

Divided Loyalties

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Snow covered Mount Williamson and the rest of the Sierra range beyond the barbed-wire fence that delineated Skip Saikawa's world. The cold morning wind tugged at his cap and bit through the thin fabric of his cheap overcoat. He ducked between two of the barracks in 35 Block; the air wasn't any warmer there, but the long wooden buildings blocked the breeze.

'Good morning, Skip,' said Bill Nakamura. 'Sorry to bother you right before you get off shift.'

Skip squatted next to the body. The young man had died with his eyes open and his mouth twisted in a horrified grimace.

'Who is he?' he asked.

'Isohei Tanaka. He lives in this block.' Nakamura paused. 'Lived.'

Tanaka's Oxford shirt was untucked from his trousers, its tails sticking out from a blue wool sweater. No blood. The top button of his trousers was undone. His hair looked mussed and dusty. Skip picked up a strand and rubbed it between his fingers, feeling oily pomade. It would have taken more than the wind to tousle that hairstyle.

Tanaka's hands were clenched. Something dark was wrapped around his fingers. Skip touched the long strands and tugged one free. A woman's hair, long and straight.

'Who found him?'

'I did. The neighbor's new baby is driving me nuts. It's easier to get up early and enjoy the sunrise than try to go back to sleep again. I was cutting through to the fence, and...'

Nakamura lifted a shoulder.

'You called the doctor?'

'I told the boy to find you first and the doctor second.'

Skip nodded. The hospital was across camp, on 7th and H, so it would take some time for the doctor to arrive. He was glad to have been able to inspect the body before

anybody else had touched it. Only the fact that most of the awakening internees were intent on getting to the latrines or the mess hall had saved it from discovery already.

Nakamura and Skip instinctively positioned themselves to block the corpse from casual onlookers, gazing north, past the guard towers and barbed wire to the vista beyond.

Damn, it was cold. Everyone said the snow would reach camp soon. Skip had never seen snow up close. He'd spent his entire life in Los Angeles before being dragged out here to the middle of nowhere, and he wasn't looking forward to his first real winter.

Shikata ga nai. There was nothing to be done about it.

'Did Tanaka have a girlfriend?' he asked after a few minutes of contemplation. He caught himself wrapping the hair around his fingers. With a surge of disgust he shook it off. The wind carried it away like a drifting spirit.

'I don't know.'

'Too bad.' He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and offered it to Nakamura.

'So early?'

'It's still late, for me.'

'I suppose a cigarette before breakfast can be excused once in a while.' Nakamura took one and pulled out his lighter. They smoked in silence, side by side.

Nakamura was a clerk in the administration office but wrote articles for the *Manzanar Free Press* – 'free' as long as each mimeographed issue was approved by the War Relocation Authority for publication, first. Skip figured his friend was wondering whether he'd be allowed to write about the death. Two weeks ago, the WRA had forbidden the *Press* to write about the protests that had set neighbor against neighbor and had made this a less-than-merry holiday season for the internees who'd lost loved ones to death, hospitalization, or arrest.

As for himself, Skip had to report the body to his Caucasian superiors, but he felt no urgency. The boy was dead. The doctor had been sent for. He was sorry for the Tanakas. Pretty hard, losing a son right before the New Year. Not that there was ever a good time to lose a son.

Strange death. No sign of foul play — just that look of horror on the boy's face, as though he'd seen something unimaginable. The Japanese term drifted up from Skip's subconscious. *Obake*. A monster, a ghost.

Literally, a thing that transforms.

Skip flicked ash into the sand. They were living in a camp full of *obake*, magically transformed from free American residents to incarcerated 'Japanese' spies by Executive Order 9066.

He raised his eyes to search the skyline. He'd found himself spending more and more time staring at the horizon lately. It was better than looking around camp, where too many people met his gaze with mistrust. He'd thought that working for the camp's internal security force would be a good thing, but ever since the riots he'd been labeled an *inu*, a traitor.

