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COPING AND HUMAN CONNECTION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN ANTHROPOLOGIST
FROM MARS

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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ABSTRACT

The point of my project has been to examine—from my own perspective as an autistic individual, as well as with the context of preexisting literature on the subject—how human beings cope with the world around us, with ourselves, and with each other. In particular, my focus has been the human urge to cope with reality by attempting to forge connections with others, because—as social creatures—this instinct is core to how we go about living and to how we organize ourselves into civilizations. For the sake of demonstrating my observations about people and our social coping mechanisms as succinctly and clearly as possible, I have decided to go about my endeavor by writing a series of interconnected flash fiction shorts depicting crystalized moments in the lives of all sorts of people dealing with all sorts of situations, and by including commentary on each short. Aspects of our social coping mechanisms that I have chosen to examine and depict include but are not limited to the following: the human ability to normalize or “other” concepts arbitrarily based on their presence within our own lives, the consequences of how young children’s concerns are often dismissed by adults, and how people mold (or fail to mold) their behavior to succeed in preexisting social structures.

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INTRODUCTION or BEGINNING OF CAPSTONE

Introduction

When I first read the title of Oliver Sacks's *An Anthropologist on Mars*, it gave me pause just on the basis of how fundamentally it resonated with me. This was of very little surprise to my brother, who pointed out that I had independently and repeatedly throughout our lifelong acquaintanceship described myself variously as: an alien, a friendly monster, and an observational drone. Today, I describe myself as fantastically autistic.

And, from my autistic perspective, the ways other human entities deal with the world--that is to say, how members of the human species cope--are entirely bizarre to me. None of it comes naturally to me, not lying and not social cues and not any variety of social subterfuge. All of it, I had to learn manually, had to *observe* and *study* and *quantify*. Before I ever knew what an anthropologist was, I was operating like one, with the caveat that everyone else already seemed to know all these things I had to teach myself through trial and error.

From these experiences, with people generally and with other scholars' formalized findings, I put together an expansive set of my own conclusions based on what I had found. Of particular interest, I was always fixated on communication and the ability of people to connect. To live our lives. To *cope*. That is why, for our purposes, we will be examining the ability of people to attempt to cope with our circumstances, ourselves, and each other, with a particular focus on the connections between people. Also of interest, we will examine the human ability to normalize or other the strangest phenomena just on the basis of their presence in our lives, because our personal norms inform a lot of how we choose to act. This ability of ours is important here because, fundamentally, social cues are norms in and of themselves--norms that I, as an autistic person with nary a socially intuitive bone in my body, had to reverse engineer through trial, error, observation, and study.

This has made me, at many points in my life, a very difficult person to form relationships with. Without an innate understanding of the rules, I couldn't play the game the way that others expected me to, even as I was in the process of working out what I was supposed to do. I operated, and in many ways will always operate, on a different set of guidelines; guidelines that have not always been compatible with the general consensus of humans. That is another reason why Sacks's writing has been of interest to me, because in his accounts, Sacks testifies to his own ability to form attachments to people who can be easily considered difficult to develop relationships with. Where there is a will, there is a way, and both my actions and Sacks's are testament to the innate drive we all have to connect: Sacks, who forged genuine feeling for people he was disincentivized by pure logic to care for, and me, who threw myself against the reality of rejection again and again in the rigorous pursuit of interpersonal connection. Interpersonal connection is how we cope with the world around us, how we make it bearable. Observation and study of the other humans around us, consciously deliberate or otherwise, is how we make that connection possible. Within the realm of the consciously deliberate, much study has admittedly been done of my fellow autistic people—by Sacks himself, famously by Bruno Bettelheim whose work in particular I had sought out in the construction of this project, and by many others. The gimmick here, then, of course, is that it is the autistic person's turn to flip the microscope around and study everyone else. (And other autistic people as well, to be fair. I like to consider myself an equal-opportunity mad scientist.)

In that sense, and in the sense of my fascination with the human drive to cope with our circumstances through finding meaning in connection, it would not be remiss to consider me an anthropologist *from* Mars. I hope my fieldwork is of at least some interest to the reader.

Nina Leilani and Usagi Akiyama-Park, Kaua'i, 2025

“I want to be a hitman,” says the little girl, six years of age and stood before the rest of her class for show-and-tell. After a moment, she amends: “The world’s greatest hitman.”

Silence.

Silence, and then:

“That’s... That’s very unique, Usagi!” It’s Nina, the girl’s teacher, who recovers first--before the other children can get it in their heads to ask what a *hitman* is. Usagi, however, remains unmoved, staring blankly back at Nina. Her eyes have an inky, lifeless quality to them; inherited from her mother, as Nina had had the misfortune of finding out at the last parent-teacher conference.

Finally, wordlessly, Usagi appears to lose interest and makes her way over to sit with the other children. Nina tries not to let her shoulders sag, but she is relieved.

“Next, it’s Rory’s turn,” she announces, trying to smile for them. If they notice her discomfort, they, in the way of ankle biters everywhere, haven’t yet learned to care for its presence. Rory stumbles to his feet and the front of the class for his presentation, and Nina’s day goes on as usual.

Surely, by tomorrow, Usagi will have moved on from her latest fixation. *Hitman*. Where on Earth had she even heard that word in use?

Unfortunately for Nina, a perfectly sensible young woman with a daycare worker’s wages’ worth of fucks to give and no access to a means of future sight, the more pertinent question was never where Usagi had *heard* the word hitman. Rather, it was where the girl would go on to *use* it.

COMMENTARY

I wanted to start with the most dismissed group of all, when it comes to our interpersonal dialogues--that being, of course, children. Here, we see Usagi expressing a sentiment that's bizarre in the way children often are; her teacher, unsettled by her inability to understand where Usagi got it from or why she feels the need to share it, doesn't engage with her and moves right along, brushing her off. The things kids say are often treated as of inherently less value than whatever it is adults are on about, as inherently less insightful or interesting, which I think is indicative in a uniquely universal way of the human urge to dismiss things that are different from our internal notions of what is "important." Less broadly, this exchange relates to Harry L. Gracey's *Learning the Student Role*, in which he examines the process by which kindergarteners are systematically coached into the rhythm, routine, and common sense of civilized life. That is exactly what Nina, ineffectually, is attempting with Usagi.

Also of note, I wanted to start off these snapshots with something bizarre, but that most of us are likely to have experienced in some way. Children saying nonsensical, unsettling things is par for the course when dealing with children, which most of us have had to at one point or another. It is not something that I would expect to strike the average human being, regardless of background, as odd--and, yet, the specifics of Usagi's scenario still see some deviation from the "norm" that are significant.

While the inclination of boys, who are socialized to accept and display violence more easily than girls, to that very violence is often dismissed as boys *being* boys, Usagi is a girl. Usagi wants to be a hitman, even if she as a small child does not (seem to) grasp the implications of such. Furthermore, I deliberately chose to describe her as unsettling, emphasizing her unusual eyes. Logically, the scene playing out in this snapshot is perfectly ordinary, but something is still implied to be off about the little girl with dead eyes who wants to be a hitman.

The trick is, Usagi *is* a perfectly normal child, and her unsettling babble *is not* without value. It is simply that normality is in the eye of the beholder, and the particular value of Usagi's babble is in the implication of how very much of a mess she will be making of the world around her as an attempt to live in--to cope with--it.

Emma Creaks and Madoka Akiyama-Park, Kaua'i, 2026

Emma has always been of the stalwart opinion that if you're not going to put skulls on whatever you're making, you should at the very least put dragons or wizards or something on it.

Otherwise, what's the point? This might make her somewhat shallow, but whatever else can be said of her, Emma certainly knows what she likes.

Which is to say, she often finds herself at the kitchen counter, burdening her notebook with skulls, dragons, wizards, and anything else that strikes her fancy. Page after page, she fits willowy, wide-eyed designs of specters and humans of bizarre enough luck to encounter them around pop-up stickers in glossy shades of pink, black, and silver. It's in this very state that she hears the kitchen door click open, and footsteps follow it. Emma looks up.

"Oh," she says. The boy at the doorway, only two years her junior, salutes her and dives straight for the cupboards where they keep the snacks. "I didn't know Allen had you over."

She sees Madoka shrug--or at least, she thinks he shrugged. It's hard to tell, from behind the low cabinet's open door. After a moment, a pair of inky, lifeless eyes peek out at her from over the top. "You're out of Stampers."

Emma makes a face of comical disgust. "David's the only one who eats that crap."

"I eat that crap."

Move and countermove. Emma laughs at him. "You don't live here."

Madoka shrugs again. She can tell this time, because his eyes bob up and down, moving out of and back into sight. He turns away, disappearing once more into the depths of the cupboard, and she hears shuffling from within as he says, “Are you working on your story again?”

Emma glances at her notebook briefly, open to display the skull logo she’d been tinkering with. The skull is flanked by the sketch of a cartoony, historically inaccurate Victorian maid with brown hair and big, fearful eyes. (And lots of stickers, obviously. She’s not an animal.) “I guess. It’s fun.”

She receives a non-committal hum in response. In the other room, Allen must have put that ghost-hunting show they like on, because she can hear the host’s voice drift in through the open door. Something about mysterious sightings of hooded figures in San Francisco.

It’s the kind of crap Emma loves, like skulls and dragons and wizards, but even she knows there’s such a thing as too much. The thought crosses her mind as her line of sight meanders back towards the open cabinet door.

She’ll be old enough to drive in two years. She’s certainly old enough to know that Madoka is a girl’s name.

Instead of voicing this, because she’s certainly known Madoka long enough to know he’s heard it all before, she asks: “Is your sister done with my copy of Gunslinger yet?”

She doesn’t see him snort, but she hears it. “No, she’s not.”

“She’s still on about...?”

“The hitman thing.” Finally, Madoka stands, now armed with a pack of Tongue Twisters and fond exasperation. “She’s still on about the hitman thing.”

Emma lets her head drop onto her notebook and the countertop, defeated. Her haystack of hair falls uncomfortably in her face. “I just want my movie back.”

Madoka doesn't snort again, but she gets the feeling he's laughing at her anyways. She watches him turn to leave, still from her new perch.

"Mom said you and Allen need to keep the door open if you go up to his room," she tells his retreating back.

He waves acknowledgement without pausing to face her. The kitchen door clicks shut behind him.

COMMENTARY

This one is straightforward in a more mundane sort of way. Any one of us who has siblings has likely been stuck in a situation where we have to interact with a sibling's friend, someone who belongs to our sibling's world but not in ours. It's awkward, because this is someone we know *of*, but not someone we *know*. I wanted this snapshot to be more grounded within the world, with the implications of people and situations that these characters are familiar with but that the reader isn't, to emphasize that feeling of knowing that--logically--there's more to our conversational partner than we're actively aware of. We as humans are very quick to delegate the role of minor character to people in our lives who do not feature in them very often, so friends of siblings occupy a very useful liminal space. A sibling is likely a major character in one's life, and a sibling's friends are likely major characters in the sibling's life. Even if we avoid acknowledging the implicit individuality of these major characters--protagonists, really, in their own rights--ordinarily, trying to find enough common ground to hold a conversation will at least prompt us into feeling some measure of it in the awkwardness that ensues.

In the same vein, Usagi, a principle character from the first snapshot, is merely alluded to as her brother's sister here. Everyone is defined by their relation to someone else in one context or another, and it is very easy to reduce people we do not know well to just that: so-and-so's brother

or sister or friend or workmate. We are all still more than that, but there are just so many people living such complicated lives, we couldn't possibly memorize them all in terms of their highly specific circumstances. Still, I wanted to use the disconnect between our impression of Usagi versus her relevance to Emma as a small reminder of a greater theme of this work: everyone has more going on under the hood than we see, and everyone has an entire life to cope with that we may or may not be aware of.

And, more simply, this snapshot and the previous one are meant to set up the style I'll be using going forward. They provide each other with context, and show off some of the stylistic shorthands I will be using to signal a relatedness between characters and concepts, like the particular way I chose to describe Usagi and Madoka's eyes.

Nicole Siqueyu and Henry Woodhouse, San Francisco, 2026

The first thing that strikes Nicole, walking up to the Kesslers' house, is that Henry's sat out brooding on the front steps again. The second thing that strikes her is that his face is red.

With some caution and twice the curiosity, she picks her way over to him, much like one might go about approaching a wild but ultimately harmless animal. He surely hears her, but doesn't look up; dark eyes fixed on the asphalt, head propped up in a hand, expression constipated like only a teenage boy can manage. Nicole considers depositing herself next to him, but stops some steps away.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" she prompts, when it becomes clear he won't acknowledge her presence. Henry's mouth only screws into a thinner, tighter, more distressed line.

Finally, he says: "Nothing happened."

Bullshit, Nicole thinks. “Bullshit,” she says, after a moment’s consideration.

Henry glares up at her through mud-colored bangs, and his face really is red, all splotchy and terrible, reaching all the way up to his ears. She doesn’t think he’s been crying and she doesn’t even think he’s angry. Not really.

“Is it a girl?” she hazards. He sputters.

“No!”

“Is it a *boy*?”

“It’s not a boy!”

Nicole raises one clearly skeptical eyebrow and crosses her arms. Henry opens and closes his mouth like a fish a few times, but he seems to give up, gritting his teeth. He breaks eye contact first (haha, sucker) and motions for her to sit down next to him, so she does.

“It’s kind of a girl,” Henry concedes, finally, still not looking at her. It’s been a while since the cracked tapestry of the asphalt’s fascinated him so thoroughly. “It’s also kind of a boy. I don’t want to talk about it.” He huffs. “They’re both assholes. And it’s not like that.”

Despite herself, Nicole does feel the treacherous tug of genuine worry stirring in her gut.

Frowning, she asks, “It’s not... you know. Anything to do with Mr. Kessler, right?”

Henry shakes his head. He still won’t look at her, but his gaze drifts ahead of him, instead of outright turned in the opposite direction of her. Baby steps. “No. He doesn’t know.”

Nicole doesn’t quite feel like she’s been dunked in cold water, but certainly like she’s been lightly splashed with it. *He doesn’t know*. Meaning: *I don’t want him to know*. Or, worse: *He’d be angry if he knew*.

Nicole swallows. In this case, Henry doesn’t want her to know either, apparently. She finds herself following his lead, line of sight wandering aimlessly to take in the empty road.

“You’re not involved in anything bad.” It’s not a question. She’s pleading with him and she knows it. But--she’s known him for a while, now. She has a right to at least this much.

From the periphery, she can see Henry side-eyeing her. “I don’t think so.”

She doesn’t know what to say to that, so she says nothing. They sit in silence for a while, the sky growing gently grey and clouded above them.

Eventually, finally, he asks her, “Did you hear about the hooded figures at Golden Gate Park?”

It feels like an olive branch, but Nicole doesn’t know how, or what over. She shrugs and accepts it. “My dad thinks it’s dumb. My mom thinks it’s a cult. Why? You wanna go ghost-hunting?”

Henry will tell her about it when he’s ready, or he won’t tell her at all. Whatever it is, it’s his business. It’s not the end of the world.

COMMENTARY

A less universal experience, this time, but still a familiar one. Much of the teenage experience revolves around tight-knit friendships among teens, especially in alliance against some kind of authority that is perceived as a threat to both, even if not all teens come from homes that make them feel unsafe. Bonding with other people, whether or not we’re able to properly communicate with them, is a primary way in which we seek to cope with and process the world around us, especially in the face of helplessness.

Still, here, Henry isn’t the one reaching out to Nicole. He’s prickly, and more or less takes her care for granted in this snapshot. That kind of mistrust is also normal, particularly in people who are hurting. Whether we cling or resolutely refuse to grab hold in the first place, whether we can’t properly decide, these are both common methods by which people react to mistreatment by others. Still, it’s important that Henry is the character to showcase the build-up of an emotional shell and that Nicole is the character to showcase care for others in the face of little to no

reciprocity, because this is precisely how boys and girls are respectively socialized. I wanted to quietly introduce a little more complexity to the world of these snapshots through this conversation between Henry and Nicole: mistreatment within the home, and gendered mistreatment. These barriers to communication, which themselves are born from people attempting to cope with their worlds in different ways, will feature as a throughline as we go on. Henry's mistreatment of Nicole here is gendered not because of what it is he is literally doing-- that is, brushing off a friend of his, in a manner that is reasonable when taken alone but suggests a larger pattern of dismissal in the way he shuts her down. Henry is stuck in his own head, self-obsessed in the particular way that's almost unique to teenage boys, which will become explicit text as we go. This makes him a mundanely inconsiderate friend to Nicole, whose feelings he does not ask after or consider, and whose circumstances he does not think to take into account. Nicole, for her part, showcases here both the admirable ability to put her feelings aside for the sake of a friend in need, but also a worrying willingness to compromise her mental health for an uncooperative party. Neither of them is quite right in their approach here, one of them too stuck in his own head and the other too stuck on other people, but they're still kids and they still care about each other, have still known each other well. Neither of them is quite right, but that's okay, so long as they learn before anyone gets properly hurt.

But people don't always learn, or acknowledge or even identify what it is they're doing to themselves or one another. Nicole and Henry, first and foremost, need to start seeing each other as "Nicole" and "Henry," rather than as "my friend, Nicole" and "my friend, Henry." It's in this same way that Emma, earlier, was tripped up by thinking of Madoka as "Allen's friend." We're people, not symbols.

As discussed in Sir Terry Pratchett's *I Shall Wear Midnight*, "Evil starts when you begin to treat people as things." In this case, "things" is a stand-in for anything from reductive mental shorthands to a passive receptor for behaviors we have internalized and regurgitate without thinking. Treating or thinking of people as things--or, alternatively, as symbols--is one way by which we simplify the human experience to better understand and relate to others, to better cope with our shared reality. However, this line of thinking is the stairway to the slippery slope of no longer thinking of people as people, because it makes it easier to rationalize unkind behavior.

Milgo Wizen and Henry Woodhouse, San Francisco, 2028

In hindsight, Milgo thinks, tucked into an alleyway some streets down from the burning wreckage yet still accosted by the shrill screech of police sirens--in hindsight, following her introduction to Henry some months back, she really should have seen the arson coming. It's not that the boy, now peering around the alley's mouth, is particularly inclined to destruction. Even packed between two buildings with him alone as company, he doesn't strike her as the type. His eyes are sunken, and his hair a mud-colored mop, but the careful way he moves implies a mindfulness of others that Milgo is perceptive enough to infer and sensible enough to value. She's older than him, old enough this year to legally drink in this country, so she reckons she ought to take the lead. She tugs at the wrist of his coat--a dark, shaggy duster almost certainly acquired from the lunatic of a girl who'd introduced the pair of them in the first place. When he turns to look at her, she glances back at the other end of the alley, where they entered it. He catches her drift, pauses for a moment, and nods. They retrace their steps and continue on down the street. It's quieter on this end. Act natural.

