

## Some Nights

“Shit,” Masa says. “My ass is fried.”

A metallic clamor fills the structure as the Mekazumi come to life. The binding rope feels as heavy over Masa’s feet as the night falling outside. To him, it’s as if the knots have become bolts strapping him to the concrete floor. His heart stopped beating when the first sounds echoed through the long corridors. Metal rings as the Mekazumi’s feet hit the floor down the hall. The door is just behind Masa, right next to his right shoulder, but he can’t move.

It’s all over.

The whole structure shakes as the Mekazumi mobilize. In just-- Masa thinks, trying to recall his teachers’ statistics and equations-- five or seven seconds, he’ll be nothing more than a greasy black mark against the wall. It probably won’t hurt, he thinks. And then all he’ll be is an example of where not to bind and what not to do when caught after dark. They’ll shake their heads and say that the kid was never meant to be a Ghost Runner, anyway, he was too impulsive and hot-headed. Poor, dead, *stupid* Masa. He even doubts that Natsu would miss him.

*Natsu.*

The name gets his heart pumping blood again and loosens the chains over his feet. Just as he starts to see long noses and flashing red eyes, Masa flees. The cold night air hits his face sooner than he thought it would. The cracked concrete of the pavement comes up hard under his deteriorating shoes. They saw him, he knows that much. He doesn’t know if they were able to identify him, but at the very least Master Kano will want him to change his hair, change his glasses, get Masa to look *different*.

If he lives long enough to see Master Kano again, that is.

Masa swallows his fear and keeps running, taking as many shady sidestreets and archaic alleyways as he can. The metal and concrete storm of Mekazumi in pursuit keep his feet moving and his brain conjuring hidden ways around the city. The only thing keeping his heart pumping, however, is the thought of seeing his fellow apprentice once more. The location of Master Kano’s house (and, most importantly, Natsu) is a dead lock in his mind, a flashing red beacon of a destination. He doesn’t dare look back to see how many Mekazumi are chasing him. It can’t be the whole town’s worth, but it has to be at least a few from the sounds of the footsteps.

Masa’s hands are sweaty and gritty, and one is clamped around his energy canister like a lifeline. That had been his most successful Run yet, with nearly half his rope taken up by straying ghosts.

The canister buzzes with spirit power and threatens to fall from Masa’s grip. There’s no way he’s losing that one, little container-- if the Mekazumi take it, if they figure out how the Ghost Runners work and how the Resistance has been running itself for the past fifty years...

...then all is truly lost, and it would be all some apprentice Ghost Runner’s fault for making one little mistake too close to sundown. God damn.

Masa runs as fast as his feet will move, feeling all the while like he’s wearing holes into the thin rubbery soles of his shoes. He half-hopes that his heroism in the face of adversity would get him a pair of new shoes. The ones he's wearing are far too small, anyway, and they're probably going to be entirely nonexistent when he's through with this running. But he knows that all he'll get is a firm talking-to from Master Kano, a haircut, and new glasses. No new shoes for the kid who almost lost the war for everyone by being entirely stupid.

Masa tries to find the twistiest way back to Kano's house, trying desperately to lose the Mekazumi that are gaining on him every second. Maybe he'll run into a Mage or Nightfighter on the street? Unlikely, but Masa can't help but hope. Hope is all that exists in this sort of a situation. He steels himself and ignores the burning pain in his legs and lungs. Even if hope can't come through, then Masa determines that he must have the effort to make it through this.

He finally glances over his shoulder once again and sees two Mekazumi that threaten him with their leering red eyes. They can tell from his outfit that he’s a Ghost Runner, that he’s one of the Resistance, and that his entire existence is dedicated to bringing them down. It’s fair, though, because at the moment those Mekazumi are devoting their lives to destroying Masa. The thick of the city washes over them with its choking smell of smoke, fuel, and hot food. Masa knows that he’s closing in on Master Kano’s house, but he also knows that he cannot lead the Mekazumi to Master Kano’s house. That would also be leading them to Natsu, and to send Natsu to the gallows is an unthinkable sin.

Cautious civilians are scattered amongst the sidewalks, watching the chase half in fear. Food vendors hastily look back at their wares and their customers pay all attention to their food. The ghosts, gaining visibility every second the night settles deeper, are as oblivious to the lives of humans as ever. Masa mentally kicks himself for his stupidity. Nobody cares about some idiot who got himself targeted by the Mekazumi. That's where the idea of a real idiot comes from. Masa swallows and runs, feeling like he's making too much noise. People swing out of his way, watching the Mekazumi with fearful eyes and hearts. He's all alone in this. Masa tries his hardest

to catch eyes, but anyone with half a brain looks down as soon as they hear the Mekazumi. Their wet rat and rusting metal smell mingles with the food and fuel, making Masa want to gag on the hideous odor. If there's any good way to die, he decides, it certainly isn't surrounded by the scent of Mekazumi shit. He swallows again-- this time to tamp down bile-- and keeps running.

