

A Paper Gods novella

AMANDA SUN

SHADOW

A watercolor illustration in shades of purple, magenta, and white. The top half features a dark, textured shape resembling a shadow or a large flower. Below this, a bright white vertical streak descends, surrounded by delicate, dark purple floral motifs and leaves. The overall style is artistic and ethereal.

Shadow

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Amanda Sun



Meet two teens whose worlds are about to change forever in this paranormal Young Adult novella, a prequel to *Ink* by debut author Amanda Sun...

Katie Greene's worst nightmare comes true when her mother dies, and she's devastated to learn that she will have to leave the only home she's ever known. Desperate to find where she belongs, she must decide if she has what it takes to start a new life across the ocean.

For Yuu Tomohiro, every day is a nightmare. He struggles to control his strange ability, and keeps everyone at a distance so they won't get hurt—even his girlfriend, Myu. At night, a shadow haunts his dreams, and a mysterious woman torments him with omens of death and destruction. But these haunting premonitions are only the beginning...

Don't miss the moment when Katie's and Tomohiro's worlds collide in *Ink*, book one of The Paper Gods series from Harlequin TEEN.

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Prologue

Tomohiro

Taira stumbled in the sand, only for a moment, but it was long enough for the shadow to reach him. It uncurled a smoky finger that scraped along the side of his ankle. He yelled out and pushed himself off the sand with his hands, the sharp grains sticking to his palms as he staggered along the shore. The wooden geta sandal fell from his foot and the shadows swirled around it, parting on either side in ashen waves before they engulfed it with the dull glimmer of oil.

His body wasn't so young anymore—he struggled with each step, heaving breath into his burning lungs. The whispers of the shadows moaned in his ears, sweeping across his thoughts like they were coming from inside his own head.

How do you run from yourself?

But he kept running, imprints of a single footprint lapped by the tide, the raised geta on his other foot carving deep lines into the sand. Half nobleman, half monster, scrambling to the only place he might be safe. And even then, there was no guarantee.

He couldn't give up.

The arch rose in front of him as he neared, the bright orange of it dulled by the oncoming twilight. Two large urns placed on either side of the Torii smoked with sour incense and thin, waxy candles. They seemed so far away. Too far.

The voices rose in awkward discord. "Taira no Kiyomori," they breathed, each syllable a separate voice.

He didn't dare look back. The shadow's breath was on him; he could feel it searing the nape of his neck.

He stumbled toward the Torii. The tide lapped in to shore, washing only knee-deep against the base of the orange gateway. It towered above him, the huge Shinto entrance to Itsukushima Shrine. He'd gone through this doorway before, but not on foot. How beautiful the imperial ships had looked as they sailed through the Torii at full tide, how colorful as they approached the shrine flooding with the sounds of *kagura* dancing. But not now. Now it was stark, the white salt spray of the ocean peeling away the pale orange paint on the shrine's walkways. Taira splashed through the surf alone, forgotten toward the barnacle-encrusted legs of the gate.

If this didn't work, he was dead.

He might be dead anyway. The ink had soaked too deep beneath the surface of his life. He was drowning—what's a last gasp of air to one already lost to the angry waves?

Everything, he thought. *It's everything.*

A shadow ensnared his lone sandal and he fell forward to a mouthful of sand. Another inky swirl tugged on his ankle. He kicked them back as he dragged himself through the gate. The shadows smashed against the Torii like a dark tide, all of them trying to enter at once, jamming the space between the legs of the gate like storm clouds, the darkness stretching to the huge orange beam laid across the top.

Taira coughed and sputtered as he kicked the shadows off his feet, watching as they struggled to enter the shrine. But they couldn't. It was forbidden, just as he'd hoped. Golden light flashed like

lightning across the shadows' surface as they tried to break through the sacred barrier. They moaned and shrieked, denied their victim.

Taira breathed heavily, watching, the sand sharp against his palms.

"So," said a woman's gentle voice, and Taira leapt upright. "You have run from yourself."

She wore a beautiful kimono of pure gold, embroidered with threads of silver. A red obi was tightly wound around her waist, and her slender hands rested upon the back of a heavy brass mirror as big as a shield.

"You know you cannot fight," she said.

"I know."

"It is what it means to be one of us," she said. "You must bear the marks."

"Help me," he said, falling to his knees before her. The returning tide soaked into his *hakama* skirt, logging the fabric with heavy salt water.

"There is no help for you," she said. "There is no escape. There is only death."

And she turned the mirror in her hands, the bottom of it grinding in the sand as she twisted it to reveal the reflective glass.

Taira looked into it, but he didn't see his reflection.

He saw me.

Chapter One

Katie

It rained all of August, but the day of the funeral was so bright and sunny that my family struggled to mourn. They waved their programs back and forth, pulling at the necks of their tight dresses and their choking black neckties as the sweat poured down. Black was the worst possible choice on a record-breaking day like this. Mom had always hated black, and I felt like the heat was her way of having the last word.

At least I knew what she'd want. I wore red.

It was strange watching our living room fill up with mourners—strange and horrifying. It didn't feel like *our* space anymore, Mom and me, but like a moving picture of a place I'd once known. I hadn't been back in the house until two days ago, and then only to pluck the red dress from my closet. I'd been staying with Mom's friend Linda, not because I couldn't fend for myself at sixteen, but because she worried the silence of the empty house would be too much to bear.

She wasn't wrong. The only way I'd found to survive was to numb myself to the loss, the icy cold sting of it freezing my heart until the reality of her death was merely something disorienting, something I couldn't really fathom.

Mom couldn't be gone. That wasn't something that could even happen to me. She had been totally fine before I'd found her that morning. I'd even poured myself a bowl of cereal, thinking she was just sleeping in late.

I knew that wasn't like her, but it's not like you expect people to die. You somehow think they won't, that life will just carry on the way it is now. You get too comfortable.

And then life shatters, and you pull the shards around yourself so you can pretend it's all fine.

As much as the quiet of the house had creeped me out, seeing the living room full of people was somehow worse. Watching half strangers grind their sweaty bodies into the fabric of our cushions, sipping punch on the good couch where Mom never allowed food—it was like I was a ghost, like the house had somehow shifted into a new future where I didn't belong.

If I couldn't stay here, then thank god I was going back to Canada with Nan. My own space wasn't comfortable anymore. I was a stranger to myself.

