

# Mado of Stone Mill

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

## PDF Revision Status

*Revised May 25, 2005 02:50 am*

This version of the PDF file contains Episodes 1-12 plus Scenes 13.1 and 13.2 as of the listed revision date. The three remaining scenes, 13.3-13.5, are in progress and not yet finalized.

Additionally, readers should be aware that the author plans to perform extensive edits to all scenes prior to final “gold master” publication, and that significant story elements may be changed.

## Master Document

This document is a work in progress targeted at a BBCode publishing environment, and may thus contain formatting characters and tags ( , , et al) that will not appear in a final finished text.

Where convenient, I will seek to remove these tags before posting a new PDF file, but make no promises.

As a master document, this version of the story is linked to and contains the most current versions of each scene's source file as of the time of its printing.

This document does not contain author's notes, reference files or scenes that have not yet been published to the **Old Home Bulletin Board** (<http://cff.ssw.net/forum/>).

## Mado of Stone Mill

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### Author's Note

This is a story based on Yoshitoshi ABE's masterpiece **Haibane Renmei**, an anime based on his doujinshi *Charcoal Feathers in Old Home*. If you haven't seen this unique and captivating production, stop reading right now, buy a copy of Haibane Renmei, watch it about thirty times, then come back and thank me for the advice. Oh, and read this story, of course.

Haibane Renmei is my favorite television series of all time by a surprisingly wide margin, and it won out over some extremely tough competition. I don't pick favorites lightly.

A thread discussing the *Stone Mill* project, which I have been publishing to the <http://cff.ssw.net/forum> **Old Home Bulletin Board** as each scene has been written, can be found at: <http://cff.ssw.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1023> Mado of Stone Mill - FanFic Series Discussion (Spoilers) . It covers some of the background for the work, commentary by the author on various and sundry trivia, and other things of a behind-the-scenes nature.

As the title points out, that thread contains spoilers, so if you prefer to suspend disbelief and like surprises,

you may not want to read that thread until after you have finished the story. Of course, that necessitates *my* finishing the story first, so a lot of the thread consists of commentary by me as I finished scenes, and so on. Hmm, maybe it could be thought of as one of those commentary tracks like they have on DVDs that no one ever actually watches.

Additionally, a thread for general, non-spoiler feedback has been made:

<http://cff.ssw.net/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1037> Mado of Stone Mill - General Discussion (NO Spoilers). In addition to serving as a sort of “status report” thread, it is intended for general words of encouragement or discouragement, because even amateur fiction writers get lonely sometimes. ^;)^

### **Mado Online and Offline**

At any given moment, the version of this story posted on OHBB will tend to be the most up-to-date. However, for those who prefer reading offline, a version of the story in Adobe PDF format is available:

<http://fiction.majic-12.com/mado>

Note: As of April 27, 2005, the PDF is horribly out of date. I intend to compile a new one that encompasses Episodes 1-11 after the current editorial pass is completed, and before getting too far into Episode 12.

### **Warning To Prospective Readers**

Anyone considering reading this series should be forewarned that it is very, very long, will most likely end up being over 100,000 words in length when it is finished, and that completion is weeks away at the time of this writing (estimate updated 4/25/2005). Needless to say, readers may understandably find such a gigantic collection of text somewhat daunting, especially for a work of fan fiction.

While I find the work fascinating, I can understand that not everyone may see it the same way. Perhaps the best approach is to read the first few scenes and decide if you can stomach the idea of reading over sixty more of them.

If your attention wanes, then I have failed to engage you. If that happens, I would be gratified to hear about it in one of the feedback threads, preferably with lots of details. Hopefully the feedback will be both blunt and honest. With it, I would seek to make the work more captivating, and I will never take offense to advice of any kind that helps my writing become more appealing to readers.

### **Notice of Copyright**

This is a derivative work of fiction (“fan fiction” or “fanfic”) based on the story, characters and settings of *Haibane Renmei*, a television series produced jointly by Pioneer Entertainment/Geneon, Fuji Television and others.

The author, writing under the pseudonym of “Majic” or “Majic of Old Home”, declares copyright on this work (*Mado of Stone Mill* Copyright © 2004, 2005 by Majic) on the foundation of its authorship and reserves any rights that may pertain to an unauthorized derivative written work. That may not be much, but the idea is to preclude some random joker from claiming copyright instead and trying to turn an illicit buck off it somehow, or limit its distribution.

This work has been undertaken purely and specifically for noncommercial entertainment purposes and may not be distributed, published, derived, sold or otherwise used for commercial purposes or profit. None of these limitations apply to noncommercial use or (recursively enough) to derivative works based on this derivative work, and the author specifically authorizes and encourages the non-profit distribution and use of this material provided that attribution to the author of this work (i.e. me, or “Majic”), the author of the original work (Yoshitoshi ABe) and any terms which may be specified by myself, Yoshitoshi ABe, our assigns, publishers or representatives are respected, maintained and preserved.

In other words, have fun, I hope you enjoy the story, and don't try to use this work to rip people off. I don't mean me, I mean other people. I don't expect to make any money from an unauthorized derivative work, so I'm not worried about that, if that's what you're thinking. I'm not starving or looking for my big break into fiction writing and international stardom, I just wanted to write a story about haibane.

*Haibane Renmei*, its characters and associated original content are © Yoshitoshi ABe · Aureole Secret Factory, and are used here without permission, but hopefully ABe-sensei, Ueda-san and their wonderful, professional, intelligent and highly attractive legal staff won't be too terribly ticked off by that and will cut me some slack.

Any applicable rights which have not been explicitly expressed here are reserved by the author of this work or the holder(s) of copyright of the respective inspirational works upon which it is based as may be appropriate or determined by law.

## **Preface**

I had originally thought of this as a “casual writing” project, a way to try my hand at fiction in a prefabricated world – sort of a “training wheels” experiment. As I began creating and visualizing Stone Mill, however, and effectively began living there as I wrote about the characters, I realized that I had fallen into a trap from which the only escape is to tell the story.

Thus what started as an innocent little diversion has blossomed into a full-blown obsession. I have been eating, drinking and sleeping Stone Mill, dreaming about the characters, watching them in my mind like a movie cameraman, knowing the overall plot but wondering what these young haibane would actually do when the scenes play out.

The images of Stone Mill and Guri that are etched upon my mind are beautiful and breathtaking beyond description, yet I must presume to try to describe them anyway. It almost seems vain to attempt it, yet I cannot restrain myself. I am not worried that Stone Mill is flat and unappealing, but that my writing may make it appear to be so.

I had decided not to try for a “magnum opus” on my first serious attempt to write fiction, and did not wish to presume to write a sequel for my favorite visual art production of all time, yet in a twist of irony, these are precisely what I find myself in the middle of doing. I don't know what will ultimately happen, but I have resolved that I must see this project through, for good or ill.

Whatever may come of it, I have already profoundly enjoyed doing the background work for the series, and hope you may find the story interesting, at least. I encourage all readers to be candid and ruthless in their

feedback in the discussion threads, because that's the only way I might ever hope to improve.

### **Editor's Note, April 27, 2005**

Since I started this project over five months ago, my writing style has improved somewhat, and I am beginning to go back and start untangling some of the odd paragraphs and opaque phrasing of earlier scenes, but not necessarily in order.

This will tend to give the text a rather uneven texture, as readers move back and forth between newer and older sections. The differences in paragraphization in particular can be disorienting, for which I apologize.

As editing proceeds, however, these problems will ultimately be corrected, although I expect the editing phase alone to take at least two months after completion of the story. Much about the text requires cleaning and polishing before I will consider this work ready for a formal unveiling.

I am somewhat embarrassed about how raw and clumsy some of the earlier work is, but offer Scene 11.5 as an example of how I intend the entire story to read once I have completed editing.

Though that scene isn't finalized -- none of them are yet -- it has the sort of prosaic polish that I wish to present in all phases of the story.

Each scene that has been edited will display the date of last edit at the bottom of the text as part of the pHPBB functionality. If a scene seems out of whack, the edit date will probably give a good idea why, although a more recent edit may only be a partial, focused edit, leaving other parts of a scene in their earlier, less refined state.

Anyway, I just wanted to explain that for those who may wonder. Serial publication of such a story comes with some liabilities as well as benefits. The unevenness of what follows is a temporary liability.

Thus with your kind indulgence and awareness of the story's flawed editorial state, I present...

## **Episode 1: Inception**

### **Scene 1.1: Dream**

Glass. A large, smooth sheet of glass.

The boy felt himself walking toward it, involuntarily, reflexively. He could not look away from it. He was surrounded by white fog, ghostly and indistinct.

He stepped slowly toward the glass, seeing its bright surface shimmer mysteriously, like ripples on the surface of a pond. Is it glass, or something else?

As he came closer, he thought he could see an image forming in the window. Yes, it's a window.

The image was foreboding, growing ominously larger, darkening the pane of glass as it seemed to accelerate.

With a cry of shock, the boy recognized the shape. He screamed wildly, unable to move, terrified of the image which drew closer and closer...

Still screaming, he sat up in his bed, looking frantically around the room. But it was not his bed, and it was not his room. Thinking he was still dreaming, he shook his head, trying to wake up.

The room was comfortably warm, but dimly lit by small electric wall lamps casting pale light on dark wooden paneling. Outside drawn white curtains were a calm, dark evening and the chirping of crickets.

The boy spoke out loud, uncertain he was truly awake. "Where am I? What's going on?"

He began weeping, wanting more than anything to simply wake up from the nightmare. He gazed at the dark quilts piled on the heavy wooden four-poster bed, studying the patchwork of subdued, earth tone colors. Tears streamed down his face as he sobbed quietly.

"You are safe."

The voice startled him. It was calm, reassuring, but the voice of a stranger.

The boy looked toward its source, and saw a young man, perhaps eighteen years of age, in gray coveralls sitting in a small, overstuffed chair next to the bed.

His bright green eyes met the boy's gaze, and he offered wink and grin in greeting. He was fidgeting with something in his hands, turning it over and over.

But something was out of place. The boy looked up to see a pale, glowing ring floating above the young man's frizzy red hair. A halo!

Then he saw the wings, like the wings of a large, gray bird on the young man's back. An angel?

The boy looked nervously around the room, trying to place himself somewhere, anywhere that might make sense. "Am I... in heaven?"

The young man chuckled softly. He studied the boy, who seemed maybe fifteen years old. His medium length hair was light brown, and fell in straight but disorderly locks. Pale blue eyes alternately met his then darted around the room.

The young man spoke evenly. "You are in a safe place. Try to relax. I know this will be hard for you, but try to be calm. We'll have plenty of time to talk about things soon enough."

He leaned forward out of his chair. "You've been asleep for quite a while. How do you feel?"

The boy wiped the tears from his eyes. "I feel dizzy." He looked with growing amazement at the young man's wings and halo. "Where am I?"

The young man looked appraisingly at the boy. "We call it Stone Mill." He sat back and placed an arm over

the backrest of the chair, relaxing casually. “Before I say much else, why don’t you tell me about your dream?”

“My dream?” The boy looked puzzled for a moment, then brightened. “Oh! I saw a big, glass window. I was walking toward it. And then... and then...”

He paused, shaking his head from side to side, his brow furrowed with concentration. “That’s all I can remember.” The boy looked down, seemingly embarrassed that he couldn’t remember more.

The young man stroked his chin in thought, then looked up with a start. “I’m sorry. Where are my manners?”

He straightened in his chair. “My name is Senkou.”

He stared at the boy for a moment, then nodded his head as if coming to a decision. “You will be called ‘Mado’, for the symbol meaning ‘window’.”

Senkou stood up, puffing out his chest a little as he cleared his throat. He bowed slightly as he spoke in a loud, official tone. “Feather Mado, welcome to Stone Mill!”

The boy shook his head, puzzled. “Mado? Stone Mill? I’m sorry, I don’t understand.” His eyes flickered nervously between Senkou’s wings and halo, and he seemed ready to begin crying again.

Senkou put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, friend, I know this is hard, but it’s going to be okay. You’ll see. Try to lie down, you’ve already been through a lot.”

Mado didn’t notice the look of concern which crossed Senkou's face then quickly vanished behind a thin smile.

Mado lay back in the bed and closed his eyes, wondering if this was still a dream. His shoulder blades ached, as if he had slept on them wrong. They throbbed with dull pain, cramped and uncomfortable. He felt an overwhelming weariness wash over his body as he drifted into unconsciousness.

As Mado fell asleep, Senkou slipped quietly out the door.

## **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 1.2: Emergence**

Mado’s eyes opened slowly, then he awoke with jolt of surprise. This room wasn’t familiar. Yet...

Mado became aware of movement and looked over to see a boy not much older than himself kneeling next to the bed, spreading something on the floor. The boy was wearing a light green gown and cap, like surgical clothing.

Mado could see the bulges of what must be wings under the gown. Wings?

He studied the cap checking for signs of a halo, but saw none. He remembered Senkou, but could not remember anyone else. Who is this?

Mado sat up unsteadily and turned his head toward the stranger. “Hello?”

The strange boy looked up, apparently surprised, his dark, almond-shaped eyes peering up from under his cap. “Oh, you’re awake. Hello! Did you sleep okay?”

Mado looked down at himself, distracted. He was wearing a coarse white robe tied with laces at the back. What is this I’m wearing?

The stranger stood up and planted himself in the chair next to the bed with a warm smile. “My name is Kabe.”

“Kabe” Mado repeated the name. “Wall?”

Mado could see a ponytail of long, black shiny hair trailing down from beneath the boy’s cap and under the neck of the gown.

The strange boy nodded, seemingly pleased. “Yes. When I was in the cocoon, I dreamed I was facing a huge stone wall, so I am called ‘Kabe’, meaning ‘wall’.”

Mado blinked. “Cocoon?” Mado tried to imagine what Kabe was talking about. He was in a cocoon, like a butterfly?

Kabe smiled indulgently. “Oh, right. Senkou said you didn’t talk for very long. I’m sure you have all kinds of questions!” He leaned back in the chair, a finger against one cheek, glancing away thoughtfully. “Wow, where to begin?”

“Are you an angel?” Mado blurted it out before realizing it, and put his hand over his mouth in embarrassment.

Kabe laughed. “No, I can assure you that I am no angel.” He paused for a moment, his eyes averted in thought. “Ahhh. Of course.”

He looked down at clothing. “You can see my wings under this?” He paused again. “Oh, right, Senkou.”

Kabe sat up straight in the chair. “I’ll try to start from the top.”

He cleared his throat. “You are in the haibane nest of Stone Mill, in the town of Guri. No one knows where Guri is, because no one who lives here may leave.”

Kabe paused for a moment, gaging Mado’s reaction. “Like myself and all haibane, you were hatched from a giant cocoon. Although all haibane can talk and perform complex tasks without training, none of us has any memory of how that came to be.”

He looked toward the window. “We believe we have lived before, but can remember only what we dreamed when we were asleep in the cocoon.”

Kabe looked back and halted the lecture, seeing confusion growing on Mado's face. "I'm sorry, I'll slow down."

Mado puzzled over the word. "Haibane? Gray wings?" He looked almost pleadingly at Kabe. "Haibane. You are a haibane?"

Kabe nodded with a smile. "Yes, and you are as well, although your wings have not yet sprouted." He studied Mado for his reaction.

Suddenly reminded of the growing pain in his back, Mado reached around, trying to touch his shoulder blades. "I'm going to sprout wings?"

A worried look came to his face as he glanced from one shoulder to the other. "It's going to hurt, isn't it?"

Kabe sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid it will." He leaned forward, clasping his hands above his knees. "I will be here to help you. Master Tsuchi has assigned me to be your senior. It is my responsibility to care for you and help you adjust to life here."

Kabe nodded solemnly without breaking Mado's gaze. "I will take care of you." He clearly took his duty seriously.

A thought suddenly occurred to Mado. "Why are you dressed like that?" Ominous and troubling explanations began forming in his mind.

Kabe sat up and looked aside thoughtfully before answering. "When the wings first emerge, it can be a bit... messy."

Mado tensed and looked down at his shoulders, then back at Kabe with a worried look.

Kabe leaned forward with a look of apologetic sincerity. "Yes, it does hurt, but do not be afraid. The pain is not easy, but it is brief and will quickly pass. By tomorrow, you will be fine."

Kabe looked straight into Mado's eyes. "I will be with you."

A bead of sweat rolled down from Mado's forehead, stinging an eye. He reached up to wipe it away and felt heat radiating from his forehead. "I think I may be sick."

Mado steadied himself with his arms, feeling suddenly nauseous.

Kabe smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, it's normal. Your wings will sprout soon. Lie on your stomach and try to relax as best you can."

He stood up and helped Mado turn over, then leaned over, unlaced the back of Mado's gown and examined Mado's back. Over the shoulder blades, two swollen red bumps were already beginning to grow larger.

Kabe reached into a bowl on a nightstand next to the bed, wrung some water out of a cloth and placed it over Mado's head like a little hat.

He smiled cheerfully as Mado's breathing became heavy “Try to breathe evenly if you can. It helps if you don't hyperventilate.”

Mado looked over to see him rummaging through a large medical kit, pulling out what looked like a dental mouthpiece. Kabe held it next to Mado's mouth. “Here, this will keep you from biting your tongue.”

Mado accepted it, testing the fit against his teeth as panic clouded his mind with frightening thoughts. Biting my tongue?

The fever overtook him, and he drifted into a strange dream of pain, screaming, blood and tears as claws tore open his back...

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 1.3: Omen**

A monster had hold of Mado, ripping, tearing, slicing open his shoulders, spattering blood everywhere. He felt a tug on his shoulder, insistent, cutting through the nightmare.

Mado was overwhelmed by fresh terror. *This isn't a dream!* He awoke with a gasp, startled. He was lying on his stomach, his face buried in a sweat-soaked pillow.

He felt the tug again and jerked his head around to look. It was Kabe, and he was tugging on a bloodstained wing. *My wing.*

Mado tried to turn his head farther to see the wings, but the pain stopped him.

Kabe chided him gently. “Try to hold still. I know it hurts, but I need to make sure they are completely clean.” He continued to sponge blood off Mado's wings. “Don't worry, your wings came in normally. They are the proper shade of charcoal gray and look great.”

Kabe leaned over and gave Mado a soft pat on the shoulder. “You're going to be fine.”

Mado relaxed a little, trying to ignore the stinging, throbbing pain in his back. He could feel the wings. *I have wings!*

Mado wished he could somehow step back and look at them, but knew he would never really be able to see them clearly -- not on his back. He thought about the practicalities of having wings. *Will I be able to fly?*

He pressed his face into the pillow. *This must be a dream!*

Mado drifted once more into sleep as he dreamed of flying, flying with birds' wings on his back, flying high among the clouds in a clear blue sky on a bright sunny day.

There was a strange new voice in the dream. “He seems to be doing well.”

Mado opened his eyes to find he was still lying on his stomach. He turned his head toward the source of the words.

Standing next to his bed was a strange-looking man who seemed to be in his late twenties or older. He was slightly hunched, had short black hair thinning on top, and was staring at Mado through thick, coke-bottle glasses. He was wearing gray coveralls with a small, circular logo above the left breast pocket.

With his halo, wings and glasses, the man looked like an owl. Mado sensed an air of importance about him. He appeared to have been talking to Kabe. Daylight streamed into the room through the curtains.

Mado saw Kabe step next to the strange man. “Yes, *sensei*, his wings came in well, and as you can see, he is blessed.” He smiled at Mado. “It is a good omen for the nest.”

Mado wondered what he meant. *Blessed?*

The man spoke with a wry smile. “A good omen for you as well, Kabe.”

He noticed Mado staring at him and bowed politely. “Greetings, Feather Mado. I am Master Tsuchi, the supervisor of this facility.”

Tsuchi glanced at Kabe then back at Mado, smiling proudly. “Welcome to Stone Mill.”

Tsuchi's tone was formal, and Mado wasn't sure exactly what he should say. “Thank you.” Tsuchi did not seem displeased.

Mado furrowed his brow in puzzlement. “I am blessed?”

Tsuchi and Kabe turned to each other and laughed affably.

Tsuchi winked at Mado. “Yes, you are blessed, as are we to have you here to join our family.” Kabe nodded in agreement.

Tsuchi continued. “Please try to rest.” He glanced at Kabe as a mischievous grin came to his face. “It won't do to have a half-awake apprentice bumping around the shop.”

Mado saw the door open a few inches, and the face of a young boy peeked in, framed in collar-length black hair cut in bangs and capped with a halo. He saw Mado looking at him and his dark brown eyes widened in surprise. Through the open door, the faint sound of hammering and machinery could be heard.

Tsuchi turned to the door. “Not yet, Umi.” He shot a warm glance at Mado. “But soon. Be patient.” Tsuchi waved toward the boy with brusque dismissal. “Now back to work with you!”

The boy's face disappeared as the door quietly closed.

Tsuchi turned to face Mado, his hands on his hips. “Feather Mado, we will leave you now to rest some more, and give you some privacy.” He smiled reassuringly. “Do not be alarmed if you are alone when you

awaken.”

Tsuchi gestured toward the door. “ We’ll be right outside. I would have Kabe stay with you, but he has some work that needs to be finished.”

With that Tsuchi and Kabe turned and left the room, the sound of machinery wafting through the door as they passed through it.

As they left, Mado noticed that Kabe’s smock was spattered with bright red bloodstains. My blood.

He felt a stab of remembered pain in his back, and tried to relax.

Mado fell asleep again as many strange questions turned in his mind. Outside, he heard the distant chirping of birds.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 1.4: Accession**

Mado awoke to the pleasant scent of flowers. He looked around the room, which was bathed in afternoon light. The window was open, and the fragrance was being carried into the room by a warm, gentle breeze.

Mado rolled over, but stopped short with a yelp as pain shot through his back. *Oh, right, the wings!*

Mado was still having trouble believing it was true. *Wings? Really? Me?*

He sat up in bed and examined the robe he was wearing. It was a plain, ivory colored affair, made of a material that felt itchy and rough. He looked at a sleeve. The fabric seemed to be stiffening as it dried out. It had a strange smell that he couldn’t place. Pungent, but not unpleasant.

On the chair next to the bed a pile of clothing was neatly stacked beneath a note. “*Get dressed. You’re late for breakfast.*” There was a little smiley face and the symbol for Kabe at the bottom.

Mado carefully slid out of bed and stretched, feeling an ache from his shoulders as he did so. He felt like he had been lying in bed forever, and twisted around, trying to loosen up a body full of aching muscles.

The wings were stiff and cramped, and shot pain through his back when they twitched. They seemed to twitch at the most unexpected times.

He walked over to the open window and took a deep breath of flowers and fresh air. The sunlight, though made mild by light afternoon clouds, hurt his eyes. *Have I seen sunlight before... somewhere?*

As his eyes adjusted, he looked outside to see rolling fields of green grass and colorful flowers. The view was breathtaking. In the distance he thought he could see buildings, but couldn’t be sure. They seemed like a mirage. He could hear the sound of small birds chirping merrily from the eaves of the roof far above.

The scene was beautiful, and absolutely unfamiliar. *Where is this place?*

Mado turned to examine the pile of clothing. *Breakfast. When did I eat last?*

There was a patch over the left breast pocket of the coveralls. Mado had seen patches like these on the chests of the other haibane. It looked like a spoked wheel stitched in brown and white, about two inches in diameter. He stared at it, pondering its meaning.

The coveralls were oversized, but seemed to fit well enough. There was a problem however: the wings. They were very sore and sensitive to the touch..

Mado saw that there were two large slits on the back of the coveralls, but lining them up with his wings seemed impossible. He couldn't get them to fold or move, and even the slightest touch caused agony. He tried leaning over, threading a wing through one of the slits, but a sudden twitch caused it to tug against the clothing.

Mado winced in agony, and wondered if he would be able to get dressed at all. *Should I ask for help?*

He decided to try to get dressed on his own, even if it meant dealing with more pain. After several unsuccessful attempts, Mado finally succeeded in fitting his wings through the slits one at a time, his eyes squeezed with effort and anguish from their movement.

He sighed with a mixture of pride and relief as he buttoned the front of the coveralls.

A sliding keeper belt held the waist in place. Socks, tee shirt and underwear seemed a bit frayed, but were impeccably clean. The shoes were heavy black leather with thick soles, but fit reasonably well and were serviceable.

Mado left the tee shirt behind. *The coveralls are hard enough to put on.*

He stepped over to a mirror mounted on a modest dresser, gazing into the pale blue eyes looking back at him. Who am I, really?

Mado stared at the winged, uniformed figure, trying to understand the meaning of it all. He turned sideways to look at the wings, an unfamiliar and surreal addition to his body. *Large gray wings, like a giant pigeon!*

The coveralls were almost the same shade of gray as the wings. Mado wondered. The gray seemed to be a standard color. *Did they choose this color based on the color of the wings?*

For a brief moment, a wave of terror swept over Mado, but he willed it away. He was starving, and it was time for "breakfast". He walked over to the large, wooden door and paused uncertainly.

Mado closed his eyes, took a few deep breaths, then opened the door and stepped through.

The hallway, like the room, was paneled in dark wood, and dimly lit by a combination of overhead electric lamps and windows on the opposite walls. The floors were of hardwood planks, and meticulously polished.

Mado suddenly realized that *everything* was very clean, almost like a hospital. There was no dust, grime or dirt anywhere to be seen.

The hallway windows looked out on a large, open indoor space. Mado approached one of them and peered through the clean, clear glass.

The room outside the window was enormous, a giant industrial edifice. From the rafters, dozens of chains and cables dangled from winches and pulleys. Beneath them was a vast concrete floor area covered with workbenches and machinery. Large skylights in the roof scattered shafts of sunlight throughout the cathedral-like main hall.

Mado saw boys in coveralls with wings and halos working at benches, others operating large machines. All of them were wearing safety glasses. He could hear hammering and the whir of the machinery through the window. It was like a giant factory, but most of the benches and machines were unmanned.

Mado looked down at the patch on his chest. *Stone Mill.*

One of the boys looked up and noticed Mado watching. It was Kabe, and he waved as he started toward the hallway. He had been working on something with a hammer and chisel, and set down a pair of gloves he had been wearing before leaving his workstation.

Mado walked over to a doorway leading out to the shop area as Kabe stepped up, grinning brightly. “You’re awake! Finally.” He gave Mado a playful punch on the arm.

Kabe stepped to one side, examining Mado's back. “How are your wings?”

Mado noticed that Kabe’s long, black ponytail was tucked into the neck of his coveralls.

Kabe saw him staring and shook his head with a smile. “Sorry, you must be starving. Come on, let’s get something to eat.”

He led Mado gently by the arm out into the cavernous shop area, following a path marked in yellow paint on the concrete floor. Mado saw that there were all sorts of colored lines painted on the floor, marking off work areas and safety zones.

The boys stepped up to a large lathe where Tsuchi was busy working. He was facing away from them, carefully machining a long shaft of shining metal, delicately adjusting a small cutting tool with a handwheel as the shaft turned slowly.

Kabe winked at Mado then called out loudly. “Sensei, look who finally woke up!”

Tsuchi glanced over his shoulder sharply, scowling through his thick glasses, his expression softening as he recognized Mado. He reached over, turned off the lathe and stepped over to them with mild indignation.

Tsuchi smiled thinly as he inspected Mado. “You look hungry.” He looked at the watch on his wrist. “I suppose we can knock off a few minutes early today.”

He turned his head and shouted. “Senkou! Last bell!”

A few moments later a loud electric alarm bell echoed throughout the huge space, followed by the sounds of machines being turned off and muffled conversations as the workers filed away from their stations.

Everyone headed toward a doorway to one side of the main room, above which the word “LOUNGE” was carved on a wooden plaque.

The lounge was a large room with two long wooden tables on one side and three oversized couches on the other. Three windows like the one in Mado's room were spaced along the far wall, while an open doorway next to a metal counter led to what must have been the kitchen.

Next to the couches were a billiard table and what looked like brightly-painted pinball machines. Like all the rooms in Stone Mill, the lounge featured dark paneling with a polished hardwood floor, and it was impeccably clean.

The other boys, all dressed in gray coveralls like Mado's, were beginning to sit down at the table nearest the kitchen. Like the other table, it was bracketed by rows of neatly arranged sturdy wooden chairs.

Mado saw Senkou step into the kitchen, from which the smell of steamed rice and vegetables was already wafting. Mado felt his stomach growl. *How long has it been since I've eaten something?*

As Kabe and Mado stepped into the lounge, the other boys turned and waved. Tsuchi stepped in, and the boys stood up.

Two boys stepped out of the kitchen: Senkou and the little one Tsuchi had called 'Umi' -- the boy who had peeked into his room earlier. Umi couldn't have been more than eleven years old.

Tsuchi gestured toward Mado. “Kabe, please introduce the new feather.”

Kabe stood straight, cleared his throat and spoke with a formal tone. “Haibane of Stone Mill, allow me to introduce Feather Mado.” At that, the boys bowed and said “Welcome,” almost in unison. Senkou and Umi waved and hurried back into the kitchen.

Kabe, Mado and Tsuchi all took a seat at the table opposite two other boys. Mado counted five including himself, plus the two in the kitchen. *Seven haibane.*

Mado shook his head slowly, still puzzled by the strangeness of what he was experiencing. Haibane. Gray-wings.

He looked around the table at the boys' wings and halos, still unable to believe it was not a dream.

A boy of Mado's age with a mop of tousled, dark brown hair, light brown eyes, thin face and a pointed, elfin nose extended a handshake. “Hello! I'm Matsu. A pleasure.” Mado noticed sawdust in the creases of Matsu's coveralls. His hands were firm and calloused.

Placid gray eyes greeted him from under a head of longish blond hair as Kumo slowly waved his hand from across the table. “I'm Kumo. Welcome to Stone Mill.”

Kumo's smile was warm, but seemed somehow distant. There was a slight cleft in his chin. Kumo was maybe a little younger than Mado, but had an air of self-assurance and maturity. Despite his distant gaze, his welcome seemed sincere.

Umi walked out of the kitchen and held a bowl of rice up to Mado, his dark eyes peering over the rim. "I'm Umi."

He carefully set the bowl in front of Mado. "I know you're hungry, but you should start with this." His eyes scanned the table. "Don't worry, the other guys won't mind."

Umi glanced briefly at Kabe as Mado accepted the bowl, then with a shake of his shiny black hair and a twitch of his wings, rushed back into the kitchen.

Mado began eating the rice with a spoon, and though it was plain, it tasted better than anything he could ever remember eating. In fact, it was the only thing Mado could ever remember eating.

He tried not to eat too fast, but it was difficult. Mado sensed an atmosphere of mirth around him, but finished the bowl in record time.

Matsu nodded sharply toward him with a smirk. "Mado, was that better than your last meal?"

Kumo stared absently at Matsu, speaking with a tone of exaggerated wonder. "Wow Matsu, that was deep."

Laughter erupted at the table. Mado pondered the joke, and decided it was indeed pretty deep. When did I eat last?

Tsuchi gestured at Mado's head with an impish smile. "I was originally thinking we should give you the halo before dinner, but since Senkou is cooking tonight, I thought you should try the food before deciding if you should accept the halo."

At that moment a loud metallic crash rang out from the kitchen, and everyone started laughing hysterically. Mado could even hear laughter coming from the kitchen.

Moments later, Senkou and Umi came filing out. Senkou carried a tray full of delicious steaming dishes and a large pot of green tea, while Umi carried a tray stacked with plates, bowls and tableware. The boys set their trays in the middle of the table and sat down.

Set before Mado was a meal that he would never forget for the rest of his time in Guri. Senkou was an excellent cook.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 1.5: Induction**

The haibane all sat back in their chairs. On the table were the remains of what everyone agreed had been a delicious meal.

Tsuchi spoke. "Is everyone full?" The question was greeted with groans of satisfaction from all around the

table.

Tsuchi nodded, whereupon Kabe and Matsu stood up and began gathering the dishes onto the serving trays while the rest of the boys continued their light dinnertime chatter.

Umi, who was sitting at the end of the table, turned to Mado, looking curiously at the new boy with light brown hair and pale blue eyes. “Do your wings hurt?” The question poured from his lips without apparent volition.

Reflexively, Mado’s wings twitched, causing a brief spasm of pain. He nodded silently to Umi.

Umi looked at Mado’s wings. “They should be okay in a few days. What was your dream in the cocoon like?”

At this, the other boys stopped talking and looked at Mado, making him feel rather self-conscious.

He cleared his throat. “Well, I remember walking toward a large glass window. That’s pretty much all I can remember.”

Mado looked around at the others sitting at the table, questing with his eyes. He saw little nods, and Senkou gave him a wink. From the kitchen, he could hear the sounds of Kabe and Matsu washing the pots, pans and dishes.

Tsuchi shifted in his chair, arched an eyebrow. “What do you think of Stone Mill so far, Feather Mado?”

The question caught Mado off guard. “Well, I...um, it’s a very nice place, but I...”

Mado stammered out the sentence as his cheeks started to redden, but Tsuchi held up a hand. “Do not be concerned.” A soft smile came to his lips. “We have all been through this. Try to relax.” His eyes swept the table. “I know you have many more questions than answers right now.”

Mado relaxed in his chair, following the little snippets of idle conversation that resumed at the table. Soon Kabe and Matsu emerged from the kitchen, and everyone filed out into the cavernous main work area.

In a large, open section of the shop, a thick white line had been painted on the floor. Mado went to join Kabe and the boys in line, but Tsuchi pulled him gently aside to stand in front of the assembled haibane.

From a side door, Umi came out carrying what looked like a circular brass mold with a wooden handle. He stepped into line, checked the catch on the mold and looked up at Tsuchi expectantly.

Tsuchi addressed the boys. “Fellow haibane, a new feather has arrived in our nest. He has been named ‘Mado’, which means ‘window’.”

He gestured toward Mado. “You may see by his wings that he is a blessed haibane. Does anyone here object to his joining our community?” Tsuchi looked over the line of boys inquisitively.

Matsu slowly raised his hand, then quickly pulled it back with a smile, causing giggles to break out among

the boys.

Tsuchi shot him a sharp glance, but said nothing, and turned to face Mado. “Feather Mado, to be born at Stone Mill is a special honor among haibane. Guri is the wheel, and we are the spokes.”

His eyes swept over the line of boys, then to Mado. “We do not believe your arrival here is a matter of chance, but that the appearance of your cocoon in our loft is a sign that you belong here with us. Nonetheless, it is the custom of Stone Mill that you are not compelled to join us.”

Tsuchi gave Mado a curt nod. “The choice is yours.”

His gaze focused through his thick glasses and seemed to pierce Mado to the core of his being. “Feather Mado, we of Stone Mill consider it a privilege to be a part of our community, but with that privilege comes responsibilities. Just as each spoke must be strong for the wheel to remain true, each of us must be true for the wheel to remain strong. We take our duties very seriously.”

Tsuchi intoned formally. “Feather Mado, are you willing to accept your responsibilities to your comrades, your nest, and to the community of Guri?”

He looked sharply into Mado’s eyes, and Mado found it impossible to look away. *Responsibilities?* He felt the other boys looking at him silently. Though only a brief moment had passed, it seemed like an eternity.

Mado turned to look at the line of boys, seeing the expectancy on their faces. “Yes.” He lifted his chin slightly, looked back at Tsuchi. “Yes, Master Tsuchi, I accept my responsibilities.”

Tsuchi nodded with a thin smile. “Feather Mado, please kneel.”

As Mado dropped slowly to one knee, Umi stepped in front of him, and held up the brass mold, which was hinged at the end. A wisp of steam hissed out as the mold was opened. Inside, Mado saw a bright pale ring: his new halo.

Umi grasped the halo with an ornate set of tongs and held it up high overhead.

Mado could see the excitement in Umi’s eyes as he spoke. “Feather Mado, we, the haibane of Stone Mill, present this halo as a symbol of your bond with us. May it guide you in the times to come.” The inflections in his voice suggested he had learned this speech carefully by rote.

As Umi moved to place the halo, it made a strange sound, like a soft squeal, and Mado reflexively looked up, knocking the halo out of the tongs. It landed on the floor with a loud clang and rolled several yards away like a loose coin, coming to rest with a hollow ringing noise.

Umi stood frozen, horrified, staring at the halo as it lay on the floor.

After a tense pause, laughter broke out among the boys, and Mado looked at them sheepishly, feeling a growing crush of embarrassment. But he saw friendly humor in their eyes, not malice or derision.

Tsuchi smiled warmly. “Do not be concerned, Feather Mado.” He turned toward Umi. “Umi?”

Umi snapped out of his trance and raced after the halo, grasping it firmly in the tongs again. Carrying the halo in front of him like a sacred relic -- with both hands tightly gripping the tongs -- he returned to his place in front of Mado.

Umi leaned forward with a worried look and whispered with a scolding tone. "Mado, be careful. The halo is very hot and won't cool until it has adjusted to you."

He reached up and placed the halo carefully over Mado's head. Mado squinted his eyes shut expectantly. The halo settled into place with a tinny whine, and he could just barely feel it hovering over his head.

There was a collective sigh of relief from the other haibane, and Mado opened his eyes, restraining the impulse to reach up and touch the glowing ring.

Tsuchi motioned toward Kabe. "Feather Mado, please take your place among us."

Mado stood up, feeling the whispery weight of the halo as it bobbed over his head, and slowly walked over to stand next to Kabe as Umi closed the mold and took his place at the other end of the line. Kabe gave Mado a little nudge with his elbow and smiled.

Tsuchi faced the row of boys. "Craftsmen, clean your workstations and begin the evening routine." He glanced at Kabe, who nodded in acknowledgment.

Tsuchi addressed the boys again. "You are dismissed."

With that, Tsuchi and the boys dispersed throughout the shop, brushing the dust and filings from their machines and benches and sweeping the floors.

Kabe led Mado by the arm to the hallway outside his room, but proceeded farther down the hall, opening one of the large wooden doors. He stood aside and gestured for Mado to enter.

Mado looked inside the room. Unlike all the others he had seen, this one had walls and a floor covered in light blue ceramic tiles. At the far end, a large metal tub was full of steaming water. On a cabinet next to it, Mado saw a stack of fresh towels and next to that, a neatly folded stack of clean clothing.

Kabe smiled and leaned toward him with a wink. "Yes, Feather Mado. *You need a bath!*"

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 2: Symbiance**

#### **Scene 2.1: Indoctrination**

Mado was walking down a long hallway of white walls. On each side were rows of light green doors, spaced as if leading into small rooms. The beige linoleum floor reflected the cold white light of fluorescent lamps

set within the acoustic tile ceiling.

An alarm bell began ringing, and all the doors opened at once.

Mado's eyes shot open. His face was buried in a soft, white pillow. He turned his head and saw dim gray light filtering into a room of dark wooden paneling. *My room?*

He started to roll over, but a sudden sharp pain in his back stopped him. *My wings.*

Mado lifted himself up onto his elbows, feeling groggy and groaning from the aches that seemed to come from every muscle in his body.

He shook his head as he began to remember the previous day, feeling a strange tugging on his scalp. How could this be real? He looked over to see a large gray feather lying on the sheet next to him. It must have come from one of his wings. *My... wings?*

It was too difficult for Mado to believe. But the pain felt too real to be a dream, and if it was a dream, it seemed to be going on forever.

Mado sat up on the edge of the bed and rubbed his eyes. He was still wearing his coveralls — he was too tired to even get undressed the night before. The bath had acted like a tranquilizer, and after he put on the fresh clothes, he had walked straight back to his room and fallen into bed, exhausted.

*At least this time I put on a tee shirt.* Mado looked at the shoes sitting next to the bed, and was glad he hadn't slept in them.

He went to scratch his head, and his fingers struck something solid. There was a dull metallic ringing sound. He tensed in surprise, exclaimed. “Oh, the halo!”

He reached up to touch it, then remembered Umi's warning. Was it still hot?

Mado eased out of bed and walked over to the dresser. In the mirror he saw the pale, shining ring floating over his head. He could see the glow of the halo reflected in his light brown hair. *I'm starting to look less and less like myself.*

He stood staring at his reflection as the weight of the thought hit him. *But who am I?*

Mado ran his fingers along the edge of the halo. It was cool to the touch. The ring was like a thin, flattened doughnut of metal or perhaps glass. The edges were sharp but not dangerously so.

He pulled on the halo and it moved, but it resisted as if it were held by a magnetic field. He pulled it a little farther and released it, and it made an eerie whining sound as it wobbled back and forth, settling finally into place.

Mado gazed curiously into the mirror at the glowing ring floating above his head. *How strange.*

He wondered what time it was. His back still felt stiff and sore, but it did seem to be getting better. There

was a soft knock on the door.

Mado turned toward the door uncertainly. “Who is it?”

A muffled voice replied, “It's Kabe. May I come in?”

*Kabe?* Mado had to think a moment before memory came to him. *Of course, Kabe.*

He called out cheerfully. “Yes, please come in.”

The door swung open slowly, and Kabe peeked in, smiling genially. “Good morning! Did you sleep well?” He walked over and sat in the overstuffed chair next to the bed.

Mado watched Kabe's wings fold in as he sat down and leaned back in the chair without any apparent discomfort. *I need to learn how to do that.*

Kabe was wearing the usual gray coveralls, but his shiny black ponytail was not tucked in. It was very long – it reached almost to his waist. Mado wondered if Kabe ever cut his hair, and doubted it. At the moment, it was thrown over his left shoulder and draped down his chest.

Mado saw the way Kabe's hair reflected the halo's light, and wondered what made the halos glow.

Kabe noticed him staring at the ponytail and lifted it with a hand, spreading the hairs between his fingers. “Pretty long, isn't it? I'm not very fond of barbers.”

He smiled ironically. “Master Tsuchi doesn't like it because it's a safety hazard if I don't tuck it in around machinery, but I'm quite careful about it when I'm working.”

Mado nodded slowly. *I suppose that makes sense.*

Kabe winked. “I'm here to help you learn about the routine. We run almost everything on a schedule. Most new feathers find it confusing at first, but don't worry, it's really not all that hard to get used to.”

He leaned back in the chair, stretching his arms. “It makes things a lot easier.” He arched an eyebrow at Mado. “A place like Stone Mill really couldn't function without careful planning.”

Mado nodded, listening as Kabe continued. “Today is Friday. Weekdays are work days, Saturday is Maintenance Day and Sunday is Recreation Day. On work days, we get up at the first bell, which is at 6 o'clock. Breakfast is served around 6:30, and work starts at 7:00 when the second bell rings.”

Kabe grinned indulgently as Mado tried to memorize the schedule. “After that, it's pretty simple: if you're working when the bell rings, stop working, and if you're not working when the bell rings, start working.”

Kabe chuckled softly in response to Mado's puzzled expression. “I'm sure you don't feel like working right about now, but don't worry, we'll start you off at a pace you can handle. Stone Mill isn't a prison, and once you settle in, I think you'll come to enjoy it as much as we do.”

He gestured amiably. "Once you learn your trade, you'll probably start thinking the days go by too fast. As Master Tsuchi says, 'Time flows like a stream, but flies like the wind.'"

Kabe sat back, relaxing in the chair, his gaze distant as he looked toward the window and rested a cheek on one hand.

Mado thought about the image of the haibane boys working in the shop. They had been working hard, but seemed to be enjoying themselves. He thought about what it would be like to operate the machines, and felt a sense of excitement. The idea had its appeal.

Kabe looked over at the door, then back at Mado. "But that comes later. We have some special tasks to do today."

Mado saw a little gleam in Kabe's deep, dark eyes as he continued. "After breakfast, we'll be going to the Temple. You will become an official member of the *Haibane Renmei*, and receive your notebook from the Communicator. I have some errands to run in town as well, and would like to have you come along with me."

Mado felt confusion coming over him as he tried to take in what Kabe was saying. *Temple? Haibane Renmei? Communicator?* It seemed like too much to figure out.

Kabe saw the look on Mado's face and leaned forward, clasping his hands in his lap. "I remember when I was a newborn. I thought I was going crazy. Nothing seemed to make sense, and everything seemed to come at me at once."

Kabe smiled warmly. "Believe me, I know how you feel right now. I just want you to know that it's okay, and everything is going to be fine." He sat up with a cheerful grin. "I will help you adjust to life here. Don't be afraid."

Mado saw the mix of mirth and compassion in Kabe's eyes and felt himself physically relax.

Mado spoke suddenly, remembering something. "I think I heard the bell this morning, but other than before dinner last night, I don't remember hearing any bells. Will I be able to hear them in my room?"

Kabe smiled softly. "When a new feather hatches, we turn off the bell timer until he wakes up and starts settling in."

Mado nodded. "Oh."

Kabe stood up, stretching his arms nonchalantly. "Come on, let's go get breakfast."

Mado put on his shoes and followed Kabe to the lounge, where the rest of the haibane were already eating. As they walked in, they were greeted with choruses of "Good morning!" from the seated boys, who had been chatting in animated tones over bowls of soba noodles and cups of tea.

Kabe led Mado into the kitchen, where they ladled noodles from a large pot into bowls, placed chopsticks, spoons and cups onto small serving trays and carried them out to the table.

As Mado sat down, Kumo filled his cup with steaming black tea. The noodles were a bit salty, but delicious.

Tsuchi looked over at Mado with a smile. “So, Feather Mado, are you ready to go to work? We have a lot for you to do today.” Light chuckles broke out around the table.

“Hey Tsuchi, I have a stator that could use winding.” It was Senkou, eyeing Mado with a grin. “But he'll have to do it by hand until he learns how to run the winder.” More chuckles.

Umi spoke up. “Be sure to have him lacquer it when he's done, I'm getting tired of being the lacquer boy.” Umi smiled at Mado as the rest of the boys laughed conspiratorially.

Kabe nudged Mado in the ribs. “Sorry guys, he's going to be my apprentice for a while, and that means he'll have to do *real* work.”

Oohs and whoas came from all around the table, and Kabe gave Mado a little wink. “He'll be plenty tired tonight, you can count on that.”

Kabe leaned over and whispered in Mado's ear. “You might want to have a second bowl of noodles. We may not have time for lunch while we're out.”

Mado took his advice, returning with a second bowl, and finished it almost as quickly as he had finished the first. Even after such a heavy meal the night before, he was very hungry.

Mado looked around the table. Already some of the faces were starting to look familiar: Matsu with his shifty brown eyes and pointy nose, Senkou with his frazzled red hair and lanky frame, Kumo with his light blond hair, dull gray eyes and cleft chin, the owlish Master Tsuchi, who seemed old beyond his years.

Around the table sat boys with shining halos and gray wings. It was still a very strange-looking scene to him. But it was starting to seem less strange. He had only met them yesterday, yet they were already starting to seem more like friends than strangers.

Mado soaked up the feeling of camaraderie that flowed around the table.

*Maybe I could get used to this place.*

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 2.2: Admission**

Outside the lounge, the loud alarm bell rang. Breakfast was over, and it was time for work. The boys stood up and starting filing out of the room.

As he walked out, Matsu looked over at Mado with a playful grin. “Say hello to the Communicator for me.” The rest of the boys laughed.

Kabe led Mado out of the room as Umi and Tsuchi stayed behind and started cleaning up.

At the end of the main shop room next to a doorway was a bulletin board alongside a row of pegs with wooden name tags hanging from them. Mado saw the symbols for the other boys' names painted in white on the tags. Kabe reached out and flipped his tag over, revealing his symbol in red.

Kabe glanced at Mado. "You don't have a name tag yet, but you will soon. When you come and go from the premises, it is important to flip the tag so we know if you are here or outside."

He stepped over to a shelf in which pairs of shoes and boots were stored in box-like compartments. "Go ahead and change out of your shop shoes. There are boots here for you. See if they fit."

Mado saw the symbol for his name above one of the compartments. There was a worn pair of black leather boots in it.

As he tried them on, Kabe explained. "We don't wear our shop shoes outside, or our boots inside. The exception is when we bring heavy items in and out through the main door. Also, be sure to clean your boots with the shoe brushes before putting them away."

Mado nodded as he laced up the boots. They were actually quite comfortable.

Kabe reached over to a shelf by the door. A small bundle wrapped in an ornate purple cloth tied with golden cords was there – the halo mold.

Kabe took it. "I'll return this while we're there."

They stepped outside onto a driveway that was paved with old cobblestones almost flattened with wear. To the left were several wooden buildings lining the east side of the drive, lit from behind by the rising morning sun.

The cobbled driveway ran straight in front of the long line of buildings then curved around to the right, where an ancient stone bridge crossed a fast-flowing stream which ran near the west side of the main building.

Around everything was a lush green meadow dotted with wildflowers, and the cool tang of morning dew mixed with their soft, sweet scent. In the distance were stands of trees.

Kabe paused a moment, allowing Mado to take in the scenery. "If your boots feel okay, we can walk to the Temple. It's not far from here."

Mado took a few steps around, testing the fit. "They feel fine."

Kabe motioned for him to follow.

As they walked down the driveway, Mado looked around in growing wonder. On the other side of the bridge, the path ended in a tee with a dirt road. Beyond that was a grass-covered hill studded with tall windmills on thick poles, their blades turning slowly in the morning breeze.

Mado paused for a moment on the bridge, following the stream with his eyes as it led them back to Stone Mill.

It was a huge frame building set on short, thick, moss-covered stone walls. On the side a large wooden paddle wheel turned slowly as water from the stream poured over it through a leaky wooden sluice.

Just above the stone walls and directly under the eaves of the roof high above were rows of windows flanked by shutters. None of the wood seemed painted, but was instead a natural dark brown

Though the building seemed very old, it was in good repair, and Mado imagined that it might be able to stand as long as it had already stood – maybe even longer.

Kabe stood next to him. “Home, sweet home.” He put a reassuring hand on Mado's shoulder. “You'll get used to it soon. I promise.”

He gestured toward the intersection. “Let's go to the Temple. I'll tell you what to expect along the way.”

They walked to the intersection and turned right. The road led them upstream alongside the bubbling stream.

As they walked, Kabe told Mado about the Haibane Renmei and the rules of the Temple.

Mado glanced nervously at his wings as Kabe explained how the bells worked. His wings were still sore and tended to twitch now and then on their own

Kabe was reassuring and told him not to worry about using his wings unless he was asked a direct question by the Communicator.

The path began cutting into the side of a tall cliff. As they crossed an old rope bridge next to a mist-shrouded waterfall, Mado looked down at the deep blue pond beneath him and the stream that poured out of it, rushing back toward Stone Mill.

Kabe warned him to watch his step as the path became narrower and curved around the nearly vertical cliff wall.

At the end of the trail was a tall, gray stone building built into the side of the cliff. Surrounding it on a small shelf of earth were neatly-trimmed grass and a well-tended garden.

They approach the entrance, which was guarded by a massive double door. A tall masked attendant in a dark green robe with wooden wings and a pointed straw hat stepped up to them and placed bells on their wings and wrists.

Kabe shook his wrists to signal farewell, and Mado quickly shook his wrists as well. The little bells tinkled brightly in the crisp morning air.

As the strange figured walked away, Kabe turned Mado. “Would you like to practice with the bells before we go in? Remember, we are not allowed to speak inside.”

Mado tried: right wing, “yes,” left wing, “no.” The practice session did not produce encouraging results, but Mado finally agreed to go in.

Inside, the Temple was filled with trees, shrubs and flowers under which rolled a carpet of green grass. Mado gasped as he looked up to see thick stone tiers lining the large, cylindrical chamber, framing an open roof far above. The Temple was huge, and breathtakingly beautiful.

The bells on the boys' wings tinkled softly as they walked.

Suddenly a loud, commanding voice boomed through the trees, echoing against the tall stone walls. “Haibane! What is your business here?”

Mado and Kabe stopped and looked at each other as the voice continued. “One haibane has come to return the halo mold. The other is a newborn. Is this correct?”

Kabe shook his right wing, rustling the high-pitched bells meaning “yes.”

The voice replied. “Proceed into the garden.”

Standing next to a small, ornate gazebo was a hunched figure dressed in a green robe with a beige hood. On his face he wore a wooden mask which covered his features, replacing them with holes and slits. On his back were two wooden wings from which slender bells were hung.

The mask gave him a strange and menacing appearance. There was an unusual symbol like a stick figure with wings on the brow of the hood.

Kabe stepped forward and handed him the halo mold. Kabe had described the Communicator to Mado, but seeing him in person was still a shock.

The figure turned to Mado. “You are the newborn. Your name is 'Mado'. Is this correct?”

Mado blushed, and mustering all his will, managed to shake his right wing ever so slightly.

The Communicator stared impassively, the mask rendering his face expressionless. “Feather Mado, you are hereby accepted as a member of the Haibane Renmei. This will serve you as proof.”

He held out a small red booklet. Mado took it in his hands. Beneath the title, he saw the symbol for his name on the cover.

The Communicator continued. “It guarantees your daily life. In return for what it provides, you are to work in this town. For yourself, for your dwelling place, and as an example to your comrades, you must become a good haibane. We are here if you need us. Come here when you are in trouble. Do you understand?”

The question caught Mado by surprise, and his right wing twitched unexpectedly, launching the bell holder into the air with a clamor. It arced high above as Mado's eyes followed it in shock.

As they fell toward the ground, the Communicator, without even turning his head, reached out and caught

the bells in his hand.

He stepped forward to place the bells on Mado's wing. "Be still."

As he leaned over Mado, he spoke softly. "You will soon face a difficult trial. Remember that you may come here whenever you need help. Do not forget."

Mado stared as the robed figure returned to the gazebo, wondering what he had meant.

The Communicator turned to face them. "Is there anything else?"

Kabe shook his left wing, the low-pitched bells signaling "no," then shook the bells on his wrists, "farewell." He turned and led Mado out of the temple, where a masked attendant removed their bells.

Kabe put a hand on Mado's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

He glanced back at the Temple. "Don't be embarrassed. I didn't know the old guy could move like that."

Kabe's grin melted away Mado's fear, and they both shared a good laugh as they started walking back down the path.

Mado asked what the Communicator meant by "difficult trial," but the question seemed to drift past Kabe as his gaze swept over the distant landscape. "I think you've had your fair share of the Communicator for now. Let's go get a scooter and head into town."

He quickened the pace a little as they crossed over the rope bridge. Mado's mind started racing.

*Scooter? Now that sounds fun!*

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 2.3: Presentation**

Kabe pulled open the huge sliding door of the garage, his long black ponytail swinging loose behind his back. Inside were several bicycles, a yellow metal locker with words "FLAMMABLE -- No Smoking" in red letters across the front and a row of four shiny motor scooters.

Each scooter was a different color: red, blue, green and yellow. All had banana seats that could accommodate two riders, and each was immaculately clean.

Kabe stepped in and wheeled out the green scooter. Mado helped him slide the door shut, then hopped on the back. Kabe started up the scooter's tiny engine and the boys sped down the cobbled path.

The wind whipped Kabe's ponytail in Mado's face, so he pinned it between his chest and Kabe's back. Meanwhile, Kabe's folded wings blocked Mado's view, forcing him to peer between their leading edges and Kabe's neck at the road ahead.

This time they turned left at the tee, then turned left at another intersection onto what seemed like a main

road lined with trees and utility poles.

They crested a small rise, and Mado began to see the town of Guri come into view over Kabe's shoulder. He noticed the tall clock tower, and imagined he could almost tell the time from here.

As the town loomed larger, Kabe told him the clock tower was their destination. Mado saw that there were many tall three- and four-story buildings in Guri as they came closer, creating jumbled silhouettes against the sky.

Kabe slowly threaded the scooter through a maze of shadowy, ancient streets lined with tall stone and brick buildings. Here and there, simply-dressed townsfolk went about their chores or sat quietly, taking in the beautiful clear morning.

Mado stared at them. Something nagged at him, then he had a sudden realization. "There are humans here?"

Mado found his own question sounding odd even as he asked it. He had assumed everyone else in Guri was a haibane like himself.

Kabe smiled over his shoulder. "Most of the people of Guri are humans. We are the ones who are unusual."

Mado pondered that. *Was I human once?*

The boys pulled up in front of the clock shop, an old stone building facing the city's broad circular central plaza.

The clock tower -- the tallest structure in town -- rose from the top of the building. Alongside the square spire was a network of scaffolding. The tower was apparently being renovated.

Kabe opened the door and motioned Mado inside. The boys were greeted by a noisome cacophony of ticking. There must have been dozens of clocks on the shelves and walls of the store, and they were all ticking.

As Mado's eyes adjusted to the dim interior light, he saw the glow of a halo over a mop of unruly black hair. He looked down to see the outlines of gray wings.

It was another haibane standing behind the counter, someone he hadn't seen before, dressed in a loose, olive gray jacket with a row of wide leather loop clasps down the front. Mado followed Kabe over to the counter.

Kabe spoke amiably to the strange haibane. "Hi Kana, is the Master available?" He held up a small toolkit. "I'm here to return this and thank him on behalf of Master Tsuchi. The regulator assembly is back in service, thanks to these tools."

Kana glanced at the toolkit. "The Master is out. He's doing a house call at the antique shop. A grandfather clock. I can give him the toolkit when he gets back, if you like."

The voice was businesslike and assertive, but seemed a bit high-pitched. There was something different about this haibane.

Mado stared for a moment, then blurted out. "You're a girl?" He blushed, immediately aware of how stupid the question sounded.

Kana's dark eyes flashed toward Mado, her voice sharp with surprise. "Is that a problem?"

She put her hands on her hips as she awaited an answer, flames growing in her eyes. Everything about her expression made it perfectly clear that the answer had better be a resounding "no."

Mado could almost feel Kabe rolling his eyes next to him as he apologized emphatically. "I'm sorry!"

His face turned beet red as he stammered out the words. "I... um... I didn't know that haibane could be girls."

Kana's eyes widened in shock followed quickly by an angry frown. She almost shouted with indignation. "What?"

Kana loomed behind the counter, her clenched fists tightening at her sides, her wings rising slowly behind her back, scowling at Mado, her dark eyes aglow with unrestrained menace.

Mado stood frozen, gasping quietly, unable to figure a way out of the hole he was digging. Kana appeared ready to punch him.

Kabe spoke after what seemed like hours of silence punctuated by the ticking of the clocks.

He held up a hand toward Kana, his voice soft, placating. "He's a newborn. He hatched two days ago. I'm sure he didn't mean any offense, Kana."

Kabe clapped a hand on Mado's shoulder. "This is his first day outside the nest."

Kana turned her head, looking sidelong at Mado as he nodded sheepishly.

Her voice was thick with skepticism. "You're kidding. You've never seen a girl before?"

Incredulous, her eyes flickered between Mado and Kabe, searching for signs of deception, but a little smile started growing on her face.

Suddenly Kana burst into laughter, almost doubling over, and Kabe joined in as Mado looked helplessly from one to the other.

Kana wiped a tear from her eye as she turned to face Mado with an impish grin. "What's your name?" She was obviously amused by his discomfort.

Mado looked as if he were physically shrinking. "I'm Mado. I dreamed I was looking at a window."

Kana stared at him intently for a moment with amazement before speaking. "You're strange, Mado."

It was not quite the condemnation he had feared.

Kabe handed Kana the tools. "Please give the Master our regards." He glanced at Mado, who was clearly ready to go – *now*. "We can talk about the tile work on Monday."

He gave Kana a cordial nod, then led Mado out of the shop. As they walked out, Mado glanced back to see Kana looking down at the counter, shaking her head from side to side with a curious grin.

Outside, Kabe stopped by the scooter, grinning wickedly. "I'm sorry, I didn't think I would need to explain *girls* to you."

Kabe smiled indulgently as Mado hopped on the back. "Let's go get some lunch."

They slowly wended their way through the narrow streets, and Mado replayed the exchange with Kana in his mind. He was caught off guard, but still, how could he be so stupid? *I know about girls, don't I?*

Mado berated himself ruefully and sighed with resignation. *I was born two days ago, but I'm acting like I was born yesterday.*

They parked the scooter in front of a small restaurant, Café Kartie. There were a few empty tables shaded by umbrellas out front, but Kabe led Mado inside. A middle aged man was absently drying dishes behind the counter.

His manner was laconic, bored. "What'll it be, boys?" The man put away a stack of plates as they walked up.

Kabe craned his neck to peek over the counter. "How's the stew today?"

The man stepped over to some steaming pots simmering on a stove. "Spicy, like usual."

Kabe seemed satisfied with the answer. "Two bowls with noodles and some tea, please."

The man ladled some long, thin noodles and piping hot stew into a pair of large ceramic bowls. He set them and a pot of tea on a serving tray and placed it on the counter.

Mado looked around. There was no one else in the café. It was still early for lunchtime.

Kabe pulled out his notebook and started writing in it. Mado caught himself and reached for his own notebook, but Kabe gestured dismissively. "It's on me. I need to keep my apprentice well-fed, after all."

He gave Mado a wink as he handed a sheet from his notebook to the man. "Let's grab a table in the back."

They sat down, and Mado woefully observed that Kabe hadn't stopped smiling since they left the clock shop. It seemed almost cruel.

Kabe leaned forward and winked, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. "So, what do you need to know about girls?" He was enjoying this way too much.

Mado squirmed in his seat, but resolved to try to salvage some dignity. "The way she dresses..."

Kabe cut him off. “Kana isn't like most other girls. She has the heart of a craftsman.” He took a careful bite of the stew, which was still steaming. “If she were a boy, I'm sure she would have been born in Stone Mill.”

He smirked with disdain. “At least she wasn't born at the Waste Factory.”

Mado wasn't sure if that was a joke. “Waste Factory?”

Kabe explained. “Stone Mill is one of three known haibane nests in Guri. The other two are Old Home, where Kana lives, and the Waste Factory.” He took another bite of stew. “All the haibane at Old Home are girls, but at the Waste Factory there are both boys and girls.”

Something in Kabe's expression suggested he wasn't at all jealous of that.

Kabe continued as he mixed the stew into his noodles. “We call it the Waste Factory because it handles certain recycling tasks. They help recycle copper wiring, for example, which is scarce but necessary for distributing electricity and repairing electrical devices. It's an important job, but...”

Kabe's eyes seemed to drift for a moment. “They don't like being called the 'Waste Factory', even though that's what it is. They prefer 'Abandoned Factory', which makes no sense. After all, *they* live there, so it's hardly abandoned.”

Kabe paused for a few more bites of noodles and stew. It was delicious. “But that's the least of their problems, I suppose.” Silence took over as the boys dug into their meals.

The stew was very good, but Mado found himself thinking he still had a *lot* more to learn about Guri.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 2.4: Accommodation**

After lunch, Kabe drove Mado around Guri, pointing out places of interest, particularly where haibane were allowed to shop.

Mado listened quietly as Kabe told him the rules for haibane: they must work, they cannot own anything new, cannot own money, can only shop at businesses displaying the Haibane Renmei symbol, that they must avoid the Wall and the Western Woods, how the notebooks work, and so on.

Kabe winked over his shoulder. “Don't worry, we are not required to eat used food. The restriction does not apply to consumable goods.”

Mado wondered what the alternative might be like, and decided some thoughts were best left unexplored.

The boys returned along the bumpy dirt roads to Stone Mill, stopping in front of the the scooter garage.

Mado looked at the other buildings lining the driveway outside the mill, wondering what they contained. He noticed a wooden windmill behind one of the sheds. It had a metal tank mounted near the top. *Water supply?*

Despite Kabe's joke that morning, Mado hadn't really done any work at all so far. But he was already feeling weary as he pulled open the sliding door for Kabe, who rolled the scooter inside.

Kabe motioned for Mado to join him. "In exchange for using the scooter, we are required to clean, inspect and fuel it after each use. That way, the next rider may use it without worry."

He handed Mado a rag and they both wiped the dust off the scooter thoroughly. They even cleaned off the tires.

Kabe showed him what to check for: oil level, air filter, sparkplug wire, brakes, clutch, headlight, tire pressure, etc. All were as they should be.

Mado wondered how old the scooter actually was, and asked.

Kabe thought for a moment. "We have had these same scooters for as long as I have been here, and that's four years. They are certainly older than that, but they are overhauled once a year, so some of the parts are newer than others."

Mado looked at the scooters with growing respect. They may very well have been classics.

Kabe explained the rules for fueling them. "We store fuel for the scooters in the flammables locker. You must always be sure that no scooters are running or that anything electrical is in use while the locker is open and fuel is being poured."

He pointed at the warning signs. "There is no smoking, of course, but no one here smokes, and I don't recommend getting into that nasty habit."

Kabe winked and opened the locker. Inside were large red fuel cans and some smaller ones.

Kabe took out a small red can. "The scooters don't use much fuel, but we keep them topped off. Don't overfill them, though, or the fuel will slosh out while you're on the road."

Kabe showed Mado the procedure, then returned the fuel can and closed the locker. They slid the garage door shut and entered the main building.

As they changed shoes, Kabe pointed at the row of tags. A new tag with Mado's symbol was hanging from one of the pegs. It was turned to the red side.

Mado reached up and flipped it over. He felt mildly proud that he now had a tag. They turned and walked through the main shop area, waving and returning waves from the other haibane who were working at their stations.

Kabe and Mado stepped up to the supervisor's desk where Tsuchi was writing and scowling at some paperwork.

Kabe paused a moment, then cleared his throat gently. "I returned the toolkit, sensei. The Master was not in, but Kana will convey our gratitude. Mado has been accepted by the Haibane Renmei and received his

notebook. I will be discussing the tile repairs for Old Home with Kana on Monday. If there is nothing else, I will show Mado his room.”

Tsuchi barely looked up. “Go ahead.” He continued writing, apparently doing some calculations.

Kabe led Mado into a hallway on the side of the building opposite of where the guest bedroom was, and continued to the end, where a series of stairs led up to another hallway.

As with the one below, there were doors on one side, and windows overlooking the shop area on the other. Mado paused and peeked through one of the windows, watching the haibane working far below.

Kabe stopped and gestured down the hallway. “This is the west loft. All the haibane normally live in either the east or west loft.”

He stepped in front of one of the doors and motioned for Mado to open it.

Mado pushed the door open and looked in. The early afternoon sun filtered in diffusely through the white curtains, but it was still dark inside. He flipped a light switch on the wall, and the interior of the room came into view as he walked in.

It was paneled much like the guest bedroom. A bed and dresser were pushed against the walls, apparently as a temporary measure.

In the middle of the room, some of the wooden floorboards had been torn up. They looked almost as if they had been clawed by some sort of beast, and the damage extended for several feet across in a large circle. There was also damage to the ceiling and the paneling of one of the walls.

Mado looked at Kabe, alarmed. “What happened here?”

Kabe smiled softly as he stepped in to join Mado. “This is where you were born.”

Mado's eyes widened as he surveyed the damage. “I did this?”

Kabe chuckled. “No, it was your cocoon. It sprouted right there next to where you are standing. As it grew, it extended tendrils into the room, causing the damage.” He smiled warmly. “It is nothing to be ashamed of, everyone's cocoon does this.”

Mado tried to imagine what the cocoon must have looked like. *It must have been huge!*

He glanced around the room, searching for evidence. “What happened to the cocoon?”

Kabe grinned. “The cocoon tends to leave quite a mess, but once the water is gone, the cocoon shell dries out, becomes brittle and starts to disintegrate. We chipped it apart easily and discarded the pieces.”

He pointed at a small brass grate embedded in the floor over a drain. “As you can see, the floorboards are already almost completely dry.”

Mado noticed that the window had been left open, presumably to help things dry out. He stepped over to it, looking at the reflections seemingly trapped between the two sliding panes. There was something familiar about this room.

Mado saw a murky image form in the window. The glass seemed to be shimmering slightly, and he stepped toward it, transfixed.

Suddenly he fell to the floor, landing on his hands and knees. Kabe rushed to his side as Mado started sobbing uncontrollably, tears streaming down his face in unstoppable torrents.

Mado's throat was so tight he could barely breathe, and his eyes were blinded by tears. He couldn't stop crying.

Kabe held Mado tightly as he spoke calmly, soothingly, trying to comfort him. "Don't worry, it's all right. It's going to be all right."

Mado couldn't help himself. Between sobs, he tried to explain. "I saw... I saw..." He did not see the tears forming in Kabe's eyes.

Kabe helped Mado sit on the floor. "Don't try to talk, just try to relax. You have been through a lot."

The boys sat quietly with their backs against the wall under the window. Long moments passed in silence.

Finally Kabe spoke formally, but softly. "It is the custom of Stone Mill that a haibane must repair the damage caused by his cocoon. Once repaired, that room is usually where he stays, but it is not required. You may choose another room if you wish. However, you must still repair this one."

He turned to Mado. "But you don't need to worry about that right now. You may use the guest bedroom until the next new feather is born."

Kabe gestured toward the splintered planks. "However, if a new feather is born before you repair your room, you must still yield the guest bedroom, so it is best not to delay the repairs."

Mado stared at the damaged floor, already thinking about how to repair it. "I understand." He stood up, but dizziness caused him to almost fall over Kabe.

Kabe rose and steadied him. "Let's get you back to the guest room. This has been a busy day for you."

Kabe left him in the guest room bed. "You do not need to worry about the bells today. You may stay here and rest as long as you need to."

He stepped over by the door and turned, smiling warmly. "Try to relax. There are many new things to get used to, and it is natural have trouble adjusting. I cried myself to sleep every night for the first week when I was a new feather."

He winked as Mado looked over at him. "Sleep well, Mado." Kabe closed the door softly behind him.

Somewhere in the distance an alarm bell rang as Mado fell into a deep sleep.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 2.5: Duties**

Mado awoke to the smell of food. His face was buried in a moist pillow. He had been crying.

He looked over to see Tsuchi sitting in the chair next to his bed. On the night stand was a serving tray with some small covered bowls and a pot of tea.

Tsuchi's eyes, magnified by the thick lenses of his glasses, met Mado's as he looked over. "How are you feeling?"

Mado lifted himself up on an elbow, wondered how long Tsuchi had been quietly sitting next to him. "I'm okay, thank you, Master Tsuchi." He looked around the room. It must have been evening.

Tsuchi's eyes stayed fixed on Mado. "It is quite normal to experience difficulties in the beginning. Though it has been many years, I still remember my first days vividly."

His eyes seemed to cloud over, and he glanced away momentarily before composing himself. "I understand your room may not be satisfactory?"

Mado was puzzled for a moment, then remembered the events of the afternoon. Was it the room, or something else?

He thought for a moment. "No, the room will be fine. It wasn't a problem with the room..." His voice trailed off as he remembered.

He looked around briefly, then sat up on the edge of the bed, facing Tsuchi.

Tsuchi nodded sympathetically. "It is very common for new feathers to have problems like that. Even old feathers may have lingering difficulties. Senkou, for example, often has nightmares. And Umi..."

He cut himself off, looked in Mado's eyes. "You should not feel that you are alone in having troubles."

Tsuchi sighed softly. "I wanted to make sure you were all right. Though your day has not been free of problems, you seem to be doing well."

He noticed Mado relax slightly. "I also wanted to speak with you regarding your duties at Stone Mill, and answer any questions you may have – although we may not have time to answer all of them tonight."

He gave Mado a thin smile. "As you know, the privilege of living in Stone Mill comes at the price of responsibilities. This may seem burdensome at first, because a small number of haibane are responsible for many things."

Tsuchi held up the palms of his hands in a gesture of comparison. “However, it is important to remember that were we to abandon our responsibilities, Stone Mill as we know it could not possibly exist. We believe the alternative would be most unpleasant.” He sat quietly, gauged Mado's reaction.

Mado was listening intently, and Tsuchi continued. “Though we have a strong sense of duty, it is not a sense of duty driven by the compulsion of others, but by our own desire to live rewarding lives.”

He leaned forward. “The Stone Mill we live in today is the Stone Mill we wish to live in. By contributing to its smooth operation, we all enjoy the benefits that result. Do you understand?”

Tsuchi's eyes measured Mado closely.

Mado imagined Stone Mill as a run-down building. He thought of the shiny scooters rusting from neglect. Master Tsuchi was right: it was important to take responsibility for the well-being of Stone Mill.

Mado spoke softly. “Yes, Master Tsuchi, I understand.”

Tsuchi nodded approvingly, seemed to remember something suddenly. “Regarding my title: I am the supervisor of this facility, and deemed a master machinist by the craftsmen of Guri. It is appropriate to call me 'Master Tsuchi' or 'Master', but it is not required.”

He smiled warmly. “Most of the boys refer to me as 'Master' when on the job, and sometimes 'Tsuchi' during recreation, but there is no formal division. Occasionally, I am addressed in less flattering terms.” He shot Mado a wry grin.

Tsuchi's expression became serious again. “It is common for new feathers to misunderstand my position in the nest. I am not your boss, and command no more authority than an appeal to your sense of responsibility. I cannot force you to do anything you do not choose willingly to do.”

