

PENGUINDRUM

The illustration depicts an underwater scene with a blue and white checkered background. In the center, a young man with purple hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and a tan vest, stands looking forward. To his left, a girl with long brown hair in a blue dress stands with her back to the viewer. To his right, a boy with red hair in a dark suit stands with his back to the viewer. A large, dark blue whale is swimming behind them. The scene is decorated with various sea creatures: a yellow seahorse on the left, a red crab on the right, a penguin on the right, and a small penguin-like creature at the bottom. There are also red coral, a yellow book with a quill, and a yellow bag with a white pom-pom. The title 'PENGUINDRUM' is written in large white letters at the top.

NOVEL

2

Kunihiko Ikuhara
Kei Takahashi

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 01](#)

[Chapter 02](#)

[Chapter 03](#)

[Chapter 04](#)

[Chapter 05](#)

[Chapter 06](#)

[Chapter 07](#)

[Chapter 08](#)

[Chapter 09](#)

[Author Bios](#)

[Newsletter](#)

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WRITTEN BY

Kunihiko Ikuhara
Kei Takahashi



Seven Seas Entertainment

PENGUINDRUM VOLUME 2

MAWARU-PENGUINDRUM Vol. 2
by IKUHARA KUNIIKO/TAKAHASHI KEI/HOSHINO LILY
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Original Japanese edition published in 2011 by
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Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64505-540-2
Printed in Canada
First Printing: December 2020
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Prologue

Chapter 01

Chapter 02

Chapter 03

Chapter 04

Chapter 05

Chapter 06

Chapter 07

Chapter 08

Chapter 09

Table of Contents

PENGUINDRUM

Prologue

IF YOU WERE TO SPOT four big, red stars floating in the night sky, you might strain your eyes to determine precisely just what those lights were.

Perhaps these conspicuously large, beautifully glimmering objects are apples—bringers of love and life. Or maybe they are the eyes of great black hares—governors of curses and terrible memories. Whatever they may be, once you've seen them, you can never go back. Once you know the answer, you must start moving at once, before it's too late.

If they are apples, then you must try your best to seize them for those you hold dear. If you find instead that they are hares with flapping ears flying your way, then you must shout at the top of your lungs to warn those you wish to protect.

I love you. That is why you must run from here. I will be fine. I need you to run, to flee from here before the reaching black shadows swallow you whole. And if one day you should find a real apple, warmly glistening, think of me somewhere in the traces of your memory. When that time comes, even if you find yourself all alone, you must eat that apple. That apple will be the reward of all those who fought to live, and of I, who gave my life to save you.

You get it, right? This isn't a tragic ending. This is the beginning of a brand new tale. So you mustn't cry. We all must take heed of those four red stars.

Chapter 01

I WAS WRONG. You were always fearless, so coarse and frank in speaking your mind to me. I wanted to be like that too, if I could. I was just a little bit jealous of that freedom of yours. I know this is no excuse, but I was frustrated and so tired of everything: the Penguindrum, that formless object that we seek; my sister's fragility; and the everyday lives we had to keep living despite it all.

I truly regret how cruelly I stressed that there had to be something dark within your heart. How could I possibly know that, when I'd met so few girls in my life? So please...keep being fearless and stubborn. Please stop wailing there, collapsed on the cold pavement. Just be by my side as I lie here on the ground. You look so pale, and it's raining so hard. The night is growing deeper, the temperature falling. If you catch a cold, it will be all my fault. So please...don't just sit there and cry. Get somewhere warm, with a roof over your head, where you can change into some dry clothes.

Also, just so you know, that nightgown you're wearing is getting soaked clear through from the rain. I apologize—I just happened to catch a glimpse of what you have on underneath. I won't say that out loud, though. I don't want to make you any madder.

I was wrong. I sincerely believe that. So, won't you please stop crying? I have no idea what I'll do if you don't, aching from head to toe as I am. I'm not especially sharp or clever when it comes to words.

That small, hunched back of yours is soaked gray, and trembling.

When I cracked open my eyes, it was to a familiar scent and the sight of a pockmarked white ceiling warping above me. At the very least, I wasn't outdoors or cold anymore.

"Tch, look at him sleepin' so peacefully. Not only is he not that sick, he's not even hurt," came a distant, but familiar, grouchy voice.

"Kan-chan, are you really one to talk? You went pale as a sheet the moment we got that call from the hospital," came a higher, teasing voice.

“Shut up. You can’t tell Shoma that.”

There was a faint chuckle.

Slowly, I moved my heavy head to see Kanba and Himari standing by the window, silhouetted against bright sunlight. Goodness, morning already? I needed to get up and make breakfast. But when I tried to sit up, I felt a prickling pain all over my body and let out a raspy moan. I realized then that I was lying in a bed with starched sheets.

“Sho-chan! You’re awake!” Himari turned and rushed over to me. The sun shone through her long, soft hair.

“Shoma!” My brother’s eyes went wide as well, then narrowed as he sighed through his nose.

I propped myself up, again taking in the smell and the ceiling and the walls, the clock hung on the wall, and my siblings’ faces.

“Wait, am I in the hospital?” I asked in a hoarse voice.

“You *idiot*!” Kanba screamed in a volume inappropriate for a hospital.

“Idiot?” As I glared at him, he shoved me down onto the bed. “Ow! What are you doing?!” I bounced a bit from the recoil of the mattress springs.

“Whatever, you can just sleep there forever for all I care!” Kanba’s face twisted.

“Don’t you remember last night, Sho-chan? You were hit by a car and brought here!” Himari stared at me nervously.

“Ah...”

Right. I had been in the dark, pouring rain. Thunder roared, and the rain was so cold and harsh, and Oginome-san was there, collapsed on the ground and crying. This was all such a mess. I couldn’t even think where to start making sense of it.

“Do you remember?” asked Kanba, glancing my way.

“Yeah.”

“If your memory’s clear, then your brain is fine. You’ve always been a little

slow anyway.” He finally smiled, poking my head ever so softly. “Don’t worry, you didn’t break anything. You’re just a little bruised. The docs were laughin’ about how lucky you were.”

I pouted and glared at him, but he suddenly looked away to the window.

“Don’t be mad at him, Sho-chan. Despite how he’s acting, he’s been worried sick about you. He didn’t sleep a wink all night,” Himari whispered to me.

“Himari!”

She pulled away from me, grinning.

I could only see Kanba from behind, but he didn’t look angry anymore.

“Oh, hey—” *What about Oginome-san?* I started to ask, but Himari cut me off.

“Oh, that’s right! I need to go tell Ringo-chan! You need to thank her, Sho-chan. She’s the one who called the ambulance for you, and stuck with you the whooole time!” Himari said innocently, before vanishing into the hall.

“Himari, wait.”

How could we...or rather, how could I face her, after everything that had happened? What could I say to apologize to her, if everything I remembered was true?

“So. More importantly, *what* happened?” asked Kanba, turning slowly back to me. His eyes flashed toward the door to check that the coast was clear before he continued, “Your accident. It had somethin’ to do with Oginome Ringo, didn’t it?”

Truthfully, it wasn’t wholly unrelated. Still, the fact that I saved her in that moment probably had nothing to do with the diary. We simply happened to be in the same place when she was in peril.

“Don’t tell me that chick *pushed* you?” he asked, his face rigid.

“N-no! Actually, I...really kind of messed up again there. I said something I shouldn’t have. But anyway, it was an accident, pure and simple. It wasn’t Oginome-san’s fault.”

He made an expression of disbelief, then narrowed his eyes in suspicion,

eyebrows knit.

“What?” I glared back at him.

“You really *are* an idiot.”

Just outside the door to Takakura Shoma’s room, Oginome Ringo leaned against the wall, sports bag in hand. The nightmare that was last night had been shoved inside the bag next to her beloved diary, along with the soiled, sopping nightgown she changed out of after arriving at the hospital. Wrapped around her neck was a clean, white towel that she borrowed from the hospital, soaked with rainwater.

“Ringo-chan!”

Ringo slowly lifted her head upon hearing Himari’s cheerful voice.

“Sho-chan is awake, and he’s doing great! He said he wants to thank you. C’mon!” Himari grabbed her hand, but Ringo did not move a muscle.

“That’s good,” said Ringo, heaving a deep sigh and smiling faintly.

“What’s the matter? Let’s go!”

Ringo’s hand, which was slightly bigger than Himari’s with its long fingers and angular nails, was icy to the touch.

“I can’t. I’m not worthy.” Ringo hung her head.

“Ringo-chan, what’s wrong?”

Ringo pulled her hand gently away. With nowhere for her own hand to go, Himari’s fingers curled softly at her chest.

“What’s with all the insults, huh?!” Shoma’s lively voice was audible through the cracked open door.

“See? He’s better already,” said Himari with a smile.

Ringo clutched her bag more tightly, pulling it up over her chin and muttering, “Shoma-kun...”

He was in the accident because of her. No matter why it had happened, that

fact was unshakable, and she had no idea how she could possibly apologize to Kanba, or the girl smiling before her...or to Shoma himself.

Project M was vital, but she never meant to get Shoma involved this way.

"It's fine." Himari smiled weakly. "Sho-chan wants to talk to you, too."

Himari dragged Oginome Ringo, her head still bowed, into the room. "Kan-chan," she said abruptly. "I'm hungry. Let's go get some lunch."

"But..." Kanba started. He looked between Shoma, who had his sheets pulled awkwardly up to his face, and Oginome Ringo, who stood stock-still in the middle of the room with her eyes to the floor.

"Maybe we should go?" Himari quietly asked.

"Yeah." Shoma's soft reply was hardly more than a grunt.

In a corner of a dining hall larger and more comfortable than one would expect from a hospital, Kanba sat leaning on his elbow, dazedly watching Himari knit. The pair of them, along with their two penguins, had just finished eating warm soba. Kanba sipped his hot tea, watching the faint tremors of Himari's eyelashes, the gentle swaying of her long hair. Himari moved her needles quickly, and Kanba had no idea how she did so with such precision.

Every now and then, Himari would open her pale lips as though she wished to say something, or softly mutter something like, "There we go," or, "Okay." Suddenly, she looked up at him. "Hey, Kan-chan?"

"Huh?" He was so enraptured watching her that, startled, he knocked over his cup. "Oops...oh well, it's fine. Wasn't much left in there."

He quickly set the cup back up and handed a wet towel to Penguin No. 1, who was sitting beside him. He directed it to clean the spill, and No. 1 dutifully began cleaning the table with both its wings.

Himari giggled, and continued. "So, um, have you ever gotten a present from a girl?" she asked, her knitting on hold for the moment.

"A present? Why?" Kanba replied, staring at the last drops of tea still left in the bottom of the emptied cup.

“Well, I mean, you’re so popular. Sho-chan said you were a ‘lady-killer.’” She gave him an odd smile.

“What nonsense has he been filling you up with now?”

“On that note, there’s something I want to ask you. What would you be happy to receive something from a girl?” she asked timidly, her eyes glimmering with intrigue.

“Hmm...” he said, pretending to think. “There’s not a single thing I’d want from any other girl,” he whispered only to himself, his attention drawn by the way Himari’s gaze was focused so wholeheartedly on him. “Well, nothing in particular,” he said flatly.

“I see.” For some reason, she let out a sigh of disappointment. “Uh, well then, how about the opposite? Is there anything you would hate?”

“Ah, well, I definitely have a few of those. Like the sorts of things chicks say they ‘put all their heart into making.’ I’m not interested in those,” he said, clearly this time.

“What?” Himari’s needles stopped moving.

“You know, like, bento and stuff, those weirdly involved ones. The ones with wieners cut into impossibly intricate octopus shapes, or the sushi rolls with pictures of flowers or animals or stuff on the cut ends. My least favorite ones are the ones with letters spelled out on the rice, like some happy housewife would make. Frankly, those give me the chills.” Kanba shook his head weakly as he recalled the bento he received with “LOVE” written out on the rice in flaked fish.

“So, bento are no good, then?” Himari leaned forward slightly. Penguin No. 3, who wore an out-of-season straw hat, mimicked this with eyes wide.

“Mm, and then there’s those stupidly huge cakes and stuff. The ones with little coupled figures in wedding dresses and tuxes on top. That one was especially freaky,” said Kanba, staring off into the middle distance as he ruminated on one particularly harrowing experience.

“Is that all? Any others?” Himari pressed on, uneasily.

“Hm...well, actually I think the absolute worst was a hand-knit sweater. It was super heavy and had big old initials on it. Sometimes she tried to force me to wear it,” Kanba said with a weary grimace, right before realizing that Himari had completely stopped knitting.

Himari lowered her eyes, jutting out her lip faintly, and set her needles down on the table. “So, a scarf would just be bothersome, wouldn’t it?”

Crap, thought Kanba. As considerate and kind as he could be to most women, he completely failed to consider what his sister might be thinking about right in front of him.

A brief silence fell between them.

“Hold up!” Kanba exclaimed as he stood up so forcefully that his chair fell over. Himari stared up at him, dumbfounded. He gripped her by the shoulders and said, “Listen, everything I was just saying was a joke! There’s no one in this world who’d be dumb enough to complain about a hand-knit gift from you! If I got a scarf from you, I would wear it anywhere, any time! Even if it was on the boiling sands of the Sahara, or the middle of a sweltering jungle. Hand-knit scarves forever! Viva la scarf! They’re the best!” he shouted, lifting his arms, knowing full well that he had gone too far this time.

He saw Himari, slack-jawed, out of the corner of his eye. Here he was, making a fool of himself. He was no better than his classmate Yamashita. Already too late to retract his best false smile, Kanba slowly lowered his arms.

Himari giggled and tilted her head. “Kan-chan, are you feeling all right?”

Just the faint smell of her familiar shampoo was enough to keep Kanba’s heart racing. He was no match for her. Himari stood up straight, stretched out a small, pale hand, and gently stroked Kanba’s head a few times. Then she tapped her broad forehead against his. Their mother used to do the same thing, long ago. Kanba shuddered, feeling his own forehead growing hot.

“I’ve finally reached a good stopping point for this, so I’m going to go home and get a change of clothes for Sho-chan now. I need you to stay with him in the meantime.” Himari was as sweet as a little candied fruit. Just the sound of her voice flowing through his ears was enough to melt all of Kanba’s troubles away.

“Roger that,” Kanba said with uncharacteristic meekness. He gave her a wry smile. If it meant protecting his family—protecting Himari’s smile—he would be a human, a fool, or a monster. Whatever it took.

He picked up the fallen chair and plopped back down on it. Across from him, Himari grinned, and put her yarn and needles away into her bag.

“Thank you, Himari.”

“But I haven’t done anything.” Her strangely soft voice echoed around the dining hall before she fell quiet again. It was as though nothing had happened at all in the past few minutes. Kanba considered saying something, but held his tongue. He decided to linger there a little while longer. Until she left the hospital, just sitting here and watching her was enough for him.

Oginome-san was utterly silent, sitting on the stool beside the bed I was propped up in. With Kanba and Himari gone and the curtains drawn firmly around me, my awareness of the surrounding empty beds began to fade, the silence enveloping us all the more starkly.

What could I even begin to say to her?

“Um. Shoma-kun. You didn’t say anything about last night, did you? When I saw Kanba-kun and Himari-chan at the hospital, I couldn’t...” Her breath hitched in sorrow. “I’m sorry!” She bowed her head so deeply that I could see the crown of her head.

I’m the one who should be apologizing, I wanted to say. Or, *Lift your head.* Or maybe, *Don’t worry about it; I’m fine.* In the brief silence, I finally sighed and spoke.

“You scraped your knees, huh?” Both her knees were plastered with blood-tinged bandages. “Did you get hurt anywhere else?”

Surely that would tell her that I didn’t blame her whatsoever. It wasn’t an especially absurd reply, was it?

“No, I’m all right.” She slowly lifted her head, glancing my way. Her eyelids were pink and swollen. She looked a bit tired.

“Good.” I smiled brightly. “I’m glad you weren’t injured too badly. I wasn’t even hurt that much. Putting me in the hospital was basically overkill,” I said. I tried to look her in the eyes, but they were hidden behind her thick bangs.

She continued staring at the floor.

“Anyway...I said some terrible things last night, too.”

The moment I said this, she cried, “I’m sorry!” and bowed her head again.

“No, listen, it’s fine.” I was trying to be as honest with her as I possibly could, but frankly, I couldn’t bear to have her apologizing to me like this. There was nothing impure in the slightest about my having saved her. However, there were copious impurities about us being together in the first place. In fact, I should admit that it was mostly impure.

This would be so much easier if she could muster up even the slightest bit of disdain for me.

“More importantly, is the diary all right?” I asked, certain that she would give me a firm reply of, *Of course it is*, but that reply never came.

“I’m going home for now. I’ll be back here later.” Slumping, she briefly locked eyes with me. She was clutching her bag close to her chest. Through the small gap in the opening, I could see the gown from the night before...as well as the diary.

“Huh? Is that the diary?” I doubted my own eyes. The sullied, rain-soaked diary appeared tattered and torn. “Was it destroyed?!”

“Half. Half of it was taken,” she said, voice trembling faintly.

“What happened?”

“It fell on the street last night, remember? Then someone came riding through on a motorcycle and tried to take it. When I tried to pull it back, it tore.”

“No way...” So my accident wasn’t the only reason she was bowing her head so apologetically. She felt responsible for losing part of the diary that we had been so desperately relying on.

I felt my mind going hazy. The diary was no longer complete. What did that

mean for us now? What effect would this have on Himari?

Why had I bothered hanging around Oginome-san for all this time?

“Excuse me,” came an annoyingly clear voice. A nurse pushing a serving cart entered the room and swiftly drew back the curtain around my bed. I reflexively straightened my spine and shut my mouth.

“I’ve brought your meal, Takakura-san.” The nurse was strangely young, her eyes sharp as she stared at me, smiling gently. “I’m sure you must be hungry. We’ve included a special dessert today.”

Now that she mentioned it, I was indeed hungry. The last thing I ate was that tainted Montblanc at Tabuki’s place.

“Pardon me,” said the nurse as she set up a folding table for me, placing a food-laden tray upon it as she continued, “Here you are. Looks wonderful, doesn’t it?”

There were a number of bizarre things happening here. She was far too young, and her nails were filed into clean egg-like shapes, which seemed odd for a nurse. Plus, she had a strange smell about her—like perfume, something with beeswax, or notes of flowers or fruits mixed in. The dessert, which was flan, didn’t fit with the rest of the hospital meal. It was decorated with whipped cream and even had fruits on top.

“Whoa, a flan. Nice!” With hunger clouding my vision, Oginome-san nearby, and my brother being somewhere here in the hospital, my guard was completely down. It never dawned on me that anyone would bother to sneak all the way into the hospital just to harm me.

“Starting with dessert, really?” asked Oginome-san, staring at me a bit judgingly as I reached immediately for the flan.

“Trouble never rests. When you’re beat, you need something sweet.”

“You’re such a kid.”

Ignoring her, I began eating the flan. The spoon itself was strange as well. It was a proper dessert spoon, not the sort of tableware you would imagine at a hospital.

“Oh, my. I’m all out of tea,” the nurse said loudly, peering into the kettle with a troubled look upon her face.

“Oh, I’ll go get some, then,” said Oginome-san, unusually considerate.

“Thank you,” said the nurse, handing the kettle to Oginome-san. “The kitchenette is a little far from here. Do you know where it is?”

“I do,” said Oginome-san with a small nod, before leaving the room with kettle in hand and her bag flung over her shoulder.

“My, I’m truly jealous of you, Takakura-san. Having your girlfriend by your side looking after you.” The nurse grinned as she watched me stuff my face with flan.

“No, she’s not anything...like that...” Before I had time to be surprised at how my vision blurred as I looked up, the spoon fell from my hand. It made a lovely ringing sound as it hit the floor.

Before I lost consciousness, I thought I heard her say, “Goodness. We better crush him soon.”

Her voice was so cold that it sent a shiver down my spine. Her face had a strange hue to it. I felt as though I had seen it before somewhere.

Ringo proceeded back down the hall to Shoma’s room, heavy kettle in hand. Just before she entered the room, she passed by someone who resembled the nurse from before, pushing a serving cart, but she paid this little mind.

“Sorry I took so long, I got you some tea,” Ringo said, adding a small, “Huh?” as she pushed her face past the curtain. The nurse and the tray were gone, and so was Shoma.

“Shoma-kun?” Had he stepped away to the restroom? If he had, then why had everything vanished, including his phone that was on the bedside table? What did it mean that even the nurse, who should have been waiting for the kettle, was gone?

Standing in the disquieted atmosphere of the silent hospital room, Ringo knitted her eyebrows.

Kanba gazed around the empty room, eyes wide.

“What do you mean, he vanished?” Presently, there was no one else in sight.

“I don’t know. He was supposed to be eating lunch, but when I got back there was no one here.” Ringo stared at Kanba uneasily, the kettle set on the floor and her bag clutched to her chest, still looped around her shoulder.

Kanba walked carefully around the bed. There was nothing particularly suspicious around. There was only a spoon lying on the clean, generic floor. He picked up the polished silver dessert spoon and breathed a soft breath. Suddenly, his phone vibrated in his back pants pocket. He frantically checked the text as he prickled with a sense of déjà vu. “It’s from Shoma!”

“Hand over the diary half, or else Takakura Shoma will die,” read the text.

“Huh?!” Ringo leaned forward, staring at the screen alongside him. Seeing this, Ringo stiffened, clutching her bag more tightly.

“Diary half? What’s that mean?”

There was another message, with an attachment. “Takakura Shoma, presently,” it read, beneath which was a web address. Kanba clicked the link at once. It was a video of Shoma bound to an operating table in a dark room.

There was a ball gag stuffed into his mouth, and his face, lit by the blue flame of a blowtorch, was twisted in fear, his moans loud and forceful.

It appeared that the video was being livestreamed, but given how dark the room was, the screen was grainy and it was impossible to tell where he was.

“What is this? Who the hell would be after the diary?”

“Um, here.” Ringo pulled the diary half from her bag and timidly offered it to Kanba.

“Just half? Where’s the rest?” He took it immediately, carefully inspecting the torn edge.

“It was taken last night,” she said timidly. She suddenly recalled the cold of the rain, the sound of the thunder, and the motorcycle’s engine roar. The

memory was so vivid that it almost felt as though she was back at that terrifying scene.

“Taken?! By who?!”

Ringo took half a step back in fear as Kanba roared at her. “I don’t know. This motorcycle came out of nowhere, and the person riding it tried to pull the diary away from me. After that I was still standing in the road, and just as a car was about to hit me, Shoma...” She pressed her forehead, dizzy. She looked ready to cry.

“Doesn’t seem like you’re lying,” said Kanba, scrutinizing her unforgivingly.

“Of course I’m not! If Shoma-kun hadn’t saved me, right now, I would be...” She looked to the bed with its sheets rumpled, where Shoma had been.

If Shoma hadn’t saved her, then Ringo would be in that bed right now, or maybe even dead. And yet she faltered, unsure of whether to prioritize him over the fate of her own family.

“So...” Kanba, with his handsome looks and a perpetual scowl on his face—so completely unlike Shoma’s—stared at the name written on the cover: *Momoka*.

We have to save Shoma right away, Ringo thought, *so he can scold me and this scary brother of his.* If only he could have been sitting in the bed, eating his flan like nothing had happened, when Himari returned with his change of clothing.

“Take it! If you don’t, Shoma will die, won’t he? So hurry up!” Ringo implored him.

“Are you sure?” Kanba asked suspiciously.

“Well...” If Takakura Shoma ended up dead, Oginome Ringo would be devastated. She could not imagine a world without Takakura Shoma, and such a thing could not be allowed to happen.

“Okay, hang on.” Kanba stared at the screen again. “Shoma’s safe for now. Plus, it’s not like we have no leverage here.” He swiftly manipulated the phone, pulling up a map, and grinned.

“What?” Ringo asked, noting how truly different Kanba’s smile was from his

brother's.

"Both those messages and that video came from Shoma's phone." Kanba zoomed in on the map, staring at a location with a red dot on it. "Knew it."

"You know where he is?"

"Yep. He's being held somewhere in this hospital. There's no way they could have gotten him that far in that short of a time. This has gotta be it."

Ringo would do whatever it took to save Shoma. Still, the sharp glint in Kanba's eye, the way he thought, and the swiftness of his actions were uniquely frightening. It was strange to think that this man could be at all related to the kind, meek, and conscientious Shoma. The chilly aura emanating from his body stung at Ringo's skin.

"You hold onto this," said Kanba, shoving the diary back at her.

"But—"

"Even if only half of it is left, Himari needs it. *We* need it. Don't hand it over to anyone, no matter what!" His voice was low and forceful.

"But if you don't take this to them, then Shoma..."

Ringo pictured Shoma's face. The way he always looked troubled, whether he was smiling, angry, or giving out a lecture. And his voice, so soft and comforting... All of these things were already so dear to her.

"I'm going to save Shoma," Kanba said. "I promise you that. That's why you need to protect this. It's important enough to you that you would drag Shoma around all over the place and *still* not give it to him, right?"

"That's...true." *If I can have faith in Shoma, then perhaps I can have faith in Kanba, too*, Ringo thought. In fact, she was a little surprised at how thoroughly she believed in Shoma. "Please, you have to save him."

"He's my little brother," he said, flashing Ringo a confident smile.

On the rooftop below the great wide blue sky, several white sheets were hung out to dry, all waving in the wind. Kanba sauntered into the sea of sheets. He

held out a paper bag as he proceeded.

“I brought the diary, as promised! Where are you? Come out and get it!” As he raised his voice, holding the bag aloft, a sphere the size of a golf ball pierced through the sheets right next to him, grazing his cheek.

He gasped as the spheres began flying in from every direction, sending him dodging to and fro, not leaving him a moment to focus.

He tried to look between the gaps in the sheets to determine where the spheres were coming from, but he could not keep up. The moment he hesitated for even a second, a sphere collided with the bag, knocking it from his hand.

In an instant, the outside of the paper bag caught fire, black smoke rising from it. The periodical he had put inside in place of the diary soon became visible.

“Saw through it, huh?!” Kanba clicked his tongue.

The spheres stopped coming, the only movement the smoldering bag and the hole-filled sheets swaying in the wind. As Kanba looked around, he spotted a glimpse of a woman’s legs, running beyond the upturned sheets.

“There!”

He pushed back the sheets haphazardly, following the sound of the woman’s feet. She evaded his pursuit as though she were dancing through the waves of sheets. Then, suddenly, she vanished.

“You little...!” Kanba rushed through the labyrinth of sheets, quickly glancing around, until he came to a space utterly devoid of anyone’s presence. All the signs of life he picked up on before disappeared.

A faint, familiar melody began to play. Kanba looked down to his feet to see a wooden music box placed there. It was playing Dvořák’s “Going Home.” His face crinkled slightly as he leaned down to look at the tiny box.

“This is...”

“So, have you remembered?” A voice echoed across the rooftop via a loudspeaker. It sounded like it was being run through a voice changer, so Kanba couldn’t tell the age or gender of the speaker.

“What’s this about?! What am I supposed to remem—?” Before Kanba could

finish his sentence, another sphere came flying toward him, completely shattering the music box. The small explosion blew Kanba onto his back, leaving him staring upward. “Owww...” He pulled himself up, patted out the embers, and stared speechless at the smoldering music box.

“Keep walking!” the speaker demanded sharply.

This was like what had happened with Kuho Asami and Chizuru and Yui, but further escalated. However, it was unclear what Kanba was supposed to be remembering, or what this voice wanted him to do. If he couldn’t figure it out, then this stranger might start taking more drastic measures. He needed to rescue Shoma.

Kanba entered the stair block. This was the same door from which he entered onto the roof, yet for some reason the air within was hot and tense. It was like he’d just opened the door into the unknown.

“Wah!” Without any notice, a brass arrangement of “Going Home” began blaring at a nearly ear-bleeding volume.

Kanba reflexively clapped his hands over his ears, but the music still reverberated inside his skull. The sound filled up every inch of the space. He couldn’t imagine how huge the speakers must have been, or how many of them there were. Kanba inched his way down the cramped, filthy stairs. His lungs burned, and he was wracked by a formless pain. Was there some deeper meaning to this tune? Or was it merely all part of the production? The sound of the instruments filled his head, his thoughts too scattered to remember whatever it was he was supposed to recall.

The third floor. Upon the wall was written the number “3,” in lettering almost as large as Kanba was tall. There was nothing unusual here; no signs of an incoming attack. “Going Home” blared from the speakers, so even if there had been some sign, Kanba likely wouldn’t have noticed.

He headed down the hall toward the next flight of stairs down. Just as he began to question his enemy’s motives—an enemy who was surely watching him from somewhere—the hospital room door in front of him suddenly opened, and a bed came rolling smoothly out before him. Atop the bed was a large, square basket, fringed by white lace.

The sight took his breath away.

Inside was a bento galaxy, packed beautifully with handcrafted, delicately cut wieners; sushi rolls with flowers and bears on the cross-sections of their slices; white rice decorated with sakura denbu forming a heart and the word “LOVE,” and all of it spattered with cheese slices cut into the shape of stars and studded with green peas.

“Is this not enough to jog your memory?” came the voice through the speaker. Kanba continued walking down the hall, not bothering to answer. His vision spun, the excessive sounds of the music throbbing in his head.

He descended to the second floor, walking with his hand against a wall painted with the number “2.” Unsurprisingly, as he reached the middle of the hallway, a bed came rattling out from one of the rooms. Atop this one was a three-tier wedding cake, lavishly decorated with frosting, and so tall it nearly reached the ceiling. At the crown of this cake were lit sparklers, as well as a pair of figures of smiling newlyweds clad in a white dress and tuxedo, moving in slow rotation.

Through hazy eyes, Kanba gazed up at the towering cake. He blinked repeatedly, the sparklers almost blinding.

“Is this not enough? Do you still not remember?” demanded the voice.

Kanba began dripping sweat, bile rising in the back of his throat at the sickly-sweet smell of the frosting combined with the booming voice. *What* did they want him to remember? He shoved the bed away and fled down the stairs. He could tell by the dull shadow cast across the floor that the cake was swaying.

The moment he reached the first floor, before he could even find the number “1” upon the wall to confirm his location, the next bed rolled out. Upon this one was a mannequin bust, wearing a sweater. The sweater was a simple crewneck, knit from bright red yarn. In the middle of the sweater was a white heart emblazoned with the red letter “K.”

All of these unpleasant memories were a sticky mess in the depths of his mind, clinging to the pit of his stomach, but they remained hidden, lurking, and he could not remember a shred of detail. The memories were like demons rising from the depths of a pool, gripping at his ankles and slowly drawing themselves

up to show their faces. “Going Home” tore at his eardrums, and the bright red of the sweater stabbed at his eyes.

“Put that on! You have no choice in this matter!” the voice from the speakers boomed.

Kanba snatched the sweater from the mannequin bust and roughly pulled it down over his uniform shirt. The ends of the sweater were unfinished, the red yarn trailing off down the hall.

“Always with the cheap gimmicks,” he muttered, but he couldn’t even hear his own voice.

As he wobbled down the hall, never once did it occur to Kanba to ask who this enemy was.

“Well? Seems like you’ve remembered,” said the voice as Kanba looked across the hall of the first basement floor, marked with a “B1” on the right-hand wall.

“Yeah. I remember.”

