

After the bell, I was forced to part ways with my friends for the day. It made the rest of the day really boring, but at least at the end, we were able to meet up again. After retrieving my heavy winter gear, I made my way outside where Ikuya and Elodia were waiting, and we made our way home together. Our neighborhood was a short twenty-minute walk from school - much too close to worry about riding a bus - and separated from the school property by a thick wooded area. It was through here that the three of us often walked, making our way along a small, natural trail cutting through the woods.

Today was one such day, however, as we approached the opening in the woods that marked the trail's entrance, we spotted something peculiar - or, rather, *someone* peculiar. A tall, dark-skinned woman with dark brown-to-red gradient hair that came down past her hips even while up in a ponytail idly meandered around near the woods' edge, clad in a thin jacket and blue jeans. Strangely, her body seemed to be surrounded by a thin, dark red glow, of sorts. This wasn't the first time I'd seen such a thing, but it was the first time I'd seen it under these particular circumstances, which made me wonder something as we approached. She hadn't noticed us yet, though - rather, she seemed to be staring at the ground, idly kicking up snow with her foot, arms crossed and an annoyed expression on her face. It wasn't until we got close that she finally realized we were there, and she glanced at us, nodding absentmindedly in greeting, then went back to staring at the ground.

I was fully prepared to pass the woman by, but Ikuya had other plans, striding up to her. "What are you doing here?" He asked.

The woman looked at him and arched an eyebrow. "Waitin' on someone," she replied. Her voice carried a clear accent to it - Nuñoa, by the sound of it. Was she from South Ardon? It wasn't often foreigners came to this city, especially from so far away.

"This far from the street?" Ikuya pressed. "Surely there are easier places for someone to find you."

"Yeah, well, I picked here. What's it to ya, kid?"

Instead of answering, Ikuya just stared at her, as if trying to read her. The woman stared back, looking even more annoyed than before. Elodia and I, meanwhile, looked on in silence, occasionally exchanging perplexed looks. This wasn't normal for Ikuya. Normally, he was passive and kind. Here, however...

"I'm sure it's fine, Ikuya," I decided to cut in. "She's not hurting anything."

Ikuya simply stared her down for a few seconds more before huffing and backing down. "Let's be on our way, then."

"Good." I turned to look at the woman. "Sorry about that. Have a nice day!"

The woman locked eyes with me for a second, her expression intrigued, but then cracked a smirk. "You, too, kid," she finally replied.

We continued on through the woods in complete silence, until we nearly reached the other side when I decided to speak up. "What was that all about?" I asked Ikuya.

He didn't respond, but instead looked wordlessly at me for a moment, then away again.

I frowned, setting my jaw. "C'mon, Ikuya. This isn't like you. Did she seem suspicious or something?"

"I guess," he finally replied.

"You guess?"

He looked at me again, but then his gaze dropped to the ground. "I'm sorry."

"I..." I paused, unsure of how to respond. "...It's okay." I didn't want to press the issue, but it was clear something was up. Could Ikuya see that weird glow around that woman, too? He hadn't said anything about it.

We continued on in silence, and once we were out of the woods, we found ourselves in the quaint River's Edge neighborhood. Named for its proximity to the vast King River, it was the typical subdivision, complete with rows upon rows of almost cookie-cutter houses. Mine was the closest, on the far corner of the street on which we first found ourselves. Elodia's was on the next block up, and Ikuya's just a few houses down from it. Thus, as we walked, I was the first to part from the group. And thus, with an exchange of goodbyes - an especially cheery one on Elodia's part in effort to cheer us up - I made my way up to my house and stepped inside.

It was nearly always quiet here, and it wasn't much wonder why, given how many people lived here. Pulling off my boots and hanging up my winter gear, I started toward the living room when a woman poked her head out from behind the wall to the next room and looked at me. It was Naomi, my older sister and guardian. She smiled cheerily to me.

"Hey there!" She greeted me, cheerful tone to match her expression. "How was school?"

I offered her an exaggerated grimace. "Aside from the disgusting wet stuff all over the ground?" I asked. "It was... weird."

"Weird?" Naomi repeated, raising an eyebrow. "What happened?"

