

The Aurore Reset

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Episode 1: Future Treats

I know this is strange. And shouldn't have happened. But, before I explain, promise me you will try to remember a few things. I regret what I did thinking back. Maybe wait to judge stuff? Also, remember you would have taken off your clothes for that much money too.

Everything started back on October 16th, 2002.

Long story short, my mom sometimes tried to save money on beer by buying a 12 pack. Intending to drink a can a night. Then the beer would be gone by morning. It had been a 12 pack night. After slamming the glass sliding door in front of my mom laying on the sofa, I left home. With anything I had important left stuffed in my emotional support hoodie pocket and a side saddle bag. And my math book. I couldn't afford to pay the fine if I didn't return it.

Yes. I have an emotional support hoodie. Leave me alone. The point is, when I left I decided I wasn't going back.

The issue was I had nowhere to go. Not after ruining everything over a stupid argument.

Do you have places you go to when you get stuck? When the world feels like it is closing in on me, I end up in the park or Neonopolis. Usually, I went to Mia's. Unless her mom was home, which is like almost never right? Well, that night I walked to the park in the dark. Hoping I could hide out behind a bush or something until I could figure out what to do. I have a bush I like. But anywhere there works. I needed a moment to breathe and to feel safe.

To my surprise, I saw a giant raised stage full of colorful lights. A crowd of partying teenagers and adults danced around, soaked in paint. The hand thingy reached 10:30 on my plastic watch. I wondered who would allow a party on a Tuesday night? The crowd cheered and held up their arms as the paint-spattered. I sighed. I thought about heading to my second spot but I figured wandering around Las Vegas at night wasn't a great idea.

A voice I can only describe as a ditzy tree beard who focused on weird words, came from behind me. I jumped. I faced a woman a little older than me wearing giant swim goggles. Spattered with so much pigment I'm not sure how she could see.

"Azami, I presume." She said, adjusting her shower cap wet with paint. "Or. Aurore Chandler it looks like is your other name."

Not knowing what to say to this I shrugged. "Yeah, I'm Aurore Chandler?"

“This is yours.” From inside her multi-color plastic coat pocket, she handed me a small flat white package. It had a strange ice cream cone logo on the front.

“I don’t think this is mine.” I tried to hand it back.

“Oh no. I can’t take it back. Make sure you watch the video when you turn 18 at midnight. You can go in. You’re an employee now, you’re on the list. Good luck. And don’t forget to wash your hands.” She said looking at the box.

“Watch the video?” I asked. The box in my hand didn’t weigh as much as a video tape. “How did you know-”

She ran into the crowd, past the entrance, not bothered by the flying paint from the super soakers on stage. The ticket woman with all the tattoo’s didn’t stop me from going into the event so I ran after the goggled lady.

As I made my way through the people after her, a familiar face popped into view. She danced, kind of, wearing an orange tank top and ripped jeans.

“Oh no. Mia’s here.” I said.

You see, I had decided she and I shouldn’t be friends anymore. Not after our last fight. Like, when the world feels like it’s going to explode, she’s the one who helps out. But, I suck and can’t keep friends. Of course, she would be there that night too. I looked at my knuckles, which had finally started kinda looking normal again. Not so purple and swollen. The colors fell on the white package before I could jam it in my hoodie pocket. I turned from the stage to walk to the back of the park past the concession stands. From there I could take the sidewalk with the working street lights. Until I could figure something out. I also have a fear of confrontation, which I’m sure didn’t factor into anything.

Then she saw me. With a clear view, no head or body part obstructed. Her eyes narrowed at me. I felt like there should have been western showdown theme playing or something.

I turned around, pretending to look at whatever else. I picked a fried sweet potato stand in the corner of the park and did not look away for as long as I could. My head turned back in the direction of where she had been standing. She stared at me. I bet she never looked away.

Too many people touched me as I pushed my way through the crowd to her. My nose bumped up against hers. She stood back, with that dirty blond, mid-length, side-parted, curly hair. The

orange tank top glowed in the neon lights. Her eyes gave me the wild bear look. Blue eyes with a hint of green and gray with little specks of like an auburn sort of color thing? Guess you know.

Anyways. She looked ticked. She pointed. I knew what she was pointing to, which was any place away from the crowd of people. I went with her. Partly having nowhere to run. Partly because I missed her. But I felt like I was “old yeller” being taken behind a shed.

Once we got away from the noise and constant paint showers, she took out her earplugs. She wrinkled her nose at me. Someone chucked a trash bag into a dumpster near the parked food trucks.

“Like. Are you following me again? Like, when you wanted that stupid note from Sally in Jr. High?” She said, with that pinch of that whatever that low-pitch California emo thing of hers is. “Who the hell talks to Sally? No one. Her parents aren’t even alive. Why are you here?”

Sometimes my brain needs time to shift through all the random thoughts that pop up. Her eyes rolled. She waited, knowing my head also runs on volunteer hamsters, which there aren’t too many of.

Instead of answering her question, I was like. “I know I punched a hole in your wall. I shouldn’t have done that over our ‘Mongolian BBQ’ vs ‘Mongolian grill’ fight-”

She let out an angry sigh. “It is not called Mongolian BBQ! It’s Mongolian grill! You make it sounds like they’re barbecuing Mongolians! That’s horrible! No one wants that unless it’s a name for a punk rock band!”

“I will not back down. But I’m sor-” I stopped myself. The “S” word is one of our forbidden words we promised not to use with each other. “I wish I could be better. I need your help. Something happened. I got this thing, I don’t know what to do with it. And nowhere to go.”

“12 pack night?” She asked.

I nodded.

“Come over for coffee?” She didn’t look at me when she said it.

“What??” I said.

“Um. Okay?” She mumbled, “I didn’t like that wall anyways. You should have called me.”

“You told me you never wanted to speak to me again. I messed everything up. I can’t do anything right and I don’t deserve you at all, to be-” I said, hitting myself with words.

She put a finger to my lips and closed her eyes. “Easy. The past is dead. We can always start over. You know, if you would take it easier on yourself, we wouldn’t fight. Never mind. I know where we can get a van. Let’s go to my house and look at those math notes you didn’t take. The class we need to pass if we want to graduate? I’m adding ‘Mongolian’ to our list of things we don’t talk about. That means you’re on your own in next week’s history test, which I am sorry-regretful of. Also. My mom is home early from the trip again. So. Be ready for that.”

“Does your mom know? About us?” I asked.

She did that weird lip thing she does when she’s not sure how to answer something. The music stopped playing. The lights went out, and people headed to their cars.

“I’ll be back.” She ran in a random direction. I found a park bench and waited.

A glow of fireflies greeted me in the parking lot as I watched the people leave and the food trucks pack up. Feeling the package in the hoodie pocket, I wondered if she would return.

A bang rangout nearby, and a familiar old white hippie van drove to onto the curb in front of me. Mia sat in the driver’s seat and motioned me with her head to get in.

“Does your aunt know you have her van?” I asked, slamming my door after climbing into the passenger seat. She frowned and closed her eyes. She breathed out with her tongue partly sticking out.

“It’s mine after I get the money together.” She said, revving the engine. The van sped down the street, more than likely over the speed limit.

Finally, she is like “Can you change the tape? And put in the ‘Aurore’s birthday mix’?”

Cassette tapes were sprawled out between the seats and on the floor, like usual. Mia didn’t want to spend the 10 bucks on an adapter for the van’s CD player, so she made tapes. She recorded a bunch of stuff so she and her aunt could have something to listen to on the way back and forth from the court. Unless Ms. Kaye was home from a business trip.

“How did you know my birthday was today?” I asked, reaching for the tape.

“That’s a stupid question” she replied, and for once, she focused on the road so she wouldn’t have to look at me. “I was hoping you would call me.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” I asked.

She let out an angry snort of air.

Something in my hoodie began to vibrate. Loud enough hear it. Her face became ghost white.

“Why the hell is that shaking?” She asked, gripping the steering wheel harder.

The intensity grew stronger and stronger in cycles of buzzing. Stopping then starting again.

“That’s what the goggled lady gave me.” I said.

“Who? GET IT OUT OF HERE!” She shouted. The van drove into a roundabout. She reached inside my hoodie and grabbed the box. She tossed the package outside onto the gravel.

Mia stretched out her arms to protect her face and got closer to me. I covered my head. We waited for what we thought would be an explosion.

The box kept moving on the rocks. We got out of the vehicle. It shook on the ground at our feet. But it didn’t explode.

We looked at each other. “Hello from Future Treats!” We heard from inside. The lid blew open. Confetti fell everywhere, “We care.”

“What the hell?” Mia shouted. “Where did that come from?”

A truck horn honked as it drove across the sidewalk to pass. She looked back to the van that blocked the roundabout.

“If it’s not going to blow up, let’s take it with us.” She picked up some confetti and put some in her pockets.

We got in and raced away. She pulled over again when it looked safe to park. We both looked at the package. I opened it. She ducked behind me. The device looked like a futuristic handheld PDA. A red screen on a square device switched on. The ice cream logo turned red.

A name appeared on the screen.

“A.z.a.m.i? I have no idea what an “Azami” is. Or how I would pronounce something like that.” I said.

Mia shrugged.

Under that name appeared mine. Aurore. The device began to talk as if a person were speaking.

“Let’s get to work!” It said.

We looked at each other. “Why does the PDA vibrate?” I asked.

“Hi, Azzzzssssami! Let’s start the employee video.” I wasn’t sure if the device thing glitched out, or if that’s how you say that name. Or if the device was supposed to shock and burn my hand a little or not?

I turned to her and I’m like, “Did that thing call me ‘A-zam-ee’?”

She shrugged. “Did that thing shock you?”

“Meh.” I shrugged.

A video played on the PDA thing. An ice cream scoop crossed the screen. Words appeared. The picture was sharper and clearer than anything we had ever seen. I wish I could see the rest of the world with that kind of clarity.

“This is nuts,” Mia exclaimed.

A flash blinded us. The ground shook. I felt this strange sensation all over my body. When I could see again, the light from objects bent in strange ways. Light from everything spun towards something. Everything went black.

Before my sight came back, I heard a voice. I looked around. Everything looked the same as it had moments before. The touch-pad glass thing did, whatever it did whenever sucking us into the thing, and now we stood in the same place?

“Happy Birthday, Employee! You can begin your shift whenever you want. You might have questions. Such as, what is going on? Where am I? How do I file my W-2? Let’s only address some of those questions.”

My head turned to the driver's seat. Mia moved closer to me and squinted at the PDA.

“What did that thing do to us?” She asked.

A new video played. “You work for Future Treats now, Azzzzamy.” The video cut from the ice cream cone to a beach with the waves hitting the sand on a bright day. “You are exactly where you were before you found this device. In the same room, with the same people you love and cherish. You are okay. You are in a completely different identical universe. *You* have signed up to work for Future Treats. Who are we? We deliver food whenever you want it. How does ‘Future Treats’ provide our great service? Without causing complications to the space-time continuum? Let me tell you. Because we care, we cannot offer our service within our universe. You can imagine why this might be a bad idea. But luckily, with your help, we can offer our service to a select few universes. Or dimensions if that makes more sense to you. Now, are you calm?”

“No!” We both exclaimed.

“Perfect. For a fun explanation, here is a scientist from our company.”

“The hell is all this? Identical universe?” Mia asked.

An ice cream scoop hand puppet appeared against a basic textured blue wall. A woman spoke in a lower ridiculous voice. “You like video games, don’t you? Well, imagine you got a high score and you’re ready to move onto the next level! The “game” auto-saves your progress into a file. Sometimes, for unknown reasons, this file can get saved into multiple copies. If you open any of these files, they play. You have all your items, and nothing major has changed. Think of this dimension you are in now like one of those save files. It’s a copy of the dimension you used to live in. You might notice a few anomalies, but let’s not freak! At Future Treats, we care. So, let’s pause a second, and think about what we learned!”

“Why is the puppet talking so much? I don’t like it.” Mia said.

To my horror, the puppet went on. “You’re in one of these dimensional “save files” right now! This isn’t a game, this is real. So please read the employee standards of conduct so you won’t get yourself hurt! We wouldn’t want that. Remember, you signed a waiver!”

The video changed to a wide shot of the lady with the puppet. She laughed and took the puppet off her hand. She spoke in a normal voice. The older woman had reddish-gray hair and laughed a bit before talking next.

“The dimension you are in is safe. Other than the risks you, and all your party, agreed to when you signed your contract. There is nothing you can do here that is going to mess up any timelines, realities, or any of that. Everything has been safeguarded for us. Now. You might ask. Could I go back in time and kill Hitler as a child? Yes, if you can find an order from back then I suppose, but you have fast food to deliver! If you choose to start your shift, you have 8 hours to take deliveries, at your convenience. At the end of the 8 hours, you might get to go home with all the money you earned. If you don’t want to work, that is okay too! We have another you on shift who is willing to work! If you choose not to take deliveries, please enjoy our time travel ‘PDA’. At the end of those eight hours in the shift, you could return to this exact moment in your own universe. If you still have questions, you can ask them then. Remember. We care.”

I saw a box on the device's screen prompting me to “Please agree”

“Is this a joke?” Mia asked. “We’re in a different dimension?”

“Are you doing this? Did you set this up?” I said.

“No! I have no idea what’s going on. Why would you say that?” She said.

I stammered. “I-I don’t know.” *Why did I say that? Mia never plays pranks on me. Why did I question her like that?* “I didn’t mean it. I don’t know what any of this means.”

“I don’t blame you for stuff.” She exclaimed. “It sounds like you got signed up for something.”

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I looked down at the PDA.

“We gotta get back to my house soon.” She shifted gears.

“Wait. If this is a job. Do you think it pays well?” I asked, raising my eyebrow.

She grunted, turning the steering wheel. “I need to talk to my mom about this. She’ll know what to do.”

I turned to her. “Didn’t the video say this is an identical dimension or something? Wouldn’t that mean that’s not your mom? It’s. One of your moms?”

“I mean,” She said. I could see her thinking. “It’s still my mom.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t tell her we got put in an identical dimension for some time travel fast food job? She’s not going to believe us.”

“That was that one day. She doesn’t always act like that, she takes stuff out on people like I do,” Mia explained.

“So she’d be okay with knowing we’ve been hanging out?”

Mia glanced then shook her head. She turned up the volume of the birthday tape mix. We listened to the bumps in the road along with wailing guitars and screaming vocals.

Episode 2 Don't Slam the Door.

Neither of us talked until the van pulled up into the open garage. We parked.

Mia whispered. "Close your door very, very quietly. Don't slam it. Mom can hear like, a mouse whispering prayers from close up. Don't make any noise above *this level* of a whisper. If she doesn't hear us, she's not going to wake up. And I don't have to explain stuff tonight. We can sneak you out in the morning before she wakes up."

I'm like "Why is the mouse praying? Why can your mom hear them? Who are they praying to? Are there cheese gods who demand sacrifices?"

She told me that wasn't the point, and told me again not to slam my door.

She got out of the van quietly as she could and snuck across the concrete floor. She reached for a rope attached to the top and pulled it all the way, closing the garage. Without making a sound.

Proud, she turned to me. "Nailed it." She whispered.

SLAM.

She looked at me in horror. I looked back, also in horror. My mouth hung open. "I was thinking. Don't slam the door so hard that I slammed the door. I am so sorry."

Stomping her foot and stretching out her fingers in anger she said. "I asked you to do one thing!"

"One is a hard number! I messed up, I'm sorry," I replied.

"Apology loop!" She said.

From the kitchen entrance of the garage, Ms. Kaye rushed out. She turned on a single light. She stood in her black nightgown looking hard and confused. We stood covered in paint.

"Mia? Is that you?" She asked.

Mia rolled her eyes. "No Mom, I'm Dumbledore. I'm here to solve all your problems for you." She shook her head as if that were the dumbest question ever.

Ms. Kaye's face got angry red. I know that look on a mom's face. I should have stopped myself from letting her pick me up from the park. She shouldn't be hanging around me. This is why I don't deserve to have happiness. Why can't I get out of my way?

"I'm sorry!" I said, hyperventilating.

Mia turned to me. "Apology loop!" She turned to her mom, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah Mom, I picked up a hooker, bought some blow, and joined a cult too."

Ms. Kaye looked at me. And sighed. "Are you the cult leader or the hooker?" She said to me.

Mia put a hand on my shoulder, since my knees were shaking and my face must have looked like a fish out of water trying to breathe. "Maybe both?" She said.

Ms. Kaye took a couple of steps toward us. "You don't have a license, Mia!" Her left eye twitched.

I gasped.

Mia shrugged. "If someone was ever home to take me to get the test, I'd have one."

Ms. Kaye is like, "Mia Serenity. What is going on? Why is. Aurore here? Close to one o'clock in the morning?"

We looked at each other, hoping the other one would know what to do. But of course, I'm stupid and can't think of anything.

Mia shook her hands at me in a strangling gesture after not saying something. "Bicana will figure out the van is gone. I went looking for Aurore at the park and found a glow party going on. Someone gave them a package with a futuristic PDA. Strange stuff happened. A puppet told us we were in an identical dimension, here to deliver fast food."

My hands shook as I reached out to show the PDA to Ms. Kaye. She looked at it. Tired.

"Nice palm pilot." Ms. Kaye closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. "Identical dimension? This is what you came up with to tell me? Out of all the things you could have picked. It's identical dimension fast food? Do you think I'm stupid?"

On the futuristic device, I looked at the apps, trying to find some way to show Ms. Kay the employee video that we saw. But the video was gone. I couldn't find it. The phone had a weird setup that made it super hard to find anything. Mia looked at me. I shook my head. "I can't find the video. It said there would be an eight-hour shift. Then we'd get to return to when the shift started or something."

Ms. Kaye stepped towards the kitchen door. "What is happening is you are going to bed. I am calling Aurore's mother to come to pick up the identical dimension traveler." Ms. Kay looked at me. "What's your number?"

"I don't know what my number is." Which is true. I didn't bother to memorize my house number. What was I going to do calling my house anyways? Check on the answering machine to see if the house was lonely? My mom would never pick up.

Ms. Kaye walked over to me. I held my breath. She took something sticking out of my hoodie, taking a flier I had stuffed in my math book. I had forgotten about our school's parent meet-up event. My mom was supposed to bring punch, and contact another student's parents about dessert, but she didn't make it out to the meeting. Ms. Kay found my name, and put her finger under my home phone number. She walked to the kitchen and picked up the receiver on the wall. She fingers punched in some numbers.

"She won't answer," I followed her inside. My hands fell flat on the counter beside Ms. Kay.

"Mom, stop." Mia stood near the refrigerator covered in envelopes marked "Bills". Held on by those magnetic things. They were all unpaid.

"Let's get everyone home." Ms. Kaye huffed, waiting as the phone rang.

Cue to tragedy, for the first time, my 'other' mom answered the phone. I was doomed.

"Sorry to call so late Ms. Chandler. Aurore is here and—" She paused. Ms. Kaye turned to me as my mom spoke, slurring her words over the receiver. She couldn't stop looking at me.

She knew.

I listened. She listened. My mom had told her something. I lowered my eyes.

"You should drink some water." She hung up the phone.

Mia hesitated, before asking, "What did she say?"

Ms. Kaye turned away from us. She spoke. “That Aurore can spend the night. I’ll drive you both to school in the morning. Does that handheld device tell you when your “shift” starts? Is it going to interfere with the math class you’re failing?”

I shrugged.

“I’m not talking to you... Nevermind. How about you both go to sleep...” Ms. Kaye turned back to talk to us. Instead, she saw me grabbing something from the top cabinet. I poured coffee into Mia’s favorite cup. The one with the emo llama. I handed it to her. And then I realized what I did. We looked up at her, together.

“How do you know where the coffee cups were, Aurore?” She asked.

I didn’t answer... I took a sip of coffee, hoping she wouldn’t notice me wide-eyed.

She shook her head. “Go study, and if you’re worried about whatever this PDA time thing is, we can deal with it later. There’s leftover pizza in the fridge if you want it. I only have 40 bucks left so that might be it for a while. I’ll call my sister in the morning. I’m going to bed.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Mia walked further into the house and turned back to look at me. Ms. Kaye went back to her bedroom, closing the door. I stood there. Confused.

She knows what’s up. She’s like “No one is in trouble. We yell it out sometimes. Come on.”

“I’m used to like, fighting with fits and stuff. This is all weird to me.”

She almost smiled. But she sounded annoyed. “Get used to it.”

We brought the pizza slices up the stairs to her room, on a plate hot from the microwave. Mia sat on the floor next to me. After using a napkin to wipe neon paint off our faces, she took a slice of pizza. Her lips twisted before taking a bite and saying. “How can you work for a company you didn’t sign up for? How is that like, legal?” She looked as hungry as I was.

I nodded. The PDA buzzed. We jumped about a foot away together in shock. She pointed. “Is there a ‘make it not do weird stuff’ button?”

Something else on the screen came up. “Take this order now and receive a two-thousand-dollar bonus! Coffee delivery.”

My eyes went to the order details. “Two thousand dollars? I can make two thousand dollars by delivering coffee? I could find a place to live, and eat, couldn’t I?”

“For a month. That’s about how much my mom pays in rent for this place. I know this address, that’s Lost Coffee. We’re always at Lost Coffee. Order sixty-six. We could pick the order before school tomorrow.”

“Your mom pays two thousand a month? About? For this house?” I asked, in shock.

She nodded. “If you include utilities, yeah. She pays a lot.”

“We don’t know what this is. What if this is some kind of… Scam. The video did have a puppet.”

“But if there are more jobs like that,” Mia said. “We could make some real money. Maybe my mom could take some time off if we could help out. Did you see all those bills on the fridge?”

I kept reading on the screen the “Two thousand dollars”. I didn’t say anything.

“Of course you don’t want to do anything.” Mia blurted. “You never want to do anything to make your situation better.”

“There’s so much about this thing we don’t know!” My fingertip glided over the glass screen. “I don’t think we should risk whatever this is.”

She looked hurt at this.

“I’m not going to mess us up this time.” I said.

She never answered that. She wanted to say something else. But didn’t.

It had been hard to sleep after drinking so much coffee and with so much excitement. But we laid close together for a few hours, with the window cracked, listening to my CD player skip every minute or so. Still laying on the floor. Because we are floor people. She had the right earbud, I had the left. We both listened to the same CD on repeat until we fell asleep, and the sun came up.

I wake up cold at the Kaye house because of how low Mia liked to keep the thermostat. She wraps herself in blankets by the time the sun rises. After staying there for a while until she can bear to get up and face the day. I used this time to go downstairs to make coffee until she calms down.

After she and I first started hanging out, we'd always start fighting first thing in the morning. I'm the grumpy one; she's an angry wild bear the entire time. She threw a spoon at me one time. That meant to stop talking. We started following a "morning depression checklist". It's our routine of coffee and panicking. Things got better. Kind of.

That morning, after showering and borrowing some of Mia's clothes, Ms. Kaye drove us to Lost Coffee in her expensive Mustang. The place was close to our school and didn't have as much traffic. I fumed over having to carry around that PDA. I couldn't leave the thing in Mia's room. But what was I supposed to do with that the whole day, keep it in my pocket? What's the point? The device uses the internet without having to dialing up, which is cool I guess, but I could just walk to a computer.

We went to get out of the car, and I was like, "Bye Ms. Kaye!" real fast and stuff. But she said "Aurore, can I talk to you for a moment? Alone?"

I bet my face looked like someone had asked me to tap dance on steak knives or something. I mouthed to Mia. "Save me." Then I remembered she couldn't read lips. And that Ms. Kay totally could see me mouthing stuff. Mia stood there squinting at me confused, trying to figure out what I was saying.

"I'm getting you an Americano." She shook her head and headed into the neon building. I sat alone in the left back seat, behind Ms. Kaye who stopped the "Aurore's birthday" mixtape. She let out a deep breath as if relieved. The sadness of the music hurt her or something. She pulled out the tape and examined the label.

"Oh." She said. "Is this tape yours?"

I gulped. "Yeah. Mia made it for me today."

"Happy Birthday." She said.

I sat frozen, unable to speak. I tried to say something that sounded like "Smanks." but my mumbling words drowned out halfway through saying it. I nodded a few times instead. That seemed to be enough for her. She also nodded.

The seats smelled clean. That's what I remember thinking trying not to think. I'm always finding new ways to do that. I asked her, "Is this about the confetti in the room last night? I can explain."

There was a long pause before she spoke to me again. She sat gripping the steering wheel with both hands. She thought a while before saying, "I'm not sure which dimension we are in. But in whichever dimension you find yourself, you can stay with us." She informed me, "Money is tight. It's bad actually. Really bad. I don't know how much I can help you."

Squirming in my seat, I exclaimed "I can look for a job." It dawned on me. My fingers glided over the PDA in my pocket "I. Oh. I have a job, I can help you."

"You mean the palm pilot you found last night?" She blinked a couple of long blinks. She turned around in the driver's seat to face me.

"Some of the orders on the PDA are for a lot of money. It's a real job, I think." I showed the amount to her. Her left eye closed, and her head tilted sideways.

"Something about this all seems. Off." She glanced sideways. "You sure this thing isn't going to start asking you to take your clothes off or something?"

I reached for the door handle. "I will never take my clothes off for money, Ms. Kaye."

She shook her head.

"You know what I wish someone would have taught me, Rore?" She reached for her purse.

In case you didn't know, Aurore is a confusing name my mom picked for me because it sounded cool. A lot of people don't know the "re" at the end is silent. So, the teachers and other kids would call me "Auro-re" or "Rory." for short back in Junior High. I don't like to be called that anymore, but I was not going to correct her.

"I wish someone would have told me to not owe anything to anybody. I haven't made a sale in months." She seemed to reflect on the thought. Her face got weird like that wasn't something I was supposed to know.

She went on, "Make sure Mia finds a pay phone and checks in with me after school, I'll be at the office. Might have to fly back to Chicago tonight." She rubbed her eyes then handed me two twenty-dollar bills from her purse. "She's going to jump without looking someday. I know because I live out of a suitcase for most days of the year. Away from my family. That's how I got here. With you around, maybe she'll think twice. About. Doing Mia things. "

"I. she. Err. Ms. Kaye? She's. My. I'd never leave her behind. You can trust me. I'm stable." Ms.Kaye grabbed my shirt as I went to get out of the Mustang. I flinched.

"Wait." She said, loosening her grip after seeing my mini freak out. "Did you see that person? They are stumbling inside. I should go in with you."

"I can throw down," I lowered my raised eyebrow.

She gave me a death glare. She leaned towards the steering wheel, tapping her fingers. "Throw down?" She remembered 'The fight.' from Jr. High, the one where all the counselors and therapists got involved.

"I... Got to go study math Ms. Kaye. We got a test this morning." I got out of that Mustang so fast. I slammed the door and ran inside the coffee shop.

"Be careful," I heard her say behind me.

I found Mia waiting in the back of the coffee shop, collecting pillows from the other eight retro sofas lining the outer walls of the shop. People sat drinking coffee in large black mugs. The purple and light blue tubes lit the place, casting shadows on the register on the L shape counter. The aroma of roasted coffee beans and indie books lingered in the air.

I walked past all the college students sitting cross legged on the floor reading weird poetry aloud, and sat next to Mia on the sofa. She reached over and put a pillow between me and the armrest. Beethoven played over the store's speakers.

She handed me the americano. The drink didn't last long, as I swallowed the whole thing in about 20 seconds. I placed my empty mug next to her's on the coffee table.

"You watched me freaking out the whole time from in here didn't you?" I asked Mia.

"Yeah, that was intense. What she say to you?"

I sneered, pulling up the PDA. Mia bumped her hips into mine, moving closer.

"What did she say?"

“I’m staying with you. If I can help pay some stuff off. We are taking this shift and giving your mom the money. And she also told me you spilled sour milk in my locker.” I glimpsed at an abstract painting of a crow pecking at a cucumber on the wall.

I took the job on the device. “Shift Begins! You have 8 hours to take orders. At the end of the shift, you might return to your dimension. Good luck, worker! We care.” It chimed.

“She’s letting you stay with us?” Mia asked. Shocked.

“... In this dimension? I guess?” I asked. Feeling as if I had slammed the door of the van again, by not asking her if it was okay.

She leaned over and hugged me. Pressing her forehead into my waist.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m having a moment,” She let go of me and sat back up before fidgeting with a pillow not sitting flush behind her. “Shut up. We’re going to figure this all out. This life stuff. Aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” I let my head rest on hers. “I’m not messing it up this time.” I said.

I tapped on ‘Confirm.’