"Cocktail weenie?" came a loud voice and I looked up. I'd been huddled in the corner by the stairs but I guess with my red dress I still stuck out.

"Aunt Diane," I said. She was the only other burst of color in the room, wearing a black dress covered in purple flowers and a too-dark purple lipstick to match.

"Have one," Diane said, wiggling the silver tray at me. She had a forced smile on her face, but even then she looked way too cheerful. "You look like you could use a bit of a pick-me-up." I didn't think we'd even owned a tray like that. Mom would have thought it tacky and cliché.

"A pick-me-up?" I said, staring at her. "My mom is dead, and you think a cocktail weenie is going to help?" It was snarky, and I knew better, but the room full of strangers was stifling. I was starting to feel claustrophobic, when there'd always been enough room in the house for Mom and me. It was like all my relatives had brought little pickaxes to chisel away at the barrier I'd built around myself so I didn't have to face the truth. Couldn't they just leave already?

“Trust me,” Diane said, thrusting the tray closer. “I’ve lost my sister, and the last way I want to remember her is cramped in a room with sweat and bad breath and a bunch of people she wouldn’t have wanted here anyway. You and I need some calories to get through this.” I looked into the sea of black as the mourners trampled around our living room and spilled into the kitchen. There was no space for memories; there was no space to breathe.

I reached a shaky hand toward the tray and loaded a couple different snacks onto a napkin. “Thanks.”

“Okay,” she said, and then she was gone, shoving the tray into the face of one of Mom’s coworkers. I didn’t know Aunt Diane very well. She’d moved to Japan to teach English when I was eight, and before that, she’d moved around the States teaching in a bunch of small schools. She had a nomadic streak, restless the way Mom was, but unlike her, Diane longed to see other countries. Mom liked to stay where things were predictable and safe. I wondered now if she would have regretted that choice. If she’d known she’d die so young, would she have lived differently?

The anxiety trickled through me. When would death come for me? Would I suddenly stop existing in the night, leaving a trail of restless mourners to share memories over puff pastries and room-temperature punch? The minister had talked about Mom’s legacy to us, her compassion and giving—she was always volunteering for things, helping people out in the community, although she often turned around and made human interest stories out of the experiences for her newspaper gigs. What was my legacy? Would my life matter?

Did I matter anymore, now that Mom was gone?

Deep thoughts for a sweaty living room but the panic rose in me anyway.

Oh god. Mom is gone. She’s gone. I felt like I would break into a million shards, all pinpricks and blood-red dress and pain, clouds looming over me, raining only on me in the whole room.

“There’s my Katie.” Suddenly Nan was towering over me, which she could only do if I was curled in the corner the way I was. It felt as if reality swirled on either side of her, the cracks holding together like fragmented glass as I stared at her hopefully, like she could fix it somehow.

“Nan,” I said, getting to my feet and then towering over her.

“You’re like a bright red rose in a garden of wilting flowers,” she said, rubbing the fabric of my dress between her fingers as I hugged her. “Don’t you look pretty in that dress?”

“Mom never liked black,” I said, and Nan grinned.

“I know,” she whispered, and pulled back the neck of her dress to show the bright magenta camisole underneath. I smiled, though I felt like crying. “You and me, we’re a couple of troublemakers.” She gave me a sly grin.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re rebels.” I relaxed a bit as Nan held my hands in hers. She understood. She knew what I was feeling. And I was so glad to have her here, because I knew enough to know I was breaking.

Leaving Albany would suck. I’d managed to get into the Advanced English class I’d wanted at school, and there’d been a waitlist a mile long for that time slot. And leaving my friends and my home—leaving my life with Mom...

But at least I had a few friends I knew from summer vacations in Canada. And being with Nan and Gramps was familiar and comfortable. Their house was small, an old converted log cabin that they’d built on to, but I was sure they’d find room for me somehow. Maybe the attic that Nan always talked about fixing up when Gramps was better.

“I better go say hello to Linda,” she said. “Thank her for pulling things together, you know.” Linda had done most of the organizing for the funeral because Nan had her hands full with Gramps’ health.

“Okay,” I said. “Where’s Gramps? I want to say hi.” I hadn’t noticed him at the funeral, but then again, I’d spent most of the service staring at my lap, pretending it wasn’t happening.

Nan didn’t let go of my hands. Then she squeezed them, her mouth a thin line.

“He couldn’t come, Katie.”

“But” I scanned the room for his smile, the curve of his back as he stumbled along with effort, but of course Nan wouldn’t lie about it. “How are we going to drive to Deep River?”

“Let’s talk after, okay? It’s been a long day for you.”

I wanted to ask how they were planning on getting all my stuff back to their house if Gramps wasn’t here. Had someone else driven Nan to pick me up? Were we going to fly? I opened my mouth to ask, but the serious look in her eyes silenced me.

“Okay,” I said. “After.” Nan squeezed my hands one more time before she dropped them. She walked into the kitchen calling Linda’s name, and I was left to wonder just how sick Gramps was. I thought the last round of chemo had finished a while ago, but if he didn’t come with Nan, it couldn’t be good news. At least I’d be able to help Nan take care of him when I moved up. How much time did he have? I thought he’d be in remission by now.

The thought was too much to handle in the middle of Mom’s funeral. Death surrounding me, pressing in from every angle. I felt the tears welling up in my eyes as I rubbed the rough fabric of my dress between my fingers. I was drowning, the room starting to spin. I leaned against the banister for support.

“Katie,” called someone, and I looked up. My mom’s coworker from the newspaper, with a wine glass in her hand and a deeply concerned look on her face.

“Hi,” I managed, but my heart was pounding in my ears.

“You poor sweetie,” she whined, and suddenly the spindles of the staircase felt too solid against my back, like the bars of a cage. “How are you doing?”

My mom is gone, Nan’s acting weird, my house is full of people who suddenly care about us and my whole life is destroyed. How do you think I’m doing?

“Um, I’m okay.”

“It will take time,” she said, swirling the punch around the wine glass. “But time heals all wounds, you know. She’s in a better place now, your mom. I know she’s looking down on you and smiling.”

I wanted her to butt out. How did she know what I was feeling? It’s not like I didn’t hope it was all true, that Mom was in heaven and happy and all that. But I didn’t need this clueless woman reassuring me. She didn’t know anything. She barely even knew me.