It wasn't fair, but Skip no longer expected life to be fair. He simply trudged through each day doing his best to mediate between the MPs and the residents and wondering if anyone would hire him again after the camps were disbanded.

If the camps were disbanded.

He yawned. He'd been working midnight to 8 a.m. for the last seven days, looking for lumber thieves and telling young lovers to break it up and go home. Sunday was supposed to be his day off. Nakamura had good reason to apologize — this body was going keep him busy for hours.

'What do you think?' Nakamura asked at last. Around them the noise was rising and breakfast smells began to waft out of the mess halls.

'Do you know any women with very long, straight hair?'

'Maybe some of the *Issei*?'

Skip had been thinking the same thing. First-generation women, the ones who'd immigrated from Japan, often kept their hair long. By contrast, the *Nisei* girls and young women preferred to wear their hair fashionably shoulder-length with painstaking curls and waves.

'Maybe ... there's an old woman around here who still dresses like she's in Japan. What's her name?'

‘Mrs. Yamamoto, the dancing instructor?’ Nakamura dropped his cigarette into the sandy dirt. ‘I don’t think she’s your killer.’

‘Who said he was killed?’

Nakamura raised an eyebrow. Of course everyone would assume Tanaka had been killed. They were still paranoid, this soon after the riots.

The doctor drove up in the ambulance, along with two paramedics who moved the body after the doctor finished his inspection. Skip was invited to the hospital in an hour or two to hear the doctor’s report. That gave him enough time to bolt down coffee and a quick breakfast at the nearest mess hall, then hurry to Mrs. Yamamoto’s barracks.

‘*Ohayou gozaimasu, Yamamoto-san.*’ He removed his cap and bowed to the old woman who sat in the doorway of her barracks room, wrapped in a bright floral-print blanket as she enjoyed the morning sun. She waved him over. Her hands were tiny and wrinkled, and she was dwarfed by the blanket. Her face was aristocratic, though, and her long, graying hair was elegantly styled over a high brow.

‘May I ask you a few questions?’ Skip asked in English. He was too embarrassed to try to speak to her in his poor Japanese. As a boy, he’d resisted learning it— after all, he’d argued, he was *American*.

‘Yes, Officer.’

‘Thank you.’ He put his cap back on his head. ‘I’ve been told that you teach *odori*.’

‘Yes.’ She watched him with dispassionate interest. ‘You have a daughter?’

‘No.’ He didn’t even have a girlfriend, which was another reason his roommates’ sexual athletics kept driving him outside. ‘But I’m looking for a girl with very long hair, and I thought maybe one of the girls learning *odori* might be ... more traditional.’

‘It’s such a pity. All of the girls have short hair now.’

‘Maybe you have an assistant with long hair?’

‘I don’t think so.’

He grunted and pulled out another cigarette. His eyes were scratchy with dust and lack of sleep. As he lit up, he studied the rock garden someone had created around Mrs. Yamamoto’s door.

‘I have been told that a son of the Tanakas is dead,’ the old woman said, shooting him a quick, sidelong glance.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ Skip said. Manzanar might be mostly covered in sand, but its grapevine was strong and healthy. ‘The doctor is examining the body.’

She was silent.

‘Did you know him?’ he asked, after an uncomfortable moment.

‘He worked in our mess hall. People said his food was especially good.’ She pursed her lips, keeping her own opinion in reserve.

‘A cook, huh? For the 35 Block?’

‘Yes.’

Now, *that* was interesting. If Tanaka had been a member of the Kitchen Workers’ Union ... the union was full of anti-administration, anti- Japanese American Citizen’s League hotheads. It had been the arrest of the union organizer, Harry Ueno, that had kicked off the riots earlier that month.

‘Thank you,’ he said, bowing again. ‘That is very helpful.’

‘Good luck, Saikawa-san,’ she said, politely. ‘Be careful.’

He paused, glancing at her, but her eyes were closed as she turned her face back to the sun. Troubled, he checked his watch and headed over to the hospital.

