's and had come to give her her homework and tutor her in what she'd missed, though the old man made it clear to him that she had gone out for a bit and might not be back for awhile, and would most likely give the both of them hell when she returned to find an unexpected visitor. It was getting late, and the landlord was heading to bed, so couldn't inform her when she arrived. Aki had told him he didn't mind, and had agreed to take all of the blame. After all, nothing pleased him more than a pissed off Asako.

He fell into the room with a sigh of relief, slamming the door behind him. The window was open, and he did everything he could to keep himself from gasping thirstily at the fresh spring breeze blowing into the room as he watched the thin, fluttering curtains distill the red glare of the setting sun reflected off of neighboring windows into a welcoming pink that warmly filled the dim room.

He sat himself in a chair with an aggravated grunt and systematically examined the barren surroundings. Asako's apartment consisted of a single small room with an adjoining bathroom and a small closet. There was a refrigerator by the hall door, a small kitchen unit beside that equipped with a sink, stove, a plastic holder to dry dishes, and a coffee maker, the last abandoned gulps left to spend the day staining a black film on its glass bottom – no other extraneous appliances were noticeable. A plain round wooden dining table with two matching chairs stood on the faux-tiling marking the edge of the kitchen, one of which he was seated in. Two windows on the connecting wall, a bookshelf with textbooks below one, a TV on a rickety stand beside the next. A ladder leaned against the far wall below a trapdoor that led to what he assumed was the roof. A single bed was pushed up against this wall with a worn mattress and thin blanket, a small bed stand with a lamp and alarm clock beside it. Bathroom next to that, closet beside that, and back to the entrance. The walls were off-white, faintly yellow where the plaster had begun to crack and peel, hardwood floors, ratted throw rugs. No decorations except for a ceramic angel on a shelf above the bed, one of its wings snapped off. Very stupid looking, he thought. The only signs of active life were the unmade bed, a school bag leaning beside the bed stand, and this morning's newspaper and her laptop on the table.

"What a shit hole," he murmured, standing and stretching before flipping on the TV and sprawling himself on the bed, waiting impatiently for the angry fireworks that would accompany Asako's return.

And The Night Comes Down

Dawn. Dim, gray dawn.

He had to argue with the landlord downstairs for a good twenty minutes or so before the small, trembling man finally accepted his identification as true and let him through the door. Tensions had been running high everywhere in the city since the attack. Even a thirteen-year-old boy was suspect now. The nerves of the old man only suffered him to give up his questioning when the boy irritably proclaimed that, had he indeed been an enemy spy and not just a pale young soldier, his patience would have lasted only so long as it took to draw his sword and skewer the old man through the flimsy wooden door.

So Aki had finally gotten in, waited patiently through a thousand groveling bows of apology from the cowering landlord, and finally he stood at the top of the ten dark, filthy flights of stairs. He coughed and cleared his throat politely at the reek of urine in the hall, trying to avert his attention from the cockroaches and the scratching of rats around them onto the landlord fumbling with his key ring.

Her single room apartment seemed like a promised land compared to what was outside. He stepped inside and took a deep breath of fresh, cold air, closing his eyes and stretching his arms behind him as he listened to the landlord close the door and hurry back downstairs.

His face was to the ceiling, arms behind his head, attentive to the unnatural quiet. Zangai¹ rarely slept, and when it did, it usually snored loudly. But where there were usually trains thundering by, doors slamming, children shouting to each other from their bedroom windows as they got ready for school, couples arguing, or yelling at their kids to ‘keep it down, do you know what time it is, people are trying to sleep’ – now there was only a grim silence. Zangai had fallen out of bed in the middle of a dream five nights ago and had suffered a severe concussion, thirty bullet wounds, nineteen sword slashes, countless bruises and scratches from grenade shrapnel, and was now residing comatose in Inu’s medical facility in the Inner Sanctum; in the meanwhile, she dreamed of the one-hundred and eighty-two civilian casualties, eleven confirmed deaths, and a thick cream icing of enemy innards spread through the streets from the Tenth Circle to the Fourth Circle. A lonely police siren began to wail in the distance.

