

## Chapter One

HISASHI OTA ALMOST TIPPED the three-wheeled cargo scooter as he took another hard corner in the dense web of Osaka's back alleys. Full throttle and white-knuckled, he pushed the little 50cc engine to its absolute limit. Cold wind whistled in his ears, whipped over his bald head, and rattled the links of fake gold chains draped around his tattooed neck. Squinting against the late afternoon winter sunlight that cut through the dense mess of overhead electrical wires, he careened down a narrow lane, drowning out the sound of the pursuing police sirens and startled shouts of foot commuters with his horn. The stack of ten-kilogram boxes of western sausages sliding wildly in the scooter's insulated compartment might just be enough to get him back in Reika's good graces.

Blood pumping with exhilaration, he leaned the cargo scooter with his full weight around A-framed digital placards, parked bicycles, and pedestrians. Hisashi risked tapping into a DarkNet overlay of police activity—the wetware transaction forced his eyes to flutter, momentarily robbing him of spatial sense and triggering a series of narrowly avoided collisions that he desperately overcorrected against before regaining control. Another squad car was approaching, but wouldn't intercept before he could lose himself amongst the clutter, refuse, and notoriously uncooperative residents of Osaka's generational slum, Kamagasaki.

Blood still pumping with the thrill of evasion, he backed off his breakneck speed for the last series of turns and cut the vehicle lights as he coasted the last dozen meters to The Waterfall.

On his approach, he signalled to the group of old men bundled up in second-hand winter clothes clustered around a barrel fire outside the restaurant. As he nestled the cargo scooter amongst the bins of garbage, one of the retirees reached under his plastic chair and threw him a bundled canvas tarp. In a practiced motion, Hisashi unfurled it, throwing it over both himself and the vehicle.

The blended scent of rotting garbage and trash burning in the nearby barrel fire was abhorrent, but he was too giddy from the thrill of another close escape to pay it much attention. Wetware overlays in his vision allowed him to see two police cars approach, and moments later, intense red lights pierced frayed sections of the canvas tarp he was hiding under.

As distinctive as he looked, Hisashi's digital countermeasures defied capture, leaving only smudges of wildly contrasting colour on playback. While eyewitness accounts could identify him, they rarely secured convictions anymore. The only way to convict him was to catch him, and the police hadn't managed that since he was a teenager.

The drunken old-timers sarcastically blew off the police questioning, seeming to make sport of the encounter. Amusing minutes of failed interrogation followed. Once the frustrated police had safely moved off, Hisashi emerged from under the tarp to the raucous cheers of the elderly men.

"What'd you bring today, Geomon-kun?"

"Western sausages." Hisashi quickly moved upwind of the trash fire and drank the discount souchu straight from the bottle offered by the least-sketchy-looking retiree. Having the

older crowd joke that he was Ishikawa Goemon, the Japanese Robin Hood, felt pleasing and appropriate. "Enough for everyone!"

He threaded past the old men in their mismatched plastic chairs, accepting pats on the back and enthusiastic ramblings, to open the badly weathered front door of The Waterfall. Instantly hit with the heat and humidity of too many bodies in too small a space, Hisashi scanned the floor for Reika's baby crawling amongst the filthy, peel-and-stick laminate flooring, chair legs, and patrons packing the ten-seat restaurant at twice its capacity. There might've been room for another table or two, but the hodgepodge of repurposed discards defied efficiency.

Half a dozen people crowded the small counter, partially concealing a portable two-burner cooktop and a modest propane grill with ramshackle venting. Two discoloured electric fans bolted into the dingy, bare plywood walls just above eye level, hung motionless. A series of hand-cranked lanterns hung from loose wires running parallel to the ceiling joists, casting cold illumination and stark shadows. The Waterfall was an intense confluence of sounds—loud chewing and slurping, competing conversations, the hiss of frying ingredients, and scraping plates or chairs— that blurred together into a vibrant, pulsating texture that renounced judgement.

With her baby in a filthy grey onesie slung over one shoulder, Reika furiously attended to both burners and grill, alternating between reusable plastic containers of unrefrigerated ingredients and open flames with her long, cooking chopsticks. Wild, unbrushed locks haphazardly escaped her lazily tied-up hairstyle, and her skin glistened with perspiration that pooled in the sharp hollow of her collarbones. Reika's threadbare blouse was sweat-stained and dark, matching the bags under her eyes.

