

# Policy of Integration

Von cork-tip

Not a lot of people came to the old barn these days. There was hardly anyone imprisoned there anymore and most villagers had long since given up on trying to convince the three remaining inmates to change their minds concerning the new policy of integration. That was why Natsuno knew it was *him* again, before the door to his cell even swung open.

Two of the guards had strapped him to the table earlier; just like they always did when someone stopped by the makeshift prison to see him. He couldn't blame them, really. Both they and he knew perfectly well that he would attack any Okiagari daring to show its face in here. He'd never change his mind in this respect, and nobody could force him to.

In the beginning, there had been lots of visitors: Sunako Kirishiki, the junior monk and Ritsuko, the nurse, to name only three of the most regular guests. They had talked a lot and begged a lot and he had somehow managed to ignore them all the while. Now, only he still persevered. Natsuno wished with all his heart that he would give up on him too, and soon. It was painful to feel his presence, to hear his voice and then deny himself turning around to look at him.

He had looked at him a lot, when he was still free. He had observed him from a distance, even followed him to his hiding place when morning was about to break, but he had never made his presence known. No good would have come of it.

Natsuno liked to believe that he had done them both a favor by not letting him know he had risen.

"Good evening, Natsuno," Tōru said, sliding the door shut behind him. "I thought I'd stop by on my way to work."

Natsuno didn't answer. He never did. He was afraid that – if he so much as acknowledged Tōru's presence – he wouldn't be able to shut him out any longer.

Used to being ignored, Tōru continued talking anyway.

"The junior monk stopped by as well. He's with the doctor right now, trying to persuade him to let go of all this hatred and prejudices. After all, Sotoba needs a clinic

and a competent physician to oversee it. It's not like we could call in an outsider."

Natsuno felt the need to scoff at him and could barely keep his tongue in check. Neither he nor doctor Ozaki would betray their convictions, no matter how persistently everyone tried to talk them out of it.

"Ozaki would be free to go by now if he'd just reconsider." Somehow, Tōru managed to fake a sigh without actually exhaling any air. "An amnesty was issued yesterday by the town council. I thought you'd wanna know. No one will be put on trial for what they did before the Reconciliation. Not even the doctor, for murdering his wife in cold blood and trying to hammer a freaking stake through Chizuru's heart."

He didn't sound angry at all, Natsuno noticed, though it was clear that he still hadn't quite come to terms with what had almost happened during the festival six months ago. Natsuno felt strangely disappointed. He would have found it easier to justify his own rage, had the fronts been clearly delineated. In his eyes, Ozaki deserved a medal rather than an amnesty. An upstanding citizen like him should never have been at the mercy of walking corpses and fools who, in all seriousness, considered peaceful coexistence a solution. The way things were going, Ozaki would rot in jail until he died; alongside Natsuno, who – of course – would never die. Securely locked up in his cell, he couldn't choose death if he wanted to. This decision was just one of many that had been taken from him.

Some days he wondered why he hadn't killed himself when he still had the chance. Soon after the negotiations had been opened, it had become obvious that Sunako Kirishiki, the junior monk, and their supporters would win out over those whose common sense dictated war. This conflict wasn't about who was right and who was wrong, or even how to weigh the guilt of individual persons, it was a struggle for survival between two different species. The inhabitants of Sotoba were either predators or prey; there was nothing in between, no grey areas whatsoever. It wouldn't work. Sooner or later the Okiagari would break the deceitful peace and start killing again. And with him, Ozaki, and the old guy from the liquor store in jail, there would be no one there to stop them.

While Natsuno was lost in thoughts, Tōru moved away from the door and came close enough to brush his fingers lightly against Natsuno's. His touch was just as cold as Natsuno remembered it, and it didn't scare him any less, now that he himself was dead. At the same time, though, he realized he'd been craving for it like the starved beast he actually was. His fingers twitched ever so slightly and he had to make a conscious effort to keep his eyes shut. There was no way he could avoid looking at Tōru if he opened them, and if he looked at him just once, he would have lost.