“Now that your shift has started, you can take an order!” It said, “These orders are from regular customers who want a good old treat from the past. Don’t forget to smile, and don’t forget to say the Future Treats motto! Our Motto is...” The speakers crackled and hissed. I held the device away from my body.

“And we’re going to buy your van from your aunt.”

She hugged me again. Which completely threw me off, cause this hugging usually wasn’t a thing.

Not after too long, a woman in her early thirties covered in awesome tattoos walked to the counter. She called out order sixty-six. I hugged Mia tighter before getting up to grab the drink.

“That’s mine.” The stumbling drunk Ms. Kaye saw out in the parking lot stood in front of me. They wore a red tie and a wrinkled white button-down dress shirt. They looked old. Burned out. Like they had been hit by a train about 20 times but somehow lived through it.

“That’s not your coffee, kid.” They said.

“It says it’s my order on my PDA.” I held up the device. The stranger held something of their own. Their device said:

“Authenticated.”

I backed away, turning to Mia, who squinted at the stranger in the store.

“What did you do?” I asked them.

The familiar looking person ran to the counter and grabbed my coffee. Mia stood closer next to me, now holding a sofa pillow ready to fight.

“What are you doing? Why? Would you take her?” The stranger asked, drooping their shoulders. How did they know who Mia was? They went on. “I could throw this, you know. I’m being nice to you. Which is nice of me after what YOU did to me.” The drunk took a few more steps back. They were moving towards the exit.

“What did I do to you? I don’t know you,” I put my hands in my pockets.

“Why do you think I look like you?” They hissed. I peered into their familiar eyes.

Other people in the coffee shop turned to us and watched us argue. The cool goth lady waved her hand. “Whatever this is, get it outside and away from here.”

The drunk shook their head. “I. Am you. From 20 years in the future. From another dimension. But you should know that by now. Look. We got off on the wrong foot here. Let’s all go talk things out. I have some hard things to say to you, but I’m going to set you right. I know a great margarita place in 2019 with some cheap specials.”

My heart sank. I couldn’t believe what I heard. I’m like “I don’t drink. I’m eighteen! You’re joking with me, right? You don’t. We don’t. Drink.”

Thinking about their offer brought a random mental image of my mom into my head. Her rummaging through the fridge for one last can of beer.

The other me started patting their pockets with their other hand. As if they were searching for something. “I have an ID that says you are of age. It’s not even fake. Give me your phone and it’s yours.”

Mia grabbed my clenched hand. “Breathe,” She said.

The stranger went on. “Can you stop being a sad little emo kid for five seconds little Azami? I got things to do.”

My jaw clenched. “That was on the package. Are... Are you calling us A-zam-ee now? Like you think that’s a name normal people use?”

“What are you saying? Azami! I changed my name to Azami.”

I’m like “Umm. Why?”

“Because you suck, and I want nothing to do with you. You’re dumb. I’m getting out of here.” They tightened their empty hands. But the to-go cup they thought they were holding was gone.

“Run!” I yelled to Mia, holding the coffee. We dashed out of the store. A-zam-ee ran after us but gave up. Instead, they raised their middle finger at us as we ran towards Fremont street.

Episode 3 Two for One

We got as far away as we could from the crazy old future “me” and retreated to my other thinking spot, the Neonopolis outdoor mall, which was not far from the coffee shop. It felt like having a private space. No one would be there. Even though it had only recently opened, it already felt like a ghost town. We took the escalator up to where the buttery scent of popcorn from the open yet already abandoned movie theater overwhelmed us. From the top floor we could look down at the food court and if the old psychopath came looking for us.

“Did that happen?” I asked. Had I really met my future self?

“It better not have.” Mia scoffed. “There better be a gas leak at the coffee shop, and that. Person. Isn’t...” She trailed off and stared into the blackened glass of a window of the former high end fashion shop. The store lasted a week. The armless mannequins seemed to be looking at Mia. “But unlike those creepy things. I think it is real. Is this all my fault?”

“What do you mean? What is your fault? That we are going to miss school today?”

Mia grabbed the PDA out of my left hand. “Why can’t you understand anything I talk to you about. The delivery date on this says 2022. Like, It doesn’t expect us to stand here with coffee and wait around forever, does it? Where do we deliver this for money?”

“Didn’t you just say not long ago that you don’t blame me for stuff?” I asked.

She gave me a cold hard look. I returned one, and we stood in awkward silence for what felt like a million years. Finally, she bit her lip. “The pocket computer thing says we have fifteen minutes, why is there a timer? I thought we were time traveling?”

She started pressing ‘buttons’. She’s good at that.

The PDA shook and hummed as loud as a jet engine. “Don’t do that! That’s not even yours, Turn it off!” I freaked out.

“I can’t stop it.” She cried.

We saw a flash. Everything went dark.

When we came to, we stood in an empty Neonopolis. That part was normal, but all the shops in the outdoor mall looked vacant. We were standing in the dark on the wrong side of a dusty “closed sign”. Only some of the the neon signs that we recognized from 2002 still worked.

The time travel device started speaking. “Welcome to the year 2022. This PDA time travel trip has been sponsored by Elon’s Cabbage! Satisfy that crunchy cabbage craving with a taste of Elon! Now verified!”

“Do they use cabbage when they barbecue your Mongolians? We got to get this delivered if we want that money,”

I grunted. “The list of forbidden words.”

“Yeah whatever.” She mumbled. “Doesn’t look like our rules helped us.”

“What the hell?” I put my hands on my hips. “Do you know how many forbidden words I struggle with when talking to you? I feel like I have to censor myself so much that I...”

“Do you know what your problem is?” She interpreted. I found myself letting off a growl in annoyance, though I sounded more like a kitten than a tiger.

“That I have someone nagging me all the time who doesn’t get I’m trying really really hard?”

“Your problem is you don’t try hard at all. You can’t do anything that might be convenient. You just complain about it and don’t try to fix it.”

“We don’t have time for this, let’s go.” I said.

“It’s fine.” She said. Of course everyone know’s those words don’t mean that. She might have well have thrown a spoon at me.

We hurried out of the outdoor mall and onto Fremont Street. People walked around us. The casino lights flashed, and slot machines clanked from a distance. Paint from a street artist sprayed into the warm air. Music from our time blasted through speakers hanging on the jumbotron overhead.

“This is the future, huh?” I asked. We stopped and looked around, together. Looking at all the lights and sights around us.

“I already don’t want it to be.” She said, deep in her thoughts. She grabbed the CD player from my hoodie pocket to drown them out.

Above the front door was an enormous banner that read “FuKuYu”, and everyone had to walk under it to get into the store. She put the CD player back in my hoodie pocket as we walked inside shaking our heads.

“FuKuYu family market? That sounds like someone made a joke but no one got it but they kept it anyways.” I said.

Mia pointed at a giant poster on the back wall. On it was an old lady with her thumb sticking up against a background of lilies. The poster read “Neighborhood market fifty percent off canned tuna day.”

“Dr. Tan-aka?” I whispered in amazement. “Did my therapist quit and buy a grocery store?”

“After meeting your future self? I know why.” She deadpanned.

“I need a drink.” I paused. “Water. Not that kind of drink.”

“I got it.” She instantly headed to the short fridges near the register full of glass marble soda and other drinks.

The order didn’t say where we were taking the coffee, so we started looking around. FuKuYu family market had a bunch of weird stuff in it. Mostly things wrapped in rice and seaweed. The air smelled sweet from the bread baking at the back of the store.

The woman at the register waved us down.

“Is that my Lost coffee?” The woman loosely swung her arms. “It should be order sixty-six?”

“Here you go. One Lost coffee.” I handed her the order trying to smile.

“Did I offend you?” The clerk asked.

“That’s how they smile.” Mia explained.

She took a large sip, closing her eyes and tilting her head. She slurped, and made a strange noise as if she was enjoying it.

“That’s the taste I’ve missed for 20 years. Makes me want to read poetry. This cost a lot of money for coffee, but.” She hummed classical pieces of music to herself. “This two-for-one deal was worth it.”

Mia grabbed my shoulder. “Two for one?”

“Yeah! Azami delivered the other coffee five minutes ago at 9:35. I gave the first one to my boss. Take the waters as a tip, I’ll cover for you. Thanks again for the discount!”

“What do you mean two for one?” My eyes turned to the time on the PDA. The time read 9:41. Which was different from the time displayed at the store by about twenty minutes.

Mia dragged me away from the counter, holding two giant plastic water bottles. “It means we didn’t make the delivery first. Your other self must have gotten the money from the order.”

The device chimed as we walked out of the air-conditioned store back into the hot parking lot. On the screen now appeared my name and A ZAM EE’s name. Under mine showed zero dollars. A ZAM EE’s had two thousand under it. I pushed the screen almost to her face, knowing her vision sucks, to show she was right.

“If you wouldn’t have fought with me we might have gotten her first.” She pointed. “Find another order, something with a big bonus.”

A voice called out from inside the store. “Azami!” The store doors opened. I turned around to a shocked older Japanese lady wearing a store uniform.

“Oh no.” She sighed. “You took that delivery job.”

“Hi, Dr. Tan-aka!” I said waving. “You look great!”

She frowned. Something about the sight of Mia seemed to trouble Dr. Tan-ake. She stood looking uncomfortable.

“We’re friends now,” Mia said, trying to figure out why she was letting off those very obvious weird vibes. “The trauma bonded us or something.”

Tan-aka blinked. “You’re trauma bonding. Yes.” She closed one eye and tightened her lips. “I don’t do that anymore. I’m glad to see you worked things out. For a minute. Hey Aurore, tell your older self to move their van. It’s been out front all month. I’m going to get it towed if they can’t get it going.”

“Van?” My words fumbled as they came out. “I have a van?”

She pointed to the corner of the parking lot. I recognized something I had not seen on the way inside.

“Is that your aunt Bianca’s van?” I asked.

There parked at the far end, taking up two spots sat the hippie van. Super-sized wheels, giant side windows. The van might as well have had a surfboard attached to the roof.

I peeked in the back windows, walking around to the front. The sun reflected off of something sitting on the front seat. I put my hand to my forehead.

“My license,” I whispered.

My wallet sat opened up with my DMV photo out in plain view. My soul died a little. “And my emotional support hoodie.” The fabric had seen better days. The more worrying part was the empty beer cans and plastic whiskey bottles littered about.

Mia choked on her words. “Why’s your stuff in my van?”

“I don’t know,” I felt my hands shake the more I thought about a future living in a parking lot. Where were my friends? Why didn’t I have a family?

I thought about finding a rock to break the window, but realized the door was unlocked. Also, it wouldn’t right the wrong of the DMV photo. Mia stood staring at her reflection in the passenger side mirror.

My eyes turned to the back of the van. The back looked like a trash-themed adventure park. The seats had been removed, and off to the left side lay a sleeping bag on a mountain of clothes. To the right was a wall of stuff with a backpack I recognized. The side saddle bag, the one I had forgotten to take to school and left in Mia’s room.

“Do you see anything of mine?” She asked. “Are you sure it’s Azamee’s? Cause you wouldn’t buy this without me right? Unless, my aunt had to sell it for some reason.”

“I’m not seeing anything that looks like it’s yours. Why do-”

“Where am I then? Is that why your future self is...” She stopped abruptly. I motioned for her to go on, but she refused. The look on her face reminded me of when Ms. Kay turned off my birthday tape mix, as if the sadness was causing active pain.

“This is a joke universe. This isn’t what’s going to happen in twenty-one years is it? You, gone? Me, living out of the back of a van? Worth nothing? Is is all there is?”

She stuck out her hand. “That’s a little dramatic. We don’t know anything yet.”

Mia opened the door and found keys that had been tossed on the driver side floor. She reached over and put the keys in the ignition. She tried to start the van. The engine made a clanking metal sound.

She gasped. “This is my van” A moment later the hood popped, and she hit some car thing near the top. “Now try it.” She mumbled, pointing towards the ignition.

I turned the key. The engine started.

The hood of the van closed shut. I got in.

“I can’t live in a van!” I said. “This isn’t what I wanted at all.”

At hearing this, Mia hit the steering wheel hard. She sat for a moment, before revving the engine.

“I wanted the van so we could get out of here. Away from Vegas, and all the sad stuff.”

I lowered my head, disgusted at myself. “We have to change this. I don’t know what this is but I don’t like it.”

“It’s useless.” She said. “We’ve watched those movies. All that stuff is impossible to change. Someone ends up dying, or someone learns some bull lesson.”

“Salmon. Like the fish!” An audiobook suddenly played through the beat-up side speakers. You know how the electronics work in that thing. She turned it off.

“It won’t matter what happens in the future or whatever. This is a different dimension. Once we end the shift. With this van full of money. We can do what we want and fix everything.” Mia shifted the clutch.

“Why didn’t you tell me you wanted the van for us? I would have tried to have helped you.”

“No. You wouldn’t have.” She said. She floored the pedal and roared out of the Fukuyu parking lot.

As the van drove down the road, I looked at orders on the device. She pointed to one of the orders. “Find one.”

I found one.

“Hey! That’s your address! Our address, I mean. Your mom. Your Future other mother must be ordering something. It won’t be a problem if other me shows up. We can team up to beat them down if they do.”

The order was for a sandwich from a pizza place we go to, from 2001. Spinnerbait Pizza. The retro ocean-y setup was cool, but the music they played annoyed both of us. It was the kind of music that would sound a lot better in a car wash than it does over speakers. Either way, we knew the place.

“Your other you didn’t look like they liked me.” Mia went on. “I bet other older you won’t take this order. Even if the bonus is five thousand dollars.”

“Mia.” I stopped. I took a deep breath. “My future self is a... I can’t think of anything nice. A jerk with short ugly hair. But you’re always going to be awesome to me.”

She’s like, “I kind of liked the short hair on you.”

I stared at her for a second. In disbelief. Instead of saying something, feeling a fight coming on, I looked back to the PDA.

“Sponsored order?” I stared down. “This says after we complete this we can do sponsored orders for more money.”

“Sponsored by whom? How much more money?” She asked.

“I don’t know. But we should find out.” I accepted the order and Mia made a left turn driving towards the pizza shop.

After picking up the sandwich in 2001, we returned to Mia’s house in 2022. Something seemed unsettling about the place now. Maybe it was the collection of garden gnomes sat by the entrance. Or the garbage laying. It wasn’t how the house was usually kept.

Mia walked to the door and tried to open it. But the knob didn’t turn. She tried her key, but the key didn’t fit. She banged on the wood. “Yo, mom it’s me. We got the sandwich.”

After a bit, we heard footsteps from the other side. For a moment Mia took a step forward, to enter but stopped. Like she didn’t believe her own eyes. I expected Ms. Kaye to come out of the house, but she didn’t.

Instead stranger stood there. Dressed in fine dinner date sort of clothes.

“Who are you?” Mia asked.

“You have my food?” The woman asked back.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Thanks.” She grabbed the sandwich. “You know when the second one getting here? I got a party starting and I owe my sister-in-law a sandwich too. Have you tried these? They are so good. It’s the peppercorns that really make the flavor pop.”

“Does anyone else live here? Does my Mom live here?” Mia asked with concern.

“I don’t know you.” The woman replied.

“Do you know who lived here before?”

“No.” The stranger seemed uneasy. “We bought it. In an estate sale twenty years ago. I’m going to eat this now. Good night.” She closed the door.

We walked away from the house. As we stood, looking down at the shadows cast by the flickering light, Mia’s eyes narrowed.

She covered her face with her hands. “This isn’t real, is it? What happened?” Her body rocked back and forth. She folded her arms. We tried to search AOL on the device to see if we could find out what happened to Ms. Kay and Mia. But we couldn’t find any real information. Everything lead us to advertisements for funeral home services and french fry sale codes.

“ This isn’t something we can fix, is it?” I asked.

“Why isn’t my Mom here?” Mia bowed her head. “We’d never sell that house.”

Had I failed Ms. Kaye? The thought punched me in the gut.

“The plan doesn’t change.” I said, pointing to the PDA. “We can take a sponsored order. We can still make as much money as we possible can.”

“What does it matter? If I’m dead?” Mia said.

“I’m not going to let that happen.”

I looked through the jobs on the device. I found one and held the phone to Mia’s face.

“Look at the amount on this order.”

She squinted. Her eyes widened at the number on the screen.

Instead of watching a rightfully emotional Mia drive that clunky van, I checked my watch. Which was useless. Time traveling between dimensions is confusing. Is that what jet lag feels like I wonder?

She parked the van at the stadium, which totally wasn’t there in 2002, and I pulled up the order. On the screen, we found two front row tickets at the 50 yard line, as well as the parking pass that we used to get in, which the device printed out for us. The delivery notes instructed us to wait in the seats until further notice.

I could see tears dripping from Mia’s cheeks. It crushed my soul. Not two seconds after parking I see a familiar jerk coming at us from the other side of the parking lot. Their walk seemed to be more stumbly this time.

“Hey!” They shouted. “You stole my van! I had to take a stranger’s car here! How did you get it running?”

“I do not want to talk to you, A-zam-ee.” I yelled out the window.

“Azami!” They pounded on the back window. We got out of the van.

“How did you know where we were?” I asked. I could still smell “The weekend twelve pack” on my breath.

“Find my phone.” Azami said.

“You mean your device? It’s in your hands stupid!” I said.

“What happened to me?” Mia asked my future self. “Why is someone else living at my house?”

“You might have moved. It’s been years.” My future self suggested, cold, rehearsed. They quickly peered into the back of the vehicle.

“We tell each other everything. Aurore.” Mia said to my future self. “Why wouldn’t you tell me this?”

Azami threw up their hands in frustration. “There’s a lot of things that are not like how I want them. But I can’t change any of that. This isn’t Back to the Future.”

I poked them in the chest. “You are going to tell me everything.”

“I’m not doing anything you ask me to do there, little foot,” They laughed.

I took a step closer to them. “I’m not asking.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Apology loop.” I reminded myself.

“I’m not bound by your rules.”

Mia threw her hands in the air. “I ... can’t deal with two of you. I need a moment.”

“I’ll be right there, I’m going to-”. Before I could finish talking, she reached inside my hoodie pocket pulling out the CD player.

“I super need these right now.” Which I knew.

“Give me back my keys?!” Azami yelled, pointing at Mia.

“You can pry them from my cold dead fingers,” She said, putting in the earbuds. She hurried inside.

“The hell, dude?” I pushed my future self, who to my surprise was a lot lighter than I expected. I noticed I could see the outline of my own ribs through the dress shirt. “What… What are you doing? With life? What is wrong with you? Why would you treat her like that? After all she has done for us?”

“We. Dude.” My other self said. “We. Don’t go penning all this on me. You’re better off without that narcissist.”

I don’t know what came over me. But I hit them. Right there in the parking lot. Closed fist and all. They stumbled back into someone else’s car, touching their bloody lip.

“I will cut you.” I said.

Azami laughed at this. “You are so under her control you have no idea how brainwashed you are.” They said turning back to the stadium. “She doesn’t just boss you around dude. She controls you. She uses your emotions to manipulate you. But you are so stupid you can’t even figure it out. I get tired of this conversation. We have this fight every time I take a shift. I’m sick of it. You never figure it out. And you never will. You didn’t mention it this time, but it’s not Dr. Tanaka but it’s Dr. Tanaka. You idiot.”

“I don’t care about your opinion, or how many shifts you’ve taken..” I yelled. “Where. Is future Mia?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t tell you even if I did.”

“You’re lying.”

“Believe whatever you want.”

I gave up on myself and let them go inside. I tried to settle my emotions before trying to find Mia, but after a few minutes I had to head in. I knew I wasn’t going to calm down. Because I

knew somehow, someway, I was to blame for what happened. And I didn't know what to do about it.

As soon as I found my seat Mia grabbed my CD collection I kept in my emotional support hoodie pocket and quickly flipped through all the CDs in the case.

"This is all you brought? You steal my entire dream life but can't bring a CD I like." Mia frowned.

I froze. Thinking of all the things I could say. "My bad." I sat down.

"I didn't mean to snap. I don't mean it."

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"What do you think."

"Are you having Jr. High cheer-leader flashbacks?" I thought it was funny, and that a joke would lighten the mood. Since she did not like being forced to do cheer in Jr. High, as you know. She did not. She straightened up and pulled back her hair from her earbuds. About to yell. We heard a familiar voice.

"You're in my seat."

"Mia's in your seat," I said, talking to my older self who arrived with a beer in their hand. They scoffed at me and sat next to us.

Future me waved their arms in the air, trying not to spill their beer. "Yeah, I'm the big scary monster. I get it kid." They mocked. "I'm the ghost of the future you!" They laughed an evil laugh. They found it funny, I guess. They chugged their entire beer then threw the empty plastic cup down to the ground.

"Don't call me kid," I told them.

"Why are they here?" She pointed at my other self with a look of disgust.

"That's how this works." Azami said.

“Then why weren’t you at the last one?” Mia asked.

Azami didn’t say anything. Mia changed the track on the CD player.

Music played over the stadium speakers. “It’s your Las Vegas Looters vs The Phoenix Hot CoMmAnDeRs. This game has been sponsored by FUTURE TREATS. We got you at Future Treats. Meet our Future Treat trained professionals who are squaring off as a treat FOR YOU!!”

Realizing everyone in the stadium can see you in your emotional support hoodie was not cool. I tried to smile for everyone watching the jumbotron but I looked mad again.

“The winner, who signed a waiver, will get 2 million dollars if they win! No rules.”

Two million dollars? That wasn’t what the order amount was for. I turned to Mia, who stood.

I sighed. “This is the weirdest birthday ever,”

“Shut up and do something already,” A-zam-ee bared their teeth at me. Which wasn’t a great look.

Azamee held the guardrail looking at the giant green tray of a field. Something began to fall from the ceiling of the stadium. Being let down on a rope to almost the fifty-yard line. It was a brief case.

“ARE YOU READY!” The crowd around us cheered. I noticed Azami bending their elbows. I recognized the look. Determination.

“The first person to get the briefcase back to their seat wins! Good luck Future Treat Employees!”

A horn blew, we heard hooting and hollering. I turned to run down to a gate allowing you field access. But I looked back to see if Azami followed me. They hadn’t. They had jumped the rail and were running across the field into a tunnel. I lost sight of them after they ran in.

I turned to call Mia, but she also wasn’t in her seat. I looked back to the field and saw her running toward the case. She ran through the cheer-leading squads. Both teams looked at the competition confused.

I tried to jump over the railing, but my foot slipped. I regained my footing, but saw my other self-run back out of the tunnel holding a ladder.

“What is this?” I yelled. I jumped down to the field. My feet moved towards Mia, who now stood at the fifty-yard line looking for some way to get up. She turned towards me. I grabbed her waist and tried to lift her up. But Azami came behind us and swung the ladder at her. I dropped her just in time. The ladder had missed her by inches.

The crowd cheered.

“The hell you doing Azamee!” I screamed, charging at myself.

“Winning.” They screamed back.

Azami set up the ladder and climbed as I checked on Mia to make sure she was okay. They grabbed each silver step as fast as they could. I shoved the ladder. The whole structure came crashing. The case waved back and forth.

I looked in all directions trying to find something to help my friend out with. I had to have something. I couldn’t keep standing there useless. With my mind blank, I tackled my future self at the knees. They threw a fist.

She had found a way to stand the ladder up. She leaped up and grabbed the suitcase, but the ladder shook. Azami had thrown me against the metal. I planted my feet, trying to not knock the ladder over. I glanced up and saw her climbing down, with the case in hand. They came at me, pushing me back.

Mia jumped before the ladder fell, landing on her feet on the grass below. Like she had practiced landing all those times back in cheer practice. She dashed towards the seats where we had been sitting.

She tried to lead Azami through the cheerleaders still standing on the sidelines. Azami approached her as if they were a hunter stalking prey running through a forest of cheerleaders. I went for a tackle, but my future self pushed me down to the ground. Azami reached for Mia, who climbed partly up the railing. She stretched out with one hand. She swung the briefcase up in an effort to push herself past the railing and onto the seats above. But the force of the swing caused it to slip out of her fingers. And it fell below, right into Azami’s hands.

She climbed over, and her sneakers landed on the floor below by seats. Azami climbed up. Mia began to strike at my older selves hand still holding onto the railing, intending to knock them down. But she stopped. She had that same pained look on her face. She couldn’t do it. Instead, she crossed her arms and stepped back. Giving them a hard look.

My hands reached out to pull Azami down. But I was too late. Before I could get back up to the row above, they sat down with all the brief case.

“We have a winner!” They announced over the speakers. Mia, with her hands folded, sat.

Panting, from having skipped out on P.E. class too many times, I returned to my seat. My other self held the case tight. It reminded me of those nature films where some animals hold the dead thing in their mouths. All proud or whatever.

“Dude, you almost hit her,” I accused. “What were you thinking? Why would you...”

“You could have killed me, Azami,” Mia sat wide eyed. “You were going to hit me.”

“In a few minutes it’s not going to matter.” They barked. “I don’t have to answer you.” They sat up, adjusting the briefcase across their chest. “I keep starting a new shift every time I get back to the store. I’ve been doing this for a while. I know how to win.”

Mia’s hand shook with disappointment. “You seen other me’s? And Aurore’s?”

“Not you Mia....Don’t worry about it.” They leaned forward in their padded stadium seat.

I leaned closer. “What happens to the losers of this game? Shift? Whatever this thing is. The ones who don’t get to the “reset point”. What happens?”

Azami didn’t answer. “Everyone, who doesn’t make it to the reset point is okay. Then the company gives everyone cupcakes and giant hugs. They care. Don’t worry about it.”

“Every shift? You do this. Over and over?” I asked.

“Told you when I first met you, I was planning on being the one to get out, and nothing you did mattered. I told one of you anyways. I guess I didn’t think time.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I threw my head back.

“Yes,” She stood up. “I’ll meet you outside.”

“See you, gatekeeper,” They waved.

I stood up and shook my head. “Are you going to sit here? We don’t have a lot of time left on this shift.”

“I’ve done this before. If I don’t see you again, like peacefully? Good luck.” They slurred their syllables.

“Screw you too.” I walked away.

I almost left the stadium, but a video ad in the food area caught my eye. “Have drinks delivered to your seat!” I looked towards the field. Helmets clanked and the whistle blew. Fans cheered.

“Hey,” I yelled to a woman vending a cart. “What’s the strongest drink you got?” I asked.

They looked at me. “You got I.D.?”

I ordered Azami, something strong, called a ‘Mind Eraser’.

“Seat 111. Tell them I said Happy birthday. Put as much booze in it as you can.” I handed the woman a 20-dollar bill and walked away.

Episode 4 A What Limit?

Mia sat in the driver's seat looking through the clutter of tapes, looking deep in thought. The van door slammed shut. She winced as I climbed in.

"I don't drop things. Why did I drop?" She started to say something else, but she couldn't.

I paused. "Please don't be sad," I shifted in my seat. "We can take what we made back to your mom."

She turned to me. "You can't listen to anything I say. I don't understand Aurore. Why don't I get to know what happens to future me? Where is my future Mom? Why is future you so-"

"-Other me takes other shifts. If we beat them there, we can do this job whenever we want. Nothing else matters."

"The one where everyone gets cupcakes? Are you kidding me with this? Do you understand what is happening? You're not beating them. You are killing them."

"We need to hurry. None of this matters anyways. Not when that timer ends, and we get back to the reset point before-"

Mia began to turn the key but stopped.

"You aren't understanding, Aurore," She said, raising her voice. "I think. You don't care about me. At all. You don't care about anything. Not even yourself."

"That's not true!" I said. "I would never! You don't know that! We can fix this. We can work on the issues between us. With this job, we can make money whenever we want and -"

"I'm supposed to be okay watching you kill yourself to work an eight-hour shift? Over and over? I thought we were getting better! But how can? When you're over there, having an identical dimension death-match with yourself? For what? Future you can't be poor. If resetting destroys the entire dimension? You are Azami the destroyer of worlds dude. Thanos has nothing on your body count!"

"Mia. I don't know why the future me does anything. But... I don't think future me means to suck. I'm still lost. When I'm lost, I do things to try to keep myself stable. You taught me how to cope. I. Think older me hurts. Because something happened to you."

“You.” She said. “You happened to me.”

Neither of us spoke. She hit the eject button on the tape in the cassette player. She looked at the handwritten label. Her hand flipped the tape around to show me the name written.

Coffee and Pizza mix.

“That wasn’t the tape in there before.” I said.

“We need to get going,” She said, looking into my eyes. “We got to beat traffic if we’re going to kill everyone in the universe and get the money we made from one order back to Mom. After that? With us? I don’t know.”

My heart sank. “Maybe my other self was right. Maybe you do just use me.” I said.