The red yarn stretched into an ancient, rusted operating room door at the end of the basement hallway. There, Kanba was sure he would find what constituted a large portion of the memory that had finally returned to him. He put his hand on the handle of the sliding door and pulled, but perhaps because it was so old, or because it was heavy, it would not budge. He pulled harder, putting his whole weight behind it. Finally, the door slowly eased open with a painful, keening sound.

Ringo’s legs dangled over the edge of the bed Shoma had laid in. She held the kettle in one hand, a teacup in the other. Evening light poured in from the window as she sat quietly, sipping cup after cup of lukewarm barley tea. She was waiting either for the phone at her side to vibrate, or for Kanba and Shoma’s return.

In the bed on the other side of the curtain lay an old man who was recently admitted to the hospital. She could hear him engaging in pleasant conversation with his family, who had come to bring him his things.

The large, round, golden teapot was still chock-full of tea. Ringo passed the miserable time quietly, unconsciously sipping the tea from the cup and filling it up again from the pot when it was empty.

The glittering spoon that Shoma had held was placed casually beside the cell phone. Ringo stared at the dimming light outside the window, her hand gripping the teacup a little more tightly. They needed to hurry up before Himari came back, or before Ringo lost her cool and started crying. For now, though, she kept a stalwart face, sipping stubbornly through the tea reserves. Even if her stomach filled to bursting, she would keep on drinking.

If only they would come back already.

The moment she saw her phone move the slightest bit, she raised it to her ear, not stopping to check who the caller was. “Hello? Shoma-kun?” Though the surface of the bed was uneven, the big, heavy teapot did not move an inch upon it. All she could hear from the other side of the phone was breathing. “Who is this?”

“The instructions I gave to Takakura Kanba were a trap. Oginome Ringo, you will bring me the diary. If you don’t come at once, Takakura Shoma will die.” The voice on the other end of the phone sounded as though it was being run through a voice changer.

Ringo pulled her face away from the phone and looked at the screen, but neither name nor number was displayed. With a flash, the screen changed, showing the same dark video that was sent to Kanba’s phone: Shoma, bound to an operating table with a ball gag filling his mouth, facing the screen and moaning desperately.

Ringo opened her mouth, unable to scream. Shoma was still safe. However, Kanba had yet to reach him. He still had not been rescued. If she didn’t hand over the diary, he might actually be killed.

She drew in a quick, deep breath as her eyes fell to the bag at her swaying feet. “I understand. Where should I bring it?” She stood up and took the diary half from the bag. She summoned every last drop of her courage, making sure the person on the other end of the line would not hear how her voice wavered.

The third-floor passage faced out onto the parking lot, from where the setting sun was clearly visible. From elsewhere, the melody of “Going Home” noted the time.

Ringo clutched the diary to her chest and started down the indicated passage. Soon, her phone began to ring.

“Hello?” She was certain she was being watched from somewhere, but there were far too many people and windows and doors in this hospital. Every last one of the nurses and patients and white-coated doctors passing her by looked suspicious.

“Keep going toward the railing,” said the voice, wholly without feeling. *“Then, drop the diary below.”*

Not saying a word in reply, Ringo looked down through the glass-sided railing. There, she saw a lot of cars, but no people. She touched the cover of the diary again, gently stroking the torn-off edge.

“I’m sorry, Momoka.”

Ringo steeled herself and threw the diary over the railing. She leaned over the railing to watch it fall just as a black figure leapt out from the shadows, snatched up the diary, and dashed away in the blink of an eye. Ringo felt the urge to chase the figure, but thought better of it. Doing anything unnecessary now might only put Shoma in more danger. Plus, she would never be able to figure out where the figure vanished to.

She crouched down on the spot, burying her face in her knees as the orange sky darkened into the navy blue of evening. “Why?” she asked no one, but all she could do was believe that her actions would be enough to save Shoma.

Ringo didn’t get any more calls, and when she tried calling back, it wouldn’t even connect. She decided to return to Shoma’s former room instead, her head and her heart twisted with unease. She stood slowly, straightening her back.

Her heart was probably still black, wasn’t it? Black and dirty.

Without the diary, there was now little left within her heart. Momoka’s diary was one of the only things giving her the strength to keep on living. It was because of the diary that she was able to maintain any ties to reality, and to

make any compromises.

If Takakura Shoma did not return, then Oginome Ringo might never again know anyone who could erase the blackness from that heart of hers.

Beyond the rusted door was a dark, silent operating room, just as Kanba had seen in the video. Even the melody from outside could not reach this place. He faced the direction the red yarn led him toward, and proceeded farther into the room.

The moment he spotted Shoma strapped to one of the old operating tables, the tension fell from Kanba's shoulders, and he breathed a little easier. The strains of "Going Home" still rang in his head, and his vision blurred slightly.

"Shoma!"

When Shoma noticed Kanba, he shook his head wildly, moaning around his gag. Kanba rushed forth to release Shoma from his bonds, but just then the iron door behind him shut with a dull sound. As he turned around, the dim lights illuminating the room all went out, and his field of vision went black. At the same time, he heard a faint mechanical sound. Beyond that, all he could hear was his and Shoma's breathing, and his own retreating footsteps.

"Shoma, are you all right?!" Kanba asked.

"Muh-huh," Shoma replied.

Kanba turned in the darkness. "Where are you?!" he called out to his unseen enemy, who he now was certain was Natsume Masako. The blackness was so thick that his eyes couldn't even adjust, but he was sure she was lurking somewhere in the dark. "Come on out. Enough of this messin' around! Let Shoma go already!"

Kanba wondered what that mechanical sound from before had been. Was it a weapon? If it was some kind of night-vision device, Masako would be able to see Kanba's position clearly. As things stood, it was unlikely she would lay a hand on Shoma, but Kanba wouldn't be able to untie his brother, either.

Kanba began groping through the darkness, straining his ears for the

mechanical sound. His first priority was to get the door open before Masako could attack.

“Heh. So you’ve finally remembered.”

Kanba gasped at the sudden whisper in his ear. She was right behind him, so close he could feel her breath.

“*You!*” Kanba squeaked out, but when he turned, he of course saw nothing.

“That sweater looks perfect on you. ‘Pigeon’s blood red’ really is your color.”

The only sounds in the darkness were Masako’s lilting voice and the sound of her footsteps.

“I don’t know anyone else who’d use such messed-up, roundabout methods. Spill it. What’re you after? How do *you* know about the diary?” asked Kanba, addressing the darkness as a whole.

Masako was seemingly unfazed by his insults. “Hm... Well, I suppose I owe you a reward, oh faithless hero who followed Ariadne’s crimson thread to this place. Very well. I will answer just one question.” She took up her beloved slingshot, one she had used so many times before, and took aim at Kanba’s forehead. She pulled the strap back taut. “What I am after is...” Her eyes narrowed behind the night-vision goggles, and after a moment, she let the slingshot fall to the ground. She then discarded the goggles completely and ran to Kanba, clasping her hands around his sweat-soaked face. She tilted her head and swiftly kissed him.

Kanba’s back collided with the wall at the force of her embrace. His eyes widened, and he was breathless from the feeling of her soft lips on his, the potent smell of the perfume she wore. Even if he couldn’t see her, he remembered these sensations vividly.

He frantically shoved at Masako, but his arms found only open air. At that moment, all the lights in the basement flickered on noisily, illuminating the whole room. Reflexively, he shielded his eyes from the bright light.

Masako vanished.

“She’s gone?!” Kanba exclaimed.

Shoma also screwed his eyes shut as he writhed atop the dirty operating table, kicking his legs and moaning. Kanba quickly went to him, removed the gag and worked at the ropes.

“Kanba, th-that woman, that was...!” Shoma frantically stammered, gasping for breath. Just like Kanba, Shoma’s memories of Masako resurfaced.

“Yeah.” Kanba wiped his lips forcefully and tore off the red sweater. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself before releasing Shoma from the table.

“Ow...” Shoma muttered as he slowly sat up. “Kanba, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Let’s go. We need to get back before Himari does.” Kanba grinned warmly at his brother.

And so, propping each other up as they tottered along, the pair departed the basement.

Ringo was nodding off on the hospital bed. She hadn’t slept a wink all night, and she was so, so sick of the taste of barley tea. She pulled out the tray table and placed the kettle and her phone upon it before lying down, ready to rest in the arms of the sandman.

The faintest hint of Shoma’s scent lingered on the starchy hospital sheets. Ringo fought back the hot tears she felt welling up behind her closed eyes. Doing so made her temples ache, and she felt all the sadder.

How much time had passed since she handed over the diary? She was at a loss. Countless dreadful images flashed through her mind, but she quashed them by imagining the best possible outcome. Her eyelids were lead, her body and mind thoroughly exhausted.

“Ringo-chan.”

Ringo opened her eyes a crack at the soft, high-pitched voice.

“Ringo-chan, have you been crying?”

She looked up, wondering who was speaking to her, and saw Himari. Ringo flew awake then, suddenly remembering where she was and the situation that was currently unfolding.

“W-welcome back, Himari-chan! I wasn’t crying!” She shuffled off of the bed, wiping her tear-blurred eyes with her fingertips. “Goodness, what am I doing here? Anyway, that didn’t take you long!”

Himari was dumbfounded. “Really?” she asked as she pulled open her bag and put the contents away on the shelf and in the drawer. The world outside the window was already completely dark. “Where are Sho-chan and Kan-chan?” she asked with a smile.

Ringo reflexively smiled back at her, but fell silent.

“Did...something happen?”

Ringo snapped back to attention at the straightforward question.

“Yo, thanks Himari,” came a loud voice from the doorway. The pair turned to look.

“Kanba-kun! Shoma-kun!” shouted Ringo, swiftly covering her mouth bashfully.

“And where did *you* two run off to? Making Ringo-chan keep watch like this...” asked Himari, puffing out her cheeks.

“Well, uh...” said Shoma, smiling weakly and scratching his head.

“Oginome-san was pretty worn out, so we went to the cafeteria to let her use the bed for a bit. Right, Shoma?” said Kanba, casually brushing the dust from his clothing and wiping his brow.

Shoma looked Ringo’s way and nodded fervently. “That’s right! You were pretty sound asleep, so we thought it’d be bad to wake you.”

Ringo restrained herself from immediately leaping for joy. “Yes. That’s right,” she said instead. “Thank you, you two,” she added with sincere gratitude.

“Oh, I see. You need to take it easy then, Ringo-chan. It’ll be time for dinner soon. We should probably head home after we get Sho-chan’s things in order.”

Himari gave a gentle smile, not the slightest hint of doubt crossing her features. Ringo pressed a hand to her chest in relief, looking again at Shoma and Kanba. Kanba patted Shoma lightly on the back, his face soft, while Shoma smiled peacefully. *The two of them really are nothing at all alike*, Ringo thought.

Still, at least there was no mistaking how close they were as brothers. Both were serious, hardworking, and full of love for Himari.

Natsume Masako sat within a subway car as the train raced along the darkened rails. She looked straight ahead, her posture perfect, with her penguin Esmeralda sitting upon her knee. Masako met the eyes of her own reflection in the glass of the opposite window, and quietly averted her gaze.

She stroked Esmeralda's dark head, the short, soft hairs smooth and soothing against her palm.

"The diary is now ours, just as planned. I can't wait to see what happens next, Esmeralda. The hunt is only just beginning. Naturally, Project M will be seen through to completion. I'm not the sort of foolish hunter who would let my prey escape my grasp."

Masako looked again at her own reflection. This time, she locked eyes with her own gaze, her eyes glinting.

"Survival Tactiiiiic!!"

Masako turned slowly toward the source of the voice. She saw a lone young boy wearing an elegant penguin hat, in the showy style of the Prince of Penguins. The boy was staring straight ahead, his eyes glowing red.

"Yes, that's right, Mario-san." She smiled tenderly at the boy. However, there was no change of expression from the boy named Mario, and not a single reply.

Chapter 02

KANBA STOOD BEFORE a large gate with a nervous-looking Penguin No. 1 in tow. No. 1 was equipped with a pot lid and a 30-cm ruler. Kanba stared at the nameplate that read “Natsume,” and pushed the dull metal doorbell. He waited a short while, but there was no reply. He was about to ring the doorbell again, but stopped and looked up to see a security camera pointed his way.

Masako stretched and sat lightly in a chair, watching Kanba through the camera. He had a low-cut sweater on, along with denim jeans and sneakers—his usual fashion.

“Goodness, we better crush him soon.”

The tiny image of Kanba glared at Masako through the screen.

“I know you’re in there,” Kanba said. “Open up already. We need to talk.” He shoved both hands into his pants pockets.

Masako sighed deeply. The gates, which were far taller than Kanba, unlocked loudly and automatically opened. Kanba proceeded through a garden filled with roses in every color and variety until he reached the entryway of the mansion.

He was sure that every one of his actions was being watched. The door of the brick-and-mortar mansion, built in a traditional English architectural style, opened before he even put his hand to the knob. He started down the black-and-white checkered hall, still in his outdoor shoes. It was dim inside, and the air carried a smell of old furniture, like in an art museum.

Moving quickly, Kanba stopped suddenly as he caught sight of a figure. It turned out to be only a white, male-shaped mannequin. As he looked around, he noticed several mannequins facing every which way, their faces distinguished only subtly by the contours that defined them. Each of them wore a sweater or shirt or parka or pair of pants that all somehow seemed familiar. Among them was a mannequin wearing the red sweater he was forced into at the hospital, crudely decorated with a photo of Kanba himself.

Kanba grimaced. Of *course* the clothes were familiar—every one of them were ones that Kanba had once worn, or were at least identical to items

currently in his wardrobe.

On the walls of either side of the hallway were pasted portraits and what looked to be hidden camera photos of Kanba, each one framed and aligned perfectly with the mannequins.

Kanba stepped quickly into the adjacent living room. The room featured a grand piano and plaster statues. There were stuffed busts of a proud-looking tiger, its fangs bared; a stag; hunting rifles; flowers in abundant arrangements in large vases; an unlit chandelier; and candles.

Long white lacy curtains wafted gently in the breeze that flowed in through the tall windows. Kanba smelled the sharp tang of paint thinner and saw Masako. She sat in the faint light, working a canvas with a paintbrush.

“So, did you enjoy our little game the other day?” asked Masako as she ceased her oil painting, her back still turned to Kanba.

Kanba did not reply. The base of Masako’s hairline was sharp and precise below a single tidy, vertical bun.

“It’s not so terrible to be the target of pursuit now and then, is it? The hunter chases the weasel, and the weasel chases the hunter. It’s an endless game of tag.” Masako turned around and laughed softly, happily.

Kanba glanced at Masako’s canvas. It was a painting of him, wearing a sharp costume like something a fairytale prince might wear, a pale-colored rose clasped in one hand. It was a red suit decorated with gold embroidery and an exaggerated ruffled collar. The gallant-faced portrait was fastidiously detailed.

“Guess you’re just as creepy as ever.” Kanba frowned as he glared at the painting, but Masako didn’t seem to notice, her eyes focused only on him.

“Do you know why I am painting this portrait of you?”

As Kanba averted his eyes from Masako’s piercing gaze, he noticed a massive painting above the fireplace. He assumed it to be that famous painting of Napoleon, but instead it was Kanba who sat atop a white horse in a cloak, pointing toward a faraway mountain ridge.

“How should I know?” Kanba replied, unable to take his eyes off the wild

image of himself.

“Shakespeare wrote in Act I, Scene I of *Timon of Athens*: ‘The painting is almost the natural man.’ Surely you’ve read it,” Masako said, one eyebrow cocked.

“I don’t remember,” Kanba replied, though of course he did. He found it to be a tedious, lonesome tale.

“Oh? I see.” Masako stood from her chair and removed her paint-smudged apron, placing it upon the seat. Beneath it, she wore a round-collared blouse made of a stark white material, a modest knee-length balloon skirt, and black tights.

“Humans in the flesh can tell a lie without a qualm. Both you and I, at present, are the same. That is why I’m painting you. The Takakura Kanba displayed upon this canvas is my truth.” Her voice flowed with a Shakespearian quality. “Love’s sweet nothings mean nothing to me. Love is but a word, a useful notion, which anyone might toy with as they please. In the end, the passion one feels when one believes they are in love is nothing more than the effect of hormones coursing through our brains.”

Masako walked straight over to Kanba, clasped his shoulders from behind and drew him near, drawing their cheeks close. She closed her eyes tightly and inhaled, soothed by Kanba’s somehow wild, but thoroughly clean scent.

“Say, how much do you love me?”

Kanba pushed her away, staring at her with a pained expression.

“You don’t have to answer me. I’m not after your foolish, calculated love! I care for nothing more than you taking my hands and showing me the truth. That is why I have put together this collection of you. So that I can adorn my walls with them, as a hunter displays the trophies from his prey!” Masako giggled, standing before the Kanbas hung on the wall.

“You’re just a friggin’ stalker!” Kanba spat, staring at the images of himself that looked like the faces of strangers within their frames.

“A stalker? My, I wonder. I am in fact a hunter, stalking after my prey, am I not?” She laughed happily, shrugging her shoulders, then flung her arms wide,

continuing excitedly, “This world is a game preserve of love! And I, who have been granted trespass to hunt here, am a hunter of love, as it were. True love is not about seeking a partner’s heart and body as your reward. It is to possess the shape of your partner’s truth. Failing to do so is like blasting your body to pieces with your own gun. I am a victor of love, a hunter of the utmost skill, and you are my prey. We persist in this eternal chase in the name of love!” Masako’s eyes glittered, her cheeks reddening.

“This ain’t a joke. Who would want to be *your* prey?” Kanba barked back, but none of his words were getting through to her.

Masako slowly shook her head, looking at Kanba with pity in her eyes. “You don’t understand. A hunt is only made enjoyable through the opposed energies of both the hunter and the hunted. You are the one who balances me, and I the one who balances you. This hunt is our destiny.”

“I don’t have the time to be playin’ games with—”

Masako cut him off. “Silence!” She then sank into a large armchair placed before the fireplace, motioning for Kanba to do so as well.

Kanba quietly obeyed, glancing silently at Masako’s face in profile. Her sharp, narrow eyes quietly faced ahead.

“Have you forgotten what you said to me back then?” Her voice sunk low.

“It was just some nonsense from when we were kids. Forget about it already.” Though thrown off his groove by Masako’s actions, Kanba was not shaken at all. After all, she’d always been like this. She was always emotional and theatrical and twisted, and never truly happy in the slightest.

“I’ll go make us some tea. What would you like?” asked Masako, as though she wasn’t listening at all.

“First off...” Kanba began, pulling one of the scorched spheres from his pocket. It was the same as the one that was in Kuho Asami’s room when she forgot all about him, and the ones that struck Chizuru and Yui when they forgot about him as well. “I’m guessin’ you’re responsible for these? Did you seriously sneak these things out of that place?”

Masako’s expression did not change in the slightest. “I had those girls forget

about you. They were foolish girls, unqualified to be hunters. Still, more importantly, I did it to protect your secret.”

“Secret? What are you talking about?”

“It’s fine. I know everything about you. For now, let’s have some tea. That reminds me, I have a lovely Nuwara Eliya Ceylon. I don’t believe you had any issue with that, did you?”

Kanba slammed his fist on the bulky armrest, growing impatient with Masako as she stood and headed for the round table in the center of the room, dodging the question. “I don’t have any secrets. Quit talkin’ nonsense!”

Masako turned back around and stared with cold, quiet eyes into the back of Kanba’s head. “Even if I say nothing of it, someday the world will know. One day you’ll be shoved off the ice wall and into the ocean.”

“What are you on about now?” Masako was always like this. Her words always fantastical, flitting around this way and that, as though each point of conversation was connected.

“The Antarctic emperor penguin. Throngs of penguins stand huddled by the waterside on the edge of the ice wall, hesitant to jump in. You’ve seen it on TV, haven’t you? If even one of them plunges into the water, they’ll soon know whether there are any ferocious carnivorous seals out there in the sea. Of course, no one ever wishes to die. So they just wait intently. They keep up their jostling atop the ice, waiting for some unlucky soul to be shoved off into the sea.”

Masako began pouring tea from the tea set atop the round table. The Nuwara Eliya had a faint orange hue and gentle fragrance of flowers and fresh green.

“And you’re sayin’ I’m gonna be that idiot penguin?” He sighed deeply, quietly. He wasn’t about to be sucked in by her strange behavior.

“That’s just the sort of place it is. You understand, don’t you?”

There was the repeated sound of water being poured, and the alluring smell that rose as the leaves unfurled.

“What a lovely fragrance.” Masako breathed the steam in deeply, smiling with

only the faintest quirk of her lips as she realized how thoroughly these tense moments with Kanba delighted her.

“More importantly, we’ve got business to settle. You need to give back Oginome Ringo’s diary. We need it,” said Kanba, listening to the sounds of tea being poured into cups behind him.

“I can’t do that,” said Masako, preparing three sets of cups and saucers.

“And why not? This is just a game to you, isn’t...”

Kanba trailed off, at a loss for words as he finally caught sight of a certain small creature. It was a penguin, short and round. The penguin, Esmeralda, glanced at Kanba with sharp, narrow eyes that much resembled Masako’s. Esmeralda sidled boldly over to Penguin No. 1, who wore a look of terror, a cold sweat pouring down its face. Then she pecked No. 1 on the beak. No. 1 dropped the pot lid and the ruler to the floor.

Masako carried over the small, cup-laden tray, handed one cup set to Esmeralda, and returned to Kanba. “We have need of that diary as well,” she said, offering a cup and saucer to Kanba. The set was painted with delicate, deep blue images, rimmed with gold.

Kanba accepted it hopelessly, unsure of what else to do.

“Do come in,” Masako called to the hallway, without looking up.

The beautiful young boy who came shuffling into the living room wore a penguin hat atop his head. He stared at them silently, his eyes glowing red. He struck an image of rather fleeting elegance, with his lowered eyes and dainty limbs ever so much like a girl’s.

“I’m sure you remember my little brother Mario. He is my precious M, my Project Mario.” Masako leaned over and offered him the third tea serving. “It’s warm. Have a seat and drink.”

The boy gave a faint nod and took the cup and saucer from Masako’s hands, then plopped down into a chair beside the table. Kanba could do nothing but watch, speechless.

“I will not hand over the diary,” Masako told him. “I will save Mario’s life by

any means necessary. Even if it means fighting you. To think that the ‘curse’ from sixteen years ago would come to fruition this way. What sublime fate! Such drama!” Masako laughed gleefully.

Kanba began to say something, but stopped. Instead, he roughly set the saucer on the table, snatched up the paling Penguin No. 1, and threw a glare at Esmeralda as he left the room.

Masako smiled and toyed with her curls as she gazed intently at her beloved’s retreating back. Even if she and Kanba were destined to battle one another, the fact that they were bound by destiny at all was enough to make her heart soar.

She rushed to the window, peeking through the curtains to see Kanba walking swiftly out of the front door. He stopped suddenly and looked up at the mansion, his face harsh and stiff. Even this was enough to set the pit of Masako’s stomach fluttering.

Her cell phone rang. Masako swiftly banished those feelings, then answered the phone. Honestly, they always had such peculiar timing with phone calls.

“Yes, he just left,” Masako said. “He hasn’t yet realized that we only have half the diary in our possession. Still, having only this half is meaningless. Could you please track down the location of the remaining half as quickly as possible?” She waited for the short response, then hung up the phone. She donned her apron once more and sat back down at her easel, face-to-face with the Takakura Kanba on the canvas. The “true” Kanba within the painting smiled back at her, saying what was in his heart: *If we are cursed, then let us be cursed together.*

Oginome-san and I sat facing one another on the subway. As my body swayed with the motion of the train, I tried to decide on the right moment to say something to her.

She was wearing the now-familiar Oukagyoen Girls’ High School uniform, a sailor suit rather lovely in its own way. I was dressed in my black Gaiennishi High jacket, of which I was already so weary.

She and I hadn’t had the opportunity to speak honestly about what happened

at the hospital that day. We couldn't talk about it in front of Himari. Oginome-san only told me after the fact that she'd handed over the diary half at the insistence of an unknown party. I was in no position to criticize her, but even though my brother insisted on rescuing me at any cost, I couldn't help but be vaguely annoyed at her for handing over something so important.

I was catering to Oginome-san's every whim this entire time solely in hope of her lending me that diary. I responded to her every request to the best of my ability, even despite that terrible fight of ours.

"So, there's something I wanted to say..." My voice, when I finally squeaked it out, was softer than normal.

At nearly the same moment, Oginome-san began, "Um...it looks like you're all healed up now. That's good." Her head was lowered slightly, but there was a smile on her face.

I steeled myself and asked her directly, "Why did you hand over the diary?"

"What do you mean, why?" she pouted.

"You know we need that to save Himari's life, don't you? But you gave it up, just like that."

"Just like *what*?" she half-interrupted defiantly.

"I mean, you gave the diary away just because I got abducted and harassed a little. Are you stupid?!" There I was, saying the wrong thing again. I knew I held no malice toward Oginome-san, but knowing that we couldn't save Himari's life without the diary got the better of my temper.

"Stupid?"

After a brief silence, her mouth scrunched up in frustration and she struck me hard across my face with her bag. The sound and the commotion drew the momentary attention of the other passengers around us.

"Oww! What was that for?!" I demanded, holding my cheek.

"You were right. I'm totally stupid," she muttered. "What do you mean just a 'little harassed'?! Do you have any idea how worried we were about you, or even how *I* was feeling when I handed that over?!"

More and more gazes focused on us as her voice grew more passionate.

“O-okay there, Oginome-san, calm down.” I reached out gently for her arms, trying to soothe her.

“Don’t put your hands on me! I wish you’d been diced up into tiny squares with a scalpel and scorched with a blowtorch and stuck back together all wrong with a soldering iron!” she spat, her eyes furious.

What a creative and terrifying punishment. I shuddered as I realized I was seeing her true colors as an occult fanatic. The other passengers watching began to avert their gazes as well, seeming to sense the danger.

“My life’s plans have been turned upside down all thanks to you! You were a huge mistake! Like hell I’d ever give my precious diary over to someone like you!” She looked downward and clutched her head dramatically. “This is my punishment, isn’t it? For trying to turn my back on destiny.”

“Right... That diary was your sister’s, wasn’t it?” Kanba told me that he’d seen the name “Momoka” written on the back cover. I felt like a jerk. The diary wasn’t just important to us, but to Oginome-san as well. She gave up this precious memento of her sister not for some stranger, but for *my* sake. “I’m sorry. That was inconsiderate.”

“It’s fine, though. I’ll just restart my project.” She lifted her head. “I’ve read that diary so many times, I still remember a bit of what was written in it. I’ll carry out the rest of my plan!”

Experience taught me that trying to stop Oginome-san when she was determined to do something was a trial I was not suited for. “You gonna go back to stalking Tabuki, then?” Frankly, I couldn’t imagine what more she could do. Getting between Tabuki and Yuri-san would be impossible. More importantly, continuing to pointlessly follow Tabuki around would make her nothing more than a stalker. If she was too obvious, then Tabuki might find out about it and come to hate her.

“Stalking? I am his bride. It was written in the diary: ‘Tonight, he and I are going to share a wonderful, romantic evening.’” Her eyes sparkled as she spoke in a sweet, enraptured voice.

“And I? Are you referring to yourself? Wasn’t that written about your sister?”

“I am Momoka, and Momoka is me. That is our destiny,” she said as though this was entirely logical. Her piercing eyes shone even brighter.

“That’s weird! You’re you; you’re Oginome Ringo! You aren’t anyone else!” For just a moment, she looked troubled at my objection. I looked her straight in the eye. “I’m not going to help you.”

She paused for a moment. “Is it...because I don’t have the diary anymore?” Her voice was cold.

“Pretending to be your sister won’t bring back the things you’ve lost. Probably not ever,” I said in a flat tone. “I know that as well as anyone. That’s why I won’t help you anymore.”

It was for her own good.

We stared at each other silently until the train arrived at East Kouenji. The automated announcement rang on the speaker as the doors opened, and everyone filed out into the station. Oginome-san drew her gaze away from me, and slowly stood.

“I see. I guess I’m doing this alone, then. I’ve been all on my own up until now, anyway. Goodbye!” she spat as she exited the train, vanishing immediately into the crowd.

As the doors closed again and the train began to move, I sat there alone, stunned, wondering if she had ever truly needed me at all.

It was the diary that connected Oginome-san and me. That was the only reason I had gone along with her. Now that it was gone, was there really any point to staying with her? It wasn’t as though either of us really wanted to be around the other, after all.

Ringo left the classroom swiftly that evening, claiming she needed to rush to catch up with Yukina and Mari, with whom she always went home from school. Ringo clutched up her bag and walked briskly to the science lab.

She kept her expression calm as she entered, not wishing to draw the attention of other girls. This wasn't any of their business. She pulled out her laptop, quickly powered it up, and navigated to the "Dulcamara's School of Magic Potions" website. She clicked on the "Magic to Make Him Yours At All Costs" link, carefully confirming that the pattern of the new magic circle she secretly scribbled in the corner of the classroom beforehand was correct.

"Okay," she said to herself. "Let's do this."

Ringo went to the teacher's desk and pulled out a blanket-covered terrarium from underneath it. Resting inside the terrarium was a large and brightly colored toad.

The toad had a pink ribbon atop its head, which was a bright blue. The top half of its belly was orange, fading to a yellow gradient on the lower half, the whole of its body spotted with black. Its eyes were large and black, and there were strange markings on its back. It was the spitting image of the toad displayed on the screen: the "Himehomare Toad."

Ringo nodded to herself, remembering the spell's instructions.

"This mysterious toad surfaces aboveground only once every sixteen years. Place this toad upon the face of a beautiful maiden, and make her perspire. If you collect eighteen milliliters of that sweat, and feed it to the man you desire... Well, will wonders never cease! He will immediately become your prisoner. There's no way he won't confess his love to you."

Ringo steeled herself and plunged her hand into the terrarium, seizing the toad. There was no time to waste, and she was going to be placing it upon her own face anyway, so she didn't bother with rubber gloves.

Goosebumps rose from her right hand all the way up her arm. She swallowed back the feeling and lifted the toad, inching it ever so slightly nearer to her face.

Ringo groaned at the squishy feeling of the toad in her hand, then quietly laid face up in the center of the magic circle. She scrunched her face and chanted: "Will wonders never cease! He will immediately become my prisoner. This is my miracle love potion!"

She plopped the toad directly onto her face.

Tabuki began to worry for Ringo. He sat by her side on the Ferris wheel, having come to the amusement park at her urging.

He remembered her suddenly appearing at his home that night with Takakura Shoma in tow, but from the moment he had taken his first bite of the cake Ringo brought with her, his memory grew hazy. The next thing he knew he was lying in bed, having been awoken by Yuri, who had just returned home. The only thing he was left with was a dull headache. He wondered if it was merely a dream, but the half-eaten cake remained upon the living room table, next to three sets of teacups.

“The front door was completely unlocked,” Yuri told him. “Tabuki-kun, were you asleep? Why didn’t you answer the intercom?”

In the moment, there was nothing Tabuki could do but tilt his head, confused.

Now, Ringo sat next to him, wearing an attractive A-line dress of a slightly glossy material. It had long, puffy sleeves, and tapered to a fluffy miniskirt. When she was getting dressed earlier in the evening, she figured the brilliant lemon yellow would stand out well on the nighttime streets. Her shoes, which matched her black tights, had a single strap with a slight heel. She wondered briefly if she was making too big of a fuss, but tonight she would claim her victory, no matter what. It didn’t matter if she was a little overdressed.