I had to get out of there before I lost it. I didn’t want to cry in front of all these people. I didn’t want them to swarm me with their empty consolations.

“Thanks for coming,” I said quietly and squeezed myself past her outstretched arm as it swirled the punch round and round. I walked along the wall to the foot of the stairs and bolted up them.

I shut my door behind me, sliding down to the floor. The air was familiar here, cooler than the living room. My eyes glazed over as I stared at my bookshelf, running my eyes over the colored spines and letting my mind go blank.

I was nothing now. I didn’t have to be angry, or sad, or confused. I could fade away, barely here at all.

It lasted about five minutes before I burst into tears.

I forced them back, unwilling to accept the truth. When my heart had calmed down and I could hear the birds chirping outside instead of the pulse in my ears, I mulled over why Gramps hadn’t come. He loved Mom, his eyes always shining when we visited. There’s no way he would’ve missed the funeral.

unless he was really sick.

One of the books on the bookshelf stuck out farther than the others, and my eyes kept drifting back to its odd shape. I rocked forward onto my knees and reached for it. The novels on either side of it toppled over with a thud as I pulled it out. No wonder it stood out beside them—it was the thick travel guide Diane had sent from Japan for my twelfth birthday, hoping she could convince me to visit. She'd just about given up on Mom, but at twelve I could fly without an adult.

"No way, José," Mom had said when I'd asked.

"Why?" I'd whined.

"Send my baby girl to the other side of the world? You're dreaming."

"Just for a week, Mom!"

"And then? What if you want to live there forever? What if you never come back?"

"Like that would happen."

"Diane never came back, honey. Why do you think you would?"

It was such a strange thing to say, I remembered thinking. Who wouldn't come home from a vacation? But Mom's eyes had filled with tears.

"We need to stick together, Katie. You're everything to me."

She was afraid. Dad had left her, and she was terrified I'd leave her, too.

"Okay, Mom. I'll stay with you. Promise."

I flipped the pages mindlessly, past glossy photos of cherry blossoms, Buddhist temples, markets filled with rows of gleaming fish.

When my tears fell, they wrinkled the pages until I couldn't even read the words.

I'd kept my promise. I'd stayed.

And after all her worrying, it was Mom who'd left me.

Chapter Two

Tomohiro

The nightmares were getting worse.

I sat up with a shout, my fingers clawing into my comforter. The darkness in my room was disorienting. Where was I? Who was I?

The shadows. The beach. The Torii.

My chance to escape.

All gone.

But the worst was the simple truth—the woman in the kimono was right.

There is no escape, she'd said. There is only death.

It's not like I wanted to be all dark and hopeless about it, but night after night of monsters whispering in your ear will do that to you. I used to think there was something wrong with me, that I needed medication or serious therapy. Like my mom—Kaasan always took a bunch of different pills for her nightmares, though she tried to hide them until she thought I was upstairs.

Now I know. There's definitely something wrong. And it's not something I can fix with any drugs.

I pushed my bangs out of my eyes and reached for my *keitai* phone on the table. I flipped it open, squinting as the bright LCD screen flashed into my eyes.

A couple texts from Myu, both from last night, wondering why I hadn't called. I was a shitty boyfriend, I'll admit it. I wasn't really sure why she put up with me. She was tall, leggy, determined to have her way. Sometimes I wondered if Myu just saw me as a challenge, a puzzle to untangle like the Debate Club she belonged to. When Myu confessed her feelings for me, I was a little embarrassed she hadn't seen through me. A lot of girls confessed because they thought I was some kind of mystery. I came late to class a lot, and sometimes I needed to skip, because of my...condition. But I worked late nights and pulled the grades I needed to keep my dad off my back. Tousan's the last one I wanted involved in what was really going on with me. And somehow the girls thought this made me a disappearing badass who was boyfriend material. I'd thought Myu was smarter than that.

Why the hell would I want to be some mysterious badass? All I wanted was for the shadow to leave me alone, the nightmares to stop.

But they won't. Not until I'm dead. I know that, because of what I am. Marked, chosen. Hunted, like Taira.

I scanned through Myu's text messages and clapped the phone shut, tossing it on my pillow. Half a second later my alarm went off and I slammed a hand on it in the darkness.

Normally I would stumble downstairs to start on my school *bentou*, but lately Myu had insisted on bringing me a homemade lunch, the box wrapped in bright *furoshiki* cloths and filled with cream-and-strawberry sandwiches, cherry tomatoes and *onigiri* rice balls. Her cooking wasn't too bad, but she always had trouble rolling the sweet egg right. It came out lumpy and crooked, which she tried to hide with strategic flower-shaped picks.

I guess I shouldn't complain. I couldn't get it right either.

In the kitchen, I wolfed down a bowl of miso soup and slathered a piece of thick toast in honey and butter. I grabbed my blazer from the hook by the door just as Tousan stumbled down the stairs.

“*Ittekuru*,” I mumbled at him, letting him know I was heading for school. He nodded, sleepy, rubbing his head with his hand. ~~He’s not lazy, my dad. He likes to see how far he can push the notion~~ of overtime, which means getting home at 4:00 a.m. and waking up late. Sometimes he ends up sleeping at the company because it’s just easier. We didn’t really get along anymore, not since I’d had to transfer schools. So it’s easier for both of us if he’s at work. He thinks I’m following his rules, and I don’t have to disappoint him with the truth.

He didn’t even say the expected farewell “*Itterasshai*” when I closed the front door. He just grunted, like that alone was too much effort.

I grabbed my bike and cycled as fast as could toward Suntaba Senior High School. One more year and I could vanish from Shizuoka City into whatever life I wanted. Everyone wanted to move to Tokyo but I wanted somewhere quiet—Kyushu, maybe, something really remote. There were a few attractive schools in Osaka, but I wasn’t sure if they were far enough away, and they were definitely too crowded. And I wasn’t sure what Tousan would say when I brought up schools that weren’t for banking or medicine. He’d probably hit me so hard that I’d land in Osaka anyway.

The minute I slammed my bike into the rack at school, I heard Myu from across the courtyard.

“Yuu-chan!”

I wouldn’t let her use my first name. It was too close, too personal, and I wasn’t used to letting someone see that deeply into me. I had to keep Myu at a distance, to keep her safe. I couldn’t let her get hurt by the monster in me. I wasn’t *that* shitty of a boyfriend.