Mia looked as if the world crushed her spirit, and the remaining bits of joy she had been extinguished. She began to cry and started the van. The phone buzzed, sounding like a cowbell. “Eight hours are up. Shift complete. Please make your way to the reset point.”

I couldn’t bare to say anything to her.

“The PDA says this is it!” I yelled. We ran into the cabbage store, leaving the van running in the street. Getting out of the stadium in that traffic hadn’t been so bad since Mia used the sidewalks. She didn’t run anyone over or anything, but we did break some traffic laws. Since the diemson was about to end and everyone was about to die we figured it would be okay.

The store near Fremont Street was literally full of cabbages for sale. They all looked the same to me. Red and green. Shelves lined with boxes of Elon’s cabbage, all with the same logo. Throughout the store, they played strange futuristic music. It was hard to hear that while fighting with the person that means the most to me in the entire realm of existence. Why couldn’t things just be okay?

“People don’t actually shop here, right?” Mia scoffed.

We heard a lady in the back of the store call out to us. “You have arrived.” I guessed it was the same goggle lady from the paint party. She looked younger than I thought, wearing a t-shirt and tie with black slacks. “It’s in the back.” She didn’t look at us. She read what looked like a Future Treats employee handbook.

“KID!” We turned around, seeing Azami step out of a cab that had parked near the van. They stumbled towards us, hardly able to walk straight. “Donnn’t get any further. Don’t get any closer to that baaack room.” They slurred their words so much it was hard to understand them.

I reached for the nearest head of cabbage and whacked Azami across the face, as hard as I could. They fell to the ground. I kept hitting them. Their device fell. Mia leapt and picked it up.

“Seriously, dude?” Azami stood, “This is how we are doing this?”

“What, my other me’s you’ve killed haven’t fought back? ” The cabbage I had held broke in half on their head. I cursed at them. Repeatedly. I grabbed another.

The goggle lady didn’t look fazed by any of the fighting. She kept looking over the employee handbook. As if she’d seen this kind of thing before.

I kicked my future self in the side, hearing them cough. I reached for a giant shelf filled with cabbage boxes. Pulling with all my weight I sent the heavy shelf crashing on Azami. Chunks of green and brown flew everywhere falling on top of them. Azmai’s foot kicked, trying to free themselves of the boxes.

We sprinted towards the back of the store and slammed the door shut. An angry Mia crossed her arms as I locked and barricaded the entrance.

“You don’t think the weird lady is going to help my-other self do you?” Something felt like I was standing on the wrong side of the door. I don’t know why, but that annoying voice inside your head that tells you not to walk into oncoming traffic was screaming at me not to do what I was doing. I didn’t listen.

In the middle of the room sat a large duffel bag stuffed as full as it could get. On top, a bulb stuck out. It lit up green.

Behind those were two red boxes on a shelf, not far from a back exit, filled with what looked like gold Future Treat vouchers for the amount we had made on the orders. Labeled on them was both my and Azami’s name. At seeing this I poured all of Azami’s earnings into my box and held onto it. Mia looked very not cool with things going on.

After that I unzipped the plastic slider on the bag. USB Sticks of yellow and red, along with hundreds of dollars of bills burst out. I held up one of the bills to the light above and saw the raised printed watermark. The embedded strip ran down the length of the bill.

Lifting the handle, I saw the words “Property of Future Treats.” A USB stick and a necklace with a large blue diamond surrounded by a bunch of other colorless rocks fell to the floor.

The light on the duffel bag turned red. “Please return company property,” An electronic voice from within seemed to speak. “It is the employee’s responsibility to return the company earnings with the money and tracking data intact.”

“How do we get out of here?” Mia said.

I hesitated, realizing I was hoping Azami would be able to get out of those shelves. Why didn’t I hate them? I had every right. However, no one came. If I hadn’t become like my mom, my future self could have fought it. But I couldn’t fight. Mia was right. I took a step away and paused. *This was the only way to keep Mia safe.* I told myself. I saw on the devices screen the option to “Reset” and end the shift.

The feeling didn’t stop. But I tapped on the PDA. Something wasn’t right. The sound was off. It hummed and clanked.

The device zapped my hand. I felt it, deep in my skin. Burning.

“Please reduce weight.” The device demanded. “Can not reset with the amount of weight detected.”

“It has a weight limit? This is ridiculous, why? Maybe this isn’t supposed to be a two person job?” I asked. “How can we reduce the weight? Do we take out some of our vouchers?”

“My mom needs that money!” Mia took off her shoes and threw them across the room into a cabbage box. I did the same with my shoes, missing the box. “Take off your clothes.”

I panicked. “I promised your mom I wouldn’t take my clothes off for money!”

“Just this once!” She said.

She threw off her watch and took the socks off her feet. I took off the comfort hoodie, which must have been weighing us down a ton. We stood in only our sports bras and boy shorts. I hit the reset button. It shocked us again.

“We need to leave our share of the money.” I realized.

“I can’t do that to my mom. I can’t. This might be the only chance I get. With. Whatever has happened in this messed up future. I won’t.” She said.

“Let’s take some of it.” I reasoned.

Mia began to pace thinking. Suddenly I had the worst idea ever. “Azami’s PDA!”

She took out their device. Their screen looked exactly like mine, with the button ready to be pressed to return us home. To reset both of us.

“We can hit the buttons at the same time.” I said. “That has to up our weight limit or whatever wouldn’t it?”

A loud thud came from the back exit door. Someone pounded from the other side. I heard my other self scream.

“We have to do this,” I said. “It’s the only way. To stop myself from hurting me.”

Mia looked at our vouchers, closed her eyes and hung her head. She nodded. We pressed the reset button on the screen at the same time.

“Congratulations on winning your shift! You win!” Confetti burst into the air. A rumbling sounded off in the distance.

The devices roared and crackled louder. I heard my future self cry out from the other room. Azami had broken down the door. They stood. Looking at me, devastated.

My vision turned blurry, until I saw the familiar spins of light circling towards a dark hole. Only now there were two black holes, on opposite sides of each other. I could hardly see, but Mia came into focus, holding onto Azami’s PDA in the air. She headed towards a different dark hole than I did. And then I saw a flash. She was gone.

Flames engulfed, wherever we were. My future self screamed, in pain. Things got cold.

“Welcome back to your timeline!” The PDA said, “This reset has been sponsored by Bobs Apples! Have a free apple on us!”

“No. No. No!” I found a way to stand up. The van sat in the roundabout with the engine and headlights on. I held the duffel bag and the box of money.

Everything looked the same as before we left our universe. Except, Mia was not there.

“Bob knows apples like how the sunset knows the Grand Canyon,” The PDA continued.

“Hey,” I heard a voice say. “Azami Chandler.”

I turned. The worker from the cabbage store stood on the sidewalk nearby.

“Yes. I am Aurore Chandler,” I answered.

“I’m here to pick up the duffel bag.” She rubbed her thumb across her fingers, waiting for me to comply. “Congrats on winning the shift.”

“Where’s Mia?” I said.

“Future Treats is not responsible for lost items. Hand over the bag please.”

I paused. “No. I want my friend back. And my other self. And everyone in the universe.”

“You should have picked better.” She grabbed the bag out of my hands. “Thank you for working for Future Treats.” She left.

What kind of sick game was this?

After rolling the van quietly back into the Ms. Kaye’s garage, I stepped out and put the keys in my pocket. I adjusted the money box. And then. Without thinking, I slammed the van door. Again. ‘Cause I can’t do a single thing right. But I wasn’t thinking. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t breathe.

Ms. Kay rushed from the kitchen, in the black night gown as she had before.

“Rory? What are you doing in my garage? With Bicana’s van? Where is Mia?”

I gasped. I thought to myself, *hold it together, Aurore. Hold it together. Mia is gone. There is a way to fix this.*

Wait. But other Ms. Kaye is dead.

I bit my lip to avoid crying.

“Aurore? Aurore, I need you to speak to me. What are you doing here?” The real Ms. Kaye said.

“I don’t know, I swear.”

“What happened?” She said. “What’s inside that box in your hand?”

I gave it to her. “You don’t have to go to work anymore. Mia wanted to make sure of that. She wanted this for you.”

“What do you mean?”

I choked. What do you do with that? This PDA sucks and Mia.. is gone? ‘Cause I’m dumb? And I choose this? But we got a free apple! There’s no chance of explaining that horrifying situation to any kind of normal person. But this wasn’t a normal thing going on.

She took a step towards me. “Is this some kind of prank? Sour milk in a locker is one thing, but this is theft. Kidnapping? We could press charges. How did you get in here? How did you get the keys, did you take them?”

I tried to think what to do next but... I had nothing. This is when I’d ask Mia what to do. But I couldn’t. I had an overwhelming thought. Had I ever known what to do on my own? Do I not make my own choices and stuff?

“Aurore?” Ms. Kaye looked at the strange object I held in my hands.

I thought long and hard, realizing I had to tell her. I had no other choice.

Or not.

I didn’t know what “or not” was at the time, but I picked it. To my shock though, pressing “start shift” on the screen did nothing. My finger jabbed at the start text over and over, trying to start a shift to go find her, to figure something out. It didn’t work. I stood there, in front of a very concerned and angry Ms. Kaye.

“I have to go. Keep the money.” I said.

“Where is she?” She asked.

I looked into her eyes. That’s where those specks came from.

“I’m sorry,”

Ms. Kaye ran after me as I left the open garage. I ran into the dark on foot, with nowhere to go.

I tried to sleep for a while in the park behind some bushes after everyone had left the glow party. Most of the time I lay there thinking about how Mia wasn’t coming to save me. Looking across the desert, I tried to count how many colors I could see as the sun rose. Not many. (My eyes also suck pretty bad.) I knew I should have been doing something to better my situation or whatever, but I didn’t. I sat there. Like Azami did. I kind of felt I understood them better. Even though how they had been living was. Iffy is a nice way to put it I guess.

I stood up from the ground. The light all flicked behind me and stuff. I headed to the bus stop down the street.

Episode 5 There are no Cupcakes.

Class chatter echoed through the halls of the school. Paper pumpkins and witches swayed on clips from the ceiling. It looked like a typical day. Most of the kids had been herded like cattle between classes already. I used my hands to comb my hair as I walked toward locker 88b. An ugly steel locker with chipped blue paint and vents so tiny it's hard to leave a note in it sat in front of me. We couldn't figure out how to get notes out, so we left a few of them. It blocked the sour milk and candy pumpkin smell from the outside world if nothing else.

I turned the combination to 01 24 75 and the locker creaked open. My nostrils flared at the sour smell as I picked up a CD case from inside. I flipped through the albums.

Next time I see you, I'll have a CD you like, I thought.

Mia wasn't gone. She's just not here. That's what I told myself, she was out there. In a dimension somewhere I couldn't reach. I needed to find a way to take another shift. I needed to bring her back.

From instinct I tried putting the CD case in my hoodie pocket, but I wasn't wearing my hoodie. The one thing that always comforted me, was now gone.

Something I didn't recognize lay on top of a bunch of crumpled notebook paper. I picked up the flier and pencil shavings fell out onto the laminate floor.

The flier read, "Hello, Winner! Come work with us again! Find an Elon's Cabbage to recharge your "P.D.A".

Why did the flier have quotes around "PDA"? My other self had called it a phone. Elon's cabbage was not a thing I ever remembered before any of this crazy stuff started happening. I assumed the location might be the same place as it was in 2022.

I dug around in the locker. I thought I had some onion dip chips in there, but I didn't.

"Aurore! You're supposed to be in class. Get going." I heard from behind me.

"Yeah. No, Ms. Trinity," I said. "I just got out of a job that devalues you as a person. That way they can take whatever they want from you. School didn't seem to work out for me either. So. I'm out."

A voice came across the intercom. "Aurore Chandler, please come to the front office."

I looked outside. Two police cars drove into the parking lot.

“Yup. I’m not doing that.” I said.

Ms. Trinity stood between me and the other exit. “You’re coming with me.”

“Like. No.” My fingers clenched around the CD case.

I kept walking. Ms. Trinity followed.

“Don’t take another step.” She said.

“Trust me, Ms. Trinity. What I’m dealing with right now, you do not want any part of.”

Ms. Trinity grabbed me by the arm. “Let’s go.”

“Can you like, not?” I ripped my arm out of her hold.

She came at me to grab my arm again, and I ran. All the way to the end of the hall. Our steps echoed. I reached the exit and pushed against the lever thing-y and I continued running.

I headed back towards the bus stop. Ms. Trinity stood, watching me run.

“It’s not working because you need to charge before you can take another shift.” The employee explained. I found the Future Treats sign up on Fremont Street. I recognize the employee as the woman from the rest point. She looked like she hadn’t slept in ages.

“You made money, right? If I made as much as you did? I’d invest it. Why would you take another shift?”

“Why haven’t you worked a shift?” I asked.

“You can’t take a job without facing an older or younger you. I couldn’t kill my future or past self. Having to look in my face and say “I’m here for the money Brooke?” I couldn’t do it to myself. Could you? Oh. Yeah. You could uh?””

Something in her eyes made me think she had often thought of this scenario. That's why her eyes froze. She brushed back the hair on her neck and went on.

"No thanks. Well, if you want another shift, I can charge the phone up for you. It's going to take a while though, like a minute." She shuffled papers on the desk before taking the PDA from my hands. With the flick of a wrist, she flung the phone over her shoulder, which clunked against a metal pan at the bottom of a bin.

"How do I find my friend?" I asked.

"You don't." The Future treats employees shrugged. "That dimension is destroyed. Gone. Everyone's dead. You can't go back to it."

"I. Killed everyone?" I said.

She nodded. I have no words to describe what I felt realizing the pain I caused. The loss. I put my feelings aside.

"They weren't in that dimension. She pressed the device at the same time as I did. She drifted into another. I don't know what. Somewhere far from me."

"You're talking about the light show after you get sucked in. Your friend is in another dimension. Did you restarted your device yet?" Brooke leaned in a little. Now interested. Her ears perked.

"I don't know what a restart is. The phone kept talking about cabbage."

"That's good. Kind of. Your odds of finding your friend in an identical dimension are better. But not great. The device looks at the recent locations in RAM to determine which data farm, or dimension, to send the worker to. It helps the delivery algorithm pick more stable universes."

The bin the lady had thrown my phone in lit up red. She frowned. "Actually, This phone's battery is toast and needs replaced. But when I cut the power, it kills the memory in the RAM. I can try to pull that dimensional location point from the RAM, but the data is fragile. Since it's stored in a temporary drive. The device generates incredible amounts of possible dimension location points. This fills up the temporary RAM fast. Sooner or later the device will find a confirmed real identical dimension. Companies buy this identical dimension point at auction, which goes for billions of dollars. So the phone spits out an insane number of tiny codes, looking for this confirmed IDP. Trying to find one of those where your friend might be is like finding a certain rock at the bottom of the ocean. Burnt toast I would say."

“You lost me way before the random toast part. Is the phone lightly toasted where it’s boring? Or burnt toast that sticks to the top of your mouth when you eat it?”

“It’s sticking to the top of your mouth, but do you want the toast or not?” She said. “Because you can start a shift on it, and you might be able to get back to the dimension your friend is in. But not on that phone’s battery. Not an eight-hour shift. Unluckily. I know a solution.” Brooke bit her lip. “It’s going to suck. Hold onto your butts.” Brooke typed something on my phone. “Are you sure you want this? If you do this, Future Treats can’t send anyone to save you.”

“I... I can’t leave her. I promised.” I said.

“A weak answer. For what you have to do. But. Sure. I’m going to switch some settings to help you out.... I ask one favor. On the condition that this works, I will present it to you at a later time. Is this acceptable?” She asked.

“Anything.” I said.

She shrugged. After doing more typing, she handed the phone back to me. “Deal. It’s gonna suck. The phone only charges halfway. You can’t replace batteries or recharge when you’ve started a shift. I’ve helped your odds by changing some settings and cutting the shift in half, but you’re going to be cutting it close. I would avoid checking your cabbage feed, but don’t tell them I told you. And don’t pay for verification. In my opinion, it’s a scam.”

I squeezed the PDA so tight my hands turned white. “I’ll figure something out. Thanks, Brooke.” I said. I walked out of the store and back out onto the busy strip.

I sat on the bus listening to a screamo metal band on the cd player, cranked to 10. The bus jostled back and forth as I held onto the handrail. Looking out the window, I saw row after row of stucco housing until finally I saw Mia’s house. At the stop, I jumped off the bus onto the pavement.

After taking a deep breath I looked towards the house. How would I find Mia after I started the shift? A feeling of dread came over it. I didn’t know if I would come back. I didn’t know if I should come back. But I wasn’t going to leave her.

“Here we go.” I walked closer to the house. I started to press “Start Shift.”

But the door opened. I stood face-to-face with Ms. Kaye.

“What are you doing here, Rory?” Ms. Kaye looked down at my shirt pocket, which held Mia’s CD case. “Where did you get that?” She asked.

“I’m going to get her. She’s going to be back real soon. I’ve got this.” My fingers were red as I gripped the phone.

“Tell me!” She screamed.

My shoulders hung. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“You’re hiding something.” She said.

I could hardly speak. “My future self got involved in a stupid time travel scam. We earned a bunch of money. For you. For us. I beat myself over the head with cabbage. But we couldn’t take everything we won. Mia didn’t make it out. But I’m going back to get her.”

“I don’t think you’re well,” she said. Actually, that’s not what she said. I won’t say what she said but you get the idea.

“It’s the truth, Ms. Kaye. I messed up, but I can fix it.”

“Tell me the truth!” She made a mad dash towards me, charging at me as if I were a rodeo clown.

I pressed “Start shift.”

The PDA sounded up like a roaring dial-up, a noise it hadn’t made before. On the top right of the screen, a battery icon flashed. The picture showed the battery less than half full.

“THIS will be the reset point you will return to!” The device reminded me. Ms. Kaye grabbed my shirt and pulled me towards her.

I tried to run but she wouldn’t let me go. The PDA swirled and pattered.

I screamed. “Get away from me!”

Confetti burst out of the device and landed on the ground. The ‘cosmic light show’ Brooke had talked about began. My vision went black. My stomach got sick.

Something grabbed at me. My eyes adjusted as I turned. Ms. Kay and I both drifted towards the dimension. Together.

I found myself at the entrance of Mia's house again. Arriving in the new identical dimension. The doorknob wouldn't turn, no matter how hard I pushed. I turned to a stunned Ms. Kaye, who stood on the lawn with her jaw dropped. Well, I guess as if she had time traveled.

Something began to play through the phone. "THANK YOU for choosing to work for Future Treats! This shift has been sponsored by New Dip Fun Burgers! We changed the recipe and dipped the fun back into our burgers! 2 for 20 bucks but order now and get a 3rd for only 10 dollars more! MUST SIGN WAIVER TO EAT FUN DIP BURGER, NO REFUNDS, ALL CRIMES COMMITTED IN AN IDENTICAL PARALLEL UNIVERSE ARE DEEMED IMAGINARY BY LAW IN THE U.S."

"I don't know who's inside the house, but I need your help!" I began pounding on the door. Hoping. I kicked so hard I lost feeling in my bare feet. "Someone!"

"Aurore!" Ms. Kaye cried running to me. "Why did I get teleported a few inches away from where I was?"

"It's a new identical dimension. I need one of us to understand what's going on here Ms. Kaye! We can't both be clueless." I kept pounding.

The door opened. Hand braces rattled. It was Mia. Kind of. This girl wore about seventy million necklaces around her neck as if it were the coolest thing ever. Her long blonde hair hung below her shoulders.

"Ewww," she said. "Are you Aurore's sibling or something?"

"What year is it?" I asked.

"What year is it?" Ms. Kaye interjected. "It's 2002, what do you mean what year is it?"

Jr. High Mia looked at me in confusion. Her right hand gripped around strains of hair as if it were a Tamagotchi. She squinted. "Is that you, Mom? Why are you here? You're supposed to be in Phoenix for two weeks. You look tired."

"Thanks." Ms. Kaye said. "I haven't had to travel to Phoenix for business since... 1998." Ms. Kaye started to put the pieces together.

Jr. High Mia looked at her older mother confused. “Um... Yeah, you do. You go all the time. You get fired?” Jr. High Mia asked. “Are you taking me to the party?!”

“1998 was so long ago,” I told Ms. Kaye.

“Why is younger Mia standing in my house?”

“There’s only one of me?” The teen tugged at her own hair. “I don’t get it. Why is everyone freaking out?”

“Sure,” I said, trying not to confuse her. I guess that was a confusing response, but whatever. I walked away from the front door and pulled out the PDA. How did I end up in 1998? It didn’t matter. Maybe she would be in the year this all started. I didn’t know how things worked, and I didn’t care.

I found an order from 2002 and tapped on it to accept it.

The device spoke. “Error. 5c23wy0u. Dimensional jump mode enabled. Please authenticate and explain the rules of the shift to your other self before accepting an order.”

Ms. Kaye gawked. “What have you gotten us into Aurore?”

“Aurore?” Little Mia asked.

My lips sucked inward in confusion. “Authenim... authenimate... what am I doing?”

The device showed a picture of two PDAs held together, with a heart between them. “Authenticate” Which like, gross, right?

“I don’t have another PDA,” I cried. “Oh my god, I don’t have another PDA to authenimate with.”

Little Mia looked at me with her hands on her hips. “Why did Mom call you Aurore?”

“Um... Call me... Azami or something, I don’t know. That’ll make it easier.” I said.

There had to be a way to locate another device. There had to be a way to make this crazy situation work. But what was I going to do with Ms. Kaye? I couldn’t get myself and Mia out of the reset point. How was I going to get both of them out? Trying not to think about it, I searched the phone trying to figure out some way to get out of this mess. I found something.

“Find my phone!” I blurted out loud. Remembering something. “My future self used Find my phone to find us at the stadium. Maybe I can find the dimension Mia is in that way.”

Little Maria looked at me. “I’m right here? That’s a hella weird thing to say to someone.”

I ignored her. I heard footsteps behind me. She looked over my shoulder. “Where is my Mia? A-zam-mi?”

“PHONE FOUND!” The device said.

I screamed. I heeled over and hit my hands on my shins, which by the way I held the PDA in that hand. That hurt, but I stomped my foot on the ground, repeatedly. Ms. Kaye and the youngling backed away.

“That’s my address,” I pointed. “It’s my mom’s address. My home. Oh...”

Little Mia’s all like “Can someone tell me what’s going on?”

Before I could figure out what to say, a familiar van drove into the driveway.

“Maria!” The woman yelled from inside the van. She honked the horn and killed the engine. The tall woman who stepped out looked to be in her late twenties, muscular, with dark hair, and wore large round sunglasses. She stopped and turned to me.

“What you looking at?” The famous aunt Bianca glared at me.

“Just enjoying the sunset,” I held my breath. I’m not sure what I meant, there was no sunset.

“Audrey?” Bianca asked seeing Ms. Kaye making her way into the house. She stood next to her niece, putting both of her hands on her shoulder. “Why aren’t you in Phoenix? You finally quit?”

“I need everyone in the house. We need to talk. We have a problem.” Ms. Kaye turned to me.
“Aurore, give me the death device you are holding. Turn it off.”

I stepped back. “I can’t. That’s the only way I can find Mia.”

“More people are going to get hurt.” She begged. “Please. Give me the phone.”

I panicked.

“I can’t. I promised you something in another dimension. And I messed up. But I’m going to keep trying until I get it right. Trust me, Ms. Kaye.”

I sprinted to the van, started the engine with my keys, and backed out of the driveway. I floored the gas and raced away from the house. Leaving everyone on the lawn behind.

As the hippie van sped down the road, I couldn’t help but wonder. How could I fix this now?

When I went inside my own house, I could see my mother lying on the sofa in the living room. She laid in the same spot she had when I left her in 2002. She narrowed her eyes at me. I hadn’t realized how much I looked like my mom. She almost looked like a younger Azami if that makes any sense.

“Well,” I whispered. “Hi, Mom.”

She tried to sit up. “Who are you?”

“You should drink some water.” I said.

Before going upstairs, I stopped in the kitchen. All the dishes were dirty, and the dishwasher hung open, half-loaded. I cleaned a glass and then filled it with water. I walked over my mom. The big TV playing at full volume. My mom took it, to my surprise.

“Why are you in my house?” She asked, taking a sip of water.

“I’m here for Aurore.”

“Okay,” She drank the rest of the glass of water and put it on the floor.

I shook my head in disappointment. “Thanks, Mom.”

I went up the stairs and into my old room. I cringed at the sight of all the papers on the wall, held up by thumbtacks. They were poems I had written that I thought were amazing. They ended up in the trash a few years later.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something move. Someone standing on a chair, looking into a mirror I had kept on an old dresser.

No. Freaken. Way. There I stood: fifteen-year-old me. Yawning, with a sweatshirt inside out. Confetti scattered through the floor as the fan spun above.

“Why are you wearing a sweatshirt?” I asked. “It’s hot out.”

“Why are you wearing like no clothes?” Rory asked, stepping down. “Who are you?” They took their headphones off. My, as in ‘Rory’s’, hair, looked awful. They had cut it short, and their bangs stuck up. Like they were conducting weather experiments. Little me looked like I hadn’t washed my face in weeks, which I bet I hadn’t.

“The hell you do to your hair!” I yelled.

“I cut it. I found some photos of someone who looked like me but older on the U-pad and decided to cut it like them.” They said.

I had NEVER and would NEVER cut my hair. And oh my god, did I sound like that??

“Doesn’t matter.” I said. “I need whatever thing you got in a package. The one that shot out confetti.”

“You can’t have my U-pad. It has games on it.” They said.

I’m like “There’s games on here? Never mind, I need that phone now.”

“You’re not the boss of me. Get out of my house.” Rory said.

“I am the boss of you, I am you,”

“Ewww. No. Why do you look like that?” They said.

“Like what? There’s no time for this Rory. You don’t get a choice.” I started looking through the room, through all the garbage I used to collect I used to call my things.

“Where is the PDA?” I said.

“I’m not giving it to you!” Rory clenched both fists.

I ducked down to look under my bed. Something hit the back of my head. I turned around. There Rory stood, holding a math book above their heads.

“Kid! The hell?” I yelled. “They charge you a lot for leaving marks on textbooks.”

“I’m hitting you with something heavier if you don’t leave right now!” Rory yelled.

“Listen to me. You let me authemniate with you, and I’ll do anything you want. I got a van. We can go anywhere. Do anything.” I took a step back. “Anything.”

Rory looked at me.

At first, Rory hesitated to get into the van. But after I reminded them of the ice cream, they got in and fastened their seat belts. It kinda sucked. I was that gullible but I always kind of knew.

“What should I call you?” Little me asked.

“Azami,” I shrugged. Who cares what they call me? They weren’t going to be there for much longer.

Rory looked at me. “I can’t say that name. It’s hard.”

“It’s not hard. A. Za. Mi.”

“Okay. A,” Rory peeked out the window and began counting light posts.

“Cool, kid,” I sighed. Close enough.

Kids ran everywhere at Sweet Scoops. What I thought would be a short stop for ice cream looked like it would take a lot more time. Time I didn’t have. I could sucker the gullible kid into authemniateing a different way. I looked at the PDA battery level and tried not to think about it too much.

“Sorry,” I heard the woman say from behind the counter. “We’re closed for a birthday party.”

“We’ll go somewhere else, kid. Let’s go.” I motioned them back outside.

“Aurory!” I knew the sugary sweet voice. I turned my head and there she was: freaking Sally Lewis. She sat at a table in her cheerleading uniform. eating a sundae with other kids sitting around a bunch of presents.

This was the party I didn’t go to three years ago. That little psychopath had tricked me. I remember laying around all day upset that day. But Rory looked happy. This didn’t feel like the same dimension, yet it had to be.

A woman stood up from her cake.

Sally reached out with her arms. She smiled wide. “Sit down, Mom. I apologized in the invitation Mia gave them. Aurory, come and have some cake! It’s German chocolate!”

I never got an invitation to Sally Lewis's' birthday party. We had a fight over it. Mia never gave me anything.

I turned to Rory, but Sally had run across the room. She hugged them. Rory didn’t move. Their eyes widened like a cat getting too much affection and not knowing what to do.

“The hell you doing, Sally?” I asked. “You hate me.”

“I don’t know you?” She asked, hugging Rory still. She had a smile on half her face and a frown on the other it seemed.

“Right, look we can go somewhere else,” I said.

“Please don’t go!” Sally cried. “We’re playing table pool, then having cake, and...”

“Can you let go of me, please?” Rory wiggled their way out of Sally’s death grip.