Naturally, she chose the amusement park at night for this encounter because the atmosphere would be perfect. The Ferris wheel, with its blue and white lights, would be the old-fashioned rickshaw that would herald their wedding ceremony. The nighttime scenery they looked out upon would be their attendants. Above it all, Ringo and Tabuki would finally swear their eternal love to one another.

“So, what’s up? You said you had something urgent to discuss,” said Tabuki as he sat across from Ringo, getting a strange feeling.

“I’m sorry to have called you out so late,” she replied. “Where is Yuri-san this evening?”

Ringo’s face glistened as though slathered with varnish, more than make-up

or streetlights or the moonlight could account for. After the self-inflicted toad torture, concerned over the excessive shine on her face, she scrubbed her face again and again. But the unusual sheen remained, as though she were cursed.

“She’s probably in the middle of rehearsal right about now. It’ll be closing night soon, so she’s been burning the midnight oil every night,” Tabuki said with a smile.

Ringo smiled back faintly and said, “I see.”

“It’s a little cold out tonight, but it’s nice to get on a Ferris wheel now and then,” Tabuki said with a slight shiver.

“Oh, well, I’ve got just the thing for that,” said Ringo, pulling a red-checkered thermos from her tote bag. “Have some coffee! I brewed it with some special water.”

Before Tabuki could reply, she poured some into the attached red cup, and handed it to him. She calculated that each trip around the Ferris wheel was fifteen minutes. She would have to be fast.

“Whoa, thanks. Let’s try this.” Tabuki earnestly accepted the cup, breathing in the smell of the steaming, dirt-colored liquid. “Hmm, this one’s got a bit of a strange fragrance. It’s sort of...earthy.”

His brows furrowed for a second, but then he put the cup to his mouth and took three large swigs. Afterwards, he stared dazedly into thin air for a moment.

“Tabuki...san?” Ringo peered at his face. She knew that her measurements of the Himehomare toad’s sweat were not precise. Still, she had run out of other options.

“*Ri-ribbit*,” Tabuki suddenly croaked, looking up, face expressionless.

“Wha? A toad?”

“Ugh...uhhh... *Aaaaagggh!!!*” Tabuki dropped the cup, clutching his chest in pain.

“Tabuki-san!” Ringo panicked. This was probably the prelude to the effects of the love potion kicking in. It was just as the website explained. There was no

way she could have accidentally poisoned him!

Tabuki coughed violently, tearing painfully at the collar of his shirt. The small buttons flew off onto the floor of the gondola. At that point, Ringo feared that she was witnessing the prelude to him transforming into some kind of were-toad.

“Aah! Oh gosh, what do I do?! Tabuki-san, are you okay?” Just as she was about to press the emergency stop button, Tabuki suddenly seized her arm tightly. Stunned, she looked back at him, but he was no longer in pain. Instead, he stared up at her wildly, his breath ragged and eyes wide.

He pulled himself up, sweeping his bangs back from his eyes, his chest still bare. Still gripping her arm, he gazed at Ringo with glistening eyes.

“T-Tabuki-san?” His hand felt abnormally hot, even through her clothing.

Tabuki drew close to her face. “Ringo-chan...” he breathed. “I like you. I *love* you!”

“What...what did you just say?” She collapsed onto the cramped floor of the gondola.

Tabuki knelt and took her hand, seemingly enraptured by her. “I love you! I can’t hold this feeling back anymore! I’m in love with you, Ringo-chan!” His voice was clear and loud, more so than she expected. “Perhaps that’s why I’m here tonight—to steal you away!”

“Tabuki-san!” Ringo was dazed to the core. Was this reality, or merely a scene from her own dreams?

She imagined that she could hear a great fanfare, and church bells, and the voice of an old man in the shopping district shouting, “Congratulations!” She could hear an orchestra playing Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” in her left ear, Wagner’s “Bridal Chorus” flowing in from her right.

With just those few tiny words from Tabuki, the scenery below the Ferris wheel took on a new warmth, glittering like a soft little treasure.

“Ah, how could I have never realized it before now? All this time, it was the line of love rising from your eyes upon which this poor migratory bird rested his

wings!” He clasped both his hands around Ringo’s.

“Tabuki-san!” Finally, after working for so long, Ringo was savoring the sweet taste of success.

“There! Look, Ringo-chan!” One hand still gripping hers, he sat them both down and pointed out at the park. “Everyone is rejoicing in our love!”

She looked out to see the city lights twinkling. “It’s wonderful,” she said. “We’re going to be so happy. It’s just as the diary—I mean, as destiny decreed.”

“Well, of course! From the moment you were born, you and I have been bound by fate. Everything that has happened until now has all been a trial, the machinations of some mischievous goddess hoping to test our love. Cupid’s arrow has struck true right here.” He unbuttoned his shirt further, baring his chest. Ringo imagined a golden arrow buried at the center of his heart.

There was no *way* this could be a dream.

“You’ve shot me down, Ringo-chan. I am your captive, your canary. Won’t you join me in this song of love?”

The two of them gazed at one another, half-speechless.

Ringo’s eyes sparkled. The Tabuki of her dreams was finally right there in front of her. She now had Tabuki Keiju just as she wished him, all by acting on her own without Takakura Shoma’s help.

In fact, Shoma had probably been nothing but a hindrance from the start. The only way to get results was to work hard on her own, and to be cautious. When it came to her and Tabuki’s destiny, Shoma really had been nothing but extraneous.

Never in Ringo’s life had she been held so firmly in the arms of any man other than her father. Carried bridal style in Tabuki’s arms over the threshold of Yuri and Tabuki’s—no, this time it was *her* and Tabuki’s home. She was whisked solemnly into the bedroom, where she and Shoma once trespassed.

With her arms around Tabuki’s neck, Ringo looked up at his serious expression. She felt the heat through his clothing and became suddenly very

aware of his masculinity. The sweet palpitations and nerves buzzing in her chest began to curdle into fear.

For better or for worse, if this was all as fate ordained, then surely there was some meaning to everything that was happening. She would not shed a single tear in vain.

As she reassured her own trembling heart, she began to calm down, although paradoxically she felt even more helpless.

The bedroom was dark. Tabuki laid Ringo down ever so softly on the wine-red sheets that aligned with Yuri's tastes. Previously, Ringo was too in her own head to realize, but this smelled like a stranger's bedroom.

Atop the bed now, Tabuki straddled her, looking down at her face. He stroked her cheeks and her glossy, bobbed hair, then forcefully placed his hand down on the bed. He embraced her small body, enveloping her. His warm legs invaded the space between Ringo's thighs, brushing against her skin.

"I love you," he said, in a low, heated voice. Ringo shrunk back at the slight raggedness of his breath.

Ringo suddenly realized that there were tears flowing down her cheeks, though her expression had not faltered. The moment she realized this, she sniffled, just a little, and Tabuki made a curious face.

"Why are you crying?" His warm voice was so close to her that she could feel his breath.

"I don't know." Why was she so afraid? She had been dreaming of this moment all her life—the day when she and Momoka would finally be as one. This was what she had fought so long and so hard for. Why couldn't she stop crying? "I've been praying for this to happen."

"Then you should be more earnest about that." Tabuki removed his glasses and placed them beside the pillow, pressing himself closer to her, his face drawing nearer.

Ringo closed her eyes tightly.

I stared listlessly at the cabbage rolls rapidly boiling inside the pot.

“Sho-chan, the pot’s boiling over!”

“Augh!” Himari’s voice brought me back to my senses, and I turned down the heat.

“Seriously, what’s wrong with you? You’re totally spacing out.” She looked at my face worriedly.

Himari’s hair was fluffy today, as though it had been through a digital perm. It was pulled to the side with a band decorated with a white flower ornament. I was impressed. When I asked her how she managed this, she said she put numerous braids into her hair the night before and slept in them. I cautioned her not to keep staying up so late, just in case.

It made me happy to see her looking so cute, but I still didn’t want her to tax her body too much. Of course, she then puffed her cheeks out indignantly, insisting she was a master at braiding and so it had *not* kept her up all night, thank you very much.

“Sho-chan?”

“Hm?” The pot was once again simmering quietly, steam rising from it.

“Something happened with you and Ringo-chan, didn’t it?” she asked decisively.

“Huh? N-nothing happened! Right?” I said with a grin to No. 2 and 3 at my feet, but the pair just looked up at me piteously.

“I hope Ringo-chan likes cabbage rolls, too,” she said swiftly.

“D-don’t get the wrong idea. Ringo-san and I...how do I put this...? We don’t have that kind of relationship.” I ladled up a bit of soup and tasted it. “Mm, that’s good,” I said, impressed by my own work.

“I get that,” she said, raising her eyebrows playfully. “But she’s your little sister’s precious best friend! It’s your job as my big brother to make nice with her again! Sister’s orders!”

Himari stood with her hand on her hip, the other hand pointing at me, much as she did during her moments as the penguin-hatted queen, though far more

gently and refined.

“Mm, yes, well...” As I grimaced, my eyes fell on the warm, neatly stacked cabbage rolls in the pot, a meal overabundant for a family of three.

“You only ever make cabbage rolls when you’re trying to make nice with someone, Sho-chan. Though of course, the only other person you’ve ever fought with is Kan-chan.” She peeked into the pot, self-satisfied, then flashed a grin up at me.

She was right. If you were to ask why cabbage rolls of all things, it probably had to do with the number of patient steps it took. I would lovingly boil the cabbage, mix the ground meat and other ingredients, roll it all up, and then carefully simmer the whole thing. During that time, I would work through all my negative feelings. By the time it was finished, they would all fade away, and I would be ready to make amends. I would lift my head high, wondering why I was mad at the other person when I was the one at fault. Then I would think how nice it would be if someone would eat these cabbage rolls that I had gone to all the trouble of making, and pile the plates high.

Lately, I was stunned to hear Himari speak as though she truly understood every little thing. Maybe she did. Her feminine intuition must have sharpened over the years.

“It’ll be fine. Your cabbage rolls are always super delicious, Sho-chan.”

Ringo’s eyes flashed open, and she shoved her palm into Tabuki’s face.

“No!” She kept pushing, shoving his chest away. She stiffened up her body, shoulders shrinking. “No. I can’t do this,” she said, half to herself.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, gently spreading out his hands. “We’re both deeply in love with one another, aren’t we?”

“Love?” As in “I love you”? Ringo thought. She shook her head without a second thought. She never really had any idea what it truly meant to be in love with someone else.

“Aren’t I your fated lover?” Tabuki asked.

Where had all of her exaltation gone? She was so desperately enthralled by Tabuki's words of love, but those words, her sense of accomplishment...that wasn't truly love.

"I'm sorry." She slipped out from beneath him and got up off the bed.

Tabuki smiled reassuringly and reached out for Ringo's turned back. "Everyone gets nervous their first time. It's fine. I'll teach out how to spread your wings and fly. Come on over here." He clambered across the bed toward her.

Ringo shook her head. "I'm sorry, Tabuki-san. I'm..." *So sorry. I was so ignorant. I didn't know that this would be so vivid, the air so hot, and dense.*

Ringo imagined this scene so many times, run so many simulations over and over in her mind, but those scenes didn't exist outside of the palace of her imagination. Her dreams were disparate from the reality of "love" or "sex."

His hot breath. His fingertips, brushing her skin. The bravado on his face, so different from usual. The scent rising from his skin.

Tabuki suddenly made a strange expression and clutched at his throat. "Guh... *Ribbit!* Urk...urghhh..."

"Tabuki-san?" Ringo slowly turned around.

He once again seemed to be in pain, coughing with his head hung low. Ringo started toward him, suddenly worried. The moment she did so, Tabuki swiftly lifted his face, surveying her with a crazed glint in his eyes, and sprung toward her like a leaping toad.

"Noooo!!!" Ringo screamed. She managed to evade his leap and fled the room, quickly shutting the door behind her. She pushed up against the door, one hand gripping the knob, the other pressed to her chest trying to calm her breathing.

"Open the door, Ringo-chan. I love you!" She could hear him on the other side. He banged forcefully on the door, again and again. "Come on, Ringo-chan. You're a good girl. Don't be afraid!"

Ringo wasn't afraid. She was terrified. She wanted to run, but if she let go of

the door now, Tabuki would just escape and catch her before she could reach the front door.

All her dreams were finally coming true. Why was she so afraid? Wasn't everything she fought for right before her eyes? All she had to do was open the door and let him take her, and then she and Momoka and Papa and Mama could all be a happy family again. The Himehomare potion was the final trick up her sleeve, and its effects would not last beyond tonight. The longer she sat here waffling, the quicker the night would slip away from her.

She stood there quietly, trying to figure out what she was so afraid of. Was it the way Tabuki was acting? Were the effects of the love potion too powerful? Was she merely afraid of her "first time"—something she had only secondhand knowledge of?

Or was she actually afraid of getting this close to Tabuki?

"Riiingooo-chan, leeet's plaaay..." He continued to knock relentlessly, though his voice was gentle.

"What do I do?" Suddenly, an image of someone flashed through her mind. He'd help her come up with something if he were here, even if he'd lecture her about her methods first. Then she would go back home with him, and they would all crowd around the dinner table.

What did that have to do with her current circumstances? Why would she picture *him*? And yet, his image was like the warm glow of a lamp through the window of a welcoming home.

The knocking sounds grew more violent, and she blocked her ears against the sound of Tabuki's voice calling her.

Just then, someone flicked on the hall lights.

"Oh? Hello there." Yuri's calm, casual voice came to her, not the least bit suspicious of Ringo's presence. She stood before the teary-eyed Ringo, wearing a white, collarless tweed jacket with a large white hat, and a large, brand name-emblazoned tote bag on her shoulder. In one hand she held a pair of sunglasses, which she had perhaps just removed.

"Yuri-san..." *Good evening*, she could not say. Soon again after came Tabuki's

pleading hungry voice, so loud that even Yuri heard it.

“Ringo-chan, I’m begging you, let me see that darling face of yours! I’m the only one who can make you feel like a real woman. You know that, don’t you?”

“Goodness! What a fabulous line, just like something out of a play!” Yuri said calmly.

“Yuri-san...” Sadness burning in her chest, Ringo steeled herself. “Please break up with Tabuki-san!”

“Huh?” Yuri was dumbfounded.

“I love you, Ringo-chan! Come quickly now, and make me your little sparrow, yours and yours alone! Oh, how I long to be smothered to death with love in the palms of your hands!”

A powerful slam against the door shook Ringo’s body ever so slightly.

“Y-you heard him. Tabuki-san can no longer love any woman but me. So please, give him to me!” Ringo pled, nearly in tears.

The pounding on the door, and Tabuki’s voice calling Ringo from the bedroom, was relentless.

“Fine,” Yuri sighed, whisking off her hat. “Though I wonder if that will truly make you happy.” The legs of her wide pants swayed.

“Then it’s decided! I’m going to marry Tabuki-san, and build a little house, and have his children, and raise a little puppy, and our whole family will be happy... together.” Ringo’s voice wavered, less and less assured the more she spoke.

“Goodness, is that so?” Yuri continued, unfazed. “I was certain that you had feelings for Takakura Shoma-kun.”

“Huh?” Yuri’s resolute assertion struck Ringo violently in the chest. His face and form, which had begun fading away in her mind, suddenly took on new clarity.

“There, you see? You’re definitely in love with him.” Yuri said, ever so gently.

“In love? Me?” Ringo’s voice trembled faintly.

“That’s right, dummy. You’ve been blind to your own feelings.”

“I have feelings...for Shoma-kun?”

Ringo always assumed that romantic feelings were a far more theatrical affair. She pictured love to be something filled with nothing but a strange, dreamy warmth, soft and sweet. Still, just as Shoma once said, she knew somewhere deep inside that she could never become Momoka. That she could probably never love Tabuki the same way Momoka had.

She was only deluding herself in thinking that she loved Tabuki.

If love was something so sweet and endearing, then why had her parents chosen to separate? Why had she tried so desperately to turn Tabuki's affections her way, to the point of warping the obvious facts?

The sound of Tabuki's pounding at her back sounded so faint and distant.

“That can't possibly be true,” Ringo whispered to herself. She would never fall for that childish scullery maid of a boy. His hair was always messy and neglected, he wasn't dashing in the slightest, and he wasn't very tall. He was always weak-willed, despite his constant grouching, and at times he was downright crotchety. Most importantly, he was not Tabuki Keiju. He was not her fated lover.

“Ringo-chaan. C'mon, open up! Hurry up! Open this door!”

“That can't...”

Yuri clasped her hands to her breast as if in prayer. “Don't give me that face, now. You need to be honest about your feelings.”

Ringo looked at Yuri, wiping her tears with her hands. Yuri's face was beautiful, overflowing with composure, her eyes full of kindness and even compassion for Ringo.

“Goodness, I'm pooped. Perhaps I'll go put some tea on. You want some?” Yuri asked gently, then padded down the hallway into the living room.

“My love can't be stopped, Ringo-chan! You have to save me!” The forceful knocking from beyond the door continued to shake Ringo's body.

She hadn't known. She was so concerned with following her normal way of thinking up until now, but perhaps she was wrong. Still, there was one thing

that was certain: The moment Shoma appeared, Ringo had become a total crybaby. Though the words she spoke when he was around her were harsh, without her even noticing, she learned to shed proper tears whenever she truly needed to.

I couldn't stand waiting before the showy entrance of the condo Oginome-san lived in. Instead, I waited a short distance around the corner, trying to hide myself and Penguin No. 2. In my hands, I held a Tupperware container, wrapped up in a blue gingham-checked bandanna.

My feelings were complicated. While I stood there nervously, a meek look upon my face, Himari crouched casually beside me, pulling sweets from a small tote bag and handing them to Nos. 2 and 3.

It was a good idea to make up with Oginome-san, but why had I bothered bringing a homemade cabbage roll along? Moreover, I had my little sister in tow, which really had me feeling like a hopeless idiot.

"If I was Kanba..." I mused. What would I do if I were him? I definitely would not have brought a cabbage roll with me, for one. It was hard to picture him stopping by someone's house at this hour, either.

"If you were Kan-chan?" Himari looked up at me.

"I was wondering what Kanba would do at a time like this. He would probably be a lot smoother about this." Somehow even comparing myself to him like this felt rather effeminate.

"That's not true. Whenever Kan-chan gets into a fight with you, he always gets sulky and stubborn." Himari grinned. "But as soon as you make your cabbage rolls, he knows that things are better, so it's all right."

That was true. The fact that making cabbage rolls was a set sign of reconciliation came about only as a silent conversation between my brother and myself. It was different with an unrelated girl involved.

"Th-that's not what I'm..." I faltered. Himari still had some rather off-base assumptions about matters like reconciling with female friends.

If I were Kanba, I would probably act all haughty, like nothing had ever happened, like I had never even heard of a fight with this girl. I would probably spout out some phrases that would set her teeth on edge and make things worse. Or maybe I would say the whole thing was a bother, and leave it at that.

“Welcome home, Ringo-chan!” Himari stood up and went out to the front of the building. No. 3 pitter-pattered along behind her. “C’mon, Sho-chan, hurry up!”

I walked reluctantly out from the shadows.

Naturally, Oginome-san looked surprised to see us, looking at us both in turn. She did not look well, as though she was perhaps a bit tired. “What’s up?”

“Um, good evening,” I greeted her, stepping out from behind Himari. “It’s, um, pretty late, huh?”

“What of it?” Oginome-san replied flatly, brows furrowed and voice softer than usual. She looked angry for some reason.

I suddenly wished I was back in my hiding place, but Himari gave me a not-so-metaphorical shove.

“I was thinking you...might be hungry?” I offered up the bandanna-wrapped bundle. “Himari and I made these. It’s our special homemade cabbage rolls—we ended up making a little too much. Oh, normally it’s a consommé, but we tried making it with a curry flavor this time. I know you like curry, so...” *So, please try some. That’s, well, why we brought it here.* I fell silent, none of the words that might have followed making it out of my mouth.

“No. I hate this,” she spat.

“Huh?”

“This is all your fault!” Suddenly, she slapped me. The Tupperware fell flatly onto the ground.

“Wh-why are you always hitting me?!” I pressed my hand to my left cheek. Sure enough, the girl was fundamentally insane.

“I want Tabuki-san! I love him! That’s why the two of us are bound to one another, why I became Momoka! It’s destiny, the reason I was born, and the

final step in reuniting my whole family! I knew that was true! And yet..." Her voice grew ragged, massive tears rolling down her cheeks. "You destroyed all of that! You just came barging into the middle of my destiny! Just trampling all over everything like you don't even care! And now all of the work I've done has been for nothing! Why did it have to be you? Why did you appear in my life? Why would you tell me that I'm *me*? Why?!" she wailed, face downturned.

"It's...my fault?" I was so confused.

She glared at me with bloodshot eyes. "What are you to me? Give me back my destiny!"

"I'm your...? I don't know."

"*Survival Tactiiiiic!!!!*" Himari's voice was like a counterfeit of her usual tone. A sweet wind blew. By the time my and Oginome-san's gazes locked, we were no longer standing on the darkened walkway, but within the alternate dimension over which the penguin-hatted reigned.

I wondered with some intensity, as Oginome-san surely did, why this would be happening at this exact moment.

"Himari?" I searched for the Tupperware, brushing the white frills aside with my hands, but it was nowhere to be found.

Oginome-san seemed unsurprised, simply standing there with the corners of her mouth downturned, not looking at either Himari or me.

"Surely, you worthless nothings have been told!" Himari stood with her hands on her hips, feet planted atop the heads of Nos. 2 and 3. Her sharp red gaze was focused on Oginome-san. "Cry, you monkey of a girl! Only on this eve shall I permit your wild chittering. Rage, and tear everything apart to your heart's content!"

At that moment, the glossy black corset and thigh-high boots Himari wore less resembled a penguin, and more the black of night. The frills trailing from the hem of her billowing skirt covered the ground all the way up to our feet. She was like a flower, heralding a new season with its blossoming.

I glanced at Oginome-san. She opened her mouth slowly, unexpectedly earnest. "You know about our family's Curry Day, right?"

I could only see the slightest hint of her face hidden behind her hair. Still, from the way she was sniffing, I knew that her eyes were still teary. “Ah, yeah.”

“That was the anniversary of Momoka’s death. That’s why, on that day, we always eat curry, Momoka’s favorite food. It’s a rule in our home.”

“I...see.” So that was why she wanted to eat curry with Tabuki. For her sister’s sake. I felt a dull ache in my chest.

“My sister passed away sixteen years ago. It was then that I was born.”

I stared at her, getting a bad feeling. The word that I so loathed, “fate,” floated through my mind.

“Sixteen years ago... No way.”

The screeching and vibration of a subway train intruded upon the realm of the penguin queen. The hem of Himari’s dress retracted, and we found ourselves sitting in the train seats. Oginome-san was beside me, Himari sitting opposite us with her legs folded, arms resting on both penguins like armrests. It was pitch black, both within the car and outside of the windows. Only the occasional flash of tunnel lights, the same color as Himari’s eyes, rushed by outside.

“Yes, way. Momoka died in that accident. You know that, don’t you? I am the reincarnation of Momoka—I was born on the day she died. That’s why I wanted to be with Tabuki-san.”

I was unable to speak. The matter of the cabbage rolls had already fled from my mind. I knew exactly which accident she meant.

“If you hadn’t shown up in front of me, everything would have gone perfectly.” She glared at me again, but not for the reason I thought.

She was right. If I hadn’t been there, at the very least Oginome-san would have been able to continue wasting her youth as a veritable stalker, in pursuit of the name of something resembling love.

“Say something! Say something like you always do! I don’t care what!” She half-begged, perhaps noticing there was something off about me.

It felt as though the train was accelerating, the vibrations growing as intense as my heartbeat. My eyes stung at the red flashing by in the darkness flowing

past outside, joined by myriad other colors.

Was she telling *me* to speak? Right here and now, in front of Himari? I squeezed my hands together, grateful for the darkness.

“No, you’re exactly right,” I told her. “I was the one who twisted your fate sixteen years ago. You can tell me to give back your destiny all you want, but there’s nothing I can do about it.” My voice faltered as I felt my throat closing, but if I didn’t force the words out, they would never be clear enough for her to understand.

“Don’t be stupid. Back then, you would have been—”

“Exactly. That’s the day Kanba and I were born.” I said, my breathing shallow. “Your sister died because of us.”

“What...what are you saying?” She looked up at me suspiciously. Her sharp eyes glittered in the light from beyond the window.

Himari—or rather, Lady Penguin—began to laugh raucously. She looked to the heavens and continued laughing in utter glee. She stomped her feet, slapping Penguin No. 2’s head.

“Shut up!” I said, looking at her aghast.

Himari grinned wickedly, her red eyes sparkling as she looked at me and Oginome-san. “Shall we initiate the survival tactic?”

Chapter 03

A MAN STEPPED LIGHTLY down the hospital hallway, threw open the sliding door to Dr. Washizuka's examination room, and cast his eyes around the room. Washizuka sat facing an unattractive gray office desk, glancing over some documents.

"Pardon me."

The man plunked a white picture frame down atop Washizuka's desk. Takakura Kenzan was in the group photo, wearing an absurdly serious expression and flashing a peace sign. There was a curtain marked boldly in ink with "36th Antarctic Environmental Protection Unit." The man then placed upon the desk a small flower vase filled with an arrangement of mostly white, but lightly pink-tinted apple blossoms.

"This should do it." When the man turned around, the place had already been transfigured into "his" examination room. The room was fully furnished in white and a splendid, pale teal, the wooden window frames and floor and ceiling in his preferred style: both somehow dazzlingly pristine and a little weathered. A large clock was projected from the desk onto the wall, which displayed the time in simple Arabic numerals.

Within the cage atop the windowsill, in front of the tightly shut, opaque curtains, were two round, pudgy rabbits with blood-red eyes. They were cloaked in soft, black fur, their noses twitching feverishly as they took in the scent of a new room. The two rabbits wore expertly tied velvet ribbons in place of collars. The two were almost identical in appearance, but were distinguishable by how one ribbon pricked cleanly up, while the other had a lazy droop to it.

The man looked around the room again and gave a thin smile of satisfaction. He sat lightly upon the exam bed and produced a bright red apple, which he juggled in his hands.

Colored light in a myriad of hues shone from his long hair, flashing in and out of sight like a prismatic rainbow within the white room.

Kanba hated the word “fate.” If births, encounters, partings, successes, failures, and whether one achieved happiness, or fell into the arms of despair, were all determined by fate, then what on earth were humans born into this world for? What is it that they even lived for?

Some were born into prosperous homes. Some were born into poverty. Some were born beautiful, to beautiful mothers. Some were not. And some were born thrust into the middle of famine or war. If all those things were set in motion by the hands of fate, then God must be a horrible, outrageously cruel creature.

“I’m home,” Kanba called as he slid open the door. Judging by the unlit lights in the house, it seemed Shoma and Himari were out. “What, is everybody out somewhere?”

He passed through the darkened entrance into the parlor and pulled the cord of the light switch.

Penguin No. 1 followed behind him, looking exhausted. Atop the table was a note in Himari’s handwriting, along with a deep, wrapped dish. Kanba picked up the note, smiling at the flower and penguin that had been drawn in the corner.

We made your favorite today, cabbage rolls. We’re stopping by Ringo-chan’s place to share some with her. Make sure you wash your hands good and eat it all up! “Hmm,” he said out loud, then leaned in and peeled back the saran wrap slightly, inhaling the aroma. “Ooh. Curry flavor today, huh?”

Suddenly, the house phone began to ring. “All right, all right,” Kanba said, assuming his uncle was calling. He lifted the receiver. “Hello, Takakura here.”

The other end was silent.

“Hello? Who is this?” Still no answer. “Hey, if this is some kinda prank, I’m hangin’ up.” He was about to chow down on some cabbage rolls, after all.

“Isn’t it stunning?” came a low, gentle voice.

“Scuse me? What?” Kanba asked.

“Your little sister, Takakura Himari, is going to die again tonight,” the person

on the other end of the line said casually.

Kanba froze, breath catching and eyes going wide. “Who are you?!”

“One who comes from the place where fate resides,” was all they said before hanging up.

The place where fate resides. Kanba was certain he had heard those words before. In a panic, he searched for the penguin hat, which should have been sitting atop the old globe, but turned up nothing. He checked the family altar, the kitchen, and atop the bed in Himari’s room, to no avail.

Immediately, he called Shoma’s cell phone, but couldn’t get through. If they were going to see Oginome Ringo, then maybe he should head to East Koenji. Or it might be faster to question Masako first if he wanted to find out who that caller was.

He went over to Penguin No. 1, who was lying on the sofa, and smacked him awake. Kanba pondered the route that would get him to Himari the quickest. However, the caller’s threat kept butting into his thoughts, and he got nowhere, growing only more irritated.

“Why won’t you pick up the *phone*?!” He rested his cell phone on the tatami, sat down, and gazed at Himari’s lettering on the note. “Himari...”

It was the start of another long, dark night.

Oginome-san and I squared off under Himari’s watchful gaze, still within the subway car in the world of the penguin hat.

“What I’m saying is, it’s because of us that your sister is dead.”

“J-just a minute! How could Momoka’s passing have been your fault?” She seemed to be seriously bewildered.

“It was our mother and father who caused that accident. It happened in the spring, when we were born,” I said in what I thought was a calm voice. “Need I explain more?”

I stared at the floor, unable to look Oginome-san in the eye. She said nothing.

“Sixteen years ago, our parents, Takakura Kenzan and Chiemi, were part of the leadership of an organization that hurt and killed a lot of people. So it was my family who murdered your sister.”

Himari, who at some point stretched out across the bench, snorted, and gave a big yawn. She flicked her hair back emphatically, making a show of it. “This is taking too long! I’m so bored I’m falling asleep. Have you two come to comprehend the ring of fate which connects you both?”

I was silent. I hadn’t been thinking about anything. No matter how I considered it, there were some things I couldn’t do anything about; conclusions I could not reach. There were some efforts that would never pay off, no matter how hard I tried. I took great care not to think about the things I didn’t wish for. However, this was reality, one formed of worries and thoughts that made us suffer.

“Have you finally come to believe in destiny? Do you curse your fate? Goodness, humans are such feeble-minded creatures. I suppose it cannot be helped. Well, I will tell you one good thing as my parting words.” Himari stood up straight and pointed at us. “Listen up, you children of accursed fate! You lost the Penguindrum! The hares of darkness will be called once more upon this world! Indeed, the day of reckoning is now fast approaching!”

The moment the lady of the hat finished speaking, the mysterious subway train came to a sudden halt. Oginome-san and I both cried out, stumbling. The darkness from outside the window flowed in through gaps in the glass, swallowing everything. The luscious, sweetly scented frills of the Penguin Hat’s dress lost their white glow, like flower petals fading, and then crumbled away like sand.

“Himari? What’s going on?!” I rushed, panicked, to Himari’s side.

The penguin-hatted queen knelt there, listless.

“Himari-chan!” Oginome-san crouched beside her as well.

“You must obtain the Penguindrum,” said the queen, “if you wish to save your sister’s life and escape your own fate. You can switch the train to a different track, but you must find the Pen...guin...drum...” Her red eyes opened wide.

“The Penguinindrum... You mean the diary, right? What is it you want us to do *now?*”

“Stop them.” The penguin-hatted queen no longer looked like much of a queen. The red light in her pleading eyes grew faint as the darkness closed in, from the edges of her desiccated dress to her body, until finally she closed her eyes.

The hat slipped from her head, as though it was nothing more than a hat.

“Himari!”

“Himari-chan!”

