

長山 新
Arata Nagayama

Halfspirit

A love story
across the veil
of death—

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HALF SPIRIT

A LOVE STORY ACROSS THE VEIL OF DEATH

Arata Nagayama 50% NO YUUREI

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PROLOGUE

The weathered Western-style mansion atop that hill was known as the “Death God’s Mansion.” It was eerie, and nobody dared to approach it.

Am I going to die like this?

My field of vision was grazed by the fading of my consciousness. The rain falling on my body as I lay on the ground continued to drain the heat from me. I was unbearably cold, and my teeth chattered incessantly.

Is this a punishment for wishing to disappear?

The darkness before me grew steadily. At that moment, amid the sound of rain, I heard a faint sound of footsteps blending in.

Summoning all my strength, I managed to move my trembling lips.

Please. I don’t want to die.

Please notice me...

CHAPTER 1

PART 1

I was in sixth grade at the time.

During cleaning time, the popular boy who sat beside me in class secretly approached me.

“Hey, want to go to the amusement park on Sunday?”

“Sorry. I want to go to the library on Sunday.” I casually declined his invitation.

Looking back, that might have been the event that determined the ups and downs of my future.

The next day, when I went to the classroom, the boy’s desk, which used to be right next to mine, was moved several tens of centimeters away. I greeted him as usual, saying “Good morning,” and took my seat.

The boy, who had been talking to his friends, glanced at my face and loudly exclaimed, “When I look closely, your eyes are huge, like an alien’s.”

The friend who had been talking to the boy burst into laughter at those words, and another boy sitting next to me sneered and laughed at me as well.

What an unpleasant atmosphere...

That atmosphere quickly spread throughout the class, and from that day until I transferred schools due to my parents’ divorce, my classmates constantly treated me coldly.

I realized then that being noticed by someone's eyes was scary.

At my new school, I vowed not to make the same mistake. I created bangs and hid my distinctive eyes. I lowered my voice and made an effort to make myself inconspicuous. Eventually, no one paid any attention to me anymore. Sometimes, it would get lonely, but it was much better than getting hurt.

Even now, at the age of sixteen, several years after that incident, I continued to live like a spirit.

“...a spirit?”

I couldn't help but flinch when I heard voices during the lunch break. The voices belonged to a glamorous group of girls gathered in front of me, enjoying their lunches.

“Yeah. Apparently, Misaki from Class B saw it. Near the Death God's Mansion.”

“You mean that long staircase? They saw someone coming out, right?”

“What's that? Maybe she just saw a living person?”

“Really? She said it was a really handsome man with a beautiful face.”

“That's just her making a fuss over a good-looking guy.”

The glamorous girl group burst into laughter, finding it amusing.

I felt relieved they weren't gossiping about me being like a spirit. I refocused on my book and chuckled at my own reaction.

This was not the sixth-grade classroom from four years ago. I didn't know if I even existed in this classroom or if it was just a background with chairs and desks. The same went for my house.

“...Oh, you're here.”

I flinched when my little sister, entering the living room, found me pouring tea in front of the refrigerator. She spoke with a scolding expression. “Don't be surprised when you can't sense me. Where's Mom?”

“She... went... out, I think...”

“Huh? What? Stop mumbling. I can't hear you.”

My sister frowned at my soft voice and threw her bag onto the sofa, making the flower charm attached to it jingle as it swung heavily.

“Sorry.”

My sister gave up on asking me and let out a sigh, heading toward the bathroom.

I released my grip on the mug I was about to borrow from the kitchen and quickly made my way to my room, as if escaping. As soon as I entered and closed the door, I felt relieved, leaning against it. Through the closed door, I could hear my sister’s cheerful voice as if she were talking on the phone.

A year earlier, my father had remarried, and I had gained a sister who was three years younger than me. My new stepmother and sister were kind people who tried to include me in the family. But I couldn’t seem to fit in properly. I always felt tense, whether I was at school or at home. I couldn’t find peace anywhere. It was as if I didn’t have a place to belong, and sometimes I felt like crying.

I didn’t feel like I had any value, like I could disappear and it wouldn’t even matter. In that case, it would be better if I could just vanish as if I never existed in the first place. Perhaps it was because I wished for everything, including this body and all the memories I had, to disappear as if they had never existed.

The events of that rainy day that would unfold afterward might have been the result of my desires.

PART 2

It was raining that day.

As soon as I left school, the rain started to pour even harder, and my worn-out foldable umbrella couldn’t provide much reassurance. To get home quickly, I

decided to take a shortcut and turned a corner into an unfamiliar alley, straying from my usual route.

At that moment, amid the sound of rain, I heard a metallic clink, like something metal had fallen.

I directed my gaze toward the source of the sound. In a puddle, I noticed a flower charm lying there. It looked similar to the one my sister had on her bag, so I raised my head to see if I could identify the owner.

A few meters ahead, a fellow female student from the same school was walking alone.

“Um... Excuse me...”

The small voice I tried to call out with wouldn't have reached her. It was drowned out by the sound of rain. Giving up on calling out to her, I quickened my pace to catch up and directly hand it over.

Suddenly, the female student started running.

Surprised, I found myself already in motion. I chased after her, running as well. The raindrops fell heavily, and the splashes from the puddles I stepped on touched my body.

It wasn't easy to catch up. The heavy rain obscured my vision, so as we went downhill, I lost sight of the female student and came to a stop.

“This...”

It was my first time at this place.

I stood in front of the long staircase adorned with weathered tiles. A shiver ran down my spine as I looked up at the staircase.

I remembered this was the staircase the glamorous girl group had mentioned as the “Death God's Mansion” earlier in the classroom. It truly had an atmosphere that could conjure up spirits and deathly figures. The staircase exuded an eerie aura, and I couldn't see the top, no matter how far I gazed. It seemed to connect with the sky.

As I shifted my gaze, I noticed the silhouette of the girl I had lost sight of standing right in the middle of the staircase.

When did she climb up so many steps?

Compelled by an inexplicable force, I sprinted up the long staircase. I couldn't even remember why. I chased after her desperately, forgetting about the pouring rain. I closed in on the girl's figure from behind. *Just a few more steps...*

A groaning sound emerged from beneath the staircase. Then a gust of wind blew, causing my navy-blue foldable umbrella to slip from my hand. I was captivated by the sight of the umbrella floating up into the sky.

With my attention pulled elsewhere, my foot slipped on the wet steps. I lost my balance and fell backward. The girl I was chasing turned to face me—it was a familiar face.

Time seemed to slow down.

Suddenly, I tumbled down the staircase I had been ascending. My entire body, including my head, hit the ground as intense pain assaulted my senses.

The navy-blue foldable umbrella rolled far away. Even if I wanted to reach out for it, my body wouldn't respond—not even a twitch. I couldn't will myself to rise from the ground. The puddles around me were tinged with red.

Am I going to die like this?

My field of vision was grazed by the fading of my consciousness. The rain falling on my body lying on the ground continued to drain the heat of my body. I was unbearably cold and my teeth chattered incessantly.

Is this a punishment for wishing to disappear?

The darkness before me grew steadily. At that moment, amid the sound of rain, I heard a faint sound of footsteps blending in. Summoning all my strength, I managed to move my trembling lips.

Please. I don't want to die.

Please notice me...

PART 3

The surroundings were dark. I found myself standing in a place enveloped in darkness, unaware of how I had arrived there.

The only thing visible in front of me was a long staircase, shining white, with no indication of where it led. As I looked up at the staircase, I noticed the silhouette of a girl in the middle. The girl, wearing a black sailor uniform, was running up the stairs.

I took a deep breath, intending to ask where I was.

“Wait!”

The voice I was supposed to utter wouldn’t come out. I stumbled back, clutching my throat. Confused, I lowered my gaze and turned my attention to the long staircase again. The girl in the sailor uniform was no longer there.

In her place stood a girl with a red backpack, standing on the steps of the long staircase.

The girl looked down at me and opened her mouth.

“Did you forget?”

I abruptly opened my heavy eyelids, and my vision was filled with a stark white ceiling and a splitting headache.

“Ouch!” I gasped, clutching my head, and sat up.

As I surveyed my surroundings, I found myself in a place that resembled a pure white room devoid of windows or furniture. Trying to recall why I was there brought a stabbing pain to my head. Only fragmented, vague memories floated in my mind. *Where on earth is this?*

“Ugh, why am I in a place like this?”

Suddenly, a male voice sounded from behind me, and I jerked around in surprise.

Behind me stood a man in his thirties, wearing a disheveled black suit. His narrow eyes peered through the brim of his black hat, revealing brown curly

hair.

“Hurry back to your own body,” the man said in a nonchalant tone, looking down at me as I sat there.

“My own body?”

I had no idea what he was talking about and stared up at the man in confusion. Seeing my reaction, his narrow eyes widened.

“...You’re kidding, right?”

The man bent down as if kneeling and met my gaze while I remained seated.

“What’s your name?”

“Huh?”

“Your... na...me.”

An uneasy feeling began to creep into my heart.

“I am... I can’t remember. My name...”

Unable to recall my own name, I fell silent.

The man smiled wryly at me. “Just pretend you didn’t meet me.”

Saying that, he stood up straight and started to leave in a hurry.

“Wait, hold on!”

I grabbed onto the hem of the man’s suit, panicking.

“Let go, hey!” The man looked at me with annoyance as I clung to his suit.

“I... I don’t... remember anything...”

“What? What are you saying?”

He tried to free his suit from my grasp.

“I don’t remember anything! Why am I here?”

I desperately pleaded with a louder voice than before. The man abruptly stopped and put on a deeply bothered expression.

“Look, if you’re here, that means you’re on the brink of death.”

“What? On the brink of death?”

The unexpected words from the man’s mouth further surprised me.

“Well, for now, you’re more like a... half-spirit, you know?”

“A... half-spirit?”

“If you had your memories, you could easily return to your original body, but without memories, things get complicated. You’ve had some bad luck.”

I looked at the man with a perplexed expression as he spoke with a lack of enthusiasm. *My soul? A half-spirit? Me? What is this person talking about...?*

“If you stay here, he’ll eventually find you.”

“...Who?”

“The Death God.”

Death God?

A sharp pain shot through my head, and faint memories flickered in my mind. An immobile body, the cold rain, a puddle tainted with blood...

In that fleeting moment of my memory, blood drained from my face. I lost my strength, and my hand holding onto the man’s suit fell limply.

“I... I fell from a long staircase...”

“A long staircase?”

The man’s voice passed through my ears, but nothing registered in my mind.

Am I going to die if the Death God finds me?

The color drained from my face, and I pressed my hand against my mouth in shock. Suddenly, the man grabbed my shoulders with both hands.

“The long staircase of the Death God’s Mansion?”

His expression had changed from the listless one before. He looked serious. I nodded, and the man seemed to realize something. He let out a sigh and chuckled.

“Oh... So that’s it.”

I stared at the man with vacant eyes as he muttered, seemingly satisfied with something.

“...I don’t want to die.” The words poured out of me. “I don’t want to die.”

My thin voice trembled. Fear and sadness welled up, and tears started to stream down my face.

The man scratched his cheek thoughtfully and took something resembling a black notebook from his chest pocket. He glanced down at it, looked back up at me, and said, “So, are you going to make a contract?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll grant you one wish.”

I was taken aback by his sudden words.

“Besides remembering your memories, there’s only one way to return to your original body. It’s simple. Within the limited lifespan of your soul, you just need to tie the fates of certain people.”

As he said that, the man’s gaze fell on the watch he wore on his left arm.

“This day is about to end. You have ninety-nine days left. What will you do?”

“A... contract?”

“A contract to take over my job. Oh, if you fail, you’ll disappear.”

The man casually said something absurd.

“But... what is your job? Who are you?”

The man smirked and gave a playful jump, taking off from the ground.

I froze in place.

The man, who had just bounced off the ground, remained suspended in midair.

Looking down at me from above, the man spoke in a listless tone.

“Well, I’m... the ‘God of Matchmaking,’ I guess.”

The God of Matchmaking...

This listless person...?

I was dumbfounded. Meanwhile, the listless god crossed his legs in midair and continued to convince me. “If you can remember yourself within that time frame, you can immediately return to your original body. I won’t force you. What will you do?”

Pressed to make a decision, I hugged my body tightly with both hands and bit my lip.

I don’t want to die...

Why do I have such a vague feeling, even though I don’t even know who I am? Crying here won’t solve anything. If what this listless god is saying is true, then I’m the only one who can help myself now.

“If... I can make that connection, can I really go back to how things were?”

Upon cautiously uttering those words, the listless god smiled and nodded, extending his left hand toward me.

“Let’s make a contract. Place your hand here.”

As I attempted to slowly overlap my right hand with the hand that was extended to me, in an instant— “Eh!”

With a forceful pull, the listless god swiftly yanked my hand toward him, causing me to stumble forward. I couldn’t grasp what was happening. As I fell heavily, the pitch-black darkness in front of me spread out and swallowed me whole.

“Oh, oops. Forgot to mention something.”

In the darkness, where nothing could be seen, the nonchalant voice of the listless god echoed. “The person whose fate to tie, like flower petals-”

The God of Matchmaking was abruptly cut off, and I crashed into something forcefully, collapsing in that direction. Despite the impact, strangely, I felt no pain. I quickly sat up and surveyed the area where I had fallen.

“...Where is this?”

It wasn't the empty white room where I had been conversing with the listless god earlier. I found myself in an unfamiliar room with a lived-in atmosphere, furnished with a bed, a desk, and bookshelves. Although it seemed like a place where someone lived, it was completely unfamiliar. The room showed signs of use, with small scratches on the door and the wooden flooring. There were navy curtains on the window, neatly arranged books on the shelves, and a globe on the windowsill.

I stood up and approached the desk near the window where the globe was placed. On the desk were several reference books, a mathematics textbook, and an open notebook. On the cover of one of the reference books, whose front was facing up, was a small black star drawn in the corner.

What are those? I wondered, shifting my focus to the textbook. Recognizing the formulas printed on the open pages, I reached out for it. However, as I attempted to grab it, my hand passed through the textbook as if it were intangible.

“...A half-spirit.”

I stared intently at the palm of my hand, which had passed through the textbook. Was I really a spirit without a physical form, just as the listless god had said?

I raised my gaze from my palm and saw a reflection of a person on the window glass. It was a somewhat unimpressive girl with long, pitch-black hair that extended about ten centimeters below her collarbone, bangs that reached her eyes, and slightly large, slanted eyes hidden behind her bangs. She was dressed in a black sailor uniform with a blue tie.

I lifted my right hand up to my face. The girl in the reflection on the surface also raised her hand. Despite the mirror's foggy surface, I could tell the reflected figure was me...

Only then did I notice it was snowing outside the darkened window.

Thunk... I heard a loud noise, as if something heavy had fallen beneath the wooden flooring.

... *Is someone there?* Could it be the listless god coming to convey what he forgot to mention earlier?

Thinking that, I headed toward the source of the sound, making my way to the door of the room. I attempted to grasp the doorknob but couldn't hold it. Instead, my hand passed through it effortlessly.

Surprised yet determined, I continued to phase through the door, passing through it as a whole. There was no pain or sensation. Smoothly, I went through the door and entered the corridor. It was unbelievable to experience something physically impossible. Although I could stand on the floor like normal, I couldn't consciously touch or grab anything.

Having reached the corridor, I descended the stairs, feeling bewildered by my body. The listless god had said, "Within the limited lifespan of your soul, you just need to tie the fates of certain people," but I hadn't been given the crucial details. Who were the humans I needed to form a connection between? What did he mean by "like flower petals"?

I stood in front of the sliding door of the room directly below where the sound had come from. I wondered if I could pass through the sliding door just like before. As I hesitated to enter the room, low moaning sounds emerged from inside.

What...? Isn't it the listless god? I froze. *Wait, do spirits also have a heartbeat? Or is it because I'm still in a "temporary" state?*

My heart rate continued to rise, and cold sweat started to form. *I'm a spirit, so it wouldn't be strange if there were also monsters* . I became scared, and for a moment, I wanted to turn back. However, I quickly changed my mind.

No, it's strange to feel in danger. I've been on the verge of death already .

I gathered my courage and phased through the sliding door, diving into the room where the moaning sounds could be heard.

As I entered the room, what caught my eye was not a monster but an old man gripping the edge of a chair in a Japanese-style room, hunching over and clutching his chest.

"Old man!"

Startled, I rushed to the old man's side. However, he didn't show any signs of noticing me. My hand, extended to support his body, passed through him.

"Ugh..."

Groaning in pain, the old man slipped through my legs and fell to the floor with a thud.

"Old man!" I shouted again, lowering myself and peering closely at him, but his eyes didn't meet mine even though I was right there.

He couldn't see me. He couldn't touch me. My voice couldn't reach him. I couldn't do anything.

I exist here, yet I don't exist...

As the old man collapsed on the floor, his hand, which had been clutching his chest, fell to the floor as if losing strength.

His image overlapped with mine, as I could only stare at the puddle of blood pelted by rain. Alone, in pain, with a cold body, I could only wait for my strength to fade, filled with despair and helplessness.

I stood up abruptly, phased through the sliding door I had just entered, and emerged into the corridor.

Is there someone else? Anyone else—?

I ran throughout the house. *Is there anyone else inside? Is there anyone who would notice the old man's plight? Is there anyone who could help?*

I passed through various rooms, checking each one, but there was no one. As I reached the last room and stood still, I felt lost. *What should I do? If things continue like this, no one will notice the old man...*

Click...

I thought I heard a small noise and turned around in the hallway. The front door had opened, and a bright light streamed into the dark corridor. It was so dazzling that I instinctively squinted my eyes.

As if drawn to it, I saw a boy entering the house through the open door. The boy had a gender-neutral, distinctively refined face, neatly styled hair, a

straight nose, and eyes that peered out from behind his slightly parted bangs. He seemed to be around high school age.

Beneath his black coat, a navy blazer uniform with a red-striped tie peeked out. The boy's hair was slightly wet, and melting snow was resting on his shoulders.

For some reason, as soon as I laid eyes on that boy, tension spread throughout my entire body.

The boy suddenly raised his head, and our eyes met. He frowned, distorting his beautiful face in an obvious display of displeasure.

"Great. Did my grandpa let another person into the house without permission?"

He clicked his tongue in annoyance.

I was simply shocked by the boy's words. Not because of his vulgar language, which didn't match his appearance, but because...

This person... Could it be that...

"C-Can you see me?" I murmured softly.

"Huh?" The boy walked toward me, his steps resolute. "I don't know who you are, but can you leave? Seriously, you're a nuisance."

With that, he maneuvered past me, deliberately avoiding any contact.

This person can definitely see me. He's talking to me...

Caught off guard by this revelation, I didn't move immediately.

The boy stopped and turned to face me, who remained motionless. "You didn't hear me? I told you to leave. Disappear right now."

The harsh words of the boy passed through my ears, not registering in my mind. *There is someone who can see me. There is someone who can hear my voice...*

Feeling relieved and happy about this, I smiled with a stiff expression on my face. The boy, however, seemed quite taken aback by my sudden laughter.

"The... the..." I opened my mouth to speak.

The boy seemed even more taken aback, taking a step back in surprise. “Huh? What are you mumbling about?”

But I had no time to be concerned about the boy’s reaction.

“The old man... He’s... dying.” I pleaded with the boy in a soft voice. “He collapsed in the Japanese-style room on the first floor... clutching his chest...”

The color drained from the boy’s face as he heard my words. He threw his bag aside and started running. I followed closely behind.

The boy forcefully opened the sliding door to the Japanese-style room where the old man lay and rushed to his side. “Grandpa!”

The boy shook the old man, but there was no response. “Grandpa! Grandpa!”

The boy seemed extremely distraught, shaking the old man vigorously over and over again.

“No... Shaking him like that won’t work...”

Upon hearing my soft voice, the boy abruptly stopped his movements.

Facing the shaken boy, I regained my composure. “...Calm down. Um... Call an ambulance.”

The boy’s eyes regained their focus as if regaining his sanity. He took out his smartphone from his pocket, dialed the emergency number 119, and placed it next to his ear.

“Hello, ambulance! My grandfather collapsed-”

After stating the situation and address, the person on the other end of the line from the fire department must have given instructions. The boy kept the phone to his ear while gently cradling his grandfather’s body, lying on the floor, and turned him onto his back. Then, he looked up at me as I stood there.

“Why did you leave my grandpa lying there when he collapsed?”

I couldn’t answer. I didn’t know how to explain, and the words wouldn’t come to me right away.

With eyes filled with hatred, the boy looked at me.

“If my grandpa dies, I won’t forgive you.”

After a while, the sound of an ambulance siren approached from outside the house. The siren became painfully loud, then abruptly stopped.

The boy dashed past me and out of the Japanese-style room. I heard the sound of the front door opening, and paramedics entered the room with the boy. The old man was placed on a stretcher and taken away.

Unable to do anything, I stood there and witnessed the chaotic scene. As the boy, who was about to pass by me, locked eyes with me, he stared intently.

“Come with me.”

Overwhelmed by the intensity of the boy’s gaze, I boarded the ambulance without hesitation.

PART 4

“Myocardial infarction?”

A female nurse approached us in the critical care unit’s waiting room. I stood slightly behind the boy, listening to the nurse’s words.

“Yes. The condition stabilized after treatment, so we’ll monitor the progress and schedule surgery at a later date.”

“So, we can relax now?”

“You can’t let your guard down, but for today...”

The boy’s face showed a sense of relief.

“You can visit him later. I’ll guide you. By the way... where are your parents?”

The nurse glanced around the boy, scanning the area.

“They’re not here. I’ll contact them. They won’t be able to come right away, though.”

Seeming to understand the situation, the nurse gazed intently at the boy.

“You’ve been through a lot on your own too. You don’t look well. Would you like to have an IV drip or something?”

The boy shook his head.

“I’m fine. And I’m not alone... technically.”

The boy briefly glanced at me, who was standing diagonally behind him.

“Was there someone else?”

The nurse looked puzzled.

“Huh?”

With hurried footsteps, a young nurse appeared from the corner of the waiting room, calling out, “I need help!” The nurse who was explaining to the boy immediately left with the young nurse, leaving us behind.

The boy seemed to relax once the nurse was gone as the tension in his body eased. He slowly sat down on the sofa in the waiting room, bringing both hands to his mouth and taking a deep breath.

I also felt relieved. The grandfather had been saved.

“Thank goodness.”

In response to my words that escaped from the depths of my heart, the boy looked at me.

“‘Thank goodness’? Good riddance.” The boy’s face expressed disbelief as he spoke in a cold voice.

“What’s so good about it? You didn’t even try to help my grandpa.”

“W-Well... I tried to help...”

“Then why didn’t you call for help right away? What were you doing inside the house while my grandpa was lying there?”

Before I could finish speaking, the boy accused me in a strong tone.

“...I thought... I couldn’t call for help...”

“Huh?”

I choked on my words.

How can I explain... I don't have the confidence to talk about myself in this situation, especially to a boy who shows animosity toward me while I myself haven't fully grasped the situation.

"Um... I... uh..." My voice became unusually weak.

"Speak clearly!" The boy's tone grew even harsher.

"What's all the commotion about?" At that moment, someone interrupted our conversation.

Both the boy and I turned toward the source of the voice at the same time. It was the nurse who had explained the boy's grandfather's condition who was returning to the waiting room.

"Oh... I'm sorry for yelling."

The nurse stopped in front of us on the sofa and looked at the apologetic boy with a puzzled expression.

"That was quite a loud soliloquy you had there."

"A soliloquy?" the boy asked in confusion, eliciting a look of pity on the nurse's face.

"Have you been able to reach your parents?"

"...Not yet."

"I see. It's not good for you to be alone at a time like this. It's understandable that you're confused. Is there an adult who can come here soon? There are procedures for hospitalization as well as some things a doctor will have to explain to them..."

The nurse seemed to be worried that the boy was distraught.

"Alone..."

The boy looked puzzled and glanced at me, who was next to him.

Even though I couldn't fully grasp the current situation, there was one thing I understood; the reason the unconscious old man didn't see me when he looked into my eyes was not because he was no longer conscious.

"...I think you're the only one who can see me..."

“Huh?” he responded to my feeble voice.

Will he believe me...?

I took a few steps forward and waved both hands in front of the nurse’s face. Ignoring the bewildered boy, the nurse continued speaking.

The boy’s eyes widened as he looked at me.

“I... I’m like a spirit. Temporarily...”

The boy froze. After a few seconds of hesitation, he awkwardly moved his face and shifted his gaze from me to the nurse. Still frozen, he spoke with a rigid expression.

“Um, as you said, I might be... confused. Like, really in a bad way.”

The nurse nodded deeply in response to the boy’s words. “Yes, you can go see your grandfather’s face. I understand that you want to see him and find some peace.”

“Thank you,” the boy replied. Without saying anything else, he followed the nurse, momentarily glancing at me and clutching his head.

It was only natural for him to react that way. He couldn’t possibly believe in spirits. I knew it was only natural, yet I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness.

If the only person who could see me, this half-spirit, denied my existence, it would be the same as not existing in this world at all.

Could I, on my own, connect with someone? As a half-spirit who couldn’t be seen by anyone, touch anything, grasp anything, or even be heard... I had just painfully realized that I couldn’t do anything in this world.

I followed behind the nurse and the boy, slipping through the door of the hospital room they had entered.

Inside the room, the old man was quietly sleeping in bed, hooked up to a respirator and IV drip. The boy looked relieved as he gazed at his grandfather.

“Um...” I spoke to the boy. However, he didn’t react to my voice.

“Could you please give me and my grandfather some time alone?” the boy said to the nurse in the room.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, the nurse replied, “I’ll be back in about fifteen minutes.” Then she passed by me and left the room.

In the silent room, the electrocardiogram monitor beside the bed beeped rhythmically. This sound was the proof of the man’s life.

The boy didn’t even attempt to look at me and tried speaking to his grandfather once again.

“Um, let’s talk...” I began, but a sudden pain shot through my head.