She bounced up and down on her toes and grabbed Rory’s hand. “What kind of ice cream do you want? They got Strawberry Blast-ro-naut! Pieces o’ Cookies n Cream!” She started listing off all the flavors they had at the store.

“The hell?” I said.

I heard Rory shout from across the store. “Hey! Ass Amy! What kind of ice cream do you want?”

“Azami.” I winced. “The coconut and chocolate Surprise.”

Rory shot me a look. "Eww."

"They don't have it!" Sally yelled.

"They have it! Second to the bottom left by the... Oh right. 1998, Um. I'll take whatever Rory has." I said.

Sally waved and pointed to the corner of the ice cream display: "Cookie dough Da-no-delight!"

With all my soul I tried not to say anything. "Thanks, Sally."

I took a seat near one of the mothers in the booth. Rory walked over to me holding two giant ice cream cones with sprinkles. Sally, who didn't finish her sundae, walked with them, smiling. They came to me.

"I'm glad we came," Rory sat next to me. I shifted towards the wall so Sally could join us.

"You got enough room, Rory?" Sally asked waddling in.

I couldn't hold it any longer. "They threw you up against a tree, Sally. What are you..."

Sally shrugged. "That happened last week. I was wrong. I should have left Mia out of our fight. No big. It's okay to make mistakes." She took a giant bite of ice cream. "I'm glad you showed up. I didn't think you'd ever talk to me again."

In the "real world" I had not ever talked to Sally again. I coughed. "Think I need something to drink."

Rory laughed at my discomfort. My jaw dropped. There I was. Smiling. Not a depressed smile, a real one. Grinning from ear to ear. Joyed to be around people. They started talking about some kids' new trapper keeper. A feeling came over me that I didn't know how to describe as I watched them interact, like a normal kid. Eating ice cream and telling silly stories about floppy disk drives failing with their homework lost on it.

"Can you stop looking at me?" Rory finally asked me, with a disgusted look. "It's creeping me out."

I ignored myself and thought about how that me wouldn't get to experience life after the shift. There was no way to bring Mia back without winning the job. I had to kill that younger version

of myself. That's a thought that turned my stomach. I had already made my choice. There was no going back now.

I pushed my younger self out of the booth, intending to go find something to drink to take the pain away. But Sally scooted back.

Bianca stood at the end of the table, smiling at me. Not a good smile.

“Stay there a moment. Tell me about your van.” Aunt Bianca stood, crossed armed with the family wild bear eyes. Little Mia “Maria” stood next to her. “Tell me about the sunset.”

“Where’s my invitation, Maria?” Rory asked little Maria. Which was not a cool thing to do in front of Bianca.

“I gave it to you. At lunch on Friday.” Maria looked down.

“You didn’t!” Rory shouted.

“What would you know!” Maria shoved Rory.

Episode 6 The Reset

Leaning in towards the booth, Aunt Bianca chewed gum, holding Maria back. Sally gently stood in front of Rory, who tried swinging after the water fountain bully.

“Want to talk about your little joy ride with my van, sunset?” Biacana said to me with the palms of her hands lying flat on the table. “You wake up and decide it’s a nice sunny day for grand theft auto?”

“Mom wants us all back at the house. To figure this out,” Maria said, holding the side of her bloody nose.

“That’s my van,” I stated.

Bianca's lips jerked out. She started to yell “Ex-Fu...” Bianca stopped and looked at Sally who smiled, looking happy to be there.

She chose nicer words: “What did you say?”

I turned around, looking out the window behind me. There in the parking lot sat the van. I noticed something else: a tiny crack on the lower part of the window above my head. I looked back and saw Rory holding their PDA. I moved my pocket computer thing as close to theirs as I could.

“Authenticated! Data transferred! Future Treats assets secure!” It said.

Data transferred? I hoped nothing on the rammy chip got moved and I had a chance to track the real Mia still.

“Turn your pager off. We got some talking to do.” Bianca spoke to me as if I were some lawyer’s personal assistant.

I grabbed Rory’s cell phone with my left hand and ripped it out. My right hand jabbed into the glass, PDA side up. I totally was going to break the window.

“That’s not how that works.’ Bianca laughed at me.

I shoved the table towards Bianca as hard as I could. Rory and Sally scooted away from me. The mothers at the table nearby stood up.

Bianca rushed at me. I climbed my way up on the table bench and jumped over my past Jr. high self. I spirited out of sweet scoops, holding on to the items in my hands with dear life. I made for the exit.

I took the keys out of my shirt pocket with my right hand and opened the door. The keys turned smooth in the ignition and the engine started. With the van in reverse, I stomped on the gas and turned as hard left as I could. I shifted into drive and floored it once again.

As I grabbed the steering wheel with my right hand, I noticed I held something. The wrong PDA, Rory's PDA. I stopped the van and leaped out. I ran back towards my own device.

Bianca, Maria, Rory, and Sally, along with most of the rest of the party, ran out of the building. Bianca ran to the exit and stood in the middle of the road. Rory held my old time travel machine.

"I don't want to do this," I said. I ran as fast as I could to the dimension death device, but I looked up. My eyes locked with Biancas, who made a mad dash for the van. I couldn't make it, and I did not want to get in a fistfight with that woman. I turned back and ran to the van, shutting the door and raced out of the parking lot.

I drove down the road. Screaming and cursing at the steering wheel. "Why couldn't you have held onto it?!" I yelled at myself.

I took a breath. The smell of the van clogged up my nose a little, but I kept trying. I looked at the phone.

The edge of the Rory's phone had cracked. As I tried not to not freak out with a full on panic attack. I had to turn back into my lane before I hitting a curb.

"One hour until the end of the shift!" The death device buzzed. I glanced again and saw a message written on the screen. This shift is a 4-hour shift, due to Future Treat minor worker labor practices."

"Brook?!" I yelled. My hand hit the steering wheel. I guess she did tell me this would suck. This wasn't what I wanted.

The phone went on. "Aurore's voice recognized. Would you like to load your profile and your last known RAM image?"

"YES!" I shouted. Then I remembered what the Future Treats employee said. If the rammy chip had to be unloaded it was over. Burnt toast. "No!" I corrected it.

“Ram profile loaded.”

You ever had a moment when you lost all control of your senses and feelings? I had one of those moments on the freeway. I had to devalue myself to escape, and I never was going to see Mia again either. I couldn’t even feel the wheel in my hands.

The van tires hit the curb as I pulled over to park near a quiet side street. I rammed my head into the steering wheel and screamed into the void.

Brook changed the settings on my shift so that I would have 4 hours to save Mia. And I couldn’t do it. I was screwed. My only chance was to somehow beat my younger self and to go back, to take on another shift. *But how?*

“The duffel bag!” I shouted.

I backed into the ridiculous cabbage store and turned off the engine. The timer on the phone dwindled to minutes remaining on the shift.

Inside, Brook stood where she had last time, reading the handbook.

“You know, you could get the money first,” She chuckled. “Your older you never figured that out. Your shift ends soon. Better get that bag, so our plan will work.”

“How could you know?” I asked. I speed walked towards the back of the store. “Why are you always here?”

“I’m always working,” She deadpanned. “Living large.”

I went to the room the bag had once been in before. In a different identical dimension that is.

“Oh,” Brook remembered. “Your younger self is here.”

The fluorescent lights in the back room were so bright they hurt my eyes. My younger self stood in front of me. Holding the Future Treats duffel bag of money.

“Please,” Rory begged. “Don’t tell me you also thought of taking the bag and hiding it so you had more time to figure out what to do.”

“Yeah, Kid,” I lied. “That’s pretty smart. How did you learn about this? About what is going on?”

“I talked to Ms. Kaye,” Rory pulled on the bag around their shoulders.

“How would she know anything?” I asked. “She wasn’t with us.”

“Why didn’t you tell me one of us is going to die?” Rory backed away.

The box of money. I had left the money with Ms. Kaye when I returned from the other shift. She must have gone looking for Elon’s cabbage. But why was Sally here?

“I’m trying to do what’s best for everyone. Those choices are hard,” I said.

“You suck at making them,” Rory jeered.

“I know. You’re supposed to keep messing everything up until you get everything right.”

“You’re not getting this money.” Sally handed Rory a cabbage.

Something happened. At first, it felt like I had been hit in the back head with a wet pillow. I rubbed my neck where I felt chunks of cabbage. I turned around.

I had the right to be hurt, but instead I sighed. I turned around to face Ms. Kaye. Holding a head of cabbage over her. I closed my eyes, “Hey Ms. Kaye.”

She lowered the cabbage. “Hey, Aurore. Or Azammi. Whatever.”

“I’m trying so hard to do the right thing. I’m trying to get her back. I wish you’d help me.”

“You’re in it for yourself. Brook told us everything. You can’t do this. Not like this.” She said, hurt.

Rory could see the pained expression on my face. “I’m not in this for myself.”

I leaped towards Rory, who now made a mad dash with Sally towards the back exit. Rory had almost made it out, but the bag snagged on the door frame. They tried to clear the frame but it wouldn’t let go. I grabbed the bag and pulled.

The phone DINGED. “Shift over! Get to the Reset Point!”

Sally grabbed onto Rory, and then onto the bag. They pulled together.

“Why is Sally here?” I yelled. I felt another soft hit to the back of my head.

“Can you stop hitting me with Cabbage, Ms. Kaye?” I yelled. “You’re making a mistake.” I pulled. The bag broke free.

Before I could plant my back foot to run, Rory bear tackled me, knocking me back. I reached to push them off of me, but they pushed my hands away, causing me to lose my grip on the bag.
BUT I GRABBED MY PHONE BACK!

On the floor, I rolled as hard as I could away. Years of stop, drop, and roll in elementary school had finally paid off. My elbows banged on the floor, leaving my skin raw and burning. I didn’t care. I pulled out the phone and found an order as fast as I could. I backed away.

A message appeared on the screen. “Ram transferred. Travel to dimension 07827534?”

I hit confirm so hard my finger jammed. It was over, but I might as well cling to hope. That was my thinking.

The phone spoke in a different, calming voice. “Confirmed, Rory! Traveling to dimension 07827534!” It said.

Rory dashed at me, but I backed away in time for the phone to take me away.

I fell hard to the ground, blinking. The store looked more modern than it had in the other dimension.

I heard a voice from the other room. “Got both the phones uh?”

“You bet!” I yelled.

“Nice,” Brooke crooned.

“Welcome to 2002! Special code successful! A similar dimension that matched your request has been loaded. This dimensional jump has been sponsored by Pet Escort Services! Let our escorts

walk your pets for you while you make deliveries! Doesn't matter the pet, we'll take care of them! Pet Escort Services. We know our way around town. Click on the PDA now to learn more! Two hundred roses."

I didn't know if Mia was safe, or where she was. I had no way of knowing.

I gasped. "Find my phone."

"Now you're getting this." Brooke encouraged, not looking up from her desk.

I had to take a bus to get to Mia's house. But since I had both phones, no one would get out of any universe. Finally arriving back at the Kaye house I yelled and made whatever noise I could, hoping someone would come to the door.

The door opened. There was that curly side part and an instant eye roll. She wore an oversized t-shirt with a pocket, no pants, and no shoes. As if she had just arrived.

"Aurore?" She spoke softly in that wonderful sarcastic voice crying. "I am so happy to see you. How did you get here?"

"I don't know how to tell you." I said. "The cabbage lady got me here. Mia. You're right. I need to stop beating myself up. Because at the end of the day, I'm all I have, and I'm no good if I'm all black and blue. I can do things. Like finding a way to see you again. I can live without you. But I don't want to. I'm going to hug you. If you'll let me," I told her.

"I was wrong," She said, crossing her arms. "Back at the reset point. I shouldn't have pushed you like that." She shifted, leaning against the frame. She looked to the side. " You punched a hole in my wall and are about to kill an entire universe's worth of people. But I don't want to live without you either."

I tackle-hugged her so hard. I held my face close to hers, holding onto her with my everything.

"I want to learn how to function. With you." I said. "I lost you. It's hard to explain but I lost myself too. And now I'm here and we are going to have to act now. Together."

"What's wrong?" She asked, concerned.

“I don’t know how this is going to end.” I almost whispered, holding down the trauma. “The next choice we make is going to be hard. Like Brooke said. But we need to go. And you got to trust me. For once. Not to slam the door. Or drop the phone. And we have to tie up your mother.”

“What?” She asked.

“You also lied to me about Sally Lewis’s birthday party. She totally did invite me.”

“No she totally didn’t,” She looked down and away.

“I’ll explain at some other time. Our time. We need to get to the reset point to take back the duffel bag so we can escape.”

“Steal back the duffel bag? From whom? Your future you? Why are we tying up my mom?” Mia walked alongside me.

“It’s okay, she hit me with cabbage. Everyone is trying to do the right thing here.” I canceled my order in 2002, taking another one in 1998, back in the other universe.

“Hug me,” I leaned in for approval. She did.

I hit confirm. The phone took us back for one last shot at getting things back to normal.

“Welcome to 1998! This dimensional jump has been sponsored by Jim Bob shaving cream! Jim Bob shaving cream gives you a close shave every time. About. Now comes in three distinct edible flavors! Raspberry, Lemon, and extra whipped. Try some on your favorite dessert!”

The phone buzzed. “Shift over! Please return to the reset point to return home with your winnings!”

We heard a thump from upstairs. Like someone walking across the floor.

“That’s from my room,” Mia said loudly.

We ran upstairs. The locked room was not a Mia thing. I thought I heard voices and faint whispers of breathing.

“They didn’t leave the bag here, did they?” I asked.

“Mia!” Ms. Kaye yelled from the other side of the door.

“Get the bag!” I yelled, charging inside. Mia went after her Jr. High self. I held my hands to my pockets to protect the phones. Rory and Ms. Kaye charged at me. Sally stood in the corner, watching.

I realized what was happening. I ducked. Bianca swung a baseball bat. She swung at my knees, missing as I pushed my hips back away. Rory threw a head of cabbage, wacking me in the face.

“Got it!” Mia yelled. She ran for the exit behind Bianca. She swung the bat downwards, missing Mia probably on purpose. I dashed by Rory and pulled Ms. Kaye to the other side of the door. I slammed it shut as hard as I could using all my weight. I pulled out the phone.

A message appeared on the screen: “Weight limit increased. Please return company property.”

I heard my younger self cry out. It got quiet.

“No!” Ms. Kaye reached for the knob.

“Mom! Don’t!” Mia shouted. Ms. Kaye pulled on the door against us.

“Mom!” Maria pounded on the wood from the other side. “Let me out!”

I heard my own voice. “Please! Please don’t do this, Azami. I don’t deserve this. Please! Why do you get to live and I don’t?”

“I’m sorry kid. It’s the job. Only one of us can get out. It sucks, but I’ve got to go.” I pressed harder door.

“If we are going to do this, we need to do this now.” Mia said.

“Let them out!” Ms. Kaye pleaded with me.

“There’s no other way, We need the three of us to get out of here. That’s the only way we can return things to normal. There are countless dimensions out there, there’s other uses. None of them will feel pain.”

“But I will!” Rory screamed.

I paused. Maria and Bianca kept pounding, kicking at the wood, trying to move us out of the way to escape. I pulled up the other phone. The other phone had the same message.

My eyes closed. I thought about the last time I saw my older self. The look on their face. There I was. Taking everything out on myself again. Hoping by doing it things would get better. Again.

Have you ever had a moment you realized you had to do something hard? I had that moment. And I decided to face it.

“Enough.’ I stood. Mia stumbled up, baffled. I walked away and threw down my phone. The door opened. “Okay little one.” I let Rory walk to me. “If you have a better plan. I’ll go with it. I don’t need to fix all my mistakes.”

The duffle bag issued an audible warning. “Reset and return the company property now. Or face the consequences.”

“The young ones should get out.” Biacna said. “Older one’s stay behind.”

Mia grabbed my hand and squeezed. We nodded. Rory, Maria and Sally stood together by the bed. Maria had the money bag.

We stood back towards the corner of the room near the ‘screaming labrums’ band posters, huddling together.

Rory’s finger hovered over the screen. They looked at Sally and Maria.

The duffle bag buzzed. An alarm sounded.

“Get going. Go make a bunch of mistakes.’ I waved.

The three stood in what felt like a photo. Not moving. Not blinking. Not breathing. The noise in the bag grew louder.

“Go on Rory.” Ms. Kaye said.

Rory and Maria looked to each other.

Maria sighed. “Don’t do it.” She said. “They’re dumb.”

“I know. Mia!” Rory snapped. They threw the phone. “You adults act like you’re all smart. I think secretly none of you have a clue what you are doing. How is this going to solve anything?”

“RETURN COMPANY PROPERTY NOW!” The bag roared.

“Rory, you’re going in.” I put the phone back in their hand. “You’re resetting.”

We heard a voice from the other room. “Hello! I’ve let myself in.”

Brook appeared from the hallway, wearing a tie and black slacks. She put one hand in one pocket and put the other hand on her hip. We found ourselves backing further into Mia’s room. Bianca picked up the baseball bat.

“You’re in the wrong house.” Bianca patted the metal with her palm.

“Nonsense. I’m here for my favor.” Brooke said.

Rory gasped.

“This is an uncharted dimension. No one can find us here,” Brooke said. “So I want... wait. Why is everyone standing around the phone and the duffel bag? You weren’t. You weren’t going to reset were you? The realization hit in and you realized you didn’t have to end the world? I hinted pretty hard, I said we had a plan. Are all the phones on airplane mode so we can let the batteries drain out?”

We all looked at each other. Rory and little Mia shook their heads at us.

“Yeah that’s what we did.” I lied, putting the phone into airplane mode. “1998 is cool. We can hang out here.” We breathed out collectively a sigh of relief.

“Most employees don’t figure out the whole Future Treats scam falls apart if you don’t do anything.” Brooke said. “No offense. But it took you a long time to figure that out. Anyways. I take some money from the bag and a few USB drives as part of the favor. The thing will run out of power after 48 hours. I’d put it in a noise proof room until then. I’ll have to hang out for a while, since I have nowhere to go. With that in mind, where is the bathroom?”

Sally pointed Brooke towards the bathroom while Bianca helped find whatever she could to silence the bag.

I realized Brooke didn't tell me about the plan because the phone was recording us in a chartered dimension. Now it didn't matter. She could have said something later, though I'm not how her shift worked.

I faced my youngerself. "I'm going to learn to be cooler to you. I'm not beating you up anymore, from here on out I am your friend. We might not get along, but I promise I will fight for you. I don't know how. But I'll learn."

Rory paused. "I don't know how to respond to that." They whispered.

"I want a sonnet."

"No." Rory nodded their head.

"So no one is dying?" Bianca asked.

Mia tackle-hugged her, and then me. She buried her face in my cheek. I squeezed her back.

I woke up like I did most mornings when living at the Kaye's house. Though I wasn't wearing my emotional support hoodie I'd never be able to replace. Well, I could if I went to the same store and bought the same hoodie in the same year but it wouldn't be the same. Though I felt off, I felt that since I accidentally killed everyone in an entire universe I shouldn't complain. I'm not proud of everything I've done. If I had better information at the time I would have acted differently. That's how hindsight works, I'm learning. Sometimes our mistakes hurt others. But we didn't kill everyone in this one, so I'll keep doing the best I can.

I made my way downstairs super early and made a full pot of coffee to start off the new routine. Rory sat at the counter, already up with their suitcases packed. Their hair stuck up worse than normal, but they didn't seem to care.

"You can make coffee, you know," I reminded them. That wasn't always a thing when the other me lived at home. I have no idea if young me should be drinking coffee either, but that didn't stop me at that age so I let it be. But our mom had started getting better after she took a part-time shift at FuKuYu family market. Dr. Tanaka opened a few years early after we told her what happened. Rory lives with me, but we tried to go visit when mom wants to see us. We're all getting there.

The coffee pot clanked. I poured Rory a cup.

“I’m putting milk in mine,” Rory said.

“That’s fine,” I sighed. They poured milk into their cup and began to drain the entire sugar container. I got annoyed, watching them use all the sugar in the house. Sure, we have more money than we know what to do with. But we’re figuring out our ‘laundry’ arrangement with the store. So we can pay taxes and spend our money. I didn’t want to go buy more sugar. I wanted to say something about being wasteful. But then I saw how my younger self smiled. In the morning. I didn’t shake my head. I left it alone.

Mia entered the room. Rory opened the fridge door to put back the milk. They turned to the waking bear. They tried to gently close the door. But it fell out of their hands and slammed shut.

“I’m s...” Rory began to mumble.

“Thank you for trying.” An annoyed Mia said. Little Maria walked down the stairs, with an equal hate of existence. She sat next to her older self.

I poured another cup and handed it to Mia. She sat in silence, eyes squinted, hair ruffled for a couple of minutes. She continuously checked her cup with her hand. When the coffee had cooled, she took a sip. She turned to me and smiled.

“Sally will be here soon. Her parents are dropping her off for the trip. I need to talk to Ms. Kaye we go.” I said.

I poured one last cup of coffee. I messed up Mia’s hair with my free hand and headed upstairs.

Knocking on the bedroom door, coffee mug in hand, Ms. Kaye said. “Come in.”

I brought the coffee mug in and sat it the nightstand. She stood in front of the dresser, packing a suitcase for our trip.

“You said you wanted to talk to me last night, Ms. Kaye?” I said.

“Yeah. I’m finishing up packing. I’m going to try to call Bianca before she takes off to meet us.”

“Nervous about driving? Or meeting your past self for the first time? My first time didn’t go well for me.”

“Yup.” She zipped up a large suitcase. “And New York is far. But she. I. She needed time to think.”

“We have time,” I said.

“Can you. Talk to. Myself for me? And tell her everything that happened? Because. I’m not sure I put it into words okay. Our first phone call did not go well. We fought over the house.”

“I can try.” I said.

She looked back up. “Are you worried? Is the company going to come after you? For not returning the duffel bag with the money?” Ms. Kaye asked.

“After the death devices powered off, Mia and I buried them. They can’t find us here.” I said.

The doorbell rang.

“That must be Sally.” Ms. Kaye frowned. I laughed at this.

We both headed to the living room. Sally’s parents, and Brooke from the cabbage store, helped bring in two large suitcases. I walked behind Mia and rested my head on hers.

“How long are we going to stay at the park??” Sally asked, all excited.

Rory was like, “As long as we want.”

“Dips on the front seat,” Brooke stuck up her finger.

I put my hand on Mia’s shoulder.

“I told you things were going to get better,” I said. I decided to eat breakfast while everyone got ready. I took one of the home baked cupcakes from a container on the counter and took a bite.

Mia stole a bite from the other side.

And that’s how I finally learned to live with myself. Not that it’s easy. Rory and I can’t agree on anything but I guess that’s how things go. Mia and Maria pretend the other doesn’t exist. I bet it’ll get easier for them.

Meeting yourself for the first time is strange. And you might find yourself saying things you don't mean. Rory won't stop saying "I'd never do that." It's confusing but we'll make it. And so will you two. Just take it easy on yourself.

Oh. Had you thought about what you wanted to call yourself, 'other' Ms. Kaye?

THE END

Saku of the Skull Talkers

By M.p Temple ©



Cover by Moryssa Block ([Instagram](#))

Saku of the Skull Talkers
Episode 1

Sakura Tomodachi had spent the morning by the river, filling a silo with buckets of river water. The other villagers had worked for weeks on an irrigation system to help with the recent drought but had run into problems with some of the local wildlife. So they elected the poor Saku to fill up the wooden water bin while the others kept the area safe.

"I'm tired of this. Curse the conquerors." Saku said to herself. Her hands were cold from the river but her face was warm from a heat not expected in a coastal village. She looked to the top of the foothill at the container, relieved that the work was almost complete. By the next day all the water would be gone, sent off in bamboo tubes to the thirsty green tea plants on the slopes below. Then she'd start out the next morning, refilling the bin. Until told otherwise, that would be her life.

"If you think you are tired now, I have bad news." A voice came from behind Saku. A woman approached, wearing a dark cloak complete with a quiver of arrows and a long black stained bow that hung on her shoulders. She squinted into the sun at the water silo. "And be thankful the conquerors took over, and stopped us from eating those crazy blossoms. Can you imagine if we all still wandered around talking to those dead things all the time?"

"Easy for you to say, Mibu." Saku pressed and cooled her forehead with her still cold hands.
"You haven't had to carry water up the mountain all morning."

Mibu shook her head. "No, I haven't. I've been on duty on the outskirts. Defending the village. Actually doing something that was asked of us."

Saku's muscles ached as she lifted the bucket and walked back up the hill. "*I am doing something.* I told you I've been taking water up, like they asked of me yesterday." She shook her head.

"You did, I could see you from my post, filling the wrong silo." Mibu 's upper lip rose for an instant but flattened.

"They said fill up the west water silo by evening!" Saku cried.

"They did." Mibu crossed her arms. "And now the east water silo is filled and ready when the next season's tea crops. But the west silo is unfilled."

"You're joking Mibu. That way is west. You're having fun with me." Saku pointed at the silo.
"Wait. No. The sun is in the wrong place. I filled up the wrong one, didn't I?"

Mibu pointed.

"You need to hurry." She said, playfully.

Whack. Cold water splashed on her bare feet. Having been too deep in thought, Saku discovered she had unknowingly dumped all the water from inside the bucket onto the thirsty ground. She cursed.

Mibu bent over laughing. "You didn't think once to check to make sure you were going to the right one? Oh Saku."

She tried to calculate how long it would take to fill the silo, counting on her fingers as if that would give her an answer. It did not.

"I don't believe in thinking." She said.

Mibu uncrossed her arms. "Come on. Let's get this filled."

"I thought you were on duty?" Saku asked.

Mibu grabbed an empty bucket and dipped it into the waters. She gave Saku a look that made her feel uneasy. "I was until I saw you headed up the wrong side of the mountain. I'm here to do your job. Again."

"Of course." Her eyes wandered in the direction of their village, Fukui. "Why can't I do anything right?"

Mibu placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'm used to you disappointing me. It is my curse. It could be worse. Rusu could have seen you. We are lucky to have one of our own in charge who takes it easy on us. You remember what Yataku's people used to do to workers who made mistakes? Or. Knew about people like us?"

The memories flashed before Saku's eyes, memories she did not like to dwell on. She also didn't like being called a curse.

"Come on." Mibu went on. "We need to finish before the gathering tonight, before anyone finds out I left my post. Rusu's would really be ticked off if she knew that."

"Gathering? Why are we having a gathering? Is this about the drought?"

"Oh Saku." Mibu said, shaking her head. She sighed before walking past carrying two buckets. "It's been talked about for weeks. I know not. But all of Fukui is summoned."

"You think they'd miss me if I didn't show up?" Saku refilled the container and ran up the hill to meet her. Something caught her foot, and the next thing Saku knew she had fallen and was feeling wet dirt on her face.

"Don't worry. I will always protect you. You're the best... sparring partner ever. Though, If you keep spilling water we're never going to finish. And someone is going to find out." She said, helping Saku to her feet.

"I will make it up to you. Someday. Somehow." Saku said.

-

After completing the task, which with the help of Mibu was much quicker, they made their way to the temple in the middle of the village. Some others still dressed in their working clothes came out of their longhouses, the roofs covered with dying grass. The two noticed that the people had already gathered. Rusu looked at both of them walking in late. Her eyes narrowed at them.

"They didn't say what this was about?" Saku asked Mibu, looking into one of the longhouses. In the middle was a garden with a shriveled tree. People used to grow their own food in the old days, keeping their own crops. But lately no one had been able to grow much. It's hard to grow crops in dust.

"Do they ever tell us anything, Saku? Why is Rusu looking at us?" Mibu said.

"They tell us to work faster, and not to have feelings." Saku sneered.

"Other than that. I think we are in trouble." She said.

They passed the dry pond under the giant arch, joining the others near one of the older shrines. After they had taken their place, Rusu nodded at them. She then addressed the crowd next to a cherry tree, whose blossoms looked withered.

"This morning came word from Shao Song. They informed me they have increased their tea and rice tax. And have doubled their tribute demand. We will need to quicken our pace if we wish to meet this. We need to minimize our mistakes, like making sure we deliver things to the correct place." Rusu said.

Saku heard a few laughs. Mibu's eyes widened. Others began to bicker aloud. Saku raised her voice. "Double? The amount of tea they want is ridiculous! Don't they drink anything else?"

Mibu gave a friendly but firm jab to Saku's ribs. "Stop speaking, we are in danger."

Rusu's eyes caught Saku's. "Your attachment to Mibu seems. Unnatural."

"Our business is our own." Saku said, feeling the villagers' eyes turned upon them.

"You're still talking." Mibu said, hitting Saku a second time in the ribs. "You're going to get both of us..."