“You...” Milgo starts to ask, and hates that she needs to at all. She dislikes big cities like these, is unused to them. “You don’t have a place to stay tonight, do you?”

Henry regards her with a sideways sort of slant to his expression. She suspects he’s suffering an adrenaline crash, with the way his hands are shaking just slightly. “I’ll ask Nicole. Her dad runs a dojo, so they have room.”

“Ah.” The girl with an interest in law enforcement. Responsible, from what Milgo’s heard. A go-getter. Still, though, she can’t help but worry. “Are you sure? You could come back with me. I only spoke with Nathan briefly, with him and Emma on the way out, but it sounded like Zarchariah Kessler had--”

Henry does something halfway between a groan and a huff. It’s a very teenaged kind of sound to make, Milgo notes, and it’s good that he can still be that way even in these circumstances.

“Legally, I don’t need a guardian anymore. And if I did, I’d just go back to Little Bugs. I’m not going back to your island with you.”

Milgo does feel a pinch of irritation at the dismissal in his tone, but she lets it go--for now--and smiles at him, torn between wry and reassuring. If she handles him with too much care right now, Milgo knows, Henry will shatter out of spite. “No, I didn’t think you would. But the option is there.”

Milgo is her mother’s daughter, after all, and a Wizen besides. Her priorities are particular, and if Henry isn’t yet aware of that, he isn’t half as smart as she’s given him credit for. Then again, he does tend to live in his own head, as boys his age are wont to.

Henry doesn’t disappoint, though, this time, and goes quiet. She can tell by his face that he mulls it over, by the complicated way it screws up. She hasn’t known him very long, but Milgo likes to think she knows people well enough in the general sense.

Gold drifts on the wind, dancing at the edge of her vision from rooftop to rooftop, in the direction of the smoke they've left behind. Wordlessly, Milgo and Henry pick up the pace.

COMMENTARY

This conversation is a reflection of the earlier one between Henry and Nicole, more or less, and makes explicit some of the implications from earlier. I wanted to make the destructive nature of Henry's dismissiveness impossible to miss, and I wanted to show that even a more self-aware kind of person might not know how to diffuse it. Milgo reflects that she should have seen the fallout--literally, the arson--coming, but she still doesn't see a way to confront Henry about his behavior here.

For the sake of clarity, I wanted to communicate my jumping off point with relatively little ambiguity, at least in terms of what Henry's most in-your-face interpersonal hang-up in behavior is. Actively shutting down attempts to help you, a willingness to "shatter out of spite" in the face of genuine care, is a fairly easy entry into the world of poor communication skills because it is ultimately a straightforward, intentional breaking down of com lines. It's in the *why* and the *how* that we get complicated, and in the fact that no one really wants to be entirely isolated.

This snapshot also makes good on the earlier promise of mayhem, all the while presenting the bizarre circumstances the characters find themselves in very matter-of-factly. Our position peripherally to the action is intentional, because I wanted to showcase Henry and Milgo's secondary reactions first, to ease the reader into their circumstances more smoothly and because I think these secondary reactions are important. Rather than their immediate impulse responses, what we're seeing here are Henry and Milgo internalizing what they'd just experienced--arson and, by implication, some flavor of trauma--and reorienting themselves around their priorities. Milgo, the calmer of the two, compartmentalizes and takes it all in stride by falling back onto

what she knows and how she's been taught to behave by her mother. Henry, meanwhile, is experiencing something new and exciting, and hasn't come down from that high and back into reality as quickly as her (as alluded to by the adrenaline crash Milgo notes). They're reacting to the same situation in very different ways, trying to cope with it in the manners that come naturally to them as a result of who they are and the lives they've led.

Usagi Akiyama-Park and Kalliope Martin, Kauai'i, 2032

By dint of exposure, Usagi is good friends with the school library's clock; not for any great love of reading, but rather, of crime. She's been a regular in detention for roughly as long as teachers have deemed her old enough to receive it as punishment.

Truthfully, she muses, flipping leisurely through a dog-eared copy of John Dicke's *Cosa Nostra*-truthfully, she's pretty sure there's worse felonies than a passion for model guns. Still, if this is where her life of crime begins, she's long come to terms with it. You can always find interesting books in a school library if you look, so she could certainly do worse.

Over the top of *Cosa Nostra*, since roughly a quarter to seven, Usagi had made note of the occasional glances the day's only other detainee had been sliding her way across the table. The other girl isn't from any of Usagi's classes, but is from the same grade. Usagi can't remember ever speaking to her. At twelve past seven, she decides it's good to try new things.

"I'm Usagi," Usagi says, quietly, and flattens her book closed against the table's shiny fiberboard surface, palm on top. She'll remember where she was. "But you knew that already."

The other girl pauses for just a moment, mouth twitching slightly open in surprise, before smoothing back out into a smile. She shuts her copy of--something. Blue cover, with a silvery

blurb and a great big moon taking up the top half of the front. Nothing Usagi recognizes.

“You’re very distinctive.”

It’s not like Usagi has much of a leg to stand on, but the first thing that occurs to her, once they’ve made eye contact, is how unattractive this person’s eyes are. They’re a pale, sickly green, almost liquid, and overly large. Bug-like, even. Usagi feels a dull pang of solidarity.

“I don’t know who you are,” she says, because she doesn’t. She’s self-aware enough to know she’s being terse, and has been told in the past that it is her tendency to be so, but she’s also not concerned enough with pretense to do much about it. To Bug-Eyes’s credit, she doesn’t seem to mind either way.

“I didn’t expect you to,” Bug-Eyes lolls. Something about her voice is too smooth, too measured, too *softened*, and it grates. “I’m Kal. My earth science class is right before yours, with Ms. Jackson.”

Kal. Usagi tries to recall anything she might recognize her by, because earth science class rings no bells, and can only vaguely dredge up a memory of overheard gossip from the year before.

Wasn’t this the girl that got hospitalized?

In any case, whether it’s this girl or some other, unrelated girl, Usagi doesn’t especially care. She nods. “Okay.”

She has half a mind to return to her book, but Kal laughs, muffled daintily behind one hand, and Usagi is surprised enough to leave her attention where it is. Shuffling from behind the low bookcase that stands between them and the front desk indicates some reaction from the librarian, but evidently, he decides it’s not worth it to get up when the noise doesn’t continue. They remain undisturbed.

“Sorry,” Kal tells her, clearly not sorry in the slightest, just barely above a whisper. Something in her liquid, bug-like eyes is--amused, almost, which is unusual. Few people have enjoyed Usagi’s reportedly lifeless stare boring into them, and it’s been levelled at Kal since Usagi first addressed her. “It’s just... It’s your face. You’re so serious. And you’re here because you keep bringing toy guns to school.”

Usagi is less expressive than her brother, even less than their boy-cousin, but more than their girl-cousin. She frowns, fractionally. “Yes.”

She doesn’t mean it as a discouragement, and Kal doesn’t seem to take it as one. Kal goes on, unbroken in her stride. “I got caught slipping a disposable camcorder into the principal’s purse.” Well. That’s less boring than expected, at least. Usagi inclines her head to Kal, mulling it over, and Kal appears content to let her.

Eventually, Usagi says, again: “Okay.”

Kal’s smile only stretches, but never too wide, always contained. “Do you want to come over to my house after this?”

“Okay,” Usagi repeats. And, “Do you want to join my hitman squad?”

Kal laughs and laughs and they get in trouble with the librarian.

COMMENTARY

In contrast to previous conversations, this is an example of two people managing to connect, rather than miscommunicate. Usagi’s terseness, rather than a rejection like Henry’s, is born from her natural disposition as a person and isn’t meant with any ill intent; likewise, Kal’s friendliness is out of personal curiosity, rather than complicated obligation. Two people happen to reach out to each other and, by happenstance, happen to be at the right place and the right time in their lives to understand and reciprocate each other’s overtures.

Usagi is still odd in the same way she was when we first encountered her, but Kal is able to handle her in a way that Nina couldn't--despite having even less information to go on--because she's able to roll with Usagi's way of conducting herself without dismissing her. The two of them also make observations of each other that would normally be considered rude, but because they're being honest, they express no intention to hurt, and they're both (seemingly, at least, in this) secure in themselves, neither of them takes it badly. The genuineness of their interaction is born from, at least on Usagi's part, a strong sense of self and an open willingness to be up-front with their impressions and priorities. They're both strong personalities, and very odd in their own ways, but meeting and just clicking with another person is something that's happened at least briefly to most of us. This genuineness, mixed with compatibility and good timing, is why it happens.

Madoka Akiyama-Park and Usagi Akiyama-Park, Kauai'i, 2032

Every time Madoka finds another one of his sister's model guns stashed between the couch pillows or jammed in the back of a cupboard, he wonders, fruitlessly, why she insists so strongly on viewing the world through scopes and down barrels. At least, he *hopes* they're models. It's hard to be sure, sometimes, with Usagi.

When Allen manages, somehow, to come upon not one--not two--but three of the things packed neatly together in a plastic container under Madoka's bed, enough is enough. Armed with the box, gripped firmly at either side like it might come to life if not properly restrained, Madoka marches out of the room, down the hall, and down the stairs. Allen's shameless laughter hounds his steps.

For once, Madoka feels, his resting face rather suits his mood. He's going to kill her.

“Usagi,” he announces, from the open entryway of the living room. “I’m going to kill you.”

She doesn’t look up, the perfect picture of a cross-legged statue sat on the sofa, dead eyes fixed on her grim task. The only part of her in motion are her hands, carefully cleaning the pieces of a dismembered Barrett M82, a mess of parts on the coffee table. At least she remembered to lay out a towel before she started, this time, if nothing else.

Usagi says: “Good thing I armed you, then.”

Madoka says: “Stop.”

Finally, she glances his way, inky black meeting inky black. Her hands never stop moving. “No.” Frustrating, but expected. Expression scrunching up slightly, mostly around his mouth and eyes, Madoka crosses the threshold. He deposits the box of (hopefully) model guns next to the remains of the M82 and himself next to Usagi. Deliberately, he avoids the edge of the towel, because God knows Usagi doesn’t wash that thing as often as she should. Madoka finds himself leaning back into the scratchy, vaguely vomit-colored upholstery, head lolling back, line of sight unfocused in the direction of the ceiling. God knows what *eco-furniture* is supposed to mean, but he wishes their parents would invest in some that’s less uncomfortable someday.

“Why not.” He phrases it like a question, but his voice falls just this side of too flat to intone as such.

Usagi, guilty of the same monotone, cares not at all. She remains unmoved, only turning back to her cleaning. “If I was in your room and I needed them, I’d have them, if I do this. A hitman should always be armed.”

“You’re not a hitman,” Madoka tells her, by this point out of habit. Out of duty. “You’re not even a man.”

“But I do have a lot of guns.”

“A lot of model guns.” Please let them be model guns.

Usagi doesn't huff, but she cocks her head so that she's looking at him slantways, eyes fractionally narrowed. It's a face he's seen in the mirror. “How'd you even find these ones?”

“I didn't.”

Usagi stares at him. Madoka stares back. Finally, she observes: “Oh. Gross.”

He finds it in him to elbow her. *This is all Emma's fault*, he thinks, with sudden clarity. All her fault, for introducing Usagi to her terrible movies, for needling her brother into approaching him the first time in second grade, and most of all for being born. If his countenance was less--or more, depending on how empty or full you perceive the glass to be--cooperative, he has an inkling that his cheeks would be burning.

“Shut up.”

“No.”

If he was a different person, Madoka would groan. If he was a different person, he wouldn't have Allen waiting for him upstairs. Such is the dilemma of his continued existence.

Before he can make up his mind on his next point of argument, on some prompt that might miraculously convince Usagi to stop leaving her toys everywhere, she gets up with a groaning of old couch springs and sweeps up the bits of her M81 into the towel like a sack. Like this, the dull blue fabric is even more obviously stained translucently brown than when it's spread out. Yuck.

“Mom'd want you to keep the door open,” she notes, dispassionate, already on her way to the back door. “But I don't care. I'm going to Kal's.”

Madoka feels a vague sense of nostalgia nip at his heels, but can't quite put his finger on why.

He watches her go, just for a moment, before heaving to his own feet. It's good that Usagi made a friend, at least; it certainly took her long enough.

Now if only she'd find a new hobby.

COMMENTARY

This is the first case in which we've been in both members' of the conversation's heads at one point, so I thought it was fitting that they also know each other well, as siblings. They're also having a conversation that they've presumably had before, but still, Usagi and Madoka reach no real solution or conclusion--Usagi dismisses Madoka's attempt at establishing boundaries, and Madoka chooses not to pursue the matter, despite not liking her behavior. Dead end conversations like this, where an issue is identified and repeats itself but goes unexamined, are frustratingly common among families because we get used to one another and one another's flaws. We become content with, or at least tolerant of, the imperfections in our dynamics with people who we are "stuck" with.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. Usagi and Madoka are both blunt, even rude people, but their dynamic isn't presented as especially dysfunctional; they're family, and sometimes family annoys each other. It's a consequence of living in close proximity with other people for so very long. This is their normal. However, at the same time, avoiding a real confrontation also means that this conversation--in which Usagi disrespects Madoka's boundaries and Madoka gives up on making her stop--will repeat itself, and nothing will improve. We learn to accept these micro-acts of interpersonal disconnection and miscommunication, but by accepting them, we are also giving up on coming to an understanding with the other person.

Maybe Madoka never could make Usagi understand or stop; maybe she doesn't care enough about him, about his right to his own space. It's a matter of priorities. Still, though, by dismissing Usagi's potential to understand him out of hand to avoid clashing with her, Madoka will never know either way.

I am, by nature, very bad at talking about my feelings for the same reason Madoka failed to communicate with Usagi here, and for the same reason that many of us fail to communicate with our loved ones: it is my, and many others', first impulse to conclude that my comfort is not enough of a priority to the other party to merit the risk of a confrontation, because even if I were to explain myself perfectly, they would still not care enough to make a change. Which would be their right, of course. But, in my case, I had spent a very long time allowing myself to be alienated from people who did genuinely care to improve, on the basis of not insisting on an honest conversation about interpersonal hiccups. Avoiding the problem is not solving the problem, not with people who you love and who love you.

For me, all that meant was that I spent my mid-teens in perpetual angsty confusion, before painstakingly unearthing my head from the metaphorical dirt. For many, it means lifetimes of compromise. For Madoka and Usagi, it means Usagi's extreme special interest in hitmen will continue to snowball unchecked. It is not Madoka's fault that he does not have the tools to express to Usagi why he feels the way he does or why he wants her to stop, but this failure to communicate, in the same way that these failures always do to some capacity, will have consequences of the both of them down the road.

[Kalliope Martin and Lucy Martin, Kauai'i, 2032](#)

It must say something about her standard of living, Kal supposes, that she's become more used to finding model guns in the kitchen than to finding her sister there. It's Lucy's house, and consequently, Lucy's kitchen; even hunched over a bowl of cereal in the dead of night, she has a right to it.

She looks up from her meal when Kal flicks the light switch on, glasses askew and cheeks hamster-stuffed. Their eyes meet, liquid green versus creamy blue. Kal remains stood in the doorway, hand still braced against the light switch and the wall.

Finally, Lucy swallows. "It's too..." She pauses. Frowns. Thinks. "... Early? For you to be smiling so much."

"I wanted water," Kal says, simply. She chooses not to stop smiling.

Lucy shrugs and shovels more cereal into her gaping maw. Kal finds herself a glass and makes her way over to the sink.

Kal isn't looking at Lucy anymore, is looking at the sink's knobs, but she thinks that her sister must be boring holes into the middle distance of the cabinets. She doesn't know how she knows this, but she's quite certain of it. Kal turns the water on, but takes a moment before positioning her glass, just letting it run for a while. Even if--when--she returns to bed, she doubts she'll have much luck falling back asleep. And it's not like she pays the water bills.

She fills her cup, finally. She cuts the water, finally. A glance sideways, mid-sip, informs her that she was right after all; Lucy's face is slack in the sickly, fluorescent lighting of the kitchen, in that way that implies unhappy thoughts, eyes terrible and unseeing. Kal feels a pang of sympathy for the cabinets, who did nothing to deserve such foul regard.

She puts her glass down on the countertop with a faint clink and the gentle sloshing of water, but remains holding onto it. Against her better judgement, or possibly precisely because of it, she asks conversationally, "How's work?"

Lucy grimaces. She's still staring at nothing at all--or. No, that's not quite right, is it? "It's going."

“I thought you were supposed to be on a job in England.”

“Scotland.”

“On a job in Scotland.” Kal takes another sip of her water. “But you’re in Hawai’i.”

Lucy grunts. Kal can tell she’s annoying her, but can’t bring herself to overmuch care. Lucy deigns to turn her attention down to her cereal, stirring it irritably with her spoon. “Turned out to be more complicated than I thought. Might put it off, get some more of the logistics in before I go. Does it matter? I survived Germany. I’ll be fine.”

Kal doesn’t wince, doesn’t stop smiling, even if Lucy isn’t looking at her. “Yes. You will.”

“Right.”

Kal wants, only briefly but very badly, to smash the glass she’s holding against Lucy’s head. She doesn’t, of course. She drains the remainder of the water.

“Will you still be here in the morning?” Kal asks, instead, and deposits her cup in the sink.

“It is morning.”

“When the sun comes up, then.”

Lucy hums, thinking. Eventually: “No.”

Good, Kal wants to say. And, *I have a friend over*, and, *Maybe you could stick around and meet her*. She doesn’t, of course.

Kal makes her way back upstairs, back to bed. She’s still awake a half hour or so later, when the front door groans open and then shut.

COMMENTARY

In contrast to Usagi and Madoka, who are pretty much normal (if eccentric) siblings with normal bumps in communication, Kal and Lucy are very much dysfunctional. While all the snapshots so far have dealt with conversations where the characters expressed things via implication without

actually voicing them, it has generally been because the characters have more context than the reader, who is only looking into crystalized moments and feelings from these people's lives-- here, for the first time, Kal is very deliberately keeping her mouth shut. She and Lucy are allowing their issues to fester, in a darker parallel to both Henry's difficulty communicating with Nicole and Milgo, and Madoka's difficulty communicating with Usagi. Kal and Lucy's stunted conversations are where relationships go to die.