‘Good morning, Saikawa-san.’ Dr. Satou shook his hand and ushered him into a small office filled with filing cabinets and a file-covered desk. ‘How are you?’

‘A little beat, *sensei*.’ Skip rubbed the back of his neck. ‘You?’

‘Well, but puzzled.’ Satou gestured to a chair as he sat. ‘The boy told me that you were the first one called when the body was found.’

‘Nakamura trusts me more than he trusts the MPs.’ Skip shrugged. ‘They’ll run the official investigation, of course. Anything you tell me will be off the record. But I’d like to know what you found out.’

‘Did you notice anything unusual about the body?’

‘Not much. The kid was holding some strands of long black hair.’

‘Yes.’ Satou nodded. ‘That is significant.’

‘Why?’

Satou pushed over a folder. ‘Tanaka was asphyxiated by a large ball of long, black hair.’

‘You’re kidding.’ Skip flipped the folder open, scanning the report. ‘Did you take photos?’

‘Yes, but they haven’t been developed yet.’ Satou picked up a jar from a shelf behind him. ‘This is what I removed from the young man’s throat.’

Skip grimaced. The dark ball of hair was bigger than his fist.

‘How could you swallow something like that?’

‘Well...’ Satou hesitated. ‘I found *mochi* flour on the boy’s fingers. The MPs speculated that someone might have filled a *mochi* cake with hair as a prank, and the boy choked on it.’

Skip shook his head. A number of barracks had organized *mochitsuki*, rice-pounding ceremonies for making the traditional New Year’s mochi sweets. It wouldn’t be impossible for some prankster to fill one of the large *kagami-mochi* with hair, and *mochi* was so sticky that it seemed like somebody choked to death on it every year. But...

‘If he’d been eating *kagami-mochi*, he would have noticed the hair when he cut it open.’

‘Yes, although some of the kitchens may be making *daifuku*.’

‘Even so, that thing.’ Skip gestured to the hairball. ‘That’s huge. You’d notice it if you bit into it. Unless Tanaka was crazy enough to swallow a cake whole.... Was there any *mochi* in his throat?’

‘No. There was some in his stomach, but ... here’s the thing. You and I both understand the problem with the *mochi* cake scenario. But if the MPs prefer to call the death an accident, perhaps it’s better that way.’ Satou gave him a meaningful look. ‘An official murder investigation might cause trouble right now.’

‘An unofficial one might ruffle some feathers, too.’

‘Then perhaps it *was* an accident.’

Skip frowned. As a cook, Tanaka would have had plenty of access to *mochi*. And if he’d belonged to the politically active Kitchen Worker’s Union, it wasn’t impossible that he’d have made some enemies with the same access. But even in an internment

camp, weapons weren't so difficult to come by that murder by hair-stuffed *mochi* made sense.

But accidental death by hair-stuffed *mochi* didn't make sense, either, no matter what the Caucasian MPs might want to believe.

He glanced again at the glistening ball of matted hair and shuddered. It looked like some small, evil creature that might abruptly uncurl and glare at him with beady black eyes. Hadn't he heard some boyhood story about an *obake* like that? *Kamikiri? Keukegen?* He couldn't remember.

'What are you going to do?' Satou asked.

'I'm gonna get some sleep.' Skip stood. 'Thank you, Dr. Satou. If I learn anything, I'll let you know.'

The other seven residents of the shared room tried to be considerate when Skip worked nights, so he got a few hours of rest before he was awakened for dinner. Skip spent another half-hour huddled under the blankets, trying to shake off the scraps of his dreams -- strange images dredged up from his childhood of living teakettles and shapeshifting cats. At last, shivering in the cold, he sat up and fumbled for his cigarettes, looking around at the empty cots.

It was hell being a bachelor in Manzanar, but it was probably no great shakes being married there, either. The barracks offered no privacy, so couples either shrugged off their modesty or went elsewhere in camp. Skip broke up a lot of necking during his nightly patrols.