"The conquerors have requested a shipment of the forbidden tea be brought to the city as soon as possible. Lord Yataku is hosting a grand meeting to calm relations with other lords in the land. As you know, the others who have been sent on this task. Did not return. I feel like this is a good job for you, Mibu."

Saku's hand caught Mibu's as she tried to hit her again for speaking. Saku threw her hand aside.

"No! I will go!" Saku said, stepping forward.

Laughter erupted. Some people clapped. Saku stood, looking into Mibu's light brown eyes.

"Let me go with her." Mibu said, turning in a panic back towards the speaker. "Let me guard her to ensure that..."

"No." Rusu said. "Maybe that is one job Saku can do correctly. You are to depart tomorrow after the sixth morning bell."

"Please! She doesn't know what she's doing, I will go!" Mibu shouted. But all of the villagers left, leaving the two behind alone. She kicked at the dirt ground. "We need to get out of here. Tonight."

"No." Saku said. "You know what happens to those who try to leave. The conquerors find them, everytime. I must travel to Shao Song, alone. This is the only way our village will ever accept us for who we are. Maybe others will start seeing how unfair living like this is."

"It doesn't matter if this is fair, Saku. This is just the way it has to be. If we want to keep living. And speaking out only makes it worse."

"We're supposed to do what then? Working harder, and keep living on less and less?"

"We have to do what we need to do to keep on going. That is the only choice. That is why we should leave. If anything ever happened to you I'd never be able to forgive myself..."

"Weren't we meant for more, Mibu?"

"We're meant to grow the conqueror's tea. That is all." She said.

"Then I will prove to you, that you are meant for more."

Mibu hung her head. "Stay safe. And when in doubt, don't say anything. Please. Come back."

"I'll be back." Saku said. "I'll show everyone. I'll even bring you back something from the markets you always tell me about." She smiled. But Mibu did not.

The next morning, six bells rang echoing throughout the dusty hills. Saku gathered the rest of her meager rice rations and returned to the temple. To her surprise no one greeted her in the small closed off structure. The rowhouse was usually guarded but not that morning. She entered, seeing a large grass woven pack overstuffed with what she assumed was the forbidden tea. However, this kind Saku had not seen before. Most of the villagers had not seen this before. Only special handlers were allowed to prepare the flower petals in that location using ingredients sent from Shao Song.

She knew she should have made some travel rice balls the night before for the day long journey. But after carrying water all day her back and forearms throbbed with soreness. She hadn't felt like cooking. Rice is also used as money, and she knew if she wanted to buy anything in the markets she would have to eat light. At least she would not have to carry water for the next few days, being able to stop along the rivers along the way.

The bag was so heavy and overfilled Saku buckled at the knees when placing it on her back.

"That's a lot of tea." She found herself chuckling at the insane amount of rich scented petals. So much that none of them were even allowed to drink. She thought about what she had heard about her people in the past, and about how the conquerors had banned the flowers that turned them mad. The villagers were known to carry skulls around all day. They weren't allowed to talk about those times anymore, not out in the open at least. It felt strange to her that suddenly she was allowed to not only carry it, but deliver it. She wondered why. The conquerors could drink it without anything happening. Why would they be offering it to other nations?

Saku looked around the Temple before setting out. The entire village was still covered in thick dust. She pulled at her jacket.

"I better get going." She thought. But then she paused, and looked about. She had no idea which direction Shao Song was in, especially with the dust.

"I guess I'll figure it out." She said. After a few hours the dust be lifted, and she would see the western mountains and would be able to find the city from there.

So she set out, not knowing where she was going. Saku had seen Mibu once head to Shao Song on the road outside the temple, so she picked that way and began to walk, hoping she headed in the right direction.

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The dust did not lift after six hours of walking. Though Saku was confident she was still heading in the right direction, for the road still lay under her feet.

Her stomach growled. She knew she would need to stop and prepare something soon, but Shao Song must have been only a few hours away. But she looked down to what she thought was the road, but saw only dirt ground.

“What happened to the road?” She said, stomping her feet. She could see nothing but the dust.
“Well. I’m doomed. That didn’t take long.”

Suddenly, Saku heard a voice behind her. “What are you looking for, stranger?”

She quickly turned, and saw a man standing behind her. The dust seemingly lifted around him.

“I’m looking for the village of Shao Song.” She answered. She noticed the man was wearing an outfit that she also had, a dress of a very bright orange color. He had a crazy haircut that looked funny to Saku. “I thought this way would take me there.”

“You’re almost to Shao Song.” The man replied. Saku recognized his dialect to be one of the conquerors. “If you follow me I can take you there. It’s down the road from here. We could be there within the next few hours. All I ask is for a little cooked meal.”

“I’m starving.” She said, “If you help me find water I’ll prepare onigiri. Then you’ll take me the rest of the way?”

“I’ll take you the rest of the way.” The stranger agreed, grinning. “What’s that on your back?”

“Tea.” Saku said.

The man took a few steps towards her and smiled.

“You are one of those skull people that they keep finding dead, aren’t you?” He said. “I like you.”

Saku began to follow him, having been taught to obey all conquerors orders, but stopped. She looked and asked. “What is your name?”

The man turned around and smiled. He held onto the handle of a large katana. “Just call me Ayashi.”

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Nearby, she could hear the sounds of a stream. From beneath the dust, a massive tent appeared in front of them. The front and the back of the tent allowed air in and a large side flap allowed entrance. It looked to Saku as if the man lived there. Ayashi took off his katana and placed it inside. She wandered looking at the stream before turning to the firepit in the middle of the encampment.

"That's a nice sword." Saku said, pointing at the katana laying now in the tent. "I need one of those if I'm going to be traveling, uh?"

Ayashi smirked. "You can't have this one. I claimed it recently. It is so new that I haven't even tested it out yet."

Saku wasn't listening, she was rummaging in her pack. "You have a pot to cook rice in? I seem to have forgotten my cookware."

After a few moments Ayashi brought a large pot with a heavy lid, along with a pan. He lit the fire and placed an iron grid over the stone pit.

"Get cooking." He said. "And cook some of these."

He handed her four large eggs. "What are these?" Saku asked.

"Duck." he said. He pointed to a spot near the stream. Their feathers lay, along with the corpse of a bird. Its bare skull seemed to be looking at Saku. She turned away.

"I'll get everything started." She began to cook. As she did, Ayashi put a kettle filled with river water on the fire.

The rice turned out wet and mushy. Saku prepared the soggy onigiri anyways with the burnt egg inside. Ayashi handed her a black cup made from clay. The liquid inside was so dark she could not see to the bottom.

"Drink this." He said , trying to swallow the food she had prepared.

"What is it?" Saku didn't look before drinking. She had drunk all of it before Ayashi spit the onigiri to the ground.

"Let's call it Sake." He said, taking another bite. "Wow. That was easy. Now, before we leave I want you to help me test out my katana."

"What do I need to do?" Saku sat the empty cup down and leapt to her feet. She stumbled. She felt her eyes grow warm, and her mind began to wander. Before she realized it, she could only focus on the sound of a laughing man.

"You don't need to do anything." He said. It looked like he was walking towards the tent.

"What did you do to me?" Saku asked, trying to get control of herself, but Ayashi did not answer. He prepared his weapon for it to be tested.

Saku tried to regain her footing. Inside her mind thoughts violently began to swirl. Images of her people appeared, but not like some of the old paintings she had once seen that the conquerors had destroyed , but real people telling her many things. As hard as she tried she could not grasp what they were saying.

"Run!" A voice inside her mind cried. Other voices joined. "Run!"

She realized she couldn't tell what was real anymore. The lines had seemingly blurred after drinking whatever she had drank. She suddenly heard another voice, but this one seemed more real.

"They're telling you to run stupid." It said.

Saku's eyes darted in the direction of the voice. It seemed to be coming from the skull of the duck.

"Don't call me an idiot!" Saku said.

"You don't have time to argue!" The skull said, "Run!"

Saku ran towards the stream.

"Not that way!" The skull cried.

She turned around, but there stood Ayashi with the katana raised.

"Let's see how sharp this is." He told her. He swung down towards her. She rolled out of the way, barely missing the blade.

Ayashi charged at her again, but she was able to move out of the way. She had no idea what was going on. Laying on the ground, surrounded by chunks of bones, the skull said. "I'm not sure why I'm having to tell you this so much, but run!"

She kicked the man's leg. He dropped the sword. She rolled by the skull, grabbed it, and ran as fast as she could into the forest, without the tea.

"Can you get your hands off my eye holes? I can't see." Said the skull in the palm of Saku's hand.

She dropped it on the forest ground and took a step back, reaching out to take hold of a dark red barked tree covered in moss. Her hands covered her mouth. Partly in shock, and a little because of the fog of dust that still lingered.

"I don't like it down here. Pick me up." The duck skull said.

"What are you?" Saku bent down, keeping her distance. Voices cried out, from where she did not know. They seemed to be speaking in her mind. She fought to drown out the multitude of voices.

"What does it look like I am?" Said the skull. "I'm a duck. And I'm dead. I thought that was easy to follow."

She placed the palms of both hands on her head and dug her fingers through her hair into her scalp. "I must be crazy." She stood to her feet, before taking a few steps away and shouted "How are you talking?!"

"...That's like asking how are you breathing. Everything dead talks, your people listen and everything is kept in balance. Which, by the way, y'all have done a horrible job with that the past 100 years or so."

"We help you out? What are you talking about? That man tricked me!?" She said.

"The ex-Samurai you were cooking for, like you were married?"

"That man was a Samurai?" Saku dropped down on her knees to address the talking deceased thing. "The one who wanted to cut me in half all of a sudden?"

"No, the other one. Duh. Ex masterless Samurai. Ronin. That's what those crazy people do, go around trying to cut people in half for fun. I think after you've killed a couple of hundred people in battle your moral compass goes straight out the window. Along with your sense of fashion."

Saku blushed. "I have that same dress."

The skull didn't reply for a moment. "I said what I said. Why are you acting like this is new to you? You've drank that tea before haven't you? You had your 18th year tea celebration or whatever you do?"

"We're not allowed to drink the tea. We haven't been allowed to for a very long time. It makes us talk to... Wait. That's why I'm talking to you now isn't it? You're responding only in my head."

She dropped the skull on a mossy rock, which bounced before landing in a bush.

"Uh? No, I'm really talking to you. Come one, you skullies know this. That's what my mother always told me. You take care of the wild and keep everything in balance. We quack a lot. Everyone does their part and all that. No one told you about this agreement? What do you all do all day now?"

"Work? Growing tea? Tea that I need to get back from Ayashi and deliver to the city. Before they do something to Mibu."

The skull looked at Saku strangely. "...You're growing tea? Why?"

"How am I supposed to get my bag back from that. Torso chopping happy ex-samurai?"

"Did a skull person, of the ultimate wild magic arts, seriously just ask me how they can defeat an ex-samurai? You ask that like you don't know you can command undead armies and summon lightning from the sky."

Saku blinked. She picked the creature back up again. "I'm sorry. What do you think my people can do again?"

"Are you really a skull person? You don't sound like it."

"Skull. Attack that tree." Saku pointed at the skinniest weakest tree her eyes could see.

"Skull person. No." It said. "My name is Kamo by the way."

She held Kamo in her hands, checking its eye holes. "See Kamo? I can't command undead armies or shoot lightning from my eyes. I'm a normal person."

"Of course you can't shoot lightning out of your eyes, that would be silly. I said you can shoot lightning from the sky."

Saku turned Kamo back in the direction of Ayashi's camp. "If I don't get that tea delivered, I don't know what the conquerors are going to do. To me or my village."

If Kamo could have roll his eyes he would have. "Maybe one of them in your village can call on the wild for aid? Someone who knows what they are doing?"

"Maybe this craziness will wear off. And soon I'll just be holding a dead duck skull, feeling silly yet gross about myself. I'm going to leave you here. And go wash my hands." She said.

"Dudes gonna drink your tea if you don't go do something." Kamo said. "And you need my help. Don't leave me down here, I can't walk, I have no legs, Saku"

She sighed. "I can't. You aren't real."

"I am very real. Take me along and let me prove it to you. When the tea doesn't wear off, and you realize the things you can do, you are going to want me. And if I stop talking? Then you can leave me."

She thought of what everyone would think if somehow someone back in the village knew what had happened. Memories of other people from Fukui not coming back, or even worse the times the conquerors had made strung up the bodies of those who were unable to do their duties as assigned came to her mind.

"I don't have a choice." She said. "I'm going to prove I can do things without Mibu. I will take you with me. For now. Until I find someone who can cure of this. Tea illness or whatever is going on right now. I'll find a way to fight Ayashi long enough to grab the bag. All without letting the people in the castle know where I am."

She carried Kamo in her arms towards the camp.

"You didn't even bring a weapon?" He said. Saku didn't reply. "Yikes. Better grab a stick or something."

She held the skull close to her face and narrowed her eyes.

"I'll drop you."

Episode Two

From up on a hill that towered above the treetops, Saku looked down on the camp. The fire had been put out and the flap of the tent had been closed. She held out the skull so that it could see, feeling completely silly while doing it, but Kamo complained about being in the pocket for too long.

After walking down from the hill she carefully crept towards the camp, dust swirling in the air above her.

"He must be asleep or something." She whispered to the skull in her pocket.

"Stop talking before he hears you." The skull said.

She heard a snap. She threw Kamo in the direction the sound had come from. His face slid in the dirt until he once again was facing her.

"Hey!!!!" He shouted, with a twinge of hurt in his voice. "I may be dead. But my feelings aren't yet. I am not a weapon!"

"You had it coming." Her eyes darted around, back to the tent. As if she expected him to come out of it. He didn't. After a few moments she went to Kamo and picked him up again. "He's gone." She said, still looking around. "Why would he leave?"

Saku carefully approached the tent, and slowly opened the flap.

The skull screamed. Saku dropped the cover. Then paused and slowly turned. Kamo might have been smiling if he had lips instead of a bone beak.

"You fell for that?" Kamo asked. "You scare easily."

Saku threw the skull into the soft dirt. After, she noticed all the items that had once been inside the tent were now gone. Including the tea. But the katana lay in the middle, seemingly waiting for her.

She approached the sword and knelt down. "Why would Ayashi leave his this? That man is crazy, Kamo."

"Not as crazy ugly as that dress he was wearing." He said.

"I'm telling you I have the same dress. Why does a duck even have an opinion on what I wear? How are we supposed to find Ayashi now? I need to get that tea back. He could be anywhere!"

"If you want my advice," Kamo said. "Burn the dress. That's not a good color for your skin tone. If you want more of my advice, let's head to the city. If this Ayashi is as unhinged as he looked, someone will know about him and where he is."

Saku cursed. "Why do I keep talking to you, you aren't real. I don't know how to get to the city. Ayashi said he was going to take me."

"He totally wasn't going to take you." Kamo said laughing.

She muttered some unkind words under before saying. "I know that now!"

"If I could see the mountains in all this dust, I could point you in the right direction." Kamo said. "You're going to Shao Song like this others right? There's an old lady near an apple tree who used to make great pickles. I used to go to with some of my friends. We'd get up high in the trees so we could see when she was washing her clothes. Then, we'd knock over the clay pots, and enjoy the good eating."

"Wait, you know how to get to the Shao Song. Because you eat, pickles?" She shook her head. "Yeah you are not real. I am nuts. Mibu can never know I drank the tea. She'd never speak to me again."

Saku turned to look high up at the trees. She put the skull in her pocket and grabbed onto the bark. Soon, she climbed far up enough to reach for sturdy branches. Though sore, she managed to make it to the top. Still the dust covered the sky.

Kamo began complaining about the darkness of the pocket, when Saku grabbed him and tossed him as high into the air as she could. She expected the skull to fall straight down, but she could see nothing past the leaves of the tree. Suddenly he fell from the dusty air into her vision. She leaned out as far as she could and reached for the skull. Her finger caught his eye hole.

"You jerk!" He screamed. "You almost shattered me. Stop dropping me!"

"I'm sorry." She climbed down the tree. "I figured you'd be able to see if I got you up high enough."

"I did! The mountains are to our left, so we need to keep heading straight up the river. The dust should clear with those wind currents. No more throwing me!"

"No promises, but I'll try." She said.

"I never expected a skull person to act like this! Have some respect! I shouldn't have to tell you that!"

"Well if by some miracle you actually do lead me to Shao Song, and I'm not just standing in the middle of the forest talking to myself, I'll consider it." Saku said.

She searched around the camp for anything else she might need on her journey but found only a water container. She filled it by the river and headed towards the city.

—

There was no moon that night, and a layer of dust blanketed the horizon. She squinted in the dark and held her hands in front of her as she walked through the forest. Her hand struck a tree at the same time that her knees hit a thorny bush. She cursed.

"I can't see anything. Which means, there's no city here Kamo. I shouldn't have listened to you!" Saku shouted at the skull.

"Oh? What's that up ahead?" He said.

She noticed the dim lights in the distance. As they approached, the night sky cleared, revealing a city illuminated by scattered, decorated paper lanterns. Banners waved out front of shops, and people in brightly colored kimonos chatted amongst themselves. The scent of cut grass on newly built doors and walls overwhelmed Saku. She had never seen buildings taller than the trees before.

"You got lucky." She told the skull. "All cities are built by water. I'm sure I knew that. This means nothing."

"I was right. You have to believe me now." He said.

She held the skull higher towards the shops, still busy with people. "What is everyone doing out so late at night? Don't they have to work in the morning?"

"They're buying stuff?" The skull said. "What, you don't buy stuff? Maybe from the money you make selling all that tea you spend all day growing?"

Saku suddenly realized others could hear, and see her talking to the skull. She put it away in her upper right pocket.

"Hey! I was talking!" The skull said.

"I can't keep talking to you." She whispered. "I'll look. Not normal."

"So?" The skull said back, Kamo's voice now sounded muffled through the fabric of Saku's pocket. "Everyone is crazy in the city. The crazier you are, the more power you have."

"If I get caught..." she began to say.

She noticed a young girl with light brown hair and a patched together blue kimono staring at her. Saku looked away and whispered. "That kid sees us. If the castle finds out I am here without the tea... Look what you..."

The child ran up to Saku and tugged at her pocket.

"Is that a talking skull!" The kid said, lifting up on her toes to speak to the foreign person.

"You never talk into your pocket for fun?" Saku tried to hurry away from the child, but she followed her behind a push cart selling dried fish and clay cooked sweet potatoes.

"We don't have pockets." The child said. "Are you friends with Oniku?!" A boy in a old kimono with a blue cap ran to her and used his arm to push the girl back. She swatted away the arm.

"Leave her alone, Sister! They don't like to talk when they've not working at the freak show."

Saku gently squeezed Kamo, as if she were asking him what she should do. Kamo responded, laughing. "Tell her. What's the worst that can happen? Those people ducklings aren't going to tell anyone."

Saku sighed, then smiled slightly at the young girl still filled with excitement.

"Okay." Saku said in a whisper. She put a finger to her lips. "I am Saku, of the pocket people."

"Tell Oniku she should do more tricks and talk less." Her brother's face soured from annoyance. He picked up his sister and carried her over his shoulders.

"But I wanted one of those skull flowers they were selling!" She said. The boy did not respond and kept walking. She waved to Saku. She waved back the boy stopped in the middle of the street. Someone was coming.

The skull laughed violently from inside her pocket. "They thought you were part of a *Misemono* freak show."

The streets grew quiet. A man in iron and leather armor, laced together with red wool and appeared with a torch in hand. He wore a kabuto with a gold trimmed visor around the helmet. With his other hand he revealed a piece of paper, with the words "Wanted." in their tongue.

"Another skulker has gone missing." The man spoke. "The regent wishes for them to be found and brought to the castle immediately. Fifty coins will be given for her capture. Alive. Unless she is without the shipment, then he will accept her head. Search the outskirts."

The memory of Mibu telling her not to talk came to her mind. She disappeared into a closed unlit shop away from the commotion in the streets. But not before seeing the boy and the girl

approach the soldier.

Saku squatted down behind the wooden counter beneath stacked white ramen bowls with blue trim. The world was silent, and shadows of the people standing too afraid to move fluttered on the transparent rice paper wall.

"Great. They know I'm here because I listened to you! What is a Misemono and how do we get there?"

"Why don't you know anything? That's where you can go to see famous weird people. I once saw a dragon mummy there. Least that's what they were telling people was behind the wrapping. Let me get this straight Saku, you are now planning to go up to a bunch of famous people off the street and hope they tell you what to do?"

Saku let out a puff of air. "I have a better idea, Kamo! I'm going to do nothing, and just stand here."

They paused.

"Well, that's not productive at all." The skull said.

"It's not. But that was our only other option, and we tried it. So, shut up and let me handle this. They have to know who would steal tea leaves there. Oniku might be able to help. She might know how to rid of this tea illness so I stop talking to myself."

"Gooooood luck with that." Kamo said as he was placed back in Saku's pocket. She left the shop through the backdoor in the kitchen next to the firepit, passing a wooden tray with leftover noodles. Incense sticks placed nearby burned, its smoke rose up towards the sky.

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They traveled past a bridge that towered over a dried up river to the plaza. Reed walls hung around the carnival perimeter, suspended by posts to block off the outside world. She found the entrance, and exchanged a palm full of rice for admission. A man with a large straw hat and face paint accepted the payment and motioned them inside. He watched her, not blinking, as she wandered into the masses of spectators.

"Hey Kamo." Saku said. "Those... people ducklings back there... called each other brother and sister. Is that normal here?"

"Aren't I just a crazy hallucination? Why are you asking me? What do you mean is that normal?" The skull asked.

"Being allowed to know who your family is? Out in the open. Being seen with them?" She asked.

"Pretty sure that's a common peoples thing."

"Not in my village." She said, looking down. "We aren't even supposed to have relationships without conqueror approval." Something about seeing the children together had tugged at her soul.

"Oh. Well. I'm not a peoples expert." Kamo said.

Singing filled the air inside the bright bazaar-like atmosphere. A woman dressed as a samurai danced and sung on stage around vender carts and stalls. Nearby a man held a pair of scissors in the air shouting "Get your haircuts here! Ponytails half-off!"

Contestants played with blow darts at booths trying to hit a circle on a piece of parchment. Grass huts and a main stage crafted from bamboo had signs above them, such as "Large bird swallows hot coals here!" or "It's a real camel! 1 coin." From carts and booths workers in tattered clothes took down signs and put away items, such as handmade dolls and painted pieces of wood with characters on them.

"Oniku!" Saku pointed to a sign on the far end of the stage, lit in a very dark blue lantern light.

She lowered her head and made her way across the Misemono through the crowds, bypassing the stage trying to hide behind the huts as much as she could. To her dismay, the Oniku booth had a rope with a sign attached. "Closed"

"You wanna buy a doll?" Saku heard a deep voice behind her. She turned and grabbed at the skull in her pocket. The sword swung against her arm as she did.

"Woah now." The voice said. The towering man came to stand in front of Saku, with his large bulging muscles. He had a very pronounced forehead and two large bumps that almost looked like horns. "We don't need violence here."

"Oh!" She pulled the sword off of her shoulder and held the handle so that it pointed downward. "I'm not attacking anyone, you scared me."

"Scare you? You're the one who came here with a weapon. You shouldn't have even been let in."

"I don't know who you are." She said.

"He's Oni-chan!" The skull said in a high pitched voice.

"I am Oni-chan." He said, not hearing the skull. Or not responding to it if he did. "We are closing as soon as the performance is finished. We open tomorrow morning, it's half price for you little

ones.” He squinted at Saku. He observed for a moment, before looking to her pockets.

“Little one? I’m an adult. I am looking for Ayashi. He took something from me.” She said.

“Sure you are.” He winked. “I know nothing of Ayashi or of the words that came out of your mouth. I can’t help you. Have a good night.”

He looked again to Saku’s pocket. His mouth dropped and looked at her in astonishment.

“Um. Hello? My face is up here.” Saku said.

“You. Are one of those skull people aren’t you?” He said.

“I am from Fukui.” She said. “You know you called me a slur right. Hard R and everything?”

“Forgive me.” He said. “I am from the old generation. Why are you here? I’m guessing it’s not to see the camel.”

“I need to get a bag from a ronin name Ayashi. Before someone finds out I’m here without the regents’ goods. Also, I hear there is another here who has pockets who might be able to help with an issue I am having.”

“I’m glad you’re saying this out in the open, Saku. So everyone know’s your here. Good thinking!” Kamo said from the pocket.

Oni-chan looked down in disappointment. “The show is over. Go home.”

“No. I demand to see Oniku.” Saku said.

He looked at her, blankly.

“No. You don’t understand. You can’t be here.”

She squinted her eyes. “A little girl told me you were selling flowers that were once grown in my village. Someone here knows something about them. Unless, you are scamming people by selling fake flowers.”

He raised his hands in defense. “Hey now, I’m trying to help you. They are fake. Don’t accuse me of selling those flowers they have by the castle if that is what you are meaning. Anything we sell is purely symbolic and not the flower itself. Do you know what the punishment is for getting caught with one of those things?”

“Show me what you are selling then.” She said, not knowing what the flowers looked like.

"I'm not doing that." He sighed. "I tried. Leave now or I'm calling Kappa over here to have you removed."

Saku turned to the last remaining people slowly making their way out of the carnival. She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted as loud as she could. "FRUAD! That's not a real camel! That's a mountain whale in disguise!"

"You have no proof! Stop spreading lies!" He tried to step out in front of her, but she went on.

"Who needs proof, I can yell whatever I want."

"Doesn't that lord Yataku want your head? Should you be shouting?" Kamo said.

Oni-chan saw people starting to notice the commotion.

The large man gently pulled Saku aside and cuffed his hand over her ear and whispered. "You are letting everyone know you are here! You know you are wanted."

"I will keep shouting until I get what I want." She said.

Oni-chan frowned, and addressed the remaining crowd. "Goodnight everyone! See you tomorrow!" He winked and smiled.

He turned to Saku. "I was afraid this day would come. I'll take you to Oniku, but I think it might be a waste of time. I feel you are going to insist."

"Pretty much, yeah." Saku said.

"Follow me." He motioned his hand towards a larger building across the way.

—

The candles released a faint sweet smell that lingered in the hut. There was an opening that led into what had been a stable but now served as a storage room for peach baby dolls for Momotaro's long lost relative. Saku felt herself gripping at the sword. Oni-Chan appeared from behind a giant water barrel, now wearing a black cloak with a large hood.

"Oniku is not here." He said. "But. I am going to perform to you, the very act she gives nightly." His voice came out sheepish. Saku thought he looked embarrassed. He picked up a fake skull, and began to speak to it. "Well hello there Jasaro!" His pitch rose to that of a convincing woman.

He used skull like a puppet. He spoke in a weird accent that made the puppet seem very unsophisticated. "Golly Madame Oni-ku! I done hadn't seen you all day! You dun drunk some tea didn't you Ms. Oniku?"

"Oh, you know I did! That's the only time you talk back! I always drink my crazy tea before I eat..."

Saku cursed, loudly, and held out her hand. "That's enough."

Oni-chan stopped, still holding the skull in mid-sentence.

"Is that. What everyone thinks we are?" She said. "We work so hard for you. And. That's it? You make fun of us for something... most of us haven't done in a hundred years?"

"That's only what they have been told about you. I do not mean to be offensive. I do this act to make a living. Nothing more."

Saku fought back tears, thinking of all the long days and extra nights she had put in to ensure that shipments could be made in time.

"You knowingly make fun of my people? For profit? That's disgusting." She turned away and looked down to floor, watching the shadows from peach babies dolls.

Oni-chan put down his skull. "I never thought of it that way. I'm here to make a living. Sometimes that hurts others. So yes. The flowers we sell are fake. I've never seen a real pocket person who has partaken of the flower tea. They do not exist."

"I need to find Ayashi. I need to get it back and delivered to Lord Yataku. Before they. Do something to me. Or mibu." She said.

Oni-chan put his hand to his chin and thought. "I still do not know any Ayashi's. But look for the machi-yakko in the market district. The commoners who patrol the city will be gathered there, eating after their shifts. If there's a Ronnin here, one of them will know. I will. retire the Oniku act..."

A woman with scales for skin poked her head through the door, panting.

"Lord Yutaka is here. Someone saw the skulker yelling during the show, what do we..." The lady spotted Saku and cleared her throat. "I mean the skull person."

"Get out of here." Oni-chan said sternly, pointing to the back of the hut. "Push aside the wall, before he finds you."

Moments after crawling through the secret opening, she heard someone burst into the hut. Followed by a hand smack. The voice rang out loud and angry.

"Where, is she?" It said.

"Someone must have been mistaken." Saku heard Oni-chan say. "There is no..."