She walked toward me, waving goodbye to her friends with perfectly manicured fingernails. I rolled my eyes. She should’ve been wearing gloves—it was winter, and even though there was no snow on the ground, the wind still held a sharp bite.

It’s not like I didn’t like Myu. For one thing, she was totally hot. I was pretty sure Sato was jealous because she’d confessed to me because he’d acted all pissed. And sometimes Myu whispered kind things to me that caught me off guard, and then I wanted to wrap her up in my arms and never let her go.

I liked having someone who cared about me, how being with Myu let me pretend I was normal. I liked that I was starting to really fall for her. Loud and demanding as she sometimes was, she had this other side to her that was thoughtful and soft. I wanted to let her see the real me, call me by my first name, to let her into my world. To draw for her.

Then I would remember what I was capable of, and why I could never do that. The shadows that tried to claim Taira in the nightmare—they were coming for me, too. The ink drowning my life—I could barely control it. I couldn’t afford to drop my guard, not even with Myu.

She wrapped both arms tightly around my arm, pressing her cheek against my shoulder.

“Yuu-chan,” she whined, her fingernails glittering in the sunlight. “You didn’t answer my texts last night.”

I wanted to say sorry, but that’s what nice guys said, and I couldn’t be one, not with the crowd we were drawing. Nice guys attract friends, but I needed everyone to leave me alone. I stepped back and shrugged.

“I was busy.”

“With what? Practice?” I didn’t answer. It was a good enough excuse. I couldn’t tell any of them the truth, not really. “Yuu-chan, the tournament’s not for weeks. How long does it take to write your girlfriend a text?”

“I barely made it home before I collapsed, Myu,” I lied. To make up for it, I cupped her chin in my hand and kissed her forehead gently. It’s not like I wanted to be a jerk, but I couldn’t afford the attention. To protect Myu and my classmates—to protect myself—I had to keep everyone at a

distance. That way I could stay in control. I couldn't let it fall apart the way it had before.

~~Being a loner had worked for a while, but that's when the balance tipped. Because when one of the kendo champs of the school turns down every cute girl's confession, shuns almost every guy who wants to hang out, forgets his wristband and shows off the trail of scars on his arm—that's when he becomes mysterious, a puzzle to be solved. That's when people talk, when the rumors swirl and the truth hovers just below the surface, ready to destroy everything.~~

That's when Myu had confessed, and I'd known what I had to do. Now we'd been together for three months, and they'd stopped digging into my past, into my present. They'd forgotten to ask where I disappeared to or where the scars came from. We'd become mini-celebrities, as much as an American quarterback dating a cheerleader, shallow crowd-pleasers who weren't asked any tough questions. We were normal, and on top of that, I blended in. And as I'd come to know Myu better, I'd found maybe didn't have to be alone anymore.

Maybe. And then the voice from my dreams, the woman holding the mirror.

There is only death.

"Oi, Yuuto!" came a sharp voice, and I snapped my head up. *Damn it.* Nothing like spacing out to get the rumors going.

"Yo, Sato," I said, waving my free arm at him. Satoshi grinned back as he walked toward us. His hair was bleached as white as a rice ball, and he'd hoisted his *shinai*, the wooden sword we used for kendo, across the back of his shoulders, both wrists wrapped around it like he was carrying a yoke. The white tie wrapped along the handle was unraveling, meaning he wasn't taking care of his equipment. Coach Watanabe would be pissed if he noticed during practice.

Myu's lips turned in a frown. She and Satoshi didn't get along. Myu didn't think much of the circle he associated with, but Sato and I went too far back for me to turn on him for any girl. We were kendo teammates and best friends since elementary school—since the transfer, when the world had gone dark around me. He had his own share of secrets, but it didn't stop him from trying to drag mine out from time to time.

"Ne, Ishikawa," Myu said, calling him by his last name to stress the distance between them. I stumbled as she tugged me toward her and pointed a finger at Satoshi. "You had all last night's kendo practice with him. It's my turn now, so get lost."

Ishikawa's face crumpled in confusion. "Kendo practice?"

Shit. The ice below me was cracking. I headed toward the school door. I had to lose the crowd before I plunged down and drowned in the truth. Myu was dragged along with me, her arms slowly unlinking from around my arm. Satoshi followed, despite the glare of death I was giving him.

"Wait," Myu said as I pulled open the *genkan* door. Walls of stacked boxes formed aisles of shoes and school slippers around us. "There was no practice last night?" The door swung shut behind the three of us. I said nothing, slipping out of my shoes and striding toward my box.

"The week before school ends?" Sato smirked. "Not likely."

"Yuu-chan, were you...lying?"

"I didn't lie, exactly," I said, my eyes downcast to the floor. I had to fix this, but instead I'd gone into panic mode, alarms blaring in my head. My heart felt like it would give out. So much for being suave and in control. *Dumbass.*

"Where were you then?" Myu said.

"With some other girl." Sato grinned.

I gave him a look of imminent murder. "*Urusai,*" I spat. "You're a dick, Sato." I pressed my fingers into Myu's shoulders, looking into her wide eyes. "He's lying."

She didn't look like she believed me.

~~"I'm totally lying, Myu," Ishikawa laughed, and then she let out a shaky breath. *What the hell? She believes him, but not me?*~~

"So?" she said, waiting for the truth.

"So he was probably sketching," Satoshi said, ramming his toes against the wooden floor to push the slippers onto his feet. "Loverboy wants to be a freaking Picasso."

"Shut up, Sato," I said. I hoped he wouldn't hear the waver in my voice.

"Wait, what? You never told me that," Myu said.

"Just some dumb art class," I said. "It's for my cram school. It's nothing."

"Don't go cutting off your ears," Sato added helpfully.

"That was van Gogh, moron."

"It's nothing, huh? Why are you flustered then?" Myu smiled. "Come on, let me see your sketches"

"I don't really have any," I said. "I leave them at cram school." Every part of my skin felt itchy, and I wanted to get out of there.

"Ne, will you draw me sometime?"

"Maybe naked," Sato quipped.

I whirled around. "What part of *shut up* didn't you understand?"

"Yuu-chan, please?"

"I'm no good," I snapped at her. "And I don't draw people, ever."

"Why not?"