In a classroom filled with lively children, I sat alone in a corner by the window, gazing outside. Images of memories, like a sandstorm, flashed through my mind, causing my fingers to tremble. A hollow, empty feeling overwhelmed me.

“Please... don’t ignore me...” A feeble voice escaped my lips.

Amid the bustling of the classroom, the view of the sky outside the window, and the voices of children from the schoolyard, I recalled something I had always thought about when sitting by that window seat.

Even though I exist here, I have nothing—no eyes, voice, or even a physical form. Yet, I’m here...

“...That’s unfair, isn’t it?”

Suddenly, I snapped back to reality upon hearing that voice. Before I realized it, the boy who had been facing his grandfather’s bed was now looking in my direction.

“Don’t cry,” the boy said, and I pressed my fingers against my eyes. I realized tears were streaming down my face.

“Ah... I’m sorry...”

“If you apologize, it only makes me feel more guilty.” The boy raised an eyebrow, wearing a troubled expression.

“Is this an illusion?”

While wiping away my tears, I hurriedly shook my head.

“Are you really a spirit?”

I nodded in confirmation.

“Are you possessing me? Are you here to curse and kill me?”

“No, never! Instead...”

What could I say to make him understand?

“...important.”

My murmured words seemed unexpectedly surprising to the boy, leaving him wide-eyed.

“Important... What does that mean?”

The boy’s expression revealed his confusion, as if he didn’t understand what I meant.

“The only one who can see me is you,” I said, bowing my head fervently. “Please, help me!”

“Huh? Help... you?” The boy seemed taken aback.

“I haven’t died yet. I want to return to my original body, but I can’t do it while remaining invisible to everyone.”

I slowly lifted my lowered head. “I have no memories, and I can’t return to my original body.”

Upon hearing my words, the boy made a face as if trying to remember something. “Come to think of it... You did say something like ‘temporarily.’ So, you’re like a wandering spirit?”

“They call me a half-spirit,” I replied. “The god call me that.”

“The god?”

I nodded. “I made a contract with him. In exchange for working for him, he’ll grant my wish.”

“Huh? And if you complete that job, you can come back to life?”

“Provided I don’t fail,” I replied.

“Because they can’t just bring you back normally?”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

“Huh? Is that really a god?” The boy seemed skeptical.

I recalled the listless “God of Matchmaking” I had encountered in that featureless white room—messy hair sticking out from a tilted black hat, an attitude of indifference, and a languid way of speaking.

Certainly, there was no sense of divine dignity about him. But...

“I have no choice but to believe. If I’m found by the Death God like this, I might die. I... I don’t want to die without even knowing who I am...”

I tightly gripped the skirt of my uniform.

“I made the contract... and the next thing I knew, I was in that house. Maybe... Maybe the god did it because he knew you would be able to see me.”

“No, I’ve never seen a spirit before,” the boy said, lowering his gaze. Then he added, “Except for now,” and pressed his head as if he were deep in thought.

“Sorry, but can’t you find someone else who can see you? I can’t believe something like this is real, and I can’t think of anything I can do,” the boy said firmly.

“But I didn’t ask you to do anything...?” I replied.

“Yeah, still, I don’t want to get involved,” the boy declared, his eyes icy cold. As I looked into those eyes, a chill ran through my body. My desperate plea had been dismissed, and I couldn’t find words to respond. It was all I could do to simply keep my gaze fixed on his cold eyes.

Silence filled the air but was subsequently broken by the sound of the hospital room door opening with a click. The nurse entered the room.

“Are you finished already? You can’t stay for too long when he’s in this condition...”

“Yes, I’ll be leaving now.”

The boy’s gaze shifted away from me.

“There’s someone here as a representative for your parents, talking with the doctor right now. I’ll guide them.”

“It’s all right... I’m going home. I’m tired.”

I watched as the boy moved away from the bed in the hospital room and headed toward the door. Was there any meaning to it all? To me being in that house? To the fact that the boy could see me...?

“Like flower petals...”

As the boy was about to leave through the door, I called out to him.

“If I connect the threads of people related to something like flower petals, I can come back to life!”

The boy flinched for a moment but didn’t turn around.

Nevertheless, I continued speaking, “Don’t you remember anything at all?”

“No, I don’t.”

Muttering quietly, the boy spoke without facing me.

“Huh? Did you say something?”

“No, it’s nothing,” the boy replied without looking back, and left without further interaction.

He opened the door to the hospital room and walked out.

I stood there, unable to do anything, simply staring at the door that was slowly closing.

PART 5

Left alone in the hospital room, I fell into deep contemplation. *What should I do from now on? How can I find the people whose fates I have to tie? Is there really anyone else besides the boy who can see me?*

I gazed at the face of the elderly man lying on the bed in the room. The artificial respirator he was hooked up to emitted a regular, cloudy mist. It reassured me that he was breathing. As my gaze shifted to the side, I noticed the bedsheet was slightly askew.

I reached out my hand to fix it. However, my extended hand passed through the bedsheet, unable to grasp it.

“Why didn’t you call for help immediately, then?” The boy’s words echoed in my mind.

“Grandpa, I’m sorry I couldn’t call for help right away,” I uttered, and a sense of futility washed over me. I knew that my voice couldn’t reach the man. He couldn’t hear me.

The clock in the room was pointing to twelve o’clock—the day was coming to an end. Time was passing by, and I could do nothing.

I didn’t know where to go. I had no destination. I couldn’t think of anything I *could* do. Was I destined to simply wait for the deadline to arrive?

And then... just like that...

Overwhelmed by anxiety, I hurriedly shook my head. I crouched in a corner of the hospital room, holding my knees. I couldn’t gather the courage to wander the night streets, so I decided to wait for the morning.

I was utterly exhausted.

With my knees hugged close, I closed my eyes and gradually drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up to the morning sun streaming in through the window.

Ah, what a relief. I momentarily hoped for a scene where I would wake up and realize it was just a dream. But my memories remained uncertain, and I was still crouched in the hospital room. The morning sunlight streamed through the window as the nurse opened the curtains. I could see a crossroad from the window, and I watched the people bustling about, starting their day along with the morning sun. I lifted my gaze, and a cloudless blue sky stretched out above.

I decided to venture outside. I had nothing but anxiety about what would happen, but there was no point in just lingering there. I tried to recall fragments of my memories from just before I became a half-spirit. Tumbling down a long staircase...

Glancing at the nurse efficiently carrying out her duties, I stood up. In my heart, I silently apologized to the sleeping old man in the bed for intruding on the hospital room, and I slipped through the door.

The long staircase leading to the Death God's Mansion... Maybe if I went to that staircase, I could trigger some other memories. With a glimmer of hope in my heart, I left the emergency hospital.

Once outside, I realized I recognized the roads in the surrounding area. When I came to the hospital at night, I focused on the grandfather being taken away, not paying attention to the cityscape. Vague memories of the directions to the Death God's Mansion were still in my mind, and my feet naturally started moving.

Perhaps my memories were missing only the parts related to myself. I also noticed something else. The people bustling in the city wrapped in coats and scarves seemed cold, but I didn't feel the chill as a half-spirit wearing only a sailor uniform. It seemed that, as a half-spirit, I couldn't even sense the temperature.

I followed the directions from my memories, crossing the intersection from the hospital and walking along the railway tracks. I passed by numerous people, but still, no one noticed me. Some people even seemed to pass through my body without realizing it.

I was worried, but after walking for a while, I safely arrived at the long staircase of the Death God's Mansion. The endless rows of worn-out tiles on the long staircase towered above me.

When I thought about the ominous mansion, I couldn't help but feel scared. *If it truly was the dwelling of the Death God... If the Death God finds me, I will die*. With that thought, my hand trembled.

But this long staircase was the only clue in my memories.

Taking a deep breath, I swallowed my fear and tightly gripped my trembling hand as I stepped onto the staircase.

Anything will do. If I can regain even a single memory...

I climbed the stairs step by step. I was scared, and my heart pounded loudly in my chest. As I reached the middle section of the stairs, the shadows of the plants beside the staircase rustled, causing my heart to shrink. Fearfully, I turned my gaze toward the source of the sound and saw a black cat in the shadow of the plants.

I instinctively forgot to blink. The black cat's golden eyes were looking at me with caution.

It was still a kitten. Upon closer inspection, the black cat had a wound on its head and seemed weak.

"Are you... okay?"

As I tried to approach it gently, the black cat seemed startled and fled up the stairs toward the Death God's Mansion.

"Wait!"

I was about to chase after it but stopped in my tracks.

From the top of the long staircase where the black cat had gone up, a figure was coming down. A shiver ran down my spine.

Could it be... the Death God?

Just as I thought that, a sudden, intense pain surged through my head. I instinctively closed my eyes, and in my mind, I saw flashes of memories like a sandstorm.

It was an elementary school. I, as a child, stood in front of the blackboard in a classroom where students were seated. The child version of me had an incredibly pale face.

Next to me stood a young female teacher who opened her mouth.

"It gets lonely, doesn't it? Everyone, let's give her a round of applause."

At the teacher's words, the students clapped in unison.

The sound of applause from dozens of people echoed in the classroom, and the young me, with sadness in my eyes, looked down.

The applause grew louder and louder, spinning in my head. A cold sweat broke out all over my body. The pain in my head felt like it was about to split open. The sound of the chime, the teacher's voice, and the high-pitched applause all mixed together made me feel dizzy. Feeling nauseous amid the fading consciousness, I twisted my body but could faintly recognize the slow footsteps descending the stairs, approaching me...

Staggering, I managed to support myself and directed my gaze toward the approaching footsteps. The first thing I saw in my blurred vision was the black cat that had run away.

The black cat was being carried by someone. They wore a duffle coat and a plaid scarf and had long brown hair that fluttered in the wind. I couldn't see their face clearly.

Could it be a woman? Holding the black cat, they passed by my side.

It's not the Death God...

As I found solace in the fact that the figure passing by me wasn't the Death God, the strength supporting my body suddenly drained away. I sat down on the top of the long staircase, crouched as if squatting, and lost consciousness.

Tick, tick, tick...

I heard the sound of the clock's hands.

"...disappear."

A small voice on the verge of tears.

I found myself standing in a dim room. As I surveyed the room, I noticed a figure leaning against the door.

Who is it?

I focused my gaze on the figure, and my breath caught in my throat.

"I want to disappear..."

Whispering those words, crying in front of the door... was none other than “me.”

“Oi... Hey.”

My head throbbed. I heard a familiar, low voice... I slowly opened my eyes. In my blurred vision, I saw a boy with a beautiful face.

The boy I had met when I became a half-spirit was peering at me.

Ah, this must be a dream. After all, that boy shouldn't be here.

The boy in my hazy vision had a troubled expression as he scratched the back of his head with his left hand. Then he gently clasped his hands together.

“Rest in peace...”

My mind became clear with those words.

“I-I’m not dead!” I forcefully raised my upper body from the railing of the long staircase I had been leaning on. At the same time, my headache throbbed dully, causing me to clutch my head.

Looking down at me, the boy calmly asked in a composed voice, “Are you okay?”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was unimaginable. But that boy, he was definitely right in front of me. It wasn’t a dream.

“Did you give up?” the boy asked me with a hesitant expression, further inquiring.

“Huh?” I tilted my head, not understanding what the boy was talking about, while still clutching my head.

“That’s why you came to the Death God’s Mansion...” Seeing the boy’s bitter expression, I realized. He misunderstood and thought I had given up on coming back to life, thinking I had come here to meet the Death God.

“No, it’s not like that! I thought that if I came here, I might be able to remember something. I remembered falling down this staircase...” I hurriedly tried to clear up the boy’s misunderstanding.

“Ah... I see,” the boy responded, looking disappointed.

A question came to my mind. Why was the boy here now? It might be a convenient thought, but...

“Could it be... you were looking for me?” I asked, and for a moment, the boy’s eyes flickered.

“Well, I didn’t really think I’d be able to find you. But I remembered something about the Death God... And there was something I wanted to confirm,” the boy explained, looking awkward.

Something he wanted to confirm? I must have had a puzzled expression on my face. The boy looked uneasy and opened his mouth.

“Grandpa regained consciousness. As soon as he woke up, he started saying that Granny, who had passed away, had saved him,” the boy said, sounding happy.

“Granny...” I trailed off, my voice barely a whisper.

“When he was drifting in and out of consciousness, he felt the presence of someone running toward him, even though he couldn’t see them. He said it must have been Granny... probably,” the boy explained.

Finally, I realized. *Could it be...?*

“Maybe it was me,” I said, and the boy lowered his head.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, bowing his head.

I couldn’t immediately respond to the boy, who lowered his head.

When he lifted his face, looking as if he were observing me, his expression was one of surprise.

I felt like crying. Until I arrived here, I passed by countless people. No one noticed me. No one could see me. I had nowhere to go. I felt a loneliness that was like being left behind, abandoned, and all alone in the world. That was probably why. The fact that someone had searched for me, someone who didn’t know where I was, made me so happy that I wanted to cry.

“Thank you... for finding me,” I said, tears streaming down my face.

The more I tried to hold back my tears, the more they welled up uncontrollably.

“Why... Why are you crying?” the boy asked, perplexed by my reaction.

His face, blurred by tears, looked confused, and I lowered my gaze.

“I’m... glad... you found me,” I managed to say in a weak voice.

“What? What do you mean?” The boy couldn’t make out my feeble words, so he cupped his hand to his ear and asked again.

“There’s no one else but you... who can find me,” I said, my voice barely audible.

The boy muttered something, his face showing a pensive expression.

“Maybe it’s really me after all,” he said.

“Huh?” I raised my face in response to the boy’s murmured words.

Our eyes met, and the boy spoke to me.

“It’s... okay. I’ll help you. I can’t guarantee that I can save you, though.”

I froze, caught off guard by the unexpected words. Seeing my reaction, the boy laughed.

“Otherwise, you might end up becoming a real spirit and casting a curse on me,” he added.

Even though he teased me and laughed, I didn’t feel the slightest bit bothered.

Contrary to his words, the boy had a genuinely kind expression on his face, and that was why—

CHAPTER 2

PART 1

“You can use that room as you wish,” the boy told me.

“O-Okay,” I responded.

Standing in front of the sliding door of the guest room, I gave a nod at the boy’s words.

We were back at the boy’s house. Or, more precisely, the house that belonged to his grandfather. It was the somewhat aged house into which I had collapsed from the pitch-black darkness after striking a deal with the listless god.

“Um... What about your family?” There was no sign of anyone else in the house but us.

“Well, it’s just me and grandpa,” he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. After telling me he would change, he started climbing the stairs. As I watched his retreating figure, I recalled our conversation just a few hours earlier.

“I’m willing to cooperate,” he had told me on the long staircase leading to the Death God’s Mansion. As he said that, he began descending the stairs briskly.

Taken aback by his unexpected words, I was at a loss for words and could not move. The boy then stopped in his tracks, looking back at me, standing there motionless.

“I’ll leave you behind,” he warned.

“Eh?”

“You’ve lost your memory, right? So, you don’t know your way home?” He resumed his descent down the stairs after voicing his thoughts indifferently.

Was this his way of telling me to follow him? I trailed behind him, maintaining a gap of about a meter.

We didn’t exchange a single word on our way home. However, each time I lagged behind, he slowed down his pace for me. Upon reaching the house, he opened the door and gestured for me to enter.

Sliding open the door to the guest room I’d been told I could use freely, I hunched over on the tatami mat. I hadn’t really thought things through with all that had happened. I wondered if entering the home of a boy I barely knew was okay.

His living with his grandfather meant the only ones in this house right now were the boy and me. When I became aware of that fact, my heartbeat quickened and my face heated up. At that moment, I flinched at the soft knock on the sliding door.

“Y-Yes?” I stammered.

The boy slid open the door in response. He had changed from his uniform into black loungewear.

“Can we talk for a bit?”

I nodded in response, and the boy sat in front of the table in the guest room. I sat opposite him, with the table between us, straightening my posture. Once he saw me seated, he began to speak.

“About what happens next, you said you need to ‘tie fates’ or ‘recover your memory’ to return to your original body, right?”

“Yes,” I replied, my expression tense. The boy made a slightly irritated face.

“I know we don’t know each other, but can we stop being formal? We seem to be about the same age.”

“O-Okay,” I replied somewhat awkwardly.

“By ‘recovering your memory,’ you mean understanding who you are?”

“Probably... But I don’t even remember my own name. I do kind of remember the roads around here, though.”

“So, you used to live around here, or you’ve been here before...” The boy stated it as a fact, but something about what he said puzzled me.

“Used to...? As in past?”

“I’ve never seen the uniform you’re wearing now.”

I glanced down at the black sailor-style school uniform I was wearing.

“I don’t think it’s from a school around here,” the boy added. His words didn’t quite click with me.

“I... this uniform...” I stammered.

I tried to convey this, but my voice naturally faded to a weak whisper.

“Huh?”

As I had anticipated, my words didn’t reach him. His face hardened as he asked me to repeat myself, causing me to shrink back.

“Look, you need to speak up. Why are you so timid? Am I that scary?”

His words made me retract further.

“I should mention that I’m actually the one who’s scared. You may not be fully aware of it, but you’re technically a ghost, right?”

His unexpected comment caught me off guard.

“You’re scared?”

He hadn’t shown any sign of it.

“To tell you the truth, quite a bit,” he admitted, seemingly uncomfortable. Oddly enough, his confession made me feel a bit more at ease.

“When I fell from the long staircase, I was wearing this uniform. So, I feel like I couldn’t have lived too far away.”

Upon hearing my words, the boy dropped his gaze, deep in thought.

“You said you fell from that long staircase, but I never heard any talk about an accident,” he mused. I wasn’t sure if my memories were correct. Could it be a

misunderstanding on my part?

“For now, let’s check if there were any accidents nearby. I’ll go back to that staircase tomorrow,” he proposed.

I reflexively responded, “I’ll go too!”

“Sure, but...” He trailed off.

Seeing me lean forward eagerly, he stepped back, a shadow crossing his face.

“I don’t know whether you can be revived right away or if it will take time... but there’s one promise I want from you if I’m to help.”

“A promise?” I echoed.

“Promise me you’ll never touch me,” he declared, his tone severe. The atmosphere instantly grew tense. I felt as if I shouldn’t ask why he made such a request.

Instead of inquiring, I reached out with my right hand, extending it to the edge of the table. With a determined grip, I tried to hold onto it. But my hand merely slipped through the table.

Witnessing this, the boy’s eyes widened.

“I can’t touch anything, even if I try. Whenever I consciously try to make physical contact, my body slips through. I don’t feel hungry or cold either. And my memories... Being a spirit... really means having nothing.” I found myself growing sad as I explained.

“You said you don’t remember your name, right?”

When I nodded in confirmation, the boy fell silent for a moment before suggesting, “How about ‘Yuu’ then?”

“Yuu?” I asked, puzzled by his sudden suggestion.

“How about using ‘Yuu’ as your name? It will be inconvenient if you don’t have a name.”

“A name...”

“Yes, Yuu for ‘Yuurei,’ an ‘spirit’ in Japanese.”

His simplistic way of coming up with a name made me laugh a little.

“What?” he grumbled, glaring at my amused smile.

“Okay, and you are...?”

“I’m Hajime Soejima.”

I was still smiling. To that, Soejima-kun responded brusquely, as if to cover up his embarrassment.

“It’s just a temporary name until we find out your real one.”

I wondered what my real name was. Who was I?

Suddenly, an image popped into my mind. It was of me crying in front of a door before I lost consciousness.

“I want to disappear...”

What was that about? A small feeling of anxiety crept into my heart.

I couldn’t sleep that night. Although Soejima-kun prepared a futon for me, my body just passed through it, making it impossible to cover myself with the blanket. But I could walk upstairs and sit... *I wonder how being a spirit works?*

Looking outside from the window in the guest room, I could see a frail crescent moon floating in the night sky.

From the ceiling, I heard a faint creaking noise. I wondered if Soejima-kun, who should be in his room upstairs, was still awake.

Staying at the house of a boy I had just met, having him give me a name... It had all turned out rather strange. *Well, the most bizarre part is probably that I’m a spirit.*

“Yuu...” I whispered the temporary name he had given me. Strangely, saying it aloud seemed to make me feel slightly more optimistic.

In the night sky, the clouds slowly covered the crescent moon.

I wondered where the listless god could be . *Is he somewhere watching me?*

That night, I spent the entire time gazing at the crescent moon in the night sky.

PART 2

“I’ve been looking online since yesterday, but I can’t find any news about the kind of accident you mentioned,” Soejima-kun said the next morning, tying the laces of his sneakers at the entrance of the house.

“You...”

“Huh?”

My mumbling was apparently unclear, as Soejima-kun looked at me with a confused expression.

“No, never mind,” I said, shaking my head to dismiss his question. I was just a little disappointed because I had expected him to call me by name.

Soejima-kun didn’t seem to notice my feelings at all.

As he stood up and adjusted his shoes with a tap, he seemed to remember something and said to me, “Oh, and just so you know, I won’t talk to you when there are other people around. I don’t want to seem weird.”

“Okay.”

I nodded in agreement. That was a fair point.

“Well, let’s go.”

Soejima-kun opened the front door. We decided to go back to those stairs in search of clues to my memory.

As we stepped outside, powdery snow was fluttering about. The breath from Soejima-kun, who was burying his face in his gray scarf, was white. I couldn’t feel it, but it was probably very cold.

Walking down the street, we passed by students in school uniforms and office workers in suits. I didn’t notice it because Soejima-kun was in casual clothes, but it might be a weekday. Was he skipping school to accompany me?

I glanced at Soejima-kun next to me, but he didn’t look at me at all, just walking along silently.

Remembering what he said about not talking when people were around, I closed my mouth too.

Still... I thought as I looked around. This feeling was entirely different from when I was heading toward the haunted mansion alone yesterday. I could feel the fleeting glances of people passing by.

Of course, it was not me who was drawing their attention. It was Soejima-kun, who was walking next to me. When I walked with Soejima-kun, I could feel the gazes of female students and office ladies.

I was drawn to him when I first saw him too.

Just by being there, he attracted attention. It was a stark contrast to me, who was invisible to everyone. I thought this as I admired his beautiful profile.

As we approached the Death God's Mansion, the crowds thinned out.

As we turned a corner in the alley and saw the tiled stairs, Soejima-kun, who had been silent and avoided eye contact all the while, turned his face toward me.

"It may be cliché, but I was thinking we could try recreating the accident as far as you remember it."

"Huh?" I looked at Soejima-kun in surprise.

"Are you ready for this?"

Soejima-kun gave me a skeptical look.

I hurriedly nodded my head repeatedly. *My life is on the line. Of course I'm willing to do it.*

"Try to remember how you fell down the stairs..."

Soejima-kun's voice trailed off, and he looked at my hands. I quickly hid them. When he looked back up, he asked me, "Is it painful to recall the accident?"

I shook my head. My hands were trembling, just like yesterday. And yet I asserted, "I'm fine with that."

"Are you sure?" Soejima-kun fixed his serious gaze on me.

"I'm afraid the Death God could reside in the mansion..." I admitted.

Even though I said I would follow, my legs froze when I stood before the long staircase.

“You don’t have to climb. I’ll do the reenactment. Just tell me what to do.”

With that, Soejima-kun stepped forward, intending to climb the stairs alone. I set my foot next to him and ascended one step. He looked up at me with a surprised expression.

“It’s fine. I’ll do it myself.”

Inwardly, I was scared of the Death God. But as a half-spirit, I’d had enough of things I couldn’t do.

If being unable to do anything in this world was what defined a spirit, then if I abandoned the few things I could do, I would truly become a spirit without any doubt.

Looking up the long staircase, I climbed step by step. Aware of Soejima-kun following a step behind me, I said, “What I remember is... it was raining heavily. I was running up the stairs when a gust of wind took my umbrella away. Distracted by that, I slipped and...”

“You fell,” Soejima-kun added as if to complete my sentence.

“The rain was hitting my body so hard it hurt, and the puddles around me were stained with blood. It was so cold it was chilling.”

“Why were you running up these stairs on such a day?”

As Soejima-kun asked me, I was about to answer when...

“Huh?”

Not noticing that I had suddenly stopped, Soejima-kun passed right through me and turned back with a surprised look.

I was holding my head. Suddenly, an intense, stabbing pain assaulted my head.

“Hey...”

Soejima-kun’s worried voice entered my ears, and I faintly opened my eyes, which I had tightly shut due to the pain. Seeing me, Soejima-kun looked around

as if he had noticed something.

“Here, it’s the same as yesterday...”

A sound like clapping resonated in my head, and the pain pounded like it was about to split open. I barely opened my eyelids. Through my blurry vision, I looked in the direction of Soejima-kun’s gaze. The plants swaying in the wind next to the stairs entered my view.

Ah, yes. There was a black cat here yesterday. This is about halfway up the long staircase...

“Let’s go down. Can you move?”

Soejima-kun peered at me worriedly. I nodded while staggering, and descended the stairs I had just climbed.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I bent my body, hugged my knees, and took deep breaths while looking down.

The pain in my head gradually subsided.

Soejima-kun, looking down at me from the side, opened his mouth.

“I don’t know why, but... You can’t go up these long stairs anymore, can you?”

Still panting, I lifted my face.

“It’s hard to reenact it, huh?”

I shook my head left and right. As my head swayed, the subsided pain throbbed again.

“But these stairs are the only clue to my memories. The only way is to remember...”

Soejima-kun’s neat, sharp eyes momentarily shifted away from me, then caught me again. To match my eye level, he crouched down.

“Actually, I didn’t just look for you yesterday to apologize for what I said to you after my grandfather’s accident.”

As he spoke, Soejima-kun began to unwind his gray scarf.

“A thing you said... caught my attention.”

“...What I said?”

When Soejima-kun began to unbutton his coat and the buttons of his shirt underneath, I was taken aback.

“Wh-What are you doing?” I retreated in surprise.

After Soejima-kun unbuttoned about three buttons on his shirt and spread the collar with his hand, he exposed the area under his collarbone.

When I looked at Soejima-kun’s chest, I gasped. When I raised my gaze from his chest, Soejima-kun was looking at me with a serious face.