He gestured at the room. “Though I have lived here in Stone Mill longer than anyone else, I do not occupy a position of superiority, but rather accept the duties given to me as Master.”

Tsuchi paused again, allowing Mado to digest his words. “Do you understand?”

Mado nodded quickly. “Yes, Master Tsuchi.”

He thought about Tsuchi's role. He tended to ask the boys to do tasks, rather than command them, although many requests were little more than a nod or brief words.

Mado found himself thinking of Tsuchi in a different light.

Tsuchi seemed to sense his thoughts. “I am the supervisor of Stone Mill, but not its owner. It is only through the efforts of each of us, and all of us as a team, that Stone Mill can continue. It is from this perspective that I recommend approaching your duties here.”

He clasped his hands and leaned forward. “Your work is important not to satisfy me, but to satisfy your own needs and the needs of your nest.”

Tsuchi smiled. "We all have days when we wish not to work, that is normal, but when such a day comes, I ask that you remember why it is that we work, and permit that to motivate you."

Mado considered Tsuchi's point. It made sense. "I understand, Master. I will try to remember."

Mado quietly vowed not to forget the significance of Tsuchi's words.

Tsuchi nodded approvingly as he sat back in the chair. "It may take a while for that to sink in, but it is good that you understand. Not all boys are as quick to do so." His expression changed briefly, speaking quietly of painful experience.

His gaze returned to Mado. "Kabe has explained some of the routine to you. As you already know, we have many rules that must be observed. At first, you may find them confusing simply because there are so many of them."

He smiled thinly. "But if you remember to be conscientious of your place in Stone Mill and considerate of its needs, the rules will become second nature to you in time."

Tsuchi turned his head slightly. "You should know that we have no formal system of punishment here. Should you commit an offense, the consequences of doing so are yours to bear."

He paused, studying Mado's reaction. "If you insult one of your fellows, the choice to apologize is yours. Should you harm the nest, it is to the nest that you must make amends."

Tsuchi shifted slightly in the chair. "Do you understand the logic of this?"

Mado thought for a moment. "Yes, Master Tsuchi, I think so."

Tsuchi leaned forward. "You will find that you will tend to be far more harsh upon yourself than any of us will be. If you have a good heart, your conscience will give you the strength and discipline necessary to succeed."

He sat up, gesturing in explanation. "Though I ask that you always consider the needs of Stone Mill and your fellow haibane, to do so is to ensure that your own needs will be fulfilled. It is really that simple."

Mado nodded in agreement, feeling already like he was becoming a part of Stone Mill, and taking pride in that.

Tsuchi leaned back in the chair and arched an eyebrow. "Is there anything you wish to ask me?"

Mado stared at Tsuchi, seeing thin lines under his eyes, wrinkles on his brow. "How long have you been here?"

Tsuchi took a deep breath and sighed. "It has been thirteen years since I was born. I have been the supervisor for six years -- almost seven, since just before Senkou was born."

Tsuchi's eyes focused somewhere beyond Mado. The question seemed poignant to him. He snapped his gaze back to Mado. "Anything else?"

Mado thought for a few moments, trying to build up some sort of understanding of the world around him. His eyes met Tsuchi's. "Do haibane die?"

A pained look crossed Tsuchi's face, but he quickly cleared his throat and composed himself.

He sat up in the chair and spoke slowly, carefully. "We do not know for sure. Just as haibane arrive in mystery, we leave in mystery. Though we enjoy our days here and the company of our nest-mates, a time eventually comes for each haibane to leave the nest and go beyond the walls."

Tsuchi shifted uncomfortably. "We believe that when we do this we are born into a new life, but no one really knows."

The subject seemed difficult for him, but he continued. "We know very little about this because no one who goes beyond the walls may ever return. The time when a haibane leaves cannot be predicted, but when the Day of Flight comes, a guiding hand is given to him."

Tsuchi gazed at the window. "Unfortunately, a haibane who is about to leave the nest never speaks of it, but disappears suddenly without warning."

Tsuchi was staring distantly, then seemed to remember himself and turned toward Mado. "I'm sorry, we usually do not speak of such things to someone who is so new. I hope you do not find this disturbing."

Mado nodded slowly, taking in the significance of Tsuchi's words. So this was not Heaven, not Eternity, but temporary. He looked around the room with a new sense of understanding.

A thought sprang into Mado's mind. "How long do haibane normally live?"

Tsuchi's eyes widened. "My, you do ask very good questions!"

He paused for a moment, thinking. "There is no fixed time for a haibane to live. Some, like myself, stay in Guri for many years. Others stay only briefly. There is no way to know how long a haibane may stay."

Tsuchi gazed toward the window again. "I thought my Day of Flight would have come many years ago, but still I remain. Many haibane have come and gone in my time here." He fell silent and continued looking away.

Mado sensed Tsuchi's sorrow and spoke with contrition. "I'm sorry, I did not mean to..."

Tsuchi cleared his throat and waved dismissively. "Do not be concerned. I agreed to answer your questions."

He paused, seemingly in thought. "But I think you should eat your meal, it is getting cold. Be sure to get some rest tonight. Tomorrow is Maintenance Day, and there will be much to do."

Tsuchi stood up. "Please excuse me." He nodded curtly to Mado and quickly left the room.

Mado stared at the closed door for a few moments, then turned to the serving tray. In the bowls were a fish chowder and rice. They were still hot and tasted good, and Mado finished them quickly.

He lay back in the bed, and realized that his wings had tucked themselves beneath him on their own. They still ached a little, but it felt good to be lying on his back for a change.

Resting tenderly on his wings, Mado fell asleep thinking about the Day of Flight.

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 3: Aspiration**

#### **Scene 3.1: Sustenance**

Mado dreamed he was flying with his gray wings, higher and higher as the ground disappeared below him. He flapped harder and harder, climbing above the clouds. Far above he saw a shimmer of light in the sky, like a surface of water at the top of the world.

He raced toward it, accelerating as his wings beat faster and faster. There was a crash of breaking glass, and he awoke with a shock. An alarm bell was ringing, and morning sunlight was shining dimly through the curtains of his room.

Mado sat up and scratched his head. His knuckles struck his halo, ringing it like an alarm bell over his head. He looked up reflexively as the glowing ring wobbled and whirled behind his head.

Peevishly, he grabbed the halo, silencing it. *This will take some getting used to.*

Though Mado had slept for a long time, he felt tired. He was still dressed in his coveralls. *I need to get some pajamas.*

He slipped on his shoes and gazed into the dresser mirror. His reflection looked less like a stranger today. He turned and tried fluttering his wings.

They moved slightly, almost painlessly. He thought about his dream. The wings seemed far too small and weak to carry him, but he wondered. *Will I be able to fly someday?*

Mado's eyes were still puffy from crying. He rubbed the sleep out of them and walked down to the lounge.

Kabe and Umi were already chatting at the table. They both turned as Mado walked in. "Good morning!"

Mado sat down next to Kabe. "Good morning." He felt sluggish.

Kabe put a hand on his shoulder. "How are you feeling today?"

Mado caught Umi staring at him. Umi's eyes flashed away as his cheeks flushed slightly.

Mado stretched his arms, and his wings extended along with them, the feathers spreading impressively like twin gray fans. "I still feel pretty sore. And tired. Will breakfast be ready soon?"

Kabe motioned to the kitchen. "Master Tsuchi will be preparing breakfast this morning, but he hasn't finished yet. It should be ready in about twenty minutes or so. Do you need a snack before then?"

Mado could hear sounds of activity in the kitchen and slouched in his chair. "No, I can wait."

Umi looked over at him. "Do your wings still hurt?"

Mado flapped his wings experimentally. "They feel much better. I'm able to sleep on my back now."

Umi nodded thoughtfully. "Are you having bad dreams?"

Mado seemed surprised by the question. Umi tended to be rather direct.

Mado pursed his lips contemplatively. "I don't think my dream last night was bad, although I don't remember it very well. It's fading already."

Mado wondered how many dreams he could actually remember. He still didn't remember much from his cocoon dream. But...

Umi was staring at him. "It's good if you aren't having bad dreams." He looked somberly down at the table. "I used to have bad dreams a lot."

The other boys started filtering in, and Tsuchi served breakfast.

As they ate, Kabe explained Maintenance Day. "All the haibane work as a team. We stick together, and over the course of the day we clean and inspect the entire building from top to bottom, as well as the support buildings. We also tend the grounds, although Matsu pretty much owns the garden."

Matsu nodded, pointed a thumb at his chest. "That's right. Don't mess up my vegetables, that's *my* job."

Kabe took a couple of bites of breakfast and continued. "While we clean things, we also check for anything that needs repairing. If it can be fixed on the spot, we do it. If it is too difficult to fix in a reasonable time, we schedule it for repair during the week. We also clean laundry and take out the trash."

After breakfast, the boys grabbed tools and cleaning gear and filed upstairs to clean every room in the east and west lofts thoroughly.

Mado found it surprising that they teamed up to clean their own personal rooms this way, but it seemed to fit the philosophy of Stone Mill. They even cleaned his cocoon room, and Matsu gave him tips on how to repair the floorboards and paneling.

When the morning break bell rang, they moved outside and slid open the huge door sealing the largest shed.

Inside Mado saw a collection of various small trucks, tractors, carts and trailers parked to each side.

In the middle of the garage, white lines were painted on the concrete floor. A flat wooden panel had been mounted high on the far wall. Attached to it was a small funnel-shaped net suspended from a metal hoop.

Senkou grabbed a large orange ball and turned to Mado. “Do you know how to play basketball?”

The game was unfamiliar to Mado, and he shook his head.

Senkou smiled slyly. “We'll show you how.”

The boys split up into two teams of three, and Mado stood aside watching as they began dribbling, passing, guarding and throwing the ball into the basket. Senkou, being the tallest, seemed to have a natural advantage, and almost never missed the net when he threw.

Mado was surprised to see that Tsuchi was very capable of keeping up with the boys, and watched him make a couple of baskets, although he usually passed the ball to a teammate given the chance. Even little Umi seemed to be holding his own, compensating for his small size by slipping nimbly between the defending players.

Mado saw Matsu's elbow accidentally hit Senkou as he jumped up to dunk the ball, and Senkou yelled “Foul!”

He stepped over to the free-throw line and began bouncing the ball, preparing for a shot. He looked over at Mado and gave him a clever wink. “Let me show you how it's done.”

Senkou set the ball on the halo floating above his bright red hair and leaped up, fluttering his wings as if to gain extra altitude. The ball arced high and bounced off the backboard, falling through the hoop. Mado stood gaping. It was an incredibly graceful feat of skill.

Matsu grumbled morosely. “...and that's why we call him 'The Sink'.”

They pulled Mado into the game, explaining the rules and demonstrating how to handle the ball. Mado was relieved to discover that he wouldn't have to use his halo for free throws, but fouls against him were uncommon.

They heard the late morning work bell ring – even outside it could be heard plainly – and began cleaning the outbuildings.

Mado got to see everything inside them. Aside from the garages, they were mostly storehouses filled with crates, boxes, materials and supplies. There was a lumber shed as well as a building dedicated to machine metal stock, another for sheet metal and piping, and a shed for masonry supplies, such as concrete, mortar, stone veneers and the like.

The maintenance team seemed to cover every inch of each building, inside and out. Nothing was overlooked, including the trucks, tractors, carts, scooters and bicycles, which though already clean were wiped down and inspected thoroughly.

The lunch bell rang and they filed inside for a light lunch of miso soup that Tsuchi had prepared that morning.

After lunch they turned their attention to the outside of the main building. Mado was intrigued to learn that they protected the moss covering the stone wall, being careful not to scrape it off accidentally while cleaning the outside walls, eaves and windows atop tall ladders.

Kabe pointed out some of the stones that had fallen out and been cemented back in place, and even on close inspection, Mado could not tell them apart.

When the boys were done with the main building, they began tending the grounds, trimming the grass with push mowers, pulling weeds and raking the clippings into piles.

While the other haibane mowed the broad, sweeping lawn, Matsu went off to the garden underneath the water tower windmill pushing a wheelbarrow full of compost. The garden was apparently Matsu's special domain, and Kabe mentioned that many of their vegetables came fresh from the garden.

After mowing, the boys swept off the cobblestones of the driveway, leaving them almost entirely free of dirt and grass clippings.

When the afternoon break bell rang, Matsu brought back fresh carrots. He handed them out, explaining to Mado that they never tasted better than when they were right out of the ground. Matsu was right: the carrots were sweet, almost like fruit.

The boys stepped into the tractor garage and played more basketball.

When the late afternoon work bell rang, they returned to the main building, where they went through every room on the ground floor. Mado saw that in addition to the guest bedroom and bathroom, there were several storerooms and some special craft rooms.

When they were done with those, they scoured the shop area, removing dust and filings that had been missed by the daily cleanings. They also checked and lubricated the machines, making sure all were functioning properly and safely.

After dinner, they thoroughly cleaned the kitchen and lounge, took the trash out to the incinerator and washed clothes in Stone Mill's large industrial-grade laundry machines. They issued Mado a few more sets of clothing, including plenty of extra socks and underwear, and showed him the chutes from the lofts which fed the ground-floor laundry bin.

Kumo joked about warning Umi before removing the laundry bin -- apparently Umi liked to use the chute as a quick way down from the east loft now and then.

When the last chores were done, the boys retired to the lounge for pocket billiards, darts and homemade pinball.

Matsu was an expert marksman at darts, and shared some tips with Mado, explaining the fine art of shooting

for points.

Tsuchi, on the other hand, was revealed as a consummate pool shark. He challenged Mado to a round, and when Tsuchi was allowed to go first, Mado saw the other boys shake their heads and smile knowingly. Tsuchi ran the table, never missing a single shot, and Mado was given no chance to shoot even once.

Matsu put a sympathetic hand on Mado's shoulder. "Consider yourself hammered."

Mado considered the pun. *Tsuchi: Hammer.*

Tsuchi winked as he set up the next round, then showed Mado some techniques that helped him improve his game dramatically.

At the end of the evening, Mado enjoyed a nice long shower and shuffled off to bed.

Maintenance Day had been the busiest day so far, and he was exhausted. But he also felt a sense of satisfaction. Not only had he seen nearly every square inch of Stone Mill, but he felt that he was finally beginning to pull his weight.

Mado fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

He dreamed of colliding billiard balls.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 3.2: Immersion**

A knock on the door awoke Mado. It was Kabe, who entered after receiving permission. He was dressed in a tee shirt and green shorts. In his hands he was carrying a pair of worn sneakers and faded red gym shorts.

Kabe called out gleefully. "Happy Recreation Day!"

He handed Mado the clothing. "You'll be needing these. Try them on. Dress for the day consists of tee shirts, shorts and sneakers."

As Mado took them, Kabe turned to leave. "See you at breakfast. Oh, and remember there are no bells on Recreation Day, so don't be late."

Kumo made breakfast that morning, and served steaming noodles heaped with spinach leaves from Matsu's garden. Around the table, the boys were dressed in tee shirts and shorts and were talking excitedly.

Recreation Day was apparently held in high regard by the haibane of Stone Mill.

Mado looked around the table. It was unusual to see everyone else without coveralls. Against the white tee shirts, their wings seemed a darker gray than usual, while their halos seemed more yellow in tint. The shorts were not of matching colors, and each was of a unique style, but all seemed comfortable to wear.

After breakfast, they headed outside. Kabe mentioned that on Recreation Day, sneakers could be worn inside and out, but reminded that the shoe brushes must be used when coming back inside.

The boys streamed around the side of the main building to the sand court, Umi leading the way, running and jumping with excitement.

“Mado, do you know how to play volleyball?” It was Kumo, who held a white leather ball in his hand

Mado shook his head, and Kumo grinned. “You'll know how in a few minutes.”

Kumo was right, Mado caught on quickly. The boys took their volleyball very seriously, and Kumo had a wicked serve, always placing the ball where the other team least desired it.

Even with only three versus four players on a team, the boys were covering their courts masterfully. Tsuchi was a fanatic on defense, and was proof against Senkou's merciless spikes.

After three closely-matched games, they took a break. The haibane were sweating from exertion and panting, their wings rising and falling in unison with their breathing.

Suddenly Umi jumped up off the ground and cried out with enthusiasm. “We need to cool off. Let's go swimming!” The look in his eyes suggested that to do otherwise would break his heart.

The boys voiced general agreement as Umi raced inside the main building. He emerged with a stack of seven neatly folded white towels and handed them out.

Umi glanced at Kumo with a clever grin. “Race you there, Kumo.”

Kumo leaned casually against the stone wall, dusting his fingernails against his tee shirt smugly. “I'll be waiting for you, Umi.”

Umi roused the rest of the boys into a trot while Kumo stayed behind, nonchalantly taking in the scenery. Mado struggled to keep up – the boys were moving at a pretty fast pace, and he was still tired from volleyball.

Umi led them as they ran down the driveway and turned right, heading toward the Temple, following the road upstream. Mado looked back and saw that Kumo hadn't moved at all.

As they passed a small stand of trees, Mado was surprised to see Kumo shoot past the group almost as if they were standing still, his light blond hair fluttering as he ran at top speed.

Matsu called out derisively. “You're late!” The boys laughed.

In moments, Kumo disappeared up the path, his feet hardly seemed to touch the ground.

Matsu leaned forward and winked at Mado as he flapped his wings. “It's all in the wings.”

Mado stared at Matsu, confused. He hadn't seen Kumo's wings moving at all.

They arrived at a small field of grass next to the mouth of the pond. The clear blue water sparkled in the sun, and the smell of the waterfall was crisp and clean in the late morning air.

Mado could see the rope bridge in the distance, on the far side of the pond, spanning the waterfall that poured down from the cliff. Overhead, light clouds softened the sunlight, casting a pleasant glow.

Lying on the grass was Kumo, resting casually, appearing ostensibly bored. As the boys ran up panting from exertion, he yawned loudly and looked at his wrist, checking an imaginary watch. "Is it tomorrow already?"

Umi tackled him as Kumo cried out in mock terror. Pummeling him playfully, Umi chided, "Next time, Kumo. You'll see."

Umi jumped up, slipped off his shoes and socks, pulled off his tee shirt with a smooth sweeping motion and dove into the water at a full run. He stayed under long enough that Mado began to get worried, then surfaced almost at the other side of the pond after what seemed like minutes.

Mado was impressed. That was a very long way to swim underwater.

The boys set down their towels, shed their shoes, socks and tee shirts and waded in. Kabe helped free Mado's tee shirt from his wings. There was a knack to it. The stretchy fabric tended to get caught on his feathers.

Tsuchi set his glasses carefully on his folded towel before joining them. Without glasses, his eyes seemed much smaller, and he squinted like a mole as he worked his way tentatively into the water.

Immediately the boys began splashing around, diving and chasing one another.

Mado submerged himself slowly. The water was bracing, but not uncomfortably cold. He knew how to swim, but wasn't sure about the wings. They felt strange as the water swirled around them, and they were still a little stiff from swelling.

Mado looked over to see the tip of a single gray wing slice through the surface of the water like a fin, heading rapidly toward him. The wing disappeared moments before he felt two small hands suddenly grab his leg.

Umi popped up with a splash. "Gotcha!" He giggled merrily before disappearing under the water again.

Mado smiled. Umi was clearly a gifted swimmer.

Mado tried a simple dog paddle. The wings offered resistance as the water flowed around them, and the sensation was very strange.

Other than pain, Mado hadn't really noticed much sensitivity in his wings before, but in the water it was impossible to ignore them. The feathers translated even the slightest ripple of motion to his back, and the skin on the "arms" under them felt as if it were covered with goosebumps. *Goosebumps, or haibanebumps?*

When he put his head beneath the surface to dive, he could feel the halo pushing against his scalp, roiling the water through his hair, the flat disk slowed down his progress.

It took some getting used to, but soon Mado discovered that the wings made excellent rudders, and found himself able to make sharp turns by pivoting on them. They also had some buoyancy, and helped him keep his face above water as he floated on his back.

Meanwhile, on his stomach during a dive, he was able to use the halo like a plane to help keep his head below the surface by tilting his head back slightly, using the water's resistance to push his head downward. *Umi must use this trick.*

As the sun climbed to midday, the boys crawled out of the water, ruffled their feathers and lay drying on the grass. Umi insisted on staying in, but Tsuchi coaxed him out by reminding him that it was lunchtime.

After everyone was reasonably dry, they put on their shoes and shirts and began walking back to Stone Mill.

As they moved slowly down the hill, Mado surveyed the landscape. Green fields were everywhere, broken by small stands of trees and an occasional grove. The scent of wildflowers made the mild noon breeze smell sweet. He took a deep breath, savoring the fresh aroma.

Off to the left, he could see the tiny buildings of the town in the distance, the clock tower a thin spire rising above them. To the right, slender windmills were turning slowly above tall, green grass.

As the boys walked down the road toward Stone Mill, chatting and joking, Mado was thoughtful, playing the scenes of the past few days in his mind.

If this wasn't Heaven, it was the next best thing.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 3.3: Precedence**

Kumo prepared a special lunch of beef with ginger, onions, carrots and celery in a creamy rich sauce over rice.

It was incredibly delicious, and Mado wondered why the boys were such excellent cooks. Then he realized that since they rotated cooking duty each day, they each had plenty of time to practice.

Mado wondered how well he would do when it was his turn. He didn't remember doing any cooking, and decided it would take a while before he would get the hang of it.

Kabe had told him he would be added to the duty list tomorrow, and would start off being responsible for dishes along with Tsuchi. He wouldn't have to cook until Friday, and then Senkou would be helping him, so he wouldn't be on his own.

After lunch, the boys split up for individual time, and weren't to meet up until dinner. Kabe suggested Mado spend the time exploring, then headed off to one of the craft rooms on the ground floor.

The other boys filtered off into different places. Mado saw Matsu and Kumo go outside, each flipping his name tag, while Tsuchi went up to his room in the west loft.

Mado prowled around the benches and machinery of the main shop area. Kabe had warned him sternly not to touch anything, but he was welcome to look all he wanted.

There were dozens of different machines, each built for different purposes. Posted on and next to each of them were instructions and warnings.

On a large vertical band saw he saw a sign that said “WING GUARDS REQUIRED”. *Wing guards?* Mado hadn't seen them, and wondered what they looked like.

He walked up to a curious machine, next to which a massive spool of copper wire was set on a spindle. A complex arrangement of guides was threaded with wire from the spool. Next to it, on a bench, a cylindrical cage with thick bars made of a dull gray metal was sitting.

Mado stared at them, puzzling out what he was seeing. *Is this the winder Senkou was talking about?* He looked at the bars of the cylinder. *The stator?*

He walked by one of the special craft rooms. The interior was brightly lit, and he could smell wet paint. He peeked inside to see Umi sitting in front of a canvas, contemplating it, a paintbrush in his hand, the tip of the handle resting on his nose. He was wearing a paint-stained smock over his recreation clothes.

Mado noticed for the first time that Umi's sneakers were flecked with multicolored spots of dry paint. He looked over at the painting. It was an ocean scene rendered in stunning colors, almost lifelike.

Mado stared at it, feeling transported. Sparkling light was reflected on golden waves, hazy reddish purple clouds told of a peaceful sunset. He could almost feel the sea breeze on his face, and gasped, remembering. *Something.*

His eyes refocused to see Umi staring at him silently. His dark eyes measured Mado dispassionately, darting from place to place, appraising, assessing him.

Mado cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I'm sorry, I smelled paint.”

Umi smiled slightly, but kept staring at him.

Mado gestured to the painting. “It's beautiful.”

Umi looked at the painting, scowling. “I had a good teacher.”

He stared at the scene, seemingly dissatisfied with something. “The waves in the back don't reflect the color of the clouds properly. I'm trying to decide how to fix it.”

Mado could see nothing wrong with the painting. It really was beautiful.

He spoke casually, amiably. “Who taught you how to paint?”

Umi's head jerked around suddenly. He glared sharply, in evident pain. Mado saw the boy's eyes moisten, and regretted asking the question.

Umi turned his gaze back to the painting. "Her name was Reki." He remained silent for a long moment. "She taught me when I was at Old Home."

He looked down, staring at the palette in his hand. "She was a good painter."

Umi's wings sagged as he bowed his head, and Mado realized that he was quietly weeping.

Mado stood in the doorway, uncertain what to do. He walked up slowly behind Umi, gently placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Umi sniffed. "It's not your fault she's gone." He stared at the painting as tears rolled slowly down his smooth face.

Mado stood speechless. He had never seen a child in such profound agony.

Umi wiped his eyes with a sleeve. "She taught me a lot of things. She was always there when I needed help. She left the nest four months ago, at the beginning of the year."

He stared at the palette, his jaw tightened. "I never got to say goodbye." He threw the palette and brush to the floor, clenching his fists.

Mado didn't know what to say. He squeezed Umi's shoulder tightly for a few moments. "I'm sorry."

Mado removed his hand from Umi's shoulder and stepped back. He spoke with forced cheer. "You used to live in Old Home?"

Umi's fists loosened. "Yes. It's on the other side of the Hill of Winds. Girls live there."

He looked down, opened his hands, staring at them. "I had to stay there while I was a young feather."

Umi sniffled and looked up at Mado defiantly. "You know, I'm senior to you. I was born four years ago, and I was allowed to stay in Stone Mill starting last year. That makes me senior to you." He frowned.

Mado was puzzled. "I thought Kabe was senior to me."

Umi nodded. "He is. All of us are. Kabe was assigned to be *your* senior, to take care of you. You will be his apprentice."

His frown deepened and he looked back at the painting. Mado stared at the reflection of Umi's halo in his straight black hair.

Umi glared at the palette lying on the floor. "People don't take me seriously because I'm a kid." He turned and gazed piercingly at Mado. "But I'm a haibane too."

Umi looked away and fell silent.

Mado stood staring for a moment, then stepped back, bowed slightly, and left in silence.

He was haunted by Umi's words as he walked out into the shop.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 3.4: Confederation**

The first morning bell found Mado already awake, lying on his back in bed, staring at the ceiling. He had not slept well, conflict swirled through his mind.

Mado felt comfortable and safe in Stone Mill, but there was so much that troubled him. He thought about Tsuchi and Umi, and their torment.

*What are the haibane?*

As much as he had learned in just a few short days, Mado felt he was no closer to knowing the answer to that question than when he first awoke in this world.

He rolled over slightly and willed a wing to partially extend. *I'm getting used to them.*

He looked at the wing, studying its structure. Though it was a uniform dull gray, it was quite beautiful. His eyes followed the overlapping patterns of feathers, wondering what the names were for the different parts of the wings. The feathers near the leading edges were short and downy, while the feathers on the trailing edges were long and rigid.

It seemed bizarre to Mado that he would have anything with feathers growing out of his body. They tickled his back when he was unclothed, an alien sensation though they were a part of him.

Mado stared at the outstretched wing. *Why do I have wings if I cannot fly?*

There was a soft knock at the door. It was Kabe. With Mado's consent he entered the room, sitting in the chair next to the bed.

Kabe's eyes gleamed cheerfully. "Are you ready for a day of work, Apprentice Mado?"

Mado stared at the ceiling. "I don't know." He felt lost and uncertain. *Why am I here?*

Kabe reached over, patted Mado's arm. "Don't worry, I'll teach you what you need to know." He leaned back in the chair, looking sidelong at Mado. "I hope you don't think I would mistreat my apprentice?"

Mado glanced over at him and smiled. "No. I know you would never do that, Kabe."

Kabe grinned affably. "Let's go get breakfast." As he stood up, he looked over. "Don't forget you are responsible for dishes this morning."

Mado slipped on his shoes and they went to the lounge.

As they ate breakfast, Kabe outlined the day's plans. He agreed to take Mado shopping first -- he needed pajamas and toiletries. After that, they would stop by the clock shop to discuss some tile repairs in Old Home with Kana.

Mado's heart sank at the thought. The idea of facing Kana again after their previous encounter made him wince. *She's... intimidating.*

After they made arrangements with Kana, they would most likely begin work in Old Home that afternoon.

Mado's question seemed to cut through the breakfast chatter. "Why do we repair the nests of other haibane? Shouldn't they do that themselves?"

A silence fell over the table. Mado felt the other boys watching him.

Tsuchi spoke. "A reasonable question, Mado. While Stone Mill does not rely on other nests for its maintenance, the haibane of the other nests have skills and talents which differ from ours."

He was looking at Mado, but his message seemed directed at all the boys. "For example, we are not capable of caring for young feathers in Stone Mill – it would be much too dangerous. So the haibane of Old Home care for them until they are ready to take their place here."

Tsuchi paused and glanced at Umi, who stared down at the table, seemingly embarrassed. "Likewise, we do not have a smelter for processing scrap metals, so this is done by the haibane of the Waste Factory. The haibane of Old Home do not possess the skills necessary to perform certain repairs properly, so we assist them."

He waited as Mado nodded slowly, a look of understanding growing on his face. "The Haibane Renmei oversees these arrangements and ensures that they are equitable. In exchange for our services, equipment and materials are provided that we might not otherwise have the means to acquire. The other nests also receive benefits in exchange for their cooperation."

Tsuchi shifted in his chair, remembering something. "Feather Mado, it seems this would be a good time to advise you that although we are encouraged to assist the haibane of other nests with the maintenance of their facilities, we are discouraged from indulging in excessive social contact."

Mado felt the other boys staring at him. He sensed there was more to Tsuchi's warning than was immediately apparent. He found himself thinking about Kana, and felt relieved that he might be able to minimize contact with her.

His cheeks reddened, and he noticed some of the boys smiling. He quietly prayed that they did not know the reason for his embarrassment.

Mado nodded. "I understand, Master Tsuchi." The boys continued eating.

After lunch, the boys lined up in the shop as Tsuchi discussed the day's plans with each of them.

He turned to Senkou. "Journeyman Senkou, Apprentice Umi will be assisting you again today. I am hoping we will be able to return the unit to service by the end of this week. Do you believe this is feasible?"

Senkou replied quickly. "Yes, Master Tsuchi. I'll let you know if we have any problems."

Tsuchi turned to Kabe. "Journeyman Kabe, do you accept Feather Mado as your apprentice?"

Kabe straightened slightly. "Yes, Master Tsuchi, it will be my honor if he accepts apprenticeship to me."

Tsuchi turned to Mado, his tone formal. "Feather Mado, you have been accepted as an apprentice by Journeyman Kabe. If you accept him as your senior, you will take the title of Apprentice and assist him in his tasks. In addition, you may be called upon to perform other tasks in support of the needs of the nest."

He paused for a moment as his eyes swept the line of haibane. "Feather Mado, do you accept your duties as a Journeyman Kabe's apprentice?"

Mado replied immediately, nodding emphatically. "Yes, Master Tsuchi."

Suddenly everyone applauded, startling Mado. He looked around to see the other haibane smiling and winking at him as they clapped, clearly pleased – except Umi, who looked straight ahead, clapping without enthusiasm. Matsu crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue.

Mado stood blinking, feeling self-conscious. He had not realized the importance of the occasion. The applause trailed off.

Tsuchi smiled warmly at Mado. "Congratulations, Apprentice Mado. You will be a great asset to Stone Mill."

He turned back to Kabe. "I understand Apprentice Mado will be assisting you with the tile repairs at Old Home?"

Kabe nodded. "Yes, sensei. I will also take him shopping for personal necessities this morning while we are in town making arrangements with Kana. We should be able to begin work this afternoon. Tomorrow I will have an estimate for completion of the repairs."

Tsuchi turned and proceeded down the line, discussing various tasks and estimates with the other haibane. As Mado stood listening, he realized that by reviewing everyone's progress this way, each haibane was made aware of what the others were working on. It made sense.

After they were dismissed, Tsuchi and Mado returned to the kitchen to wash dishes. When they finished, Mado met Kabe by the bulletin board.

As they changed into their boots, Kabe nudged Mado playfully. "I bet you can't wait to see Kana again."

Mado's shoulders sank. "I'm never going to live that down, am I?" He glanced over at Kabe with a dejected

frown.

Kabe punched his arm softly. “Don't worry, Mado. Kana is actually quite nice once you get to know her.”

He looked down as he finished tying his laces with a meaningful grin. “But I don't recommend angering her.”

The boys walked out to the scooter garage. They took the yellow scooter this time, and Kabe thoughtfully tucked in his ponytail before they rode out.

As they sped toward town, Mado found himself dreading his next meeting with Kana.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 3.5: Commutation**

Kabe and Mado threaded their way through the narrow streets of Guri as the morning sun chased away the shadows between the tall old buildings, the scooter moving almost at a crawl in places.

Mado watched as block after block of houses and businesses rolled slowly by, and was impressed by the size of the town.

They turned down a narrow alley and stopped beneath two light brown banners hanging from an arch. Kabe parked the scooter next to a rack of clothes that was sitting near the door of a small shop.

As they dismounted, Mado noticed the winged stick-figure symbol of the Haibane Renmei on a rusted plaque next to the entrance. Old metal pots hanging from strings inside the green wooden door rattled and clanked as Kabe opened it and they stepped inside.

A bored-looking young man with loose black hair and a thin scruffy beard greeted them laconically as they walked up the counter. “Welcome.”

He looked at Kabe with undisguised disappointment. “Oh, Stone Mill. If you need coveralls, I just sent you guys some last week. I probably won't have any more until next week at least – and only if someone at one of the factories decides to get rid of some coveralls.”

He noticed Mado staring at the racks of clothing that filled the shop. “Are you new?”

Mado nodded as his eyes explored the racks. “I was born last week.”

The man narrowed his eyes and humphed flatly. “You don't look like you need clothes.”

Kabe interjected. “He just needs some pajamas. We have enough coveralls for now, thanks.”

The man rummaged around in some boxes behind the counter and pulled out a set of light gray pajamas. “Try these. I know you Stone Mill haibane prefer gray everything, although I have something in pink in the same size if you like.”

He smiled sarcastically as Mado held the pajamas up to his shoulders. They looked like they would fit.

Mado handed them back. "I'll take these, please."

The man narrowed his eyes and glanced over at Kabe. "I suppose he'll want wing slits sewn into them." Kabe nodded.

The man smirked. "I guess I can fit it into my busy schedule." He pulled out a pair of scissors and whistled tunelessly as he worked at a sewing machine behind the counter.

Mado looked around the shop. It didn't seem to get much business.

Kabe tutored Mado as he wrote a description of the purchase in his notebook, tore out the page and handed it to the man, who folded the pajamas and put them in a small paper bag.

The man waved absently as the boys left the shop, the rattling pots heralding their departure. Mado tucked the bag into a small rack behind the seat of the scooter and they rode off to the next shop.

The second-hand store was in an alley not much wider than the one the used clothing store was in. Small brass bells tinkled as they opened the door and walked inside.

The shop was full of all sorts of knick-knacks, odds and ends, cookware, dishes, glasses and just about everything imaginable.

Behind the counter stood a girl about Mado's age with light brown hair drawn into two short, fluffy ponytails which stuck out behind each ear. As she greeted them, Mado saw that she had a halo and gray wings, which were painted with pink and blue stripes. *A haibane girl!*

Mado uneasily resolved to try not to say anything stupid.

The girl waved as they approached. "Hi Kabe. Who's the new boy?"

She smiled as she leaned across the counter. Her brown eyes looked Mado up and down, making him feel uncomfortable.

Kabe put his hand on Mado's shoulder. "This is Mado." He gestured toward the girl. "Mado, this is Ame of Abandoned Factory."

Mado bowed slightly. "Pleased to meet you."

Ame's eyes sparkled, her voice bouyant. "How can I help you, Mado?"

Mado's eyes searched around the store. "I need um... personal items."

Ame cocked her head and grinned puckishly. "What *kind* of personal items?"

Mado thought he could see an almost imperceptible smile form on Kabe's face as he stood stoically,

absolving himself of the conversation.

Mado cleared his throat, avoiding her eyes. “Toiletries. Things like a comb, toothbrush, scissors, that sort of thing.”

Ame feigned mild surprise, her mouth forming a little “o”.

She grinned as she studied his face. “It doesn't look like you need a shaving kit yet, but those are the best deals.” She stepped out from around the counter and walked toward the back of the store. “I think we have what you need over here.” Mado followed her, Kabe trailing quietly behind.

Ame helped Mado choose a well-used but functional kit with a small leather case.

As he wrote up the purchase in his notebook, she smiled softly and asked, “So, what do you think of Guri?” Her head was tilted slightly to one side as she looked in his eyes.

Mado thought for a moment, reviewing his experiences. “It's beautiful, but I seem to have a lot to learn about it.”

Ame nodded knowingly. “All of us do.”

He glanced at her wings, wondering if they were painted with nail polish, and decided not to ask, but her eyes caught his. “Everyone's wings look the same, and they're all the same dull, boring gray.”

Ame turned and fluttered her wings, showing them off. “Do you like the colors?”

Mado nodded quietly and she smiled as she handed him the shaving kit in a small paper bag.

As they left, Ame gave them a little wave with her hand. “Bye Kabe, bye Mado! Have fun!”

They waved farewell as they walked through the door.

Back on the scooter, Kabe smiled over his shoulder. “At least you didn't ask her if she was a girl. I think you're learning, Mado.”

Mado shook his head bitterly as they rode toward the clock shop, steeling his nerves for his next encounter with Kana. He secretly hoped she would be out on an errand.

They pulled up to the clock shop and entered to the clatter of dozens of ticking clocks.

An elderly man with square-framed glasses was working at a bench behind the counter, facing away from them. A small patch of gray above his collar was all that remained of his hair. He was wearing a dark gray apron over a white shirt.

He turned in his chair as the boys approached the counter. “Can I help you gentlemen?” His gruff voice was moderately cheerful, and his gaze was sharp but not unfriendly.

His eyebrows arched with recognition. “Oh, Kabe. I hear Master Tsuchi was able to repair that hydraulic regulator that was acting up.”

He stood up and positioned himself behind the counter. “You know, that's the third time he has needed to borrow those tools this year. I can sell him the tools -- they are used, after all. Let Master Tsuchi know that I will be happy to do that, and make the price very reasonable for him.”

Kabe bowed respectfully. “Thank you, oyakata. I will tell him of your offer. We are actually here to see Kana.”

The nodded and man turned, opened a door behind the counter and shouted. “Kana, you have visitors!” He sat back down at the bench and resumed working on a small, square wall clock.

Kana appeared a few moments later, wearing a peach-colored apron over her gray shirt, wiping her hands with a rag. She smiled. “Hi, Kabe.”

She turned toward Mado, the slightest trace of a smirk on her lips. “Hi, Mado.”

Kabe spoke almost immediately. “We're here to discuss the tile repairs needed at Old Home.”

Kana's eyes lingered on Mado before she turned back to Kabe. She reached into her pocket, pulled out a small piece of paper, unfolded it and handed it to Kabe. It was a map.

Kana leaned over and pointed out details as she spoke. “The room is in the north wing, second floor, third door from the west stairway. That's where the twins were born, so it's a real mess. When do you think you can fix it?”

Kabe studied at the map. “Mado and I are planning to go and assess the damage this afternoon.” He glanced up at Kana. “Will someone be there, or should we just go up to the room?”

Kana looked down, thinking for a moment. “Rakka should be there. She was given time off from her job to help take care of the twins. If you don't see her, the house mother will be there, but she's usually pretty busy with the young feathers.”

She pursed her lips. “You should be able to find your way to the room with the map, though. Don't worry about going in on your own.”

Kabe nodded and turned to leave, but Kana interjected. “So, Mado is your new apprentice? There's a *lot* of bad tile in Old Home.” She arched her eyebrows hopefully. “Maybe we can finally get some new tiles that match for a change?”

Kabe paused, glanced at the map, then looked at Kana. “Sorry Kana, but you know the Renmei would never approve new tile. We're only permitted to make the repairs we do to protect the structure.”

Kana gazed downward with a dejected sigh. “They're so cheap sometimes. It's hard enough just keeping the lights on in that place.”

She glared ruefully. “Oh well, I figured I'd ask. Let me know if you run into trouble. I need to get back to work.” With a perfunctory wave of the rag in her hand, she stepped back through the door.

As they mounted the scooter, Kabe turned to Mado. “You see? She's not so bad. Kana has a hard time at Old Home. It's a very large place for such a small number of haibane.”

He started up the scooter. “We are fortunate that Stone Mill is a more manageable size. Let's head back for lunch.”

As they left town and rode toward Stone Mill, Kabe told Mado about Old Home.

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 4: Praelation**

#### **Scene 4.1: Appliqués**

After lunch, Kabe worked in the shop while Mado and Senkou washed dishes. When they were finished, Kabe handed Mado a bucket and bag of tools, picked up his own bucket and bag, and led the way to the garage.

The boys placed the items in the back of a small, flatbed utility cart. It was like a tiny, open three-wheeled truck, painted the same shade of gray as their coveralls.

It was not much larger than a golf cart would be, with room for the driver and a passenger to sit side by side on a bench seat. The Stone Mill logo was painted in brown and white on the hood.

Kabe pulled the cart in front of one of the storage sheds. They loaded some bags of mortar, plaster and concrete mix into the cargo area.

Kabe walked over to another shed and returned with a two-wheeled hand truck. “We'll want this when we get there.” He loaded it onto the cart.

The boys hopped up on the thin bench seat and drove slowly down the driveway.

Old Home was not far from Stone Mill, and as they rounded the Hill of Winds, Mado saw it for the first time. Kabe had described it, but Mado's eyes widened as they drew closer, the building loomed large against the afternoon sky.

It was like a huge walled castle of light gray stone set upon a gentle hill of green grass. Two large trees framed the arched entrance, while the terracotta-tiled roofs of inner buildings rose majestically behind the wall. There was a clock face on the tall, square tower, and Mado felt as if they were crossing a moat as they drove over a small stone bridge to park by the entrance.

They walked past a cluttered bulletin board next to a rack of name tags and into the courtyard. Mado found himself gaping at the tall buildings. The place was enormous, much larger than Stone Mill.

Kabe had told him that even counting the young feathers, less than twenty haibane tended to live in Old Home at any given time. Mado tried to imagine a handful of haibane maintaining the huge compound and realized that if anything, Stone Mill wasn't doing *enough* maintenance for their sister nest.

As they strode past a brass antique water pump mounted atop a stone pillar, a haibane girl stepped out of a doorway carrying a wooden box. Inside it were what looked like various personal items. The girl spotted the boys, set down the box and trotted over to greet them.

She was a little younger than Mado, and was wearing what looked like a white school uniform dress with brown trim and a matching kerchief. Her sandals clopped softly on the grass as she ran, triggering quiet echoes between the massive buildings. Her brown hair fluttered in disarray around her head, and a few stray locks seemed stuck to her halo. Mado saw sparkles in her deep brown eyes as she came to an abrupt stop in front of them.

Her voice was bright and cheerful. "Hi! You must be Kabe. I'm Rakka." She bowed politely and turned to Mado. "And *you* must be Mado."

She smiled slightly as she bowed, and Mado realized with sudden terror that Rakka – and all the girls of Old Home – had no doubt heard all about his first meeting with Kana.

Rakka's smile broadened as a flush came to Mado's cheeks, but he was relieved to see that her expression held no cruelty whatsoever. She actually seemed quite charmed to meet him.

Kabe took mercy on Mado and broke the silence. "Kana told us you would be here. I understand the twins have become a full-time job."

The look she gave him said far more than words ever could. Rakka seemed to age ten years in a matter of seconds. She frowned and averted her gaze as she replied. "You could say that."

Seeming to remember something, she brightened, the sparkle returning to her eyes. "Let me show you where they were born!"

Without pausing Rakka turned and ran toward the large north wing building, then stopped, ran back to them. "Sorry, this way!"

She walked quickly back toward the north wing as Kabe and Mado followed.

Rakka led them up a gloomy staircase to the second floor. A line of dim fluorescent lights and small inset windows only partially illuminated the dark hallway.

The walls were covered to waist height with mismatched ceramic tiles. Squared arches were spaced down the hallway, acting as modest barriers separating the tall, rounded wooden doors that lined one side. Dust was gathered thickly along the baseboards.

Old Home gave Mado an empty, haunted feeling, and he felt renewed gratitude for the warm comfort of Stone Mill.

Rakka stepped up to a door and swung it open, flipping a light switch as she entered the room.

The scene inside was not encouraging. Although it was much cleaner than the hallway, at least half the floor and wall tiles must have been irreparably damaged, seemingly crushed by some sort of monstrous force. Worse, the subfloor under the tiles had also been damaged, with large chunks of concrete removed and strewn around the room.

Mado tried to imagine what the cocoons must look like, and decided they must be terrifying things.

Rakka nodded sympathetically as the boys surveyed the damage. "I know it's bad. There were two cocoons, and they both grew very large. There almost wasn't any room to stand in here when they hatched."

Kabe stepped over to one of the walls. The plaster had been heavily damaged, and an enameled steel sink mounted on the wall had been crushed beyond repair.

He pointed at the sink. "Looks like some plumbing damage, but thankfully no leaks. I'll have Kumo come over and fix it." Kabe pulled out the map Kana had given him and jotted some notes on it.

His gaze worked its way around the room. "It will be necessary to repair the subfloor before we can start working on the tile. Also, it seems most of the displaced tiles will not be usable." He jotted some more notes, looked over at Rakka. "We may have to scavenge if we cannot find enough replacements."

Rakka nodded slowly as Kabe spoke reassuringly. "We will do what we can do to avoid that."

He gestured to the doorway. "Will it be acceptable for us to come and go freely during the day as we work on this? It will probably take several weeks."

Rakka clasped her hands together and nodded emphatically. "Oh yes! And please let us know if there is anything we can do to help."

She bowed to each of the boys and trotted lightly out of the room.

Kabe turned to Mado. "We should begin the subfloor repairs at once. It will take a week for the concrete to fully cure."

As they walked back down the hallway, Mado commented. "She seems nice."

Kabe smiled. "The girls of Old Home are very well-mannered. Unlike the girls of the Waste Factory, they tend to be modest and polite." Kabe obviously held the girls of Old Home in high regard.

Mado thought of Ame. *She* didn't seem to be ill-mannered, and she was very polite.

They pulled the cart into the courtyard and parked it next to the north wing door, then piled the bags of

concrete onto the hand truck. They wheeled the hand truck carefully up the stairs, with Kabe pulling and Mado pushing.

After all the bags were moved into the room, the boys carried up the buckets and tool bags. It took three trips to bring everything up.

Although the sink was crushed, the boys were able to use it to fill the mixing bucket for the concrete. They swept the subfloor clear of loose debris with a discarded board and cleaned out the holes with brushes from their tool bags.

Kabe showed Mado how to properly prepare the mixture, and in less than an hour they were troweling the fresh concrete smooth. When it dried, the subfloor would be as good as new.

As they cleaned off the trowels and rinsed the excess concrete from the bucket, Kabe explained what they would need to do next.

He gestured toward the floor with a trowel. "The concrete must be allowed to completely cure, so there is nothing we can do until next week. It is imperative that as much moisture as possible be permitted to escape from the subfloor before we install the tile, otherwise it may come loose and buckle."

Kabe motioned at the edges of the damaged area. "Old Home uses a mortar base directly under the floor tiles. This is not the way I would have done it, but it is important that we match the set of the other tiles as closely as possible. Otherwise, we risk doing an improper job."

Mado listened intently as Kabe explained the finer points of tile setting. Although they would not be able to begin laying tile until the following week, Kabe demonstrated how they would apply the mortar layer, place the tiles, space them, level them and seal them.

He showed Mado a storeroom at the end of the hall. Inside were a few stacks of floor tiles.

Kabe pointed at them. "These will not be enough. Fortunately, many of the buildings in Guri were built with similar tiles. There is a dealer in town who salvages materials from old buildings. He often has these tiles, and the Renmei will cover their expense."

Kabe paused, staring at the stacks of tiles. "Unfortunately, we are only permitted to install used tiles. The Renmei does not allow us to install anything new in any nest of the haibane. It is a rule. Even the mortar and concrete mixes are ground up from salvage."

Mado contemplated that. *Nothing new.*

Kabe continued explaining the upcoming tasks, quizzing Mado and ensuring he was comfortable with the work they would be doing.

Mado was very happy. Working with Kabe was fun, and he was an excellent teacher. Mado felt lucky to be Kabe's apprentice.

By the time they returned to the cart and drove out of the courtyard, Mado was confident that he would be

able to help Kabe do a superior job of repairing the floor.

They joked and laughed as they rolled slowly down the road with the afternoon sun at their backs, talking about concrete, tile and the girls of Old Home.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 4.2: Advent**

It seemed he had been asleep only a little while when Mado felt a hand on his shoulder, rousing him awake. It was Kabe.

Mado looked around the room. It was still nighttime, and he could hear the soft chirping of crickets outside the window. The single electric lamp lit the room dimly, leaving much of Kabe's face in shadow.

He stepped back as Mado sat up in the bed, rubbing his eyes. "Kabe, what's wrong? What time is it?"

Kabe was wearing what looked like a very old and faded pair of coveralls, adorned with many small rips and stains. The Stone Mill patch on his chest was frayed.

He stared at Mado for a long while before answering. "I want to give you something."

Kabe reached into a pocket and pulled out two small items: a worn folding pocketknife and a small gray oblong sharpening stone, its edges rounded from wear.

He held one in each hand, regarding them thoughtfully. "This is how you sharpen a knife properly."

Kabe held out the stone, drawing the edge of the knife across it in smooth, sweeping motions, a metallic grating the only sound that could be heard in the room.

He carefully examined the edge. "It is important to keep a knife sharp." He held up the blade, turning it in the dim light of the room. "A dull knife is more dangerous than a sharp knife: it can slip and cut you. Always keep your knife sharp."

His eyes peered over the edge of the blade with dark intensity.

He handed the stone to Mado. "This is a piece of the original millstone found in this building. No one knows how old it is, but it is very ancient. It was given to me by my senior, long ago."

Mado turned the stone over in his hand. It was almost the same color as a haibane's wings. He gazed incredulously at Kabe, sensing the significance of the gift.

Kabe stared thoughtfully at the knife, weighing it in his hand. Suddenly, he reached behind his neck and with a single stroke cut the ponytail from his head.

Mado gasped as Kabe held it out in front of him, the rubber band still holding it together at the top. Kabe smiled ironically as he examined the long black shock of hair. He stepped over to the dresser and left it there, lying in a loose coil. Mado sat speechless, stunned by the scene.

Kabe turned and shook his head, allowing his hair to fall free. Even without the ponytail, it still reached almost to his shoulders, framing his face in black.

He folded the knife as he walked up to Mado, and held it out in offering.

As Mado took it, Kabe's hands closed around his. Mado stared helplessly, trying to understand what was happening.

Above his head, Kabe's halo dimmed momentarily, once, twice, as Mado's eyes widened. *How did he do that?*

His chin lifted slightly as his eyes stayed fixed on Mado. Kabe leaned close and cleared his throat. "Mado..." His eyes began to moisten. Kabe was trying to say something, but could not.

He cleared his throat again, and spoke firmly but softly. "Keep it sharp."

Kabe released Mado's hand and walked quickly out of the room, leaving the door open.

Mado sat motionless on the bed, looking at the knife and the stone in his hands. He stood up and went to the door, but Kabe was gone.

Mado closed the door quietly and sat down on the bed, pondering the gifts Kabe had given him.

He placed the knife and stone on the nightstand and stared at them blankly. *Why did he give me these gifts now?*

Mado sighed and lay back in the bed as fatigue overcame him, and fell asleep in bewilderment.

He awoke to the sound of the first bell. His body was stiff, and ached deeply.

Mado sat up, replaying the scene with Kabe in his mind. The knife and stone were there upon the nightstand, proof that it had not been a dream. *I need to talk to him about this.*

He changed into his coveralls, slipped the knife into a hip pocket and went down to the lounge.

No one else was at the table yet, and Mado peeked into the kitchen to see Umi hard at work cooking breakfast.

Mado sat at the table without speaking as the other boys filtered in. He watched silently as Umi occasionally peeked his head out of the kitchen, looking toward the shop expectantly.

Matsu, Tsuchi, Kumo and Senkou had joined Mado at the table and were chatting idly when Umi finally emerged frowning from the kitchen with his hands on his hips. "Where's Kabe? He's supposed to help with breakfast this morning and it's almost done."

Mado spoke tentatively. "I think he was up late last night. Should I go check his room?"

Umi looked toward the shop and humphed. “That's okay. If he oversleeps, he can go hungry.” He stepped back into the kitchen as the boys chuckled softly.

A few minutes later, Umi returned with a tray carrying a large bowl of noodles and a pot of tea. He brought the soup bowls, cups and tableware in a second trip.

As they began breakfast, Senkou turned to Mado. “So, what was Kabe doing last night that kept him up so late?”

Mado's eyes stayed fixed on his food. He wasn't sure if he should tell anyone what had happened. It seemed too personal for discussion at the table. He looked up to meet Senkou's inquisitive expression, decided he had to say something.

Mado reached into his pocket and pulled out the knife. “He gave me this.”

Silence fell over the table as the boys gazed at the knife. After a moment of shock, the boys looked at one other with alarm.

Umi gaped at the knife with a turbulent mixture of emotions too complex for Mado to decipher. Suddenly he jumped out of his chair and ran out into the shop.

Kumo called out. “Umi?” He moved to stand up, but sat down, staring thoughtfully at the knife in Mado's hand.

Moments later, Umi returned, panting. “He's not in his room, I can't find him anywhere!” The boys looked at each other again as the air became thick with tension.

Tsuchi turned to Mado, his eyebrows arched in concern. “Mado, did Kabe say anything to you?”

Mado fumbled with the knife in his hands. “He said to keep my knife sharp.” The boys all stood up, leaving Mado sitting, confused. *What's going on?*

A strangled cry escaped from Umi's throat. “*No!*”

He ran over to Tsuchi, grabbed his arm. “We have to stop him! Please, we need to go stop him!” He ran out into the shop then back into the lounge. “Hurry! We need to go now!”

Mado could see tears on Umi's face as he pleaded.

Kumo stepped over, put his hands on Umi's shoulders and turned to Tsuchi. “I'll check the ruins.”

He walked quickly out the door, Umi at his heels. Soon after, Mado heard the sound of a scooter revving away at top speed.

The other boys sat down at the table, staring at it solemnly. Mado looked around at their faces, trying to understand what was happening.

Tsuchi spoke softly, his eyes cast downward. “Mado, did Kabe say anything else?”

Mado squirmed in his chair. Fear began gnawing at him as he replied. “He cut off his ponytail, and he gave me a sharpening stone.” With that, the boys bowed their heads.

Tsuchi's voice was almost a whisper. “I see.”

Outside, in the shop, the morning work bell rang. No one stood up or even turned their heads. They all sat quietly, staring at the table.

Mado's chest tightened as frightful awareness grew slowly within him. *No!*

Tears began to well in his eyes, and Mado glanced over to see that the other boys were quietly weeping.

Except Tsuchi. He sat with his hands flattened on the table, glaring at them bitterly, his frowning face a mask of hardened sorrow. Mado thought he could see a single tear form slowly on the edge of one of Tsuchi's thick lenses.

Almost an hour later, the boys were still sitting silently at the table when Kumo and Umi returned. Their faces were pale and streaked with tears.

Umi walked slowly toward the table, his expression blank, unfocused, entranced, carrying something clutched against his chest. He reached out and placed a dull metallic ring on the table with a soft thud.

It was a halo, lifeless and gray, its light extinguished.

The boys stared quietly as fresh tears rolled down their cheeks. Umi fell to the floor, sobbing as Kumo kneeled to comfort him.

Tsuchi lifted his head slowly, cleared his throat and spoke, emotion barely restrained in his voice. “Senkou, please disable the bell timer.”

He bowed his head, and his words were almost a whisper. “Today will be a Day of Grief.”

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 4.3: Affliction**

Senkou stood up and walked slowly out of the lounge.

The other boys sat motionless, staring at the darkened halo as Umi sat on the floor softly whimpering “no... no...” over and over. Kumo kneeled quietly by his side, his hands on Umi's shoulders.

Senkou returned carrying a small wooden block and set it on the table. He carefully lifted the halo and gently placed its edge in a thin slot. The halo sat upright. The block was apparently designed to hold it.

Kumo stood up slowly, reached into a pocket and placed a large gray feather in an oblong depression carved

into the holder. It was Kabe's feather. Kumo had collected it at the altar in the ruins where they had found the halo.

Umi looked up at the memorial, jumped to his feet. "No!" His angry gaze swept over the faces of the boys, locked on Mado. "*No!*"

He glared at Mado intensely, frowning, rage growing on his small, tear-streaked face. He opened his mouth to say something, closed it, then ran abruptly out of the room.

Kumo rushed quickly to follow, but stopped short and returned to sit at the table.

Mado stared at the empty doorway, wondering why Umi seemed to blame him for Kabe's disappearance. He closed his fist around the pocketknife. *Could I have stopped him?*

They sat in silence for several minutes before Tsuchi spoke. "Mado, I am very sorry we were unable to better prepare you for this. It came upon us unexpectedly. We did not see any of the signs."

Tsuchi's gaze remain fixed on Kabe's halo. "These things happen, I suppose, but I have never seen a Day of Flight occur so soon after the hatching of a new feather." His voice trailed off.

He cleared his throat and continued. "For us, today will be a Day of Grief. On such days, we are encouraged to cope with the pain of our loss. There will be no bells, and all tasks and duties will be suspended. We may each seek solitude or the comfort of our fellows as we choose."

Tsuchi's eyes turned slowly toward the kitchen. "As has been my custom, I will prepare the evening meal. It will be miso soup, Kabe's favorite. There will be no lunch, but there is rarely a need for it on days like this."

Tsuchi lowered his head and scowled at the halo, his expression a tense facade of self-control. Suddenly a single sob shook his body, and he buried his face in his arms.

Senkou rose and stood next to him, placing a hand gently on his shoulder. "I'll make some snacks, Master. There may be a need." He turned, bowed slightly to Kabe's shrine, then moved quietly into the kitchen.

Kumo stood up from his chair, bowed toward the halo and slipped out of the room.

Matsu sat staring at the darkened ring. Mado had never seen such a serious expression on his face. Matsu's eyes were swollen from crying.

He noticed Mado watching him and rose uncomfortably, walking quickly toward the door. Matsu paused there, turned, and bowed toward the table. A single word appeared on his lips. "Kabe." He turned and left.

Tsuchi's head was still resting in his arms, his own halo inches from Kabe's.

Mado quietly rose and bowed toward the small shrine, trying to think of Kabe, but he felt numb. None of this seemed real. None of *any* of this seemed real. He turned and walked out into the shop.

Mado's eyes scanned the empty benches and silent machinery. Were it not for Kabe's disappearance, the shop

would have been bustling with activity. Today it would be a ghostly monument to the spirit of Stone Mill.

Mado heard a crash come from one of the craft rooms, and walked over to investigate. A light was on in the paint room. Mado moved quietly up to the door and cautiously peeked in.

Umi was there, standing over his painting, which had been thrown to the floor. In a far corner lay the collapsed easel, a leg broken. Mado saw an overturned can of paint, which had spilled everywhere.

Broad splashes of scarlet crisscrossed the front of Umi's coveralls. Red liquid covered his hands and was smeared on his cheeks where he had wiped away tears. The paint was spattered in his hair and even on his halo, tiny islands of red embedded in the pale glow. Red streaks formed abstract patterns on his wings.

At Umi's feet lay the oceanscape Mado had seen earlier. The canvas was smeared with swaths of red, ruined by Umi's own fingers.

He stood staring at his crimson hands, clenching and unclenching them. He seemed to sense Mado's presence and turned to face him, his eyes red from weeping and anger.

Umi was breathing heavily, his face twisted with torment. He stood glaring at Mado, his fists balled tightly at his sides.

Mado lifted his hands in a gesture of placation. "Umi, I'm sorry."

Umi's eyes narrowed, an expression of unrestrained hatred growing on his face as Mado spoke. "I didn't know. He didn't tell me he was leaving."

Umi sniffed with disdain and drew a paint-covered hand across his cheek, reddening it even more. "You didn't know him. You were only his apprentice for one day."

He glared at the ruined painting. "We were born the same year." His fierce gaze returned to Mado. "He gave me my halo."

Umi scowled darkly, his breath hissing softly between his teeth. "*I should have been his apprentice. He was my friend.*" His eyes flickered with sparks, cutting into Mado like a knife. Under the splotches of paint his face flushed with rage.

Umi's voice was a low growl as he spoke through clenched teeth. "*I hate you.*" He pushed past Mado and ran out into the shop, leaving a small red hand print on the leg of Mado's coveralls.

Mado looked down at the painting. Between red smears, he saw that the distant waves reflected the colors of the sunset clouds perfectly.

Mado stood rigidly, staring into the ruined scene, feeling his capacity for emotion drain slowly from his body. There was too much pain for his heart to hold. Much time passed before Mado could free his gaze from Umi's ruined masterpiece.

He finally shook himself from his fixation and walked into the shop, looking around blankly. *How long was*

*I standing there like that?*

An intermittent trail of small red spots led to the door by the bulletin board, and Mado followed it outside, not bothering to change his shoes.

He stepped out onto the cobblestones. The morning sun was climbing in a clear blue sky, the brightly lit beauty of the meadows a painful contrast to the darkness in Mado's heart. The spots trailed off somewhere in the grass, and Umi was nowhere to be seen.

Mado walked slowly down the driveway, not sure where to go. He felt abandoned and utterly alone. *How could Kabe leave me like this?*

Mado stopped and frowned, fighting back fresh tears.

He was still standing in the driveway when Kana rode up, peddling furiously, her thick black locks dancing over her ears. Slung over her shoulder was a khaki leather messenger bag.

Kana threw her bicycle to the ground and ran to Mado, panting from exertion. "Mado!"

He gazed at her with dull eyes, hardly seeming to register her presence. She stared at him with frightened concern as she stopped to catch her breath.

Kana spoke quickly between gulps of air. "I saw Umi on my way to work. He was running across the Hill of Winds. It looked like he was covered in blood." The alarm that was already on her face began to grow as she realized that Mado was in shock.

Her eyebrows arched as she glanced at the small red hand print on Mado's leg. "I followed him. He ran to Old Home. Rakka and Hikari are with him now."

Kana swallowed quickly. "He refuses to talk. He was covered with paint, not blood. We don't think he's hurt, but he looked horrible."

Kana stepped close, put her hands on Mado's shoulders. "Mado, are you okay?" Her worried eyes searched his face, looking for clues.

Her voice trembled. "Mado, please, what happened?" Her grip tightened, and she shook him gently.

Mado's gaze slowly came into focus on Kana's pleading eyes, seeing compassion where he had expected none. He shook his head, trying to snap out of his daze. "Kabe..." He choked out the words. "Kabe is gone."

The expression on Kana's face turned from shock to pain as realization swept over her. She looked through Mado as she quietly spoke the name. "Kabe."

Kana stared at the ground for a few moments, slowly shaking her head as the significance of the news sank in. She looked up, still shaking her head as her dark eyes locked on his. "Mado, I'm so sorry."

She studied his face as if reading his anguish, her own eyes mirroring his. She stepped closer, hesitated, then

stepped back as her gaze fell to the cobblestones.

Kana's expression hardened as she glanced up. "I need to talk to Master Tsuchi."

#### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 4.4: Repercussions**

Mado led Kana into the main building of Stone Mill.

As they walked through the shop, Mado didn't notice as Kana's eyes darted from one machine to the next. Her expression was a mixture of wonder and jealousy. For most girls, Stone Mill would have been just a machine shop, but for Kana, it was a forbidden paradise.

Tsuchi was still sitting at the table in the lounge. His hands were neatly folded in front of him, his face composed, frowning stoically. His eyes did not leave Kabe's halo as Kana and Mado approached.

Kana bowed. "Master Tsuchi, I heard about Kabe. I'm sorry."

Tsuchi slowly turned his head, regarded Kana impassively, saying nothing.

She swallowed uncomfortably and continued. "Umi is at Old Home. He's very upset and won't talk to us. We're not sure what to do." As Kana spoke, Tsuchi's attention shifted to the small red hand print on Mado's coveralls, then back to Kana.

He stared at her for a moment before returning his gaze to Kabe's memorial. "Has he been injured?" Tsuchi's expression had not changed since Mado and Kana entered the room.

Kana gave Mado a troubled glance before replying. "He was covered with red paint, but I don't think he was physically hurt. He'll need a change of clothes, though." She sighed softly. "He was a real mess."

Tsuchi stared at Kabe's halo as he spoke slowly, deliberately, his voice almost a monotone. "Kana, please accept and convey our apologies to Old Home for the disruption caused by a member of our nest. Aside from providing a change of clothing, however, I am not sure what we can do."

Tsuchi paused, then turned slowly to Kana. "Umi is free to go where he chooses. Although he is a haibane of Stone Mill now, we cannot compel him to leave Old Home or to return here."

For an instant, pain flashed across his face. His jaw tightened before he turned to stare at the halo. "Please look after him."

Mado realized at that moment that Tsuchi was utterly heartbroken, barely able to maintain his composure.

Kana gave Mado a worried look, her eyes pleading for help.

Mado cleared his throat. "Kana, I will take you to Umi's room." He turned to Tsuchi and bowed. "Master."

Kana bowed quickly and followed Mado out of the lounge.

Umi's room was in the east loft, and neither spoke as Mado led Kana up the stairs and stepped inside.

Kana stood quietly as Mado searched for the clothing.

Although Mado had helped clean the room on Maintenance Day, they had not opened closets or dresser drawers. Even on Maintenance Day, a reasonable degree of privacy was observed.

Kana's eyes studied some paintings hanging on the walls, examples of Umi's work. All of them portrayed oceanscapes, most of them with sunsets, none of them showing any sign of land. They were all rendered exceptionally well, almost lifelike.

Over the bed was a small portrait of Old Home, painted in a different but somehow familiar style.

She stepped over to a small plaster statue on the dresser which depicted a fish jumping out of water, its sleek body curved in a shallow "S". Kana stared at it, regarding it thoughtfully.

Next to the figure on a polished metal tray were several tiny, rounded, brightly-colored stones. They had been carefully placed, their natural colors arranged so as to be pleasing to the eye.

Mado rolled some socks and underclothes in a fresh set of coveralls and handed them to Kana.

As she took them, she gave Mado a worried look. "Are you going to be okay?"

Mado stared dully at the bundle in Kana's hand. "He thinks it was my fault. That's why he ran away."

Kana frowned. "You know that's not true. When the Day of Flight comes, no one can stop it. There was nothing you could do." Her eyes softened. "It wasn't your fault."

She tucked the clothing into her messenger bag. "Look, I have to hurry. I still need to go to town and tell Master and Nemu what happened."

Kana looked away briefly. "Umi has kind of caused some problems at Old Home, with the young feathers." A pained smirk came to her face. "We practically had to pry him off the house mother, he was holding her so tightly. He got paint all over her skirt."

She glanced at Mado then down at the floor. "Mado..." She lifted her eyes. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

Kana patted his shoulder and left the room. Mado followed her outside.

She lifted her bike upright and paused, frowning cryptically at Mado. "Mado, don't be so hard on yourself. Try to get some rest." She swung a leg over the bike and pedaled off at top speed.

Mado watched as Kana disappeared in the distance, racing toward town. Far away, beyond the thin spire of the clock tower, the midmorning sun was climbing slowly through a clear blue sky.

Mado lifted his head, feeling the sun's gentle warmth on his face. He closed his eyes and quietly prayed that

it might melt the ice in his soul.

Somewhere overhead a bell chimed once, loudly.

There was a sharp stabbing in his shoulder. Something was wrong with his left wing,. It was twisted painfully against his back. He opened his eyes, saw blood on cobblestones.

Someone was shaking his arm. "Mado, wake up!"

He turned his head, it was Matsu, kneeling next to him. Mado was lying on the driveway, a small pool of blood near his head spreading slowly along the cracks in the cobblestones.

Mado's eyes narrowed with confusion, blinking back the sun's glare. "Matsu, what's going on?"

There was panic on Matsu's narrow face. "Mado, you passed out. You're bleeding. Are you okay?" His eyes searched Mado's face. By his knee was an open first aid kit.

He leaned over, urgent. "Can you sit up?"

Matsu lifted Mado gently, helping him sit up, steadying him with his hands.

His voice was a quaver. "Mado, please, are you okay?"

Matsu was terrified, looking into Mado's eyes for signs of awareness.

Mado put a hand to his head. There was a small cut over what felt like a sizable bruise on his left temple. He lowered his hand, looked at the blood on his fingers.

Matsu's face drew close. "Mado, do you know where you are?"

Mado looked around slowly. "I'm on the driveway. Kana just left." Matsu's shoulders relax in visible relief.

Mado closed his eyes tightly, opened them. "Matsu, Umi ran away. He's at Old Home."

Matsu sat down next to Mado and began cleaning the wound with a piece of gauze soaked in alcohol. He actually seemed pleased when Mado reacted to the stinging.

Matsu's tone was matter-of-fact as he swabbed Mado's temple. "Mado, this could be a serious injury. We're going to have to get you to a doctor right away."

He applied a thick square of gauze over the wound, then wrapped a thin bandage tightly around Mado's head to hold it in place. The bleeding stopped.

Matsu turned Mado's head to look into his eyes. "It looks like you have a concussion. There could also be internal bleeding."

Matsu's voice held panicked anguish. "Mado, I need to go tell Master Tsuchi, but I'm afraid to leave you like

this. Do you think you can walk?”

Mado looked around blankly. “I think there's something wrong with my wing.”

Matsu's eyes briefly flicked to the wing. “You were lying on it when I found you. It may be sprained.” He sighed impatiently. “Mado, do you think you can stand up if I help you?”

Matsu reached his hands under Mado's arms and helped him to his feet.

Mado was unsteady but capable of walking with Matsu's support. They moved slowly toward the main building, Matsu's arm tight around Mado's shoulders as they carefully picked their way over the cobblestones.

Senkou was sitting at a bench in the shop when they entered. He glanced over, saw the bandage and immediately ran over to the two boys. “What happened?”

Matsu's fear was contagious, and they helped Mado to his bed in the guest room as Matsu explained what he could.

Senkou leaned over Mado, concern etched on his face. He checked Mado's eyes, looking for differences in pupil size, checking for signs of serious injury.

Mado's wing appeared to be sprained but not broken, and he was able to lie on his back without undue discomfort. The head injury was worrisome, however. Mado would need professional medical care.

Senkou stood up. “I don't think we should try taking him to town.” He turned to Matsu. “Can you get the doctor?”

Matsu looked up at him, and Senkou saw something in his expression that changed his mind. “Okay, you stay here with Mado and I'll go get the doctor. Be sure to keep him awake and don't leave him.”

Senkou turned and walked quickly out the door.

Matsu sat close to the bed, holding Mado's hand, chatting, questioning, keeping the conversation going.

As they waited for the doctor to arrive, they spoke of many things.

#### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 4.5: Therapeutics**

They heard the doctor long before they saw him. He was complaining bitterly about Senkou's driving. “...there are many good reasons why I don't normally ride scooters, and you just gave me a few more.”

The doctor stormed into the room in a huff. He was an elderly man with thin white hair and narrow, half-lens reading glasses covering his gray eyes. He was wearing a light green lab coat and carrying a large, black valise.

He scowled as he walked into the room, his bushy white brows knitting together as he walked up to the boys and set his valise on the nightstand.

“You must be Mr. Mado.” The growl in his voice faded to gentle huskiness as he leaned over the bed, looking Mado up and down. “Senkou tells me you took a spill. Can you tell me how you feel right now?”

Mado lifted a hand to his temple. “My head hurts. It's throbbing, and the left side of my head feels bruised.” He glanced at his left wing. “And my wing hurts. I think I sprained it.”

The doctor asked Mado several more questions as he unbandaged the wound and cleaned it thoroughly with a series of antiseptics.

He tested Mado's temple and wings for pain, then proceeded to poke and prod him in all sorts of unlikely places, checking extremities for sensitivity and mobility.

The doctor was at the foot of the bed, checking the reflexes of Mado's toes. “What were you doing when this happened, young man?”

Mado thought for a moment. “I was looking at the sun.” The doctor's head popped up as Mado corrected himself. “I wasn't looking with my eyes, I was just letting it shine on my face.”

The doctor stood straight, his hands on his hips. “Senkou tells me that Kabe has left the nest. I suspect you're feeling a lot of emotional strain right about now.”

He glanced at Matsu, who was watching anxiously. “I know you Stone Mill boys are hard workers, but you really need to give yourselves time to deal with the loss of a close friend.”