He thought about Tanaka's styled hair and nice clothes.

A woman's long black hair. Dead fingers sticky with *mochi*.

Be careful, the old woman had warned him.

He checked his watch. It was still early enough for an old woman to be awake, and far too early to change into his uniform. He pulled up his suspender straps and pushed himself out of bed.

Mrs. Yamamoto shook her head, her lips pursed. 'I'm sorry. I can't help you.'

'Maybe you saw something?' Skip pressed. 'Late at night?'

‘I go to sleep very early. In fact, I am usually getting ready for bed right now.’

Skip didn’t believe her. It was only eight, far too early to go to bed in the noisy, overcrowded camp.

‘Why did you tell me to be careful this morning?’

‘Riots, shootings, arrests ... emotions are very strong right now.’ She shot him a sharp look. ‘When people allow their emotions to run out of control, they become dangerous.’

Skip nodded. Manzanar had experienced that danger first-hand during the riots.

‘You knew about Isohei Tanaka. Do you remember if there was a girl he was seeing? Maybe one with long hair?’

‘Her hair was shoulder-length and curled.’

Skip leaned forward. ‘Whose?’

‘Rin Yamada’s.’ The old woman raised her plucked eyebrows. ‘She came to my class four, five times, but she had no grace. She was hungry for attention; from me, from the other girls, from boys. Very unladylike. She grew angry when I scolded her. I told her to try the other *odori* class in camp.’

‘But she was Tanaka’s girlfriend?’

‘Yes.’ The woman’s tone was scornful. ‘She boasted about it.’

‘Did the two of them get along well?’

Yamamoto waved a dismissive hand. ‘Yamada stopped coming to my class months ago. I don’t know anything more.’

Skip stood and bowed. ‘Thank you, Yamamoto-san.’

‘Be careful,’ the old woman said, again.

‘Of what? The people who killed Tanaka?’

Yamamoto gave him a steady look.

Strange old woman. A gust of cold winter wind blew down his back. He yanked at his coat collar.

Dinner first. Then he would find Rin Yamada.

Skip stayed in the 35 Block to eat, joining another policeman in the line outside the mess hall. They chatted desultorily, avoiding discussion of the riots or Tanaka’s death

out of respect for the families in line around them. The weather was so cold that everyone was bundled in their heaviest coats, and their breath showed in ghostly little puffs of white as they spoke.

The mess hall was crowded and noisy, as always, but it was warm, and the food had improved since those first days when Caucasians had made their meals. Under the cover of the noise, Skip felt safe asking his dinner companion about Tanaka's death. The WRA had declared it an accident, he was told. The boy had choked on *mochi*. A tragic death, but safely uncontroversial.

Skip rubbed his fingers together, remembering the hair that had clung to them.

'Do you know a girl named Rin Yamada?'

'That guy's girlfriend? Yeah, I've seen her around. She's a knockout, but...' the policeman shook his head.

'What?'

His friend leaned forward, glancing around.

'They say she was a *jorō*, before the war.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, that's what I heard. Of course, what difference does it make in here?'

It would explain why Mrs. Yamamoto had been so scornful, Skip mused.

'So now Yamada's boyfriend is dead,' he said. 'Bad luck.'

'Not as bad as Tanaka's,' his companion observed.

Skip finished his meal, said goodbye, and headed out into the December evening. He quickly learned that Yamada lived in the 22 Block, which gave him a moment's pause. The dissidents who'd spearheaded the riots had held their meetings in that block. Skip pulled his fedora lower. More than one member of internal security had gotten beaten up for venturing into the wrong part of the camp at the wrong time of day. He kept his eyes down and one hand curled around the badge in his pocket as he hurried through the sandy streets.

Yamada shared a room with several other single women. Light trickled out from under their door. He knocked, and the door was opened by a plump girl in a cute fuzzy sweater. He smiled at her.

