

Miyabi

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I try placing my hand on my chest. It is beating. My heart is still working. I'm happy. I'm Alive.

KITŌ AYA

Chapter One

An Unwanted Toy Dressed in Red

I was but a little ball in the corner of the dark place. That is my very first memory. Surrounded by the stench of humans, I could only guess at what life exactly was. Faint noises around me, I was not alone. I still wonder how I got there. But there was nothing before that stench of feces and the dark place. Not far outside of this darkness, I heard voices. Then the darkness fell, quite literally. Suddenly one side of the dark room fell away and silver light poured in. What was now left of the dark wall was a series of bars. Just outside were two people. One was a woman in her late twenties. Dark half long hair, scrawny build, dirty clothes. The second was a man in his late thirties or early forties. His black frock coat hanging open, revealing the slender saber hanging from his waist.

"This is my stock. What business are you in?" The young woman asked.

"I run a brothel. I always welcome new whores. Keeps the regulars happy." The man smiled and bowed slightly.

"I have a few nice boys and girls that would fit a gentleman such as you." She said and walked in roughly my direction, "Take a look at my carts, maybe you'll find a little gem amongst them."

Elegantly, she stretched out her hand in my general direction. I looked around me. The dark cart I was in had six other people in it. Four boys and two girls, ranging in age from mid-teens to late thirties. My young eyes followed the two people outside walking towards one of the other carts. I could hear them talk, but I didn't comprehend. I didn't understand. Eventually they arrived at the cart I was in. The young woman pointed at one of the young men in my cart.

"That is a good one. Healthy and quite pretty."

"No, remember, I'm from Kyō. Only girls."

He was standing close by now. His voice was soft, yet strong. The scent of his perfume broke ever so slightly through the stench. His dark eyes scanned the other people in the cart as he took out a small metal box. Flipping it open, I noticed strange white sticks inside. Of course they were cigarettes, but I didn't know that at the time.

As the man placed one between his lips, something strange happened. The man held his index finger slightly below the tip of the cigarette. I saw it as clearly as the massive moon in the sky, sparks jumped from the tip of his finger. Soon the sparks became a full flame. The cigarette was lit. And then, just as sudden as it had appeared, the flame evaporated. His eyes fell upon me. They scanned me thoroughly. As he sighed, he took the cigarette from between his lips and walked over to the side of the cart. I expected him to be gone, but when another wall of my formerly dark room disappeared, I was suddenly a breath removed from him. My small heart froze instantly. His face seemed enormous as he brought it up to the bars. I was able to see all of the creases in his face. The man was handsome, with a clean mustache detailing his face nicely. His lips curled and blew out a large cloud of smoke

straight at me. The light from the moon slipping between bars were visible as rays in the cloud of smoke dancing around me. I coughed slightly.

"How about this blonde one?" He said, still staring at me.

"That one? She's nothing." The young woman said, "She's only five years of age, I think. It would take about ten years before you'd be able to use her. Ignore her, she's too broken for you, sir."

"Broken?"

"Yes, she's dumb. In all of her time here, she has never spoken a word."

"Really? Fascinating!"

"She's nothing but a blank slate."

The man's gaze didn't falter. He saw me, he was one of the few people whom ever did.

"No, she is so much more, I can see it in her eyes." He whispered. He stood up again and yelled out loudly, "I'll take it. I can use it, I can make something of it."

"Are you certain?"

"Troubled times, my dear girl. She might be of use." The man said and took out his coin purse, "I suppose one gold coin will suffice."

"DEFINITELY!! I wouldn't be able to sell the little twerp otherwise anyway. If only she'd been five years older. A blond human girl is priceless."

After signing some paperwork, I had officially become the man's property. The cage opened. I have to admit it frightened me. Not the man. Not being property. I feared that open door. The world that man belonged to. I pulled back as the man reached for me. I expected to be pulled out violently, as I had always been treated. But this man placed his hands under my arms and lifted me up as if I were a puppy dog. Carrying me like a baby, he started to walk. As he walked away, I looked over his shoulder and saw the slaver caravan. Slowly it became distant. It became small and meaningless in the world around me. The silver night landscape, the hills, distant forests, rock formations, the caravan seemed but a spec in it, my world seemed but a spec.

I was shivering, sitting there by the fire in the open. In the open. I still wasn't used to it. I kept staring in fear at this man, what was he planning to do with me?

"So" he eventually sighed, "Here we are."

I didn't speak.

"My name is Cain Hanaguchi. Pray tell, little one, do you have a name?"

A name? What a question the man asked. Of course I didn't have one. I was able to understand the question, but answering it was more of a problem. In fear, I placed my hands over my face, I was in darkness once again. I felt slightly more at ease.

"Okay, fair enough. You don't speak. Can you speak? Can you understand?"

I think I shrugged instinctively. He didn't ask any more uncomfortable questions.

"Okay, so." He clapped his hands together, "A name for my newest girl. I can't just give you any old name. Something befitting."

He was quiet for a few moments. I listened to the crackling of the fire. My eyes fell closed. I really enjoyed the sound.

"I know what your name is. Miyabi. It means 'gracefulness' and 'elegance'. A traditional aesthetic ideal."

Thus I was born Miyabi. I didn't understand half the words he was babbling, mind you. But I understood that he had given me the name Miyabi. My lips faintly formed the letters. They rolled easily. I was content with it.

"Miyabi. Yes, that's perfect." He clapped his hands.