[Dalisay Siqueyu and Henry Woodhouse, San Francisco, 2033](#)

Even with four children to her name, Dalisay is quite certain that her house never cultivated the air of madness about it that her little foster brother's apartment did, even when the entire brood still lived at home. It may be a question of space, of concentration by volume, but Dalisay doesn't think so. Nothing about Henry is ever so simple, so easily solved; no, with him, it's always a production.

It's on her mind, more or less, as she lets herself in. He never explicitly issued her a spare key to his front door, they've never been especially close, but he's never complained about her borrowing the one he'd handed her daughter the day after he moved in. Nicole is out of town more often than not, recently, anyways. Busy, working. Dalisay feels perfectly justified. Her resolve only strengthens, her convictions only proven correct, at the predictable sight of Henry with his head buried in crossed arms, sat hunched over the folding table he'd equipped the kitchenette with. She spots him immediately--the front room isn't large, and Henry is hardly a subtle presence.

For a moment, Dalisay allows herself to hope that he's asleep, but he shifts just enough to squint one bleary, blaringly green eye at her when he hears her approach. She imperiously deposits the pair of plastic bags she'd carried in on the kitchenette counter.

"You didn't do your grocery shopping." It's only an assumption, but she states it as fact. She likes to think she knows Henry, more or less.

"Thanks," he croaks, muffled, and the one eye disappears back into the crook of his elbow. "I was going to. He's just--not sleeping yet, but. Having the other one around helps, I think."

"The other one?" Dalisay demands, dubious, crossing her arms. "Henry, Blake was one thing, before, but turning up with a kid *twice*--"

"I didn't *turn up with a kid*," he cuts in, shifting to level a tired glare up at her over his forearms. She will give him this, his eye bags do look marginally less pronounced. "*You* turned up here and made it your problem. I was happy to keep it to myself."

She raises a lone brow at him.

"I wasn't happy," he concedes, and bids a hasty retreat back behind the barrier of his limbs.

"And I appreciate it, I do, but I wasn't going to make trouble for you on purpose."

"I know that," Dalisay tells him, not unkindly, but not gently either. She's always had this strictness about her voice, she knows. "And my Nicole knows that, which is precisely why she knew to ask for my help when she realized what you'd gotten yourself into. This isn't for you. This is for her. If I put it like that, you can accept it, yes?"

Silence answers her. She chooses to interpret it as assent.

In conclusion: "You're terribly predictable, Henry."

"I guess," he allows, reluctantly. "But she's not mine, for the record. The other one."

"Whose is she, then?"

“I had to bring Blake on a job, couple months back. Didn’t have anyone to babysit. You remember Atticus’s girlfriend, with the crazy eyes? Kuznetsova?”

Atticus, from Little Bugs. Unlike with Henry, Dalisay had known him as a housemate, rather than from her intermittent visits there as an adult. She nods, even though Henry isn’t looking at her, and purses her lips. Despite everything, and despite Henry, Atticus reigns as her most annoying foster brother.

“Her sister was looking for someone to do some digging on... some stuff I signed an NDA on,” Henry continues. “The other one, the other kid, is the sister’s kid. Ran off with Blake when we were there. Can’t get rid of her now. They’re finally asleep, in the other room.”

Dalisay sighs, suddenly feeling very tired herself. Three years of this, now. Blake isn’t a bad child, with his big toothy smiles and mass of haystack hair, but he isn’t an *easy* child. And Henry is... Well.

“At least they’re sleeping,” Dalisay says, and doesn’t lean in to ruffle his hair so much as to place her palm on the top of his head, dark skin against unnatural green. She isn’t quite patting his head, he would hate that, at this age. But this, he will live with.

Henry makes a defeated sort of noise, a kind of verbal shrug, somewhere in the back of his throat. “At least they’re sleeping.”

“You know this would be easier if you accepted the Wizens’ offer.”

“It would.”

And that’s just it, isn’t it? Nothing about Henry is ever easy, ever simple. But that much, at least, isn’t Nicole’s problem, nor Dalisay’s. And there are more pressing matters to attend to.

Dripping disapproval, Dalisay demands: “When was the last time you washed your hair, Henry?”

COMMENTARY

Again, here, we have returned to the particular miscommunications and interpersonal aggressions that Henry excels at. While he's older, he's still a very messy person with a very messy life, and still relying too much on women who by all rights have better things to be doing and for which they would actually be properly appreciated. To Henry's credit, he does express vague awareness of what he's doing now, but not really in any meaningful way so far.

Where Dalisay is different from a teenaged Nicole is in that she is, here, enforcing her own boundaries and refusing to do more for Henry than she feels comfortably justified in doing. His problems aren't her problems, and she will not carry his emotional baggage for him, though she will still do what she can as a concerned acquaintance.

Nathan Samuels and Emma Creaks, Kauai'i, 2033

Nathan has always been of the stalwart opinion that if you don't have anything nice to say, you should still say something nice, because the maintenance of positive social bonds is necessary to the cultivation of success in the social civilization of humans. This might make him somewhat mercantile--somewhat of a bastard, even--but at least he's polite about it.

Most of the time, at any rate. There isn't always a reason to. Like when he's home, for instance, which is generally a relief for multiple reasons; most pressingly, the fact that at home, he can *complain*.

Rather impolitely, but honestly, Nathan storms in through the apartment's front door and then into the little kitchen, depositing his luggage onto the living room couch along the way and himself into a counter seat at the finish line. He allows himself to be loud, and to heave a great, big, frustrated exhale, and to slump onto the nice, cool granite of the countertop. It feels nice, smooshing against his hot cheek.

One chair over, Emma doesn't click her laptop shut, but does stop typing for the moment to regard him with a mild, sideways sort of curiosity. From the corner of his eye, he can make out that she has two tabs open: an email client and her digital art program of choice.

"Was it that guy again?" she asks, instead of welcoming him home.

"It was that guy again!" Nathan bemoans, instead of taking issue. "I don't know why he even bothers making an appearance. He doesn't do anything, doesn't say anything, until I do-- *something*--and he just..." Nathan turns his face fully into the countertop. His next words are muffled unattractively, he knows. "I was two thirds through my proposal for the San Bruno cleanup, the situation with the barrels. You know the one, I told you, the idiot with the barrels and the fireworks?"

Emma nods, which he can only kind of see from his current position.

"Right. So, I was two thirds into it, when this guy--he doesn't even get up, he rolls his eyes and he just says,"--and, here, Nathan takes on a pitched down, mocking tone--"*Maybe if you thought more about the environment and less about measuring dicks with your sister, you'd actually have a real plan.* How does he even know I have a sister? Nelly doesn't operate in the San Francisco area." He groans, nice and overly put-upon. "I hate Woodhouse."

"At least the feeling's mutual," Emma reasons, and he knows by the click-clacking of keyboard keys that she's either thinking about it or he's lost her attention.

Nathan brings up his arms to fold under his head, still on the counter. "It's like he knows something I don't. Like he knows me, and... and *expects* something from me, for me to know things, but I'm always disappointing him somehow. I don't even know him. It's like he's always angry, or tense, or--something. And I can't figure it out." Because Nathan really hadn't had a

good idea of how to deal with the situation, just a proposal and a chip on his shoulder, but no one had any way of *knowing* that.

Emma hums assent. She really is thinking about it, then. “It’s like that when I run into him too. But he doesn’t run away from you.”

“No.” And he could, is the thing. Henry Woodhouse doesn’t have to represent San Francisco in regional conferences, because only stupid people want anything to do with San Francisco since four years ago. And yet. “He doesn’t.”

Nathan peeks out from over his elbow, squinting up against the kitchen’s fluorescent, ecologically friendly lighting to look at her. Emma frowns just slightly at her screen, but he can’t be sure if whatever’s on it is the real perpetrator. She actually had known Woodhouse, at one point, after all--before she’d turned seven, before Nathan had known her, before she’d moved to the aloha state. For all that counts for anything.

“I can barely start a conversation with him, let alone hold one,” Nathan whines, and he knows he’s whining, but he also knows that Emma won’t overmuch mind. “Ties to the Wizen family, former job and a few contacts with the Goldcloaks, possible connection to the cult arson case with the hooded figures from five years ago, probably has a kid or maybe two kids. That’s all I’ve got, hearsay.”

She stops typing and leans back in her seat, haystack hair dripping tailward, arms stretched to anchor palms flat onto the countertop either side of her laptop and eyes presumably to the ceiling. He can’t tell, still, with his head pillowed on his arms.

“There’s gotta be a story there,” she says, finally. There’s a blank quality to her voice, a sort of focus that reminds Nathan of bloodhounds. It’s very quintessentially Emma, and it startles a laugh out of him.

“What are you gonna do? Crack him like a nut?” he asks her, helplessly fond.

Emma huffs out a laugh of her own, glancing at him from her perch, sideways. “If he stays still long enough.”

“And therein lies the problem, doesn’t it?”

They lapse into companionable silence. Eventually, Nathan hauls himself to his feet and out of the kitchen in search of a change of clothes, followed down the hall by the faint clacking of keyboard keys.

COMMENTARY

Nathan and Emma are both characters who had been, briefly, mentioned in conversation between Henry and Milgo before. This is important, because Emma’s description has already also connected her to Henry’s son, the way that Usagi and Madoka’s descriptions connected them before reference to Usagi as Madoka’s sister was made. It is also relevant that this conversation took place from Nathan’s perspective, because in this case, both he and the reader is held at somewhat of a distance from what is going on in Emma’s head--the reader more so, if I have done my part correctly, because Emma and Nathan are implied to have known each other for a while now.

Emma and Nathan communicate with each other easily, despite Nathan’s introduction making note of him being, essentially, a liar of necessity. The takeaway here is that Nathan is relatively pessimistic about his interactions with people and realistic about the rules of the social game, but is not incentivized by it to be cruel, and is still able to see the immense value in communicating honestly with people (Emma, in this case) who would readily accept reasonable imperfection from him. Still, though, he can be careless, which is alluded to by his reference to a situation where Henry had seen through his act of confidence and control.

The narration's talk of politeness also puts Henry and Nathan in contrast in that Henry has, so far, been a good deal less socially conscious and much more actively unpleasant, but also very honest. Honesty, which Henry is free with and Nathan is conservative with, is important; so is awareness of the self, of others, and of the kind of situations we find ourselves coping with, which Nathan is implied to have and Henry explicitly lacks.

Nathan's narration also calls back to Emma's, in her conversation with Madoka. Nathan and Emma are able to connect in part because they are similar people who are honest with themselves about who they are and what they like, and have managed to communicate that to one another, although how they got there still remains off screen. Usagi and Kal were an example of two people clicking for the first time; Emma and Nathan are an example of two people who have clicked a long time ago and remained interlocked since. Nathan makes no pretenses of how he feels and Emma makes no smalltalk with him, instead both of them moving directly to address the point and why he's behaving the way he is.

They also, notably, do not play the kinds of games of implication that Henry has in his interactions with Nicole, Milgo, and Dalisay. There is no pussyfooting around the issue and no meaningful silences, just two people gossiping about a bad experience at work and a topic they both have some level of interest in. The only outsider here is the third party of the reader, observing a domestic moment between two people who get along and communicate openly.

[Lucy Martin and Milgo Wizen, Emmuwuzere Island, 2034](#)

The Wizen house, with its worn wood and hand-me-down furniture, never quite struck Lucy as the kind of place where a room would need to be set aside as an office. And yet. The furniture is still well-used here, the wood still worn, the lighting still natural and airy, but the sturdy wooden

desk, the scratchy guest seats facing it, and the dusty old bookshelves lining the walls telegraph nothing but *home office* and *you are an outsider here*. She can hear some of the younger children playing outside in the garden--with the chickens, by the sounds of it.

Across from Lucy sits the Wizen mother, homey and smiling and with her hands folded politely atop the desk. They're an odd bunch, the Wizens, even by her standards--cultish, almost, with their three matriarchs and one unifying philosophy of family. Rural gothic. Then again, that's kind of how it always is with these families, isn't it?

"You're asking for quite a bit," Milgo notes, not unkindly. Curiously, even. Lucy can work with curiosity.

"It's a big payout," she counters, leaning back in the scratchy guest seat she occupies, arms loosely crossed. "I've always been reliable before, and it's not technically illegal. Definitely not illegal in this country."

Milgo laughs a little, still polite, but warm. "No, probably not."

This kind of person, this is the dangerous kind, Lucy thinks. She carefully doesn't narrow her eyes, carefully remains relaxed.

"So?"

"So,"--Milgo starts, and gestures, palms facing up and splayed in a sort of casual, ephemeral shrug--"I don't think the kind of manpower you're asking for is the right manpower for the job. I don't think numbers will get you anywhere, especially as far away as Scotland."

"But you're not turning me down."

"Oh, no, I am." She laughs again, and Lucy's brow twitches. "But I can refer you to someone with a little more experience in, well. Breaking and entering."

Lucy frowns, but bites. Even if she's being co-opted into progressing an unrelated Wizen agenda, they gain nothing by screwing her over. "Okay."

"Have you done any work with Henry Woodhouse?"

"Woodhouse... Wait." A moment, and then another. When Milgo just keeps smiling at her, Lucy goes on. "The San Francisco guy?"

Milgo nods. "The San Francisco guy."

"What would I want with the San Francisco guy?"

"Your skillset is limited." Milgo's voice is measured, so measured, and it sets Lucy's teeth on edge. Pointedly, she doesn't think of Kal. "His is... also limited, but in a different way. You should talk to him."

Lucy slumps, just a little bit, defeated. "Might as well, if you're going through the trouble of giving me a reference."

"Don't be like that. You'll get along."

She sounds confident in that. Lucy raises one eyebrow in question.

Milgo looks like she might laugh again, and if she does, Lucy will scream. "You have some things in common." She inclines her head to Lucy. "He'll understand, if you tell him about your sister."

Lucy feels her muscles lock up, immediately, despite herself. She breathes out a long, seething breath--almost a hiss--and forces herself to untense. How does Milgo even know about her sister? How *much* does she know? "I'm not going to tell him about my sister."

Milgo shrugs properly now, unperturbed. "Well, you should."

“Right. Right, okay.” Lucy gets up from her scratchy guest seat. From outside, she hears some Wizen kid or other howl with high pitched, small-child laughter. “Thanks for making time for me, but I should go.”

“It was good to see you again, Lucy.” Milgo smiles at her, bleedingly genuine.

Without another word, Lucy very much does not run away. She has a flight to catch, and before that, she wants ice cream. She deserves it, she thinks.

Wizens.

COMMENTARY

This is the first instance in which a character introduced through the thread of connections leading up to Usagi has interacted with a character introduced through the thread of connections leading up to Henry on-page so far, and Milgo and Lucy’s relative distance from Henry and Usagi themselves is deliberate. It’s a small world, after all.

Milgo continues more or less in the same vein as the last time we saw her, still trying to poke people around her into doing what she thinks is best for them while very carefully not being so direct as to prompt them into running away forever. Lucy knows to take her more seriously than a teenaged Henry did, so she’s more sensitive to that, and the business relationship the two are implied to have permits Milgo to be a little more heavy handed because Lucy will put up with her for the sake of that business. It’s a give and take, like all the dynamics so far have been, but more explicitly.

Very few of our relationships exist for the sake of themselves, but rather, because there’s something we want to or think we will achieve through them. Sometimes that thing really is the relationship itself, and is born of genuine like and love between humans, but often not. Here, Milgo and Lucy are looking to achieve a payout, but Milgo is also advancing the secondary

agenda she's been implied before to have--a moral one, in this case. Lucy, likewise, is balancing the attempt at getting help from Milgo's family with a desire to not acknowledge her own issues. Both Milgo and Lucy are both coping with the situation they've found themselves in according to the way they're used to living, respectively, and according to their respective goals. Milgo, obliquely, comments on this when she suggests that Lucy would be better off opening up to someone who might relate to her, but Lucy--in a perfectly natural reaction--is uncomfortable with the mortifying ordeal of being known. Milgo is ultimately being pretty insensitive here, especially since Lucy wants her family's help more so than Milgo wants anything from Lucy, and so Milgo has some measure of power in this interaction that she's using to poke at Lucy with. Still, that doesn't make Milgo wrong about Lucy, just a little skeevy in her approach. The fact that Lucy knows to recognize and treat Milgo as a threat to any level is also of note, because it's something that Henry wasn't able to do the last time we saw him speak with Milgo. Milgo is friendly, well-meaning, and soft-spoken; she isn't anything that Henry, who's been socialized as a boy and who generally approaches social situations like a brick propelled through the air, has been raised to identify as potentially dangerous. Lucy, on the other hand, has been socialized as a girl. As discussed in Rosalind Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabees*, the social hierarchies of young girls are much more geared towards an early understanding of soft power and how to deploy it, and likability is a weapon because it can be leveraged. Regardless of how Lucy or Henry may or may not have chosen to identify later in life, these early experiences do inform how people operate and the ways we interact with others. In my own experience as a very small, friendly, cheerful person, people who had been socialized in their early childhood as boys almost universally and immediately identify me as someone to be looked out for and protected (condescendingly or otherwise), while people who had been socialized in their early childhood as

girls will generally hold me at some level of wariness until they've gotten a better feel for who I am for these same qualities. Most people don't do this consciously, but it is a pattern I've encountered in my own experiences with people nearly universally, and it has had no correlation with however those same people happen to have come to identify in regards to their gender orientation later in life. It has, consistently, been a matter of how young children are taught to process and scan for potential danger in those they interact with.

Nicole Siqeyu and Usagi Akiyama-Park, Kauai'i, 2034

Even in the sweltering Hawaiian heat, with only the meager shade of the convenience store's overhang to protect her, Nicole could at least console herself with life's simple pleasures. The salad she'd purchased, for one, was only slightly soggy, so it really could have been worse. The can of ice tea she'd obtained alongside it, likewise, also managed to remain reasonably cool, all things considered. And, perhaps best of all, she wasn't being shot at.

All in all, a fantastically boring day complemented by an only slightly miserable lunch. She really could do worse for herself at this point, she thinks, squinting blearily up at overly bright summer skies. She'd gotten a solid three hours of sleep the previous night, even. Nicole was doing *amazing*.

To her left, a dark-haired teenager approaches the shop. The girl is tall for her age, for all Nicole can estimate from her own perch sitting cross-legged on the pavement, and there's something about her expression that Nicole just doesn't like. Something around the mouth, she thinks. The black slackness of it.