The doctor shook his head slowly. “There is only so much a haibane can take before something snaps. You need to go easy on yourselves.”

He glared at Mado, his tone mildly scolding. “Particularly you, Mr. Mado. You were born less than a week ago. Haibane newborns have enough problems under the best of circumstances.”

The doctor gave Senkou a sharp look before continuing. “It is very important to give yourself enough time to adjust to life here. I'm sorry to see you have to go through this on top of everything else.”

He stepped over to the side of the bed. “Mr. Mado, you have a mild concussion and bruising with a laceration on your left temple. Also, your left wing is sprained at the wrist.” He sighed softly. “That's not bad for an unconscious fall on cobblestones. You could have easily broken something.”

The doctor adjusted Mado's left wing slightly. “The good news is that I see no evidence of any form of neurological damage. I am a bit worried about what caused you to lose consciousness in the first place, but from what Senkou told me, you boys have been having a rough time of it today.” He turned to his valise and pulled out a strange-looking device.

The doctor unfolded the thin gray metal arms, which were joined by a large round reinforced hinge. “You're going to need to wear a wing brace for a while.”

He leaned over Mado, attaching the brace with thin bands that threaded between the feathers. “Try not to move it for a few minutes, they are tricky to adjust properly, and I don't get much practice putting them on.”

Mado's wing twitched reflexively, but the doctor held it firmly and steadily as he adjusted the bands. In a few minutes the brace was installed, reinforcing and supporting the swollen wrist joint of Mado's left wing.

The doctor tugged on the brace, checking the fit. “You'll need to wear that for at least a couple of weeks. Don't worry, you can get it wet, and you shouldn't need to remove it at all during that time. The brace bands are designed to allow proper circulation and not chafe the skin.”

The doctor rotated Mado's halo and pointed to a wide, shallow notch on its edge. “See this?”

He pulled the halo forward a couple of inches so Mado could see it as he strained to look up past his eyebrows. “That must have happened when you fell. You're lucky you're not in worse shape. The halo took a pretty good dent, but it will eventually mend itself on its own.”

He let go, and the halo snapped back into place with a soft spring.

The doctor leaned over and looked closely at Mado's head wound. “Your scalp has stopped bleeding. The wound is small and was already well-cleaned when I arrived.”

He glanced over at Matsu, gave him an approving nod. “Your friend took good care of you. I'm going to re-bandage it, and I recommend keeping ice on it to help with the pain and swelling.”

The doctor applied a new bandage to Mado's temple, then reached into his valise, pulled out two small bottles of pills and handed them to Matsu. “Have him take two of these every two hours until they run out, then one of these every four hours until they run out. They will help with the inflammation of his scalp and wing wrist.”

He closed his valise and pulled it to his side. “Mr. Mado, like all haibane, you are in otherwise excellent health. Stay in bed for the rest of the day and you should be back on your feet tomorrow. But take it easy and try not to move that wing too much for at least a few days.”

The doctor glanced at Matsu, then back at Mado. “You can sleep on your back, just try to avoid rolling over on that side. You may find it helpful to place a pillow between your shoulder and the wing if you can do so comfortably.”

He leaned over, checking Mado's eyes one last time. “You may develop a mild fever, but the medications will help. Schedule an appointment with my office to have the brace removed in a couple of weeks.” He stood up with a sigh. “Contact me if you develop a severe fever or nausea, or if you have any problems with the brace.”

The doctor stepped over to the door and turned, scowling at Senkou. “After that ride over here, I think a nice relaxing walk back to town is what I need.”

He winked as his frown became a smile, then turned and gave Mado a warm grin. “I'm leaving you in good

hands, Mr. Mado. Rest up, and get well soon.”

The doctor shut the door behind him as he left the room.

Matsu stayed in the room while Senkou fetched water, tea, ice and washcloths. Matsu sat staring at Mado, relief evident on his weary face.

Mado smiled weakly. “Matsu, thank you.”

Matsu grinned, his impishness returning. “Try not to make a habit of this, Mado.”

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 5: Relegation**

#### **Scene 5.1: Consultations**

There was a soft knock at the door, and Matsu gave the visitor permission to enter. It was Tsuchi, scowling as he walked into the room.

He stepped up to the foot of Mado's bed, resting a hand on one of the posts. “Mado, I just spoke with the doctor, and he explained your injuries.”

Tsuchi's gaze lowered, shifting to Mado's feet. “I apologize for neglecting your care.” He glanced up. “You are still a new feather, and a reaction such as this to the stress you have been forced to endure could have easily been anticipated.”

Mado held up a hand, almost sat up. “Master Tsuchi, it's not your fault! Please don't blame yourself.” He lay back with a sigh. “Kana tried to warn me when she left. I should have listened to her. And none of us were ready for Kabe to leave.”

Tsuchi looked up, his lenses magnified the pain in his eyes. “I appreciate your graciousness, Mado, but you are under the care of Stone Mill, and as supervisor, it is my responsibility to ensure your safety and well-being. It is an error I do not wish to repeat.”

He turned to Matsu. “Matsu, you performed admirably. The doctor was impressed with the care you gave Mado, as am I. He is convinced that your quick thinking and capable response spared Mado from further injury and potentially serious complications. Well done.”

Matsu smiled, looked over at Mado and patted his arm.

Tsuchi faced Senkou, who was pouring a fresh cup of tea. “Senkou, although the doctor complained about your high-speed driving style, you brought medical care to Mado quickly. Your concern for the well-being of your brother haibane is evident. Thank you.”

He turned back to Mado. “When a Day of Flight occurs, we normally allow ourselves three days for grief, remembrance and renewal. However, today has been exceptionally difficult. Therefore, if I have the consent of the nest, I propose that we set aside an additional day and declare tomorrow a Day of Solace.”

Tsuchi looked around the room, seeing nods of approval from everyone, including Mado. His gaze returned to the foot of the bed, and his wings sagged slightly as he spoke. “We have lost two feathers from our nest today. One will never return, the other we must hope will return soon.”

He paused for a moment. “I am not sure what we can do, but I feel we must do whatever we can to assist Umi. He is clearly suffering unbearable torment.” It was obvious that Tsuchi was not free of torment, either.

Tsuchi looked at each of the boys in turn before continuing. “I intend to visit Old Home and speak with Umi. I think it would be best if I go alone for my first visit, and have you remain here to care for Mado.

He glanced at Senkou. “After I speak with Umi, I intend to consult the Communicator at the Temple before returning to Stone Mill. Please inform Kumo of what has happened when he returns and request that he remain here. I should be able to return in time for dinner.”

Tsuchi bowed slightly to Mado and left the room quickly.

Senkou handed Matsu a fresh cup of tea and looked over at Mado. “I think you can expect visitors for a while. I'll go get some chairs.”

He returned with two extra chairs from the lounge, set them a few feet from the bed

Senkou turned to Matsu. “We should take turns keeping an eye on Mado tonight, just in case. I need to finish up some things in the shop.”

He nodded at Mado. “Remember to relax, friend. We need you healed as soon as possible.” Senkou winked and stepped out the door.

Mado watched him leave, then lay back in bed, staring at the ceiling.

Matsu spoke quietly. “Mado, I know this must be terrible for you. I was lucky: I was here almost a year before one of us left the nest.” He sighed gently. “It was hard, but I don't think it ever gets any easier.”

Mado turned his head to see Matsu staring down at his hands, which were clasped gently in his lap. “Last year we lost Akashio.” Matsu looked up, meeting Mado's gaze. “He was my best friend.”

He continued with fondness in his voice. “Akashio used to help me in the garden. He was also a serious prankster.”

Matsu grinned impishly. “If you think I'm bad, he was ten times worse.” His eyes clouded with remembrance. “He wasn't a bad guy for a machinist.”

Matsu paused and gazed back down at his hands. “He never said goodbye to me.” He looked toward the window. “They never do.”

He turned to Mado. "Someday our time will come to leave the nest. I'm sort of afraid of it, but whatever it's like, I can't imagine it being worse than being left behind."

Matsu shifted in his chair, staring at the window, and they sat for a long while in silence.

Outside, in the shop, they heard a muffled shout. "Mado!" Moments later, the door opened.

It was Kana, flushed and breathing heavily. A drop of sweat rolled slowly down the side of her face. She was still wearing her messenger bag.

She stood in the doorway as she caught her breath, staring at Mado's bandage and wing brace. Concern was written on her face like a sign in bold letters.

Finally Kana spoke hurriedly. "Mado, I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have left you like that." She moved to the foot of the bed and looked down at her feet, still trying to catch her breath. "I knew you were in bad shape, but..."

Matsu gazed at Kana for a moment, then at Mado. His expression was difficult to read. He stood up and quietly left the room, closing the door behind him.

Kana kept her eyes on her feet as she got her breathing under control. She swallowed tightly, then glanced sheepishly at Mado with a sigh of guilt. "I'm sorry."

Mado sat up, resting on an elbow. "Kana, it wasn't your fault. You tried to warn me." She shook her head and sighed softly. Mado watched as a series of cryptic expressions crossed her face.

Finally she nodded slowly as a thin smile came to her lips. "Okay. If you say so." A weight seemed to leave her shoulders. She closed her eyes as put her hands behind her head and stretched casually, as if to make sure the weight would not return. A brief silence fell over the room.

Kana grinned impishly as she pointed at the wing brace. "How long do you have to wear that? Master Tsuchi said it was sprained, but we didn't talk long."

Mado glanced over at the thin metal rods bound to his wing. "The doctor says I can have it taken off in a couple of weeks."

Kana nodded approvingly as her eyes turned to the bandage. "How's your head feeling?"

Mado put a hand to his temple. "It's throbbing still, but it's not too bad."

Kana sat down in the overstuffed chair next to the bed and slouched. She turned her head away slightly, regarding him from the corners of her eyes as she spoke. "So, when are you going to finish that tile job?"

He relaxed his head against the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know. It looks like we'll be taking the rest of the week off. The subfloor needs to cure anyway, but without Kabe..." He frowned. "I may be able to finish it."

Mado looked over at Kana with a fond smile. “Kabe was a really good teacher. He told me everything we were going to do before he left.”

Kana reached into her bag and pulled out a small box of chocolate-covered mint candies. “Here. I know you probably aren't allowed to go to the store right now.”

She reached out with a playful grin and popped a mint in Mado's mouth, then set the box next to the sharpening stone on the nightstand. The candies had a hard shell, but inside was a soft, creamy center of minty sweetness.

She stood up and looked askance at Mado with a tone of concern. “Get better, okay?” A clever smile came to her lips. “Let me know when you can start work again. I'll try to get some time off to help you with that tile.”

She winked cheerfully. “And try not to fall down so much.” She turned and walked out of the room with a casual wave of her hand.

Mado lay back as his body sank into the mattress. His eyelids seemed to close of their own volition.

As he drifted into a deep sleep, he thought of Kana, tile and sweet mints.

## **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 5.2: Consolation**

Mado was standing on tall, green grass.

Overhead, dark gray clouds blanketed the sky, and a light drizzle fell around him. In the distance, he saw a massive stone wall that seemed to stretch off in the distance to both the left and the right. It looked very old: moss and thick vines could be seen on its imposing veneer.

Around Mado were fractured stone columns and scattered blocks, the ruins of an ancient building. Ahead he saw the cracked remains of a short stairway. As he walked slowly toward it, he realized that there was a pale glow above the top step.

Voices began whispering as he came closer. He could almost understand what they were saying, but they stopped, and he heard a door close.

He opened his eyes to see Tsuchi quietly seating himself next to the bed.

Tsuchi's smiled cheerfully. “Good morning, Mado. I hope we didn't disturb you. Kumo had the previous watch, and it was necessary to answer some of his questions about yesterday's events. How are you feeling?”

Mado put a hand to his temple. “My head's not throbbing anymore, but it still hurts. I think I'll be okay, though. I don't want to lay around in bed all day.”

Tsuchi's smile broadened. “I understand. You seemed to be sleeping restlessly when I entered.” He checked his wristwatch. “You have been in bed for over sixteen hours.”

Mado sat up and scratched his head, felt the bandage there. At some point he had changed – or been changed into – his pajamas. Tsuchi pushed his chair back as Mado swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Mado's left wing was still sore, and although the brace was surprisingly light, it still felt strange and made his wings feel unbalanced.

He tried extending the wing, but it barely moved. It was swollen and stiff.

Tsuchi leaned forward, clasping his hands. “You are probably feeling very sore this morning, which is to be expected.” He studied Mado's face. “You seem to otherwise be well. I think it will be safe to leave you alone today if you require some privacy.

Mado quietly nodded assent.

Tsuchi leaned back, relaxing in the chair, but his face tensed. “I visited Umi yesterday. Unfortunately, he was unwilling to speak to me. Nemu has been caring for him.”

He sighed remorsefully. “He seems unwilling to leave her side. She told me Umi hasn't spoken a single word since he arrived at Old Home. We are very worried about him.”

Tsuchi glanced at the floor. “Mado, I know this may be difficult, but I am hoping to better understand what happened between you and Umi yesterday.” He leaned forward expectantly. “Can you tell me what he said to you?”

Mado put a hand to his chin in thought. The events of the previous day seemed to run together. In his mind he saw Umi, covered in bright red paint, his angry eyes burning like twin flames. It was not a pleasant memory.

Mado spoke uncertainly. “I think he was jealous because I was Kabe's apprentice. He seemed to think it should have been him instead of me. He never said it directly, but he seems to think it's my fault that Kabe left.”

Mado lowered his hand, stared at it uncomfortably. “He ruined one of his paintings.”

Tsuchi nodded slowly. “Kabe and Umi were close. However, Senkou's need for an apprentice was greater when Umi was assigned to him. Maintenance and repair of electrical systems is an important part of our work.”

He looked down at his hands and sighed. “Umi lost some close friends from Old Home recently. He was very upset each time, but I thought he had eventually recovered. I now think I was mistaken to assume that.”

Tsuchi looked up, meeting Mado's gaze. “Mado, it is of course not your fault that Kabe left. There is no predicting when the Day of Flight will come, and though I have known many haibane who have left the nest, I have never been able to determine any specific reasons for their departure.”

He shifted in his chair. “Please do not allow Umi's anger to cause you despair. His frustration lies with the circumstances of our existence, but because he is young he is unable to accept them, he lashed out at you

instead.”

Tsuchi's eyes returned to his hands. “Umi is a responsible and hard worker, but I sometimes forget that he is nonetheless still a child in his heart.”

There was a soft knocking at the door.

Mado turned. “Please come in.”

The door opened, revealing Kana and a haibane girl Mado hadn't seen before.

She was wearing what seemed to be a school uniform, with a white ruffled long-sleeved shirt, tan ribbon tie and a short, pleated dark gray skirt. Her blonde hair was tied with a large red ribbon into a ponytail set high behind her head. Her blue eyes were bright behind large round glasses, and she smiled warmly as she met Mado's gaze. In her hands was a large pink box.

The girls both bowed and Kana introduced her. “Master Tsuchi, Mado, this is Hikari.”

Tsuchi stood up and bowed slightly. “Hikari and I have met, but it was long ago.” He turned to Hikari. “It is a pleasure to meet again.” He bowed again before returning to his seat.

Hikari's smile was sunny, her voice bright and cheerful. “Oh thank you! It's good to see you too, Master Tsuchi. We wanted to drop this off. Is it okay if I set this here?”

She carefully placed the box on the dresser, then turned to Mado, arching her eyebrows with concern as she clasped her hands tightly at her chest. “Kana told us what happened. Mado, I'm so sorry!”

Hikari's eyes moved back and forth between Mado's bandage and the wing brace. “Are you feeling better this morning?”

Mado nodded gently. “Yes, thank you.”

She turned to Tsuchi. “Nemu has taken some time off work to take care of Umi. He's been staying in her room, because the twins are still staying in the guest room, and we can't put him with the young feathers, the way he's acting.”

Concern covered Hikari's face with a mild frown. “We're very worried about Umi. He won't talk to anyone, not even Nemu.”

Tsuchi nodded slightly. “Yes, we are also concerned, and trying to determine the best way to assist him. It is difficult, as I am sure you can appreciate. We apologize for the disruption, and are grateful for the care you are showing for a member of our nest.”

He lowered his gaze, looking again at his hands. “We are hoping he will be rejoining us soon.”

Hikari nodded. “We'll do whatever we can, Master Tsuchi. Nemu will take good care of him. He may just need a little time to get over the shock. I know he and Kabe were very close.”

She glanced over at Kana. "Please excuse us, but Kana needs to go to work and I need to get back to Old Home."

Hikari stepped over to the door and turned to Mado. "I'm glad you're doing better. Get well soon!"

Kana smiled impishly. "You can't slack off forever, Mado."

They both bowed to Master Tsuchi. Kana waved and Hikari gave Mado a wink as they left, closing the door softly behind them.

Tsuchi stood up and walked to the dresser. "Umi is in good hands."

He looked down, staring at the ponytail that was still lying where Kabe had left it. "Mado, may I have your permission to place Kabe's hair with his halo and feather? It is a special and personal token, suitable for remembrance."

Mado nodded consent.

Tsuchi picked up the box. "This appears to contain pastries. I am sure you are hungry, but with your leave I will place these in the lounge."

Mado nodded again, slowly. "Yes, please, Master Tsuchi. I'll be out for breakfast soon, but I should take a bath first. I think I could use one."

Tsuchi nodded quietly, set the ponytail on the box and carried them out of the room. Mado could smell sweet apples as Tsuchi left, and felt a pang of hunger. He looked down at the nightstand, saw the box of mints and popped one into his mouth.

Mado stepped over to the mirror and lifted the gauze over his temple. The wound had healed so quickly that the bandage wasn't even stained.

He removed it and stared at the wing brace in the mirror. The doctor said he could get it wet, but it would take some getting used to. He stretched his arms and wings, but the left wing remained stiff and pained him with the effort to extend it.

He leaned closer, peering at the wrist joint in the mirror, and could see the small feathers over it ruffed out from swelling. *That will take while to heal.*

As Mado fetched some fresh clothes from the dresser, he thought about Umi in the cold halls of Old Home, refusing to speak to anyone. He wondered if there was some way he could help, but worried that his presence might make things worse. *This is too confusing.*

Mado stared into the mirror and sighed, feeling more like a stranger to himself than ever.

If there was ever a better time for a nice hot bath, Mado couldn't remember it.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 5.3: Gradations**

Breakfast consisted of buckwheat noodles in a light chicken broth. Mado loved the taste, and felt he may have found his favorite noodle.

His hair and wings were still damp from the bath he had just finished – especially his left wing. He couldn't ruffle its feathers.

On the table, Kabe's ponytail had been placed carefully around the base of the shrine in a neat black circle. Next to them the box Hikari had brought sat with the lid partially open, filling the air with the mouthwatering smell of baked apple filling.

Next to the box was a small card, carefully lettered: "Please accept our sincerest condolences. The haibane of Old Home." Beneath it were the signatures of Nemu, Hikari, Kana and Rakka. Beneath them were scattered the symbols for the young feathers, some neat, some illegible. Mado didn't see Umi's symbol on the card.

He reached into the box and took one of the pastries, a small apple turnover with small red dots and green leaves dabbed over white cream cheese glazing covering a thin, flaky crust. The filling was of finely diced apples, moist and sweet. They were delicious.

Kumo sat across the table, playing with the noodles in his bowl. Normally distracted, he seemed unusually focused on the noodles as he twirled them around and around.

He looked up at Mado, a small frown on his face. "I'm worried about Umi. I know he's a kid, but this isn't like him. He's never acted like this before." He looked back at the bowl, stirring. "What if he's sick?"

Mado shifted in his chair. "Sick?"

Kumo spoke slowly. "What if there's something wrong with his mind? You know, a mental illness." He continued staring at the bowl.

Mado hadn't thought about that. In a way, everything here seemed too fantastic to believe, itself a product of some sort of mental illness. He pondered Kumo's question. *Is Umi insane?* It didn't seem right that a child could be "crazy", yet...

Kumo stood up, pushing back his chair. "I'm sorry. I'm just worried. Umi's a good kid." He picked up his bowl, which was still almost full. "It's been hard on him. I guess I just need to get some fresh air."

He carried the bowl into the kitchen, poured it out and washed it, then left the lounge without saying a word.

Mado finished his noodles and washed the bowl in the kitchen sink. *Has Umi have snapped?*

The image of Umi enraged and splashed in bright red standing above his ruined painting haunted Mado's thoughts as he stepped out into the shop. Was the fire in Umi's eyes borne of the flames of madness?

The shop was deserted and silent, the inert machinery hunched like ghostly figures in the light gray glow that filtered through the skylights. Somewhere in his heart, Mado lamented that the shop was not bustling with activity as it was the first time he saw it.

He walked over to the main entrance, staring absently at the name tags. Kumo, Matsu and Tsuchi had left. Senkou was still inside.

Umi's name tag also showed him as being inside. Mado reached out, hesitated a moment, then flipped the tag, exposing Umi's symbol in red.

Mado felt a pang of irony and decided Kumo's suggestion about fresh air had some merit. He flipped his own name tag, changed into his boots and headed outside.

It was still early and the morning air was cool and crisp, with a hint of sweet wildflowers. A bright sun rising in the east foretold of another warm, clear spring day. No one was anywhere to be seen, and Mado started walking down the cobbled path, not really sure of his destination.

He stopped at the small stone bridge and gazed down into the swift waters. Fish were drifting and darting from one eddy to another, seeking shelter from the current.

Mado found himself reminded of Kana. *River fish*. He wondered what her cocoon dream must have been like.

A cool breeze came rustling and chilled Mado's left wing, which was still soggy from his bath. He tried to ruffle it, but it was still too stiff. He looked over at the windmills on the Hill of Winds and decided to take a closer look.

They were mounted atop thick pylons composed of narrow timbers lashed together with thick ropes. Moss and lichens seemed to cover everything, even the slender propellers, giving the windmills an earthy, organic look. Each had three blades which turned slowly in the morning breeze with soft whooshes and faint creaks.

Mado strode through the tall grass, looking left and right at the windmills as he moved between them. One of the pylons was empty. The propeller blades were tied vertically alongside the timbers, but the generator was missing.

Mado wondered who put the windmills here, and who maintained them.

As he crested the first hill, he looked over and saw Old Home, still and majestic in the clear morning light. To the right, other clusters of windmills stretched off into the distance, but Old Home attracted Mado's eyes like a magnet.

He stood motionless, thinking of Umi, Kana, Rakka and the girls living in Old Home's dank corridors. It seemed ironic that such a cold place could shelter such warmth.

There was a whisper, faint in his ear. He could hear it, but couldn't make out the words. *Is someone calling me?*

Mado looked to his right, regarding the dark, forbidding forest in the distance. Had the whisper come from there?

He walked slowly down the hill, listening, then moved along the road past Old Home, following the silent summons.

The road became narrower as it approached the edge of the woods. Mado stopped. *Someone called my name.*

He looked down the path, which narrowed further as it wound beneath the boughs of great trees, their trunks stained with the passage of many years. Something felt wrong.

Mado looked around suspiciously. *These must be the Western Woods.*

He heard it again, louder, a whispering voice. He thought he could hear it say his name.

Mado walked down the overgrown path, following it as he followed the voice. The overhanging arch of ancient boughs moved slowly by as he fell into a trance. His feet moved against their will, carrying him deeper into the forbidden forest.

Trees arched over him as he followed the trail, which was now barely distinguishable from the wild grass growing around it. Underfoot, thin gnarled roots tripped at Mado's feet, but he pressed on, unable to stop or even pause to rest.

The woods seemed to stretch on forever, but ahead he could see a clearing, a brightness in the gathering gloom. His compulsion waned and he stopped at the edge edge of the forest to allow his eyes to adjust to the glare.

The clearing was strewn with chipped stone blocks and cracked pillars embedded in tall, green grass. Beyond the ruins, the wall loomed tall and large, more menacing than Mado had ever seen it.

He walked slowly across the grass between the silent monoliths, drawn forward by curiosity. There was something familiar about this place. *I've seen this before, in a dream.*

Mado stopped between two large squared columns. Ahead was a short staircase crowned by a small stone footing. A figure was seated next to it, reclining against a sheered boulder.

It was Kumo, his chin resting on his knuckles, his profile dark against the backdrop of the distant wall. Seated on the stones with the halo glowing over his golden hair and his gray wings at rest behind him, he was reminiscent of a morose Greek god, silent and brooding. He seemed lost in thought.

Mado walked closer, moving slowly up the steps before Kumo showed any sign of noticing him. His gray eyes looked through Mado as he nodded a quiet welcome.

Kumo turned his gaze to the topmost step. "I come here to think."

His voice was flat and distant. "This is where they go when they leave." Mado sat down on a step nearby,

facing Kumo as he continued. "Sometimes I feel like I can hear them talking. I think they leave something behind when they go, more than just a halo and some feathers."

Mado saw that Kumo had a large gray feather in his hand and was rolling it softly between his fingers as he spoke. "I can feel Kabe here, like he's still nearby, but I know he's gone and won't be coming back."

There was sorrow in his voice, but no tears came to his eyes. They stared through the feather as his fingers played with it.

Kumo looked toward Mado, past him. "I know you're new, and probably haven't had time to wonder, but aren't you curious about what happens when we leave? What it's like?"

He pointed at the small footing. "That's where we find the halos. Every time. We never find anything else, except for some feathers. No clothing, no shoes, nothing. What happens to them?"

Kumo held the feather in front of his lips and blew softly. "They say that a haibane transforms into a column of light on his Day of Flight, but I've never seen it. I've only been here a couple of years, though. They say it's beautiful."

He stared up thoughtfully at the sky. "Do we live again, or do we just disappear forever when our halo goes out?"

Mado looked at the stepping stone. A few gray feathers were strewn around, presumably from Kabe's passing. They both sat quietly for a long while as the cool morning wind brushed their hair.

Finally, Kumo looked over at Mado with traces of a smile on his face. "I know Umi was jealous of you. He and Kabe were very close."

Kumo's smile became warm with remembrance. "When Umi was at Old Home, Kabe used to make up excuses to visit him there. Kabe was like a big brother to him, and was always arguing for Umi to be accepted at Stone Mill, even before he was ready."

He looked back at the feather in his hand. "Umi really wanted to be Kabe's apprentice."

Mado sighed and hugged his knees, gazing down at the base of the steps.

Kumo continued. "I saw the paint room. I know Umi said some pretty bad things to you."

His gray eyes pierced Mado. "You need to know that Umi's a good kid. He's hurt, that's why he said those things. He knows none of this is your fault. He's not stupid."

Kumo twirled the feather playfully. "Not as stupid as I am, anyway." A thin smile returned to his face.

Many moments passed before Mado spoke. "Kumo, do you know why we are here?"

Kumo smiled sardonically. "Everyone asks that question. I thought Master Tsuchi would know, but he doesn't. I asked the Communicator at the Temple, and he gave me some sort of silly non-answer." He sighed.

“I don't think he even knows, though he acts like he knows everything.”

Kumo grinned waggishly as Mado shifted uncomfortably. “I don't think we're supposed to know why we're here.”

Mado replied before he could catch himself, his voice edged with frustration. “Then what's the point?”

Kumo's grin became a smirk. “Who says there has to be a point?” He looked back at the feather. “Maybe there isn't a point to any of this.” The smirk disappeared. “Maybe there never was.”

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the flat surface of the boulder as the morning sun warmed his face.

Mado's eyes swept over the broken stones of the ruins. “There has to be a point. There must be a reason why we are here.”

Kumo sat quietly for a long while, then stood up, brushing off the legs of his coveralls as he grinned at Mado. “You can believe whatever you want. Maybe *that's* the point.”

He stretched extravagantly, the feathers of his wings spreading like broad, gray fans, then motioned toward the wall. “Kabe told you about the wall, right?”

Mado looked over at the wall. “He said we aren't allowed to touch it.”

Kumo nodded approvingly. “Master Tsuchi says the wall can kill you if you touch it. I don't know if it's true, but I never tried it, just in case.”

Mado gazed up at Kumo inquisitively. “What happens if a haibane dies here? Can we die?”

Kumo glanced at Mado's wing brace. “I don't know, but I know we can sure get seriously hurt. I heard the reason there's a sign on the band saw is because a haibane got his wing cut off.”

Mado's eyes widened as Kumo smiled ironically. “Seems to me like we can die.”

As Mado stood up, Kumo turned to him. “You know, neither of us is supposed to be here, or in the Western Woods, for that matter.” His eyes narrowed. “I hope you don't mind keeping this a secret.”

Mado looked around at the ruins and nodded slowly.

Kumo nudged him conspiratorially. “There are some other things we do that Master Tsuchi doesn't know about.” He grinned mischievously. “Come on, I'll show you what we do for fun around here when things get boring.”

Mado and Kumo chatted as they walked back through the Western Woods.

Apparently, there was even more that Mado had yet to learn about life at Stone Mill.

## **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 5.4: Diversions**

Kumo and Mado emerged from the darkness of the woods into a bright meadow. Ahead, beneath the rising midmorning sun, the dirt path curved past the stately ramparts of Old Home.

Mado noticed for the first time that a large section of Old Home's north wall had been knocked down, apparently long ago, and wondered what might have caused such damage. Inside, the north wing building seemed to suffer minor damage from the same cause.

As they walked, Kumo spoke softly. "I keep wanting to visit Umi, but I think what he needs most right now is just a little time by himself. I want him to know I care, but sometimes that means stepping back."

Mado gazed at the red tiled roofs behind the walls. "I just want him to know that I'm not mad at him. I want to talk to him, too, but I suppose you're right. He doesn't seem to want to talk to anyone right now, especially me."

Kumo gave Mado a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and they walked past Old Home in silence.

In the rear of the scooter garage, Kumo pulled back a canvas tarp and unveiled his pride and joy: a motorcycle.

This was no mere scooter, but a full-blown street bike. Mado was surprised. He hadn't noticed it on Maintenance Day, but then realized that Kumo was probably cleaning it while Mado and Kabe had focused on the tractors and carts.

The motorcycle was a nondescript beige color, but instead of open space in front of the seat, it had a teardrop fuel tank above a large engine. The crankcase and chromework were polished to a mirror finish, and the rear wheel was set far behind the seat, shrouded by a close-fitting fender flanked by large leather saddlebags.

The bike's racing suspension held it low to the ground, and as with all machinery at Stone Mill, it was immaculately clean.

Kumo wheeled it outside and, after a few attempts, kick-started the engine. It roared to life with a deep growl, then idled with a menacing grumble. The bike was like a wild beast set on two wheels, and Mado stood staring at it with a mixture of wonder and fear.

Kumo smiled and beckoned. "Come on. Let's go for a ride. I know you're still sore, so I'll take it easy. Let me know if we're going too fast."

Mado closed the garage door and hopped on. True to his word, Kumo idled the bike slowly down the cobbled path.

As they crossed the main road to town, however, Kumo asked over his shoulder. "Okay if I open it up a little?"

Mado replied with a modest amount of hesitation. "Sure."

Kumo gave the throttle a small turn, and the boys surged down the road as the wind whipped their hair. Mado tightened his grip on Kumo's waist.

Kumo had hardly brought the bike above an idle, yet they seemed to be flying down the road.

Mado looked around and realized that they weren't taking the same road Kabe had used, but another road that stretched to the right, east of the main town. They were following the river, and to the right was a patchwork of planted fields dotted by small cottages and barns stretching toward the distant wall.

Kumo's wings were tucked close to his shoulders. Mado tried to follow suit, but his left wing wouldn't move and was being swept back by the wind. It wasn't painful, but it was unbalancing and a bit worrisome.

Kumo looked back. "Doing okay?"

Mado looked over at his wing. "I'm fine, but I can't tuck in my wing."

Kumo nodded and eased off the throttle a little. "I'll take it easy for now. Once you're healed, I'll show you what this baby can *really* do."

Mado tried to imagine the beast they were riding roaring down the road at top speed, and decided he could wait.

They came to a fork in the road, and Kumo eased the bike down the road to the right, which crossed the river and followed what looked like a dry, overgrown ditch.

To the left, Mado could see several large industrial buildings and warehouses. They were in the East District, and moved quickly along rows of small shops and storehouses.

In and around them were townsfolk in work clothes and smocks, moving carts full of crates and boxes in and out of the many commercial buildings which lined the streets. Mado could hear the whine of machinery and the pounding of hammers as they passed some of the small factories. Guri had a thriving industrial community.

Ahead, set apart from the other buildings, was a gigantic facility of rusting steel, a towering edifice of girders, box beams and corrugated sheet metal. Within the massive structural frame were complex clusters of piping, ducts and catwalks, while along the top – almost five stories up – were large shop enclosures with oddly-placed windows set in their metal walls.

A tall chain link fence interspersed with sections of brick wall surrounded the place.

Although this was a work day and most of the district was alive with activity, the huge factory seemed deserted. Kumo pulled the bike up to a large rusty iron gate set between two brick pillars. It was closed, and no one could be seen anywhere nearby. The boys dismounted and Kumo rested the bike on its kickstand.

Kumo put his hands on his hips as he surveyed the area. "Looks like we're a bit early. They're probably still at the garage. They should be along pretty soon, though. They usually eat lunch here."

Mado looked around, confused. “Who?”

Kumo crossed his arms, smiled broadly and sat against the bike. “The haibane of the Factory, of course. Kabe told you about them, didn't he?”

Mado nodded shallowly. “Well, sort of, but...”

Kumo shook his head and chuckled. “Oh right. Kabe wasn't a big fan of the Factory. I guess he probably didn't tell you much.” He looked around. “I suppose I can try to fill you in a little while we wait.”

He stood up and swept his arm expansively toward the huge building. “This is the Abandoned Factory, also called the 'Waste Factory' or just 'the Factory'. Seven haibane live here: four boys and three girls.”

Kumo pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “They all have jobs in town, but once a week, usually on Fridays, they work here running the furnaces.” He pointed at the complex ductwork. “One of the things they do is melt down scrap metals.”

Kumo paused as Mado looked at the structure. Were all those ducts and pipes for the furnaces? It was such a monstrous place, Mado tried to imagine only seven haibane running it. As with Old Home, Mado could see why such a small group would need help maintaining such a large facility.

Once again, Mado felt relieved to have been born at Stone Mill.

Kumo continued. “The haibane of the Factory are, shall we say, a little different in their attitudes from the other nests. I like Stone Mill, but I often hang out here because I like the feel of the place, even though we're not supposed to socialize.” He grinned impishly. “But I fix things while I'm here, so technically I'm doing what I'm supposed to.”

Kumo shrugged. “If I happen to have some fun while I'm doing it, I don't see the harm.”

Kumo smirked at the Mado's anxiety. “The Renmei likes to tell us what to do, but some rules are more important than others. I won't touch the wall, but if I want to hang out at the Factory, nobody can stop me.” He put his hands in his pockets. “So far, it hasn't been a problem.”

Mado nodded slowly, cautiously.

Kumo winked. “Don't worry Mado, I won't get you into trouble if that's what you're thinking. The boys at the Factory like to have fun, but they're actually pretty careful to play by the rules – most of the time, anyway.”

He grinned wickedly. “On the bright side, it's usually not boring around here.” He looked over at the gate. “At least, not when somebody's home.”

They both looked over as a haibane boy approached riding a skateboard. He seemed to be about Senkou's age, and was wearing gray coveralls much like those worn at Stone Mill, but without the patch. His black hair, though cut short, was unruly under his halo.

The boy kicked up his skateboard and came to a stop a few feet away.

His steel blue eyes gave Mado a piercing stare. “You must be the new guy at Stone Mill.” He nodded as his voice became relaxed and friendly. “Welcome.”

He glanced over at Kumo with a wry smile. “Showing the new feather how the other half lives?”

Kumo spoke with a forced grin. “I'm just teaching him what parts of town he should stay out of.” He turned to Mado and smirked. “Mado, this is Hyouko, the foreman of the Waste Factory.”

Hyouko shot Kumo a cold look. “We prefer to just call it 'the Factory', and we don't make fun of that old barn you guys live in, so I don't see why you insist on calling us a bunch of waste.” He smiled thinly. “You're the ones who make so much trash.”

Hyouko turned to Mado. “Ame says you're Kabe's new apprentice. How's that working out?” His eyes narrowed as he noticed Mado's wing brace. “What happened to your wing? Did you break it?”

Mado's expression became pained, and Kumo interrupted. “Hyouko, Kabe's gone. He left the nest yesterday morning. That's why we have a few days off.”

Hyouko's shock was followed by a scowl. “Damn, I'm sorry.” He shook his head sympathetically. “Wow, right after you became his apprentice. That must really hurt.”

His gaze fell to the ground as he put his hands in his pockets. “Kabe and I didn't get along very well, but he was a good guy. I'm sorry to hear that he's gone.”

The boys stood in silence for a few moments before Hyouko spoke up. “Come on, let's get this gate open.”

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 5.5: Instatement**

Kumo wheeled the motorcycle through the gate as Hyouko led them into the giant facility's courtyard, gesturing and explaining to Mado how the Factory's furnaces worked.

Hyouko pointed at a knot of blackened ductwork. “You can see where the exhaust gases are eating a hole through Number Two. That's why we're going to have to take it down for an overhaul soon. It's interfering with the scrubber.”

He turned to Kumo. “Do you think you can help with it?”

Kumo nodded. “I'll let Master Tsuchi know you're planning to overhaul Furnace Two. The ductwork doesn't look like it will be a problem, but we should go over the whole system anyway. It's been a while.”

Hyouko nodded and led them to a large office-style entrance shaded by a broad overhang of brushed sheet metal which faced the Factory's expansive courtyard. “This is the cafeteria. The girls are making sandwiches today. Let's get things set up for them.”

He pushed open a glass door and led them into the Factory's cafeteria.

It was a large room filled with beige Formica-topped tables flanked by loosely scattered folding metal chairs of a similar color. Underfoot was a floor of drab green tiles that must not have been waxed in years.

Though there were only seven haibane living in the Factory, there were at least ten tables, each with an average of eight folding chairs set near them.

The dingy off-white walls were festooned with various impromptu awards and gag trophies, some rather crude, all of them apparently the handiwork of the resident haibane. Overhead set in the acoustic tile ceiling were an array of fluorescent light fixtures. Most were buzzing, some were dark.

At the far end of the room was a cafeteria serving line complete with a stack of battered metal serving trays and metal cannisters stuffed full of bent metal tableware. One of the glass panes on the counter front had been spider-cracked by some sort of impact.

On the wall behind the serving line was a large white banner upon which the words "Kiss the Cook" had been spray-painted in black letters.

A wooden plaque on the wall next to Mado caught his attention. A real fish, once quite large but now dry and dessicated, had been spraypainted gold and mounted. Hand-lettered in black on a small brass plate under the fish were the words: "Most likely to drown while fishing: Gake."

As Mado looked around at the strange decorations, he heard the sound of motorcycles coming to a stop outside. Moments later, the boys and girls of the Factory swarmed into the cafeteria in a cloud of laughter and taunts. Each of the girls set a bag of groceries on one of the tables as they all stopped talking and stared at Mado.

Mado saw Ame smile and wave at him quietly with her fingers. Her wings had been freshly painted in brighter shades of red and blue. She was wearing a peach-colored long-sleeve shirt and a short pleated skirt of reddish plaid, a different outfit from the one she was wearing when Mado first met her.

Next to her was a girl with black hair tied into two slender ponytails that hung from high on her head gathered with elastics featuring two red beads each, like plastic cherries. She seemed a little older than Mado, and was wearing a loose, long-sleeved lavender shirt, a short dark brown pleated skirt and tall black platform boots that were almost knee-high.

Her hair, a lock of which was kept from her face by a small brass barrette, shined brightly under her halo as her dark eyes regarded Mado with a smirk.

She glanced over at Ame with a coy smile. "You're right, Ame. He *is* cute."

Ame blushed and slapped the girl's arm. "Shut up, Midori!"

Midori stepped back, her smile widening. "Wanna fight for him?" She executed a graceful front kick, the toe of her boot stopping inches from Ame's chin.

Ame's cheeks reddened more deeply as she grabbed the heel of Midori's boot with both hands. She growled menacingly. "Shut up, idiot!"

The boys stepped back and started laughing and jeering as the tussle began to escalate.

Ame's eyes flashed with anger. She scowled darkly and lifted the boot higher to tip Midori onto the floor, but Midori lifted her other foot and, swinging from Ame's grip on her heel, rolled backward in a loose somersault and pushed off from the floor, lightly springing to her feet.

It was an impressive demonstration of gymnastic skill, although none of the Factory haibane seemed surprised by it.

Midori's smile became a grin as she started dancing lightly on her toes, her hands held up in a sparring posture. "Oh, you think you can take *me*, sister?" She flipped her flattened hands in beckoning. "Come on. Let's see what you got."

Ame assumed a fighting stance, her face flush with anger. Behind her Mado could see the third girl, who was wearing a black beret, roll her eyes and shake her head in mild exasperation.

Hyouko strode over and stepped between the scuffling girls. His voice sounded almost tired. "Knock it off."

He gestured toward Mado. "This is Mado, the new guy at Stone Mill. He was apprenticed to Kabe, but I just found out that Kabe left the nest yesterday. Take it easy on him, okay?"

He turned and patted Mado's shoulder quietly as he walked by and disappeared into the kitchen behind the metal serving counter.

Silence fell over the room, and Mado saw shock appear on the faces of the haibane of the Factory as they took in the news. One by one, the boys filed up to him while the girls picked up the bags of groceries from the table. There was nothing about their behavior to suggest that Midori and Ame had been fighting just moments earlier.

An older boy who resembled a shorter version of Senkou approached Mado first. Like the other boys, he was dressed in gray coveralls. Unlike Senkou, his loose head of hair was brown instead of red.

Though there was a slight smirk on his face, there was compassion in his brown eyes as he punched Mado lightly on the arm. "I'm Douro. Sorry bud." He glanced at Mado's wing brace but said nothing, and sat down at one of the tables next to the serving counter.

Next was a boy a little younger than Mado with short reddish brown hair, green eyes and freckles on his cheeks. He was the shortest haibane of the nest, but seemed to make up for it with enthusiasm.

Like Douro, he gave Mado a soft punch on the arm. "Baku. Bummer." He sat down next to Douro at the table.

The last boy was about Mado's age and height, with light brown hair like Mado's, but with brown eyes. He gave Mado a broad and cheerful smile as he punched him on the arm. "Kabe was a good man. He helped me

reline Number One, and that was a filthy job. I'm sorry he's gone.”

He moved to walk past Mado, then stopped. “Oh sorry, my name is Gake, but everyone around here calls me 'Cliff' ('Kurifu'). Same thing, I guess. I dreamed I was standing on the edge of a cliff.” He patted Mado's shoulder and sat down next to Baku.

The girls stood in front of Mado, each holding a grocery bag.

Midori spoke first, holding her head slightly to one side as her eyes studied his face. “I'm Midori. I was just giving Ame a hard time. We're friends. I didn't mean anything by it.” She patted his shoulder as she walked by and into the kitchen. “I'm sorry about Kabe.”

“Hi, I'm Hachi. I dreamed a bee was buzzing around my head.” She was wearing a black beret over her shoulder-length brown hair. Mado arched an eyebrow at her wardrobe, an ensemble consisting of a yellow short-sleeved shirt with a short black skirt and matching yellow shoes with yellow-stripped black socks.

She noticed Mado examining her bright wardrobe and smiled crookedly. “Yeah, I know it's silly, but it's fun.” She winked humorously. “I get to wear bold spring colors.” Her smile quickly faded. “I'm sorry about Kabe.”

Hachi leaned close and whispered. “Don't pay any attention to Midori, she's just jealous.” She punched him lightly on the arm as she walked past and joined Midori in the kitchen, leaving Mado feeling more than a little confused.

Ame stood in front of him, clutching the bag of groceries in her arms. There was genuine pain in her eyes as she spoke softly, almost a whisper, seeming to want to avoid being overheard.

She glanced down at the grocery bag before meeting Mado's gaze. “Mado, that's terrible. I'm so sorry. I'm going to miss Kabe, too.”

She seemed about to say more, but stopped short and looked at his wing brace with widening eyes. “What happened to your wing?” The others had seemed to notice the brace but hadn't said anything.

Mado answered quietly. “I sprained it. It'll be okay.”

Ame smiled thinly, and her fingers brushed his arm as she moved by him to join the other girls in the kitchen.

Mado turned as Ame passed him, following her with his eyes. He could smell the fresh paint on her wings, and noticed that the elastics she used to gather her ponytails had small plastic daisies placed so they could only be seen from behind.

As Mado turned, he almost bumped into Kumo, who had been standing silently behind him the whole time.

Kumo gestured toward the back of the room with a grin. “Let's have a seat.”

He motioned Mado over to the table where they sat opposite the boys, who were already starting to wrestle

and taunt one another. Baku had been smiling and whispering something in Douro's ear but stopped abruptly when Mado and Kumo sat down.

They sat for a while in silence, the only sounds being the muffled chatter and noises coming from the kitchen where Hyouko and the girls were working.

Finally, Douro spoke with what seemed to be a permanent smirk on his face.

“So, Mado, who broke your wing?”

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 6: Specifications**

#### **Scene 6.1: Engagements**

The question caught Mado off guard. *Who broke my wing?*

The wording seemed to imply that it wasn't an accident. Mado stared at the boys across the table, sensed an element of mirth in the question. Did they assume someone had attacked him?

Mado glanced over at the wing brace. “I fell and sprained it. Luckily, I didn't break it.” The other boys stared at Mado's brace as he explained. “I can get the brace off in a couple of weeks.”

Douro's smirk remain unchanged.

Kumo spoke up. “Douro, Hyouko tells me you guys are about to overhaul Number Two.”

Douro nodded. “Yup. The exhaust flue's leaking bad enough that we can't really run it anymore without stinking up the place.” His expression turned to disgust. “Heck, what we put *into* Number Two smells bad enough, let alone what's been leaking past the scrubber.”

He glanced at Mado and smiled wryly. “Is Mado going to be able to help us? We start next week.”

Mado looked at Kumo, who returned Douro's smile as he spoke with exaggerated smoothness. “It depends. What's in it for me?”

Douro's smile widened. “How about not getting your butt kicked for starters?”

Baku and Gake broke into a chorus of drawn-out “oohs”.

Kumo feigned mock terror. “Please don't scare me like that. You *know* I have a weak bladder.”

The table erupted in laughter, and Kumo paused before continuing. “I'll tell Master Tsuchi what's going on and he'll schedule the work. Mado may be needed to help get Generator Eight back online because Senkou's apprentice...”

Kumo frowned slightly and looked down at his hands on the table. “We're a little shorthanded and have some work piled up.”

He cleared his throat as his expression hardened. “It's pretty bad at Stone Mill right now. We're offline until Monday at least. Umi ran back to Old Home and isn't talking to anyone.”

The mood across the table sank as Kumo and Mado explained what had happened. Mado told them about Kabe's last deeds, the finding of the halo and the trouble with Umi.

When they finished, Douro shook his head as he spoke. “Damn, that sounds like a really bad scene. Is there anything we can do to help? We can get time off from the garage if you can use a hand with some things.”

The other boys nodded in agreement with Douro's offer.

Baku raised his hand. “I'm an Apprentice Mechanic, if you can use one. I'm qualified to operate lathes and mills, along with the usual stuff.”

Gake chimed in. “I can help with what Kabe...” He looked down. “...was working on.” A silence fell over the table.

Kumo nodded with a thin smile. “Thanks for the offer. I'll tell Master Tsuchi. We may not need help with our current workload, but we might not be able to help you with the overhaul of Furnace Two until after next week.”

Douro and the boys nodded. “Just let us know.”

Hyouko walked out of the kitchen carrying a tray with a large pitcher of iced tea and several glasses, set them on the table and sat down next to Douro. “Lunch is almost ready.” He looked at the faces of the other boys, then at Kumo. “What did I miss?”

Douro leaned over to him and whispered a quiet summary as Hyouko nodded slowly.

Hyouko stared at Kumo for a moment before nodding sharply. “Okay. Just let us know if we can help. We can push back the overhaul on Number Two if we have to. It's not that big a deal.”

Kumo returned Hyouko's nod and looked over at the kitchen as the girls filed out, each carrying a long sandwich on a wooden board. Hachi sat down next to Kumo and placed her sandwich on the table. Ame sat next to Mado and did the same.

Midori sat down by Hyouko and set her sandwich on the table with a sweeping, imperious gesture. Like the others, it was built from a long loaf of bread sliced horizontally and set on a board of arm's length. Piled between the bread slices was a thick stack of sliced meats, cheeses, lettuce and vegetables covered with mustard and mayonnaise. The sandwiches were cut into hand's-width-sized portions.

Midori's sandwich was the tallest, with a generous layer of assorted hot peppers piled on top of the other ingredients. In addition to that, several peppers had been pushed into the bread atop each slice.

Midori pointed at the peppery sandwich. “Fair warning. Usually only Baku, Douro and I can handle these peppers. They're hot. Try some if you like.”

Her eyes gleamed as she smiled sardonically. “They're fun.”

Midori glanced over at Mado. “Since this is your first time here, you should know that we don't talk and there's no fighting during meals. Unless someone talks, in which case they're fair game for everyone else.”

Her eyes flashed at Douro meaningfully before she continued. “When you're done eating, just sit back and relax until everyone's done. It's one of our little rules around here.”

Douro snickered but said nothing.

Midori waved her hand toward the sandwiches and spoke as if quoting someone. “Shut up and eat.”

The boys smiled and grabbed sections of the sandwiches, eating them noisily but without speaking. Kumo met Midori's gaze as he slowly reached for a sandwich with peppers.

She smiled and took a bite of her own slice of peppery sandwich, chewing quietly, watching Kumo's dramatic play.

Kumo slowly moved the sandwich to his mouth and ostentatiously chewed off a large piece. He then pulled one of the peppers off the top of the bun – a large red strawberry-shaped one – and popped it into his mouth. He began chewing slowly, deliberately as his cheeks began to redden.

Midori grinned wickedly and pulled three peppers from her sandwich and popped them into her mouth: one each of red, green and yellow. Her eyes began to water as she chewed them, but her gaze remained locked with Kumo's.

Midori's grin broadened as Kumo finished his first bite. Tears began to run down his cheeks.

Undaunted, Kumo opened his sandwich and scraped all the remaining peppers into his mouth. He began chewing, and his entire face turned a bright shade of scarlet. Beads of sweat formed at his temples.

The other haibane quietly ate their sandwiches and watched with quiet amusement as Midori and Kumo raised the stakes of their silent battle,

Mado was working on a pepper-free slice. It was delicious, and he realized that although sandwiches seemed somehow familiar, this was the first one he had eaten since the day he was... hatched. *I know what a sandwich is, but I was hatched from a cocoon. It's so bizarre.*

Midori followed Kumo's example and scraped all the peppers from the sandwich into her mouth. She chewed them quickly, then pulled all the peppers out of the top of the bun and swallowed them whole as her face turned beet red.

Kumo stood up as he tried to finish chewing his mouthful of peppers and started pounding on the table with

his fist. Finally, he managed to swallow painfully as sweat and tears poured down his face.

The whole time, except when his eyes were squeezed shut from the effort of swallowing, his gaze remained fixed on Midori.

She reached across the table, took the top bun from Kumo's sandwich and popped all the peppers from it into her mouth. Tears streaked down her face, but her eyes gleamed as she chewed the last of the peppers with a broad smile.

Kumo smiled as affably as he could through his discomfort and nodded to Midori. She returned the nod respectfully.

Both contestants were red-cheeked with tears running down their faces, but both sat quietly smiling as they acknowledged the end of the challenge.

Just as the contest ended, Douro glanced at both Kumo and Midori with a smirk, then reached over and grabbed his third piece of pepper-laden sandwich.

Mado looked around the table. All the boys and girls were quietly eating, their halos bobbing as they leaned forward to take bites, the only sounds in the room those of chewing and swallowing. Behind each set of shoulders were gray, feathered wings.

For a moment, the strangeness of the scene surprised Mado. There was something that seemed so surreal about people with wings and halos.

Mado caught Ame staring at him. She had finished about half of her sandwich and had stopped eating. She smiled brightly and nodded, acknowledging Mado's attention. With her eyes, she led Mado's gaze across the table.

Baku had a slice of pepper sandwich in each hand, taking bites alternately from each one. Neither he nor Douro, who was now eating his fourth piece, seemed affected by the peppers in the slightest.

Finally, after several minutes, everyone was sitting back from the table and sipping iced tea.

Midori looked around the table and cleared her throat. "Everyone full?" Nods and affirmations signaled the end of lunch.

Midori gestured toward the kitchen with her thumb. "Take it away, boys. Hyouko can stay here because he helped with lunch."

Baku, Gake and Douro stood up and each took a sandwich board into the kitchen. They came back, sent Gake into the kitchen with the tray of iced tea and glasses and began clearing and wiping off the table.

When it was clean, they joined Gake in the kitchen and could be heard cleaning and putting things away.

Hyouko gazed at Kumo and Mado, then at each of the girls. "Kumo, if you don't mind, could you tell the girls what happened?"

## **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 6.2: Admonitions**

Kumo and Mado recounted the tale again, adding details when one of the girls would ask.

As Mado told of his last meeting with Kabe, he felt Ame's hand softly clutch his forearm. He glanced over and saw that her eyes were moist. She was almost crying.

Mado's cheeks flushed as he directed his gaze across the table, trying not to stare at Ame.

Hyouko sat quietly, looking down at his hands while he listened. Next to him Midori had crossed her arms and was frowning as she stared at the table. Hachi had quietly placed her hand over Kumo's as he spoke.

As Mado told of his last meeting with Umi, he heard Ame gasp softly next to him, her grip on his arm tightened. Midori put a hand to her forehead, subtly shielding her eyes as Mado told of Umi and his painting, and the red paint.

When Mado told of Kana and his fall, Ame seemed to catch herself and released his arm. Mado heard her sniffle as he finished his story.

There was silence as each of the haibane sat quietly, considering what they had just heard.

Mado turned to look at Ame. She was staring at him, her face tracked with tears. Pain and sympathy were written in her expression.

Ame's voice was soft. "Mado, I'm so sorry. This has been so terrible for you." She put a hand gently on his shoulder. "Are you going to be all right?"

Mado stared silently into her deep brown eyes. He could see his own reflection in them, twin mirrors of his own soul. He watched as a fresh tear welled and began rolling slowly down her soft cheek.

He felt an impulse to brush her tears away.

From the kitchen came a loud smacking sound, like a board hitting something soft.

Baku's voice shouted angrily. "Ouch! Douro, just put it away, you moron!"

There were muffled laughs, after which the boys filed out of the kitchen.

Douro looked around with his hands on his hips, smiling. "All done!" He walked up to the table. "What happened here?"

Mado felt Ame quietly shift away from his side. She quickly wiped the tears from her face. Midori looked over at Douro, still frowning. Hachi cleared her throat. Hyouko continued to stare downward at his hands, lost in thought.

Douro looked around the table, then at Mado. “Oh right. You told them, didn't you? Not the best news we've heard this week, that's for sure.”

He stepped over by Hyouko and tapped him lightly on the shoulder. “We need to get the girls back to work. We should finish up that tractor this afternoon if we want to be able to help out Stone Mill.”

Hyouko nodded and stood up, seemed to shake himself back to the present situation. “Yeah.” He looked over at Kumo and Mado. “Sorry guys, but we need to get back to work. Let us know what Master Tsuchi says, okay?”

Everyone filed outside through the glass door.

As they entered the courtyard, a loud grating squawk sounded overhead. On a girder high above sat a single crow, staring impassively, its dark eyes unblinking.

Mado stared back at the crow. There was something about this one that seemed different.

Hyouko noticed Mado's fixation. “The crows are a real problem around here, but they usually don't show up until Thursdays when people start bringing in the dumpsters for Number Two.”

He looked up at the crow with a smirk. “They'll be unhappy for the next few weeks though, because we won't be handling garbage until after we're done with the overhaul, and crows can't eat scrap metal.”

He smiled ironically. “They can go bother the guys at the fertilizer plant for a while.”

Mado continued to stare quietly at the crow. *Why does it seem so familiar?*

Douro reached down, picked up a small rock and hurled it deftly at the bird. The crow took off with a loud squawk in a frenzy of flapping black wings, then sailed over the western section of the Factory and out of sight. Mado's gaze followed it as it disappeared.

Kumo put a hand on Mado's shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Mado shook off his trance. “Yes, sorry. There was something about that bird.”

Kumo nodded sympathetically. “Come on, let's head home.”

As they rode away, Baku called out. “Take care of my bike, Kumo.”

Kumo smiled and waved over his shoulder as they rolled through the gate.

Mado was puzzled. “What did he mean by that?”

Kumo smiled over his shoulder. “This used to be his bike. I'll have to tell you about that sometime.”

Mado nodded curiously. He suddenly remembered something. “Kumo, why did you eat all those peppers?”

Kumo grinned wickedly over his shoulder. “Because *that's* what life is for.”

He laughed and sped up the bike as they crossed the river and followed the tree-lined road back toward Stone Mill.

Inside the scooter garage, as they sat polishing Kumo's motorcycle, Mado stopped wiping and frowned at the rag in his hand. “Why aren't we supposed to socialize with the haibane in the other nests? They seem nice enough to me.”

Kumo looked over and smiled thinly. “It's not because the other haibane are bad, if that's what you're worried about.”

He reached over, toying with one of the straps on a saddlebag. “It's because there have been problems in the past. Some pretty serious problems, actually.”

Kumo sighed and looked up at the rafters of the garage, his yellow hair falling back past his ears. “Trouble between Old Home and the Factory, trouble between the Factory and Stone Mill, trouble between Stone Mill and Old Home.”

He glanced over at Mado with a smirk. “A whole lot of trouble all around.” He stared at the strap between his fingers. “It's not the fault of any one nest, there's just trouble when we get too close to each other.”

Kumo set the strap in its buckle, then met Mado's gaze. “You should ask Master Tsuchi about it once things get back to normal.” He buckled the strap and smiled mysteriously. “He knows all about it.”

The boys finished cleaning and fueling the motorcycle, tucked it back under its tarp and closed the door of the garage.

The soft warmth of early afternoon lit the buildings and the green lawns of Stone Mill. Overhead the water tower windmill turned slowly with soft creaks. The scent of wildflowers was in the air, and Mado could hear the playful chirping of birds.

As they walked toward the main building, Mado paused. On the cobblestones at his feet was the small pool of dried blood left where he had fallen just the day before.

Kumo stopped next to Mado with a look of concern. “Are you going to be okay? You know, that concussion can still give you problems. You should be careful.”

Mado nodded slowly, staring at the blood. “Yeah, I'm not dizzy or anything.” He glanced at Kumo. “But there's been so much to think about.”

His eyes wandered toward the Hill of Winds, where the distant windmills were turning slowly. “I think I just need some time to take everything in.”

Mado smiled at Kumo. “Don't worry, I'll be fine. I've figured out that if I start feeling dizzy, I'll just sit down for a while.”

Kumo grinned. "Okay. But try not to go too far away. I was pretty surprised to see you at the ruins this morning. You should stay closer to Stone Mill."

Mado nodded. "I'll be careful."

He waved as Kumo entered the main building, then started walking slowly down the path. The sun felt good on his skin, and it was nice to think of spending a quiet afternoon outdoors on a day like this.

As he crossed over the small bridge, he looked down into the rushing waters of the stream and thought of Kana. He wondered how she was doing, and thought about the tile job at Old Home. Maybe with help from Kumo and Gake, he could finish the job after all.

Mado walked slowly up the hill, looking from one windmill to another as the tall grass swished around his boots. Small butterflies flitted between tiny meadow blossoms. He took a deep breath of the sweet air, its scent a mingling of wildflowers and green grass.

Mado sat down, leaned back against one of the thick pylons, closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of the sun on his face. He caught himself and, though he was sitting, decided he should avoid a repeat of the previous day's mishap and opened his eyes.

Peeking around from behind the pillar of an adjacent windmill was the face of a young girl. Her straight golden hair was cut in bangs, and her blue eyes were fixed on Mado. Above her head was the pale glow of a halo.

Her mouth opened in a silent gasp as she realized she had been spotted, and she quickly disappeared behind the pillar.

At that moment, Mado's eyes shot up at the sound of a squawk from the top of the same windmill. A crow was perched on the generator's positioning vane, staring at him. As Mado stared back, the crow cocked its head and cried out again, then flapped its wings, landing on another windmill farther away.

*Is this the same crow I saw at the Factory?* It seemed familiar. It seemed to be trying to tell him something, to get him to follow.

Mado saw the girl again, peeking from behind the more distant windmill. Startled, glanced at where he had seen her earlier.

There was no way she could have moved from the first windmill to the second without being seen. Mado blinked in confusion. *What's going on?*

As Mado stood up, the girl disappeared again. He strode toward the windmill and called out. "Wait!" But she was gone, leaving no clues to where she had vanished.

Above, the crow squawked again, then flew swiftly away toward the Western Woods.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 6.3: Sanctifications**

Mado's eyes followed the crow as it sailed away, and he found himself looking once again at Old Home, its distant tiled roofs bright in the afternoon sun.

Near its walls he thought he saw a girl walking, dressed in white. Was it Rakka? She disappeared into a small stand of trees.

Mado scanned the grassy slopes of the green hill. There was no sign of the young girl he had seen earlier. *Was I dreaming again?* He shook his head, confused.

He resisted the urge to follow the crow and began walking back toward Stone Mill. Something felt strange about all this, and Mado realized that he still didn't know very much about Guri. *What kind of place is this, anyway?*

He stopped by the last windmill and looked down at Stone Mill. The rushing water washed over the paddle wheel, turning it slowly. Mado glanced at the patch on his chest and back at the wheel. *We are the spokes.*

Movement caught his attention and he looked over to see a small knot of dark shapes move slowly up the road from his right.

Three figures in black robes led them, followed by a small black cart surrounded by six townsmen in black suits. Behind the cart perhaps a dozen townsfolk followed, all dressed in black.

Mado stared at them. *A funeral procession?*

He watched as they moved slowly past Stone Mill, apparently headed toward the Temple.

Mado's feet moved of their own accord, and he walked down the hill, taking up a position far behind the marchers, wanting to follow, but not wishing to intrude. He walked slowly as they followed the path toward the pond.

Before reaching it, however, they turned left at a fork and proceeded up an overgrown path toward a forest.

Behind them, a bent robed figure and a man in a black suit stopped at the intersection and faced Mado. They appeared to be waiting for him.

Mado hesitated. He had not wished to interfere, but the couple stood unmoving, waiting. He approached them slowly, hesitantly.

They bowed as he approached, and Mado returned the bow, embarrassed.

The robed figure was an elderly woman wearing a veil. He could see many lines of age on her face, and her voice cracked as she spoke. "Thank you for bringing a blessing for my husband."

She coughed heavily with a dry wheeze, and the man put his hands on her shoulders to steady her. "Mother, we should catch up." The man was also old, but seemed in good health.

He glanced at Mado with a thin smile. “Thank you for the blessing. We are grateful. When you see him, please let my father know we miss him.”

They turned and the man helped the old woman as she worked her way slowly up the path toward the thick woods.

Mado stared after them, confused. The black figures disappeared between the trees of the forest. *I brought a blessing?*

He looked down at himself. He was wearing his gray coveralls. He wondered what the townsfolk had meant. *When I see him?*

Mado shook his head in confusion. He looked at the forest into which the procession had passed. Above it, the sun was moving slowly across the sky. *Toward the west. Everything points to the west.*

He stared at the woods, into the darkness protected beneath the bright green tree tops.

Suddenly, Mado steadied himself. *Was I about to pass out again?*

He looked around nervously. He didn't feel dizzy. He looked over at the pond and remembered something.

*I need to talk.*

He followed the path across the rope bridge and stood before the gate of the Temple, staring up at the stone walls towering above. With a soft rustling, an attendant approached and placed the bell holders on his wings and wrists.

Mado shook the bells on his wrists. The attendant bowed slightly and left. Mado pushed open one of the massive wooden doors and entered the Temple.

As before, Mado was stunned by the beauty of the place, and paused a moment to admire the round stone tiers rising in majestic cascades to the circular opening framing the deep blue sky far overhead. He walked slowly into the garden.

The Communicator was in the gazebo, sitting at a small table writing on a sheet of light brown paper with a long brush.

Mado stood in front of him, watching as the brush methodically formed characters on the paper's surface. The Communicator gave no hint that he was aware of Mado's presence, and continued writing for what must have been several minutes.

Finally, Mado gently shook the bells on his wrists. The Communicator glanced up and set the brush in a holder on the table. The mask hid his eyes behind narrow slits, and Mado could not see lips behind the mouth hole.

Though the Communicator's face was hidden, Mado felt as if he could almost see an expression on the mask itself.

“You may speak.”

The words caught Mado off guard. *What do I want to say?*

He stared at the Communicator, suddenly at a loss to explain why he was here. His cheeks began to blush as he stared nervously at the mask.

The Communicator sat quietly, returning Mado's stare for several moments before he spoke in his deep, resonant voice. “Your ordeal is a difficult one, but you need not be afraid.”

Mado stared at the mask. Tears began to form as he stammered. “I... I...”

Suddenly Mado fell to his knees, sobbing uncontrollably as tears washed down his face. “I... I can't...” His throat tightened and he cried passionately, unable to stop the tears.

He felt a hand on his head and realized that the Communicator was softly stroking his hair. Though it seemed strange, the touch was soothing.

Mado looked up at the mask, wondering what the person behind it was like. He seemed to care about Mado somehow, even though his personality was concealed behind the mask and authority of his office. *Who is the Communicator, really?*

Mado wiped the tears from his face as the Communicator withdrew his hand.

He stood up and quickly composed himself, embarrassed. “I'm sorry.”

The Communicator spoke gently. “There is no need to apologize.”

Mado stared at his feet, trying to remember why he had come here. “I don't know why I'm here.”

He had meant to refer to why he was at the Temple, but realized that the statement had a much broader meaning.

The Communicator stared impassively at Mado for a few moments. “None of us knows why we are here.”

Mado sniffed and wiped his cheeks again, then looked up at the mask, standing a little straighter. “I don't know what to do. I'm worried about Umi.”

The Communicator nodded once, slowly. “Umi is in danger of falling into darkness. He needs your help.”

Mado's eyes widened. “But what can I do? He hates me, and he won't talk to me. Or anyone.”

The mask stared, unmoving. “Umi hates no one. His anger is an expression of his pain. The danger he faces is that of shutting himself within a circle of sin. You must go to him and show him forgiveness.”

Mado sniffed and tried to nod assertively. “Okay. I'll try.”

The Communicator nodded again, slowly. “You should go now. The longer you wait, the greater the chance that Umi will become bound by sin.”

Mado shook his wrist bells, bowed respectfully and walked quickly out of the garden. As the attendant removed the bells from his wings, Mado pondered what the Communicator had said. *Bound by sin.*

Mado followed the path down the hill and took a shortcut over the Hill of Winds. He looked for them, but saw no sign of either the girl or the crow. The windmills turned slowly with gentle whooshes in the light afternoon breeze.

As he walked down the hill through the green grass, he wondered what he would say to Umi when they met, or if Umi would even talk to him. He was lost in thought when he looked up suddenly, surprised.

Before him stood the tall stone walls of Old Home.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 6.4: Visitation**

Mado walked slowly through the arched entrance and into the quiet courtyard.

He looked around, saw no evidence that anyone was home and realized that he had no idea where he should go. On the building to the left, the west wing, was a large stone balcony supported by arched masonry which sheltered an entrance marked by three large latticed glass doors.

Mado wandered toward it as he scanned the windows facing the courtyard for signs of occupancy.

As he approached, a young woman appeared at the edge of the balcony. She stood with her hands resting lightly on the stone rail, staring across the courtyard at the east wing.

Mado stopped and gazed up at her. She did not seem to notice his presence. Though there was an edge of concern in her eyes, her expression was calm.

Mado waved tentatively. “Hello?”

The woman glanced down at him, startled. “Oh, hello! I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. I'll be right down.”

She disappeared behind the balcony wall and emerged a few minutes later from one of the glass doors of the lobby.

The young woman strode up and bowed slightly. “I'm Nemu. You must be Mado. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

Mado bowed and felt himself blushing. Everyone seemed to know who he was – except him. He wondered if Nemu knew him as the boy who had never seen a girl before and sighed softly.

She was taller than Mado, and seemed as if she might be in her early twenties. Her shoulder-length brown hair was drawn back behind her ears, framing her placid face.

She was wearing a thin white v-necked sweater over a knee-length brown skirt that matched her hair. Hanging from a thin string around her neck was a pendant in the shape of a small cluster of grapes.

Her smile was pleasant and genuine, and set Mado at ease almost magically. Though he had just met her, he already liked Nemu.

Mado unconsciously returned her smile as he spoke. "I'm here to see Umi."

Nemu nodded with what seemed almost like relief. "Thank you."

She glanced toward the east wing. "Before I take you to him, do you have time for tea?"

Mado nodded, followed her past one of the glass doors and through the sparsely furnished lobby.

She led Mado upstairs, and he noticed that the hallways in this building seemed much cleaner than those of the north wing, but everywhere were the mismatched tiles Kana had complained of.

Nemu stopped next to a large shoe rack in an alcove and handed Mado a pair of guest slippers. They each changed into slippers and passed through a rounded wooden door into what Nemu referred to as the guest room.

The room was large, and though it was well-kept, the plaster on the walls was worn and chipped. Dark rattan chairs surrounded a rectangular marble-topped dining table upon which two small potted plants were placed.

Next to Mado was a bed whose rounded foot was guarded by a short bronze railing. Set upon the hardwood floor beneath the bed was a thick rug patterned with an eclectic arrangement of stripes and squares.

Flanked by white curtains, a large glass double door decorated with an esoteric pattern of squared wooden frames was opened onto the balcony outside. Next to the door, steam wafted from a metal pot heated by a tall, elaborate freestanding kerosene stove.

Nemu sat Mado at the dining table and disappeared through a doorway partially covered by the flaps of a green-trimmed hanging. He looked around the room.

There was a potted palm in one corner next to a large wooden hutch, and small potted plants were placed around the room. On the wall opposite the balcony were several framed paintings depicting Old Home, a windmill and various landscape scenes.

Nemu emerged from the kitchen with a serving tray and set it lightly on the table. Upon it were a peach-colored teapot covered with small red polka dots, a matching jar, a bowl of small colorful flowers and two cups with saucers.

She filled the teapot with steaming water from the stove and sat down at the table.

Nemu scooped a generous amount of rich, dark, coarsely cut tea from the jar into the teapot and looked over at Mado. "Do you mind if I add flowers? They are nice to add to the tea when they are in season." A soft

smile came to her lips. “The twins like to pick them.”

Mado nodded and she dropped a small scoop of blossoms into the teapot.

They sat quietly for a few moments, allowing the tea to steep. The fragrance of tea and wildflowers filled the room.

Nemu smiled warmly. “How is Master Tsuchi?”

Mado glanced down at the empty teacup in front of him. “He's okay, I guess.”

He paused for a moment, then shook his head and looked up at Nemu. “No, he's not. I think he's really hurt by all this. When Kabe left, he almost couldn't talk. Then when Umi left...”

Mado's eyes returned to the teacup.

Nemu nodded slowly and lowered her gaze. She spoke gently, her voice soothing. “I think I know how he feels. When Kuramori left, Reki did the same thing. I was heartbroken.”

She glanced at the door to the balcony. “When she ran away, I thought it was because she didn't care about me.” Her voice trailed off and there was silence for a while.

Nemu's eyes returned to Mado. “I didn't get a chance to speak with Master Tsuchi much yesterday. Please tell him that I would love to have tea with him when his schedule permits.”

Mado nodded but looked puzzled. “Kuramori?”

Nemu smiled, her eyes a subtle mixture of fondness and sorrow. “She left the nest a long time ago. At one point, she and I were the only haibane in Old Home, except for the young feathers. When Reki hatched...”

Her smile faded and her expression became distant, mildly pained. “Kuramori taught me about love and acceptance, and forgiveness. But when her Day of Flight came, none of us were prepared.”

Nemu bowed her head. “Reki thought Kuramori had abandoned her, and we had a big fight before she ran away. Things were much harder in those days for everyone, especially the young feathers.” She looked over at the bed and fell silent.

The quiet of the room was broken only by the gentle swishing of the curtains, rustled by a mild afternoon breeze which whispered past the open glass doors. Outside, on the balcony, the edge of sunlight crept above the thick stone railing, shrouding it in shade.

