

**The Two of Us, Standing Here**

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**Chapter One - Please Step Back from the Edge of the Platform**

Ken stood at the edge of the Yamanote line platform in Shinjuku station, staring down at the gravel that lay between the rails. It was nearing one in the morning, but some of the bustle and noise of the city outside still permeated the station. Not that it was really busy in here. A drunk businessman came careening down the steps, swaying with each step, humming something terrible and off-key. A young couple sat on one of the nearby benches, gazing into each other's eyes and their lips barely millimeters apart. A homeless man was starting to set up his cardboard sleeping pad in the corner. Ken watched the latest train go trundling away without him in it. Or under it.

Scuffing his shoe against the edge of the platform, he stared down at the rails, trying not to blink. He was glad that they hadn't installed those safety barriers here, yet. Quite a few stations had been fitted with automatic barriers that would only open when the trains came in, mostly to prevent drunkards and crowds from falling onto the tracks. They were only a meter high or so, and would hardly do anything to stop anyone determined to jump onto the rails.

But still. He wanted this to go without any incident. He hardly wanted to make an undignified leap over the barrier, land face-first on the tracks and die with a broken nose. No, that would never do.

How long had he been standing here?

He wasn't sure. Since he'd arrived at the station, twelve trains had already come and gone past the platform, and each time Ken had quietly watched crowds wander on and off the train. Each time, he'd thought, no, not this train. This one doesn't feel right. Maybe the next one.

It wasn't that he was scared. He told himself that he wasn't scared.

Somewhere behind him he heard the cheery babble of a young child, and when he turned, he saw a happy couple walking hand-in-hand followed by their daughter. The girl looked about seven -- she was holding a small plastic bag containing a pair of orange goldfish, probably from the late-autumn festival a few blocks away. So, that meant this train wouldn't do, either. He'd have to wait until this child left. His aim wasn't to traumatize and leave behind psychological issues; his aim was to end a problem.

For a moment, he felt like a disgraced samurai waiting for the signal to slit his stomach, but then he realized that comparing himself to them would be a little arrogant. No, he thought, this is nothing that grand. Just a scheduled extermination. A human being that has contributed little to society must make a swift and efficient exit before becoming a burden. That was all.

Ken looked at his watch -- a Chinese counterfeit Rolex given to him by a girl he'd dated three times before she dumped him -- and he saw that he didn't have that many more trains left before the station closed for the night. Of course, he could always sit on one of the benches and wait until the trains started up again in the morning, but then that would kill the mood. As much as Ken wanted to respect the homeless men scattered around the station, he thought that they lent the air a rather depressing feel. It was hardly the type of mood he wanted to ferment in before he died.

He knew this, because he'd been through it the previous week. He'd shown up at the station waiting for the right train, and hadn't been able to find it. He'd ended up sitting on a bench all night beside a homeless man sleeping under a newspaper.

He really wanted to find that right train. His last moments, at least, would ideally carry some small modicum of dignity. Not too much. Just a little.

It had been disappointing.

But he was used to being disappointed and being disappointing.

"Excuse me."

The voice came from behind him. Ken turned to face it. It belonged to one of the station attendants, a young man dressed in the standard uniform and with hair sticking out at odd angles beneath the brim of his hat.

Ken said in his best pleasant voice, "Yes?"

The attendant stood stiffly at attention as he said in the level, soothing voice of a trained professional, "Is something the matter, sir?"

Ken thought at the back of his mind that this attendant was definitely a comparative beginner. The veteran attendants probably would have started this confrontation with a polite formality rather than spooking a potential customer with such a direct question. But that was okay. Ken knew it would be easier to lie to a trainee.

"Nothing's wrong." Ken's voice was equally calm and polite. "I apologize if I'm causing any trouble." He pointed down at the rails and recited the excuse he'd carefully planned out the day before. "I lost a pair of cufflinks on the rails yesterday. The wind blasted them right off as I was waiting to get on the train." He smiled. It was a good smile.

The attendant looked puzzled. He had probably been shown the security camera tapes of Ken standing at the edge of the platform, pacing around occasionally, staring at the rails. And he had probably been told to go confront this lurker in the station. The managers of the station no doubt wanted to avert any sort of situation.

Ken continued, "I was hoping I would be able to find them, but I guess I'll have to give up if I can't find them today." Past the attendant's shoulder, Ken could see the little girl and her parents getting on an incoming train. Ken watched as the train groaned and puffed and trundled off. He thought it looked tired.

There was a pause before the attendant said, "I see. I hope you find them, sir." He paused again. Definitely a trainee. Then he added, "Perhaps you could file a request with the Lost Items desk."

"I will. Thank you." Ken smiled.

The attendant left with the standard half-bow, and Ken mentally apologized to him. The attendant would no doubt have to spend the rest of the evening reporting this to his superiors and being berated for not handling the situation in the 'proper way,' whatever that was. Ken knew the pains of being in that position.

But that also meant Ken would have to find the right train tonight, or go to a different station tomorrow. He was worried. He'd been hoping he'd be able to end things here, in this station. Moving to another station to finish the job would feel a bit like tracking mud across a clean floor. What if he had to wait even longer for the right train at a different station? And what if he got kicked out of there, too? Ken rubbed the back of

his neck. He wanted this suicide to end as a small, neat package. Or as neat as a suicide could be.

More people came and went. A fashionable young woman left for the street, and a tipsy man in a suit staggered in. There weren't that many people around the station.

Then the right train came. It was the second-to-last train of the night. Ken looked up just as the message trilled over the electronic PA system, the soothing voice descending from above him, "The train will be arriving at Shinjuku station shortly." It added, "Please watch your step." It had a note of regal finality to it, Ken thought. And he felt a twinge in his chest that told him that this was the right train. The sound of the train approaching carried the perfect combination of pride, mourning and determination.

For a moment, Ken wondered if he should take his tie off. Would it get tangled in the wheels? Should he take his shoes off? Empty his pockets?