Nicole doesn't stare, and the girl doesn't enter the convenience store. Instead, she plants herself some ways from Nicole, hands stuffed in her pockets and back propped up against the wall. She

doesn't, interestingly, pull out a phone to mess with, which Nicole for one would have. She stares out into the parking lot with inky, lifeless eyes. Waiting for someone, then? Nicole qualifies whether or not she's bored enough to ask about it.

The answer, as it turns out, is *yes*.

"Waiting for someone?" Nicole prompts, out loud.

"Yes," says the girl, and then nothing. She doesn't even have the decency to look at Nicole. Vaguely irritated, Nicole wonders what it would take to phase the modern teenager, and her mind obligingly conjures up the memory of the work uniform she'd banished to the back of the motel closet. Golden pseudo-spandex streaming in the wind--that would be a sight, surely. Ugh. Less drastically, Nicole opts for: "Boyfriend?"

The girl continues to respond with more nothing. "No."

"Girlfriend?"

A pause, this time. Nicole almost dares to identify a thoughtful quality to the silence that passes between them. "She's a girl," Nicole is informed of, finally. "And I know she's my friend." Despite herself, and despite the three hours of sleep she's running on, Nicole manages to dredge up a measure of curiosity. She quirks a brow. "How's that?"

"Because I wouldn't ask her to be a hitman with me if we weren't friends."

Nicole chokes, but luckily not on her salad or ice tea, because she's not rude enough to stuff her face while making small talk with strange Hawaiian children. "*Hitman?*"

"Yes."

And she sounds so *serious* about it too, so utterly grim. Nicole openly stares at her now, owlishly fascinated. "You're a hitman?"

“Not yet.” The girl, still, remains entirely unphased. Her expression hadn’t changed once, her gaze unmoving, and--with a start, Nicole realizes that this... murderous fetus... has been *scanning their surroundings*. Had positioned herself against the wall to *minimize potential angles of ambush*. She couldn’t be--what, younger than fourteen? Isn’t that a little old for these kinds of daydreams? Shouldn’t there be a--a limit, of some sort?

But.

Well.

Then again.

Nicole squints up at the teenager, more or less how she’d been squinting at the sky earlier.

“Not... yet.”

“Not yet,” Hitman Girl repeats, in that same monotone. Also in that same monotone, she observes: “You’re not from here.”

“How’d you figure that?”

“Haven’t seen you before.” Spoken with perfect certainty, and not a moment’s hesitation. Nicole frowns at her.

“So just because you don’t know me, I’m a tourist?” she asks Hitman Girl.

“Yes,” Hitman Girl says, again, immediately. “Or you’re here for work.”

“Well.” Nicole considers this, dubiously. “I am here for work.”

Another moment of silence is exchanged. Eventually, Hitman Girl finally, *finally*, spares Nicole a sideways glance. Briefly. “What’s your job?”

“That’s... Hm.” Nicole thinks on it. “Law enforcement, I guess.” When the girl tenses up, Nicole is quick to wave her off, laughing a little, but this kid’s (non-)reactions are admittedly starting to come off as slightly unnerving. “I’m not here to arrest you. You’re not a hitman *yet*, are you?”

Hitman Girl relaxes. “No.”

“Right.” Nicole shifts her weight some, trying to get comfortable against the wall without dislodging the plastic container of salad or can of ice tea held in her lap. The ice tea, tragically, has gone all the way lukewarm. “Right now, I’m actually looking for someone. Wanted for theft, or something, but we don’t have her current address.”

“Theft is a boring crime,” comments Hitman Girl, wisely. Unlike murder, apparently, which must be very exciting.

“Mm. Super boring. Even more boring when management can’t seem to decide what priority this mess should be.”

“They can’t decide?” Still no intonation, of course, but Nicole chooses to take it as a question. If this girl knows everyone as she claims, she might even know Nicole’s woman.

“Yup. We’re being pressured by her previous hit to prioritize it, but they’re being cagey about what was stolen in the first place, so.” Nicole risks her lunch to flash the girl a pair of jazz hands. The ungrateful twerp doesn’t so much as look. “You’re really mellow, you know that?”

“Yes.”

“Does the name Lucy Martin ring any bells?”

Silence. Contemplative silence, maybe. Nicole almost imagines that she can see the gears turning behind those truly unfortunate eyes.

After a good, solid minute and half, Hitman Girl’s mouth turns just a little bit downwards, at the corners. She says: “No.”

Nicole shrugs, but finds herself smiling at the other’s frustration. If she really had memorized everyone in town--then, that would be cause for concern. Eighth grader syndrome, though?

Eighth grader syndrome--teenage delusion--was something Nicole was perfectly happy to leave teenagers to struggle with and grow out of. "Bummer."

Neither of them seems to find much to say to the other, after that, but Nicole doesn't mind, besides the nebulous impression that she's somehow soured Hitman Girl's mood. She hurries along with the rest of her lunch, which was light to begin with.

She's just stuffing the can into the plastic container, mentally preparing herself for the emotional effort of pulling herself to her feet to locate a bin, when another teenage girl bee lines for the store from across the parking lot--this one shorter, with brown hair. Nicole's girl, the aspiring hitman, takes off at a brisk jog to meet her halfway, and the pair of them scurry off together to do whatever it is that teenage girls do these days. Hitman Girl, as Nicole will remember her for some time yet, is apparently quite athletic, judging by speed alone.

Nicole hadn't quite gotten a good look at the second one, but something about her had been familiar.

Four hours later, Nicole will have realized she'd recognized Kalliope Martin from her picture in the case file.

COMMENTARY

In this snapshot, Nicole and Usagi don't even know each others' names, and never learn them.

Occasional, bizarre conversations with strangers in spaces where you're both just killing time in between an actual objective or destination are a fairly universal experience, I think; everyone has had some kind of interaction with a stranger that's stuck with them to some extent, without ever learning what that person was called, or what their deal was. That's Usagi and Nicole's experience here, where the pair of them aren't exactly regarding each other as fully fledged people because they know nothing about one another, while still not necessarily being actively

dismissive. Nicole, in fact, is almost willing to take Usagi's desire to become a hitman as the seriously concerning thing that it is, despite Usagi's childish, absurd presentation. The only reason she doesn't is a misunderstanding, when she reads Usagi's frustration as frustration with *herself* for not actually having everybody memorized, and takes it as confirmation that Usagi is basically just experiencing the delusions a lot of young teenagers with a wish for escapism deal with.

Of course, in this instance, Usagi and Nicole are much more directly connected than most random strangers would be. This is to highlight the fact that, despite knowing nothing about each other, they're still people living full lives within the same world and the same overarching social structures. For all you know, that stranger on the bus went to school with your grandmother.

Connections and webs of connections are all around us.

It's also important that we encounter this adult Nicole in such a different context relative to the snapshot in which her teenage self had spoken with Henry. She's focused on her own issues, her own job, for the moment, and is much less peppier than she was when trying to be there for him. Still, she is friendly, and brightens up some after confirming to herself that Usagi is probably not involved in anything actually dangerous. She's grown up, and implicitly, is a little more willing to impose on others (within reason) by not clamping down quite so hard on her negative feelings and responses. The teenage Nicole had frozen up, some, at her own panic for Henry's situation; the adult Nicole eats garbage next to the convenience store and tries not to question her life choices too obviously in front of strange teenagers. She's still much more put together than Henry, and still tries to stay some level of positive. She's calmer than her teenaged self. Also, she didn't try to nose into Usagi's business as much as she did into Henry's--Henry is her friend, and their conversation had implied a worrying history, so the boundaries there were different.

Kalliope Martin and Usagi Akiyama-Park, Kauai'i, 2034

Honest people, Kal thinks, are definitely the worst. Kal is self-aware enough to know that she, herself, is rarely honest outside the confines of her own head; that she keeps her hurt and her poison locked behind her teeth and her teeth behind a pretty, close-lipped smile. That's how it should be.

Usagi isn't one for conversation, but every word that makes it out of her mouth is a bullet, carefully considered before its release with the cold precision of a sniper. This is a deceptively easy observation to make, Kal had found, very quickly. Usagi doesn't maim on purpose. Usagi hands you her truth smelling faintly of niter and leaves you to take what you will from it.

Kal doesn't hate this part of Usagi, because Usagi is two thirds sharp edges and Kal had early on decided she liked the whole. The issue, for Kal--it had never been the honesty itself, not quite. It was the *waiting*. It was the waiting, and the waiting, and the waiting. The *knowing* by the atmosphere growing charged all around them that Usagi was looking at her as if down a scope. The understanding that Kal could only wait patiently to be skewered through.

She had always been good at patience, at least. She likes to think so, at any rate.

"I'm patient," she tells Usagi, now, sitting across from her at the coffee table that Lucy bought but is never around enough to actually use. In practice, it belongs to Kal, the same as the house. The white woodgrain matches the neutral cream color of the couch cushions. Kal is struck by the familiar urge to upend the contents of her teacup onto the surface, to stain it, to vandalize; she does not. Instead, she sets her teacup into its saucer with a porcelain click.

"That's why you're recon," Usagi agrees, with the slightest nod. She still reacts when prompted, but her tea remains entirely untouched and rapidly cooling. Kal very carefully does not scream.

“I’m very patient.” Kal, suddenly sick of looking at Usagi, fixes her gaze back on the table.

Painted, pastel flowers curl across its surface like cobwebs. She swallows. “But not because I like to be.”

She can imagine Usagi’s inky eyes boring holes into her, all the weight of a black hole behind each socket, and feels small and stupid. After some time, Usagi says: “I do.”

And she does, is the thing. Usagi could sink whole days into watching grass grow, that lifeless focus never once wavering, and Kal--and Kal *can’t*. Kal can avoid, can pretend, can sit quiet for a lifetime, but the silent promise of Usagi’s purpose, of whatever it is that she’s working up to, is driving Kal up the proverbial wall.

“I know,” Kal manages, and her voice cracks on the *oh*. “I know.”

Usagi doesn’t look uncomfortable, or particularly apologetic, and why should she? She has a right to think things through, a right to her unflinchingly brutal honesty. It’s just... unusual. Kal can’t have been expected to come with preinstalled defenses for a form of attack she’s never experienced before. Can’t have been expected to know how to weather Usagi’s scrutiny without squirming.

Finally, Usagi shrugs, almost imperceptibly. “I met a cop today.”

A laugh is startled out of Kal, wet and halfway to hysteric. “You met a cop?”

“Yes.” A beat. Kal’s been told before that her eyes are bug-like, by Usagi even, but never before has she felt acutely this much kinship with insects under microscopes. “From overseas.”

“A cop from overseas,” Kal repeats, slower. Something about the way Usagi’s mouth curls just a touch down, at the corners, sends alarms rattling slowly to life inside her skull. “The woman from the convenience store?”

“Yes.”

Well. Usagi did seem off since about that time, staring more and speaking less. Kal very carefully does not fidget, but she does frown. “Did she--Usagi, is this about the gun thing again? Did she want to arrest you?”

Usagi outright scoffs, and Kal laughs again, this time more subdued. Usagi’s priorities are the same as ever, at least. She crosses her arms. “No.”

“Then...?”

“What’s Lucy’s job?”

The small, tentative bud of relief that had started to take root in Kal’s gut dies an abrupt death under Usagi’s bootheel. She blinks at her friend, liquid eyes surely owlshly huge.

“Oh,” she says, small and stupid. “*Oh.*”

Usagi doesn’t uncross her arms, doesn’t fidget, doesn’t turn away. Only stares, with that same deathly intensity she would level at grass growing or paint drying or a human being down a scope. Somehow, Kal can’t bring herself to hate it, or dislike Usagi’s honest expectation that Kal will provide her with answers. She can’t help it.

“Remember,” Kal chokes out, distant to her own ears, as if from under water. “Remember three years ago, when I was hospitalized?”

Usagi is honest. Maybe--Maybe Kal can give it a shot, too.

COMMENTARY

This one follows very directly from Usagi’s conversation with Nicole, and is the first snapshot to explicitly take place over the same day as another one. This is to highlight the fact that, even though Kal wasn’t involved with Usagi and Nicole’s conversation and Nicole has no way of knowing that it’s going to impact her, that interaction will have consequences fo Kal through

Usagi's participation in it. We have an impact on the lives of people we don't know all the time, indirectly. That's what Nicole's role here is.

Kal's perspective also continues to be possibly the most clearly repressed, to the extent that she outright conceptualizes Usagi's straightforwardness as some kind of attack. It isn't, of course--honesty for the sake of itself isn't an insult, and claiming that something is "true" for the purpose of hurting others is just another kind of lie. However, for someone so used to keeping her true thoughts and feelings to herself as Kal, Usagi's openness is scary, unnatural, and unnerving. It's alien to her, because Kal is used to avoiding difficult realities and conversations and doing what's convenient, as most of us are. Kal is notably aware of her own dishonesty and of why it's necessary in her life, though, which is also part of why she's able to push through despite her panic and try to actually talk to Usagi.

Kal, here, is trying to connect, even though it's new and scary. She doesn't know what Usagi is thinking, just that Usagi seems to be unhappy with something; she doesn't know if she's facing down potential rejection. Her choices, here, are to try to leave things be and let the pieces fall as they may, to try to re-calibrate her behavior to suit Usagi's preferences and avoid conflict because it's less of a hassle, or to try to work things out honestly. None of these options are inherently wrong, but if she wants her and Usagi to have something genuine, she's going to need to accept the risk that she's going to get hurt and try to *be* genuine with Usagi. Speaking genuinely and honestly with others, I would say, requires a level of trust because by baring our soul to others, even in small ways, we give them leverage. In an ideal world, no one would then turn around and use that leverage unfairly or cruelly, but we do not live in an ideal world and we are not ideal people. It's up to Kal to decide whether or not she trusts Usagi, and whether or not the potential of a genuine connection with Usagi is worth the cons of gambling on that trust.

Also important here, Kal is gambling on Usagi, not on anyone else. Just because she is willing to take this step with her best friend, that doesn't mean she's suddenly comfortable being an honest person in general, and that's part of why we cut off where we do.

Not all of Kal's nerves are couched in her unfamiliarity with honesty, as well. I think it's fairly common for us in our relationships to find ourselves in situations where the other person just feels off, like maybe they're mad at us, for whatever reason. It's a very stressful situation to be in, just by virtue of the mental gymnastics that go into resolving it. Do you trust your gut, or do you put your faith in the belief that if there really was a problem, your loved one would tell you? The best course of action will vary immensely by context, by who the other person is to you, and by who you both are individually. It's not a coincidence that I chose to get into this kind of social minefield with a pair of teenage girls as our lenses of it: from personal experience, the kind of environments that teenage girls create around ourselves and that we're encouraged to cultivate are so deeply non-conductive to straightforward communication. Usagi is just taking some time to think, but part of Kal's panic is that she's more used to this kind of wordless tension as a form of social punishment for a perceived slight, which it would then be her job to identify and rectify to regain her standing with the other girl. It's a power play.

A lot of guys complain, to the point of stereotype, about how girls expect them to be mind readers and give them the cold shoulder for doing something wrong without actually ever saying that they're angry or with what. It's reductive to say all girls are like this or that guys never behave this way. The very straightforward Usagi herself isn't actually doing that at all, and it's only the similar symptoms that trigger Kal's ingrained panic response. But, it's a useful benchmark for highlighting that this is very much a punishment tactic, and that it feels awful no matter who you are. Girls aren't supposed to fight, aren't supposed to display open aggression or

get into conflict that looks like conflict, by the standards that we're held up to as young children; this kind of aggressive, punitive conflict aversion is often the result.

Kal's apprehension here is entirely justified, even if Usagi isn't doing anything necessarily wrong either. They're kids, and they're still fumbling through trying to figure out how to communicate with each other--that's something many adults never learn at all. Little failures of communication like these, where what Usagi is actually doing strikes a dissonant chord with Kal for no fault of her own but because it scans to Kal as related to past traumatic experiences, are to be expected between any two people at some point if you keep talking to one another. It's how Kal and Usagi choose to handle this miscommunication as they go that counts.

[Lucy Martin and Henry Woodhouse, Oakland, 2035](#)

Despite all standing evidence and past misdeeds, Lucy is not stupid. She likes to think so, at any rate; and at the very least, she isn't stupid enough to meet Henry Woodhouse on his home turf. At the same time, she didn't especially want to find out what it would cost her to convince Milgo to reel him too far out of his comfort zone. So, a compromise: Lucy would meet him in a town just out of San Francisco, they would talk shop, and he would most probably turn her down. Her time would be wasted, but she will have humored Milgo, which is a currency unto itself. Simple. Easy. Clean.

It is this compromise that finds Lucy perched on one of the window-facing, out-of-the-way stools belonging to a little-hole-in-the-wall cafe in Oakland, California. Armed with her phone in one hand and a sugar laden coffee in the other, Lucy pretends admirably that the bags under her eyes are a fashion statement of no concern and waits for the man of the hour.

When he does arrive, twelve minutes late and heralded by the high jingling of the bell at the cafe's door, the first thing about him that strikes Lucy is the unfortunate, pallid green of his hair and eyes. The second thing that strikes her is that his eye bags are more prominent than hers by several orders of magnitude. The third thing, following from the first and second, is that he is very clearly possessed.

Lucy pockets her phone. She flags him over wordlessly, with a raised hand, and he trudges over to take up the stool next to hers with little fanfare and deceptively quiet steps. Lucy chooses not to frown, instead offering up a wry half-smile.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," she tells him, going for a commiserative sort of vibe. "I recommend their ristretto."

Her efforts earn her a slight upward quirk of his lips. In the dim, gray-ish sunlight of a cloudy afternoon, it looks demonic. "Don't be. I know Milgo can be..." Woodhouse's face does something complicated as he thinks it over. "Difficult. To turn down, and generally."

Lucy can feel herself grimace. "Yeah, I... can't really argue with that."

They lapse into a tense silence, during which Lucy takes her time rolling her information around in her head and Woodhouse, pointedly, orders nothing. Whatever Milgo has on him, it has to be good, for him to have agreed to meet with Lucy outside of San Francisco—she couldn't dig up any records of him having left the city since breaking with Golden Mist, beyond making the occasional appearance at Lake Michigan to harass Samuels's brother. Maybe it's the arson case no one's ever quite managed to conclusively connect him to. If anyone could get to the bottom of it, it would be Milgo Wizen.

"So?" Woodhouse prompts, finally, without looking at her. He stares ahead, out at the street, only just this side of bleary. His arms have been crossed haphazardly on the countertop.