“I’ve been told it looks like flower petals.”

On Soejima-kun’s chest, there was a small bruise that looked like flower petals.

My memory flashed back. The figure of Soejima-kun trying to leave the old man’s sick room appeared in my mind. I released my voice toward Soejima-kun’s back.

“The person whose fate to tie...”

“Do you remember anything?”

“No, I don’t.”

“...like flower petals.”

“To be honest, I thought I didn’t want to get involved. But, if I can see you, then maybe...”

“...You’re the one whose fate I have to tie?”

As I whispered quietly, Soejima-kun made a complicated face.

“When I thought of it that way, I felt as if I would ultimately cause your death, which made me feel bad. So, I searched for you.”

Soejima-kun began to rebutton his shirt.

“Why... did you keep silent until now?”

As I voiced the doubt I had been harboring, the hand of Soejima-kun, who had been adjusting his scarf, stopped abruptly.

“Because I thought it would be faster for you to regain your memory.”

Once Soejima-kun fixed his scarf, he checked on my condition.

“You seem to be okay now.”

After being told that, I realized that my headache had subsided.

“Let’s go.”

“Eh, where to?”

“The library. There should be local newspapers and such there. Let’s gather more information.”

Soejima-kun stood up straight.

“There must be other ways if we think about it. We don’t have to be obsessed with the long stairs.”

As he said that in his usual indifferent tone, he began to walk. I was still unable to move, though. I couldn’t understand what Soejima-kun was thinking.

The petal-shaped bruise... Perhaps to reassure me that there were other ways to return to my body, Soejima-kun told me about it.

Noticing that I wasn’t moving, the boy stopped and turned around, waiting for me. Startled back to reality, I stood up and ran toward him.

PART 3

If I can be seen by Soejima-kun because I am the one to “tie his fate,” then the events surrounding me, being a half-spirit, might hold some kind of meaning.

I thought so because our trip to the library that day also had meaning.

“Hajime?” On the station platform on the way to the library, a voice called out, and Soejima-kun and I turned around. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be at school?”

“Kusunoki?”

The girl ignored Soejima-kun’s surprise and approached with a “Hmm,” scrutinizing the boy’s face. Naturally, she did not seem to notice me standing next to him.

“What?”

Soejima-kun directed an annoyed gaze at the girl.

“You seem to be doing better than I thought.”

“Huh?”

“Your grandfather collapsed, right?”

I stared at “Kusunoki-san” from right beside them. I felt as though I had seen her somewhere before.

“Aren’t you lonely, living alone in such a big house?”

When Kusunoki-san said that to Soejima-kun, her long brown hair swayed in the wind. That scene seemed familiar.

This person...

“The cat lady...”

“Cat?”

Involuntarily voicing out, Soejima-kun asked me back.

The color of confusion seeped into Kusunoki-san’s face as she watched Soejima-kun suddenly utter an unrelated word.

Oh no!

I quickly covered my mouth with both hands. Soejima-kun also made a bitter face and tried to cover it up. “No, I thought there was a cat...” But Kusunoki-san did not seem to hear Soejima-kun’s awkward cover-up. She was sniffing the sleeve of her coat instead.

“Does it smell like an animal? I’m taking care of a sickly kitten, you know.”

I sighed in relief. It seemed that Kusunoki-san didn’t find it odd. I thought that Soejima-kun would also be relieved, but he seemed surprised.

“Did your parents allow you to keep it?”

When Soejima-kun asked, Kusunoki-san shook her head left and right.

“I’m keeping it until I find the owner. A friend is helping me out.”

When Kusunoki-san answered, Soejima-kun murmured, “Ah,” seemingly satisfied, and gave me a quick glance. He probably wanted an explanation for the words I had blurted out.

I hastily removed my hands from my mouth.

“Could that cat be...”

Before I could finish what I was about to say, Kusunoki-san jokingly addressed the boy. “Hajime, would you like to keep it?”

Soejima-kun didn’t say anything, at which the girl laughed lightly.

“Of course not.”

“Sure, I’ll take it.”

“I thought so. I was just aski-” In the middle of the sentence, Kusunoki-san’s face froze. She shook her head around, looking at Soejima-kun with an incredulous expression.

“Wait, what did you just say...?”

“I’ll keep it.”

“What?! What happened?!”

“What? You asked yourself. I don’t dislike cats.”

As Soejima-kun said this, Kusunoki-san’s face broke into a broad smile.

“I couldn’t find anyone who would keep it. I didn’t know what to do!”

Perhaps in her excitement, Kusunoki-san extended the hand she had been shaking up and down toward Soejima-kun’s arm.

At that moment, I couldn't immediately understand what had happened before my eyes.

It happened in an instant. Soejima-kun forcefully brushed off the hand Kusunoki-san tried to touch him with. It was as if he were rejecting something unpleasant that was approaching him.

I was surprised, but even more surprised was Soejima-kun, whose face was a picture of shock.

Kusunoki-san looked at her hand that was brushed off and then at the boy's face, her expression seeming to remember something.

"That's right." Watching Kusunoki-san's sad smile, Soejima-kun gasped.

"Ah... I'm sorry."

As Soejima-kun's voice came out, an announcement informing of the arrival of the train began to play over the station platform.

Kusunoki-san again looked down at her hand, the one that was brushed away.

"Can I bring the cat to your house after school tomorrow?"

When Soejima-kun nodded, Kusunoki-san said, "Take good care of the kitten."

The girl's smile seemed deep and meaningful, causing a slight ripple in my heart.

The train arrived, and many passengers descended from the opened doors onto the platform. The crowd of people obscured the conversation between the two. They remained silent, and once the disembarking passengers had left, they boarded the train. I followed suit and got on the train.

Standing in front of the train's door, Kusunoki-san said, "See you..." and Soejima-kun nodded. The girl then moved away from us and walked to the front of the seats, grabbing a strap.

The train was surprisingly crowded for a weekday. It began to move, the carriage shaking.

I stood close to Soejima-kun, trying to make myself as small as possible to avoid passengers passing through me.

Even though I lacked a physical form, there was a certain discomfort in having people walk through me.

I kept myself small, my gaze focused on Kusunoki-san, who was standing in front of the seats. Even though she had been friendly with Soejima-kun, I wondered if she kept her distance in the carriage because she was secretly upset.

The girl was calmly operating her smartphone with her free hand while the other held onto the strap. In sync with the train's sway, her long hair swayed slightly. Even under her coat, one could discern her slender limbs. She had mature facial features, but her round, endearing eyes stood out.

The sight of Soejima-kun and Kusunoki-san standing side by side was like a painting... and with that thought, I suddenly felt embarrassed about my appearance. I pressed down my bangs with my hand, trying to hide my alien-like eyes.

Peeking through the gap in my bangs, I took a quick glance at Soejima-kun nearby. He was gazing at the scenery outside the train window. His profile had a somewhat melancholic look.

I was reminded of the moment when Soejima-kun brushed off Kusunoki-san's hand.

Was he startled when he thought his arm was about to be touched?

The words that Soejima-kun had uttered passed through my mind.

"There's one promise I want from you if I'm to help. Promise me you'll never touch me."

I would come to understand the meaning of those words later.

After we got off the train, we walked through a sparsely populated street leading to the library.

There were many things I wanted to explain and ask Soejima-kun about the black cat and the girl named "Kusunoki-san," but I couldn't find the opportunity. Maybe it was the same for him.

When we arrived at the library, Soejima-kun searched for news about accidents similar to what I remembered and for places similar to the Death God's Mansion, extending his search even to other prefectures. He spread newspapers and magazines on the table so I could see them, and we both leaned in to check. However, no matter how much we searched, we couldn't find the information we were looking for.

As time passed, I became less confident in my memory.

Soejima-kun would touch the back of his head several times in a troubled manner. He might be feeling stuck in his investigation.

After a while, Soejima-kun stood up and gestured for me to follow him. I trailed behind him, and we ended up facing each other, hidden in the shadow of a bookshelf. It seemed to be a blind spot; there were no people around.

Soejima-kun, who had been thinking about something with a troubled look, started hesitantly.

"Do you... know Kusunoki?"

I didn't think it was a question he would hesitate to ask, so I responded, "I saw her on the long staircase yesterday; she had the black cat with her."

"Yesterday?"

Upon hearing my words, Soejima-kun furrowed his brows, touching the back of his head with a hand as if something was bothering him. Could it be a clue about the accident?

While I was waiting for his next statement with expectation, Soejima-kun muttered to himself, "What is she doing there... She was also skipping school today."

I suddenly realized... he wasn't asking for information about the accident; he was curious about Kusunoki-san. That made me more curious about the troubled Soejima-kun.

"Um... Is Kusunoki-san... a friend?"

The boy looked at me as I asked in a muffled voice. I wasn't sure if it was all right to ask.

“She’s a classmate. Just that.”

Soejima-kun replied and then quickly said, “Let’s go back to the search,” and stepped out from the shadow of the bookshelf.

It felt as if I was being told not to delve any further into the matter of Kusunoki-san.

PART 4

A pale light was piercing through my shut eyelids. When I opened my eyes, the morning sun was shining in from the window of the guest room.

What time is it now? I wonder if Soejima-kun is already awake.

I slid through the sliding door of the guest room and walked down the hallway, stopping in front of the stairs leading to the second floor. The room on the second floor where I first appeared in this house was Soejima-kun’s. I couldn’t sense any movement in his room from downstairs.

Yesterday, we had searched for all possible information related to “my memory” at the library, but we hadn’t gotten any significant clues before the library closed. Even after returning home, Soejima-kun kept searching for information on the internet. All I could do was verify the information he provided and try to remember something—and I couldn’t remember anything! I was not useful at all. Even after we retired to our rooms, I could hear noises from Soejima-kun’s room through the ceiling of the guest room I was staying in. It seemed like he was awake until late at night.

The house was silent. I guessed Soejima-kun was still sleeping... but just as I was about to turn on my heel, I thought I heard music coming from somewhere. Following the faint sound, I found myself in the living room. The sliding door was left open by about a third.

Without slipping through the gap in the sliding door, I entered and saw Soejima-kun sitting on the sofa, his arms crossed, asleep. One of his earphones was hanging by his side. Music was probably leaking from the one earphone connected to his smartphone.

On the table in front of the sofa where Soejima-kun was sitting, A4 papers, books, and pens were spread out haphazardly. Careful not to wake him up, I peered at the items spread out on the table.

On the table were textbooks, notebooks, and articles about high school traffic and school accidents printed on A4 paper, with red circles marked around them.

When did he get here...?

I turned my eyes to Soejima-kun, sleeping on the sofa.

I couldn't tell the room's temperature, but considering there had been a flurry of snow yesterday, it must be cold. I was worried about Soejima-kun, who was sleeping in his thin clothes without anything like a blanket or comforter.

But I, who couldn't touch anything, couldn't put something on him. I was reluctant to wake him up, and I was just wandering around, unable to do anything. As I was doing this, my eyes met Soejima-kun's, who had opened his eyelids faintly.

When our eyes met, Soejima-kun gave a small shudder and opened his eyes wide in surprise.

After a few seconds of staring at each other in silence, Soejima-kun said with a look of realization, "I was surprised. I thought you were a spirit... Ah, you are a spirit."

"Sorry..."

Soejima-kun scratched his head and yawned.

"How long have you been here?"

The question I wanted to ask was reversed in a sleepy tone.

"Just now... I thought I heard music."

I pointed to my own ear. Soejima-kun seemed to notice that one of his earphones was out and tapped his smartphone to stop the music.

“I had been holed up in my room all the time. I fell asleep intending to change my mood.”

Soejima-kun began to tidy up the A4 papers and textbooks that were spread out on the table. I watched intently as he picked up a textbook.

What Soejima-kun had in his hand was the math textbook I had seen on the desk in the room the day I first appeared in this house. Noticing my gaze, Soejima-kun tilted his head and asked, “What?”

It was such a minor thing that it wasn’t worth talking about, so I shook my head to indicate that it was nothing, but Soejima-kun gave me a skeptical look.

“If you’ve thought of something, speak up. It’s on my mind.”

“It’s... really not a big deal.”

As I fumbled for words, Soejima-kun urged me to speak up, looking annoyed and saying, “Just say it.”

I hesitated and then voiced my thoughts. “I just thought that I remembered the formula in that textbook...”

I had thought he would find it a really trivial story, but Soejima-kun’s reaction was different from what I expected.

Soejima-kun had a look on his face as if he had realized something.

“I see. That makes sense,” Soejima-kun muttered, as if he had come to a conclusion by himself.

“We don’t necessarily have to stick to the accident on the stairs. The point is to recover your memory.”

“Huh?”

“You’re wearing a school uniform, and you’re probably about my age. If you remember this second-grade high school math formula, you must be around seventeen...”

“So...?”

Not understanding what he was trying to say, I looked at Soejima-kun as if to probe him.

With a look of inspiration, he turned his gaze to me.

“Let’s go to my school. You must have been going to school before you became a spirit. Even if it’s a different school, you might remember something if there are similarities in the classes and atmosphere.”

And so, we decided to go to school that day.

I had never thought of going to school, but just like I remembered the formula in the textbook, I thought that I might remember something else. Besides, I felt guilty that Soejima-kun had taken time off from school to investigate me, so it seemed like the best way for both of us.

I, who didn’t need much preparation to go to school, was waiting at the entrance for Soejima-kun to get ready. I was somewhat restless, checking with my hand to see if my bangs were properly covering my eyes, when Soejima-kun, changed into his school uniform and putting on his coat, came down the stairs.

Once he put on his shoes, he looked at me and nodded slightly. I understood it to mean “Let’s go,” and I also nodded in the same way.

Soejima-kun’s high school was three stations away from his house. It was a coeducational middle and high school, as he had explained to me on the way.

“It should be just about the end of the first period.”

As the school’s main gate came into view, Soejima-kun checked the time on his smartphone. Perhaps because it was past the school commute time, we were the only ones on the school path lined with trees that had already lost their leaves.

“I think you know this, but...” Soejima-kun said, looking at me.

I replied, “I won’t talk when there are people around.”

We reaffirmed our “promise” and passed through the school’s main gate.

After crossing the schoolyard and changing shoes at the shoe racks, the bell rang to signal the end of class. The school building we stepped into was modern in design, with stark white floors and walls.

As we walked down that white corridor, I noticed a female student who had come out into the hall for a break glancing at Soejima-kun. Even here, he was the center of attention among the girls. As I walked alongside him, I was impressed.

“It’s Soejima-kun. Cutie!”

The flamboyantly dressed female students talking in the corridor exclaimed in delight, making sure Soejima-kun could hear them as he was about to pass by. Soejima-kun shot a displeased glare at the girl who had spoken... but she was delighted by it, exclaiming, “He glared at me~!”

Despite passing by many students in the corridor, no one noticed me. Even though I knew I was invisible to everyone, my body tensed with each person I passed, and I felt nervous.

Upon entering the classroom of second-year class one, a few students turned their gaze toward Soejima-kun.

Completely unfazed by the attention, he put his bag on the window-side seat in the front row.

“Hajime!”

The sound of bustling footsteps echoed from behind. Before we could turn around, a small male student suddenly pounced on Soejima-kun.

I turned pale. The sight of Soejima-kun shaking off Kusunoki-san’s hand on the station platform flashed through my mind.

“You’re heavy, Yousuke.”

While giving a cool smile, Soejima-kun firmly pushed the head of the small boy he called “Yousuke” away. Pushed by Soejima-kun, Yousuke’s head tilted at a forty-five-degree angle as he chuckled. “Ouch, ouch, ouch.”

“That’s so mean, Hajime.”

Feigning tears, Yousuke pulled his hand away from Soejima-kun’s shoulder and asked, “Why are you talking like a girl?”

Soejima-kun, retorting while scrunching up his handsome face, laughed without malice. I was surprised by the playful and enjoyable interaction

between the two.

Soejima-kun is touching someone normally...

After promising not to touch and witnessing his behavior of swiftly shaking off Kusunoki-san's hand, I had assumed Soejima-kun disliked being touched by others, but it seemed not to be the case.

Also, this was the first time I'd seen Soejima-kun laugh so innocently. He always seemed somewhat aloof and mature, but like this, he felt more his age.

This is how Soejima-kun behaves at school...

While fooling around with Yousuke, he seemed to notice my gaze as if I were seeing something unusual. Perhaps he remembered that I was there and quickly returned to his serious expression.

Yousuke, who had been messing around, knelt down with both hands on Soejima-kun's desk and opened his mouth hesitantly.

"...not dead, right?"

At Yousuke's words, Soejima-kun and I were taken aback.

"Grandpa..."

After hearing Yousuke's words that followed, I was relieved for a moment, thinking it was about me. I felt embarrassed, thinking I was being too self-conscious...

"Don't go around killing off my own grandpa, all right?"

Soejima-kun's voice was tinged with a sense of relief.

At Soejima-kun's joking response, Yousuke's expression softened.

"Then I'll go visit him."

"No, don't."

"Eh, why's that?"

"Because you're noisy."

At Soejima-kun's words, Yousuke asked with a serious face, "Who, me?"

“My grandpa isn’t good at being fussed over,” Soejima-kun explained with a small smile to the serious-faced Yousuke. Then, the boy made a face as if he’d remembered something.

“Now that you mention it, he did say something like that.”

Yousuke’s muttering voice reached my ears, but it didn’t seem to reach Soejima-kun. When the older boy responded with a “Hmm?” the classroom bell rang. Yousuke dodged the question, saying, “Nah, I’m just worried...”

Before the bell even finished ringing, a male teacher walked into the classroom, and Yousuke and the other noisy students hurriedly returned to their seats. Amid the leftover noise of break time, the male teacher stood at the podium and called for order.

“Stand up. Bow!” the class leader called out, and the sounds of chairs being pulled out overlapped sporadically throughout the classroom. The students bowed their heads lethargically, and everyone sat down at the call of “sit down.” Everyone except for me.

The male teacher started the lesson by flipping the textbook and saying, “Let’s continue from yesterday...” From Soejima-kun’s seat by the window, I looked over the classroom.

Was I also attending classes like this?

I tried to imagine it by closing my eyes. A memory so hazy it resembled a sandstorm appeared on the back of my eyelids.

A classroom filled with frolicking children and me sitting alone in the corner by the window, watching outside. By my side, a boy was talking.

“I’m on class duty with her today. My luck is the worst...”

No.

I opened my eyes forcefully. My heartbeat increased, and a cold sweat beaded on my forehead.

Tap tap...

The sounds of my pounding heart and Soejima-kun tapping his desk with a mechanical pencil mixed together.

I looked over at Soejima-kun. He was leaning on his elbow, his gaze fixed on the blackboard.

Tap, tap... He tapped again on the notebook lying on his desk.

Then, he glanced at me as if he were in trouble and slid the notebook on his desk toward me to show me.

That was when I finally noticed. Scribbled at the edge of the notebook was a message for me. *Why don't you take a walk around the school? You might remember something.*

“Yeah...”

My voice might have been drowned out by the noise in the classroom and not reached Soejima-kun. The faint memory that had surfaced earlier bred a kind of fear in me.

The thought of recovering my memory was somehow frightening.

PART 4

I left the classroom and began to walk around the stark white corridors of the school building.

Chemistry lab, art room, infirmary, gymnasium, teachers' room, library—I went around all sorts of places in the school, but I couldn't remember anything.

As I was climbing up the stairs, I stopped in my tracks when I saw myself reflected in a full-length mirror at the corner. A girl in a sailor uniform with long bangs and slightly slanted eyes was looking back at me with a gloomy face.

Did I like school? Did I participate in club activities? Did I have friends? Did I have someone I liked? Someone I cherished? Someone who worried about me? *Why can't I remember anything?*

In my memory, the younger me was told by a boy that I was “the worst.” *Was I such a horrible girl? I want to believe otherwise, but I don’t know what kind of person I am.*

Desperate to remember even a little, I repeatedly walked around the school building. Even though no one could see me, I quickly left places where many people were gathered, as if running away. As I repeated this, my head became hazy, and I became numb to the passage of time.

When I realized it, the stark white corridor was tinged with orange, and the sound of the brass band practicing on the grounds echoed. I turned on my heel and went back.

When I returned to Soejima-kun’s class, the classroom was quiet. The once lively classroom was now bathed in the orange light of the setting sun.

I walked into the orange classroom and moved toward Soejima-kun, who was reading a book by the window. As I stood next to him, he noticed me and lifted his gaze from the book.

After looking at me for a few seconds, Soejima-kun placed his book on the desk.

“I thought you might have gotten lost since you didn’t come back for a while.” He joked before asking me, “Do you remember anything?”

I looked down. Avoiding my silent face, Soejima-kun rephrased his question. “Did you recall anything?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I see...” Soejima-kun said and began to pack his books and notebooks into his bag. I bit my lip. I wanted to suppress the feelings of guilt and the rising whimpers.

“I didn’t think you’d be able to remember anything so quickly.” Soejima-kun’s nonchalant words were tinged with kindness, and my emotions welled up. The whimper that I had tried to suppress stuck in my throat.

“What if no one wants me to come back to life?”

“Huh?” Soejima-kun asked back in my muffled voice.

“What if the person I can’t remember is a terrible human being?”

Had he connected the disjointed parts of my soft voice in his head? After a slight delay, Soejima-kun looked up at me. “Are you afraid to know your past?”

His voice echoed in the empty classroom.

“Unfortunately, if you want to come back to life, you have no choice but to face your past,” Soejima-kun said, pulling his chair back with a screech and standing up. “Because it’s impossible for you to tie my fate.”

I lifted my downcast face.

“I can’t imagine a future where I’m happily spending time with someone.” Soejima-kun’s face, though expressionless, was beautiful, tinged by the orange sunset. He slung his bag over his shoulder and spoke to me. “Let’s go home for today, Yuu.”

The name that Soejima-kun had given me echoed sadly in the classroom.

Having everything in terms of looks, being the center of attention even in silence, and having people around him. At this time, I was so consumed with myself that I only saw Soejima-kun’s exterior.

At this moment, I still didn’t realize that Soejima-kun was also truly alone.

I was bound by the past, and you were imprisoned by the future.

CHAPTER 3

PART 1

We walked home silently along the usual route to school. We didn't speak because there were people around, but even when there weren't any, we didn't know what to say to each other. By the time we got off the train, the sun had completely set. The residential streets had few streetlights, making them dimly lit. As I caught sight of Soejima-kun's charming house, I squinted my eyes.

There was a figure in front of the house.

"Someone is there," I said aloud, but I wasn't sure if Soejima-kun could hear my voice.

The boy stopped in his tracks once, then suddenly dashed forward without saying a word.

I hurriedly followed him.

"Kusunoki."

The figure in front of Soejima-kun's house was Kusunoki-san. She turned her face toward us and chuckled when she saw Soejima-kun, who was out of breath.

"I brought the kitten."

Kusunoki-san raised her arm slightly to make the black pet carrier she was holding more visible. A brown checkered scarf was wrapped around it.

The girl's nose was slightly red. She must have been waiting in front of the house for Soejima-kun to come.

“Why didn’t you call me when you arrived?” Soejima-kun asked, and Kusunoki-san replied with a glimpse of her white teeth as saying, “You know me. I forgot.” Then she turned her gaze toward Soejima-kun’s house, in which no lights were on and asked, “Your grandpa is not here, right?”

“Didn’t you know already? Anyway, it’s cold, so why don’t you come in?”

Kusunoki-san shake her head at Soejima-kun’s words. “It’s fine.”

She was about to stretch her hand with the carrier to him, but, as if remembering something, she crouched down and placed the carrier on the ground instead.

“Take good care of it.”

As Soejima-kun embraced the carrier on the ground, Kusunoki-san showed a refreshing smile. “Well then.” She turned around and started walking back the way we had come.

Soejima-kun kept his gaze on Kusunoki-san’s diminishing figure.

Even when her figure disappeared into the darkness and he couldn’t see her anymore, Soejima-kun continued to stare.

PART 2

Once inside the house, Soejima-kun opened the black pet carrier in the living room. Inside was a curled-up black cat.

“A scab,” Soejima-kun said quietly, looking at my face as we crouched facing each other.

It felt like the silent walk home was a lie as Soejima-kun returned to his usual self. I nodded in relief, acknowledging Soejima-kun’s words.

The black cat I had seen before had a wound on its head. The fur around the scab was slightly shaved, showing signs of treatment. It was still a little swollen, but it seemed to be recovering.

As Soejima-kun reached into the bag, the black cat leaned in, seeking his touch.

“You’re not shy around people, huh?” Soejima-kun lifted the front paws of the black cat with both hands.

“There don’t seem to be any other injuries...”

I also approached the black cat to check. However, the previously docile black cat suddenly bared its fangs at me as if threatening me. Startled, I stepped back. The black cat leaped off from Soejima-kun’s hands and fled toward the sofa in the living room.

Soejima-kun looked at me with wide eyes. Seeing me slightly shocked, he asked, “Why?”

“I-I didn’t mean to... startle it...”

“No, not that.” Soejima-kun pointed to the black cat hiding behind the sofa. “Can that cat see you, Yuu?” he asked, his voice dropping as he slumped.

“Yeah,” I replied casually, and Soejima-kun seemed relieved.

“If you noticed, you should’ve told me earlier. Even small details could be important,” he said.

“Oh, right! Sorry,” I apologized in a fluster, and Soejima-kun chuckled, feeling the tension release.

“You’re completely different from earlier,” Soejima-kun said, looking at me with a sense of relief. “You seemed so distressed at school.”

Memories of my childhood had resurfaced at school, brushing against my mind. Those memories might be important in recalling my own self. I needed to talk about them properly. Opening my mouth to express my thoughts, I hesitated. “...I can’t remember much, so I got a little discouraged...”

But the words that came out were different. Something inside me prevented me from speaking my true feelings. Guilt surged within me as I averted my gaze

from Soejima-kun and continued with my fabricated words.

“I’ll walk around inside the school again tomorrow. Maybe there are still things I can remember...”

“I’m not going to school tomorrow,” Soejima-kun interjected.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed, raising my voice, and quickly turned my gaze back to the boy.