Luckily, Tōru pulled his hand back almost immediately.

"I really don't understand you," he said with frustration. "Isn't that what you wished for? Isn't that what you hoped for, back when you told me ..." He trailed off, seemingly unable to bear the memory.

Every single time he came here, he would try to talk about that night, and every single

time he'd fail. Natsuno was glad he couldn't follow through with it. He didn't want to be reminded of those last few hours he had lived and thought as a human being. Not by Tōru of all people. He had been so stupid back then; foolishly hoping to get through to an undead monster solely by the power of -. He couldn't even admit it to himself, it was too ridiculous. Not while he was awake, at any rate.

"You wanted me to run away with you. You thought it might work. Back then, I was the one who had doubts. I threw it all away, when ... when ... Oh God, I'm so sorry!"

When he backed away, it didn't come as a surprise to Natsuno. Soon, it would be over. Tōru's courage usually left him after a minute or two of discussing the topic. Well, not so much discussing it as holding a monologue. In this respect, Natsuno could sympathize with him. It wasn't easy to put into words what had happened that night, and he himself wouldn't be able to do it either. That night had been special, not only because he had died with a crying Okiagari on top of him. That night had helped him understand. He'd finally been able to see the truth.

If Tōru hadn't been able to fight the instinct to kill, then no one ever would. Peaceful coexistence would always remain a pious hope.

It took a while for Tōru to recover from the sudden onslaught of guilt and self-loathing. It always did. Natsuno had long since gotten used to it. When he had still been free to roam the village, he had often watched as Tōru laid down flowers underneath his window. Tōru had spoken to him like one would to a truly dead man, confiding in him, even sharing his most well kept secrets.

On some days, Natsuno had enjoyed it, had enjoyed detecting regret in Tōru's demeanor and fondness in his words. On other days, he had cried. He had cried, because he wasn't truly dead. He had cried, because his family was gone – his father raving mad, his mother moved away. But first and foremost he had cried, because he couldn't save his one and only friend. Neither the living, breathing person he once had been, nor the wretched creature he had turned into. He had really wanted to leave Sotoba with him. He had talked himself into believing they would find a way to make it work.

Then, Tōru had killed him.

"I just couldn't take it, you know." From the looks of it, Tōru had found his voice again, much sooner than expected. Natsuno imagined he had practiced this one-sided conversation often enough to make some progress. Now, he would proceed to ramble on about how deeply he regretted killing him, and how he wished he could turn back the clock, and so on and so forth. Natsuno knew this particular monologue by heart.

"I just couldn't stand the thought of Megumi being the one to kill you."

That statement took Natsuno off-guard and he couldn't help voicing his surprise by way of a rather undignified growl. Bloody Megumi wasn't part of Tōru's routine monologue and Natsuno hadn't exactly wished for him to bring her up. Damn Megumi, damn her to hell! Without her, his life might have taken a turn for the better,

Okiagari or not. But then again, without Megumi he would have had no reason to sleep over at Tōru's place more often than not, and they would never have become such close friends.

Silently he wondered if, maybe, he owed her after all.

"She finally got to leave for the big city yesterday, so I thought I could tell you that much without her ever getting wind of it. She's still pissed at you for not telling her you'd risen. And, in all honesty, so am I."

Natsuno pressed his eyes shut even tighter, slowly but surely starting to feel uneasy. He didn't like the direction this was headed.

"I know you think you did us all a favor by keeping out of sight, but that's not true. You were really only thinking of yourself. I felt horrible when you were gone, apologizing to thin air. And while I'm not at all proud of having turned you into this, it's still better than never seeing you again. Natsuno, please, look at me. At least tell me you hate me for what I did. This silent treatment is driving me insane."

And as an afterthought he added, "It's childish of you, too."

Taken aback by this unprecedented forthrightness, Natsuno was beginning to have difficulty keeping quiet. He felt he had to justify himself. These accusations were anything but fair. He wasn't childish. If anything, he was deliberately being misunderstood. Tōru had cried when he had bitten him to death, which meant that he had to know it was impossible for an Okiagari to refrain from killing their prey. The hunger just couldn't be controlled.