“So, I have an offer for you,” Lucy says, plainly. “I need manpower, but not the kind of manpower the Wizens can offer, apparently. And Milgo told me you had some experience with breaking and entering.”

He gives another smile, the fiendish one. “I did learn from the best.”

The best, huh? Lucy inclines her head to him, interested. “And that would be...?”

At last, Woodhouse turns to her, kind of. His gaze is slantways, just out of the corner of his eye, at an angle. Something about it is knowing, and Lucy doesn’t like it. “Well. Second best, I guess.”

Very deliberately, Lucy does not flinch. After a moment’s consideration, she decides to preen, only a little. Tastefully.

“The question stands,” she maintains, posture carefully relaxed, body language precisely open.

“Did they also teach you arson?”

“No.” Henry doesn’t flinch either, but he does scowl. Despite herself, Lucy can’t help but be impressed with his lack of hesitation, on the professional level. He might be kind of good to work with after all, maybe. “But they didn’t *help*.”

“They as in...?”

“The two dumbest, most frustrating people I ever met. It doesn’t matter.” There’s a hard edge to his voice that wasn’t there before. A clear dismissal. “What did you want, Martin?”

“You and me. Scotland’s west coast. Priceless, familiarly inherited rocks,” Lucy fires off, letting it go. Idly, she wonders if Samuels’s brother is involved, somehow; she’d never been to any of the Lake Michigan conventions, but as far as she’s heard, this level of vitriol is usually reserved for him. “I already have a buyer lined up. Simple, easy, clean.”

“Rocks?” Woodhouse repeats, skeptical.

Lucy wiggles the fingers of her free hand at him for effect. “*Shiny* rocks.”

“Right.” He frowns at her. “And this would be... simple. Easy. Clean.”

“Yes.”

“Like Germany?”

Startled, Lucy does flinch, this time. She clamps down on it quickly, expression shuttering off into blank neutrality. “So you heard about it. Golden Mist?”

Woodhouse’s regard meanders back to the window. “I guess. I did used to work with the Goldcloaks, but it couldn’t have been a lot of people. I already figured it had to have been you—friend of mine just confirmed it.”

“Oh.” Suddenly unable to stand the sight of him, Lucy turns her attention to the murky, mostly drained depths of her coffee cup. “That wasn’t...” She swallows. “I don’t consider the situation with the Von Zauswalds indicative of my usual mode of operation. I was on a time crunch.”

“They’re still out for your head, you know?” She hears him shift in his seat. “Whatever you took, it must’ve been a big deal. For them to be so cagey about it, and for you to have risked putting yourself in this position.”

Lucy doesn’t answer. In the privacy of her own head, she curses Milgo Wizen quite colorfully.

Woodhouse sighs, probably through his nose, judging by the sort of hissing quality of the sound.

“I can’t work with you if I don’t know what motivates you.”

Irritation swelling inside her, animating her from within, Lucy glances hotly back up at him.

Their eyes meet, locking, like a pair of unhappy bulls in a too-small enclosure. “Ditto.”

Woodhouse stares at Lucy, and Lucy stares at Woodhouse. He doesn’t seem to her to be...

content, exactly, but he seems calm. Curious, but ready to shut her out and walk away.

Annoyingly, she would prefer it if he didn’t. Like it or not, she’s back to the drawing board if she

can't convince him. More days down the drain, more hours of planning to be dumped into a job that's already taking too long.

In this poorly constructed analogy, Lucy wonders, would Milgo be the matador?

Her throat is dry. Lucy ignores it, and speaks. "It was for my sister."

Woodhouse considers her through horrible, unnaturally green eyes. Neither of them is stranger to offering, she knows; to sacrifice. It comes with the skillsets they've... maybe not *chosen*, in his case, but developed.

Finally, painfully, he concedes. Smiles, that awful smile.

"Emma Creaks was the best and worst thing to ever happen to me."

COMMENTARY

In this one, Lucy is wary of Henry, but not outright afraid of him the way she is with Milgo. In fact, from Lucy's perspective, Milgo haunts the entire exchange; Lucy foists a lot of responsibility on Milgo, within her own mind, for the actions she chooses to take with Henry here. While she defends her apparently less than stellar track record to Henry by claiming that there were extenuating circumstances, she's being impulsive here too and taking a gamble on opening up to him, even if she doesn't technically lose anything material for it. It's easier for Lucy to cope with this difficult decision by pretending it isn't up to her at all, that it's because of Milgo that she's doing what she's doing.

While humans tend to like the idea that we're free agents when we do well, for a lot of people, it's easier to cope with risky or poor decision-making by shelving our agency in those choices. That's what Lucy is doing here, though in a very minor, subconscious way. "It's not my fault, it's her fault," is more or less Lucy's line of thinking, in preparation for what she thinks will be the fallout of what she's doing.

Lucy's motivations in opening up to Henry also contrast Kal's motivations for opening up to Usagi. In Kal's conversation with Usagi, she was looking for genuine connection and understanding, and taking a leap of faith on a very personal basis. The narration in her section reinforces that, specifically noting that Kal likes Usagi on a personal level. Lucy, though, is a complete stranger to Henry, and is only cursorily invested in his circumstances; all she knows about him, as her narration notes, is pretty much gossip. Lucy decides to exchange personal information with Henry for very professional reasons, because Henry is interested in her business proposal and Lucy needs him to make it work. They're not looking to make a real connection, even if Lucy believes some level of manufactured solidarity between them will give Henry incentive to go along with her.

The stakes in this conversation are also very different to the stakes in Kal and Usagi's conversation. Lucy risks embarrassment and the mortification of being known, sure, but Henry is still a stranger to her; the only kind of relationship on the line is whether or not they will form a business one. For Kal, though, she was risking possibly having Usagi reject her on a personal level and end their friendship. Emotionally speaking, Kal was making a much bigger decision, even if there would have been no real material consequences for her either.

Henry Woodhouse and Nicole Siqeyu, San Francisco, 2035

Not only, Henry reflects, did his teen-angst bullshit have a bodycount by the time he was fourteen—it also had a dropped arson charge, a place on a good few international watchlists, and a trail of broken hearts left in its wake, his own first among them. He's old enough at this point to understand that entire period of his life, and possibly his entire life period, to have been... disconcerting, so to speak. Everything had seemed to follow very logically on from the last step

at the time, but looking back on it all from the outside, a solid ninety five percent of actions he'd been unflinchingly confident in taking were completely, perfectly bananas.

He liked to blame his youthful insanity on Emma, who was just insane, and Nathan, who loyally enabled her. He'd like to, but he never quite could; not entirely. He could, though, wholeheartedly and with mounting dread hope that Emma's little clone would make better decisions than any of them had, when he and his red-headed shadow of about two years now made it to that age.

Though, well. Considering Henry's own persisting track record and unfortunate relationship with impulsivity, it would be pretty dumb to hold out *too much* hope. He wasn't exactly the greatest role model.

To the backdrop of two very loud five-year-olds shrieking their way through whatever game they'd concocted behind the door to the other room, Henry slumps into his squashed, ratty couch and holds his phone up to his ear, latest bad decision in progress. A nauseatingly green face set with almost-familiar eyes peers at him with malevolent interest, whimsically downside up in the air above and to the front of his own, made of smoke and memories.

All air leaves Henry in a tired rush as the tone gives way to the sound of waves crashing on the other end.

"Still in one piece?" he asks, shooting for casual.

"All limbs attached," comes Nicole's answer, as easy as it is dry. Bullseye. "What do you want?"

Henry feels his face twitch. Not quite annoyance; Nicole has a point, after all. He's self-aware enough to acknowledge that. Ignoring the way his ever-present specter laughs at his-self-wrought, admittedly-plight, he huffs. "I don't always want something."

"You do," she says, without malice. "Even if it's just to make sure I'm not dead yet."

He can't argue with that, so he doesn't. "By that logic, everyone wants something."

"Well. Yes."

"... Point taken." Henry mulls over his own intent. After some thought, he goes on. "Get anywhere with the Martin thing?"

There's a beat, and he can practically hear Nicole grimace. "Kinda. I ran into her sister, but I didn't recognize her until after she'd walked off, and I still can't track anything to do with either of them. No house, no school, no nothing. Why?"

Henry takes a deep breath. Exhales. Speaks. "I have a job with Martin."

Predictably, a crash-bang and a slew of swearing sounds from the other end, indicating that Nicole's dropped, dived after, and subsequently retrieved her phone. "You can't just *say* that!"

"Well, okaaaaay... Buh-bye, Nicole..." he drawls, making a show of hovering over the *end call* button even though she can't see him.

"That's not what I mean!" There's a thud over the line, like she'd just plopped down onto a couch or a bed or maybe the beach sand, if the waves he can still faintly hear are any indication.

He wonders where she is. "You are *insufferable*. Explain."

"Milgo set it up. Apparently, she wanted us to talk about our *feelings*."

Nicole snorts. Henry agrees wholeheartedly.

"I don't think Martin was happy about it either, but the bottom line is, I want to know what I'm getting into," he continues, batting away the unwanted presence of green with his free hand when it attempts to migrate from the ceiling to perch at his shoulder. "I think I know what she took from the Zauswalds, kind of. I'll tell you what I know, and you tell me what you know, and we'll see what we can put together. Deal?"

Silence. He's known Nicole long enough to be fairly confident in his interpretation of it as contemplative in nature. Eventually, he hears her sigh.

"Deal," Nicole says, and though she can't see him, Henry nods.

"Okay." He swallows. "The first thing she told me is, she took it for her sister."

"We have records of her sister having been in the hospital at around the same time," supplies Nicole, thoughtful. "We can't get a hold of what for, though. So—if she had to take something from the Zauswalds to fix it, that tracks."

"Right." Henry nods, again. "I don't think Martin knows exactly what it is either, because she had kind of a hard time describing it. Lotta vague gesturing with her hands, lotta Buffy speak."

A pause, and some rustling over the phone. Henry doesn't need to see Nicole put her head in her hands—maybe just the one hand?—to know they're at that stage of the conversation.

"*Buffy speak?*" she asks, muffled. By her hands or hand, presumably.

"You know, like... When you know something, or about something, but you don't know how to explain it or say it? Or what it's called? And use the word *thing* or *thingy* a lot, trying to describe it. Like if I tried to explain what a wizard is to somebody as a magic-y bastard who does the spell thingy."

"I am begging you to use people words."

"Hm." Henry smiles. "No."

He hears Nicole hiss out an exhale through her nose. "Tell me what Martin told you, Henry."

"She said the Zauswalds, at one point, before she took it, had this—*means*, of making the impossible possible. Of making it happen." Henry pauses briefly to once again swat his green nuisance away from his shoulders. It seethes its disapproval at him, to no avail. "It's not really an item, she said, and it's not a person. It didn't sound like she knew what to call it, or understood

exactly how she was containing it. She stole their container too, obviously she would have, if she knew she was dealing with something so dangerous.”

The line goes quiet for a solid chunk of a minute while Nicole processes. Finally, she swallows, audibly. “You don’t need some kind of... whatever that is, just to fix someone that’s hurt, or sick. There’s easier ways, if she just needed to fix her sister.”

“If whatever was wrong with her sister was normal, yeah,” Henry completes for her. “Also, I’ve been calling it the possibilit-inator, for the record.”

“Shut up, I’m thinking.” Obliging, he does. “If she needed that much of a—that much of a *hammer*, she had to be facing a complicated problem, whatever was happening to her sister. A problem she couldn’t just... out-manuever. Something that was already impossible, that necessitated a counter to the impossible, rather than a straightforward counter to the problem at hand itself. Henry, what’s the most complicated problem you can imagine yourself facing? The most impossible problem?”

Henry shares commiserating eye-contact with his specter, as if looking directly into a camera.

“I’m shutting up, remember?”

Nicole doesn’t miss a beat. “Will you stop being difficult, for *once*?”

“That’s just it, though.” Henry lets out a rattling breath through his teeth. “The most difficult problems—they’re not *complicated*, Nicole. Something that’s impossible, something that you ask the world for and it says no, that’s simple. There’s nothing, *nothing* simpler than a ‘no.’ How do you cut the Gordian Knot, Nicole?”

Silence. Silence, and then, tiny as if from very far away:

“I have to check that year’s obituaries.”

Promptly, but not unexpectedly, Nicole then hangs up on him. Henry's arm, the one he'd used to hold up the phone to his ear, falls away to thump onto the couch at his side; like a puppet, its strings cut. Nicole will get back to him sooner rather than later, he knows, but he still can't help the exhausted unease that claws its way down from his chest to settle uncomfortably in his gut. Empathy, especially for people like Martin, is a bitch.

The thought has him turning away from the intent green eyes that follow him, always, to squint at the door to the other room, where he can still hear the kids. His kids, he supposes, the both of them—because whose else would they be, if not his? Who else would step up here, in this, if not him?

With a great, big, put-upon sigh, Henry heaves himself to his feet to go hunting for orange juice to tide the pair of them over until he can figure something out for dinner. Maybe he'll order Taco Bell, he thinks, and snorts quietly to himself.

COMMENTARY

The first snapshot from Henry's perspective. Overall, Henry's own perspective and perception is fairly different from other characters', even characters like Dalisay or Nicole who are reasonably close to him; as much of a mess as we've seen him as so far, like with Nicole who was initially presented as rather put together, there's more to Henry than just what's obvious. He's fairly responsible with his kids, for one, making note of keeping them fed and hydrated even though he's been established to neglect his own health, and giving them free reign over his teeny apartment's one bedroom.

He does, however, still have issues with connecting with others and properly communicating with them. He's known Nicole for a very long time, but he still speaks in circles with her, resorting to a lot of sarcasm, evasive language, and pop culture references rather than getting to

the point straightforwardly. Even his internal monologue makes liberal use of pop culture references, because Henry himself finds it easier to communicate through that medium. Anyone who gets his (dated, for the story's present) references immediately has something in common with him, and a line is immediately drawn between him and anyone who doesn't get it. It's a very stuck-in-your-own-head way of attempting to communicate, because Henry's only really amusing himself. The particular references his dialogue and narration make are also relevant in their content, rather than just on principle—the snapshot begins with a reference to the black comedy *Heathers*, from the late 80s, where a school is plagued by a string of murders disguised as suicides; he references the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series, an archetypically retro-nerd TV show, and its dialogue choices when Nicole doesn't understand his obtuse terminology; he makes a vague *Phineas and Ferb* joke by alluding to the inventions, called -inators, constructed by the central villain every episode; he name-drops the Gordian Knot, a classical concept, to avoid giving Nicole a straight answer; and finally, the snapshot closes out with an especially obstructed reference to the surrealist comic, *Flork of Cows*, which Henry does not even fully illustrate to the reader and instead only laughs at within the privacy of his own thoughts, off-page. Even Henry's own perspective is full of obfuscation, as if he's actively avoiding having to be up front with even the reader. Henry is, on every level, hiding from others, as an extension of the coping mechanisms we have observed in his younger self. He's just more humorous about it as an adult.

The *Flork of Cows* reference is especially important, I think, because it's the one that Henry is keeping closest to the chest, as well as the one with the most layers to it. Specifically, Henry's amusement at feeding his kids Taco Bell relates to a series of strips in the comic that tell the story of a surly, nameless protagonist getting into a series of mishaps learning to connect with

the failed clone of his late brother, who asks to go to Taco Bell with him; only Henry himself has the context for why it would be at all funny to make the connection, at this point.

Still, though, even with Henry being as difficult as he is, Nicole still knows him well enough at this point to make connections the reader still shouldn't really be able to, like how she jumps to needing to check the obituaries without Henry needing to be completely clear with her. She just has more context, because even with very private people, just sharing the same space long enough will give you some shorthands for what the other may be alluding to. We also, importantly for her, see her being much shorter and more direct with Henry than her teenage self was, and more willing to express annoyance with his attitude. Henry, for his part, takes it well, though it still doesn't motivate him to be up front with her.

Henry himself, and the previous snapshot from Lucy's perspective, do both imply, however, that he had been up front with Lucy, privately. Henry himself notes that he feels some level of connection with her—empathy, at any rate. Understanding, and the ability to relate. Still, though, what Henry is doing here isn't exactly a display of empathy, even if he feels justified in it because he wants to know what he's getting into; by immediately turning around and reporting to Nicole like this, he's betraying Lucy's trust. But: he would be betraying Nicole's trust by not forwarding this information to her, because it's relevant to her work, and she's counting on him to be reliable as a longtime friend. There isn't really a right answer in this situation, just a matter of priorities, and even Lucy herself is unlikely to be surprised at all by Henry's decision to put his obligations to Nicole first.

It also becomes fairly apparent in this snapshot that when Lucy noted that Henry appeared to her to be possessed, she may very well have meant it literally. When Kal thinks of Usagi as a sniper

and Henry thinks of Blake as a clone, etc, the characters' potential literality should also be kept in mind.

Nathan Samuels and Noelia Samuels, Washington, 2035

Nathan knew that there were siblings out there who got along perfectly well—siblings who were best friends, even. He knew this, though, not through personal experience, but rather through distant acquaintanceship with a handful of Wizens and his proximity to the Creaks siblings. For his own part, Nathan could confidently say that as decidedly in his sister's corner as he considered himself, he hated her. Luckily, the feeling was mutual, so he rarely felt particularly compelled to muster up any guilt on the matter.

He's not sure if it's right, exactly, and it's certainly not ideal, but it's... statistically average, he thinks. Normal. He and Nelly, they're okay.

He never likes spending time in her swanky Washington apartment, with its high ceilings, tall windows, open floor plan, and oppressively perfect interior decor. It's a politician's apartment, and it suits her, in a way.

"Ever since you moved out," he tells her, not for the first time, perched unhappily on one of the sleekly modern sofas that populate her living room, "You have always bought *the* most uncomfortable furniture."

"It's not about having comfortable couches," she fires back, sitting similarly, and knocks back her glass of whiskey. "It's about making a *statement*. If an associate has the nerve to make work for me in my own home, the least I can do is force them to sit in uncomfortable chairs."

Even her cups are obnoxious, it occurs to Nathan. He holds his own glass up to the light to observe, turning it this way and that to properly appreciate the craftsmanship. “Do you and Rin even use these when you don’t have people over? The couches, I mean.”

“No,” she says, easily. “We have comfortable chairs in the bedroom. Cheaper too.”

“Of course.”

They lapse into—not comfortable, exactly, but familiar silence. There has always been a lot of that, between them. Nathan and Nelly had always been such nice, quiet children, after all.