“I-Is it okay for you to miss school that much?” The words that came to mind flew out of my mouth. Seeing my concern, Soejima-kun burst into laughter.

“It’s Saturday tomorrow, and the gates will be locked, so I can’t get into school,” he explained.

“S-Saturday,” I muttered, realizing I had completely forgotten about the days of the week.

“You can freely go to school, so it’s fine if you go, but I’m thinking of visiting my grandpa tomorrow,” Soejima-kun said. “I have to bring him a change of clothes, and I thought I’d ask about your presence. We need to pick up even the smallest details...”

His words pained my chest.

The next day, I decided to accompany him on his visit to his grandpa.

I had only seen his grandpa in a distressed state, either collapsing or sleeping with a ventilator, so I wanted to see him awake and in good spirits.

“There’s no need to worry. He’s completely recovered,” Soejima-kun said in a deserted corridor on our way to the hospital room.

His grandpa had been moved to a private room in the general ward.

Soejima-kun, with the paper bag containing his grandpa’s clothes, daily necessities, and newspapers in his free hand, opened the door to the hospital room. Inside, I saw his grandpa sitting up in bed, wearing glasses, and engrossed in a book.

He really looks lively...

Seeing his grandpa, a smile involuntarily formed on my lips.

The old man seemed focused on his reading and didn't appear to notice Soejima-kun opening the door.

"Grandpa," Soejima-kun called out at the bed in his usual indifferent tone. His grandpa kept his eyes on the book, raised his hand as if to say, "Wait," and gestured with his palm.

"Hey, don't disturb me. I'm at a good part," his grandpa said without looking up from his book.

Standing next to the bed, Soejima-kun glanced at the book his grandpa was reading. Just as I was about to peek at the page from behind Soejima-kun, I was taken aback.

Soejima-kun forcefully swiped the book his grandpa was reading, sending it flying.

"Damn, geezer..." Soejima-kun muttered in a cold voice, looking down at his grandpa on the bed with a callous expression.

"What the hell are you doing, Hajime?" His grandpa looked up at Soejima-kun with a burst of energy.

"At your age, shamelessly reading something like that..."

There was a quiet anger in Soejima-kun's voice.

The cover of the book that fell on the floor had the title "Top 10 Masterpieces of Erotica."

"Men are boys no matter how old they get," his grandpa said confidently. "You always begged me to read for you, and I would indulge you."

"It was children's books. What age were those stories meant for?" Soejima-kun retorted, slamming the paper bag he had brought onto the bed.

I alternated my gaze between his sulking grandpa and Soejima-kun's cold expression.

"You're a cold-hearted grandson. You don't even come to visit properly," his grandpa complained.

"I came three days ago. Besides, who do you think saved you?" Soejima-kun replied.

"Your grandma in heaven," his grandpa responded promptly, chuckling mischievously. Soejima-kun, despite his exasperation, had a softened expression on his face. He pulled a chair from beside the bed and sat down.

"Hey, grandpa. What was grandma's presence like?" Soejima-kun asked.

"Hmm?" his grandpa pondered, placing his hand on his chin as if trying to recall. "However you describe it... It felt like a gentle, airy presence."

"But you couldn't see anything, right?"

"What's with all these questions?" his grandpa asked, looking puzzled. Then, as Soejima-kun took out a white undergarment from the paper bag he had placed on the bed, his grandpa exclaimed, "Hajime! This won't do!"

Soejima-kun directed his gaze to the white undergarment his grandpa had unfolded.

"Huh? This is the white undergarment we have at home, right?"

"The name. It's written so small in the corner," his grandpa said.

In the corner of the undergarment, "Hajime Soejima" was written in small letters with a marker.

"I've been telling you this since you were little, right? You should write your name on your belongings. Have you been properly writing it big on your things?" his grandpa said as he intentionally showed his teeth like a child. Soejima-kun picked up the book that had fallen to the floor and quietly muttered.

"Yesterday, Dad and the others came to see me."

Soejima-kun's expression changed at his grandpa's words.

"I thought you said you didn't want to see them."

His grandpa looked at Soejima-kun with a gentle face.

"They just came to deliver some things."

Without responding to his grandpa's words, Soejima-kun stood up from the chair and faced the door. Seeing the boy like that, his grandpa smiled.

"Wait a moment."

His grandpa called out to Soejima-kun, then rummaged through the nearby drawer of the shelf where the television was placed. He grabbed something and handed it to Soejima-kun.

The boy held out his palm bluntly, and his grandpa placed a five-hundred-yen coin in it.

"What's this?" Soejima-kun looked at the five-hundred-yen coin in his palm and asked bluntly.

"Use it to buy the second series of 'Masterpieces of Erotica,'" his grandpa said in a higher pitch. Soejima-kun, with an annoyed expression, slammed the five-hundred-yen coin onto the bed.

"Hehe."

Seeing the interaction between his grandpa and Soejima-kun, I couldn't help but laugh. The boy glanced at me briefly from behind and furrowed his brow.

"Oops," I thought. In front of his grandpa, Soejima-kun looked like a cute child.

"I'm going home," he said with a tired expression, quickly heading toward the door of the hospital room. I followed behind him.

"Hajime!" his grandpa called out to Soejima-kun's back again. Soejima-kun stopped in front of the door and turned around.

"Aren't you lonely being home alone?" his grandpa asked.

"It's you who must be lonely... I'll come again," Soejima-kun replied.

His grandpa smiled faintly at the boy's words.

It started raining outside the hospital. Soejima-kun muttered, "Stay here for a moment," and ran toward the convenience store.

I slipped through the automatic doors and reached out my hand, standing at the edge of the entrance canopy. Raindrops fell through my palm and onto the

ground. I lowered my gaze to the ground, knowing there was no way I could touch them, and a ball rolled toward me.

A boy, around the third or fourth grade of elementary school, ran up beside me and lightly kicked the ball, passing it to another boy. *Are they here playing because they're bored while visiting someone at the hospital?*

Amid the conversations and applause of the boys, faint memories of the child version of myself in school resurfaced. Each of these faint memories made my heart ache with sadness. Did I have any memories that would make me look back and feel happy?

I just wanted to remember one kind memory. If I could do that, maybe this inexplicable void in my heart would diminish a little. I noticed a loud noise and turned to the side, where Soejima-kun had opened a plastic umbrella. He held the umbrella up and stepped out from under the entrance canopy, leaving half of the space under the umbrella empty for me.

“Uh...” I realized that he was making space for me to join him. “I-It’s okay. Rain can pass through me, so I won’t get wet,” I stammered.

Soejima-kun furrowed his brow and moved his lips, saying, “It’s fine.”

The boys who were playing nearby were looking at Soejima-kun, who stood there holding the umbrella with suspicious eyes. I hurriedly jumped into the space under the umbrella that Soejima-kun was offering. The umbrella blocked the raindrops falling from the sky. I looked up and saw the raindrops hitting the plastic umbrella and bouncing off. I had a vague sense of déjà vu. What was it? Had something similar happened before...?

A slow gaze shifted from above and met Soejima-kun’s. With the boy looking at me with a tilted head, our proximity made my heart feel like it was about to jump out. I hid my flustered feelings and casually shook my head as if nothing was wrong. Soejima-kun pointed forward, and we started walking.

A few people were scattered along the way from the hospital to our house. Under the umbrella held by Soejima-kun, I couldn’t calm down, and my heart was pounding. It was probably because I was worried that anyone would think it strange that Soejima-kun was walking with the umbrella tilted to one side.

Because there were people around, we didn't say anything. The rain blocked out the surrounding sounds, making it quiet. The sound of my heartbeat echoed, and I wondered if Soejima-kun could hear it too.

When I first met Soejima-kun, my chest became restless, and an unpleasant tension ran through my body. Now, I had a slight understanding of the reason behind it. The child version of me in my memories was frightened by the boys who sneered at me, calling me the "worst." Perhaps I was subconsciously afraid of boys my age. Soejima-kun might have felt the same way as the boy in my memories.

But Soejima-kun was someone who took a spirit that couldn't get wet in the rain under his umbrella. As we walked side by side in the rain, I thought about how I had to talk about the memories I couldn't bring myself to speak about.

But I couldn't say them. I didn't want Soejima-kun to know that I was someone who was ridiculed by others. That's why I couldn't ask him.

"I can't imagine a future where I'm happily spending time with someone," he said.

I wondered why he, who was so kind, would think that way.

PART 3

"Fuyu."

When Soejima-kun called from the living room, holding the dish he'd filled with food, the black cat sprawled on the floor roused itself and ran over to him. As the black cat moved, the round name tag attached to its red collar swung from side to side. The name "FUYU" was inscribed in Roman characters. It had taken a lot of deliberation for Soejima-kun to buy it.

Soejima-kun had named the black cat “Fuyu.” When asked why he chose this name, he simply responded, “Because she came in the winter.” It was an unwavering, straightforward way of naming.

When Fuyu approached, Soejima-kun’s usually stern eyes softened, his expression becoming gentler. Seeing that gentle look on his face always somehow made me happy.

“Fuyu’s scab has become less noticeable, hasn’t it?” I said standing next to Soejima-kun. The black cat immediately looked up at me. Initially frightened of me, perhaps knowing I was not a normal human, Fuyu had grown completely used to my presence. A week had passed since we visited Soejima-kun’s grandfather at the hospital, but there had been no progress in my search for my lost memory.

I didn’t understand why Fuyu could see me. Could I be seen by animals, even if not by humans? I tried standing in front of dogs and birds out for walks, but they didn’t seem to notice me.

I pondered if Soejima-kun could see me because he was the person whose fate I had to tie, and that perhaps there was a reason Fuyu could see me too. Soejima-kun diligently sought any information that could serve as a clue, and every day, I accompanied him to school to search for my memory. I roamed the school grounds enough to remember the layout, but my memory did not revive like the first time I had gone to school.

Time passed while I obtained no significant information and recalled no new memories. I knew nothing about myself. Yet, being close to Soejima-kun at school, there was one thing I had come to understand.

Occasionally, Soejima-kun would look off into the distance, outside the window or across the hallway, and when I followed his gaze, Kusunoki-san was always there.

I noticed something like that from the beginning. Kusunoki-san seemed to be a “special existence” to Soejima-kun. The contract with the “listless god” surfaced at the back of my mind. I was originally here in front of Soejima-kun to tie fates.

In the classroom dyed orange, Soejima-kun had told me it was impossible for me to tie his fate. I had not asked him why he thought that way, as I knew he avoided the topic on purpose. Although I thought I shouldn't pry, the thought of Kusunoki-san being the one I must tie Soejima-kun's fate to had brushed through my mind several times.

And unexpectedly, I found out about their past.

"I wonder if Soejima has a girlfriend?" One of the female students watching the boys play a basketball game during class in the gymnasium said this out loud amid the echoes of the dribbled balls.

I inadvertently turned to look at the group of four girls talking. Soejima-kun was participating in the game, and I had been watching close to them.

"Eh, he does, doesn't he?"

The female students continued their cheerful conversation, looking at Soejima-kun.

"But we haven't heard anything, have we?"

"That's true."

"Maybe he's not interested in girls?"

"Does he swing that way?!"

As the girls laughed boisterously, I inwardly denied it. After all, I was fairly sure that Soejima-kun...

"Kusunoki."

The voice wasn't mine. One of the four girls mentioned it as if recalling, her voice filled with laughter.

"Wasn't she the one?"

Another girl chimed in as if remembering something.

"It was a rumor in middle school. His ex-girlfriend."

"Ah, that's right!"

Ex-girlfriend...? As I was surprised, an unbelievable word hit my ears the next moment.

“That bitch? That’s the worst. Ah, so that’s why they broke up.”

The girls broke into laughter.

The long hair swaying in tune with the train’s movement, the slender arms and legs, the mature face, the lovely round eyes... The sight of Kusunoki-san standing next to Soejima-kun was like a picture. That foul word was so far removed from the Kusunoki-san I had seen; I doubted my ears.

The buzzer sounded, ending the game.

In the group of boys heading to the locker room after the class, I saw Soejima-kun slowing down his steps, directing his gaze outside from the entrance of the gym. I couldn’t tell from my position what had caught his attention. Was Kusunoki-san in his line of sight again? Soejima-kun and Kusunoki-san, who were once lovers... What happened between them? It was impossible for me not to care.

The next day, a change occurred.

I thought it was the beginning of an ordinary morning like any other.

When I woke up in the morning, my day started with combing my hair while looking in the mirror in the washroom. If my bangs were parted sideways, and my alien-like eyes were peering out, I had to fix my bangs to hide them, or I wouldn’t feel at ease. I couldn’t remember why I thought my eyes looked like an alien’s or why that made me uneasy, but I believed the current me was the product of the past within my lost memories.

As I was fixing my bangs, I heard Fuyu’s footsteps walking down the corridor leading to the entrance, and I left the washroom.

“Fuyu, you can’t go outside.”

I heard Soejima-kun’s voice talking to Fuyu from the direction of the entrance. Soejima-kun’s voice, when he talked to Fuyu, was slightly softer than his usual dry tone.

When I peeped at the entrance, I saw him squatting down, petting Fuyu's head.

Every morning, Soejima-kun waited for me like this, and it had become routine for us to go to school together.

"Good morning." In a low voice, I greeted Soejima-kun, who was looking at Fuyu. Normally, he would return my greeting with his usual nonchalant "Good morning," but this day was different. Soejima-kun's expression, dragging a smile directed at Fuyu, froze the moment he looked up at me.

"Yuu, don't you look... somewhat transparent?"

"What?" I looked down at myself.

Nothing had changed. I couldn't understand what Soejima-kun was saying.

When I returned my gaze, his expression was frozen in confusion.

I was frustrated that time was passing without finding any memories or clues about the accident. But the fear of death I felt when I first became a spirit might have faded as I started to treat my days spent with Soejima-kun as normal.

I hadn't even considered the possibility he couldn't see me anymore.

Had my body, unnoticed day by day, been becoming more transparent in Soejima-kun's eyes? A figure no longer visible to anyone practically ceased its existence.

"Don't worry; there's still plenty of time," I said. I was scared, but pretended to be fine,

Soejima-kun looked up at me. Surprisingly, he looked paler than I did.

On the way to school, and even after arriving at school, he had a difficult expression, as if deep in thought.

Yousuke was at the shoe lockers, greeting with a carefree voice, "Hajime, good morning~," but Soejima-kun seemed to be in a daze and didn't even hear him.

"Hajime?"

When he was grabbed firmly by the shoulder, Soejima-kun turned around with a start.

“What’s with that gloomy face from the morning?”

With a teasing smile, Yousuke was met with a dull response from Soejima-kun, who then turned his gaze to me.

I usually somewhat understood the meaning of Soejima-kun’s glances, but this time I was puzzled.

Seeing Soejima-kun’s unusual behavior, Yousuke seemed to sense something.

“Did you, by any chance, heard about Kusunoki’s rumor?”

“...People always talk about Kusunoki. It’s nothing new.”

As he put on his shoes, Soejima-kun seemed uninterested, causing Yousuke to look a little annoyed.

“Kusunoki was worried about you. On the day you skipped school, when she heard that your grandfather had collapsed, she even came to me.”

Soejima-kun’s expression didn’t change.

“I told her if she was worried, she should contact you directly. Then Kusunoki said that you didn’t like people worrying about you...”

Soejima-kun abruptly slammed the locker shut, interrupting Yousuke’s words.

“I know. I saw her.”

Yousuke looked surprised at Soejima-kun’s dry tone.

“I’m not in a position to worry about Kusunoki,” said Soejima-kun with cold eyes, and left Yousuke behind, walking down the hallway alone.

I followed him. He didn’t go to the classroom but instead climbed the stairs toward the rooftop. No one was on the rooftop in the winter, so he walked to the front of the fence and looked down.

“Soejima-kun...”

At the sound of my voice, he turned around.

“I said there must be other ways for you to come back to life... but in the end, I couldn’t do anything.”

He shook his head violently and forced a smile.

“Maybe if the person whose fate you’re destined to tie wasn’t me, you could have easily come back to life.”

Seeing Soejima-kun try to smile, I decided to take a bold step forward.

“Soejima-kun... you like Kusunoki-san, don’t you?”

I threw the words I had been unable to say at Soejima-kun.

“Yeah, I do.” With a blank expression, Soejima-kun stated it plainly and without hesitation. I was the one taken aback.

“If that’s the case, then if you connect with Kusunoki-san—”

“It’s impossible.”

His voice seemed to leak out from the depths of his heart.

“I dated Kusunoki in middle school. But I hurt her. I can’t be in a relationship with anyone.”

“Why?”

In response to my question, Soejima-kun lowered his gaze for a moment before smiling faintly back at me.

“Because I’m broken.”

Broken...

Before I could ask what he meant by that, Soejima-kun spoke again. “Sorry... could you leave me alone for a bit?”

He was always like this. He never gave me a chance to say anything and made sure I couldn’t pry any further. Swallowing the words about to leave my throat, I turned on my heel and began to walk away. Just as I was about to slip through the rooftop door, I looked back.

I stared directly at the side profile of Soejima-kun, who was gazing at the city through the chain-link fence.

The contract with the listless god, the flower-like bruise on his chest, and the significance of Soejima-kun being able to see me.

I felt a sense of mission deep in my chest, unaware that this would later torment Soejima-kun and put me in the corner.

PART 4

The person Soejima-kun was supposed to be “connected” with might be Kusunoki-san. I had just slipped through the rooftop door and stopped before the stairs. Soejima-kun said without hesitation that he liked Kusunoki-san and had hurt her. Why did the two break up? Did Kusunoki-san distance herself from Soejima-kun? Or was it the other way around? Who initiated the breakup? Could Kusunoki-san’s feelings for Soejima-kun still be the same? If Kusunoki-san still had feelings for Soejima-kun, even if they had been apart for a while. If their feelings for each other hadn’t changed, then my belief that Kusunoki-san was the person Soejima-kun was supposed to be connected with should not be wrong.

I appeared before Soejima-kun to make that connection... so I thought I’d try to find out more about Kusunoki-san. For Soejima-kun, who was desperately trying for a spirit he didn’t even know, it was the least I could do.

I raced down the rooftop stairs and ran to find Kusunoki-san. Classroom during class, courtyard, gym, infirmary—Kusunoki-san was nowhere to be found. Where could she be? Was she not at school?

In the third-floor hallway, where special classrooms like the music room and the chemistry room were lined up, I stopped to catch my breath. There was no sign of anyone in the silent hallway. It seemed like there was no one here.

As I was thinking about where else I hadn’t been in the school, holding back my bangs that were covering my forehead, my eyes paused at one place. The door to the classroom at the end of the hallway was slightly ajar, about ten centimeters open.

I was oddly curious. As I approached the door, I looked up at the classroom sign. The plate read “Art Preparation Room.”

I slipped through the door into the art preparation room. In contrast to the brightness outside the window, the room was somewhat damp and dimly lit. Plaster statues, easels, canvases, and books that looked like professional texts were scattered around a large table.

Sometimes intuition surpasses logic.

The figure of a female student standing in front of the window in the art preparation room caught my eye. Slender arms and legs, long brown hair. Even without her turning around, I knew who it was—Kusunoki-san.

The girl was looking out the window of the art preparation room.

I held my breath. As if being led, I slowly approached Kusunoki-san. From the open door of the art preparation room, I could hear the sound of footsteps and voices. Kusunoki-san turned away from the window with a surprised look on her face and checked the situation in the hallway through the gap in the door.

Three male students, holding world maps and atlases, were passing through the hallway in front of the art preparation room, chatting. After confirming that the trio had disappeared from sight, Kusunoki-san dashed out of the art preparation room.

Her sudden action left me behind in the art preparation room in surprise. The sound of her running away faded into the distance. I stood in front of the window where Kusunoki-san had been until a moment ago. And then, I looked in the direction of her gaze...

I left the art preparation room, ran through the stark white corridor, and headed toward the rooftop where Soejima-kun was. I decided to properly tell him about my thoughts. As I ran up the stairs to the rooftop, a figure suddenly appeared before me.

I'm going to crash! I reflexively closed my eyes and braced myself. The sound of a sudden brake resonated on the stairs. I realized that there was no reason for me to crash into anyone. After all, I was a spirit. Only one person in this world could notice me and stop for me. With that thought, I opened my eyes.

Soejima-kun, who had burst out of the spiral staircase, had an intense expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

Upon hearing my words, Soejima-kun spoke in a hoarse voice. “I got a call... My grandfather’s condition...”

My eyes widened.

I also headed to the hospital with Soejima-kun, who had left school early. The tension on his face was palpable as we headed to the hospital, conveying the severity of the situation.

Soejima-kun was trying his best to keep it together, but he looked as if he could crumble at any moment. I felt anew the enormity of his grandfather’s presence in his life. The hospital room we were told to go to at the reception was the intensive care unit where his grandfather had been taken when he collapsed.

In front of the hospital room, Soejima-kun hesitated momentarily before opening the door and looking at me. Then he quickly looked back at the door, exhaled the breath he had been holding, and put his hand on the doorknob.

Following Soejima-kun into the room, I took one step in and froze.

“Wow, I saw an angel.”

A loud laughter that seemed out of place in an intensive care unit echoed throughout the room.

“An angel?”

“Yes, right in front of me... An angel in white.”

Sitting up and looking serious, the old man in the bed was making a young nurse laugh with a look of distress.

Huh? His condition was supposed to have deteriorated...

Leaving me stunned by the old man’s nonchalance, Soejima-kun silently approached his grandfather’s bed.

The old man, who had been talking to the nurse, noticed Soejima-kun approaching.

“Hey, Haj—”

Before the old man could finish saying Soejima-kun’s name, he gasped in pain. The boy was standing tall, pinching his grandfather’s cheek.

“Why do you look so well?”

“What’s wrong with being well?”

After brushing off Soejima-kun’s hand, the old man covered his face and pretended to cry.

“Cruel grandson... doing such a thing to a weakened old man.”

“Where?!”

The old man peered at Soejima-kun through the gap between his hands and looked up at him. Soejima-kun turned his back to the bed as if to hide his face from his grandfather.

Standing at the foot of the bed, I couldn’t see what expression Soejima-kun was making.

The young nurse, who must have witnessed Soejima-kun’s expression, sensed the mood and quickly excused herself. “Well then, I’ll be outside if you need me.” She hurriedly left the hospital room.

Silence filled the room.

With his back turned, Soejima-kun was met with a slight smile from his grandfather.

“What’s with the pitiful look on your face?”

“Shut up,” Soejima-kun retorted to his grandfather with his back still turned.

“All right, to cheer you up, I’ll read a book like I used to.”

Several books with covers were lined up on the shelf next to the bed. The old man extended his hand and tried to pick up one of them. However, the book with the cover slipped from his outstretched fingertips and fell to the floor. The old man’s hand was trembling slightly.

Soejima-kun quickly picked up the book that had fallen to the floor and offered it.

“It’s fine. It’s probably another erotic novel.”

“You’re sharp. But this is a masterpiece.”

At the grandfather’s laughter, the creases in Soejima-kun’s forehead deepened. It seemed that Soejima-kun had also noticed the old man’s hand trembling slightly, as it was quickly hidden under the covers.

“Don’t worry. I won’t die until I see my grandson’s wife.”

“You’ll never die then.”

“Again, you say something like that...”

The grandfather looked at Soejima-kun with a gentle expression and suddenly asked, “Are you scared?”

“Huh?”

“Are you so scared that you can’t stand it?”

“What are you talking about...”

At the grandfather’s words, Soejima-kun looked puzzled.

“You’re scared when you think about the future, aren’t you?”

“Who isn’t...”

As Soejima-kun replied in exasperation, his grandfather spoke more emphatically.

“No, your fear is different. Your fear is that you’re abandoning the future.”

At the old man’s words, Soejima-kun laughed abruptly.

“That’s over the top.”

The old man squinted his eyes and continued, “Hey, Hajime. Don’t neglect the present just because you’re consumed by fear of the future.”

I supposed the words were unexpected. Soejima-kun fell silent and dropped the covered book he had been holding out onto the bed.

“...It doesn’t suit you to say something so sensible.”

At Soejima-kun’s words, the old man wrinkled his face even more and laughed heartily. “Well, that’s true.” The grandfather’s cheerful laughter echoed in the hospital room, and Soejima-kun gave a small smile as if he were being drawn in.

At that time, I thought the banter between these two, devoid of any pretense, would continue forever.

The old man’s joyous laughter, which resonated in the hospital room, still lingers in my head. Change always comes suddenly, and there’s no way to prepare for it. My emotions were left behind at that moment, and it felt as if only I was being left behind by the passing of time.

Later that night, the old man passed away.

PART 5

A light dusting of snow fell. Tiny flakes of snow accumulated in a thin layer at my feet. Staring straight at the memorial altar decorated with a picture of the old man with a smiling face, I remembered him, who would laugh heartily in the hospital room, his face crinkled by his honest grin. That was the last interaction between Soejima-kun and the old man.

Late at night, we received another call from the hospital, and it was from Soejima-kun’s uncle, who had come as a proxy for his parents. He was with the old man in his last moments.

Soejima-kun’s parents couldn’t come to the old man’s side immediately upon receiving the news. The flights were canceled due to the low atmospheric pressure. It was only then that I learned that Soejima-kun’s parents lived far away.

When the old man passed away, Soejima-kun neither lost control nor cried. I didn't know what to say or do, so all I could do was interact with Soejima-kun as usual.

Even during the solemn funeral, Soejima-kun was just indifferent. I had thought I couldn't go, since I wasn't the old man's family member—I wasn't even a person—but Soejima-kun said he wanted me to come with him. That was the only change in his demeanor that I could notice.

Immediately after the cremation, the old man's ashes were deposited. The grave was located at a scenic spot up a hill. After the ceremony, Soejima-kun was looking down at the city, which was turning white with snow, as if avoiding the relatives deeply engrossed in their conversation. I was watching Soejima-kun's back, wondering if I should call out to him.

“Hajime.”

Soejima-kun turned around, and so did I. Behind us were his parents. The father had a stern face, while his mother looked timid.

