

Rings

Part 1: Ring of Fire

by Raphael Henaut

The evening had been long and good. The way home seemed shorter than it really was before they set off. The alcohol in their bloodstream didn't have a lot to do with that. The fact that they wanted more time to speak did have a lot to do with it however. Miyasaki was very quiet at this late hour. It was still hot, the summer night had made and held a lot of promises. The only bad thing about it was that it was soon to be over and so they decided to walk, hoping that the spell cast early would last a bit more. Somehow through their walking and talking, the night would stretch.

They would avoid having to go back to their daily routine and stress. Most of them hoped to go to college and all their families pressured them to go to a good college. Even those who did not hope to go to college anymore. But even though it was not what they wanted, they pretended that it was. That was the way things were. The town of Miyasaki rested with the night and their talking would not disturb its sleep. They were merely shadows, talking too loud because they were too drunk. They still hoped that they had some sort of control on their lives. Maybe after all they were not yet sacrificed to the greater good of traditions and expectations. Or maybe they were.

Pretending is already a sacrifice, and they all pretended it was what they wanted. Even Hanako pretended and it had brought her nothing. Her parents had been happy with her because they believed that they were pulling in the same direction. They wanted her to want to go to college and to try very hard to do so. Nothing less would satisfy them. She had smiled, said she understood and told them that she would do her best.

She had had other plans. She had her guitar and she had intended to find clubs to play in while she waited for her break which may and may not come. She was not interested in its coming or not. She was only interested in doing things her way. But she would not do things her way. She would go to college as they wished her to and she knew that this was only a delay. She loved playing. It was her passion and passions have a way to consume everything, time first of all. Then when free time is consumed it takes over the other aspects of one's life. She would stop doing her homework to be able to play. In the end, it would consume her. All it needed was time.

She had drunk more than she was used to and that is what she assumed caused what she saw when they passed close to one of the town's high schools. She saw lights inside the building and she stopped walking, looking at the building for a long, long time before she remembered she was drunk. She shook her head and hurried to catch up with the others who had not waited for her.

“What is it?” Takayuki asked when she caught up with them.

“I thought I'd seen lights in the building,” she answered.

Takayuki looked in the direction of the high school building. “There are lights there.” Maybe she was not that drunk after all.

From where she stood Hanako could smell sake on Takayuki's breath. Yes, she could doubt that what he said was true, she could doubt his ability to see lights even if there were some. But she saw them too. Of course she was drunk too but maybe not that much. Maybe there were lights to be seen. She turned towards the others.

“What about you guys? Can you see them?”

They looked in the direction of the building and it was clear by the way they did that they thought she and Takayuki were drunk. But they looked as she asked them and a few seconds later they turned back to Takayuki and her.

They nodded. They could see the lights too. No big deal. Except that the lights she could see looked like they were flickering. They looked like they were moving. So it was probably from a fire. And it could mean that the building would burn down. She didn't like that. She was curious as to what caused this light.

“How about we go and take a look?” she asked her friends.

“What for?” asked Genji.

“I'm curious, look, the light flickers. It could be a fire.”

Genji shook his head from side to side. “So when you see a deserted building that looks to you as if it could be on fire you want to go and look inside?”

“Aren't you curious?”

“No. I'm tired and I want to go home.”

“Well, I am going to take a look, you guys do what you want.” Hanako said knowing fully well that they would follow her. That at least one of them had a crush on her and would see it as his responsibility to see that she was all right. She liked to use it because she did not need

anyone and it served him right to think that she needed help. She did not who it was. Her friend had let it slip that it was one of them but that had been the extent of her slip. She had since then been very careful about not telling anything more to Hanako.

She walked towards the high school building without looking back, knowing that they would catch up with her. The gates to the school yard were closed but this did not stop Hanako who started climbing them. She then let herself drop on the other side, catching a glimpse of her three friends running to catch up with her. She turned back to the building, smiling. She walked to the door and turned the handle confidently. The handle turned and she pulled on the door but it didn't budge. It was solidly locked.

Genji, Takayuki and Kazuo caught up with her.

"What now?" asked Kazuo.

"We go in." she answered as if his question was really stupid.

"Okay," said Genji. He turned the same handle she had turned, he pulled on the door just as she had and the door opened.

Hanako was about to ask him whether he had not seen her try that already, expecting him to fail but when she saw the door open she said:

"This door was locked."

"No, it's not. You probably pushed."

Hanako knew she hadn't and wanted to tell Genji as much but his tone indicated that as far as he was concerned this conversation was over. There was not point in trying to talk to him.

Genji went in and she followed him. Takayuki and Kazuo went in after her, they looked a bit reluctant. Maybe Genji had been the one to talk to them into following her.

"Where were the lights you saw?" asked Genji as they made their way through the school.

"You saw them too didn't you?"

"I'm asking you. I'm not sure where they were anymore."

"More or less on each level near the stair case from what I could see."

Genji nodded and they headed towards the staircase. They climbed to the third floor where they stopped as they had not found anything so far.

"Maybe it was nothing," suggested Kazuo.

"I'm sure I saw it," Hanako answered.