Their peace is broken by Nelly, who speaks up. “I remember, you wanted me to keep you up to date on anything Woodhouse. He’s working with someone I know, recently, according to her.”

Nathan raises an eyebrow, prompting her to go on.

She does. “I told you already about Martin, right? Lucy Martin? The one who caused that incident in Europe a while back.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Nathan allows, grimacing. “Why *do* you still know her, actually? If it comes out that you do, it won’t matter who you’re married to or where you stand, whatever you or Rin do. The Zauswalds don’t have much of a foot in the States, but she’s not in a great position, still. They’re still pressuring Golden Mist, and Golden Mist still needs their cooperation in Germany.”

Nelly shrugs. “She’s reliable. You don’t come by a seer like that every day.”

“You don’t think they can catch up to her?”

“No, I don’t. She’s not the smartest person I know, not really, but I don’t consider her stupid either.” She shrugs again. “And, well. No one can *prove* we know each other.”

Nathan finds himself smiling a thin smile. It’s an expression he could recognize from a mirror or from Nelly’s own face, often enough. “Right, of course not.” He frowns, slumping some.

“What’s Woodhouse want with her, though? He only leaves San Francisco for guild sessions, these days.” Something unfortunate occurs to him, and his eyebrows knit together. “She’s not...?”

“She’s not poking around San Francisco. I just told you I don’t think she’s stupid, Nathan.”

Nelly rolls her eyes. “Why is it so strange, anyway? Since when does Woodhouse ever make sense?”

“Everyone makes sense,” Nathan admonishes, annoyed. He, unlike Nelly, doesn’t have the benefit of indifference when Woodhouse insists on making a nuisance of himself. When Woodhouse insists on provoking this frustrated, pent up tension whenever he and Nathan find themselves in proximity. “I just—don’t have all the pieces. Even Woodhouse is human, even he has to operate on some kind of internal logic.”

“What pieces do we have, then, between the two of us?” Nelly prompts. Her expression turns mulish, almost genuinely thoughtful. “Woodhouse knew Emma at one point, when they were both six or so, and then they never spoke again after she moved. He was there at ground zero of San Francisco getting *weird*, was probably involved with the Kingslayer cult arson case at the center of that entire mess. San Francisco, now his territory, is possibly the only city in the country where the hooded figures won’t go. He used to work for the Goldcloaks, a dangerous job no one thanks you for, because he was—what? Dead broke? And,”—here, she sloshes her whiskey at Nathan for emphasis—“He shows up to guild sessions like clockwork, seemingly for the fuck of it.”

Nathan sets his own glass aside on Nelly’s tastefully, infuriatingly modern coffee table, so that he may have both hands free to steeple his fingers. “And Martin stole the magic of miracles from the Zauswalds.”

“Oh, yeah.” Nelly drains the rest of her drink. “Remind me, did I ever tell you why she did that? We got plastered together recently, maybe a couple months back, almost a year. She called me up, because she’d just got out of a talk with the Wizens–Jinnow? Milgo? One of them—and none of her friends were free.”

Nathan winces. “I’d want to get plastered too. But—wait.” He makes a face. “No, you didn’t tell me.”

Nelly shrugs some more. “It’s not like you’re involved with the Golden Mist investigation. Do you want me to tell you now or not?”

“Fine. Hit me.”

The corners of Nelly’s lips quirk up, baring teeth. “Her sister died.”

“Oh.” Nathan leans back into Nelly’s couch. He lets the revelation bounce around his skull some.

“And nothing else worked?”

“They were close, apparently, at one point. Nothing else worked to bring her back, and you know how death can be. You never really know what happens after.” Nelly tips her empty glass up, upending the ice cubes into her mouth. Nathan hates the crunching sound they make. After swallowing, she goes on. “Martin needed a miracle, so she went and swung a bat into the Zauswalds’ beehive to get one. But, see, that’s the thing.”

When Nelly’s pause goes on, Nathan feels his brow twitch. He knows she’s doing it to annoy him, and she knows it’s working. “What’s the thing, Nelly?”

“The thing is, Nathan, that it didn’t work.”

Nathan’s mouth falls slightly open.

“The body wouldn’t budge,” Nelly tells him, growing animated with what he now recognizes as grim, vaguely horrified curiosity. “She has a grave, on Kauai’i. Headstone and everything. But

it's not that nothing happened either, because you can't throw miracles around without things getting weird."

Nathan feels himself catching on, bile fascination coming to life somewhere in his gut. "She made a double."

"Exactly."

"And now she's working with Woodhouse."

It takes a second, but true to form, Nelly starts laughing at him. Nathan can only pour himself another drink.

COMMENTARY

Nathan and Nelly are the third set of siblings to get a snapshot to themselves, and in terms of functionality, they're somewhere between the Akiyama-Parks and the Martins. They definitely know how to talk to each other, communicate a point, and carry a conversation, and are maybe even better at it than the Akiyama-Parks, but they also have a lot between them that goes carefully unvoiced and they certainly don't like each other. Nathan and Nelly's relationship is business, but it's also ironclad, with them being completely confident in talking about information that could ruin them if it got out. Nathan and Nelly's idea of family is obligation, which isn't conducive to fostering genuine emotional connections, but which is much more stable than Lucy and Kal's inability to properly define what they want from the other in the first place.

Nathan is actively uncomfortable in Nelly's presence and space, in contrast to how at ease he was with Emma, someone who he was choosing to be around rather than feeling like he needs to maintain some kind of relationship with. They also, though, know each other very well; Nathan is much better at predicting what's going on in Nelly's head than in Emma's, because they were

shaped by the same circumstances. Nathan doesn't like to be around Nelly, but he's ultimately pretty honest and straightforward with her, even if there are things neither of them know how to talk about; in contrast, the Martin sisters were actively hostile to one another in their snapshot. Nathan and Nelly know how to navigate one another, while the Martin sisters do not.

On the flip side, though, Nathan and Nelly's businesslike obligation to one another also reflects emotional detachment. Nathan is surprised at the idea of Lucy going so far out of her way just to keep her sister in her life, because he would never go through so much trouble to maintain a relationship with Nelly and vice versa. Lucy and Kal, as messed up and unhealthy as their dynamic is, do still love each other in a very complicated, unhappy way. It wouldn't hurt so much if they didn't care.

The Akiyama-Park siblings, unlike the Samuelses and the Martins, don't really have any of these issues. So far, their friction has been the product of Usagi being a bad roommate, more than anything; they're still kids who don't really know how to communicate with one another, despite having no real deep-seated issues. Their situation, though, is also the least extreme or traumatizing—they're noted in their own snapshot to have at least one parent actively in the picture, they both have friends, and they both have their own interests to occupy their free time. Meanwhile, Nathan's narration has alluded to the expectations he and Nelly have been confined by, and the Martins have no parents and Kal is a dead clone girl. For people to form healthy, openly honest connections with one another, their environment and the way they're taught to interact with the world is important.

Because Nelly and Nathan were expected to be quiet and convenient, they grew into adults who see human relationships as very transactional, and who have too many bad associations with the other and how the other operates to be able to open up to each other. Because Lucy and Kal only

really had each other for at least some period of time, they were at least at one point close and are very attached to each other, but have no idea how to troubleshoot their issues with one another for fear of outright losing that relationship rather than just being unhappy in it.

I also want to point out that Nelly is doing the same thing here that Henry did earlier, breaching Lucy's trust not out of malice but simple practicality and an incompatible hierarchy of priorities. Lucy has very good reasons not to trust other people with her secrets and to be reluctant about trying to reach out for connection with others; for every Usagi out there, there's a Nelly. It isn't wrong or misguided of people to be wary of one another, even if it's unfortunate that we live in a world where this kind of subterfuge is expected in most of our relationships. There is a real risk factor in trying to reach out to others.

[Kalliope Martin and Usagi Akiyama-Park, Kauai'i, 2036](#)

The first time Kal boards a plane, she's seventeen in some senses and five in others. There's a giddy, bubbling, bottled up sort of dread pooling in her gut as Usagi bulldozes through customs with the same pigheaded surety and lifeless eyes she regards all the world with; all the while, tugging Kal along by the hand. Kal isn't sure what Usagi told her own parents, exactly. Maybe that Lucy would be chaperoning them—she wouldn't even be lying, technically, if all goes to plan. Usagi probably wouldn't have meant it as a lie, knowing her, anyway. Always so confident. “Someday, we'll have someone for logistics,” Usagi tells her, characteristically grim, as they cue up to board.

With her heart in her throat, Kal is starting to think that she might believe her.

COMMENTARY

Kal and Usagi, here, are in a liminal space—as teenagers, and as individuals rushing through an airport. That’s why it’s especially brief, the snapshot acting in itself as a transition. I think a lot of people end up doing things when they’re teenagers, with their friends, that are motivated but impulsivity and that feel both amazing and terrifying in the moment. Those decisions, made on a kind of high of feelings, are pretty hazy and liminal-feeling in their own right. It’s not something you think through, it’s something you do when you’re a kid and you feel invincible because you’re finally starting to understand the weight of the connections you think you’ve made, and because the alternative is confronting your own relative powerlessness.

While the decision Kal and Usagi are making here is pretty extreme—boarding a plane on their own, that is—this impulse exists in even the most well-behaved people. We’re more likely to do something silly if our friends are backing us up; in my own experience, when I was a young teenager, a couple of us egged each other on into rooting through a neighbor’s pile of discarded junk for material to build a secret base. That neighbor had never given us permission, and we all knew it was bad, but it was thrilling to keep a look-out for each other and then to run away all together when we thought we saw the owner approach. When you’re a kid, being a little bad together with your friends feels good, because of that understanding that you’re all sticking your necks out together. It’s a proof of trust and companionship, a show of faith, even if it’s pretty shallow in reality. All people feel a need to be understood and accepted by others in some way, but it’s something that most of us are only going to start to realize somewhere in our teens, a point in our lives where we’re also pretty likely to start feeling out the differences between ourselves, the people we’d like to be, and the adults in our lives. The affirmation that our peers, our friends, are willing to do stupid things with us is a way of drawing a line in the sand. Us on

the inside, the *other* and the *not-us* on the outside. This is especially true when we have a real, tangible reason to feel othered from our other relationships, like Kal does with Lucy.

To illustrate the point of how much likelier kids are to engage in bad behavior when it is done as an affirmation of group exclusivity and membership with their friends—that secret base anecdote would usually be so out of character for me, my own mother had initially been dead certain I’d made it up when I retold it to her while writing this section up.

Usagi, though, in contrast to Kal, is seemingly more motivated by the same independence streak we’ve seen in her so far. Kal herself ascribes a lot of agency to Usagi, noting how usual she’s being, when her personality is taken into account; Usagi isn’t being impulsive, Usagi is being decisive. On some level, Kal understands that this is kind of a bad idea, so she’s preemptively giving Usagi more responsibility and perceived control over the situation, even though she’s made no moves to vocalize dissent. This, again, is for Kal’s own peace of mind.

[Lucy Martin and Henry Woodhouse, Mull of Galloway, 2036](#)

Hell is a little, warded tent on the cliffs of Galloway with no one for company but Henry fucking Woodhouse, Lucy realizes belatedly one stormy winter’s afternoon. Not that she would know it to be afternoon, of course, by anything but her own internal clock; the sky is dark with clouds, and Henry’s mood is dark with a certified homebody’s regrets.

For her part, Lucy tries to make the best of her lot and ignore him, tricked out binoculars studiously trained on the furiously churning waters of the Irish Sea ahead. She’s left the wards to him, because it will keep him busy and because he’s ultimately the better wizard of the pair of them, while she sits on her butt at the edge of their little circle with her favorite stake-out blanket wrapped around her shoulders and a humble cheese sandwich in her free hand. Her stake-out

blanket is a lovely, creamy pink, but she doubts Woodhouse is particularly able to appreciate that.

“Why did I let you talk me into this?” Woodhouse asks from somewhere behind Lucy, between her and the tent. “I am never, ever leaving San Francisco ever again. I’m never leaving my apartment again, actually.”

“Not even for Michigan Lake?” Lucy asks, blandly, around a mouthful of cheese sandwich. She doesn’t turn around.

“They have *housing* there. And *toilets*.”

Lucy swallows. “And Nathan Samuels.”

“I hate you.” He says it with such mournful conviction too. Lucy would almost feel bad for him, if this wasn’t her life, and if whatever’s possessing him hadn’t been periodically trying to shove her out of their circle and into the storm.

“I don’t get you,” she tells him instead. “You could just stay away. What keeps you coming back? What keeps you involved at all, to be frank? Sunk cost fallacy, bile fascination, what?”

A great, heaving sigh comes from behind Lucy. She wonders if his shoulders have slumped, but she really has no way of knowing without turning around to look, and she’s still too professional for that. “Same thing that keeps you involved, I think. Love.”

Something in Lucy’s face twitches. “That just makes us both suckers.”

Rustling and clinking from behind her inform Lucy that Woodhouse’s returned to his own task, leaving her with nothing much to do but watch the ocean and stew, as she had been. It won’t matter once the job is done and she gets to never think about Woodhouse again, but dammit, she was going to throttle Milgo. Milgo, and her meddling, and her comparisons. Because—

Because she wasn't wrong. Because Lucy and Woodhouse did have a good few things in common and a good few things to talk about. Because Lucy and Woodhouse, when faced with similar problems, fucked up in opposite directions.

But Lucy doesn't have to *like* it.

"I don't *get* you," Lucy repeats, with feeling. The rustling and clinking stops, almost expectantly, and she continues. "You didn't get what you wanted either. How can you be okay with that?"

A pause, a put-upon sigh, the sound of footsteps, and a fully grown man in a truly ancient duster thudding down to the ground beside her. Lucy glances at him slantways, already dreading the conversation she's started.

"Of course I'm not okay with it," Woodhouse huffs, and even Lucy can tell that he's taken some kind of offense. "But what was I supposed to do? No matter what Emma or Nathan did, it's not Blake's fault."

"It's not Samuels's brother's fault, either, technically, or his girlfriend's," Lucy fires back, and takes vindictive satisfaction in the way Woodhouse's face goes carefully blank. "But you still go out of your way to fuck with him, and you still run away from her."

"I don't *fuck* with him. I don't go to guild meetings for him." His hands clench and unclench in the dirt. The one of them that Lucy can see does, anyway. "If I don't try to look out for San Francisco, nobody else can, not at the guild. So I have to go, and when I do, he's just—it's *frustrating*. To see him, to know how much more he could be if he got his head out of his ass for two minutes, and for him to still be so... For him to not *know*."

"But you're not going to tell him." Lucy takes another bite out of her sandwich. Chews.

Swallows. "And his girlfriend?"

“Is a lunatic. I can’t—” He cuts off, abruptly, and turns fully to face Lucy. “It’s not her fault, but it’s still *her* fault, all of this. All of it. Casper has her face, you know that? Blake has her face. I *can’t*.”

Startled, Lucy blinks up at Woodhouse. It really is a crime, the handful of inches he has on her.

“I mean. Yeah, I avoid my house to avoid... you know. I get that.”

He turns away, and after a beat, so does Lucy. For some minutes, neither of them says anything, the pair of them looking out at the sea. Just as Lucy begins to wonder if she should offer Woodhouse the spare binoculars, he sighs, again, and bats at something she can’t see to his left. Casper, presumably.

“I was never going to get what I wanted, with either of them, and that’s not Blake’s fault. He didn’t ask to be born.” Woodhouse shifts. Shrugs. “I didn’t have anything to do with him, then, and he had nothing to do with me. None of it was my fault, that time, for once. But he needed a home, and I was there, and someone at least should’ve tried.”

Lucy scowls. “You’re a self-righteous prick, Woodhouse.”

All it earns her is a single brow raised in skeptical mockery.

“And you’re a shitty, irresponsible adult,” Woodhouse tells her, dripping sarcasm. “And that’s coming from *me*. Do you know when the last time I showered was?”

“I don’t want to. I’m trying to eat.” Still, though, she can’t help but see his point. She gazes down at her cheese sandwich in lament. “It’s not like I don’t understand, intellectually. Just because cloning my dead little sister was an accident, just because I did something stupid and desperate and that I didn’t understand, it doesn’t mean it’s not my fault. But it just...”

Helplessly, Lucy looks back up at him. “You got a *kid* Woodhouse. A kid and some weird, freaky ghost thing. I got a duck that quacks and waddles like my sister, but *isn’t*. I buried her.”

Woodhouse makes a complicated, sympathetic face, only slightly too tight around the eyes and mouth to be a grimace. “I’m not going to pretend I understand what that’s like, or why that’s the best the Zauswalds’ magic could do for you. But that’s still really, *really* not an excuse.”

Defeated and frustrated, Lucy readjusts her position so that she’s once again oriented out toward the sea, away from Woodhouse. “Whatever. Inevitably, the world will correct itself, probably. And then it’ll be gone. It won’t be my problem anymore.”

“She,” Woodhouse corrects, and the sound of grass being squashed signals that he’s also turned away. Graciously, Lucy refrains from trying to claw his eyes out.

Instead, she stuffs the rest of her sandwich in her mouth and brings the binoculars back up to her eyes. It’s quiet as she chews, and she can almost pretend that there’s any kind of peace between the pair of them.

Eventually, attention still firmly on the water ahead, she can’t help but ask: “Casper?”

“You know. Casper the Unfriendly...” Woodhouse stops mid-jazz hands, which Lucy can’t so much see as she can guess at, based on their several hours of being stuck together at this point. She hears him straighten, then stand. “Something’s tripped the wards.”

COMMENTARY

Here, we finally start to get the payoff to Milgo’s little scheme, with Henry and Lucy managing to more or less connect and poke each other into self-reflecting despite not really coming to any real agreement. They don’t like each other, and don’t even really respect each other beyond the baseline professional level, but they’re able to understand one another and speak honestly about their bad experiences. This is the most honest we’ve seen either of these characters, and that’s partially *because* they don’t really care about each other and aren’t as afraid of the consequences to their relationship as they would be with their loved ones. Milgo was right, and this is good for

them. They're able to relate to each other as people, and that's dragging them both out of their own heads to an extent and forcing them to take someone else into account.

Still, though, Lucy is still very defensive and Henry still can't help but fall back on obtuse references to separate himself from the raw emotions of the things that have traumatized him.

Just because they're making some level of progress doesn't mean that the way they interact with the world on the most fundamental level has changed. Their coping mechanisms are still the same; they're just working around them, very clumsily.