Hisashi elbowed his way to the counter, ignoring the grumbles of the standing diners, and unzipped his bomber jacket against the warmth. He reached to tap the far shoulder of one patron, stole a grilled shrimp off his plate, and was rewarded with a solid rap across the forehead by Reika's cooking chopsticks.

"Don't steal from paying customers," she admonished, hard brown eyes cutting.

The patron grumbled and curled his arm around his plate, protecting it from further molestation.

Hisashi knew the man couldn't have offered much for the modest serving of stir-fried noodles. If he received shrimp, Reika must've judged him as decent. Most patrons of The Waterfall wouldn't have a pair of hundred-yen coins to rub together by this time of the month.

"How about something for your provider?" he asked, hoping to deflect her rancour.

Reika's lips curled into a sneer. "You only provide problems. What did I tell you about bringing the cops here?"

He shrugged. "I heard you liked sausages."

Her eyes perked up, one eyebrow raised. "Oh yeah?" Ignoring the baby pawing at her face for attention, Reika reached behind her for a chipped bowl. She held a clutch of udon over it, dangling the thick noodles expertly in mid-air. "How much are we talking?"

He loved this part of the game. "Enough."

She let a few strands drop into the bowl—the rest hung precariously in the grip of her long, cooking chopsticks. "This much, enough?"

"You'll probably want to add some shrimp."

"There's no more shrimp," she said firmly.

"Not even for fifty kilos?"

Reika wiped the sweat from her brow with her free shoulder and heaped a generous portion of udon into the bowl before plucking a shrimp or two from several nearby patrons to load onto Hisashi's dinner. A chorus of loud protests followed.

Irritated, Reika passed the infant over the burners to Hisashi and stabbed a pair of mismatched plastic chopsticks into his bowl with enough force to rattle the dishes on the countertop.

"One more ungrateful word from any of you bastards, and I'll slice you for the pot."

Hinata played with Hisashi's fake gold chains, giggling and undercutting the stunned silence of the diners. Why was Reika leaning into the gossip? Hisashi recognized she was probably capable of murder, but to stew a lover into curry was a stretch, even for the drunken ramblings of old-timers. Still, no one had ever seen her with a man, and no man had ever been foolish enough to claim to have been her lover.

Reika took a shrimp from Hisashi's bowl and tossed it on the plate he'd stolen from.

Hisashi wrinkled his nose and pulled his face to one side. "Hey, Hinata's smelling pretty ripe."

"Go change him, will you?" Reika's voice betrayed a sudden exhaustion.

"Nope."

Her expressive lips reformed their habitual frown. "Fine. Show me what you've got."

She snapped her fingers twice and gestured sharply for one of her less dishevelled customers to jump behind the counter, passing off her cooking chopsticks without instruction as she walked outside. Hisashi cradled Hinata in the crook of his left arm, picked up the noodles, and followed Reika outside.

"Rei-*chan*, go grill us some sausages!" demanded one of the drunk old men sitting on the plastic chairs outside.

The others rejoined in the request, slurring their contributions with enthusiasm.

"Been a while since you've had a good sausage in your mouth, huh, *ojiisan*?" She pushed cheek with tongue, cupping one hand in front of her lips.

Laughter.

Hisashi angled past the cluster of retirees to the garbage cans and concealed cargo scooter, patiently waiting for Reika to wrap up her crude banter. The grime-covered baby stank worse than the rotting garbage. Careful not to spill his meal, Hisashi rocked his upper body so his chains jingled, delighting Hinata with both noise and movement.

"You're good with him," Reika pronounced, arms crossed in front of her. A seam tear under her left arm exposed a window to her sharp ribs.

Hisashi helplessly held out both bowl and infant to Reika, gesturing with his chin to the hidden vehicle. "I can't show you with my hands full."

"I'll manage."

"You know, you could probably do with some dinner yourself. You're looking pretty—"

She jabbed him hard with her slender finger. "There will never be a day I allow you to tell me how I look. Am I clear?"

"A hundred percent."

She plucked one of his shrimp and chewed it absently as she moved aside the trash cans. Reika pulled back the canvas tarp, scowling at the cargo scooter's logo.