"You had a lot to drink," Takayuki reminded her.

"You saw it too."

“I had a lot to drink too.”

Hanako sighed and sat on the stairs. She could feel a headache coming and she she knew that she would not blame the sake for it. She would blame her friends. She suspected that none of them had seen lights. They had just said that they saw them because they liked her. She put her head in her hands and breathed deep, hoping to short-fuse the headache before it had a chance to settle in and really make her miserable.

She looked at the floor and saw that what little light they had inside the building at night was flickering. She raised her head slowly. There was a door near the stairs on each floor. This door led to a corridor which it turn led to the classrooms. Above this door there was a a sign with a small light bulb inside. This sign said: 出口 Exit. The small light bulb flickered. What she had thought was the beginning of a fire was just weak light blubs. She looked at the others. She saw that they had understood from the first floor that this was what she had seen. Genji had probably known this even before setting foot in the building. They were just humoring her.

She felt her face burn and she could tell she was blushing. She didn't say anything. Was it the sake that had made her believe that she had seen some of those lights move. It had to be. Or else they would have looked curious as well. But they just looked guilty to her. She got up and walked to the corridor. Her headache was there now, brought faster by the shame. She looked on both sides of the corridor.

“This doesn't make sense.”

“What doesn't make sense?” asked Genji.

“Those lights.” She answered pointing at the sign.

Genji looked at the sign. “So that's what we could see from outside.” There was no surprise in his voice.

“It can't be,” she answered.

“Why?”

“It's on the wrong side.”

Genji looked at the sign again. It only seemed weird to him now that the sign saying exit could be seen when you came in.

“Yeah, it's weird but it still has to be what we saw.”

“No, it's not just on the wrong side if you want it to point at the exit. It's also on the wrong side to be seen from the outside. I can't see the sign if I'm in the corridor. There are no windows in the stairs. The windows are in the corridor. We can't have seen this light from outside. It's just

impossible.”

Takayuki and Kazuo were in the corridor with them and were observing the fact that the light could not be seen from the corridor. It was only logical that it could not be seen from outside either but they looked like it held little interest for either of them. Genji looked a bit more curious but Hanako could not help but wonder how much of that had to do with a crush on her.

“You're right, it can't have been what we saw from outside,” said Takayuki. “But does it matter?”

It mattered to Hanako but she could tell the others did not care. She looked at them. She looked on both sides of the corridor again. On her right with her back against the window she could see light coming from the other end of the corridor. It was dim but it was there. She kept looking that way until she could hear the others shift and do the same. None of them said anything. Was she the only one to see what little light there was to see?

She could not tell where the light came from, what was its source but she could swear it was there. She walked in that direction and the others followed her. The light flickered just as the one she had seen from outside and though it was not near the stairs since it had been moving then maybe she had found what she was looking for.

Before they had the time to reach the end of the corridor they could see that the light came from beyond a turn in the corridor. The light flickered on and on. It was becoming easier and easier to see it and Hanako stopped. She felt Genji grab her arm and she could tell he was scared because of how hard he grabbed her. There was the hint of a shadow that looked like legs then it disappeared.

Was it her imagination or could she hear footsteps?

A candle came in view, held by hands. Arms followed and a girl their age walked into view. She was carrying her candle, holding it carefully with both hands in front of her as if it was her most valuable possession. She turned to them and from the shadow of the girl on the wall Hanako could tell that others were following her. The girl kept walking and others followed her, all of them were holding candles in front of them. Large candles that made their faces look pale. Hanako noticed that the girl was dressed in the school's uniform. The girl stepped aside as did the girl behind her and they let a boy younger than they were walk ahead. His uniform looked older, 50 years older. Not all their uniforms were the same and some wore the uniform of Hanako's high school.

Hanako felt cold. Genji's hand on her arm was sweaty. The aftertaste of sake had gone. Now she tasted salt, her own fear. It was bitter because she had not just brought it on herself but on her friends as well.

The boy walked to them, holding his candle carefully. He looked in her eyes. His lips moved but they could not hear anything. Behind him the other kids nodded from time to time. After a few seconds the boy seemed to understand that they could not hear him and he smiled.

“Get them,” he said and this time they heard it. Behind him boys and girls started walking towards them. Hanako looked in the boys' eyes, his dark brown eyes were not mean but sad. Then she could see flames in them as if reflected in his eyes. She looked over her own shoulder expecting flames but there was nothing. Then when she looked back at the boy she could see the flames at the end of the corridor.

“Run!”

She turned and ran, she noticed that neither Kazuo nor Takayuki had needed her shouted advice to start fleeing. They were already running ahead of Genji and her. Genji had waited for her. The door to the stairs slammed shut on its own accord and they heard a whoosh as flames ran on the ceiling lighting the corridor and outrunning them to the door which it set ablaze. Kazuo and Takayuki reached the door and hesitated. Kazuo grabbed the handle and let go immediately, holding his hand, it was hot. When Hanako and Genji reached the door, their pursuers were still far from them, on the other side of the corridor. Where they walked the floor was set ablaze. They were careful with their candles.