And he did empty his pockets to deposit the loose change on the floor for some homeless man to pick up. A teenager wearing headphones looked over at him curiously, and Ken gave his usual awkward smile that said, please don't mind me.

He left his bag there, too.

His shoes, he kept.

He could properly hear the train coming in, now, and it just confirmed that this was the right train. It sounded energetic.

Standing at the edge, Ken took in a deep breath. He'd read somewhere that the sound of a train hitting a body was something like the sound of a hammer hitting a pumpkin. Not very glorious. But that was okay. He told himself that would be okay. There was a small shiver running down his spine that he tried to ignore, as he repeated to himself that it would be okay.

The train's lights were bright. It was coming in fast, so he let out the breath he'd been holding, and jumped off the edge. Somewhere behind him, the headphone-clad youth gasped. He thought he heard the sound of a cellphone camera going off, but maybe that was just his imagination.

What wasn't his imagination, though, was when he turned his head to look at the incoming train, and realized that there was something between him and the train's headlights. Something a bit smaller than him, but not by much. Something clothed in a gray dress and with short brown hair. Something that was actually a woman.

He didn't understand why she was there, but there wasn't much of anything he could do about it, so he only stared.

She was backlit harshly by the train so he couldn't make out her features, but he could make out the silhouette of her face.

She had the most perfect nose he'd ever seen.

In that brief moment, he thought that she had smiled at him so he tried to smile back. But before he could, his feet hit the ground, and the train hit both him and her.

Ken opened his eyes.

He immediately knew that he had messed up. He wasn't supposed to open his eyes ever again. This hadn't been the right train. He silently cursed himself and let out a tense lungful of air. He also realized that his chest was hurting something awful.

He was lying on the gravel on his side with his arm pinned under his chest, and when he tried to raise his head, he could just barely make out the people standing on the platform staring down at him. The teenager with the headphones had a digital camera out and was snapping photos.

Ken felt strangely annoyed and opened his mouth to say something, but then a gloved hand was slipping under his head to lift it up. His ears were ringing, and he was having a hard time making out what the emergency rail staff were saying as they rolled him onto his back. When had they arrived? Ken coughed. He felt like someone was ramming a folded umbrella between his ribs and threatening to open it.

The train sat on the rails just out of reach, the headlights staring owlishly at him. The conductor must have slammed the emergency brakes at the last minutes to slow the train down, and so it had pushed him along the rail instead of pulverizing him. Ken coughed again as he was lifted onto a stretcher. He thought the train looked vaguely apologetic.

Then he remembered that he hadn't jumped alone.

It hurt to move his neck, and the paramedic strapping him down on the stretcher was obscuring his view, but at the corner of his vision he could barely make out another team of emergency workers. They were leaning over a second stretcher, loading it with a slender figure. There was a lot of blood. How had he missed all that blood at first? Some of it was bound to be his. Was he going to die after all?

He spotted a pale wrist, a stray strand of dark hair, a shapely nose. That perfect, perfect nose. He stared at it. It was rude to stare, but he was too dazed to keep himself in check. He thought, if she gets mad at me for staring, that will be my excuse. He thought, and then I'll apologize for staring.

The ringing in his ears was slowly fading, and Ken wanted it back. There was too much noise coming from the platform, a medley of screams and murmurs. The paramedic carrying the end of the stretcher his head was resting on -- the one who was still obscuring his vision -- shouted something at the crowd as he stood up. Ken felt himself being lifted up. His chest hurt more. He coughed again.

He wanted to see if the woman on the other stretcher, the woman who'd jumped beside him, the woman with the perfect nose was alive. No, he wanted to see if she was alright. As alright as a person could be after being hit by a train. But there were too many medics. He lost sight of her nose, and then he lost sight of her entirely as his stretcher was carried away.

A camera shutter clicked somewhere to his left. Someone was crying.

And then he closed his eyes.

The sheen of fluorescent lighting glowered down at him when he next opened his eyes. It was far too bright, and Ken groaned. He usually never groaned because it was rude and he would have been reprimanded if he ever groaned on the job, but right now he didn't care. It was too bright, and he groaned, and then his chest hurt so he groaned again.

A nurse appeared at his side as if she had been waiting for hours for this moment. Her smile was almost as bright as the lighting, and Ken had to squint at her to keep himself from groaning a third time. That would be too rude.

"Mr. Kataoka?" Ken opened his mouth to respond, but could only cough instead. The nurse didn't seem to mind terribly, or notice at all -- she looked down at her clipboard and said in a very matter-of-fact way, "You've been asleep for almost a full day, Mr. Kataoka. How do you feel?"

A pause. "I'm not very sure." Ken almost said it as a question, instead of a statement. "My chest hurts?"

"You broke two ribs, and one punctured your right lung. We had to reinflate it," the nurse responded. She was trying to sound sad, but wasn't doing a very good job of it. Ken thought at the back of his mind that he could probably do a better job of it than she was doing right now. But then he was distracted when she added, "You also broke your leg. A complete fracture."

Ken looked down the length of the hospital bed he was lying on -- white sheets, a blanket patterned with little green medical crosses -- and realized that his right leg was in a long cast. It didn't hurt very much. His chest was what hurt.

The confusion must have shown on his face, because the nurse lifted a page on her clipboard and said, "You may be feeling some prolonged numbness in your leg until the anesthesia wears off. You were in surgery for quite some time."

She clicked her tongue in a rueful *tsk*. "You're lucky to be alive, Mr. Kataoka." A pause, before she leaned in close as if to tell him an incredibly important secret regardless if he was interested or not. "I shouldn't be telling you this, but the EMT men said if the train had braked even a second later your ribs probably would have shattered and crushed your heart." She straightened up, giving him a plasticine smile that didn't quite reach her cheeks. "Life is a wonderful thing, Mr. Kataoka."

Ken continued to wonder why his chest was still hurting.

And then Ken woke up, which was puzzling because he didn't remember falling asleep. It must have been the morphine. The tube sticking out of his arm was morphine, right? He didn't know very much about medical procedures -- he had never been active or careless or special enough to require surgery before -- but he had seen a few medical shows on television. Sitting up against the pillows with a grunt, he stared lazily at the bag of clear fluid for a few moments.