Soejima-kun's parents had come the evening after the old man passed away. They greeted him in a somewhat formal manner, then told him they would stay at the funeral home. Even I, who didn't know their circumstances, could feel the awkwardness between Soejima-kun and his parents, and it reminded me of the exchange between the old man and Soejima-kun I had witnessed before. *“I thought you said you didn't want to see them.”*

Soejima-kun's face was rigid as he interacted with his parents, completely different from when he was with his grandfather.

“We can't indulge your selfishness anymore.”

I was taken aback by the strong tone of Soejima-kun's father's voice.

“Now that your grandfather is gone, we can't leave you, a minor, here alone.”

It was their way of saying there wouldn't be room for any dissent. After seemingly considering it for a moment, Soejima-kun opened his mouth.

“Can you wait until spring for me to transfer schools? There are only a few months left, and I want to finish my sophomore year here.”

Because Soejima-kun's response was not to his liking, his father showed frustration.

"Why is that? You always..."

"Dear..."

With a timid voice, the mother interrupted the father, who was becoming upset.

"It's so sudden. He needs time to say goodbye to his friends and sort out his feelings."

His father swallowed his words, looking dissatisfied. Then, Soejima-kun said, "Thank you, Yoriko-san."

At Soejima-kun's words, both parents looked surprised. Leaving his parents behind, Soejima-kun left his grandfather's grave alone.

When we returned home by taxi, blissfully ignorant Fuyu greeted us at the door. After Soejima-kun changed out of his uniform, he began to research information related to me on the internet as usual. "You don't have to do this today." I swallowed the words that came to my throat. The house was filled with an unchanging everyday life. The dishes on the kitchen table, the well-kept flowers in the bay window, the toothbrushes in the cups in the bathroom... The old man's presence was overflowing everywhere in the house, and it seemed like a lie that the old man was no longer in this world.

Like any other night, after midnight, we said goodnight, and Soejima-kun went to his room while I retired to the guest room. Even when I was alone in the guest room, I couldn't sleep. Outside the window, the snow continued to fall silently. The scene of the last exchange with the old man in the hospital room kept coming to mind. As I was about to leave the hospital room that day, I casually turned around. Looking at the old man on the bed, I was startled. For a moment, it seemed like the old man was smiling at me. There was no way. He must have been looking at Soejima-kun's back. But it still left a deep impression on me.

As I gazed blankly out the window, I heard Fuyu's footsteps in the quiet house. When I opened the sliding door, Fuyu was turning a corner in the dark

corridor. When I looked at the clock in the guest room, it was past 1 a.m. Normally, Fuyu would be sleeping in the bed in the living room at this time. Wondering what was going on, I followed Fuyu.

Fuyu moved down the dark hallway and eventually disappeared into the gap in the sliding door of the Japanese-style room. That was the grandfather's room. Knowing that Soejima-kun had been keeping Fuyu out of that room, I hurriedly slipped through the sliding door. "Fuyu! You shouldn't go in..." I stopped mid-sentence. The moonlight reflecting off the snow was pouring into the Japanese-style room from the large window on the veranda. The back of Soejima-kun's hair, sitting on the veranda with the window open, was swaying in the wind.

As Fuyu approached Soejima-kun, who was looking up at the falling snow in the night sky on the veranda of the Japanese-style room, she sat on Soejima-kun's lap as if snuggling up to him. Even from behind, I could tell that Soejima-kun had turned his gaze from the snow in the night sky to Fuyu.

"Isn't it cold?"

When I timidly spoke to Soejima-kun's back while sitting on the veranda, he shifted his gaze from Fuyu to me. I was unsure what to do, but like the black cat, I went to the veranda and sat next to him.

"Can I watch with you? I can't sleep." When I said that in a muffled voice, Soejima-kun nodded.

Fuyu curled up in Soejima-kun's lap to keep out of the cold. He narrowed his eyes, looking at Fuyu. His eyes, somehow, resembled the old man's when he was in the hospital room, watching Soejima-kun with squinted eyes. I imitated Soejima-kun and looked up at the snow falling from the dark night sky. The snow seemed to be sucked into the pitch-dark night sky.

It was quiet. So quiet that you hesitated to breathe. I didn't know how much time we spent side by side on the veranda, looking up at the night sky. It was Soejima-kun who broke the seemingly endless silence. "I... was wrong?"

When I was unexpectedly spoken to and turned my face, Soejima-kun lifted a book covered in a dust jacket in front of me.

"It's fine. It's probably another erotic novel."

"You're sharp. But this is a masterpiece."

It was the book the old man had intended to read to Soejima-kun in the hospital room.

"I assumed it would be another strange book, knowing Grandpa, but it wasn't."

When I removed the book's cover, the name "Hajime Soejima" was boldly written on the back cover in childish handwriting. The pages that Soejima-kun flipped open for me to see were lined with larger and rounder letters than usual, typical for a children's book.

"When I was little, I loved this story, and I often begged Grandpa to read it to me..."

I looked up at Soejima-kun.

He was suppressing his emotions, maintaining a blank expression. The moment I saw his profile, I was overcome by intense sorrow, the reason for which I couldn't fathom. It felt as though my heart was being ripped out.

"Well, here begins the adventure. Are you ready...?" Soejima-kun looked at me in surprise.

I began to cry uncontrollably as I read the beginning of the book.

The swell of emotion welled up in my eyes as tears. Even I was taken aback. I hung my head, pressing my eyes to stop the tears, but they wouldn't stop. I was unbearably sad.

Fuyu, who had been resting on Soejima-kun's lap, lifted her head as if to ask what was happening.

Finally, I managed to speak. "I-I'm sorry..."

Soejima-kun, visible through my tear-blurred vision, looked down at the book. "Won't you read for me?"

"...Huh?"

"Continue."

Soejima-kun gave a relaxed smile, and I regained my composure.

Wiping away my tears, I turned my eyes back to the book Soejima-kun had opened.

“Tom’s eyes shone somewhere in this world...”

As I read in a tearful voice, Soejima-kun listened quietly.

Soejima-kun, you never say anything when you’re hurting, do you? Despite probably being in the deepest sorrow out of everyone, you don’t let any tears or pain show, just enduring it all alone.

The snow continued to fall. It was as if a cold, freezing sorrow was overflowing from the sky.

When I finished reading the final page, Soejima-kun, who had been listening quietly, closed the book and said, “Your voice is beautiful.”

My tear-swollen eyes widened at Soejima-kun’s unexpected words. Paying no mind to my reaction, Soejima-kun continued, gazing idly at the snow, “Don’t die, Yuu...”

I couldn’t immediately respond to his words. I didn’t know what was going to happen to me. But right now, I couldn’t admit such weakness to Soejima-kun. I took a deep breath and said in lieu of a nod, “Soejima-kun... What if... What if Kusunoki-san still loves you?”

Soejima-kun, who had been watching the snow, slowly turned his gaze to me.

“Even if you were the one who hurt Kusunoki-san, she still loves you...”

Soejima-kun gave a bitter laugh. “There’s no way that’s possible...”

“There is,” I asserted.

“I saw it. Kusunoki-san was in the art preparation room, staring intently at you on the roof... She seemed concerned,” I continued quietly.

“There is a future where you can be happy with someone.”

Soejima-kun closed his mouth for a moment, then gave a small laugh.

“Were you daydreaming?”

“No, really...”

“Even if what you say is true, it’s impossible. I’d surely repeat the same mistakes.”

“Repeat?”

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m broken.”

Soejima-kun looked down at his open palm.

“Just like you, Yuu.”

“...Huh?”

“I can’t touch.”

As I puzzled over what he meant, Soejima-kun, still looking down, continued, “I resist touching women. I get goosebumps when touched. Even if... it’s a girl I like.”

I was too shocked to say a word.

“I can’t do what comes naturally to others, like holding hands or hugging,” Soejima-kun quietly continued. “Kusunoki asked me if it would be disgusting if tried to do it for her too...” He clenched the palm of his hand that had been open. “I couldn’t say that it wouldn’t.”

Soejima-kun’s gaze met mine again.

“I can’t hope for that. A future where I live with someone I love...”

Soejima-kun’s eyes were clear. The barrier he always held up against intrusion was now gone.

“Is it just women?”

When I asked, Soejima-kun nodded and continued in a flat tone, “It probably started when my mother died...”

“Your mother...?”

I was confused. The image of the “mother,” who was next to Soejima-kun’s father, floated in my mind. The person whom Soejima-kun called “Yoriko-san” was...?

“That woman is my father’s second wife.”

Soejima-kun seemed to anticipate my question and continued, “My mother... When I was in elementary school, she was in an accident.”

Fuyu, lying on Soejima-kun’s lap, turned over.

“I remember being pulled by the hand, hard, by my father as he rushed to the hospital. My mother was in the mortuary, looking like she was just sleeping... I touched her, thinking she might wake up.”

Soejima-kun stroked Fuyu, who was on his lap.

“The moment I touched her, I felt a shudder. The cold, hard, lump-like feeling of just meat was so disgusting to me.”

Fuyu, being stroked by Soejima-kun, purred contentedly.

“I was sad and very scared. It’s terrible, isn’t it? Even though I loved my mother so much.”

I looked at Soejima-kun. “Do you remember that...?”

Soejima-kun stroked Fuyu with a vague expression on his face.

“I wonder. It just became too much for me. Not with my remarried father and his wife, but I wished to live with my grandfather, and that’s why things didn’t go well with Yoriko-san. I can’t control myself... I would hurt them if I stayed.”

I tried to imagine Soejima-kun’s past days. There must have been many events that made him feel “if I stay, I’ll hurt them.”

But still...

“...I’m not hurt.”

At my quiet words, Soejima-kun stopped stroking Fuyu.

“I’m not hurt, even when I’m with you.”

Hearing me say that, Soejima-kun gave a bitter laugh.

“That’s because...”

“...I’m a spirit.”

I reached out from the veranda to touch the falling snow.

“I’m an unimaginable being.”

The snow, of course, slipped through my palm and fell.

“The unimaginable is happening. If so, there might be a happy future that you can’t imagine... The possibility is not zero.”

Soejima-kun cast a meaningful gaze at me. Avoiding his gaze, I dropped my eyes to the children’s book on the floor.

“I want to live.”

I said something unfair. I knew he would have difficulty refusing me if I said that.

Soejima-kun dropped his gaze to the children’s book and then turned his gaze back to me again.

I had been a spirit for almost a month.

We tried to believe that tying his destiny would save us both and lead to happiness.

CHAPTER 4

PART 1

[Due to a personal accident that occurred at ○○ station, both the up and down lines have suspended operation. We apologize for the inconvenience...]

On the platform of the station where we were heading to school after the mourning period, the announcement of the train suspension was made, and Soejima-kun and I looked at each other. Murmurs and voices of dissatisfaction spread through the crowded platform of commuters and students.

Everyone was overwhelmed with their own daily lives. They had become too accustomed to the term “personal accident,” and nobody paid attention to the death of a stranger.

From the public’s point of view, Soejima-kun’s grandfather’s death might also be seen as insignificant, even though it had a significant impact on Soejima-kun.

Soejima-kun was set to transfer schools in the spring. As he had wished, he was allowed to live alone at his grandfather’s house until the end of the second grade.

In a few months, Soejima-kun would be leading a completely different life from now.

Amid the noise of the crowded platform, he muttered to me, who was lost in thought, “We got up early, didn’t we?”

That day, we had left home earlier than usual. It was to stop by his grandfather's grave before going to school.

On the way to the cemetery, Soejima-kun said, "Grandpa would say I hardly ever come." While tending the grave, I noticed that the tombstone now had the name and death date of his grandfather, which had not been there at the time of the funeral. "He would probably say the characters are too small."

Memories still brought sadness. Standing next to Soejima-kun as he put his hands together at the grave, I also put my hands together and made a wish in my heart.

May we tie the fates successfully, may Soejima-kun find happiness; please lend us your strength.

Sitting on the snow-covered veranda, I said, "I want to live."

"I can't imagine it going well..." Soejima-kun responded, picking up the children's book placed on the floor. "...but is that still okay?"

He had chosen to confront the matter of telling Kusunoki-san about his feelings —something he had been resisting all along. It must have been his grandfather who prompted Soejima-kun to do this.

The first period had already started by the time we arrived at school.

Presumably not wanting to attract attention by entering the classroom during class, especially on the first day after his mourning period, Soejima-kun had decided to skip the first hour and head to the rooftop. I followed him.

Once he confirmed that there was no one on the roof, Soejima-kun, with a terribly serious expression, talked to me. "So... how should I go about confessing?"

"What!?"

I was taken aback by his words, which did not align with his serious expression.

"Well... I think you should just express your feelings honestly..."

I can't remember it, but no matter how I think about it, I can't imagine I have any romantic experience that would qualify me to give advice to someone. Hearing me say it

without much confidence, Soejima-kun let out a deep sigh, resting his forehead on the wire mesh of the rooftop.

Panicking, I tried to think with my inexperienced mind. “When you dated Kusunoki-san before...”

“That time, it was Kusunoki who...”

“What did Kusunoki-san say then?”

“Huh!?”

“If you express it in the same way...”

When I said that, Soejima-kun seemed to freeze for a moment as if recalling that time, then he averted his eyes as if embarrassed.

“Absolutely impossible.”

Despite his assertive declaration, Soejima-kun hung his head. It piqued my curiosity to see Soejima-kun, who usually had a cool, nonchalant air about him, looking so flustered. What kind of confession had Kusunoki-san made, I wondered?

Searching for words to comfort the now-silent Soejima-kun, I said, “You don’t need to think so hard about it...”

“Once before, I hurt Kusunoki... and now your life is on the line,” he said.

I stared at Soejima-kun, seriously and deeply troubled. I felt a warmth in my chest at the sight of him struggling so hard even after he said he couldn’t imagine it going well.

“I’ll also think about a better way!” I exclaimed, then was surprised by the loudness of my own voice. Soejima-kun looked up, startled by my outburst.

“I might not be much help, but...” I mumbled into my hand, which covered my mouth. Soejima-kun watched me.

“Would you mind... letting me practice a confession?” he asked.

Caught off guard, I responded with a surprised, “Huh?” and Soejima-kun’s eyes darted nervously.

“I want to know if it’s right or if there’s anything I need to improve...” he said. Seeing Soejima-kun blush for the first time was somehow adorable. I covered my mouth with my hand to suppress a smile and gave a fake cough.

“If you’re okay with me... please go ahead,” I replied in a muffled voice.

Soejima-kun turned to face me, scratching his head and looking down as he addressed me. “You might think it’s too late, but even after we broke up, I was still... concerned about you...” he mumbled, lifting his gaze. His eyes, peeking from beneath his bangs, locked onto me.

I felt a flutter in my chest at his pleading expression.

“Um...” He paused, swallowing his breath. The tension radiating from Soejima-kun accelerated the pounding of my heart.

“Ah, no, it’s impossible! I can’t!” he suddenly exclaimed.

Soejima-kun’s ears turned bright red, and he ruffled the back of his hair as if to disguise his embarrassment. Even though his gaze had strayed, the loud pounding of my heart persisted.

“I don’t think I can say it well,” he admitted, falling silent in his gloominess. Feeling the need to say something, I racked my brain for a solution.

“How about... a letter!” My suggestion seemed to stun Soejima-kun as he looked up at me. “If speaking it out loud is too difficult...”

“Like... in the Showa era?” Soejima-kun frowned at my suggestion. It was a complete shot in the dark. In this day and age, a letter...

“Right, it’s silly.” I conceded, feeling embarrassed.

On the way home from school, we stopped by a bookstore. Soejima-kun held up a sheet of blue letter paper in the stationery section, showing it to me as if to ask, “How about this?”

I nodded in agreement.

By the time we arrived at the nearest station to his home, the stars had begun to twinkle. As we moved from the main road toward the residential area, the crowd thinned out. When the salaryman walking ahead of us turned a corner, and we were the only ones left walking down the residential alley, Soejima-kun

finally spoke. "I'll write the letter and give it in person to Kusunoki tomorrow," he said. I never thought he would actually confess through a letter.

"What... What will you write?" I wondered if my idea really was good enough.

Soejima-kun gave a faint, bashful smile and replied, "Like I'd tell you." He then gazed at me seriously.

"Wh-What is it?" I asked, flustered.

Soejima-kun then voiced his concern. "I wonder... If things go well between Kusunoki and me, will you disappear?"

His question made me realize something I hadn't considered before. I had been solely focused on bridging the gap between Soejima-kun and Kusunoki-san, but what would happen to me, the half-spirit, if I succeeded in tying their fates together?

Would my current body vanish the moment their fates were connected, returning to my original body somewhere else? If that were the case, the everyday life I had been sharing with Soejima-kun and Fuyu would come to an end.

"I won't be able to hear your hesitant way of speaking anymore, Yuu," Soejima-kun remarked.

A wave of loneliness welled up within me, but I quickly dismissed it.

Soejima-kun would get to date the person he liked, and I would be brought back to life. It was something to be happy about, not sad...

"S-Sorry. I know it's hard to understand me. I think... I should try to speak more clearly..." My voice, directed away from Soejima-kun, was as faint as always. Every time I tried to say something, I would hesitate. I would worry whether it was okay to say this or not, and sometimes, I grew tired of my suppressed voice. I could never speak well.

"It's fine, don't change. I'll just listen more closely," Soejima-kun replied in his usual aloof tone, making it feel as though the air had stopped for a moment.

His words were unexpected. I never thought he would say something like that.

When I met his gaze again, Soejima-kun said, "I'm the one who should be sorry. I wasn't able to find out who you truly are." A complicated expression crossed his face.

"I wonder if it will go well..." His voice was devoid of energy.

Without thinking, I found myself replying. "It will!" My words, unusually strong, surprised Soejima-kun.

"It will definitely go well," I murmured again, more to reassure myself. Soejima-kun let out a small smile.

"When you come back to life, tell me, okay? What your real name is, how you lived..."

"Okay." I nodded, feeling a flicker of unease. When all my memories returned, would I be able to meet Soejima-kun again?

The house of the old man could be seen at the end of the road, lit by the city lights. As I thought about how close we were to home, I also found myself wishing that we could continue walking like this for just a bit longer.

I knew there wouldn't be many more opportunities to walk home with Soejima-kun like this.

As we opened the front door of the house, I could hear the sound of Fuyu's footsteps. When Soejima-kun turned on the lights, the hallway brightened instantly, and I could see Fuyu coming toward us.

As he took off his shoes, Soejima-kun gave Fuyu a gentle look.

"We're home, Fuyu," I called out to the black cat as I stepped into the hallway. Usually, when I called her name, Fuyu would look at me, but this day was different.

Fuyu went toward Soejima-kun.

She passed right through me.

Soejima-kun's expression changed.

"Fuyu...?"

Fuyu didn't respond to my voice, to my presence, ever again. From this day onward, Fuyu could no longer see me.

PART 2

We needed to hurry. The fact that Fuyu could no longer see me drove us into a frantic rush.

The bell signaling the end of the lunch break rang.

Cautiously, mindful of others, Soejima-kun opened his shoe locker and carefully slipped a blue envelope inside.

"Hajime!"

The loud calling of his name made both Soejima-kun and me jump. We turned toward the source of the voice.

"What are you doing? You'll be late!"

Yousuke-kun, walking down the hall with a classmate, held up a chemistry textbook as if to show it to Soejima-kun.

"Wait, chemistry is next?"

The next class was in a different room. Soejima-kun, with a glance in my direction that seemed to say, "I'll go ahead," began to run toward the classroom.

"Oh, he's unusually hurried," Yousuke commented, and I watched Soejima-kun's retreating figure as he ran down the hallway.

The blue envelope that Soejima-kun had left in his shoe locker would be in Kusunoki-san's hands in a few hours. Then, surely, Soejima-kun's confession would...

The sunlight pouring in from the hallway windows was dazzling. As I inadvertently glanced out the window, I noticed Kusunoki-san walking down the corridor.

The timing was peculiar. It was as if the sixth sense kicked in when you were conscious of someone, allowing you to spot them easily.

I approached the window and watched Kusunoki-san.

She stopped walking down the corridor as if reacting to something, then turned around. Was she called out to? A male student approached Kusunoki-san, and they began to walk together.

The group of female students' gossip in the gym came back to me. *"That bitch? That's the worst."*

I shook my head as if to dismiss the words, but a sense of unease flickered in my chest. I looked at the shoe locker where Soejima-kun had placed the blue envelope. I wanted to erase even the slightest anxiety. I wanted to believe that Soejima-kun's confession would go well.

I followed after Kusunoki-san. But by the time I got to the corridor I could see from the window, Kusunoki-san was no longer there. From the layout of the school that I remembered, I thought she might have headed to that place I had seen before.

I climbed the stairs at the end of the corridor and headed to the third floor.

Along the corridor with unused classrooms... Stepping through the door of the art preparation room, just as I had suspected, Kusunoki-san was there. She was standing alone in front of an open locker, seeming to look at something inside.

I felt relieved to see that Kusunoki-san was alone, but at the same time, I felt disgusted with myself. I felt relieved that she was not with the boy from before—a reaction, no doubt, influenced by the rumors I had heard about her from the girls in the gym.

With a smile on her face, Kusunoki-san locked the locker she had been looking into and walked past me toward the door. She gently opened the door just a few centimeters and looked outside.

Her behavior was strikingly similar to ours when we were trying to avoid being seen while putting the blue envelope into the shoe locker. It had been the same before, too. In the art preparation room, Kusunoki-san had seemed conscious of others' eyes.

What was she doing there?

I looked around the art preparation room. When I glanced at the locker she had been looking into, my eyes caught a calendar hanging on the wall, and something dawned on me. The day Kusunoki-san was watching Soejima-kun in the art preparation room was the day his grandfather's condition suddenly worsened. That day, like today, was Thursday.

Suddenly, there was a loud clatter from the hallway. Startled, I turned around.

Kusunoki-san was no longer by the door. When I hurriedly stepped through the door, I saw papers scattered across the hallway. A young male teacher was on his hands and knees, looking as if he had tripped.

I looked for Kusunoki-san. She was at the end of the corridor, staring out the window. When I followed her gaze, I saw Soejima-kun in the chemistry room.

By the time school was out, Soejima-kun was leaning against the wall near the shoe lockers. Every now and then, a passing student would sneak a glance at his handsome profile. He must have been so nervous that he didn't even notice their gazes.

A shadow appeared in front of Soejima-kun, who was looking to the side.

The person who stopped in front of Soejima-kun looked puzzled and said, "What is this?"

Standing in front of Soejima-kun, Kusunoki-san thrust the blue envelope at him with a prickly voice. The seal had been broken.

"Did you put this in my shoe locker to mock me?"

As Kusunoki-san sharply retorted and pushed back the blue envelope, I was taken aback by her words. Inside the envelope was a letter that Soejima-kun had written last night while shut in his room.

While I was nervously wondering what on earth he had written, Soejima-kun seemed undisturbed by Kusunoki-san's reaction.

"I'm not making fun of you. Can we talk somewhere else?"

Their classmates around the shoe lockers were curiously watching their exchange. Realizing they had attracted attention, Kusunoki-san and Soejima-kun started walking toward the back of the school building.

Soejima-kun turned and looked at me, who was standing still. I understood he was telling me to follow them. I nodded to his gaze and chased after the two.

In the back of the school building, Soejima-kun and Kusunoki-san stood facing each other.

The girl took out a sheet of notepaper from the blue envelope and unfolded it in front of Soejima-kun.

"Going to the trouble of putting it in an envelope and even writing a name on it... What is this?"

I was startled by what was written on the notepaper that Kusunoki-san unfolded.

What was written on the notepaper wasn't text. There was a drawing on the notepaper that looked like a child's doodle. It was a terribly poor drawing.

Pointing to the drawing, Soejima-kun said seriously, "Kusunoki."

Understandably, Kusunoki-san furrowed her eyebrows and pressed Soejima-kun. "So, what's your intention?"

"I tried to imitate you."

"Huh?"

"The picture you drew for me a long time ago..."

As Soejima-kun said that, Kusunoki-san seemed to realize something. She looked at the notepaper she was holding in her hand with a puzzled expression.

"I wasn't this bad at drawing."

Looking at the drawing on the notepaper with a distant look in her eyes as if she were recalling something, Kusunoki-san gave a faint smile and looked at

Soejima-kun again.

“I drew it better than the real thing.”

At Kusunoki-san's words, Soejima-kun chuckled softly, causing the girl to let out a small laugh as well. I could see from my distant vantage point that a soft atmosphere had developed between the two of them. Then Soejima-kun spoke.

“I'm moving in the spring.”

Kusunoki-san looked surprised.

“I... Even after we broke up, I've always been concerned about you, Kusunoki.”

Perhaps guessing that Soejima-kun was about to say something significant, Kusunoki-san's expression stiffened.

“I know I have no right to say this, but...”

“Wait...”

Interrupting Soejima-kun, Kusunoki-san cast her eyes down. Her expression seemed troubled. There was a moment of silence. As I felt my heart beating faster, I stared at the two of them in their silence.

Recalling the way Kusunoki-san had looked at Soejima-kun, I was certain.

Everything will be all right; it will work out...

“I'm sorry.”

I doubted my own ears. With a pained expression, Kusunoki-san returned the notepaper and envelope to Soejima-kun. The voice I had heard was real; it was a harsh reminder of reality.

As Soejima-kun received the returned notepaper and envelope, Kusunoki-san quickly walked away.

I stood there, stunned by the scene.

Soejima-kun crumpled the returned notepaper and envelope in his hand. He scratched the back of his head and leaned against the school building wall.

“Ah... It didn't work out.”

He looked at me, cracked a small smile, and spoke in a bright voice. “Don’t look so down.”

I wasn’t sure what expression I had on my face, but it must have been very gloomy, enough to make the person who would most likely want to cry worry about me.

“I... I thought it would work out...”

I watched from a distance as Kusunoki-san looked at Soejima-kun. I was certain, without any basis, that her gaze was special. With that baseless confidence, I had pushed Soejima-kun too hard...

I shrank within myself. I didn’t know how to apologize.