"You robbed the good meat shop in Shikitsuigashi?"

"No, no. The other one."

"Fuck those guys." Reika unlocked the insulated cargo compartment, appraising the stack of boxes, face sour. "What am I supposed to do with fifty kilos of sausage and no freezer?"

"It'll keep. It's winter."

"Totally won't."

"Just cook it thoroughly? It's not like you've got reviews to worry about."

Hinata's grimy little fingers tugged on Hisashi's lower lip.

She snapped and gestured. "Give him here."

He handed over the infant, smothering the impulse to mention Hinata's hygiene. No matter how reckless he could get, there were some things he couldn't walk back. He started to shrug out of his bomber jacket to offer her, but she cut him off with a shake of her head.

"Don't. I won't suffer the gossip of people thinking we're a thing."

Would it be so bad? While no one knew her exact age, Hisashi figured she would be somewhere in her mid-to-late forties. At least, she'd already been a proper adult when he was a teenager. He sat on the scooter's seat sideways, failing to think of a way he could survive making a first move, and absently ate his dinner. Reika began changing Hinata's diaper on the cargo box beside him.

While Hisashi wasn't typically squeamish, the sharp smell and sheer abundance of mustard-coloured excrement turned his stomach. "Gross. It's all over him."

"Don't be a baby." Reika mechanically threw a series of used wet tissues into the mess of diaper before neatly folding it over onto itself, and sealing it into a perfectly compact, putrid ball.

Hisashi lunged to save Hinata from happily rolling off the makeshift change table as Reika disposed of the diaper in a trash can. He thought he caught a glimmer of her smile, and made a mental note to playback the wetware memory later to verify. He glanced across the street

to a short run of concrete stairs fronting a derelict shop where Taka normally sat. That new girl was there again—dressed down today, but still decked out in wealthy kit. She couldn't be more than twelve.

"Hey, have you seen Taka around?"

"What have you got him mixed up in?"

"Nothing," he mumbled, shaking his head, slurping udon.

"Better not. If I find out you're using him for one of your scams—"

"It's definitely not a scam," he anxiously interrupted.

"Ota."

Hisashi knew he was on thin ice when Reika addressed him by his last name. Needing to deflect her inquisition, he gestured to the girl with his chopsticks. "What do you make of her?"

"Fucking tourist," she spat, changing Hinata into fresh diapers. "She's been waiting in Taka's spot like he's her lost dog."

Hisashi grunted and nodded, mouthful of noodles.

"And she had the nerve to tell me to look after my own son," Reika hissed.

He glanced at Hinata's filthy clothes, but otherwise happy disposition. "Did he wander outside again?"

"That's not the point. She doesn't *belong* here. That girl hasn't earned the right to judge anyone."

"I know, but—"

"I'm the beating fucking heart of Kamagasaki, Ota."

"I get it, I get it. I'll see what she's about, okay?" He hesitated. "Anyone else come around?"

"You mean, the police?"

"No, like..." He weighed how much to venture. "Nice cars driving slow, tinted mirrors."

She narrowed her eyes. "What aren't you saying?"

"Nothing." He tapped on the insulated cargo box with his elbow. "Need me to bring these in?"

She shook her head and finished buttoning up Hinata's grey onesie. "I'll put the *ojiisans* to work. They like to feel useful. You don't need the scooter right away, do you?"

"Not until morning, no. It's trash, but someone will buy it."

"Alright." She sighed deeply. "We're even from the sausages then."

"A bit more than even?"

"Nope," she said flat and hard.

Reika slung Hinata over her shoulder and, walking past the burning trash and spent lives, disappeared into The Waterfall.

After eating the last of his udon, Hisashi threw the tarp back over the cargo scooter and entrusted one of the old men to return the empty bowl and chopsticks. Already half in the bag, they likely wouldn't miss the unopened bottle of shochu Hisashi discreetly pinched.

Out of habit, he scanned the surrounding area for people who shouldn't be there, but found only the same eclectic storefronts with hand-painted signs, the assortment of tarp-and-tent encampments at the edge of Triangle Park, and the accumulation of refuse the city refused to collect. There were regulars, dressed too warm or not warmly enough for the cold weather, forming in clusters around makeshift fires at the edge of the park, or in front of shops that might take pity on them. The only one out of place was the girl sitting on the concrete stoop that Taka's mother had died on so many years ago.