"I just don't, okay? God, you guys. Leave it alone."

I slid open the door to the hallway and slammed it closed behind me. *Calm down*, I told myself, but I couldn't. I was sinking in the sand, the gateway to escape out of reach. Everything was unraveling in front of me, the shadows closing in. Swirling around me like I was some demon at the end of a dark alley. Which I guess I was.

There is only death.

No. I'll fight it. I'll fight it until the end.

Chapter Three

Katie

Nan was flying back to Canada without me. Gramps was too sick, and despite my protests that I would help them, there was still a mess of paperwork hanging over us.

A few years ago, before Gramps' brief remission, he'd been so far gone that we were waiting for the doctor to call any day. At that time, when all our waking thoughts were of death, Mom made an appointment and changed her will. Legal custody of me would go to her sister, Diane, and not Nan and Gramps. Even without the legal issues, it was Mom's last wish, and Nan was holding to it religiously.

"But Aunt Diane lives in Japan," I said.

"I know, sweetie."

"Japan."

"I know. And it's a nice country. I visited her there and the people were just lovely."

"Nan, I don't even speak Japanese!"

She'd squeezed my hands in hers again, but this time her grasp was weak. "We'll get it sorted out," she said.

Like I was just some sort of tangled knitting project of hers, like she could just unravel me and start over. Twisting my life into new shapes, something that everyone would nod and agree suited me better. But the stitches from my old life would show, the snarls and bends of the old pattern wrecking the new.

Mom was gone. Could we just stop trying to fix it for a minute? It couldn't *be* fixed. Shipping me overseas wouldn't make my life better. It would just make me vanish, tucked away where no one could look at me and feel awkward. Was Nan even on my side? Her eyes were tired and sad. I knew she loved me, but I also knew she wasn't really seeing me. She was seeing Mom, and having her close but out of reach was hurting her.

God, I felt so alone. I *was* alone. This sore, horrible aching in my chest like I would just fall into pieces. All I wanted was to disappear.

There was a knock on my bedroom door. Almost all the guests had left from the memorial, ready to get back to their real lives.

This was the only life I had left. And it was falling apart.

A second, louder knock came, and before I could answer it, my door swung open to Aunt Diane, standing there with a worried look on her face.

"Hey," she said.

I slumped down onto my bed, the energy knocked out of me. What kind of guardian would Aunt Diane be anyway? I knew so little about her.

Nan sat down beside me, patting my leg as I stared at the ceiling.

"So...you know, huh?" Diane said.

"I don't get it," I said. "Mom never wanted to go to Japan. Why would she send me?"

"I think she was more concerned that you be with someone who loves you and can take care of you," Nan said. "Diane will look after you, Katie."

Can't you do that? I thought. *Don't you love me? You wouldn't do this to me if you did.*

I figure you're allowed to be childish when you've lost everything.

"I know it's been hard to spend time together, Katie," Diane added. "But we're family, and I want to do what I can to help you."

"Then let me live with Nan," I snapped.

Nan moved her reassuring hand from my leg. "Katie."

"It's okay, Mom," Diane said. "She has a right to be upset. Katie, you know Nan and Gramps really can't handle any big changes right now. Let's just work it out for a bit until Gramps is better, okay?"

"I don't want to," I said, and Diane's face fell. Okay, so I felt a little guilty about acting five, but my life was crumbling before my eyes. It was my only way to fight back. "Look, Aunt Diane, it's nothing personal, but I don't even know Japanese. I mean, past Hello Kitty and sushi, I really have no clue."

"Just Diane," she said with a nervous laugh. "I never got the hang of that aunt thing. And it's okay, I know you'll pick it up quickly. I'll help you, and you can enroll in cram school, too."

"I can't," I snapped, but what I meant was, *I'm afraid*. Too much change, all at once. Sure, going to Japan was exciting, but not if you're going because your mom is dead and nobody wants you. I just wanted Mom. That's all. Not exile to the other side of the world.

And the conversation I'd had with Mom hung over me like a dark cloud. It was the living-there-forever part of the talk swirling in my thoughts, Mom's face when I'd wanted to take that vacation to Japan. *What if you never come back?* And now, to be told I was moving there—it was like some eerie prophecy of hers coming true, like something terrible was waiting for me there.

That was crazy, right? Because there was nothing more terrible than what had already happened to me. But why did I feel that way?

Nan and Diane looked at each other for a minute.

"Well," Diane said cautiously. "What if you stay here?"

"Alone?" Nan and I said together.

"No, I mean with Linda. Just for a bit. The school year in Japan doesn't start until the end of March and I wouldn't want to throw you in halfway through the year. Maybe we can wait to see if Gramps gets better? You'll at least have a bit of time to figure out what you want to do."

It was true Linda had offered to let me stay as long as I wanted, but I doubted she was thinking of adopting me for the rest of the year. It was one of those empty promises people make to you, like "let me know if you need anything" and "I know your mom's in a better place."

"What's putting off the inevitable going to do?" I said.

"More time to decide," Diane said. "It's too sudden right now."

"Yeah, but decide what? I don't have any options."

"I know," Diane said, "but not having options doesn't mean you don't have choices."

"Um...I don't get it."

Diane crouched in front of me, smelling of sweat and punch and appetizers from downstairs. "You can come to Japan filled with hope and confidence that you'll make it work. Or you can be dragged because your life's in tatters and none of us can fix it the way you want. And who knows, maybe this will all sort itself out and you'll have choices you didn't even realize you had. You still have choices because you can decide how you face this. You can choose your next move, Katie. What do you think?"

I let Diane's words soak into my thoughts. Stay here with Linda, living my life alone, in a way. The thought scared me as much as moving to Japan, but I wanted to hug her for suggesting it. At least she was treating me like an adult, like my life wasn't being decided by some piece of paper. Like it

actually belonged to me.

“Okay,” I said. “I want to stay with Linda for a while before I figure it out.” At least that way, my home would be across town. At least then I wouldn’t have to face the fact that Mom was gone for good.

Would everything hurt like this from now on? It was like I was caught in a storm, the rain so thick I couldn’t see anything around me. How was I supposed to make life decisions while drenched and disoriented?

“I’ll talk to Linda,” Nan said. “Katie, you know Gramps and I will do everything we can to get the custody papers in order as soon as he’s well, right? Japan is just temporary.”