“Did I do it badly?” Soejima-kun asked me as he looked at the notepaper that Kusunoki-san had pushed back at him.

Suddenly questioned, I hesitated.

Seeing my reaction, he gave a bitter laugh. “I guess so.”

Soejima-kun had been holed up in his room for many hours. Maybe he had redrawn the picture many times.

While recalling Kusunoki-san looking at the picture on the notepaper nostalgically, I asked, “Why did you draw a caricature?”

“Maybe because that’s how we started dating.” Soejima-kun answered, still staring at the notepaper, with a distant look.

“But memories weren’t enough.”

As Soejima-kun spat out these words, he crumpled the notepaper with the caricature drawn on it and hung his head as if to hide his face.

“We’re running out of time.” The words Soejima-kun muttered in a strained voice were a reminder of the time we had left. Standing beside Soejima-kun, who was silently hanging his head, I couldn’t move or say anything.

After stuffing the crumpled notepaper and envelope into his pocket, Soejima-kun lifted his face as if to shake off his wavering emotions.

“Let’s find another way to bring you back to life.”

When Soejima-kun lifted his face, he had the calm gaze he always had, like a completely different person from a moment ago. I hesitated to meet his eyes. Seeing me like this, Soejima-kun continued, “I’m sorry. I couldn’t ‘tie our fates.’”

I wondered why Soejima-kun was apologizing. The pain welled up in my chest all at once, seeing him not blame me at all.

“I’m sorry...”

As I whispered an apology almost inaudibly, Soejima-kun laughed, saying, “You cry so easily.”

More events that threatened to wipe away his smile followed.

Upon returning home that day, a cold wind blew in from the hallway window that had been left unlocked. We didn’t hear the footsteps that always greeted us.

Fuyu was nowhere to be found in the house.

We ran out of the house and searched around the neighborhood. Even as the day turned into a deep night, we couldn’t find Fuyu.

“Yuu!”

In my panic, Soejima-kun called out to me as I was running around aimlessly.

“Let’s go home for today. Fuyu might just be out playing and might come back.”

“But, if Fuyu...”

The image of Fuyu sprang into my head, and I couldn’t contain my anxiety. Soejima-kun gently said, “Don’t worry.”

He was putting up a front. He must be worried too. He was stifling his true feelings, not uttering any complaints or the truth. And the person making him do that was me, standing right here.

Looking back, ever since he met me, it had been one thing after another for Soejima-kun.

He was told by a suddenly appearing half-spirit—me—that I might die if we didn’t tie the fates, he got involved in my search for my memories, he lost

someone important to him, and confessed his feelings to someone he'd been thinking about all along without any desire of his own and got rejected.

The only thing I could do for Soejima-kun, the purpose of my existence as a half-spirit who had made a contract with the listless man calling himself the God of Matchmaking, was to encourage him to form bonds.

If I can't do that, what am I doing at Soejima-kun's side? If I can't come back to life, Soejima-kun will surely blame himself. Maybe all I'm doing is making Soejima-kun unhappy. Where is the light of hope?

The more I groped for the light, the more I got lost in the darkness. I felt despair, thinking I might be unable to escape from this abyss. I realized the only thing I could do was not to drag Soejima-kun further in.

On our way back home, Soejima-kun talked more than usual. He only chose trivial topics, such as interesting overseas dramas or new developments near the station. It seemed he hesitated to speak about the future. He knew it would only make him more anxious. He felt like his life was a dead end.

Even after a night, Fuyu didn't come back. We posted "lost cat" signs in the neighborhood, reported to the health center and the police, and searched for Fuyu but couldn't find her, even after several days had passed. I wasn't focused on finding my memories.

I had been thinking all the time . How can I disappear from Soejima-kun's life. That's the only thing I can do for him.

Whether I was on the train, walking down the school road, or at school, that was all I thought about.

The first period of that day was a school-wide assembly. I went to the gymnasium with Soejima-kun, mixed in with the students walking down the hallway. Each class formed two lines in the gymnasium and lined up in attendance number order. At the end of the line, teachers were also standing. A PE teacher in a jersey, using a microphone, told the bustling students to be quiet.

The principal climbed onto the stage and started speaking. Hardly any students were seriously listening. Even Soejima-kun wasn't listening to the

principal's speech. He looked for a moment toward a different class across the row. Kusunoki-san was standing in his line of sight, and my chest throbbed with pain.

It was natural. Just because he got rejected didn't mean he could get over his feelings immediately.

I remembered the sight of Kusunoki-san, who had been staring at Soejima-kun intensely.

From the art preparation room and the window at the end of the hallway, I could see that Kusunoki-san was indeed looking at Soejima-kun. Was that just my misunderstanding? Then what was she intently looking at?

As I was looking at Kusunoki-san across from me, I noticed a sudden change. Her head swayed heavily.

“Eh...”

This was when Soejima-kun reacted to my muttered voice and turned his eyes to where I was looking. Through the gaps between the standing students, I could see Kusunoki-san falling to the floor like a puppet with cut strings. A female student standing behind Kusunoki-san let out a short shriek at the sight in front of her. A dull sound echoed in the gymnasium.

Starting with a short shriek, the voices of the students who noticed Kusunoki-san's fall spread. The student rows broke as they tried to see what was causing the commotion. Voices overflowed, and students surrounded Kusunoki-san, who had fallen, forming a circle around her.

Soejima-kun was trying to get to the fallen Kusunoki-san, weaving through the students. I, too, slipped through the students. Soejima-kun stood on the outside of the students surrounding Kusunoki-san.

Immediately afterward, a young male teacher emerged between the surrounding students, carrying the fallen Kusunoki-san with somewhat unsteady steps. A female teacher and a PE teacher wearing a jersey who arrived late urged the agitated students to be quiet. The students' agitated voices changed to whispers, and their gaze was focused on the young male teacher, who seemed somewhat unreliable, holding Kusunoki-san.

While returning to Soejima-kun's class row, he and I, like the surrounding students, stared at Kusunoki-san being carried away by the young male teacher. When we could no longer see her, the principal resumed his interrupted speech, and the gymnasium gradually returned to its usual boring atmosphere.

As I was debating whether to go check on Kusunoki-san or stay next to Soejima-kun in the class row, I realized that there was nothing I could do either way. Absent-mindedly, I was standing there doing nothing, wondering what the point of my existence was.

I couldn't read Soejima-kun's feelings from his expression standing next to me. But there was no way he wasn't worried about Kusunoki-san. It seemed like I would be swallowed up by a pessimistic feeling if I did nothing.

"Soejima-kun... I'm going to check on Kusunoki-san." Breaking our promise not to talk in public, I spoke to Soejima-kun's back and fled the gymnasium.

I walked through the empty corridor and slipped through the door of the infirmary. I passed by the dozing school nurse and approached the bed with the curtain drawn. As expected, when I passed through the curtain, Kusunoki-san was sleeping on that bed.

The sunlight filtering through the window curtain faintly illuminated Kusunoki-san sleeping on the white bed. Despite her mature features, Kusunoki-san looked like a young child when she was sleeping.

The white curtain, the white bed, and the light filtering through the curtain highlighted her beautiful sleeping face. It was as if she were sleeping in a bright light—the complete opposite of me.

This person... She could make Soejima-kun happy.

As I held down my bangs to hide my alien-like eyes, I felt miserable and desperately endured the heat welling up in my eyes.

PART 3

The sound of a ringing phone entered my ears from behind the curtain in the quiet infirmary.

When the school nurse answered the phone, I could hear the sound of her hurrying out of the infirmary. Without seeming to notice the noise, I could see Kusunoki-san sleeping quietly through the gap of my hands holding back my bangs. I closed my eyes, on the edge of tears, and thought. *To not make Soejima-kun sad, I have to disappear. What if I say I regained my memory and make up a false story? Will he be relieved? Will he realize it's a lie right away...?*

The sound of the infirmary door being opened again rushed into my ears as I closed my eyelids.

I didn't pay attention, thinking that the school nurse had returned, but when I noticed the hurried footsteps approaching, I heard a voice from behind the curtain.

"Is anyone there? I'm coming in."

Into my eyes jumped the figure of a panting Soejima-kun, opening the curtain.

Soejima-kun stared at me, standing in front of the bed for a few seconds, and said, "I see..." as if to catch his breath.

"What's wrong? What about the morning assembly?" I asked Soejima-kun, who looked flustered.

"I was thinking too much."

"Huh?"

"I thought you might just disappear." Soejima-kun smiled at me with a relieved expression.

The moment I saw that expression, an impulse to suppress something surged within me.

"I won't give up. I won't give up until the end," Soejima-kun said, looking at me with a serious gaze.

My thoughts were seen through, and I didn't know what to respond with, so I was confused. Still, I had to say something, so I opened my mouth.

"That's embarrassing."

The voice that echoed by the bedside wasn't my flustered voice. Soejima-kun and I were surprised and turned our faces in the direction of the voice. There, Kusunoki-san raised her upper body from the bed with a grumble.

"It's just anemia. What are you talking about?" Kusunoki-san said to Soejima-kun in a clear tone, her face looking embarrassed.

How long had she been awake? Soejima-kun and I looked at each other.

Kusunoki-san couldn't see me. There was no way she thought Soejima-kun was talking to my spiritly self. It was only natural to think he was talking to her.

The girl laughed bitterly in her bed.

"What? Did you think I was lying in bed with an incurable disease?"

As she said that, Kusunoki-san had a look on her face as if she'd realized something.

"I see. Your grandfather's death was sudden, wasn't it?"

As she said this with a sense of realization, Kusunoki-san made a peculiar expression, as if she felt sorry for laughing. She might have thought Soejima-kun had overlapped her fallen figure with his grandfather's.

"But it's not that..."

While staring at Soejima-kun scratching his head in distress, Kusunoki-san asked, "Did you carry me to the infirmary?"

"No, it wasn't me. It was Miyoshi."

"Miyoshi-sensei..."

Saying that, Kusunoki-san cast her gaze down on the bed.

"I couldn't expect you to carry me," Kusunoki-san muttered in a small voice, and closed her mouth. Soejima-kun also fell silent. I was watching the two of them in silence with mixed feelings. Being alone together after that confession must have been awkward for both of them.

As I was thinking this, Kusunoki-san, who had been silent, started laughing.

Looking at the laughing girl, Soejima-kun asked with a puzzled look, “Huh? What are you...”

“Sorry, sorry. But that...” Kusunoki-san pointed to the school shoes that Soejima-kun was wearing. “You’re still marking them properly.”

Soejima-kun’s face turned red instantly. A small star mark was drawn in an inconspicuous position on the shoes that Kusunoki-san was pointing at.

“You used to mark all your belongings with that mark in middle school instead of writing your name.”

Come to think of it, I had once seen a small black star mark drawn in the corner of Soejima-kun’s textbook.

“You remember weird things.”

“I didn’t think you would remember the caricature.”

Kusunoki-san, with a mischievous smile, asked in a somewhat lonely tone. “So, if you’re moving, nobody’s going to live in your grandfather’s house?”

“I haven’t asked about what’s going to happen yet, but probably.”

“I see... That’s a shame. It was a popular spot for girls at one point.”

“What do you mean by ‘popular spot’?” Soejima-kun frowned.

“When the rumor spread that if one went to your house, your grandfather would let anyone in, it became a popular spot for girls who liked you in middle school.”

Kusunoki-san laughed softly as she spoke. Soejima-kun seemed to be recalling those times, his expression turning exasperated.

“That was really tough. When I got home, there were people I didn’t know at all having tea and chatting with my grandfather as if it were the most natural thing in the world.”

“I know. I was glared at by you in a really annoyed way too.”

Listening to Kusunoki-san’s words, I remembered as well.

When I first met Soejima-kun, I was at his grandfather's house. Soejima-kun made a clearly displeased face at me and said, "Great. Did my grandpa let another person into the house without permission?"

"He was a flirtatious old man, so he probably just wanted to chat with young girls..." Soejima-kun sounded exasperated, but there was a hint of tenderness in his voice.

Kusunoki-san shook her head at his words. "He said it was 'rehabilitation.'"

"Huh?"

"I didn't really understand what he meant by 'rehabilitation' until you explained your condition to me. I think your grandfather was hoping that you would get used to interacting with girls normally. In middle school, you avoided girls more than you do now."

"That's normal for that age, isn't it?" Soejima-kun laughed lightly.

"That brings back memories. Even though you glared at me coldly, I... I didn't give up and kept going to your grandfather's house." Kusunoki-san spoke nostalgically of their common memories, which I was not privy to.

"I had to be persistent, you know? Most people got annoyed with you and stopped coming soon after."

"It felt like you were part of the family. You were always at the house."

Kusunoki-san laughed in amusement at Soejima-kun's words.

"While talking with your grandfather, I used to wait until you finished your club activities, and when you came back, my I kept insistently telling you that I liked you and asking for your number. I would be met with a cold attitude and feel sad."

Soejima-kun made a surprised face. "You felt sad?"

"Of course. I'm delicate even if I'm pushy," Kusunoki-san said jokingly, and Soejima-kun's face clouded slightly.

"I felt sad because no matter how hard I tried, you wouldn't give me the time of day. I decided to stop chasing after you and stop going to your house... Then..."

Kusunoki-san laughed softly.

“You handed me a piece of paper in the school hallway that read, ‘You forgot something,’ and then quickly left. When I opened it, I saw that your phone number was written in the corner of your portrait I had doodled at your grandfather’s house.”

Breaking Soejima-kun’s silence, Kusunoki-san asked in a teasing tone, “Did the push and pull work well?”

“Don’t make fun of it.”

Saying that, Soejima-kun looked up at Kusunoki-san, who raised her right hand as if asking for a handshake. “Can you hold my hand?”

“Huh...?”

“Is it still impossible for you to touch me?”

Kusunoki-san stared intently at Soejima-kun as if testing him. His eyes swam as he hesitantly extended his right hand.

However, he stopped just a few centimeters before they could touch. The few centimeters felt like a huge rift. Soejima-kun’s gaze briefly caught me, who was watching from the side, then quickly looked away.

“I guess it’s still like that.” Kusunoki-san said this and was about to retract her hand, Soejima-kun suddenly grabbed her right hand.

Surprised by the sudden grabbing of her hand, Kusunoki-san’s face twisted slightly.

“It hurts. My hand...”

Even as Kusunoki-san said this, Soejima-kun did not let go of the hand he was gripping.

“I’ll change. I want us to date again.”

The light shining through the white curtains in the infirmary illuminated the two of them holding hands before my eyes.

I had been wishing strongly for Soejima-kun and Kusunoki-san to get back together. And yet, now that I was seeing the scene I had been wishing for, I

couldn't understand why my heart felt squeezed, making it impossible to look at the two of them directly.

PART 4

"I want us to date again."

Soejima-kun, gripping her hand, got a quiet nod from Kusunoki-san.

After confirming Kusunoki-san's nod, Soejima-kun's gaze slowly moved toward me. When I responded to Soejima-kun's gaze, which seemed to confirm his success, with a smile, the corners of Soejima-kun's mouth slightly curved upward. Seeing that expression, I was sure. Everything had gone well. Soejima-kun's relationship was reconciled, and I would come back to life...

Ah, I see. The squeezing feeling in my heart must be because I'm sad to say goodbye to Soejima-kun.

In an attempt to calm myself down, I took a deep breath and checked my own body.

I had expected the situation to change dramatically now that the relationship was reconciled, but my body remained standing in the health room without change.

In the face of my body, which showed no sign of change, I panicked and turned my gaze to Soejima-kun. He must have been thinking the same thing as me—that a change would come immediately. A hint of confusion seeped into his eyes.

"Hajime, it hurts."

"Ah... sorry."

Startled by Kusunoki-san's voice, Soejima-kun abruptly let go of the hand he had been holding.

My mind was in chaos. I had just reconciled their relationship. I was supposed to be able to return to my original body once I connected their fates, so why...

Kusunoki-san checked her right hand, which Soejima-kun had let go of, with her left hand, then asked, "Hey, would you go home with me today?"

With confusion still lingering in his eyes, Soejima-kun gave a small nod. Upon seeing this, Kusunoki-san flashed a bright smile.

Soejima-kun made eye contact with me in my state of confusion and flicked his gaze toward the door. That was a sign for us to go outside.

"I'm going back to class. Kusunoki, you should rest a bit more."

Saying this to Kusunoki-san, Soejima-kun left the infirmary. I followed behind him.

Once we were outside, facing each other in the empty hallway, Soejima-kun opened his mouth, seemingly perplexed.

"Does this mean... We didn't tie our fates together...?"

Seeing Soejima-kun's dark, hardened expression, I felt sad. He was making such a face at a happy moment when he should be celebrating his reunion with the person he loved.

"Maybe things are just ambiguous for now. I'm sure the relationship will be fully reconciled soon."

I tried to show him a bright smile. However, no smile was returned from Soejima-kun. He seemed to be about to say something, but then he closed his mouth. We could hear the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs near the infirmary.

Maybe the situation would change as time went on.

Such faint hope turned out to be vain. Even after school, I remained a half-spirit.

When it was time to leave school, I told Soejima-kun that I would go home early to avoid being a hindrance to him and Kusunoki-san. Soejima-kun fixed his gaze on me. “When I get home, let’s watch the foreign drama we talked about last time.”

This was the first time Soejima-kun had said something like this. It felt as if he was asking me not to disappear silently, and it shook my heart.

I left the school alone. The tree-lined street I walked down every day, the train platform, the train, the familiar route from the nearest station to our house. No one paid any attention to me. I was invisible. Nothing had changed.

Feeling depressed by my unchanging state as a half-spirit, I stopped walking.

“Please... God... Show yourself...”

Even as I murmured in supplication, the listless god did not appear.

Upon arriving home, I slipped through the entrance of the old man’s house, where no lights were on.

The house, the absence of Soejima-kun and Fuyu, the pitch black darkness. Soejima-kun had always turned on lights throughout the house for me. He had been considerate enough to ensure I wasn’t in darkness, in the guest room, or in the corridor.

While waiting for Soejima-kun to return, I found myself frequently glancing at the clock in the living room.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, the dimly visible hands of the clock moved on to seven, nine, and even past ten, yet Soejima-kun did not return.

The alternating thoughts that he might still be with Kusunoki-san and the fear that something might have happened kept me restless. Unpleasant thoughts skimmed through my mind.

What if the old man I had met in the hospital room during the final phase could see me?

What if Fuyu not returning had something to do with the fact that I was becoming invisible to her and Soejima-kun?

I, who had been holding my knees, stood up and went outside from the entrance.

I considered going to look for Soejima-kun. However, nothing came to mind when I thought about where he might have gone.

After school, other than stopping by various libraries, Soejima-kun would go straight home and look up information about the accident for me. The only image I had of him was him tirelessly searching for ways to bring the half-spirit back to its original body.

Unable to do anything, I stood idly at the entrance and looked up at the night sky. It looked beautifully clear and bluish-white, as if extremely cold.

“... Yuu?”

When I turned my face, Soejima-kun was there, with a face asking, “What are you doing?”

“Why are you outside in this cold...”

As he began to say this, Soejima-kun made a face as if he remembered something.

“Oh, right. You can’t feel the temperature, can you?”

As he said this with white breath, Soejima-kun looked at the school uniform I was wearing. In contrast to Soejima-kun, who was wearing a gray scarf and a coat, I was lightly dressed in a sailor suit. As I nodded in response to Soejima-kun’s words, I looked away.

I swallowed the question that came to mind. *What were you doing?* I wasn’t family. I might not even be a friend. I knew I was not in a position to ask such a thing.

At the end of my lowered gaze were Soejima-kun’s sneakers.

Although it wasn’t raining, Soejima-kun’s sneakers were muddy. Looking closely, I noticed mud on his uniform trousers as well.

Soejima-kun, noticing my gaze, spoke.

“Ah, this... I slipped a little.” Soejima-kun laughed in a self-deprecating manner.

“After I dropped off Kusunoki at her home, I went to the long stairs of the Death God’s Mansion.”

I looked up in surprise.

“I couldn’t find anything that might serve as a clue, though...”

A hint of regret seeped into Soejima-kun’s voice.

“Why... go that far...”

My own voice was trembling. I bit my lip. Soejima-kun’s kindness was making my chest hurt.

After all, I can’t do anything. I can only bring him misfortune.

“It would have been better if you hadn’t found me at the long stairs of the Death God’s Mansion...”

“Eh?”

“If you hadn’t found me, you wouldn’t have gotten involved in such a troublesome matter.”

The self-deprecating words slipped out.

“Actually, I had a slight memory of my past. A childhood memory, probably. It seemed like a boy in my class didn’t like me. I’m not someone who is liked by others. I’m not... someone for whom Soejima-kun should go all out.”

Like a flood, self-deprecating words overflowed from my trembling lips and echoed in the silent residential area. The memory of the past that I didn’t want Soejima-kun to know, and that I couldn’t bring myself to tell.

Even though I was determined to face the past, there was always fear in the corner of my mind.

In truth, the reason I couldn’t regain my memories might be that I didn’t want to know what kind of person I was.

“Sometimes I think...” In the silence, Soejima-kun whispered.

“Maybe you’re just an illusion that I created.”

I was puzzled by Soejima-kun’s words.

“I was fed up with reality, thinking nothing good would happen from here on. So I thought maybe that was why you appeared. It’s strange, isn’t it?”

Soejima-kun, laughing as if mocking himself, took a deep breath and said in a resolute tone, “I want to know. I want to be sure that you’re not an illusion. That you are a real person. I want to believe you exist and are not just a spirit.”

Soejima-kun’s words pierced the dark feelings that filled my mind. Keeping my lips clenched as if to suppress the warming emotions, I said in a choked voice, “Probably only you, Soejima-kun, would say such a thing.”

The boy, not missing a word of my mumbling, chuckled slightly.

The round moon hanging in the clear, blueish-white night sky illuminated my body.

My consciousness was still here; my feelings were still swaying.

It’s not over yet. Is there still something I can do?

CHAPTER 5

PART 1

Underneath the rows of trees lining the school path, near the shoe lockers, along the corridors... No matter where I walked, classmates glanced at Soejima-kun, murmuring among themselves. Today, more so than usual, Soejima-kun seemed to be the center of attention.

Walking by his side, I could sense an unusual atmosphere in the school. Even Soejima-kun, who was accustomed to being stared at, appeared to have noticed the classmates' increased attention.

Upon reaching a hidden corner of the corridor, he looked at me, silently mouthing, "Could it be... they can see you?" with an oddly puzzled expression.

Of course, that wasn't possible. The person they were focusing on was Soejima-kun.

Maintaining his uncomfortable expression under the piercing gazes, Soejima-kun started toward the classroom. From behind him came the hurried, flapping sound of approaching footsteps. As Yousuke-kun tried to jump at him, Soejima-kun swiftly dodged, leaving the boy to stumble forward with his momentum.

"What are you doing?" Soejima-kun asked in a cool tone. His face tensed up as Yousuke-kun, who had regained his balance, grinned and nodded repeatedly, looking at Soejima-kun with an oddly smiling gaze.

"What is it?" Soejima-kun asked, drawing back slightly, only for Yousuke-kun to enthusiastically hug him.

“I’m glad for you. I’ve been hoping it would happen,” Yousuke-kun said.

“Huh?” Soejima-kun tilted his head, attempting to peel off the clinging boy.

“You’re dating Kusunoki, right?”

“Huh?”

“It’s the talk of the school.”

“Rumors...” Soejima-kun exhaled in seeming comprehension of the attention he had received up until we reached the classroom. “Anything involving Kusunoki turns into gossip.”

“It’s you, though,” Yousuke-kun retorted, an exasperated expression crossing Soejima-kun’s face. “You were the one who followed Kusunoki when she was taken away and returned home with her that day. That’s what stood out.”

Yousuke-kun grinned, his delight apparent. “Still, good for you.”

Contrasting with the boy’s smile, Soejima-kun’s expression darkened. A fleeting glance in my direction caused his expression to harden further.

“Hajime?” Yousuke-kun’s smile faded as Soejima-kun fell abruptly silent.

Noticing his concern, Soejima-kun forced a laugh and said, “It’s nothing... I’m just happy,” as if to diffuse the awkward atmosphere.

Last night, Soejima-kun had suggested that we spent our limited time re-examining the accident instead of going to school. However, I had expressed my desire to attend.

When asked for a reason, I replied, “I think it would be better for you to spend as much time as possible with Kusunoki-san to strengthen your bond.”

Before a discontented Soejima-kun could protest, I continued, “Besides... I feel there’s something that can be done in the school where I’ve recovered some of my past memories.”

To my assertive statement, Soejima-kun silently acquiesced with a reluctant nod. Seeing his agreement, I breathed a sigh of relief.

I wasn’t lying.

The image of Kusunoki-san in the art preparation room, seeming to avoid people's gazes, was fresh in my mind. It had been bothering me for a while.

What was Kusunoki-san doing in the art preparation room?

On that pale, transparent night, I resolved to do everything in my power once again.

I decided to investigate Kusunoki-san's strange behavior. The fact that the next day was a Thursday seemed to reinforce my decision. However, I couldn't tell Soejima-kun about this.

After all, Kusunoki-san's unusual actions might have absolutely no connection to the fact that I hadn't changed. I didn't want to fuel Soejima-kun's worries—that my continued existence might mean the bond he had formed was a mistake.

When the first period started, I slipped out of the classroom where Soejima-kun was and walked down the now deserted hallway. I walked along the covered walkway and climbed the staircase at the end, which led to a hallway lined with special classrooms. I looked up at the sign reading "Art Preparation Room."

It was Thursday. What was Kusunoki-san doing in the art preparation room?

I passed through the door and approached the window where Kusunoki-san had been the previous Thursday. I planned to wait for her there.

She might not come today. The class had just started, so she wouldn't come there immediately—I had let my guard down with that thought.

That was why I was genuinely surprised when I heard the sound of the door opening behind me just as I was standing by the window.

Kusunoki-san? I turned around and looked at the person who'd opened the door. The one who had entered wasn't Kusunoki-san. The man who entered was thin and lanky, with a narrow chin and a somewhat timid appearance, dressed in a crumpled suit.

