

# Smuggler from Tsundoku

by  
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‘Hey, uh sorry to bother you so early but uh.’ He cuts short before shuffling. ‘Could you, uh, um-’ The vendor looks up from the bench screen covering half the countertop and grunts, ‘spit it out already.’

He wipes his brow and tugs at his flailing jacket. ‘Sorry, sorry. I just wanted to rent, rent out an arm. Left arm... for the day. I forgot my other—’

‘Yeah OK,’ the seller clatters around in the back of the small pop-up shop and shouts, ‘which are you? 24? 26?’

‘24.’

He pulls out joints and spare limbs in his half-assed search. ‘Here you go.’ The guy presents a metallic right arm possessing a few dents across the wrist joint and lower arm. The elbow creaks when he drops it between them on the table. ‘Return it by the end of the day, it’s the last one I have in service.’

A trembling exhale leaves the man as he bows his head and drops some loose coins atop the wooden surface. ‘Thank you so much. Thank you, I will definitely be back before the second call.’

‘Alright, mate.’ He replies curtly, taking his attention back to the screen.

The man mutters his gratitude once more while fumbling to take the arm. It is colder to hold than he thought but it is his one chance of getting the hell out of there. Before he turns back to the hailing storm beyond the little shelter of the shop, he opens the wrist flap and stuffs it full.

Closing and locking the arm, he places a protection sphere securely in the closed metallic fist, creating a ripple in the air around the limb. Neon light blinks from the overhead sign through the tumbling droplets, calming the man slightly before he flicks on his warped rain cover and departs for the nearest station.

The shrill laugh of the downpour nearly drowns out the whistling cries coming in and out of Shinigami<sup>1</sup> station. Guards stand at attention in pairs from the northern entrance to the boarding platforms. He watches unnoticed while shuffling past with a lowered head and straight gaze. Only until he reaches the platform does he halt and gorge his surroundings. The well-lit space holds little occupants, with abandoned benches stretching down the clean-swept space. The heaters above dispel the little water that managed to slip past the conjured protection from his brief walk.

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<sup>1</sup> (死神) a God or spirit of death originating from Japanese culture and religion

A whistle echoes through the tunnel, becoming louder by the second. When the night train rushes to parallel the platform, the man was expecting a strong breeze to push against him, but no such thing occurs. He scratches his head before walking down the platform and sitting at a dark brown imitation of a wooden bench. When the train's doors open silently, a singular hooded person steps off. Hunched over and with a coat covering every notable feature. They appear as more of a ghost than a person. They look around the platform, spotting the man sitting and watching before approaching him. He expects the stranger to slink through the terminal, as his reputation would imply, but instead, they walk in a plonking waddle. Like they were injured and limping.

A lump sits in his stomach.

Something is wrong.

He kept his expression straight but as the stranger limps closer, he tenses unconsciously.

'Taron.' Monotone and filled with gravel, the stranger's voice echoes loudly inside the station's silence.

The man pauses before nodding a few times. 'That, that coat is very old,' He swallows a ball of spit. 'M-must be at least two ce-centuries, right?'

'Why are you here.' Taron sits, waits, and feels the air rush from his body. Flecks of measly courage peel away.

'I, uh-'

He fumbles to take the sphere from the clenched fist.

The stranger brings his attention to the detached limb. With his face covered, Taron cannot tell if he is upset or indifferent to the gesture. Looking each way, he pushes it fervently towards the stranger. 'T-take it. I don't want it anymore.'

The stranger grunts but does not take the arm. Instead, he turns it over in Taron's grasp before resting his hand atop the wrist panel. His fingers, wrapped in what appeared to be a sort of bandage, once a cream colour but now a smudged grey, tense and stretch over the small latch. He does not open it.

'Where.'

Taron flinches at the demand, 'w-where?' He repeats.

The stranger slowly taps against the arm.

'I got- got it from the northern entrance. Outside the northern entrance.'

He stands silently, only tapping the arm. The metallic ticking is deafening to Taron. He flicks his gaze from up to the stranger, to across the platform, to the waiting train, and down to his feet. At last, the stranger hums, but it comes out as a growl. A flinch forces its way through Taron.