Mister Cain went to sleep soon after, leaving me alone. He didn't chain me, he didn't lock me up. I was just sitting there by the fire, hearing it crackle, watching Mister Cain sleep. I was clueless as to what to do. Leave? Was I allowed to leave? Was I supposed to leave? Or would he kill me for leaving? Many slaves were killed for smaller faults. And this man owned me, he had the paperwork and everything. No, I was his property, I would stay with him.

Then I remembered. This man had created fire at the tip of his finger. I could barely believe it. The idea of fire was quite strange to me, having lived in darkness my whole life up until that point. But the idea of it being created by nothing but a finger seemed ridiculous. Had it been a trick? Having legs far too weak to carry me, I got to my hands and knees and slowly crawled towards him. I reached out for him. My hand placed on the man's chest, I felt it moving slowly. I felt the heat of his skin through the shirt of his suit. His face was at peace, calm, almost the face of a man who had died peacefully. Next I took his hand and looked upon it. Somehow this hand had created fire. I saw no evidence of a cheap trick, what I had seen had either been real, or it had been a fault in my own head.

I was so focused on Mister Cain's hands, I didn't expect to see Mister Cain look at me when I once again looked up at his face. His stare at me was intense and frightening. I was so startled by this I fell on my butt and crawled backwards. I was in such a panic, I wasn't paying attention in the slightest. Crawling backwards, I placed one hand in the fire. But I didn't flinch or fear and there was no pain. Instead I crawled further backwards. Now that Mister Cain was a few meters away from me, I stopped, curled up in a little ball and buried my face in the earth. I buried it so deep that the taste of dirt was present in the back of my throat. But like that, I was in a dark place again, feeling slightly more at ease. Now all I could do was wait for the lashes that were bound to strike my back. This was the world of a slave after all. But, to my surprise, none came. What I did feel was a large warm hand on my back. It was not striking me, but calming me, it felt soothing.

"I'm sorry." He whispered, "Years of sleeping with one eye open, so to speak. Come, give me your hand, it must be hurting."

He was right, it had started to hurt. With the initial shock wearing off, it soon became unbearable. So I sat up straight, eyes cast down, holding out the burned hand. It was trembling, I had not a bit of control over it. With tears in my eyes I stared at it. Red, blistered.

"Well, it's not that bad, now, is it?" Mister Cain smiled.

He placed one hand under my burned hand, and one hand above it.

"Let's make it right."

The hand he was holding above mine slowly started to move. Its fingers slowly moving individually up and down. Then from the tips of his fingers something strange poured. It is hard to describe. I could best describe it as light threads. They seemed to pour out continuously. Finally they touched my burned hand. In the first moments the light threads stung the burned palm of my hand, but soon it went numb. The pain had dissipated, hell, all sense of touch had dissipated. It felt as if my hand was gone. Mister Cain continued with whatever he was doing for at least ten minutes before finally letting go of my hand. And as he did, the feeling returned. But something was off, the pain was gone. No, it was more than that. The red was gone. The blisters were gone. My hand was as good as new. I looked up in shock at Mister Cain, he was smiling. Although I did notice the sweat on his brow. Whatever he had done, it had been a burden on his body.

"There, all gone." He whispered and tapped me on the cheek.

I wanted to say something, SPEAK. Words were still lost to me, yet I still wanted to express myself.

"Fire"

And that was that. My very first word, spoken. FIRE.

"Yes" Mister Cain smiled, "Fire burned your hand."

No, he understood me all wrong. I shook my head vigorously.

"FIRE!" I repeated, this time with energy while holding up my index finger.

"Ooh, you saw me light my cigarette. I guess a slave as young as you might not know about it. It is called magic."

He held an open hand out towards me and suddenly, a large flame appeared from it. I stared at it, awestruck. Holding my hand close to the flame, I felt the heat. It was actually there. The fire was real. As I stared at it, I noticed not the smallest flicker of the flame touched his hand. There was more I wanted to learn. This magic thing, I wanted to know more. So I waved my formerly damaged hand and spoke another word.

"LIGHT!!" I cried.

"Ah yes, that. That was healing. Quite taxing, but you saw what it could do. And that wasn't magic, but rather wizardry. I know, weird. It is but an arbitrary distinction in one art."

I felt calm. Maybe for the first time in my pathetic little life, I felt calm. With ease in my heart, I placed my head in Mister Cain's lap. I slept in peace, hearing the crackling of the fire, feeling the warmth of this man. In my young mind, I had found a saint. Kindness in freeing me, wisdom in the knowledge of Magic and Wizardry.

The next day, a group of other people joined me and Mister Cain. The way I understood it, he was their ... Lord? Or was it their Master? Their general? Well, I didn't know these words at the time, but those were the basic ideas going through my mind.

We rode for days, or maybe even weeks, time felt like an uncertainty to me. All that time, Mister Cain spoke to me. He taught me. He taught me of this world. He taught me of magic. He taught me of wizardry. He taught me the wisdom and kindness within his heart. And slowly, I was taught more words, I was taught speech. Mister Cain was forming me as he saw fit.

Kyō, what a magnificent city. We rode in on horseback. It was breathtaking. Mister Cain and I were at the front on a big white horse, flanked by two large men and followed by a dozen men and women. Riding straight through the center of the large streets, it felt strange. Just earlier, all I knew was the small dark room, now I was riding straight through the center of a capital city. My young eyes were looking endlessly at the people around us. The magnificent clothes they were wearing, Kimonos and Yukatas were dominant, but there were definitely some dresses and suits amongst them. This was the very first time I discovered the concept of beauty. I fell in love with it.

We were well into Kyō when we saw a group of men and women walk in the center of the road straight toward us. They were wearing pale blue yukatas and had swords on their hips. The man at the front of this group had