"Natsuno," Tōru insisted in a stern voice. "We really have to talk. It's been six months since the Reconciliation. Everyone else is getting on with their lives, but I just can't as long as you're still in here. I miss you, damn it! Maybe I could move on if you were dead. But you're not dead. Not really. You're just stubborn and afraid."

Natsuno had to clench his fists in order to prevent himself from opening his eyes, or – even worse – talking to him. Tōru was only trying to provoke a reaction out of him, but he refused to play along. Unlike Tōru, he possessed a considerable amount of self-control.

"I'm living with Ritsuko now," Tōru said and Natsuno promptly felt a pang of jealousy in the pit of his stomach. Back then, he'd been prepared to accompany his friend when asking Ritsuko out on a date. That had been a long time ago, though. It had been before Tōru had turned. Before he had claimed Natsuno as his prey. Before he had first climbed through Natsuno's window at night.

"She's my human cohabitant. You know we're all supposed to have one - I told you before. If we don't feed on anyone, we die. But if we feed regularly and add donated blood to the diet, it becomes possible to overcome the killer instinct."

Listening to Tōru's shockingly candid confession was getting harder by the second.

Natsuno wanted nothing more than to put his fingers into his ears, but the strong leather bonds around his wrists rendered that impossible.

"You've fed as well. I can tell. Or rather, Tatsumi told me. Did you know Tatsumi left the barn four months ago? It was actually possible to reason with him. Sunako did a good job of it."

Painfully, Natsuno gritted his teeth. Of course he knew the bastard had been set free. God knew what he was up to now! But the worst part about it was that, right now, he didn't even care. All he could think about was Ritsuko and how she lived with Tōru now. Surely he would kill her too. Or would he? What if he truly loved her? Would it be possible -?

"Everyone's come to their senses by now, expect for you, the old guy from the liquor store, and doctor Ozaki. I've been patient so far, but you can't expect me to wait forever."

At that, Natsuno was tempted to point out that Tōru did, in fact, have the time to wait forever. After all, they'd both be around for another couple of centuries. Instead, he bit his tongue and remained silent. If he uttered so much as a single word, Tōru would have won.

As if on cue, Tōru closed the distance between them once again, with all the self-confidence he had shown as a human evident in his step. He had changed a lot during these last six months. He didn't laugh as much as he had when he was still alive, but neither did he cry like he had right after he had risen. It was obvious that he had come to terms with this new form of existence.

"Living with Ritsuko is nice," he proceeded to tell Natsuno, most likely unaware that he was twisting the knife in a wound Natsuno would rather have turned a blind eye to forever. "When I asked you to help me get a date with her, I truly liked her. I still do. Now, I have to feed on her blood in order to survive, and the way she treats me is more like a mother would her child. I've long since learned not to kill. In fact, I don't think I'd have killed you if you hadn't repeatedly provoked me to."

That did it for Natsuno; he couldn't control himself any longer. Too scandalized to care about the consequences, he opened his eyes abruptly and was surprised to see Tōru smiling down at him softly. There was nothing to smile about that accusation.

"What do you mean by that?" Natsuno asked reluctantly, his voice hoarse from disuse.

"You heard me the first time. No need to repeat myself." The smile didn't vanish from Tōru's lips, so it couldn't be an illusion. He was beautiful. Just like Natsuno remembered him. Even in death he had been beautiful. As expected, looking at him from up close had been a grave mistake. He wouldn't be able to deny him anything now. At least not for long.

"Care to explain?" Natsuno hissed, determined not to give in all that easily. After all, Okiagari had to be fought whatever the circumstances.

Casually, Tōru glanced at his wristwatch and Natsuno felt horribly outmatched.

"I don't have much time. My shift at the café will start soon. It's already 10 pm."

Natsuno didn't feel inclined to let himself be toyed with any longer.