We also see, again, Henry's responsible streak when it comes to his kids. He himself notes that his attitude to childrearing is in contrast to his difficulty in prioritizing and taking care of himself, and while Henry doesn't verbally make the connection himself, a big part of his drive here is his own bad experiences in foster care that have been repeatedly alluded to. Lucy is taking out her frustrations, in her own way, on her charge, because she doesn't really know how to do or be better; Henry, meanwhile, took the other road, of not wanting to replicate what things were like for him because he's able to recognize that he had been a destructive, unhappy child.

Usagi Akiyama-Park and Kalliope Martin, Mull of Galloway, 2036

As much as Usagi did genuinely believe that it would be good for Kal and her sister to stop pussyfooting around and confront their issues as soon as possible, she'd be lying if she said she wasn't also ready to jump at any excuse to launch her first real operation, and Usagi rarely lies. She was getting bored of staking out the convenience store for practice, anyway.

In contrast to Kal, radiating misery in the pelting, Scottish rain even as she trudges resolutely along hand-in-hand with Usagi, Usagi herself is self-aware enough to be quite sure that her own expression is set with the same grim determination that is her default. Her eyes may be manic

with glee, even, judging by the particular, exasperated quality about the angle of Kal's frown.

This is fine, all of it; it's why Usagi is guns, Kal is recon, and not vice versa. The great outdoors will be a moot point, once their assassination squad is a few more people strong.

And it will be. Usagi has known as much since she was six, after all.

An especially strong gust of wind blows down on them, front to back, so Usagi digs her heels in and tightens her grip on Kal. While she'd rarely—if ever—gotten the chance to practice cold weather scenarios in Hawai'i, Usagi is more or less happy with her success so far, and how the mountaineering gear the pair of them had... *secured*... has held up. She would voice this to Kal, if she weren't sure Kal would sock her arm for it, presently.

Instead, Usagi nods into the distance, where she can just about make out tent. Something about the air around it is wrong, seemingly bubbling up into a dome around its parameter. Critically, Usagi wonders if regular firearms would be enough to breach whatever protections they have up. "That her?" she yells over the howling gale.

"Should be!" Kal yells back from just a step behind.

Usagi nods, mind made up to keep going, but something in the space around them *shifts*. Usagi feels it immediately and moves to pull back, every muscle poised to jump, but she still feels herself pulled forward and off her feet—feels her eyes widen, hears Kal yelp, and—

And feels the both of them land in a heap on the ground, eating dirt. Usagi jerks to look up immediately, to get a visual on their new situation, and only Kal yanking hastily at the back of her coat keeps her from bolting to her feet. Usagi takes note of several things in quick succession.

First, the rain's stopped and the wind's stilled to a calm. Hearing about magic—magic beyond the occasional tales of a townspeople encountering a supposed parade of nightmarchers, at any rate—

from Kal had been interesting despite how erratic the bulk of that heart-to-heart had been, but it had changed very little for Usagi, ultimately. This, though. This could be useful.

Second, the practice dummy, also identified as Kal's sister, stands over them with a pink blanket around her shoulders and a green-haired man at her side. The practice dummy appears stricken, even horrified, and likely also confused; the green man appears exasperated. Neither is an enemy combatant, yet. Hostility levels will likely rise or fall as the encounter unfolds.

Third, the practice dummy is working up to addressing them.

"You— *You*—" Lucy starts, flabbergasted. "*Why?*"

Kal's grip on Usagi's coat tightens and her expression locks into a neutral smile, so Usagi perks up and answers for her. "You're both really dumb. You hafta talk about it."

Lucy's face turns an alarming shade of red. "*How?*"

Usagi's eyes only narrow at her, fractionally. "A hitman never reveals her secrets."

Lucy sputters, but the green man and Kal are both startled into laughter—his full-bodied and incredulous, hers somewhere in the ballpark of hysterical. Usagi hadn't been making a joke, but Kal's hold on her slackens, so she'll take it as a victory nonetheless.

"You're really—" the green man starts, grin crooked and eyes full of mirth along with something... else. He doesn't get to finish, however, and Usagi doesn't get to think about it for very long, because that's when the wards pulsate and quake and spit out two new additions to their group in a shower of sparks.

COMMENTARY

The first snapshot where more than two characters get to speak. I considered giving it more room to play out and touch on conversational dynamics in a group setting, but ultimately, that's beyond the scale of this project and tangential. Keeping in line with the two-person moments

we've been looking at thus far, the important players here remain Usagi, Kal, and what this experience means for the pair of them.

We both get to see the culmination of Usagi's unchecked attitude here, and Kal's growing willingness to rely on her, for better or for worse. Even though Usagi is coming off here, to Lucy, as completely unreasonable and bizarre, Kal still let Usagi maneuver the both of them into this situation and is continuing to actively enable Usagi to speak for the both of them. Kal had physically held Usagi back from starting a fight, but she's also relying on that physical contact to anchor herself and calm herself down.

Usagi, for her part, is reaching the logical, fantastical extreme of her situation: she has always been perfectly serious about wanting to become a hitman, an objectively terrible thing, but no one has ever taken her particularly seriously about it, and so no one ever thought to properly sit her down and talk her out of it. While most people don't go gallivanting off to the Scottish countryside for hired gun training at the flimsiest excuse, it's a fact of life that many people do in fact go on to defy what we would usually consider common sense just because nobody ever properly bothered to rid them of certain notions. For example, when I was very young, I got myself jammed under the kindergarten fence because nobody had ever explained to me that I shouldn't be trying to wedge myself out of it. In that case, after being freed, the teacher was able to understand that I had been operating on bad information and explained to me why I should avoid wedging myself under the fence. Some things are bound to slip through the cracks, though, especially because kids are rarely taken very seriously, and some very concerning beliefs about reality can go unchecked well into adulthood. Usagi's beliefs about what is and isn't possible and desirable have taken her all the way to Galloway, and she's perfectly convinced that there's

nothing unusual about the way that she thinks. She's very matter-of-fact about it all, within her own head, because this *is* Usagi's normal.

Nicole Siqeyu and Usagi Akiyama-Park, Mull of Galloway, 2036

In Nicole's own opinion, Nathan Samuels should have never been her problem. Antagonizing him had always been Henry's decision, for whatever reason, and it has thankfully never involved her; she hasn't been unlucky enough, at this stage, to have had much involvement in guild politics.

However, her friendship with Henry is reasonably well-known. She just never thought that Samuels would go out of his way to *make* himself her problem over it.

Yet, here she was: in the butt-fuck middle of nowhere, Scotland, holed up in Lucy Martin's dinky stake-out tent with a surly teenager that she'd been sincerely hoping to never run into again, trying really hard to pretend that she couldn't hear the Martin sisters or the men have conversational crises on opposite ends of the wards outside. All because Nathan *fucking* Samuels just had, absolutely *had*, to come to her looking for Henry's whereabouts, knowing that she'd know and knowing that he was working with Martin somehow, knowing that she couldn't turn him down without being turned in for misconduct and strung up by her ankles. Nathan *fucking* Samuels.

Nicole picks and pokes, miserably, at the drenched pseudo-spandex of her uniform. She considers ditching the hood, but seeing as she still doesn't know if a physical fight is going to break out, she decides against it. Under the cover of her visor, she glances sideways to Usagi, sitting cross-legged on the tent floor beside Nicole.

“What *are* you doing here?” she asks, for lack of much else to distract herself with. Usagi doesn’t look at her, doesn’t even move, and Nicole tries not to be unsettled by the consistency of her grimness. “Martin didn’t exactly strike me as the type to bring her kid sister and her kid sister’s friend to work for no reason.”

“We followed them,” Usagi says, still looking steadily forward. Something about her lifeless eyes shines with what Nicole almost wants to call pride. “Kal and the target need to talk. The mission was to make it happen. Mission status still unclear, but I’m optimistic.”

Nicole’s eyebrows knit together. The clumsy, clearly pop culture-cribed spy talk should be laughable, but between Usagi’s delivery and the implication that a determined teenager successfully tailed the thief Nicole’s been after on and off for years now, she doesn’t feel very much like laughing.

Nicole is saved, at least, from having to try to come up with a response, because Usagi perks up and keeps speaking. She even graces Nicole with her attention, calculating in a way no seventeen-year-old has the right to be. “Why are you here?”

It’s too flat to be accusatory. Curious, maybe. Nicole slumps a little against the tent’s tarp wall.

“Same as you, in a way. Samuels—the guy I showed up with—he wanted to talk to Henry.”

“The green man.” Usagi nods, like it makes sense to her.

Nicole grimaces, though Usagi wouldn’t be able to see it. The green hair and eyes were... not something Nicole liked to think about, exactly, nor something Henry had ever given her a straight answer on. Maybe that’s going to change now, but probably not. “Right. That guy.”

“What are they talking about?”

“Why are *you* talking so *much*?” Nicole rolls her eyes. Again, not that Usagi can see. “I thought you were the quiet type, from last time.”

Usagi remains perfectly undisturbed. Doesn't even blink. "Information is Kal's job, but she's busy."

"Right. Right, okay." What a deeply creepy child. She's going places, definitely. Prison, most likely. "To be fully honest with you, I'm not sure what they're talking about. Henry won't tell me what his problem with Samuels is, and I could never piece it together."

Usagi tilts her head, fractionally. "You're a cop."

"I'm not a *detective*, and I wasn't being paid to dig up either of their skeletons." Nicole hisses out a breath, nice and slow, through her nose. "It never seemed to add up. Henry, he's—he knows Samuels, has clearly known him for ages, I think since we were teenagers. Since he got involved with the Wizens." Since Henry started refusing to tell anyone where he'd been disappearing off to, with a boy and a girl he refused to name. "But when anyone asks either of them about it, they say they met at a guild session in 2031."

Usagi says nothing. Nicole doesn't pretend to have the slightest clue what she's thinking.

"We both knew Samuels's girlfriend when we were—what, six?" Nicole continues, regardless.

She chooses to keep the fact that one of the kids Henry is raising is the spitting image of Emma to herself. "But apparently, Henry hadn't seen her until 2031 either, and he avoids her now if he can help it."

"Why does Nathan want to talk to him now?"

Nicole shrugs. "Nominally, because Samuels doesn't trust whatever it is that he could be getting up to with Martin's resources. I pretty much believe him on it, but there's too much history there at this point for any kind of confrontation between them not to blow up in a personal way."

Usagi turns back to face ahead, like the opposite tent wall is interesting somehow. Nicole takes it as her way of signaling the end of her interest in the conversation.

What a frustrating kid.

COMMENTARY

I wanted to stay in Nicole's head for her second talk with Usagi, because with the pair of them, a part of the point of showing them talk is the fact that Nicole isn't able to read Usagi properly.

That would be more difficult to convey from Usagi's perspective.

Their conversation didn't really go anywhere from the perspective of the characters, even if the information that Nicole brings to the table is relevant to the overall narrative, because even now that Nicole knows to take Usagi more seriously she still doesn't know how to make a real effort to understand her and isn't in a position to want to. She had expressed concern for Usagi within her own head the first time they met, but the timing isn't right; Nicole is drenched and unhappy to be where she is in the first place, and is in no mindset to try to reach out to Usagi. She's only able to be frustrated with her for her unsettling qualities right now, where before, she was in a better head space to be sympathetic.

Even good, kind, other-minded people aren't going to be able to connect with others—or even try to offer that connection—all the time, and that doesn't make them bad. Emotional vulnerability is exhausting, and even though Nicole isn't being a perfectly responsible adult in this conversation, it's understandable that she wouldn't be able to emotionally prioritize Usagi in this situation.

She's also still showing loyalty to Henry here, by only sharing with Usagi vague speculation and keeping any genuinely sensitive information to herself. Usagi, meanwhile, is still keeping it to herself out of caution that she knows Nathan and Emma, like she kept it to herself that she knew Lucy.

Lucy Martin and Kalliope Martin, Mull of Galloway, 2036

Lucy, in many ways by her own choice, is not always the most observant of people. Willfully, even. It's crucial, for work, for her to be able to read potential buyers, colleagues, and obstacles, but at home—at home, she gets to pretend she doesn't notice the loaded silence that characterizes her relationship with the little clone wearing her sister's face, when she can't avoid being present in the first place.

Silence continues to characterize them now, even on the edge of a cliff in the ass end of Scotland. Looking Kal in the face now, staring down her tightly polite smile and liquid eyes, Lucy can only feel the muscles in her jaw work as she casts about for something, *anything*, to bring this not-but-almost confrontation to an end.

Distantly, she can hear Woodhouse and Samuels's brother have a screaming match. She wonders, vaguely, if she should envy them.

“What do you *want*?” Lucy somewhere between begs and demands, eventually.

Kal answers her with more silence, but of a contemplative, complicated sort. Before Lucy can snap and scream, she lets out a stilted, defeated breath. “I don't know.”

A laugh, piercingly clear and twice as mean, is startled very honestly out of Lucy. “You don't *know*?”

Kal's smile stretches, just a bit, kind of like a rubber band under uncomfortable strain. “Not in the slightest. I could ask you to love me, but you're not going to.”

It rings between Lucy's ears like a hockey puck, or maybe like a shot. She feels sweltering irritation bubble up under her skin, on the inside of her skull, and there's nowhere for it to *go*.

Her hands ball into fists, only not painfully so because the fucked up adrenaline cocktail Kal has managed to kickstart her brain into brewing seeps into whatever aspect of her physical being governs motor control.

“Give me a *break*,” Lucy hisses, quiet, always so *quiet*. It didn’t used to be like this between them. Or—no. No, it didn’t used to be like this between Lucy and her sister. “Could you, Kal? If you were in my situation, are you really going to tell me you could look at yourself and not want to *break something*?”

“I don’t *know*,” Kal returns, again, possibly even quieter, with a mounting edge of hysteria. The wind and rain howl outside, Woodhouse and Samuels’s brother scream at each other from across the wards, the world spins on. And still. Still, Lucy and Kal remain the cowards they’ve been up until this point. “I don’t *know*, okay? But I—I’m miserable. You’re miserable. I don’t understand why we’re like this.”

Lucy buries her head in her hands. “Because I fucked up! I fucked up, Kal, and you’re not—”

Lucy bites off her own words with a strangled growl. “You’re not what I wanted. And I know already, I know that it’s my fault. I put my sister in the ground, what do you *want from me*?”

“I know!” Kal insists, and Lucy can’t see her anymore, but there’s a wetness to her voice that suggests tears. God. God, Lucy really can’t see her cry right now. God damn it. “I saw my own— It was *my*—” An honest-to-heaven sob cracks through. “It was my body too!”

“No. No, it wasn’t. That’s the problem.”

“But *why*? I’m—even if I’m not what you wanted, I’m here, aren’t I? I’m still breathing for now, aren’t I? Just for a little while—just for a little while, why won’t you...”

Kal trails off into barely audible snuffles. Lucy tries and fails to muster up the courage to look at her again, and fails.

Lucy is no good at words, she knows. Not when it comes to this person, this little mess she’s responsible for and refuses to read. But—maybe she can be good at silence.

Feeling tired to her bones and still not brave enough to look Kal in the face, Lucy takes one and then two and then three steps forward, and wraps her arms around Kal.

Neither of them is sure how long they stand there crying for, but it's exhausting.

COMMENTARY

This isn't a resolution to Kal and Lucy's problems, not really. People's interpersonal troubles very rarely get resolved through a one-off screaming match, and Lucy and Kal still have no real idea how to talk to each other. However, what they did manage to do is take the first step and reach out to one another, and despite the clumsy delivery, they've achieved reciprocity. This conversation isn't going to make either of them happy, but they needed to have it so they can move forward. Whether or not they can make good on this opportunity or fall back onto their old habits depends entirely on the effort both of them are willing to put forward.

Personally, I fundamentally hate engaging in or even being a bystander to arguments like this one, where no real problem solving can actually take place due to the inexperience and inability to communicate honestly of the people involved. Kal and Lucy are absolutely going to need a therapist to help them sort their problems with one another out, but not all relationships, relational problems, and people are like that; in my own life, when it comes to my close family members and our disagreements, I try to be as direct as possible with anything that's bothering any of us to avoid it spiraling.

That's only possible to accomplish in a healthy way because there's a strong, pre existing bond of trust between me and these people, and because I'm very careful with how I express myself. Precision is important, as well as honesty and faith that the other person will let you explain yourself, and Lucy and Kal just aren't there yet. Even with the people I love most, conversations about how we hurt one another unintentionally are always stressful and painful, and I don't think

anyone actually really *wants* to have them. We just have to understand that the alternative is worse.

Arguments like Kal and Lucy had here, where something is achieved in terms of establishing mutual investment but nothing is fully fixed, are much more common than arguments where a problem is entirely laid out and addressed in clinical detail but a good deal less common than arguments where nothing at all productive happens. Most people will have conversations like this at some point, whether we can identify them or not. The most important thing that Kal and Lucy, at least, managed to achieve through their experience with an argument like this is that they've both more or less managed to communicate the unspoken *care* they've invested into each other and their relationship, and that neither of them is actually as indifferent or as oblivious as they've both been pretending.

Nathan Samuels and Henry Woodhouse, *Mull of Galloway*, 2036

"You've been on my case for years," Nathan fumes, well and truly at the end of his rope. "The least you can do, Woodhouse, is tell me *why*."

"And I'm telling you," Woodhouse fires back, his face a splotchy, angry red. "That the least you can do is *fuck off*."

Nathan inhales through his nose and forces himself to stay calm. Calm-ish, at least. "Do you have any idea the kind of situation you're in? With Martin?"

"You're not going to do anything." Woodhouse crosses his arms. "None of you've so much as wanted to make eye contact with San Francisco since—" His breath hitches, but it might just be that he's reaching the point of being too furious to speak properly. "Since I was twenty. Go ahead, report it to the guild. It's not a fight I'm going to lose."

Not physically, Nathan thinks, and grimaces. He can't help but dart a glance at the prominent pockets of Woodhouse's old, awful coat, wary of the wand surely hiding in their depths. But—no. He knows this much about Woodhouse, at least: he's not going to throw the first blow when he risks a pair of idiot teenagers as collateral.

“Look,” Nathan starts, and tries not to sound like he's pleading. “Just—for once, try to look at this from my perspective. I've been trying to figure you out ever since I met you, and I can't make sense of anything you do.”

That seems to take some of the fight out of Woodhouse, whose shoulders slump ever so slightly.

“I wish—” His breath hitches, again. “I wish I'd met you sooner.”

Nathan blinks, lips parting just a bit in silent surprise. “I thought you hated me.”