Mado tried to imagine what it had been like for Nemu. *Reki was the one who taught Umi how to paint.* He wondered what kind of person Reki was as his eyes studied the paintings on the walls.

Nemu seemed to remember herself and glanced at Mado. “Oh, I'm sorry.” She stood up and disappeared into the kitchen, returning moments later with a small tray of pastries.

She sat down and placed the tray next to the teapot. “Hikari calls this the 'spring baking season'. The farmers bring us things when they clear out their root cellars. We received a lot of apples this year, and Hikari has been putting them in everything.”

Nemu smiled affectionately. “She's very creative.”

The pastries were shaped like miniature pies, and their scent mingled with the smell of tea and flowers, adding tartness to the pleasant bouquet.

Nemu poured tea into each of the cups and lifted one.

She closed her eyes and drew the steam into her nose with a deep breath, enjoying the aroma with obvious relish. “The tea merchant calls this 'Black Honey'. It's my favorite.”

Nemu opened her eyes, gazing serenely at Mado over the cup. “It comes from outside the walls, but no one knows where.”

She looked into the dark liquid. “I wonder what it's like where it grows.” She closed her eyes again as she took a small sip.

Mado carefully sampled his tea, which was still very hot. It tasted sweet, like honey, although Nemu hadn't added anything but the wildflowers, which contributed a mildly bitter but pleasant tang to the flavor.

The brew was delicious, almost intoxicating, and Mado's eyes closed as he took another sip. Across the table, Nemu cradled the cup in her hands, lost in tranquil meditation.

They sat quietly for long moments, enjoying the tea and the relaxing silence of the room.

Nemu poured them each a fresh cup and smiled serenely. “Thank you for coming to see Umi.”

Her smile faded, but her expression remained peaceful. “He's been having trouble, and still hasn't said a word to anyone. I had the doctor look at him this morning. He says Umi is physically healthy, but wouldn't talk to him, either.”

Nemu sighed softly. “The doctor told me the only cure he could recommend is love.”

She stared at the cup in her hands. “We have a lot of that. We've missed him since he moved to Stone Mill.” She looked up, and Mado saw worry in her eyes. “He's been staying in my room and won't leave it. I brought him one of Reki's sketch pads and some pencils, but all he draws are dark circles.”

She took a sip of tea and paused, studying the cup pensively. “Last night I heard him talking, as if someone was in the room, but no one was there.”

Nemu's eyes returned to Mado, and in them he saw the pain she had been so carefully concealing. “I'm very worried about him.”

She took another sip and gazed at her cup, frowning.

Mado shifted in his chair and stared into his tea, watching as bits of tea leaves and tiny leaflets from the wildflowers circled slowly around the bottom of the cup.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 6.5: Reflections**

Nemu led Mado across the courtyard to the east wing. Her room was on the ground floor near the clock tower.

She listened for a moment, then knocked softly on the door. "Umi, Mado is here to visit you."

Nemu opened the door slowly.

The room was small but cozy. A patchwork of rugs had been set on the floor, completely covering any evidence of the tile underneath.

On the walls were several paintings of a style that matched the paintings in the guest room, mostly landscapes or still life studies. The afternoon sun filtered through drawn white curtains, giving the room a mild gray glow.

Next to a tall bookcase overflowing with books was a small wooden table complemented by an elaborate rattan chair. On the table were several books in small stacks next to a polished pewter tea service arranged on a matching tray.

Mado's eyes were drawn to a large portrait on the wall over the table. It depicted a young haibane woman in a white blouse and long red skirt seated with her hands in her lap. Her dark brown hair was tied in a long, thick ponytail draped down her chest. The eyes behind her glasses were warm, but her expression was distant, enigmatic.

Opposite the bookshelf was a large sink set in a wooden cabinet next to an ancient dresser topped by an ornately chased oval mirror. As everywhere else in Old Home, the plaster on the walls was worn and chipped. A door led to the adjacent bedroom.

Umi sat on a small red couch under the window, drawing on a sketch pad. He did not look up or acknowledge that anyone else was in the room.

Mado stepped over to the table, turned the chair toward Umi and sat down quietly.

Nemu bowed slightly. "I'll be in the guest room." She closed the door quietly and left.

Umi was not wearing the Stone Mill coveralls Kana had brought for him. Instead, he was dressed in a faded red short-sleeved tee shirt and light brown shorts.

As Mado watched, Umi continued drawing, his face a model of artistic concentration. Occasionally he would make corrections with a gum eraser, but at no time did he look away from the drawing.

Outside, the clock tower bell rang four times, slowly. In Nemu's room, the peals were loud and resonant. Umi seemed oblivious to them.

Mado leaned forward in his chair, his hands clasped loosely in front of him. "I wanted to make sure you're all right."

Umi continued drawing, his expression unchanged.

Mado sat up, wondering what he should say. "We miss you at Stone Mill."

Umi rotated the sketch pad and paused for a moment before continuing.

Mado sighed, then remembered what the Communicator had told him. "Umi, I'm not mad at you."

The pencil skipped, and Umi hesitated before making a correction with the eraser. He set the tip of the pencil against the paper, but stopped drawing. Several moments passed in silence.

Umi took a deep breath, his eyes fixed on the sketch pad. His look of concentration became a frown. Finally, he spoke, quietly. "I know."

He clutched the pencil in his hand and looked up. "I'm not mad at you either." He lowered his head. "I'm sorry. For what I did."

Umi's voice was flat and emotionless, but Mado sensed that the apology was genuine.

Mado sat nervously, not sure what to say next. Umi had finally spoken to him, but he seemed distant, detached. The emptiness in his voice was almost more troubling than his silence had been.

Umi resumed his sketching.

Mado leaned forward, tentatively. "What are you drawing?"

Umi answered without looking up. "Kabe's halo." He turned the pad again and continued drawing.

A few moments passed before Umi stopped and frowned at his work. "When I picked it up, I saw something in it, like a reflection. But halos don't reflect like that. I'm trying to figure out what it was."

He held up the pad, showing it to Mado. "See?"

Mado leaned forward, studying the drawing. It was a freehand sketch of a darkened halo, a thick, almost perfectly round circle. Umi had carefully shaded it with his pencil.

At the top, near the twelve o'clock position, he had left an area unshaded, its edges ragged and indistinct. It looked like a reflection of the sun, but Umi had subtly and lightly shaded the image in a way that was somehow disturbing.

Mado couldn't make out what it was, but it reminded him of a ghostly face.

Umi turned the pad around and stared at the image. "It only lasted for a second, but I know I saw it." He looked at Mado. "I think it's important."

Umi gazed at an empty corner near the door for a moment, then shook his head. "No."

Mado turned toward the corner. There was nothing there. He glanced back at Umi, who was still staring at the corner.

Umi regarded Mado thoughtfully, apparently sensing his alarm. "That's just Okera. She's an angel. I'm the only one who can see her."

He saw Mado's eyes widen. "Don't worry. She's nice." He looked back at the corner and smiled.

Mado glanced over at the corner. "What does she say to you?"

Umi turned and smiled at Mado, and for a moment his voice brightened. "She tells me all kinds of things. She can talk to birds. She says it wasn't your fault Kabe left, but I already knew that."

He gazed at the corner. "She says Kabe's okay, that he's happy. I knew that too. I can feel it."

He stared down at the sketch as his smile faded. "She says I shouldn't be sad."

Umi frowned, and for a moment, his face flashed with emotion. "But I can't help it." His frown darkened. "It's not fair."

He closed his eyes, and Mado could sense the struggle within Umi's heart.

They sat quietly for a long while as Umi held his eyes tightly shut. Mado felt uneasy, trying to decide what to say.

Finally, he spoke. "Umi, are you going to be all right?"

Umi took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He looked at Mado, and though his voice remained flat, pain was written on his face. "I don't know."

He scowled at the drawing. "I don't want people to worry about me. I just don't feel like talking to anyone right now."

Mado sat up in his chair. "I understand." He glanced over at the empty corner. "Do you want to come back to Stone Mill soon?"

Umi put the end of the pencil to his nose and studied the drawing. "Someday I want to go back, but not yet." He set the pencil down on the sketch pad. "I need to stay here for a while."

He stared at the corner of the room for a moment, then turned his head and looked into Mado's eyes, his gaze direct and piercing.

“This time, I want to make sure I get to say goodbye.”

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 7: Discrepancies**

#### **Scene 7.1: Suppositions**

Mado stepped out of the east wing and into the courtyard of Old Home. The afternoon sun was low in the western sky, and he squinted as he raised his hand to shade his face.

The look in Umi's eyes was still etched in Mado's mind. Though Umi's face was that of a child, his eyes held a fire of desperation that was disturbing to contemplate. It was as if he had reached his last marker of hope, beyond which no thought of uncertainty might be allowed to pass.

Mado put his hand to his brow and tried to shake off the memory. It was all still too much to comprehend. Umi was traumatized, that much was clear. And seeing things that were not there.

Mado remembered Kumo's words. *Is Umi insane?*

A hint of movement drew Mado's attention. Nemu was standing on the guest room balcony, waving tentatively toward him. Even at this distance, he could see the concern on her face.

Mado waved back unenthusiastically. *I can't tell her. Not this.*

He gestured toward the exit to his left, and Nemu nodded as he turned to leave. *I need to tell Master Tsuchi. And the Communicator.*

Mado's thoughts drifted in strange patterns as he walked slowly up the Hill of Winds. Though his mind was troubled, Mado still found his eyes checking the windmill pylons for signs of the girl he had seen earlier.

At the crest of the hill, he stopped as his gaze came to rest on a crow sitting on the tail vane of a windmill. It sat watching him silently, intently, its dark eyes emotionless and impassive.

Mado stared at it with narrowing eyes. *This is the same crow.*

The crow turned its head, paused for a moment, then quietly took flight, gliding toward the Western Woods. As Mado's eyes followed it, he saw a figure walking near the edge of the forest.

It was girl, perhaps his age, with golden hair tied in long twin pigtailed. She was wearing a light brown dress and dark brown shoes with tan knee-high socks.

Above her head floated a halo, and her wings were charcoal gray. Her gaze was downcast, and she seemed to be troubled as she moved slowly through the tall grass.

Mado raised his hand and waved, but when she saw him she froze for a moment, staring at him with wide eyes. She shook her head quickly then darted into the forest undergrowth, as if frightened.

Startled, Mado looked from side to side, scanning the hill, wondering if she had seen something he had not. He was alone. *Why do these strange girls keep running away from me?*

He looked down at himself with a confused shrug. *Do I look that bad?*

Mado stared at the forest for a moment, wondering if the girl might reappear, but finally shook his head and turned to walk back to Stone Mill.

A feeling of dread came over him. Too much of what was happening didn't make any sense, and Mado began to worry that he might again become overwhelmed.

Mado stopped next to a windmill and sat with his back against the thick pylon, the feel of its timbers solid and reassuring. He took a deep breath, reminded again of the sweetness of the wildflowers and the beauty of the day as afternoon began to give way to early evening. *I still can't believe any of this is real.*

Could a dream last this long, and seem so real, yet still be a dream? Mado took another deep breath and held it as he listened to the gentle swoops of the windmill blades. *Should I believe this?*

He looked over at Old Home, its red-tiled roofs lit brightly by the descending sun. *What if I wake up and none of this ever happened?*

A gentle breeze whispered softly from the west, and Mado thought he could hear a girl's voice cry "Jika!"

Mado sighed and stood up, brushing stray grass from the seat of his coveralls. *I need to be strong.*

His eyes scanned the horizon, tracing the faint outlines of the distant wall. *I am here for now, that's going to have to be good enough.*

Mado straightened his back, took a deep breath and returned to Stone Mill with a quickening step.

Senkou was sitting at the table in the lounge, fidgeting with something as he stared at Kabe's memorial. As Mado approached, he seemed to suddenly shake from his reverie and smiled. "Oh, hi Mado."

He stopped turning the object in his hands. It was a pocketknife like Kabe's, but worn and polished smooth with handling.

Mado fished Kabe's knife from his pocket and examined it. "These are the same brand of knife, aren't they?"

Senkou stared at the knife in his hands. "Yes. Akashio and I got them the same day. They were the only two knives in the whole second-hand store that matched, so we bought them."

He sighed softly, slipped the knife into a pocket and glanced at Mado's knife briefly before meeting his eyes. "How are you holding up?"

Mado stared at the floor as he put the knife back in his pocket. "I talked to Umi." He glanced up and met Senkou's inquisitive gaze. "I need to talk to Master Tsuchi."

Senkou nodded sympathetically. "He's in his room." His eyes flicked toward the doorway before returning to Kabe's halo. "He'll want to hear what you have to say, I'm sure."

As Mado turned to leave, Senkou stopped him, holding his gaze. "Mado, I'll have to tell you about Akashio sometime. He's the guy your knife came from."

He glanced at the knife in his hand, back to Mado. "He was Kabe's senior, and the one who gave him the only remaining piece of the original millstone known to exist. He was a good haibane, and we missed him sorely when he left."

He reached out, lightly clutching Mado's forearm, his gaze fixed and firm. "Mado, Kabe gave you these things even though he knew you for only a few days. You should never underestimate the importance of what he did."

He sighed and stared down at the knife in his other hand. "I know he cared for you very deeply. Never forget that."

Senkou released Mado's arm and sat contemplating the pocketknife as Mado quietly left the lounge.

Tsuchi's room was the northernmost in the west loft. Mado knocked softly on the door.

From inside came a soft reply. "You may enter."

Tsuchi was sitting next to the window, his winged profile a dramatic silhouette against the bright afternoon sky as he sat hunched over a miniature tree with a tiny pair of scissors, the thick lenses of his glasses gleaming like twin prisms.

He did not look up as Mado approached quietly. "How are you feeling?"

Mado's eyes fell to his shoes, and he cleared his throat as he shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "I spoke with Nemu."

Tsuchi's scissors made a sharp snip as he cut an almost imperceptibly small leaf from the tree. "Ah, Miss Nemu. Is she well?"

Mado paused for a moment. "She seems well. She regrets that she didn't get to speak with you yesterday, and would like to have tea with you when your schedule permits."

Tsuchi sat up slightly, a thin smile on his lips. "Ah." He paused as his smile broadened, and nodded to himself. "Should you see her before I do, please tell her that Friday afternoon would be ideal, and that I would be honored."

He loomed over the diminutive tree, studying it carefully as his smile turned to a scowl. "Do you have any

news regarding Umi?”

Mado cleared his throat again. “Yes, Master Tsuchi.”

Tsuchi froze, unmoving as Mado's eyes returned to his shoes. “Umi talked to me.”

Tsuchi turned and stared at Mado, pinning down his fleeting gaze.

Mado swallowed before continuing. “I'm not sure what to say. He says he wants to come back to Stone Mill, but not yet. Not for a while.”

Tsuchi turned to regard the tree as he cradled the scissors in his hands.

“Master Tsuchi.” Mado's voice held an edge of fear. “He says he can see an angel. He calls her Okera.”

Tsuchi's head turned suddenly, his eyes piercing Mado, but he said nothing as Mado continued. “He says he wants to stay at Old Home so he can say goodbye this time.”

Tsuchi's eyes fell and he turned toward the tree, poising the scissors as his face became a hardened mask.

He sat quietly for several moments before speaking softly. “I see.” He sighed as his gaze remained fixed on the tree. “Is there anything else?”

Mado shook his head slowly, doubtfully, and turned to leave, but Tsuchi spoke again, the hardness in his voice gone. “You should rest. I can bring you dinner if you wish.”

Mado shook his head again. “Thank you, Master, but I'm not really hungry.” He glanced toward the door. “I think you're right, though, I'm feeling very tired.”

He stopped by the doorway and bowed. “Good night, Master Tsuchi.”

Tsuchi nodded. “Good night, Mado. Rest well.”

Mado heard the soft snip of the scissors as he quietly closed the door to Tsuchi's room.

As Mado walked across the silent floor of the machine shop, Matsu entered from outside and stopped to change his shoes.

Mado drifted over as Matsu turned to him. “Hi Mado. Are you feeling okay?”

He stood up and gently brushed back the hair over Mado's temple, checking the bruise. “You look out of it.”

Mado nodded slightly. “I'm still feeling pretty tired. It's been a weird day.” He glanced at the name tag rack. “Matsu, do you know all the girls at Old Home?”

Matsu arched an eyebrow. “I haven't met the twins yet, but I've met the rest. Why do you ask?”

Mado stared sheepishly at the floor. "Is there a blonde girl there who wears her hair in pigtails?"

Matsu scratched his head in thought. "No, I don't think so, unless Hikari's starting to braid her hair." He glanced sidelong at Mado. "Where did you see this girl?"

Mado flushed slightly, feeling silly for asking. "By the Western Woods. It wasn't Hikari."

Matsu's eyes widened. "You didn't go into the Western Woods, did you?"

Mado dodged the question. "I saw her from the Hill of Winds. She was a long way off. She ran away when she saw me, though."

Matsu shook his head slowly, puzzled. "You're right. That is weird." He studied Mado with concern. "You look like you should get some rest."

He grabbed Mado's arm and led him to the guest room.

Matsu stopped at the doorway before leaving. "Mado, remember, you're still recovering. Take it easy on yourself, okay?"

Mado nodded quietly as Matsu softly closed the door, then turned to look in the dresser mirror. There were dark circles under his eyes, and as he took off his coveralls, several feathers fell to the floor.

He picked one up, a large flight feather, and studied it absently for a moment, then picked up the rest of the feathers and set them on the dresser.

Despite the wing brace and stiff wrist joint, the pajamas went on easily. *I'm getting used to having wings.*

Mado stepped over to the open window and watched as the last touch of sunlight swept across the town, lighting the clock tower spire for a few moments before leaving it in the gathering shadows of twilight. Beyond the wall, clouds began to form, hinting of a change in weather.

He watched quietly as a full moon began to rise quickly behind the town, coming into view in what seemed like minutes, its light a ghostly glow through the thickening clouds.

Mado caught himself suddenly and leaned against the windowsill. *How long was I staring like that?*

He shook his head and slipped between the sheets, the bed a soft and welcome sanctuary from the trials of the day.

Though the rising moon had been pale white, that night in his dreams it was blood red.

Note: My 500<sup>th</sup> post to Old Home Bulletin Board! Yay! ^:cool:^

## **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 7.2: Retrospection**

Mado stood before the shimmering window. Through it details of a distant vision began to emerge.

It was an oceanscape, painted in rich tones by a full, red moon. In the foreground, on the water, something was engulfed in flames, burning in a bright yellow pyre against the crimson sea.

The scene darkened, becoming a richer red as the ocean rose slowly toward the windowsill, then slid ominously up the surface of the glass, quietly filling it with impenetrable rubescence.

The undulating surface passed above the top of the window, which began to bulge from growing pressure. Mado tried to turn away, but stood frozen, unable to move. He screamed, but no sound came from his mouth.

From within the scarlet depths a fist emerged and punched through the glass, shattering it, spilling the bright red liquid into the room, covering everything as Mado cried out repeatedly in mute terror.

Red brightness blinded Mado's eyes as his knees buckled. He shook his head and tried to recover from another shock.

He was awake, standing in front of the open window in his room.

The crimson light of a morning sun peeked above the wall behind the town and shone brightly on his face, lighting the thick clouds above it in fiery colors, painting the meadows with the glow of flames.

*What happened?*

Mado was hunched over the windowsill, clutching it tightly. *How long have I been standing here?*

Overhead, in the eaves, the nesting birds were twittering, their cheerful chirps greeting the dawn with discordant enthusiasm.

There was a loud knock on the door. "Mado? Are you okay?"

Mado shook his head, tried to steady himself.

The door burst open. It was Matsu. Mado turned as he stormed into the room.

Matsu grabbed his shoulders. "I heard you screaming." His wide eyes probed Mado's face with evident concern. "What happened?"

Mado put a hand to his head, trying to shake off the fog of confusion. "Matsu."

Matsu guided him to the bed, which was in disarray from what must have been a difficult night. "Mado, did you have a bad dream?"

Mado sat down on the bed, paused a moment, then turned and laid back, reflexively tucking his right wing under as he carefully rested the left wing on the sheets. "Yes. It was..."

He squeezed his eyes shut and put both hands to his face, trying to get his bearings.

Matsu leaned over to examine Mado's bruise. "Mado, does your head hurt?" He checked Mado's forehead for a fever. "Do you feel dizzy or nauseous?"

Mado shook his head slowly. "I think I'm okay, but when I woke up, I was standing next to the window."

Matsu sat himself in the chair next to the bed. "You were sleepwalking?" Suspicion and worry etched his face. "Have you done that before?"

Mado shook his head. "No, I don't think so. My dream..."

Matsu leaned forward and plucked a large gray feather from the bed. "You seem to be losing a lot of feathers, and you don't look very good." He held up the feather.

Mado turned and stared at it blankly. There were several other feathers scattered around the sheets.

Matsu set the feather on the nightstand and paused for a moment before continuing. "You don't have any of the signs the doctor told me to watch out for, but I'm still worried."

He gazed probingly into Mado's eyes. "Mado, I think you're pushing yourself too hard. You've been through a lot." He glanced at the nightstand. "You've only been here a week, and it's been a tough week."

Mado sighed and let his head sink into his pillow as he stared at the ceiling. "I guess you're right. It hasn't been easy." He closed his eyes, trying to relax.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "Mado, I'm worried about you. I've only been here a few years, but yours is the toughest first week I've ever heard of."

Matsu pulled back his hand and interlaced his fingers, studying them. "I'm sorry to see all this happening to you. It doesn't seem very fair."

Several moments passed in silence before Matsu stood up. "I'm not going to call the doctor, but next time I'm in town I'm going to talk to him about you, okay?"

Mado nodded quietly.

Matsu paused by the door. "Mado, try to take it easy. Don't let this get any worse than it already is."

He turned and glanced back, smiled crookedly. "I'm going to help make breakfast this morning. Come to the lounge when you're ready."

Matsu winked ingenuously. "I'll try to keep things hot if you need a little more sleep." He closed the door

softly behind him.

Mado lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to piece together what was going on.

Matsu was right, there was a lot to deal with, not the least of which was the difficulty of accepting that any of this was real. It was all too strange, too sudden to be believed.

*Who am I?*

The question hung unanswered in his mind. The one question he couldn't answer, yet the most important question of all. A brief surge of terror swept over Mado as the uncertainty of his own existence gnawed at him.

*I need to eat.*

The thought seemed silly in the middle of his despair, but Mado focused on it and got dressed. *Whether this is real or not, I'm hungry.*

He smiled ironically as he opened the door and made his way to the lounge.

Tsuchi and Senkou were seated next to each other at the table, conversing quietly. From inside the kitchen came the muffled voices of Matsu and Kumo.

Mado sat down at the table across from the others.

Tsuchi regarded Mado quietly as Senkou turned and spoke. "Matsu says you had a rough time of it last night. How are you feeling this morning?"

Mado placed his hands on the table and gazed at them, speaking softly. "I had a bad dream. I woke up standing next to the window." He looked up. "It's been hard."

Senkou and Tsuchi nodded sympathetically.

Tsuchi spoke. "Matsu's concerns are well-founded. Yours has been an especially difficult time. You should not be ashamed to take the rest you need." He glanced briefly at Senkou. "There is much work to be done, but nothing we do is more important than your health."

Tsuchi fell silent as his eyes strayed to Kabe's halo.

Senkou gave Mado a sharp nod. "I'm hoping to take you as my apprentice, Mado, but don't worry, we're not planning any work until Monday. You should try to relax and rest as much as you can until then."

He had been concealing his pocketknife in his palm, and began flicking it between his fingers, turning it rapidly as the folded knife slipped from one finger to another.

Tsuchi cleared his throat and sat up as his eyes returned to Mado. "Today is a Day of Remembrance for Kabe. It is on this day that we will honor his memory and his contributions to our lives. It is also on this day

that we will divide his belongings and put his room in order for the next new feather to hatch there.”

He glanced at the darkened ring. “At sunset, we will place his halo on the altar at the Chapel.”

Tsuchi paused for a moment, staring at Kabe's memorial. “Mado, if you need to rest, we can delay the ceremonies. It need not be today.”

Mado replied quickly. “No, Master Tsuchi. I'll be okay. I'm just a little tired. I think it would be good to remember Kabe today.”

He hadn't noticed, but he had subconsciously pulled Kabe's knife from his pocket. He sat staring at it in his half-open grip.

Matsu and Kumo brought out breakfast and serving dishes. Matsu sat next to Mado, poured soup into his bowl and tea into his cup.

He smiled with mock cheer. “Miso soup again. Kabe doesn't know what he's missing.”

Fleeting smiles appeared around the table as the boys ate somberly. After everyone was finished, Tsuchi and Senkou cleared the table and washed dishes in the kitchen.

Kumo turned to Mado. “Matsu told me what's been going on. He's right. You need to chill out or things are just going to get worse.” He shook his head incredulously. “It's already pretty harsh as it is.”

Kumo paused for a moment as a thin smile grew on his face. “You don't have to save the world, Mado.” He patted Mado softly on the shoulder. “Just try to hang in there, and it'll be okay.”

After breakfast, the boys filed up to Kabe's room, which was two doors down from Tsuchi's room at the north end of the west loft. On the way, Kumo and Matsu stopped by the laundry and picked up baskets.

The room was as Kabe had left it, no one had entered since Kabe left except for Umi, who had looked briefly for him there on the morning of his disappearance. The walls were bare except for a seascape hanging over the head of the bed, one of Umi's paintings, showing a calm, tranquil sunset under clear skies.

On the dresser in front of the mirror was a large plaster sculpture of Stone Mill. Unlike the other statues scattered around it, it was painted. Though Kabe's style was relatively crude compared to other sculptures Mado had seen, there was an evocative quality to his work, as if his departures from realism were deliberate and communicative, almost impressionistic.

The walls and roof lines of Kabe's version of Stone Mill were concave and swept stylistically, unlike the building itself, whose lines were straight and functional. The paddle wheel wasn't round but almost elliptical, seeming to compress under the weight of the water flowing over it.

But the water... Kabe understood water, and his lines captured it beautifully. The subtlety of the colors suggested that it was Umi who had painted the piece.

Senkou motioned toward the sculpture. “That will go in the lounge.”

The boys nodded agreement as he bent over and began opening the dresser drawers. He emptied clothing from them, throwing them into the basket by his feet. He paused upon reaching the bottom drawer, and took a deep breath before moving its contents to the top of the dresser.

There were four plaster statuettes, white and unpainted, each a vignette based on a symbol. One showed a stout, short-handled sledgehammer striking an anvil. *Tsuchi: Hammer.* The next showed a tall, windswept pine tree. *Matsu: Tree.* The third portrayed a lightning bolt striking a mountaintop from a small cloud. *Senkou: Flash.* The last showed a large spider perched on an intricate web. *Kumo: Spider.*

The boys stared silently at the statuettes before Senkou spoke. "I think we know who gets each of these." He paused for a moment, staring at his statuette. "We'll leave the door open. People can come back later for them if they want."

He glanced around the room. "There isn't much else here. Kabe didn't tend to collect things."

Matsu stepped over to the bed and stripped it of blankets and sheets, pulling them up into a large bundle and cramming it into the basket he had brought. "Let's get this stuff back to the laundry."

He and Kumo carried out the baskets of bedding and clothes.

Tsuchi picked up a piece of paper from the corner of the dresser, unfolded it and scanned it quickly. He turned and handed it to Mado. "This is for you."

It was the map Kana had drawn for Kabe. It had his notes from his survey of the twins' cocoon room scribbled on it. Mado read through the notes, estimates of tiles and materials needed. The name and address of the salvage dealer was written there, as well as some tips about setting the new tiles.

At the bottom of the page was one line unlike the rest. It was a single sentence: "Mado, I'm sorry."

Mado stared at the words for a long time before folding the map and placing it in his pocket.

Tsuchi quietly took his statuette and left the room while Senkou picked up the lightning bolt figure and turned it over in his hands, pondering it.

Senkou turned to Mado and motioned toward the bed. "Would you like that painting?"

Mado glanced at it and nodded silently.

Senkou stared at the statue in his hand. "There's something else I think you should see."

Mado followed Senkou downstairs to one of the craft rooms and turned on the light. It was the room in which Kabe had worked, scattered with pieces of plaster statuary in various states of completion.

Senkou pointed to a work bench next to a stool, where Kabe apparently had been working last.

On a square of thick waxed paper was a statuette like the ones that had been hidden in Kabe's dresser

drawer. It showed a window, large and opaque in the whiteness of plaster, the wall around it broken out stylistically like a bust. But the flat surface of the windowpane was not blank. Kabe had impressed some sort of pattern upon it, though faintly.

Mado picked up the figure, studying the window. The lines suggested some sort of landscape or vista, but it was indistinct, impressionistic, inconsistent in its perspective. There was something familiar about the image. *Where have I seen this?*

A hand clutched Mado's shoulder. It was Senkou. "Mado, are you all right? You've been standing there like that for a long time."

Mado looked up, saw the concern in Senkou's eyes. "Sorry. Something about me and windows." He smiled, embarrassed, as Senkou nodded skeptically.

Senkou led him back to the shop as Mado clutched the figure in his hands. "You should rest, Mado. I'll come get you for lunch, and we won't leave you behind when we go to the Chapel."

Mado protested feebly as Senkou herded him into his room and closed the door. He quietly collected the feathers on the bed and placed them in a small pile on the nightstand, and soon fell into a fitful sleep.

Late that afternoon, Mado was given the honor of carrying Kabe's halo to the Chapel in the Western Woods, where the haibane of Stone Mill stood long in silent remembrance under a red evening sky.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 7.3: Renovation**

That evening, Mado arranged Kabe's feather and ponytail with the sharpening stone on his dresser as a small, personal memorial.

Next to these he placed the folded map Kana had made. He gathered the piles of his own feathers and tucked them into a dresser drawer.

It had been a difficult day emotionally, but Mado slept peacefully through the night and remembered no dreams.

Though there was no morning bell, he woke up at about the same time as the other boys and helped prepare breakfast with Senkou, who gave him several tips and guided him through the steps for making a delicious soup with buckwheat noodles, chicken and green onions from Matsu's garden.

During breakfast, Tsuchi made an announcement. "Today is a Day of Renewal. It is the tradition of Stone Mill that on this day we cope with our loss by doing something new, or that we have been postponing. This can be a personal act or something public, and may consist of one thing or many things."

He paused as his gaze swept around the table. "Tomorrow we will resume our normal routine with Maintenance Day, and the bell timer will be reactivated. I will also post a new work schedule which reflects the... changes we have experienced recently."

At this there was a moment of gloom, but Matsu quipped. “Does this mean I'll finally be getting that raise you promised me?”

Chuckles broke out around the table, and the mood lightened as the boys continued eating.

Matsu, who was sitting next to Mado, leaned over and whispered. “If you don't have anything planned, I have an idea. I'll show you after breakfast.”

Mado nodded quietly and joined in with the small talk that worked its way around the table. For the first time in what seemed like forever, the mood at breakfast was light and cheerful.

After breakfast, Matsu led Mado outside to one of the storage sheds and pulled open the door. “Here, let's load these up.”

Mado helped him stack several short pieces of lumber onto a special hand truck, which Matsu secured with a strap. “Follow me.”

He wheeled the lumber back into the main building and with Mado's help used a hand-winch to lift it up to the west loft. Matsu rolled the hand truck down the hallway and stopped in front of Mado's room.

He turned to Mado and winked. “Let's do something new today.”

Mado shook his head. “I thought I was supposed to repair it myself.”

Matsu smiled. “That's true, but there's no rule that says I can't help you.” He gave Mado a soft punch on the arm. “Come on, let's get started.”

The boys brought up tools from the shop and began carefully prying up the damaged planks from the floor of Mado's room. Many of the planks were salvageable, and Matsu showed Mado how to refinish them using the belt sander.

Despite how extensive the damage had originally appeared, with Matsu's help the floor was repaired and ready for polishing after only a few hours of work, and they had already fixed the damage to the wall by lunchtime.

This time Senkou showed Mado how to make a beef curry which received high praise from the rest of the boys.

After lunch, Matsu showed Mado the fine art of working with wood overhead. Within an hour they had repaired the ceiling and were sanding, polishing and waxing the floor to a glossy finish.

Finally, after the floor was polished, the tools cleaned and stored and the extra lumber returned to the shed, Matsu helped Mado position the furniture and declared the room ready for occupation.

He gave Mado a broad smile. “See? Working with wood is fun, and this job was a piece of cake.”

Mado was quite impressed, and found himself admiring both Matsu's talent and his attitude.

Matsu motioned to the door. "Come on. We worked pretty hard today. Now it's time to relax."

He led Mado outside once more, this time behind the sheds to the garden under the water tower. Though Mado had seen it before, this was the first time he had ever actually entered Matsu's garden.

It was a very large plot, perhaps two or more acres in size. Surrounding it was a white picket fence which had been reinforced with a fine metal mesh resembling tightly-woven chicken wire. A trellis arched over the entrance, which was guarded by an elaborately-carved wooden gate depicting a pine forest.

Inside, thin gravel paths bordered by bricks led between carefully-tended rows of vegetables and herbs of all kinds. In the corners, center and rear of the garden were several different varieties of fruit trees.

Matsu led Mado to the center of the garden, where they sat on an ornate wooden bench next to a stone birdbath set in a small circular bed of brightly colored flowers. The light of the afternoon was softened by clouds that moved slowly across the sky, casting shadows broken by the tall apple trees which circled the clearing and gave a modest amount of shade to the bench.

Tall green plants of all kinds surrounded Matsu's inner sanctum, and the air was rich with the scent of growing things.

The boys sat quietly, enjoying the peacefulness of the garden for a long time before Matsu finally spoke. "Everyone needs a place where they can be alone and think. This is my place for that."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose. "I like the feel of things that grow. I always have. It's in my blood."

He turned to Mado, his expression that of peaceful satisfaction. "When I got here, the garden was only about half this size, and didn't have any trees. It took a lot of haggling and arm twisting to get them, especially these full-grown apple trees, but here they are."

He pointed at a small tree root sticking out of the flower bed. "Most people don't put trees in their vegetable gardens because of the roots, but I like trees, so I'm willing to cut back the roots when I need to."

Matsu scanned the plants surrounding them with a mild scowl. "There were holes in the fence, too, and the rabbits got most of what managed to grow here. It took a while to get rid of them, because a lot of them were dug in pretty well."

His face darkened as he glared at the ground. "I hated doing it, but they had to go."

Matsu turned to Mado, his expression solemn. "Nothing worthwhile comes without a struggle of some kind." He turned away, regarding the birdbath. "That's the way life works."

Mado nodded slowly, sympathetically.

Matsu continued. "Spring is my favorite time of year. It's also the most work, but it's worth it." He waved his hand in an arc. "A few months ago, almost nothing was growing here, just a few winter crops I was

experimenting with. Not much can grow in winter around here.”

Matsu paused and stared at the base of the birdbath for a few moments before speaking. “I know you've had a really hard time so far.” He looked up, his eyes meeting Mado's gaze. “But I know you're going to like your time at Stone Mill.”

He glanced over at the birdbath. “I have, and I don't ever want to leave this place.” His gaze fell. “But none of us get to make that choice. We just have to make the most of it while we're here.”

Matsu paused and stared at the flowers circling the birdbath. “Mado, you should know.”

He turned and gazed into Mado's eyes, and though Matsu was smiling faintly, his eyes were moist. “Kabe was the one who helped me fix my room, before I even knew I was going to be a carpenter.”

He turned back to the birdbath and closed his eyes as a tear rolled slowly down his cheek.

They sat in silence as the shadows of clouds slipped over the garden, ominous gray figures creeping slowly over the lush green plants.

Finally, Matsu wiped the tear from his face and turned to Mado, smiling softly. “You're always welcome to come here whenever you like, if you ever need to be alone or just need someplace that's quiet.”

He stood up. “If you're ready to move into your room, I can help.”

Mado sat for a moment, mildly worried. “What if I sleepwalk again?”

Matsu stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Hmm. You have a point. Maybe you should wait until you're sure you won't be sleepwalking anymore before you move upstairs.”

The boys returned to the main building, and Mado went upstairs as Matsu entered one of the craft rooms off the main shop floor.

Mado stood in his cocoon room, surveying it, testing the feel of it. He sat on the bed and bounced up and down a few times, then stepped over to the dresser and checked the drawers. They were all empty, but the bottom drawer seemed to stick a little.

He tugged on it firmly, and the drawer came out, landing on the floor with a thud. While he was checking the slide rails, Mado found a small hardbound book that was held in place by a metal tray mounted on the back of the drawer – a holder clearly intended for concealment.

Mado picked up the book and sat down on the bed, studying it. It was a diary, apparently written by a previous occupant of the room. Mado paused for a moment, wondering if it was right to read a personal diary, but in the end was unable to resist looking.

The beginning told of many mundane things, day-to-day events, and mentioned names Mado didn't recognize, except one: *Tsuchi*.

On a whim, Mado thumbed through the book to look at the final entries, and stopped as his eyes caught a single sentence at the top of the last written page:

*“She is gone.”*

Mado stared at the sentence for a moment, then continued reading.

*“I have tried to take the advice of my friends, tried to do what the Communicator told me to do, tried to accept, tried to forget. But I cannot. Without her, my life is meaningless. There is nothing for me anymore. I pray with all my heart that we might meet again, but I know we will not. She is gone, and only darkness remains where once there was light in my life. I cannot continue. It is over.”*

Mado gazed silently at the final sentence on the page, the last entry in the diary:

*“For me, there will be no Day of Flight.”*

## **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 7.4: Adumbration**

Mado stared at the last entry in the diary for a very long time before he closed the book, placed it in the metal tray and slid the drawer back into the dresser.

He stood silently, lost in thought for many long moments before he walked slowly out of the room.

Master Tsuchi had gone to Old Home to have tea with Nemu, but Mado felt compelled to find him. He needed to talk about this, and only Master Tsuchi was likely to know who had written the diary hidden in his room.

Mado stood at the threshold of Stone Mill, deciding whether or not to interrupt Master Tsuchi's tea.

He had just decided to go when Tsuchi walked through the door, a characteristic scowl on his face. "Good afternoon."

Tsuchi's gaze returned to Mado frequently as he changed into his shop shoes. "Are you feeling well?"

Finally he stood up and faced Mado, the worried movements of his dark eyes magnified by his glasses.

Mado swallowed. "Master Tsuchi, if you have time, can we talk in private?"

Tsuchi nodded and led Mado up to his room. He took a seat by the window and motioned Mado to an overstuffed guest chair.

As Mado sat down, Tsuchi picked up his scissors and made a seemingly gratuitous snip at the tree, removing no visible clippings. "How may I help you?"

Mado squirmed in his seat and cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Did you know the person that lived in my cocoon room before I was born?"

Tsuchi glanced casually at Mado. "Yes. His name was Hebi. He was a machinist like myself. Why do you ask?"

Mado put his hands together, fidgeting nervously with his thumbs before speaking. "I, um, found his diary."

Tsuchi paused, then set the scissors on the table, his gaze sharp. "And what did it tell you?" His tone was even, but the question had an edge to it.

Mado hunched over, concentrating on his hands, his thumbs. "It said he wasn't going to take the Day of Flight."

Tsuchi's expression did not change, but he remained motionless, frozen, for a long while. He glanced at the tree, then turned and looked out the window, the bottom half of his face lit by the afternoon sun.

More time passed before Tsuchi spoke. "We do not know what became of Hebi. He disappeared one day long ago, and has not been seen since." He lowered his eyes. "We never found his halo."

Tsuchi cleared his throat and paused before continuing, his words slow and drawn out, speaking seemingly against his will. "Hebi was... my first apprentice."

He closed his eyes and fell silent.

Mado stared at his thumbs, taking in the significance of Tsuchi's words.

Finally, Mado spoke. "Master Tsuchi, it mentioned a girl, and that she was gone."

Tsuchi bowed his head. "Yes. They were in love with one another." He turned to Mado, his features impassive. "Her name was Sono. They fell in love while Hebi was assisting her with converting the tower clock at Old Home to electrical power."

He smiled slightly. "Their feelings were hardly unknown to the rest of us, but no one considered it to be a matter for concern." He turned back to the window, his smile bitter. "They were so happy together."

Tsuchi spoke softly. "But one day, not long before the conversion would have been completed, Sono disappeared." He glanced at Mado. "Her Day of Flight had come."

He fixed his eyes on the miniature tree. "Hebi became depressed. As time passed, his feathers began to darken with black spots. The Communicator informed me that Hebi had become sin-bound."

He cleared his throat and turned back to the window. "I tried to help him, but he was beyond my reach. One day, he vanished." He turned to Mado, sorrow etched deeply on his face. "We never found of any trace of him, nor any clue as to what had become of him. He simply disappeared."

Tsuchi turned back to the window and rested his chin on his fist. His voice was almost a whisper. "It was wintertime."

Mado watched quietly as a tear rolled slowly down Tsuchi's cheek.

After many moments, Tsuchi wiped away the tear and turned to Mado. "Is there anything else?"

Mado shifted in his chair. "Master Tsuchi, about Nemu..."

Tsuchi's gaze fell and he turned back toward the window. "Yes, I know. I wish to be alone now."

Mado's eyes widened in surprise, but stood without speaking and bowed low. By the doorway, he turned and bowed again. "Please forgive me, Master Tsuchi."

Tsuchi turned toward Mado, but his eyes were lowered. "No. Please forgive me, Apprentice Mado."

He returned his gaze to the window, lost in thought as Mado quietly closed the door.

Mado wandered across the quiet shop floor, saw Kumo by the door changing into his boots, and walked over to him.

Kumo looked up and smiled, stray yellow hairs falling over his eyes like thin straw. “Hey Mado.” His smile faded as he tossed back his hair. “You don't look so hot. Is something wrong?”

Mado shook his head as if to throw something off and smiled thinly. “No, I'm okay. Where are you going?”

Kumo's smile returned. “Master Tsuchi has asked me to represent Stone Mill for the overhaul of Furnace #2 at the Factory. They should be done using the furnaces for the day, so I'm going to help get things started.”

He leaned over and nudged Mado conspiratorially as he spoke in a stage whisper. “But the real reason I'm going over is because tonight is Pizza Night at the Factory. Their regular food might not be all that great, but the boys at the Factory make the best pizza you've ever tasted.”

Kumo glanced at the lounge, then leaned closer. “Want to come with me?”

Mado paused for a moment, seemingly confused. “I can't. I need to help Senkou with dinner tonight.”

Kumo slapped a palm to his forehead. “Oh right, you're cooking today. Sorry about that!” He glanced over at the lounge. “I hope you're not mad that I'm skipping out. I'm sure you and Senkou will cook a great dinner.”

He grinned sheepishly and lowered his voice. “But we're talking about Factory pizza here. It's really awesome.”

Mado smiled and nodded. “I'm not mad at all. I'll let Senkou know you can't make it.” He winked. “And I won't tell him about the pizza.”

Kumo flushed slightly and stared at the floor. “Well, the truth is that I'll be taking measurements and sizing up what replacement parts we'll need for Number 2, so it's not just about the pizza.”

He grinned at Mado as he stood up. “You should probably get some rest after dinner anyway. You look pretty tired.” He gave Mado a soft punch on the arm and walked out the door.

Mado drifted over to the lounge and heard sounds coming from the kitchen. It was Senkou, who was cleaning fish at the sink.

He turned and grinned at Mado. “Hi! Kumo caught these today. Fresh brook trout.” He held one up. “Nice fat ones, too. They usually aren't so plump this time of year.” He continued cleaning them as Mado walked up to help.

Senkou gestured at the tub of fish. “Kumo already gutted them and left the heads on for frying, which is how we usually eat trout. But since these are such nice fish, I want to try a recipe with their filets. Something new.”

Mado cleared his throat. “Kumo says he won't be able to make it for dinner tonight.”

Senkou smiled as he continued working. "I know. He told me when he dropped off the fish. He's going to help the Waste Factory get started on their broken furnace." He gave Mado a wink. "He's crazy about their pizza, too."

Senkou showed Mado how to the trout leaving a minimum of bones, and then a trick with the knife that removed stray bones from the filets. "I love fish, but I hate bones. You don't want to get one of these caught in your throat. The tiny ones are the worst."

After all the filets were prepared, Senkou placed them in a covered bowl and stored them in the walk-in refrigerator. He emerged carrying a large brown root that consisted of a convoluted network of connected thumb-sized nodes.

Senkou broke off a node and popped it into his mouth, closing his eyes with delight. "Ah, delicious!" He removed another small piece and handed it to Mado. "Matsu gave me this today, the first ginger of the season. Be careful, it's kind of hot."

Mado chewed tentatively on the root. It was indeed hot, but had a sweetness to it that was reminiscent of a sugary mint. Senkou was right, however, it was delicious. *And hot...*

Senkou poured some tea from a pot on the stove and handed it to Mado with a smile. "Here, this will help."

Senkou put the root on the chopping block and began mincing it into tiny slices. His expression became solemn. "Traditionally, your senior is the one who tells you about his senior. That's the way we pass down knowledge of the past, and the way we honor those who have gone before."

He glanced over at Mado, but continued to focus on the cutting board as he chopped up the ginger root. "Kabe didn't get a chance to do that, so I'm going to be the one to tell you about Kabe's senior, instead."

As Mado helped prepare the vegetables for the evening meal, Senkou told him about Akashio.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 7.5: Intimations**

That night, dinner was especially delicious. Senkou showed Mado his new recipe: seared filet of trout in ginger teriyaki sauce served with garden vegetables over brown rice. It was good that they had made so much of it, because everyone helped themselves to multiple servings.

After dinner, Matsu mounted Kabe's sculpture of Stone Mill on a special shelf in the lounge while Senkou showed Mado the subtleties of pinball. Tsuchi excused himself and retired early to his room.

As Mado watched, Senkou showed off some of his strategies for timing the flippers and using almost imperceptible nudges to affect the ball's trajectory when it was moving slowly.

He smiled as the points racked up. "Your body should match the rhythm of the table."

When Matsu had finished mounting the sculpture, the three boys played darts. Senkou was very good, and

Mado was learning quickly, but Matsu was phenomenal, able to place the darts exactly where he wanted to get the points he needed.

After several rounds, the boys parted in good spirits and went to their rooms.

Mado picked up Kabe's feather from the dresser and stepped over to the window. Though the moon was full, a ceiling of clouds had formed, allowing only a soft hint of pale light to shine dimly through. The evening had a cold edge.

Mado stared at the feather, thinking of what he had learned from Tsuchi that afternoon. *How can he deal with so much grief?*

He thought about Hebi and Sono, and was tempted to go back and read more of the diary. *No, not yet.*

Mado laid the feather on the dresser and sat on the bed. The mints Kana had left were still on the nightstand, and he popped one into his mouth. *I wonder what she's doing right now?*

There was a knock on the door. Kumo's voice was muffled. "Okay if I come in?"

He stepped into the room and handed Mado a small box. "It's from Ame. A carrot cake. She says she hopes you're feeling better." He sat down by the bed as Mado stood up and set the box on the dresser.

Kumo turned toward Mado, leaning casually on the arm of the chair. "So, are you feeling better?"

Mado glanced at the window and paused before answering softly. "I think so." He stepped over, sat on the bed and began fidgeting with his hands. "But I'm still confused about a lot of things."

Kumo stretched his arms and slouched in the chair. "Like what?"

Mado stopped fidgeting and met Kumo's gaze. "Like why are we here?"

Kumo threw his head back, blew air through his puffed cheeks and closed his eyes in thought. After a few moments he sat up and leaned forward in his chair. "Still worrying about that?"

He smiled ironically. "You might want to give yourself a few more days to figure out the meaning of life."

Mado nodded quietly before speaking again. "Kumo, do you ever wonder if any of this is real?"

Kumo chuckled softly as he stood up and yawned, then drifted over by the door. Just before he closed it behind him, he gave Mado a sympathetic grin. "All the time, Mado. Good night." He winked and closed the door softly.

Mado stood up and walked over to the dresser. The cake smelled delicious. A tiny note was tucked inside the box. "*Mado, get well soon. Come by the store sometime. I have something for you. Ame.*" There was a little smiley face with wings and a halo next to the signature.

Mado slipped the note into a dresser drawer and changed into his pajamas. As he lay in bed, many thoughts

swirled through his mind, and it was long before he finally fell into sleep.

It was raining, and the sky was a hazy gray blanket over the land. He was standing at the edge of the forest, gazing at the ruins. *This is a dream.*

Without willing it, he walked toward the stones of the altar staircase. As he passed between two cracked pillars, he saw a glow on the top step and stopped.

Mado watched as the glow slowly brightened, and within the brightness, something began to take shape. Though his eyes hurt and he was forced to squint, Mado continued to stare as a figure formed within the light, a figure with a halo and wings. A brilliant white arm seemed to beckon him closer.

Mado moved toward the figure, transfixed and unable to resist the call. As he reached the bottom step he could see a face within the dazzling cloud of luminance, smiling warmly.

He froze with shock. *I know you.*

Mado reached out his hand to touch the figure, and at that moment, there was a blinding flash of lightning. He screamed as the figure exploded into a cloud of feathers in the blast of the thunderbolt.

Mado could hear his own voice shrieking in agony. *No! NO!*

The light turned bright red. His skin was wet, and he was shivering. He swooned, and fell against a hard surface of stone, nearly collapsing.

As consciousness came to him, Mado realized he was outdoors in the chill of early morning. *What happened?*

He was standing on a small bridge, leaning against one of the stone side rails. The red light of the rising sun painted everything around him in a watery crimson glow.

A light drizzle drifted down from reddish gray clouds, and Mado shivered uncontrollably as he clamped his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering. His pajamas were soaked, and he was standing barefoot on the slippery stones of the bridge.

He turned his head to see the broad bulwark of Stone Mill bathed in the vermilion glow. Mado was standing on the bridge over the stream that ran next to it. *At least I didn't go far.* He glanced down at the mud on his feet. *Or did I?*

Mado shook his head a few times and walked up the path, more confused than ever. *This is getting serious. I need to talk to the doctor.*

Just before he reached the building, a figure emerged wearing a bright yellow raincoat.

“Mado!” It was Matsu, and he ran up and quickly hustled Mado inside.

Without another word, Matsu carefully guided Mado into the guest bathroom, handed him some towels and

set him down in the curtained changing area.

He stood with his hands on his hips as he regarded Mado skeptically. "Get out of those wet clothes. I'll give you some privacy, but I'm not leaving this room until I know you're okay." He drew the curtain as Mado undressed.

Matsu's voice had a thinly veiled edge of panic as he spoke. "Mado, do you remember anything that happened?" Mado heard the sound of rushing water as Matsu began to fill the bathtub.

The towels were warm and welcome as Mado wiped the cold morning rain from his skin, and he lost himself for a moment before answering. "I had another dream. I dreamed I was at the ruins."

There was a rustling as Matsu took off his raincoat and hung it on the wall. "Do you remember leaving your room, or going outside?"

Mado wrapped one of the towels around his waist and opened the curtain. "No. All I remember was the dream. Then I woke up on the bridge down the road."

Matsu's eyes met Mado's, and he made no effort to hide his worry. "I'll go get the doctor then. After you're warmed up and in bed."

They stood quietly as the tub filled. Finally Matsu leaned over, turned off the faucets and checked the temperature. "It will feel pretty hot, but it will warm you up. Be careful getting in. Let me know if you need help."

He stepped over to a small stool and turned away modestly as Mado carefully slipped into the steaming water. It was hot, but it felt good after the cold rain.

Matsu sat on the stool and glanced over, his eyebrows steepled with concern. "Mado, this is getting serious. I'm really worried about you." He looked down at his hands, which were folded in his lap. "We may need to start watching you at night."

Mado relaxed, sliding more deeply into the water. "Maybe we can tie something to the door that will wake me up when I open it." He paused for a moment. "And I guess we should lock the window shut, just in case."

Matsu sighed and said nothing.

Mado's halo scraped against the side of the tub, whining ethereally as he slid further down and ducked his head under the surface. He luxuriated as the hot water warmed his scalp, and emerged to see Matsu standing over him in a state of near panic.

Mado blushed self-consciously. "Oh, sorry!"

Matsu sat down and smiled slightly. "It's okay. I'm just a little nervous right now for some reason." He rolled his eyes and both boys laughed.

Mado grinned with mild embarrassment. "I'll try not to worry you so much, Matsu."

Matsu shook his head skeptically. "Good luck."

After the bath, Matsu had Mado change into a thick robe and led him back to the guest room. There Mado changed into some fresh underwear and slipped into bed. As with his previous dream, the bed was in disarray, but there were only a couple of stray feathers to be found this time.

Matsu sat in the chair next to the bed and leaned over, checking Mado's temperature and looking in his eyes for signs of problems. "Do you feel dizzy or sick?"

Mado shook his head softly. "Only when I woke up, but I think that's because I didn't expect to wake up standing on a bridge." He smiled. "That was pretty weird."

Matsu smiled thinly and stood up. "You actually look better than you did yesterday." He walked over to the door. "I'll see if I can get Kumo to bring the doctor." He winked. "I'm not sure he would come with Senkou."

Matsu paused before leaving. "I'm going to leave the door open. If you have any problems, just yell, okay?"

Mado nodded as Matsu left. He lay back in the bed, trying to relax, trying to understand what was wrong with him. *How did I get outside without waking up?*

Mado stared at the ceiling for a very long time as he tried to remember the dream.

There was a noise, and Mado looked over as he heard heavy footsteps approach. A figure in a dark gray raincoat stopped in the doorway and pulled back the hood.

It was Kana, her face and hair soaked from the rain. She stood quietly for several moments before speaking. Mado could see the fear and shock in her eyes, though her expression was neutral and dispassionate.

She seemed to look through him before her eyes focused on his. When she finally spoke, her voice was flat and emotionless, but Mado sat up, conscious of her anguish.

"Nemu and Umi are missing."

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 8: Oscillations**

#### **Scene 8.1: Incitations**

Kana's gaze fell to the floor as she walked slowly to the foot of the bed.

Mado swung his legs over to get up but stopped short. Blushing, he remembered that he was wearing only his underwear, and pulled the blankets over his legs as he shifted to face Kana.

Mado looked over as Matsu entered the room, his eyes following the trail of water Kana's wet raincoat had left. He stopped by the dresser and stared at her, his expression a mixture of surprise and confusion. He opened his mouth to say something, but closed it.

Kana continued, her voice flat and quiet, barely concealing the emotion beneath. "We found tracks in the mud leading toward the Western Woods. They're fresh, and look like they were made by Nemu and Umi."

She sighed thinly. "We know Nemu is wearing a raincoat, but we don't think Umi is."

Kana swallowed uncomfortably. "We already checked the ruins. There was no halo, just some feathers." She paused. "We figured they were Kabe's. The other girls are checking the woods."

Matsu glanced over at Mado in appeal, but Mado remained silent, listening to Kana.

Kana continued staring at her feet. "I wanted to see if maybe Umi came here." She gazed up at Mado. "I need to talk to Master Tsuchi."

Matsu spoke up. "I just tried talking to him, but he's in his room and says no one is allowed to disturb him."

Kana glared at him, her voice rising and indignant. "Nemu and Umi are out there somewhere in the rain! Isn't that good enough?"

Matsu sighed and bowed his head in resignation. "He said to go away when I told him that Mado needs the doctor."

Kana's eyes flashed over, locking on Mado, her tone suddenly urgent. "What's wrong?"

Mado tried to look away, but could not. "I've been sleepwalking." He finally broke Kana's gaze and looked down at the bed. "I woke up on the bridge this morning."

Kana sighed softly and shook her head. Mado could see her eyes close as she stood quietly.

Finally she turned, staring at a point on the floor between Mado and Matsu, her voice edged with impatience. "We need to find Nemu and Umi. Can anyone here help?"

Kana scowled with frustration as her eyes flickered between Matsu and Mado. "I need to go back and start the clock tower bell."

Matsu lifted his head and met Kana's fiery gaze. "I'll talk to Senkou. Once the doctor is here, I'll see if we can help look." He glanced at Mado. "But I want to hear what the doctor says before I leave." He hurried out of the room.

Kana's expression softened as she turned to Mado. She seemed about to say something, but stepped back as the doctor strode briskly into the room, valise in hand, Kumo trailing after him.

The doctor carefully moved the box of mints aside and set his valise on the nightstand. Neither he nor Kumo were wearing raincoats, and Mado realized they must have left them by the main entrance.

The doctor stood next to the bed, appraising Mado. "Hello again, Mr. Mado. Kumo told me about your latest adventure. How are you feeling right now?"

As he spoke, Senkou and Matsu walked quietly into the room and stood behind Kumo.

Mado looked over to see Kumo's eyes moving between the wet floor and Kana. "Kumo, Nemu and Umi are missing. Kana came here to see if we could help look for them."

Both Kumo and the doctor turned toward Kana with widened eyes. Kumo spoke. "Did you check the ruins?"

She nodded. "We didn't find a halo, just some of Kabe's feathers."

Kumo gasped and stared blankly for a moment. "Kana, I picked up all of Kabe's feathers yesterday. I didn't leave a single one behind."

The haibane looked at each other with shock and alarm as the meaning of the news sank in.

The doctor glanced at each of them before speaking. "It seems I came at a difficult time."

He turned to Kana. "You say Nemu and Umi are *both* missing? And there are fresh feathers but no halo at the ruins." He glanced at Kumo. "Looks like something of a puzzle."

Senkou spoke up. "We need someone to keep an eye on Mado while the rest of us help search." He looked over at Matsu, who nodded silently.

Senkou turned to Mado. "Mado, I know you want to help, but you need to stay here with Matsu." He motioned toward the door. "Let's go."

Kana lingered briefly, her eyes darting between Mado and the doctor before she followed Senkou and Kumo out of the room.

The doctor glanced over at the door. "I may have some extra patients today, so we'd better get started." He scowled at Mado. "You didn't answer my question, but in a way, you did."

He leaned over the bed. "Let's have a look at you."

The doctor performed a series of tests much like those he had done during his previous visit. "Neurology seems normal. Let's have a closer look at those wings."

Mado rolled over onto his stomach. The doctor tugged on the wing brace. "Is the brace bothering you?"

Mado shook his head as the doctor examined his left wing's wrist joint.

The doctor flexed the joint a few times. "The swelling is almost completely gone. Does this hurt?"

Mado shook his head. "No, it doesn't hurt at all."

The doctor nodded approvingly. "You seem to be healing quickly, like a haibane should. Come to my office at the end of the week and I'll take off the brace."

He scowled as he pulled a magnifying glass out of his valise and carefully examined Mado's feathers. "You've lost an unusual number of feathers. That's never a good sign."

He glanced over at Mado. "You haven't been pulling them out, have you? Were any of them discolored?" Mado shook his head.

The doctor studied the roots of the feathers. "Have you been preening them?"

Mado looked over. "Preening?"

The doctor smiled. "Combing your feathers, straightening them out, that sort of thing." Mado shook his head as the doctor nodded thoughtfully.

He stood up and placed his hands on his hips. "First the good news. The feather loss you're experiencing doesn't appear to be due to feather mites or any sort of parasitic infestation or infection. There is no swelling or reddening of the follicles. It also doesn't seem that you are being aggressive in your preening, which is a problem with some new feathers."

His expression turned to sympathy as he continued. "Now the bad news. There is nothing I can do about either your feather loss or your sleepwalking. I suspect that both are due to the stress you're dealing with."

The doctor sighed. "With a human patient, I can usually prescribe a mild sedative and have him take a little time off from work." He glanced at Matsu, then back to Mado. "But you're not a human patient."

He placed the magnifying glass in his valise and closed it. "There is no apparent physical cause for your ailments."

He picked up the valise and turned to Mado. "Mr. Mado, the most important thing for you to do is try to rest and relax." He glanced at Matsu. "I know that may be especially difficult right now, but the more stress you undergo, the worse these problems will become."

The doctor stepped over by the door. "I have other patients I must see today." He turned to Matsu. "Is there someone here who can give me a ride?"

Matsu looked at Mado. "Will it be okay to leave Mado alone like this? I'm the only one here who can take you back to town right now."

The doctor glanced at Mado. "I doubt he'll be sleepwalking in the next hour or so. I'll give you some tips for dealing with sleepwalkers on the way."

Matsu stepped to the side of the bed. "Mado, are you going to be okay while I'm gone?"

Mado nodded. "I'll stay right here. I'll try to rest and not go for a walk." Mado grinned reassuringly, but

Matsu's expression was worried as he followed the doctor out of the room.

Mado lay back in the bed and stared at the ceiling. *How am I supposed to avoid stress with all these things going on?*

He thought about Umi wandering in the rain. And what he had tried to tell Master Tsuchi about Nemu.

In the distance, Mado could hear the sound of the clock tower bell of Old Home, ringing slowly but continuously, a soft reminder of the worries the morning had brought.

Just as he closed his eyes, he heard a soft voice call out. "Hi."

Mado sat up quickly, startled, and looked at the doorway.

It was Umi. He was still dressed in the faded red tee shirt and light brown shorts he had been wearing in Nemu's room. He was soaking wet from head to toe, but was smiling cheerfully as if nothing was wrong.

In his hands was a darkened halo. Umi held it in front of him, regarding it with an incongruous look of wonder. His smile became a mischievous grin as he peered over the edge of the dark gray ring, staring sharply into Mado's eyes.

Umi glanced around conspiratorially, then moved slowly to the foot of the bed, the halo clutched tightly in his hands.

Mado shifted uncomfortably, not sure what to do. He could see that Umi was trembling. His skin was pale, his lips and fingernails were tinged blue from the cold rain. But these were not the most disturbing aspects of his appearance.

Umi's eyes were ablaze with madness as he leaned over the bed, and he giggled softly before speaking in a voice barely above a whisper.

*"Mado, I saw it."*

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 8.2: Disclosures**

Umi nodded emphatically and giggled as Mado's eyes widened with realization.

He held up the dark ring. "It comes out of the halo. The light, it's like nothing you've ever seen." He clutched the halo against his chest and closed his eyes. "It's the most beautiful thing in the world."

Umi stood with an expression of beatific bliss as shivers began to wrack his body.

Mado edged closer. "Umi, we need to get you warmed up. You must be freezing."

Umi's eyes shot open, his smile became a forced grimace. "No, I'm okay." He held up the halo. "I need to take this back to Old Home. They need to know what happened."

He lowered the halo, fixated on it. “They need to know that Nemu is okay now.”

Umi turned to leave and began laughing hysterically as his knees buckled under him. He fell to the floor, still laughing as tears began to fall from his eyes. The halo rolled from his fingers and fell next to the dresser with a soft metallic thud.

Mado jumped out of bed and knelt next to Umi. *I need to get him warmed up right now!*

He carefully lifted the small boy in his arms. Even soaking wet, Umi was surprisingly light. The laughs faded into sporadic chuckles, and beneath his half-closed lids, his eyes had rolled back in their sockets. His wings were trembling, scattering tiny droplets of rain.

Mado carried him quickly into the guest bathroom and set him gently on the floor. After starting the water and checking to make sure it would not be scalding, Mado quickly peeled off Umi's clothes and eased him into the near-empty tub.

As the hot water slowly rose, Mado supported Umi's head with one hand while massaging his fingers and toes with the other. They were ice cold, and though Umi stirred now and then at Mado's movements, he was not conscious.

When the water reached Umi's chest, Mado turned off the water and carefully lowered the boy as far under the surface as he could, cradling his chin to keep it out of the water.

Umi's eyelids fluttered and his limbs convulsed once spasmodically. “What?” His lips, which had been almost bright blue, were now a dark purple.

Mado leaned close. “Umi, can you hear me?”

Umi's head moved from side to side, and he coughed several times, disturbing the water around him. Finally, his eyes opened halfway, and took several moments to focus on Mado's face.

His voice was weak, and a shiver shook his body as he spoke. “Mado?”

Mado nodded with obvious relief. “Umi. Do you know where you are?”

Umi looked around the room. “I'm in Stone Mill. But how did I get here?” He raised a hand to his head, puzzled.

Suddenly, his eyes opened wide and he sat up, roiling the water. “Nemu!” His gaze darted around the room. The word was a quiet whimper. “No.”

Umi put his hands over his eyes. “She's gone.” His body convulsed with sobs as he leaned forward. His hands concealed his face as he wept passionately.

Mado held Umi's arm tightly, wanting to comfort him but also not wanting him to slip and hurt himself. Umi was still shivering. They sat like that for several minutes.

“Mado?” It was Matsu. He hurried up to the tub. “Umi!” He kneeled next to the tub, his eyes flickering between Mado and Umi. “What happened?”

Umi sat up and wiped his cheeks. “Nemu's gone. I saw her fly away.” He grinned impishly at Matsu and began giggling nervously.

Matsu shook his head once. “What? You saw it?” He sat down, leaning against the tub, his mouth agape.

Mado glanced at Umi, then at Matsu. “Matsu, I think Umi needs the doctor.”

Matsu paused for a moment. “Huh? Oh, I can't. They were waiting for him when I dropped him off. There was some sort of emergency.”

He briefly held the back of his hand against Umi's forehead. “You're doing the right thing, though. The doctor told me about exposure. We need to keep him in the bath to get his temperature up.”

Mado stood up. “Matsu, can you take care of Umi?”

Matsu nodded. “Sure. But where are you going?”

Mado walked to the doorway and turned, his expression grim. “I'm going to talk to Master Tsuchi.”

He walked back to his room. Nemu's halo was still on the floor. He placed it gently next to Kabe's memorial, slipped into his coveralls and hurried upstairs.

Mado stood next to Tsuchi's door for a few moments before knocking. There was no response, and Mado knocked more loudly. Still nothing.

He pounded on the door as hard as he could, then shouted. “I'm coming in!”

As with all the doors in Stone Mill, there was no lock. It took a few moments for Mado's eyes to adjust to the darkness in the room.

Tsuchi was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. His eyes seemed small without his glasses. Tsuchi did not move or acknowledge Mado's presence as he stepped closer to the bed.

Mado cleared his throat loudly. “Master Tsuchi. Umi is here. It's an emergency.”

Tsuchi closed his eyes but said nothing.

Mado stepped closer. “Master, Nemu is gone.”

Tsuchi's eyes squeezed tightly shut, then relaxed without opening. He breathed a soft sigh through his nose but did not move.

Mado stood next to the bed. “Master, what's wrong?”

Tsuchi lay motionless for many moments before speaking softly and evenly. “Apprentice Mado, you do not have my permission to be here. Please leave at once.” He did not open his eyes.

Mado knelt and reached out impulsively, but drew back his hand. “Master, are you sick?”

Tsuchi's voice was a low growl. “Yes. Now go away and let me rest.”

As Mado moved to stand up, he saw a small feather on the floor. He picked it up and gasped.

Near the tip of the feather was a dark spot, as if it had been stained with ink. Mado stood up quickly, holding the feather in his fingers. “Master!”

Tsuchi grunted angrily and turned his body away, pulling the covers tightly around him. But as he turned, Mado saw that Tsuchi's wings were speckled with dark spots.

Mado's arms fell to his side. “Master...” He turned to leave, but stepped over to the small table. It was dimly lit by the gray haze shining through the window.

The tiny tree had been cut. One of its main limbs was severed and lay on the table. Next to it were Tsuchi's glasses, and next to them was the necklace Nemu had been wearing when Mado last saw her.

Tears began to stream down Mado's face as he turned back to Tsuchi. “Master, please...”

Tsuchi's voice was muffled, but the tone was unmistakable.

“Mado, *leave me alone.*”

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 8.3: Contingence**

Matsu was helping Umi dry off when Mado returned to the guest bathroom.

Mado paused in the doorway, his expression stern. “Matsu, take care of Umi. I'm going to Old Home. We need to call off the search and tell everyone what happened.”

Matsu stood up as if to protest, but Mado held up his hand. “I'm going. Take care of Umi.”

Umi was wrapped in white towels. One was draped over his head like a hood, his halo floated lightly above it.

Mado smiled thinly. “Umi, stay here with Matsu, okay?”

Umi blushed and lowered his head. “Okay.”

Mado returned to his room and grabbed Nemu's halo. As he turned to leave, his eyes lingered on Kabe's ponytail, and the stone Kabe had given him.

Mado hurried to the main entrance, quickly changed into his boots and put on one of the bright yellow raincoats from the coat locker. He tucked the halo into one of the raincoat's large pockets and stepped out the door.

Outside, the rain was a light drizzle pouring from a puffy gray blanket of low, overcast clouds. Mado considered taking a scooter or bicycle, but decided it would be safer to walk.

He jogged over the bridge, taking care not to slip on the stones. Wet grass soaked the legs of his coveralls as he ran over the Hill of Winds.

The ringing of the clock tower bell grew louder as Old Home came into view. No one else was outside, and Mado hoped that somebody had stayed behind.

He entered the courtyard at a brisk walk, and saw light in the windows of the guest room. Mado hurried through the lobby and up the stairs. He pushed his way into the guest room without knocking or changing out of his wet boots.

Rakka was sitting at the table, flanked by two young girls.

They were each maybe twelve years old, their blonde hair cut in bangs. Each was wearing a dark green sweatshirt with matching green shorts. Their blue eyes stared in wide alarm as Mado strode into the room.

Mado recognized them from the Hill of Winds. *So, they were twins!*

Rakka stood up in surprise, and the girls ducked behind her, seemingly trying to hide. That they were themselves almost as tall as Rakka made the scene comical, and Mado smiled inwardly, though his expression remained serious.

Mado paused next to the bed and pulled the halo from his raincoat. He glanced at it for a moment before meeting Rakka's widening eyes. "Nemu is gone."

Rakka turned and sat back down at the table. She bowed her head for a moment before speaking. "I know." The twins drifted behind the table, watching Mado curiously.

He stepped over to the table and placed Nemu's halo gently on a corner, then stepped back a few paces. "Umi is at Stone Mill. He was soaking wet and was very cold, but I think he's going to be okay." He lowered his eyes. "I hope."

The girls all stared at the halo for several moments in silence.

Finally, Rakka turned to Mado as the twins sat down at the far end of the table. "Is he talking to anyone?"

Mado nodded. "He says he saw her leave." He glanced at the balcony door. "We need to call off the search."

Rakka nodded thoughtfully. "Kana said to turn off the bell for a few minutes, then back on, and to do that three times. That's the signal for everyone to come back." She stood up.

Mado held up a hand. "I'll do it. Do you know how to turn the bell off?"

Rakka nodded. "Go to the top of the stairs. The breaker switch is on the wall next to the trap door."

As Mado turned to leave, Rakka spoke suddenly. "Oh, Mado..."

He paused as Rakka motioned toward the girls. "This is Kasai and this is Jika."

One of the girls protested. "No, *I'm* Kasai and *she's* Jika."

Rakka's eyes flashed as she snapped angrily. "Not now, *Jika*."

Mado bowed slightly, a thin smile on his face. "We've met." He turned and hurried out of the room.

At the top of the stairs, Mado threw open the trapdoor. There was a light switch nearby, and Mado turned on the room lights.

This close, the bell was almost deafening, and Mado threw the double knife switch on the wall before taking a moment to look at the room. The bell stopped ringing as the machinery of the clock wound down to a stop.

One half of the room held a complex arrangement of gears behind the clock face. In the other half was a wooden desk topped by a row of small books.

A book was lying by itself in front of them. Mado sat in the small wooden chair and opened it.

The book was full of drawings and notes describing the conversion of the clock to electrical power. Mado studied the drawings with fascination. *Hebi and Sono made these.*

A few minutes passed before Mado stood up and threw the knife switch again. The machinery roared to life and the bell started ringing loudly. He put his fingers in his ears and stared at the book on the table as the tower bell tolled.

Mado had just turned off the bell for a third time when he heard footsteps running up the stairs.

Kana's head, wet from the rain, appeared in the trap door. A moment later, she climbed up and stood next to Mado.

He stared at her mutely. She seemed to be standing kind of close.

Kana shook some of the water from her hair. She moved even closer as her eyes locked with Mado's. "Did you find them?" Her dark eyes were lit with intensity as she waited for an answer.

Mado swallowed and glanced at the floor before answering. "Nemu's gone. Umi is at Stone Mill." He stared at the floor. "Rakka has Nemu's halo."

He looked aside uncomfortably.

Kana lowered her head, her voice was soft. “Oh.” She turned and sat down on the chair, staring at the machinery of the clock.

After a few minutes of silence, Mado moved to turn on the bell again, but Kana stopped him. “Leave it off. Everyone was coming back anyway.”

She turned to look at the book on the desk, which Mado had left open. “Do you understand these drawings?”

Mado nodded slowly. “I think so. They show the gearing and connection schematics for the electric motor.”