Yeah, I thought. But how long is temporary? What if Gramps doesn’t get better?

I smiled feebly and Nan squeezed my hand, lifting herself slowly off the bed and stumbling down the hallway. She wasn’t well either—Diane and I could both see it.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You got it,” Diane answered. “And if and when you’re ready to come to Japan, I have a spare room that needs some decorating.”

I tried to smile. It came out hollow and fake. “Okay.”

“Listen,” she said, reaching for my hand. At the last minute, she pressed her fingers into the comforter instead. Maybe this whole thing was scary for her, too. “Let’s find a good Japanese class so you can start learning. Just in case. I mean, it’s something to take your mind off everything anyway, right?”

My room felt as stuffy as the living room had. I needed fresh air, or the walls would start rippling.

“Okay.” Anything. Just leave me alone. I need to be alone.

You are alone, Katie. You’ll be alone forever now.

“Katie.” Diane’s voice was steady. “Don’t try to do everything.”

“What do you mean?”

She stood up, ran a stiff hand through her tangled hair.

“I mean it’s okay to need help,” she said. “Let’s start small. I’m going to order some dinner. Chinese okay?”

I nodded, then fell back on my pillow. Diane backed out of the room and clicked the door closed behind her, the smell of cocktail weenies and rancid punch lingering in my room.

At least I could escape to my dreams, where Mom was still alive. Where I could choose what happened next.

It’s called running away, I told myself. Some choice.

Japan?

What if you never come back, Katie?

“You’re never coming back either, Mom,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

The world around me swirled to blackness.

Chapter Four

Tomohiro

Even with the cold and biting wind, I found Myu on the school roof where we often shared lunch on warmer days. Usually there'd be a few students up here, but the cold weather had forced them into hidden corners of the school to eat their lunches—the home ec tables, the far shelf in the library, the row of harps in the music room that formed a wall of strings. Myu was alone up here, and it was too quiet, eerie.

She stood with her back to me, her fingers threaded through the links in the chain fence around the edge of the roof. The wind tangled and untangled her hair as I stepped closer, watching it dance and whirl around her. She gazed out over the courtyard, almost deserted in the cold.

She was crazy to be out in this freezing wind, even if the sun was so bright I had to shield my eyes. But I liked that about her, when she did unexpected things. Her glittering nails and dangling earrings made her seem fragile sometimes, like something delicate, but then I'd find her standing alone on the roof in a storm, and I'd see the strength in her.

I smirked, just a little. Things were never what they appeared to be, not in my world.

I took another step toward her, my movement hidden by the sound of the wind encircling us.

She'd confessed to me up here that day. Sato and I had come up to the roof to drink our cold milk teas after kendo practice. I remembered throwing the can at him hard that day because I was pissed. He'd brought down a *tsuki* hit that I'd barely dodged, and I hadn't even anticipated it. It used to be so easy to take him down, but he'd been getting tougher, and somehow while I was busy drowning in the nightmares that haunted me, he'd left me behind and surpassed me.

I'd looked at him, scrolling through his phone for any texts from *them*, any threats they wanted him to make today, any runs or jobs they wanted to send him on. It had started the spring we'd entered Suntaba, and it was getting worse. He was spiraling into his own darkness, and the thing was, he'd chosen it. It wasn't like me. I didn't have a choice. Why would you take a normal life and throw it away?

The bitterness had spilled over inside of me as it joined with my frustration from kendo practice.

I hate you, I'd thought as I ran my thumb down the cold tea can. *Your life was normal. You don't have the nightmares. You could even be the better kendouka if you focused.*

I didn't hate him, not really, but the jealousy was white hot as I pulled back the can, the weight of sloshing in my hand as I hurled it toward him.

Your life was normal, and you fucked it up.

The can smacked into Satoshi's chest and he curled his fingers around it before it could drop. "Oi, what the hell, man?" he said, his deep eyes searching mine. "Save it for when you beat the crap out of Katakou School's team." He grinned then, pressing a gentle fist into my shoulder before cracking the pop tab backward.

I remembered the shame that followed.

I hate you, I'd thought again, but this time it was myself I hated.

And then Myu had appeared at the top of the stairs, her skirt hiked up short and her nails painted with blue bows or stars or something that sparkled in the sunlight.

She'd stood there for a moment, her hair catching on the wind the way it was now, her eyes locked with mine and a letter in her hands. ~~She'd looked determined, like I was just an argument she had to win.~~

Another rejection I'd have to make. Another person I'd have to push away.

And something in me had snapped. I wanted to be normal, like Satoshi. I wanted it more than anything.

So I'd said yes when she confessed—yes, let's go out. And I don't know which of us had been more surprised.

So much had changed in three months. The nightmares still haunted me, but I didn't feel as alone. In the daylight, standing here with Myu, I could almost imagine that being normal was possible.

A gust of wind twisted her hair around her bright red-and-cream muffler, and I reached out my hand for her.

Alone on the rooftop together. Romantic or something, right?

But alone on a rooftop with me could be deadly. That's what happens when you're marked. I was drowning slowly, drop by drop.

I didn't want to live in shadow anymore. I didn't want to push her away.

I rested my hand on her muffler, her tangled hair soft against my fingers.

She whirled around. "Yuu-chan."

"Myu," I said. "What are you doing out here? *Sa-me zo.*" I tucked the knit muffler tighter around her neck.

"It's cold," she agreed. "I was just thinking. About us."

Oh, great.

"What about us?" I said, wrapping my arms around her. She didn't move away, so I figured it was good sign.

"Are you...is everything okay with us?"

How could it be fine when I was less than human?

But I wanted it to be fine. God, how I wanted it to be fine. Myu put up with my crap—wasn't that all I could ask for?

"Everything's fine," I said. "It's great."

She could destroy me now. She could ask if what Sato had said was true. Was I with another girl instead of her? Could I tell her where I disappeared to all those times, or why I didn't answer my phone?

No. I couldn't tell her anything.

If she asked, I would be silent, and she would leave. And I would be alone on the rooftop, looming over the world that could never really be mine.

Myu smiled and leaned into me. "*Suki,*" she said. *I love you.*

I held on to her, looking out at the emptiness of the courtyard.

Is this what love is? Because if she lets go of me, I will gasp and sputter and drown.

There will be nothing left of me but emptiness.