It felt very strange, being alive after a near-death experience. After what was supposed to be a fatal experience. Ken had never expected the necessity of a repeat performance, and the thought gave him a headache. Would he be on some sort of blacklist with the Tokyo Rail company, now? Would he not be allowed to take the trains? He didn't own a car, so it would be hard going anywhere if that was the case. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to stay alive for a few more years, even if it was a slight inconvenience to society. But it wasn't a very pleasant thought. Would this go on some sort of record? He didn't want to be recognized by anyone as "that failure who couldn't even kill himself." What a disgrace that would be.

Tanaka, especially, would have a field day with that.

Just thinking of Tanaka made his chest hurt, and not in a good way. Ken rubbed a hand against his chest for a moment until he realized that the woman in the bed across from him was giving him a strange look, so he stopped.

Tanaka was one of his coworkers who was known for being a bit pushy and a bit malicious. Over the past few weeks, a rumor had started spreading, saying that Ken was gay. Ken wasn't sure where or when the rumor had started, but he knew inherently that Tanaka was the one who had no doubt started it. Tanaka tended to be the origin of all rumors at the workplace.

Either way, the rumor had begun inflating like a rising lump of dough, but Ken hadn't been able to diffuse it because trying to deny it would involve acknowledging the rumor existed in the first place, and acknowledging it would involve drawing attention to himself.

Ken realized that he was rubbing his chest again. He lowered his hand and sighed.

It took a lot of effort to think, so Ken instead let his mind wander towards a less somber topic, and wondered how long his clear bag of morphine would last. His awareness was rather dulled thanks to the post-surgery dose of opioids, so it made him jump when there was a knock on the doorframe and a nurse materialized at the doorway. She gave him a polite, plastic smile before saying, "Mr. Kataoka, there's someone here to see you."

"Oh, thank you." Ken automatically looked up and gave her a polite, plastic smile back before managing to process what she had said. A visitor.

He must have been staring at the far wall looking intensely confused, because when he blinked, he realized that the woman across from him was awkwardly looking away from him. Ken made sure that his hand wasn't near his chest.

The visitor turned out to be his brother. His brother, who was often described as a taller, older, better-looking version of himself. Or, rather -- Ken was often described as the shorter, quieter, less-accomplished version of his brother. Ken looked up as his brother, dressed in a dark suit and colorful tie, approached the bed.

"Hi," Ken said after a moment.

"You're an idiot," his brother said without hesitation.

Ken would have been content to end the conversation with a bland 'Okay,' but he could already tell that his brother was not in the mood for any of that. So he fidgeted with his blanket before asking, "Have mother and father already heard about this?"

"Of course they have!" In a rare moment of agitation, his brother raised his voice to an angry snarl. "They're furious and upset! What the hell were you thinking?" Ken knew better than to interrupt, as his brother went on, poking a finger at Ken's shoulder. It stung, but Ken tried not to flinch. "And I can already tell that this is going to cause plenty of trouble for more than enough people so you better have an excellent excuse. And don't tell me something like, 'I slipped,' I'm not falling for that."

Ken bit his lip. 'I slipped' had been the excuse he'd been thinking of. For a moment, he considered remaining silent, but his brother had his arms crossed, brows furrowed as if he were waiting to immediately disapprove of whatever Ken said. So Ken scratched at his cheek before daring to say, "It was an accident?"

He promptly regretted it, because the hard rap of knuckles against his forehead made his head ache, and the harsh grind of angry words in his face didn't help either. "Don't you dare." There was the rattle of the aluminum curtain rings clicking against each

other as his brother shut the curtains around Ken's bed with a single, furious swipe of his arm. "Don't you dare try to brush over the matter like that. The JR East rail company started harassing mother and father, who directed them to me, so they've calling me since last night demanding that I compensate for the cleanup cost and the train delays. Not to mention the media, they're all over this case. Do you have any idea how big of a headache this all is?"

Briefly, Ken wondered if his brother would have been more satisfied if he had at least managed to end his life successfully. At this point, his brother's unspoken accusation seemed to be something along the lines of, 'You can't even get *this* right, stupid little brother of mine?' Rubbing the sore spot at his temple, Ken mumbled, "I'll pay you back for all that."

He earned another knock to the head for that, and was busy trying to massage the pain away without jostling his broken ribs as his brother growled, "It's not about the money, you idiot, you think I'm concerned about the money? I don't want this sort of thing associated with my name. You know what one tabloid's saying about this? They think it's some sort of lovers' double suicide."

Ken blinked. The woman with the perfect nose. Was she alive?

Daichi went on without pause, giving Ken a flat-handed whap to the forehead.

"I don't care about your love life, but that better not be true or else you'll have to pay for a lot more than just the cleanup costs." A wild gesture of his hand. His brother had especially long, well-shaped fingers -- pianist fingers -- and they snagged against the curtain as he said, "And don't think you can just sit in the hospital and cruise through this. I spoke to the doctor and you're not even that badly hurt, you lucky idiot."

His brother paused to take a breath. Had those last few words been a compliment or an insult? Ken settled for the latter and prepared himself for more of the ongoing angry tirade. For a moment it looked like his brother was just about ready to start another round of growling, but suddenly stopped, closing his mouth and letting out a long, loud, exasperated breath through his nose. "Fine. Whatever. You living headache. I thought you'd finally settled down quietly with that job and you had to do something like this."

Ken didn't mention anything about Tanaka.

Another sigh that sounded louder than it would have naturally been. His brother was looking at his watch. "I should have known better than to expect a private room we could talk in. We'll be having a proper talk later, understand?"

"Okay," Ken said, mostly so his brother wouldn't nudge him again. "We'll talk later." He didn't look forward to being released from the hospital.

But he did get a few sharp yanks at the ear, probably for good measure. "Alright. I have to go to a meeting, now. I postponed it just to come make sure you weren't causing any more trouble. You have a cellphone?"

"Not anymore."