‘Is Miss Yamada in?’ he asked, in his most pleasant voice. ‘I’m Hiroshi Saikawa. ‘Skip’ to my friends.’

The girl giggled. ‘Please wait here, Skip.’

‘Sure. No problem.’ He stood and smoked in the dark until the door opened again and another young woman stepped out.

‘Mr. Saikawa?’ she asked.

The other cop hadn’t been exaggerating -- Rin Yamada was a knockout. Her figure was obscured by a fashionable wool overcoat, but she had a striking face and thick, full hair that fell in loose ringlets to her shoulders. Her hands, encased in leather gloves, were long and slender, and she was almost as tall as he was. Her expression was wary but not shy, and she met his eyes boldly.

Skip thought she looked like a movie star.

‘Miss Yamada.’ He touched his hat. ‘How do you do?’

‘I don’t believe we’ve met.’

‘No, ma’am.’ Skip reached into his coat and pulled out his cigarettes, wanting to delay the inevitable. ‘Smoke?’

‘Thank you.’ She took a cigarette. He caught himself smirking as he whipped out a lighter and lit it for her. Her dark eyes flickered up to his face in the brief flicker of flame. ‘How may I help you, Mr. Saikawa?’

‘Skip. Please call me Skip.’

‘Then how may I help you, Skip?’

He took a deep breath. Could he possibly present his business without alienating her? Probably not, he thought with regret.

‘I’m sorry about your boyfriend.’

‘Isohei?’ She regarded him coolly. ‘We’d broken up.’

‘Oh. I hadn’t heard.’

She lifted a shoulder.

‘I was hoping you might answer a few questions about him,’ he ventured. ‘The case is closed, so it’s nothing official. Just some information to satisfy my curiosity.’

The faint light leaking through the barracks’ curtained windows painted Yamada’s face in stark black and white.

‘Are you working for the WRA?’

‘No. And I’m not working for JACL, either. I’m only asking for myself.’

‘I don’t know how I could possibly tell you anything useful, Mr. Saikawa.’

He grimaced at her use of his last name. Well, there was no way around it. He might as well get to the point.

‘Did you see Tanaka, the night he died?’

‘No.’

‘He was dressed for a date. When did you two break up?’

‘Why are you asking me these questions, if you aren’t working for someone? Do you think Isohei was a dissident? Or an informer?’

‘No. I think he was a lovestruck boy.’ Skip dropped his cigarette and stepped on the butt, screwing it into the cold sand. Time to take a shot in the dark and see if anything yelped. ‘And I think he fell in love with the wrong kind of woman.’

She gave a short, sharp laugh.

‘And I think you’re crazy.’

‘Maybe. Crazy to waste my time, anyway. Nobody’s going to question the WRA’s report. Not without proof. And you’re not going to give me any proof, are you? But you could give me a few answers.’

‘I don’t know anything about it.’ She flicked the cigarette butt away. Skip grabbed her arm.

‘Wait.’

‘All I have to do is scream,’ she said, calmly. He dropped his hand.

‘I’m not threatening you, Miss Yamada. I’m just trying to understand what happened last night.’

‘I don’t know why you think I have anything to confess.’

‘Tanaka was dressed up like a guy going out on a Saturday night date, and you’re his girlfriend. Or you were, anyway. He died with a woman’s long black hair tangled in one hand.’ And jammed down his throat, but that wasn’t public information. ‘Maybe you didn’t kill him. Maybe you saw who did. Was it political? Was he murdered? Tell me what happened. I can help.’

‘You work for internal security, don’t you?’

Skip glanced around before giving her a short, shallow nod. She turned away with a look of disdain.

‘Let’s take this conversation somewhere more private, Mr. Saikawa.’

They walked side-by-side west along 6th Street. Not many people were out -- it was dark and chilly, and the increased security since the riots had made staying out late uncomfortable for everybody.

‘You’re *Nisei*,’ she said at last. ‘*Kibei*?’