The stranger retracts his covered hand and reaches into the numerous folds of the hooded coat.

Taron feels his bones try to retract but instead of a gun or small dagger, the stranger points two

slips of paper towards him. He licks his chapped lips before taking them in a shaky grasp. Two tickets. One going straight to Goshyo<sup>2</sup> station. The other further south. A district not familiar to him.

‘Uh-’

Without another sound, the stranger takes the arm and stalks away.

He limps slowly across the platform,

heads for the shadowed edges

and gradually

fades.

Taron blinks, rubs his eyes, and looks to where he saw the stranger slink to, but he was gone.

The train whistles, quiet and piercing. Taron rubs at his head before standing on his numb legs and walking into the night train.

The pitching cry travels through the station, signaling the train’s departure like a wailing child at a funeral. The stranger taps against the wrist panel again, opening it this time. He pulls free the package and, in its place, leaves three small glowing green orbs. He slings the arm across his shoulders while leaving through the northern entrance of Shinigami station. He walks with his uneven step and a concealed frown fixed on his face.

Spying the small lit up stall, he finds the owner fixated on the tabletop screen. His eyes narrow from under his hood. The guy appears older than seventy, alone in the city’s shallows. Amidst all the downpour, it was unlikely he would get any help – least in the next few days. A better person would continue along, have the arm discovered in a dumpster a few blocks down. A better person would leave it all alone. A better person would tempt fate and leave an empty arm at the shop.

‘Shut up,’ The stranger murmurs before he stalks up to the stand, slamming the arm down.

Without waiting for the owner’s outburst, he leaves, turning down the next ally to wait. The annoyed grumbles of the man can barely be heard under the rain hitting his ears but only seconds past... A popping, spitting sizzle.

‘Ahh!’

The pained shout pierces through the air, only growing louder and louder before passing after three minutes. The stranger starts along the alleyway with the package tucked securely in his inner waist pocket.

It was not long, a couple of twisted streets and damp lighting here and there before he found a familiar red door.

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<sup>2</sup> (後生) translates to ‘afterlife’ in Japanese

Passing through the decrepit entrance, he ignores the nails sticking through the wooden floorboards, the static sound of television the next room over, and heads directly into the kitchenette.

‘You look like a dead rat.’ The words slither out from the corner of the room, where the shadows seem longest.

He raises the package from his pocket, waving it towards the lounging figure, ‘why pick roundabout methods.’

‘Just for a bit of fun. He would have died either way.’

He grunts and fiddles with the cloth, ‘you want me to go to Bainintoshi<sup>3</sup>.’

‘Oh, don’t be like that.’ atop, in and under, they fold into themselves while crawling towards him.

‘He deserved it; you have no idea how many people that fool screwed over.’

‘You are Kamisama<sup>4</sup>.’

‘Well, no- but I can’t help it if he decides to trust in a broken system.’

‘Do not decide the living.’

A hand, like tree roots, twisted and textured, reaches over, pushing away his hood and cradling his covered cheek. ‘Why? That’s the fun of life.’

He leans into the frail palm, allowing himself a moment of comfort. ‘You will become sick.’

‘I am sickness.’

The stranger pulls away with a grunt. ‘Here,’ he calls, taking out another package. This one wrapped not in a grey scrap of cloth, but rather, in fine scarlet silk – something you could only find along Gouman<sup>5</sup> Boulevard.

Unfolding the silk with spindled fingers, they find two bronze rings. Delicate and handcrafted.

Small vines were carved along each one, creating a stunning, twisted jewel that one could admire up close as well as catching the curiosity of one afar.

‘Thank you.’ They finally said after a moment of silent regard, ‘your offering is welcomed.’

The stranger nods once, then twice before turning and leaving for the door. Opening it, he pauses, glances back to the strangled shadow just once, before continuing alone into the consuming night.

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Inspiration: the whole body of work/entire exhibition: *Lost In Translation*.

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<sup>3</sup> (売人都市) ‘Smuggler/dealer city’

<sup>4</sup> (神様) ‘God’

<sup>5</sup> (傲慢) ‘Pride and arrogance’