"I'll get you a new one. Need a way to contact you."

A pause. Ken could see the way that his brothers was acknowledging the presence of the other people in the room, and the next few words came out much smoother and more full of familial care. "I'll bring you a fruit basket or something next time. The food here must be bad."

"It's okay." Ken rubbed his ear. "You can go to your meeting."

His brother gave him a ruffle to the hair that wasn't quite as rough as he feared. The folds of the curtain whooshed against each other as his brother pushed them aside and made for the doorway. Faintly, Ken could hear a nurse bidding him a good day, but Ken knew that his brother wouldn't be having a good day, not after that long tirade.

It was late the following morning, while Ken was chewing on the less-than-appetizing rice cracker that had come with his breakfast, when a nurse approached him with the suggestion of walking around a bit. She flashed him a thousand-watt smile and said, "You need to give your lungs some exercise, and it might be a nice change of pace."

The rice cracker was slightly damp and didn't give any sort of crunch when Ken bit off another piece. He would have said, 'I'm okay without any sort of change of pace,' but she was already dragging the IV pole and a pair of crutches out of the corner next to his bed. She glowed at him without words.

He first tried to support himself on one crutch the IV pole and promptly crumpled to the ground when the pole went sliding forward, sending him plummeting to the floor. The smiling nurse helped him to his feet and propped him up on both crutches. Ken spent a long moment standing there, thinking this was impossible.

Five minutes later found Ken wandering aimlessly down the hallway. He felt a bit like some five-legged monster, between his legs, the crutches jammed under his arms, and the IV pole he had to push a couple steps ahead like an unruly child. The cast on his broken leg dragged like a deadweight. Weaving a drunkard's walk down the hallway with the nurse trailing a few steps behind him, Ken wondered if this was what pet dogs -- those little terrified-looking ones that old ladies liked to lead around -- felt like. If he had a tail it would have been tucked between his legs.

A couple doorways down, he tripped over his own cast and bumped into a little girl in a wheelchair, making her drop her cup of rainbow pudding. He didn't manage to say 'sorry' before she teared up, though, and he had to mumble a frantic apology before she started bawling.

"It's okay." The nurse behind him pattered forward to comfort the little girl. "We'll get you another one, okay? So stop crying." Instantly, two more nurses appeared seemingly out of thin air to chide the little girl, and Ken stared, wondering how these nurses had mastered the art of teleportation.

However, it was clear that he was no longer the item of the day to be pampered and prodded, so Ken hobbled his way to a nearby bench and sat down. The cushions wheezed beneath his weight, making him feel fat. For a long moment, he stared at the cast that swallowed his lower leg. He tried to wiggle his toes within its plaster confines but the cast was too cramped and it only made his ankle prickle with pins and needles.

So, he thought. This is what being a proper, all-around failure feels like.

He had started unconsciously counting the visible folds of bandages layered over his foot and didn't realize until after a few moments that someone had taken a seat on the bench. Not right next to him, but with a small, polite space between them, like there was an invisible man seated there. Ken looked up and gave the newcomer a surreptitious sideways glance. It was a woman. She had somehow taken a seat without the cushions complaining.

He stared for a moment longer than he should have, but he couldn't help that.

He recognized that nose.

## Chapter Two - Please Wash Your Hands Regularly to Avoid Spreading Germs

Fingers coiled loosely around the IV pole, crutches tucked under his arms, Ken continued to stare at the woman while he wondered what was the right thing to say. He'd been searching for the right set of etiquette guidelines on which to base his words when she turned to him first. Naturally, he gave a startled jump.

Completely unruffled she said, "Good afternoon."

Even the small movement made his chest hurt, and Ken had to press a hand against his ribs as he looked over. "Oh, good afternoon."

"Oh dear, I'm sorry." The woman pressed a hand to her lips, a paragon of mild-mannered niceness. "I didn't mean to startle you. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Ken wheezed. "It's nothing."

In between dry coughs, he managed to get a better look at this person, though -- he definitely recognized her. This was the woman who'd also jumped the rails. The woman who'd been hit by the same train. It was a small relief to see that she was alive, although she was probably feeling less optimistic about the failed suicide attempt. Maybe she could share his disappointment.

She looked to be slightly worse for the wear than he, with her arm in a green cast that extended above her elbow almost up to her shoulder, supported by a white sling. Band-aids spotted her neck, and she had a cotton bandage taped to her jaw. It rendered her expression slightly lopsided when she smiled at him ruefully, saying, "You looked rather uncomfortable for a moment there. I hope you aren't in pain?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm alright." Ken dropped his arm away from his chest and gave a small nod of his head in the standard apologetic gesture. He wanted to ask her if she was happy to be alive, but that seemed a bit rude to say right off the bat, so instead he said, "Your injuries look rather bad, too. Don't they hurt?"

"Not at all." She gave him a doe-like smile, the cotton pad pulling tight against her skin and just barely revealing the dimple in her cheek. "The doctors said they've given me local anesthetics to help." She seemed strangely cheerful as she said that, as if she were entirely unconcerned about the fact that she had been injured in the first place.

A small movement at the edge of his vision caught his attention and Ken looked up to see 'his' nurse giving him a polite smile and wave. The little girl in the wheelchair had been pacified with a new, bigger cup of rainbow pudding and the nurse mouthed at him, 'I'll be back in a bit.' The other nurses had vaporized into thin air. Ken gave the nurse an awkward smile and nodded, allowing her to wheel off the little girl. The corridor was mostly empty now except for the occasional rogue patient that went drifting by.

Ken was trying to keep himself from staring at the lopsided smile and beautiful nose of the woman beside him, when she gave a small bow of her head and added, politely, "Oh, I'm sorry I haven't introduced myself. That was terribly rude." Her good arm was pale and slender, her wrist bony as she raised her hand to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "My name is Jun Saotome. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Kenichi Kataoka." Ken performed the same half-bow in return and immediately regretted it because the umbrella in his ribcage was starting to poke against his lungs

once more. "The pleasure is all mine, Ms. Saotome." It sounded terribly stiff, but that was the way most introductions went. Perhaps now they would talk about their occupations, or their families, or maybe even how they felt about their treatment in the hospital. There were many topics they could discuss. None of them seemed particularly exciting, but that was the nature of polite conversation.