Hisashi opened the bottle of souchu, and walked calmly towards her. The girl's model of UkiyoAR glasses was top-of-the-line, and her over-ear headphones were boutique. He could find buyers for both in minutes, and would've already been lining up bids if the girl hadn't somehow wrapped her kid-fingers around Taka.

She tensed up at his approach, eyes down, over-selling the ruse of not noticing him. The toes of her designer boots touched at a sharp angle, her slouch deepening as he closed in. She turned her face away, eyes squeezed shut, body trembling. Hisashi got within half a meter, crouched down directly in front of her, and took a drink.

"Oi, tourist."

She flinched even before Hisashi poked the shoulder of her thin pleather jacket.

Forcing himself to look past her expensive gear and deliberately dressed-down clothes, he couldn't detect any telltale signs of abuse. Not too skinny, and with no traces of visible addiction, either. Her short hair was well-maintained and fashionable enough for him to have seen dozens of women in nicer neighbourhoods wearing the style. Definitely preteen.

"What are you doing here, kid?"

"Nothing. Sitting. I'm just sitting," she whispered, rapid and tense. Her knees pressed together, somehow maintaining the awkward angle of her feet.

"It's rude not to look at someone when they're talking."

She obediently complied. Seeing his reflection in her translucent UkiyoARs lenses—face and neck tattooed, visible scars, and shaved head—he grasped her wide-eyed fear. She was just a kid. A rich and stupid one, but still only a child. He stood up, took a step back, and gestured around with the bottle.

"You don't belong here. It's not safe. You're not safe."

She nodded mechanically, expression muted.

"Why don't you go do whatever it is you people do, and leave Taka alone?"

She started to say something, bit her lip, and simply shook her head.

"He's not your plaything, or your feel-good pity cause."

"It's not like that," she said, barely audible.

"We look after our own here. He doesn't need your charity."

"I said, it's not like that."

Hisashi smiled at the sudden conviction in the little girl's voice. "What is it, then?"

"You wouldn't understand."

He laughed, genuinely amused at the preteen hubris. "I've known Taka for twice as long as you've been alive, kid." He snapped his fingers and gestured to his eyes as she looked away.

"Hey, up here when I'm talking."

"Just please. I'm not hurting anyone." Her nails dug into her thighs. "I won't be any trouble."

He sucked his teeth. "We're not content for your social streams. Our lives aren't meant to make you feel better about your shitty little problems."

She shook her head, frowning with both eyes and mouth. The externalized emotion undercut his indignation, nagging at his conscience.

"You should be at your private school, out shopping for new clothes, or at some fancy lessons. Anywhere but here." He shook his head, sighing long and deep. "Kamagasaki is where the discards go, kid. It's a place you're born into or find yourself in when everything in your already fucked world breaks. There's nothing here for you."

"Yet, here I am," she whispered.

Hisashi resented the swell of involuntary empathy and tried unsuccessfully to drown it in souchu. He'd never understood women, and certainly couldn't fathom a tween girl twenty years his junior, but something in her response struck him as more than preteen angst. Although running near the limit of his credit, Hisashi executed a paid wetware lookup, pattern-matching on her face. The search returned a shocking number of her DarkNet personas and explicit content. Auto-inbounding, memory-preview bundles unpacked and imprinted on his flesh memory. Disgusted, he immediately scrubbed his scratch memory, not wanting any trace of it in his digital record. He was probably just added to a police list from his search query alone.

Looking away, Hisashi swallowed, took a few breaths, and tried to clear his tightening throat. He drained the rest of the alcohol and threw the bottle over the makeshift encampment at the edge of Triangle Park, angrily trying to will the sickening memory of explicit content out of existence. The bottle shattered in the distance.

Unable to bring himself to look her in the eyes, Hisashi forced his gaze beyond her. "You're on a day pass, understand? But if you ever try to spend the night, I'll drag you out by those fancy boots and throw you to whatever it is you're running from."

"Thank you."

"What's your name, kid?"

"Mayu," she said meekly. "Just Mayu."

"Okay, just Mayu. Tell Taka I'm looking for him."