Something or someone struck Oni-chan hard, over and over. He grunted out in pain, gasping, spitting.

"Bring this hideous liar to the castle." He said, seemingly to others who had entered the room.

Saku felt a hand on her shoulders. She jumped.

"This way." The man with the straw hat said.

When Saku left that night, creeping past royal guards who surrounded the Misemono, she left with an Oni-chan doll and a mermaid handbag she had been given on the way out by the man who took her admission. They made their way into the night towards the market district.

"That Oni-chan really went all out for you. I wouldn't get beat up for you." Kamo said. "And, I thought the act was pretty funny."

Saku, despite how she felt, didn't fling the skull into the sky in the middle of the night but did give it a whack on the top of its head with her index finger. The shops had closed for the night and only a few lanterns were lit. Because of this, a vast array of stars hovered above Saku. She stared at them, as she often did when it was clear, and wondered.

"I thought I would find help here." Saku said. "There is no help. I'm on my own. And I can not fail. I'm going to find a way to free Oni-chan. I won't allow anyone else to get hurt because of me."

"I mean, I got us here." Kamo said. "I'd call that helping. Yes, I told you to tell the ducklings who you were so I did mess up. But you had a shouting match that let everyone know where you were, so maybe we should call it even."

Saku found herself smiling at this. She wiped it off her face as soon as she heard screaming. She looked to see where the noise was coming from.

"Isn't that where we are going?" Kamo asked.

She kept walking toward the screams. Her pace quickened.

Episode Three

Guided by distant voices, Saku navigated to the market district, where multi-level housing structures loomed above. Fearful whispers came from people in the windows, as well as the gathered crowd in the square below. Three men in armor stood with a boy and his sister with cloth wrapped around their eyes. She ran faster, feeling the ground uneven on her bare feet. She gripped the hilt of the katana around her waist.

"Don't!" Someone screamed.

"You remember you don't know how to use that sword right?" Kamo said to her.

The large men holding the children stood next to a flower cart and a number of booths with high scaffolding. They wore red overvest around their white kimonos, with a katana strapped around their waists.

At the front of the crowd people lay down their large curved swords. Saku joined in the back and watched as one by one people began to kneel.

"I don't care who demanded it." One of them spoke, refusing to lower his weapon. "This is madness! We don't know where she is!"

"You were warned, and yet there were uprisings." The man holding the boy hostage spoke. His helmet had a large half crescent symbol on the front. His skin looked weathered, his eyes old, but unwavering. "This is how Lord Yataku deals with these problems now. There is no exception. The skull girl was reported found, yet not taken to the castle. Their fate will be the same as the head of the Misemono. Failure will no longer be tolerated."

"Unless one of you brings us the skull girl. And the bag she was carrying." Another of them said. He tightened his grip on his yari and the frightened girl at the same time. She breathed heavily, and her hands shook. Her brother tried to control his breathing, while he kept turning his head as if to look for his sister through the blindfold.

Saku's eyes darted to the little girls whose dress she recognized, the one who wanted a skull flower.

One by one the market guards lay on the ground and put their hands on their head in a plea of mercy. The crowd slowly began to do the same, dropping to their knees, then laying down. Begging. Voices from the housing above cried down. "Let them go!"

"There's nothing you can do" Kamo said. "Not with the reach of those long weapons against your stubby little sword. Not three against one. Let's sneak out of here while you still can..."

Before he could finish speaking, he realized everything had gone silent. Only Saku remained standing.

"If you want my head, then come take it from me." She said stepping forward.

"Why don't you think about anything you are doing! These are pro's." Kamo said. "Well. Nice knowing you."

The three men took a step forward, not releasing the children. Saku unshelved the sword as fast as she could and held it up. The blade shook in the air.

"What are you doing? You're holding that in your left hand. You people things always fight with your right..."

"I use my left hand." She said.

Kamo quacked.

The guard with the girl let her go, his left hand grabbing the far end of the yari. He slashed down at her, his blade meeting hers with a clang. The katana fell to the ground from Saku's hand. She grasped her wrist and watched as the man used the center of his weapon to knock her to the ground.

"Okay, time to get up. You got this." Kamo tried to sound encouraging.

"She doesn't have the tea! We can kill her!" A guard said.

She leapt onto her feet, and sprung onto a cart before the man could bring the weapon up to strike again. He stopped, looking amazed at her.

"Get her Hojo!" One of the armored men cried.

"Can she do that, Ito?" He yelled, turning to the other two holding onto the kids.

She climbed up to the booth scaffolding, that bent and shook with each step she took. The yari jabbed in front of her, still being in reach from the ground. She brought the sword up again, swinging her elbows back, trying to find her balance.

A voice called out somewhere nearby. "Nope, don't hold it like that, you're exposing yourself. Hold up the katana with two hands, at an angle low in front of you with the blade pointing up."

She looked round, looking for the source of the voice but stopped when the men started kicking the support beams. The reed of the scaffolding began to shake.

"What are you doing? No one does that in a fight, that's against the code!" The man shouted at her.

The boy squirmed in his capturers hands. The guard dropped his weapon and wrapped his arms tightly around the child. "There's no code Hojo! Just kill this girl already."

"Don't be over spirited, and don't let the enemy see your spirit." The skull said.

"Come again?" She said nervously, trying to catch her breath.

"Chill out and focus on your breathing." The voice went on. "If they swing, swing downwards to defend then get your sword back up high. But keep it low enough you can cut them if you need to. Watch their movements."

Saku jumped onto the ground below. The guard saw this, and took a jab at her.

Clank! She swung low to block a cutting sword.

"Slash!" The voice cried.

The katana flicked up and slashed the cheek of the man hard. He let out a cry. She staggered, gasping for air before raising her sword to meet his weapons thrust.

"Breathe through your nose, exhale out the mouth when you swing." The voice seemed to be coming out of an eagle-owl skull laying on one of the plates in an outdoor eatery nearby. It sat alone, as if someone had placed it there after a meal had been finished. The other man bobbed his head twice, then swung, heaving out all their air through their nose.

She raised her elbow up to block. She spotted his right knee had extended too far in the movement of the swing. She tried to slash but, out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the other man holding his Yari high. Having released his grip, the boy ran free. The children took off their blind folds and raced towards the people still on the ground. They stood up and gathered around the kids, making their escape leaving only the guards and Saku in the market. Her hands held the sword at the base position. She took a chance, and swung. The weapons clanked.

"Yeah, no don't do that. Just try to stay alive. You can't beat these guards." The voice said. "Let them make the mistakes."

"Who are you?" Saku yelled, quickly moving behind a bin, dodging an attack.

"I am known by the name Fushichou." The small eagle-owl skull said. "Don't lose focus!"

"Then stop talking!" Saku shouted.

The three guards found themselves on the wrong side of a booth, unable to reach Saku as she ran. She jumped on a stall and reached for the banner to pull herself up. The banner ripped, sending her crashing down.

They stood in front of her with their weapons drawn. The one called Ito nodded to Hojo, who unleashed a mighty swing down towards her.

But he stopped. He stared at something in front of him in the distance. The other's gaze turned to whom he was looking at. A man wearing a bright orange kimono walked into the market with a bow on his back. He walked leisurely towards them.

"I'd leave the skullie alone." A familiar voice rang out. "She's taking it easy on you." Ayashi walked to the flower cart, and picked a yellow morning glory and placed it behind his left ear. He picked up Fushichou from the table of the eatery. "That's yours Saku." He tossed the skull to her.

"Nice throw." Fushichou said. "And soft hands. You must study this well." Saku put the skull in her pocket.

"You have no business here, Ayashi." The guard said.

The man withdrew from the skull person and turned his focus to Ayashi. He readied the bow, drew an arrow pointed at the gaurd. His shadow stretched far out in front of him.

Ayashi pulled the string tighter. "Tell the regent he can't rule a city if he keeps killing all its people."

"We are everyone's problem right now." The man called Ito said.

A flash from high above caught Saku's eyes. Without thinking she swung, slashing Hojo's side, who had tried to take a swipe at her. The man cried out in pain.

"Stop!" Ito cried.

"Then don't come at me." She said.

"Told you." Ayashi spoke.

Ito rushed to the side of the fallen man. The cut was deep in his flesh. "My son!" He cried.

Saku's face turned white. Ito's face turned red. He looked to Ayashi, then to Saku.

"Next time skull girl, it will be me talking to your skull." He said.

Ito and the other guard helped the wounded man up. Blood gushed from his side. His face narrowed when he realized the commoners still watched from the windows above. The three men left the market.

Saku pushed Ayashi and crossed her arms. "You tricked me. You tried to kill me, Ayashi!"

"Fushichou was my master's trained bird." Ayashi said. "And my gift to you for almost cutting you in half. That and the sword you stole from me, you can have that too I guess."

"Well golly. Thanks." Saku said, sarcastically.

"That yokai saved you." He said.

"These skulls aren't yokai." She said, incensed.

"Mononoke then." Ayashi waved her off. "Doesn't matter. You need to help me."

"Help you? You poisoned me with that tea, that has me hearing skulls and you want me to help you? How about you give me back my tea, I give it to the city heads, and I go home! Where I have to relearn everything I know about everything!"

"You're welcome." Ayashi said. "I was wrong to trying to kill you. Nothing we can do about it now." He paused a long while before saying. "When was the last time you ate?"

Saku's nostrils flared. "I will do nothing you..."

Ayashi rolled his eyes. "You saw the daimyo and his son, whom you have seriously injured. If you don't come with me, and listen to what I have to say. Then he will make sure you die."

"That was the Daimyo?" She asked.

Ayashi straightened his garment and hummed softly to himself. Saku narrowed her eyes as he walked away. She went after him.

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Drunk men stood on their chairs, singing together as Ayashi sat down reaching for a grilled meat stick. He took a giant bite as one of the patrons took a step onto the table before the barkeep verbally berated the men for standing on furniture.

"You're safe here. I've bought you some time. Eat." Ayashi said to Saku, who sat facing the door on the other side of the izakaya.

"You need your strength." He went on. "What I need your help on next isn't going to be easy."

Saku looked at him, then down to the meat. "One. I'm not helping you. Two. I don't eat that."

"Who doesn't eat meat?" He said. "This is good, it's teriyaki. It tastes sweet...Fine. Then tell the bartender what you want. Hey! Ayumi! Can you bar-keep skullie here, some animal feed or something?"

"What do you want?" Ayumi asked, walking over swinging a rag.

"Rice." She said. "With vegetables, if you have them."

"That's all you want? You sure you don't want some Pork?" He pointed to meat sizzling over hot coals.

"Yeah, try the chicken." Something in the wastebasket said. "I bet I taste great! I'm fresh! I didn't even see it coming! I went to the feeder to see if a butterfly was still hanging around and, then WHACK. That was it for me haha. Oh. I had so much I was planning on doing. I guess I won't get to do any of that anymore. I really wanted to see that butterfly." The voice inside the basket grew sad.

Ayumi tried to figure out why Saku didn't speak. "The meat is fresh."

Saku began to cry. "Can you get me rice and vegetables please?"

The man shrugged and returned to the stoves to prepare the meal.

She noticed two armored men in blue in a booth in the corner of the small room, downing sake as fast as they could. They didn't look like the guards Saku had seen, and she wondered who they were and why they were there. Though Ayashi did not seem bothered, she watched them from a safe distance.

After a while, Ayumi came back with a giant bowl of rice, stacked high, along with a plate of roasted vegetables. Saku stuffed rice inside her mouth and shoveled in the vegetables with chopsticks as fast as she could. The soldiers in blue scoffed.

"Are we having an eating contest?" Ayashi asked.

Saku talked with her mouth full. "Only reason I'm here is because I haven't eaten in almost two days. You tried to kill me."

"I get it." Ayashi said. "I'm naughty, but I'm going to tell you where your tea is. No strings attached. Which is usually my choice on how to make arrangements."

The conversation of soldiers in blue nearby grow in volume. One spoke, too loudly before

returning to a whisper. "...Bloody *skuller*..." The other man nodded and poured back another cup. "... that village is complicating the peace talks."

Hearing the slur almost made Saku stop eating. Almost. After she had eaten the last Lotus root and sweet potato, she finished her rice. She poured water into the bowl, swirled it around, and then drank the water, making sure every grain of rice was gone. She placed the chopsticks in the bowl and sat it on the table as the soldiers gave the barkeep a few coins and left. But not before giving Saku a cold hard look.

"You're going to see a lot of that sort of talk up north." Ayashi said. "They are like birds, who repeat everything they hear. They know Nothing. You can't do about that. What you can do is get the tea. It's in the red-light district at the kissing house. Past the street gambling alleys. Someone holding it for you, waiting."

Saku shook her head in confusion. She raised her hands upwards and spread them apart with her palms facing up. "The kissing house?" Did you leave something in your room when you stayed there?"

"Not my kind of place. Most of the tea is intact. I've enjoyed a couple of cups but I'm not hearing skulls talk. I left it for someone who needed it."

Voices raised. "Maybe the northern clan could show us a thing or two about bringing wealth!"

"You are a traitor even suggesting such a thing!" The other drunk man shouted.

Ayashi looked over. The arguing stopped, and the men returned quietly to their drinks.

"The tea will be there waiting for you with a geisha. Named Hana." Ayashi said.

"I don't have a choice. Do I?" Saku asked.

"Sure you do. I paved the entire road ahead of you. You can pick which side you walk on. Don't forget that." He said. "You better get out of here. Ayumi is pretty shady. If they don't already know where you are, then they soon will."

"What you say?" Ayumi asked.

"I said you were a great friend." He said.

"I will go. But I do not forgive you." She said.

"Good." Ayashi said. "Forgiveness is a means of control. I'm not here to control you."

Saku left. Ayumi looked on from the counter, deep in thought. He checked his cash box, and frowned at the mostly empty wooden container.

—

The glow got brighter as Saku walked towards the red light district. Men stumbled drunk smelling of sake and sweat. Music could be heard playing down the street at the kissing house. Dice rolled.

"It's gonna be Cho!" A voice cried from inside the cup a man was shaking. The man took bets and slammed the glass upside down on the ground. He lifted to reveal two dice both with one red dot facing up.

"Even!" The cup man said. It was Cho. A few men grunted and groaned. The cup man took the bets and placed them into his earnings. "Don't complain. Next game. Don't be cheap."

Kamo spoke from Saku's pocket. "What was that voice?"

"They must be made of skulls." Saku said. Such games were not allowed in her village. She found herself wanting to learn how to play.

She walked past the gambling and into the red light district. The strong smell of incense and perfumes hoovered in the air. Yet, something smelled fowl. Her eyes adjusted to the red light. She could see the kissing house on the left. A giant structure with a rice paper front with the words "Kuchibashi-ya" written on it. A large cherry blossom was painted on the paper next to the door. A few men crossed over from a bar across the street into the kissing house, hanging on each other singing loudly.

Kamo let out a nervous sigh. "This is all very bad..."

"Kamo is it?" The other skull said, "Nothing comes easy. You seem to lack direction my friend."

She tried to clear her mind, and separate her thoughts from those of the skulls.

"Oh I LACK DIRECTION!" Kamo lashed out. "You going to tell me how to breathe too?"

"You're dead, you don't do that." Fushichou said.

"STOP!" Saku yelled, clenching her fist and tightening her face.

The air filled with static. She felt a sting and a few hairs on her head stood up.

"You're both great, you're awesome. But I have way too many thoughts for everyone to be talking all the time." She said.

Inside the kissing house men laughed, glasses clanked, and young women in white face paint and long kimonos hung onto the men. Saku did not know whom she was searching for, and knew she couldn't go in and start asking everyone where Hana was.

She walked past the entrance, hearing some shaking in a room closed off with a divider painted with a smiley face. Women giggled.

Everyone seemed to be involved with someone else in the room. Except one. She stared at Saku as if she had never seen anything like it. She couldn't look away. She walked across the tatami mat. Her white painted face and blackened teeth, red stick and eye liner stood out amongst the other women. Her figure was stunning, especially to someone who had not seen a kimono look as smooth and soft. Her eyes locked with Saku's.

When she got too close, she took her hands and put them around her face. She spoke, passionately.

"I've been waiting for you. Tell me you are looking for Hanna." The Geisha said.

"What?" Saku said, noticing the woman's hands smelled of expensive perfume. "Ayashi says you have my tea. I need it."

"This way." Hana motioned towards a divided room. They entered, and she slid the door shut.

She spoke. "You must know something. I am lord Yataku's wife. Vanished here for speaking out about his treatment of the people. If you help me escape from this city, he will not let you live. He will kill you. It's a matter of time at this point. The only one who can change my husband's mind is Ito. If you help me out of the city, I will convince him to help us."

Saku's heart sank. "Wife? He sent you here?"

A voice raised in the other room. A scuffle broke out, cups crashed to the floor. Women yelled. Multiple footsteps clopped against the flooring.

"Ayumi said the skull girl is here," Someone said.

"There's no way out of here. Please tell me you know how to use that sword." Hanna said, pointing down.

"I've gotten lucky a few times." Saku confessed.

"Where is she?!" Saku remembered the voice of Ito, who stood on the other side of the divider.

The door began to slide open. Saku kicked the rice panel as hard as she could. She grabbed Hana's hand and pulled her out of the room. Ito turned and ran towards them with a sword in his red swollen hand.

Saku drew the katana. Hanna stepped away.

"Ito. We need to talk." Saku pleaded.

Ito charged.

"YOU KILLED MY SON!" Ito screamed.

Saku swung in a wide sweep. Ito dug his foot into the tatami mat and leaned to avoid the hit. But the katana cut him across the side, slicing open his armor. She rushed out of the kissing house and onto the street nearly stumbling into some bystanders who had gathered to watch the commotion.

Saku saw Ito had crossed over the building's threshold and had closed the distance. The giant man charged at little Saku. In desperation, she hooked his shoulder with her arm and used his momentum to suplex him. The back of his head thumped against the stone road hard. His pupils dilated. He didn't move, he looked up.

She stood to her feet and looked to him bleeding on the ground.

"I didn't want this." She said

"Lord Yutaka will surely kill you now." Ito said, slurring his words. "Even if you give him his tea. You have shamed him in front of the other warlords. By not arriving on time. He will not stop until you are dead."

"I just want to go home to Mibu." Saku said.

"There's no chance of that now." Ito's eyes closed. If his spirit left him, she did not know.

They heard footsteps and clanking of armor approaching. Saku and Hanna ran. Hanna had the bag of tea in hand. Others went to Ito's side, and began to give aid in whatever way they could. Somebody cried for help. But his own men did nothing.

Episode Four

"I'm in the wrong pocket! I don't like this, why am I here?!" Kamo said from within Saku's garment.

Saku switched Kamo and Fushichou positions in the dark not far from the gambling den. The area was silent after the events earlier in the day. Hanna returned from peering over the wall of the housing complex, keeping an eye out for Ito's men. She tilted her head and brought her lips forward. A strange sparkly breeze passed through the air. Hairs on Saku's head stood up.

"What have I done Kamo?" Saku said, not noticing anything but her own thoughts. She crossed her arms tightly and gripped her hands.

"Actually, I like the other pocket better." Kamo said.

Hana smiled like she thought Saku was playing a strange game with her. "Kamo? It's only us here."

Saku pulled the skull from her pocket. "Here he is. I can hear a soul inside this skull."

Hana screamed, then covered her mouth.

"I'll admit this isn't the best I've looked, but that was uncalled for." He said.

"Saku, We need to get as far away from my husband and the city as possible. He might change his mind after a few days. His mood might blown over."

"I know I was late," Saku said "but I have done nothing to deserve this."

"Nothing?" Hanna said, leaning harder against the wall, tugging on her kimono's sleeves. "You hurt his Daimyo, and his son. And you are aligned with Ayashi. The one Lord Yataku blames for the death of his son. From his wife before me. And you saved me from the kissing house!"

Saku lowered her eyes. "I have nothing to do with Ayashi. I need to fix this."

"That's not how anyone sees it now." Hanna said. "Please listen to me. This goes deeper than you know. I can not let you go to Lord Yutaka. I once pledged my life to serve the Miko. I served as a shrine maiden to a shaman until I came of age. Until my family gave me to him. To settle a dispute. He is quick to take revenge for the most petty things. It's not only you in danger. It is everyone. The people here, Lord Yataku's enemy's... and your village. "

"What dispute?" Saku asked.

Hana was taken back. "Over land. Your village. The matter was settled. Until my brother did what my brother does. That is why you can not go tonight."

"Your brother?" Saku asked.

Hanna wiped her face with the hem of her garment, and patted her skin to remove some of the makeup. Some of the white paint remained on her forehead and cheeks. She felt her skin.

"Ayashi. Is my brother. The son of Lord Noriko of the north." She spoke, closing her eyes. "He was given to Lord Yataku in the arrangement as a warrior. He was disowned when he killed his son in battle."

"I can not fail Mibu." Saku said. "I'm not leaving without a solution."

"You won't be failing your village." Hanna said. "I promise. Get me somewhere safe for a little while, and then we can return and go to the castle. I can train you to use that sword, and...I can prepare you for this fight."

Saku looked to the stars.

A loud bell tolled across the city. Hanna gasped. It rang, repeatedly. A long held note blasted from a multitude of horns far away. Windows and doors shut. Slowly the light from the surrounding city ceased until the sky was pitch black.

"Is it time to work?" Saku asked.

"No." Hanna said. "Lord Yataku has locked the city down. There will be men at all the exits. They aren't going to let us leave. We can try to find a place to hide in the city until we can find a way out and..."

Saku again looked to the stars. "My parents were taken from me by the conquerors when I was young, which happens to all children who are allowed to live in my village. But I met my Mom once. We snuck off in the night and watched the stars. She told me she knew her mother, who used to only tell certain stories when certain stars could be seen. That was the only time our people would share the tales. I hated how long they were. But now, I wish I could listen. Because I don't remember the story she told. No one knows the stories anymore. Yet my village sings the praises of the conquerors for saving them. Life is a gift that has been taken from us. I don't want to be silenced anymore. Go wherever is safe Hanna, Get out of the city as soon as you can." Saku tightened her hair tie. "I wish you the best of luck."

"Saku no." Hanna said. "You can not do this, you are weak, he will make an example of you. You need to come with me and..."

"Can you send word for him to meet me at the warehouse?" Saku said, heaving the tea bag over her back shoulder. Hanna nodded. "Until we meet again. Or. In the next life if nothing else." She said.

"And Saku. We still need Lord Yataku. Cause. If my father gains control. You wont have a village to go back to."

Saku paused before adjusting the bag on her back. She disappeared into the night.

Three guards came out of the darkness and surrounded Saku, who stood with in the middle of the warehouse. She drew her sword. Her heart pounded.

A deep voice echoed through the large room, surrounded by bins and shelves of goods. She recognized the voice. "I have been told your name is Sakura. Your head isn't very good is it? Put the sword down."

He appeared, catching Saku off guard. He adjusted his hair in his topknot, and motioned for a young woman to approach. She handed him a pipe and incense, which he lit and smoked. He exhaled and handed the object back to a geisha. He tightened the sash on his red kimono.

"You should do as he says. For now." Fushichou advised. Saku lowered the sword but did not put it in its sheath.

"What did you think would happen here tonight? Saku?" He said.

"I plead with you." She said. "Please do not let my actions affect my village. My fault is my own. I will do whatever it takes to make things right in your eyes."

Lord Yutaka crossed his arms. His guards looked at each other. "I'll let you explain to me, your regent, why you feel you do not deserve death. For allowing me to show our enemies such weakness. Why should your village should go unpunished? The ones who sent such an incompetent little girl. I shall entertain your answer."

"Ayashi stole it from me." Saku said. "I had to track it down. My village did nothing wrong."

"They sent you." He said. "This is the third time the delivery did not arrive. You were unacceptably late. Which is none of my concern. But then I hear, Saku, that my doctor tells me that my Daimyo needs special herbal treatment, because of something you did. A leaf that grows not in this area. I know you not, but you somehow have become a menace that I can not let stand."

"What if I find you this leaf?" Saku said. "To make things right? Then I will return to my village, and you will have no dealing with me from here on out." Saku tightened the grip on her katana.

"I need no help from a skull person." Lord Yataku spoke. A guard offered him a sword, which he took. "I do not accept failure."

"Let me do it for you." The guard said.

"I can handle a sixteen year old woman." Lord Yataku said, smacking the guard.

"I'm twenty six." Saku said.

She pulled the sword back to face upright and found her center, standing shoulder length apart. He held the sword high and sideways in the air and rushed at Saku letting out a cry.

With the flick of Saku's top wrist, she swung up hard, hitting an exposed elbow. Blood gushed. He cried out in pain, and took the sword in his left hand. A guard came to his side, but he used the edge of the hilt to hit the man on the head.

She backed away and dove into one of the four long aisles. Yataku crossed after her. Saku had run to the end of the row, looking back to see Lord Yataku tucking his elbow into his ribs. He winced in pain but walked towards her.

Saku quickly took Kamo out of her pocket, stood on her tip toes and placed him on a shelf up high above. From the corner of her eyes she spotted the regent. He swung. The blade hit Saku's shoulder and cut her garment and slashing her skin. She sprinted past sake barrels, and ducked down out of sight. While he searched for her, she placed Fushichou on a pallet stacked with perfume crates.

She reached and grabbed a hold of the top shelf. The bare soles of her feet bounced off the bamboo and she leapt into the air. Before she could gain her footing, Yataku caught her with his other injured arm and yanked her off. She grabbed at his elbow as she fell towards the ground. He let go. Saku cleared out of the row. He stood, bleeding, still searching for her.

Fushichou called out. "Don't go that way, he's headed in your direction."

Kamo chimed in. "His guards aren't doing anything, you should be able to run out of here if you can get away."

Saku jumped to a shelf, but the top plank snapped in half. She was able to straddle what remained of the shelf, but Yataku spotted her. Before she could react, he threw his sword at her. She ducked, but could hold her balance no longer, especially with the tea on her back. The fall sent her head first to the ground, with the katana still in her hand.

Her vision blurred. He approached where she lay and picked up his sword. Before he could swing at her, she stood to her feet and slashed at the shelf, sending paper goods and jewelry flying. Her arms reached out and pulled herself through to the other side. Once she had crossed, she turned and backed away facing the cut she had made. She readied her sword. A knee cap came into view. She slashed. She felt her left foot slip on the dirt from the weight of the swing.

With his left hand Lord Yataku swung down. The swords clanked. Saku's press the blades towards his face, her blade close to touching his cheek. Trying to muster all her strength she pushed with her right hand on the katana. But in doing so, her feet slipped. She felt the sword leave her fingers. He headbutted her. She fell. After impact, Saku twisted back around looking up, discovering Lord Yataku above her. Blood dripped from Saku's face. She starred. Not blinking. His brow narrowed. He pointed the edge of the blade at her heart.

Saku's elbow jerked back. She threw the bag of tea at Lord Yataku and screamed. With every single inch of soul and being. Her throat went raw and it burned as she yelled.

Thunder clapped. The air filled with static. A flash binded them as lightning cracked through the thatch roof. The bolt struck Yataku. His body fell to the ground like a rag doll.

Saku stood to her feet, but her knees buckled. Her mouth dropped. She put her weight on the bamboo shelf. Her head felt dizzy. Her body was faint.

A voice cried from the other side of the warehouse. "I told you that you could shoot lightning from the sky! But noooo. Don't believe Kamo."

"Is he alright!" Asked Fushichou.

Lord Yataku lay with half his face in the dirt. His hair sprawled out in chunks on the ground.

Saku shook her head. "I... don't think so."

His guards closed in.

"Help!" She called to them. "What did I do? Someone help him!"

The guard did nothing. Another approached and looked down to his leader. They crossed their arms almost at the same time.

Saku grabbed Fushichou from the shelf and ran to the other end to collect Kamo. She put the skulls into her pocket and exited the warehouse.

Once outside Saku panicked, finding a corner and making herself small. She saw someone running in the darkness towards her. She backed further into the small space. Lights in the city

began to be lit. Soon she could see Oni-chan in front of her, with his hands and feet bound in rope. She went to him, cut the ropes, and shelled the sword. She cried standing in front of him, swollen. Broken.

"What. Happened?" He asked.

-

"The guards heard something, then gave up and let me go." Oni-chan said. Water boiled in a pot on top of a lit fire in the hut. The sound of chaos could be heard outside, with the misemono performers and the rest of the city learning the news about the daimyo's and the regent's death.

"I ran from the castle as fast as I could." Oni-chan went on. "Do you mean." Oni-chan said, "That you have taken down both Lord Yataku and the daimyo in the same evening?" He walked to the pot and wet the cloth in the hot water.