If he had to choose the topic of conversation, he would go with occupations, Ken decided. It was inoffensive and could branch out into a number of different topics. It would be the most logical choice, Ken decided.

But he didn't have to make that choice.

Instead, Jun scratched her cheek just below the bandage and said, almost sheepishly, "I'm sorry you weren't able to succeed." She laughed into her palm. It was a soft, shy sound. Ken thought it was charming. He was also flattered that she had apparently remembered him from their ill-timed jump onto the rails. She continued, "When I saw that I hadn't made it, I'd hoped that the attempt hadn't been a waste for at least one of us."

"Oh, no, on the contrary," Ken said, giving his hand an awkward wave. "I'm sorry you also ended up here. It must be a bit discouraging to just end up injured. Especially with something as troublesome as a broken arm."

Ken was suddenly glad that all of the nearby nurses had mysteriously vanished for the moment, and that there were no patient rooms close enough for someone to eavesdrop, because he was fairly sure that this sort of conversation would end up with the both of them getting shoved into a prolonged period of therapy sessions. And he doubted that would help matters much.

Still, he kept his voice low as he added, "I suppose we'll have to make the best of the situation. Especially while we're stuck here."

"I suppose we will." Jun looked thoughtful, still tapping at the cotton bandage as if it were a particularly itchy spot. Her hair fell down to her chin in neat strands, swaying slightly as she nodded. "I hope I won't have to stay here for too long, though. I would hate to take up space in such a manner when someone else would be more appreciative of it. It would be a bit of a waste."

A waste?

Ken asked, "A waste?"

Jun smiled, lowering her hand and placing it neatly on her lap. "That is not to say I don't appreciate the doctors' and nurses' hard work, but as one might say, there isn't much use in repairing an object that will be thrown out soon."

There was an awkward silence that hung in the air like a half-deflated balloon, while Ken argued with himself over what would be the right thing to say. He had never once discussed his thoughts of suicide with anyone, and had certainly never discussed the aftercare of a suicide attempt before. This was a strange and new conversation, and it was somewhat unnerving to enter such foreign territory. So he hesitated before asking, "Are you planning on trying again after you leave the hospital, Ms. Saotome?"

He wondered if it was strange that they both knew what the unspoken 'failure' and 'thing to try again' was. The word 'suicide' just seemed so bulky for a conversation as delicate as this.

Jun thought for a few moments, tapping a finger against her chin. Ken realized that there was a small bandage there, too. He wondered how distressing it must be for a

woman to have injured her face like that. Then he wondered if that was sexist, and he felt bad.

Further down the hallway, he heard the muffled sound of a nurse announcing that it was meal time in another room. For the first time since he'd been hit, Ken looked at the time. His wrist was bare, his watch probably broken and tossed away, so he turned to the wall clock -- a bland, mint-green affair that occupied an inoffensive space just down the hallway -- which read a little past noon.

"I suppose I will." Jun spoke suddenly and decisively. Her voice was still quiet, but it had a gentle firmness to it. She repeated, "I think so. Yes. I will." She gave a small nod, and Ken was once again charmed by the small highlights of her features -- the perfect nose, the stray strands of hair brushing against her shoulder, the way her brows were slightly furrowed. He watched as she said, "So I hope I will not have to stay in the hospital for too long. It would be terrible if I had to postpone it for much longer."

Ken nodded because what could he say? 'I hope you succeed' would just sound morbid, and 'good luck' would sound equally wrong. He was wondering if 'I hope your injuries will heal quickly' would be appropriate to say, when Jun looked at him and asked, brightly, "Will you also be trying again, Mr. Kataoka?"

Ken didn't know.

He tried to think of a good answer, but all that came out was, "I don't know?"

He wasn't very sure why it came out as a question instead of a statement.

But before he could add anything, a nurse (not his nurse) came strolling down the hallway and approached them. "Oh, there you are!" Ken immediately worried that she'd heard the tail end of his conversation with Jun, but was put at ease when the nurse only smiled at them and said, "It's mealtime. Are you feeling well enough to eat, ma'am?"

"Yes, of course. Thank you." The smile Jun gave to the nurse was graceful. "I suppose I should return to my bed."

"I'll get you a tray in just a moment, then." A pause. The nurse looked to Ken, who sat up straighter. "Um, and you, sir? Are you in a nearby room?"

"Oh, I'm not here." It was only after the words had left his mouth that Ken realized they sounded kind of stupid. He tried to rectify that. "I'm from over that way." He pointed down the hallway and realized that hadn't sounded much better.

"I see." The nurse gave a polite smile. "You might want to head back, if you'd like to eat."

"Thank you, but I'm not that hungry." The cushions of the bench were silent as Jun rose to her feet, and Ken followed suit. Between the rattling IV pole and his crutches, Ken was a bit noisier as he stood up. It was a bit embarrassing. "I guess I'll be leaving, though?"

"Of course, you can always ask for something later," the nurse said with that unwavering ceramic smile. "Ms. Saotome, please wait a moment while I get a tray for you."

The nurse turned to leave, as did Ken, but he was stopped by Jun's soft words. "If you're not returning to your room to eat -- would you mind staying for a few moments?"

Ken wasn't exactly sure how he ended in the corner of Jun's single-bed room, managing to cram his crutches into the space between the plush chair and the wall.

Trying to keep the tube for his morphine drip from tangling with his arm, he wrestled the IV pole into the space next to his crutches. At the back of his mind, he processed the quiet conversation that was going on between Jun and the nurse.

Jun had accepted the tray of food the nurse offered with both hands, as Ken straightened out his morphine tube. She was still smiling as she lifted the lid off of her bowl of soup and said, as if delighted, "Thank you for the meal."