I quickly sat her up, brushing the hair from her face. Her face was pale, twisted in pain and dotted with sweat. “Himari! Himari!”

“Shoma-kun, we’re back.”

I looked around, suddenly realizing that we were back on the walkway in front of Oginome-san’s condo. The streetlamps shone down on the quiet nighttime street around us, and Himari’s body was curled in on itself. She was unconscious. The small white floral band that fastened her hair lay on the asphalt.

What was this day of destiny? Was everything ruined because we gave up the diary? Still, the penguin queen had said “parting words.” I’d never seen her in that much pain, nor had she ever vanished like that.

The cabbage rolls wrapped in gingham, lying on the concrete, were already completely cold. Penguins No. 2 and 3 opened the lid, and stared inside.

On a spring morning sixteen years ago, two children were marked by fate. They knew nothing of each other’s existence, nor of the humans who knew how to cherish, but also hurt each other.

In a large, dim, warehouse-like room, Takakura Kenzan raised a receiver to his ear.

“Really, they’ve been born?! How is my wife? Is everyone doing well? Oh, wonderful! Yes, yes, thank you so much. We’re in your debt. I’ll drop in there

just as soon as I finish up some work. Please look after them. Of course. See you later.” Kenzan hung up the receiver, muttering, “Wow,” to himself. His cheeks were flushed and he beamed with a smile. Then, he picked the receiver right back up, and began laboriously sending a message on his pager.

“Shall. We. Initiate. The. Survival. Tactic?”

That message would be delivered all throughout Tokyo. It would be sent out to his associates at the base of Tokyo Tower, the government offices in Shinjuku, a busy street in Ginza, even the National Diet Building. The men who received and confirmed this message renewed their own resolve, and thought of Tokyo. Their city. Then they thought of this country, Japan, their thoughts spreading out further to the entire world.

In the morning fog, some men in work suits intermingled with the crowds of commuters and students pouring into the station entrances. A van pulled up in front of them as they stood beside the road, surveying the scene. Kenzan slowly emerged from the back doors.

He exchanged gazes with each of the men looking back at him and gave a small nod. “With this, the world will finally be at peace,” he said without moving his lips, holding an inward-facing peace sign in front of his chest. He and the men filtered into the crowd, and vanished into the station.

That morning, Tabuki Keiju, age ten, had overslept. He ran down the street, the open flap of his black backpack fluttering noisily, his messy bedhead untended. That day was his and his classmate Momoka’s turn to care for the class rabbit. They agreed ahead of time to make the commute together, but at this rate, Momoka would probably board the train before him.

“Come onnnn...!” he groaned, gazing at the traffic signal that turned red just when he was about to cross. He groaned in irritation, jogging in place.

“Seriously, why did this have to be the one morning my alarm didn’t go off?”

The moment the light turned green, he took off again at full speed.

“If I’m late, I’m gonna end up in tickling hell again!” he moaned pitifully. When he finally arrived at the station, he came upon a clamor that was

unthinkable for a normal morning crowd. He halted at this strange scene, trying to see what was going on. A pair of station employees repeated a message shouted through megaphones:

“Please accept our apologies! We cannot permit anyone to enter the station at this time! Due to a recent accident, service has been suspended on all train lines! We apologize for the inconvenience, but we kindly ask for your understanding!”

Tabuki stood, bewildered, among the adults troubled by not being able to board the train. “An accident? On the subway?” He was dubious, but then he overheard some of the commuters talking.

“Sounds like it was because of the fog.”

“I heard it happened in front of the Diet Building station.”

“No, it wasn’t just on this line; there were others, too.”

“I heard there were explosions.”

“Explosions?” Tabuki looked up at the sound of helicopters flying above. Ambulances and fire trucks raced past him, their sirens at full blast.

He stood there speechless for a time, unsure what to do, feeling a sense of unreality. Then it hit him.

“The subway? Momoka-chan!” He forced his way through the crowd of adults, all busy sharing information and contacting others, trying to see what was going on inside the station. “Excuse me, please move! My friend... She’s inside!”

“Whoa, look at that!”

Tabuki turned around at the sound of a man’s loud voice.

“Smoke? Is there a fire?”

Several adults were screaming now. Tabuki watched, unable to speak, his mouth agape. Between the distant skyscrapers were countless pillars of black smoke, rising up to a sky blue as ever. Numerous helicopters hovered around them.

This is bad, Tabuki thought. However, in the face of a serious incident that had already occurred, there was nothing a ten-year-old boy could do.

Momoka's memorial portrait was bordered in white, delicate flowers. It pictured her with a soft, lively expression, as though someone had just called her name. Her striking, wide eyes peered out from below thick-cut bangs. Her hair fell stick straight to her shoulders, her smile carefree.

Tabuki stood motionless in the black clothing his parents picked out for him. There were adults dressed in black suits that reeked of mothballs, and students weeping dramatically. Relatives, who seemed to have known her better than he did, spoke of the kind of girl she was.

"It was such a terrible accident. I can't believe there were so many casualties," said one of a group of women who appeared to be acquaintances of Momoka's mother. She was gazing softly up at the sky, her arms folded.

"Momoka-chan was only ten years old, wasn't she? The poor thing," another said sadly, gazing at the assembly.

"She was on the way to school. For her to have been just one train later than usual on *that* of all days... That's so unfortunate."

That of all days, the woman emphasized. Tabuki was aware that this happened because he left the house late. However, he also understood that it didn't mean Momoka's death was necessarily his fault.

"Apparently, they never found her body. The only thing they retrieved was her diary," one said, very curiously.

"What? Really? Just her diary?" said another anxiously, as though they could not bear to stand there a moment longer. The woman kept glancing between the sky and the assembly. The visitation line stretched on for a while. "So then, that casket..."

"Totally empty. That's probably why it took them so long to put this service together. I'm sure it was just too much for her parents to bear," another said with a shrug. They seemed to be implicitly suggesting that this was not the sort of thing one should inquire into.

“That’s true.”

Tabuki’s homeroom teacher was tearfully encouraging his classmates to write their send-offs for this small, empty, white wooden coffin. Each of them wrote their thoughts in a letter that the unfortunate girl might read in Heaven.

Tabuki was almost never tardy when it came to class presentations. However, for the first time, he was late with his submission. He briefly considered not doing it at all. For days and days, he stared at his composition paper, but nothing at all came to mind. In the end, he simply wrote “Momoka-chan” on a little white card, glued it to the page, and submitted it.

He could not write “Thank you” or “I’m sorry” or “I love you.” “Goodbye” was completely out of the question. Their teacher was a little concerned that he might write something inside that should not be written, but seeing Tabuki’s clear dejection, they said nothing more on the matter.

Tabuki felt a wild, violent hatred toward his classmates who wrote innocent things like, “Please stay your same bright and happy self up in Heaven, Momoka-chan.” He knew firsthand that there were times when even innocent words felt the cruelest.

People only spoke without any doubt about God and Heaven when it was convenient for them. What had God or Heaven ever done for them? If such benevolent forces existed in the world, then why hadn’t they saved Momoka? Praying to such a worthless God never once crossed Tabuki’s mind.

“Still, it’s something of a mixed blessing, isn’t it? Momoka-chan’s little sister was born the same day she passed away.”

Momoka’s haggard-looking mother was in the seats reserved for family. Her head was lowered, and she held the smiling newborn Ringo in her arms. Ringo’s cheeks were a rosy red, like the fruit that was her namesake, and she was given Momoka’s diary to hold.

Obviously, Tabuki could not believe Momoka was dead. Why, they hadn’t even found her body. Momoka was looking forward to her sister’s birth more than anything. Plus, she promised to see the cherry blossoms with him when the trees were in bloom.

At any rate, there was no way that a girl as special as Momoka could simply just vanish from the world without a trace. It just could not be. This funeral with no remains was as empty as that coffin, overflowing with nothing but flowers and baseless conjecture.

As he stood there, unmoving, Tabuki squeezed both his hands tight and looked up at the smoke rising from the chimneys of the crematorium. Finally, he began to cry. The tears rolled down his cheeks, dripping onto the ground and forming small stains. Still, he did not feel any better, and that was fine. He could keep waiting without forgetting Momoka. He could go forward, bearing the burden of losing her.

The cherry trees had already begun to bloom.

The call from Shoma came soon after the previous bizarre call, as Kanba paced impatiently around the house.

“Aniki, Himari collapsed again! Putting the hat on her didn’t help. Something feels different this time! What do we do? Anyway, I’m taking her to the hospital, so hurry!” Kanba knew immediately from the trembling in Shoma’s clipped voice that something unexpected had happened.

As he scooped up No. 1 and ran through the night to the hospital, Kanba thought of the cabbage rolls sitting on the table.

Whenever he had those perpetually petty fights with his brother, Kanba would always sulk off to bed in a huff, or make some excuse to go meet someone. Shoma would always go around the house, cleaning more thoroughly than usual. Both of them refused to budge an inch, neither wanting to be the first to speak. However, when it was just the two of them, or even with Himari present, they couldn’t keep up the stubborn act forever. It was too hard to keep going around with a scowl and refusing to speak a word to one another. As a signal that it was time to give up and make amends, the standard dinner menu in the Takakura house would be cabbage rolls.

A sweet, flavorful consommé wrapped in tender, boiled cabbage. The lovely look of the carrots and onions all stewed together.

“It’s cabbage rolls for dinner tonight. That should be good,” Shoma would say, bluntly stating the obvious.

“Guess that’s all right,” Kanba would reply, as though fully uninterested.

And with that, their fight would be over.

Sometimes, in the middle of the fight, Kanba would also make cabbage rolls at Himari’s behest.

“You’ve gotta make them sometimes too, Kan-chan. You’re fighting, aren’t you?” Himari once said to him, dressed in a jersey with a fine floral print, and denim shorts with long soft green socks, slamming a cabbage down atop the cutting board in the kitchen. “Honestly, the two of you are like little kids. The wise Lady Himari sees through all ruses!” A small pin had been stuck through her long hair.

Kanba had dragged himself over beside her, watching dazedly as she prepared the pot and bowls.

“Where’s Shoma?”

“In the bath. He’s in there scrubbing the heck out of the tile grout with an old toothbrush. So tonight, we’re cooking.” She peered up at him. “I’ll peel the cabbage; you go ahead and chop up the thick parts in the middle.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he’d sighed, gripping the knife awkwardly.

Himari had diligently filled the pot with water and peeled the cabbage leaves one by one.

“Heh heh heh, thou art such a stubborn creature, my dear. Do as I say, and bare yourself! *Oh dear, my lord! You must jest! No, don’t look!*”

Kanba was soothed down to the core. No matter how he felt, the little girl standing before him understood him, tolerated him, and always watched over him.

“C’mon, Kanba, you’re the servant, you have to say some stuff too!” she’d said very seriously. “And get busy!”

“Huh? Me? Some stuff, hm...?” he’d said as he thinly sliced and separated the cabbage cores. They sometimes set those aside in the fridge, chopping them up

finely to put in the cabbage roll soup.

“Then you shall be punished, stripped bare and boiled to death!” said Himari, forcing her voice deep, rapidly peeling off the cabbage leaves, her little hands red with effort.

“Oh no! Your lordship, please stop!” Kanba had said by way of canned reply.

There was the fresh smell of the cabbage, and the fragrance from Himari’s hair, which swayed nearby. It was the same shampoo that she used every day, so why had the scent seized at his heart, sending a startlingly unusual ache into his brain?

“Hey, isn’t that a bit too many, though? We really gonna make that much?” he’d asked, distracting himself. Himari had seemed hell-bent on using up the entire head.

“Well, this is thy favorite dish, is it not? One would naturally prepare such an amount, if it’s to soothe thy spirits,” Himari had replied, puffing out her chest.

“I don’t really need soothing, though,” Kanba had said, thinking he might give a cabbage heart or two to Penguin No. 1. Penguin Nos. 1 and 3 were busy spinning around in circles, flirting with one another and toppling over on the floor, putting on a little act as the servants.

“Really? Then you need to make up with Sho-chan at dinner tonight.” Himari had smiled quietly, giving a triumphant snort at the mountain of peeled cabbage leaves.

“Huh? Well...” Kanba had waffled on his reply, following Himari’s little hands as she carefully submerged the cabbage into the pot.

“Don’t look so weird about it. The cabbage rolls are a sign of making up, aren’t they?”

“I guess so.” His fight with Shoma hadn’t been why Kanba made that face. It was because he was thinking about the girl in front of him. A girl who always looked Kanba straight in the eye, unwavering, and the only girl in the world who Kanba truly treasured from the bottom of his heart.

The man in a white lab coat shuffled down the empty subway train, an apple in one hand, the other hand shoved in his pocket. He walked through one connecting door after another, his coat sleeves flapping behind him.

The two red-eyed assistants following him were nearly twins, but they were easily distinguished by the red velvet ribbons adorning their fluffy black hair: one standing up straight, the other drooping. They wore black blouses with ascots the same color, secured with cameo broaches embedded with ruby-red stones. Their classy, charcoal-gray short pants were held up by dazzling white suspenders. Their simple garters were an essential accessory to the black socks they wore upon their tiny feet.

They scurried behind him, one of the assistants carrying a polished black leather medical bag, the other a silver attaché case.

The man smiled thinly. Their upcoming destination was but one of the places where fate resided. He could not wait to plunge in deep and brush that fate with his own two hands.

I watched Himari's pale face as we rocked within the rushing ambulance. Oginome-san called to her repeatedly, but Himari only writhed in immense pain.

Himari was carried on a stretcher through the emergency room doors, and rolled quickly down the dark hallway to an intensive care room.

I had watched this scene before, the first time Himari died: helplessly standing with my brother on the other side of the glass while the doctors and nurses rushed around, frantically attaching and detaching tubes and masks, taking measurements, and infusing Himari with various substances.

This time it was not Kanba beside me, but Oginome-san. Still, that didn't change a thing. We didn't have the Penguindrum.

"Mary had a little lamb," I said unconsciously.

Oginome-san looked at me uneasily.

I stared back and forth between the penguin hat and the white flower tie in

my hand that had been in Himari's hair. In that moment, all I wanted was to stop thinking, if only for a little while.

I could hear the regular beeping of machines from within the room. The electronic sounds reported on Himari's life, but there was something almost mocking to their ring.

There was nothing either of us could do but stare in silence from the other side of the glass.

"Shoma-kun, are you all right?" Oginome-san's voice sounded as though it was coming from a million miles away.

Was I all right? What did "all right" even mean? If she was wondering whether or not I was alive, then of course. I was standing there, healthy as a horse. But Himari could die at any moment. Under what circumstances could anything be considered "all right?"

"Mary had a..." I mumbled.

One of the graphs on the screens suddenly went flat, and the machine emitted a long, ear-piercing beep. Dr. Washizuka and a few of the nurses conferred with one another, and then removed the oxygen mask from Himari's mouth. They were doing it again—that grim ceremony of checking the clock and giving their condolences.

"Himari-chan!" Oginome-san screamed.

"Shoma!"

I looked up at the shout to see Kanba standing before us, shoulders heaving with breath.

"What happened?"

What *did* happen? I had made curry soup cabbage rolls together with Himari. I had boarded the subway and gone all the way to Oginome-san's place, to bring her some. Then the penguin-hatted Himari had appeared and unilaterally expressed her farewells.

She had bewildered us with haughty words and actions, and then vanished before our eyes. Then Himari collapsed, and now she was probably dead.

“Oi, are you listening?! Get it together, Shoma!” He gripped my left shoulder tightly. My body swayed loosely.

“Kanba-kun!” Oginome-san said, trying to calm him.

“Stop messin’ around! Gimme that!” He snatched the penguin hat from my hand and shoved his way into the room, ignoring the doctors’ warnings.

As he snatched it, the hair tie I was gripping along with the hat dropped to the floor.

“Himari! *Himari!*” Kanba called her name over and over again. Everyone in the room tried to console him, to calm him down, but it was no use.

“The black rabbits tempted her,” I said in the quietest whisper.

“Shoma-kun, what’s wrong?” Oginome-san peered at my face. Her large, distressed eyes were red and moist, her expression intense.

I just stood silently, weakly shook my head.

Mary had three beautiful little lambs. Whenever she took them out walking to the fields, everyone turned to look. The little lambs’ wool was soft as an angel’s wings, and they were all waiting with bated breath for the day she would shear them and spin the wool into yarn.

One morning, Mary awoke to a shock. The apple tree in her garden was dying. It was the first tree in the world. Every year it produced heaps of beautiful fruit, and aside from the lambs, it was her pride and joy.

Mary ran to the apple tree and began to weep. This tree once lit the way for the dreams, the loves, and the future of the world. Now that the tree withered, the world was plunged into darkness.

Mary wept and wept, the words of comfort from her lambs falling on deaf ears. Just then, a voice suddenly came from the sky. “Don’t give up,” it said. “The world hasn’t ended just yet.”

Mary lifted her eyes to see two large black rabbits sitting atop the cliffs, bodies swaying, ears pricking, their red eyes glinting. The black rabbits spoke to Mary as one: “Deep in the forest is a shrine to a goddess. Retrieve the ashes

from the torch that burns there. If you sprinkle those around the apple tree, it will recover.”

Mary shook her head. No mortal could lay a hand upon the goddess’ flame—that much was law. However, the rabbits insisted. “Just borrow a little bit of the ash. That’s all you need to return light to this world. Surely even the goddess would be overjoyed by this.”

They convinced her. That night, Mary stole some of the ashes from the shrine, and sprinkled it on the roots of the apple tree.

Just as the black rabbits said, the apple tree came back to life. Mary reveled, dancing under the tree, so thrilled that she did not even look upon her beloved little lambs. The goddess, however, was outraged. Mary should *not* have broken the law.

The goddess decided to punish Mary. Or rather, one of her lambs would be punished in her place.

“Which. One. Shall. It. Be?”

The goddess chose the smallest and youngest of the lambs. The chosen lamb was a splendid, gentle-mannered babe. She loved cooking and knitting, and was always worried for her two hopeless older brothers.

The two sheep left behind said to the goddess, “Oh, Goddess. Why did you choose the smallest one, our little sister?”

And the goddess said to the sheep, “Because that’s the most senseless punishment, isn’t it?”

Seeing Kanba sitting at Himari’s side, Dr. Washizuka exchanged glances with the other doctors and nurses present, and they all quietly exited, leaving nothing but faint mechanical noises, the smell of medicine, and an empty room.

Kanba forced Himari’s limp hands around the penguin hat.

“C’mon, here’s the hat. This should fix it, right? Wake up, Himari!”

A faint red light shone from the eyes of the hat. Noticing Himari’s slender fingertips move ever so slightly, Kanba knew. He just knew it would be okay.

Shoma must have done it wrong, or been mistaken somehow. He had made it in time.

“Himari...?”

Suddenly, Kanba was in the world of the penguin hat. The sky above was ashen with black clouds, the ground consumed by tattered frills. There was no trace of the familiar sweet fragrance. There was only the penguin-hatted queen, on the ground on hands and knees as a fog began to roll in on the feeble wind.

“Oi, didn’t I give you a part of my life?!” Kanba shouted at her. “Are you telling me you forgot our exchange?!”

The queen heaved a deep, pained sigh, and said nothing.

“Say something!” Angry, he roughly turned Himari’s body, sitting her up.

Himari’s chest heaved, the sound of her breathing desperately thin, a sound like a cracked flute wheezing from her throat. Her long hair and black skirt were spread wide across the ground.

“The offering I previously plundered from you is out of juice, so to speak.” The queen said. “Anyway, it’s too late now. We are returning home. This girl’s life has run out.”

Himari smiled cruelly, but her forehead was dotted with sweat, and her breath hitched now and then. She took Kanba’s hands and joined their palms, intertwining their fingers.

“This is goodbye,” she said firmly.

“Goodbye?! What do you mean? Where are you going?”

“To the place where fate resides, of course.” There was not a hint of fear in her voice. Her fingers pulled gently away from his.

“Just once more,” Kanba begged, grabbing her hands back. “Couldn’t we do it one more time?”

The silhouette of Himari’s delicate body was clear in the penguin dress. She had a childlike slenderness, straight limbs, a concerningly thin waist, narrow shoulders, and a modest chest swelling beneath her beautiful collarbones.

Light lingered on Himari's red eyes as she looked at Kanba, shallow breath leaking from between her lips. At the very least, the penguin-hatted queen in Himari's body was still alive. Gently, Kanba pulled her slender waist closer. His grip on her grew steadily firmer, and he could hear her strained breathing in his ear.

"My life in exchange for Himari's life. That should be enough, shouldn't it?" He became aware of how tightly he was holding her, and loosened his grip.

"It's no use. That's just puppy love. You only feel that rapturous ecstasy the first time. It only works once."

"Puppy love? Don't make me laugh. What would you know about love?! Ecstasy? Only the first time? If the first time was enough to ease this pain, then I..." He pulled his body away from Himari's and ripped open his shirt. "You don't know if it'll work until we try. Hurry up, let's do this!"

The faint glow of life within his chest burned like a tiny candle flame. "The red glow of a scorpion's soul," Himari choked out in a ragged voice. She undid the large ribbon at her own chest, her fingers trembling. Then she stood, letting her frilly skirt fall to the ground. "Very well."

Kanba looked up at Himari, his breath hitching.

"Shall we initiate the survival tactic?" she said, and shed her corset. Her upper body was freed, her breath still faltering, but calm.

Her body was smooth, yet beautiful, like a bar of fresh soap. Kanba gazed into her red eyes. They were wide open, staring into his soul. She leaned in, one hand slipping straight into Kanba's chest.

Nothing happened.

She was unable to extract the red light of Kanba's life. He ran a hand along Himari's back as she plunged another hand into his still-agonized chest, trying to draw out that light, but it was as if fate itself was fighting back. She couldn't do it.

She lowered her eyes and shook her head. Kanba gripped her arms as she tried to pull away.

“It’s no use,” she said softly.

Kneeling, the queen cradled Kanba’s head, drawing their faces close. Kanba brought his cheek to hers, simply letting her hold him.

He would think nothing of sacrificing his life if it meant saving Himari. However, if he couldn’t do that... If this pain in his heart and soul meant nothing...then what was Kanba supposed to live for?

He longed to touch her. He wanted nothing more than to be by her side, no matter where, no matter how. As the scent of the realm of the penguin-hatted queen began to fade, for just a moment, he could smell the scent of shampoo wafting from the hair of the real Himari.

When Kanba came to, he found himself collapsed on the floor of the ICU. He opened his eyes and reached out a hand to Himari, who lay motionless on the bed. Before he could grip her pale hand, the penguin hat slipped from it, and fell to the floor.

The flat prolonged beep signaling that Himari’s life had run out rang through his skull.

“Why? Why was I not enough for you?!”

Kanba felt the red flame within his own chest go out. His body no longer ached. However, the fact that Himari had just died did not mean his love for her had as well.

Chapter 04

AS IF IN RESPONSE to Kanba's cry, the door to the intensive care room flung open forcefully. "That's right. You *weren't* enough. Isn't that right?" came a calm voice that seemed to carry a hint of a smile.

Kanba slowly turned his tired body to see a tall man standing there, both hands shoved in the pockets of his lab coat, his shining white hair lazily arranged. Beneath the lab coat, he wore a pale pink dress shirt with a dark gray striped necktie, neatly pressed slacks, and sharp, glossy black shoes.

As if in reply to the man's question, two young boys with small red eyes, carbon copies of one another, poked their heads out from behind his back. The hair atop each of their heads was as puffy as a dandelion, but black as night, and decorated with a red velvet ribbon. Each likewise wore a shining red cameo broach that fastened the black ascots at their chests. They wore charcoal-gray short pants, black socks held up with garters, and suspenders so white as to be blinding. The one with a ribbon that pricked up was called Shirase, the one with the lazy ribbon, Souya. The pair stood there, one holding a polished black leather medical bag and the other a silver attaché case.

The man smiled again at Kanba as the latter stood up with a grim expression on his face. The man's eyes were like two discrete miniature universes, every part of their surfaces glittering to the point where it was unclear whether he was even looking your way. His hair appeared to change color with each shifting of the light, shimmering like the inside of an abalone shell.

"Stunning, isn't it?"

Kanba froze as he recognized the voice that spoke to him over the phone. This was the man who called to inform him of Himari's death.

"Don't give up. The world hasn't ended just yet."

"You... Who are you?"

The man narrowed his sparkling eyes, tilted his head, and glanced at his wristwatch. Shirase produced a nametag from the medical bag, and quickly affixed it to the man's lab coat.

“Let’s keep the introductions brief,” said the man.

His nametag read “Internal Specialist—Watase Sanetoshi.”

“I just started at this hospital today. Nice to meet you.”

Not one of the doctors or nurses who should have been in the room seemed to be coming to explain Sanetoshi’s presence. Not even Washizuka, Himari’s primary physician, returned.

Kanba was suspicious of the man. He had a feminine visage, and hair that seemed oddly lengthy for a male doctor. He did not have any particular eagerness about him, but something about him made the air tense, and he spoke presumptuously. Even more suspicious were the two boys with him.

Sanetoshi snapped his fingers, and this time the lock of the attaché case that Souya was holding popped open, showing a beautiful row of apples inside.

“What’re those?” Kanba asked.

Sanetoshi smiled and picked up one of the apples, changing it into an ampoule like an illusionist. “Souvenirs for you all, brought from a faraway place.”

Kanba leaned forward, staring at the ampoule. It was mostly white, but he could see a faint peach hue mixed in. It was the same peculiar color as an apple blossom. Somehow, it reminded him of the frills and sweet smell that spread across the world of the penguin-hatted queen.

“Shall we initiate the survival tactic?” said Sanetoshi softly.

Kanba got goosebumps. The man before him had just spoken words that no one should ever say so casually, so calmly. It was as though he was indicating to Kanba just how much he knew.

“What...did you just say?”

Sanetoshi shrugged his shoulders innocently. He took the syringe that Shirase pulled out from the medical bag, opened the lid of the ampoule, and drew the liquid inside the syringe.

“You lowly thing. You are a pitiful, defenseless child. All you can do is stand there cursing your own fate, unable to save even your own precious sister.

However, I wonder what I could do.” He expelled the air from the syringe, his hair swaying.

“What is that medicine?” Kanba asked. He glanced toward the window where Shoma should have been peering in, but he saw nothing beyond the glass. If Kanba had to make this decision on his own, there was no way in hell he would trust this man who called himself a doctor.

“Hmm...well, for now, I suppose you could call it a kiss from a prince that awakens the sleeping princess. A *grown-up* kiss,” Sanetoshi emphasized with a smile.

“That’s wonderful, Dr. Sanetoshi!” Shirase and Souya said in chorus, grinning.

“What are you going to do to her?” Kanba demanded.

Sanetoshi stared down at Kanba, syringe in hand. Kanba couldn’t tell if the man was looking *at* him, or at something that lay deep *within* him. Or maybe at something else entirely.

“Unfortunately, this gift does not come cheaply. This is a precious, state-of-the-art medicine. There are plenty of patients in the world who would benefit from it.”

Though his words were harsh, nothing about his expression or voice suggested even a hint of malice. This terrified Kanba more than anything.

“You want money?”

The man let out a reflexive laugh at Kanba’s bluntness. “If you truly feel that is a sufficient price to pay for your sister’s life, then I suppose that must be true.”

Kanba took a step toward him. “If it’s money you want, I’ll pay it, so just hurry up and—”

“I don’t want the pittance a parentless high school student could pay,” Sanetoshi interrupted. Still, he anticipated this sort of tenacity from Kanba. That was why he had opened the ampoule. He was, frankly, a little bit bored by how predictably this was going.

“I’ve got my ways! I promise!”

“Oh? And can you guarantee that?” He walked up to Kanba and pressed a

finger to his bared chest.

“What is it?” Kanba panicked slightly, feeling like Sanetoshi somehow knew everything about him. He knew that should be impossible, but everything about the man clearly indicated that he did.

Sanetoshi found himself amused by Kanba’s rugged expression and defiant eyes. He was passionate, intense, and altogether entertaining. “Is she really worth that much to you?” he asked out of pure curiosity. This small, pale, dead girl in the nearby bed had long eyelashes, lustrous hair, and strong eyes. She was attractive, but that was all.

“She’s my precious little sister,” said Kanba, telling a slight lie. In truth, she was more than that.

“And what do you expect to get out of this?” Sanetoshi asked, bemused. This, too, was an obvious question. “You’d fling your young, healthy body into the fire again and again for your sister’s sake, but what would be left of you? A charred, hideous scorpion heart? Or pure white ash? If it’s ash, then you’ll probably just be blown away into nothingness on the wind.”

Kanba slapped Sanetoshi’s hand away. “I don’t need anything in return. There’s nothing I want. As long as I have Himari, I’m fine. Hurry up and do it! You’re a doctor, aren’t you?!”

Sanetoshi gave a short whistle, his indication that he was truly and thoroughly impressed with Kanba.

“Stunning, isn’t it?”

Shirase and Souya, who were standing stock-still, grinned and said in unison, “A contract has been formed! That’s our Dr. Sanetoshi!” Each of them applauded.

What on earth was this bizarre performance? Who exactly were these boys who looked so remarkably alike? Endless questions ran through Kanba’s head, but the relief he felt at just the notion that Himari might be saved drained all of his energy. He felt as though he might pass out right then and there.

“Well then, here we are.” Sanetoshi walked to the bed and stood reverently at Himari’s side. He touched her pale arm, and efficiently performed the

injection. All the liquid in the syringe shot up into Himari's body.

"Himari," Kanba whispered, his breath hitching.

While all of this was going on unbeknownst to me, I was sitting on a bench a short distance from the intensive care room, still in shock. "This is our punishment," I muttered.

"Huh?" I knew that Oginome-san was watching me with worry this whole time, but I couldn't ease her concern. I couldn't possibly pretend to be all right. She couldn't help me. I was beyond help.

"If Himari never wakes up again, that will be a punishment passed down upon our family." Out of the corner of my eye I saw her frowning, at a loss for words. "It's true, though, isn't it?" I went on. "When you think about what our mother and father did, no matter what we do, we could never make up for it."

"That's not..." she trailed off.

You all didn't do those things. Uncle Ikebe had told us. I think our middle school teacher said the same thing as well. *You all need to have pride in yourselves. Live with your heads held high.* But what exactly did we have to be proud of? We could do nothing on our own, living only by relying on one another. Living with our heads held high was something that was never an option for us.

"Honestly, I always knew this day would come. I've known since that day three years ago."

Three years ago was the last day we were able to live as a normal family, the three of us normal children. We ate breakfast as a family, waved goodbye to one another at the front door, and headed to school while our parents went to work.

But our mother and father never returned.

Kanba and I, thirteen years old, and Himari, then ten, sat leaning on our elbows at the table, waiting for our parents to come home. We'd set out the

dinner that our busy mother had made ahead of time.

We were not especially worried that our parents weren't back yet. They typically never gave us any word, no matter how late they were going to be. We were merely hungry. There was no way that our mother and father, the most dependable people in the world, would ever not come back. Then...

"Man, those two are late. Wonder if they're workin' overtime."

I looked suddenly at the clock, realizing it was already around 9 P.M. Normally, we would already be finished eating and straightening up by now. "I wish they would call us," I said.

"Let's just go ahead and eat. I'm starving." Kanba popped one of the pickles from the plates into his mouth.

"No. We eat dinner as a family; that's the household rule," I said, glaring at him.

We both looked at Himari, who was already sipping a bowl of miso soup.