Kana glanced at him. “That's right.” Her eyes flicked to the motor then to Mado. “Do you know anything about motor speed controllers?”

Mado pursed his lips. There was *something*. “I don't know, but I could learn.”

Kana stood up. “The clock runs too fast, but I can't fix it. Let's talk about it later. Come on.” She led Mado down the stairs and back to the guest bedroom.

A crowd of haibane was gathered around the table, all staring at Nemu's halo, which still rested where Mado had left it. They all looked over as Kana and Mado entered the room.

Mado cleared his throat to speak, but Senkou interrupted. “Rakka told us about Umi. Everyone is back from the search and accounted for.” He turned to Rakka. “Is there anything more we can do?”

Rakka shook her head slowly as she stared at the halo. “We expected it to happen sooner or later.”

Hikari chimed in, her expression sullen. “I guess we just hoped it wouldn't be today.”

Rakka stood up and bowed to each of the boys. “Thank you for helping us. Please let Umi know that we're glad to hear he's okay.” She sat down again, staring at the halo.

Senkou motioned Kumo toward the door, but as they went to move past Mado, he stopped them. “Senkou, Master Tsuchi is, um, sick.”

Senkou and Kumo looked at each other as Hikari spoke up. “Oh, did he catch a cold? Please give him our respects.”

Mado was about to answer, but Senkou interrupted him and turned to bow to the girls. “Please accept the sincerest condolences of Stone Mill for your loss. Contact us if we can be of any assistance. We must be going.”

The girls waved somberly as the boys left the room.

Kana grabbed Mado's arm as he turned to go. “Mado, take care of yourself, okay?” Her tone was casual, but her eyes held worry. Mado nodded quietly and left.

Senkou and Kumo had ridden scooters for the search, and Mado rode back with Senkou. They moved slowly

down the muddy road in silence, and did not speak as they hosed off the scooters then wiped them down in the garage.

After they had gone inside, hung up their raincoats and changed into their shop shoes, Senkou and Kumo glanced at each other before Senkou spoke.

“Tell us about Master Tsuchi.”

#### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 8.4: Frequencies**

Mado reached into his chest pocket and pulled out the spotted feather he had found next to Tsuchi's bed.

Senkou and Kumo stared at it quietly before Senkou spoke. “Let's check on Umi.”

Umi's room was near the north end of the East Loft. Matsu was there, sitting next to Umi as he lay in bed. Both turned as the other boys entered the room.

Senkou stepped over to the bed and shook Umi's hand. “Apprentice Umi, it's good to have you back.”

Umi blushed and lowered his head. “Thanks.”

Kumo stepped up next and grinned broadly as he punched Umi lightly on the shoulder. “Stupid kid, you had us all climbing the walls.”

Umi's face reddened even more, but he smiled. “I'm glad to see you too, Kumo.”

Kumo gave him a bear hug then stepped back from the bed.

Matsu spoke up. “His temperature looks like it's back to normal. He has a mild cough, but no fever.” He sighed in mild frustration. “I want to get the doctor, but the nurse said he was needed at the hospital for emergency surgery, so he's probably not going to be available for the rest of the day.”

He glanced over at Umi. “I think he's going to be all right, though. It's hard just getting him to stay in bed.”

Matsu reached over and tousled Umi's hair. His knuckles rapped the halo, making a loud ringing sound.

Senkou cleared his throat. “So Umi, are you planning to stay?”

Umi's blush returned as he nodded. “I'm sorry I ran away.”

Senkou smiled thinly. “Just tell us where you're going next time. We want to make sure you're safe.”

Umi nodded again, and looked up with a crooked smile. “I know.”

Kumo leaned forward. “I hear you saw Nemu leave. What was it like?”

The boys all watched quietly as Umi spoke.

He smiled and his eyes brightened, then unfocused. His tone was wondrous, awestruck. "I thought she didn't see me following her, but when she got to the top of the stairs, she waved at me."

Umi closed his eyes for a moment, seeming to savor the memory. "Then she turned around and held up her arms, and her halo..."

Tears began to flow slowly down Umi's cheeks as he paused, still smiling, his eyes closed. "It shined so brightly that I couldn't see anything for a while."

He opened his eyes. "When I could see again, she had turned into these lights, and there was this bright beam coming from the halo. It seemed to light up everything."

Umi's eyes stared distantly as he spoke. "There was a sound in my mind, like singing, like angels." He held out his hands in a lifting gesture. "Then everything went up into the sky."

He closed his eyes again as his hands fell into his lap. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

There was silence in the room for several moments before Kumo said simply, "Wow."

Umi opened his eyes and smiled contentedly. "I'm not afraid of it anymore." He lowered his head as his smile became a frown. "But I'm going to miss her. A lot."

The boys all bowed their heads for a moment. But Senkou broke the silence. "I'll bet you're starving." He motioned toward the door. "Come on, let's eat."

Umi jumped out of bed before Matsu could stop him and was already putting on his coveralls as the boys began filing out of the room.

Senkou had prepared some soup earlier, and Kumo helped him as he brought it out and poured it over noodles. Kumo added some herbs and spinach leaves as a finishing touch, and the boys sat down to lunch with strong black tea.

The mood at the table was cheerful, and the boys took turns hassling Umi in their own little ways, letting him know they were glad to have him back. When the meal was done, they unanimously decreed that Umi would have to wash the dishes, but both Matsu and Kumo helped him, and soon all the boys were sitting at the table again.

Senkou clasped his hands and set them on the table, adopting an official tone. "Mado met with Master Tsuchi this morning." He nodded toward Mado. "Mado?"

Mado reached into his pocket and pulled out the feather again. Both Matsu and Umi gasped, and all the boys traded sharp glances.

Senkou cleared his throat and continued. "We know what this means, but Mado may not."

He turned to Mado, and though his expression was stern, his eyes held compassion. “A haibane whose wings are blackened is sin-bound, and cannot receive the blessing of the town. For that haibane, there can be no Day of Flight.”

Mado's eyes darted around the table before he spoke. “Is there any way to cure it?”

Senkou fell silent briefly, staring at his hands. “Yes, but we don't know how.” He glanced at Mado, then back at his hands. “I told you about Akashio, but I didn't tell you everything.”

Senkou's gaze swept over the table, and the boys shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. “As you know, Akashio was Master Tsuchi's apprentice and Kabe's senior, and one of Stone Mill's best machinists ever.”

He shifted to face Mado. “Here's the part I didn't tell you. A long time ago, Akashio became sin-bound. Master Tsuchi was frantic. He was afraid Akashio was going to run away, so he followed him everywhere and made sure Akashio was always being watched.”

Senkou paused for a moment, then continued. “We don't know what happened, but one day Akashio wasn't sin-bound anymore. His wings went back to normal overnight. Master Tsuchi never told anyone what happened, but he must know.”

Kumo spoke. “Okay, so what do we do?”

Senkou glanced at Kumo, then down at the table. “I think we should do the same thing.” His eyes scanned the faces of the seated haibane. “We should watch him.” There were nods of agreement around the table.

Senkou stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I think we need to get back to work, too.” More nods. “If no one objects, I propose that instead of Recreation Day tomorrow, we make that a work day. We need to get Number Eight back on line.” There was unanimous approval.

Matsu spoke up. “Good. It was kind of nice at first, but I get less time off now than I did when we were working. It'll be nice to relax for a change.” There were chuckles and nods around the table.

Senkou smiled. “Okay. I'll add a watch list to the work schedule, and the bells will start ringing again tomorrow morning.”

He paused for a moment. “I think it will be okay for us to stand our watches in the main shop at a workbench near the front door. Aside from the main entrance, the only other way out is through the back door, but there's no way anyone could open that without being noticed. That way we can work while we stand watch.”

The boys nodded. The back door was a huge wooden door on slide rails.

Kumo spoke up. “I think it would be a good idea to put bells on the front and back doors, also, just in case. I can make some up and install them no sweat.”

Senkou nodded approvingly. “Okay. Today is Maintenance Day, but I say we skip it this week. It's raining

anyway.” He turned to Umi. “Umi, you need to get some rest.” He glanced sharply at Mado. “You too, Mado.”

At that, the boys stood up. Matsu shepherded Umi upstairs while Senkou and Kumo began working in the shop.

Mado walked back to the guest room and looked in the dresser mirror. His wings looked a little frayed, but the feathers didn't seem to be falling out so quickly. Though there were still dark circles under his eyes, they weren't as deep. He still looked haggard, but something had changed.

He stared at Kabe's memorial on the dresser for a long while, then reached over and carefully moved the items into his top dresser drawer.

Mado sat on the bed, and noticed the box of mints on the nightstand. He popped one into his mouth, then slipped the box into his chest pocket. After several minutes passed, he stood up and walked out the door.

Mado stood quietly in front of the door to Tsuchi's room, gathering his nerve before knocking. There was no response. Mado knocked again. “I'm coming in.”

Tsuchi has sitting at the small table, dressed only in his tee shirt and underwear, staring at the miniature tree. His wings were covered with small black spots.

As Mado entered, Tsuchi set Nemu's necklace on the table, but did not look over.

Mado sat in the guest chair.

Tsuchi's eyes remained fixed on the tree as he spoke softly. “Why do you insist on disregarding my privacy?”

Mado cleared his throat. “Because I care about you.”

Tsuchi's eyes flashed behind his glasses, piercing Mado. “Why should you care about me?”

Mado stared at Tsuchi. “Because you care about me.”

Tsuchi sighed peevishly before lowering his head.

Mado continued. “I know what happened to Hebi, and now I know what happened to Akashio.”

Tsuchi turned toward the window, and Mado could see a tear roll down his cheek, sparkling in the dim gray light.

Mado leaned forward and spoke evenly, and there was a fire in his eyes. “Master Tsuchi, I'm not going to let you disappear. I'm not going to leave your side.”

Tsuchi glanced at Mado, his expression indecipherable.

Mado stood up, his gaze locked on Tsuchi as he spoke, his voice firm and unwavering.

“I'm going to be your apprentice.”

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 8.5: Connections**

Tsuchi stared at Mado with shocked incredulity before his expression finally softened.

A very thin smile formed, but then became a scowl as he faced the window. “I do not doubt that you would be an excellent student, Mado.”

Tsuchi glanced at Mado, his expression pained. “But I'm afraid I cannot accept you as my apprentice.”

He lifted a hand as Mado moved to respond. Mado stepped back, glaring defiantly.

Tsuchi faced the window again. “The Communicator has informed me that my time here is nearing its end.”

Mado sat abruptly in the chair, startled but unfazed. He spoke quickly. “That's why you need to train a replacement.”

Tsuchi turned, listening as Mado continued. “I know I'm new here, and there's a lot I don't know yet, but I've been watching, studying the machines, looking at the drawings on the benches. You're the only machinist, and once you're gone, we won't have one.”

Tsuchi waved dismissively. “Kumo can handle it.”

Mado shook his head. “Kumo's not a machinist. You've been here so long, it would be a shame not to pass on what you know.”

Mado leaned forward, holding Tsuchi's gaze. “Master, I want to learn as much as I can before you go. I want to be a machinist. Please, *teach me*.”

Tsuchi arched his eyebrows, seemingly impressed, but turned to the window with a frown. “I'm afraid I will not have much time to teach you, Mado. Now that I am sin-bound, I will likely disappear soon.”

Mado stood up, indignant, his face flushed. “No! I won't let you!”

He sat down, glaring, his eyes locked on Tsuchi's. “You didn't let Akashio disappear. I'm not going to let you disappear.”

Tsuchi sniffed loudly and faced the window. “You mean the way I let Hebi disappear.”

Mado almost spat out the words, his voice edged with frustration. “Master! It wasn't your fault! You didn't know.” He sat back in the chair, trying to calm down. “But you saved Akashio. How did you do it?”

Tsuchi glanced briefly at Mado. “That's not something I want to talk about.”

Mado stood up again, his face flushed, nearly shouting, his fists clenched. "Master! How can you say that? Do you want to leave me feeling the same way about you that you feel about Hebi?"

Tsuchi's eyes flashed and locked with Mado's. As they stared silently at one another, a tear rolled slowly down Mado's cheek.

Mado's voice has choked. "Master, please don't do that to me." He fell to his knees, his eyes pleading. "Please Master, let me help you." Tears streamed down his face as he began sobbing.

Tsuchi sat watching him in silence, his expression a hardened mask. But slowly, tears began to roll down his face, and his expression softened as he leaned forward and put a hand on Mado's shoulder. "Mado, I'm sorry."

Tsuchi sat up, and his cheeks reddened as he bowed his head. "I have been a selfish fool." He cleared his throat, then leaned forward and helped Mado to his feet.

Tsuchi stood facing Mado with a thin smile, hands on his shoulders. "Mado, I accept you as my apprentice."

Mado grinned exultantly through his tears. "Thank you, Master."

He wiped the tears from his cheeks and straightened his back. "As your apprentice, I wish to make a formal request."

Tsuchi arched his eyebrows, his expression mildly amused. "Oh?"

Mado cleared his throat. "I request your promise that you will not leave Stone Mill until you are no longer sin-bound."

Tsuchi's eyes widened in surprise before he looked aside. "I do not think I can promise that, Apprentice Mado." He turned and held Mado's gaze. "But I promise that I will try not to abandon you the way I was abandoned." He lowered his head, and they stood in silence for several moments.

Mado cleared his throat again. "Master Tsuchi, as your apprentice, I think it would be best if you got something to eat. Are you willing to go to the lounge, or should I bring you something?"

Tsuchi glanced at his wings. "I think I would prefer to eat in my room for now."

Mado gazed down at his feet. "They know about your wings, Master." He looked up sheepishly. "I told them."

Tsuchi scowled, his voice stern. "You really don't respect my privacy, do you?"

The scowl became a smile, and he patted Mado's shoulder before sitting down. He stared at the miniature tree for a moment, then smiled ironically. "Thank you for your disrespect."

Mado walked to the door, turned, bowed low, then went downstairs to the kitchen.

The soup that Senkou had prepared was still on the stove and hot. The large pot was over half full, enough for another full meal for the whole nest if needed.

Mado poured some soup over noodles, added herbs and spinach leaves and prepared a serving tray complete with a pot of tea.

When he returned to the room, he found that Tsuchi had changed into his coveralls and put on his shoes. The items on the table had been put aside, and Mado set the serving tray down in front of Tsuchi with a bow.

Mado stepped back and spoke. "Master, would it be okay for me to stay and talk while you eat?"

Tsuchi furrowed his brow for a moment, then nodded. "If you wish."

Mado sat down in the guest chair. "I'm sorry for being so rude, but I think it's important that we not keep any secrets from each other."

Tsuchi arched his eyebrows, but continued eating quietly.

Mado leaned forward and clasped his hands. "I know you don't have to answer my questions, but there are some things I need to know." He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Why did Akashio's wings turn black?"

Tsuchi answered between bites. "I believe it may have had to do with his cocoon dream, but I do not know."

Mado nodded thoughtfully. "What was it that cured him?"

Tsuchi's eyes flickered to Mado's wing brace. "That is also something I do not know." He paused for a moment, smiling thinly. "Perhaps it was the realization that I was not going to leave him until he got better."

Mado grinned, then pursed his lips. "Master, why did Nemu give you her necklace?"

Tsuchi froze, staring at his soup. He set down his spoon, reached over and picked up the necklace, staring at it thoughtfully.

He spoke softly. "I first met Miss Nemu at the library many years ago when I was studying for my master's examination. She was very knowledgeable about the technical manuals and went out of her way to help me study."

Tsuchi gazed out the window. "Without her, the test would have been far more difficult. As it was, I achieved the highest score on the written test in the history of the Machinist's Guild. The oral and practical examinations were nearly effortless, and I was ranked a Master Machinist with honors. No other haibane has ever been so awarded."

His attention turned to the tree. "Over the years, Nemu and I became friends. Never very close, but I was always glad when chance would have us meet. I truly enjoyed her company."

Tsuchi's expression became pained, and he stared at the necklace as his voice edged with sorrow. "It was only yesterday, when we spoke over tea and she gave me her necklace, that I realized how much I regretted

not having known her better, how fond I had become of her without knowing it. It was a bitter thing to discover at the end.”

He softly cleared his throat. “I have known much sadness in my time here, but it was this which had finally broken my heart.”

Fresh tears rolled down his face. “She was a good haibane, and I will miss her terribly.”

Tsuchi quietly hung the necklace around his neck, and held the small cluster of grapes in his hand for a moment before tucking it under his collar.

Mado bowed his head, and they sat silently for a long while. Mado thought about his first and last meeting with Nemu, how they had shared tea, and how he had waved to her after speaking with Umi. *I never told her he talked to me.*

Tsuchi gazed toward the window. “I am comforted, though, by the memory of our last meeting, and I will never forget it.” He paused for a moment, then slowly began eating again.

Mado sat quietly, staring at his hands before speaking. “Master, I think you should know that Umi saw Nemu take flight.”

Tsuchi glanced over, his eyes wide with astonishment. “He witnessed it?” He looked down, bewildered. “I will speak to him about it. Thank you for telling me.”

His brow furrowed. “How is Umi doing? Is he well?”

Mado sat up and nodded. “I think he's going to be okay. All of us met at lunch today. We have decided we will cancel Recreation Day and work tomorrow instead. Everyone wants to get back to work.”

Tsuchi smiled. “I see.” He gestured toward the door. “Is Senkou handling his responsibilities properly?”

Mado nodded emphatically. “Yes, Master Tsuchi.”

Tsuchi's smile broadened. “Very good.”

He gazed thoughtfully at Mado, and there was a gleam in his eyes that had not been there earlier. “I think it would be best if you go now, or I will never finish eating. I will take the dishes down to the kitchen later.”

Mado stood up and bowed. “Thank you, Master.”

As Mado paused by the door, Tsuchi spoke, his voice cheerful.

“I recommend resting well tonight, Apprentice Mado. You have a very busy day ahead of you tomorrow.”

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

## **Episode 9: Assemblies**

### **Scene 9.1: Components**

Mado was surrounded by haibane he did not recognize.

They were all dressed in bright white robes and stood in a throng around him, a crowd of boys and girls capped by glowing halos, hair of all lengths and colors, gray wings folded against their backs. A girl was walking among them, hugging and being hugged by the other haibane.

It was a clear, sunlit day. Mado surveyed the scene, and saw that they were standing in a temple. Everywhere were pillars of stone and arches set in the closely-trimmed grass.

It was the place of ruins, but everything was intact, unbroken. Highlighted in the stonework were strange symbols and reliefs. Atop a short, wide span of stone steps was a large, squat altar stone carved with unknown characters.

Mado watched in silent wonder as the girl walked slowly up the steps. Her hair was long and black, like Kabe's, but flowed down her back in a beautiful cascade that shimmered in the bright sunlight.

At the top step, she turned toward the haibane, and Mado gasped. She was beautiful, stunningly beautiful. Though her face bore a smile of triumph, her cheeks were glistening with tears. She bowed low, and her halo flickered once, twice, before she rose.

All the haibane bowed in response.

The girl turned toward the altar and raised her arms, her wings extending along with them. There was a sound, like a high-pitched whistling or whining. The sound became louder, pulsing in a staccato cacophony.

It was a bell, an alarm bell.

Mado sat up suddenly, his pajamas were soaked with sweat. He looked around, bewildered, confused. He was in his bed, in the guest room. He shook his head, trying to return to the dream, but could not.

He hopped out of bed and stepped over to the window. The morning sun was breaking through gray clouds, and the rain had passed. A crow was perched outside the closed window on the wooden ledge. Its dark eyes stared at him as it cocked its head.

It squawked loudly, then took flight with flapping wings.

There was a knock at the door.

It was Matsu. "Mado? Are you all right?" Mado invited him in.

Matsu walked in and sat down in the chair next to the bed. He turned toward Mado, who stood staring out the window. "Did you sleep okay?"

Mado gazed out the window for a moment before stepping over to the bed and sitting down. “Yes.”

He glanced at the window again. “I dreamed I was at the ruins, except they weren't ruins. It was a temple. And there was this girl...”

Matsu smiled. “At least you didn't sleepwalk.” Mado glanced at his feet and grinned in response.

Matsu gestured toward the dresser as he stood up. “You should get dressed. Today's a work day. See you at breakfast!” He patted Mado cheerfully on the shoulder and walked out of the room.

Senkou and Matsu were sitting at the table when Mado entered the lounge. He peeked into the kitchen, where Umi and Kumo were busy making breakfast, then sat down next to Matsu.

Senkou winked. “So, Mado, are you ready for your *second* day of work?” At this, Matsu grinned crookedly.

Mado shrugged. “I guess so.” He glanced over at the doorway. “I'm going to be working with Master Tsuchi. I'm going to be his apprentice.”

Senkou and Matsu exchanged astonished looks.

Matsu voice held disbelief. “Did he really agree to let you be his apprentice?”

Mado nodded.

Umi and Kumo carried serving trays from the kitchen and set them on the table.

Umi spoke with excitement as they sat down. “Really? Master Tsuchi is taking you as his apprentice?”

Mado nodded again as the other boys glanced at one another.

Senkou spoke. “We're a little surprised because Master Tsuchi hasn't accepted an apprentice since Akashio, and that was years ago.”

At that moment, Tsuchi walked slowly into the lounge, his trademark scowl graven upon his face. The boys looked over, then all stood up quickly and bowed low.

Tsuchi nodded curtly as he took a seat next to Senkou. His wings were speckled with dark, discolored feathers.

Tsuchi's movements were slow and deliberate as he quietly ate breakfast, his scowl unchanging, his eyes on his bowl. The other boys ate silently until finally Umi spoke.

Umi was leaning hard against the table, his eyes wide with curiosity. “Master, is it true that Mado is going to be your apprentice?”

Tsuchi froze, then set down his spoon. He turned his head deliberately, gazing at Umi for several seconds

before nodding once, slowly.

Umi shrank back in his chair, intimidated.

There was an uneasy hush that hung over the table for several seconds before Matsu spoke, almost indignantly. "Master, we understand about your wings. It's okay. We want to help. We don't want you to suffer."

Tsuchi's eyes turned and met Matsu's, and the two stared at each other as if locked in a contest of wills.

Finally, Tsuchi blinked, and his eyes returned to his bowl. "You are right." His voice was soft, contrite. "I am sorry for my behavior. It is not appropriate."

Senkou smiled and nudged him with an elbow. "You shouldn't scare us like that. Half of us aren't even awake yet."

There were a few nervous chuckles as the boys resumed eating, and light chatter broke out around the table.

The boys finished breakfast early, and everyone helped with the dishes. They were already lined up in the shop when the morning work bell rang.

Tsuchi stood facing the row of boys. He had relaxed during breakfast, but his stiff demeanor returned at the sound of the bell.

His voice had a formal edge as he spoke. "Haibane of Stone Mill, we have mourned the loss of one of our brothers."

He glanced at Umi, who stood at the end of the row, staring straight ahead, almost unblinking. "Today we return to our duties, and a schedule that does not recognize our frailties. It is my hope that each of us will find comfort in the satisfaction that comes from hard work and a job well done."

Tsuchi paused for a moment, his eyes moving down the row from one boy to the next. They lingered on Umi before he turned to Mado. "Apprentice Mado, you already understand the duties and responsibilities of being an apprentice. Is this correct?"

Mado nodded enthusiastically.

Tsuchi continued. "In addition to these things, you should know that I expect more from an apprentice than most masters do. Working with me is not easy, and you can expect many hardships as my student."

Tsuchi scowled menacingly. His eyes narrowed sternly, piercing Mado with their intensity. "Do you still wish to become my apprentice?"

"Yes, Master Tsuchi, I do." Mado spoke loudly, his voice almost echoing throughout the vast shop space.

Tsuchi nodded curtly. "Very well. I accept you as my apprentice. You will be assisting me with fitting the bearings and rotor assembly on the main shaft today." A thin smile came to his face. "And a few other tasks."

I hope you slept well last night, Apprentice Mado.”

He turned to Senkou. “Journeyman Senkou, Apprentice Umi will assist you with the stator. It is my hope that we will be able to install this unit by Wednesday at the latest. Do you believe this is possible?”

Senkou nodded with a mild smirk. “Yes, Master Tsuchi. Now that I have my apprentice back, we should have the stator wound, tested and installed by the end of the day tomorrow.”

Umi shifted uncomfortably at the end of the row, but said nothing.

Tsuchi spoke in turn to the rest of the boys. Kumo would be working at the Abandoned Factory that week, assisting them with their furnace overhaul.

Matsu would be working at Old Home. He had apparently volunteered to fix the sink and work on the ceiling and walls of the room Kabe and Mado had started work on. Mado felt a pang of remorse upon hearing this, but didn't know why.

The thought quickly passed as Tsuchi dismissed the other boys and led Mado over to the large lathe, where the main shaft was still mounted, ready for further machining.

Tsuchi pointed at a drawing on a nearby table. “Let's see where we need to begin. What can you tell me about this drawing?”

Mado had studied it before -- it had been sitting there throughout the previous week. He looked it over carefully nonetheless, mindful of Tsuchi's gaze, before speaking tentatively. “It's a plan for the main shaft assembly, showing the dimensions for the bearing seats and shoulders, and the drill points for the rotor mount screws.”

Tsuchi nodded with satisfaction. “Very good. It seems you can read basic drawings. Let's see how well you approach problems.”

He led Mado over to the lathe, and pointed at various sections of the main shaft as he spoke. “It was necessary to machine a new main shaft after a bearing failed on the previous one. The failure caused extensive scoring of the shaft, and allowed the rotor to contact the stator, shearing both and ruining them. It was a massive and catastrophic event, and one we need to prevent from recurring.”

Tsuchi pointed at one of the bearing seats, a section of the shaft upon which a bearing sleeve would be installed. “The bearing that failed was here. It had worked away from the shoulder and off the seat. What do you recommend we do to prevent that from happening in the future?”

Mado stared at the shaft for a few moments, then turned and studied the drawing. After thinking for a while, he turned to Tsuchi. “According to the plans, there's enough clearance to put in a bearing retainer plate. I see that you've already drilled the holes for one.” He glanced at the shaft. “There's one other thing I think would be a good idea, though.”

Tsuchi arched an eyebrow as Mado continued. “I think you should put a slight inverse taper on the bearing seat, just a thousandth or two, so that over time the load pressure will tend to force the bearing against the

shoulder on the side opposite the retainer plate.”

Tsuchi glanced at the shaft, then the drawing, before regarding Mado with an amused smile. “Interesting. You think like a machinist. Such a taper would have to be very subtle to avoid deforming the bearing, but I think you have a good idea. It would indeed aid in keeping the bearing in place, as well as reduce the load on the retainer plate.”

He stepped over to the drawing. “I will annotate the plan to reflect this.” He turned to Mado. “You will be the one who applies these changes, under my supervision.”

“No!” Tsuchi and Mado turned toward the sound. It was Umi. They could hear Senkou's voice in response, but couldn't make out the words. They appeared to be disagreeing about something.

A flash of concern crossed Tsuchi's face, but disappeared as he faced Mado. “I will guide you through each step. Are you ready to begin?”

Mado looked around briefly, a puzzled look on his face. “Master, before we start, I have a question.”

Tsuchi nodded affably. “What is it?”

Mado's cheeks flushed. “I know that Senkou and Umi are working on the stator, and that we're working on the main shaft for the rotor, but, um, what is it that all this is for?”

Tsuchi stared at him for a moment, then started chuckling, astonished. Suddenly, he broke out laughing so loudly that both Senkou and Umi walked over to look.

Tsuchi laughed almost hysterically, steadying himself against the lathe and fighting back tears.

It occurred to Mado that this was the first time he had ever seen Tsuchi laugh, and he exchanged confused looks and shrugs with the other boys as Tsuchi sought to regain his composure.

Finally, Tsuchi quieted down, though a broad smile remained on his face as he cleared his throat. “Please forgive me. We tend to take this for granted, as I hope you can appreciate. With all that has happened, I suppose we neglected to tell you.”

Tsuchi glanced conspiratorially at the other boys before continuing. His smile was warm, his voice edged with mirth.

“Apprentice Mado, it is the primary duty of Stone Mill to operate and maintain the wind generators.”

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 9.2: Protocols**

Tsuchi gathered his composure and, coughing importantly, assumed his trademark scowl as he turned to face Senkou and Umi, who stood staring at him expectantly.

Tsuchi's tone was abrupt. “What is the basis for your disagreement?”

Senkou shifted uneasily on his feet. “Master, Umi and I have differing opinions about the stator pack. I think we should wind it as closely as possible within the tolerances, but Umi thinks we should do the opposite, and gap them as much as the specifications allow.”

Umi interrupted. “If we wind them too close, the insulation will break down and cause a failure.” He put a hand over his mouth and looked at Senkou. “Sorry.”

Senkou smiled. “It's okay. Umi's right, but I'm only suggesting that we should wind them at the minimum tolerances, not any closer. Doing that will increase the power output.” He made a sweeping gesture. “Doing that on enough stators will increase the reserve power-generating capacity of the entire system, which will increase overall fault tolerance and system reliability. What do you think, Master?”

Tsuchi glared at the two boys, his scowl unchanged.

Suddenly his expression softened. “Let's ask our newest apprentice for his opinion.”

He turned to Mado, and the three haibane stood watching him quietly, waiting for an answer.

Mado swallowed uncomfortably and spoke to Senkou. “How did you wind the rotor for this unit?”

Senkou glanced at Tsuchi. “Down the middle of the spec, as usual.”

Mado nodded. “And the last stator you wound, how did you wind that?”

Senkou grinned slyly. “The same.” He shook his head slowly and sighed. “I think I see your point. I guess we don't need the extra power that badly.”

Senkou turned to Umi. “Is down the middle okay with you?”

Umi nodded emphatically, and the boys went back to begin winding the stator.

Tsuchi put a hand on Mado's shoulder and smiled warmly. “Nicely done, Apprentice. Now, let's get to work.”

With Tsuchi's close supervision, Mado made the changes to the shaft and installed the new sleeve bearings and bearing retainer plates. As they were setting the torque of the retainer plate screws, the break bell rang.

Umi stepped over. “Master, would you like to play some basketball for the break?”

Tsuchi glanced over at Mado before answering. “No, I think I will stay indoors for a while.”

Mado interjected. “How about some pool, then?”

Umi smiled and rushed off to get Senkou. The break became a pool clinic with Tsuchi giving pointers and making some of the trickier shots as the other boys played against one another. When the bell rang, they hurried back to work.

Tsuchi guided Mado through the checklist as they fitted the rotor assembly to the main shaft. By the time the lunch bell rang, the assembly was completed, balanced, spin-tested and ready for installation once the stator was finished.

Senkou and Umi served lunch, which consisted of hot soup poured over rice noodles.

The conversation was light and lively as the boys caught up on each other's experiences. Umi was surprisingly candid about his recent period as a fugitive and uninvited guest at Old Home, and though there were a few moments of uneasy silence, the end of lunch found the four haibane feeling relaxed and reassured by one another's company.

As the other boys returned to the winding station, Tsuchi led Mado to a large work table and pulled a canvas cover off the main chassis for Wind Generator #8.

Referring to a thick book of drawings, he coached Mado through an inspection checklist, explaining the various components, their functions and most common modes of failure.

By the time the afternoon break bell rang, the chassis was inspected and ready for installation of the stator assembly.

As the boys walked toward the lounge, Senkou stopped suddenly, seemingly remembering something. "Mado, has anyone taught you how to ride the scooters?"

Mado shook his head, and Senkou led him outside as Umi and Tsuchi squared off for some advanced pool.

Senkou pulled back the sliding door to the garage and stepped inside. He paused, then pointed at a bicycle. "Do you think you can ride a bike?"

Mado nodded and wheeled the bicycle outside. Although he was a bit wobbly, he was soon riding the bike in tight circles over the cobblestone. Clearly, he had ridden one before, and Senkou nodded approvingly.

Mado wheeled out the blue scooter as Senkou retrieved a servicing stand and set the scooter on it. The stand stabilized the scooter, keeping it from tipping to either side, and lifted the rear wheel off the ground, allowing it to spin freely.

Senkou explained the gears, throttle, shifter, clutch, brakes and how they all worked together before having Mado start the engine and practice with it.

Though it took Mado a while to get the feel of things, he was soon able to ride the scooter, if somewhat gingerly.

At Senkou's urging, rode the scooter down to the bridge. As he slowed to turn around, he stopped and stared up at the Hill of Winds. The girl with the golden pigtails was there, wearing the same dress he had seen her wearing before, sitting, watching him.

She stood up when she realized he saw her but paused, staring thoughtfully, before turning and disappearing over the crest of the hill.

Mado sat up on the scooter, tempted to follow, but soon turned and rode back to the shed, where he and Senkou wiped it down as the late afternoon bell rang.

With all the work now waiting for completion of the stator winding process, Tsuchi led Mado over to his desk in the main shop area.

Tsuchi sat down, sighed and hunched his shoulders before gazing over at Mado. "You have done well today, but now it is time for something more challenging."

He smiled ironically as he handed Mado a small scroll tied with a ribbon. "It is my custom to meet with the Haibane Renmei Communicator on Sunday afternoons to report the status of the nest and receive instructions for the coming week. However, while I am... ill..."

He glanced back at his darkened wings. "I will be delegating that task to you."

Mado's eyes widened with surprise, but he accepted the scroll and bowed slightly. "Is there anything you want me to tell the Communicator?"

Tsuchi smiled cryptically. "Just give him my note. I'm sure he will ask you whatever questions he needs answers to." He waved his hand dismissively as he turned his attention to some papers on his desk. "Go to him now."

Mado changed into his boots slowly, thoughtfully. While he didn't think the Communicator was all that bad, the idea of having to meet him every week seemed intimidating. He wasn't an unkind person, but had a way of saying disturbing things without warning.

As Mado crossed the small stone bridge, he looked up at the Hill of Winds, but the girl with the pigtails was gone. He stopped and leaned on the stone railing, gazing down at the fish darting here and there in the swift current.

There was so much to take in, so much that didn't seem to make sense, and Mado wondered if he would ever be able to relax and not have to worry about what was going to happen next.

At that very moment he heard the cry of a distant crow and, with an ironic shrug, decided that it would probably be a long time before he would truly find some peace in this world.

Soft sunlight and scattered clouds blown by a soft afternoon breeze followed Mado as he walked up the path to the Temple. Spring was in the air, in the sweet smell of flowers on the wind, the muffled buzzing of bees, the colorful flapping of butterflies' wings and the constant chirping of birds.

It was a beautiful day, but Mado found it difficult to shake off his anxiety as the Temple drew closer.

An attendant was waiting for him when he arrived, and placed the bells on his wings and wrists. Inside, the garden was brightly lit, almost as if with an inner glow of its own. The Communicator was sitting in the gazebo, writing on a long, thin scroll of parchment with an ink brush.

Mado stopped a few paces away and watched as the Communicator kept writing, seemingly oblivious to his presence. *Does he really not know I'm here, or is he waiting, testing me?* After what must have been a few minutes, Mado shook the bells on his wrists and held out the scroll in his hand.

The Communicator glanced over, then set his writing aside and stood up, looming over Mado. He took the scroll from Mado's hand and read it quickly, then rolled it up, tied the ribbon around it and set it on the small writing table he had been using.

He looked back at Mado, his mask expressionless and unreadable. He stared for an uncomfortably long time before speaking.

“Is there anything else?”

Mado began to shake his left wing but stopped. After a pause, he shook the bells on his right wing. “Yes.”

The Communicator turned his head and seemed to look askance. “Very well, you may speak.”

Mado blushed slightly, but mustered his courage and spoke. “I know of three nests for the haibane. Stone Mill, the Factory and Old Home. Are there any others?”

The Communicator studied him for a moment. “Why do you wish to know?”

Mado's face flushed. “I saw a haibane girl. She's not from any of the nests I know of.” He stared at the ground. “I want to know who she is.”

Mado glanced up sheepishly, meeting the Communicator's inscrutable gaze. He thought he detected something like amusement behind the mask, but couldn't be sure.

Finally, the Communicator spoke. “She might not want you to know who she is. Is there anything else?”

Mado's jaw dropped unconsciously, but he quickly caught himself. “Yes. It's Master Tsuchi. Is there a way to cure him?”

The Communicator looked askance again. “Cure him of what?”

Mado's face reddened again. *Should I tell him?* “His wings. His... feathers have black spots on them.”

The Communicator's face almost turned away. “I see.”

He stood motionless for several moments before turning to Mado. “You cannot cure him of his sin. However, you can be there for him when he needs you most. He faces a very difficult ordeal.”

Mado nodded. “Like I did?”

Though expressionless, the Communicator's head jerked up slightly, and he seemed surprised. “*Did?*” There was a pregnant silence in the air as he studied Mado from behind the thin slits of the mask.

Finally, the Communicator lowered his head and drew close in a way that seemed almost menacing. There was an edge of solemn warning in his voice as he spoke.

“Feather Mado, your most difficult trial lies ahead.”

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 9.3: Precession**

Mado stood motionless, dumbfounded, as the Communicator turned and retrieved two scrolls from the table in the gazebo.

“Give this to Master Tsuchi, and this to Feather Umi.”

Mado took the scrolls and stared at them, still shocked at the idea that he faced even worse challenges than he had already endured.

The Communicator stood quietly, regarding Mado cryptically from behind his mask before finally speaking.

“You should return to Stone Mill. Is there anything else before you go?”

Mado moved to open his mouth but stopped, and instead shook the bells on his left wing. “No.”

He shook the bells on his wrists, turned and slowly left the temple, his mind racing with troubled thoughts.

When he returned to Stone Mill, he found Matsu at Tsuchi's desk in the shop. They were apparently talking about the impeller blades and support post structure for Generator #8.

They both stopped and stared at Mado as he approached. Senkou and Umi, who had been operating the winding machine, stopped working and walked over to join the other haibane.

Without speaking, Mado handed the scroll marked “Tsuchi” to Tsuchi, then turned and handed the scroll marked “Umi” to Umi. He then took a few steps backward and stared at the floor.

Matsu reached out a hand to Mado, clearly concerned, but lowered it and stood quietly as Tsuchi and Umi read their respective scrolls.

Both finished reading at the same time, and exchanged meaningful glances before tucking their scrolls into pockets in their coveralls.

Umi spoke softly to Senkou. “I need to go to the Temple tomorrow morning. I'll try to go early so we won't get behind.”

Senkou's eyes widened, but he nodded sympathetically and said nothing.

Tsuchi seemed about to say something when the front door slammed open, causing the newly-installed doorbell to clang loudly.

It was Kumo. He was pale and his eyes were wide with fright. All the boys clustered around him, allowing him time to compose himself.

After several deep breaths, Kumo stood up straight and cleared his throat. His eyes were puffy and he was clearly very upset.

Kumo's voice trembled as he tried to deliver the news as calmly as he could. "Gake of Abandoned Factory is in the hospital. I just came from there, and I've been there most of the day."

The boys traded surprised looks as Kumo continued. "He was removing vibration dampers from the exhaust ducting on Furnace #2 yesterday. Apparently, he was trying to get a head start on the overhaul, but it was raining, and he slipped."

"He fell four stories onto solid concrete." Kumo lowered his gaze. "The doctor has been watching him all night, and he's not sure if Gake is going to make it."

His voice became choked as he continued. "His halo... it's really banged up. It's almost bent in half, but worse, it..." He swallowed uncomfortably. "It's been flickering. No one knows what's going to happen. He hasn't regained consciousness since the accident."

Kumo buried his face in his hands and began sobbing. Umi hugged his waist, trying to comfort him.

The haibane of Stone Mill stood quietly for a long time as they took in the news.

Finally, Mado spoke. "I want to see him. Can we go to the hospital?"

Tsuchi nodded slowly as he spoke. "Whoever wishes to may of course go and visit him. I would go myself, but..." He glanced at his darkened wings and then stared at the floor as the boys changed into their boots and hurried out to the garage.

They sped into town on scooters, with Kumo leading the way.

The hospital was an ancient stone building in the North District, its walls covered with tangles of dark green ivy. The receptionist, upon seeing the crowd of haibane surge into the lobby, stood up and led them to Gake's room, which was on the ground floor not far from the entrance.

The room was large, with four beds, but only Gake's was occupied by a patient. Inside the room were all the haibane of the Abandoned Factory, and as the five boys walked in, the doctor, who had clearly not slept all night, seemed about to protest, but remained seated next to Gake, watching him with a look of resignation.

Gake's head was almost completely covered with bandages, and the one eye that was not covered was bruised and swollen. His right arm was held straight by a splint wrapped with bandages, while his right wing was fitted with a brace much larger and more complex than Mado's.

Judging from the massive swelling near the wrist joint, Gake's wing had been broken by the fall. His one visible eye was closed, swollen shut, but the eyelids fluttered and his eye seemed to move rapidly behind it, as if he was having a bad dream.

Over his head, his halo hovered battered and bent over at a right angle, almost comically deformed. As Mado watched, it flickered erratically. *Like Kabe's halo.*

The haibane of the Factory nodded in greeting as the boys of Stone Mill entered the room, but none of them spoke. All of them had apparently been holding vigil at Gake's side throughout the night. Even Douro had tears on his cheeks, and made no effort to hide them.

After a long period of silence, the doctor spoke. "I have never lost a haibane patient, and I'm not about to lose one now."

He sighed. "But I must be honest with you, I have never seen injuries this serious."

He exchanged a meaningful glance with Hyouko. "We are doing what we can to stabilize him, but all we can do is try to make it easier for him to heal."

The doctor stared somberly at Gake. "After that, it's up to him."

Ame turned her head and met Mado's gaze. She had been crying, but did not flinch as her eyes stayed locked on his. There was something in her expression. She returned her attention to Gake.

Hyouko was wearing a light brown sweatshirt and a maroon ball cap which concealed his halo. His hands were in his pockets, and his steel blue eyes darted here and there, as if searching vainly for answers in the hospital room.

Finally, he turned to Matsu. "Kumo and I have been talking, and we think we should put up some scaffolding before we continue the overhaul. The framework is too complicated for safety lines -- they get tangled in it -- which is why we don't use them."

Hyouko blushed as he spoke, seemingly embarrassed and perhaps feeling guilty about Gake's fall. "We were wondering if you could help with the scaffolding, since you're the only haibane carpenter."

Matsu nodded immediately. "Yes. I'll talk to Master Tsuchi. I'm sure he will approve. I'm also willing to help with the overhaul." He glanced over at Gake. "I'm not as good with metal as I am with wood, but I think I can make myself useful."

Matsu paused for a moment, then seemed to remember something. "Mado, do you have the note Kabe gave you for the room at Old Home? Kana said you knew what needed to be done."

He gestured in explanation as he spoke. "Since you're waiting for the stator to be finished, maybe tomorrow you can continue working on the room. Kana said she could take tomorrow afternoon off to help, and I can help you get the materials tomorrow when I go pick up the wood for the scaffolding."

Ame's eyes flashed quickly from Matsu to Mado before returning quickly to Gake.

Mado felt the tension in the room elevate slightly as he nodded. "Okay. I have the note Kabe gave me, and it has the quantities."

He glanced at Ame briefly. "Kabe showed me what needed to be done. With Kana's help, we may be able to finish laying the floor tile tomorrow."

Matsu seemed to sense some of the tension but nodded silently.

The room remained quiet for several minutes before the doctor stood and spoke. "I know you're all worried. I'm worried, too, but there's really nothing more we can do for him but give him some time to heal."

He scanned the room, examining the worried faces. "I think it would be best if you all returned to your nests and got some rest. If you like, I will arrange for messengers to contact both nests if there is a change in his condition. They can notify you quickly."

Hyouko spoke. "You're right, doctor. I want to stay a little longer, but I think everyone else should go home and rest up."

Midori stood up. "I'm going to tell Old Home. They don't really know Gake, but I think they should know about what happened."

Matsu interjected. "I can give you a ride if you need one."

Midori nodded and smiled, but Baku spoke up. "That's okay, I can take her on my bike." He glanced over at Kumo and followed Midori out of the room.

As Mado filed out of the hospital with the rest of the haibane, a sudden thought panicked him. *No one's watching Master Tsuchi.*

He had ridden over with Kumo, and urged him to hurry back. Kumo obliged, and they raced ahead of the other boys at top speed.

At Stone Mill, Mado jumped off the bike and ran inside. Tsuchi wasn't in the shop or lounge.

Mado ran up the stairs and knocked quickly before bursting into Tsuchi's room.

Tsuchi was there, sitting at his small table next to the window. It was dark, but Mado could see that the dark spots on Tsuchi's wings had spread, making them almost entirely black.

He was staring at the scroll spread out in front of him, the scroll Mado had brought from the Communicator.

Mado stepped closer, but stopped. His voice was edged with worry. "Master..."

Without turning his head, Tsuchi spoke, softly, his tone even and measured, and Mado's eyes widened as he listened.

“Please accept my apology, Apprentice Mado, but it may be necessary for you to complete the reassembly of Generator #8 without my supervision.”

#### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 9.4: Proscriptions**

Mado stood silently for a moment, staring, trying to understand what was upsetting Tsuchi.

He stepped closer and glanced at the scroll. Upon it, in the center, was written a single word: “Father.”

Mado sat down in the guest chair, thinking, trying to understand the meaning of the message. “Master...”

Tsuchi did not divert his gaze from the scroll. “Apprentice Mado, I am grateful for all that you have done to help me, but this is something I cannot explain to you. Please leave me. I will honor my promise to you.”

He lowered his head and said no more.

Mado stood up and went to the door, then paused. “Master, should I bring you dinner?”

Tsuchi spoke without raising his head. “No, but thank you. I cannot bear the thought of eating tonight.”

Mado bowed low for a very long time before leaving quietly.

The other boys were entering as Mado walked down the stairs. In his haste, Mado had forgotten to help Kumo put away the scooter, but Kumo did not seem to mind.

Senkou spoke first. “How is Master Tsuchi?”

The expression on Mado's face answered the question even before he spoke. “Master's wings... they've gotten worse. I'm worried about him. He says he doesn't want dinner tonight.” Mado swallowed. “And that he may not help with the reassembly of the generator.”

The other boys looked at each other before Senkou spoke again. “Do you think I should talk to him?”

Mado shook his head uncertainly. “I don't know. He said he couldn't explain. I don't think he will talk to anyone.”

Senkou nodded thoughtfully for a moment, then turned to the other boys. “Come on, let's cook up some dinner.”

Senkou and Kumo cooked while the other boys sat at the table. Umi hadn't spoken throughout the entire trip to the hospital, and sat staring at the tabletop.

Matsu gave him a little punch on the arm. “Hey Umi, try to quiet down, okay?”

Umi smiled thinly. “I'm sorry. It's just that there's so much bad stuff happening.” He paused, then looked back at the tabletop. “And I'm worried about tomorrow. What's going to happen.”

Matsu smiled reassuringly. “You mean the Renmei? The Communicator is probably going to tell you some riddles to confuse you and then send you away wondering why they made you go all the way out there in the first place. I wouldn't worry about it.” Though he sounded cheerful, something in Matsu's tone suggested he was a little worried himself.

Silence fell over the table, and no one said anything more until Senkou and Kumo brought out dinner. It was a hasty meal of stir-fried vegetables, but was as delicious as any fine collaboration between Stone Mill's two best cooks.

Mado spoke first, to Senkou. “I want to help keep watch over Master Tsuchi tonight. I'm okay now, and think I can do my part.”

Senkou thought for a moment, and smiled. “I know you want to help, but I think both you and Umi need more time to rest. Kumo, Matsu and myself can handle it. We did fine last night.” Kumo and Matsu nodded affably.

Matsu winked. “I think both you and Umi will be glad you got a good night's sleep tomorrow. You've both got a hard day's work ahead of you.”

Both Mado and Umi grinned sheepishly and small talk took over the table as the older boys tried to brighten the mood.

At the end of the meal, as Mado and Matsu stood up to collect the dishes, Umi blurted out a question. “Is Gake going to die?”

There was a long, uncomfortable moment of silence before Kumo answered. “Nobody knows. We hope not. The doctor gave him some medicine from the Renmei.” He looked down. “I hope it works, but he's hurt real bad.”

As they stood at the sink washing the dishes, Matsu leaned over. “Mado, are you doing okay? You're going through a lot of stress, and the doctor said you need to take it easy.”

Without volition, Mado almost screamed his reply. “I'm fine!” He put a hand over his mouth, shocked and apologetic. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I guess I'm feeling the strain.”

Matsu gave Mado's a reassuring nudge with his elbow. “It's okay. I know it's hard for you. Try to give yourself a break. You can't save the world.”

Mado's eyes flashed. “But I *must* save Master!” He put his hand over his mouth again, and fought back tears.

Matsu dried his hands and put one on Mado's shoulder. “Don't worry. It's going to be all right. You'll see.”

The words sounded hollow, but Mado found them comforting nonetheless. *Maybe it will be all right, after all.*

Words came into Mado's mind as if from nowhere. *There is always hope.*

Finally, Mado swallowed and set his jaw firmly. "Let's finish these dishes. Then I'll go to bed." He nodded crisply. "You're right. I need a break."

The other boys were out in the shop when Mado walked out of the lounge. They were finishing up some of the work that had been interrupted earlier.

As Mado looked, Umi met his gaze and held it. There was something about his expression, but Mado couldn't decipher it. But the look made him feel uneasy.

Mado walked wearily into the guest room and stared at his reflection in the mirror. The dark circles were returning to his eyes, and he looked haggard. *I still don't even know who I really am.*

He thought he heard a sound like a distant bell coming from the window and looked over at it. It was already dark outside, and Mado thought he could see movement in the inky images in the glass. The bell chimed again, louder, more distinct.

Mado was standing at the temple, the old temple, before it had been ruined. The pillars were there, the strange symbols upon them intact, the masonry uncracked. Overhead, dark clouds were blown by stormy winds.

Scattered among the pillars, on the grass, were piles of white clothing, like discarded laundry. Movement caught Mado's eye, and he saw a figure robed in red and white approach the steps to the altar.

It was a haibane boy, but something was wrong. His wings were pitch black, as black as his hair. He ran quickly up the steps and turned, facing Mado. There was madness in his eyes, and he grinned wickedly with what seemed like maniacal glee.

In his hand was a long knife, dripping with red liquid. The boy's white robe was covered with red splotches, and his hands were stained red. *Like Umi's hands.*

Mado recoiled, startled, afraid. There was something haunting and *familiar* about the boy's expression.

He glanced away from the grinning boy and saw that one of the piles of clothing near him had gray wings protruding from it, and a dim halo.

With shock and horror, his eyes went from one pile to the next, seeing wings and dimmed halos -- and blood on each of them.

He looked back at the altar. The boy had turned away, facing the altar stone, and Mado saw that the stone was stained red with blood.

Horrified, Mado began to scream mutely as the boy raised his arms skyward, his black wings extended, ruffled like the wings of a carrion crow.

The boy's halo began to glow brighter, and Mado's throat became hoarse as he screamed desperately, vainly, unable to make a sound, unable to move.

At that moment, there was a blinding flash as a bolt of lightning struck the altar from the clouds. The explosion deafened Mado. The boy disappeared in a cloud of black feathers, his halo smoldering and trailing smoke as it flew in a high arc through the air.

The blast was immediately followed by another, and another, and Mado watched in horror as thunderbolts destroyed the temple, methodically, piece by piece, stones exploding in blinding flashes.

And columns of light. There were columns of light rising from the bodies of the fallen haibane. The air was filled with small blue luminous clouds, swirling like a swarm of angry hornets.

The flashes and roiling lights blinded Mado, and he reeled as the deafening shock waves became a dull ringing in his ears.

It was the morning bell. Mado stumbled and caught himself on the windowsill. Outside, the sun was rising in a clear blue sky. *I've been standing here all night.*

Mado shook his head, trying to orient himself. *This is bad. This is very bad.*

Outside, on the windowsill, was a crow, staring quietly at Mado. It cocked its head, then flew away in silence.

Mado looked around the room. He was exhausted, yet something was nagging at him. Suddenly, he ran out the door and up the stairs to Tsuchi's room.

Without knocking, he burst into the room. Tsuchi was still sitting at the table by the window. It was as if he hadn't moved all night.

Mado stepped close, catching his breath from the run up the stairs.

Tsuchi turned his head, and Mado could see that tears streaked his face.

The thick lenses of his glasses seemed to magnify the pain in Tsuchi's eyes as he spoke, his voice soft but broken. "I am truly sorry, Apprentice Mado, but I have no further business in Stone Mill."

Tsuchi turned to stare at the scroll, and his voice softened as he spoke.

"I am a murderer."

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 9.5: Procedures**

Mado staggered briefly, and Tsuchi reached out to steady him. "Mado, are you okay?" Concern overwrote the grief in Tsuchi's eyes.

Mado tried to steady himself, but his mind whirled with confusing images. The boy in the dream. *Could it*

*be him?*

He shook his head violently. Something was wrong, it didn't feel right.

Suddenly Mado shouted. “*NO!*”

Tsuchi shifted back in his chair, startled.

Mado continued, his voice angry, defiant. “No! You're *not* a murderer. It's not you. You didn't do it.”

Tsuchi stared blankly at Mado, his eyes blinking in confusion. “Mado, what are you saying? How can you know the nature of my crime?”

Mado put his hands to his temples. He felt dizzy. “Master, why do you say you're a murderer? Tell me.”

Tsuchi continued staring for a long while before speaking. “Please sit down.”

Mado sat in the guest chair, leaning to one side, trying to steady himself.

Tsuchi spoke slowly. “I had thought my cocoon dream was complete, but it was not.”

He sighed and stared at the scroll, his face reddening as he continued. “I dreamed of a swinging hammer. I thought it was a hammer being used to shape metal among the flames of a forge, but it was not.”

Tsuchi paused as fresh tears rolled down his cheeks. “The Communicator sent me this message to remind me of the truth.”

He turned and gazed at Mado, his eyes red with sorrow. “It was my father. I murdered him with a hammer.”

Mado sat up straight, staring at Tsuchi with disbelief. Something felt out of place, distorted. *He's wrong. He's not a murderer.*

Mado's voice was weak, but gathered strength. “No Master, that's not true. You're not a murderer.”

Tsuchi bowed his head and shook it from side to side. “No, it is true. I remember it now. I killed him.”

Mado shook his head again, trying to clear his mind

A thought came to him. “Master, the Communicator sent you this scroll. There is only one word on it. What if you're wrong? What if that's not what the Communicator is trying to tell you?”

Tsuchi looked up. “But my memories...”

Mado interrupted. “Your memories could be wrong. It could just be a bad dream.”

Mado shook his head again, feeling tremendous irony in his words. “Master, you need to talk to the Communicator.”

Tsuchi glanced at his blackened wings. "I do not intend to leave Stone Mill in this condition."

Mado stood up, his voice angry. "Master, you *must* talk to him. I will not leave your side until you promise you will."

He paused, trying to calm down. "Umi is going to the Temple this morning. I think he's afraid. You could go with him."

Tsuchi stared into Mado's eyes. Somewhere, deep inside, Mado could see something change.

Tsuchi lowered his gaze for a moment, then spoke. "Very well. I will accompany Umi to the Temple."

He glanced up with a thin smile, and there was mirth in his voice. "You are without a doubt the most stubborn apprentice I have ever seen."

Mado's wings sagged as he sighed with relief. "Come on, Master, let's get some breakfast."

Tsuchi followed him down to the lounge, where Matsu and Umi were seated at the table. Kumo and Senkou were in the kitchen cooking.

The boys took note of Tsuchi's wings with obvious concern, but said nothing.

Tsuchi sat next to Umi. "Apprentice Umi, I will escort you to the Temple this morning."

Umi's eyes widened, and he shot a puzzled glance at Mado, but quickly nodded and smiled with obvious relief. "Thank you, Master."

Matsu gazed at Mado, then at Tsuchi, trying to mask his concern. "How are you feeling, Master?"

Tsuchi smiled ironically. "I have not been sleeping well." He winked at Mado with an air of weak humor. "I think I need a vacation." At that, nervous chuckles broke out around the table.

Senkou and Kumo brought out a large steaming bowl of buckwheat noodles in a beef broth with mint leaves.

The boys began eating, trading quiet comments before Tsuchi cleared his throat, bringing silence to the table.

Tsuchi spoke in formal tones. "Journeyman Senkou, in light of my condition, I request that you assume the duties of the Supervisor of Stone Mill until I am fit to resume them. Do you accept this responsibility?"

Senkou's eyes widened, but he nodded. "Yes, Master Tsuchi. I will do my best."

Tsuchi nodded approvingly. "I have already shown you most of what you need to know, and will make myself available as much as I can to assist you in your duties." He stared at his bowl of noodles for a moment, then continued eating.

After breakfast, Matsu and Umi volunteered to clean up. Mado followed Tsuchi, Senkou and Kumo out to the shop and over to Tsuchi's desk.

There Tsuchi went over several papers with Senkou, explaining them. Kumo interjected about the need to have Matsu install scaffolding at the Factory, and Tsuchi deferred the decisions to Senkou, who approved and assigned Mado to continue the repairs at Old Home.

As Umi and Matsu stepped out of the lounge, Tsuchi pointed at a drawer in a filing cabinet. "While Apprentice Umi is away and unavailable to assist you, I recommend studying the contents of that drawer."

Senkou nodded as Tsuchi joined Umi. The two changed into their boots and left with a soft tinkling of the doorbell. Senkou sat down at the supervisor's desk, surveying the layers of paperwork with a look of resignation.

Matsu walked over and beckoned to Mado and Kumo. "Come on. Let's go to the salvage yard. We're going to need three carts at least."

He glanced at Mado. "Do you have the note Kabe gave you?"

Mado patted his pockets and shook his head.

Matsu smiled impishly. "Well then go get it. We'll meet you outside." Mado hurried to his room.

The note was in the drawer along with Kabe's ponytail, feather and the window statuette. Mado picked up the note and studied it, looking for the tile quantities he would need.

His eyes paused as they caught the words. "Mado, I'm sorry."

Mado folded the note and put it in his pocket. He noticed the box of mints Kana had given him, and on an impulse put it in his other pocket and hurried out to the garage.

Outside, the sun cast bright light on a crisp clear morning. The chill in the air helped Mado shake off some of his exhaustion, and he managed a smile as he walked up to the garage.

Matsu and Kumo had already pulled two vehicles out onto the cobblestones. One was the size of a small truck, with an open cab and large bed bordered by cargo stakes. The other was a heavy-duty utility cart, much like the one Kabe had used to carry the bags of mortar and concrete to Old Home.

Kumo drove another utility cart out of the garage and parked it next to Mado. He slid over on the bench seat. "Mado, hop in. Let's see if you can drive one of these things."

Mado sat in the driver's seat and, with Kumo's patient coaching, was soon driving the cart around with ease.

Kumo hopped out and jumped into the cab of the truck while Matsu took the driver's seat in the other cart.

As Kumo rolled the large truck forward, he looked back with a smile and waved his arm forward dramatically. "Wagons, ho!"

The convoy winded slowly down the path and on to the main road toward the East District. The salvage yard was at the edge of town, a large, weed-strewn lot piled with debris of all kinds. Most of it seemed worthless, and some of it looked as ancient as the ruined temple.

The boys pulled up next to an old wooden shack with dirty windows and peeling off-white paint. A middle-aged man stepped out scratching his head and cursing under his breath. His greasy black hair was graying in a salt-and-pepper pattern, and his gray coveralls looked as if they had never been washed. His leathery face was creased with wrinkles, and he always seemed to squint one eye -- but not always the same eye.

He spat on the ground as he walked up to Kumo. "Great. More haibane to cheat me out of my hard-earned profits." He glanced disdainfully at the truck and carts. "Come to finish me off for good, have you?"

Kumo hopped down from the truck and smiled. "Maybe next time. For now, we need a lot of lumber for scaffolding, and some floor tiles for Old Home if you have any."

The salvage dealer spat again and scratched his head. "Yeah, I've got some lumber for you. Probably more than you'll need." He thought for a moment. "I've got a few pallets of large green floor tiles from an office building demo we did a few weeks ago. That's 720 tiles. If you need more, you're out of luck. I'm not going to break down any pallets for you, so you have a choice of one, two or three of them."

Mado looked at the note in his pocket. Kabe had estimated they would need about 30 good tiles to repair the floor, and he made a suggestion to pick up as many spares as possible. *720 tiles?*

Kumo glanced over at Mado. "Your cart can carry a pallet of tiles, but that's pushing it. You'll need to drive slowly and not make any sharp turns. Will 240 tiles be enough?" His wink suggested he knew that would be more than enough.

Mado nodded, dazed.

Kumo turned to the salvage dealer. "Let's get Mado's tiles loaded first, then Matsu and I can worry about the lumber."

Matsu nudged Mado's arm. "I left a hand truck at Old Home yesterday, and Kana can help you unload the tiles. You'll want to stop off at the clock shop and let her know, though."

The salvage dealer started up a dilapidated forklift and in a few minutes gently set a pallet of green tiles on Mado's cart. Though the man seemed careless in his work, the pallet was centered perfectly on the cargo bed. Kumo helped Mado tie down the load as Matsu went off with the salvage dealer to pick out lumber.

Kumo gave Mado a punch on the arm. "Mado, you look like hell. Take your time, don't push too hard and don't try to lift anything too heavy." He glanced at Mado's wing brace. "You're still a cripple, you know."

He winked. "Make Kana do most of the work. She's stronger than she looks. Drive slow and take care."

Kumo patted Mado on the shoulder and trotted off to join Matsu and the salvage dealer in a distant corner of the yard.

Mado started up the cart and gently wheeled it out the gate. The pallet stack was actually rather short, and the cart handled well, much to Mado's relief.

As he slowly guided the cart toward the clock tower, he remembered Ame's note and decided he should stop by and see if she was at the second hand store.

Mado threaded the cart through the narrow streets and stopped in front of Ame's store. The bells chimed as he entered, and Ame was sitting behind the counter, reading something.

She looked up and almost leaped out of her chair, smiling brightly. "Mado!"

Mado blushed slightly as he stepped up to the counter. "I'm sorry, I forgot to thank you for the carrot cake. It was delicious."

Ame's smile broadened and her eyes gleamed as she leaned over the counter. "I'm so glad you liked it." Mado felt a little uneasy. Ame was very close to him. But he didn't step back. Her smile was warm, and he could smell something like strawberries in her hair.

Mado paused for a moment, staring into Ame's eyes before remembering himself. "Is there any word about Gake?"

Ame's eyebrows arched with a pained expression, and she drew back, staring at the counter top. "He hasn't woken up yet. The doctor says there's no change in his condition."

Mado felt a pang of guilt. Ame seemed crushed with worry. "I'm sorry. I'm hoping he'll get better soon."

Ame nodded solemnly. "He will. I know it."

There was a long silence as both Mado and Ame stood lost in thought.

Suddenly, Ame clapped her hands together with a grin. "Oh, I have something for you!" She ran into a room behind the counter. Mado thought he heard a muffled twanging sound.

Ame emerged from the storeroom carrying a large wooden instrument. A red ribbon was wrapped around the neck. It was a guitar.

Ame handed the guitar to Mado. "A customer brought this in. It didn't have any strings on it, but the man at the music shop put some on for me. They're used strings, but they're in good condition, and he tuned it. He even showed me how to tune it. I thought you might like it." She lowered her head slightly, looking up at Mado expectantly.

Mado took the guitar in his hands, surprised and embarrassed. It was an old instrument, but it was beautifully made, well-carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. He blushed, shocked at Ame's generosity, and felt confused.

Mado stammered. "I... I... thank you." He unwrapped the ribbon. "But I... don't know how to play it."

Ame's eyes lit up and she smiled radiantly. "But you can learn. I know you have talent. Here, I'll show you how to tune it. It's real easy."

She reached over the counter and guided Mado's hands. "See, you turn these pegs and it changes the tension of the string. Start with the top string, then finger the fifth fret like this. Tune the next string so it sounds the same, and work down."

She helped as Mado worked through the strings, checking their tones. "Oh, then there's this one. It's different. You finger the fourth fret for that one, like this. Then back to the fifth one for the last string."

Ame beamed as Mado strummed the open strings. "See? It's easy. You can practice some chords, too." She stepped over to her chair, picked up the book she had been reading and handed it to Mado. It was titled *How to Play the Guitar*.

She guided Mado's fingers and pressed them against three strings. "Strum it. That's 'A'." Mado strummed the strings with his fingers. The chord sounded beautiful.

Mado's eyes moistened as he tried to suppress a tear. Ame leaned over the counter, her face almost touching his. "Do you like it?" Mado nodded mutely, his eyes locked on Ame's.

Ame handed Mado a small sack. "Here are some picks and things to practice with."

Mado stood, overwhelmed. "Ame... thank you." He bowed, careful not to strike the guitar against the counter. He looked over at the door. "I'm sorry I have to leave so soon, but I need to take some tiles to Old Home."

Ame's radiant grin disappeared, and a look Mado couldn't make out came to her face, but she nodded and smiled thinly. "I understand. It's a work day after all." She glanced over at the door. "Please be sure to stop by anytime you're in town. I'll let you know if we hear anything more about Gake."

Mado gathered up the gifts, and Ame held the door open for him. "You look really tired, Mado. Try to get some rest, okay?"

Mado nodded and bowed, then carefully placed the guitar, book and sack on the passenger side of the cart. He tied a short section of rope around the guitar to keep it from falling off, then slowly drove the cart down the alley as Ame stood by the shop's door, waving goodbye.

Mado felt slightly dizzy as he pulled up in front of the clock shop.

The cacophony of ticking clocks greeted him as he walked through the door. Kana was behind the counter, sitting at a bench working on a clock. As Mado stepped up to the counter, she turned, and seeing him, almost knocked the clock off the bench in surprise.

"Mado?" She stood up, smoothing out her apron as she cleared her throat. "Um, how can I help you?" Her eyes met Mado's then darted to the floor, then back again, nervously.

Mado felt confusion sweep over him again. I need some sleep so badly!

He cleared his throat and tried to speak evenly, but stammered. "I... um... Matsu needs to work at the Abandoned Factory, so I'm going to be working at Old Home today." He glanced down at the floor, cursing himself as he felt his face blush. "Um... Matsu said you might be able to help?" He looked up, not knowing what to expect.

Kana stared at him for a long moment, seemingly lost in thought. Suddenly she caught herself. "Oh! Right." She glanced through the door to the back room. "Yes. Master said I can take some time off to help."

Kana's cheeks reddened slightly as she looked down at the counter. "I heard about Gake. Midori told us. We want to help out however we can." She looked up at Mado, and there was an odd sheepishness in her expression. "Rakka took the twins to the hospital. They made snacks for the doctor and nurses."

Mado nodded. "That was very thoughtful of them." He glanced at the door, feeling suddenly nervous. "I have a cartload of tiles. Can you help me unload them when I take them to Old Home?"

Kana stared at Mado again, then replied, as if surprised. "Oh, of course." She stepped over and looked out the window. "The cart looks full, so I'll ride my bike back and meet you there."

Mado nodded again. "Okay, I'll see you there, and thanks."

Kana smiled crookedly and disappeared into the back room as Mado walked back out to the cart. There was something about the exchange. Mado felt even more confused. And tired.

The sun warmed the flowery morning fields as Mado slowly drove the cart full of tiles down the bumpy dirt road to Old Home with a guitar at his side.

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 10: Progressions**

#### **Scene 10.1: Foundations**

At the intersection that led to Stone Mill, Mado stopped the cart. I forgot to get tools.

He sat for a moment, trying to shake off his fatigue. The brightness of the morning seemed to lend a white aura to everything. Things seemed to move at the corner of his vision, and it was unsettling. He closed his eyes for a moment, resting them.

Something was shaking him. He opened his eyes and looked over. It was Kana.

She lifted her hand from his shoulder and crossed her arms. “Are you okay? You've been sitting there like that for a while now.”

Mado shifted in his seat and shook his head. “Sorry. I'm just tired.”

Kana nodded curtly. “You look awful.” She cocked her head slightly. “We don't have to do this today, you know. Why don't you take the day off?”

Mado thought about it. Some rest sounded very good. *But no, I have to go on.*

“I can't.” He looked away from Kana at the distant fields. “It's kind of complicated.”

Kana put her hands on her hips, skeptical. “I see.” She looked at him appraisingly. “Are you going to be able to drive okay?” Her tone suggested doubt.

Mado sat up straight and gripped the steering wheel firmly. “Yeah, I'll be okay. This cart doesn't go very fast anyway.”

Kana looked at the passenger seat. “Where'd you get the guitar?”

Mado glanced over at it. “Ame gave it to me.”

Kana arched an eyebrow. “Ame?”

Mado blinked a few times. “She's from the Factory. She works at the second-hand store.”

Kana turned her head, looking askance. “Oh, I see.” She nodded at the guitar with a smirk. “I guess she likes you.”

Mado smiled thinly. He felt like he was missing something in the dialog.

Kana picked up her bike from the ground and swung a leg over the seat. “I'll meet you at Old Home.”

Mado nodded. “I need to stop off at Stone Mill and pick up some tools, so I might take a while.”

Kana waved casually as she rode off. “Okay, I'll be waiting.”

Mado turned the cart up the road and pulled onto the cobblestones of Stone Mill. He untied the rope from the guitar and gathered up the gifts to take inside. Not wanting to change out of his boots, he set them in the changing area and looked around the shop.

Senkou was still sitting at the supervisor's desk, reading what looked like an old thick book. No one else was there, and Mado stepped back outside.

As he loaded a tool bag and some buckets onto the cart, he saw Umi walk up the path. He was walking slowly, his hands in his pockets, eyes downcast. He seemed as if he was going to walk past Mado before he looked up and stopped suddenly.

“Oh, hi Mado.” His voice was flat, depressed.

Mado stepped over to him. “How did it go?”

Umi glanced at Mado then down at the cobblestones. It had apparently not gone well.

He took a deep breath before answering. “It's not something I can really talk about.” He looked over at the shop building. “I need to go get to work.” He waved dejectedly and walked slowly toward the building.

Mado called after him. “Is Master Tsuchi still at the Temple?”

Without stopping or turning his head, Umi nodded and stepped through the front door of the shop.

Mado stared at the door for a while, then turned to see if Tsuchi might be walking down the road, but there was no one in sight.

He wheeled the cart around in the driveway and drove slowly toward Old Home. As he pulled up the path toward the tall beige walls, he found himself once again imagining Old Home as a castle. He fancied that he could see pennants and banners waving from the rooftops as he drove slowly into the courtyard and stopped next to the north wing building.

Kana waved from a window on the second floor -- the cocoon room.

She ran out of the stairwell door carrying a piece of broken tile in her hand as Mado untied the ropes holding the pallet in place. She had changed into old gray coveralls that looked almost identical to a Stone Mill uniform -- without the patch.

Kana held up the tile fragment next to the pallet with a grin. “Wow! They match for a change. And look at how many of them!” Her wings fluttered and she seemed almost ready to dance with excitement.

Mado stopped for a moment, surprised by her enthusiasm -- and the fresh sparkles in her eyes.

“Come on!” Kana started untying the ropes with gusto. “This is enough to put matching spares in every wing!”

The tiles were stacked and neatly tied into bundles of five. Although some had hairline cracks or excess mortar on them, overall they were in excellent condition, and Mado realized with a smile that the salvage dealer was not as slovenly in his work as he was in his appearance.

Kana grabbed a couple of bundles. “There's a hand truck inside, but it'll be faster if we just carry them. Let's start with the cocoon room.” She ran quickly into the building.

Mado grabbed a couple of bundles and followed. Though they weren't terribly heavy, they weren't light, either, and Mado found himself walking instead of running up the stairs. Halfway up, Kana passed him, running back down the stairs with a smile.

Mado set his tiles next to the bundles Kana had left. He stood for a moment, surveying the room. It had been a week ago to the day that he and Kabe had repaired the subfloor. He knelt next to the concrete, feeling it with the back of his hand the way Kabe had showed him. It was dry.

Kana carried the tool bag and buckets into the room and set them next to Mado with a smirk. "Need these?" Before Mado could answer, she had already dashed out of the room.

He looked at the walls and ceiling. Matsu had done a very good job on the ceiling and wall plaster. Though the color was slightly off, the work was smooth and seamless. The crushed sink was still in place, and Mado realized they had forgotten to get a replacement at the salvage yard. Tomorrow, I guess.

Mado stood up and looked around. The room had been thoroughly cleaned of debris, and even the broken tiles had been wiped down and neatly stacked next to one of the walls. Alongside them were the bags of mortar he and Kabe had left the week before. There were also some buckets and tools, as well as a ladder. Matsu had apparently expected to return today to finish the job.