The nurse gave an artificial smile, helping Jun arrange the blankets around her lap and pick up the chopsticks that skittered around the tray. "You seem in much better spirits than yesterday, Ms. Saotome." She removed the foil from the plastic cup of pudding and placed it at the corner of the tray. "We were quite worried about your condition, so we're glad to see it's improved."

Ken was pretty sure the nurse was just being polite.

He wondered if Jun knew the same.

She probably did, judging by the way she said, "Thank you very much. I wasn't thinking straight from the anesthesia, and I think I just needed some time to think things over." Shifting the way her cast-encased arm sat in its sling, she smiled at the nurse. "I've cleared my thoughts, now. I apologize for causing any trouble."

The nurse beamed back. Ken felt like he was going to be a bit nauseated from all of the smiling that was glowing at his side, and he distracted himself by staring at his cast.

The nurse wheeled the cart of food trays off, and Ken watched her back for a moment (not in a lecherous way) before turning to Jun. He asked, "I'm sorry if this is intrusive, but was something wrong yesterday?"

Jun was picking up little bunches of rice with the very tip of her chopsticks, like a sparrow eating delicate beakfuls of grain, and she gave Ken a contented look before saying, "When I awoke after surgery yesterday, I told the doctors I still wanted to die, they were rather troubled over what to do with me." She picked up another morsel of rice. The bundle of white grains looked like a flower as she popped it into her mouth. "I suppose it was a bad thing to do, because they wanted to put me in the crisis stabilization ward at first. But hopefully they will assume it was just a side effect of the anesthesia. I hope I won't have to deal with counseling."

She was quite serene as she said this, and Ken also felt himself being infected with her tranquility. He was somehow quite all right with the fact that she was planning on attempting suicide again, somewhere down the line, and he felt that if someone had offered to throw him under a train right then and there, with the guarantee that he would die this time, he might just say yes.

They changed the topic of conversation after a few moments, though, because a patient would occasionally go wandering past the open doorway and they both knew that discussing the ramifications of their failed attempts and any plans for additional attempts wouldn't reflect very well on how the other patients viewed them. It was a change that was mutually understood without having to be discussed.

First, they talked about jobs. Ken explained that he was a salesperson at the Takashimaya department store near Shinjuku station. He sold business-casual suits on the fifth floor.

"You look like a good salesman," Jun said earnestly. "You have a nice smile."

Ken gave his nice smile. It wasn't a particularly sincere smile, but it was nice enough for most occasions.

Then Jun explained that she was a secretary at a publishing company. Which publishing company? Jun said, shyly, that it was just the Tokyo branch of Condé Nast company. The one that published lots of magazines.

Ken was about to say that she looked like a good secretary but paused because that, too, seemed somewhat sexist. So instead he said, "It sounds like a tedious job."

"It is." Jun nodded in agreement. "But it's alright."

"I see."

He tried not to wonder about whether she would be able to keep her job now that her arm was broken. He also tried not to think about the state of his own job. He must have missed a full day of work. His manager would be furious. If his cellphone hadn't been wrecked when the train hit him, he probably would have found at least a handful of voice messages berating him. He was suddenly glad his cellphone was probably lying in pieces between the rails in Shinjuku station. In a way, he'd left his mark there.

They then discussed their meals, because the weather outside was too unremarkable to have a substantial conversation about. The sun shone through the window in an halfhearted manner, and Ken said, "I was expecting the food to be worse. You know what they say about hospital food."

Jun brought a hand to her mouth to cover it politely as she tittered. "Of course. I have a friend who was hospitalized recently, and she told me so many horrifying things about the food she got!"

The conversation might have gone on to other pleasantly-predictable topics, such as how they felt about the hospital and their opinions on the mid-day reality show playing on the wall-mounted television, if a nurse hadn't suddenly appeared by the doorway. She knocked politely at the doorframe and said, "Mr. Kataoka?"

Ken looked up, jostling his crutches in the process and sending them clattering to the floor. He was trying to prop them back up against the wall as the nurse went on, "There was someone looking for you, but your attending nurse said you'd gone for a walk." She smiled thinly. "Would you like me to lead you to your room?"

"Just a moment, please." Gathering up his crutches, Ken moved to struggle to his feet when Jun's voice came floating over from the bed.

"It must be difficult trying to walk back. If you don't mind my presence, then perhaps they could be led here?"

"Um?" Ken looked up.

The nurse, catching his eye, interpreted that as a yes. "Just a moment then. I'll lead them here."

Automatically, Ken turned to Jun to apologize for the trouble, but she cut him off with a smile that said, 'Please don't worry about it.'

For a moment, Ken wondered who was looking for him. There weren't very many people who would look for him. Then he remembered. Jun's smile had faded away to a vaguely curious look, so Ken gave her his awkward smile. "Um, I think it's my brother. I'll go outside to speak to him."

He was halfway through fetching up his crutch when his brother came barging through the door in a fast, professional walk. "Are you trying to be as annoying as you

can possibly be, just to make me run around this place like a cockroach," His brother growled, before grabbing Ken's ear. Ken had been half-sitting, half-standing, and it put him in a very awkward position when his ear was yanked up and forward. "Even with a broken leg, you just had to make me walk around asking for you."

"Sorry." Ken stood up, so at least his broken leg wasn't propped up at an awkward angle. "The nurse said I should walk and I ended up here."

His brother let go of his ear, and poked him hard in the forehead instead. "What, in some stranger's room?"

"I didn't go invading anyone's room."

"And yet I find you sitting here."

"I didn't mean to." Ken's voice had been growing quieter with each sentence, and his last few words came out as an awkwardly mumble. But there was a distinct pause, and when Ken moved his hand away from his sore temple, he saw that his brother was looking over at the bed, as if suddenly realizing that he'd been speaking too loudly in someone else's room, thus being a nuisance. His brother cleared his throat and shoved Ken to sit down before turning to Jun. She had been serenely eating her cup of pudding.

"I'm terribly sorry, I've heard about the circumstances," his brother said, voice back to a courteous, soothing murmur. Jun looked up. "My brother must be such a nuisance. Thank you very much for having tolerated him thus far."

