

OKAMI

A matter of honour.

BY GRACE TANG

“**O**kaasan, look!” The boy tugged on his mother’s arm, pointing at the balding man splayed across the pavement. “That man is asleep on the street!”

The stench of alcohol wafted up from the unconscious man’s body. While the boy’s mother politely chose to ignore the man’s transgression, Yuka openly stared. She gingerly picked her way over him and into the club from which he had emerged.

She scanned the tables for her client as her eyes adjusted to the dark. Hiro was sitting in a private booth, a bottle of whisky in the centre of the table.

“Hi.” She slid into the booth to sit facing him.

“I already told your boss, I’m not interested in hostesses tonight.”

“I’m Yuka.”

He looked up from his glass, one eyebrow raised.

“You don’t look the part.”

“And that’s precisely why I’m so good at what I do.”

The left corner of his mouth raised slightly in a half smile. Given what her boss had told her of her client’s reputation, Yuka considered this a minor victory. He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a phone, sliding it across the table.

“In the photo album you will find geo-tagged, time-stamped pictures of your target. I trust that is all you need.”

She pocketed the phone and rose from the booth. “Consider it done.”

The days were short this time of year, meaning the drinking started early, fuelled by the Western holiday season. Yuka tried to block out the drunken chorus of businessmen in the karaoke bar next door as she studied her target, looking for all the world like a teenage girl texting her friends.

Her target appeared young, probably in his mid-twenties, somewhat good-looking. For most people, the deductions would stop there, but Yuka picked up on things most people would miss, like the characteristic bump of a concealed sidearm.

The geo-tags were erratic, but mostly centred in downtown Tokyo, disturbingly near areas where certain high-ranking Yakuza members had recently been found dead. Judging from the time stamps on the photos, he was active mostly at night.

She was liking this job less and less.

She flipped through the rest of the pictures quickly, until one image made her do a double take.

She pressed the back button and zoomed in on her target’s neck. She squinted long and hard until she had convinced herself without a shadow of a doubt that her eyes were not playing tricks on her.

“Son of a b—”

She was going to need more than a handgun for this job.

“Hiro,” Yuka struggled to control herself as she growled into the phone he had given her. “I want the fee doubled.”

“We had a deal.”

“When we struck that deal, I thought I was dealing with a *human*.”

“He is technically still *part human*.”

“*Technically*, he can smell my goddamn gun from two miles away!”

“So, get a gun that can shoot farther than two miles. I’m sure your boss can spare you one.”

Yuka was sweating bullets. She could handle any human, but this was the first time she had had to take down an *Okami*.

She methodically set up the sniper on the ledge of the roof. It was half an hour to the new year, and the cheerful sounds of party-goers echoed from the apartments and streets below her. According to her boss’s intel, her target would be exiting the opposite building about now, after completing his own hit.

Minutes passed like hours. Yuka took her eyes off the sight for a second to glance at her wristwatch. Where was he?

“Looking for me, I presume.”

Yuka jumped, drawing her handgun from her waist at the same time as she spun round to face him.

He was more impressive in the flesh, his movements graceful, his voice commanding.

But most surprising of all was his scent — mostly canine, a hint of human, powerful and yet profoundly ... sad.



“You’re not one of my hits. I won’t harm you.”

He seemed almost nonchalant about the fact that she was pointing her handgun at him, finger on the trigger.

Yuka lowered her weapon slightly.

“Is this a trick?”

“I wish.” He laughed, unsmiling. “Perhaps you are too young, or your masters treat you well. But I am tired of being used.”

Her grip on her weapon tightened. “I have no masters. The people I work for take a cut of my fee, but what I earn is my own.”

“Boss, master, what’s the difference? At the end of the day, we are all their dogs. Isn’t that why we wear these collars?”

For the first time tonight, Yuka was aware of the cool metal of the pendant she wore around her neck, one

that identified people of her species, specifically engineered for her profession.

“As I was saying, I am tired. You may complete your job.”

She was shaking now, blinking furiously.

“*Sumimasen, Oniisan*. I don’t want to, but ... I have my obligations ...”

“Yes, the loyalty of the wolf is why it was chosen to construct us. The only honourable way out of service to our masters is death.”

He bowed. “*Sayonara*.”

He disappeared down the stairwell. Wiping her eyes, Yuka readjusted her sniper, gazing through the night-vision-enabled sight.

The clock struck midnight, and fireworks lit up the sky, accompanied by thunderous booms and the stench of gunpowder.

“*Okaasan!* Look!” The boy tugged at his mother’s sleeve and pointed. She smiled and held him tighter in her arms, their faces lit up by the showers of shimmering sparks.

No one paid any attention to the young, well-dressed man, lying prone in the middle of the pavement, as they picked their feet carefully around him. ■

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