Kana rushed in carrying three bundles of tiles and set them next to the others. She looked over at Mado with a mischievous grin. "Oh, I get it. Make your apprentice do all the work, eh?" She gestured at the bundles of tiles. "Will this be enough?"

Mado stared at Kana for a moment. My apprentice? He looked at the stacks. There were seven bundles -- 35 tiles -- as well as the stacks which had been brought in from the storeroom. More than enough. He nodded curtly.

Kana's eyes quickly scanned the room. "Okay. I'll put the rest of the tiles in the storerooms while you get started in here. Just yell if you need me." She darted back out into the hallway.

Mado smiled. As tired as he was, Kana's enthusiasm was contagious, and he got started mixing the mortar. The sink was still usable, and Mado carefully added water to the mix, stirring it thoroughly like Kabe had showed him. He filled a couple of buckets with fresh water. They would serve as rinsing buckets.

He had rinsed off a trowel and was getting ready to spread the mortar when Kana stepped into the room, clapping dust off her hands with a smug grin. "All done! Can I help?"

Mado handed her a trowel and had her rinse it to coat it with water. Kabe had warned him repeatedly to always keep his trowel clean, and to rinse it often to keep materials from drying on it. "Good tools are hard to come by, so we need to take care of them," he had said.

Kana worked with obvious delight as Mado showed her how to lay down the mortar, smooth it out and draw the screed over it to level it with the existing mortar at the edges. Soon the mortar was laid and finished and the tools all carefully rinsed and dried, but they would have to work quickly.

Kabe had complained bitterly that the original Old Home masons hadn't used an adhesive coat between the mortar and tiles, but insisted that new tiles be laid the same way. Thus the new tiles had to be set on the fresh mortar before it dried, and that made repairs a tricky business.

Mado pulled a chalk line bulb out of the tool bag and had Kana hold the other as they marked out where the

tiles would be laid. They held each end at an existing tile seam while Mado pulled up the line and let it snap down against the mortar, leaving a matrix of light blue guidelines.

Working carefully from the edges, Mado and Kana gently set the tiles on the mortar, nudging them as needed and evening the gaps with a spacing tool. They worked so intently that as they approached the center, laying the last tiles, they bumped heads. Both recoiled, blushing with surprise, but both smiled and, without a word, finished setting the last tile.

As they stepped down carefully on the tiles with their boots, pressing them into the mortar, they bumped into each other again, and Kana joked. "Shall we dance?"

Using the back edge of the screed, they checked the level of the tiles, and pressed down a few corners that had been overlooked. When they were done, the tiles were level enough that the screed passed over them smoothly, and the tiles were set so well that they were almost indistinguishable from the originals.

Mado spoke proudly. "We did a very good job. All these tiles need is a seal coat now, but we'll have to wait a week to allow the mortar to cure."

Kana was nodding with a broad smile on her face. She clearly loved the work -- her dark eyes sparkled with delight -- and Mado remembered Kabe's words. Kana truly did have the heart of a craftsman.

She looked over and saw Mado staring at her. The smile faded, but there was something in her expression, something unfathomable.

It was at that moment that Mado felt a sense of realization, of remembering something he had long forgotten. He looked into Kana's eyes, seeing something familiar. Something...

The room seemed to sway, and Mado saw shock come to Kana's face as everything faded into darkness.

## **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 10.2: Fundamentals**

Mado was falling through dark stormy clouds. Overhead, a crescent moon cast a dim light on the turbulent skies. Occasional lightning flashes cast the brooding clouds in stark relief.

And through them Mado was falling -- endlessly falling, the cold wind tearing at his clothes and biting his face.

There was a dim light below, so far away that it seemed stationary, but Mado was falling toward it and could see it growing larger. The light grew brighter, and Mado could see ripples within it, like the surface of a pond.

There was a voice calling in the distance, a girl's voice. "Mado..."

Mado's eyes flashed open to see Kana's face recoil in shock. She had been leaning close, calling his name.

Mado was lying in bed in his coveralls under a blanket. His shoes had been removed, but his socks still covered his feet.

The room was unfamiliar. Kana's sat in a chair next to the bed, studying him intently, worry written in her expression. She was wearing gray coveralls flecked with small bits of mortar.

Mado tried to sit up, but was too weak to move. He looked past Kana at the room.

He was in Old Home, in one of the dormitory rooms. It was clean and neatly kept, but sparsely furnished. Kana was sitting in a rattan chair, behind her was a small workbench topped by a small lamp.

On the bench was a short stack of books and a blue toolbox. A small piece of machinery lay partially disassembled next to them. On the corner nearest Mado was an alarm clock, but it was facing away from him.

The door to the room was partially open, and Mado could see the dark hallway outside.

The room was small, containing only the bed, the workbench, a small dresser and a standard Old Home sink. Some plush dolls sat atop the dresser: a black and white cartoonish dog, a white rabbit and a blue rhinoceros, all arranged in a wicker basket with a tall loop handle. Next to them were some odd-shaped bottles of blue and green.

On the walls were what looked like finger-paintings made by a child. The colors were bright, and all of them depicted sunny days with blue skies dotted by puffy white clouds.

Over the workbench was a cuckoo clock with a swinging pendulum, and next to it a painting of the Old Home clock tower, rendered in a style that Mado had seen before. *That must be one of Reki's paintings.*

The closet door was open, and inside Mado could see Kana's wardrobe -- the olive green jacket, the gray trousers, drab winter clothing, a few sets of gray coveralls and something unexpected.

At the end of the clothes rack was a white gown, a gown like the one Mado had been wearing when he first awoke at Stone Mill. *She must have kept hers.*

Kana sat impatiently as Mado surveyed the room. She did not speak, but there was a mild flush to her cheeks and she seemed embarrassed.

Mado turned to her. "What happened?"

Kana leaned forward, her hands clasped together in her lap. "You passed out in the cocoon room. I caught you just before you hit the floor." She glanced down at the floor. "I didn't want to leave you there, so I brought you here."

She glanced over at the half-open door. "You were mumbling things, but you could sort of walk. It was too risky trying to take you down the stairs so I went up. This is the only room in the north wing with a decent

bed, so that's why you're here.”

Mado looked around. “This is your room?”

Kana nodded.

Mado lay back in the bed, staring at the ceiling. “How long have I been here?”

Kana sat up in the chair, casually throwing an arm over the backrest. “It's been a few hours at least. You weren't sleeping very well.” She reached into a pocket, pulled out a bright brass pocket watch and flipped open the cover with a flourish.

Kana smiled as she called out brightly. “It's 5:47 in the evening!”

She closed the watch and slipped it back into her pocket. “Normally the tower bell would be ringing in thirteen minutes, but the clock isn't running because I'm working on it.”

She gestured at the workbench. “That's the motor speed controller. The clock was running way too fast and it was driving me nuts having to reset it all the time.”

There was a soft knock as the hallway door swung open slowly. A girl's voice spoke. “Kana, are you coming to dinner?”

It was Hikari. She looked into the room, saw Mado lying in Kana's bed and stood frozen in the doorway.

Hikari's face was as white as a sheet, her mouth frozen in an “o”, her dark blue eyes were wide, almost filling the rims of her glasses.

Kana stood up, alarmed by Hikari's expression, stared at her for a moment, then shrugged with confusion. “What?” She glanced at Mado, then Hikari, and shook her head with bewilderment.

Awareness came to Kana with a sudden start, and her hand shot to cover her mouth as her face became beet red.

Kana's expression quickly darkened, and she turned toward Hikari with clenched fists, her voice strident with outrage. “Hikari!”

Hikari recoiled with surprise, then leaned forward, hands on hips, scowling at Kana, her tone indignant. “Kana!” Her eyes moved accusingly toward Kana's bed.

Kana looked over her shoulder, and there was a brief moment of silence as the girls stood frozen in place, both staring at Mado.

Mado stared back mutely, blinking, not sure what was going on.

Kana sighed as the color drained from her face. She shot a sharp glance at Hikari and spoke with dark menace. “Don't even *think* what I think you're thinking.”

She sat down in the chair, gesturing casually with one hand as she lectured Hikari in a reproachful tone. "Mado and I were setting tiles in the twins' cocoon room. He passed out again, like last week." Hikari nodded slowly, her suspicion beginning to dissipate.

Kana continued. "He's lucky I caught him. The doctor said this might happen." She glanced over at Mado. "This was the only safe place I could think of putting him, so that's why he's here."

Hikari's air of accusation faded, but there was skepticism in her eyes as she gazed at Kana's bed.

Kana leaned forward, menacingly. "And that's the only reason he's here. Got it?"

A playful grin came to Hikari's face. "Oh, of course!" Kana almost growled in response.

Hikari clasped her hands together. "I'm sorry Mado. Where are my manners? I'll bring up some food for both of you."

She turned to leave, but Kana interjected. "Hikari, could you have someone tell Stone Mill what happened? I don't think we'll want to move Mado for a while."

Hikari nodded and disappeared down the hall.

Kana's wings sagged as she slumped in her chair. "That girl, I swear sometimes..."

She looked over at Mado with a crooked grin. Something seemed to come over her, and suddenly she was laughing hysterically, almost falling out of her chair.

Mado smiled, but was still confused about what was going on. The sound of Kana's laughter was soothing though, and chased away the remnants of his dark dream.

Mado felt a sudden uneasiness. "I need to get back to Stone Mill." He tried to sit up again but couldn't.

Kana leaned over and pushed his shoulders back down into the bed. "Not right now, unless we can get some volunteers to carry you back." She sighed. "Mado, you look like you haven't slept since you hatched."

Mado tried to will himself upright, but was nearly paralyzed with exhaustion. He looked down at the blanket that had been thrown over his coveralls. The bed was soft and had a faint fragrance Mado found pleasant.  
*Kana's bed.*

The realization caused his body to tense in a sudden wave of panic, but with a sigh, Mado relaxed and accepted his fate with resignation.

Kana glanced at the open door, then back at Mado. She leaned close, almost whispering. "You kept calling out for Master Tsuchi, like you were afraid for him. Is something wrong?"

Mado pushed his head back into the pillow and closed his eyes. *She doesn't know. Should I tell her?*

Mado deliberated in his mind, and the silence became uneasy.

Kana broke the ice. "Well, at least your wing looks a lot better." She grinned cheerfully and pointed at Mado's wing brace.

Mado smiled slightly, but his expression darkened. "Kana, I've been having bad dreams."

Kana chuckled ironically. "I noticed. So what's bothering you?"

Mado looked up at the ceiling. "Everything, it seems. I keep dreaming about the past -- I think. Strange dreams, about the ruined temple."

Kana's expression became solemn, and she leaned closer, but said nothing.

Mado sighed. "Some of them are very scary, and they keep me from being able to sleep. I stood by the window all last night, I never even made it to bed."

Kana sat up straight as her eyebrows arched in surprise. "Wow." She paused thoughtfully before speaking softly. "Mado, who's the murderer?"

Mado's eyes flashed over to her, inquiring.

Kana glanced down, then met his eyes. "You kept talking about a murderer in your sleep. And there were other things you said."

Concern came to her face. "Mado, I know you're in a lot of pain." She sighed. "I wish I knew what was going on."

Kana shifted in her chair, throwing an arm over the backrest as she made an explanatory gesture with her free hand. "I don't know what's wrong, but I think it's going to be okay eventually."

She surveyed the room contemplatively. "I had bad dreams at first, too. They were horrible." She closed her eyes and paused for a moment before turning toward Mado. "But they went away after a while."

Kana shifted in her chair, smiling with forced cheer. "You're going to be fine."

There was movement at the hallway door. It was Rakka, dressed in her white and brown uniform. She peeked into the room tentatively, her voice shy, uncertain. "Good evening. I brought dinner."

Rakka walked slowly into the room carrying a large serving tray and set it on the workbench next to Kana. On it was a steaming bowl of spaghetti with meat sauce and half a loaf of garlic bread. There was also a large pot of tea.

Rakka clasped her hands and bowed nervously. "Hikari told me what happened. I'm really sorry." Her eyes flickered toward Kana as she sighed. "So many of us seem to be having problems these days."

She glanced with mild irritation at the door. "I wanted to see you, but I had to make Hikari keep the twins

downstairs.”

Rakka sighed with fatigued exasperation. “Since we went to the hospital this morning, they both want to be nurses.” She smiled slightly. “I was afraid they might do more harm than good here, though.”

Mado smiled involuntarily as a sparkle came to Rakka's eyes.

Kana interjected with a tone of mild annoyance. “Thanks for bringing up dinner. Do you think maybe you can tell Stone Mill about Mado?”

Rakka nodded enthusiastically. “Of course! I'm sure the twins would love to go. Anything to get them away from Hikari for a while so she can get some time to relax.”

Mado could see a frayed edge to Rakka's enthusiasm. Caring for the twins was apparently taking its toll on her.

Rakka's eyes darted between Kana and Mado. “How long do you think Mado will have to stay here?” There was something in her voice that Mado couldn't quite decipher.

Kana shrugged. “I don't know. Until he can walk, I suppose. He's exhausted.”

She glanced over at Mado. “I was going to try to take him to Nemu's room at first, because it's on the ground floor, but going down the stairs was too dangerous, so I brought him here.”

Rakka nodded sympathetically, but her almost imperceptible smile suggested skepticism similar to Hikari's.

Kana rolled her eyes and sighed with irritation. “Thanks Rakka. I think we can take it from here.”

Rakka bowed and winked mischievously before trotting out of the room.

Kana turned to the food with a look of resignation. “Sometimes I wonder why was I born here.” She grinned impishly. “Oh well, at least the food's good.”

Mado tried to sit up again, but couldn't, and Kana scolded him gently as she tucked another pillow under his shoulders, propped him up and carefully fed him dinner.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 10.3: Intermediaries**

Gray light filtered into Mado's eyes as he awoke. Is this... a dream?

He was lying in a soft bed, and there was a sweet smell in the air. He sat up and rested on an elbow. He was in Kana's room, and it was morning.

Kana was sitting asleep at her workbench, her head resting on her arms, the lamp on, shining dimly. Mado

felt a twinge of guilt that she had been forced to sleep like that, but the expression on her face was peaceful and relaxed.

Mado smiled as he remembered his first meeting with Kana in the clock shop. He still felt intimidated when she was around, but in her sleep, Kana seemed less threatening.

He sat up and stretched. For the first time, he felt truly rested and refreshed. He couldn't remember any nightmares -- or dreaming anything at all. He simply felt good. For a change.

Mado sat watching Kana. Her wings rose and fell slightly with her breathing. He felt strangely grateful that she was there. In his mind he imagined Kana sitting next to him in the night, watching over him, protecting him.

He remembered her gently spooning spaghetti into his mouth, careful not to let sauce drip on his coveralls, and he smiled. Mado realized that he truly liked Kana, despite the fact that she always seemed to confuse him.

He stood up and stretched again, extending his wings in a broad fanning motion, luxuriating in how relaxed his muscles felt. The movement awoke Kana, and she straightened in her chair, rubbing her eyes.

She glanced up Mado with a crooked smile. "You seem to be doing better."

Mado grinned. "I really need a bath."

Kana laughed. "Me too."

She stood up, and they stood close to each other for a moment. Mado looked into Kana's eyes, glimpsing something unexplainable that quickly passed.

Kana glanced at the door and cleared her throat impatiently.

Mado shook his head to clear it and bowed slightly. "Kana, thank you for taking care of me."

Kana smiled thinly and gestured toward the door. "Come on, let's get you back to Stone Mill."

She led him down to the cocoon room and helped him carry the tools down to the cart. The twins were sitting on the bench seat, pretending to drive, but quickly jumped out and stood behind the cart when they saw Mado and Kana approach.

The young girls bowed and spoke almost in unison, smiling with mock innocence. "Good morning." They were both dressed in identical green sweatshirts and blue shorts, and Mado still couldn't tell them apart.

One of the twins spoke politely. "Are you feeling better this morning, Mr. Mado?" Mado smiled at her formality and nodded affably.

Kana gestured toward the west wing. "Why don't you two help Hikari fix breakfast? I'll come help once Mado's on his way."

The two girls nodded at each other, bowed quickly to Mado, then ran into the building through one of the large glass doors.

Kana spoke under her breath. "They're good kids, but Rakka's too easy on them. She's going to spoil them if she doesn't watch out."

With the tools and buckets secured on the cargo bed, Mado started up the cart. Before leaving, he turned and waved to Kana. "Thanks again, for everything."

Kana smiled and waved casually as she turned toward the west wing.

It was still early, and the air was crisp. As Mado drove out of Old Home's entry arch, the morning sun dazzled him with its brilliance. Birds were chirping everywhere, and Mado took a deep breath, thinking that this would indeed be a beautiful day.

Back at Stone Mill, Mado quickly put away the tools and buckets, and put the empty pallet and ropes in the lumber shed. Though he worked quickly, he made a point of thoroughly cleaning, inspecting and fueling the cart before closing the garage door and heading inside just as the first morning bell began ringing.

Senkou was in the kitchen when Mado entered the lounge, and stepped out to greet Mado when he saw him.

Senkou's smile was warm. "Mado, you look a lot better." He winked and gave Mado a punch on the arm. "Are the beds really softer in Old Home?"

Mado blushed and smiled. "Whatever it is, I do feel a lot better this morning. Can I help with breakfast?"

Senkou smiled but shook his head. "Kumo and I have it covered. Just relax and we'll take care of everything."

Mado moved to protest, but Senkou's smile stopped him. "Okay." He sat down at the table, wondering how everyone else was doing.

Kumo came in, winked and hurried into the kitchen. Mado could smell something different cooking. It smelled great.

Matsu and Umi came in together. Both seemed tired, and Umi still seemed sullen. They quietly sat down at the table across from Mado.

Mado was about to say something when Tsuchi entered the room. The boys stood up and bowed, and Tsuchi responded with a nod and a smile. He sat down next to Mado, seeming more relaxed than Mado had ever seen him before.

"Good morning Mado, Matsu, Umi." Tsuchi nodded to each with a smile. Kumo and Senkou, hearing his voice, called out good-mornings from the kitchen.

Tsuchi turned to Mado. "You're looking well, Apprentice Mado. Was your stay at Old Home pleasant?"

Mado sensed an air of mirth in Tsuchi's question but replied indulgently. "Yes. I slept well, and I'm ready for work today."

Tsuchi smiled cryptically. "We'll talk about that momentarily, but it is good to see that your health is improving."

Mado glanced over at the other boys, confused, but their expressions offered no clues. Conversation turned to the good weather and other minor things until Senkou and Kumo carried out breakfast.

They set separate plates in front of everyone, and on each was a breakfast of steak, eggs and fried potatoes. Mado had never seen such a thing for breakfast, but it was mouthwateringly delicious. Without fanfare, all the haibane tore into their meals, eating with obvious delight, and several compliments for the chefs.

Finally Mado spoke. "This is delicious! What's the special occasion?"

Kumo and Senkou looked at each other, then turned expectantly to Tsuchi.

Tsuchi wiped his mouth with a napkin and regarded his plate for a moment before speaking. His expression was complex, but he seemed pleased overall.

He cleared his throat and looked at each of the haibane in turn, signaling a formal announcement. "My friends, it is with mixed feelings that, after nearly seven years as the supervisor of Stone Mill, I must announce my retirement. I have been relieved of my duties by the Haibane Renmei, and have been advised to take a vacation that they believe is long overdue."

Tsuchi paused, looking again at each of the boys at the table before continuing. "The Renmei has assured me that this decision was not made with prejudice, and that they appreciate and honor my service. However, they insist that this is the proper time for the appointment of a new supervisor, and that Journeyman Senkou is well qualified for the job."

He nodded at Senkou, who blushed and looked down at his plate. "Therefore, as of today, Journeyman Senkou shall officially be recognized as the Master of Stone Mill, and I surrender the position to him with full confidence in his abilities."

Tsuchi again surveyed the table as the boys looked at each other, at Tsuchi and Senkou, taking in the significance of the news.

Umi spoke first. "Master, is it because of your wings?"

A pained expression flashed across Tsuchi's face but quickly disappeared, replaced by a warm smile. "Apprentice Umi, you always ask the most penetrating questions." His voice softened. "That is one reason, but not the only one. I discussed this matter at length with the Communicator yesterday, and though I was reluctant at first, I am convinced that this is a good decision."

Umi nodded quietly, but lowered his eyes and stared at his plate.

Matsu spoke next. “So Master, what are you going to do now?”

Tsuchi smiled, and Mado realized that Tsuchi appeared more relaxed than he had ever been before. Though his wings were still almost solid black, his shoulders were less hunched, and he seemed younger.

“I was going to speak to you about that, Journeyman Matsu. I was hoping to make use of the garden you so carefully maintain to pursue some time for meditation. I have some special requests to make of you, which I will discuss later.”

Matsu nodded with a grin as Tsuchi turned to Mado. “Also, though I intend to spend most of my time relaxing, I still have an apprentice to train, and Master Senkou has agreed to grant me a wide degree of discretion with regard to his assignments.”

Tsuchi flashed Mado a mischievous smile. “Apprentice Mado, as of this moment, you are to suspend all work on Old Home and Generator #8.” Mado's eyes widened in surprise, and he was about to speak when Tsuchi held up a hand in dismissal and reached into a pocket.

Tsuchi produced a small, solid cylinder of brass and brandished it flamboyantly, ensuring that all the boys at the table saw it.

“Apprentice Mado, you are hereby assigned to craft this piece of brass stock into a work worthy of my approval. You may fashion it in whatever manner you wish, using any tools you wish, however, you may only remove material, and may not add or return any material to it once removed, or use any other materials in constructing your project.”

He handed the piece of brass to Mado with an air of formality. “The craftwork you create must consist of a single piece composed solely of this brass. Do you accept this assignment?”

Mado accepted the piece of brass with a puzzled look while the other boys whispered among themselves with what sounded like surprise and disbelief. Umi glanced at the object in Mado's hand with unrestrained envy, then returned his gaze to his plate. Only Tsuchi and Senkou sat watching Mado, both with conspiratorial smiles on their faces.

Mado stared at the brass cylinder in his hand. “Yes, but why do you want me to do this?”

Matsu smiled and was about to speak, but Tsuchi raised a hand, silencing him. He looked at each haibane in turn before speaking.

“The purpose of this assignment will be revealed to you only upon its successful completion.”

#### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 10.4: Advancements**

The haibane of Stone Mill finished their breakfast amid a cloud of cheerful and often boisterous conversation. Even Umi, who had sat rather sullenly through the meal, perked up and joined in, and the boys

were still talking excitedly when the morning work bell rang.

Matsu and Umi volunteered to clean up -- after a glance from Senkou, who stood up and made his first announcement as Master of Stone Mill. "We'll line up after the dishes are done. In the meantime, those who can, prepare for your assignments." He nodded at Tsuchi and the non-dishwashers filed out into the shop.

While Senkou and Kumo stepped over to the supervisor's desk, Tsuchi led Mado to a large oven at the back of the building, flipped a light switch and motioned for him to look into the viewing window. Inside, the stator was rotating slowly as if in a rotisserie, being gently roasted by electric heating elements.

Tsuchi flipped the light switch off as Mado looked over inquisitively. "Senkou and Umi finished the winding process yesterday. The stator has been turning under low heat overnight and will soon begin the cooling phase. The purpose of heating the stator in the kiln is to cure the insulating lacquer so it dries evenly without dripping or cracking. The same had already been done for the rotor before you were born."

Tsuchi led Mado over to the generator chassis. "You have already completed the pre-installation inspection of the chassis. As soon as it's ready, Senkou and Umi will install the stator inside it. Once it's secured, they will install the bearing struts, rotor assembly, lubricant system and the regulator assembly."

He pointed to the weathered cover pieces sitting on the floor nearby. "Once everything is tested, they will install the cowling and the unit will be ready for redeployment."

He turned to Mado and placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "I know you want to help, but for now, you are a trainee and will have to focus on other tasks. However, I will ensure that you are offered the opportunity to observe the key steps of the process. Also, it is customary for all the haibane of Stone Mill to assist with the removal and deployment of generators, so you will be present for that."

Mado nodded, seeming moderately relieved, but still very confused.

Tsuchi winked and led Mado over to the muster line. "I know you still have many questions, but do not be concerned. You and I will have much time to talk today."

Tsuchi and Mado stepped into line joining Kumo as Matsu and Umi walked up. Facing the haibane of Stone Mill was Senkou, seeming somewhat self-conscious as the new supervisor. He winked at Tsuchi. "Sorry Master, but it feels a little weird standing in your spot."

Tsuchi grinned affectionately. "Master Senkou, that's your spot now." He cleared his throat and nodded toward the row of boys. "We await our assignments."

Senkou blushed slightly but stood straight and assumed an official tone. "Very well. Master Tsuchi, as we previously discussed, you will be working with Apprentice Mado today." Senkou smiled broadly. "And I trust you will find some time to relax in accordance with your instructions from the Renmei."

Tsuchi smiled and nodded. "Yes, Master Senkou." At his side, Mado glanced at Tsuchi then nodded quietly.

Senkou turned slightly. "Kumo, Matsu, you will continue the installation of scaffolding at the Waste Factory. I don't think I need to remind you to be extra careful up there, but I'll remind you anyway: be extra careful up

there. Use safety lines whenever you can, don't rush the job and don't work alone. Always have your partner nearby to help out if you get in trouble. Understood?"

Kumo and Matsu nodded in unison.

Senkou turned to Umi. "Umi, as usual, you're with me."

He scanned the row of haibane with a grin. "Okay, let's do a good job today."

The boys dispersed and quickly got to work. Tsuchi led Mado over to the entrance. Matsu and Kumo had already changed into their boots and were out the door -- leaving it shut with a clanging of the entry bell Kumo had installed.

Tsuchi and Mado took their time changing into their boots, and Mado looked over to see Senkou and Umi at the supervisor's desk. Senkou was showing Umi a technical drawing, pointing at various details and explaining them.

Tsuchi gestured at the guitar Mado had left in the changing area. "Is that yours?"

Mado looked over, surprised. "Oh, yes. Ame gave it to me."

Tsuchi smiled -- there seemed to be a twinkle in his eye. "Why don't you bring it?"

Mado looked even more puzzled. It was as if Tsuchi had been replaced with a different person, but he grabbed the guitar and followed Tsuchi out the door.

It was still early, but the rising sun had taken some of the chill out of the air. High overhead, birds chirped merrily and flew to and from the dozens of nests lodged in the rafters of Stone Mill. Mado recalled with a smile how careful the boys had been not to disturb the nests while cleaning the building on Maintenance Day. Birds of a feather.

Tsuchi and Mado walked without speaking, but each was taking deep breaths of the fresh clean air and seemed to appreciate the tranquility of the morning. In the distance, Mado could see Matsu and Kumo speeding off toward the East District on scooters, already far enough away that their passing was marked only by the faint, distant buzz of the motors.

Tsuchi opened the elaborately carved gate, and ushered Mado into the garden. As he walked through, Mado's guitar struck the side of the trellis with a loud twang. He stepped inside and inspected the instrument for damage. I need to be careful.

The two haibane walked quietly to the center of the garden and took a seat on the wooden bench as several birds fluttered out of the birdbath and into the trees overhead. There must have been dozens of them hidden among the leaves, calling to one another, each with their own distinct songs.

Mado looked over the garden. Since his last visit, many of the plants had grown taller, and over them hundreds of multicolored butterflies flitted among fresh blossoms accompanied by the occasional buzz of honeybees.

Sitting next to Tsuchi, gazing at the beauty of the spring morning with a guitar in his lap, Mado felt more at peace than he could ever remember, and he relaxed, resting against the bench's backrest and enjoying the tranquil sounds of the garden.

They sat in silence for a long while, each appreciating the soothing ambiance, before Tsuchi finally spoke.

“For thirteen years I have lived in Stone Mill, and yet it seems that only now can I truly appreciate what a beautiful place it is.” He turned to Mado with a soft smile. “For as much as I have learned in my time here, I am now coming to realize how little I truly know.”

Tsuchi took a deep breath and surveyed the garden with satisfaction. “Matsu is truly gifted at his work, both as a carpenter and a gardener. In his heart, I think he loves gardening most, but unfortunately there is no Gardener's Guild, and though his work in making this place beautiful is a great blessing for Stone Mill, it is nonetheless superfluous to our duties.”

He shifted on the bench, turning to place a hand on Mado's shoulder. “Mado, as your teacher, it is my wish that if there were only one lesson you might learn from me, it would be the lesson I have learned last.” He gestured to the garden. “And that is to appreciate the beauty of life that surrounds you while you can.”

Tsuchi turned and put his hands on his knees, leaning forward to take a deep breath of the flower-scented air. He smiled with delight and sat back against the bench, watching the birds that had cautiously returned to the birdbath. “As haibane of Stone Mill, labor comes naturally to us. It is in our blood. We work hard, but we work for the joy of working itself.”

He turned to Mado. “There will never be a shortage of work or worries in your life, Mado, so you need not seek them out.” He looked back at the birdbath. “That is the lesson it has taken me thirteen years to learn.” He closed his eyes and sat motionless, as if in meditation.

Mado looked down at the guitar in his hands and plucked one of the strings experimentally. It buzzed with a soft growl. He turned toward Tsuchi. “Master, what happened yesterday, at the Temple?”

Tsuchi smiled and turned to Mado with a wink. “I received some much-needed counseling.”

He looked at the birdbath contemplatively. “When I first arrived at Stone Mill, I was frightened and felt out of place. I was desperate to fit in. I felt guilty that everyone was so helpful, expecting nothing in return from me, and I wanted to pay them back. And I wanted to impress them, prove that I belonged here.”

He turned to Mado, his gaze penetrating. “You may have some idea of what I am talking about.”

Mado blushed and nodded, looking down at the guitar.

Tsuchi patted him on the shoulder and continued. “As it happens, this is true of every haibane born to our nest. I have come to believe that none the haibane of Stone Mill are born here by chance. Though we are each individuals, we are all of like mind and spirit, true brothers in our hearts.”

He gazed into Mado's eyes with unflinching sincerity. “I know that you are still wondering why you are here,

and still wondering if you belong here at all. You should know that I am certain you belong here, that Stone Mill is your true home in this world, and that you must never doubt that, no matter what fears may trouble you”

He nodded crisply. “You are a haibane of Stone Mill. Never forget that. It is a title of honor and respect, and as a haibane of Stone Mill, you are worthy of honor and respect. Have no doubt of it, unless you would consider me a liar.”

Mado was mildly alarmed by Tsuchi's stern tone, but sat up straighter and nodded in affirmation. I am a haibane of Stone Mill.

Tsuchi smiled warmly and faced the birdbath, closing his eyes.

Time passed before Mado spoke again. “Master, did the Communicator say anything about your wings, or the scroll he gave you?”

Tsuchi took a deep breath, and furrows came to his brow before he turned to Mado. “Yes. We spoke about that.” He turned back, gazing at the birds frolicking in the bath. “You are correct. I am not a murderer.”

Mado sighed loudly with relief, then put a hand over his mouth in embarrassment.

Tsuchi smiled briefly, but became solemn as he spoke, staring at the birdbath. “The Communicator reminded me that I was born a blessed haibane, just as you were. Therefore, I did not enter this world bound by sin, and could not be a murderer.”

Tsuchi paused for several moments before lowering his head. “However, my memories persist, and the Communicator refused to declare them false.” He sighed. “I am sin-bound, and it is for that reason, among others, that the Renmei has relieved me of my duties.”

He looked up at the bath again, an ironic smile on his face. “In response to my request for assistance with my condition, the Communicator told me a riddle. *'To recognize one's own sin is to have no sin.'* He called it the Riddle of the Circle of Sin.”

Tsuchi turned to Mado, still smiling, but with pain in his eyes. “It seems a simple enough riddle, yet I cannot overcome the paradox of the statement. I cannot understand how one can be free of sin simply by acknowledging it.”

He sighed. “For if I have sin, and acknowledging it removes my sin, then I am deceiving myself by believing I have sin, and in doing that I have sin. But if I do not acknowledge my sin, then surely I have sin. Either way, I am left with sin. The riddle seems inherently false and insoluble.”

He shook his head slowly in frustration. “Perhaps I am interpreting it too literally, but it makes no sense to me.” He sighed and looked down at his lap. “The Communicator has warned me that until I solve this riddle, I will remain sin-bound.”

Tsuchi looked up at Mado with a hint of fear in his eyes. “And he has warned me that I have little time left in which to do this.” He lowered his head, eyes closed.

Mado thought Tsuchi might begin weeping, and put a hand on his shoulder in reassurance. “Master.”

The shadows of the trees moved slowly across the ground as they sat in silence.

Finally, Tsuchi looked over at Mado with a calm smile. “Do not be concerned. There is always hope.”

He gestured at the guitar. “Why not play a song?”

Mado blushed and looked down at the instrument. “I don't know how to play it. I just got it yesterday.”

Tsuchi grinned. “Then you might as well start practicing now.”

Reluctantly, Mado strummed the strings, then started experimenting with fingerings. He remembered the chord Ame had showed him, and strummed it a few times. Then he tried other combinations, but they all sounded wrong.

He glanced over at Tsuchi, embarrassed at the sour noises he was making, but Tsuchi was smiling and nodding approval.

Mado spoke with an edge of frustration. “Master, it sounds awful! Why are you smiling?”

Tsuchi turned to Mado with a soft grin. “It sounds sweet to my ears, because it is the sound of learning.”

Mado sat gaping for a moment as Tsuchi turned back to the birdbath and closed his eyes. Mado strummed a few more chords -- all of them more discord than chord -- before Tsuchi spoke again without turning his head or opening his eyes.

“There is one more thing, Apprentice Mado. I advise great caution in pursuing the machining project I have assigned to you. I will give you only one opportunity to succeed.”

He paused for a moment, his voice soft but firm. “If you should fail, you will have failed forever.”

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 10.5: Accomplishments**

Mado sat looking at Tsuchi, stunned by gentle way in which he had delivered such a threatening warning.

After staring for a long moment, he spoke. “Master, I know I'm not supposed to know the reason for this, but, well...”

Tsuchi turned and smiled softly. “Actually, the purpose is to teach you. You have requested that I teach you to be a machinist, I agreed, and now your lessons have begun.”

Mado stared blankly at him. This is not exactly what I expected.

Tsuchi seemed to read Mado's thoughts and continued. "I would be a poor teacher if I did not give you the guidance necessary to succeed. You have already demonstrated an inherent talent for machining. I do not believe that this is a coincidence."

Tsuchi looked toward the birdbath again. "All haibane born to Stone Mill possess inherent talents associated with a craft. Senkou is a natural electrician, and will soon become recognized as a master of that craft, I am sure. Matsu is a carpenter, and the finest I have ever seen, haibane or human. Kumo is a plumber by trade and a journeyman of that guild, but is also talented with engines and sheet metal."

He paused and sighed. "Umi is a natural painter, and truly gifted, but aside from applying lacquer to windings and certain other small tasks, there is little need for a dedicated painter at Stone Mill, so he is apprenticed as an electrician." He glanced up at the birds in the trees thoughtfully. "Although I am coming to believe that the decision to force Umi down that path was an error."

He turned to Mado and winked. "But you are most certainly a natural machinist. In a single day, your first day, working on a critical component requiring very tight tolerances, you proved that beyond all doubt." He turned, scanning the lush greenery of the garden. "I am convinced that before long, you will become a Master Machinist."

Mado's eyes widened, but he didn't feel very confident. He patted the brass cylinder in his pocket gently. "But what am I expected to do with this? I don't know what it's supposed to do or what it's needed for."

Tsuchi grinned conspiratorially as he reached into a pocket. "My last apprentice used almost those very same words when I gave him his assignment." He pulled a short brass chain out of his pocket. "Akashio made this from a piece of brass stock identical to the one I gave you." He handed the chain to Mado.

It was roughly the same length as the piece of brass Tsuchi had given him, and the links were about as wide, but it was difficult for Mado to imagine the chain had been made that way.

Tsuchi pointed to the links. "Note that they are uniform and seamless. I measured each of them with a caliper and they are identical within a thousandth. Akashio was very meticulous in his work." He chuckled. "He almost passed out when I told him that it wasn't in one piece, and therefore technically not within specification."

Tsuchi smiled with a devilish look of mischief. "But because it had been made from a single piece, I accepted it, and Akashio was permitted to continue his progress."

He winked at Mado. "The purpose of this project is to allow me to determine your skill as a machinist. If you apply the talent I have seen within you, I am confident that you will succeed."

His look became stern. "But do not for a moment doubt that I will accept only the finest work I think you are capable of, and I consider that to be a very demanding requirement." He leaned toward Mado, speaking in a precise tone. "There will be no margin for error."

Mado nodded, feeling intimidated by Tsuchi's apparent ambivalence. He studied the brass chain in his hand,

admiring the skill it must have taken to make it, then handed it back to Tsuchi.

Tsuchi put the chain in his pocket and winked. "Don't worry, Apprentice Mado, you need not make a chain, or even anything fancy. You need simply make it very well."

Tsuchi shifted on the bench and gestured toward the gate. "I think this would be a good time for you to go and look for inspiration for your project. Though you do not have forever to complete it, there is no specific time limit." He stared back at the birdbath. "However, it would be advisable to complete this task before my time in Guri ends."

Mado stood up and bowed low before turning and leaving the garden.

He returned to the guest room and set the guitar, book and sack against one wall. He stopped and looked in the mirror. In just the span of a single day, Mado was looking healthier. The dark circles under his eyes were gone and he flapped his wings gently a couple of times. They felt strong and his feathers seemed fuller. His left wing wrist felt perfectly fine, and Mado was certain he no longer needed the brace.

He pulled the brass cylinder out of his pocket and set it on the dresser. Realizing his coveralls desperately needed washing, he emptied his pockets, setting Kabe's note and Kana's box of mints on the dresser. On a whim, he popped a mint into his mouth. Kana has good taste in mints.

Mado ran a hand through his hair and remembered how badly he needed a bath. Will it be okay to do that during work hours?

He puzzled over the thought and finally decided that getting cleaned up was a worthwhile part of his duties.

He ran the bathwater extra hot, and sat in the tub in absolute bliss for what must have been an hour -- spending the morning break in the bath plus quite a while more.

After emerging from the bath, he relished the feel of fresh clean underwear, coveralls and socks. He realized with a smile as he put on his coveralls how hard it had been the first time. Now he didn't even remember his wings when getting dressed -- they just slipped through the slits by habit.

He stood in front of the dresser mirror again, feeling clean and even better than before. Now what?

He stared at the brass cylinder. I need inspiration.

Mado decided that a walk would be in order and spent the late morning strolling on the Hill of Winds. He marveled at how different the windmills seemed to him now, knowing that it was Stone Mill -- his nest -- that was responsible for their maintenance. He wondered how many there were, and counted at least two dozen within sight. In the distance, he thought he could see even more.

He stood on the summit of the hill, relishing the feel of the warm sun on his clean skin. The air was heavily perfumed with the sweet smell of millions of wildflowers whose blooms spread out endlessly in all directions. Birds chirped and whirled playfully through the air, and Mado found himself suddenly looking, searching for something, wondering.

No crows.

Nor did he see any strange girls. He smiled and sat with his back against one of the thick pylons, listening to the soft whooshes of the generators' blades. Impeller blades.

He found himself listening for unusual sounds -- squeaky bearings, creaking, signs of material fatigue. Mado searched the nearby windmills with his ears and his imagination, envisioning the machinery contained within the old weathered cowlings.

He was late for lunch, but Senkou didn't scold him. He had made sandwiches, and neither Kumo nor Matsu had returned for lunch. Even Tsuchi was late, lingering in the garden, lost in his thoughts.

That afternoon, Mado decided to take one of the scooters into town. The red one was available, and he fired it up, moving slowly down the path at first, but soon he was cruising down the main road at top speed, enjoying the feel of the wind in his hair, and smiling at the fact that he could tuck his wings in now and race down the road into town.

As he slowed and wound his way through the narrow streets, he wondered if he should stop off and visit Ame or Kana. Naw.

Mado decided to go exploring, and rode around the town all afternoon, becoming familiar with the ins and outs of Guri. Some of the roads passed over others on small arched bridges, and Mado found himself delighted at the many secrets the town held, all contained within narrow streets edged by tall buildings of stone and brick and tile and wood.

He stopped by the music shop, looking at the instruments in the windows. This must be where Ame got the guitar strings put on.

He looked at the different displays. There were several brass instruments: trumpets, saxophones, trombones and many types of horns Mado didn't recognize. Something caught his attention. It was a small flute. It seemed made of silver, not brass, but it was about the right size. Hmm.

Mado stared at the flute for several minutes before riding on. I wonder if that would be a worthy project?

He found his way to the center of town and stopped by the fountain, staring at the clock tower. She's probably right there.

Mado pulled around back and could see Kana's bike parked against the wall. He paused, feeling an urge to see her again and make sure she was okay. After all, he was the reason she hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, but he decided against it and rode back to Stone Mill, carefully cleaning, inspecting and refueling the scooter before putting it away.

Dinner that night was also special: fried battered shrimp and vegetables served with a delicious dipping sauce and brown rice. Senkou seemed to have no difficulty being both the supervisor and head chef of Stone Mill.

Matsu and Kumo reported a productive day at the Factory, but Gake's condition had not changed. The mood

at the Factory was somber, and both Matsu and Kumo had decided that cheering up the haibane of the Factory was almost as important as installing the scaffolding.

Tsuchi was relaxed and pleasant at dinner, his mood a stark contrast to his black wings. There had been no change in them, and Mado wondered how long it would take for them to return to normal. When will he solve the riddle?

That evening, Mado practiced with his guitar in the guest room. The book showed basic fingering techniques, scales, progressions and chords, and soon Mado had memorized a few more. He had to stop, though, because the strings hurt his fingers. According to the book, building up callouses on one's fingertips was a necessary part of becoming a guitarist.

Mado went to bed early that night, enjoying the feel of his freshly-washed pajamas, and fell asleep thinking pleasant thoughts of spring, gardens and flowers.

But that night, Mado dreamed.

He was standing at the ruins again. It was cold, and from the dim glow growing in the east, Mado guessed it was very early in the morning. But what morning?

He looked around, trying to place the time. Is this the past again?

Around him, perched on stones and on the grass were what seemed like dozens of crows. All of them were staring at him silently, their dark eyes made Mado feel uneasy.

As he surveyed the scene, a figure emerged from the woods. It was a boy wearing a light brown sweatshirt and a maroon ball cap. Hyouko.

As Mado stood staring, Hyouko walked up to him with a smile. "A little early for you, don't you think?"

Mado blinked. "What?"

Hyouko chuckled. "I've never been able to figure out you Stone Mill types. What are you doing here?"

Mado shook his head. "I don't know."

Hyouko smirked. "Wow, and I thought I had problems." He stared over at the altar for a few moments, then looked back at Mado with a smile. "Ah, I see. I never would have guessed."

He looked around. "What's with all the crows, do you think?" He stepped toward one to shoo it off, and it hopped back a few steps, but didn't fly away.

Mado stared at the crow. "I don't know. They keep following me. It's like they're trying to tell me something." He sighed. "But I can't figure out what it is."

Hyouko smiled and patted Mado on the shoulder. "I know what you mean. For as long as I've been here, I still don't have a clue about this place." He gazed off at the altar silently, pausing before he continued. "But I

think I've seen enough.”

He took off his hat, revealing his halo, and Mado's eyes widened as he saw it flicker once, twice.

Hyouko smiled and handed Mado the hat. “Yup, it's about that time.”

Mado took the hat in his hand, stunned, not knowing what to say.

Hyouko stretched his arms and looked around with satisfaction. “I was hoping it wouldn't be raining. That poor chick from Old Home must have hated her last day.” He glanced to the east, where the sky was growing brighter. “Looks like it's going to be sunny and clear today.” He smiled at Mado. “I couldn't ask for anything better.”

His expression turned serious. “Keep an eye on Gake for me. He's in bad shape, but I think he's going to make it.” He smiled crookedly. “I know what it feels like to spend time in a hospital.”

He started to move past Mado but then seemed to remember something and paused with a sudden look of concern. “Midori's going to freak out. I wonder what she'll do without having me to boss around?”

He looked over at Mado with a smirk. “It's funny. Ever since she hatched, she's been like a bratty little sister to me. Always nagging, telling me what to do. She's never wrong about anything, as far as she's concerned.” He turned and stared to the east with a soft smile. “But you know, I'm really going to miss her.”

Hyouko turned back to Mado. “She's always been there for me, protecting me.” He chuckled. “She even holds the umbrella for me when it rains.” He glanced to the east, and Mado saw a tear roll slowly from one of Hyouko's steel blue eyes. “And now she's grown up.”

Hyouko looked back at Mado as more tears streaked down his face. “I'm glad you're here, so you can tell her something for me.” He glanced to the east again. “Tell her...” He paused, then fished in one of the sweatshirt's pockets and pulled out a yellow bell nut.

He dropped the nut in the hat Mado was holding. “I was going to give that to her at the Passing of the Year festival, but I didn't get the chance.” He wiped the tears from his cheeks and pointed at the hat. “Give her those for me, will you?”

Hyouko reached out and playfully flicked Mado's halo, causing it to ring brightly in the crisp morning air. “The dent's gone.” He gestured at Mado's wing brace. “Try not to break it again.” He punched Mado on the arm as he walked by.

Mado turned and watched as Hyouko walked slowly to the top of the steps. He turned and winked, shooting a finger at Mado like a toy gun. He grinned ironically. “See you around.”

Hyouko turned, faced away from Mado and raised his arms skyward. His wings extended with a magnificent ruffling of feathers.

As Mado watched, Hyouko's halo began glowing, brighter and brighter, until Mado had to look away.

Suddenly the crows, which had been sitting quietly, took flight and swarmed around Mado, all of them cawing and flapping their wings in a frightening display. In their cries he thought he could hear voices, and he could see the bright light from the altar reflecting iridescently off their black feathers.

The movement and calls of the crows disoriented Mado, and he fell to the ground on his hands and knees before darkness overtook him.

He awoke to find Kumo hovering over him nervously, his yellow hair backlit by the morning sun. “Mado, what are you doing here? What happened?”

Mado sat up, shaking his head, trying to place himself. He was wearing his pajamas, his skin felt ice cold, and his bare feet were caked with mud. He was sitting on the grass of the ruins. Next to him were a red ball cap and a yellow bell nut.

Mado stood up and looked over, trembling as memory returned to him.

Upon the altar were fresh gray feathers and a darkened halo.

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 11: Confluence**

#### **Scene 11.1: Divisions**

Mado and Kumo stood side by side, staring at the altar.

After a long while, Mado walked slowly to the top step, knelt and picked up the dull gray ring, gazing at it with somber disbelief. He thought he saw a flash of light -- something -- flicker in the halo as he picked it up, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Mado stared morosely at the darkened halo in his hands. “Goodbye, Hyouko.”

Kumo stepped up quietly and put a hand on Mado's shoulder. They remained there in silence as the sun rose slowly over the trees, illuminating the altar with its warm brilliance.

Finally, Kumo helped Mado to his feet. “Come on, we need to get you to Stone Mill.”

Mado shook his head. “No, I need to take these to Midori.”

Kumo sighed. “At least change into some clothes first.” He gestured to the east. “I brought a scooter. If you want a ride, I'm going to Stone Mill.” He turned and strode briskly toward the trail in the woods.

Mado paused for a while, staring as Kumo walked away, then hurried over, picked up the hat, carefully placed the halo, bell nut and several of Hyouko's feathers inside and ran to catch up with Kumo.

Kumo warned Mado to watch his feet as they mounted the scooter. Without shoes, they could get hurt or caught on something. Mado tucked his feet as close to the scooter's sides as possible as Kumo raced out of the woods and back to Stone Mill. He parked the bike next to the front door and ushered Mado inside.

Mado's feet were still covered with mud and, without thinking, he stopped in the entryway and cleaned them off with a shoe brush. The bristles felt like needles against his cold feet, but he didn't want to track mud into the building. In a few moments he hurried on, with Kumo following him in confused exasperation.

All the other haibane of Stone Mill were standing in the main shop area, and everyone was staring at Mado as he walked in, carrying Hyouko's hat and its sorrowful contents clutched against his chest.

Mado nodded as he hurried by. "I'm okay. I need to change." He stopped for a moment, almost as an afterthought. "Oh, Hyouko of Abandoned Factory has taken flight." Whispers broke out among the other haibane, but Matsu simply stood staring at Mado with what looked like a mixture of worry and disappointment.

Mado paused, staring back apologetically, then rushed into the guest room, hurriedly changing into his coveralls. He put on his socks but not his shoes, grabbed the hat and rushed back out to the changing area, slipping his feet quickly into his boots and lacing them up frantically.

The other haibane gathered around, and Matsu stepped forward. "Mado, where are you going?"

Mado didn't look up as he finished lacing his boots. "I need to take these things to Midori right away."

Matsu put a hand on Mado's shoulder. "Mado, you need to stay here." There was a meaningful pause. "You're not well."

Mado stood up and faced Matsu with a defiant nod. "I know."

He tucked Hyouko's hat inside the chest of his coveralls, rushed out the door, started up Kumo's scooter and sped off down the path.

Matsu and Kumo hurried to the garage to get some other scooters, but Mado was long gone by the time they began to ride after him.

Mado's expression was grim as he raced through the cold morning air. Why don't I feel anything?

Buildings and people blurred by as Mado rode recklessly through the bustling streets of the East District at top speed, deftly threading his way through and barely missing carts and pedestrians as he passed.

The iron gate of the Abandoned Factory was open, and Mado rode inside, pulling up sharply next to a crowd of haibane.

All of them were there, clustered around Midori, who held Hyouko's skateboard in her hands. She looked up

as Mado jumped off the scooter and stepped toward her.

Mado stopped a few paces away, staring, hesitant. Midori's face was streaked with tears. She already knows.

Midori held up the skateboard, and Mado saw that a character had been painted on it in bright red. "Dai."

Mado stared at the skateboard. Large? He shook his head in confusion.

Ame spoke, her face pale with worry. "Mado, Hyouko's missing, and we found this." She glanced at Midori, then looked at Mado plaintively. "We were about to go check the Western Woods." Pain flashed in her eyes as she saw the expression on Mado's face, and she looked at the ground, shaking her head slowly.

Hachi was standing behind Midori, hands on her shoulders, comforting her. Baku and Douro were glaring at Mado.

Douro finally spoke, his irritation evident in his voice. "Well?"

Slowly, reluctantly, Mado reached into his coveralls and pulled out Hyouko's hat. The world seemed to suddenly become silent as the Factory haibane stood motionless, staring at it.

Midori's face, which had been a mask of angry determination, melted into unrestrained shock and sorrow, and she fell to her knees, shaking her head slowly, staring at the hat, sobbing timidly, tears pouring down her cheeks like tiny streams.

Douro's face grew red, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled deeply, seeming to try to contain himself, but his self-control failed. "Damn him! *Damn him!*"

He reached down, picked up a large rock and hurled it toward Furnace #2. It clanged against the framework and fell to the ground.

Douro glanced sharply at the hat in Mado's hand then ran off, disappearing into the maze of metal behind him.

Baku stood with his fists balled, anger on his face, but tears began welling in his eyes, and Ame turned to comfort him.

Mado knelt in front of Midori, trying to maintain his composure, but the heartbreak on her face was too great, and Mado blushed, looking down as his own tears began to flow.

He took a deep breath and looked into Midori's eyes. In them he saw a maelstrom of grief, accusation, fear and abandonment. "Midori..."

He took another breath, trying to calm himself, but his voice was cracked, uneven as he spoke. "I don't know why, but I was there when he left." All the haibane were staring at him.

He reached into the hat and pulled out the bell nut. It made a soft rattling sound as he offered it to Midori. She set the skateboard on the ground and took the yellow nut in her hand, staring at it, confused.

Mado cleared his throat. "He asked me to give that to you." She looked at him, startled. "He said he meant to give it to you at the Passing of the Year, but didn't get the chance."

She gazed at the bell nut with astonishment before clasping it against her chest. She doubled over as fresh tears flowed from her eyes, sobbing uncontrollably as Hachi knelt next to her.

Kumo and Matsu sped in through the gate but pulled up short. Seeing what was happening, they parked their scooters at a respectful distance and walked up quietly, stopping a few paces behind Mado. Both bowed their heads, staring at the ground.

Midori's sobs faded, and Hachi lifted her gently, steadying Midori as she remained kneeling.

Mado pulled the halo from the hat, and a few of Hyouko's feathers fell softly to the ground. He bowed low, offering the ring to Midori with reverence.

She took it in one hand, holding the bell nut in the other. Her eyes flickered between them as her eyebrows arched in confusion. She seemed ready to double over again, but did not. No more tears came from her eyes. It seemed as if there were none left for her to cry.

Mado gently placed Hyouko's hat at Midori's knees and moved quietly away, respectfully, before slowly rising to his feet and stepping back between Matsu and Kumo.

Kumo spoke solemnly, formally. "The haibane of Stone Mill offer our deepest condolences to the haibane of the Factory for your loss." At that, the three boys bowed low.

After a pause, Kumo spoke again. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

Hachi was still kneeling next to Midori, she looked at Baku and Ame. They were staring at Midori with obvious pain in their eyes. Midori remained kneeling, shaking her head and gazing in horror at the halo and bell nut in her hands.

Hachi looked up and shook her head gently. "I think we just need some time to ourselves right now."

Kumo nodded, and the boys bowed again before returning to their scooters. Mado saw Ame glance at him as he turned, and nodded to her before pushing his scooter off the kickstand.

The boys rolled their scooters quietly out the gate before starting them, and rode together slowly through the streets of the East District.

As the other boys turned onto the main road back to Stone Mill, Mado turned in the other direction and steered toward the center of town. *There's something I need to do.*

He looked up at the clock tower as he rolled by the fountain. It was just after nine o'clock, and he coasted the scooter to a halt in front of the shop.

Inside amid the cacophony of ticking clocks was Kana, preparing the store for a new day of business. She

was wearing a peach-colored apron, and looked up with surprise as Mado walked in.

Kana straightened, looking sidelong at Mado as she read his expression. “What's wrong?”

Mado stood mutely for a moment, staring at her uncertainly before speaking. “Hyouko of Abandoned Factory has taken his Day of Flight.”

Kana's eyes widened and she looked away toward a corner of the shop for a moment before turning to face Mado, but said nothing.

Mado continued staring at her, gaging her reaction. “I was there, at the ruins, when he left.”

Kana gaped at him, shocked. “What?”

Her eyes darted to the floor, then around the shop, seeking refuge from Mado's unnerving gaze as she shifted her weight with discomfort.

Mado continued, his voice calm but edged with tension. “I was sleepwalking and dreamed I was there. Hyouko walked up and we talked, then he... left.”

Kana looked at the floor with a frown.

Mado's voice remained even. “There were crows everywhere. They seemed to be trying to tell me something, but I passed out again.”

Kana glanced up sharply with an expression of contempt, her voice thick with distaste. “Crows?” She sighed impatiently as her eyes darted to the floor, then fixed on him with growing irritation.

Mado continued impassively. “When I woke up, I was at the ruins in my pajamas, with Hyouko's hat next to me.”

Kana's hands flew to her hips. She leaned forward with a huff, scowling, her eyebrows knitting angrily, her voice edged with annoyance. “Why are you telling me all this?” She stood glaring at him indignantly.

Mado paused with a look of injured shock. His composure failed, and unbridled fear flashed across his face. He looked down at the floor, suddenly embarrassed. *Why am I telling her this?*

He stared at Kana's feet, stammering. “Because I... because I...” He looked up, trying to mouth words as Kana's expression softened slightly.

Mado blushed and looked back at the floor. “I'm sorry.” His wings sagged as he fought back tears.

She reached out a hand and lifted Mado's chin, forcing him to look into her eyes. She spoke quietly with a little nod. “It's okay.”

Mado smiled crookedly and tried to speak again but could not. Kana frowned and looked askance, puzzling over Mado's distress.

He glanced over her shoulder to see the clockmaster's head peek in from the back room, then quickly disappear.

Kana turned her head, facing Mado squarely. Her dark eyes gleamed intensely as she spoke with even determination. "I'm by your side."

The words caught Mado off guard, and his his eyebrows arched in confusion. He swallowed and almost looked away, but held Kana's gaze. "What do you mean?"

Kana's eyes flickered to the floor as color came to her cheeks. She glanced nervously back to the counter, then at Mado before looking at a point below Mado's chin with embarrassment. "It's something I heard Rakka say." She cleared her throat. "To the twins, once."

She sighed uncomfortably and looked up. "I just want you to know that you're not alone." She smiled crookedly, her tone winsome. "Everyone here has problems."

Mado's confusion lingered, but he took a deep breath and relaxed as Kana shifted to one foot, her hands still on her hips.

Kana spoke with an impish grin. "Basically, if you have wings in this town, you've got issues."

Mado grinned with gratitude as tension fled from the room.

Kana studied Mado's face inquisitively, then seemed to remember something. She blurted out with sudden cheer. "I know!"

Mado stared with bewilderment as Kana reached into her hip pocket and pulled out her large brass watch.

She flipped open the cover, glanced at the dial and then at one of the clocks. She smiled proudly. "Perfect time."

Kana closed the cover and held the watch out to Mado. "Here."

Mado took the watch with a look of fresh confusion.

Kana smiled softly. "I want you to have this. I fixed it myself and it keeps perfect time." She looked down at the watch affectionately. "With this, you won't ever need to worry about being late."

Kana held up a hand dismissively and shook her head emphatically as Mado moved to protest. "Nope! It's yours now."

Mado stared at the watch with a look of shock.

Kana stepped back and grinned mischievously. "Just be sure not to wind it up too tight." She winked and darted quickly into the back room.

Mado stood holding the watch in his hand, gazing at it with disbelief. *A gift.*

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the knife Kabe had given him, holding it in one hand and the watch in the other.

Mado stared despondently at the door through which Kana had left. *Not Kana!*

He stepped forward as if to follow her, but then stopped, uncertain. He glanced at the items in his hands and placed one in each hip pocket.

Mado gazed at the door to the back room for a while longer, then walked quietly out of the shop.

As he guided the scooter slowly along the main road toward Stone Mill, something ahead caught Mado's attention and he stopped suddenly.

In the distance, above the Western Woods, a bright column of light rose high in the morning sky.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 11.2: Injunction**

Mado sat on the scooter, staring blankly.

A brilliant beam of white light stretched from the treetops to a point so high in the clear blue of the morning sky that it couldn't be seen. Swarming upward along the column were dozens of small luminescent light blue clouds, while thin white arcs radiated gracefully outward from the center like the ribs of a delicate lantern.

This can't be happening.

Mado shook his head and looked up to see the lights disappear into the cloudless azure heavens.

Another one?

Mado throttled the scooter and raced down the bumpy road toward the Western Woods. His heart skipped a beat as he passed Old Home. They just lost Nemu a few days ago.

Fresh terror overtook him. Kana? It couldn't be...

Urgency caused Mado to speed recklessly through the woods, hurtling down the narrowing root-strewn trail as branches whipped his face and shoulders.

He skidded to a stop, almost crashing into a gnarled tree, quickly set the scooter on its kickstand and rushed to the edge of the clearing.

The ruins were empty, but Mado could see the light flecks of feathers on the altar. He stood for a moment, staring, when movement to his left caught his eye. A figure wearing a light brown dress was walking slowly toward the altar from a different trail, far to the south.

It was the girl with the golden pigtails, walking slowly, her eyes fixed on the altar, occasionally stumbling, heedless of the stones at her feet.

Mado watched in stunned silence as she walked slowly up the steps and knelt, bowing her head. She reached down and clutched something against her chest, and Mado could see that she was sobbing.

He began walking toward the altar, uncertain of himself but driven both by curiosity and a desire to comfort her in her grief.

The girl turned and stood up quickly in shock as Mado approached the altar. She was perched precariously on the top step, her eyes darting wildly from side to side. She reached up and quickly wiped her tears away with a sleeve.

As Mado came closer, she called out. "Stop!"

Mado froze in place, surprised. She seemed terrified of him. He held up his hands in a gesture of placation. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

The girl's eyes kept darting nervously, and she seemed ready to run away at any moment. Her eyes narrowed and her voice was thick with suspicion. "Why are you here?"

Mado took a step back and the girl seemed to relax slightly. "I saw the light and came to investigate." His eyes flickered to the darkened halo the girl was holding against her chest. "I thought it might be a Day of Flight."

The girl glanced down at the halo in her arms, and Mado saw fresh pain come to her face, but she raised her chin defiantly, her eyes wide like those of a frightened animal.

She turned her head slightly to one side, her eyes narrowing again as she looked at the patch on Mado's coveralls. "Who are you?"

Mado took another step backward and bowed. "I am Mado, a haibane of Stone Mill."

With Mado's retreat, the girl relaxed a little more. Her wings, which had been arched with tension, eased against her back.

The girl blushed and looked down at her feet. "We're not supposed to be talking."

Mado blinked in confusion. "Why not?"

The girl's eyes narrowed again and suspicion returned to her face. Her tone was sarcastic, skeptical, as if Mado couldn't possibly not know. "Because we're not from the same nest, of course."

Her suspicion seemed to grow as Mado's eyes widened. He shook his head, confused. "I don't understand."

The girl's eyes widened. "Don't tell me you don't know the rule?"

Mado shook his head. "No. I've never heard of such a rule." He paused, trying to take in the meaning of the girl's words. "I talk to the haibane of Old Home and the Abandoned Factory all the time."

The girl turned her head further, looking askance at Mado with disbelief.

Mado continued. "I just came from the Abandoned Factory. Their foreman, Hyouko, took his Day of Flight this morning." He looked at the fresh scatter of feathers on the altar, then back at the girl. "I didn't realize this happened so often."

The girl tensed and seemed ready to bolt, but as she looked in Mado's eyes, her suspicion was slowly replaced with wonder. "You're not lying to me, are you?"

Mado shook his head, holding the girl's gaze.

She looked around in astonishment, shaking her head slowly from side to side. "You mean you're really allowed to talk to each other?"

Mado nodded emphatically. "Yes, we have to in order to do our jobs."

The girl's eyes flashed toward Mado. "What?"

Mado found himself amazed at the girl's reluctance to believe him. "We couldn't possibly perform repairs on the other nests if we couldn't talk to the haibane who lived there."

The girl's eyes widened with fresh surprise. "You fix other people's nests?" Her eyes unfocused and she stared distantly with an almost slack jaw.

She shook her head as if to snap out of a daze. Her eyes focused on Mado's patch. "You're a repairman?"

Mado smiled. "Well, sort of. I'm training to be a machinist."

The girl stared at Mado, seeming almost ready to faint with disbelief. Mado worried that she might fall off the altar. He took another step backward. "Would you like to sit down?"

The girl continued staring at him for a moment, then nodded slowly and sank to the steps, tucking her dress over her crossed legs. She looked at Mado. "A machinist? You mean you can fix tractors and things like that?"

Mado paused thoughtfully. "Well, I'm not trained to fix tractors, but I suppose I could learn. I'm sure Kumo could, or some of the haibane of the Factory who work at the garage."

Her eyes widened again. "The humans let you do that?" She looked down at her feet, shaking her head slowly.

Suddenly, she jumped to her feet, her face flush with anger. "You're lying to me!" She turned, leaped off the altar and ran back in the direction she had come, still clutching the halo against her chest.

Several paces away, she stopped and looked back at Mado, and he could see fresh tears on her cheeks. He stood silently, not knowing what to do. He looked over at the altar and sat down on the bottom step, taking one of the fallen feathers in his hand. I wonder who this belongs to?

He didn't turn his head as the girl slowly approached.

Her voice was soft, contrite. "I'm sorry I called you a liar."

Mado looked up and smiled. "It's okay." He gazed thoughtfully at the feather in his hand. "It looks like we live by different rules."

The girl smiled and sat down next to Mado, surprisingly close. She sighed. "I didn't know things were different for the other nests. According to the boss, the way we live is the way it's always been."

Mado looked over. "The boss?"

A look of pain came to her face and her eyes fell to the dark ring still clutched against her chest. "This was his halo."

Mado looked with surprise at the halo, then at the girl. "Does your nest have a replacement chosen yet?"

The girl looked at him levelly and shook her head. "Now it's just me and the little ones." She sighed with resignation. "We're already behind. We're not even half done with planting." She looked up at the sky wistfully. "Soon the season will be over if we don't hurry."

Mado stared at her with wonder. A nest that no one told me about. Why?

He shifted, turning toward her. "Do you need help?"

The girl seemed surprised by the question and lifted her chin, her nostrils flaring. "We can take care of ourselves."

She glared at him with an air of defiant pride, but it soon melted and her eyes moistened as she slowly shook her head. "No, that's not true."

She sighed, looking down at the halo in her arms. "Without the boss, we won't be able to keep up." She glanced at Mado with embarrassment. "Even with the boss, we were already behind. Toward the end, he hardly did any work at all."

She gazed over at the Western Woods. "I heard there was a temple somewhere that was for the haibane, but I couldn't find it."

Mado spoke up. "You mean Temple of the Haibane Renmei?"

The girl stared blankly at Mado. "The what?"

Mado almost recoiled with astonishment. “You've never heard of the Haibane Renmei?”

The girl shook her head mutely as Mado looked at the feather in his hand, surprised yet again. She's never even heard of them!

She gestured at the ruins. “I was worried that maybe this was the temple the rumors were talking about, and that no one was left that could help us.”

Mado sat for a moment, trying to keep up with all the strange things he was hearing.

Suddenly, he had an idea. “I can take you to the Temple if you like.”

The girl shifted on the stone step, slipping away from Mado slightly. Mado sat still, looking calmly in her eyes, quietly assuring her that he meant no ill toward her. He noticed for the first time that her eyes were hazel-colored, light brown flecked with specks of gray and green.

After a tense moment, the girl relaxed. “I guess so. We need the help, especially the little ones.”

Mado nodded, stood up and reached down, helping the girl to her feet.

She stood close, facing him, and with a blush of self-consciousness, stepped back and looked down at the grass.

She glanced up at Mado with embarrassment. “I'm sorry, my name is Suke.” She curtsied awkwardly. “Thank you for helping me.”

Mado bowed and gestured toward the woods with a smile. “My scooter's that way.”

As she turned to leave, Mado reached down and gathered some feathers. The girl stopped, puzzled as Mado handed them to her. “To remember him by.”

Her eyebrows arched with fresh pain, but she accepted the feathers with a small bow of gratitude.

Suke was somewhat self-conscious about riding on Mado's scooter, and sat precariously balanced side-saddle on the back of the seat, clutching the halo and feathers against her chest with one arm while tightly gripping Mado's waist with the other.

She spoke with a tremor of fright. “I've never ridden on one of these before.”

Mado smiled and shook his head with fresh amazement as he eased the scooter slowly along the trail, mindful of how he felt during his first ride on a scooter just a couple of weeks before.

As they rode slowly past Old Home, Mado saw Rakka in her white and brown school uniform shepherding the twins out the archway. They were running with their arms extended, circling each other like golden-haired birds of prey.

Mado smiled at the irony of girls with wings pretending to use their arms as wings and waved as he passed

them. The twins stopped and waved back. Rakka wagged her forearm absently in greeting, staring open-mouthed at Mado's passenger.

Soon Mado stopped the scooter by the rope bridge next to the waterfall. Suke was afraid to cross at first, but Mado led her gently by the hand and coached her patiently as she timidly negotiated the narrow trail along the side of the cliff.

Suke's eyes went wide at the sight of the Temple, and she almost seemed to stagger as they approached. She was staring up at the tall walls set against the cliff, and clutched the halo and feathers more tightly against her chest as they drew closer.

An attendant stood by the door. As Mado walked up, he quietly placed bells on Mado's wrists and wings and stepped back.

Mado looked over at Suke. The attendant had not fitted her with bells. Mado gestured, pointing at his bells, then at Suke, but the attendant shook his head and stood still.

Suke whispered to Mado. "What's wrong?"

Mado glanced at the Temple doorway then the attendant before looking into Suke's eyes with a confident nod.

"Wait here."

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 11.3: Vortex**

Mado walked quickly through the garden. The Communicator was seated in the gazebo, examining dried plants arranged on a small gray metal pan.

Mado stepped up and paused for a moment. Does he ever leave this place?

Mado shook the bells on his wrists, and the Communicator looked over at him, his mask as impassive as ever. He stared at Mado for a long time, and Mado was about to shake the bells again when the Communicator finally spoke. "What is your business here? I permit you to speak."

Mado took a deep breath and exhaled, searching for the right words. "There is a haibane girl who needs help. Her name is Suke, but I don't know what nest she's from. Her boss took his Day of Flight today and now Suke is left alone with some young feathers."

The Communicator stared at Mado silently, unmoving.

Mado paused, then realized he hadn't asked a question. "The attendant wouldn't put bells on her wings, and I don't know if she's allowed inside the Temple, so I'm here to ask permission for her to come in and talk to you." Mado took another breath and held it, wondering what would happen next.

The Communicator continued staring at Mado without speaking.

Mado became impatient. "She's afraid. Can't you help her?"

The Communicator spoke slowly, formally. "What does she seek from us?"

Mado was put off-balance by the question. *Didn't I just tell him?* "She needs help." He paused, thinking. "She said something about being behind on planting, and that the little ones needed help."

The Communicator continued staring dispassionately at Mado for a long moment before speaking again. "The Haibane Renmei does not recognize Suke as a member, nor any haibane of the nest you speak of."

Mado's eyes widened in surprise. He raised his voice, protesting stridently. "But she's a haibane! I thought that's what the Haibane Renmei was for!" He put a hand over his mouth and bowed apologetically. "I'm sorry."

The Communicator paused briefly before replying. "It is true that we exist to serve the haibane. It is also true that no member of our alliance who seeks aid will be denied. However, we are forbidden from interfering in the affairs of those who have chosen independence."

Mado shook his head. "I don't understand."

The Communicator continued, his voice impassive. "Haibane Suke is a member of a nest in the South District farming village known as the Abandoned Farmhouse. Hers is a nest that chose independence from the Haibane Renmei long ago, and it is a decision we must respect. As long as she and her nest desire independence, we cannot intervene for any reason."

Mado stood staring at the Communicator. "Independence?"

The Communicator spoke, his tone unchanged. "We exist to serve the haibane. We do this through the maintenance of a cooperative alliance among our members. Those who choose to become members of the Haibane Renmei receive its benefits, but are also bound by the restrictions we deem necessary to ensure the security and stability of the alliance."

A puzzled look came to Mado's face. "But what about the halos? Don't they come from the Renmei?"

The Communicator nodded. "Yes. We provide halos to all haibane. However, we do so because we are the keepers of the Wall, and are thus required by its power to perform those duties which are inherent to its relationship with all haibane. In addition to providing halos, there are certain other tasks we perform for all haibane, regardless of their affiliation. However, we are prohibited from doing anything more than the Wall requires for those haibane who choose independence. For us to do so would be a grave offense."

Mado looked down at the Communicator's feet. He was wearing open sandals with socks.

Mado stood silently, thinking about what the Communicator had said. Suddenly, he looked up. "What if she asks to join the Renmei?"

The Communicator's head did not move, and his voice was unchanged. "No haibane who seeks membership in our alliance is refused. Therefore, if Suke wishes to become a member of the Haibane Renmei, she will be accepted. This will also be true of any haibane in her nest who should choose to join us."

Mado smiled triumphantly. "Then can she come here and ask you?"

The Communicator nodded. Mado bowed quickly, shook the bells on his wrist and trotted out of the garden with excitement.

Outside, Suke was still standing. She had edged away from the attendant and was staring at him nervously. She looked over at Mado with evident relief. "Can they help me?"

Mado nodded. "Yes, but you must become a member of the Haibane Renmei or they can't."

Suke shook her head with confusion, her pigtailed slapping her shoulders. "What do you mean?"

Mado explained as patiently as he could, feeling surprised that she wouldn't simply want to join. "The Haibane Renmei is only allowed to help members. It is forbidden from interfering in the lives of haibane who aren't members."

Suke stared blankly at Mado as he continued. "The Communicator said that your nest chose independence a long time ago, which must be why you've never heard of the Renmei before. It's against the rules for the Renmei to get involved with haibane who don't want to be members. So if you don't join, they can't help you."

Suke stared at Mado for a while, glanced at the attendant then at the ground. She seemed conflicted and shook her head with doubt. "I don't know. We've always taken care of ourselves." She sighed. "It's been our tradition for as long as anyone can remember. I'm not sure it would be right to change it just because times are hard."