‘No, I’ve lived in L.A. all my life.’ His father had died young and his mother, a schoolteacher, had barely earned enough to keep a roof over their head, much less send him back to Japan for an education. ‘You?’

‘The same. Do you ever feel the strain?’

‘Sure. Especially when my mother was alive.’ He lifted a shoulder. She’d died six years ago, of pneumonia. ‘I don’t have any close relatives in L.A., so it’s not too bad anymore. My last boss was *Issei*, though.’

‘My parents are still alive. They’re in the Amache camp.’

‘It’s unusual to be placed apart from your family.’

‘I preferred it that way. So did they.’

‘So.’ He glanced at her raised shoulders and bitter expression. ‘Are your parents old-fashioned?’

‘My family wants me to be a good Japanese girl, but my friends and the rest of the world expect me to be a good American girl. “Don’t smile.” “Smile more.” “You’re too thin.” “You’re too fat.” “Wear this.” “Wear that.” For the longest time I tried to be everything to everybody, and in the end nobody was happy, not even me.’ She waved a gloved hand at the tall sentry tower ahead of them. ‘It’s the same for all of us now, isn’t it? No matter what generation we are, we’re not Japanese enough for Japan and not American enough for America.’

‘That’s what the Citizen’s Federation was complaining about, wasn’t it? Are you a member?’

‘I’m not a joiner. Besides, that’s part of the problem. You’d think that here, in prison, we’d unite to prove that we’re loyal Americans. But instead we split ourselves

apart -- JACL, the Manzanar Citizen's Federation, the Blood Brothers, the Black Dragon Society, the Kitchen Workers' Union ... it's stupid.'

'Was Tanaka a member of the Kitchen Workers' Union?'

'Why do you care?'

'Was he killed for something stupid? Did he die because he'd joined the wrong political group?'

She turned. They had stopped on I Street, on the southwest edge of camp. A guard tower's searchlight swept back and forth over the barbed-wire fence. The guns in the tower were pointed toward the camp.

'Isohei *was* stupid.' Yamada's breath formed a gust of white in front of her. 'He was an agitator. He threw stones and ransacked rooms and shouted at the soldiers to shoot when they were guarding the police station.'

Skip grunted. He'd been one of the few members of camp security who'd worked during the protests. He remembered how frightening that angry mob had been. And the Caucasian MPs by his side had been just as frightening, watching him with open suspicion, as if at any moment he might pull out a smuggled gun and shoot them in the back.

He rubbed his forehead. The memory gave him a headache.

'He had never acted that way before,' Yamada continued. 'He had always been nice, bringing me candy and food from the kitchen and taking me to the movies and the dances. But he was just a jellyfish, floating whichever way the tide took him. Around polite people, he was polite. Around bullies, he was a bully.'

'He tried to be everything to everybody,' Skip murmured, echoing her earlier words.

'I didn't like it, so I stopped seeing him. But he wouldn't give up. He came by last night to bring some *mochi* as a peace offering. I thought he was going to apologize for being so spineless, but all he did was bluster and say that I had no right to break up with him.'

'He got violent,' Skip guessed, turning to face her. She looked at him, her movie-star face hard.

‘He started calling me names. He said I was a whore and no man would ever love me.’

Skip blinked, startled by her blunt language.

‘That was rude of him.’

‘Yes.’ She didn’t flinch from his gaze. ‘But I would have ignored him, if he hadn’t attacked.’

Skip glanced at her small hands, encased in smooth leather and clutching the front of her coat.

‘So you killed him?’ he asked skeptically. The beam of light from the guard tower flashed over the left side of her face, casting the right in shadow.

‘I didn’t mean to. But he shoved my face against the barracks wall and started to unbutton his pants. I panicked.’

‘What did you do?’

The light moved away. Skip’s heart started pounding harder as he studied Yamada’s embittered smile and watched the white, ghostlike condensation that mingled between them with every exhalation.

An identical cloud of condensation rose *behind* her, haloing her head in a frosty cloud.