"Mmm, Mom's miso soup really is the best in the whole galaxy," she sighed.

"Even *you*, Himari?"

Just then, the intercom buzzed.

"Coming," I replied lazily, standing. If it was our parents, they would not have bothered pushing the buzzer.

When I reached the entryway, my eyes fell on a small vase filled with flowers I did not recognize. They were small white blossoms, with five petals each. We did not typically decorate our house with flowers. Moreover, there hadn't been any flowers there that morning.

Things were starting to feel a little odd.

The bell buzzed again, urging me out of my reverie.

"Ah, coming. I'll be right there." I stepped down and slid open the door to see an unfamiliar man and woman in suits, standing there with serious looks on their faces.

"Might you be Takakura Shoma-kun?" the man said in a low voice as I stood

there, puzzled.

“Yo, what’s up?” said Kanba as he emerged from the parlor, sensing something strange.

“And you’re Kanba-kun. Is your sister Himari-san in as well?” The man took a swift step into the entryway. His well-polished black leather shoes had strange metal buckles on them. The half-hearted gentleness in his voice put me strangely on edge.

“Oi, hang on! Who the hell are you guys?!” Kanba said louder.

“Your mother and father are out, then? I don’t suppose they’ve been in contact with you?” the woman asked sweetly, stepping between the man and my brother.

Kanba faced off with the pair, shielding me as I faltered. “I dunno what you want, but you can’t just barge into people’s homes.”

The pair looked to one another, as though surprised by Kanba’s manner. We heard the phone ring from the parlor. *It must be our parents*, I thought.

“Kan-chan?” Himari said, suddenly popping her face out.

“You stay in there!” Kanba commanded.

Himari shrunk back and said softly, “Uncle Ikebe’s on the phone. He says it’s important.”

Kanba sighed, glared at the two strangers, and padded back into the parlor to pick up the phone. “Yeah, it’s me. Kanba. There’s some weird people at our front door right now.”

I nervously listened as Kanba fell quiet. What could our uncle be saying to him?

“What’re you talking about?!” Kanba said angrily, and slammed down the receiver.

Not wanting to attract the attention of the two strangers nearby, I instead looked at the flowers atop the shoe shelf. What kind of flowers were those? Maybe our mother or Himari picked them somewhere.

After that, as Kanba instructed, we each packed a few days' worth of clothes, and left the house with the two strangers, who identified themselves as police officers. For some reason, I thought of bringing the white flowers from the entryway along with us, but decided against it. There was no real reason to do so.

We crammed ourselves into the back seat, Himari in the middle, as their car sped off into the night. The familiar scenery rolling by somehow looked alien.

Himari looked to the floor uneasily, clutching her favorite stuffed animal, a bear with a pirate-style black eyepatch.

"It'll be okay," I said with a faint smile, stroking Himari's hair.

Kanba only looked straight ahead, a stern expression on his face, not saying a word.

"Aniki," I said timidly, "Did Uncle Ikebe say anything else?"

Kanba looked to the window, and did not reply.

I sighed, asking Himari if she wanted to move to the window side.

"Yeah." She gave an earnest nod, and the two of us wriggled to switch places.

"We don't usually go out at night. This is kind of weird," I said, to which Himari nodded firmly again.

We exited the quiet residential district into downtown. The car rolled on through the night, beneath the neon of various shops and buildings, until it reached the parking lot of a hotel amidst a group of skyscrapers.

It was a small, neat double room. Perhaps mentally exhausted, Himari fell quickly asleep on the smooth sheets of one large bed, while my brother and I sat in beige-covered armchairs by the window. I watched my brother in the chair opposite from me, while he quietly watched the policewoman beside him.

Everything in the room, which was plenty large for a set of children, was strangely unappealing. Perhaps it was because of its rather angular design, with dim orange sconces hung around. There was a tiny fridge, onto which was posted a room service menu made of smooth, off-white paper. There was a white telephone beside the TV, and a simple built-in dresser. We had not

bothered using the closet; the duffel bag containing our clothes sat atop the wardrobe chair.

“This room might be a little cramped for the three of you, but I hope you can put up with it for now.” The woman spoke with a hint of sweetness in her voice, much like a kindergarten teacher.

“Why are you tellin’ us we have to stay here?! What happened at home?!” Kanba glared at the cops.

“Um, can we call back to the house? If our parents get home and we aren’t there, they’re probably gonna worry.”

The pair looked slightly troubled. “I apologize,” the policewoman said. “We haven’t been cleared to discuss the details yet. Anyway, you all should probably eat something.”

Three sets of bento and drinks had been provided for the room. However, we were so preoccupied with trying to understand what was going on that we weren’t remotely hungry.

“If you need anything else, there will be someone waiting outside the room, so feel free to tell them,” said the woman in parting. She opened the door and said something to the cop stationed there, and then closed the door behind her.

Silence fell over the room, the lights kept dim for our sleeping sister’s sake.

“Damn it, they’re treatin’ us like little kids!” Kanba said. He stood angrily, then flopped back down on the other bed.

“Seriously, though, what was with telling us to bring a change of clothes?” I flopped down beside him, stretching out my tense muscles. I was still feeling rather optimistic. “Oh, I know. There’s probably one of those unexploded bombs or whatever buried under the house. They were talking about it on the news. They found an old mine, and it would be dangerous until they could deal with it, so the residents were evacuated. I mean, it could explode any moment, so they’re probably just not saying anything so people don’t panic.”

Kanba still looked displeased. We both fell quiet, and I drank a bit from the large bottle of tea that was left there.

When I happened to look at the clock beside the bed, I realized that by now we would usually all be snuggled in our futons.

“Ah!” We were both startled by a sudden loud ring from the telephone.

“I’ll get it,” said Kanba immediately. “Hello? Oh, Uncle. Where are you right now?”

Kanba looked at me, and we exchanged a glance.

“Yeah, Himari’s already asleep. What? I mean, they told us not to use the phone or the TV, but okay.”

He nodded his head toward the TV. I timidly picked up the remote, and turned on the set.

“Maybe they really *did* find a bomb underneath the house,” he snorted.

“Aniki. Look,” I whispered, turning the volume down so as not to wake Himari.

He looked at the screen, the phone still to his ear, and went silent.

On the small screen was a house. From here, it looked like a total stranger’s house, but it was unmistakably ours. It was lit by numerous camera flashes and the lights from the television station’s mobile relays. Amidst the reflected red lights of the patrol cars, the police made their way into the house, dodging reporters.

“Currently, the police are conducting a search of this house where, based on police intelligence, the two primary suspects are believed to be in hiding,” a reporter said swiftly.

Two primary suspects. I repeated the phrase inside my head. What was with this “in hiding” business? They made our perfectly normal house sound like some kind of secret hideaway.

“That’s...our house. What...what is this person saying?”

The reporter wiped sweat from their brow, expression deadly serious. Then, they began speaking again, in similar fashion.

“What the hell is this? What’s going on?” Kanba asked our uncle over the phone. “Hey, wait a minute! Tell me what’s going on!”

“Aniki, you’re gonna wake Himari.”

After a brief silence, Kanba put down the receiver. “What’s with this? Uncle Ikebe said that he’s helping with the investigation. He said it’s probably gonna go all night, and he’ll come here when it’s over, and—”

“Kanba,” I said before he could finish his mumbled explanation, shakily pointing a finger at the TV screen. Displayed were two peaceful-looking portraits of our mother and father, Takakura Kenzan and Chiemi. Beside their names, which were printed beneath the photos, was the word “SUSPECTS” in clear white lettering.

I felt ill, like my whole head was spinning. Still, I quieted my breathing as much as possible, hoping to avoid waking Himari. The flashing, multicolored lights from the TV screen reflected on my still, silent brother’s face as if he were glass.

In the intensive care room, Kanba knelt beside the bed, gripping Himari’s hand as he carefully monitored her condition. Sanetoshi handed the emptied syringe to Shirase and stood on the opposite side of the bed, watching over Himari with a thin smile.

“Now then, it’s time for the princess to awaken.”

Just as he finished speaking, Himari’s eyelids fluttered, and her eyes opened. The EKG machine she was hooked up to began quietly beeping again. “Himari!” he cried.

“Splendid work! You’re stunning, Dr. Sanetoshi!” Shirase and Souya shrieked in sync, applauding.

Kanba breathed deeply, and gripped Himari’s hand again in both of his, lowering his head in sheer relief.

Himari blinked again and again in the overly bright lights of the room, looking at her warm right hand. Noticing her gaze, Kanba looked up and smiled at her.

“Why don’t you call for your dear younger brother?” asked Sanetoshi, quietly approaching the bed.

“I don’t need you to tell me that,” Kanba replied. He gently released Himari’s hand and went to fetch the wide-eyed Shoma, who waited beyond the glass.

“Good morning,” said Sanetoshi, peering at Himari’s face with a grin. “Long time no see. Or rather, nice to meet you.”

Himari looked weakly into his eyes, blinking softly. Where was she right now, and by what means had she been awakened? She had no recollection of this dashing man standing before her, but she got the strange feeling that she knew him.

Sanetoshi straightened his back. Various colors shimmered faintly along his long, silvery hair. “I’m Watase Sanetoshi. Starting today, I’m your primary physician.”

“Primary physician...” Himari repeated in a hoarse voice. Looking at this man, who wore his lab coat with a peculiar air and did not seem at all like a doctor, made Himari feel as though she was still in a dream.

“Looking forward to working with you. Ah, looks like your big brothers are back.”

As Kanba opened the door to the room, a bleary-eyed Shoma came rushing in, Ringo following after him.

The three gathered around Himari with teary eyes, and a bit of pink started to color her far-too-pale cheeks. Himari smiled back at them and tried to say something in her still-hoarse voice, but could not get the words out.

“You were saved, Himari,” Shoma muttered.

Kanba patted his still-trembling brother on the back. “Everything’s fine,” he said in a strong but soft voice, as though assuring himself.

“Mary’s little lamb, yes?” said Sanetoshi. He picked the penguin hat up from the floor gently, so as not to disrupt the rejoicing children, and brushed off the dust. Then, he looked into the hat’s red eyes, the corners of his mouth pricking up ever so slightly.

The goddess decided to rescind the punishment of death that she sentenced

upon Mary's youngest lamb. However, this did not mean that she had taken pity on Mary, nor that she felt any compassion for the lambs, nor even that her anger had at all abated.

The goddess spoke, "Well, if the punishment were over now, that would be boring, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, indeed!" replied the large, sneering black rabbits who heard the goddess's words. Their voices rose like a storm, their ears flapping enthusiastically.

The boundless library of fate, as always, was as bright as though lit by the sun. Sanetoshi was clad in a fully buttoned, tight-fitting white shirt; a beautiful lustrous black wool jacket; and narrow-legged pants, which matched the jacket. He walked at a leisurely clip through the Hole in the Sky Annex, and translucent geometric shapes in various hues floated up and vanished where his feet hit the floor. He listened carefully to another pair of footsteps softly pattering nearby.

The owner of the dainty footsteps drew nearer, and then farther away again, as though peeking in on him, but never did they come into view.

Sanetoshi suddenly began speaking to the unseen other, his voice resounding through the large, curving bookshelves of the spacious annex. "By the way, how do you feel about the word *fate*? Do you believe in the reality of such a notion? By 'fate,' I mean the idea that the main beats of someone's life are decided from birth, and that there is absolutely no way to challenge that. Do you believe such a law exists?"

In lieu of a reply, the other peeked out briefly from behind one of the shelves. Their hair, falling straight to their shoulders, swayed, the hem of their jumper skirt fluttering.

Sanetoshi pressed on. "Could I ask you to listen to me, just for a little while? I need to talk to you—just a smidge, truly—about the past, and about what happens from here on out."

There was no reply from the other. Ignoring this, Sanetoshi continued.

"Long ago... Well, to be fair, it was only sixteen years ago, but it was then that

a certain girl suddenly appeared before me. Surprisingly, she and I were the same sort of person. She had the same eyes, the same smell. I finally knew that I was not alone in this world. I was so happy.”

A soft light came in through the wide arching skylight. Sanetoshi tilted his head up, eyes squinting against the light, and strained his ears. He could hear the mysterious girl walking softly somewhere between the infinite bookshelves.

“I was completely alone until I met her. Mine was the only voice I could hear out loud in those empty surroundings.”

He turned suddenly toward the direction of the girl’s footsteps, neither hurrying nor pursuing, but moving unmistakably toward her. Within the traces of her footprints on the floor, sprouts emerged and stalks grew. Leaves formed and blossomed with flowers of every hue, dying away in an instant. Sanetoshi picked up the single remaining flower petal and followed to where the flowers bloomed and shimmered before dying.

“However, in my mind, I was certain that I could hear the voices of everyone in the world. ‘Help us,’ they would cry. That’s how I was able to see in which direction the world should be proceeding. I’m telling the truth, you know.”

She still did not reply to him, just continued watching Sanetoshi from out of sight. She would tiptoe deeper into the annex, or take some book off the shelf and flip through it. Her trail of flora sprouted offshoots to shield her, growing leaves and blossoms, bearing fruit, and then quickly fading away.

“You haven’t changed,” he murmured. As always, she had no doubts that she was loved; no doubts about *what* she loved. She just ran around earnestly, completely happy.

As Sanetoshi’s footfalls quickened ever so slightly, geometric shapes of stronger, more vibrant colors than usual raced upward, shattering in midair—products of his ever-so-faint feelings of love and hatred and regret, the complexes of superiority and inferiority that warred within Sanetoshi.

A shadow like red smoke rose from his faintly swaying hair, and vanished. Sanetoshi shrugged his shoulders and smiled wryly, keeping himself in check.

Just as he thought she had gone entirely silent, she appeared before him.

Thigh-high socks covered her little legs, and her feet were clad in pale pink enamel shoes. Her eyes were open wide and bright.

Sanetoshi stooped down slightly, his smile unfading, and met her gaze. He held out the flower petal in his hand. "Still, I was still terribly sad," he told her. "There was one more thing that I realized the moment I met her: Our paths could never cross. She could never truly be my ally. She denied me, the sole other being who could view the world as she did."

Not a hint of emotion crossed her face. The only movement was the faintest trembling of the lashes that bordered her beautiful eyes. She quickly closed her eyes and then blinked once, twice, and the flower in Sanetoshi's hand silently disappeared like smoke.

"What?" Sanetoshi asked. "Do you have a question for me? Go ahead. Are you wondering about what just happened? Why I saved Takakura Himari's life? Hmm...why *did* I? Well, that's a secret for now. You'll find out soon enough." This time it was Sanetoshi who flitted away between the shelves. The girl did not attempt to follow.

Sanetoshi suddenly felt a soft breeze across his back, the wind caressing him like the touch of a soft hand. He glanced back to see this breeze sparkling in a maelstrom of vibrant flowers and light, circling him as though it was alive, before scattering in every direction. He turned back to her.

"What? Don't be angry. Here, let me put it this way. I just want to know for certain: Does the notion called 'fate' exist in the world of men? Does that rule truly govern people's greatest triumphs and tragedies?" He paused. "I want you to find that out along with me."

On the other side of the walkway, the girl was silent. It was impossible to tell if she was angry or not.

He snapped his fingers. "I know! The two of us will search for the Penguin drum together, and find out whether it truly exists. What do you think? Not a bad idea, right?" Sanetoshi asked in a persuasive tone, producing a glossy red apple.

She did not open her mouth.

“Now then, go to her side. Then you’ll see what it is that I see: the fates of those three siblings.”

He tossed the apple, not waiting for her reply. At the same moment, the outlines of the Hole in the Sky Annex began to blur.

“I’ll see you later, my one and only beloved. We’ll meet again in that other world. I will never leave your side. You are the only other person in this world like me.”

Her expression, naturally, did not falter as the sunlight vanished. All color and form faded, and she was expelled from the darkness of the crumbling Hole in the Sky Annex. She merely tumbled down into “the other world,” her shoulder-length hair fluttering along with the ends of the penguin hat she wore.

Her tiny lips moved ever so slightly, but Sanetoshi could no longer tell what she was saying. He merely watched over it all without a hint of fear.

Himari remained in the hospital again for some time after that.

“Guess I don’t have much choice,” she said, forcing a smile.

The room into which she was admitted for her stay was far different this time. The walls and ceiling were plastered, and the flooring was of a rich, dark hue. A window led out to a small balcony, and that window was covered by layered curtains made of white cotton and lace.

The large, white, wooden bed was fitted with soft off-white sheets, a far cry from the starchy hospital sheets that reeked of disinfectant. The room also came furnished with a wardrobe, inside of which were Himari’s beloved crafting tools and half-read books, her favorite stuffed animals and pajamas, and even her undergarments.

On the bedside table was a classic-style reading lamp, hung with a shade of a sophisticated pattern and decorated with white lace and embroidery. There was still plenty of room on the table. Himari thought it would be perfect to pull up to it on its matching white chair and settle in for morning and evening meals. Plus, if anyone dropped in for a visit, they could have a nice, relaxing time sitting there.

The three of us had our doubts that this room ever existed in this complex before now. Himari especially would have explored every inch of the hospital until she was sick of it. We were all suspicious, but Dr. Sanetoshi explained that it was a special room “for a patient undergoing special treatment with a new type of medicine.” We didn’t have much of a choice but to accept it. The important thing was that this was undoubtedly the perfect room for Himari, a room like something out of the fairy tales she so loved, which filled me and Kanba with nothing but joy.

“Poor Himari,” I sighed. “Luckily, she gets to have a good and friendly doctor looking after her. This room is super close to the exam room, too.” I slumped in my chair a little as I watched Himari’s peacefully slumbering face. “Don’t you agree, Aniki?”

Kanba didn’t reply. I looked over and saw him with a deadly serious look on his face, watching Penguin No. 3 in the corner of the room. No. 3 had a scarf wrapped around itself like the obi of a kimono, and Nos. 1 and 2 were tugging on the scarf, spinning No. 3 around. Kanba couldn’t possibly be suspicious of the penguins after all this time, so what was with his dark look?

“Is this about the hospital bill?” I asked. That *was* bound to be an issue. This room was incredibly nice, and Dr. Sanetoshi himself called the new medicine “stunning.” I wondered what we would do about the meager savings we’d scraped up, not confident that we would be able to cover this just by cutting back on household expenses.

Naturally, even Himari was concerned. She even asked us about the bill, but while I stood there, dumbly flapping my mouth, Kanba just smiled and said, “It’s not going to be a problem, so don’t worry about it, Himari. You just need to focus on getting better, okay?”

His trustworthy smile was enough to set Himari at ease, if only for a moment. I was bad at faking smiles, though, so it was impossible for me to pretend to be calm.

“Shoma,” Kanba said abruptly.

“What?”

“You and me, we have to do absolutely everything that we can for Himari.”

“Yeah.” Despite my agreement, I was anxious about all of this. I couldn’t shake the sickly feeling that the modest happiness that the three of us shared was steadily being eroded—eroded by the Penguin drum, Himari’s hospitalization, our economic situation, and countless other things.

The pendant lamps hanging from the ceiling swung gently in the breeze flowing through the open window.

Masako sat languidly on the sofa, her legs crossed. She wore a soft robe with chiffon frills at the collar, and slippers of the same material. She slowly sipped a plain breakfast tea as she sat in the living room, which was lit only by the sunlight beaming in through the window.

The assorted lights and sounds from television were irritating, and watching for very long always gave her a headache. She supposed she just had to put up with it now and again, at least for the sake of basic information gathering.

She rubbed the corners of her thin eyes. On the screen in front of her was a flashy news crew near a subway station. The female reporter, mic in hand, wore a rather cheap-looking pastel blue two-piece suit.

“One of the newest symbols of Tokyo is now celebrating ten years in business, after overcoming the trials of sixteen years ago. Here at the Tokyo Sky Metro, or the TSM for short, all employees are offering a silent prayer before the start of business this morning. Right now, a crowd has gathered to offer flowers at the prepared memorial.”

There were several employees directing the proceedings, all lined up in front of the white flower display and the large signboard reading “Thanks for 10 years!” Nearby, balloons with the Tokyo Sky Metro logo on them were being distributed to children.

Just watching the affair fatigued Masako immensely, and she leaned back into the sofa, sighing. Everything about this program was sickeningly theatrical. The sights were already becoming overly familiar: the monorail running down underground; the people going in and out of the station; and the smiling faces of Double H, dressed as station staff and serving as honorary stationmasters for the day, introducing the commemorative slogans.

“To be able to develop and maintain such a modern transportation system has been a bright beacon of hope for all of us. However, as we step forth into the next ten years, we must look back at the Tokyo subway network’s recovery, and never forget the great tragedies that occurred here. Those we lost will never return to us, and things will never go back to the way they were. Now then, we would love to hear from all of our viewers and listeners today. Send us your comments by phone, email, or fax. You can find our numbers and email address right here. Please write them down carefully.”

Masako’s eyes dropped to the large caption displayed on the bottom of the screen, and she immediately picked up the phone receiver. Expressionless, a teacup in her left hand, she listened to the lively ringing of the phone.

“It looks like we’ve already gotten a caller. Let’s go ahead and introduce them.” The female reporter on the screen took a cell phone from one of the staff members and put it to her ear. “Hello?”

“So glad to see you looking so happy,” Masako said abruptly. *Though perhaps the term “blissfully ignorant” would be more apt,* she thought silently.

“Hm? Hello? Would you like to give us your name, first?” said the reporter, voice still chipper despite the puzzlement on her face.

“The bright places and the dark must coexist as one. The bright places can shine only because there is darkness that exists elsewhere. The brighter the light gleams, the deeper and thicker the dark becomes. When the light shines too brightly over everything, the darkness has nowhere to go. It lashes out into the bright places to swallow up the light,” said Masako, placing her teacup down on the saucer.

“Um, what exactly are you saying? Could you give us your name?”

“And by the way, that suit doesn’t flatter you at all.” *It’s a dreadful color,* Masako thought.

“Come again?” The smile faded from the reporter’s face.

“Goodness, we’ll have to crush that soon,” said Masako, and gently hung up the phone.

“Hello? Hello?”

Unconcerned with the bewildered reporter on the screen, Esmeralda, who was sitting upon another sofa with her eyes glinting, deftly gripped the remote control and turned off the TV.

The phone rang only a moment after Masako set down the receiver. His calls to her always seemed perfectly timed. Masako had already begun to be able to distinguish the sound.

Gazing at the graceful apple blossom arranged in the gaudy vase, she wordlessly picked the receiver back up. On the other end, Sanetoshi was silent for some time. Masako got the feeling he was grinning, as though he was ridiculing her.

She thought of her young brother, whose bedroom she peeked into a little while ago. He was slumbering peacefully, a calm look on his face. "You know, Mario is doing well because of you. I suppose I must give you my thanks."

"Thanks are unnecessary. You've already paid a sufficient price in return, after all."

Masako hung her head, her expression bitter. "I really want to crush him," she said, pinching her forefinger and thumb together forcefully.

"By the way, I have some new intel regarding the missing half of the diary. I know who currently holds it." There was a smile clear in Sanetoshi's voice.

Esmeralda, sensing the topic of conversation, whipped her whole body toward Masako, who drew in a sharp breath before asking:

"Who? Who has the other half?"

The words "Tenth Anniversary," which were supposed to have a celebratory ring to them, only gave Tabuki an eerie feeling. He passed through the station gates as usual, boarding the downward escalator.

Both the station walls and the inside of the train were adorned with posters featuring popular idols. They depicted two charming girls striking a pose and smiling, with catchy phrases like "Onward to the next ten years!" and "Congratulations on ten years!" He almost wanted to ask the posters just what

was so amusing.

Time stopped for Tabuki on that day. Even after ten years had passed, it never did start moving again. His sorrow had only grown deeper, his bitterness stronger, his memories of her slowly growing dimmer. He had come of age, taken a job, and started his life all alone in this world.

He came aboveground again to the sight of festivities.

He squinted in the bright light, passing through the cityscape around the station to which he felt so ill-suited, avoided the crowds, and headed for home. The wind that grazed his cheeks and forehead now and then carried with it hints of winter. His left hand felt an uncanny sense of the changing seasons as well. He might need to start wearing a light jacket soon.

Though he always felt the turning of the seasons, ever since that day, he often forgot that he was a fully grown adult. This was despite his marriage to Yuri, the times when he was standing in front of his rowdy students, or speaking with his colleagues, or paying his taxes, or just being with Yuri. The fact that the boy known as Tabuki Keiju was now a fully-fledged member of society still did not feel real.

Just before he reached his building, Tabuki spotted Ringo standing quietly before the entrance, and smiled at her. "Oh, Ringo-chan! What's up?"

When she saw him, she did not smile brightly like she usually did, greeting him only with a quiet "Hello."

"We've got tea and coffee; which would you like?"

As she sat nervously on the sofa, Tabuki's voice from the kitchen suddenly reminded Ringo of the incident that she previously orchestrated in this room, and she froze.

"E-either one...is fine."

"It's getting pretty cold out, huh?" Tabuki's carefree voice echoed into the spacious living room. "I guess the seasons'll be changing again soon."

"That's true. So, um... Tabuki-san, how are you feeling? Physically, I mean?"

“Hm? Physically?” he repeated, carrying in a tea set upon a tray.

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

As Tabuki poured the tea in an unpracticed fashion, Ringo straightened up her posture, wondering how to broach the subject. Truthfully, this was probably something she shouldn’t even be talking about. Still, now that she knew, there were a lot of things that Ringo needed to consider.

“Tabuki-san...”

“Hm?” He glanced at her, his expression calm.

“Tabuki-san, about the Takakuras. Um, you know about their parents, don’t you?”

Tabuki didn’t react to the question much. “Ah. Heard about it from Takakura, then?” He smiled quietly, pouring some newly purchased autumn harvest Darjeeling tea into a very Yuri-styled cup.

“Yes.” Ringo watched as Tabuki’s quiet expression remained unfaltering. She prayed it would remain that way.

Tabuki sat down across from her. “Here you go,” he said, handing her the tea. Ringo let the cup warm her slightly chilly hands, but she did not bring it to her lips.

“I was surprised to learn that those two were students at my school. It’s a strange coincidence, isn’t it? I was the friend of one of the victims of that accident, and they were...” His words trailed off. “Cream and sugar?”

“Do you still remember the accident?”

Tabuki gave a pained smile. “Honestly? It still doesn’t feel real. The last time I ever saw your sister was when we parted ways the day before, on the commute home from school.”

Ringo leaned forward slightly. “What would you do if you ever found the perpetrators? If you found Shoma-kun and Kanba-kun’s parents?”

“Who knows? I mean, I know they’re ‘the perpetrators,’ but they never did anything directly in front of my eyes, and I don’t even know all the particulars of the incident. It was probably way harder on your parents. At the very least, I

don't have any particular vengeful feelings toward them or anything."

Though somewhat relieved, Ringo recalled Shoma's words—that if Himari never woke up, it would be because it was a punishment passed down on their family. It was an indelible sin they would carry on their backs, no matter what else they did.

"It doesn't feel real to me, either," she told Tabuki. "I don't know how Papa and Mama felt. I was still little, so I got a sense that they were super sad, but don't really know anything about what actually happened back then." She paused and thought about how Shoma carried the shadow of the tragedy, and the darkness that she herself embraced. She tried to align the two within her mind, but couldn't. Those two things were so different in quality and weight, yet they had come this far over the past sixteen years, overlapping and separating again and again. So why were they still so wholly distinct?

"That's fine, actually," Tabuki said quietly.

"You know, I wanted to be Momoka. If only I'd been able to heal everyone's sadness—Papa's, Mama's, and yours." Ringo's eyes welled up, but she would not cry. There was no way she could cry, knowing how much sadder Tabuki must be, how much more he must be suffering.

"There are things in life that we can't get back, no matter how hard we try," he told her. "However, we stumble upon many other things in their place. I'm glad that you and I met, for example. Aren't you, Ringo-chan?" This time, his smile was different, brighter.

Ringo quickly dried her eyes. "I am!" she replied. "I am." She was glad that she had gotten to meet the Takakura siblings as well. "Still, maybe it would've been better if I never learned about Shoma-kun's parents."

"No, I'm sure there's a reason for that. Everything has a meaning, no matter how painful or sad it is. Nothing in this world is meaningless." His tone was firm and assured in a very teacher-like way.

Ringo nodded dutifully.

It was pointless to think that they could keep on forever, not really knowing anything about one another. The more they got to know each other, the less

avoidable the topic of the accident would be.

They would have to overcome this.

As she swayed on the subway, Ringo suddenly pulled out her phone, and began sending a text to her father, Satoshi:

Papa. Sorry I couldn't call you yesterday. Could I come over to your place to hang out sometime soon? BTW, Mama won't know about this. Also, congratulations on your remarriage, Papa. I hope you're happy with your new wife.

The moment she hit “Send,” her heart grew troubled, and she realized that she was in the middle of losing something very dear.

She held the phone up in front of her. A charm of a lonesome-looking penguin holding an apple swung from the phone strap. She removed the charm and rolled it around in her palm.

Her father was still her father, but this man—Satoshi—would no longer be looking out for her or her mother. He was as good as a stranger.

Ringo liked the word *fate*. There was the phrase “a fated encounter,” wasn’t there? It couldn’t be by mere chance that a single special encounter could permanently and completely alter the course of your life. Surely, that had to be fate. Naturally, there was more to life than just happy encounters. There were plenty of sad and painful things as well. It hurt to accept such things as fate. Still, Ringo was certain—there was a reason for the sad and the painful things. Nothing in this world was truly meaningless.

Ringo believed in fate.

The well-built officer from before sighed when she saw the report on the news. On the TV screen, our house was packed with investigators from every possible agency. There was such a big commotion on site that it was hard to believe it was nearly midnight. The woman glanced at me as I watched the scene, dumbfounded, as though it had no relation to me.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

What did “all right” mean in this context? Was she asking if I had a problem with our home being treated like this? Was that house on the television even actually *our* home? Maybe we were mistaking it for a different house.

“Mom and Dad would never do something like that! Did you all even seriously look into this?!” my brother squeaked out.

“Unfortunately, it’s true. I wish we had been able to fill you in about this sooner,” the woman replied coolly. “Law enforcement has been investigating your parents for quite some time, and has collected a lot of evidence in relation to their crimes.”

“You’re lying. Our mom and dad...would never...” Kanba looked over at Himari. She was softly snoring, her stuffed bear beside her. “How are we supposed to explain this to Himari?”

“Kanba...” I said quietly. I tried to put my hand on his shoulder, but he shook me off.

“This is all a fake! Mom and Dad aren’t criminals. They aren’t those kinds of people!” he shouted in a voice neither Himari nor I had ever heard from him. It was like the roar of a powerful beast.

As I looked at my teary-eyed brother, I slowly began to realize that this was in fact reality. If that was true, though, then what would become of us when morning came?

Chapter 05

IN A HOTEL SUITE with a view of the nighttime lights of Tokyo Tower, there was a bathroom with a large marble tub, and a sitting room that was furnished with a leather sofa and a television. On the round glass table beside the sofa were seasonal flowers, and either wine or champagne to suit the evening's mood, along with a number of other liquors lined up in the minibar, to be consumed at one's pleasure.

In the bedroom was a queen bed in a matching beige brown. Yuri sunk into the sofa, staring dazedly at the familiar bed, gulping down carbonated mineral water.