Chapter Five

Katie

So this was what my life had become.

I sat on the bed, not even bothering to raise the blinds. The light from outside only emphasized the features that reminded me this room wasn't mine. Bright red walls, posters of bands I didn't listen to, a black dresser with a graveyard of torn stickers littering the top. Linda's daughter Jess had started university in September—Linda had barely made the drive back across the country in time to help plan Mom's funeral. And now I haunted Jess's room like some kind of ghost, pale and lurking in dark corners.

I remembered the day in July when Linda and Mom were having coffee in our kitchen, Linda laughing nervously about empty-nest syndrome. "What am I going to do with all my free time?" She was giggling. Mom had patted her arm quietly as Linda babbled on.

Mom could always see through people to the real story, see what was really in someone's heart, even if they didn't know it themselves. It made her a great journalist but a tough mother. She always knew when I was lying, so there was no point in telling her anything but the truth. We talked over everything instead, every dilemma that weighed on me, every drama that seemed huge and crushing and mountainous.

It was funny, looking back on it. Those troubles were feather-light compared to losing Mom. This was the real mountain looming over me, and now Mom wasn't here to help me navigate it.

But I would make it through, right? I was already better, a few weeks dulling the sting of losing her.

Lying to myself, of course. I was in pieces. What would Mom say if she were here? Pat me on the arm, pour me another cup of tea. *Talk to me, Katie. You can't climb a mountain if you don't look where you're going.*

Living with Linda was all right for a while. School started, and everything was back to normal. At first my friends walked on eggshells around the subject of Mom's death, a few timid *sorrys* muttered nervously, like they were somehow killing her just by saying it. But after a few weeks they moved on to the usual high school news, who was dating whom, the chem teacher's breakdown in class, the mystery graffiti in the lunchroom. Only I was trapped in the past, some sort of time-warped version of myself that couldn't break free from the grief. Some days I took off at lunch, tears rolling down my face all the way back to Linda's. Friends stopped calling to see if I wanted to do things. They knew I'd end up blubbering, which is no fun, fair enough, but I couldn't help myself. I felt caged in, like I couldn't grieve. How could I? My life was still in limbo, stuck at a weird crossroads where the only way to go forward was to rip everything to shreds again.

I was stuck in this weird room of harsh red and black, the ceiling sloping in like a tomb and shelves of books that weren't mine.

A room missing its girl. And a different girl in its place. Like some kind of changeling.

There was a polite knock on my door, followed by the handle turning and creaking as Linda tiptoed in.

"Hey, Katie," she said with a forced smile. "Doing okay today?"

"Yeah," I said. We were strangers, really, linked only because of Mom. And yet she kept the smile

on, even with me sitting on the bedspread Jess had picked out, the room that was supposed to be empty for her visit back from college this week.

“You’re making yourself at home in Jess’s room, right?” she said, her eyes falling on my suitcase still in the corner. “You might feel better if you unpack, you know? Her dresser’s empty. And you know you can read any of her books if you want, okay?”

“Thanks,” I said. I’d peeked at her books my first week, feeling like a bit of a snoop. All epic space adventures and murder mysteries. Reading about space only made me feel confined; murder mysteries only filled my thoughts with death. The redness of blood and the blackness of space, echoed by the paint colors in her bedroom, stifling as they tried to absorb me and make me fit.

They couldn’t. I was just too different.

“If you want me to move my stuff for Jess’s visit—” I started, leaping to my feet like I was going to start clearing out right away. But all I had was a small pile of books beside the bookshelf and my bulging suitcase in the corner. It was kind of pathetic, really.

“That’s okay.” Linda smiled. “You barely have anything to move. And anyway, Jess will take the couch for now.”

“But it’s her room,” I said. The wider Linda’s smile, the more intrusive I felt. We both knew I was in the way.

“No worries,” she said. “She’s a big girl, and she’s only here for a few days. She’s lucky I haven’t turned her room into some kind of yoga studio or something. Maybe I’ll talk to her about letting you paint it something else. That red really makes the room look so much smaller.” Like changing the color would make me fit, but it was sweet of her to try. “Um, have you changed your mind about the Japanese class starting tonight?”

The mention of it sent my heart pounding. I couldn’t face it. Starting a new life meant admitting Mom was gone.

“Maybe,” I said. “But I-I’m not sure if I can.”

“Okay,” Linda said gently. “But I just think...” She looked at my face, and I must’ve looked like a wreck because her eyes softened and she backed out of the room. “I’ll check with you later, okay? Think about it.”

“Sure,” I said, and the hallway swallowed her up. Just me again.

I collapsed back onto the bed, staring at the sloping ceiling above me.

“I can’t,” I said to the stucco. “I can’t stay here.”

The house was too small for a charity project like me, and I wasn’t helping with the skipped classes and creepy emo lurking I did in Jess’s room. Some days it was all I could do to get up and brush my teeth. I was skipping more and more classes, falling further behind. I could see it looming in Linda’s eyes—*the talk*, when she’d have to politely remind me that dropping out of school was only hurting myself. I could see it in her face, that she felt like she was letting Mom down every time I cut class.

I was struggling, but she didn’t know how to help me. I was some foreign thing dropped in her lap, and she was as lost as I was.

Tell yourself the truth, Katie. Look at that mountain. Size it up, or you’ll never climb it.

It was time to face the truth. Staying with Linda wasn’t a choice. I was a puzzle piece crammed in the wrong box.

Japan couldn’t be any worse than this, right? I reached for the travel guide at the bottom of the stack of books I kept beside Jess’s cluttered shelf. The pages were worn with all the tearful nights I’d spent flipping through. Diane lived in Shizuoka, which wasn’t featured at all on the glossy photo pages. About an hour outside Tokyo, its claim to fame was the fields of tea surrounding the city for harvest.

That and a great view of Mt. Fuji, although the book featured a view from Kamakura so I couldn't be sure.

I didn't know if I had it in me to go to the Japanese class. I'd set the bar pretty low the past few weeks—I bet Linda wasn't even expecting me to make it to the front door. I reached for the required textbook and cracked open the spine.

“Holy crap,” I said, staring at the foreign squiggles and lines. Three writing systems—two phonetic and one made up of ancient Chinese symbols called kanji. It said I needed to know thousands of the symbols to read a newspaper. I tossed the book on Jess's bed, crammed between the bookshelf and her black desk. The shelf was old and rickety, and some nights I swore it would come crashing down on my head. Death by book avalanche. Not the worst way to go, I guess.