I remembered seeing him in the corridor in front of the art preparation room, stumbling and swaying. He was the young male teacher who had been the first to rush over when Kusunoki-san collapsed, cradling her and leaving the gym.

Soejima-kun and Kusunoki-san called him “Miyoshi-sensei.”

Upon entering the art preparation room, Miyoshi-sensei furrowed his brows as he looked my way. He stepped closer, one step at a time, without uttering a word.

Is he able to see me? My heartbeat escalated. As he reached my side, I held my breath in anticipation, but Miyoshi-sensei didn't even glance at me. He simply closed the open window curtain.

Maybe the sunlight from the window was just too bright. Feeling relief, I released the breath I had been holding. Miyoshi-sensei pulled out an apron covered in paint from a shelf behind some specialized books, put it on, and then, without hesitation, grabbed a pen stand from the mess of things scattered about. He retrieved a canned coffee from a mini fridge hidden behind a plaster statue and plonked it onto the large table.

Clearly, he was the art teacher who owned this room. Whether he was here for class preparation or just to take a break, it seemed to have nothing to do with Kusunoki-san, and I felt disappointed.

Kusunoki-san had fled the classroom to hide when she sensed people outside the art preparation room. If someone was here, she might not come. The curtains had been drawn, and I couldn't even check the outside situation.

There may be no point in staying here. As I was contemplating leaving and absent-mindedly watching Miyoshi-sensei, my train of thought halted in the next moment.

Miyoshi-sensei had moved away from the table, pulled a key from his pocket, and inserted it into a locker.

What? I remembered Kusunoki-san smiling as she locked up the locker. Miyoshi-sensei opened that same locker.

Miyoshi-sensei took a sketchbook from inside the locker, sat on a chair in front of the large table, and started drawing something.

A sense of unease welled up inside me. I walked toward the sitting Miyoshi-sensei and peeked at his sketchbook. The drawing there made me freeze. A

meticulously drawn portrait of Kusunoki-san, as if he had copied it from a photo, was there.

The unease inside me burst. I couldn't hear anything—the bell signaling the end of the first period, the sound of the pen running over the sketchbook, nothing.

Miyoshi-sensei stopped his hand as if he'd noticed something and turned toward the art preparation room's door, gently smiling. Slowly, I turned my gaze toward the source of the smile too.

There, at the door of the art preparation room, stood Kusunoki-san.

"I figured you might be here since it's Thursday and the curtains of the art preparation room were closed."

Miyoshi-sensei tilted his head slightly.

"Haven't you been avoiding me for a while?"

Upon entering the art preparation room, Kusunoki-san closed the door and turned to Miyoshi-sensei.

"That's not the case anymore. I've dispelled the rumors about us."

With light footsteps, she took a seat opposite Miyoshi-sensei at the table.

"Dispelled?" Miyoshi-sensei asked, tilting his head.

"Did you overwrite them by dating someone conspicuous?"

What?!

Watching the surprised Miyoshi-sensei, Kusunoki-san chuckled. "Strictly speaking, it was just a smokescreen to date you secretly."

"Smokescreen..."

"Don't worry. Even though I said we were dating, it's just an extension of being friends. He can't even touch girls."

Miyoshi-sensei made a face as if he'd realized who she was talking about.

"Hajime-kun?"

"Yeah, he asked me to date him again."

Peering into Miyoshi-sensei's sketchbook, Kusunoki-san said, "Isn't my face a bit too round in this drawing?" as she tapped her portrait with her finger.

After contemplating for a moment and taking a sip of his canned coffee, Miyoshi-sensei opened his mouth.

"Guess you're happy now, aren't you? Originally, I was just advising you about dating various people because you were unable to forget Hajime-kun..."

Kusunoki-san's finger, which was tapping her portrait, stopped.

"Annoyed? I know you were called by the vice-principal because of the rumors about us meeting privately."

"No, it's not about that..."

Kusunoki-san looked straight at Miyoshi-sensei.

"When the rumor about us dating spread around the school, I was thinking about how I could protect you. I even went to the 'Death God's Mansion'..."

"Death God's Mansion?"

"You don't know? It's an urban legend that a spirit who can grant wishes lives there."

"Wishes? I thought the story was that if you get close, you'll be taken away by the Death God?"

"It doesn't matter now. In the end, nothing happened. What I want to say is I even clung to such jinxes because I wanted to be with you!"

At Kusunoki-san's words, Miyoshi-sensei choked on his coffee in surprise.

"Actually, I was planning to ask Hajime to play the role of smokescreen for the rumors. He didn't seem interested in dating anyone, and I thought he didn't feel anything for me anymore... That's why I was surprised when he confessed."

While choking, Miyoshi-sensei made a serious face.

"I thought I couldn't ask him to do that if he had serious feelings. That's why I initially refused. But because you carried me to the infirmary, it could become a rumor again and cause trouble for you. I couldn't think of any other way to

prevent that... I don't care what anyone thinks of me as long as I can be with you."

What is she talking about?

As I listened to their conversation, I was simply stunned.

"And Hajime hasn't changed."

At Kusunoki-san's sigh-like laugh, Miyoshi-sensei tilted his head and said, "Eh?"

"I tried to see if he could touch me. He held my hand, but he was trembling. That's strange that he says he likes me."

"Why..." I let out a voice.

The image of Soejima-kun tightly holding Kusunoki-san's hand, the gaze staring at her, and the words "I love you" that Soejima-kun stated without hesitation raced through my head one after another.

"I wonder if there's any girl Hajime wants to touch..."

Without noticing my voice, Kusunoki-san continued to chat with Miyoshi-sensei. The sight of her smiling face made my chest burn. My irritation turned into sadness, and I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

Unable to watch Miyoshi-sensei and Kusunoki-san any longer, I slipped out of the art preparation room and into the hallway.

I can't tell Soejima-kun. There's no way I can tell him... My hands gripping my head tightened. The bangs I held down with my hand ruffled, and a familiar figure appeared in my blurred vision. I held my breath at the sight.

No way...

I raised my face in disbelief. Soejima-kun was standing next to the door of the art preparation room.

"Soejima-kun..."

My heart trembled. His face, looking at me, was calm.

Without saying a word, he looked at me and started walking down the corridor in silence. My heart pounding, I followed behind Soejima-kun.

When we finally climbed the stairs, that felt horribly longer than usual, Soejima-kun opened the door to the rooftop and shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s cold.”

Soejima-kun’s hair and the hem of his uniform were fluttering. It had to be cold and windy. The sky was covered with thick clouds, and it looked like it would snow at any moment.

Soejima-kun looked back at me, who had followed him.

“I’ve had this feeling of discomfort for a while now...”

I braced myself for a story about Kusunoki-san.

I still hadn’t sorted out what happened in the art preparation room just now. I didn’t know what to say to Soejima-kun. But what he said next wasn’t about the girl.

“Why are you dressed so lightly, Yuu?”

“What?”

I was taken aback by Soejima-kun’s words.

“If Yuu became a spirit right after the accident and met me... It’s strange to walk around outside in just a school uniform at this time of year. Even more so if it was raining.”

I looked down at the sailor suit I was wearing, then raised my face.

“It’s also strange that I can’t find any news about the accident no matter how much I search. It’s odd that an accident in our local area doesn’t have any articles...”

“Soejima-kun...”

Without paying attention to the voice I let out, Soejima-kun continued as if trying to feign calmness, as if trying to dodge an important matter. My trembling heart ached as if it were being squeezed. I could clearly see the disturbance Soejima-kun was trying to hide. Having heard the conversation in the art preparation room, I didn’t know what to do.

“Maybe we are...”

“It’s okay!” I cut off Soejima-kun’s words.

Soejima-kun finally stopped speaking. His face, that looked at me, was far from calm. “Are you seriously saying it’s okay?”

Soejima-kun laughed as if amazed and looked at me with a face as if biting down on something bitter.

“Why were you in the art preparation room?”

His tone was flippant.

“I saw you at the window of the art preparation room from the classroom. I wondered what you were doing and found it strange when the curtain closed. You can’t touch the curtain; there must be someone else. ‘Who is it?’ I thought...”

Soejima-kun was looking at me with suspicious, cold eyes.

“You were there because you doubted Kusunoki’s feelings, right? You didn’t tell me because you thought you couldn’t, right? Because you understood that our fates weren’t truly tied, right? From the beginning, we were wrong about everything. That’s why you’re still here, isn’t it?”

I barely held myself from being taken aback by Soejima-kun’s words. “No. Nothing was wrong.”

To my shaking head, Soejima-kun spoke in a strained voice. “You’re becoming more and more transparent.”

“Huh?”

“Your figure is becoming more and more transparent...”

Trying to hide the shock that ran through my entire body, I let out a voice. “The listless god appeared!”

I was saying the lines I had made up when I believed I couldn’t tie the threads of fate anymore and decided to disappear without making Soejima-kun sad. But it was different from that time when I considered giving up everything and disappearing from Soejima-kun.

I haven’t given up yet. Yes, because I haven’t given up, I say this.

“I was told that if I remembered my memory and announced it, I would have to disappear from you, and I couldn’t tell you. I wanted to stay with you a little longer. The reason I’m becoming transparent is because of that. I can’t clearly say when, but I can return to my original body. It’s thanks to you.”

He looked at me with a sad face.

“You’re lying, aren’t you?”

I desperately tried not to mind Soejima-kun’s gaze, which was clearly doubting me.

“It’s true.”

I stared straight at Soejima-kun, who was stunned.

“I will definitely come to see you again in my non-spirit form.”

As I told a lie, a sharp pain pierced through my chest. I should have realized it earlier. If I had thought to deal with it myself earlier, I wouldn’t have hurt Soejima-kun.

The boy, who had been staring at my face, apologized to me quietly.

“Let me sort things out. For now, I’m going to talk to Kusunoki properly, so stay here.”

With that, Soejima-kun turned his back to me and left through the door. I was left alone on the rooftop, looking up at the gray sky. My determination was solid.

I caught sight of Soejima-kun running down the hallway from the rooftop stairs. Taking my eyes off his figure, I quietly left the place.

I went through the school’s main gate, took the train, and returned to Soejima-kun’s house.

The aged pillars of the house, the slightly damaged corridor floor, the guest room where I woke up every morning, the sofa where Fuyu often slept, the internet news article printed on the table in the living room... Images of Soejima-kun diligently searching for who I was throughout the house appeared and vanished from my sight.

As I stepped out of the entrance, I stopped and turned back. I faced the house in front of me, which felt like my place at some point. *There are plenty of kind memories I wished for here. I thought I couldn't do anything alone in a form that no one would notice.*

Soejima-kun always reached out to me. I admired Soejima-kun's strength, who hid this weak part of himself while saying he couldn't see a future for himself. That strength lit me up like a candle. Because I wanted to be like that...

It's not good to keep clinging to the hand that reached out. If I can't stand on my own two feet, I can't do anything for anyone. I won't return to this house anymore. I will surely come back to life. And... I'll keep the promise I made with Soejima-kun. I'll go tell him who I am.

I averted my gaze from my grandfather's house, where I spent time with Soejima-kun, and looked forward.

I started walking toward the place of the last memory I really needed to remember.

PART 2

I'll show you that I can get my memory back.

I took a deep breath and looked up to see the long staircase of the Death God's Mansion. The dusk that could be seen beyond the long stairs was covered with deep clouds.

I had decided to reproduce the accident, which I had given up once.

I stepped forward and climbed the long stairs step by step. When I reached the middle of the stairs, the vegetation began to sway in the strong wind. At the moment when I thought the rustling of the plants was eerie, I was struck by a sharp pain in my head.

Like being punched, the pain made me groan involuntarily, holding my head. My vision blurred all at once and became hazy. My body swayed. A distorted noise-like image flashed on my blinking eyelids, and I was startled. In it, I saw my silhouette for a brief moment.

I was starting to remember. It was the same as when I had fainted here before. At that time, too, I climbed up this long staircase and saw a form of me that I didn't remember... Thinking so, I realized a possibility.

Is this intense headache due to my memories resurfacing? Are the noise-like images that appear on my eyelids my lost memories...?

I desperately whipped my swaying body and stepped on the stairs. I climbed step by step, stomping my feet, resolved to scale the wall I had once turned back from.

Remember. I have to remember.

Another step up the stairs. The headache, which felt like getting hit, was getting stronger and stronger. The noise that flickered in my head, which seemed to turn white, was gradually changing into a clear image.

The classroom of the sixth grade of elementary school, the sound of chimes, the teacher's voice...

"Let's have _____ give the last greeting."

A young me stood in front of the blackboard, with all eyes in the class on me. It seemed like I was giving a farewell speech before transferring schools.

"As the teacher said, I will be transferring to Kanto. In this class, I..."

The young me stopped speaking with a nervous look on her face as dozens of gazes were directed at her, and she cleared her throat.

There was a faint rustle among the students in the classroom as the young me stopped speaking. After looking over the classroom, the young me clenched her fists, made up her mind, and opened her mouth.

"I have no good memories of this class."

The smile of the teacher next to me faded, and the rustling in the classroom got louder. Even so, the young me continued speaking in a firm tone, "Actually,

I wanted to talk more with everyone and be friends.”

The classroom fell silent. Among the students, whose black eyes were moving left and right as if they didn't know what to do, one boy was staring straight at me.

“What are you talking about? We got along very well, didn't we, Rakka?”

The boy who made a smirk and said so in a loud voice was the one who had said my eyes were like an alien's.

His voice changed the atmosphere of the silent classroom all at once. The boys agreed as if to mock me. The girls giggled, trying to suppress their laughter. Some of the children looked away.

The young me stood in front of the blackboard in the classroom, looking pale.

“You wanted to play more with everyone in this class, didn't you?”

The teacher standing next to me spoke in a gentle tone, as if to supplement my words.

“It's going to be lonely. Everyone, let's give her a round of applause.”

As the sound of dozens of claps echoed in the classroom, the young me clenched her fists so tightly that her nails dug in as she looked down.

The memory that came vividly to my mind...

My foot, which was firmly planted on the stairs despite my swaying body, got tangled. I desperately supported my body, which was about to fall forward.

I held my head.

“Rakka,” a fallen flower.

That's right, that was what they called me. It was my nickname in the sixth grade, where I was derogatorily called by a play on words created by swapping the first character of my name with the one for “falling,” meaning a fallen person.

At that time, the applause echoing in the classroom sounded like the voice of a demon to me, who was standing in front of the blackboard.

It was then that I found out that my words had no value and that no one would listen to me. The feelings I voiced turned into a void several times over, and I

became disgusted with myself.

Speaking out was a waste of time.

Just keep your mouth shut. To not catch anyone's eye, erase your presence. A worthless person must not get in the way of anyone, or they will not be allowed to live.

Still leaning forward, I slowly squatted down the stairs. I was entranced by the memories I recalled, and tears overflowed from my eyes.

The sound of the demonic applause was still ringing in my head...

I heard the footsteps of someone coming down the stairs, step by step, disrupting that sound. The footsteps stopped in front of me as a shadow of the squatting person was cast over me.

The grass and trees by the stairs rustled in the wind. Still in a daze, I looked up at the person who had stopped in front of me.

There shouldn't be anyone who would stop in front of me. I was an invisible spirit.

The black garment of the young man who stopped in front of me was fluttering in the wind.

"I've been looking for you..."

I made eye contact with the young man, who said that in a gentle voice.

Looking down at me was a frighteningly beautiful young man in his mid-twenties. Straight chestnut hair, black leather gloves, a completely wrinkle-free shirt, and a black garment that fluttered in the wind.

I shuddered at the beautiful young man's soft smile directed at me. He posed as if saluting with his hand on his chest.

"I will guide you to where you belong."

I felt a fear like never before.

"Who are you..."

To the thin voice that came from my trembling lips, the beautiful young man quietly said,

“I’m the Death God. Nice to meet you.”

The coldness was circulating through my body from my fingertips.

“He’ll eventually find you. The Death God.”

The voice of the listless god grazed through my entranced mind. *I have to run.* That was what I thought, but I couldn’t take my eyes off the Death God’s smile. I couldn’t even blink...

I felt pain, as if I had been struck in my head again. A resonating sound could be heard. The crossing gate alarm was ringing in my head. I could see myself, with a school bag on my back, standing in front of the crossing. The snow falling in flutters was covering the sidewalk white, and snow was also accumulating on my head and shoulders with the school bag.

I clenched the straps of my school bag with both hands and moved my feet to approach the track where the crossing gate had descended.

“I want to disappear...”

I could hear my own voice, squeezed out in my memories...

“That’s right. Your place is not here.”

The beautiful Death God’s gentle voice slid into my aching head. Through my tear-blurred eyes, only the Death God was reflected. He extended his hand.

“If you take this hand, you will be freed from your suffering.”

My head hurt as if it were throbbing.

“Let’s go.”

Pain and memories whirl fiercely in my head.

Where am I right now? Where should I be? Is there a place somewhere where I would be allowed to exist?

As if drawn in, I reached out to the left hand the Death God had extended. The sky seen over the shoulder of the Death God was deeply covered with thick gray clouds. It seemed about to start crying. My fingertips gently touched the Death God’s hand.

PART 3

Under the sky deeply covered with gray clouds, I was being assaulted by suffering. The throbbing head, the swirling memories were choking me; it was unbearable. I wanted to be released from this suffering quickly. Would this hand presented before me save me?

I wanted to go to a place where I wouldn't feel sadness or pain. A peaceful, calm place without suffering that would accept me...

In my blurry vision, I saw my extended arm. As my fingertips touched the Death God's hand, as if drawn in, something brushed against my arm.

It slipped gently through my arm and fell to the ground. I slowly raised my gaze overhead to confirm what had brushed my arm.

Snow was falling from the gray sky I looked up at.

"Your voice is beautiful..."

A deep and soft voice that resurfaced in the back of my brain, snow illuminated by the morning sun, a children's book I read aloud, a name written large on the back cover, the stoic profile next to me on the veranda I sat on.

"Don't die, Yuu..."

In my clearing view, snow was dancing down.

"Soejima-kun..."

I caught Death God's eyes popping wide at the edge of my vision.

I pulled back my extended hand, turned my back as if writhing, and stepped forward to rush down the stairs.

The Death God chased me. The sound of his footsteps was approaching my back as I ran down the stairs. There was no time to look back. I mustered all the strength in my body.

My head hurt dully, and my staggering body was heavy. My body wouldn't move as I wanted it to. My foot, which didn't match the pace, slipped on the step. I stumbled with the accelerated momentum and fell straight down.

This is bad! I'm falling—!

I tightly closed my eyes and braced myself for the violent impact that would hit my whole body. In that moment, I felt as if time had slowed down.

I had a sensation of my abdomen being caught by someone. Feeling that my falling body was being held by someone, I opened my closed eyes.

My thoughts couldn't catch up.

There was supposed to be no one at the bottom of the stairs. Yet, now, I was indeed entrusting my body to someone on the step below the stairs.

The footsteps of the Death God were slowly approaching from behind. I lifted my disturbed face, which was reflected in his drooping eyes.

“Ah... Ah!”

His unique tone of voice, the brown wavy hair peeking out from the black hat.

“Why...”

Looking at me, who was stunned, he smiled broadly.

“Man, things have become troublesome again.”

The listless god I'd always wished to appear was there.

There was a small sound of footsteps stopping behind me. Still held by the listless god, I turned around.

“What are you doing, senpai?” The Death God, who had stopped his foot on the upper step of the stairs, said so in an amused tone and showed a full smile to the listless god.

“Please hand her over to me.”

The Death God slowly extended his hand, gloved in black leather. The listless god, who had been holding me, put me down on the stairs and sheltered me behind him, saying in a light-hearted tone, “Don't make such a scary face.”

“Scary? Me?”

“Your eyes aren't laughing.”

“I don't want to be told that by someone whose eyes are gleaming.”

The Death God stepped forward with an even bigger smile. “Please don’t get in my way.”

Scratching his forehead casually, the listless god responded to the approaching Death God, “That won’t be possible. This child is under contract with me.”

“Contract...?”

The Death God furrowed his eyebrows at the listless god’s words, whose face, previously looking rather bored, changed. The listless god thrust his right hand forward.

“Yeah, she’s under my jurisdiction.”

When the listless god swung up the right hand he had thrust out, sparks flew up in front of the Death God with a sharp sound. The scattered sparks melted the snow in an instant. Startled by the sparks, the Death God covered his face with his arm to protect himself.

Pointing his thumb at me standing behind him, the listless god addressed the Death God.

“The fact that she didn’t take your hand was her own will. Disappear!”

With his arm still against his forehead, the Death God let out a small laugh as if he were holding back from bursting out laughing.

“She’s already starting to disappear, you know?”

Then he turned his gaze toward me, trembling behind the listless god.

“Which is what she herself wished for.”

With an audacious smile, the Death God suddenly disappeared. As if following the meaningful gaze left by the Death God, the listless god turned back and looked at my trembling figure.

The tip of my finger that had touched the Death God was starting to disappear. *It’s not transparent. My finger is fading out of existence.* From my fingertips to my palm, my body was gradually starting to disappear, as if it was being eaten away.

“No, stop!” I let out a scream. The listless god dropped his gaze to my disappearing fingertips and seemed to immediately notice something, looking down the stairs and muttering.

“He’s coming this way, looking for you.”

Looking for me? Could it be...? Clasp my vanishing hand with the other, I looked up while trembling.

As if seeing through my thoughts, the listless god gave a small nod and lifted his right arm, pointing his index finger.

“Don’t abandon hope until the very last moment.”

With a thud, a pain as if I were being punched hit my head again. When I opened my eyes, that I had involuntarily closed due to the pain, the listless god was nowhere to be seen.

Along with the pain, my past memories raced through my mind like a revolving lantern. Suddenly, I noticed I had lost sensation in one of my hands. When I looked down, my arm had already vanished up to the wrist.

Will I make it in time?

If I can recover my memories before this body disappears. If I can remember who I am!

I bit my lip and stamped on the stairs. Dragging my unsteady body, I started climbing up the stairs. Despite the fear of disappearing making my legs want to give in, I moved them, looked upward, and took one step after another.

There were things I wanted to say. If I could meet Soejima-kun in a form other than a spirit, there were words I wanted him to hear. Things that I couldn’t put into words, buried deep in my chest, motivated me.

The top of the long staircase appeared in my foggy field of vision. There, I could see my younger self from when I was a sixth grader. *Is it a phantom of the memories that overflowed from the consciousness that I’m seeing?*

Memories were racing through. The past me existed in those memories. The me who always held her breath, and was spending each day hiding, was coming back to life.

That’s right.

I could only protect myself by hiding in order not to get hurt or catch anyone's eye.

I was always living without feeling like I was truly alive, wandering each day like an incorporeal spirit, hoping to vanish entirely yet always wishing to be found. Wishing to be noticed.

Amid these conflicting desires, where is the real me? Is it in the painful past that clings to me or in the future full of nothing but anxiety?

Living now as if I were half-dead, I cried countless times, thinking it was all over. But still, I faced my weaknesses. Even if no one noticed me, I stood up time and time again.

The half of me that hid was not really weak. Remember! I am-...!

“Yuu!”

I turned around toward the source of that voice. The sound of footsteps rushing up from below the stairs brought up a surge of emotions. I stared at the figure approaching, my eyes on the verge of overflowing with tears.

My legs started to crumble. My feet were beginning to vanish. The fingertips covering the vanished arm were also becoming ambiguous from the edge of my body. My disappearing feet could no longer support my body, and I almost fell onto the stairs on my knees.

The sound of footsteps stopped a few meters away.

I desperately lifted my face. The moon, hidden by the clouds, appears, illuminating the figure a few meters away. There, in front of me, was Soejima-kun, his face pale.

“Why... There's still time...!”

Before Soejima-kun's words ended, I moaned again with a painful headache that hit me.

“Could it be your memories?”

With a stunned expression, he walked one step at a time. With the remaining hand that was disappearing, I somehow managed to prop myself up.

The center of my body was rapidly becoming transparent.

“Soejima-kun, I...”

I mustered the words welling up from my throat.

“...want to see you again.”

Memories whirled around my head. How many times had I wished that tomorrow wouldn't come?

Despite trying to smile, a tear trickled down from my eye. There were still things I wanted to say, but my voice didn't come out anymore.

I remembered the translucent night sky.

You didn't miss my vanishing voice and smiled gently. You don't realize how much it mattered to me. You don't understand how every aspect of your existence, which you call broken, matters to me.

Even if everyone says you're strange, I don't think so. You're like a light that illuminates my darkness.

Soejima-kun, who was rushing over, tried to say something to me with a desperate face. But I couldn't hear anything anymore...

The last thing that jumped into my eyes was the sight of Soejima-kun reaching out to me, who was disappearing.

Snow began to fall from the sky, dyed in the twilight. It was falling on Soejima-kun, who was standing alone on the stairs.

When he slowly opened his hand that grabbed the air, the fallen snow melted from the warmth of his palm. As if there was nothing there in the first place, leaving no trace.

“I wanted us to be together. That's why I...”

Soejima-kun's voice no longer reached me...

In the falling snow, leaving Soejima-kun standing alone, my body vanished.

CHAPTER 6

PART 1

The rain beat down on my body as I lay on the ground. My freezing-cold body didn't move, but I could hear. Mixed with the sound of the rain, I could faintly hear someone's footsteps—someone was there.

I faintly opened my eyes. Puddles were rippling from the falling rain.

An older woman picking up a collapsed umbrella in the distance was reflected in my faintly opened eyes. The woman looked around and tilted her head, returning her gaze to the umbrella.

“...notice me...”

I moved my lips as if pleading. But my voice, which came from my trembling lips, was drowned out by the sound of the pounding rain.

In my fading consciousness, I, who had run out of strength, quietly closed my heavy eyelids.

The warning alarm was going off. I, carrying a school bag on my back, stood in front of a railway crossing covered in white, with snow falling lightly from the sky.

Snow was also piling up on my head and shoulders, and I moved my foot forward to approach the railway, where the gate had been lowered.