The street and streets of people silence themselves as Masa and the Mekazumi run. It's almost cat-and-mouse, except the cat is really a giant rat and the mouse is a teenager. Masa is so tired that he wants to die. He can almost taste the blood and metal of his execution on his tongue.

They have to know his family name by now-- they must be connecting him to the Resistance. It's really all over, he realizes as he almost trips over his feet. Death to Masa.

There is a bang, sudden silence, and something wet on Masa's back. A Mekazumi growls.

Something heavy and metallic hits the ground with an inhuman shriek. Masa keeps running.

There's another bang, more Mekazumi growling, and a shouting voice. "Kid, stop, I need the ammo!" Masa stops and turns around. The energy canister, slick and gritty with sweat, is still grasped in his hand.

The two Mekazumi who had been following Masa lay twitching on the ground. Red blood mixes with machinery and sparks, leaving black marks on the sidewalk. A tall, dark-haired man stands over their bodies. He points a silver gun, glittering like Masa's canister, at the bodies. "Kid, the ammo," he insists. Though the man can't be any older than 25, Masa gets a sense of authority from him.

Trembling, Masa walks toward the man, holding the energy canister out in front of him. The man grabs the canister and flicks a switch on his gun, opening a small hole on its top. "Hafta do," the man says. He pries one end of Masa's canister open and jams it over the hole on his gun. Some silvery spirit energy leaks out and toward the sky. "Just to finish them off."

The man seals his gun and tosses the canister back to Masa. He's still trembling a bit, but his stubbornness rises. Masa steps toward the man. "Listen, I know you're a fighter--" he starts.

Bang. Bang.

The Mekazumi stop twitching.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a fighter and I just wasted your unlogged energy," the man replies casually. He slides the silver gun into its synthetic leather holster and turns to look at Masa. "I'm Master Goro, by the way, Rank 5 Nightfighter."

"Masa, sir." Ingrained respect for authority, especially Resistance authority, overtakes Masa's

anger. "Training Ghost Runner."

Goro laughs. "You think you'll ever be a real Ghost Runner, going around and pissing off Mekazumi like that?" He puts a hand on his stomach and laughs harder. "Good joke, kid."

Masa fumes. "It was an accident!" he shouts. "I almost had half a full measure of spirit energy in that canister and you wasted it!"

"Yeah, but I sure as hell got those Mekazumi off your tail."

Masa falls silent. Half-thought struggles come out of his mouth, but he never follows up on them. This only makes Goro laugh harder, which in turn only angers Masa more.

"Who's your Master, kid?" Goro asks as soon as he can breathe through the laughter.

"I think that I can get back myself."

Goro chuckles, almost throwing himself back into the laughing fit. "Good luck not alerting yourself to stationed Mekazumi, kid." The appellation makes Masa want to strangle the fighting master. "I'll escort you. Nightfighter's honor. Gotta protect the weak at all times."

Masa can practically feel the steam blowing from his ears. He says yes anyway, albeit grudgingly. "Master Kano," he answers, "the fifth house into the Resistance complex."

Goro nods and starts walking down the street, nonchalantly passing the corpses of the Mekazumi he had slain. After some hesitation, Masa follows him. In silence, they make their way to the complex.

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"I am such an idiot," Masa complains through the hair that now hangs in front of his face. It's his third day into a week of disciplinary arrest. While Natsu gets to go out and collect canisters upon canisters of spirit energy with Master Kano, Masa is stuck at the house, cleaning.

The moon shines weakly through heavy clouds. "Don't worry," Natsu answers, as cheerful as ever. "It looks like rain tomorrow. No-one can go out in that sort of weather." Concrete Town, as it is lovingly nicknamed by its inhabitants, is too small a town to have any proper rain equipment. To go out in even a drizzle is to get burns beyond repair, with a journey of thousands of measures to get help.

"I can't even see through this," Masa mutters. "Mekazumi not being able to see me... I couldn't even see them!" Masa casts a glare at the reflective window again. "I look horrible."

Natsu smiles at him and gently pushes some of the thick, black hair that hangs in front of Masa's glasses away. "I think you look really nice with this hair," he says.

“Some Nights” by James Rich

Masa says nothing and stares more intently out the window, trying to hide his blush. "Thanks," he says, after a long silence, "but don't just say that to make it better."

Natsu's smile brightens. "I really think you look great," he says, "and you're welcome."