"Make it quick then," he ordered rudely, but Tōru didn't seem overly bothered by his tone of voice. With a shrug, he sat down on the edge of the table Natsuno was strapped to.

"Alright," he relented. "Just don't complain if this lacks the finesse you've been hoping for."

With that said, he leaned down and kissed him right on the lips. It wasn't a chaste kiss either, and, for the first time in his un-life as a Jinrō, Natsuno regretted that, unlike regular Okiagari, he still breathed.

Tōru was cold to the touch like he had been back when he had sucked the life out of him, but he felt alive too. When he let go after what seemed like a small eternity, Natsuno knew for sure that he would never be able to drive a stake through his heart. There were other things he longed to do though.

"I was drawn to you, even before I died," Tōru elucidated with his trademark smile firmly in place. "That's why I couldn't stand the thought of Megumi claiming you for herself. She never loved you like I did; she just associated you with the big city she was so obsessed with. How could I let her have you?"

He licked his lips teasingly like only a full-fledged vampire could, completely negating the reformed addict image he had cultivated so far.

"She would've lost interest in you sooner or later. I'm assuming Tatsumi knew exactly how I felt about you and that is why he had me assigned your case. Still, I wouldn't have touched you a second time if you hadn't sought me out."

Natsuno hadn't remembered how to breathe just yet and couldn't voice his amazement at how straightforward Tōru had become all of a sudden. He had been cheerful and happy when alive, and sad and subdued after he had died. Right now, he was ... exciting.

"We could still run away together, if that's what you want," Tōru offered generously. "I don't care as long as you finally see sense. The cohabitation project is going great, I'm telling you! And neither of us is actually a monster. Well, I might be, but not you. You haven't killed anyone, have you?"

There was no need to answer, since Tōru knew full well that he was right. Natsuno didn't feel capable of saying anything that actually made sense anyway. In fact, he couldn't do shit except staring at Tōru like he had grown a second head. He had never been kissed before. He had been stalked, spied upon, and killed, but never kissed.

After giving the matter some thought, he concluded that he rather liked it. He would have kissed Tōru back right then to convey his approval, but, given the circumstances, couldn't follow up his thoughts with action.

"Could you, you know, do that again?" he ventured to breathe the wish, unaware of the fact that the conversation had already moved on.

Tōru pretended to be confused, but went to no real effort to conceal the deceit.

"Do what? Kill people? Why would you ever want me to do that of all things?"

"Not that, you idiot!" Natsuno snapped at him, trying to hide his embarrassment behind a facade of fake anger and impatience. He couldn't bring himself to say any more. And of course, Tōru faked ignorance in response.

"I really don't know what you're talking about." The lie was obvious, like the mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "But if there's something you want to tell me, you'll have to hurry up and spit it out. My shift's going to start soon. I'll have to leave in a couple of minutes. Oh, and one more thing: Today will be the last time I stop by. I have a life again, you know. And if you want any part in it, you better change your mind and accept the new policy of integration, so that they can release you. Being strapped to a table doesn't seem all that pleasant to me ..."

At this point, Natsuno knew he had lost the fight. He was outwitted and outdone and could do nothing to get back at Tōru short of staying true to his former beliefs and, by that, in prison, which he wasn't overly keen on any longer.

"Damn you to hell, you son of a bitch!" he cursed loudly. As it were, he could have just as well outright admitted defeat, since Tōru understood perfectly well what he really meant. The smug grin on his face told Natsuno as much.

"I think it should be reasonable to expect that you will leave here before long," Tōru concluded, evidently satisfied with how this little scheme of his had played out. Cruelly, he didn't kiss Natsuno again before standing up and heading for the exit. He was already halfway through the door when he turned around one last time.

"And if you do indeed leave", he stressed the words emphatically, "then please remember to let me know. I don't wanna have to learn of it from Tatsumi again."

After he had closed the door behind him, Natsuno stayed inside the barn for another 38 hours. That was how long it took for him to convince the town council of his newfound resolve to adhere to the new regulations.

He never regretted that decision; not even once.