She enjoyed how spacious the room was, but there were far too many unnecessary items. They were only provided when she and Yuuki Tsubasa came to this room, anyway. The expensive alcohol and lovely bath and wonderful view were the sorts of things expected to be enjoyed together by two people who loved each other. Taking that into consideration, such entertainments were nothing but a waste of time and money whenever she came to Yuuki's place.

That evening was a great success for "Tokikago Yuri's Final Performance: The Tragedy of M ~ Taking Flight." Both the theater lobby and the green room was filled with mountains of colorful flowers sent by celebrities from every sphere. The audience was deeply moved by the sight of Yuri in costume singing and dancing as she gazed deeply into Yuuki's eyes, the whole theater erupting into applause.

As she left the theater, Yuri waved to her fans, tears streaming but her smile bright. However, her mind was preoccupied with what she was meant to be doing from there on out. All those faces she glimpsed out in the darkened rows as she glided out onto the stage in a cart shaped like a swan—not one of them knew the true Yuri. All those envious gazes saw only the beauty upon her face. She no longer required any of them.

"What's wrong? Feeling a little worn out?" Yuuki asked as she stepped out of the shower. She was clad in a bathrobe and toweling off the tight curls of her

short, golden brown hair.

Yuri took a moment to admire Yuuki's body. She was nearly five-foot-six and well-proportioned, her face aglow in the light and the steam from the bathroom.

"No, I'm all right," Yuri told her. "I'm about to take a shower myself." She set her glass down on the table and stood.

"Take your time," said Yuuki from behind her, amused.

Yuri had never bathed together with Yuuki. She had been invited to do so countless times, but she always bathed alone. There was no reason for them to bathe together, after all.

She put on the water in the tub, but before she removed her make-up, she glanced at the diamond ring on her left hand. She almost forgot it was there, even though she was married to Tabuki Keiju.

Her face cleaned, she removed her showy white gold earrings and her long pearl necklace, taking down her carefully styled hair. She stripped out of her black-and-grass-patterned stockings, black sleeveless dress, short slip and underwear, and sunk into the tub without so much as a glance in the mirror of the dressing area. Her skin was practically white beneath the water.

Sometimes, Yuri wondered why she slept with other people. Was she seeking pleasure? Was she lonely? Or maybe she was just subconsciously hoping that someone might appear and tell her she was truly beautiful.

She stroked her breasts and her belly and her back, finding her body just as hideous as ever.

Yuri lay atop the bed, thinking about how she was someone's wife and how this was an act of pure wickedness, especially considering that she didn't need Yuuki anymore. It felt even more bold and immoral than usual.

Yuuki loved seeing Yuri like this, and told her over and over again how wonderful she was, how lovely she was, and how much she loved her. She said it so many times it was sickening.

“Want anything to drink?” Yuuki stood by the single glass-faced wall, wearing a dressing gown over her bare skin. She gazed at the scenery outside, or perhaps her own reflection, as she happily sipped her brandy.

Yuri, wrapped in the sheets, did not reply, simply staring at the massive figure of Tokyo Tower. Perhaps it was because “she” was gone that Yuri had become such a wicked woman. But this would be the last time.

Starting now, Yuri was taking it all back.

“Fly, Istanbul,” said Yuuki. Her eyes sparked as she sat on the bed and pulled Yuri close. “You were amazing tonight. I haven’t gotten that fired up in a long time.” Her gaze fell bashfully.

Yuuki was always fired up. She was so passionate that Yuri was jealous of her. “Hand me my underwear,” said Yuri, slowly sitting up.

Yuuki reached down over the bed and handed Yuri the fine, lacy undergarments that were thrown haphazardly onto the rug.

“That husband of yours is such a buzzkill. You only get this kind of feeling between two women.”

Yuuki was the one who was a buzzkill. Naturally, she was opposed when she first heard that Yuri, who she assumed only had love for other women, would be marrying Tabuki. *Why?* She asked. *You don’t need him.* She even proposed that they somehow live together instead. For obvious reasons, this was kept a secret from her, and she hadn’t realized that she had never truly been loved in all this time. She was the belle of the proud ranks of the Sunshiny Opera Company.

“You’re such a bore.”

Yuuki opened her mouth with a surprised, “Huh?”

“I’ve been feeling this way for a while, but sex with you is always so predictable. Haven’t you noticed that? Did you really think that technique of yours could satisfy a woman? Seriously, you *are* a woman.” Yuri slipped out of bed, quickly throwing on her clothes.

Yuuki dropped her still brandy-filled glass upon the carpet.

“I’m going home. To my ‘buzzkill’ of a husband.” Yuri smiled softly as she picked up her coat and handbag. Even without makeup, her face was still clear and beautiful.

“Is this a joke?” Yuuki demanded.

“Do you think I would tell such a humorless joke?” Yuri pulled her large sunglasses from her bag, donned them, and left the room. She sighed deeply as she headed for the elevators.

Just as she reached the car that was brought around to the hotel entrance, Yuuki, having hastily re-dressed, caught up with her.

“W-wait! Please wait! If there’s some reason for this, please tell me!” Yuuki Tsubasa’s voice, so perfect for the stage, echoed around the entrance. “You and I are partners for life, aren’t we? We’ve always been together, both onstage and in bed.”

Yuri turned back, interrupting her. “Yes, and I’ve quit the troupe, haven’t I? Have you already forgotten that? I’m leaving both the stage, and you. Don’t misunderstand me. Never again am I sleeping with some washed-up actress. Try not to let the number of times we’ve been together fuel your attachment.”

Yuuki froze in shock. “You’re...you’re lying! You’re lying, right? Say you’re lying.”

Yuri ignored her, stepping into the red sports car and slamming the door shut. Yuuki ran after her, pounding violently on the door. Yuri rolled down the driver’s side window about halfway, nonplussed. Yuuki clung to the edge of the window, her breath fogging faintly on the glass.

“Are you really okay with this? With breaking up with me?” Yuuki’s face was pale, not a hint of gloss on her lips, and her voice was husky. She tried unsuccessfully to suppress a wicked sort of laugh. “I might just start spreading rumors.”

Ah, so this was how it was going to end. Such hideous conduct from the beautiful Yuuki. Yuri started the engine, barely looking at her. “An unfortunate human being to the last,” she said as she rolled up the window and drove away.

She glanced at the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of Yuuki in hot

pursuit, screaming her love for Yuri so loudly that it echoed throughout the parking lot. The sound didn't reach Yuri's ears, and even if it had, it wouldn't have changed anything.

Once she drove a short distance from the hotel, Yuri took a deep breath. The cool night air washed over her, carrying away all other scents.

Perhaps the reason she worked so hard at her acting career was that someone had once called her "beautiful," and Yuri wanted to confirm that for herself. She wanted to be someone who was sought after, someone who was needed. But as she rose to the top spot in the troupe, her beauty became nothing more than a commodity, which only wounded her even more. Everyone praised her for her beauty, but the more praise she received, the emptier it felt. No matter how she tried to pour her passions into noble, beautiful things, hoping to cast aside her hideous, self-pitying heart, she was fundamentally a wretched creature. When Yuri was bathed in the hot spotlights onstage, she felt like her body would burn to ashes. If only she could live a solitary life as whatever truly beautiful thing lay within her soul. How splendid she could be if she could only embrace that beauty, polishing it until it glistened. Would that she could cast away everything that kept her trapped here, and fly right now to *her* side.

The flashy red car accelerated through the nighttime streets, shining in the city lights.

Although Yuri's heart was connected to her body physically, at times it felt completely detached. Still, she could bury a lot of darkness in the corners of that heart. She would bury it beneath exorbitantly priced alcohol, deliriously delicious food, and well-made clothing to cloak her body. And, of course, one-night stands.

All of her transient lovers had opened their eyes wide in shock upon first seeing her body, yet they still lavished her with sweet words—that it was nothing to worry about, that she was still beautiful nonetheless. Yuri knew that was always a lie. However, whether a lie or the truth, if she were not called beautiful from time to time, the urge to carve up her own flesh began creeping in. Even though she knew that no matter who she slept with, it changed nothing.

No one could touch Yuri's heart, nor would she let them do so.

Yuri worked so hard to live this long in a world without *her*; the concerns of others were nothing to her. There was only one person who kept Yuri tied to this world. She was the one who would tell her with utmost sincerity that she was truly beautiful. Yuri couldn't afford to let others grow attached to her. Even if that meant denying anyone else in this world who might truly want her, Yuri would accept nothing less than once again being with the one to whom she swore an eternal bond.

Yuri's eyes blurred with tears. Gripping the wheel tightly, accelerating even faster, she began to quietly sing. Both her resonant voice and her teardrops, which tumbled into the darkness like pearls, floated away into the night air.

Hurry, I want to see you soon. I have to keep going until I can.

After my afternoon lessons, I left the school building in a bit of a daze. My brother had left early to see Himari in the hospital. I was sure that our homeroom teacher, Tabuki, would give us plenty of leeway again once we explained the circumstances. The only thing that mattered was that Himari was alive.

All throughout the day, I was lost in thought. Himari's life was saved, thanks to Dr. Watase Sanetoshi. Couldn't that be enough? What had the penguin-hatted queen's parting words to us meant?

On top of everything else, we lost the Penguinindrum, and now this world would be set upon by the hares of darkness once more. We, the children of cursed fate, would have judgment cast down upon us. If we did not obtain the Penguinindrum and change tracks, what exactly would happen? More importantly, what *could* happen?

"Shoma-kun?"

As I walked along, staring at my own shuffling feet, a voice intruded into my thoughts, and I looked up with a start. Oginome-san, dressed in her sailor uniform, stood out amongst a group of Gaiennishi High students on their way home.

“Jeez, I’ve been waiting for you forever!” she said, puffing out her cheeks theatrically and rolling her eyes. “I texted you so many times. Is Himari-chan out of the hospital yet?”

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I’m in a hurry.” What did my face look like in that moment? I lowered my gaze, stepping around her.

“Just a minute! What’s wrong? Why are you avoiding me? You won’t answer my calls or my texts. I’ve been worried.” She tugged at the sleeve of my uniform, tickling my elbow a little.

“Well, what do you expect? There’s nothing I can do to make things up to you.”

“Make things up to me? What are you talking about?” she asked in her usual manner, though sounding slightly flustered.

There was nothing I could do for her to make up for the fact that my family had killed her sister. I could not look her straight in the eye, instead gathering only vague impressions of her. Her loafers. Her thigh-high socks on her slender legs. Her scent.

“What is it you want me to do?” I asked. “If this could be fixed by prostrating myself in front of you, I’d do it a hundred times, even a thousand. But it wouldn’t do anything, would it? There’s no way you could ever forgive us.”

Hares of darkness. Their massive, black ears flapping, casting a great shadow upon my heart, rather than the world. Were these my true colors? I was trying to hurt Oginome-san again. More importantly, I was trying to hurt *myself*.

“Forgive you? That’s never even crossed my mind. Look at me. Let’s talk.” She reached out to me weakly, but I ignored her.

“No. You should never, ever forgive us. You should hope our family sinks into the pits of despair and falls into ruin. I bet you’ll just keep watching us until that comes true, won’t you? Everyone else did. Everyone left us, and the three of us had to live all alone.”

I was weak. I knew that she held no ill will toward us, that she didn’t think of me or my siblings that way. But what if that changed someday? What if she were to suddenly hate us, and condemn us as the children of murderers?

“I’m not like them. I would never leave you all over something like that. I love Himari-chan, and I—”

“Just stop it already!” I raised my voice, cutting her off. A few of our fellow commuters looked our way, mistaking it for a lovers’ spat. “I don’t want to hear it anymore! I don’t want to hurt anyone else, or be hurt, more than I already have. What’s the point? It’s better if we never see each other again!”

Now that the truth had come to light, it was best for both of us that we went our separate ways, riding the rails of our own fates. That way, we would never be able to hurt one another again someday.

“Hurt...? I see,” she whispered. “I guess I was only thinking about myself. Seeing me, and talking to me, hurts you. I’m sorry. I was stupid.” The sorrow was heavy in her voice.

“That’s enough, all right?” Her hand was still holding my sleeve, and I jerked it away, pulling away from her. I walked away quickly, not looking back to see the tears that were probably in her eyes.

If I had started crying there, I suspect that my fellow classmates might have said something. In her case, however, someone would probably come up to her and shout terrible threats my way, unable to stand the sight of her tears. Still, if some other guys were to show up, wanting to comfort her, then it was none of my business. It would be good for her. For me and my siblings, a normal happiness like that was impossible.

Kanba sat on the edge of a high-backed stool in the examination room, and placed a thick envelope upon the white wooden desk. Sanetoshi sat on the other side, his arms resting on the desktop.

Kanba still had little confidence in this doctor sitting before him. Nor did he have any in the unusual examination room that appeared within this hospital, nor in Himari’s special room. Furthermore, there were those suspicious children who followed the man around as his assistants. No matter how you looked at it, this whole thing was bizarre. However, there was no other way to save Himari at this point. If these methods required money, then Kanba had no choice but to furnish it.

“How stunning. To think you could collect so much money in such a short amount of time!” Sanetoshi smiled and drew an ampoule from the pocket of his lab coat, setting it on the desk. However, upon seeing the relief on Kanba’s face, he quickly stowed it back away. “Sadly, although I applaud your efforts, this is not quite enough.”

His hair was loosely arranged, and he wore a light blue button-down shirt with a pale green vest. He had on beige corduroy pants, and dark brown loafers. His arm was encircled by a wristwatch with a black band and face with a starry night design. Lastly, he had a mysterious smell, like fresh greenery. The exact scent changed every time he moved, just like the otherworldly light shining from his hair.

“For now, take this.”

The money should have been enough. Kanba was growing irritated at Sanetoshi’s relaxed, amused expression.

“The market is a living thing, you know. Every day, the lives of children are placed in a hierarchy by the market’s whims. Some children are saved. Some are not,” Sanetoshi said quietly, lowering his eyes.

“Fine. I’ll do something by the end of the day,” Kanba replied, quashing his own feelings. No matter how angry he was, Himari would be dead without Sanetoshi.

“My, how reliable.” Sanetoshi crossed his legs, satisfied.

“So, when will she be able to leave the hospital?”

“When the secrets of this world are revealed.”

“Huh?” Kanba looked up, but Sanetoshi smoothly averted his gaze.

“Hmm. I think after she has a few more ampoules, she should be recovered enough to return home.” The doctor grinned. The hair hanging in front of his cheeks swayed with a pale blue hue.

“I’ll be back.” Kanba stood swiftly, turning his back.

“You aren’t going up to see her?” Sanetoshi asked, in a way that did not sound at all malicious, as though it was perhaps genuine curiosity.

“There’s something I need to do first.” Kanba said as he left the room.

“Even more stunning.” Sanetoshi slowly recrossed his legs.

Himari sat upon the bed in her spacious single room—so different from all the rooms she occupied during previous hospital stays—knitting with No. 3 at her side. She was making gifts in preparation for the chilly weather on the horizon. They were simple fringed scarves, one of peachy pink yarn and one of blue, with starry symbols stitched in white on each.

“All done! The warm and toasty scarves are complete!” She spread one out to display it, and No. 3 clapped its hands earnestly.

She examined the details of her handiwork, then beamed and rubbed them along her cheeks. “What splendid achievements!” she said to herself. “I am quite satisfied!”

No. 3 nodded happily and embraced Himari, burying its face in the scarves as well.

Himari tried holding up the scarves against the photo of Double H that decorated the cover of *Sixteen* magazine on her lap.

“This one’s for Hibari-chan, and this one for Hikari-chan. I wonder if they’ll like them.” She felt her heart suddenly quiet at her own carefree words. Just *who* would like something like this? She would be lucky if they even accepted them. The place from where the pair on the cover were smiling was leagues away from Himari. A lonesome feeling bubbled up inside her. She was so isolated from society already, and the world was leaving her farther and farther behind.

Himari shoved the scarves and the magazine into the trash bin, and curled up in the middle of the mattress. Having pointless hopes and dreams only led to sadness. She simply needed to quiet her heart and while away her days in boredom, just as she always had.

“Pardon me.” Sanetoshi said as he opened the door of the room, Shirase and Souya in tow. Himari, who usually greeted him with a smile, remained beneath the sheets, staring silently.

“So, my princess, how are you feeling today?” Sanetoshi asked as he walked over to the side of the bed, but there was no response. “Splendidly, I hope.”

Suddenly, his eyes fell upon the scarves sticking out from the trash bin.

“Oh? What happened to these?” he asked, picking up the two scarves.

Himari peeked her head out from under the sheets. “I threw them away,” she whispered. By her feet, atop the sheets, No. 3 rolled over, pretending to be sulking in bed as well.

“But you knitted them with such care,” Sanetoshi said. “They’re so wonderfully made. You really are skilled. I thought they were a gift for someone special.” Sanetoshi retrieved the scarves from the bin and spread them out, admiring them.

“Forget it.” Himari kicked her legs and curled back up under the sheets, utterly withdrawn.

“What’s wrong?” Sanetoshi smiled.

“No one would ever be happy to get a scarf that I made.” Her voice was muffled.

“Hmm. Well then, perhaps I’ll take them.” Before she could reply, Sanetoshi looked at the two scarves and wrapped the pink one around his neck.

“Huh?” Himari poked her head back out, surprised. She looked at Sanetoshi, her hair slightly ruffled, wide eyes as curious as a small animal’s.

Shirase and Souya appeared mildly surprised by his actions as well.

“It’s stunning. They’re both so beautiful. Matches my outfit today, too, don’t you think?” Sanetoshi smiled.

Shirase and Souya applauded in sync, saying, “Amazing, Dr. Sanetoshi! It looks splendid on you!”

“Right?”

“But...” Himari looked down, her cheeks slightly pink.

“I mean, you were just going to throw them away, weren’t you? So...”

“I-It’s fine. You can have them, I guess.” She turned away, pouting.

Still smiling, Sanetoshi took a syringe from Souya's hands. As far as Sanetoshi was concerned, Himari was utterly adorable. Yet he simply had no idea how to make heads or tails of anything else about her. "Now, can I go ahead and give you your shot?"

"Okay." Her voice was minuscule. Her long eyelashes cast shadows on her far-too-pale cheeks. Himari was quite accustomed to receiving injections, so she quickly pulled back her hair and nonchalantly opened the front of her nightgown.

Her innocent manner already had a femininity to it, which so befuddled Takakura Kanba. *Honestly*, Sanetoshi thought, *humans are such incomprehensible, wretched things*.

"What do you think of this room? Anything lacking?" Sanetoshi politely asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Nope. I've never stayed in such a nice hospital room before." It seemed that the slightest bit of her energy returned. Even if her gifts never made it to her brothers, as long as somebody could make use of something knitted by the likes of her, then perhaps that was enough to raise her spirits.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Sanetoshi as he pushed the cold syringe cleanly against Himari's bare skin.

Numerous slingshot-style modified guns sat in parts, all in a row. There were tubes loaded with bullets, and laser lights to keep one's aim steady. There were thick bands to propel powerful projectiles the size of ping-pong balls, sturdy handles to grip the body of the gun tight, and scopes to see targets from far away.

"Goodness, we'll have to crush her soon," Masako said to the voice on the other end of the phone. She polished the lasers and the lenses clean, and blew dust from the tubes and the scope. She put the guns neatly back together and held each one up in front of her, making certain that each red light shone with proper aim and that each strap was strong enough.

"Yes, as soon as possible would be ideal," said the low voice, as emotionless

as ever.

“Are you certain that the woman possesses the other half of the diary?”

“Yes. Stunning, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. I’m getting chills. I’ll get it this time for certain,” Masako declared, and hung up the receiver.

One bullet rolled across the tabletop, coming to a stop against the diary half. Masako picked up the bullet and loaded one of the guns, taking aim at a plaster figure.

Beside her, in an armchair, Esmeralda’s eyes were glistening, a teacup in hand.

“Esmeralda, I’m going vixen hunting!” Masako was about to leave, but then her eyes fell on the old clock on the wall. “Although I better start somewhere else first.”

As she left Gaiennishi High behind, Ringo wept deeply, feeling as though she were cast aside from everything and everyone in the world. The sun had already set long ago, and Shinjuku was flooded with crisp air and neon lights.

There was no doubt that the accident which caused her sister’s death sixteen years ago was a serious matter. That incident altered the fates of Ringo and her family, as well as the fates of so many other people. And yet, as they lived on with more and more new feelings arising, they couldn’t really escape that fate, could they? Would defying fate end only in tears?

Ringo shuffled along aimlessly, clutching the magazine that inspired her to talk to Shoma. Her handkerchief was soaked from the salty tears that refused to stop, no matter how many times she dabbed them away.

Men. Ringo had thought them so important. A man had now seen her true form. A man had decisively refused her.

It felt as though there was a large vacuum beneath her chest or somewhere in her gut.

She looked at the magazine to see the tagline “*A Victory for the Meeker Kind!*”

Plus, how to win his heart with just a glance. ☆”

What a thoughtless, vapid tagline, Ringo thought, then said aloud, “I’m such an idiot.” If one could achieve success with such half-hearted measures, then she should have been able to do the same with effort. “Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot!”

She crumpled the magazine up tight and tossed it away, crouching down and muttering, “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” repeatedly.

“Ringo-chan.”

Ringo heard a car come to a stop, and someone calling to her. She turned around and saw Yuri in the driver’s seat of a glistening car with a sharp profile.

“Get in,” Yuri said, opening the passenger-side door.

She had no reason to get in, but she had no reason not to. Either way, it was better than just lumbering around out here by herself. She quickly dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief once more, and climbed into the passenger seat.

Yuri started driving, not saying a word, only smiling softly.

They sailed through the dazzling evening lights and merged onto the highway.

“Something happened, didn’t it?” Yuri asked Ringo. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

Once the cityscape, which somehow looked different than usual, started rolling by, Ringo’s high-strung emotions finally began to calm. Yuri’s uninquisitive manner was soothing, and Ringo finally opened up.

“Apparently, looking at me and talking to me hurts Shoma-kun. I’ve never seen that look on his face before.” She tried to elaborate, but only fragments of words came to mind, and she covered her face in shame as the tears began to flow once again. “He said we could never see each other again; that it was better if we didn’t. If that’s what fate has in store for us, then there’s nothing I can do about it, is there?”

“You poor thing,” Yuri said. “You really are in love. But just so you know, by and large, first loves rarely come to fruition. I had someone like that once, too.”

“You did?” asked Ringo. She was taken aback. Even Yuri, who was kind and beautiful and had taken Tabuki under her wing, once had a love that was never

to be. Ringo straightened her back and looked at Yuri's face.

"Just so you know, it wasn't Tabuki," Yuri said, smiling playfully.

"What happened to them?"

"They vanished. One day, they were suddenly gone from me. Both in shape and form. Honest to God."

"In shape and form?" Ringo tilted her head slightly.

"So what I'm saying is, I understand exactly what you're going through. At times like this, the best thing you can do is to totally *fabulous max* it up with your girls!" Yuri floored the accelerator, and the car zoomed.

Ringo was slightly relieved to be with someone who did not know her all that well. On top of that, she had no real intention of finding out just what kind of person Yuri truly was, which somehow gave her a great sense of comfort.

Kanba sat in a deserted subway car, legs crossed, Penguin No. 1 at his side. The black-suited men stood in front of him, surrounding him.

Without any hint of agitation, Kanba took the envelope from one of the men. "Perfect. This should be enough for Himari's medicine." No. 1 gave a stoic nod as well. Kanba slipped the envelope inside his jacket pocket. "Now then, about the next job..."

Just then, the doors connecting to the next car clattered open. Kanba turned to see Masako, makeshift gun in hand, and Esmeralda, glaring directly at him.

"Goodness! We'll have to crush them soooon!" Masako somersaulted into the car, popping back up and shooting each one of the black-suited men, who had been too stunned to move.

"Masako!" By the time Kanba could react, most of the men in black were already on the floor.

Masako faced off with Kanba, who was still sitting, not moving a muscle. Her hair was immaculate, not a single strand coming loose from her curls. She wore a navy-blue blouse with a bowtie at the neck, and a knee-length skirt with an intricate black print. Black tights adorned her legs, and on her feet were high-

heeled ankle boots in a lively blue hue.

She leveled the gun at his forehead. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing? I told you, didn’t I? You stand at the edge of that frozen shelf as we speak. If you take another step, you’ll fall into the icy sea!”

“That’s none of your business.” Kanba lifted his head slightly, looking coldly back at her.

Masako frowned. “If you need money, I’ll pay it. That should work, shouldn’t it?”

“You’re gonna break into the Natsume family funds?” Kanba managed to say.

“Yes. I’ll crush them until there’s nothing left, just before you fall into the sea and become food for the orcas. All right?”

Without warning, she shot at Kanba. The bullet rushed just past his ear, shattering a window. He leapt from the seat and grabbed the barrel of Masako’s gun. “You’re just gonna shoot me?!” he demanded.

“What exactly is so appealing about that little girl?” asked Masako, her voice trembling slightly.

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Please just be straight with me. I came here to find you. I know everything about you.”

Kanba glared back at her, saying nothing.

“If you don’t know, then shall I say it for you? You’re in love with that young woman. And there’s nothing you can do about it, no matter how much you fight it!”

Kanba felt a twinge of pain in his heart as she said this. However, he did not let it show as he turned the muzzle of the gun away from him. “Just who the hell are you talking about? All I want to do is protect my family.”

“Which means that I’ll never be good enough for you, will I?” said Masako, voice wavering faintly. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she pulled another gun from behind her back, aiming it once again at Kanba.

“Enough already.”

Masako bit her lip hard, gripping both of the guns. “You wound me! But that’s fine. I’m going to seize my happiness my own way. I’m going to save Mario-san, no matter what!”

She turned her back on Kanba as he stood there in shock, and disembarked the train.

Kanba breathed in deep, surveying the countless bullets and men in black rolling along the floor of the train.

Masako would come for him. What she said was probably true. He probably had truly let a good thing get away. But either way, that had nothing to do with what Kanba needed to do, and what he *would* do.

The onsen district was far chillier than the city proper, so Ringo borrowed Yuri’s stole to wrap around her neck. Yuri pulled straight up to a ryokan, a traditionally styled building surrounded by the quiet sounds of the sea, and was greeted by a personable middle-aged woman.

“Welcome, Tokikago-sama. Thank you for your continued patronage. You must be tired.”

Ringo sat across from Yuri on an old-fashioned sofa in the lounge, sipping the warm tea that the matron had brought them. Yuri’s silk stole felt nice on her skin, and carried the sweet smell of her cosmetics and perfume.

“Ah, that was such a refreshing drive, wasn’t it, Ringo-chan?”

Ringo nodded, rubbing her eyes that were now fully dried of tears, but probably still red.

The matron brought over a register, upon which Yuri wrote a swift “Tokikago Yuri & Ringo.” Ringo thought it odd, and looked up at her curiously.

“My, traveling with your sister? How lovely.” The matron grinned. “Now then, please wait just a moment and I will show you to your room.”

“Thank you,” Yuri replied with a smile as the matron walked away. She leaned in close to Ringo and whispered, “I always sneak away to stay at this place. So

for today, I'm your big sister. Are you okay with that?"

"Sure. That's okay," Ringo nodded, bashfully hiding her mouth behind the stole.

"Perfect. I'm so happy to be here with my cute little sister. Now, why don't you give your mother a call, and then we'll take a dip in the onsen, have something tasty to eat, and rest these old bones!" Yuri stretched out, thoroughly excited.

The low-ceilinged, vermilion-carpeted hallway was decorated with several small, framed sumi ink drawings of sea creatures. There was a warm orange light from the lanterns, which were intricately woven out of bamboo and washi. Bit by bit, Ringo's heart grew calmer.

The pair changed into yukata as they breathed in the scent of the tatami in their cozy little room, and then gazed out at the lights of the traditional-style garden.

Ringo found the curious nighttime atmosphere somewhat intoxicating. She smiled back at Yuri, overtaken by the peculiar feeling that everything that had happened during the day was miles away. Even though the reality was that Shoma hated Ringo now, it still gave her heart the deepest sense of relief to be able to escape that truth, if only for now.

For a little while, she could keep from sinking into her own thoughts and hurting herself even further.

The outdoor bath seemed to have been reserved for them. They slowly dipped their feet into the wide stone basin beneath the hazy lantern light, sighing with relaxation as they sunk into the hot water. Their breath condensed into white clouds, and the sky was far darker than that in Tokyo, allowing them to clearly see the stars scattered across the sky.

Ringo focused her senses on the distinct smell of the onsen, and the warmth of the water surrounding her.

Not once since Momoka's death and Ringo's birth had the Oginomes gone on a trip as a family. They made trips to the aquarium and the amusement park,

and little excursions in the evenings, but as far as Ringo could remember, they had never done anything like visit an onsen ryokan. Ringo never realized or acknowledged that fact before.

“This feels wonderful,” she said, evading her own thoughts as she gazed out onto the distant rolling waves.

“I’m glad. There’s nothing better than letting the water wash all the pain and sadness away.” In fact, that was why Yuri had come here herself. No matter what loneliness she fell into amongst her troupe, no matter what inexplicable intercourse she had, the water was always her truest friend, washing all those memories clean away.

The two of them still wore their towels as they soaked in the bath. Ringo thought it strange, but truth be told, she was a little embarrassed to be naked in front of Yuri. She thought perhaps Yuri did this out of consideration for her.

“It seems strange to be doing this with you, Ringo-chan. Honestly, I rather thought you hated me,” Yuri said.

“No, I, um...” Ringo trailed off. She was a little bit pleased to know that Yuri had put the past aside and thought of this moment only as “strange.”

“I’m kidding,” Yuri said softly. “You don’t have any reason to hate me, now.”

“I’m sorry.” Ringo’s heart sank as she realized that Yuri could see right through her. It was true that by now, Ringo no longer held any particularly contemptuous feelings toward Yuri. They scattered away into the wind, along with her relationship with Shoma.

“It’s fine. That just means now we can actually have some fun together.”

Yuri looked exceptionally beautiful with her hair casually arranged, her pale neck and collarbones shining in the light. If Ringo was as beautiful as Yuri, then perhaps Shoma wouldn’t have left her. Ringo and Yuri were leagues apart when it came to the swell of their breasts beneath their towels as well.

Yuri noticed Ringo glancing at her chest. “Does it bother you?” she asked.

“J-just a little.” Ringo lowered her face, her cheeks reddening.

“I think you’re wonderful just as you are, Ringo-chan.” Yuri smiled softly,

wholeheartedly.

“I guess. I know that I’m cute, and pretty, and I...” She clamped her mouth shut. The tears she was holding back were about to flow again. If only she were wiser and more beautiful, perhaps Tabuki would have had eyes for her. Maybe Shoma wouldn’t have made such a terrifying face at her. Maybe he would have actually needed her.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not a big deal. Boys are...” *Unnecessary*, Yuri started to say, but stopped herself. “Let’s just say they’re best swept out with the trash. Plus, I’m sure that someday soon, Shoma-kun is going to realize just how wonderful you are.” *Though perhaps it’s already too late for that*, Yuri thought to herself.

“I wonder if it would have been like this if my sister was still alive,” Ringo said quietly. “If we’d have gone out together like this, and talked, and had fights.”

Yuri clutched at her chest as Ringo spoke. Once again, both she and Ringo were running along the rails of fate, chasing Momoka’s shadow. They were the same in every way.

“Um, could I ask you one thing?” Ringo asked her.

“Sure.”

“How did you meet Tabuki-san? I mean, you’re a big star, Yuri-san. You two live in entirely different worlds.” She looked at Yuri with the unreserved eyes of a child.