"Oh, not at all!" Jun shook her head, lips curved in a graceful half-smile, as she put her spoon down. "Your brother has been very kind to me. I was fortunate enough to be given a single room, but as you can see, it's a rather dreary place to be for long. Your brother's company has been wonderful." She shot Ken an inconspicuous sideways glance that said, 'I'm telling the truth,' before continuing. "You're his brother, though? It must be so worrying to have a sibling in this situation."

"Yes, yes I am. And it is." Ken could feel the smoldering glare his brother directed at him before pulling the wallet from his jacket's inside pocket, sliding out a business card to hand to Jun. It was black and stylish and had lettering embossed with silver foil and read, 'Kataoka Daichi, Head Designer.' Daichi did the head designing at a promising new company that manufactured and sold fashionable ties, belts, and other accessories for the ambitious young businessperson. Daichi always wore items from his own company, and occasionally sent samples that Ken never got around to wearing. Ken could have sworn that back home, he had a replica of that very same tie Daichi was wearing now.

It was, admittedly, a nice tie.

Ken tried not to think about that, though, and he only watched as Daichi returned the wallet to his pocket and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you. Please don't hesitate to contact me if my brother is ever any trouble."

"It's nice to meet you. But please rest assured -- it's been delightful being able to speak to your brother. A friendly conversational partner always makes a dull place more enjoyable."

"I do hope that your injuries aren't too severe. It must be awful, being involved in such an incident."

It seemed a bit uncharacteristic for his brother to be acting this polite; Daichi was the type to keep all conversations aloof and professional, and under normal circumstances would probably have cut this dialogue off several lines ago. Ken wondered if perhaps

they knew each other. Daichi certainly looked like he was trying to make a good impression.

"Hopefully, this idiot will also be better soon." Ken winced, as Daichi clamped two fingers at the shell of his ear and tugged ruthlessly. "He's always been like this, causing trouble. Who knows when he'll stop."

Jun smiled politely. Ken would have stayed quiet, but it hurt, and he couldn't help interrupting with a meek, "My ear hurts. A lot."

Daichi probably would have yanked on his ears a few more times just for the sake of it, growling harsh words the whole time, if a nurse hadn't interrupted right at that moment. The nurse had blinked into existence just outside the door, giving a polite knock against the doorframe. She said, "Excuse me, Ms. Saotome?"

Jun looked up, her expression a controlled, polite smile. "Yes?"

"You've got a visitor."

Ken realized that the nurse was flanked by a very imposing looking man in a gray suit. Instantly, Daichi had let go of his ear and was yanking him to his feet, propping him up on his crutches.

"I'm very sorry," Daichi said, his voice smooth. Dipping his head low in a very polite half-bow, Daichi dragged Ken towards the door, ignoring the rattle of the IV pole as it lurched across the floor. "My brother shouldn't have stayed here like this. We'll be leaving."

Hobbling along on his five legs, Ken tried not to fall over. Leg buckling as his cast snagged on a trailing electrical cord, he fumbled to regain his balance. He happened to look over at Jun in the process and felt that there was something strange about her expression. Her nose looked somehow less perfect. She was smiling, but that dimple was gone. It was a smile that was awfully hard to read.

Ken blinked and might have said something, if Daichi hadn't yanked him out the door with a polite "Thank you very much for your time."

As he stumbled his way down the hallway like a dog with too many limbs, Ken managed to catch a glimpse of the very imposing looking man step into Jun's room. Faintly, he heard Jun's voice say, "Good afternoon, sir," and even from the very short time they'd spent talking, Ken felt that there was something off about those three words.

When they got back to Ken's bed in the shared room, there was a fruit basket waiting on the little bedside table. The enormous pink ribbon around its handle almost engulfed the skewers of strawberries sticking out of the basket. It contained an apple, a pear, a banana, and a few other fruits surrounding a massive prickly pineapple. Ken stared at the pineapple.

"I know you can't eat it here, it's for show. It was the best basket I could find at the store near here." Daichi grumpily helped Ken get back into bed before stowing the crutches away and dragging over a chair. "And here's a cell. I bought it used but it'll work." Ken fumbled the phone when Daichi tossed it to him. Daichi, taking no notice, only snuck a glance over at the door before leaning in close to mutter, "Did you tell her anything about me?"

It was a weird question. "No?" Ken opened the cellphone, examining the state it was in. The screen was a bit scuffed and the hinge wouldn't snap open quite right, but it

would, as Daichi had said, work. "Why, do you like her? You usually don't care much about what people say about you unless it's work-related."

There was a moment of heavy silence, so Ken looked up. Daichi was staring at him like he had said something monumentally stupid.

"Haven't you at least watched the news reports about you jumping the rails?"

Ken fidgeted with the phone. "There's a news report? I didn't think it'd be a big enough deal for the news."

"Not you. You're not important enough for a news report of your own." Daichi had the tendency to be painfully blunt. "She is. I didn't know at first either, but it turns out she's from a big-shot family."

"Ah?" Even to his own ears, the noise he made sounded stupid. Daichi slapped him upside the head with the flat of his hand.

"Dunno why she tried to jump, but her father's a big name in the fashion industry."

"Ah." Ken scratched his chin. So that was who that very imposing man had been.

"She probably has some influence. So not someone I wanna piss off. But that's not what I'm here to talk about." Daichi snatched the cellphone out of Ken's hands. "Went to pick up your stuff from Takashimaya since they don't want you or your junk there any more. And I heard some rumor about you."

Ken stiffened, at that.

"Some guy named Tanaka."

He couldn't help it. Part of him felt the powerful need to punch Tanaka in the face, right at that moment. He hadn't wanted to punch anyone in a long time, so it was a strange feeling that he didn't know how to deal with very well. He settled for clutching tight at a fistful of his blanket.

It was very rare that Ken ever showed any signs of agitation. Or, at least, rare enough that even Daichi -- who rarely cared about Ken's various mild-mannered reactions to the world -- noticed this small, angry gesture. So instead of saying anything more about Tanaka, Daichi sighed and gave Ken a light shove to the shoulder.