A minute later, I picked up the book again.

あ-い-う-え-お。

A-i-u-e-o.

Maybe I could do this. Maybe I could pick up the shards of my life and make something with them. Maybe this was a choice I could make.

I stared at the symbols for hours, sketching them out on my notebook five at a time, starting with the hiragana. I wrote them over and over, until my page was a sea of vowels, shaky-handed letters that could spell anything I wanted them to. A page full of potential, a page full of choice.

The door opened again, this time Linda dangling her keys from her hand, her pale face worried and hesitant to ask. But she did, after a moment.

“You ready to go, sport?” she said, jingling the keys.

My fingers curved along the loops of the hiragana I'd drawn.

“Yeah,” I said. “I'm ready.”

Chapter Six

Tomohiro

For a while I thought I was in control. There hadn't been any more incidents, at least not ones that caught anyone's attention. What was another scrape or gash on my arm? If it was contained to only me, then I considered it under control.

Not anymore. My hand shook as Nakamura-sensei wrote the kanji on the board.

"I know it's the last day of class," he chuckled, his fingers dusted white with chalk as he sketched each stroke, "but I don't want any slackers, got it? One more lesson so you're prepared for Year 3 History, *ne*?"

"*Haiiiii*," droned the students, but I couldn't speak. I stared at the name on the board.

Taira no Kiyomori. The one from the dream.

"So, who knows about Taira no Kiyomori?" Nakamura said. "Anyone?" A few tentative hands shot up. Definitely not mine.

"A samurai, right?" said Tanaka Keiko. I knew her vaguely, because a long time ago I'd been in Calligraphy Club with her brother, Ichirou. I couldn't announce the connection to her, of course. That had been when it all started.

"More than a samurai," Nakamura said. "He established the samurai-run government in the 12th century. He put his own son on the throne as emperor and staged a coup that changed everything for the samurai families. He also contributed heavily to the rebuilding of Itsukushima Shrine. But..." He paused dramatically, like my heart wasn't already in my throat, like I wasn't going to be sick. "There are rumors he wasn't even from the Heike family, that his father wasn't actually Taira no Tadamori."

Nakamura leaned against his desk, looking at us with gleaming eyes.

"They called him the Monster," he said. "The Demon Son."

A monster. The shadows chasing him to the Torii outside Itsukushima Shrine—was it all real, then? Some sort of vision of the past? I'd thought it was just a nightmare.

"We don't know much about his parentage, but he might have been an illegitimate heir to the throne. Or, if the rumors were true, his father was something far more sinister."

"A demon?" Keiko laughed. "That's just a story though."

"*Deshou*," said Nakamura, smiling. "I guess it couldn't be true, could it?"

It could. It was. They had no idea what they were saying, but I did.

The Demon Son. Close enough to the truth about me. But I couldn't accept it. I would run from myself, just like Taira had.

"Yuuto," came a harsh whisper, and I looked over. Satoshi was nodding his head at my paper. I looked down, startled by the sprawling mess of ink. The letters on my page were so badly blotted that they curled out in strange shapes, completely illegible.

"Too much caffeine," I whispered back. I lifted my hand to show him how it was shaking. And I exaggerated, because Satoshi was the only one who suspected anything about me. I had to overdo it so he wouldn't think anything was actually wrong.

"Right," Sato said, rolling his eyes. "Lay off the good stuff for a bit, yeah? Nakamura will kick you off the kendo team if he sees you like that."

I gave him the finger and he grinned while I turned the page in my notebook. But inside, my heart was pounding.

The letters weren't blotted from a shaky hand. I was losing control.

When the bell rang, we stood and bowed to Nakamura before he left the classroom. I stretched as everyone started on today's cleaning duty. Satoshi lifted his chair and threw it at me. I barely caught in time.

"Jeez, Yuuto," he said. "Still out of it?"

"Just aspiring to be like you," I said, flipping the chair over and slamming it onto his desk. Tanaka Keiko pushed between the two of us, pressing a mop against Sato's chest.

Sato sighed. "Again?"

Tanaka smirked. "What, you'd rather have bathroom duty?"

"On second thought..." he said, grabbing the mop from her.

My *keitai* buzzed and I reached into my book bag for it. The kendo warrior charm swung back and forth on the strap as I flipped the phone open.

"Myu?" Sato guessed, rolling his eyes. He leaned the mop against the wall while he lifted two more chairs onto desks.

I stared at the text.

"Shiori," I said.

Sato's voice went quiet, full of concern. "She okay?"

Shiori and I had become closer since Kaasan's accident, when I'd promised to look out for her. She used to hang out with Sato and me all the time in junior high. Not so much lately, since I wanted to keep her safe from him. I smirked at that—the Demon Son, keeping Shiori safe from a harmless thug like Sato. But the real problem for her wasn't Sato or even me. It was the morons tormenting her every chance they got.

I shook my head. "I gotta go."

"Damn. Why can't they leave her alone?" Sato and I were used to the texts from Shiori now, pleading for help from the latest confrontation. We didn't know who they were—students at her school, most likely—but whoever they were, when I found out, they'd see just what kind of monster I could be.

No. I couldn't give in to the darkness, not even when I wanted to. Not even when it called my name.

"Cover for me?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know the drill," Sato said. "But then you've got to come with me Friday night."

"Why?"

"Backup. In Ikeda. There's this guy I gotta meet up with, and—"

"Damn it, Sato!"

He leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest with a shrug. "Those are my terms, man."

I glared for a minute. "Sometimes I really hate you."

"Same here," he smiled, and smacked my arm. I waited until Tanaka's back was turned and then slipped out the door of the classroom, hurrying to the *genkan* to put on my shoes.

"Yuu-chan!" I heard as I pulled on the second shoe.

Not now. It wasn't like I didn't want to see her, but I had to help Shiori and I couldn't exactly tell Myu that. She stood in the doorway, her foot dangling just above the top stair. As usual, she'd pulled the waist of her skirt too high to show off her legs. A thought buzzed in the back of my head that I should be upset about the rest of the guys at school seeing her like that, but I was more worried about Shiori right now. They were making her life a living hell again, and I had to get there to stop it.

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