“Well, that’s an interesting story. We’re childhood friends. We were classmates in elementary school.”

“Huh? Then...did you know my sister Momoka?” Ringo’s eyes went wide.

“Yes, I did. Very well.”

“What kind of girl was she?”

There was something a little frightening about asking questions about Momoka. Tabuki called her a special girl, and surely Yuri would as well. If Ringo were to hear those words, it would only make it more hurtful to live. Still, she wanted to know. Just what was so special about her sister? What was the

difference between Momoka and her?

Yuri slipped out of the water, and sat upon the ledge, looking up at the sky, and breathed deeply. Seeing her curved back made the outline of her beautiful body beneath her towel all the clearer.

“Well... She was like the first cozy little stream or field of flowers you might find on the other side of a parched desert. The babbling of that brook, or the chirping of a little bird. The hot, orange flame of a candle, stumbled across on a cold, dark snowy night.” Yuri spoke as if reciting the lines of a play. “Momoka changed how I looked at the world. When I was with her, everything around me seemed to sparkle with a new light. She felt that the world was overflowing with happiness and things worth loving. And that included even me.”

“Tabuki-san said the same thing. I guess she really was something special. The complete opposite of me. Why is that?”

“Hey now, that isn’t true.” Yuri frowned and slipped back into the water, bringing her cheek to the nape of Ringo’s neck. “Sisters are a curious thing. Did you know you have the same scent as she did?”

The same scent? Taken literally, Yuri was probably referring to Ringo’s body odor, but something in the way she said it suggested something more. Ringo tilted her head, listening to the sound of the waves and stroking her arm beneath the water as she wondered exactly where it was that she differed from Momoka.

She gazed upon Yuri’s face, which was exceedingly picturesque.

Ringo was stunned to learn that ryokan had ping-pong tables. After they sipped some cold juice to cool down from the bath, the pair went to have a look at the rec room, and they picked up a pair of paddles and began to play.

Ringo watched Yuri, who seemed relaxed in her yukata as they hit a bouncy plastic ball back and forth. If Momoka was still alive, she might have had this kind of future. Maybe they would have visited this onsen together, all three of them as a set: Yuri, Momoka, and Ringo.

If her sister was still alive, then maybe things would not have gone so terribly

with Shoma. Of course, without her sister's death, she might not have met Shoma in the first place. Fate did possess such cruel irony.

"You know, I used to want to be Momoka." Ringo said as she hit the ping-pong ball with a light snap.

"Why?" Again came the snapping sound.

"Because Tabuki-san loved Momoka."

"My, should you really be telling that to his wife?" Yuri gave a playful, wicked smile.

"Ah, I'm sorry." Still, she did not fail to strike the ball back.

"It's fine. I'll forgive you this time," Yuri replied, not sounding at all angry.

Ringo was fully aware that she was about to ask yet another strange question, but she asked it anyway. "Um...why exactly did the two of you get married?"

"Because we love each other," Yuri softly replied.

"Well, of course." *It was a stupid thing to ask*, Ringo thought. What other response could there possibly have been?

"That's a lie," Yuri admitted. "Really, we're just a sham couple." Another light snap of the ball echoed with her joking words.

"Huh?"

"Just kidding. Truthfully, though..." Suddenly, she struck back with a little more force. "The two of us are bound by a ring of fate. That's why we're together."

"Fate?" The ball shot past Ringo, bounced upon the rec room floor, and rolled away.

"You must be hungry. I suppose we should get going." Yuri lightly dabbed her forehead with the towel draped around her neck.

After dinner, the pair sat facing each other behind their plates, which had been picked clean of sashimi and grilled dishes. Yuri sipped a white wine, Ringo some soda water. Already the pair felt as though they had fully opened up to

one another. During the meal, Yuri could not eat her squid sashimi, and forcefully offered it to Ringo, which Ringo found rather adorable.

Somewhere deep down, Ringo had begun to think that Yuri was some sort of flawless person who was not fussy in the least. Even when she had been saying how blackhearted Yuri was, somewhere deep down, she felt that she was no match for her. But when Ringo calmed herself down, she recognized that there was no such thing as a perfect person. Then she realized that was probably a hint as to why she had chosen Tabuki.

“There are a lot of other ways in which you resemble Momoka,” Yuri said softly, looking at Ringo.

“Really? Like what?” Ringo leaned in.

“See? Whenever Momoka was interested in something, she would tilt her head just a little bit and stare really hard with stars in her eyes, just like that.”

“Huh. Really?” Ringo grew a little embarrassed and reflexively fixed her posture, combing her bangs with her fingertips.

“There, that too! Whenever she was feeling shy, she always fiddled with her bangs,” Yuri cackled.

“I’m sort of glad to hear this. Papa and Mama never talked to me much about Momoka.”

“I see.” Yuri gazed intently at the way Ringo’s throat moved as she gulped down her soda water. She took in the shape of her lips and her chin. Even Ringo’s voice and the way she spoke invoked familiar feelings within her. She was most certainly Momoka’s little sister.

The soda water, with its strong carbonation and hint of sweetness, gurgled down Ringo’s throat and bubbled in her stomach.

“So, do you still want to be Momoka?” Yuri’s wide eyes stared deeply into Ringo.

She struggled to answer. What would she do if someone were to say to her right now that she could still become Momoka? She tried to think of an answer, but her thoughts suddenly became hazy.

“Wha...what...?” She dropped the glass to the floor.

Yuri approached slowly, sitting next to Ringo, gently resting her hand atop hers. “My. Even here, you are two peas in a pod. The shape of your fingers, that slight angle of your nails... Look, even those pale little half-moons. How wonderfully *fabulous*.” Her pale fingertips pinched the tips of Ringo’s nails, and she stroked her fingers.

Ringo’s vision blurred, but she could still make out Yuri watching her with a sad look upon her face. Her head was filled with the fizzing of the carbonated water, and everything fell away, the wheels in her brain unable to turn.

“Forgive me, Ringo-chan. I need you to become your sister.”

“Yuri-san...?” she mumbled, now swaying so terribly she could hardly sit up. *Yuri-san*, she wanted to say, *everything’s going fuzzy*.

“You know something? No one has ever known the real me and still called me beautiful. In a world where only beautiful things can thrive, only beautiful things are true, no one could ever love me. You get that, right?” Yuri gently stroked Ringo’s cheek. “But Momoka was the only one in this world who knew everything about me, and she still said I was beautiful. She saw me as I truly was. That’s how I’ve been able to keep existing. Momoka was my destiny.”

Momoka was Yuri’s destiny? Ringo could barely even comprehend those words. Her body felt strangely feverish, and there was a dazed, sleepy feeling deep in her skull as her breath grew ragged.

“I want to see her. I want to see her again so badly. I won’t believe it! Momoka can’t possibly be dead!” Yuri said, taking out the other half of the torn diary. “The time has finally come. It’s all happening, just as it’s written here in Momoka’s diary.”

Ringo recalled that night in the rain when the diary was taken away from her. A big, black motorcycle. The rider, who had ripped away half of Ringo’s diary of fate. The rain was so cold, and she was so sad.

Why did Yuri have the other half of the diary?

“Ringo-chan, I want you to become Momoka, but I know you would hate me if you saw the real me. That’s why I had to drug you and make it so you can’t get

away from me. So that you can't live without me." Yuri slowly stroked the nearly-unconscious Ringo's chest where it was bared beneath her yukata, and pushed her down on the spot.

"You really do resemble her. I love you, Momoka."

Yuri gazed at her through moist eyes, straddling her delicate body and staring into her face. Her now-closing eyes, her silhouette, her stick-straight hair. And then there was her *scent*.

"Momoka."

Yuri's glossy lips pressed down on Ringo's. As Ringo's scent, the same as Momoka's, flowed into Yuri, she closed her eyes and wept. Teardrops dripped onto Ringo's cheeks.

The rustling of Yuri undoing the belt of Ringo's yukata sounded softly in the dark room.

Chapter 06

CLOAKED IN A RYOKAN YUKATA made of a white material with an indigo pattern on it, I kicked my legs out beside the table, watching the tumbling tower in front of me. The tumbling tower was a simple game where you rolled the dice and placed little figures atop a tower matching the colors you rolled. You had to be careful about how you balanced the figures, and whoever toppled the swaying tower was the loser. I was paying careful attention to the four-colored, faceless dolls.

“Okay, green, huh? Let’s go!” As a likewise yukata-clad Yamashita rolled the dice with reckless force, his face glowed happily. His cheeks were slightly red from the onsen waters. “All right, you’re up next, Shoma!”

I reached out and rolled the rounded dice, which landed on blue.

We were here because Yamashita won some vouchers for an onsen visit from a drawing in the shopping district near his house, and for some reason, he invited me as his guest. For all his constant talk of girls, unfortunately, he still he had no girlfriend he was close enough with to invite on such an excursion. At first I refused him, saying it wasn’t really my style, but I imagined how devastating it would be for Yamashita to invite my brother and be cut down with something like “Why the heck would I go on a trip with another dude?” So either out of guilt or something else entirely, I landed myself in this situation.

“There you go,” I said, plopping a blue figure onto the tower.

“What’s with you? You came all this way; try to have a little more fun! Don’t just mope around because you got dumped! There’s as many women as there are stars in the sky!”

I sighed deeply. That still didn’t mean I was thrilled about going to an onsen with another guy. Moreover, the thought of our last activity here being sitting knee-to-knee in our room, playing a tumbling tower game, wasn’t very helpful.

“And for all the women out there, there wasn’t even one who wanted to go to an onsen with you?” I said under my breath.

“Ohh, that’s cold! You really gonna call me out like that?! Fine, let’s put it a

different way. Even if you're a poor shot, as long as you keep firing, you're gonna hit somethin' eventually. So, we're gonna keep shootin' out at all those stars. You get it?" Yamashita rolled the dice with a grin.

"A poor shot, huh?" My brother, who hit every target he fired at, had enthusiastically offered me up for this trip, but I wondered if he was taking care of things properly at home. I was the one who always had to mix the nukadoko, keep track of when we ran out of things in the fridge, and look after Himari. He wouldn't go living it up on a date with some girl just because he was home alone, would he?

"Yo, your turn, Shoma!"

Why had Oginome-san been there? Even after I turned my back and left, when I glanced back before I was out of sight, she was still standing there, probably crying. I had made her cry so many times that I wasn't in any position to judge Kanba, even though making Oginome-san cry was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Hello! Earth to Shoma-kun!"

I grabbed the dice near my hand and began to roll, when suddenly my phone vibrated on the tatami. I picked it up to see the name *Oginome Ringo* on the screen. I could not bring myself to answer, so I just stared hopelessly at the screen until the vibration stopped.

"Fine, I get it. I'll just take your turn, too," Yamashita said wearily, rolling the dice around in his hand.

Nothing was cutting through my sadness today, not the train ride nor our meals nor the tumbling tower, nor even Yamashita's vapid chatter. It was like I was trapped inside a clear, thin membrane, cut off from the outside world. I was aware that my head was in the clouds, but I had no idea how to bring myself back to reality.

"Maybe I said too much," I muttered as the call went to voicemail. Or maybe not. There was no point in us continuing to hurt each other like this, and it was best that we never saw each other again.

It wasn't like I hated her, though. It was more like I was desperate to protect

something, but I couldn't figure out what that something was. Was it so important that I would spit upon her goodwill?

"Oh, that reminds me," Yamashita said, interrupting my brooding. "I passed this super gorgeous lady out in the hall earlier! Seems like she's stayin' in the next room over. I feel like I've seen her somewhere before, but I can't remember where. Someone as hot as her has got to be an entertainer or something. Maybe she's staying here incognito. Wonder if she's on the prowl for a boyfriend right now? That'd be lucky," Yamashita rattled on, continuing to place figures on the tower.

"It's all my fault," I whispered. I had hurt Oginome-san, but I was talking as though she was in the wrong when she hadn't done anything. I'd hurt her in order to stop myself from hurting her anymore.

When I played back the voicemail recording, I heard Oginome-san's voice, which already sounded like a distant memory. However, she was talking in a strange voice, and what she was saying didn't make any sense.

"Shoma-kun? I'm pretty messed up right now. And it's all your fault!" The recording abruptly ended there, switching over to the automated female voice of the service provider.

"Huh? What was that about?" I frowned, hanging up the phone. I was confused. Then, after thinking about it for a bit, I called her back. She picked up on the third ring, but was quiet.

"Um, hello? Oginome-san?" I said timidly.

"Whaaat? Shoma-kun? You're toooo late. I'm already part of a world that a child like you could never understand." Her intonation was slurred. It almost sounded like she was drunk.

"Wh-what are you saying? Where have you gone?" Maybe she really *was* drunk. If that was true, she was a seriously delinquent girl.

"Wheeere? I mean, from now on, I'm gonna do a lotta things that you've neever even thought of. I'm gonna seee and be taken to this sorta place, and that sorta place, and places I've never even seen before, and turned all inside out." Her voice was slurred, drifting. "I'm already about to float away!"

“W-wait, don’t be hasty! You need to look out for yourself! Don’t get desperate and do anything you’ll regret later!”

“Shut up! I’m gonna break outta my cocoon and become a beautiful butterfly. See youuu.”

“You idiot! Butterflies only live for a week or so! A human life is way longer!” I panicked as her giggling grew more distant. “Hello?! Oginome-san, hello?!”

“You duuummy.”

“Oginome-san, keep it together! I’ll be right there!” As I jumped to my feet, I suddenly remembered that I wasn’t in Tokyo. I couldn’t “be right there.” I froze with panic, momentarily unable to hear anything besides the sound of the waves outside the window.

My numb legs collided with the swaying tower. It collapsed spectacularly, the colored dolls tumbling to the floor.

“Seriously?! We’d gotten it so high!” Yamashita pouted.

I rubbed my temples, thinking. I needed Oginome-san to confirm where she was, and then contact Kanba, and get him to find her. But could I really expect him to intervene if it had nothing to do with either Kanba himself, or the Penguin drum? What was happening now was between me and Oginome-san, and I was the reason she was putting her own chastity in danger. It was only reasonable that I should do something about this myself. But how was I supposed to get back to Tokyo?

“Yo, Shoma, seems like things are heatin’ up a bit next door.” Apparently, Yamashita had grown bored of the tumbling tower, and was trying to find out what was happening in the next room with the old-fashioned trick of pressing a glass cup against the wall.

I ignored him and held the phone back up to my ear, still connected to the call. Right now, I needed to find out exactly where Oginome-san was.

“Oginome-san, answer me! Hello! Hello?! Where are you right now?!”

On the other end of the call, which had gone quiet, I could hear a faint voice. The voice was laughing softly, and sounded like it belonged to a woman.

“There’s no need to be afraid. Now, open your legs!” the owner of the voice said gleefully.

“Whoa, she was just all, ‘Open your legs!’ Was that hot chick actually some kind of *domme* or something?”

“You’re getting so stiff. Relax. Don’t worry, it only hurts at first.” I could hear the gentle voice drawing closer to the phone.

“You’re getting *stiff*? Relax? Don’t worry, it only hurts at first? *Hurts*? What kind of kinky stuff is happening over there?!”

I stared at Yamashita. He was repeating every word I heard over the telephone. But he wasn’t listening to the phone. He was listening to the voice next door through the glass cup.

“I’m going to take you to the Shangri-La of Love, the El Dorado of Pleasure,” said the woman on the phone.

“Shangri-La of Love? Eldor Ado of...pleasure? Shoma, what’s an Eldor Ado?” Yamashita strained to hear through the glass.

With the phone still to my ear, I put my hand over the mouthpiece and asked, “Yamashita, that’s from the room next door, right?”

“Y-yeah, next door,” he replied nervously, noticing how deadly serious I was.

I tossed down the phone and rushed over to the room next to ours. I made my way inside. It had the same layout as ours, so I flung open the sliding screen door to the tatami room with a bang.

I stood there in shock for several seconds, eyes wide, forgetting to breathe. Oginome-san was asleep, completely nude, her upper body thrust out from the futon. Yuri-san, her yukata opened, was stroking Oginome-san’s exposed thighs. She slowly lifted her head from where she was kissing the girl’s slender shoulders.

“How impolite. Have you thought about knocking?”

“Y-Yuri-san, what the heck are you—”

I suddenly gasped as I saw it: Oginome-san’s phone, still somehow connected to the call, was gripped in her thoroughly unconscious hand.

“Who says that you need a man to pleasure a woman?” Yuri said. “Ringo-chan is so cute, isn’t she? That’s why I’m going to take that precious treasure of hers.”

“T-treasure?! St—*stop it!*”

I rushed at Yuri, but suddenly my foot slipped on the futon, and I tumbled.

“Agh!” The moment I saw the overhang of the interior wall, it was already too late. It cracked against my skull with a noise and impact that shocked even me, shaking my entire brain. I collapsed on the spot, falling into unconsciousness.

My head ached as though it was about to burst. Surely this was my punishment for having hurt yet another person. I groaned and sat up, holding my head.

“You said that you didn’t need Ringo-chan, didn’t you?” The room I was in was dark, but I couldn’t smell the tatami. I was somewhere else. “And yet, here you are interfering.”

“Oginome-san? Oginome-san!” I gazed around the darkness, but could see neither Oginome-san nor Yuri-san.

“Do you regret casting her away, telling her you didn’t need her?” Yuri-san asked, her haughty tone unfaltering. “Or do you simply covet her now that someone else wants her?”

“That’s not true! I never said I didn’t need her. I just said I thought it was best for both our sakes if we didn’t see each other anymore.” Of course, realistically, Yuri-san was right. From Oginome-san’s perspective, it didn’t matter what my true feelings were. *Let’s not see each other anymore. I don’t want to see you.* In other words, I had as good as told Oginome-san that I was fine without her.

“You’re so young,” Yuri sighed. “But more importantly, she doesn’t love you! She’s just desperate right now! You understand that, don’t you?! And yet here you are.”

I realized that I was still wearing my yukata. The thought somehow crossed my mind as I grew vaguely anxious about my lower body. “You’re just hurting

Oginome-san even more, aren't you?!" I shouted.

"Well, you're the one who hurt her in the first place. If she's love-drunk over me instead, then maybe she can be happy. Everything works out all right in the end, doesn't it?" Yuri-san said coldly, her voice gentle, yet somehow rather cold.

"But you're Tabuki's wife, aren't you? Are you actually in love with Oginome-san?"

"Do you really have any right to ask that? Exactly what are you to her?"

I hung my head, but could see neither my bare feet nor the floor, only more darkness.

"I'm her..." I trailed off before deciding not to bother answering. "Anyway, do you really think that I could just leave her alone after she called me up like that?!" It was a pitiful excuse. After the way I had left her, I could not possibly call myself her friend. However, as far as I was concerned, those were two separate matters entirely.

"So then, what are you?" Her voice echoed in the darkness. "You're protecting a girl's chastity out of your own moral code, even though you said you never wanted to see her again? Are you going to reach your hand out to Ringo-chan like this, just to shove her away again?"

"I'm..." I was lost for words. Yuri-san was silent. She seemed to be awaiting my reply. "I don't care if it's selfish of me or whatever, but I want to save her. Anyway, you're in no position to judge me!" The moment I shouted this, the night sky, which I previously looked up at from the outdoor baths, unfolded before me.

"Oginome-san! Oginome-san, where are you?!" I began walking into the night. I could no longer hear Yuri-san's voice. "Let's get out of here! Oginome-san!"

Obviously, I couldn't bring her back to my house, but I couldn't help feeling that I had begun to think about our evening commutes as going home "together." Despite everything, I wanted to go home together with her. Back home to Tokyo, where neither of us had to worry anymore.

Yuri spent much of her youth gazing out through the window at the evening sky as it glowed down on the town. She focused mainly on the ash-colored tower that stood amidst the skyline as it sunk into dull colors. It reminded her of Michelangelo's *David*, its sharp face with its wide, fearsome eyes facing right toward Yuri's home. As long as that tower was there, Yuri would never be free.

Yuri's father was a sculptor of some renown. All of her father's works had elegant curves and smooth surfaces, and just looking at them inspired joy. His sculptures resembled him, in a way. They were sagacious and calm, and handsome in countenance.

Yuri understood almost nothing about art or sculpting, but she loved to go into her father's studio and look upon the various shapes and colors of wood and stone and clay, the wax and the resin, each giving off a unique scent that she would breathe in. She was not allowed anywhere near the various tools he always worked with, as they were dangerous, but the ones sitting on his workbench were large and sturdy, and each one of them seemed incredibly important.

Yuri loved her Papa, who could carve out any shape in the world from a rough and humble lump of stone, and respected him deeply.

"Yuri, do you like beautiful things?" he asked her suddenly one day.

"I do, Papa," she replied frankly, without hesitation or suspicion.

"Well then, let's make something beautiful. You like your Papa, don't you?"

"Of course, I love you!" Yuri grinned.

"Papa loves beautiful things, too. No—I can *only* love beautiful things. That's why I'm an artist." He was smiling back at Yuri, blowing smoke from his sturdy, beloved pipe. The tobacco leaves that he smoked in his pipe were kept in a little tin, and always smelled so strangely. Because of this, even from a young age, Yuri never had any desire to pick up the habit.

Suddenly he leaned in and stared at her with a serious look on his face. It was actually a little frightening, and Yuri frowned slightly. She felt the same way she did when she had done something bad, and he learned she was hiding it from

him.

“Yuri, you are truly hideous,” he said as he held his pipe in one hand, the other resting on Yuri’s shoulder. His voice was quiet, hinting at pity.

Yuri was speechless at this unexpected attack.

“No one could possibly love hideous things. You saw your mother, didn’t you? After she gave birth to you, she just became uglier and uglier. That was why she couldn’t stay. It’s why she met that fate,” he said sadly, his voice dark and quiet.

As far as Yuri was aware, her parents had never been on bad terms. However, one morning, her mother simply vanished. There was no other way to put it. There were three servings of ashen fried eggs in a black frying pan, and her mother’s apron was draped lightly on the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

Yuri remembered placing her yellow vinyl kindergarten backpack on the chair, and pouring some orange juice into a cup. She’d waited for her mother. But her mother never returned, and Yuri never knew where she went because she never saw her again.

When comforting Yuri about this, her father said how unfortunate it was. But he had also said it was inevitable. Yuri did not understand this; there was nothing she could do but cry, cry, and cry her eyes until no tears were left. From that day on, the Tokikagos were a family of two: father and daughter.

Nothing about her mother seemed real at all. She disappeared as though by some trick or act of God, so Yuri never once cried or fussed over her afterward. Her father was always nearby, working in the studio attached to their house, and though she missed her mother, there were no real hardships in their household. Plus, she somehow understood that there was no sense in looking into her mother’s disappearance.

The smell of the tobacco from her father’s pipe filled the whole house. It was as though her father was always there, protecting and watching over her.

But now he was saying these things.

“Your mother was hideous, and she was stupid. She could never understand my art. Listen, Yuri. No one can love a child who isn’t beautiful. They aren’t worthy of it.”

He admonished Yuri gently, his voice as sweet as if he were reading her a picture book. However, Yuri sensed something was strange, and unconsciously took several steps back.

“Yuri, you are hideous,” he went on. “No one is going to love you as you are. Not even I could love you.”

“Am I really that hideous?” Yuri cared for her appearance as much as any average little girl, who looked in the mirror as often as any normal elementary-schooler did. She had no illusions that she was especially beautiful, but she was petrified at the weight behind the word *hideous*. It was a grown-up word, not a childish one like *ugly*.

She did not get the impression that he was lying.

“That’s right. You’re your mother’s daughter, after all. But I can remove all the unnecessary parts from your body, and make you into a beautiful girl. Just like Michelangelo carved the sublime form of David out of a marble slab.”

Michelangelo was a sculptor her father greatly adored. Yuri herself had seen his works in books.

If she could not become beautiful, her father would abandon her as well. Moreover, everyone in the world would call her hideous, and Yuri would be forced to live a life of solitude.

Yuri glanced at the tools lined up on the worktable. There were a variety of large picks and chisels, hammers and files and planes. Her body stiffened as she noticed the various electric saws and small sculpting scalpels.

“So, I have a request. I want you to let me transform you into something beautiful so I can love you. I can only love beautiful things, after all.”

He spoke as though this were perfectly natural, smiling gently at her. Yuri opened her mouth silently, her throat closing up, unable to squeeze out the words.

“Papa wants to love you, Yuri!” he insisted frantically.

Yuri could not bring herself to doubt his words. Her thoughts were in turmoil, still aghast at the fact that she was apparently hideous. Most importantly,

though, she wanted her father to love her. “I’ll do anything, Papa,” she told him. “I’ll do anything you want, so please love me!”

The little Yuri clung to her father’s pants, which were thick with plaster. With this, her father would love her. Her father would save her—she, who could not be loved by anyone.

Gently, sweetly, he stroked Yuri’s hair with his big hands, calloused slightly from his daily work. “You’re a good girl, Yuri. A very good girl,” he said. As Yuri stared devotedly up at him, he set his pipe down next to the worktable and picked up a large chisel. “Now, come sit up here.”

A cold sweat began to prickle on Yuri’s back. Still, she followed her father’s lead without saying another word, climbing up onto the worktable.

With his other hand, he lifted a hammer, his expression so serious that it was mournful.

Through the studio window, the face of the dusky-colored tower stared her way. All the while, she only gazed back at it, still and silent as an abandoned doll, not even breathing.

She just wanted to be loved.

Yuri sat in a corner of the art classroom, her left arm in a sling and wrapped in bandages.

“Now, everyone pair up with your best friend, and the two of you are going to try drawing each other,” said the carefree art teacher with a smile. Most of the children were excited by this and quickly formed into groups of two.

Left behind in the matchmaking, Yuri sat quietly in her seat, watching sadly as her boisterous classmates scurried like mice around the classroom, easels and canvases in hand.

It was just as her father had said. *No one will ever choose me, because I’m hideous*, she thought.

The feeling stung. She hung her head and poked softly at her arm.

“Tokikago-san?”

Yuri looked up at the cheery voice to see Oginome Momoka, whom she knew nothing of besides being in the same class as her. Momoka stood before her, holding her easel and canvas and wearing a smile. This girl, with her striking eyes beneath her thick, straight cut bangs, smiled wider as Yuri met her gaze.

“If it’s okay with you, could I draw you, Tokikago-san?”

Momoka stood up straight, her large, sharp eyes glittering. Her shoulder-length hair swayed gently.

“Why?” Yuri knitted her brow.

“Well, I mean... You’re really pretty, Tokikago-san,” Momoka swiftly replied.

Yuri’s eyes went wide. Momoka tilted her head slightly, her smile unwilting.

“I guess, but...” What could Momoka possibly like about her? Was she just making fun of her? Still, she had no choice but to produce a drawing of someone’s face with her unbandaged arm “as well as she could,” as per the teacher’s instructions.

Yuri sat face to face with Momoka, each sketching the other’s countenance. Momoka’s gaze was direct and unreserved. Time and again Yuri would feel bashful, her head lowering, and Momoka would remind her to lift her head a little bit.

What a strange girl this Momoka is, Yuri thought as she watched her, hard at work on the other side of the drawing paper.

The photos labeled “Our Friends’ Faces” were posted in the hallway outside the art classroom. Only one was chosen as the winner: Momoka’s portrait of Yuri, hanging with the teacher’s handmade gold medal affixed to the lower-left corner.

“Whoa, this is my first gold medal! Must be because I had such a good model.” Momoka smiled proudly.

“Oginome-san...” Yuri could not bring herself to return Momoka’s wide smile.

“Just Momoka is fine! Hey, let’s walk home together today,” said Momoka. It was as though she hadn’t a fear in the world, as if the thought that her offer

might be rejected didn't even cross her mind.

This time, Yuri did not question her as to why, but she did, of course, reply. "I guess, but..." *But* Momoka truly was an odd one. *But* Yuri was so hideous. *But* what could possibly be appealing about her? She swallowed back all these excuses.

On the way home from school, Momoka wanted to stop by the park, so Yuri followed quietly along with her. When they reached the edge of the pond in the middle of the park, Momoka dropped her backpack, crouched down and leaned forward. "Heeey!" she exclaimed.

"What?" Intrigued, Yuri likewise dropped her bag, crouching beside her.

Momoka looked happily at Yuri. "Look, there's some ducks." She pulled a leftover roll from the school cafeteria out of her bag, unwrapped it, pinched off a small piece, and threw it into the pond.

One duck swam toward the bread floating atop the water, then gobbled it up with its yellow, plastic-like beak.

"I always stop by to feed them on the way home," said Momoka. "It seems like they're starting to get kind of attached to me. You wanna try feeding them, too?" she asked, tearing off half of the chunk of bread and offering it to Yuri.

"No," Yuri softly replied.

"Why not? They're so cute."

"I hate them," she said, a little harshly. Then, realizing that she had inadvertently taken her frustration out on Momoka, she grew sad. She glanced back at the pond to see several ducks looking their way, as though inquiring if they might have a few more pieces of bread to give.

"I see, you're not good with ducks. I'm sorry." Momoka gave a thin smile, but did not appear angry or sad.

"Have you heard the story of 'The Ugly Duckling'?" Yuri asked tentatively.

"Yeah."

"I *really* hate that story."

“How come?” Momoka pinched off some more bread and tossed it to the ducks.

“Because it’s all a lie. There’s no way that the ugly duckling could just magically wake up one day as a beautiful swan.” Yuri gestured vaguely at the ravenous “ugly” ducks.

“Yeah, well, I guess.”

“Ugly things have to endure a lot of pain before they can become beautiful. They have to endure, and endure, and endure, and then when they’re finally beautiful, everyone will love them.” *It’s the same for me and for ducks*, Yuri thought. She looked down at the clean white bandages wrapped around her left arm. She still had a lot more to endure before she could become beautiful.

“But I wonder... Was the ugly duckling really all that ugly?” said Momoka, tilting her head.

“Huh?” Yuri was surprised by the question and looked up at Momoka’s handsome face.

“I’ve seen baby swans before at the zoo, and I didn’t think they were ugly at all.”

Yuri was lost for words. She had never stopped to consider what the real thing might look like.

“I think everything is pretty. The sky and the birds and the bugs and the frogs, the flowers and rocks, and even the ducks. God made this world, after all. So how could there ever be anything dirty or ugly in it? God would never make anything like that.” Momoka looked up to the sky, radiant.

“But there *are* ugly things. My papa...” Her papa had most certainly said that Yuri was ugly, so ugly that no one could love her, not even him.

“What about your papa?” Momoka looked her in the eye, curious.

Yuri couldn’t finish the sentence. There was no way her father could have been wrong about anything, which was why Yuri had to keep enduring. And yet, she got the feeling that he was doing something horrible that she couldn’t tell anyone about.

Her papa was remaking his hideous daughter so she could love and be loved. How could that be a bad thing? Yuri's heart started racing painfully, and she had no idea what she should do.

"You can call me Yuri, too," she told Momoka as she frantically scooped up her backpack and fled. "Goodbye!"

As Yuri ran, her face twisted as she became aware of the acute pain in her arm, and she prodded at the bandages. She had to keep enduring this so she could be beautiful. Momoka could never choose or love her as she was, after all.

As always, that evening Yuri found herself in her father's studio. Now, however, she no longer looked around in wonder at everything there, as she once had. She just stood still and silent, eyes lowered as she occasionally noticed the dull-colored tower outside the window out of the corner of her eye.

"Yuri, you were later than usual today. Did you make a detour?" her father asked calmly as he inspected the rock he had brought in for a new sculpture.