‘It isn’t easy trying to please everyone,’ she said. ‘I felt like I was being ripped in half. I needed to be a good Japanese daughter for my parents and a swell American gal for my friends.’

Her lips tightened.

‘Have you ever felt like that?’ she asked in a much deeper voice, even though her lips were still sealed. Her curls slowly uncoiled, thick tendrils of hair stretching like tentacles in the white cloud of breath that surrounded her head. ‘Like two people in one body?’

‘Yes,’ he choked, staring. ‘Yes, I have.’ *Yōkai*. The half-forgotten word rose to the surface of his memory. *Yōkai*, an *obake* that had once been human but was transformed by strong emotion.

How much had Mrs. Yamamoto known?

‘I hated that feeling,’ the deep voice said. ‘So I did something about it.’

‘Look, M-miss Yamada,’ Skip stammered, acutely aware of how alone they were out here at the edge of camp on a dark winter night. ‘I don’t...’

She turned toward the barbed-wire fence, her hair rippling like the thick, ropy black arms of an octopus. The bright searchlight flashed across her still features again before moving on. As soon as her back was to him, her floating hair spread like legs, revealing their moist, innermost secret.

Her skull had split apart. The flesh on either side of the horizontal fissure had drawn up to form blood-red lips, the bone of her skull had become jagged teeth, and the glistening tissue over her brain had elongated into a short, vein-covered tongue.

‘I may not be able to please everyone,’ the *yōkai* said in a deep, demonic voice, ‘but this way I don’t *have* to.’

Hair-tentacles brushed his face and writhed around the sides of his head.

‘I don’t care what you did to him,’ Skip protested, recoiling. ‘If that guy tried to rape you, he got what he deserved!’

Her hair dragged his head forward. Two more strands wrapped around his wrists, holding him fast. The fleshy breath from her second mouth felt foul and hot on his face. His heart rattled his ribs and his balls tried to crawl back into his body.

‘You’re an informer,’ Yamada said with her natural mouth. Hair spread over his face like a living web. ‘You’ll turn me in to the WRA. I can’t have that.’

‘Turn you in?’ Skip’s laugh was unsteady as her hair insinuated itself between his lips. ‘You think anybody’s gonna believe me? Miss Yamada, listen! Killing me will only cause trouble! You think *two* choking deaths can get passed off as accidents?’

The tentacles stopped, holding his face inches away from her monstrous red maw. If he could just pull a hand loose, or his head --

Was that *mochi* caught between those bone teeth?

‘I won’t turn you in,’ he promised, desperately. Long black hair tickled the back of his throat. ‘What you did was a one-time deal, self-defense. I get it, really! But if you kill *me*, people will start asking questions. I’m with camp security. The MPs won’t ignore it if *I* turn up dead. So let’s call a truce, huh?’

‘How can I trust you?’ the skull-mouth demanded.

‘We’re both stuck in camp. Neither of us has any power here, not really. Easier on both of us to shut up and stay out of each other’s way.’

‘And when the war is over?’ she asked from the other side. ‘What happens then?’

‘America’s a big country. We don’t ever have to see each other again.’

Yamada was still for a long moment. Then, slowly, her hair slithered loose, releasing him. He stumbled back. She turned, her face a hard white mask as the searchlight swept over it.

‘Make sure we don’t, Mr. Saikawa.’

She walked away, down 6th Street toward the central bustle of Manzanar.

Skip shuddered, brushing away long, broken strands of hair from face and wrists. More hair adhered to his tongue. He gagged as he clawed it away, leaning over to spit into the sand.

‘Hey, you!’ A flashlight beam blinded him as an MP’s voice rang out. ‘What the hell are you doing out here all alone? Get away from the fence!’

Skip squinted, raising his hands with a wince.

‘Internal security, sir!’ he shouted. ‘If you’ll let me reach into my pocket, I’ll show you my badge.’

His head felt like it was about to split in two.