"Yes." Saku said.

Hana gasped. "Once my father hears of this. He will try to take control of Shao Song."

"There is no town guard left either." Oni-chan said. "There is no one to protect the city other than his forces, most of whom are off aiding the northwest."

Saku refused Oni-chan's help. "The guards did not come to Lord Yataku's side when the lightning struck him. They stood there, willing to watch a living man die."

"Wait." Oni-chan said. "He got hit by lightning?"

"Now you got to master talking to animals and you're set!" Kamo said to her.

Saku sighed. "I think the tea has given me these powers."

"Are you sure you don't want an exhibit in this misemono?" Oni-chan said. "Once you have overthrown the city. And taken control before the forces of the north do? No one will remember Oniku!"

"You can't be serious." Hanna spoke. She hid her arms in her Kimono and rocked on the back of her feet.

Saku stood and paced the floor. Her legs were weak and stiff, but she managed to walk to the other side of the room. She reached inside the large wooden barrel filling a pitcher. She drank from it with both hands, gulping. She slammed it on the table.

Her gaze turned to the crackling fire. She held a solution to fix everything.

Episode Five

"I could be daimyo." Saku said.

Hanna patted her bare skin with Oni-chans cloth. She looked different without her makeup, more sophisticated than expected. Her kimono shifted on her shoulders as she tugged at the collar.

"You would need control of the workers," She said. "and the armed forces. We don't have that. The Tamina clan of the north are cruel and will destroy your village the first chance they get. Lord Niroko is not merciful like Lord Yataku was."

"Really, she can't be any worse than the last guy." Oni-chan said.

Saku slowly paced back and forth in the hut. She felt herself checking her pockets, making sure the skulls were still in their place. "But I'm the idiot. I can't make right decisions, how am I going to know what's best for that many people? And, this is our chance to rule ourselves. For the first time in a hundred years."

Hanna shook her head. "This is only going to make matters worse. Yes, I could help you and yes the people respect me. The ones who don't want me crucified think I'm okay anyways." She muttered. Her elbows dug into the bamboo table as she put her hands on her chin hard. She sighed deeply with a pained expression on her face.

"When Lord Niroko finds what we are doing," She went on "know our heads will be removed, cleaned up and dressed up for everyone to see. So if we do this, make sure you look your best."

"I do not want to become someone's talking head!" Saku shouted.

Sparks appeared in the air. As soon as she raised her voice, everyone in the room jumped back. She stopped and looked to the sky, spreading her arms out wide as if she could do something if thunder crashed down. Nothing happened. She repeated herself. Calmly. Everyone returned to where they were standing before.

"You were serious." Oni-chan said. "In that case, I am with you. My head would look good on a display."

Hanna closed her eyes. "Tenma was a regular at the kissing house. Yataku's samurai shall listen to him. We will need his help to rally the left over forces to take the castle. To show the people some legitimacy of your clan. Your divine powers should help."

Oni-chan clapped his hands together excitedly. "You could be Emperor! I think we have one... Bukofu or something? But who cares! You can claim divine right!"

"Good thought, but let's keep it simple." Hanna said.

Saku waved Oni-chan off and walked around the water barrel. "I can't even be in charge of my finances. I got sad once and ate an entire week's wages. Get Ayashi. How can we call on him? The city can rally around him!"

"If Lord Yataku is dead, then he is gone." Hanna said. "My father is angry at him. He likes his head attached, he tells me often. If you, and your gift do not help us no one will. And they come for the village next."

"You mean he would leave us? After cursing me?" Saku said.

"That's pretty typical." Hanna said. "You. Are the only one who can help us."

"I did not have "take over Shao Song" in my spirit reading this week." Oni-chan stated. "I shall spread the word, and I will gather everyone and bring them to the front gate of the castle."

Hanna reached out her hand to Saku's. "If not you, then who?"

Kamo coughed from inside the pocket.

"How can you cough if you don't breathe air?" Saku asked.

"Being as out touch as you are with your past and culture and knowing nothing about yourself and all that, is this a good idea?" Kamo asked. "With great power comes the ability to roast people like a rice cracker. This could get a lot of people hurt if you don't use it right."

Fushichou agreed.

Saku bit her lip, trying to numb the sensation of dread. She took Kamo from his pocket and spoke to him. "It feels like a lot of people are going to be hurt no matter what we do." Saku said. "I told Mibu I would not let her down. I won't back out of that now." She said. Hanna and Oni-chan looked at each other, uneasy while she spoke to the object in her palm.

"I do not agree with this plan." Kamo said.

"There has to be more diplomatic solutions." Fushichou added.

Saku placed Kamo back in the pocket, and turned to the two. She nodded firmly. "Let's find Tenma."

Kamo quacked.

"Language." Fushichou warned.

The two story wooden structure had the smoothest walls Saku had ever seen. Its pointed roof was tightly woven with thatch, its wood unblemished. The camellia flowers were so brightly yellow that they could be seen in dimly lit city lights. She marvolved at the artisanal compound. The scent of rain clouds rushed past them in a chilling breeze. Saku held up a lantern, with an Oni-chan face painted on it.

"Only one family lives here?" Saku asked as they waited at the sliding door. "How can they afford it? Do they work a lot of extra shifts at the fields or whatever they do?"

"Nobles don't have to worry about money." Fushichou said. "They don't have to work for anything."

The idea of not working was hard for the villager to wrap her head around, having been used to strict routines of labor. A memory came to her mind of receiving her monthly rice rations that had been halved. She had worried how she was going to survive without food. Did these men not worry like that?

A servant came to the door to answer for Tenma, wearing a light red garment with a long sash around the front. They were led to the second level to a room with a giant open window, letting in the night air. A garden filled with Azalea flower beds and tall potted fruiting trees thrived inside the room.

A man entered the garden from the other side. Light shone off the top of his shaved head, his back hair unruly in an up knot. He adjusted his clothing, trying to hide the scar on his neck from them.

"My condolences, Lady Yataku. I received word that he has passed on." Tenma put a hand on her shoulder. "I understand things were difficult between you and Yataku."

"That's one way to put it." Hanna removed Tenma's hand from her shoulder. Saku could see a tear roll off the corner of her eye.

"We need your support." Saku said. "With Hanna's help, I am going to rule the city. So I get this is sudden, and you don't know me. But if you believe..."

"Oh, spare me your attempt at politics." Tenma said, waving his hand into the air dismissively. "If it is for my lady, then you have my support. I do not care that you are a slave. It is time for that way of life to end. Lord Noriko will aim to capture the castle as fast as he can. We must gather everyone and..."

An arrow whistled through the air. Tenma grabbed at the shaft that lodged itself into his chest. He tried to breathe. Hanna and Saku took cover behind the pots as another arrow struck him.

His body fell to the ground, on top of a bed of flowers. Peering over her cover, Saku spotted a darkly clothed man standing by the window welding a longbow with gold engravings. The man's eyes widened. He pulled the string back and aimed in Saku's direction. The tip cut through the air sharply. Saku spun to the other side of the pot. It struck the fabric on her back, ripped it and cut her skin. Saku screamed with all her might facing towards the attacker from behind cover.

Thunder cracked. She turned to shield her eyes from the flash. Hanna tried to do the same, but could not. Her brown eyes met with the thunderbolt in front of her that ripped through the complex and struck near where the attacker stood. He dropped, and cried out face first into the floor. He laid on his side and curled into a ball, grabbing at the burn marks at his side.

Saku approached him.

"That is your power?" Hanna asked Saku, not moving. "You did that?"

"Who are you?" Saku asked the man lying on the ground, not noticing Hanna hunched over with her eyes closed tight. His feet were kicking, randomly as if he could not control them.

"When the Skullers are destroyed." The attacker gritted his teeth as he spoke. "The Tamina will control all the tea. My family gets to live. That make's both our deaths worth it."

Dark smoke filled the room. Sparks had ignited the wood of the flower beds, sending flames reaching towards the Tenma clan banner. Hanna tried to walk over to Saku as the fire grew, but she stumbled.

"You work for my Father. You Shinobi." She said to the attacker. The man let out a final breath.

Tears from Hanna's red eyes streamed down her cheeks. Her pupils had turned mostly cloudy white. Saku say them.

"What did I do?" Saku gasped.

"Everything is cloudy. Help me out of here. Fast. Where there is one Shinobi, they are others nearby."

Saku helped Hanna leave the building, hearing frantic voices from within the compound. The air grew cold, colder than any night before it. A breeze swept through the city, causing the clouds of smoke to drift. She felt her hands tremble again.

Can I use this power without hurting someone? She thought.

-

When they had left and were sure they hadn't been followed, they ducked behind a yakitori-ya restaurant. Saku could still smell the grilled meat. She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Tenma was our only hope." Hanna said. She held a hand to her forehead. Her eyes did not move. "We have no way to gain our forces' trust."

Kamo laughed. "I told you running into things without plans doesn't work."

"Shut up Kamo." Saku said. "Is there anyone in Lord Yataku's samurai unit that would help us?"

"Jiro and Bokoni are the only ones. But Bokoni used to serve Noriko before the land was given to the Zumono clan. Though Jiro could lead the remaining men, He was loyal to Yataku, and therefore I am not his best friend so to speak."

A bowl from inside the empty restaurant fell on the ground, letting out a loud CLANK. Saku jumped and drew her katana. A cat with it's back arched slowly backed away the bowl. She sighed and returned the sword to its place.

"You've gotten yourself in deep in this one." Kamo said from inside her pocket. "I hope Hanna's blindness is temporary. 'Cause that would suck."

"It is questionable." Fushichou said. "If you fail, you will die. As will the others."

"Can everyone give me a second here?" Saku said, patting her pockets.

Hanna reached out, feeling her. When she found her, she drew closer to Saku.

"He is our only choice." Saku said. "We head to the outpost."

—

"Hanna. You can not ask this of me." A man with long gray hair spoke, rather harshly. His age could be seen in the wrinkles of his face, and his arm struggled to hold the weapon he was cleaning steady. His nostrils flared from the smell of fire from the cooking pits still burning.

"I'm not doing this for me." Saku said. "I'm doing this for everyone in Shao Song."

He wiped the blade of his Yari and turned to the remaining tents in the outpost. Where there once had been stationed a thousand men were now only two hundred. The samurai who left when word arrived the regent had been killed and brought none of their belongings along as they fled into the night. Jiro searched another abandoned tent, gathering any weapon he could find. Saku led Hanna as he walked.

"Why should I trust a tea slave?" He knelt, feeling the cold metal of a sword left in the dirt. He wiped it with a cloth and took it with him.

"We... aren't slaves." Saku said. "We are in debt to you conquerors who stopped us from drinking the tea ..." She stopped speaking. She swallowed hard and paced back and forth, left to right in front of the man. "We are slaves, aren't we?"

Hanna took a step toward Jiro who closed the flap on a tent and wandered to another. "Our choices are to fall to the north, or take the city. All we need to do is go get it."

"Is that all?" Jiro sneered. "Walk straight in? Should we knock first? You tell me how this works Hanna. These men are hungry, and their morale is low. If you wanted to help, you would start picking up weapons so we can sell them and buy those who survived the northern siege of Chinoki."

"I've stopped a man's heart tonight. And caught a house on fire" Saku said. "With your leadership, we can do anything if we work together."

"You? You are the one who killed Lord Yataku?" Jiro blew out his cheeks before throwing a pile of weapons at his own tent.

"Totally wasn't on purpose. I didn't know I could do that. I screamed and lightning came out of the sky, and..."

"Traitor!" One of the samurai shouted from nearby.

"She also killed Ito and his son." Said another.

She addressed the crowd of warriors who gathered. The men looked tired, and thin. "This was not my plan. I do not wish to take life. I want to do what's best for everyone, but I can't do it myself."

From behind a rack filled with stored weapons near the tent, Jiro pulled a wooden training sickle. He showed the weapon to Saku and nodded. She shrugged, confused. He tossed it at her.

"Fight me. Slave."

She looked at the sickle. "I can't even cut grass with this."

"No one is cutting grass." Jiro said. "You are no warrior. I can not fight with you."

"Why are we fighting with farm equipment? Mibu always beats me when I spar with her like this. What does this prove?"

"We don't have time for this," Hanna said. "The north might already be in the castle, we need everyone to go with us. I know a secret path that only a few know. We might be able to force our way in."

Saku and Jiro turned to one another, realizing she could see less than they thought. Hanna held out her hands in front of her while her white pupils struggled to see the shadows in front of it.

"I know what you're thinking, but I can see a little. I can lead you in the right direction. If we make it in time, we can recruit those remaining in the castle to our cause."

Saku pulled Kamo out, as if he were a worry stone. "Are you with us?" She asked Jiro.

"Well of course I am. I'm starting to feel at home in that pocket."

"Not you Kamo! Sorry, I was talking to the skull." She said to Jiro.

He stared hard at the woman before turning to the dimly lit castle on top of the forested hill. Tall grass near them waved back and forth in the cool breeze.

"I want no part in this slaughter," He said. "Leave before it's too late."

"No." Saku said.

A man rushed into the training grounds, frantic and calling out. "The Tamina clan of the north have sent their forces to the market district! And the Henashi clan of the Northwest have taken the bridge by the Misemono! Jiro you need to do something!"

Jiro lowered his eyes. "I'm too old for this. This is a death trap."

"I'm going to the castle." Saku said. "With anyone who wants to go with me. You can be a part of why people die. Or you could help all of us find a way to live. Let's go Hanna." Saku led Hanna in the direction of the castle on the hill. A few warriors joined them. Most of the gather crowd did not.

Jiro cursed as they disappeared into the night.

Saku removed brown tree needles from her between her toes. The dense conifer trees and steep rocky terrain made traveling difficult for the Tomodachi forces. They made their way slowly upward. The climb felt much longer than it looked.

"If we are where I think we are." Hanna said. "The gate to the back tunnel path should be up ahead. Someone should make sure it's clear before we proceed." A few men in blood soaked clothing and patch work armor left the group to scout up ahead.

After several minutes they returned. "There's no one in the garden." One told Hanna. "They must all have gone to the main castle."

"Garden?!" Hanna exclaimed. "We need to go east. I have led us astray."

"What garden?" Saku said.

"It is of no importance." She said, "Let's press on."

Hanna stood and gently reached for Saku's hand. She motioned with her head for her to follow. After they walked along a path, they found by lantern light a gate built of stacked stones that created an arch. Beyond it, in the distance, stood the white castle.

"Keep going." Hanna told the men, struggling to transport the weapons attached to their backs through the thick of the forest. She also took hold of one of the men's shoulders with her other hand.

Something in her voice gave Saku pause. Ignoring her grip, she pointed the light at an entrance to a stoned off area.

"Is this the garden?" Saku asked, walking inside.

Hanna tried to pull her along, but she left and entered. "Wait!" Hanna yelled.

Inside Saku found herself in a field of tall flowers. The plant's stalks were tall and husky, and the middle of the red blossom was a white hard seed, shaped like a skull. Red mushrooms grew at the base of the plant, surrounded by animal bones. Saku reached out, standing on her tippy toes, to gently feel the plant she had only heard before.

"These. Were my peoples flowers? The source of the crazy tea?" Saku asked, as a man guided Hanna inside. She remembered the conquerors checking their belongings when she was growing up, looking for seeds even one hundred years later after the take over. Saku had always assumed they were doing this out of the kindness of their heart so that their people could function away from the insanity their way of life brought. Holding the flower in her hands she realized nothing about the way she lived was done out of concern. It was to silence their power.

"They're so beautiful." Saku was able to say. Her mouth hung open. "This is what made the tea that I carried from Fukui."

"No." Hanna said. "That is tea from another flower. Purchased from the Misemono. No one is the wiser. Yataku wanted to keep the flower away the village. Now I can see why."

She saw tears in Saku's eyes.

"I have only dreamed of seeing these." She pulled one down towards her and felt its soft petals on her face. She went on, releasing the flower, and suddenly grasping her necklace. "My mother said she saw one once. On the only night I got to see her. Before they took her away. She refused to tell me where she saw them, in case I went looking for them. But I never have left the village. Why are they growing these still?"

Hanna looked down. "To warn what the Zumono clan would do if they were ever crossed. For a long time. It worked. Come on, I still need your eyes." Hanna said.

"Why did you try to keep me from these?"

She did not answer her question. She simply said: "The castle isn't far. We need to move."

Before leaving Saku took two flowers and placed them inside the misemono bag.

Once they had passed the fields, they headed east until they found the tunnel. They climbed through the rocky hand dug path up to a raised stone piled platform that stretched the entire length of the foothill. Beyond tree's above stood the painted white castle, with its four levels with slanted roofs, painted very dark blue. Dim light shown through a multitude of silt windows on the lower half.

"How are we supposed to get in from down here? I thought you knew a way to get in." A samurai asked.

"I told you I knew a way to the castle, No one said anything about getting in." Hanna spoke.

Saku approached the platform and took hold of one of its stones, testing its sturdiness. "This is no bigger than a black pine. I can get in and find out what's going on." She found a foothold and began to climb.

"Are you insane! You're going to fall to your death! I'm not ready to die again!" Kamo said.

"I climb these all the time." She said. Her right hand slipped as she tried to pull herself up, which caused her to lean back. Quickly she found a hold and steadied herself.

"All the time?" Fushichou asked.

"Every once in a while." Saku admitted.

Slowly, carefully moving up and sideways, she found a secure hold on the boulders and cracks of the platform until she came to a narrow window. She leaned in, palming her left hand, to peek inside. A candle burned from the other side of the small room, filled with bundles of arrows that hung from the wall from leather straps. She struck the wooden bar on the window as hard as she could, but it did not move.

Using the windows ledge as a foot hold, she leveraged herself up. With her other leg she kicked at the bar, making a loud thump.

"That's a lot of noise you are making." Kamo said. "You're going to alert..."

Before Kamo could finish speaking Saku had found a hold and lifted herself up, using all her strength so that her feet dangled below her. Using both legs, she kicked cause the wood to crack, sending pieces crashing down to the stone floor. Her fingers slipped, and she felt herself falling. She desperately reached for something to hold. Somehow before falling helplessly below, her fingers caught the edge of the ledge. She dangled for a moment, panting, her face flush. Frantically, she fought to pull herself up and over the window into the room. After positioning herself sitting below the window, she tried to regain her breath.

"Well. They know you are here." Kamo said. Saku drew her katana and stood to her feet.

The halls were quiet. The rooms, decorated with armor displays and pottery, were lit but empty.

"Where is everyone?" Saku whispered.

"You should open the front and get everyone inside." Kamo said.

Suddenly a voice rang out in the halls.

"You really don't have to tug on my ear. OUCH! THAT HURTS!" It said.

"That sounds like Ayashi?" Saku said.

"Get moving." Another voice cried.

Saku turned in time to see Ayashi thrown hard to the tatami mat in a large room next door. She looked up to see someone standing in the shadow of a wood sculpture of a Warrior. The figure held a long bow with an arrow drawn, pointing at Ayashi. She walked into the room and stood at a safe distance away in the shadow of the Zumono family banner. Ayashi looked hurt.

She clenched her fist and gritted her teeth, her eyes pointed in the direction of his capturer. Sparks flew. But then she thought of Hanna. Out there. Blind and helpless. And the building had

caught fire earlier. As much as she wanted to, seeing the figure in the shadow, she did use her power. She loosened her grip and calmed herself.

"Where is Saku?" The voice cried after a moment of silence. "Or the Ronin dies."

The figure stepped into the light. Saku's hands shook. "MIBU!" she cried.

"SAKU!"

Saku ran to Mibu and jumped on her, wrapping her legs and arms around her. They hugged each other tightly.

"I thought you had been killed! I left to look for you when you didn't return. I tracked you to the camp, the Misemono. I heard you were wanted then, everything in the outside world went crazy. It is chaos out there." Mibu cried.

"I almost killed you."

Ayashi remained on the ground. "I'm not the bad guy here, I'm on your side."

"I told you, not to speak unless I tell you to!" Mibu said, turning in his direction.

"She jumped me. And took me captive. From behind! That woman is crazy!" He said.

"Silence!" Mibu yelled. "We've been here for hours, where is everyone? What is going on? What's that in your pocket?" Mibu began to reach into Saku's pocket.

"NO!" Saku said. But Mibu took the object out anyway. Saku tried to reach to take it back, but Mibu held her hand away.

"Oh it's you!" Kamō said, now in Mibu's hand. "I remember you. You were in the market district one day. You fed some of your Onigiri when I was alive."

Mibu looked at the duck skull in horror. She dropped the skull. Saku fell to her knees to save Kamō from falling to the ground.

"What is this, Saku? Why do you have this? Like you're a tea drinker?" She said.

"His name is Kamō. A spirit speaks from within this skull. That of a duck who lived in this area. A duck you shared your Onigiri with when you were in the market district."

Mibu stared at her friend in disbelief. "I told you that story." She said. "What madness are you speaking?"

"You have to trust me. There are some things I have learned about myself that are going to be very hard to believe." Saku pulled a skull flower from her bag and presented it to Mibu. "There are a lot of things we were told that are wrong."

"Put that away." Mibu said, turning around in shame. "Why do you have that? You would anger the conquerors with that behavior! We are not to..."

"Do not speak their names like that." Saku said. "They were not our friends, as they are now. There is nothing wrong with me. For once everything is right and I have found a way to fix everything."

"What did you do? Why are you talking like this?" Mibu spoke. Her eyes were closed.

"I forced her to drink the tea." Ayashi said.

"No one else has to know." Mibu said, reaching for Saku's hand. "We can heal you Saku. Let's get you home."

"No. We are here to take over this city."

Mibu looked at Saku hard, putting her hand to her side. "This isn't like you."

"But it is." She said. "This is the real me. I didn't know. We were lied to. We are freeing the village."

"Free? We aren't slaves we are free. We have a conqueror ruler, what are you talking about? We have two hours a day to do whatever we want!"

"We are not. I accidentally killed Yataku and messed up his military advisor's head. We decided the town should belong to the people."

Mibu dashed swiftly to Saku and got in her face. "Not only did you drink the forbidden tea, but you are now crazy enough to think you can create a political coup?"

Pounding echoed through the walls.

"That's coming from the front gate." Mibu said, "quick get the prisoner..."

Saku turned to where Ayashi had been. He had vanished. Mibu narrowed her brow.

"I am a fool. Let's get out of here." Mibu reached for Saku's hand.

The two found an opening that looked out to the large arch that led from the forest road to the castle. A multitude of people stood, holding torches shouting.

"What are they saying?" Mibu said.

As they listened and watched from the room above, they began to recognize the words the crowd was chatting. Oni-chan and others from the Misemono stood along with them.

"Long live Tomodachi." They cried. Saku squinted, and recognized the girl and his brother standing next to Jiro, who stood tall holding his weapon high.

"Why are they saying this?" Mibu asked.

Saku's mouth twisted as she rubbed her fingers together, as if to check if she were awake. "I. Am your daimyo now."

"You are delusional." Mibu said. But Saku stepped out so that the crowd could see her below. Cheers erupted from the people. She saw Hanna and the other forces make their way to join the crowd. Mibu's jaw dropped and Saku raised her hand.

"As first order as your daimyo." She shouted to them. "Fukui and all slaves are free."

Mibu, though baffled, shrugged. "Well. Okay then. You might be crazy. But I'm not going to complain." She said.

"Hail Emperor Tomodachi!" A voice cried out.

"I'm not crazy. I can shoot lightning from the sky. But I can't show you. I can't hurt you like I've hurt others." The realization came over her face as she spoke.

"Sure you can shoot lightning from your eyes." Mibu said, softly patting her on the shoulder. As if her friend had too much sake to drink on a day off from the fields."Have you eaten since you became a tea drinker? Maybe the grain from the rice will soak up the wacky juice in your stomach."

Strange music began to play from below the forest path. Dark toned flutes rang out. Everyone stepped back, to allow a small band of men coming on the path towards the castle. A single man stood in front of them, holding a message and a torch. Saku and Mibu left, and ran through the castle to the gate below to join the others. They walked to the group. Jiro and his warriors surrounded Saku. A man held out a red wax seal with the northern clan symbol stamped on it.

"Lord. Tomodachi. And Lady Hanna." The man said. "Lord Noriko wishes to speak to you, at a neutral site. The letter also describes the wishes of some samurai who were protecting Lord Yataku. They wish to join our clan."

Jiro looked at Hanna, who frowned. "What is this?"

The man approached Hana. Jiro began to draw his weapon, but Saku motioned for him to halt.

"This is to find a peaceful agreement on your cities surrender. We have made a treaty with the Northwestern clan. The region was given to us in this agreement. We wish for a peaceful transition of power."

Oni-chan took hold of a large club, with pieces of metal sticking through. Others in the crowd did the same.

"The emperor will approve." He said. "There is no use in resisting. Shao Song belongs to the Tamina clan."

"It belongs to us." Saku said. Approaching. "The city is of its people. Not Lord Noriko."

The man looked at Saku for a moment. But turned back to Hanna. "We await your reply and cooperation. As do the rest of Yataku's men who left the castle and joined us."

Hana's eyes met Saku's. The woman seemed as if she had been in that moment before. She spoke, still looking at Saku. "I shall meet Lord Noriko as he wishes. But we shall not give up this city."

"Lord Noriko will look forward to your presence." The man said. They left.

Mibu lowered her head. "There is no chance the army of this city can match the north if some of their forces have surrounded them. We have no chance."

"Kamo and Fushichou have gotten me this far. They will help us." Saku pulled both skulls out from her pockets.

"We are not gods Saku." Fushichou spoke. "We are just spirits."

"Put it away." Mibu said, dismissively. Mibu hung her head and walked back towards the castle.

Hanna was led to Saku. She crossed her arms. "Jiro said you saved his grandkids. He knew not of this before."

She paused. "You know. If both of you had the power of the tea, there's no way anyone could stop us."

"She doesn't believe me." Saku said.

Hanna's eyes looked out deep into the night. "I have failed you. If I could have led you here quicker I might have been able to talk the remaining men into staying and fighting with us. You must find a way to show her. Tomorrow, I will find a way to end this."

Saku looked in despair at Hanna. "You can't see because of something I did. I can't risk hurting her. And she is never going to believe me. We need to get away from this castle. I don't know who thought this was a good idea, but if we are attacked by two armies we would be trapped here."

Hanna grinned. "Well. Look at you making smart decisions."

"Let's make sure everyone gets something to eat first." Saku said.

Episode Six

For hours Jiro's men battled to retake the Misemono. The north and their allies retreated to the outskirts of town. At the suggestion of "Lord Tomadachi", the warriors were sent out to key points in the city until the morning. Fushichou suggested the carnival as a resting place due to its tactical advantage. Saku wasn't sure what this meant, but it seemed like a good plan. It was her idea for the willing samurai and entertainers to patrol the streets. Until the armies could be repelled.

"Outside is a strange choice to sleep," Oni-chan said. "Are you sure you don't want a better dwelling? You are the daimyo now."

Oni-chan the lantern, with his own face on it, high so that Mibu could finish placing her bedroll. The giant had placed them in a tent not far from the stage. He realized Saku was looking at the animal hide of the tent, with a look of disgust.

"It is only for the night." Oni-chan told Saku. "Few hours."

"Did it have to be animal?" Saku asked. Oni-chan shrugged.

"Really?" Mibu scuffed. "If you wanted you could order twenty geisha's and a persimmon, and you're upset that the tent is normal? "We've slept in an animal tent before. You didn't care then."

They tried to situate themselves in the space as best they could, but the overwhelming feeling of responsibility lingered in Saku's mind. Giving out orders had been more exusing than summoning lighting, and the looks from Mibu's face while doing it tired her more.

"Things are different now." Saku said, still looking at the hide disapprovingly. "Now that I know this was an animal with a story to tell, I can't look at it the same way anymore. But the tent will do for now."

"No more skull talk." Mibu said. "You will sleep it off. The city might be fooled, but I'm not. And when they realize it we might be in trouble when the conquerors figure out..."

"They are not our conquerors anymore." Saku walked to Mibu and gave Oni-chan a look. He got the idea.

"We wake early to meet the north at the temple on the edge of the city. Rest well."

Oni-chan nodded at Mibu and returned to his dwelling for the evening. The air had warmed once again and the cicadas chirped. Saku looked down, with her fists clenched as Mibu rummaged through her pack for rations. She found onigiri and handed it to Saku, who took a bite as soon as she could. The salty plum and rice was satisfying, after losing so much strength throughout the past days. Mibu pivoted towards her, and bit into her own ration.

"This is not of craziness." Saku said after taking a last bite. "This is a gift. A gift we have been lied to about all of our lives."