A train passed the railway crossing where the alarm sounded, pushing aside the snow. I stopped the foot that I had raised. A shadow fell, and the snow

fluttering from the sky didn't fall on me. Something was blocking the snow and me.

To confirm what that something was, I gently looked up...

When I suddenly opened my eyes, a white ceiling jumped into my sight. At the same time, a splitting headache hit me.

"Uh..."

I squinted for a moment in pain and then slowly opened my eyes again.

The bright sunshine illuminated the white ceiling. The sound of metal scraping reached my ears.

When I glanced in the direction of the sound, I met the eyes of a woman in a white suit. The woman, with a surprised expression, rushed over to me.

I looked around. A white futon, a bed I was sleeping on, nearby walls, a window, an IV drip in my arm, a bandage wrapped around my head, a monitor screen showing waveforms...

Is this a hospital?

A woman in a white suit peeked at me.

"Do you understand me? Can you tell me your name?"

To that question, I nodded. I understood everything. I remembered everything.

"Fuuka..."

I am Fuuka Ishibashi. I moved to this town due to my parents' divorce when I was in sixth grade. My current family is my father, my stepmother, my father's second marriage, and my sister, who is three years younger than me. I am a first-year student at an all-girls school established just two years ago. I don't stand out in class, and I'm like a spirit that you wouldn't know whether they were there or not.

"Are you really a spirit?" At that time, a low, gentle voice echoed in my head...

"When you come back to life, tell me, okay? What your real name is, how you lived..."

A boy with a beautiful face talked to me in my memory, and I jumped up from the hospital bed where I was lying.

“I have to go.”

My throat was dry, and I couldn't form words. The nurse, a woman, hastily restrained me as I tried to jump out of bed. My body swayed because I couldn't put strength into it. The nurse supported my body, which was about to fall.

My body didn't move as I wanted it to. But at least it wasn't transparent.

“Calm down. You're not in a condition to move yet! I'm calling the doctor,” the nurse said, pressing the nurse's calling at my bedside.

Shortly after, the doctor who rushed to the ward told me I had been in a coma for nearly three months.

PART 2

“Chasing after a student from the same school...?”

When my parents, who had rushed to the hospital after discovering that I had awakened, asked why I was on the long stairs of the Death God's Mansion, they got an answer that made them tilt their heads.

“It was probably Misa Otsubo from Class B.”

Upon hearing my muttered response, my parents looked at each other. My sister, who had come to the hospital with them, was looking at me on the bed with a cold gaze.

“Didn't you mistake her? She couldn't have been there.”

“Eh? But...”

“Your memory is confused due to the accident.”

To comfort me, my father gently patted my shoulder.

I was not confused. I definitely chased after a female student from the same school. When I fell down the stairs, the person I saw was Otsubo-san, but I swallowed the words that had risen to my throat.

I understood from how my parents in the ward behaved that no matter how much I talked, they wouldn't take me seriously.

My strength recovered with each passing day.

The scenery I could see from the window had shifted from the fall, when the accident happened, to the winter. Although it had been autumn just the day before, the moment I woke up, the season had changed to winter in an instant.

I couldn't tell anyone about the events I experienced as a half-spirit.

It wouldn't make sense to anyone if I told them. Just like when I told my parents why I climbed up the long staircase, I didn't want to worry them, nor did I want to be dismissed. There was only one person who would understand this outlandish story.

On the third night, after waking up in the hospital room, I snuck out, slipping on my coat over my pajamas.

I wanted to see Soejima-kun. I wanted to report to him that I had returned to my body. Relying on my faint memory, I headed to Soejima-kun's grandfather's house. The road I remembered really existed.

I walked the road without hesitation and arrived in the quiet residential area where the old man's house was located. I looked around the alley, illuminated by the dim light of the streetlamps, and couldn't believe my eyes.

Among the lined-up houses, only Soejima-kun's grandfather's house was missing. The place where the house had been was now a vacant lot.

"No way..."

I stood still and turned on my heels to escape from what I saw.

From that day on, I could no longer confirm the days I had spent as a half-spirit.

I thought about going to the high school Soejima-kun had attended, but I was scared. If the existence of Soejima-kun was denied, I was afraid that the

precious days I spent as a half-spirit would become an illusion.

After a while, the results of the tests I had undergone after waking up in the hospital were released.

My body was in perfect health, the cause of my nearly three-month sleep remained unknown, and the day of my discharge was decided.

The bandage on my head was also removed. I took a peek at the mirror handed to me by the nurse. Since the injury was on my head, the wound was not noticeable under my hair, which reassured me.

Reflected in the mirror I looked into was my image, unchanged from before the accident, hiding my eyes under long bangs.

“Did you take off the bandage?”

When I looked in the direction of the voice, my sister, in her school uniform, was standing in front of the ward door.

Upon entering the ward, the nurse asked my sister, “Oh? Are you alone?”

“Yes,” she replied, and sat down in the chair beside my bed.

“You two get along well.”

When the smiling nurse left the room, an awkward atmosphere filled the ward. It was the first time my sister had come to my ward alone. I wondered why she had gone out of her way to come, even though I would be discharged in a few days.

In the room with just the two of us, my sister was looking down, silent. Not knowing what to say, I was bewildered.

“Do you want something to drink?”

All I could do was say something commonplace. I fumbled to take a can of juice from the fridge in the ward and offered it to her. However, my sister didn’t take it. Instead, she gave me a dubious look.

“You’re hiding something, aren’t you?”

I was startled and nearly dropped the can of juice I was holding.

Hiding something... The first thing that came to mind was my days as a half-spirit, but there was no way she could know about that. As I panicked, my sister asked me another question that perked my ears, “Weren’t you pushed down the stairs?”

“Pushed?” I opened my eyes wide and answered, “No way.”

But my sister said with a stern look on her face, “Everyone at school is saying that. They say it might have been done by the person from two years ago.”

“The person from two years ago?”

“Two years ago, someone came to our school and said, ‘A student here is going to have an accident on the long staircase.’ They’re saying that person might still be after you...”

Someone’s after me...?! It was just an accident; what on earth are they talking about?

“There’s no way I’m being targeted.” I nervously denied it, but my sister shook her head.

“I overheard the teacher who came to our house telling Mom and Dad to be careful. They said a suspicious man with a news article about the accident has visited the school several times, asking to meet you...”

A man with a news article about the accident...

My thought process stopped for a moment.

“What kind of person?! Do you know his name?”

I panicked and leaned forward suddenly, surprising my sister.

“I don’t know his name, but they said he had an ID card from XX University.”

“A university student...”

The hope that had started to swell in my chest quickly deflated, and I felt my energy drain.

“Do you know him? I can ask Mom and Dad, but I don’t think they’ll tell us.”

“No, it’s fine. Don’t ask.”

When I replied in a flustered manner, my sister shrugged her shoulders. “Mom and Dad are acting strange. They seem to be avoiding the topic of the accident, even though you might be in danger.”

She had come to the hospital room probably out of concern for me. I was surprised that she was worried about me.

“It really was just an accident.” I smiled to reassure my sister and handed her the can of juice in an awkward manner.

On my first day back at school after being discharged from the hospital, I slipped into my black sailor suit for the first time in a long time, tightly tied my blue tie, and stood in front of the mirror.

My jet-black hair, which was about ten centimeters past my collarbone, long bangs that covered my eyes, slightly large upturned eyes hidden by my bangs, and myself in a black sailor suit with a blue tie appeared in the mirror, as ordinary and unassertive as ever.

As the sound of a knock on the door echoed, my stepmother opened the door to my room, asking, “Are you ready?” She was all dressed up.

On my first day back to school, my stepmother was going to accompany me. It seemed that she wanted to thank the teachers and discuss my future.

I put on my coat over my uniform and stepped outside the front door of the house. A strong wind blew, and I shrank back. It was cold with just one layer of coat over my clothes.

Now that I was not a half-spirit, I could feel the coldness properly.

“Wait, Fuuka. It looks like the weather is going to turn bad.” My stepmother, who had come out of the entrance later, handed me a navy-blue folding umbrella. I stared at the umbrella and took it. It was the umbrella that had flown out of my hand during the accident.

“It’s an important umbrella, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“You wouldn’t listen when I suggested buying a brighter-colored one. You’ve been using this umbrella all along, haven’t you?”

“Is that so...?”

Seeing my reaction, my stepmother gave me a gentle smile.

“You don’t have to be considerate with me. You got it from your mother, right? You have to take care of it.”

Is that so? With the feeling that something was missing from my memory, I put the navy-blue folding umbrella I had received into my bag.

When we arrived at the nearest station, I lined up with my stepmother on the platform to wait for the train.

The station was crowded during rush hour. As I watched the usual morning scene of people packed onto the platform, I began to feel more and more like I was just part of the backdrop of this world.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about before we get to school, Fuuka.” I looked at my stepmother. She had a grim expression.

“Your father and I decided to keep quiet until you were discharged and settled in, but one of your classmates...”

Just as my stepmother began to say something, a train pulled into the platform.

As the train arrived, the platform became even more crowded, with passengers getting off. My stepmother stopped speaking, followed the flow of the line moving forward, and boarded the train. I followed her to get on the train, but in that moment, I saw a male student on the opposite platform through the crowd.

“Fuuka?!”

My stepmother’s confused voice came from behind me.

I turned my back on the train and was heading toward the opposite platform.

The striped tie and navy-blue blazer uniform that I caught sight of overlapped with the figure in my memory.

When I got close to the ticket gate, I saw the boy’s face... I didn’t know him at all.

Coming to my senses, I looked toward the train I was supposed to board, which had already started moving. The moving wind of the train fluttered my skirt and hair, and I held down my bangs.

What am I doing?

I was dismayed at myself and felt like crying.

The listless god, the chilling smile of the Death God, the missing Fuyu, my body that disappeared, the promise with Soejima-kun...

I was going back to my daily life before the accident as if nothing had happened. Although I thought that was fine, a part of me didn't feel that way.

I pretended not to notice, but the truth was, I hated my old life. I was disappointed in myself for having lived like a spirit. I wanted to disappear, yes, but what I truly wanted was to erase that part of myself that could only live in such a way.

PART 3

The answer I was hoping for may not come back. People might laugh and say it was like a dream. But still, I decided to try everything I could do now, just as I believed in myself when I was a half-spirit.

The school road lined with trees I visited was the same as in my memory.

At this time, students were walking in a line toward the high school. I, too, used to walk this path in my invisible form with Soejima-kun. Although I felt like a spirit, things were different. Even with a thin voice, I could talk to anyone.

"Um, excuse me!"

The female student I called out to shivered at my sudden appearance behind her.

“Do you... know someone named Hajime?”

“Huh? What?”

I was too nervous to speak properly. I took a deep breath and rephrased my question, “Do you know a person named Hajime Soejima in the second year?”

The female student tilted her head.

I asked the same question to many students, but all the answers were the same.

No one knew Soejima-kun, who was a prominent figure in school. My anxiety just deepened.

The students were looking at me, who was asking anyone, with suspicious eyes. I could hear some voices that seemed to be amused. Nevertheless, I continued to ask questions and found a male student who said he was in the second grade, first class.

With a suspicious expression at my question, the male student told me, “There’s no one like that in the class...”

Not long after, I was staring at the vacant lot.

Behind the school road lined with trees, the old man’s house I came to on foot was just a vacant lot, just as I saw when I escaped from the hospital.

I let out a sigh that became a white cloud in front of me. My heart grew colder in the face of reality that I had to accept. It was so cold that the hand I used to hold my coat tightly closed felt as if it were frozen.

It was just as my mother-in-law had predicted. The weather worsened, and it began to snow heavily.

I took out the folding umbrella from my bag and opened it.

The heavy snowflakes falling silently without any wind were beautiful.

The snow piling up in the vacant lot brought back scenes in my memory one after another.

The image of Soejima-kun, sitting next to me on the veranda, relaxed and smiling, vividly surfaced in my mind.

I couldn't bear it anymore and looked down. It was when I tried to stop the rising emotions by gripping the umbrella tightly and closing my eyes tightly—a sharp pain shot through my head.

"I'll give it to you." I heard a voice of someone offering the navy-blue folding umbrella to me when I was in elementary school...

Surprised by that image suddenly resurfacing, I opened my eyes, and something quickly crossed before me. When I followed it with my eyes, it was a black cat with a sturdy body. It stopped a little distance away and looked at me as if to scrutinize me with its golden eyes.

"Fuyu?"

It was an adult cat. It couldn't be the small kitten Fuyu. However, the red collar the black cat was wearing was exactly like Fuyu's.

Am I seeing things?

When I tried to approach, the black cat ran down the road as if to escape. My umbrella fell from my hand as I tried to chase after it. The impact caused the frame to bend slightly.

The next moment, my thoughts froze as I looked at the inside of the umbrella.

A small star was drawn with a magic marker in the corner of the inside of the folding umbrella. I slowly turned my eyes from the umbrella to where the black cat had been.

The memory fragments that appeared in the back of the black cat running down the distant road overlap. Forgotten memories came back to life...

A crossing with an alarm ringing.

A train passing through, brushing off the snow.

A shadow covered me with my school bag on my back, and something obstructed the falling snow from the sky and me.

Looking up to confirm what that something was, there was a navy-blue folding umbrella.

"I'll give it to you."

A high school student in uniform offered me the folding umbrella.

He left me, who was taken aback, with the navy-blue folding umbrella as if forcing it on me, and then he hurriedly left.

Why did I forget? From that moment on, I have always wished to meet the person who gave me this umbrella again.

Still in a daze, I dropped my gaze to the coat I was wearing.

“I’ve never seen the uniform you’re wearing now.”

“If Yuu became a spirit right after the accident and met me... It’s strange to walk around outside in just a school uniform at this time of year. Even more so if it was raining.”

That’s right. The accident happened in the fall. Could it be possible for the seasons to change in an instant?

“I’ve been telling you this since you were little, right? You should write your name on your belongings. Have you been properly writing it big on your things?”

The black star mark I recognized was drawn in inconspicuous places on the back cover of a reference book, the corner of my indoor shoes, and a folding umbrella. Each interaction with Soejima-kun, which I traced from the bottom of my memory, suggested a possibility.

With a glimmer of hope, the cold winter wind swept through my cheeks.

I was running to a place in my memories. When I reached the cemetery on the hilltop with a beautiful view, I climbed a slope and searched for the old man’s grave.

I remembered the scene of Soejima-kun looking at engraving on the tombstone... *“He would probably say the characters are too small.”*

When I was a primary school student, the young man who gave me the folding umbrella in front of the railway line looked a lot like Soejima-kun I met as a half-spirit.

If that’s not a mistake, if the black cat with the red collar is the grown-up Fuyu, if the seasons changed in an instant, then the time I spent as a half-spirit was...

My heart was throbbing heavily. When I arrived at the cemetery, I checked the tombstones from end to end. After a while, I found a tombstone with the name “Soejima Family Tomb,” which was well taken care of and had fresh flowers on it. I could only hear the sound of my heart beating hard.

I approached the tombstone and confirmed the names and date of death engraved on the side, just as Soejima-kun did in my memories.

“Four years ago...”

Warmth shot up from within my chest.

On the side of the grave, the name of the old man and the date of his death four years ago were carved.

The me who had become a half-spirit had been here four years ago. Soejima-kun and I had definitely been there.

Wiping away the tears that welled up, I stomped on the ground and retraced my steps.

I ran down the slope to the station and checked the route to XX University. I was convinced that the university student who had come to visit me with the news article about the accident my sister talked about was Soejima-kun.

Soejima-kun exists. It wasn't an illusion.

I ran. My breath became increasingly short, and my pulse quickened. The wind from running made my bangs, which hid my eyes, flutter.

The nearest station to the university where I arrived was filled with a lot of people. As I looked around for the exit to the university, I noticed a figure in the distance in the crowd through a gap in the passing people.

He looks like him...

I pushed through the crowd and chased after the figure. I didn't know if the one I spot in the crowd was really Soejima-kun. I could have been mistaking him for someone else.

“Wait.”

The thin voice I let out was drowned out by the bustling people. I bumped into a person walking in front and got a scowl.

The distant figure I found was getting further and further away, and I couldn't catch up.

I stood still in the crowd. The people passing by were avoiding me as if I were in the way. My figure was buried in the wave of people. I had always lived like a spirit, hiding my voice and presence. I had given up. I thought this was the way it would always be. How many times had I swallowed the words I wanted to say?

But Soejima-kun looked for me. He tried to find me. He made me notice the half of me I had forgotten. That I was not a spirit, that I was there...

I clenched my hands tightly, made up my mind, and took a deep breath.

“Wait! Soejima-kun!”

I screamed with all my might, as if throwing everything at him. The eyes of the passing people all at once stabbed at me. My face got hot as if it were on fire, but I didn't look down.

The voice from my throat went through the crowd, and the figure I saw in the distance turned around. I was staring at him as if I were praying.

PART 4

“Ugh, were you called too?”

The moment the door to the Death God's Mansion was opened, the listless god pulled a face.

The inside of the mansion was lined with tables and chairs, just like a large courtroom. A large cross was adorning the wall at the center of the stage, and

the massive door right beneath it was illuminated by the light streaming in from the entrance.

Inside the mansion was a beautiful young man, seated on a chair. He turned his face toward the entrance, where he heard a voice and spoke.

“Given the way you’re dressed, I thought you were someone else, senpai.”

The listless god wore a suit with a black cloak, gloves, and a neatly tied black necktie.

“You certainly don’t look like the ‘God of Matchmaking.’”

The listless god tilted his head as he walked toward the smiling, beautiful young man.

“Well then, what do I look like?”

“A Death God?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

Saying so, the listless god directed his gaze at the massive door and let out a sigh.

“Ah, if you’re here, it means we’ve been assembled for the Fuuka Ishibashi case, huh? The thought of those high-ranking Death God geezers coming in from that door is seriously bothersome. The talk will definitely drag on.”

“Shall we block the door? It’s the only connection around here between the two worlds.”

As the beautiful young man pointed at the door with a playful look, he continued, “But it can’t be helped, right? You made a strange contract and toyed with Fuuka Ishibashi’s soul, senpai.”

“Huh? That was you! You tried to kill a soul that wasn’t due yet!”

“I’m offended. I merely tried to fulfill her wish. It’s you who made it complicated, senpai.”

The listless god snapped at the young man’s nonchalant statement.

“It was already a mess when I found her! She was in the other world even though she still had a lifespan, and she lost her memories. All of it was your

doing.”

“I wasn't planning to reap her soul yet, but since the opportunity arose, I thought I'd guide her right away.”

“The opportunity arose?”

“She chased after a soul that I was guiding. Living beings with a waning soul flame can see the souls of those who are dying. I thought she wanted to come to this side, but I was wrong.”

“Guiding... You mean another person died?”

“Yes, I think her name was Misa. Although her physical death was still a long way off, she had been longing for death for a long time, so I helped her.” The beautiful young man gestured with his thumb and index finger, creating a gap of just a fraction of a centimeter. “The flame of her soul was also about to be extinguished.

“Poor thing. No one around her seemed to notice, and the body without a soul that was discovered was already starting to rot.”

The listless god had a disgusted expression on his face.

“Why do you bother to reap a soul that still has a lifespan? I wouldn't want to increase my workload.”

At his words, the beautiful young man gave a slight smile.

“I want to help. I want to save souls for whom this world is only an endless darkness of suffering. After all, aren't we Death Gods the only ones who can give hope to such souls?”

The mansion fell silent. The beautiful young man looked toward the listless god, who said nothing in response and scratched his own cheek as if he were pondering something.

“Not sure. Souls are stubborn. They can take a tiny spark of hope and fan it into a big flame.”

“Like with this Fuuka Ishibashi and that boy... Is that what you're trying to say?”

At the young man's question, the listless god gave a meaningful smile.

"I was wondering why you made a contract with Fuuka Ishibashi and sent her soul back to four years ago. Was it a coincidence that you found her soul?"

"No, I was searching for it. Fuuka Ishibashi's future had changed, and it had caused some trouble."

The beautiful young man tilted his head.

"Four years ago, there was a stubborn old man who kept the flame of his soul burning despite being at the end of his life. The rookie Death God in charge couldn't handle it, so I was called in. The reason the old man kept the flame of his soul burning was because of his grandchild."

"Grandchild?"

"That boy, the grandson, didn't have any hope for his future, and as the years went by, the flame of his soul became weaker and weaker. The old man must have felt that too. When he died, his grandson would be left alone. He was concerned about his grandson, who could not form deep relationships with people, and he couldn't quite let go of life."

The beautiful young man looked as if he had realized who that grandchild was.

"So, I showed the old man the future recorded in the Death God's notebook. The future where the boy and a certain girl's fates intertwined."

The listless god continued his story, swinging the black notebook he took out of his breast pocket. "The old man was finally convinced by that future. However, you changed it. The content of the future I showed the old man in the past changed."

"Isn't it your fault for trying to finish your work quickly by showing the future? The future is not set in stone, after all."

At the beautiful young man's exasperated words, the listless god gave him a dull look.

"In the notebook, the condition of Fuuka Ishibashi on the verge of death in the future was recorded. I thought it was strange and looked for her soul, just to

find out it had lost its memories. But, well, it still had a lifespan.

“A normal Death God would try to return a soul with a lifespan to its body. Once that was done, the future will revert to its original state. I thought about leaving it to any Death God because the procedure is troublesome, but then you had to get involved.”

“That’s harsh.” The beautiful young man gave a bitter smile.

“As I was thinking about what to do, Fuuka Ishibashi said, ‘I don’t want to die.’ Then I had an idea: ‘If I send this girl back to the past as a soul, wouldn’t that solve everything?’”

“Solve everything?”

The listless god gave a smirk.

“The boy, whose soul’s flame was weak, could see Fuuka Ishibashi’s soul. If the two of them met in the past and their soul’s flames grew stronger, the old man would be freed from worries about his grandson, and Fuuka would be able to return to her original body. All I needed to do was to explain this situation to the old man. Additionally, if it was right before death, when his flame was flickering, it would fulfill the old man’s wish to meet his grandson’s fated partner.”

“So, the catalyst of their hope was matchmaking?”

The listless god nodded.

“The connection leading to their future has been established. Well, it seems Fuuka herself hasn’t realized yet that the fates she was supposed to tie together were hers and that boy’s.”

“Wind and flowers, petals dancing like snow... was the meaning of her name, right?” Upon saying this, the beautiful young man furrowed his eyebrows. “Indeed, she and the boy became each other’s hope with time. As the flames of their souls grew larger, the boy was becoming unable to see her soul. However, the flame would become smaller again if their hope became an illusion. And hope is not everlasting.”

“True. I don’t think you’re wrong. But you see, I was counting on a small pilot light that would save the fire of their souls until the last moment.”

“A pilot light...?”

“Yeah. The soul’s flame of the black cat, which had weakened due to its instinctive sense of death from injury, also grew larger after meeting the two. Until all the flames burn out, living beings retain the power to fulfill the life they’ve been given.

“Even a faint flame can ignite someone else’s fire. It can even rewrite someone’s unfortunate ending. The soul that strives to live until the very end is hope.”

Saying that, the listless god opened the black notebook he held. The characters written under the name “Fuuka Ishibashi” in the notebook were disappearing on their own, being rewritten anew.

“Look, it’s Fuuka Ishibashi’s new future.”

“Huh?”

Ignoring the puzzled, beautiful young man, the listless god, with a full-faced grin, gazed at the future being recorded in the black notebook.

PART 5

The figure I was looking at with a prayer turned around.

The person who turned around at my voice was Soejima-kun, who had a slightly more mature face. His eyes widened. We stared at each other for a few seconds. Making his way through the crowd, Soejima-kun slowly walked toward me, and I walked toward him.

We stood facing each other. Soejima-kun, with an almost unbelievable expression, was standing in front of me. He looked at me with a dreamy look on his face, then showed a complex expression of joy and anxiety and spoke in a small voice, "Don't tell me you're a spirit again."

At that moment, I was at a loss of words.

"Hey... ouch!"

Soejima-kun pinched my cheek with his fingertips. As if confirming, he traced my face, but then bowed his head as if to hide it. The cool palm that touched my cheek was dyed with my body temperature...

When I had previously hushed my voice and tried to erase my presence, I had lost sight of myself. But this palm touching my cheek dispelled my doubts, telling me that I was alive and was not a spirit; I had not lost my existence.

I felt warmth. My cells breathed. The withered air was fresh, the footsteps of passing people bounced like music, and the breath I exhaled in the freezing cold told me of my breathing.

Yes, I always wanted to tell Soejima-kun. I am...

"...not a spirit."

Soejima-kun didn't move his downturned face. Wondering if it was hard to hear, I opened my mouth again.

"I'm here."

"I can hear you clearly."

Saying that, Soejima-kun, who raised his face, was slightly teary-eyed. "I could hear you."

A slightly more mature Soejima-kun, smiling with teary eyes, was reflected in my eyes. A sight I couldn't have imagined was clearly reflected in my eyes.

"I thought there would be nothing good in my future."

A shyly smiling Soejima-kun was reflected in my eyes. Nothing was obstructing the view. The bangs fluttering in the wind no longer hid my alien-like eyes. What was in front of my eyes wasn't darkness, like I had always

thought. It was something much brighter and more dazzling than I could have ever imagined.

This dazzle might be a momentary sparkle. The nearby sadness and the uncertain future could easily darken everything at any time.

But what was hidden in that darkness was not just suffering. Believing in my figure that became invisible in the shadows, my voice that seemed drowned out by the noise, I walked through the darkness.

If I force my feet that are about to stop to stand up and strain my eyes to see the unobstructed view, I'm sure I can find beautiful things that have melted into the darkness. I will meet such a sparkling moment again.

A large number of people came and went the station's premises. Lost in the crowd, my figure, which had become invisible and buried among many people, seemed to be clearly emerging. Here. Now.

Amid the overflowing crowd, the real me, not a spirit, was certainly here.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ARATA NAGAYAMA

Born in Kitakyushu City, Fukuoka Prefecture, he made his debut with this work in 2018.

He enjoys watching musicals, and he dreams of touring theaters all over the country someday.

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