With a reluctant sigh, he opened his eyes and turned to look at the room. It was just as she must have left it that night, and as he slowly paced the area, looking from object to object, he felt he could trace her every step.

She had been working on a homework assignment on her laptop while waiting for a bath to fill, curled on her side under the blankets on the single bed in the far corner, the small TV beside the window on the opposite wall tuned to the Inu news channel and muted. Kicking the blankets aside, she had gone to the fruit bowl next to the sink and, leaning on the counter to flip through the front-page section of the newspaper, she had taken a bite out of an apple. The first of the explosions must have gone off just then. She dropped the unfinished fruit on the paper as the building shuddered, ran to the window,

¹ Zangai is the HQ of the Inu Corporation – its structure is laid out in rings, with the Tenth Circle being the outermost and the “Inner Sanctum” being the colloquial term for the innermost sector of the city containing Inu Headquarters and all its corresponding buildings.

threw it open, and leaned into the bite of winter's evening air, looking down the street towards the erupting fires and the screams. Knocking one of the wooden kitchen chairs to the ground as she rushed to get her clothes and weapons on, she had climbed through the trap door in the ceiling, slamming it closed behind her as she leapt from roof to roof and plunged into the chaos.

The covers of her bed were unmade, falling into a haphazard triangle, bunched around the open laptop whose battery had died days ago. The apple still lay on the counter, the bite brown and rotting, its juice staining the old paper, a single fly who had survived the frost of the season sucking at the evaporating liquid. The bathroom light was off, and the faucet quietly dripped as always, but the water was high and ice cold in the tub. Figures still moved silently across the TV, surreal in the stillness. Clothes were strewn across the floor in the space between the closet and the bathroom, looking like a small tornado had come in with the frigid air from the open window to tear them off the hangers, as the real wind had indeed scattered the rest of the newspapers from the table, and was now gently blowing the thin pale curtains towards him like silent mourning ghosts.

Her spirit was part of the very essence of the room, in the half empty glass of water on the bed stand, in the dry textbooks on the second hand bookshelf, in the bare cabinets and empty refrigerator, in the crudely constructed ceramic angel with one broken wing on the shelf above her bed, on the stark, lonely white walls, in the hardwood floors and the dark green throw rugs, suddenly so vibrant and rich in these bleak settings. He kept glancing to the door, expecting her to walk in and catch him like before, her face relaxed and unsuspecting as she entered, open and honest and almost warm for a few moments before she saw him and froze, her gaze as incomprehensible and unreadable as usual. But just for those brief moments, he would see her again.

A biting pain rose in Aki's throat and sickness gripped his stomach as he turned to the TV and watched the familiar images flow past him over and over again.

He watched her amid the flames and the blood, her pale hair red and gold in the chaos of the dark night, her eyes ablaze with fury, and remembered the only smile she'd ever directed at him as he cradled her shattered body in his arms and her eyes closed, a single tear washing through the dark stain of blood on her face.

He imagined her in this room, standing in the doorway, surprised at his unannounced visit. He thought of his pleasure at seeing her frozen in horror and terror and anger, knuckles white as her grip tightened on her schoolbooks.

He thought of her immobile in the hospital bed for long, sleepless days just past, silent and cold, her body bruised and broken, her face thin and ashen and pained by a longing to slip away from this world, from this cold, barren room he stood in, from the fires and the blood, and from him, he who had hated her and longed for her and was realizing only now that it might be too late to make amends.

The stiffness in his throat rose to a sharp cry as he collapsed on the bed, curling himself tightly into the warmth of the blankets as his head rested on her pillow and the tears fell into small dark circles on the fabric. He gasped and choked on sharp breaths, desperately sucking in the lavender scent of her hair as five days of exhaustion and confused emotion washed over him, and it was dark again.