Mirthlessly, Woodhouse laughs. The sound is almost grating. “It would be easier if I hated you.”

“And you—don't?”

“No, I don't.” There's something about the complicated slant of Woodhouse's smile that Nathan doesn't like, but he's not sure precisely what. “You're not a fucking idiot, Nathan. I know for a fact if I met you when we were fourteen, if you got your *head* out of your *ass* about your family when we were teenagers, you'd be—” He breaks off to hiss out a profanity. “You'd be doing so much more *good* with your *stupid guild job*.”

Nathan feels his own face growing hot with frustration, which is just fitting, really. With Woodhouse losing steam, of course it would be Nathan's turn to start losing his temper; it's always been like this for them, as far as he remembers. A terrible see-saw of who has the higher mental ground. “See, it would make sense if you'd come to that conclusion over the time of me knowing you, but you've been like this since day one. What are you comparing me to,

Woodhouse? I just—I can’t figure it out. What your problem with me is, or with Emma, for that matter.”

At her name, Woodhouse’s hands visibly tighten on his still-crossed arms. “You.”

“I’m your problem? You just said you didn’t hate—”

Woodhouse rolls his eyes. “No, dumbass, *you*. I’m comparing you to *you*.”

Nathan puts his head in his hands and—very deservedly, he thinks—lets out a strangled sound of frustration. “I am begging you to make sense! For two minutes, Woodhouse!”

He hears Woodhouse laugh. Genuinely, he thinks, if sadly. Nathan wants to wring his neck.

“Remember around the time things started getting weird in San Francisco? When we were fourteen?” Woodhouse prompts, too casual to actually be meant even remotely casually.

Nathan nods, but doesn’t look up. Muffled by his hands: “The start of the San Francisco breach incident.”

“Right. That’s the first time I met you.”

Nathan parts his fingers just enough to glare at Woodhouse in question, one-eyed. The face he gets in return is amused, but brittle.

“A version of you. The *breach incident*—” And here, he deploys air quotes, the absolute *tool*. “—Like Golden Mist started calling it at the time, wasn’t Cthulhu trying to break into reality. It was two idiot teenagers making pit stops on their interdimensional road trip.”

Nathan’s hands drop to his sides. “You’re shitting me.”

“Nope!” Woodhouse has the nerve to faux-cheerfully pop the p, arms fanning out halfheartedly at either side of him like a poorly motivated circus ringleader.

“You—” Nathan chokes, just a little. “You’re telling me, you’re so weird about me and Emma because there were *two pairs of us*?”

“Bingo! Knew you could do it, Nathan!” He cocks a pair of finger guns at Nathan, but doesn’t resist when Nathan bats them away. Actually, Nathan halfway suspects that if he did decide to go for Woodhouse’s throat, Woodhouse might just let him.

“*That’s why* you’re always so familiar with me? Because you—what? Did arson with *another me?*”

“The arson was mostly my fault,” Woodhouse admits, and gods above, he sounds *sheepish*. “It was...”

Woodhouse sighs, and plops down cross-legged onto the grass. After a moment’s hesitation, Nathan follows suit.

“I’m gonna start from the beginning,” Woodhouse tells him, resolute. “A long time ago, in a galaxy far—”

“I’ll kill you.”

“No, you won’t, but fine.” Woodhouse deflates some. “When I was really small, I lived in a group home, Little Bugs. It’s how I know Nicole, her mom used to live there before I did and visited sometimes to help out. The man who taught me magic adopted me from there.”

“Zachariah Kessler, the necromancer,” Nathan recalls. “Who died in the...”

“Cult arson case.” Woodhouse nods, and grimaces. “He wasn’t... He wasn’t a good person. He was an asshole, actually. He needed to outsource for an apprentice because his son and daughter both got away from him the second they turned eighteen.”

“And that’s where you come in.”

“Right, except that when I was fourteen, I ran into the—” His breath hitches one more time.

Nathan’s hands ball into fists in his lap. “The other you, and the other Emma. I knew an Emma already, the same one you know, from around the neighborhood when I was six. I thought it was

the same one at first, which is where it started, I tried to talk to her.” Woodhouse shakes his head, helplessly fond. “Lunatic. Completely crazy, every version of her. And you, you’re always an enabler. I got this coat off of her, you know that? And it was all your... the other you’s fault. He managed to lose my old jacket at the docks. She said a trenchcoat was more interesting.” Nathan squashes the pit growing in his stomach and leans in, drawn in despite himself. “How did they get here? Other worlds are still... That’s still not normal. We don’t know how to do that yet.”

“She had this kind of device,” Woodhouse says, motioning with his hands to indicate size. “Like a music box and a compass and a clock. Wouldn’t let anyone else touch it.”

“Of course not,” Nathan huffs. “She wouldn’t be Emma, if she did.”

“Right?” Woodhouse flashes a smile Nathan wouldn’t quite call happy. His eyes look a little glossy. “I don’t know how they met the Wizens, but they introduced me to Milgo. Milgo already liked them both, at that point.”

Nathan tilts his head. “And–Kessler?”

“Oh. Yeah, him.” Woodhouse looks away, planting his hands on the ground at either side of himself for support and shifting his weight back. “He found out about them, and he wanted her clock. Things... escalated.”

“To arson. Things escalated to arson.”

That earns Nathan another eye roll. “*Yes*, arson.”

“And murder.”

“Yes, murder!” Woodhouse glares at him. “And he wasn’t the only one who wanted it. Things... kept escalating.”

“And eventually,” Nathan realizes, slowly, with a dull, dawning pang of sympathy. “They left. When the breach case closed, when we were twenty.”

“Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner!”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Cope.” Woodhouse shifts his weight again. “It’s not really... *exactly* that they left, though. You know how Emma is. She’s greedy.”

“She’s...” Nathan thinks about it. “Yeah. She wouldn’t give up on seeing a whole world just for one person’s sake.”

“Yeah. So, he left, and she’s avoiding me. It’s why there’s no hooded figures in San Francisco.” Nathan stares at him, uncomprehending.

Once more, Woodhouse rolls his eyes. “Why do you think they swarmed the cult arson case? Emma—that version of Emma—is the Kingslayer.”

“The...?”

“Just the one. Just—time clones and time clones of Emma, at different points in her personal timeline. Emma all the way down.”

“Oh,” Nathan says, distantly. He kind of feels like there’s water in his brain, like maybe he’s drowning. Drowning in very, very stupid water.

“And,” Woodhouse starts, hesitantly but with a palpable level of *schadenfreude*, “Obviously, because it’s Emma, she wasn’t ever going to go with a whimper. It was always going to be a bang.”

Nathan only keeps staring at him.

“Tough crowd.” Woodhouse rubs the back of his neck, uncomfortable. He exhales. “I don’t really... want to get into it, but it’s why my hair and my eyes are like this.”

“Why you’re possessed.” It’s not a question. “Woodhouse, what the *fuck* are you possessed by?” Woodhouse shrugs. “Some kinda... extradimensional spirit of malice. I bound it to myself to put it down, and the two of them blamed themselves, and things...”

“Escalated.” Nausea, Nathan thinks. What he’s feeling is definitely some kind of nausea. Maybe he’s dissociating?

“Yup.” Woodhouse doesn’t pop the p this time. Nathan almost wishes he would. “And there’s... one other thing.”

Nathan puts his head back in his hands. Only Woodhouse can make him feel so fucked up inside.

“Get it over with.”

“There’s... one more.”

“One more *what*, Henry?”

“After he left and she started avoiding me,” Woodhouse begins, slowly. Awkwardly, even. “A doctor who knew I was involved with them asked me for help with... Uh. Another interested group. Interested in the Kingslayer cult, I mean, which is really a misnomer, I don’t even know why the guild started calling her a Kingslay—”

“Get it *over* with.”

“Tough crowd,” he repeats. “So this—interested group. This lab. They wanted their own Kingslayer, but then the project fell through, and that doctor I knew wanted to know if I’d help with the... collateral.”

“The collateral.”

Nathan doesn’t see it this time, but he hears Woodhouse shift his weight, hears the grass squelch with it.

“One more clone. There’s—one more, failed Emma clone. He’s about six now.”

Nathan looks up, finally, blankly. For a while, he and Woodhouse just... *look* at each other.

“She’s going to kill you,” Nathan tells him, eventually.

“I *know*,” Woodhouse all but wails.

COMMENTARY

This is the first snapshot that starts in the middle of a conversation, and it’s only possible because of the amount of context we have for Henry and Nathan’s situations at this point. Nathan, like the narrative, has been trying to puzzle Henry out for a while; our perspective is similarly informed to his own, here.

This conversation is also an example of an argument going well, which was only possible because Nathan and Henry have been dogging each other for so long, trying in their own clumsy way to connect. Henry, to an extent, understands that Nathan has a right to know why he’s been treating him the way he has, and Nathan has the conversational skills to manage that very complicated topic. Nathan, after years of trying, lucked out with a phrase that kicked something in Henry’s head into gear—when Nathan commented on their first meeting, from his perspective, and an already emotional Henry broke and spilled his guts.

They’re both being very straightforward here, especially for what we’ve seen of Henry, which is why they get anywhere. Nathan is able to keep Henry on track, and Henry is willing to make the effort, even though neither of them really *wants* to have this conversation.

Usagi Akiyama-Park and Henry Woodhouse, Mull of Galloway, 2036

Usagi watches impassively as Nathan and Siqeyu set up a magic circle to eject themselves,

Usagi, and Kal to the town of Stranraer, where Nathan and Siqeyu had reportedly left a car.

Woodhouse stands beside her, an air of complicated exhaustion about him, and Kal sits off with

her sister by the cliff on the other side of the wards. The other adults are willfully ignoring Kal and Lucy, Usagi has gathered.

Periodically, Woodhouse has been shooting glances at Usagi that she can't read. She wonders, without remorse, if he's realized she'd been eavesdropping on him and Nathan.

Eventually, he stuffs his hands in his coat's pockets, so casual that it loops right back around to furtive. Side-eyeing Usagi, he opens with: "So... hitman, huh?"

"World's greatest hitman," Usagi corrects, still looking dead ahead at Nathan and Siqeyu working.

"Right," he agrees, awkwardly. "How come? How come that's what you want, I mean."

"It would be cool."

Woodhouse laughs, but the tension doesn't ease from his shoulders. Usagi isn't worried, though; if he wanted a fight, he would've started one already. "What, murder?"

Usagi's nose wrinkles instinctively, face scrunching up into a disdainful little expression, the most emotion she's displayed visibly in... about three weeks now, she thinks. "The *style*."

He laughs some more, more easily this time. "The style?"

"I want to kill people in *style*."

That seems to sober him up, mouth clicking shut. Usagi can see him looking at her from the corner of her vision, but she can only guess at what he's thinking. Some variation of *what the fuck*, probably.

"Well, that's surprisingly straightforward," he tells her, even though he's clearly not happy about it. "Have you ever killed anyone before, then?"

Usagi perks up and turns to him, enterprising. "Will you hire me to?"

"What? No."

Usagi turns back to Nathan and Siqeyu. How disappointing.

After a beat, Woodhouse sighs loudly. “So you haven’t killed anyone, but only because nobody’s hired you to?”

“And it would have to be a cool kill,” Usagi emphasizes.

“If I tell you there’s nothing cool about killing people, I’m just going to sound like an anti-smoking commercial.” Woodhouse facepalms. “But it’s *true*.”

Usagi ignores him. He sighs again, louder.

“Home situation?” he asks her.

Usagi doesn’t roll her eyes, but only because she’s a deeply unemotive person by nature. “You won’t believe me if I tell you my family is happy, but Nathan knows it is.”

“Lunatic,” Woodhouse mutters, likely for his own benefit rather than hers. “Completely crazy.”

He straightens, pinning her with a look of enough intensity that Usagi feels compelled to blink back up at him. “Just—Think a little before you do anything you’ll regret, alright? There’s a lot of ways to be cool that don’t involve killing people. And if you ever land yourself in stupid trouble over it, or need someone with no right to judge you to talk to after you’ve done something worth regretting, or just an adult who takes you seriously, I’m in the phonebook.”

“I do what I want,” Usagi says, like that explains everything.

Woodhouse buries his head in his hands. “Where have I heard that one before?”

Siqeyu calls out to them, then, and it’s time for Usagi to go. It’s too bad, really. She would’ve liked to take the long way back, to take advantage of the weather.

COMMENTARY

Henry and Usagi, in terms of perspective and build-up, are the closest things this collection has to a protagonist—there is, I think, at least some measure of payoff to the pair of them finally

getting to talk, even if neither is aware of the parallels between them or how their lives really intersect below the surface.

For the first time that we've seen, an adult is both taking Usagi seriously and trying to genuinely help her out of this bizarre and messed up mindset, which is in line with Henry's responsible streak when it comes to kids with few options. Usagi, of course, is still a stranger to him, and very set in her ways, but he's giving her an out nobody's ever taken her seriously enough to even think to offer before. Whether she takes him up on it or goes and makes her own horrible mistakes in life, it's still important that he's putting her in a position where she has the option of and a shot at a different path than the one she's on now.

We also see, here, that even when Usagi isn't looking directly at people, she's still paying attention, very clinically in fact. It's just something Nicole—and Henry, for that matter—couldn't notice, because Usagi keeps these observations to herself. It's a small disconnect in their perception of the world versus Usagi's, but it's indicative of the bigger issues to communication that we've looked at throughout; an assumption and a misunderstanding, born from people simply living as individuals who perceive the world from their own perspectives.

Henry, also, is still making references that his conversational partner could not be expected to understand. His comment about Usagi being a lunatic and completely crazy is a callback to how he described Emma in the previous snapshot, because Usagi's ability to jump to bizarre conclusions despite an apparently normal upbringing reminded him of her, and his comment about the phonebook is a half-hearted Dresden Files reference to try to lighten his own mood and take away from the emotional gravity he feels that his offer is made with.

Usagi Akiyama-Park and the Kingslayer, Singapore, 2046

Two figures sit side-by-side in amicable silence on the steps to the left of the Merlion, one hooded and the other in nondescript casual clothes. By virtue of the Kingslayer's cloaked presence, the pair are given a large berth by the late evening's dwindling foot traffic, though curious glances and flashing phones will occasionally be pointed their way.

"D'you regret it?" Usagi asks into the coming night, staring out the glimmering surface of Marina Bay's water with inky, lifeless eyes. "Any of it."

Emma hums, thinking. "Not really. There's no point, right? Things that I can't change because they've happened already, things that I'm not willing to change even when I can... It might not be very *nice*, but feeling bad about it won't do anyone any tangible good. It's the same for you, isn't it?"

"It is." Usagi takes a bite out of her satay. Swallows. Goes on. "I've always known what I wanted."

"We're lucky. It's not true for very many people, even if it is for us." Emma considers her ice kacang like it holds the answers to the universe's mysteries. Usagi side-eyes the cup with squinting disgust. "I think... at the end of the day, people want to be happy. We're always doing what we *think* will make us happy, will make our lives worth living, even if we don't always put it that way in words and even if we're wrong. You and I just happen to be very straightforward with ourselves."

"We're selfish people."

"We are!" Emma laughs, muffled some by the Kingslayer's mask. "But we don't dislike it enough to try to change it."

Usagi mulls that over. "It's not just a matter of disliking it."

"Isn't it?"

“No.” Usagi takes another bite. “It’s a matter of understanding that, at the end of the day, the way we behave is the one thing we get to control completely. If we want to achieve something, or if we want something to change, all we can do is change our own approach and see where the dominos fall after that. And hope it’ll make a difference, I guess.”

“But not everyone sees it that way,” Emma finishes for her, resigned understanding in the set of her shoulders. “We can scream and scream into the void all we want, but we can’t force other people to change, to want to change, or to feel something that they don’t. We can’t force the world to be a better place, or people to be better.”

“Or worse.”

“Or worse! People are people.”

“People are people.” Usagi turns her satay over in her hand. “And people are a complicated mess.”

“But it’s worth it, isn’t it? To not give up. To accept the good with the bad and keep trying to connect, and to keep trying to improve our ability to communicate with the people we’ve already made connections with. To keep trying to understand ourselves and each other properly.”

“For me, yeah.” Usagi shrugs. “And for you, but not for everyone.”

“I guess not.” Emma consumes some of the ice kachang, somehow, through the mask. It doesn’t stain, doesn’t appear to have made contact with the ice kachang at all. Usagi’s never managed to figure out how she does that. “But even when we do our best, it doesn’t always work out... Like for me and Henry, and Henry and Nathan.” A beat. “My Nathan, I mean. Not the me and the Nathan who live here.”

Usagi looks at Emma out of the corner of her eye. “You wanted different things.”

“We were never going to want to stick around and he was never going to want to come along with us. I just realized that before he did, and I don’t hold it against him.” She tilts her head. “I don’t think it’s wrong to expect things of people, and to want things. But it’s important to understand that it’s not wrong to be rejected either.”

“Unless it’s someone who’s responsible for you.”

“Right! I’d be pretty pissed off if my mom suddenly decided she couldn’t stand me for no reason, after all!”

Interesting. Usagi tucks it away for later. “Most people... we’re not really obligated to each other at all.”

“Not really. Other than by the things we feel we have to do as part of a social collective, I guess? Or the things we understand we’ve got to do to avoid social backlash. Most people are much better liars than we give ourselves credit for.”

“It’s not a bad thing, though.”

“Not in the kinda world we live in, no. It’s convenient, and most people aren’t gonna be too appreciative if you tell them their haircut looks bad just ‘cause you really thought so...”

“It’s a *frustrating* thing.” Usagi finishes her satay and tosses the stick into a nearby bin. “Life would be easier if everyone just said what they mean. Somebody telling you your haircut sucks just to hurt you, instead of ‘cause they really thought so, is just lying anyway.”

“Yup. As it is, though, the smart thing to do is to keep what you really think and feel to when you’re talking with people you can count on not to take it personally, so long as you’re not trying to hurt them or be a jerk. It’s those relationships that make life worth living! Those relationships, and interesting stories you get to tell later!”

Usagi thinks about that, but doesn’t turn to fully face Emma. “Why are you the Kingslayer?”

“No idea! I’m sure I’ll get to the bottom of it eventually, though. There’s still a lot that I don’t know, but I have the time.”

They lapse into comfortable silence, for a while. Comfortable silence, until Emma finishes her desert and tosses its remains into the same bin Usagi had used, and stands to go. Without looking up and away from the water of Marina Bay, Usagi asks her a final question.

“Anybody ever tell you about your clone son?”

Emma chokes.

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