“Move!” Genji yelled at Kazuo. He took two steps back and threw himself against the door which flew open. Genji fell on the other side, his T-shirt had taken fire. They ran in the stairs. Hanako crouched by Genji but when she held her hand at him to help him get up he pushed her roughly.

“Just go!”

She did as he told her, not without a look at him as he was taking his burning T-shirt off. They went all the way down, but when they reached the ground level it appeared that it would be hard for them to get out as every exit was on fire.

Genji caught up with them as they were watching the door they had come through, flames barred the way and they could tell by the heat the flames sent their way that there was no forcing their way through those.

This time they could hear footsteps. They could see shadows as their pursuers came down the stairs carefully. Genji looked at Hanako. He had burns on his shoulder and arm. She wished she could say she was sorry. She wished she could say that she wanted to take it back. But she could not say anything.

“I’m going to try and distract them. You guys make your way to the back of the building hopefully, you’ll find an exit there,” Genji said.

Hanako opened her mouth and he just shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, does it?”

What if it did? Hanako asked herself.

The boy was the first one they could see. But when he saw them, when he saw Genji he stopped and let two boys who looked older and tougher go ahead of him. Genji ran straight at them and he struck them both with a roundhouse kick. He missed their bodies but Hanako realized that he had been aiming at the candles and he sent both their candles flying. There was a second of stunned silence before both boys burst into flames. Hanako, Kazuo and Takayuki took this as their cue to leave. They ran as fast as they could to the other side of the building. When they caught sight of the doors leading out they saw that there were no flames and they redoubled their efforts to reach them in time. They were ten feet from getting out when flames burst from the ceiling to form a wall of flames. Takayuki tried to go through it but his screams of pain convinced Kazuo and Hanako not to do anything. They could hear footsteps already. There was nowhere they could go. They were cornered.

The boy walked ahead of the others. He looked angry. He walked to them, the ceiling was burning and Hanako and Kazuo were sweating. When the boy walked the floor was set ablaze after him, making sure they could not leave. Hanako and Kazuo were sitting, hoping to catch fresh air near the floor.

“Where’s Genji?” asked Hanako.

“He’s waiting for you,” said the boy.

He bent down to make sure that Hanako could hear him, their faces were almost touching. She could feel the heat from the candle he held in his hands. There were flames in his eyes and she understood that they had never been reflections but just his wish. He had wanted flames to appear and they had. Her hand opened and she smiled ready to knock the candle out of his hand, ready to knock what little cursed life there was out of what she saw in front of her.

When her hand started moving she saw his eyes go white and her own body cramped. She fell back on the floor, her open eyes rested on the flames burning the ceiling as she fainted.

The heat was gone. Most of it anyway. Hanako's face was numb as if the heat had scarred it too much for her ever to feel anything else than the burning memory of fire. Her eyes opened and she looked around her. She was lying on the floor in a classroom, there were no tables or chairs. There was just a desk near the board. By her side was Genji who had sustained more burns when he had tried to buy them time. Kazuo was nowhere to be seen.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I failed you.”

She looked at Genji. “No, you did not. You did your best. I should have tried to help you.”

Genji shook his head. The door opened and the boy came in, still holding his candle, followed by a few boys and girl, all holding their own candles. Among them was Kazuo.

Hanako opened her mouth to call him but she knew he wouldn't answer. He was now with them. Only then did she notice that there were two unlit candles by her side. She supposed that it meant one for her and one for Genji.

The boy walked to them, this time there were no flames other than that of the candles in sight. He knew they had understood that fighting was useless.

“You're awake.”

Hanako nodded.

“Now it is time to light your candles.”

Hanako looked at Genji. She saw the burns on his shoulder and arm, on his face. She could smell his burned skin. He was in no condition to fight or flee and she wouldn't go without him. She turned back to the boy.

“Do we have a choice?”

He merely smiled.

Hanako had wanted this night to go on forever. As she took the candle she realized that this night would probably last forever as far as they were concerned. The designs of some of the uniforms she had seen worn by the boys and girls in front of them gave her a notion of how long they had been doing this. Once their candles were lit they would follow the boy for a long long

time. No will of their own and unless their candles fell, no ending ever. No longer themselves just as Kazuo who was staring blankly ahead, seeing her and Genji but not recognizing them. Takayuki was probably dead. He was the lucky one.

Hanako took the candle by her side but waited until Genji had taken his before she made another move. She didn't want to be alone. When he had taken his candle she held hers ahead of her, allowing the boy to light her candle with his own.

For eleven years they followed Nobu for that was the boy's name, every night roaming the corridors, hoping to lure kids inside the building and sometimes they did. When they did, it was the last that was seen of these kids. They lit candles of their own and followed Nobu with them. They had forgotten their names, there was no room for names except His. There was only room for the constant buzzing in their heads. Nobu was most of the buzzing. Their own thoughts were lost in the haze. Not once did their eyes meet during these eleven years. Then one night, as they were following Nobu, their eyes met. Their hearts no longer felt cold, the buzzing ended and they heard what they thought. The candle was no longer needed, their hearts beat once again and both let their candles go at the same time.

In the end passions always end up consuming the people who have them. And so it did with Hanako and Genji.

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