"Fine, let's talk about that later"

"Okay." Ken let go of the blanket. His anger was quick to fade.

They sat in silence for a moment before Daichi pulled a tangerine out of the fruit basket and started peeling it. "I'm starving so I'm going to have this. I know it's supposed to be yours but I don't care." The air quickly filled with a sharp, citrusy tang. Throwing the peel into the nearby trashcan, Daichi pulled apart the wedges of fruit. "And go take some fruit to Ms. Saotome later. She looks like the type to appreciate that sort of gesture."

Sniffing as the sting of tangerine flecks tickled his nose, Ken rubbed his cheek. "Aren't visitors supposed to bring fruit to the sick people, not sick people delivering to other sick people?"

Daichi dropped half the tangerine in Ken's hand. "Yeah, well you've got all the time in the world, while I don't. Make her some apple rabbits, you're good at that stuff."

"Apple rabbits." Ken rolled the tangerine half in his hand. "If she's really from a prestigious family like you said, won't she think something like that's childish?"

"Take the peach, then. They're good these days. Slice it up pretty or something."

Peeling the tangerine half into bite-sized wedges, Ken thought for a moment.

"Actually, I'll just make some apple rabbits." He was suddenly and inexplicably reminded of her odd expression as he'd left her room, and wanted to see her dimpled smile again. "They're cute. Everyone likes them."

"Suit yourself." Daichi finished eating his half of the tangerine.

Daichi left shortly afterwards, saying he had yet another meeting to attend to. His company was discussing designing some special commemorative ties for the company's anniversary. "They might even be sold overseas," Daichi had said smugly. Ken had said, with the appropriate amount of enthusiasm, that he looked forward to seeing the samples.

After Daichi left, Ken got to making some fruit presentable.

The nurses at first seemed hesitant to let Ken slice fruit, not when it was on record that he might have attempted suicide, but after his attending nurse watched him slice three apple rabbits without anything exciting happened, she relented. So, using the two apples from the fruit basket, Ken made ten proper apple rabbits. His first few attempts had ended up with lopsided folds of the apple peel because it had been a while since he'd sliced fruit, but he quickly grew better at it.

Although his current job had little to do with handiwork, Ken had always been good with his hands. Staring at the ten apple rabbits arranged on a plate borrowed from the nurses, Ken scratched his chin.

Maybe ten was too many. He ate two. There, eight apple rabbits in a half-circle.

In the end, he had to ask a nurse to help him carry the plate to the room down the hallway, because he would have ended up spilling little apple rabbits all over the floor if he tried to juggle the plate with his crutches and IV pole. "Wow, these are good!" The nurse looked delighted as she led him down the hallway, holding the place with both hands. "Do you regularly do things like this?"

"Um, not really." Ken wobbled on his crutches all the way to the room with the plaque that read, 'Saotome Jun.' "I can take it from here. Thank you very much."

The nurse beamed as she surrendered the plate of apple slices and went on her way.

Balancing precariously on his five legs, Ken peeked into the room. He had partly expected to find the intimidating Mr. Saotome there, but there was only Jun sitting on the bed, hand resting in her lap. It was only when Ken ventured a quiet, "Ms. Saotome?" that she looked up with a polite smile.

"Mr. Kataoka. What brings you back here?"

"Uh, I brought you some fruit."

"Oh, you shouldn't have!" Leaning over in the bed to angle the chair in Ken's direction, Jun beamed at him. Ken thought that it still looked a little bit different from the smile she'd given him before, somehow. Not that he could pinpoint anything precise. It was still a beautiful smile.

Waddling his way towards the bed, Ken handed her the plate of apple rabbits before taking a seat, trying to quietly his crutches against the wall. "I'm sorry, it's not much, but I thought it might be nice."

"Did you cut these yourself?" Plate in her lap, Jun delicately held up one of the apple rabbits between her thumb and forefinger. The apple peel ears brushed against her

nails, and she seemed to admire the way that Ken had scored little circles to mark the rabbit's eyes. "I haven't seen an apple bunny in quite some time! It's very well done."

Sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck, Ken gave the polite laugh he always used when he didn't know how to respond to praise. "It's not much," he mumbled. "I just paid attention in home economics class when I was younger. Daichi made fun of me all the time."

Jun smile at him before nibbling at the apple slice, where the rabbit's face would be. "It's a very kind gesture. I'm sorry I don't have anything to give in return."

"No, it's okay." At the back of his mind, Ken thought that if they had been close enough to forgo formalities like apologies, their conversation would have lasted about a minute total. He normally didn't think these things, so he wasn't sure why speaking with Jun made him think about it. Ignoring this, he said, "Please consider it an apology for the rude interruption earlier. I hope I wasn't too big of an eyesore for your family?"

"It was fine." Jun popped the rest of the apple rabbit into her mouth. She didn't elaborate on that answer.

The wall clock ticked several seconds away and Ken absently watched the delicate movements of Jun's wrist as she ate another apple rabbit.

"Mr. Kataoka, do you have a romantic partner?"

The question came out of the blue. Ken tried not to look too awkward as he answered. "Um, not really. No, I don't."

"Oh, that's a relief." A pause. Jun looked thoughtful. "Then, may I ask a favor of you?"

Jun looked at a rabbit apple as she said this.

Ken blinked. "Ah, certainly?" He hadn't meant that to be a question.

"I'm sorry, I'm normally not the type to ask things of people so easily, but I feel that you may understand." Sliding a finger beneath the curve of the rabbit's ears, she lifted the pointed sections of apple peel up. The rabbit seemed to be twitching its ears. "Of course, please don't feel pressured to say yes. I would hate to make you uncomfortable." She turned to him and beamed.

How could Ken say no? He said, "I'll do whatever I can," and once again gave her his nice smile.

Shifting in bed so she could see out the doorway, Jun put the apple rabbit back down on the plate before saying, calmly, "I would be extremely grateful if you would accompany me in another attempt to leave this world." Despite the polite phrasing, the request was quite simple at its core.

Please die with me.