I told her about the heated debate in first period, as well as Ikuya's sudden hostility toward that strange woman.

"Hm..." Naomi bowed her head a bit, thinking. "Ikuya's usually such a nice boy. Strange that he'd suddenly act like that. What was that lady doing, anyway?"

"She said she was waiting for someone. Aside from that... she wasn't doing anything, really." I

pondered mentioning the red aura to her, but something told me she wouldn't believe me. No one else seemed to notice it, after all.

"Strange. I wonder what it was..." She paused a bit. "Well, at least all that weirdness is past now. I'll let you relax for a bit. Hopefully things go better tomorrow."

"Me too." Once Naomi returned to whatever she was working on - something related to her work, I imagined - I made my way upstairs to my bedroom. From here, I dropped myself onto my bed then reached for my monitor's remote, switching it on and to its television setting. It was just past sixteenth hour at this point - just in time for the afternoon news.

Today's top story was of the recent sightings of a mysterious masked figure, cloaked entirely in black. Apparently, the man - or woman, or whatever - was spotted downtown, lurking by a particular building. The eye-witnesses were unable to get a clear look at the person - the photos were blurry; video footage was short and vague. It seemed the figure would appear, lurk for a bit, then disappear into thin air. There were several rumors already forming about this figure: that he was a ghost, a burglar, an illusion... whatever they were, they were causing a bit of a stir. It made me arch an eyebrow, though. A cloaked teleporting figure? I questioned the story's legitimacy, but the number of eye-witness testimonies made me wonder. Whatever it was, I definitely questioned their "dangerous" nature. They hadn't even done anything yet.

A thought struck me, however: what if this figure was actually using *magic*? It would explain a lot of things, but... wouldn't that prove that there *were*, in fact, people who could use magic in the city? Or perhaps they'd gotten in somehow - perhaps using their teleportation power. But why come to Bishop Heights? What could they possibly want here?

I continued watching the news for a bit - of course, the story about the strange cloaked figure replayed multiple times, as the top story was wont to do - until I decided it was time to start on my homework, switching my monitor to its computer setting to do just that. A couple of worksheets for calculus and physics respectively, a chapter to read for history... tedious stuff, all of it, but easy enough, at least.

The rest of my evening was relatively uneventful. It wasn't until I was getting ready to go to bed that things took a turn for the interesting. I had just climbed into bed when my phone buzzed, my text tone sounding. Perplexed - and more than a little annoyed - I picked up my phone to check it.

[Activity in the haunted apartments!] it read. It was from Elodia. He spoke of the old apartment complex visible from his house. It'd been abandoned for years, apparently, and rumors had started to circulate that it was haunted.

[What do you mean?] I replied.

[Basement lights are on! I think I saw some shadows too.] The reply came pretty quickly. I stared at the message. This wasn't the first time this sort of thing has happened.

There had been plenty of reports of lights being on, shadows moving... but those claims were usually debunked quickly. Elodia wasn't one to make up wild stories, however, so that was enough to convince me this wasn't just a trick of the eye.

[You're sure?] I sent.

[Yup! I just saw another shadow!] Elodia replied, quickly again. Part of me wanted to investigate this for myself, but there was no way in this or any world Naomi would let me do that. *That building's condemned!* she'd say. *I'm not going to let you go in there and have it fall down on you.* Always the worrywart, my sister. It didn't help my curiosity in the least, though. Maybe they'd still be there tomorrow after school.

[You really think it's a ghost?] I decided to ask.

[What else could it be?] Elodia replied. [I can't think of anyone who'd go down there and mess with the lights.]

He had a point. [I wonder what kind of ghost it is.]

[I hope it's a nice ghost.]

[I've never heard of nice ghosts. They all try to kill people and stuff.]

[Horror stories don't talk about nice ghosts. Wouldn't be scary.]

[I guess so.]

There was no reply for a few minutes, and then, [The lights went out. I guess the ghost went to bed.]

[Maybe. Hopefully it doesn't invite any ghost friends.]

[But then it'd be an awesome ghost party!]

[LOL, yeah.]

The ghost party became the topic of our texting conversation until an absurdly late hour, until finally we both became too tired to continue. Exchanging good nights, I put my phone away and drifted off to sleep.