She looked up at Mado. "Somebody decided that there was a reason for not joining the Renmei, and we've stuck with that ever since. It must have been a good reason, or I'm sure we would have joined a long time ago." She pursed her lips. "But I don't know what the reason was."

For a moment, her eyes pleaded with Mado for some sort of direction, but they hardened and she lifted her chin. "We've always made our own way, and don't owe anything to anyone. What does this Renmei expect in return for my joining it?"

Mado furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "There are rules we have to follow, like not touching the wall. Also, we're expected to work in return for what the Renmei gives us. Everyone needs to have a job." He sighed and rolled his eyes. "We're not supposed to go into the Western Woods, but they don't seem to enforce that rule very strongly."

Suke nodded. "What else?"

Mado was straining, trying to remember everything. "Oh, we're not allowed to own anything new, or own

money. They give us books with pages in them we use to buy things. Only certain shops accept them, so we can only shop in those places.”

He reached into his hip pocket, pulled out his small red notebook and showed it to Suke. It was curved from being pressed up against his thigh. He opened it and leafed through the pages, explaining how the system worked.

She nodded as he put the notebook away. “Okay, so what's the catch?”

Mado tried to remember. “They get to choose the supervisor for the nest. Well, my nest anyway. And there are some other rules I can't remember, but they're not bad. I think there are town rules that the humans make that we might be expected to follow, like not stealing or things like that, but so far, nobody's said anything about it to me.”

He grinned crookedly. “We're not supposed to spend too much time around humans or socializing with members of other nests, but they don't seem to enforce that either. I'm not even sure it's a rule, actually, because we sure seem to spend a lot of time together.”

Mado smiled warmly, and Suke returned the smile. “Okay, so what will the Renmei do for me if I join?”

Mado thought for a moment. “Well, we can come and help fix things, and maybe we can help with your planting. The girls at Old Home can probably take care of your young feathers, if you want. They have a huge place with plenty of room and a house mother to watch over them and teach them. The haibane of the Factory can fix tractors and equipment, and probably some other things I don't know about yet.” I wonder where Midori works?

Suke looked at Mado thoughtfully. “So what if I change my mind?”

Mado replied. “I didn't ask, but I think you would just go back to being independent. After all, that seems to be what happened in the first place.” Mado smiled.

Suke closed her eyes hard and took several deep breaths, her brow furrowed in concentration. Finally, she opened her eyes and smiled. “Okay, I'll talk to this Communicator of yours.”

Mado ushered her over to the attendant, who placed bells on her wings and wrists.

Mado suddenly blushed and leaned over, whispering in her ear. “Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to tell you. We're not allowed to talk inside the Temple without permission.” Suke's eyes narrowed in suspicion, but she listened as Mado explained.

He showed her how to use the bells. Suke tried practicing, and though her wings were strong, she had trouble moving them separately. She blushed and whispered. “I've never had to move them like that before.”

Mado smiled. “I know the feeling. Don't worry, he'll probably give you permission to talk right away.”

Suke sighed nervously but followed Mado into the Temple. Inside, her eyes widened in amazement as she gazed at the massive tiered galleries of the Temple. She looked up, gaping at the clear blue circle of sky far

above. “Wow!”

Mado smiled and put a finger to his lips. “Shhh!” Suke blushed and nodded her head.

The bells on the wings of the two haibane jingled lightly as they approached the gazebo.

The Communicator stood and faced them as they stopped. Mado shook the bells on his wrist, and Suke quickly followed suit.

The Communicator's tone was formal and menacing. “Haibane! What is your name?” He leaned forward on his cane, looming over Suke, seeming to scrutinize her intensely through the eye slits of his mask.

She stared at the Communicator with a look of timid confusion. “Uh... uh... uhhhhh?”

The Communicator continued. “Your name is 'Suke', is it not?”

Suke's expression brightened and she twitched both her wings in excitement -- shaking the bells for both “yes” and “no” -- as Mado turned away, closing his eyes with mild disappointment.

Her cheeks reddened in embarrassment. She lowered her head and closed her eyes with effort as she slowly raised her right wing, ringing the bells meaning “yes.”

The Communicator spoke in a tone of admonishment. “You should endeavor to make your wings a properly working part of your body.”

Although the mask concealed the Communicator's face, Mado sensed an air of amusement as he spoke. “Feather Suke, I permit you to speak.”

Mado and Suke sighed with relief, and Mado realized that both of them had been tense with anxiety.

The Communicator addressed Suke. “What is your business here?”

Suke glanced at Mado and cleared her throat. “I think I want to join the Haibane Renmei, but I need to talk to you about it. Mado explained some things, but I want to make sure I know what I'm getting myself into.”

The Communicator nodded. “Very well.” He turned to Mado. “Feather Mado, is there anything else?”

Mado looked at Suke, who glanced nervously at the Communicator but smiled warmly. “Thanks, Mado. I think I'll be all right now.”

Mado smiled back and bowed to her. He turned to the Communicator, shook the bells on his left wing, then shook the bells on his wrists, turned and left the Temple.

Though Mado heard the lunch bell ring as he pulled up to the garage of Stone Mill, he nonetheless took his time and methodically cleaned, inspected and refueled the scooter. The trip through the woods had left some scuffs and smudges on the scooter's finish, and Mado took the extra time to polish them out.

The haibane of Stone Mill had almost finished eating when Mado entered the lounge. They had been talking animatedly, but fell silent when Mado stepped up to the table.

Mado blushed and swallowed nervously as the other boys stared at him. "I'm sorry about this morning."

He saw the other boys trade meaningful glances, and though there had been an air of tension in the silence, it quickly dissipated.

Matsu spoke first, his expression a mixture of wonder and concern. "Mado, where have you been all morning? And why did you ditch us on the way back?"

Mado was about to answer when Senkou interjected. "Mado, you must be starving. I made sandwiches for you. They're in the kitchen, take as many as you like."

Mado nodded and stepped into the kitchen. There was a generous stack of freshly-made sandwiches on a plate under a wrap of paper. They were piled high with meat, cheese and lettuce. Mado's mouth watered as he put a couple of them on a serving plate. He's right, I haven't eaten all day.

The boys had begun talking quietly as Mado was in the kitchen but became silent again as he sat down next to Tsuchi. Mindful of their gazes, he nonetheless took several hurried bites of a sandwich, eating so fast that he started to choke. He pounded his chest as his face flushed and, impulsively, grabbed Tsuchi's tea and quickly poured it down his throat.

The emergency over, he gasped with satisfaction, wiped his mouth with his sleeve and looked around the table. "Hmm?" Reminded by the shocked expressions of the boys, he returned Tsuchi's cup and apologized as the stares turned to grins and chuckles.

Matsu quipped. "And we were just commenting on how peaceful this meal was."

Tsuchi smiled impishly. "Good tea makes a difference."

Mado's face turned beet red. "Sorry. I was really hungry." He took a couple more bites before continuing as Tsuchi filled a cup of tea for him.

Matsu leaned forward anxiously. "So Mado, where did you go?"

Mado looked up from his sandwich. "Oh, right. Sorry." He paused for a moment. Let's not talk about Kana.

He set the sandwich down on his plate. "I had an errand I wanted to do in town. On the way back, I saw a light coming from the Western Woods."

At this, the boys looked at each other with astonishment, and a dull roar of chatter broke out as the conversation turned into chaos.

Tsuchi held up a hand and the table fell silent. "Apprentice Mado, are you saying that another haibane took flight today?"

Mado nodded, and as the haibane of Stone Mill listened with rapt intensity, Mado told them about Suke of the Abandoned Farmhouse.

## **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 11.4: Vergence**

The boys were spellbound by Mado's story, staying in their chairs as the afternoon work bell rang, and they sat quietly as Mado finished speaking and casually started taking more bites from his sandwich.

Tsuchi spoke first. "Apprentice Mado, do you know whether or not Suke actually agreed to join the Haibane Renmei?"

Mado shook his head, chewing on a bite of sandwich.

Umi spoke up. "Master, did you know about this other nest?"

Tsuchi shot a sharp glance at Umi, but nodded and smiled softly. "Yes. I saw one of them many years ago while exploring the South District farming village. I asked the Communicator about it, and he advised me to avoid the village." He glanced at Mado. "He also advised me not to speak of what I saw to anyone."

Umi's eyes widened. "Wow."

Kumo shook his head. "So they've been there all this time? I wonder why I've never seen any of them in town?"

Mado shrugged. "She didn't say, but I don't think they normally go very far from their nest. It's against their rules to talk to other haibane, so I guess they just hang around the village and work wherever their fields are."

Senkou spoke authoritatively. "I'm sure we all have plenty of questions, but we should let Mado finish his lunch, and we need to get ready for the deployment." He seemed about to get up, but stopped. "Oh..."

He looked over at Matsu with a nod. "Matsu?"

Matsu gaped blankly for a moment, then seemed to remember. "Oh! Right." He turned to Mado. "After you disappeared in town this morning, I went to the Temple to ask about your sleepwalking."

Mado stared at Matsu expectantly, chewing slowly on a fresh bite of sandwich.

Matsu glanced at Senkou, then swallowed. "The Communicator has forbidden us from interfering with you when you're dreaming or sleepwalking." He looked down at the table. "I told him you might get hurt, but he didn't say anything." He looked up at Mado with obvious pain in his eyes.

Mado swallowed. "Did he say why you can't help me?"

Matsu shook his head and stared down at the table. All the haibane were staring at Mado silently. They've already talked about this.

Matsu looked up. "So we can't stop you. But how did you get out last night? We all stood our watches properly. Each of us worked at a bench that's almost right by the front door. There's no way we could have missed you."

The boys looked at each other briefly, then back at Mado.

Mado looked down, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "I don't remember leaving Stone Mill. I just remember waking up at the ruins."

Kumo spoke up, mildly frustrated. "But you had to get out of the building somehow. You didn't just fly away, did you?"

There were some cryptic glances, but no one spoke.

Finally, Umi broke the silence. "What if he didn't go out the front door?"

Kumo looked over at him. "Well, we have bells on all the doors, and I checked Mado's window. It was latched from the inside, so he couldn't have gone out that way."

Senkou shook his head. "Strange. It's tempting to keep a direct watch on you, but we have our orders." He nodded curtly at Mado, but there was worry in his eyes. "Try not to get hurt out there, okay?" He sighed. "Maybe you should sleep with your clothes and shoes on for a while."

Mado blushed and looked down at the table. He realized that, as before, he was physically exhausted, and suddenly felt a wave of depression wash over him. Why is this happening to me?

The other boys stood up and Matsu leaned over, patting Mado's shoulder. "Sorry, Mado. We'll do what we can, but maybe Senkou's right about staying dressed." He sighed. "At least until it gets warmer."

At the thought of that, Mado began quietly weeping, and the haibane of Stone Mill gave him sympathetic pats on the shoulder as they filed silently out of the lounge.

Senkou leaned over Mado's shoulder, speaking softly. "Don't worry. It'll be all right. Come out and join us in the shop when you're done. We're going to load up the hammer truck now."

Mado looked over inquisitively. "Hammer truck?"

Senkou winked. "You'll see." He gave Mado a playful slap on the shoulder and strode out into the shop.

Mado finished the second sandwich quickly and hurriedly washed his plate and teacup.

When he stepped out into the shop, the main door was already open, and the other boys were using one of the overhead electric winches to lower the wind generator into a special tray mounted on the front of a crane truck. *The hammer truck?*

Mado had seen the truck before, but it was normally covered with a canvas tarp in the garage. It was similar to the truck Kumo had driven, with an open cab and a large flat bed. However, it had an extensible crane arm attached to a special gimbal mount installed on the bed. The arm extended over the bed next to the driver's seat and had a large rectangular bucket at the end. Everything was painted standard gray, except for the large Stone Mill logos which had been stenciled on the sides of the lift arm.

A short, sturdy hydraulic manipulator arm extended from the bucket, and after the boys had placed the generator in the cargo tray, they attached a special hook on the arm to a lift point on the top of the generator. The arm held the generator in place against the cargo tray.

It was a truck that seemed custom-made for removing and installing wind generators.

Mado stepped up beside Senkou, who was overseeing the operation. "Is this the hammer truck?"

Senkou nodded.

Mado studied the truck with puzzlement. "Where's the hammer?"

Senkou looked over at Mado and laughed. He pointed at Tsuchi. "Right there."

In response to Mado's confused expression, Senkou continued. "Master Tsuchi designed and built this truck, so we call it the 'hammer truck'. It's a nickname. I think he calls it a specialized multi-axis mobile utility hoist, but that doesn't exactly roll off the tongue." He winked at Mado playfully. "So 'hammer truck' it is."

He pointed at the gimbal mount. "That's what makes it special. The lift arm has an extra degree of freedom, and it's the only one of its kind that we know of."

Mado glanced over at Tsuchi. "Why did he design it that way?"

Senkou smiled and ushered Mado over to Tsuchi, who had just stepped back from helping to secure the load. Senkou whispered in his ear and Tsuchi turned, grinning broadly. "You aren't the first person to ask me that question."

He gestured at the truck. "The generator pylons are typically located on irregular grassy slopes. We are required to service them year-round, in all kinds of weather." He glanced at Mado with a clever smile. "Sometimes we don't get to position the truck where we would prefer to."

He pointed to the lift arm. "Most hoists of this type use a standard swivel arm arrangement with a separate swivel joint at the end of the arm for the bucket. In most situations, that's fine. However, in our case, because of the weight of the generators versus the size of the truck and lift arm available to us, we need to minimize the lateral loads on the arm in cases where we must park the truck with an orientation other than directly uphill or downhill of the pylon."

Mado cocked his head, trying to envision what Tsuchi was describing. “So the arm won't bend sideways?”

Tsuchi smiled proudly. “That's basically correct. The lift arm is a standard type optimized for vertical stress, and is essentially all that is available to us in Guri as far as extensible load-bearing arms go. However, in situations where the truck must be parked on a steep slope alongside a pylon, we run the risk of overloading the arm laterally. I had originally considered reinforcing the arm for lateral strength, but ultimately, due to limitations in the type and suitability of materials available to us, was forced to improvise.”

Mado scratched his head. “But isn't the gimbal system inherently weaker and more complex?” He regarded the bearings and hydraulic actuators skeptically.

Tsuchi nodded. “A fair question. As it turns out, the gimbal rings are made from a surplus smelting crucible and, combined with the bearing shafts I was able to manufacture from the same material, the assembly is actually stronger than the original swivel mount by a wide margin.” He pointed proudly. “As you can see, the actuators are relatively compact, protected by the rings themselves and positioned for maximum mechanical advantage.”

A distant look came to his eyes as Tsuchi smiled nostalgically. “Ironically, the furnace we used to temper the rings once they were machined is the same furnace being overhauled at the Abandoned Factory.” The smile faded. “Now they burn trash in it.”

He glanced at Mado. “The solution has proven to be very robust. We have been using this truck in all weather, year-round since it was modified without any failures or observable degradation of the gimbal assembly, and with only two actuator replacements. That was back when I was a journeyman.” He sighed and his black wings sagged. “Nine years ago...”

His look became pained, but at a signal from Senkou, Kumo, who was driving the truck, started to back it slowly out the door as the other haibane followed.

Tsuchi's eyes cleared and he smiled, motioning to the other haibane, who were walking down the path behind the slow-moving truck. “Let's go deploy a generator.”

It was a warm early afternoon, and the dull roar of the truck seemed out of place among the tall grass and endless sea of wildflowers on the Hill of Winds. The wide tires made twin trails of crushed grass along which the haibane walked.

Mado found himself in awe of the spectacle in front of him: a procession of boys dressed in gray coveralls with wings and halos following a large gray truck between rows of tall weathered windmills on a hill of bright green grass and colorful flowers under clear blue skies. This is definitely a new experience for me.

Kumo parked the truck facing the empty pylon, which was located on a fairly flat section of the hill. Mado could hear the ratcheting sound of a handbrake being pulled, and Kumo hopped out of the cab, stepping back to a control panel at the rear of the truck. With a few well-practiced manipulations of some levers on the control panel, Kumo swept out the stabilizer legs which were tucked alongside the cargo bed and planted them, almost lifting the truck's wheels off the ground.

Matsu and Senkou removed some long wooden poles with small, oddly-shaped metal hooks at the ends from

the truck bed.

Senkou smiled at Umi. “Think you can handle Safety One?”

Umi grinned and accepted the large pole with glee. He took up a position to one side of the pylon.

Senkou turned to go to the other side, but Tsuchi stopped him. “I’ll take Safety Two. You need to supervise.” Senkou smiled with embarrassment and handed him the pole. “Sorry, this takes getting used to.”

Tsuchi patted him on the shoulder and took a position opposite Umi on the other side of the pylon.

Senkou turned to Mado and gestured toward the truck. “Feel free to stand anywhere you like on this side of the stabilizer legs, but don’t get too close to the truck.” He paused. “If you want, you can stand by Kumo at the Ground Station.”

Senkou walked over and stood to the side of the truck next to Matsu. He called out formally in a stern voice. “Preparing for lift operations. Ground Station ready?”

Kumo called out. “Ground Station ready!”

Senkou turned. “Safeties ready?”

Umi shouted with what sounded like joy. “Safety One ready!”

Tsuchi announced with an ironic smile. “Safety Two ready!”

Senkou turned to Matsu and called out. “Lift Operator to your station!”

Matsu nodded with an enthusiastic grin and climbed quickly into the bucket. He reached down, checking some things, then attached a safety harness over his shoulders, threading his wings carefully through the loops and buckling it with a loud snap. He reached down again, apparently inspecting controls.

Matsu stood tall and called out with excitement. “Lift Operator ready, request permission to lift!”

Senkou blushed and paused, staring almost apologetically at Tsuchi for a moment, but called out proudly. “Lift Operator, you have permission to lift!”

Matsu practically sang the words. “Ground Station, disengage lift locks!”

Kumo flipped a lever, and there were several soft clacks as different locks unlatched throughout the lift system. “Lift locks disengaged!”

Matsu nodded. “Lift locks disengaged, lifting generator!”

Matsu operated a row of levers at the front of the bucket, and the arm rose slowly upward, carrying the heavy generator with it.

Mado looked over and saw Rakka and the twins standing at a safe distance. Rakka was holding each back by a hand, and the girls were squirming with excitement. They saw Mado looking and waved wildly. Mado waved back with a smile. This is exciting!

Umi looked over, saw the girls and looked away uncomfortably. His expression was grim as he stared at the pylon. He seemed to be deliberately trying not to look at the girls as he worked.

Matsu rode upward in the bucket with obvious exhilaration and positioned it above and just to the near side of the top of the pylon. Using the manipulator arm, he gently adjusted the position of the generator to place its thick swivel post over the center of the pylon.

After a few finishing touches, he called out. "Preparing to lower generator. Safety One, check alignment!"

Umi squinted at the stop of the post and called out "Safety One, alignment good!"

Matsu looked down at Tsuchi with a broad smile. "Safety Two, check alignment!"

Tsuchi adjusted his glasses as he peered at the top of the pylon. "Safety Two, alignment good!" He grinned and gave Matsu a thumbs-up.

Matsu called out. "Safeties stand by, lowering generator!"

Mado glanced over to see Suke walk up slowly from the direction of the Temple and stop at a couple of windmills away, gazing at the hammer truck with a look of unrestrained wonder. Though she still held the darkened halo and feathers of her former boss tightly in her hand, she was smiling radiantly, and waved at Mado with her other hand, which was holding a small red notebook.

Mado saw the notebook and sighed with relief as he waved back. She's going to be okay.

He turned to watch as Matsu gently lowered the generator onto the top of the pylon. Mado could see the chassis of the truck shift from the lightening load as the generator dropped gently into position.

Tsuchi had described the swivel, bearing and brush assembly at the top of the pylon to Mado earlier. It allowed the generator to in turn place, facing the wind, while transferring electrical power through the brush assembly to the pylon and through it down to the underground power lines.

Matsu called out proudly. "Generator in position. Safeties engage retaining latches!"

Tsuchi reached up with his pole and deftly flipped a small lever near the top of the pylon. "Safety Two, retaining latch engaged!"

Umi seemed to have trouble guiding the long pole at first, but soon flipped his latch and beamed as he called out. "Safety One, retaining latch engaged!"

Matsu shouted. "Generator installed! Preparing to install impeller blades!" He moved the bucket to the front of the generator and called out again. "Ready to install impeller blades. Safety One, release the top retaining band!"

Mado watched as Matsu and the safeties methodically attached the long wooden impeller blades which had been stored against the side of the pylon to their mounting struts, carefully unlocking and rotating the main shaft for each blade.

Tsuchi had explained that this was necessary for the safety of the haibane during operations because there were often strong or gusty winds during the procedure. Thus each generator had a series of safety locks and latches to keep the main assembly and blades from turning unexpectedly.

Mado felt a sense of both awe and pride well within him as he watched his fellow nest-mates work so efficiently. Though they had no doubt done this many times, they still seemed to love their work, and Mado found himself wishing he could be the Lift Operator, high above the ground, controlling the crane, directing the installation process. Someday, I'll be up there.

He smiled inwardly at the thought.

Once all the blades were installed, Matsu gently lowered the lift arm and bucket back into their traveling positions and hopped out. Kumo operated some levers and stowed the stabilizer legs, both boys checked the truck and got permission from Senkou to move it.

Kumo backed the truck slowly away from the pylon and stopped. Senkou stepped up, inspecting the finished windmill one last time before calling out. "Safety One, release the shaft lock!"

Umi used his pole to depress a button on the back of the generator, and the blades began to turn slowly in the gentle afternoon breeze. Though they were surrounded by identical windmills, it was still impressive to see the newly-installed generator come to life.

Senkou cocked his head, listening for sounds that might indicate trouble. Except for the gentle whooshing of wind across the blades, the generator was completely silent.

Senkou smiled and called out. "Safety Two, release the swivel lock!"

Tsuchi reached up with his pole and flipped a lever near the top of the pylon. The windmill turned slowly, majestically, aligning itself with the warm currents of flower-scented air.

The haibane all stood back, staring at the windmill. Mado heard some sounds and looked over. Rakka and the twins were cheering and waving their arms merrily. Mado turned and saw Suke waving her notebook in triumph.

Senkou faced the boys with a proud smile as he called out. "Haibane of Stone Mill, nicely done!"

At that, the boys all cheered loudly and congratulated each other, shaking hands, slapping each other on the back. Senkou stepped up and commended Matsu for his work as the Lift Operator.

Senkou turned to Kumo with a smile. "Kumo, you're up next for Lift. Matsu's driving." He pointed to a windmill a few pylons down. "We're going to pick up Number Eleven."

Matsu nodded, hopped into the driver's seat and slowly piloted the truck toward the windmill.

As the other boys followed the truck, Mado met Rakka and the twins, all of whom trotted up with excitement. Rakka smiled with sparkling eyes. "I've never seen that before!" She glanced over at the truck. "I guess because I usually work in the afternoons." She looked back at Mado with a bright smile. "That was amazing!"

Mado blushed and bowed. The twins were chattering and arguing almost incoherently with excitement, but hushed as Suke walked up.

She appeared timid, uncertain. Her eyes shifted toward the hammer truck with what looked like fear, and she glanced at Mado with obvious anxiety.

Mado turned and smiled, beckoning Suke closer. "Suke, this is Rakka." He gestured at the twins. "And Kasai and Jika of Old Home." *I hope they don't start arguing over who is who.*

Suke curtsied in her awkward way, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

Mado turned. "Rakka, Kasai, Jika, this is Suke of the Abandoned Farmhouse."

To Mado's relief, all three girls bowed politely and stood silently with affable smiles on their faces.

Mado turned and bowed to Suke with a smile.

"Feather Suke, welcome to the Haibane Renmei."

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 11.5: Concordance**

There was an uncomfortable silence as the girls stared at one another.

Rakka and Suke, though smiling, were eyeing each other with what looked like suspicion. At Rakka's side, the twins were starting to become restless.

In the distance, the haibane of Stone Mill were removing the impeller blades from Generator #11. Their excited calls were muffled by the fragrant afternoon wind.

Suke stood as calmly as she could, but her eyes repeatedly flickered over to the hammer truck, and each time her eyebrows lowered in what seemed like anger. Rakka kept glancing at Mado uncomfortably, as if pleading for help.

Mado broke the ice by turning to Rakka. "I'm sorry, I guess I should explain." Rakka looked at Mado expectantly. He gazed back, trying to decide where to start. How can I explain this?

Suke stood quietly, shifting her weight peevishly from one foot to the other, glancing nervously at Mado, Rakka, the twins and the hammer truck while Mado told the story of their meeting that morning.

The girls of Old Home stared at Suke with widening eyes as the significance of Mado's news took hold, but they remained quiet as he spoke.

Suke grew increasingly impatient and finally stood glaring at Mado, her arms crossed, holding the halo, book and feathers tightly against her chest.

Mado paused, looking at her curiously . “Suke, what's wrong?”

She pointed toward the boys of Stone Mill with the hand holding her notebook. “What is he doing here?”

Mado looked over, not understanding. “Who?”

Suke's gaze was fiery, her voice edged with contempt. “The one with the black wings.” She turned toward Mado, and he was shocked by the look of hatred in her eyes. Next to him the girls of Old Home stirred uncomfortably.

Mado gaped for a moment before speaking. “You mean Master Tsuchi?” He looked over as Tsuchi reached up with his pole, flipping a lever at the top of the pylon.

Suke stared darkly at the hard-working crew. “They shouldn't let him touch things like that.” She glanced at Mado with a frown. “Don't they know about the curse?”

Mado shook his head slowly, alarmed by her intensity.

Suke's eyes widened with disbelief. “You can't be serious!” She held out her notebook accusingly at Tsuchi. “He's a black-wing, can't you see?” She made an odd slashing gesture with the hand holding the notebook, and seemed ready to spit on the ground with disdain.

Mado glanced over at Rakka and saw sheer terror in her eyes. Her lips were trembling, but she stood firm, though she was clearly distressed by Suke's behavior. The twins had drawn next to her, clutching her sleeves and peering warily at the strange haibane girl.

Mado leaned toward Rakka and spoke softly. “Rakka, do you need to be somewhere?”

She stared at Suke for a long moment before slowly moving her head from side to side. Her eyes were moist, and she seemed ready to cry, but she did not. The fear passed from her face as she spoke a single word quietly. “No.”

Rakka swept the twins behind her protectively with her arms as she took a step forward.

Mado raised a hand in warding, but Rakka spoke with indignation as she glared at Suke. “What are you talking about?”

Suke's head snapped toward Rakka, her eyes narrowing with suspicion, her voice almost a hiss. “He's a

black-wing!" She made the slashing gesture again.

Rakka spoke with an edge of menace. "What do you know about black-wings?"

Suke lowered her head and squared off, facing Rakka as if about to strike her. Her words were thick with vitriol. "A black-wing is a curse on the nest." Her eyes flickered toward Tsuchi. "They must be driven away or the crops will die." She glared at Rakka, her face contorted with barely-subdued rage. "They are evil!"

Mado glanced back and forth between the girls, uncertain if he should step in or step back. They seemed ready to tear one another apart.

Rakka took several deep breaths as she stared unflinching into Suke's eyes. The girls seemed locked in a battle of wills, neither giving ground.

One of the twins called out nervously. "Rakka?" Rakka reached back and held up a hand without breaking her gaze on Suke. Wait.

Tension crackled in the air as the two girls glared at each other with savage intensity. Suddenly Rakka shook her head emphatically as she shouted. "You're wrong!"

Suke took a step back, surprised, intimidated. She gave Mado a plaintive look. Mado led her eyes back to Rakka.

Rakka was standing with her fists balled at her sides, her face aglow with passionate outrage, her wings arched in tension at her back. "You don't know anything about black-wings. They're not evil. They're just like everyone else!"

Suke humphed sarcastically. "How would you know?"

Rakka took a deep breath and raised her chin proudly. Her voice was firm and even. "Because I was a black-wing once, and so was my friend."

Mado gazed at Rakka in shock as she stared evenly at Suke, a look of solemn triumph on her face. Rakka's eyes blazed with twin reflections of the afternoon sun, and Mado realized at that moment just how beautiful Rakka truly was.

Suke took another step backward, shaking her head while staring at Rakka's wings. "That's impossible." Her eyes narrowed as she spoke sharply. "You're lying!"

Rakka's nostrils flared as she took a step toward Suke, her arms straight at her sides, her knuckles as white as her dress. The flames in her eyes were the only answer that was needed.

Mado turned toward Suke in stunned amazement, speaking as calmly as he could. "No Suke, she's not."

Suke snapped toward him, an expression of angry betrayal on her face.

She took another step backward and began breathing heavily, looking back and forth between Mado and

Rakka with helpless confusion. Her eyes reddened. She turned her head from side to side, her pigtailed sliding over her shoulders.

Her lips trembled. "No." It was almost a plea. Her face became a mask of pain and her voice was cracked, scratched. "No, it can't be true."

She gaped at the earth in front of her, her eyebrows arched in astonishment as she shook her head emphatically, slapping her pigtailed against her wings. Suddenly she fell to the ground. The halo and scarlet notebook tumbled onto the grass amid a small flurry of feathers.

She doubled over, drawing her knees against her chin as her fingers clutched tightly at her hair. She shook her head from side to side, her halo rolling back and forth amid the wildflowers, cutting into the grass like a blade. She sobbed violently and muttered hoarsely, her voice a faint husky whisper. "No... no..."

Mado glanced over to see Rakka's rage evaporate into compassion. She turned toward Mado and he saw the fires in her eyes die slowly, smoldering like cooling ashes.

He stared at her with growing amazement as the meaning of what had just happened took hold.

Rakka was a black-wing.

Behind her, the twins looked at each other, then Rakka, not knowing what to do.

Rakka paused for a moment, allowing her breath to become even, then stepped quietly over to Suke and knelt beside her, placing a hand lightly on her shoulder. Suke's body shuddered with anguish.

Rakka glanced at the twins and motioned with her hand. They sat down on the grass, staring at the older girls with sad bewilderment.

Suke lifted her head and rose up on her knees, her face torn with agony as she looked skyward. Some wildflowers had been caught up by her halo, making it a sparse glowing garland hovering over her golden hair.

Tears washed down her cheeks as she stared at the heavens, her eyes nearly swollen shut from weeping. She closed them, clenching her fists against her chest as she bowed her head and spoke in a voice heavy with profound sorrow. "Kusachi, please forgive me."

Rakka reached out and hugged Suke tightly as the grief-stricken girl buried her face against Rakka's shoulder. Rakka spoke gently, her voice soothing. "It's all right. It's going to be all right."

Rakka glanced up and met Mado's shocked gaze. There was something about the look in her eyes that tore at his heart, and tears began to spill down his cheeks.

There was a hand on his shoulder. It was Matsu.

Mado looked behind him to see Senkou at the Ground Station of the hammer truck. Senkou glanced over as Mado watched, his concern evident even at this distance.

Matsu spoke softly in Mado's ear. "What's wrong?" He looked down at Suke. "Is that her?"

Mado nodded somberly and wiped the tears from his face as Matsu stared at the girls. Rakka was holding Suke like a child, swaying slowly back and forth, stroking her gently, whispering to her quietly.

Matsu leaned back toward Mado. "What happened?"

Mado stared at Suke before turning and whispering a reply. "She just got some very bad news."

The boys stared silently at the girls for a while before Matsu glanced over at the hammer truck and spoke softly to no one in particular. "They're almost done. Is there anything we can do to help?"

Rakka looked up morosely and shook her head. She slowly lifted Suke to her feet, hugging her, keeping her steady. She motioned to the twins and they darted up quickly but quietly, one picking up the halo, the other Suke's notebook.

Both stooped over and recovered the fallen feathers from the grass, then stood together staring at the darkened ring with forlorn curiosity.

Mado and Matsu bowed solemnly as Rakka guided Suke toward Old Home with the twins following silently behind them.

The two boys walked slowly toward the hammer truck as the lift crew secured the newly-retrieved generator in the cargo tray. The other boys saw the looks on their faces and finished up quietly.

Senkou spoke softly. "Well done."

He nodded toward the east, and the haibane of Stone Mill marched silently behind the slow-moving truck as it worked its way down the Hill of Winds.

As they drew close to the road, Mado saw Kana ride up and stop, watching as they approached. Her messenger bag was slung over her shoulder, and she sat on her bike gazing at the hammer truck with a gleam in her eyes. She seemed oblivious to the somber mood.

Kana waved with a glowing smile as the boys passed by, and Mado walked over to her with a feeling of turmoil. Kana.

Her smile disappeared as he stepped close. "What's wrong?" Something caught her attention and she turned her head toward the passing haibane, her eyebrows arched with a look of surprise.

She turned back to Mado. "What's up with Master Tsuchi's wings?"

Mado paused, staring at her feet, and didn't look up when he answered. "Ask Rakka."

Kana's back stiffened, a look of confusion on her face. "What?"

Mado met her gaze reluctantly, afraid to look in her eyes. "It's complicated."

Kana glanced back at Tsuchi, then shrugged. "Whatever."

She leaned back and put her hands behind her head, stretching, looking down at Mado appraisingly. "Is this a bad time for you?"

Mado looked over at the truck as it moved up the path to Stone Mill and shook his head.

Kana smiled and lowered her arms. "Good! I wanted to see if you were going to replace the sink in the cocoon room." She paused and glanced down sheepishly. "And maybe help me with that motor controller."

Mado stared at her blankly. With all that had happened, fixing the cocoon room seemed like a long time ago. I'm tired.

Kana leaned forward, balancing the bike between her legs. "You look tired. You really don't get much sleep, do you?"

Mado lowered his head and shook it from side to side with resignation.

She clapped a hand on his shoulder. "It's the dreams, isn't it?"

Mado nodded slowly. I'm glad I told her.

Kana withdrew her hand and stared down at the handlebars of her bicycle. "I guess I should talk to you about that sometime." She looked toward Stone Mill. "About some of the things you said when you were passed out."

Mado looked up sharply, but said nothing. Kana stared back with an unreadable expression.

A sudden thought came to Mado. "Kana, can you come with me to Stone Mill?"

Kana nodded enthusiastically. "Sure!" She swung a leg over the bike and dismounted, walking it alongside Mado as they moved slowly up the road.

Kana tried to sound cheerful. "Mado, you can tell me about Master Tsuchi's wings." Her voice trailed off. "I heard you calling his name." She blushed slightly. "And some of the things you said."

Mado glanced over at her, feeling both embarrassed and indignant. What did she hear?

They walked for a while in silence before Kana spoke with a tone of mock nonchalance. "So, what time is it?" She smiled and arched an eyebrow suggestively.

Mado returned the smile and reached into his pocket. He fumbled with the catch and the cover flipped open. Within the main dial was a secondary rotating dial covered with illustrations of clouds and stars. Day and night.

Mado spoke as pleasantly as he could as they crossed the small stone bridge over the fast-flowing stream.  
“5:17 PM.”

Kana smiled. “Great! Plenty of time.”

Mado glanced at her ruefully, thinking about the watch in his hand and what it signified. How much time is there really?

He closed the cover and returned the watch to his pocket as they strode up the path to Stone Mill.

The boys were preparing to remove the generator from the cargo hoist with an overhead electric winch. Kana leaned her bike against the stony foundation wall and walked beside Mado through the cavernous main door, waving as they passed the hammer truck. There were several stares as Kana walked by, but no one spoke.

Mado saw Kana's face light up at the sight of the machinery in the main shop. She glanced over and blushed at his attention, but her eyes quickly returned to roaming over the machinery as if they were able to physically touch it.

He led her up the stairs to the West Loft and down the hall. Mado looked over as they passed the door to Kabe's room. A strange feeling came to him, as if someone was inside, but he shook it off.

For a moment, it had felt as if Kabe was still there, and Mado tightened his lips with a pang at the memory. Kana glanced over, but said nothing.

He stopped in front of one of the doors. “This is my cocoon room.” Kana looked at Mado with a question in her eyes, but didn't speak.

He opened the door slowly, trying not to look at the window, and led Kana into his room.

She looked around curiously. “This seems like a nice room. Why aren't you staying in it?” She glanced at Mado, and then caught herself. “Oh, right. The sleepwalking.”

Mado knelt down in front of the dresser and pulled out the bottom drawer. Kana knelt next to him with interest as he retrieved the diary from the hidden metal tray.

He handed her the book. “I think you should read this.”

Kana accepted the diary with a puzzled expression, glanced briefly at the cover, then riffled through the pages casually before looking up at Mado. “Why?”

Mado gathered all his will to avoid looking away. “Because it was written by one of the haibane that worked on the Old Home clock.”

Kana's eyes widened in astonishment and a look of joy came to her face as she eagerly flipped open the book to the first page. “Wow! Really?”

Mado replaced the drawer and guided Kana to her feet as she continued reading. He cleared his throat. “You might want to read that later.”

Kana flushed with embarrassment. “Oh right.” She tucked the diary in her messenger bag and followed Mado into the hallway.

As they passed Kabe's room again, Mado heard a sound. Kana looked over. “Hmm?” She had heard it too.

Mado reached out and slowly opened the door. He gasped and released the knob, allowing the door to swing the rest of the way open on its own.

Inside was an enormous light-blue sphere covered with irregular vein-like tendrils.

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 12: Union**

#### **Scene 12.1: Conflagration**

Mado stood staring at the giant object which seemed to fill Kabe's room with its sprawl. *So this is what they look like.*

The cocoon was large, larger than Mado had expected, though he had expected it to be large. Its surface had a cast like bluish white plaster. *A giant shell, like an egg.*

The tendrils snaked over the surface of the cocoon and extended into the floor and ceiling, burrowing into it like pale tree roots. As Mado watched, he could see some of them move ever so slightly, digging deeper into the splintered floor planks. Above, thin tendrils probed gently into the dark wooden paneling.

Kana slapped Mado's shoulder. “Congratulations!”

Mado started, shaken from his reverie, and stared at Kana. Her face was covered with a wide grin as she gestured toward the cocoon. “A new feather! Man, you guys are lucky.”

Kana shook her head in amazement as she regarded the giant orb. “It's a big one, too.” She smiled at Mado mischievously. “Looks like you're going to be a senior.”

Mado stared blankly. *Me, a senior?*

Suddenly he reeled and put a hand to his head. *Something's wrong.*

Kana turned with alarm. “Mado, what's the matter?”

Mado pressed his palms against his temples, fighting off a sudden wave of nausea. He squeezed his eyes shut as a disjointed series of images battered his mind. *Fire!*

Kana's stepped close, studying Mado with concern. "Are you okay?"

Mado opened his eyes, but sight returned slowly. In his mind, a huge metal structure towered over him, wreathed in smoke. *The Factory.*

Kana reached out to comfort him, but he held up a hand. "I'm all right."

Kana's eyes flashed as her hands flew to her hips. "You don't *look* all right. You look like you're about to pass out!"

Mado smiled crookedly. "I need to go."

He shook his head rapidly to clear it then bolted down the hall, leaving Kana standing by Kabe's room with an angry frown.

The haibane of Stone Mill had backed the truck out of the shop and were just beginning to pull the door shut when Mado darted past them and wheeled the red scooter out of the garage.

Without a word, he started the scooter and sped down the path at top speed. *I need to warn them.*

As Mado raced down the main road toward the East District, a huge cloud of dark smoke rose over the town, climbing and billowing in fiery turbulence, looming over everything like a giant black mushroom. Mado tried to increase his speed, but the throttle was already hard against the stop, wide open.

As he drew closer, he heard the staccato ringing of alarm bells in the town interrupted by single rings. Staccato burst, pause, one ring, staccato burst, repeat.

He weaved precariously between the carts and pedestrians of the East District, most of whom had stopped and were gazing at the huge cloud towering above them.

The gate to the factory was open, and a crowd of people had gathered on either side, being kept back by uniformed members of the Community Watch. Mado zoomed past them into the courtyard, throwing the scooter to the ground in a skidding stop. *I'm too late!*

Mado stood agape, taking in the scene. Firemen were hurrying to and fro, tending hoses and sifting through piles of blackened lumber on the ground with their axes.

There were three bright red firetrucks, none of them much bigger than the hammer truck, each with red lights flashing. Two of the engines were pump trucks, while the third was a ladder truck whose ladder was raised next to the blackened facade of Furnace Number Two.

Atop the ladder, a fireman was hosing down the smoldering structure with a thick stream, while another sprayed a huge fan-shaped plume of water from the ground. The scaffolding that had been built around the furnace stack was ruined, most of it laying in charred, soggy heaps on the ground.

Smoke still billowed from gaps in the furnace ducting, though no flames were visible. Water flowed everywhere, raining down from the scrubber flue, dripping from girders, flowing in wide torrents and deepening pools.

There was a white ambulance, a small vehicle resembling a tall station wagon, atop which a single red beacon flashed.

Mado looked over to see two medics kneeling next to someone on the ground who had a dark gray blanket thrown around his shoulders.

It was Baku. He was propped against a broad metal stanchion, his face blackened with soot. Close by stood the girls of the Factory, watching anxiously with worry as the medics shined a light in his eyes and questioned him quietly.

As Mado approached, Midori turned and glared at him. She spoke briefly to the other girls, then stormed past, waving a hand for Mado to follow.

She stopped by the cafeteria entrance and stood waiting impatiently, fists tightly balled on her hips, as Mado slowly walked up. Her face was pale and twisted into a contemptuous frown.

Mado stopped sheepishly in front of her, staring at her feet, uncertain of her anger. She was trembling.

Midori's voice held a mixture of shock and rage. "That *idiot* tried to kill us all!"

Mado looked up, reluctantly meeting Midori's fury. "Douro."

Midori humphed. "Douro shut off the sprinklers and the water supply for the scrubber, then overrode the igniters and filled up Number Two with fuel. Then he touched it off!" She glanced at the medics. "If it weren't for Baku, we would probably all be dead."

Sorrow dampened her anger. "The fuel valve was surrounded by flames. Baku ran in and shut it, then opened the water valves, but he got burned and took in a lot of smoke." Her gaze fell to the ground. "When we found him, he wasn't breathing."

Midori stared at the medics, who were still hovering over Baku. "We thought we'd lost him." She seemed ready to cry.

Mado reached out to comfort her, but she held up a hand. "I'm okay."

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry. None of this is your fault." She sighed heavily. "I just can't believe he would actually do something like this." Her eyes closed as she shook her head in disbelief.

Mado spoke softly. "Where's Douro now?"

Midori's eyes flashed with dark fire. "He took off, the coward. The Community Watch is looking for him."

She glanced toward the gate. "They'll find him." She lowered her gaze. "They always do." Her voice was thick with irony.

Midori cleared her throat. "Look, I need to get back and see how Baku's doing."

She turned to leave but stopped short, looking sidelong at Mado. "Why are you here, anyway? It's kind of late for work, isn't it?"

Mado nodded. "I'm not here for work. I just felt like something was wrong."

Midori's eyes narrowed. "I see."

She paused thoughtfully, not meeting Mado's eyes as she spoke. "Thanks for bringing me Hyouko's things." She ran to join the other girls.

Mado followed slowly and watched as the medics placed Baku on a folding gurney and loaded him into the rear of the ambulance. One of the medics spoke to the anxious girls before getting in. The red beacon on top stopped flashing as the ambulance moved slowly out the gate.

The girls were all talking at once when Mado walked up.

Ame turned to him. "Mado, are you going to the hospital? They're taking Baku there. They say his burns are relatively minor, but they want to have the doctor look at him and run some tests because of the smoke."

Mado nodded. "Sure."

A tall fireman carrying a clipboard and a roll of plans tucked under one arm strode up. It was the fire chief. Next to him, also carrying a clipboard, was a mustachioed man in a dark gray uniform trimmed with gold piping and topped by a gendarme cap. Silver stars embroidered on his gold epaulets indicated senior rank.

The fire chief nodded at Midori. "I know you want to join your friend at the hospital, but before you go, I would like to give you my preliminary report." He glanced around at the other firemen. "We probably won't be here when you get back."

Midori nodded. "Okay. How bad is it?"

The fire chief cleared his throat and studied his clipboard. "Furnace Two looks like a total loss. Baku already cut off the fuel line for it, but we've also shut and tagged the main fuel supply valve for the entire facility. Don't reopen that valve without clearance from me."

Midori frowned. "But that means we can't cook, or have hot water either."

The fire chief continued. "You might want to plan on dining out for a while. There was enough damage to the fuel system that clearing that tag will probably take quite some time."

He gestured toward the blackened furnace. "The sprinkler system is heavily damaged as well, so when we're done here, we'll have to shut it off and tag it out. That means no sprinkler protection for this unit." He turned

to Midori. "Which means you can't run any of the other furnaces until it's fixed."

Midori put her hands on her hips, frowning as she nodded. "Okay."

The fire chief lowered his clipboard and sighed. "Douro was very methodical in his work. If I wanted to kill everyone here, this is the way I would have gone about it. Without Baku's intervention, this entire facility would almost certainly have been destroyed, and probably several adjacent structures as well."

The uniformed man spoke up. "I am the watch commander for this shift." He nodded curtly in recognition. "Midori."

His tone sharpened. "This is a very serious crime. If it wasn't for your friend's bravery..."

He glanced toward the gate, which was flanked by several members of the Community Watch, still diligently keeping the crowd from blocking the entrance. "You should probably get used to the idea of not seeing much of Douro anymore."

The fire chief bowed toward the girls then stepped quickly over to the ladder truck, pointing to his right as he shouted. "Ladder hose, two o'clock! Try to get into that gap!"

The watch commander motioned to his clipboard. "I have taken your statements implicating Douro as the individual responsible for deliberately starting this fire. I will interview Baku later when a doctor approves. Is there anything you wish to add at this time?"

The girls all shook their heads.

He surveyed them appraisingly. "Haibane Douro is now a fugitive, suspected of arson. If you see him, contact us immediately." His eyes lingered on Mado before returning to Midori. "Do not approach him. He should be considered extremely dangerous."

Midori sighed and bowed her head. "Okay."

The man continued. "The Community Watch is on full alert. I have held over the day shift and activated the reserves. Word is being passed through all the neighborhoods. I will keep a patrol stationed here to guard your nest until he is apprehended."

Midori's gaze flickered to the gate as she nodded slowly.

He turned to Mado. "May I see your notebook, please?"

Mado glanced at the girls with confusion as he pulled the red Haibane Renmei notebook from his pocket and placed it in the man's hand.

The watch commander did not open the book, but studied its cover. "You are Mado." He gestured at the patch on Mado's chest. "The newest arrival at Stone Mill, then?"

Mado nodded silently.

The man shook Mado's hand before returning the notebook. "A pleasure to meet you. Please keep your notebook with you." He smiled thinly. "You match the suspect's description rather closely, so please accept my apologies in advance if you are stopped and questioned frequently tonight."

The watch commander bowed crisply and stepped over by the fire chief, comparing the notes on their clipboards.

Midori stared at the top of the furnace, shaking her head. "There's not much for him to come back to. That's his room up there."

Mado looked up and saw that one of the sheet metal buildings above the furnace had been destroyed, its walls blackened and sagging inward, smoke still trailing in roiling wisps from within.

Ame spoke up. "Midori and Hachi can take Baku's scooter." She turned to Mado. "Mado, can you give me a ride to the hospital?"

He nodded, hurried over and lifted his scooter off the ground. Midori and Hachi idled past as Ame hopped on and wrapped her arms tightly around his chest.

Mado gunned the throttle, caught up and followed the girls as they passed between the crowds of humans at the gate and wound through the narrow, darkening streets across town to the hospital.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 12.2: Commissions**

The receptionist was already standing next to the front desk when the haibane entered, ready to lead them to the examination room near the emergency entrance at the rear of the building.

Mado trailed behind the other girls, slowed by fatigue and confusion. As they passed Gake's room, he stopped and put a hand against the wall. A wave of dizziness washed over him.

Did someone just call my name?

Mado peered cautiously into the room. A nurse was changing Gake's intravenous drip, hanging a fresh bag of light green fluid from a tall metal stand.

Gake was sitting up in the bed, staring at him. His head was still covered with bandages, but they seemed thinner and more lightly wrapped than before. His right arm was still in the heavy splint, while his right wing sagged under the weight of the thick brace which held it stiff.

Gake's halo was still bent at a right angle and floated over his head like a tragic but comical symbol of his infirmity.

Mado stepped over to the side of the bed, speechless.

Gake continued staring at him. His unbandaged eye blinked several times before widening with recognition. "Mado? Is that you?"

Mado nodded silently.

Gake smiled. "You sure look different. I almost didn't recognize you." He seemed about to say more, but stopped and gazed at an empty corner of the room for a few moments.

He turned back to Mado with an expression of unrestrained wonder. "Wow! I never would have guessed." He smiled conspiratorially. "I suppose I should shut up about that then."

Gake lifted his splinted arm slightly. "Funny that I felt sorry for you hurting your wing. I think I have you beat in the injury department." He smiled ironically. "On the other hand, you look like you haven't slept for days, so I guess I can't complain."

He lowered his head for a moment as his expression grew serious. "I heard about what happened at the Factory. Tell Baku I hope he's okay. It took guts to do what he did. The packing on Number Two's fuel cutoff valve is really tight to prevent leaks, so it usually takes two people to turn it. I'm sorry I wasn't there to help."

Gake's unbandaged eye focused intently on Mado. "I need to get some more rest. Tell Midori it's not her fault, that I'm going to be okay." A thin smile came to his lips. "Oh, and let Ame know I owe her a carrot cake. It was me."

Gake lay back in the bed, taking care not to put pressure on his right wing, and fell quickly into a deep sleep.

Mado reeled from dizziness again, and almost put his hand on the nurse's shoulder.

The nurse stared at him with alarm. "You don't look well. Do you need help?"

Mado gave her a blank look before shaking his head.

The nurse glanced at him with unconcealed skepticism before turning to lean over Gake and adjust his bedding. "I suppose you're worried about Gake." She gently lifted Gake's head and shifted the pillow. "We all are. He's been unconscious for a long time."

Mado's voice was buoyant with relief. "Well, at least he finally woke up."

The nurse straightened and turned, piercing Mado with her eyes. "What do you mean?"

Mado stared back at her, surprised. "I just talked to him a minute ago. You were here."

The nurse glanced at Gake, then looked sidelong at Mado. "Yes, I was here when you walked in, but Gake has never been awake. You just stood there looking at him."

Mado's jaw dropped involuntarily as the nurse spoke. He put a hand to his temple. "That can't be right."

The nurse glared at Mado as she put her hands on her hips with indignation. "Sir, I am quite positive that haibane Gake has not regained consciousness." She sighed as her expression softened. "I'm sorry. I'll get the doctor."

Mado held up a hand. “No, I'll be okay. I'm going to see Baku. I imagine the doctor needs to take care of him first.”

Mado glanced at Gake for a moment before hurrying out of the room.

The emergency examination room was located along the main corridor near the back of the hospital. Mado could hear the doctor talking as he approached.

“... should know in a few days. In the meantime, I want to keep him here for observation. Smoke inhalation, especially in an industrial fire, can have very serious consequences.” The doctor stopped speaking, and Mado realized everyone was staring at him as he stood in the doorway.

The doctor stood near the head of a bed which was equipped with tall metal rails on either side. Opposite him, the three haibane girls turned and gazed quietly at Mado, their expressions unreadable.

Baku lay in the bed, shirtless with both arms bandaged to the elbows. An oxygen mask covered the lower half of his face. He winked and waved a bandaged arm in a weak greeting.

The doctor's voice was cheerful, but his expression showed concern. “Hello again, Mr. Mado. I was just explaining to your friends that Mr. Baku will have to stay here for a while.”

He gestured at Baku. “He received second-degree burns on his palms from turning a hot valve handle. That might leave some mild scars, but rest of the skin was only reddened from heat exposure.”

The doctor leaned over and adjusted a valve on the regulator supplying oxygen to Baku's mask. “The smoke inhalation is a different matter.”

He stood up and stared appraisingly at Baku as he spoke. “We don't know what he inhaled, which is why I've ordered a full series of toxicology tests.” He turned to Mado. “It will be at least a few days before we know more.”

Everyone continued staring at Mado as the doctor fell silent.

Ame spoke first. “Mado, where have you been? Are you feeling all right?”

Mado seemed startled by the questions. “Oh, I'm okay. I just stopped off at Gake's room on the way by.”

Midori interjected. “Is he still asleep?”

Mado's cheeks reddened. “Well, yes, I suppose.”

Midori crossed her arms with a huff. “What does *that* mean?”

Mado gazed sheepishly at the floor. “The nurse says he didn't wake up, but I talked to him, I think.”

Hachi took a step forward. “What?” She seemed almost ready to run out of the room.

Midori held out a hand, holding Hachi back. "Wait. This was one of your dreams, wasn't it?"

Mado stared at the floor, embarrassed. "I don't know. I guess so." He met her eyes. "The nurse says I was just standing there."

The doctor stepped over and cradled Mado's jaw in his hands, moved Mado's head from side to side. He examined Mado's eyes and checked the faded wound on his scalp. "Has this been happening more frequently, Mr. Mado?"

Mado nodded silently as the doctor stepped back, studying Mado thoughtfully.

Ame gave Mado a pleading look. "What did he say?"

Mado cleared his throat nervously. "He said to tell Baku he hopes he's okay, and that he's got guts. He said the fuel valve usually takes two people to turn, and that he's sorry he wasn't there to help."

The girls turned to Baku, who was staring silently at Mado. There was moisture in Baku's eyes, but he did not weep.

Mado faced the girls as they turned back to him. "He said to tell Midori it's not her fault."

Midori's cheeks reddened, and she arched her eyebrows, but she said nothing.

Mado continued. "He said he's going to be okay, but he needs more rest." He turned to Ame. "And he said he owes you a carrot cake. That it was him."

Ame's eyes widened. "How did you know about that? Someone took the first carrot cake I made for you." The girls exchanged puzzled glances.

The doctor nodded toward the bed. "Mr. Baku, ladies, please excuse me. I'm going to have a look at Mr. Gake." He brushed past Mado and walked briskly out of the room.

Moments later, Kumo and Matsu stepped in, looking around curiously.

Kumo's voice was almost a whisper. "How is Baku? We just came from the Factory. The fire chief told us what happened."

Matsu stared at Mado with obvious concern, but did not speak.

Midori answered. "The doctor thinks he'll be all right, but wants to keep him here in case he inhaled something poisonous from the fire." She turned to Baku. "We should give him some time to relax."

She reached down and adjusted Baku's mask slightly before turning to the other girls. "We should go check on Gake."

The girls filed out the door. Shortly thereafter, a nurse walked in, checked the oxygen regulator, then sat

down next to Baku with his chart.

Kumo motioned for the boys to step into the hall.

Matsu finally spoke, his voice tight with worry. "Mado, how did you know about the fire?"

Mado gazed at his feet. "I saw it, in my mind." He sighed as he glanced up at Matsu. "I'm sorry, but I can't help it."

Matsu shook his head. "It's not something you need to apologize for. The Communicator told me..." He put a hand over his mouth. "Oops."

He grabbed one of Mado's arms. "Come on. We need to get you back to Stone Mill."

Mado followed quietly as Matsu led him down the hall, Kumo trailing closely behind. They stopped at Gake's room and peeked in.

The doctor was speaking. "...still not responsive. I'm sorry."

He sighed with resignation. "It never rains but it pours. I have two haibane in the hospital, one who obviously needs psychiatric care and is running around loose somewhere, and another I can't be sure about one way or the other."

Matsu tugged on Mado's arm. "Come on."

In front of the hospital, as they mounted their scooters, Matsu motioned to Mado. "You lead this time, in case you decide to make any sudden detours."

Mado led the other two boys through the dark streets of Guri, driving slowly, carefully as he he picked his way by the glow of the scooter headlights. On the main road outside town, the cool evening air swept over the boys as they bounced over the rutted thoroughfare beneath a sky filled with stars.

At Stone Mill, the boys cleaned, fueled and inspected their scooters before putting them away.

In the lounge, a plate of sandwiches covered with waxed paper was centered on a table next to a pitcher of cool water and some glasses. The boys sat quietly as Mado tore into a sandwich.

As he finished it and reached for another, Senkou walked in and sat down without speaking. He pulled out his worn pocketknife and fidgeted with it pensively.

Mado hesitated before beginning the second sandwich, scanned the faces of the other boys. "I'm sorry I ran out on you today."

Senkou smiled thinly as he flipped the knife between his fingers. "It's okay. We're getting used to it." He saw Mado blush and quickly corrected himself. "That came out wrong. We may not understand exactly, but we know you need to do what you need to do."

Mado set the sandwich on the plate in front of him and stared at it dejectedly. "I'm the only one who's like this, aren't I?"

Senkou stopped fidgeting and palmed the pocketknife. "Everyone's different, Mado. It's okay." He glanced at Kumo. "You're still new here. All of us had problems when we were newborns."

Mado frowned at the sandwich. "But I'm not fitting in. Nobody can trust me because of my dreams."

Matsu almost stood up in protest. "That's not true!"

Senkou motioned for Matsu to be silent and held Mado's gaze evenly. "Mado, you're wrong about that." He glanced at Matsu. "We are all craftsmen here at Stone Mill, and yes, that means we have important responsibilities."

He leaned forward earnestly, his chest pressed against the table. "But Mado, we are all haibane, too. It's okay that you're different. We don't hold that against you, and never will. You're one of our nest brothers, and nothing is ever going to change that."

Mado stared at him for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Okay, I guess you're right. But still, it feels wrong." He sighed at the sandwich. "I just want to be like everyone else."

Senkou smiled. "Mado, I doubt you will ever be anything other than yourself." He glanced at the other boys. "What we're trying to tell you is that it's okay."

Mado pondered Senkou's words quietly, then grinned as he plowed into the next sandwich with gusto.

Senkou winked. "Kana showed us the cocoon you found. You've had a very busy day!"

Matsu spoke up. "Mado, the cocoon is almost ready to hatch. I can help you move out of the guest room if you think you're ready."

Mado swallowed a bite. "But what about my sleepwalking? Will it be safe to move upstairs?"

Matsu sighed. "I think so, but I can't say why, exactly. We'll still keep an eye on you, even if we aren't allowed to get in your way."

Mado stared at Matsu as he took a few more bites. *Why can't he tell me?*

After Mado finished his sandwich, Matsu followed him to the guest room. There wasn't much that needed to be moved, just Mado's clothes, the guitar and some keepsakes. Mado surveyed the room nostalgically before leaving. The boys carried everything up in one trip.

Mado dumped the items into the top two drawers of the dresser of his new room and leaned the guitar against the nightstand next to the bed. My cocoon room.

Matsu stepped into the hallway and waved him over to Kabe's room.

The door had been propped open, while outside a sign had been posted. “CAUTION: Cocoon Room”

Matsu gestured to the huge light-blue orb. “I guess this is the first one you've seen.” He turned and gazed at it with unabashed marvel. “It grew very fast, and Master Tsuchi says he's never seen a cocoon appear so soon after a room was vacated.”

He glanced at Mado. “This is something very special.” He pointed at the tendrils. “Everything the cocoon needs to make a haibane comes from those roots. They are thick here, but become smaller and finer as they spread out.”

Matsu kneeled next to the cocoon and picked up a splintered piece of wood. “See? The wood of Stone Mill is full of little holes where the roots have been.” He handed the shard to Mado. “At first, I thought it was termites, but we don't have termites. Turns out it's the cocoons.”

He made a sweeping gesture. “The tiny roots reach all the way through the walls and floors into the ground, and into the piping, where the cocoon gets its water. All the nests are like this. Even the stone of Old Home and metal of the Factory are full of little passages from cocoon roots.”

Mado studied the tiny holes in the wood with fascination. *What are we, that grow like this?*

Matsu clapped a hand on Mado's shoulder. “Congratulations on finding a cocoon! We usually only find them on Maintenance Days.”

Mado handed the wood fragment back to Matsu, who set it gingerly on the floor next to the cocoon.

Matsu motioned toward Mado's room. “It's late. You should try to get some sleep.”

Mado reflexively pulled the watch from his pocket. “9:17 PM. I suppose I could use some rest.” His wings sagged at the thought of finally being able to spend a night in peaceful slumber.

Matsu leaned through the door as Mado sat on his new bed. “Try to relax. Remember, we'll be keeping an eye open for any problems.” He winked and softly closed the door.

As Mado undressed, he glanced over at the window. *I need to stop worrying about windows.*

He slipped into his pajamas, then turned and faced the window. Outside he could see a starry night, and that was all. He stepped closer, tentatively, unsure, but the view did not change.

*It's just a window, nothing more.*

He took Kana's watch from the pocket of his coveralls and stared at it for a moment. *How much time before Kana...?*

From another pocket, he pulled out the now half-crushed box of mints. He set both on the nightstand, turned off the dim room light and crawled between the sheets.

Mado quickly fell into a refreshing, dreamless sleep, but soon awoke in darkness.

There was a sharp tapping at the glass of the bedroom window. *Should I look? Maybe it will go away.*

Mado remained motionless in bed, trying to avoid attracting attention from whatever it was, but the tapping grew louder, more insistent. He reached over and opened the pocket watch, but it was too dark to read the dial.

He quietly slid out of bed and turned on the light. *4:44 in the morning. Strange.*

Mado took a few deep breaths, then resolved to face the window again. *There's nothing there. I'm in the loft, far above the ground. It's only the window rattling in the wind.*

He closed his eyes for a moment as he approached the window, then opened them with a startled gasp.

A girl with long black hair was hovering outside. Mado could see the light of the room shining upon her white robe. Her dark shimmering locks floated around her pale face as if she were submerged in water.

Above her head was a bright halo, while large wings arched from her back, framing her face with their graceful curves. *The girl from my dream!*

The girl was slowly beckoning for Mado to follow.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 12.3: Directives**

Mado stared at the girl in the window, overwhelmed, unable to move as thoughts raced through his mind.

*This must be a dream.*

The girl winked and smiled cheerfully as the vision began to fade.

Dizziness almost overcame Mado as the images in the window shifted. He was unsteady, adrift as he stared at the reflections of the room in the mirror-like panes.

There was a tiny gleam outside in the darkness, and Mado stepped close, leaning over to get a better look. The gleam came from the eye of a crow which was perched silently on the windowsill.

*This is the bird that's been calling me.*

The crow cocked its head and cawed softly. Mado gazed into its dark eyes, mesmerized. *I know you.*

As Mado watched, the crow quietly took wing and sailed into the darkness toward the Western Woods.

*I need to go to the ruins.*

Mado quickly put on his coveralls and shoes. He placed the knife in a hip pocket and stared thoughtfully at the pocket watch before dropping it into the other.

He picked up the crushed box of mints and popped one into his mouth. He paused for a moment, then slipped the box into a chest pocket.

Mado opened the door and almost fell over Matsu, who was sitting in a chair placed squarely in the middle of the doorway.

Matsu jumped to his feet, startled. "Sorry!" His eyes narrowed as he studied Mado's face. "Are you awake?"

Mado pinched a forearm. "I think so." He gestured at the window. "A bird woke me up."

Matsu moved the chair aside. "I'm not trying to interfere, I just want to make sure you're okay."

Mado glanced at the window. "I think I'll be okay, but I need to go to the ruins."

Matsu straightened. "I can go with you, if you like."

Mado shook his head. "I think I need to go alone." He put a hand on Matsu's shoulder. "But thanks for keeping an eye on me."

Matsu nodded slowly as Mado hurried down the hallway.

At the bottom of the loft stairs, Mado heard a sound. A light was on in the paint room. He walked quietly to the door just as Umi was leaving.

Umi froze for a moment, his eyes wide with surprise, then quickly switched off the light and threw his apron into the room before nearly slamming the door shut.

He shook some stray hairs from his face. "Hi Mado."

Mado smiled. "Good morning. We're both up pretty early, it seems."

Umi smiled nervously. "I'm working on a special project." He motioned toward the closed door. "Promise me you won't go in there, okay?"

Mado glanced at the door, briefly remembered his last encounter with Umi in the paint room, and nodded silently.

Umi sighed with relief. "Thanks." His eyes narrowed. "So what are you doing? You don't look like you're sleepwalking."

Mado grinned. "A bird woke me up, so I need to go to the ruins."

Umi stared at him for a moment, then lowered his head somberly. "At least you get to go."

Mado cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

Umi gazed at the floor, hesitant. "The Renmei. They say I can't go anywhere unless I have Master... Senkou's permission."

Umi looked up, met Mado's eyes. "That's my punishment. It means I can't go to Old Home anymore except on official business."

Mado stared blankly at Umi, unsure of what to say.

Umi shook his head quickly. "Sorry. It's not your problem." He glanced at the closed door, then ran across the shop and up the east loft stairs.

Mado gazed thoughtfully at the bottom of the stairs for a moment before he walked to the main entrance and changed into his boots. He reached out and flipped his name tag to red. *How often have I forgotten to do this?*

Outside it was still dark, and the air was brisk with chilling dew. There was no moon in the sky, which was a riot of bright stars.

Mado quietly slid open the door to the garage and wheeled out the blue scooter.

The single headlight cast ghostly shadows as Mado drove carefully down the path, turned left, then right at the main intersection, heading east along the road away from town.

To his right, the spectral ramparts of Old Home passed slowly by. Mado found himself imagining it as a great castle in ancient times, unsure why he always felt that way when he saw the place.

The darkness deepened as Mado threaded the scooter carefully beneath the overhanging boughs of the Western Woods. He shook his head ironically. *I already remember the way.*

At the edge of the clearing, Mado parked the scooter and surveyed the shadowy stone shapes strewn over the moist grass, then walked quietly among them.

Mado stood in front of the ruined altar shivering in the cold morning air, fighting off weariness and fatigue, waiting, unsure of what to expect. A wave of dizziness came over him, but passed just as suddenly.

Far overhead, in the western sky, a star twinkled brightly.

Mado stared in amazement as the star fell slowly earthward, growing brighter as it descended toward the altar. It became so bright that Mado held up a hand to shield his eyes.

In his mind he heard a sound like a single, resonant voice which sparkled like glass, raised in passionate

song, holding a single, breathtaking note.

The star flashed in blinding brilliance as it touched the stone of the top step, revealing a shimmering form bathed in a soft white glow.

It was a young woman dressed in a white robe. Her long black hair cascaded over her shoulders. Above her head a dazzling halo shone with silvery fire, while behind her back arched two huge wings, much larger than the wings of a haibane. Like her skin, they were pale white.

Overcome with shock and emotion, Mado's knees began to buckle, but the woman raised a hand, and he felt himself gently lifted.

She smiled radiantly, and her voice was as clear and jubilant as a chorus of chimes, yet soft and soothing as a warm summer breeze.

“Dearest brother, do not despair. There is always hope.”

The young woman turned her palms upward as she continued.

“Heavy are your burdens, but you are brave and strong.”

She lifted a hand, as if in blessing.

“Let not your sorrows trouble you, and rest peacefully knowing that dawn follows dusk.”

Mado felt the chill of the morning leave him and stared, transfixed, as the woman glided gracefully down the stairs, stopping within arm's reach. She was much taller than Mado, and even more beautiful up close.

In her deep, dark eyes, Mado could see constellations of stars.

She spoke gently, lovingly.

“The light within you shines brightest when darkness surrounds you.”

The woman raised her arms, and Mado gazed in astonishment as her light flowed over him, bathing him in its warm luminance. He felt his fatigue fade away and stood straighter, buoyed by the energy of the light.

He froze with surprise as the young woman leaned over and softly kissed his brow. Mado felt memories flood into his mind. Thoughts like forgotten songs returned but seemed to vanish as quickly as they came.

*Why can't I remember?*

The woman ascended the steps without turning away, reassuring Mado with the melody of her voice.

“Remember that you are never alone, and that you must stand firm when all seems lost.”

Mado struggled to speak, but his words sounded harsh in response to the woman's soothing tones. “You're

my sister?”

The young woman glanced toward the woods behind Mado with apparent surprise, and he turned to look, but saw nothing.

He took a step toward the altar, his mind filled with questions. “I know you, don't I?”

She smiled warmly and raised her arms. Mado squinted as her halo flared and the woman vanished, becoming a shining star which rose slowly, majestically into the dark morning sky.

The song of her passing filled Mado's mind with its vibrant beauty, forcing tears to his eyes.

Mado gazed intently at the star, trying not to lose it against the countless other stars. *I need to remember which one it is.*

But the star was soon lost to his sight.

Mado felt a moment of dizziness which quickly passed. There was something on the altar, and he stepped forward to get a closer look.

It was a single white feather which glowed softly in the morning darkness. Mado picked it up, studied it, then placed it in a chest pocket.

There was a fluttering of wings, and Mado turned. Around him in a semicircle were dozens of crows, all of them staring at him silently, watching.

Mado stared back with growing alarm. *These crows aren't friendly.*

He stepped cautiously toward the nearest crows, but they did not move. Behind them, over the Western Woods, the eastern sky was growing lighter with the coming of morning.

Mado continued, trying to thread his way between the dark, menacing birds. Suddenly, with a squawk, one of them took flight, flying so low over Mado's head that its beak struck his halo, which rang out with a tinny whine.

As if on a signal, all the birds leaped into the air and began circling him in a raucous swarm, their harsh cries almost deafening in their intensity. Mado thought he could hear voices in their calls, taunting him sarcastically.

The birds flew closer and closer, the flurry of their wings tossed Mado's hair. He felt a nip at his temple, then another on an arm, and another on a wing. The crows were pecking at him. He tried to push through them toward the woods, but his movement only seemed to anger the birds even more. One scratched his cheek, drawing blood.

Disoriented and frightened by the black feathery mob roiling around him, Mado fell to his knees and doubled over, folding his wings tight against his back, terrified, trying to protect his face from the onslaught of beaks and claws. *What am I going to do?*

There was a shout, and Mado looked up to see a halo bobbing among the dark fluttering wings. It was Kana, her eyes ablaze with fury, swinging a leafy tree branch in each hand, swatting crows to each side as she waded toward him through the noisome swirl.

Kana handed him a branch. “Mado! Quick, take this!” She continued thrashing the other branch at the crows, flinging them away among a chorus of indignant squawks.

Mado stood up and started swinging, standing back to back with Kana as they fended off the black maelstrom.

After what seemed like an eternity of vicious combat, the crows fell back and dispersed with a cacophony of angry caws.

Mado and Kana stood side by side, panting from exertion for several moments before Kana finally spoke.

“Are you all right?” She reached over and touched the scratch on Mado's cheek.

Mado nodded quickly as he tried to catch his breath.

Kana looked around, glaring angrily at everything. “Damn crows! I hate them!”

She turned and inspected Mado for injuries. “I've never seen them act so aggressive, though.”

Kana stepped back and put her hands on her hips, scowling. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

Mado smiled ironically. “Following a crow.”

Kana sighed heavily. “Looks like you hit the jackpot.”

Mado surveyed the ruins. Aside from a scattering of black feathers, there was no sign of the crows.

He turned toward Kana. “Did you see any lights coming from the altar?”

Kana shook her head. “No. I just came out of the forest and saw all those crows flying around you.” She scanned the horizon pensively. “I've never seen anything like it.”

Mado nodded thoughtfully for a moment, then put his hands on his hips. “So what are *you* doing here?”

A flush came to Kana's cheeks. She stared at the ground, embarrassed. “I heard a scooter driving by, toward the Western Woods.” She glanced up sheepishly. “I thought it might be you.”

Mado smiled coyly. “Sorry I woke you up. I come here so often, I got tired of walking.”

Kana's eyes widened with surprise, then suddenly she started giggling. Mado found himself unable to resist and joined in.

As the eastern sky brightened, the two haibane stood laughing among the stone columns and wet grass of the ancient ruins.

Finally, the laughter died down. Kana wiped a tear from her eye as she shook her head. “You're strange, Mado.”

Mado grinned and pointed at the flashlight Kana had dropped at the edge of the woods. “Looks like you walked. Can I give you a ride?”

Kana glanced toward the woods. “Sure, but...” She turned and faced Mado with an intense glare.

“First, we need to talk about that diary you gave me.”

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 12.4: Consonance**

Kana put her hands on her hips, pinning him down with her familiar scowl. “So, why did you want me to read that diary?”

Mado's mind went blank. *Why did I give her the diary?*

Mado blurted out a thought. “I wanted you to know about Master Tsuchi's wings.”

Kana humphed. “You told me to ask Rakka about that. I did. It's all we talked about last night.”

Mado flushed in embarrassment. “The clock. I thought you would want to know.”

Kana's scowl darkened. “There was hardly anything about the clock in it.” She took a step toward Mado and leaned forward, her face inches from his, her eyes gleaming with accusation. “What's the *real* reason?”