"What are you suggesting?" Mibu said. "That we were once a village of. What? Tea drinkers? Who really could talk to skulls? And what, the Shao Song took this from us? But let us keep growing the tea for some reason? And no one has bothered to try it, until you Saku? Why would any rational nation do this? I know you can be stupid, but..."

"I am not stupid. They wanted to suppress our power." Saku said. "Have you ever thought about our schooling growing up? It's like they wanted to confuse us, and punish us if we did not listen without resistance. So that we follow their rules without question. They take us away from our parents early on to stomp out the last embers of our past. We are a threat to them. But no more."

Hearing that, Mibu laid on her bed roll. Her hands rested behind her head as she looked up. She closed her eyes and sighed deeply. "I can't begin to explain how disappointed I am in you. We had a lot of good teachers who worked really hard with us. I never thought you would do this. What you speak is not truth, it is sickness and it is despicable." Mibu reached under her bedroll and picked up a small rock. She flung the rock into the night.

"Why don't you believe me? You've always believed me." Saku said.

Mibu rolled to her side. "This isn't believable. That is why. We must rest."

"LISTEN TO..." She stopped and covered her mouth with her hands. Mibu jolted up in panic and looked to her. She stood there. Silent for a moment.

"I can't get mad. I want to show you. But I don't want to hurt you." Saku said. She sat down next to her on the bedroll.

"Why is your hair standing up like that?" Mibu asked.

"It is because of my powers." She said.

"Powers? Really Saku? Thinking you can talk to things is a power?" Mibu rolled back over to face the wall of the tent. "Bet you haven't washed it since you set off for the trip. That's why."

Saku turned to the bag she had been given with the skull flowers inside. She wanted to look at them, but did not want to start a fight.

"Saku." Kamo said. "I'm not sure what to do about your friend there, but if you put me somewhere I can see I can scream at you until you wake up. That way you get up early."

"Really?" Saku whispered.

"What?" Mibu said.

"Nothing." She took Kamo out of her pocket and placed him so that he could see outside.

Mibu rolled over to see what Saku was doing. She frowned. "Can we put the gross toys away please?"

"Kamo is my friend." Saku said.

"I am too tired." Mibu said. "Come back to me. The real you. The one who understands the value of hard work and loyalty. If you continue on like this, I won't be helping you. Our village will not either. Daimyo, or not."

Saku said nothing.

"Now hold my hand." Mibu said.

She did. Her eyes did not close for a long while. She wondered to herself how she could prove her truth. But her eyes grew heavy, and soon she drifted into sleep.

—

"WAKE UP!"

Saku rose at the sound of the screaming skull. A sharp blistering thump rang out. At first Saku thought it was the wind, but realized an arrow had struck the tent tool. Its shaft was painted blue.

"Mibu!" Saku shook her friend and looked back out. Mibu sat up. She grabbed the bag and her weapons.

"I heard commotion in the distance." Kamo said.

Mibu grabbed the long bow and searched the area. On the edge of the misemono lights flicker. The sky gently began to light with dark blue light. The morning sun would soon make an appearance. They could hear the cries of men and swords clashing. She reached for an arrow.

She took a step forward and signaled Saku to be silent as she choked down her emotions.

"She's listening to screaming." Fushichou said.

"We must go help them." Saku said, beginning to walk in that direction.

"If that is the clans, we can not fight them by ourselves. Even if you think you have powers, there's too many of them. We need to get out of here."

"We can't leave Oni-chan."

"There's nothing we can..."

Saku ran towards the sound of the clanking.

"Stop!" Mibu cried to her.

She didn't listen. She hurried towards the misemono entrance, holding her katana high. Mibu ran after her with her weapon drawn.

Oni-chan and other performers struggled to keep a large bamboo gate closed. Others and their families scattered into a chaotic collecting of belongings. Cries rang out from the other side. Saku put the sword back in its sheath, and ran to help.

"Wait." Oni-chan shouted. "You need to get out of here. Noriko is going to want you dead." His massive forearms strained against the efforts of the outsider invaders.

"I won't leave you. We aren't finished here. We need you..." Saku said, stepping up.

Dozens of sharp twangs ripped out from above. Arrows flew over the wall. Saku turned and saw Mibu leap in the field behind her, missing an arrow narrowly.

"Get out of here. " He said.

Mibu cried out. "We need to tell others before the entire city falls. We can get the word out at the castle." Mibu said, readying her bow looking at the gate. Saku's eyes drew to where the cracking sound was coming from. With a snap, the gate broke in two.

"Thank you for your kindness." Saku said.

Saku met Mibu and dashed towards the back of the fenced property. A wave of men lunged across of what remained of the gate. Entertainers, a "yokai" and a 'kappa', or so they claimed to be, fought with crude stage weapons against the north's strongly crafted katana's.

Oni-chan dug in his heels but could hold the men back no farther. Dirt spread upward from where he landed. A balding man in a blue kimono with his hair pulled back stood over him. The Tomodachi samurai fought back around Oni-chan, trying to get to his position.

Oni-chan tried to get to his feet, but it was too late. Saku could only watch from afar as the northern samurai jabbed the dagger into him.

The two women found themselves running through smokey streets heading towards the castle. Saku breathed in sharp through her nose, and smelt a bitter and grassy burn.

"The flowers!" Saku shouted to Mibu. She pointed towards the smoke. She quickened her pace towards the skull flower fields.

"Can you stop running into danger!" Mibu passed the stone entrance and joined Saku in the fields, who was cutting every flower she could. Mibu turned towards the castle. There also were flames.

"Hanna." Saku said, also noticing.

"We can't save everyone." Mibu said.

"This is our last hope." Saku picked a skull flower and put it in her bag. The bag overflowed.

"We can't..." Mibu began to say. But instead she watched as her friend obsessively placed flowers in the mermaid bag. Mibu stood. Horrified. "The field is on fire! Saku."

"Yes! Hurry! Take all you can carry."

"Enough of this! No More Saku! You're going to get us hurt!"

Saku began to stuff flowers in Mibu's pockets. "Just believe me."

"Believe me!" Mibu shouted. "You are sick!"

"Then be sick with me."

Mibu saw smoke quickly rising ahead of them. She took a flower and snapped it at the stem. She took another. "Now let's go!"

The smoke followed them until they arrived on the edge of the district. Saku stood on the street, looking back to the burning field. Flames roared high. The chatter of panic and chaos echoed throughout the city. Men ran carrying weapons, running towards the castle.

"What if these are the only flowers left?" Saku thought. Slowly realizing. "If they are attacking Shao Song. They will send men to Fukui. We need to go find Ayashi and get to our village."

They fled towards the castle at a hurried pace towards the city. They found a royal messenger and sent word to Jiro to hold the city until they returned. They escaped out into the forest, heading towards the village.

—

Saku and Mibu crept up to Ayashi's encampment. They had traveled along the river there in hopes that he had returned to it. But instead, a lone man in blue sat on the stump where Saku had once drunk the tea. He drew no sword. He nodded at the woman, and motioned for them to sit down. They hesitated. The man showed them the palm of both hands. "I am Lord Noriko. Lord Tomodachi. I am here to talk."

The two skull women stood. With their arms crossed. Lord Noriko shrugged but did not seem concerned.

"Where is Ayashi?" Saku spoke.

"Place your weapons on the ground. You have my word you will not be harmed."

Saku looked to Mibu. She spoke. "You attacked the city after inviting us to a peace treaty. We can not trust you."

"I did not attack." Lord Noriko said. "The forces of the city attacked us. Lead by Jiro. Ayashi. And Hanna. They choose not to counsel you, but to try to kill us in our sleep."

"No." Saku said. "They wouldn't do that."

"This isn't the first time the two have done this before Saku. This is merely the echoes of a deal poorly drafted. I have paid the cost of their mistakes today. I knew you would come here. Looking for Ayashi believing he was helping you. He was helping himself."

"You lie." Saku said.

"It might be unwise to lie to one who can summon thunder." Lord Noriko said. "I only speak truth."

Saku put her weapons down. Mibu did the same, but reluctantly.

"You were a creation of Ayashi." said Lord Noriko. "You were given the tea so that you would aid his cause. So that he would have an unstoppable weapon. You happened on the way, so he chose you. My spy believes this. You have caused many people harm."

"My only intention is to do what is right." Saku said.

"I believe you." Lord Noriko said, sitting up. "I would have requested to speak to you in person if they had come to surrender as I requested. But now it does not matter. The city of Shao Song is mine. Ayashi and Hanna shall be dealt with, with care. I am here to speak to you about your village."

"Why me?" Saku said.

"I do not recognize Rusu as head of the village. For I did not appoint them, they can not be trusted. For she was placed by Lord Yataku. That part of the world is gone. You were trying to take what originally was my daimyo of your village, a proper council with us in the coming months. I shall give the city time to regain its own order. We do not seek control of your people. But we do request that the tea trade is kept open only to us. I give to you my letter to read to your people stating these wishes." He handed Saku a letter sealed in red wax.

"That's it?"

"There is one matter you should consider wisely. You and the village must destroy all the remaining skull flowers. I shall not take them from you. But you should consider your power. And what a people might do with it who have been sickened by lies."

"You're talking about the crazy tea too?" Mibu said. "Is this a joke?"

"Is that why you burned the flowers?" Saku said.

"Yes." Lord Niroko said. "Because I had to. What if there are others out there who get powers from this? Your village is no longer the keepers of the wild like they once were. Maybe not all of your village should have that power."

"You're telling me." Mibu spoke. "If we trade with you, you will leave us alone?"

"Yes." He said. "If you destroy every last remaining flower. We will happily trade with you. But If you do not, we shall destroy you. We shall give you time to decide. We shall seek you when the time is right. Do I have your understanding? And your promise to council with me?"

"Yes." Saku said.

"I shall see you both again soon enough."

At that he stood and bowed. They bowed back. He walked into the forest.

"Why does he believe you can summon lighting?" Mibu said. "He's going to learn that's a lie."

"It's not a lie. But the things he told us? Just now? Those were lies. We have to get to the village as soon as we can. Our people are in danger."

Episode Seven

Off in the distance, waves crashed onto the Fukui shoreline. Saku and Mibu stood staring, collecting their thoughts after the day-long journey from Shao Song. The gray skies cast a shadow upon the village. Saku breathed in the salty air. The rich scent of dry cedar and pine loomed, and this calmed her spirit. The vegetation around the village somehow looked drier than it had before she left. Neither of them could remember a time where the land looked like it did. The green tea crops on the hill sides were brown and leaned heavy to the side. This was a sign that the water silo had failed to keep their crops alive.

"Our people are not ready for this." Mibu said, fidgeting with her bow string.

"Nor am I." Saku bent down to rest her knees. "But we have to convince them that the northern clan means to kill everyone. We can't let them suffer the same fate as Oni-chan. The forces will be here soon. We have to do what we can to stop people from getting hurt." Her gaze turned to the village, which now looked so small and unimportant.

"You don't think he will keep his word?" Mibu said. "If we destroy the flower, you don't think he will leave us alone?"

"No." Saku said.

"We should have left the village. You should never have gone to the city." Mibu said. She cursed.

She took a few steps away from hillside and turned back in the direction Shao Song. Smoke still rose. As much as they both might have wished this, that they should have just left, they knew that was no longer an option.

They reached for each other's hand and dead tall grass waved back and forth a passing breeze. Saku smiled.

"This skull talk has put everyone in danger. A friend of yours died because of it. If it does not end, then I can't keep doing this with you."

"Please." Saku said. "Don't do this. Not now."

"We have to at least try to meet Lord Niroko's offer.' Mibu said. "The flowers should be destroyed. Please. This is bigger than us, if there is a chance we can live in peace, we have to..."

"There is no chance." Saku said. "These clans thirst for power and will lie, cheat and steal to get it. We saw it. All we need to do is find a way to show it to them. But I need you on my side. You are my hope. If these flowers are lost, so is our lives."

Mibu's shoulders stiffened, which could be felt in Saku's grip.

"What you have become," Mibu said, "Is that which has been taught by everyone we have ever known to be wrong. Deplorable. And a hindrance to our peoples progress."

"And those all," Saku said. "Were lies."

Mibu let go of her hand. Saku hunched her shoulders.

Rusu shook her head, along with most of the rest of the village standing in the open air at the Temple. "They put the village idiot in charge." She said.

Saku's eyes turned away from her back to her people who looked confused. Some scratched their heads, others placed their hands on their hips in disbelief.

"That's some way to speak to their new leader." Kamo said from inside Saku's pocket. "I'm hearing a lot of mumbung, are they usually like this? I'm glad you didn't return to get hope when we first met."

"We must destroy the flowers. This is easy." Rusu said, trying to raise her voice. Saku held out a hand and shook her head.

"You have no power here anymore." She said as loud as she could, addressing everyone who had gathered. "I am your daimyo. And the chosen leader of Shao Song. We must join with them to defeat the north and their allies. They no longer are our conquerors."

An older man in the crowd squinted and rubbed his neck. "Should we check with someone first? This doesn't seem right.."

Mibu told them what she had witnessed, the people at the castle crying out "Long live Tomadachi."

"Well." The same man said. "Which Tomadachi do they mean then? A lot of us share that family name."

"It is I." Saku said in frustration. "I am your leader. And I am telling you they are on their way, and they mean to kill us all. We need everyone ready to fight as soon as possible."

People gasped. "That kind of talk is going to scare the children! Besides, we can't put together an army without the conquerors approval" The old man said.

"No," Saku said, fighting down her anger. She fought to keep her fists relaxed. "I. Tell what the conquerors what to do now."

"Maybe so." Rusu said. "You might have fooled them, but you do not fool us. If you truly want to do what is best for us, you will at least listen to what we have to say! And I say give them the flowers!" Some people cheered in agreement.

"The Tamina clan of the north, and the Henashi of the northwest, only want to take control of the tea market. I have heard these words from my own ears, as a shinobi died cursing our people. They think somehow this will bring prosperity to the land. They then attacked Shao Song after agreeing to peace talks. The Tamina can not be trusted."

"Excuse me." The same old man said, raising his hand. "The conquerors said tea trade wasn't a big deal. This doesn't make any sense. It sounds like you want an excuse to run things."

Fushichou made a baffled noise from the pocket. "They are serious? Whoever controls the tea practically controls the country. Especially if they open up trade routes to worlds far north!"

Saku found herself chuckling at this. She covered her mouth with her hands.

"Whom do you speak with?" Rusu said. She moved closer. "You look as if you are laughing at something in your pockets."

Mibu stepped in front of Saku. "That matters not." She said. "What matters is the choice we make next."

Rusu crossed to Saku and looked down in pure spite. "There was nothing in you to ever value. There still is not. Again. I ask. Whom were you speaking with?"

Saku began to pull something out of her pocket.

"Don't." Mibu said.

"They must know." Saku reached deeper.

Mibu grabbed Saku's hands from in her pocket.

"Your hand in my pocket. In front of everyone." Saku whispered. "In a temple."

"I know." Mibu sighed, with her back to everyone. "I'm trying to protect you from yourself."

"I need to tell my truth." Saku said. "To protect you. To protect everyone. I don't need your understanding. I need you to listen."

Mibu narrowed her brow and slowly, thoughtfully, removed her hand from Saku's pocket.

Saku presented the duck skull to the villagers. People gasped. Someone in the crowd shrieked. She then presented to them the owl-eagle skull in the other.

"This is Kamo." She raised her left hand, "and Fushichou!" She raised her right.

The crowd was flabbergasted for a long while.

"I was forced to drink the tea against my will." Saku could hear the shifting and the uneasiness in the crowd. "But I since then, I can talk to the spirits within these bones. These are my friends. The powers are real. That is why is Lord Yataku has fallen. Because of me. And it can be yours. If you restore tradition, and drink the tea." She looked into the eyes of the people, and then put the skulls back in her pockets. "I can summon light if I get angry. I didn't know that when it happened."

A disgusted cry rang out from the villagers.

Followed by Silence.

The same old man cried out. "We aren't really going to listen to this nut case are we?"

A man rushed into the garden center of the temple. He turned to Rusu and reported, out of breath "A ship has arrived on the shore! The clan of the north is sending forces this way. We have spotted them in the forest. What do we do Rusu!?"

"Rusu is not in charge." Saku said. "I am."

The man stared at Saku blankly. "Is that a joke? Forces that could easily wipe out everyone in this village are approaching, and you're making a joke?"

"She jokes not." An old well known woman by the named Asta spoke. "She is Saku, the daimyo of Shao song, and Fukui."

The man looked at Saku. "I'm not bowing to you."

"No one asked you to do that, Kenji." Saku said. "Someone please. Drink the tea."

"Destroy the flowers." Rusu said. "And trade our useless tea to the north. From what's left of it that isn't brown. If you can talk to skulls and summon lightning, prove it. Show us."

Asta nodded. "Seems fair to me. You are asking us to drink poison."

"I can't summon it. I mean. I can. But I can't control it. And I will not do anything to harm any of you. You aren't going to believe that the skulls talk no matter what I do."

"That's convenient." Someone yelled.

"Ask Kamo a question, I will tell you his reply." Saku said, again pulling Kamo out of her pocket. People gawked.

"That's not going to work." Mibu said, shaking her head. "Let us decide for ourselves."

Saku took a step forward and raised her chin to speak. "These flowers are all that remain of the true us. The people we used to be. The people we still are. We can re-learn our past and tell our ancestors stories once again. We have been lied to our whole lives. Our people were not crazy. They were protectors of the wild. Our people have sworn an oath to the soil. It is time that we remember."

A young boy shook his head. He looked to his mother. "That's the crazy tea talking."

"I speak the truth!" Saku said. She backed off and looked to the sky. She drew in a deep breath. She let it out.

Mibu felt something static surge in the air. She looked around, trying to figure out where the feeling had come from.

"Without proof." Asta spoke, "destroying the flowers is the sensible thing to do. If they kill us after, there is not much we can do." "Our past or not, the conquerors have helped us grow beyond those years. Those are people of the past. Not who we are now."

"I shall not destroy my flowers." Saku held the bag closer to herself. Asta noticed this. "I will not destroy our history."

"That was our history." Asta said. "This is ours now."

"Mibu." Saku said. "Tell them. This is not the best for them. This is allowing the outside world to win. We must allow the past to teach us."

"Saku." Mibu said, biting her lip. "I. Don't."

Saku looked away from her. "I know. I said I didn't need your understanding. It is not fair for me to ask this of you. Is there no one who will drink this tea? Mibu. You? Please."

Mibu stepped back and hung her head.

No one spoke. Saku slowly backed away from the people. "Decide for yourself. I appoint Asta to manage this affair. Talk it over. Fast. And tell me what you decide. I then will consider your wishes. But I can see now. You do not understand. I'll fight them myself."

She turned and walked towards the shore as the shadow of a large sail cast over the village. On top of the wooden boat on the top deck sat a large castle. The northern clans banners waved from all sides of the ship. Archers stood on raised platforms around the castle, holding their arrows high yelling.

Mibu called out. "Wait!"

Saku stopped. She turned around and touched her katana with her finger tips. Her face flushed of all colors. "Do not follow me. If you do not believe me."

Mibu did not move.

"I tried." Saku said. Dust kicked up behind her as she turned to leave the Temple. With the crowd looking on as she walked away towards the warship.

Forces holding yari's stood at attention on the soft coastal sand as Saku approached, alone. She fought the softness as she walked, struggling to get her feet moving the closer she moved in. Until she arrived at where tidepools and waves had moistened the sand. That was enough for her to take a strong stand to face the clan of the north. She adjusted the misemono bag of skull flowers around her shoulders.

"I have no advice on how to handle this fight alone." Fushichou said. "This is far out of the scope of my knowledge."

"I am not alone." Saku said. Looking at the weapons the men held. "Not with you two."

"Really Fushichou?" Kamo said. "You don't know what she's going to do? With all that water around the boat and all?"

"Okay everyone," Saku said to her pockets. "I'm off to go die here, so if you can both quiet it down that would be great."

"You're not going to die. Not if you keep calm, spread your wings and... oh yeah. You're not a duck. Sorry." Kamo said.

"I get what you're getting at." Saku said. Smiling.

"Greetings. Lord Tomodachi." An older Samurai spoke. "I am Yoshio. An aid to Lord Noriko. You indeed were given time, though perhaps not the time you might have assumed. Will your village meet our demands?"

"Yes." A voice said. Rusu approached carrying a sack with two skull flowers poking out. "Here they are. We agree to your terms. That is what we have decided."

Mibu stood in the field nearby with others.

"I'm so sorry Saku." She said. Ashamed.

People of the village drew closer. Asta and Rusu were among them. They both approached Saku. She jolted back away from them.

"You can not ask this of me." Saku said, looking into the eyes of her people. They seemed like strangers now. People she no longer could communicate with. They would never believe her. They were going to destroy everything without even trying to understand anything.

"Are the last of the skull flowers in your bag?" Asta spoke.

"Yes." Saku said. Facing her.

"Hand them to Mibu." Asta ordered.

"You don't understand what you are doing!" Saku shouted.

Mibu again felt static in the air. Everyone did. People shifted and looked around.

"Someone take them." Rusu shouted. She nodded to a group of men holding crud weapons.

Mibu ran to stand in front of the men. "No." she said.

The men tried to push aside Mibu but she stood firm.

"If you do not give them to us, we have orders to attack. Make your choice." Yoshio said.

"There's other solutions to this. This can't be the only way." Mibu said.

"If you take a step forward" Saku said to the clan of the north. "I will be forced to kill you." She held the palm of her hand on her sword. "Turn back now and leave."

A samurai reached for Saku's bag.

"Shield your eyes." Saku shouted.

Her fist clenched hard, she gritted her teeth. She began to scream, but instead channeled that energy to her veins. The man leapt away from her, feeling the power in the air. Without making a sound, she looked to the gray sky. A lightning bolt spilt through the clouds and struck the warship's main castle. It burst into flames.

"Told you." Kamo said.

Samurai leaped over board, frightened. They joined the other forces on the shore, who began to move towards Saku. She defended herself, blocking the men's attacks. But the more that attack, the harder it became. With all her strength she fought as the people from her village looked on. Mibu ran, but was out of reach to aid her.

"Please!" She yelled. "Stop this! Don't make me do this!" They did not.

Another bolt cracked above them, striking many men. Other forces kept moving. Saku backed away, summoning another bolt on one of the raised platforms hitting an archer before they could release an arrow. Flames on the ship grew. Men broke ranks, and started running away from the village. Some of the people of Fukui ran to take cover. Mibu rushed to Saku's side, releasing a shot that struck the last archer standing in flames.

A samurai was in reach and took a jab at Saku. She blocked. With a blink of her eye, electricity came from the sky and was absorbed into the attacker's sword. The man instantly fell to the ground, lifeless. At the sight of this, the northern clan fled. Running, scattered through out the beach. Saku's eyes followed this, but her heart sank at the sight of northern forces gathering on top of a hill from the other side of the village.

"I can't handle all of them." She said, seeing the pure number of samurai forces. She turned to the people hiding in the field. "For those who wish me to lead you. Head to the eastern water silo."

Mibu ran with her towards the mountain slopes at the edge of the town. As did most everyone else. Rusu included.

The villagers stood atop of the steep slope next to the water tower. They looked down to the northern clans forces who walked up towards the town.

"Release the water!" Saku cried. The villagers rushed to the structure and began to open gates on the aqueduct, sending water gushing down the bamboo and onto the soil below. The northern clan stopped, many of the men looking to their soaked feet. They looked back up in time to hear Saku summoning thunder nearby.

"Stay back!" She shouted to the warriors. Most began to retreat, but a brave few made their way up through the tea plants towards the top. She rushed down to meet them. With a swift motion struck a man's knee with the handle of the katana. He tumbled down.

"Last chance!" She screamed. "Leave now or else!" Again, the men did not stop and marched upward.

With a blink she summoned lighting to the slope, dropping a multitude of men who had stood in the wet soil.

But when Saku had called forth the thunderclap, some of the sparks had flown onto the misemono bag, causing the flower petals to go up in flames. The bag burned. She threw it off and tossed it down.

"NO!" She cried towards the bag. Thunder struck the bag, ripping it apart. Saku screamed again. A scream that echoed in the air, which had suddenly smelled moist. A bright flash came right in front of Saku. A sudden crack rang out so loud that it sent everyone, friend and foe, to their knees.

Everyone could feel tingling in their bodies. She found the bag on the ground. In flames.

"NOOOOOOO!" Saku let out a death curdling scream directed in front of her. She began to hit the ground. Thunder clapped. People sheided their eyes from all the flashing light.

And then, for the first time in a long time, it began to rain. Giant raindrops fell to the ground. The thirsty soil quickly drank up as the rain grew heavier. The northern clan fled, back in the direction of Shao Song.

One man, worn from battle and years, called out to the village, spitting angry. "We shall not forget this. This only gets worse from here!"

Saku kept looking at the ashes that used to be the bag. Her hair and garments were soaking wet. She cried. A stream of rain fall down the hill.

Mibu walked to Saku and put a hand on her shoulder.

"All is not lost." She said. "Trust me. I'm sorry I struggled to believe you. Also, please don't ever get mad at me."

"They're gone." Saku said.

"Trust me." Mibu said. "Can you get up?" She held Saku to her feet. They walked together back up to the village. The rain continued to fall.

The villagers returned to their homes, not sure if to celebrate or if to mourn. All except Saku and Asta. They stood back in the Temple garden, looking over the tea shack where Saku had once loaded the tea to take to the conquerors. Rain beat hard against the longhouse roofs in the most wonderfully deafening way to those who had lived in drought for so long.

Asta spoke, leaning on a fence that overlooked the pond, now filling with water. "The north might not have been completely wrong in their demands. Does anyone in this world need that kind of power? The ability to end life is a force no one should have."

Saku straightened up. "You learn so much from speaking to the spirits. To fight was not an easy choice. One I made every attempt not to make. But Lord Niroko forced my hand."

Saku looked up at the dark cloudy sky. She went on. "I had forgotten my favorite part when it rains. Everything is more green. All the plants brightened up, like they had woken up on the right side of the bedroll. I think this. Power is still needed."

Asta nodded. "I am sorry that we did not believe. But it sounded so unbelievable. It went against everything we thought we valued. I ask for forgiveness."

"Forgiveness is a means of control. Though I am your leader, I do not wish to control you." Saku said. "I will rule. I understand that might not be popular with the village. They will learn to accept it. Dissolve the relationship approver consul, the people are free to love whoever is an adult. Dissolve the schools, and teach the children something useful about living. I will need your input, Asta. I wish to listen to the people the best I can. For now I must return with Mibu. Get the forces trained, and ready defenses. Send word to us in Shao Song if trouble comes. By bird if you must. I fear the north will not stay content for long."

"I shall do as you wish." Asta bowed. "But as you said. This is going to be difficult for us. I fear Rusu will lead a resistance at some point no matter what you do. Some are thankful for what you have done. But many feel betrayed by your decision to not do as they wanted.."

"There's a lot of work to be done, but work on our terms. Someday they will realize I have shown them how special they are."

Mibu heard a knock at the entrance of her home. She pulled back the bamboo sliding door. Saku stood, with a heavy pack and a walking stick. She still had her Katana on her person.

"What are you doing?" Mibu said.

"I'm leaving. I'm going to find my friends. To make sure Oni-chan is buried. I came to tell you goodbye." She said.

"You're not leaving without me." Mibu said.

"You didn't believe me. How can I be with you? Not after you did what you did." Saku said.

"Come inside." Mibu pulled Saku inside and shut the door. She walked across a dirt floor to a wooden box. She picked it up and handed it to Saku.

"What's this?" She said.

"Open it." Mibu said.

She slowly pulled the top of the box, making a scraping sound. Her eyes widened. Suddenly she began to cry. Inside were two skull flowers.

"You did trust me." Saku whispered. "But the two flowers that Rusu had..."

"Were Asta's. That makes four skull flowers that have survived. I go where you go. Always." She said.

"I will find a way to grow new skull flowers. In case any of our people are someday ready. If that is what they choose."

"Then let us find a way." Mibu smiled.

The two left Fukui the next morning. To vibrate plants and fresh morning air. The sun rose, exposing a refreshed and thriving landscape.

"Where are we going to find them?" Mibu asked, checking her bow.

"I don't know." Saku said, peeking in her pockets checking on her skull friends. "All I know. We head north."

The end.

Dear fellow cow watchers, thank you so much for listening to this series. If you enjoyed this season of Cow's Audiobooks, or want to say anything about it let me know! I think someday I'd like to write another Saku story. But for now I don't know what's coming next, but be sure to check back here for more information. Until next time, Good luck looking for cows out there.

Bonus

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

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