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Mitsuko picked the damp chiffon of her sundress from her spine and groaned. Holding a hand against her brow, she stared up the dusty hill stretched out before her. The peak seemed a hazy mirage. Over her shoulder, a long country lane sloped down the hill and disappeared behind a little cluster of houses at the edge of her village. Had she really been amongst them less than half an hour ago?

The constant beating of cicada wings paired well with the humid air dragging at her sunburnt cheeks and the repetitive thrum of her laboured march. In her sandals, the balls of her feet stung, what little dust lay trapped between them turning the soles to sandpaper. With another heavy step, she swapped her delivery box to her off hand and squeezed her sore fingers into a fist.

The toot of a moped horn blared behind her. Ducking her head, she shuffled into the scratchy grass on the roadside. A young delivery boy rolled by, waving to her, beaming. He tooted his horn once more and Mitsuko inclined her head in a friendly nod. While her fingers ached, his heavy looking parcels rattled against the basket of his moped as he effortlessly sailed by. She glared at his bone dry back.

Finally cresting the hill, Mitsuko left the main road to follow a diverging footpath. Partially hidden in a copse of trees, it provided relief from the baking sun and she paused for a second to catch her breath in the shade. The path wound through the pines, over a dry brook and up to a creaky old gate. Wishing she'd had the foresight to wear more suitable shoes, she moved along the trail of whipping brambles and loose moss covered stones, unlatched the gate and hobbled into a familiar clearing.

The remnants of the old Hadagi farm looked the same as ever. Amongst row upon row of wilting vegetables, the ancient house stood proud. Its outer shutters and paper screens were thrown open and a wing chime hung, silent, at the threshold. Sliding out of her sandals, Mitsuko stepped up onto the walkway overlooking the crops.

'Hadagi-san?' She called, tiptoeing further inside. 'It's Watanabe.'

Not wanting to loiter in the hall any longer, she muttered a quiet 'don't mind me' and knelt at the table in the open-plan living room. Placing her palm over the logo of Okazaki Udon, she slid the front face of her delivery box up and unpacked its

contents. The ceramic bowl inside was still warm to the touch and, when she removed its lid, steamed. It smelled good too. Carefully, she placed a deep spoon into the broth. Then she stilled.

A brown-headed thrush had landed on the table. Mitsuko stifled her breath. The distant sound of water dripping and a pungent odour reached her, but she didn't want to risk turning away. The thrush tipped its head and hopped towards her, once, twice. It opened its sharp beak and chirruped, the feathers of its neck fluttered and rippled. Curious, its tiny head whipped left, right, up and down, then stopped. The hollow of its jet black stare seemed to draw Mitsuko in. She focused past the yellow rings around its eyes and into the darkness.

It was reflected there that she saw him. Hiroto Hadagi: Farmer, friend, father. He lay on the stone cold tiles of his kitchen, curled in a taught ball like a foetus in the womb. His face and neck were scorched red, raw and blistered. Frail fingers fisted the front of his crusted yukata, trapping the fabric against his chest. A pot lay beside him, upturned, a coagulated puddle of milk beneath it. The tap was dripping.

Absent thought, Mitsuko staggered past the body to turn it off. The second the cold metal touched her fingers it triggered a lurch in her gut. She twisted the water on to full power and threw up into the bursting stream. Coughing and gagging, throat burning, she held onto the counter and squeezed her eyes shut to block it all out. There was no blocking the smell though: stale milk and vomit and the heavy stench of a body decaying in the heat.

When all she could do was spit out bile-tasting globs and quake, she blearily edged around Hiroto's swollen body to reach the house telephone and dialled the only number she could think of. Sobbing into her shaking hands, she bent at her core and listened to the phone ringing out.

'Pick up,' she chanted quietly as she bit at raw nails. 'Pick up.'