Mado blanched. “I... I...” *I don't even know myself!*

He fought against a wave of panic as he fished in his pockets. He pulled out the watch and held it in his hand. Kana's eyes flickered to it, then back to Mado as her eyebrows knitted angrily. *She's going to punch me!*

Mado cleared his throat nervously. “Why did you give me this?”

Kana stepped back, surprised. “Why?” She glared at the watch. “Because I wanted to cheer you up.” She looked up at him. “You seemed depressed.”

Mado countered. “But isn't this watch special to you?”

Kana's eyes widened. “Well, yes. I found it and fixed it myself, but...” She smirked playfully. “Mado, I work at a *clock shop*. Do you have any idea how many watches I can choose from?”

Mado paused, studying her. “But you gave me *this* watch.”

Kana sighed in resignation. “Yes. I know.”

Mado pulled the knife out of his other pocket. “Kabe gave me this the night he left.”

Kana froze for a moment as her eyes flicked back and forth between the watch and the knife, then over Mado's shoulder to the altar. She blanched as her arms fell to her sides, then took another step backward as realization came to her.

Mado stared at her halo, looking for some kind of sign.

Kana shook her head, opened her mouth, then closed it again before finally finding words. “You think I'm going to...?”

Mado's gaze stayed fixed on her halo.

Kana's eyes rolled up briefly, following Mado's gaze. “Why are you staring at my halo?” They widened in shock. “Mado!”

She stepped forward with an indignant huff. “I'm not going anywhere!”

Mado's eyes met hers as she continued, abashed. “Well, I don't *think* so, anyway.” She straightened her back. “I haven't made any special plans, if that's what you're worried about.”

Mado stared at her uncertainly.

Kana glanced at the altar then took another step forward, her voice suddenly soft. “Mado, if I did, would you...?” She fell silent as her gaze came to rest on Mado's wing brace.

Mado gaped, caught off guard by the question. “I... um...”

Kana shook her head and smiled disarmingly. “Don't answer that.” She glanced at the altar again, then grabbed Mado's arm. “Come on.”

Mado clumsily dropped the watch and knife in his pockets as Kana dragged him toward the trail in the woods. At the edge of the clearing, she leaned over and picked up the flashlight, a large box-battery type, and switched it off.

Overhead, the sky was turning a light shade of azure as the red morning sun lit the tops of the trees. Birds began chirping among the branches of the woods, cheerfully greeting the dawn.

Kana motioned toward the nearby scooter. “Nice bike.”

Mado started it up and waited as Kana climbed on and wrapped her arms around him. As he picked his way along the narrow, root-strewn trail beneath the lingering gloom of the overhanging boughs, Mado felt Kana's cheek against his shoulder and blushed self-consciously.

The morning sun shone brightly in Mado's face as the scooter emerged from the Western Woods. Ahead, the stately silhouette of Old Home was backlit by the warm radiance of the sky.

As the scooter pulled up to the arched entrance, a small group of haibane approached. Mado and Kana dismounted and stood waiting as the visitors strolled up.

It was Suke, surrounded by four children, two boys and two girls, who walked silently with her, their eyes wide with wonder at the sight of Old Home's massive walls.

Suke's hair was unbraided, and cascaded over her shoulders like a golden waterfall which glowed in the light of the morning sun. It was a moment before Mado recognized her -- and then only because she was wearing the same brown dress, so different did she look. *She's beautiful!*

The tiny band of haibane stopped as the young feathers gathered close around Suke, eyeing Mado and Kana suspiciously.

Suke gestured affably. "Children, this is Mado of Stone Mill and this is Kana of Old Home." The boys bowed while the girls curtsied awkwardly.

Suke indicated each of the children as she spoke. "Mado, Kana, this is Kama, Ineda, Kaden and Makura." Mado and Kana bowed slightly as the children stared at them.

Suke smiled warmly. "The little ones wanted to see Old Home before going to the Temple." At that, all the children turned to look at the entryway.

The younger brown-haired boy, Kaden, who was dressed in stained green work clothes, cocked his head, listening. Suddenly, he perked up. "There's kids in there!" He darted off into the archway.

The older girl, Ineda, whose long black hair was braided in a single pigtail, called after him. "Kaden!" She glanced at Suke, then ran after him, followed closely by the other two children.

Suke called out. "Children, wait!" But they had already disappeared around a corner. She moved to follow, then paused.

Suke stared at the ground for a few moments before glancing up sheepishly. "Mado, I'm really sorry about yesterday." Her cheeks reddened as she lowered her eyes. "Thank you."

Mado bowed, and Suke hesitated a moment before running after the children, her golden hair fluttering in the morning breeze.

Mado turned to Kana to explain, but she held up a hand. "Suke had dinner with us last night. She told us everything."

Kana stepped toward the entrance to Old Home, gesturing for Mado to follow. "Let's go get breakfast. Rakka wants to talk to you."

The sound of children shouting and laughing in the south wing echoed throughout the courtyard as Kana led Mado to the porticoed entrance of the west wing. In the alcove, they changed into slippers before entering the guest room.

The twins were sitting side by side on the bed, propped up by pillows. Each had a book in her hands and was reading intently when Mado and Kana walked in. They both looked up and spoke in unison. “Good morning Mado. Good morning Kana.”

Mado smiled and bowed slightly. The girls resumed reading, and Mado noted the titles on the books' covers. One was titled *Human Anatomy* while the other was titled *The Structure of Knowledge*.

Kana led Mado over to the kitchen doorway and leaned through the short curtain. “Mado's here. I invited him to breakfast.”

Rakka peeked out and smiled cheerfully. “Oh, good morning Mado!” From behind her, Mado heard the rustling of pans as Hikari called out. “Hi Mado!”

Rakka glanced at Kana, then disappeared behind the curtain.

Kana motioned toward the table. “Sit down.” Mado took a seat on the side opposite the kitchen and Kana sat next to him.

Rakka brought out a tray with tea and a large pile of assorted rolls. Mado recognized the teapot. It was the same teapot Nemu had used when he saw her last.

Rakka paused for a moment, about to say something, then shrugged and hurried back into the kitchen.

A smell wafted out that seemed familiar, but Mado couldn't place it. *Where have I smelled that before?*

He turned to Kana. “What's that smell?”

Kana shot him a strange look. “What?” She sniffed the air. “Oh, that's bacon.” She gave Mado a wry grin. “Haven't you had bacon before?”

Mado shook his head. “I don't think so, but it smells familiar.”

Kana spoke as she poured them each a cup of tea. “I know what you mean. Every time I ride by the river, I get the same feeling.”

Mado took a bite out of a croissant. It seemed a bit overcooked, but was flaky and delicious.

Kana placed a cup of tea in front of Mado and stared at him for a moment. “You know, you don't look as tired as you used to. Did you sleep okay last night?”

Mado gazed thoughtfully at the cup before answering. “Yes, I think I did, actually.” He glanced at Kana. “A bird woke me up.” He winked and patted his pocket. “At 4:44 in the morning, in fact.”

Kana smiled warmly. "That doesn't sound like a lot of sleep." Her expression grew serious. "What happened at the ruins before I got there?"

Mado stared appraisingly at Kana for a moment before speaking. "I saw an angel."

Kana scowled. "An angel? You're kidding, of course."

Mado shook his head and reached into his chest pocket. "She left this behind." He held the white feather in his hand. Even in the morning light which brightened the guest room, it had a soft glow of its own.

Kana's eyes grew wide as she looked from the feather to Mado, then over at the kitchen.

Rakka and Hikari were peering out from between the flaps of the curtain, side by side, gazing at the feather. As Mado turned, they looked at each other then ducked quickly back into the kitchen.

Mado glanced over at the twins, who were both still concentrating on their books, apparently oblivious to what was happening at the dining table. Mado put the feather back in his chest pocket and buttoned it.

Kana cleared her throat. "Okay, that's different." She regarded Mado skeptically. "No one I know has ever seen an angel before." She glanced at his pocket. "But I've never heard of angels leaving actual feathers behind."

Kana scowled. "Are you sure it isn't just some bird's feather?"

Mado shrugged. "I don't know. I saw it after she left."

Kana's eyes narrowed. "She?"

Mado took a sip of tea. "She called me her brother, but she didn't look anything like me, and seemed a lot older than me."

Kana opened her mouth to say something, but Rakka and Hikari burst out of the kitchen carrying large serving trays.

Hikari called out cheerfully. "Time for breakfast!"

She set plates in front of Kana and Mado, and for herself, Rakka and the twins. On each plate were generous servings of eggs and bacon, garnished with green leaf lettuce. Meanwhile, Rakka placed tableware, more tea cups and condiments on the table.

Rakka and Hikari sat down, but the twins had not moved and were still studying their books. Rakka called them, and allowed them to bring their books to the table. Throughout the meal, each of the girls remained glued to her book, seeming to eat as an afterthought.

Mado motioned to the twins. "What has them so interested in reading?"

One of the twins interjected. "We're studying for our jobs."

Kana spoke up. "Suke is here, at the south wing. She's showing the Farmhouse kids what Old Home is like." She glanced over at Hikari.

Hikari stared blankly at Kana for a moment, then quickly responded. "Oh, right! I'll go check on them after breakfast."

The meal passed uneventfully with small talk and pleasant chatter. Afterwards, Hikari and the twins cleaned off the table as Rakka, Kana and Mado moved out to the table on the balcony.

In the courtyard, by the south wing, Suke and the house mother were talking, surrounded by a swarm of playing haibane children.

Rakka glanced nervously at Kana before speaking. "Mado, I wanted to talk to you about Master Tsuchi's wings."

Mado stared expectantly.

Rakka continued. "The feathers turn black when something's wrong. When something's *really* wrong." She arched her eyebrows in an expression of pain. "Do you know why Master Tsuchi's wings turned black?"

Mado caught himself fidgeting with his thumbs. "He thinks he did something bad in his past life." *I'm not sure how much I should say about this.*

Rakka nodded thoughtfully. "But he wasn't born with black wings, right?"

Mado shook his head. "He says he wasn't."

Rakka glanced at Kana with discomfort before speaking. "Kana showed me the diary you loaned her."

Mado's eyes flickered to Kana, but he said nothing.

Rakka's eyes began to moisten, and her expression was intensely earnest. "Mado, I don't know much about this, even though I used to be sin-bound, but Master Tsuchi is going to need you."

She paused for a moment, then leaned forward against the table, her voice pleading. "Mado, when that happens, you need to be there for him."

Mado nodded slowly, meeting Rakka's intense gaze. "I will."

The twins came rushing out and stood on each side of Rakka. One of them spoke. "Rakka, remember we have to go in for our appointments this morning." The other chimed in. "We can't be late!"

Rakka stood up and bowed. "Let me know if you ever need to talk."

Mado stood up and bowed in response. Kana got up from her chair and escorted Mado to the courtyard.

Mado saw Hikari, Suke and the house mother walk into the south wing, followed by the boisterous flock of young feathers.

Kana turned to him, her expression solemn. "Mado, that goes for me, too." She patted him on the shoulder, then disappeared into the west wing entrance.

Mado reviewed the events of the morning as he rode slowly down the road. On a whim, he rode past the intersection leading to Stone Mill and sped toward town as the sun rose above a crisp clear morning.

When Mado walked in, the owner of the music shop was just opening the store for business. He was an elderly man with flyaway white hair and an expression of perpetual boredom. The elbows of his gray sweater were worn, and his walk was little more than a shuffle as he moved here and there, fussing with displays.

He turned toward Mado with a look of surprise. "Oh, hello! I didn't see you there. What can I do for you, young fellow?"

Mado pointed at the display window. "I would like to have a look at that flute, please."

The man cup a finger to one ear. "What was that?"

Mado raised his voice. "May I see the flute in the window?"

The old man looked puzzled. "Flute?" He worked his way slowly over to the display case. Mado pointed to the small silver instrument.

The store owner smiled broadly. "Oh, you mean the piccolo!" He nudged Mado's ribs. "Actually, it's half-scale. I call it a 'soprano piccolo'." He handed Mado the instrument. "Here you go."

Mado studied the piccolo. It was very small, not much longer than his hand. *It's about the right length.*

The old man spoke fondly. "This is a very rare piece. Solid silver, and very old, if I'm not young." He pointed at it in illustration. "Just look at those valves. Incredible craftsmanship!"

Mado glanced up inquisitively. "How much would it cost to buy this?"

The store owner cupped a hand to his ear. "What?"

Mado raised his voice. "Can I buy this?"

The old man leaned back with surprise. "Buy it? I'm sorry, but I can't sell it to you. We don't have a contract with the haibane." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "In fact, other than that nice young girl from the second hand store, you're the only haibane we've ever had in here."

Mado fingered the valves of the piccolo, and spoke with deliberate loudness. "Would I be able to borrow it then? I would only need it for a little while." He looked up. "I want to make a copy of it out of brass."

The store owner's eyes widened. "Really?" He stared at the patch on Mado's coveralls. "Say, you're one of those Stone Mill haibane, aren't you? I didn't know you made copies of musical instruments."

Mado smiled, keeping his voice raised. "It's a project for my master. He wants to see how good I am at machining."

The old man grinned. "Ah, I see." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well, you seem honest enough, and you're a haibane, after all. Certainly!" He gestured toward the counter. "Just sign and leave a feather."

The store owner placed the piccolo in an ancient and elaborate wooden case as Mado signed and plucked a feather for the clipboard. He slipped the case in his pocket and waved goodbye to the old man as he returned to the scooter parked outside.

Mado thought about visiting Ame, but decided to hurry back and check on Master Tsuchi.

At Stone Mill, Senkou told him that Master Tsuchi was in the garden.

Mado made his way past the carved wooden gate and quietly approached the circle of trees that marked the garden's center. Around him, butterflies flitted and birds chirped, all to the hum of buzzing bees. The garden was lush with greenery and blossoms, beautifully lit in the clear spring morning.

Tsuchi was sitting on the wooden bench reading something. In front of him, several birds splashed playfully in the birdbath.

Mado smiled inwardly. *They've gotten used to him.*

The birds scattered as Mado approached. He stopped in front of Tsuchi and bowed.

Tsuchi's eyes remained fixed on the scroll in his lap. "I received a scroll from the Communicator today."

Mado peered down at it. On it was written a single word: "Mother."

Tsuchi raised his head slowly, not quite meeting Mado's gaze. His voice was flat, but his expression was pained. "Apprentice Mado, I think it would be wise to finish your project soon."

Mado gasped as he saw Tsuchi's halo dim once... twice...

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 12.5: Conviction**

Mado stared at Tsuchi's halo in shock. "Master..."

Tsuchi glanced upward, then turned aside. "Apprentice Mado, I wish to be alone for a while."

Mado held out a hand. "But..."

Tsuchi glared meaningfully.

Mado bowed low. "I'm sorry." He turned and hurried out of the garden as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Outside the garden gate, Mado fell to his knees and wept passionately.

There was a fluttering of wings, and Mado looked up to see a single crow land a few feet in front of him. He recoiled, remembering the brutal assault at the ruins, but the crow stood still and showed no signs of aggressiveness.

Mado stared at the bird. *This one's different.*

The crow cocked its head and cawed softly.

Mado gazed into its dark eyes. *You're someone I used to know, but who?*

The crow took wing and landed by the corner of one of the sheds. Mado stood up, wiped the tears from his face and followed.

The crow flew again, this time landing by the entrance to the main building. As Mado approached, it cried loudly, then climbed high into the air with a wild flapping of wings and disappeared over the top of the roof.

Mado walked through the door, causing the bell Kumo had installed to clang softly.

As he changed into his shoes, Mado wondered what the bird had been trying to tell him.

Senkou walked up and put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Mado glanced up and nodded.

Senkou looked at the floor. "And you found Master Tsuchi?"

Mado nodded again. "Yes."

Senkou turned away, gazing out over the shop. "Are you going to be okay?"

Mado sighed and finished lacing his shoes. "I don't know."

Senkou faced him. "What are you going to do?"

Mado stood up and paused for a moment before answering. "I'm going to get to work."

He brushed past Senkou and hurried up the stairs to the west loft.

Outside Kabe's room, Mado stopped and peered inside. The cocoon was beginning to darken, becoming a deeper shade of blue.

Mado stared at the probing tendrils that pushed their way into the floor. *A new feather for the nest.*

In his room, Mado removed the brass cylinder from the top drawer of the dresser and held it in his hand, studying it. With his free hand he fished the ornate wooden box out of his pocket, set it on the dresser and opened it.

Mado stood with the brass cylinder in one hand and the piccolo in the other, comparing them, weighing his options. *Can I really do this?*

He lifted the piccolo, examining the tiny valves closely. *It's so complicated, and I can't make springs out of brass.*

Mado imagined what kind of machinery and tools would be needed to create the piccolo from the brass cylinder. *The valves are impossible! How would I do the hinges?*

As he gazed at the piccolo, Mado remembered Tsuchi's warnings. He would be graded on accuracy and precision, not how complicated the work was. *Why do I want to impress him so badly?*

Mado closed his eyes and gripped the two objects tightly in his hands. *What if I fail?*

Minutes passed as he wrestled with doubt before his eyes sprang open.

Mado spoke the words out loud. "I won't fail."

He hurried downstairs to the shop. *I need to get busy.*

Mado stepped up to Senkou, who was sitting at the supervisor's desk, reading an old, thick book. Senkou glanced at the items in Mado's hands, then gave him a puzzled look.

Mado cleared his throat. "I'm going to be working on my assignment today, and I need to hurry."

Senkou gazed doubtfully at the piccolo. "If you're planning to do what I think you're planning to do, I don't think you have enough time."

Mado nodded sharply. "That's why I need to hurry." He turned and scanned the shop. "Do we have any small coring bits?"

Senkou's eyes narrowed. "How small?"

Mado pointed at the tiny hinges of the valves on the piccolo.

Senkou gasped, then chuckled. "You must be crazy!"

Mado smiled. "Yeah, I think you're right." He regarded the valves thoughtfully. "Well, it's brass, so I'll see what I can do."

Mado stepped quickly over to the planning bench opposite Senkou's desk and started measuring the piccolo with a set of calipers, sketching out the dimensions on a large sheet of paper. He double-checked the dimensions, then triple-checked them, firming up the sketch with each pass.

Next he got out a fresh piece of paper and began sketching the machining plan, which illustrated each major step of the process he would use to form the brass into a piccolo.

The first steps were pretty straightforward, and filled the first sheet. These would be the easy parts, which could be accomplished on the lathe and milling machine with a high degree of mechanical accuracy. At the end of this process, he would have the rough equivalent of the piccolo with blocks where the valves would be.

The second sheet outlined the harder work that would be needed to shape the outsides of the valves and their hinge blocks. At the end of this process, the piece would be hollow and look identical to the piccolo with all its valves closed.

The third sheet took most of Mado's time to work out. In this step, he would need to carefully cut the valves away from the seats in such a way that they would still close tightly against the curved surface of the piccolo's main barrel. In the end, he opted for flat valve valves and valve seats, which simplified the design immensely.

But the hardest part of all would be the valve hinges, which he would need to carefully core from the hinge blocks using a tiny hollow drill bit. And all this had to be done in a way that would not require springs. The design and machine plan for those steps occupied the entire fourth sheet of paper.

Mado reviewed the plans carefully, checking for errors. Everything looked feasible, but none of it looked easy.

He smiled ruefully. *I won't be sleeping for a while.*

Mado stepped over to the small precision lathe workstation and carefully aligned and secured the brass cylinder in the chuck. *Here goes*

On a whim, Mado shaved off two large spirals of brass and set them aside for later. *A gift.*

Mado worked quickly but carefully, making several passes with the tool bits, knowing that he could always remove more, but couldn't replace material once removed.

A rhythm came to his work, as if he had already done it a thousand times. *Deja vu. I've done this before.*

In his mind, a forgotten song came to Mado. It was a song he could not sing, but its melody filled his mind as he worked. His hands worked in time with the song's movements. *I was born to do this.*

Mado shifted the work to the large, elaborate milling machine. He began to whistle along with the tune, his confidence growing.

As he seated the work on the milling platform, Mado saw movement out of the corner of his eye. It was Senkou.

“Mado, are you ready for dinner?” Senkou's eyes narrowed. “You did hear the bells, didn't you?”

Mado shook his head. “Bells?”

Senkou's eyes widened. “Mado, you've been working since before lunch. You mean you haven't heard the bells?”

Mado shook his head. “Sorry.” He glanced at the milling machine. “Is it okay if I just get a snack later? I'm kind of busy.”

Senkou stepped over and examined Mado's handiwork before answering. “Of course.” He stepped back, appearing somewhat stunned. “I'll leave some sandwiches in the kitchen.” He stared for a moment at the milling machine before turning and hurrying off.

Mado studied the milling plans for a moment, then got to it, humming the song in his mind as he worked quickly and methodically.

As his hands flew over the mill controls, Mado found himself fascinated by how natural everything seemed, even though he had never used the milling machine since his arrival at Stone Mill. *I'm a born machinist!*

Mado grimaced as he edged the cutting tools back and forth along the work, carefully cutting channels, easing the tools in, then out, verifying his dimensions with the caliper set. *No margin for error.*

He paused for a moment before proceeding to the third sheet of the plan. Overhead, the skylights were dark, but Mado hadn't noticed, hovering as he was in the light of the milling station.

Someone was standing a few machines away. It was Umi. *I wonder how long he's been watching me?*

Mado waved. Umi waved back, hesitated, then stepped over to the paint room and slipped inside.

Mado stared at the closed door. *Now I know how he feels when he paints.*

He turned back to the machining plan, studied it for a moment, then returned to work, the song growing louder and more beautiful in his mind as his hands caressed the controls of the machine and dripped cutting oil at the points of contact.

The bits he needed for creating the tiny gaps between the valves and valve hinge blocks were so delicate that Mado broke one. Horrified, he checked the work, and was relieved to find that the damaged tool had not ruined it. *I need to be more careful about torque, lateral loading and heat.*

Finally, he came to the final challenge. The valves and seats had been completed to near perfection, with tolerances so close that Mado used average readings from different calipers to verify them.

He stepped over to the miniature lathe. His plan was to create a series of hollow drill bits from sections of the thin steel welding rods he had found at the welding station. *These should be strong enough to cut brass.*

After several fruitless attempts, Mado had his coring bits, plus spares. Making them was very difficult, because the walls of the bit had to be razor thin, and even a slight misalignment or flexion of the material

would ruin a potentially good bit.

As he turned to take the bits back to the milling station, Mado saw Umi close the paint room door and walk quietly across the shop to the east loft stairs.

Mado smiled. *At least he knows when to quit.*

Mado stared at the plans, then the bits, then the nearly-finished piccolo clamped in the milling machine. *Maybe I should take a break.*

The image of Tsuchi's halo came to Mado's mind, and with a surge of adrenaline, he got back to work, carefully installing and aligning the core bit for the first attempt.

Before starting, however, he decided to perform some tests on some scrap brass from a recycling bin.

The first attempt proved the wisdom of testing. The thin brass core broke off when the bit was removed, which would have ruined the entire piccolo.

Mado studied the problem and solved it by using a process of making very shallow passes combined with liberal amounts of cutting fluid. After a solid series of successes, he began on the piccolo.

Mado was so absorbed in his work that he didn't realize he was covered with sweat from head to toe by the time he finished the last valve hinge. He checked the valves, then carefully fingered them, checking for resistance and signs of torsion of the hinge pins. The valves moved freely.

The other thing Mado had been uncertain of was his solution for not using springs, which was the use of cammed surfaces which pressed against the brass barrel.

Mado had carefully ensured that the surfaces the cams pressed against were of the proper thickness to allow enough flexion to function properly, but the minimum needed in order to reduce the amount of work hardening of the barrel that would result from repeated fingerings. *They will break eventually, but this was made to be admired, not played.*

Mado smiled ironically as he carried the piece to the rotary tool station for polishing. As he sat down, he saw Master Tsuchi walk quietly across the shop, change into his boots, flip his name tag to red and step outside.

Mado smiled. *Off to work in the garden.*

It was then that Mado realized that Matsu was also working in the shop, near the front door. He stared fretfully at the door Tsuchi had just exited through. *They've been keeping watch, and I didn't notice!*

A bell rang, and Matsu glanced over at Mado before heading toward the lounge.

Mado stared at him. *Breakfast?* Overhead, red morning light filtered into the shop. *Wow.*

Mado began buffing and polishing his handiwork, oblivious to the boys who filed quietly from their rooms into the lounge.

“Mado?” Mado turned. It was Matsu.

“Don't you think you should at least have breakfast? You've been working all night.” Matsu's concern couldn't have been any more evident.

He pointed at the piccolo in Mado's hands. “I think it's done. Can I see it?”

Mado stared at Matsu for a moment, confused. “See it? Oh!” He handed his work to Matsu.

The piccolo had been polished to a mirror finish and gleamed in the crimson glow which filtered into the shop through the skylights. Matsu gently fingered the valves with an expression of childlike astonishment.

His eyes were wide as he carefully handed the piccolo back to Mado. “Mado, I've never seen anything like this. It's incredible!”

Mado regarded the piccolo skeptically. “I'm worried about the cams.” He fingered a valve as he carefully studied the movement of its cam.

Matsu grinned and shook his head. “Senkou put your sandwiches in the refrigerator, and there's some soup on the stove if you want some.” He glanced at the piccolo before returning to the lounge.

Mado made a few more passes with the buffing tool, then decided the work was finished.

He stood up and stretched, and began to walk toward the lounge, but changed his mind. He slipped the piccolo into his chest pocket and changed into his boots. *I'm going to give it to him first.*

The morning air felt good on Mado's face, and he smiled with rapture at the rising sun. *I did it!*

The sky was clear, a brilliant blue. The scent of wildflowers wafted gently from the fields, while far overhead, under the eaves of the main building, the nesting birds chirped and chattered with riotous gaiety.

Mado cautiously entered the garden, quietly opening and closing the carved gate.

He removed the piccolo from his pocket and examined it as he walked, checking it obsessively for anything he might have overlooked. It gleamed golden in the morning sun, and Mado turned it from side to side, looking for any imperfections the sun's light might reveal.

*There will be no margin for error.*

Something seemed out of place as Mado approached the center of the garden. *There aren't any birds in the birdbath.*

As Mado moved closer, something else seemed out of place.

Tsuchi was standing precariously balanced on the backrest of the wooden bench. A rope had been passed over the limb of an overhanging tree and was tied in a noose around his neck.

Mado's legs had already started moving involuntarily. He was running toward Tsuchi before he even realized what was happening.

Everything became completely silent. The movement of the world slowed to a syrupy crawl as Tsuchi casually glanced down at his watch then kicked the bench away, causing it to tumble with a series of dreamlike bounces against the birdbath. *Out of reach.*

Mado noticed that Tsuchi's black wings were slowly fluttering, almost as if he might take flight.

Mado watched everything unfold calmly. There was no panic in his mind. He was calculating the steps needed to reach Tsuchi as he fell slowly, the rope tightening around his neck. *Three steps away.*

Mado dismissed the possibility of uprighting the bench. He ran with painful slowness as he focused on the ground between himself and Tsuchi's legs and the need to reach them as quickly as possible without stumbling. *Step there, then there, then there.*

In the back of his mind, he prepared for what might need to be done if Tsuchi's neck was broken by the pull of the rope, considering options, treatment requirements, movement restrictions. *He's swinging to the left. Compensate.*

One step away, Mado leaned over, assessing the best place to grab Tsuchi and lift him, checking his angle of approach, estimating joint movements and centers of gravity. *Right there.*

Mado reached out and grabbed Tsuchi's legs just above the knees. With painstaking deliberacy, Mado carefully placed his feet for maximum stability, then straightened his legs. *I can't afford to slip.*

Mado lifted Tsuchi effortlessly, his strength magnified by the rush of adrenaline through his veins. He could sense the tension easing on the rope, but he could not reach up or remove the noose which must still be tight around Tsuchi's neck. Mado's cheek was pressed against Tsuchi's thigh, and he couldn't see if Tsuchi was still conscious -- or if his neck wasn't broken.

Mado's mind raced though the world stood still. He was visualizing the noose he had seen, trying to remember if it was a knot that would stay tight or loosen when tension was removed. *I need to lean back a bit so he doesn't slump forward against the noose.*

Mado's legs were locked straight, spread in a shoulder-wide stance, his arms were wrapped tightly around Tsuchi's legs. A thought flashed through Mado's mind: concern that his grip may cut off blood flow. *I have to risk it, can't allow him to slip through my arms.*

Mado wondered for a moment if Tsuchi was still conscious, and if so, if he would try to struggle. *He's not moving or resisting.*

Mado was reviewing his options, looking for a safe way to lift Tsuchi higher, when the edges of his eyesight began to darken. He was staring at the fallen bench, watching as his field of vision slowly narrowed to a small circle. *No, not now!*

Mado found himself mentally preparing his body, considering ways that he might be able to remain upright. *Perhaps if I lean this way. I need to keep my arms tight.*

Mado's mind flickered rapidly among possibilities as darkness overtook him.

## **Mado of Stone Mill**

*A Story by Majic of Old Home*

### **Episode 13: Revelation**

#### **Scene 13.1: Recognition**

Mado felt as if he were rushing through a long, dark tunnel.

Though the sensation of motion was unmistakable, there was no sound or wind upon his face. The silence itself was terrifying, and Mado felt as if he were smothering, unable to breathe.

A tiny pinpoint of light appeared and grew slowly, almost imperceptibly at first. The light was bright white and became brighter and wider as it grew.

Mado felt that he was rushing toward it. *What is this?*

The light grew so intense that Mado was blinded, though he could nonetheless see soft ripples across its surface, like water.

Mado's eyes shot open and he was overcome by brightness. Slowly his vision returned. There was light blue, and bright green. He could feel something solid against his back. *I'm lying on the ground.*

Memory returned to him, and Mado reflexively tried to sit up in terror. "Master!"

Firm hands held him down. "Try to relax."

Mado saw soft dark eyes through thick lenses. Tsuchi's face was streaked with tears but bore an expression of immeasurable relief.

Tsuchi leaned close. "Mado, thank you." He squeezed his eyes shut as fresh tears rolled slowly down his cheeks.

Mado forced himself up and hugged Tsuchi tightly. "Master, I thought I was going to lose you."

Tsuchi smiled. "That was not possible, because you refused to let me go." He gently helped Mado sit up.

Mado shook his head and looked around. The bench lay overturned against the birdbath, from the tree the noose still hung as if ready for use.

Mado blinked in confusion. “Master, what happened?”

Tsuchi blushed and glanced downward momentarily, but met Mado's gaze as he spoke. “I awoke to find that you were holding me up by my legs. Now that I remembered the rest of my dream, I realized that I had been wrong. I was able to remove the noose from my neck.”

Mado glanced at Tsuchi's throat. There was a thick red welt running under his chin and around his neck under his ears. A tear came to Mado's eyes as he stared at the wound.

Tsuchi's gaze was distant. “I remember feeling someone grab my legs after I...” He closed his eyes for a moment. “I didn't know if it was real or an illusion.”

He smiled warmly. “At first, I was unable to step down. You would not let me go, and didn't listen to me when I spoke. It was not until after I leaned over and we both fell to the ground that I realized you were unconscious.”

Mado stared at Tsuchi numbly. “What?”

Tsuchi glanced down at his watch. “Mado, you were holding me for almost thirty minutes. I do not know how long you were unconscious, but you were unresponsive when I awoke.”

He frowned with remembered grief. “I was afraid I had lost you.” Tsuchi lowered his head and sobbed.

Mado hugged him, and they sat like that for a very long while.

Finally Tsuchi cleared his throat and shifted back a short distance. He reached into his pocket and produced the brass piccolo Mado had created.

Tsuchi stared at it for a moment before speaking. “I found this lying on the ground. Is it yours?”

Mado nodded slowly.

Tsuchi humphed sarcastically. “I note that it has been scratched.” He pointed to some scratches on the barrel which been caused by the gravel of the path.

Mado stared in horror at the scratches. “Master, I...”

Tsuchi laughed merrily. “I'm sorry, Mado, I couldn't resist. Obviously, I will take responsibility for the damage to your craftpiece.”

Mado slapped Tsuchi's arm playfully.

Tsuchi adjusted his glasses and squinted at the gleaming brasswork. “I will need to perform some measurements, of course, but I had a brief opportunity to study this piece carefully while you were unconscious.”

He met Mado's gaze squarely. "Apprentice Mado, this is the finest craftpiece I have ever seen. It is, in fact, better than almost any masterpiece I have ever seen, and rivals my own."

Mado's eyes widened, but he sat quietly, listening.

Tsuchi continued. "I know you made it, because I watched you make it."

Mado shifted. "What? How?"

Tsuchi smirked. "The west loft has windows overlooking the shop." He humphed. "Not that I needed to be so clever. I actually stood behind you several times as you worked, and you never noticed me at all."

Mado's cheeks reddened. "I guess I sort of get lost in the work."

Tsuchi grinned and held up the piccolo. "That is hardly anything to be ashamed of."

Mado glanced at the welt on Tsuchi's neck, which was beginning to darken. "Master, you said you remembered your dream. What happened?"

A flash of pain crossed Tsuchi's face, but he did not look away. "I thought the Communicator's message meant that I had harmed my mother, and I did have memories of a woman being brutally attacked."

Tsuchi paused for a moment, trying to compose himself. "Mado, I now know that I did what I had to do to *protect* my mother." A sob choked his throat. "But I was too late. I failed."

Tears streamed down Tsuchi's face, and Mado held him again, tightly, as sobs wracked his body.

Nearby, birds began to splash and frolic in the birdbath, scattering drops of sunlit water into the bright flowers below.

Tsuchi stirred and pulled away, contrite. "Mado, I'm sorry I broke my promise to you."

Mado stared at him for a moment, then grinned mischievously. "But Master, you didn't. You never left Stone Mill."

Tsuchi smiled crookedly. "How do you feel? You were unconscious for over five minutes after I awoke, and I have no idea how long before that. Should I get the doctor?"

Mado stretched and flexed his joints, then fanned his wings experimentally.

He shook his head. "No, I think I'm okay." Mado smirked. "And it's not like passing out is anything new for me."

Tsuchi grinned and stood up, extended a hand and helped Mado to his feet. The haibane dusted themselves off, then replaced the bench and removed the rope from the tree.

Tsuchi massaged the welt under his neck and turned his head experimentally. "There's some chafing, but I

don't sense any damage to my vertebrae.” He turned to Mado. “Is the chafing noticeable?”

Mado nodded emphatically. “Definitely. I'm sorry Master, but it's all dark red now.”

Tsuchi sighed ironically. “Well, hardly worse than the alternative, I suppose.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the piccolo again.

Tsuchi shook his head with amazement as he spoke. “Mado, this is magnificent.” He clapped a hand on Mado's shoulder. “Truly, you are a gifted machinist.”

Something caught Mado's attention, and he pointed with surprise. “Master, your wings!”

Tsuchi looked over his shoulder and ruffled his feathers. All of them were pure charcoal gray, without a single spot or blemish.

He smiled triumphantly at Mado. “The Circle of Sin has been broken.”

Tsuchi's expression became serious. “Mado, I will always be grateful for what you have done for me.”

Mado grinned wryly. “I wouldn't be a good apprentice if I didn't have a good teacher.”

Tsuchi glanced at his watch. “It looks like we both missed breakfast.”

The two haibane chuckled and exchanged mild jokes as they walked slowly out of the garden and back to the sunlit entrance of Stone Mill.

Inside, Tsuchi pulled a winter scarf out of one of the locker compartments and quickly wrapped it around his neck.

Kumo and Matsu's nametags indicated that they were away. Senkou was showing Umi some electrical schematics at the supervisor's desk in the shop.

Senkou called out without looking over. “If either of you are hungry, there's soup in the kitchen.” He continued explaining the drawings to Umi.

Tsuchi and Mado glanced at each other, then both slipped quietly up the stairs to the west loft.

Before entering his room, Tsuchi turned to Mado. “I will have an errand in town for you this afternoon. I recommend getting some rest. I will wake you up for lunch.”

Mado nodded. “Thanks Master. Some rest sounds great right about now.”

Once in his room, Mado kicked off his shoes, fell on his bed and was asleep almost instantly.

He awoke to a loud knock at the door. “Come in.”

It was Tsuchi, carrying a serving tray with a pot of tea and two large sandwiches. He set them on the

nightstand.

Tsuchi bowed. "Lunch is served. It's actually after lunch, but you were impossible to wake up sooner, and you needed the rest."

He reached into a back pocket and pulled out a thin cardboard tube wrapped with a small sheet of paper secured with a string.

Tsuchi set the tube on the serving tray. "This is your errand. Take this tube to the address shown, give it to the secretary and wait for instructions. The note also includes a map to help you find the destination. Can I trust you to take care of this for me today?"

Mado nodded. "Of course, Master." He tore into a sandwich, taking huge bites.

Tsuchi smiled and poured some tea. "Here, you might need this." He winked and slipped quietly out the door.

After finishing the sandwiches and several cups of the strong black tea, Mado took the tray to the kitchen and washed the dishes. The shop was empty, and Mado guessed that the other boys were at the Factory assessing the damage.

The Mado took the green scooter, which was the only one left. It was still early afternoon when he pulled up in front of his destination and parked the scooter out front.

A large bronze sign with elaborate inlays was mounted over the entrance of the ancient stone building. On it was engraved the words: "Order of Machinists"

Mado walked in and handed the tube to the secretary, a young man in his early 20's with short dark brown hair.

The secretary pointed to some seats in the lobby. "Please wait while I process this." He opened one end of the tube, looked inside, then disappeared through a doorway covered by a red full-length curtain.

Mado nodded and wandered over to the waiting area, in which several glass display shelves had been arranged. On the shelves were dozens of pieces of metal artwork. One work was displayed in a special case, and Mado stepped over to study it.

The piece consisted of steel carefully shaped into thin, wispy flames which surrounded a large anvil. Striking the anvil was a massive hammer whose handle, though made of steel, had been meticulously sculpted to appear like real wood.

Tiny stylized sparks leaped from where the hammer struck the anvil, and as Mado looked closer, finer levels of detail became apparent. All of the details, angles and finishes were crafted to take advantage of the light to create clever illusions which deceived the eye. In places, the steel seemed transparent, so delicately were the flames rendered.

Mado stared at the tag on the base. "The Forge"

A small placard next to it read:

*This submission was crafted by Master Candidate Tsuchi of Stone Mill from a single piece of crucible steel over the course of three days. It was accepted as his masterpiece and commended with distinction to the guild's permanent collection.*

Mado sat in one of the chairs and stared at Tsuchi's masterpiece. It was an incredible work of art.

After what seemed like a very long time, the secretary emerged carrying the tube and returned to his desk. Shortly thereafter, an elderly man thrust the curtain aside and strolled into the room.

Mado stood up and bowed as the man came to a stop in front of him.

The man was no taller than Mado, and was somewhat plump. The only hair on his head was gray, and consisted of tufts behind his ears, in his ears, his bushy eyebrows and thick mutton chop sideburns. He was wearing a yellow long sleeved shirt under a bright green vest. A huge metal buckle in the shape of a cog fastened the wide belt which suspended his dark trousers.

The man coughed importantly. "You are Mado of Stone Mill, yes?"

Mado nodded.

The man's light gray eyes narrowed. "I don't remember seeing you here before. How long have you been studying under Master Tsuchi?"

Mado paused, thinking carefully. "I formally became his apprentice on Sunday, so five days ago, I guess, or six days, counting today."

The man's eyes widened in disbelief. "What?" He glanced over at the secretary, who shrugged uncertainly.

The man leaned close, his tone impatient. "Well then, who did you study under before that?"

Mado edged back slightly, intimidated by the man's bearing. "Journeyman Kabe, but only for one day." In response to the man's bluster, Mado added. "I haven't been here very long. I was born a little over two weeks ago."

At that, the elderly man's jaw dropped almost to his chest. He quickly composed himself. "Excuse me." He stepped over to the desk and whispered in heated tones to the secretary.

Mado saw the secretary pull the brass piccolo and some notes from the cardboard tube. The elderly man took them and strode purposefully back to Mado.

He cleared his throat. "Let me see if I understand. Did you make this?" He held up the piccolo.

Mado nodded. "Yes. Last night, from a cylinder Master Tsuchi gave me."

Though shock registered on the man's face, it quickly faded.

He studied the notes in his hand. "And Master Tsuchi witnessed you crafting it?"

Mado nodded. "He says he watched me, but I was kind of busy and didn't notice. I'm sure he wouldn't lie about that." He quickly added. "And I did make it myself. I used a piccolo from the music store as a model."

The man's eyebrows bristled. "He didn't help you, did he?"

Mado shook his head emphatically. "No sir! I made it myself from scratch."

The man nodded. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to suggest that either you or Master Tsuchi is dishonest." He paused, scowling at the note. "Excuse me." He hurried past the curtain and through the doorway to the back.

Mado stood for several minutes before sitting down -- just as the man returned, shaking his head with apparent disbelief.

Mado stood and bowed again. "Is something wrong?"

The man smiled warmly. "No. I'm afraid that even after all these years, you haibane never cease to amaze me."

He puffed out his chest and adopted a stern, official tone. "Apprentice Mado, in consideration of the recommendations of Master Tsuchi of Stone Mill, his testimony of your worthiness and my personal evaluation of your craftwork, I hereby, as Grandmaster of the Machinists Guild of Guri, confer upon you the title of Journeyman Machinist with Distinction."

Mado gaped in astonishment, then quickly closed his mouth.

The man paused briefly before continuing. "Furthermore, and in full awareness of the unusual circumstances in your case, I grant an exception to the minimum service requirements prescribed by the Guild and honor Master Tsuchi's request that you be declared a Master Candidate."

He leaned forward slightly, speaking with gentle emphasis. "You are hereby advised that upon satisfactory completion of the oral and written examinations for that title, and upon acceptance of a masterpiece deemed worthy by the Council of Masters, shall you be named a Master of this Guild."

The Grandmaster extended his hand, and Mado shook it as if in a daze.

The old man smiled warmly. "Congratulations, Journeyman Mado." He leaned forward and whispered. "Take whatever time you need for your Master's studies, but know that I expect to see great things from you soon."

He turned to the man at the desk. "Secretary, draft and issue a Letter of Patent with Distinction for Journeyman Mado and a Notice of Master Candidacy. Let the record show that the Master of the Guri Ironworks and the Master of the East District Specialized Machinery Service were personally consulted, concur and will witness the propriety of these awards."

He regarded the piccolo in his hand. "Journeyman Mado, this is easily a masterpiece in itself. Are you willing to accept its commendation to our permanent collection?"

Mado was about to nod, then caught himself. "But the scratches..."

The Grandmaster's eyebrows arched as he held up the piccolo. "What scratches? This piece is flawless!"

Mado stared at the piccolo with amazement. The scratches had been polished out, and the piccolo glowed with pristine perfection.

The old man scowled at one of the notes in his hand. "If you're referring to the scratches Master Tsuchi claims to have been responsible for, he indicated here that he corrected them, which is perfectly acceptable."

Mado sighed with relief. "I would be honored to have my work added to the guild's collection."

The Grandmaster nodded approvingly. "The honor is ours, Master Candidate Mado."

He glanced over at the secretary. "Please excuse me, but I have other business to attend to. The Secretary will see to your needs, and remember that as a member of our guild, we are at your service should you ever need us."

The Grandmaster winked at Mado, nodded to the secretary and disappeared behind the red curtain.

Mado sat quietly, taking in the significance of what had just happened as the secretary drafted his documents. *Master Candidate!*

After what seemed like an eternity, the secretary called Mado over and handed him a cardboard tube.

The secretary gave Mado a respectful nod. "Everything is in order, sir. Congratulations. You should be very proud."

Mado bowed and returned to his scooter in a daze. *Is this a dream?*

He started the scooter and headed for Stone Mill, but found himself involuntarily traveling in a different direction. *I need to be somewhere.*

Mado followed his instincts, turning and navigating without being sure of where he was going -- until he pulled up in front of the hospital.

He waved to the receptionist. "I'm here to see Gake. I know the way."

Mado stopped short upon entering the room. A young haibane girl dressed in a white nurse's uniform was standing next to the bed, staring at Gake.

She turned and smiled brightly. "Hi Mado!"

Mado paused for a moment, then made a guess. "Kasai?"

The girl's smile broadened. "Jika." She put a hand over her mouth and giggled. "Kasai works at the library now."

Jika turned from side to side, showing off her dress. "Do you like it? Hikari made it for me." She glanced over at the door. "I just started today. I'm an assistant nurse trainee. I'm on break now, so I thought I would visit Gake."

Mado stepped over by the bed. "Is there any change?"

Jika shook her head. "No. He still hasn't woken up yet."

A brief wave of dizziness caused Mado to grab the side rail of the bed. There were whispers in his mind, memories. *There's something I'm supposed to do now.*

Mado reached down and took hold of Gake's left hand. "Gake, it's time to wake up." There was a strange sensation, a sense of warmth passing from his hand to Gake's, a sense of flowing, shifting consciousness. *I can feel what's wrong.*

He noticed Jika staring at him, but continued, focusing on Gake.

Mado leaned close to Gake's face and whispered. "Gake, come back. It's okay now. I'm with you." Gake's body suddenly went rigid.

There was a gasp. It was Jika. She tapped Mado's arm. "Is he having a seizure?"

Mado leaned closer, almost touching Gake's face with his. "Gake, it's me. It's safe. Come back now."

Gake's body shook with a single spasm as his unbandaged eye shot open. A single word sprang from his lips. "No!" His eye focused. "Mado?"

Mado straightened up as a mild wave of dizziness passed, smiling warmly. "Welcome back."

Jika's eyes went wide with shock. "I need to get the doctor!" She bolted out the door. Her voice echoed down the corridor. "We need the doctor in Room 14!"

Gake frowned. "I had the strangest dream. I was standing on a cliff above the ocean. I felt myself slipping. The edge was crumbling." He smiled weakly. "But you were there and took my hand. You kept me from falling."

A tear welled and rolled down his cheek. "Mado, thank you."

Mado squeezed Gake's hand. "It's okay. You're going to be all right."

The doctor stormed into the room, scowling. "What's going on here?"

He froze in place and gaped at Gake for a moment before turning to Jika, who had followed him in. “Jika, get the floor nurse and have her bring an exam cart.”

Jika nodded and hurried out of the room.

The doctor pulled out a flashlight and shined it in Gake's eye. “Hello, Mr. Gake. How are you feeling right now?”

Gake smiled ironically. “Tired. How long have I been asleep?”

The doctor glanced at Mado and hesitated before answering. “It has been a week, Mr. Gake. That was some fall you took, young man.”

Moments later, Jika, followed closely by a nurse, pushed a small cart full of sliding trays next to the bed.

The doctor used a series of instruments to examine Gake and test his reflexes. Jika tugged on Mado's arm and pulled him aside.

Jika's eyes were still wide, her voice a loud whisper. “Mado, what did you do?”

Mado shook his head. “I'm not sure. I just felt like maybe he would wake up if someone tried.”

Jika glanced at the bed. “But Mado, they've been trying to wake him up every day. I was here this morning when they did it. We did all kinds of things to try and get him to wake up.”

The nurse beckoned to Jika. “Be sure to watch what the doctor's doing, Jika. We don't get too many coma recoveries, so pay attention.” Jika stepped over by the nurse's side.

Finally, the doctor gave the nurse and Jika a list of instructions and stepped over to Mado. As an afterthought, he turned. “Jika, have the receptionist send a messenger to the Abandoned Factory with the news. And remember, no running or shouting.”

Jika blushed, nodded and slipped quietly out the door.

The doctor faced Mado and opened his mouth to say something, then stopped and shook his head with a grin. “You haibane really are something.” He glanced at Mado's wing brace. “It's time to take that off. Follow me.”

As Mado followed the doctor out of the room, Gake raised his hand in farewell. Mado winked and waved back.

The doctor led Mado into a room and sat him on an examination table. He inspected Mado's wrist joint, then tested it by repeatedly flexing and extending the wing. “Any pain or discomfort?”

Mado shook his head. “It feels fine.”

The doctor nodded, pulled a pair of snips from a drawer and quickly cut all the retaining bands. He folded

the wing brace and handed it to Mado. "Here, keep this as a souvenir." He grinned. "And a reminder to be careful."

Mado smiled. "I'll try." He slipped the brace into a hip pocket, from which it protruded a few inches.

The doctor reached over and pressed his fingers at the base of Mado's wings. "Before you go, I want to check something." He poked and prodded Mado's back, apparently feeling for something, before nodding and stepping back.

The doctor motioned to Mado's back. "Just like the rest." He sighed. "Even though I'm the only haibanologist in town, I don't get many chances to actually study haibane. I was checking the positions of your wings' brachia, and sure enough, they are right where they should be."

Mado stared blankly.

The doctor smiled. "The brachia are like the upper arms of your wings. All haibane have them, but they don't emerge with the rest of the wings. Instead, they stay below the skin and engage a secondary glenoid socket on your shoulder blade. The only reason I know that is because of an accidental wing amputation I had to treat several years ago."

Mado gasped. *The band saw?*

The doctor frowned sympathetically. "It was a nasty business, but the reattachment was successful." He smiled. "You haibane never cease to amaze me."

He motioned with his hands. "During surgery, I had a chance to examine the normally hidden structure of the upper wing." He shook his head. "It's puzzling. Instead of fully emerging after birth, your wings only partially emerge, which is why they are so awkward. Except for being covered by the skin of your back and some thin retaining muscles, the brachia are fully functional. There are feather follicles on their skin, for example, but feathers don't grow from them while they are inside your back."

The doctor gestured with his arm. "Imagine if your arms were pinned to your sides at the elbow. That's basically the story with your wings, why they are so clumsy, and why you can never fold them completely against your back. They aren't designed to work that way."

His expression became distant. "But I wonder, will your wings ever fully emerge someday?" The doctor smiled and shook his head. "I'm sorry, I'm sure you have things you need to do."

Mado hopped off the table, bowed and returned to Gake's room. Jika and the nurse were at Gake's side. Jika turned and put a finger to her lips.

Mado nodded and walked out to the scooter. *Quite a day so far.*

As he worked his way through the narrow streets of town, a thought occurred to him. *I should tell Ame.*

Mado parked the scooter in front of the second hand store and entered to the sound of the door chimes. Ame was arranging some shelves at the side of the store, but upon seeing Mado hurried over to greet him with a

bright smile.

She stopped inches from him. “Hi Mado!”

Mado gazed into her eyes for a moment, lost, before speaking. “Gake's awake.”

Ame's eyes widened and she put both hands over her mouth. Tears rolled down her face as sobs wracked her body. She fell against him, and Mado held her as she wept.

Many moments passed before Ame straightened and stepped back, wiping tears from her cheeks.

Her voice was shaky. “I was so afraid I would never hear those words. It's been so long, and he was hurt so badly.” She smiled crookedly. “I'm glad you were the one who told me.”

Mado gazed silently at Ame. Even with eyes puffed red from crying, Ame was a beautiful girl. He felt a twinge in his heart. *She's so sweet.*

Ame stared back at him. “Mado, are you all right?” Her eyes flicked over Mado's shoulder in surprise. “Your wing!”

Mado nodded. “The doctor took off the brace today.” He extended his wings and gracefully ruffled the feathers. “Good as new.”

Ame smiled but then leaned close with a soft scowl. “You look tired.”

He avoided her eyes. “I haven't gotten much sleep lately, and it's been a pretty big day.”

Ame's eyebrows arched. “Oh? What happened?”

Mado paused. *Let's stick to good news.* “I became a Journeyman Machinist today.”

Ame's mouth fell open, and her hands flew up to cover it. “Already?” Her eyes widened. “That's wonderful!”

Ame threw her arms around Mado and kissed him squarely on the lips.

By reflex, Mado took a step backward. Ame let go of him, put a hand over her mouth and blushed. “I'm sorry!”

Mado shook his head. “I... was surprised.”

Ame glanced at him sheepishly. “No, I shouldn't be that way. I know it makes you uncomfortable.”

There was an awkward silence before Ame seemed to remember something.

She cleared her throat. “Douro turned himself in. He's being held at the jail. I'm going to go to his hearing on Monday. They're going to charge him with arson.” She frowned. “I'm not sure how I feel about that.”

Mado spoke quietly. "I'm sure it must be hard. You've been through a lot."

Ame nodded. "We all have." She glanced at the door. "It's closing time, and I want to see Gake. Can you give me a ride to the hospital?"

Mado nodded and waited as Ame hurriedly closed the shop and joined him outside. At first her grip on his waist was tight, but loosened as they worked their way through the streets to the hospital.

Mado dropped Ame off at the hospital, then rode toward the center of town and parked in front of the clock shop.

The door was locked, so Mado knocked sharply on the frame of the latticed glass door. After several attempts, the clock master opened the door.

He gave Mado a puzzled look. "I'm sorry young man, but we're closed, and Kana has gone home."

Mado shook his head. "I need to talk to you about something. Can I come in?"

The old man ushered Mado into the shop and closed the door.

### **Mado of Stone Mill - Scene 13.2: Redemption**

It was past dinnertime when Mado emerged from the clock shop and rode off on the scooter.

The evening sun flashed on his face as he passed between the shadows of buildings. Mado squinted against the glare, thoughtful and pensive as he slowly worked his way along the bumpy dirt road to the cobbled driveway of Stone Mill.

Within the garage, the other three scooters stood in a row, clean and polished, ready to ride. Mado carefully cleaned, inspected and fueled the green scooter before parking it next to them.

He entered the main building to the soft sound of Kumo's door chime, flipped his tag and changed into his shoes. Behind him, there was a soft commotion in the shop, but Mado was too tired to look.

After spending a few moments in thought, Mado stood up and walked toward the lounge, but stopped short with surprise.

The haibane of Stone Mill stood on the muster line, watching him, waiting expectantly. Mado was surprised to see Tsuchi standing with them, the scarf still around his neck, but tucked under his collar like an ascot.

Senkou stood in front of the row of boys and motioned for Mado to get in line. Mado hurried to his place next to Umi with a puzzled look.

Senkou cleared his throat. "Now that we're all here, there are some important matters we must attend to." He smiled conspiratorially. "As a result of Master Tsuchi's urging, Umi and I took care of some unfinished business in town today."

He scanned the row of faces before continuing. His eyes stopped on Umi, who nodded to him and smiled.

Senkou brandished a rolled up sheet of parchment. "It's official. I'm now a Master Electrician."

The haibane cheered and clapped enthusiastically. Senkou blushed and fidgeted with the scroll.

After a modicum of silence returned, Senkou glanced at Tsuchi with embarrassment. "I guess now I shouldn't feel guilty about being called 'Master'."

Senkou grinned. "Of course, now that I am a Master of my guild, I can make recommendations regarding certain longstanding oversights." He motioned to Umi. "Umi, please step forward and read the decree."

The young boy darted to Senkou's side, faced the row of haibane and unrolled the scroll in his hand.

Umi cleared his throat and read quickly, his voice raised high with excitement. "On this day a full quorum of the Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades did convene to consider the petition of Umi of Stone Mill for membership in our order. Having examined a sample of his work, thoroughly tested his knowledge of paintcraft in both theory and practice, and with the personal recommendation of the Master of Stone Mill, the Brotherhood has deemed him worthy to be counted among our ranks."

Umi squirmed, almost dancing in place as he continued. "Therefore do we, the Masters of the Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades, bestow upon Umi of Stone Mill the title of Journeyman Painter with Distinction and, upon the unanimous request and consent of the Brotherhood, appoint his craftwork to a place of honor in our halls."

The boys applauded raucously at the news as Umi's face glowed with pride.

Senkou motioned to the line of boys. "Journeyman Umi, congratulations. Please take your place among us."

Umi rushed back to stand between Mado and Kumo as Senkou glanced meaningfully at Tsuchi. "Master?"

Tsuchi stepped over to the supervisor's position as Senkou took his place in line.

Tsuchi surveyed the faces of the boys before speaking. "Haibane of Stone Mill, as the past supervisor of our nest, I left some tasks unfinished. It is my intention to complete them tonight."

Tsuchi beckoned to Mado. "Mado, please step forward." He held out his hand.

Mado glanced nervously at the line of boys before walking slowly up to Tsuchi and placing the cardboard

tube in his hand. He turned and faced his nest-mates with reddened cheeks as Tsuchi quietly studied the contents of the tube.

Finally, Tsuchi spoke with his chin raised, his tone solemn and formal. "My friends, as you know, I have been a machinist for many years. It is my privilege to announce to you some events which are unprecedented." He paused as all eyes turned to Mado.

Tsuchi read one of the scrolls slowly and deliberately. "Be it known that on this day the Grandmaster of the Order of Machinists of Guri, upon examination of craftwork found worthy, the recommendation and testimony of Master Tsuchi of Stone Mill, and with the agreement of the authorized representatives of the Council of Masters, did confer upon Mado of Stone Mill the title of Journeyman Machinist with Distinction."

The boys glanced at each other briefly in surprise before breaking into boisterous applause. Mado's face turned beet red at the attention, but Tsuchi placed a hand on his shoulder in reassurance.

Tsuchi rolled up the scroll and returned it to the tube. "As you know, there are very few cases in which an apprentice, even a haibane, is granted journeyman status in less than a year, but you are all witnesses to his skill, and the craftpiece I showed you earlier today."

The boys nodded assent almost in unison.

Tsuchi smiled at Mado. "I had thought myself special in that regard, having achieved that rank in only five months, but there is no record or memory of any machinist making journeyman in less than a week!"

He glanced meaningfully at the boys. "But that is not Journeyman Mado's most impressive accomplishment."

Tsuchi unrolled the other scroll and read in a loud voice. "Journeyman Mado, the Council of Masters of the Order of Machinists of Guri summons you. Be advised that upon satisfactory completion of the requisite oral and written examinations, and upon acceptance of a masterpiece deemed worthy, shall you be named a Master of this Guild."

The boys stared at Mado in astonished silence. Tsuchi took a step backward, then bowed low. At this, all the boys bowed low and held the bow for several moments.

Mado gaped at them, incredulous.

Finally, they all stood straight and gazed at Mado in awe.

Tsuchi stepped to his side and put a hand on his shoulder. "Journeyman Mado, you should know that even for a haibane, it is unprecedented to receive an invitation to the Masters Council prior to having served five years as a journeyman." He gestured at Senkou. "I became a Master in five years, and Senkou has just done likewise."

Tsuchi's voice softened as Mado's face blanched. "Mado, no one in the history of any guild in this town has ever been offered a mastery at the age of two weeks and two days, and it is very unlikely that such an offer

will ever be made to anyone ever again. You should be proud.”

Mado's eyes unfocused. “I feel dizzy.”

Tsuchi reached out to steady him, but Mado raised a hand. “But not that kind of dizzy.” He smiled at the row of boys who gazed at him with admiration, and tried to speak. “I... I...”

Tsuchi patted his shoulder. “Journeyman Mado, please take your place among us.”

The haibane of Stone Mill cheered and applauded deafeningly as Mado returned to his place in line. When quiet returned, Tsuchi stepped over to the supervisors desk and removed the lid from an ornate wooden box.

He reached inside and removed the small tree that had previously been stationed at the table in his room. Mado could see the gap in the otherwise perfect foliage left by the limb Tsuchi had cut from it.

Tsuchi stood facing the assembled haibane, holding the tree in his hands. “This is the Tree of the Masters of Stone Mill. It is the oldest tree known to exist in Guri. Its history and custodians are recorded in the Book of Masters.”

He nodded. “Master Senkou, please come forward.” Senkou stepped up and placed his hands upon the tree's vase.

Tsuchi spoke in a clear voice. “Master Senkou, I bestow upon you stewardship for the care of this tree, this nest and those who dwell here. Do you accept this responsibility?”

Senkou nodded. “I do.”

Tsuchi released the vase, stepped back and gestured toward Senkou. “Brother haibane, I present Master Senkou, the supervisor of Stone Mill.”

The boys applauded with a loud clamor as Senkou blushed, holding the tree, trying to look dignified. Behind him, Tsuchi clapped enthusiastically with an expression of unrestrained pride.

When the applause finally faded, Tsuchi walked to the supervisor's desk, followed by Senkou, who carefully placed the tree inside the box. They both returned to face the boys. Tsuchi was carrying an old, thick book. It was the same book Senkou had been studying earlier.

Tsuchi held up the book. “Haibane of Stone Mill, this is the Book of Masters. In it are recorded all the important events of our nest, such as the births, promotions and departures of our brothers. When he was appointed supervisor by the Renmei, I presented it to Senkou for his study.”

Tsuchi paused, looking in turn at each of the boys before continuing. “Today I made a notation signifying my resignation as supervisor, but before doing so, I made another entry.”

He glanced at Mado before assuming a formal scowl. “The Book of Masters is so old that many of its pages are faded beyond legibility. The first characters which can be read are in a language unfamiliar to us.”

He scanned the row of faces with a piercing gaze. "I have studied this book in its entirety for seven years, and though many great achievements and acts of bravery are recorded, I have never seen an entry such as the one I made today."

Tsuchi addressed Mado formally. "Journeyman Mado, please come forward." He motioned, and Mado took the place indicated between Tsuchi and Senkou.

Tsuchi tugged at the scarf wrapped tightly around his neck as he spoke to the line of boys. "You already know what I wrote, because, as Mado slept, I told you. You have seen my injury, and you know that my presence bears witness to the truth of this."

He turned, and Mado saw a tear form at the edge of one of Tsuchi's thick lenses. "Mado, for saving my life though it was certainly lost, you are the first haibane to be commended in the Book of Masters for an act of true heroism."

Tsuchi bowed, and all the haibane followed suit, including Senkou. Mado stood bewildered, uncertain of what to say or do. When the boys rose, Mado saw that many of their faces were streaked with tears.

He turned to Tsuchi. "Master..."

Tsuchi put a hand on Mado's shoulder and smiled warmly. "Mado, you are truly special among haibane. Your deeds will never be forgotten."

Tsuchi began clapping, and slowly, all the boys joined him in a crescendo of applause and cheers. Mado stood dumbfounded as tears poured from his eyes.

When quiet returned, Senkou put a hand on his shoulder. "Journeyman Mado, please take your place of honor at the head of the line." Senkou pointed to the place he had previously occupied, at the right end of the line. Mado stepped into place next to Matsu, who clapped a hand on his shoulder.

Matsu leaned close and whispered. "Way to go!"

Mado smiled, trying not to feel self-conscious.

Senkou placed his hands on the book as Tsuchi spoke. "Master Senkou, I present to you the Book of Masters. May your contributions to it be greater than any which have come before." Senkou took the book as the boys applauded again.

Tsuchi walked over to the line and whispered. "Excuse me, Journeyman Mado." He stepped between Mado and Matsu, leaving Mado at the end of the line.

Senkou held the book against his chest as he spoke. "As you all know, there's been a lot going on lately. In addition to our normal workload, we've received requests for an unusual amount of assistance from other nests, including a new nest that's in pretty big trouble. As the new supervisor, it's my responsibility to figure out how to handle all this."

He glanced at Tsuchi before continuing. "Master Tsuchi and I have reviewed the latest inspection reports on

the wind generators, and believe we can safely suspend the maintenance cycle while we help the other nests with their problems. Aside from the reserve capacity we already have, Number Eight was the only generator on our list with known serious problems.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Excuse me.”

Senkou stepped over the the supervisor's desk, set down the Book of Masters and returned with a sheet of paper in hand.

His eyes scanned the paper. “Since I became supervisor, I've been consulting with Master Tsuchi, the Renmei and the seniors of the various nests. As a result of that process, I have a plan I want to propose to you. As far as I know, this has never been done before, so please bear with me.”

Senkou paused before continuing. “First, the Abandoned Factory. They are shorthanded and are offline until they can restore their sprinkler and fuel systems. Currently, Feather Midori is the senior haibane there. She has asked for our help.”

He indicated a spot at his side. “Journeyman Kumo, please come forward.” Kumo stepped up and stood next to Senkou, seemingly confused.

Senkou faced him. “Journeyman Kumo, the haibane of the Abandoned Factory have voted to make you their new foreman. The position is temporary, and you may be replaced by a similar vote in the future or at the direction of the Renmei. You would be expected to stay in a room they have prepared for you there, and take responsibility for restoring the Factory to full operability. Do you accept this assignment?”

Kumo stared at Senkou with astonishment, then glanced at the line of boys with a frown. “Does this mean I won't be a member of Stone Mill anymore?”

Senkou chuckled. “Of course not! You will always be one of us, and your room here will still be yours. And we'll want you to help with the generators, like always. However, you will also be a respected nest-mate of the Abandoned Factory haibane.” He leaned forward and winked. “They really want you to be their new foreman, Kumo.”

Kumo stood thoughtfully for a moment, then nodded. “Okay, I'll do it.” Once again, the haibane of Stone Mill applauded wildly.

Senkou quipped. “Anyone else's hands getting sore?” Laughter broke out among the boys as Kumo returned to the line.

Senkou grinned broadly. “Matsu, please come forward.”

Matsu stepped up, and Senkou put a hand on his shoulder. “I sent Journeyman Matsu to the Abandoned Farmhouse to do a work assessment. His assessment is that it's a disaster area.”

Senkou's grin became wry. “Well Matsu, here's your chance. The haibane of the Farmhouse are willing to accept you as their new boss. Same deal as Kumo. Are you up to it?”

Matsu glanced sharply at the row of boys, then Senkou. “Nobody's going to mess up my garden, are they? That's still mine, right?”

Senkou chuckled. "I think we know better than to try to take your garden away."

Matsu nodded firmly. "Okay then, I'm willing to do what I can to get the Farmhouse in shape."

The applause was not quite as loud. The fatigue of repeated clapping was clearly getting to all of the boys, and Matsu grinned impishly as he returned to the line.

Senkou glanced at Mado. "This is a long meeting. We'll see who passes out first." Soft chuckles broke out in the line of boys.

Senkou winked. "Okay, let's wrap this up. There's a few more things. We'll be rotating Maintenance Days from one nest to the next from now on. All the haibane of each nest have agreed to help out the others on Saturdays, so even though it will be only once a month for each nest, we'll do a very good job of it."

The boys looked at each other as Senkou continued. "Tomorrow, we'll be helping out the Farmhouse. Let's call it 'Planting Day'. Matsu and Suke estimate that with all of us helping, we can plant all the crops in a single day. So that's what we'll be doing tomorrow."

Senkou seemed to remember something. "Oh, and one last thing. All the nests have agreed to get together for recreation on Sundays. It's not mandatory, but we'll all be meeting here at Stone Mill on Recreation Day." He grinned wickedly. "Because we have the best courts."

Kumo called out. "But the Factory has the best volleyball player now, so watch out, Stone Mill." The boys chuckled, some of them punched Kumo's arm.

Senkou grinned. "Okay, that's it. No work tonight, no watches, no chores. There's soup in the kitchen for anyone who wants it. My advice is to take it easy and rest up for tomorrow, because we have a lot of planting to do. Remember: Guri is the wheel and we are the spokes."

The boys dispersed after trading shoulder pats and punches. Tsuchi stepped over and joined Senkou at the supervisor's desk, going over some notes. Mado saw Tsuchi's halo flicker, and remembered what he had hoped to forget.

The guitar rested against the nightstand in Mado's room. He picked it up and sat on the bed, strumming the strings absently with his fingers, frowning at the fretboard. *This is going to take forever to learn.*

He practiced a few fingerings, then set down the guitar, changed into his pajamas and quickly fell asleep.

It seemed only moments later that he heard a loud tapping at the window. Mado hopped out of bed and turned on the light. According to the watch on his dresser, it was 5:43 AM. *Wow, I actually got some sleep last night.*

He stretched his arms and wings, took several deep breaths, then turned to face the window, steeling himself for what it might reveal.

On the windowsill, faintly illuminated by the light of the room, a crow was perched. It tapped sharply at the

window with its beak. As Mado approached, it called out with a raucous squawk and took flight. Shortly afterward, Mado heard more squawks in the distance.

Mado changed quickly into his coveralls and rushed down to the shop. The other boys were already there, milling around by the entrance.

Senkou spoke. "Master Tsuchi is gone. Some crazy crow made a bunch of noise and woke everyone up. We're trying to decide what to do."

Mado glanced at the row of name tags. Tsuchi's was flipped to red. Mado sat down at the bench and began to quickly change into his boots. "Let's go."

The other boys glanced at one another then followed suit and streamed out to the garage, taking all four scooters. With Mado in the lead, they swarmed down the road and into the Western Woods, lighting the narrow trail with their bobbing headlights.

A mild moonless morning glow lit the clearing. The boys ran up to the altar and sighed with collective relief to see that there was no halo upon it. Umi stooped over and collected the stray feathers which had accumulated and stuffed them in a pocket.

Kumo surveyed the woods. "I wonder where Master Tsuchi is?"

The boys stood for a while, then sat around as time went by. In the east, the glow of morning became brighter.

After more than an hour had passed, Umi jumped to his feet. "There!"

Tsuchi emerged from a trail far to the north and was walking slowly toward the waiting haibane. Even at this distance, his irritated scowl was plain to see.

At Senkou's direction, the boys lined up, facing the altar.

Tsuchi stopped in front of them. He was wearing a very old and dilapidated pair of coveralls. The patch on his chest was fuzzy and attached by only a few frazzled threads. His boots were stained, and one had a hole in the toe. He was still wearing the scarf around his neck, tucked into the frayed collar of the ancient coveralls.

Tsuchi's scowl darkened as he impatiently scanned the row of boys. "What are you doing here?"

There was a pause before Senkou spoke. "We're here to say goodbye, Master."

Tsuchi's eyes flashed behind his lenses. "You of all people know the tradition, Senkou."

Senkou blanched but stood firm. "I know." He swallowed, then spoke assertively. "Maybe it's time for a new tradition."

Tsuchi's eyebrows arched in surprise, then he glared witheringly at the line of boys. "So all of you intend to

disrespect our customs and my privacy?”

Umi called out. “Yes!” There was a sudden outbreak of laughter among the boys, and Tsuchi's expression softened. Finally, he joined in, and laughed more loudly and freely than Mado had ever seen before.

When the laughter died down, Tsuchi quipped. “Disrespect for my privacy seems to have become an epidemic.” He smiled and sighed with resignation. “Very well. I cannot honestly say that I am upset by this.”

Tsuchi straightened and cleared his throat. “I have dreamed of this day for many years. I feared it might never come.”

He stepped up to Mado, reached into his chest pocket and held out Akashio's brass chain. “Were it not for the courage of my closest friend, it would not have.”

Mado blushed and took the chain, closing his fingers tightly around it.

Tsuchi stepped back as his eyes moved from one boy to the next. “I know each of you as my brother, my coworker, my nest-mate and my friend. I am honored to have you with me on this day.”

Tsuchi's halo dimmed twice as he continued. “Now it is time for me to go. I will miss you, though I pray we might somehow meet again.”

His eyes lingered on Mado. “Goodbye, my dearest friends.” He turned and walked slowly up the stone steps.

At the top, Tsuchi faced the line of boys. “I will not forget you.” He bowed low, his halo dimmed again, and the boys returned the bow as tears began to roll down their cheeks.

The morning sky was brightening as Tsuchi turned to the west and raised his arms. His gray wings extended and fanned in an impressive display.

Tsuchi's halo flared brighter and brighter, and Mado closed his eyes in anticipation. Next to him, the boys gasped when the flash came.

Mado quickly opened his eyes to see a wide column of brilliant white light rise from the altar. Tsuchi had vanished into a luminous mist and was no longer visible. A few gray feathers settled slowly toward the steps.

From the column light blue clouds appeared and began swarming around the altar like insects.

In his mind, Mado heard a sound like many voices raised in song, their notes clear and true, light and beautiful like a waterfall or a spring rain. Among them a man's voice shouted in rapturous triumph, a joyous cry in perfect harmony with the voices of the chorus.

The light blue clouds began swirling faster and faster around the column. Mado heard the sound of a woman singing as one of the clouds rushed out from the throng and sailed over the line of boys, so close to their heads that their halos whined in resonance.

Mado jumped with astonishment at the sound. *It's a chord! Our halos are playing a chord!* The thin metallic

notes rang in perfect harmony with the song in Mado's mind.

The cloud returned to join the others as Umi cried out. "*Okera!*"

The swirl of light blue clouds spun rapidly as the music reached a crescendo, then dissipated as the clouds began racing up the brilliant column. Above, thin white arcs radiated outward like the ribs of a delicate lantern.

More clouds began chasing upward along the column, following it into a vanishing point that seemed infinitely distant in the clear blue zenith.

The last of the clouds ascended and the song faded from Mado's mind as the column disappeared far overhead into the bright morning sky.