"Yes. A little one," she said in a wilting voice.

"Did you make a friend?" Her father shut his eyes as he caressed the large, rough stone, pondering.

"I did." A little more strength flooded into her.

"That's good. I'm sure she's a wonderful girl."

Somewhat relieved, Yuri breathed, "She is." Momoka *was* a nice girl.

"Well then, you can't believe that girl." He opened his eyes wide and glared at Yuri.

Yuri looked perplexed as she looked back up at her father. He picked up his pipe from beside him and smiled, a heady smell rising from him.

"Those so-called wonderful girls always put on a good face for everyone. They do it just so everyone will say how wonderful they are. Those girls, more than any, will say sweet things to your face, and then stab you in the back without a second thought. You mustn't trust in strangers." He crouched down to meet

Yuri's eyes and continued, "The only ones you can believe are those bound to you by blood: your family. Your family never lies to you. I've never lied to you, right?"

"The only pure and beautiful love is that which exists between family. Everyone else is just like your hideous mother. I'm all you have, Yuri, and you're all I have. I am the only one who can truly love you."

"Papa..." Yuri was devastated. She thought that Oginome Momoka was a good person, but she was actually a wicked child. If that was true, though, then did a truly wonderful child exist anywhere in the world?

She believed her father was saying that there were no good girls anywhere at all—including Yuri, most likely.

"You get it? Hurry over here, then," her father beckoned in a low, sweet voice.

"Coming, Papa." The expression drained from Yuri's face, and once more she stood still as a doll.

For a long while, her father's studio echoed with nothing but the loud sounds of him swinging his chisel. After Yuri's left arm, it was time to fix her right leg.

The next morning, Yuri brought in a large book. It was a fictional novel, far denser and more complex than she usually read. She picked it specifically so she didn't have to see what was going on around her. Her noisy classmates, the sun outside the window, the curtains swaying in front of the windows, the little doodles on the blackboard... She wanted to expunge all those things from her mind so they couldn't lead her astray again.

"Morning, Yuri." As soon as Momoka entered the classroom, she went straight to Yuri's seat, grinning.

Yuri only stared at the small lettering upon the pages, not replying.

"...Yuri?"

"Don't bother yourself over me anymore." Yuri ran her eyes over the characters, not taking in a single one of them, waiting for Momoka to be gone.

If her father was correct, then Yuri would only end up swindled by a “wonderful girl” like Momoka. Her father was the only one she could trust; the only one she could love.

“What’s wrong?” Momoka cocked her head, suspicious. “Hey, Yuri, did you get hurt again?”

“I don’t believe you.”

Though dumbfounded, Momoka remained at Yuri’s side, but eventually gave up and quietly went to her own seat.

In the middle of class, a small folded letter had come Yuri’s way. There was really no reason for her to respond to the invitation, but after school, her feet instinctively carried her not to her house, but to the noted location.

At Momoka’s invitation, Yuri was headed to a park near the imposing tower. Subconsciously, she was happy to be seeing Momoka, if only a little. Being invited somewhere was a special feeling, like she had been chosen.

Momoka was sitting atop a small hill in the park, arms around her knees. She gazed at the field with a quiet expression, her backpack gently brushing against the tips of her smooth, straight hair.

“Why would you ask me to come to a place like this?” Yuri asked on arrival, not bothering with a greeting. This was no place for her to show happiness, and if her father was right, this might be the start of a betrayal.

“Because I want you to trust me,” Momoka said clearly, looking up at Yuri with her strong gaze.

Yuri caught flashes of that loathsome tower out of the corner of her eye. Even when she was standing still as a doll in the studio, quashing all thought and emotion, she knew that dark tower was still glaring at her.

“Leave me alone. You’re just making fun of me because I’m so ugly and pitiful, aren’t you?”

“That’s not true. Yuri, I love you,” she said, without hesitation.

“Liar! The only one you love is yourself, because you’re such a ‘good girl’.”

Momoka’s face was serious, but she did not appear to be especially hurt as

she pulled a diary out from her backpack and displayed it. “Well then, will you trust me if I tell you a secret?”

“Secret?” Yuri wondered if Momoka had something that she couldn’t talk about, the same as her. The same kind of secret that kept Yuri from showing what was beneath her bandages, or speaking about it. Like a shadow was hanging over her. “Okay.”

“Come over here.” Momoka smiled happily, beckoning Yuri to sit beside her.

The two were silent for some time, sitting side by side in the grass. There were only a few people in the park, and it was strangely tranquil, a gentle breeze blowing over them. The grass prickled at their thighs, and the earth was cool and ever so slightly damp.

“So what’s the secret?” Yuri kept her back to the tower as much as she possibly could.

Momoka exhaled softly and put her hand on the diary sitting on her knees.

“I...can change fates.” She cradled the diary closely on her lap. Her long, downturned eyelashes cast shadows on her cheeks. “I use the spells written in this diary, and I make a wish to God. When I do, I can change someone’s fate, just like changing the tracks on a train.”

“I don’t get it.” This confession was nothing like Yuri expected. She felt something hazy spread throughout her chest, like smoke.

“Um, I’ll tell you another secret.”

“What?”

“The rabbit we keep in the agriculture shed... I changed its fate once.” The tip of her nose crinkled slightly. “That rabbit should have died, actually. But I used my magic spell, and I changed its fate.”

The hazy feeling drained from Yuri’s body. Momoka had just said something quite intriguing, but incredibly strange. “You’re lying. That rabbit has always been super healthy.”

“When I change someone’s fate, the world changes a little bit to match it. But no one else realizes it.” As she said this, Momoka held up her left index finger,

which had a band-aid on it. “But my body remembers.”

“What do you mean?” Yuri stared at the serious expression on Momoka’s face.

“This is the price. In order to use this spell to change fate, you have to accept a punishment.”

Once again, Yuri found this secret of Momoka’s unbelievable. Caring for the class rabbit was a rotating duty, and Yuri had seen many times for herself that the rabbit was perfectly healthy. Never once had it shown signs of being in poor health.

“Do you wanna try changing it?” Momoka asked quietly.

“Huh?”

“Your fate. Wanna try changing it?” Momoka turned her downcast gaze up to meet Yuri’s, meek and quiet, her silky hair swaying gently.

Cautiously, Yuri looked at the ash-gray tower. As long as that tower was there, she could never be free. It was always watching her. She had to sacrifice who she was—a soulless doll—or the tower would swiftly catch onto her. If that happened, she would never have any hope of becoming beautiful...and no one would ever love her.

She could not step down from that worktable in her father’s studio.

“Yuri, you’re gonna die with the way things are going. So I’m going to use my spell and set you free. I don’t mind ending up with one more band-aid if it means you’ll be happy.” Momoka smiled, her striking eyes glittering.

“What are you saying? I can never be free! That tower is my father, and it’s always, *always* watching me! Until that thing disappears from this world, I...”

Yuri grew terrified at the words suddenly pouring from her mouth. They were her deepest feelings.

She knew the truth. She knew that there was something wrong with the things her father said, the things he did. And yet, she could not defy him, or tell anyone, because she was afraid.

Momoka was right. If things continued at this rate, Yuri would most certainly

end up dead. She had turned her eyes from the obvious truth, trying to believe in her father's love. But even if she admitted the truth, it still did not mean she could escape that place.

"Should I get rid of that tower?" Momoka asked casually.

"Come on! You can't possibly do that!"

"I think I can, though." Momoka was serious.

"Liar!"

"I'm not lying!"

Yuri ripped at the grass and quickly stood up, raging at Momoka. "Is it really that fun to make fun of people? Is it because I'm ugly? Well, that ends today. That's what my papa said. It all ends today. Come tomorrow, I'll be..." *Beautiful. Dead.* Both were true, yet both seemed like a lie. The hazy feeling spread through her brain, and she felt bile rising. "I'll be..."

Beautiful. A child who her father and everyone else could love. Wrapped in bandages from head to toe, transformed from a doll into some kind of monster before she died. Either way, there was no way anyone could make that tower disappear.

"No, you're gonna die before then! Please, stop this!" Momoka stood up as well. She seemed to see right through Yuri's turmoil with those strong, willful eyes.

"No! If I have to live my life being so hideous that no one will ever love me, then I'd rather just die and become a swan! It all ends tomorrow!"

"Yuri!"

"You're a liar! I hate you!" Yuri took off running, trying to escape both Momoka and the tower, which loomed over her, enormous.

She hoped someone would save her. She wanted to be saved, chosen, loved. But it was hopeless. There was no God in this world. Yuri could not believe that everything in this world was beautiful, the way Momoka did.

Though she cursed her own hideous fate, tomorrow she would be a doll once more, and then it would be over.

That evening, as expected, she stood in her father's studio. The moment she returned home, she buried her own feelings, banishing her thoughts as well as she could. She stared dazedly at the new tools her father had ordered, which were laid out on the worktable. The handles were glossy, their metal tips glistening.

"My new chisel is finally here." Her father sighed with satisfaction. "Are you ready, Yuri? Today will be my last great work. From now on, you'll be something that your Papa can love forever. My magnum opus." Her father pulled her up and set her down upon the workbench.

Yuri stiffened her body, letting her eyes rove to the window. There, as always, stood the gray tower reminiscent of the statue of David, gazing her way with its fearsome visage.

Yuri should have loved her father. Both in the past, and now. She truly should have. And yet...

The metallic sound of the chisel striking rang out. The sound, like the ringing of a bell, echoed loud and clear as the night went on for what felt like eternity.

Himari was watching a music program on the small TV set on her bedside table. Double H was set to appear today.

"Now then, up next are our two stars from Double H: Hibari-chan and Hikari-chan!" The studio audience cheered at the emcee's introduction. The pair stepped out onto the stage to a fanfare, smiling and waving.

Himari was glued to the screen, completely transfixed.

"What's this? Looks like you all have new outfits today," said the emcee.

"We had them put together to match these scarves!" said Hibari, stroking the scarf wrapped around her neck. "We had them switch up our wardrobe a bit, too."

"Oh? Then could these be gifts from someone special?" the emcee asked.

"They were knitted for us by a dear friend. We're so happy to know that she's still out there cheering us on. Right?!" said Hikari, looking at Hibari with a wide

grin.

It was like a dream. Hibari and Hikari were wearing the scarves she knitted, the ones she tried to throw away. Himari's lips trembled faintly, and quiet tears rolled down her face. Penguin No. 3, dressed in a wig with a star-shaped hair ornament attached in the style of Double H, looked up as it felt the tears dripping down on it, and squawked softly.

In the examination room, Sanetoshi and Kanba and Penguin No. 1 sat facing each other. Sanetoshi leaned back, rocking the wheeled chair he sat in as he waited for Kanba to speak.

Kanba tossed an envelope down onto the desk. Sanetoshi raised both his eyebrows slightly, and checked the contents.

"The rest of the money," Kanba said.

"How stunning." Sanetoshi glanced at Shirase and Souya, who stood subdued behind him.

"That should be enough, right? Now hurry up and cure Himari."

"Ugh, what a drag..." Sanetoshi muttered, spinning his chair around.

Kanba was about to complain about this, but just then the door opened, and Himari rushed into the exam room. "Dr. Sanetoshi!" she cried out.

She was wearing a gauzy nightgown with a pale pink floral pattern. Though it was already quite chilly out, she wore no dressing gown over it.

"What's wrong, Himari?" Kanba asked, standing from his stool, seeing the slight redness in Himari's eyes.

Not answering his question, Himari walked straight over to Sanetoshi, enthralled. "Sensei, Double H! Those scarves!"

"Hmm?" Sanetoshi smiled. His expression was soft, almost feminine.

"Um, I just saw on the TV... Those scarves! Double H were wearing them! How? Did you...?"

Sanetoshi stood slowly. "You need to put something else on. The cold isn't good for you," he said in a pacifying manner, softly patting Himari on the head.

She looked up at him, her eyes sparkling.

“How stunning! Just as we expect from Dr. Sanetoshi!” cheered the two boys.

Kanba felt completely out of the loop. He observed the scene, silently looking upon Himari’s blushing, happy face from a distance as she looked at Sanetoshi.

“Boys, you flatter me too much,” Sanetoshi chided with a thin smile. The pair abruptly restrained their applause, snapping to attention.

Himari finally turned back to Kanba, her whole face beaming. “Kan-chan, this is amazing! Dr. Sanetoshi sent the scarves I knitted to Hibari-chan and Hikari-chan, without me even asking him to!”

“Huh.” Puzzled, Kanba looked at Sanetoshi. As always, the doctor gazed both at the siblings and at nothing at all with his sparkling black eyes, eyes that were like a portrait of a galaxy.

“It’s like magic! Thank you, Sensei!” Himari said earnestly, turning back to Sanetoshi.

“My, my, guess the cat’s out of the bag,” he said quietly and without a hint of shame. He returned Himari’s smile before glancing back at Kanba. “Now then, if you don’t get some sleep, your body will never heal. Let’s talk more about magic later.”

Kanba was less than pleased. It was not surprising that Himari would be so innocently enamored with Sanetoshi, but it also looked like Sanetoshi was going out of his way to placate her by getting involved in her affairs.

And yet, Kanba could never have made Himari as happy as Sanetoshi just had.

“I’ll see you in your room later,” Kanba told Himari as Shirase and Souya led her away.

“Kay.” Himari nodded as she left. The room went quiet for a moment before Sanetoshi spoke.

“Are you perturbed by what I’ve done?”

Sanetoshi wore beige slacks and a violet-colored dress shirt beneath a thick gray cardigan. As always, he looked nothing like a doctor. Those rainbows shimmered in his loosely gathered hair, and he had both hands shoved in the

pockets of his lab coat. Though he looked young, he was still a tall man, more mature than Kanba, and right now he was the only one capable of saving Himari.

“No, I should thank you. But how did you know about those idols?” Kanba asked.

“Knowing everything about one’s patients is part of a doctor’s duty.” The corners of his mouth pricked up, and he narrowed his eyes as though he was looking right through Kanba. “Being in good spirits is good for the body.”

Rather than be perturbed, Kanba truly could not believe that this man even existed. Still, this was all for Himari’s sake. No matter how suspicious or creepy or arrogant Sanetoshi was, it didn’t matter as long as he could save Himari.

“Are you really that concerned about whether your sister loves you?” Sanetoshi suddenly asked, flopping back into his chair.

“Huh?”

“I saw your face just then. Wish I’d taken a picture.” *It was priceless*, Sanetoshi thought before adding, “You know something? Family is just a type of fantasy. It’s something like a curse, isn’t it?”

Kanba stiffened up his cheeks so as not to let any emotion show on his face. A curse?

“Think about it. Think of all the suffering children, bound to their fates in the name of ‘family.’ All the parents who think they can do whatever they want to their children in the name of love. Even when the only people those parents love are themselves, they force their children to love them back simply because they are related.”

“What are you trying to say?” Sanetoshi’s words always seemed engineered to irritate Kanba and get him fired up.

“Who knows? I just assumed it was what you thought.” Sanetoshi approached him, rolling chair and all. “Wouldn’t it be easier for you if you weren’t related to them?”

“I’ve never once thought that.” The unrest and irritation froze solid again.

“Really? That’s good, then. In that case...” Sanetoshi spun the chair away from Kanba, but glanced at his face. Gentle shades of peach and blue shimmered in Sanetoshi’s hair.

Kanba cast his eyes downward, his face pale and hard.

The faintly sweet smell of apple blossoms wafted throughout the room, mixed with the fragrance of fresh greenery drifting off of Sanetoshi.

As Himari snuggled into bed, Shirase and Souya efficiently tucked her in beneath the covers, saying “Good night!” in tandem before leaving. The two boys seemed younger than Himari, and rarely spoke, but they were quite handy.

Kanba entered the room, along with Penguin No. 3. “Himari,” he greeted her.

“Kan-chan!” Himari sat straight up, grinning. “Sanetoshi-sensei is amazing, isn’t he?!”

“Yeah.” If only they weren’t related. Then Kanba could shout to the whole world how much he loved Himari, without any fear or judgment. If he and Himari weren’t related, he could worry only about the two of them. He wouldn’t have to care for the Takakura household, and no one would have to suffer.

“Sho-chan went to an onsen, didn’t he? Sounds nice. I wish I could go, too,” Himari said, happily squeezing No. 3.

“He sure got lucky. Yamashita, too. Kinda lame going to an onsen with another dude, though.”

If he were someone else right now, he could place a hand at the back of Himari’s neck to make her look his way, take in the look of surprise in her eyes, and press his lips against hers before she could say a word. But in the end, would that truly make him happy?

“It’d be nice if we could all go to an onsen together someday, once I get better,” Himari said. Her tone of voice made her sound like she was hoping to one day become a princess and live in a big castle.

“We’ll go,” said Kanba. “Just for a day trip or something.”

Who would he truly be if he wasn’t Takakura Kanba?

He chatted for a bit with Himari and told her to get lots of rest, then casually exited the room. By the time he was seated on the subway, he was exhausted, his breathing so painful it forced his eyes shut, leaving him unable to speak.

He stared at his own sharp, strong face in the dark window glass across from him and thought, *I am Takakura Kanba, older brother of Takakura Himari and Takakura Shoma.*

In the next room over from the unconscious Shoma and Ringo, Yuri put her yukata back on and opened the torn half of Momoka’s diary.

Back then, Yuri felt everything deeply. Perhaps this was why the world felt so empty and unreal, now that she was certain about a specific thing.

“Momoka,” she murmured, fingers tracing the childish lettering, “I guess it really did need to be you.”

Looking upon the foolishly earnest, brave forms of the two youths, Yuri felt strangely distant, as though she suddenly aged tremendously.

“Momoka...” *What do I do, Momoka? I’ve changed so much since then.*
“Would you still call me beautiful?”

“Pardon me, miss?”

Yuri stiffened up at the clear voice of a hostess, quickly concealing the diary within the flap of her yukata. “Come in.”

“Please forgive the intrusion.” Masako, disguised as a hostess, shuffled into the room. She looked around at the surroundings and crouched down beside the melancholic Yuri. “Are you finished with your meal? I will take your dishes.”

“Sorry, could you try to finish up quickly?” Yuri began casually arranging her bangs with her fingers. She seemed a bit drunk.

“Yes, I’ll just be a moment,” said Masako, quickly taking away the food that had not been to Yuri’s liking. “By the way, miss, I heard tell that a famous

actress is visiting here today. Have you met her?"

Yuri sighed. "I see," she replied. Even without her makeup, anyone who was familiar with Yuri would recognize her right away. If the hostess hadn't heard of her, then she could just feign ignorance and let the moment pass in peace.

"I heard a rumor going around amongst the other hostesses. Even the matron was babbling something about getting an autograph to decorate the lobby with." Masako emphasized her excitement somewhat conspicuously.

"Goodness." Yuri began feeling just the slightest bit uneasy at the hostess's strangely calm demeanor. The girl's eyes were sharp and calculating, despite her young age.

"To be honest, I really don't like people who work as performers," said Masako, stacking the empty dishes into a black wooden box.

"Oh? Why's that?" Yuri looked the hostess up and down. She was dressed perfectly in her kimono, her hair neatly arranged. Her motions were both efficient and beautiful, which was unusual. She was nowhere near the age of a veteran employee, but her appearance was flawless...a bit *too* flawless.

"People like that are always starved for love," Masako replied without hesitation. "They were never recognized or loved when they were young. So when they grow up, they push themselves over the top in order to take back their unhappy childhood. It's as if they're seeking revenge. They're always desperate to be needed by others, for people to think they're special."

Her face unchanging, Yuri continued scrutinizing the hostess.

"No matter how many days they spend in their fake little worlds with people fawning over them, every morning they wake up alone, wracked by nightmares. Typically, they lose sight of themselves, plagued with impatience and anxiety if someone doesn't constantly reassure them with phrases like 'You're all I need.' The more I think about it, famous people really are pitiful."

"You speak as if you've seen this before." Yuri placed her elbows on the now-clean table and stared at her fingernails, which were long and filed into a pleasing curve, decorated with pearly pink rhinestones.

"Yes. I've done a lot of looking into you, after all," Masako sneered.

Yuri looked up. Masako's eyes glinted back down at her. "Who are you?" Yuri demanded.

"I'll be taking the other half of that diary!" Masako left the tray upon the floor, standing.

"I see. So you're the one who has the other half." Yuri stood up straight, pressing her hand to her chest.

"So? Soon it won't be just half anymore. That's what matters. Goodness, we better crush you soon!" Masako took out a small gun and took aim at Yuri.

"Don't underestimate an actress!" Yuri shouted.

With that, the battle was underway.

I woke to the sound of breaking glass. The cold wind that blew in through the window chilled my whole body.

"Hm?" I lifted my head slightly and looked around the room. The lights were on in the adjoining room, and I could hear the gentle sound of waves. For a moment, I wondered where I was, until the silky material of the yukata and the smell of an unfamiliar futon reminded me that I was at a ryokan. As soon as I came to, my head began to pound. Just then, I noticed someone sleeping right beside me.

"Oginome-san!" I shouted, panicked.

Oginome-san was lying next to me on the same futon, sleeping with a peaceful expression on her face. Her yukata was properly rearranged, the blankets draped over us. Perhaps, despite everything, Yuri-san hadn't done anything to her. Nor to me, of course. I let out a deep sigh of relief.

I recalled Yuri's surprising, bewitching form, poised over Oginome-san's nude body.

There was a one in a million chance that I happened to have been staying at the same ryokan on the same night when such dire circumstances were afoot. I was grateful for the coincidence, but what on earth was Oginome-san thinking, throwing her body away like that? If she had let Yuri-san take her chastity,

changing “from a caterpillar to a butterfly” would have been the least of her concerns. I started to wonder how one woman could steal another’s virtue, but quickly abandoned the train of thought.

“Ooookay...” I sat up and rubbed my temples, then fixed the hem of my yukata.

Oginome-san looked so peaceful. Her eyes were closed tight, the sound of her breathing synced with the rise and fall of her chest. It wasn’t like watching Himari sleep—that always made me a little anxious. Himari’s breathing while she slept was like that of a little bird, so faint I sometimes feared she might fade away. Oginome-san, however, had a vivacious, lively way of sleeping. It might have been a strange way to phrase it, but it made me smile.

“Oh my. What a gentleman you are. I should have taken you out.”

I stood up with a start, positioning myself to shield Oginome-san. “Yuri-san!”

Yuri-san stood in front of me, clad in her yukata and sweeping her damp, disheveled hair gracefully. “While you were relaxing in here, someone came to steal the diary.”

“Huh?” I was taken aback. Was she referring to *that* diary?

“Momoka’s diary,” she clarified as I stood there speechless. “Don’t worry. The little mouse took a decoy and fled out toward the sea. Remember, it’s important to always keep your valuables in a safe when you travel.”

She opened up the little safe that came with the room, and pulled out half of the diary.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “I was the one who stole half of the diary from Ringo-chan. I have a desperate need for it.”

Since Yuri was the one with the other diary half, the one who had come here was probably the woman who abducted me at the hospital. I shuddered to think that there were even more people around who were after the diary—and the Penguin drum.

Seeing me collapse on the spot, Yuri-san chuckled. “You shouldn’t give up the things that are important to you so easily.”

With the still-sleeping Oginome-san at my back, the word “fate” leapt, unbidden, into my head. Were we truly being flung around at the whims of fate? Perhaps “we” now included Yamashita, who was now all alone in our room, either sleeping or killing some time.

Yuri woke up upon the workbench. She opened her eyes a crack and thought she saw a vague face in the wooden panels of the old-fashioned ceiling, its eyes staring back down at her in the dim studio. She felt around and found her shed clothes and unraveled bandages in a heap to the left of her naked body.

She sat up, hearing nothing but silence in the room until she softly murmured, “Papa?”

There was no reply. She hugged her own bare skin, shivering faintly.

“I’m...alive.” She looked down at her massively scarred body and began prodding here and there. She was terribly battered, her scars alone enough to make someone think she wasn’t human. It was as if a wholly different kind of organism latched onto her, like a parasite. However, although she remembered the chisel being swung, she found no new injuries, nor was there any of the pain she should have felt.

“Papa?” she uttered again, tentatively. There was no trace of the smell of tobacco from his pipe.

Suddenly, she realized there was something different about the usual smoky gray that loomed over the distant scenery outside. She turned to the window and was instantly lost for words. The dull-colored tower resembling the statue of David was gone. In its place was a gleaming red building with completely different architecture, one she had never laid eyes on before.

“The tower. It changed. Papa’s tower changed!”

Shaken, Yuri slowly put on her clothing and climbed down from the worktable, staring hard as she approached the window. Sure enough, where the tower had stood, there was now a red tower in its place.

She recalled the fantastic secret that Momoka had revealed to her in the park. Though she thought it impossible, she felt the pit of her stomach tighten, her

pulse quickening.

Yuri searched the whole house for her father, and then raced outside. He was nowhere to be found. She would need to inspect the red tower next.

If Momoka had truly used a spell to change the tower, then her friend was going to be punished for changing fate. She would be paying the price, all for Yuri.

As she approached the vicinity of the tower, her shoulders heaving, she knew for certain that the ashen tower had transformed into something else entirely. As she ran straight ahead, she saw a crowd of people. Immediately, she pushed her way in.

“Momoka!”

From between the adults, she could see a young girl being carried on a stretcher. The adults murmured among themselves:

“It just happened. There was a lot of screaming.”

“Apparently that little girl just suddenly caught on fire.”

“How?”

“Who knows? But it happened really suddenly. I have no idea why.”

Yuri squeezed her way through the ring of onlookers, unable to speak, her whole body shaking. Momoka was being loaded into the ambulance, covered in large, terrifying burns—yet she still clutched the diary to her chest.

Yuri’s eyes went wide, her body freezing in place, so still she could scarcely breathe.

Momoka had not been lying. This was the price she had paid for saving Yuri. This was the method of punishment that God had chosen.

Why would God in all His wisdom ever do such a despicable thing?

As she sat beside Momoka’s bed, leaning across the sheets, Yuri felt a peace that she had never felt before in her life.

“Papa hasn’t come back,” said Yuri. She suddenly felt so sorrowful it surprised

her, even though she had no right to ever worry about loving her father again.

“He’s not going to come back. He went away, along with the old tower,” Momoka said quietly, but with a voice hinting at a smile.

“You used your spell, didn’t you?” The peaceful feeling came flooding back.

“Yeah, I did,” she replied, as though it was no big deal.

“So this *was* the price you paid for setting me free.”

Momoka nodded slightly, as if to say there was no point confirming or denying it, just accepting it as a simple fact.

“Why would you do something like that?” asked Yuri, reaching out for the singed diary sitting neatly on the bedside table.

“Don’t!” Momoka suddenly shouted. Yuri’s hand stopped.

“Why not?”

“You can’t look inside!” Her eyes were sharp, powerful, as she gazed at Yuri. “You can’t get close to the junction. You’ll lose something important to you. That’s the price you pay.”

“Then why did you change my fate?” There was no reason in the world that Momoka should have been hurt so much simply for changing Yuri’s fate.

Momoka looked straight back at Yuri and laughed. With the tip of her finger, the only thing visible beneath the bandages, she touched Yuri’s hand.

“I told you, didn’t I? Because I love you. You’re beautiful just as you are.”

Yuri was unable to hold back the tears. Ironically, it was Momoka who should be crying, seeing as how she was in so much pain. But Yuri simply could not stop herself.

“Why are you crying?” Seeing Yuri’s face soaked with tears, Momoka stroked the top of her head with her fingertip.

From then on, Yuri spent as much time with Momoka as she could. She got to meet Tabuki Keiju, a good friend of Momoka’s, and soon came to make other friends as well. Still, the only one she truly believed in, the one she truly adored, was Momoka.

She cherished everything about Momoka: her hair that fell straight to her shoulders; her large, sharp eyes; the wide smiles on her face; her bravery in dabbling in anything that caught her interest. Upon reflection, Yuri had probably been smitten with her from the first time they met.

Day by day, these feelings warmed her heart, forming a little bud, which began to blossom a little bit at a time, as if it were being nourished by the warm days of spring. However, roughly one year after Momoka saved Yuri, Yuri was forcibly separated from her.

Momoka was in an accident and vanished utterly and completely right in front of Yuri's eyes, just like Yuri's mother and father. However, Yuri assured herself that if Momoka vanished because of that accident, then fate just needed to be changed again. This time, Yuri would use the spell written in the diary to change Momoka's fate.

It was Yuri's turn to make the sacrifice. She would get the diary and bring Momoka back, no matter what it took. She would bring back the gentle, cool feeling of holding her little hand.

Until then, she had to keep on living in a world without her love.

Chapter 07

FOLLOWING THE SHOCKING onsen affair, Yuri-san had a new room prepared for herself, and I brought Oginome-san to sleep in my and Yamashita's room. Yuri said that she wasn't going to do anything else, and it felt like she was telling the truth, but having seen her assaulting Oginome-san, I wouldn't leave the two alone together.

Yamashita was sleeping in our room, sprawled out on the tatami. When I told him that I was bringing in a girl, he naturally kicked up a fuss and started grilling me about our relationship, but I explained simply that she was "a friend of Himari's."

Himari's friend. Our friend. Still, we could not stay together forever.

I barely slept a wink before morning came. The sky was bright and clear, and the relaxing sound of the waves and crisp air enveloped my fatigued body, giving me just a little more strength to face the day.

"Where...am I?" Oginome-san mumbled as she awoke, sitting up and rubbing her tired eyes.

I was sitting by the window in a rattan chair, but before I could open my mouth, she noticed Yamashita snoring beside her, and screamed.

"*Who are you?!*" She crawled quickly away from the futon, holding shut the front of her yukata.

I wished she wouldn't make such a fuss over the likes of Yamashita, given what a terrible situation the night before had been.

"Um, good morning, Oginome-san." Her jaw dropped again as I called out to her from the wide-open sliding door of the adjoining room. "How are you feeling?"

"Where's Yuri-san?" she asked.

I wondered how much she remembered about the night before. I was up all night wondering if it was better that she remember nothing at all, given that nothing happened, or whether I ought to tell her about some of it, but I still had

not come to a decision.

She immediately began to question me. “What are you doing here? Who’s this guy?”

“His name is Yamashita. He’s my classmate. We both happened to be staying here yesterday. Then, last night, there was that call.” If she remembered what was said during the phone call, she might end up remembering the state she had been in. I shut my mouth.

“Call?”

“Oh, well, uh, you accidentally had some of the wine that Yuri-san was drinking, and you um, got drunk, and...called me. Then, we found out we were staying at the same ryokan, so...” So, what? I already told her that we shouldn’t see each other anymore, so it seemed odd for us to meet up just because of some “strange coincidence” while traveling.

She raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Sounds weird.” Though she was groggy, she still had a sharp look in her eyes.

“You were really drunk, and I was worried, so I helped look after you. I mean, Yuri-san doesn’t know anything about us, and I couldn’t just leave you alone.”

She looked at me, slightly troubled. Had I said something strange? The silence was painful. My story really didn’t add up at all.

“I see. Thank you,” she said softly. “I remember as far as eating dinner, but I have no idea what happened after that. I’m sorry for troubling you.” She slowly stood up, sweeping her hair into place with her hand. “I’m going back to my room. I need to check in with Yuri-san.”

I wanted to tell her that she probably shouldn’t be alone with Yuri-san, but it was already breakfast time. I didn’t have enough money to pay for her train fare, and judging by the uniform and the few other items I saw in Yuri-san’s room, Oginome-san came here right after we parted ways at the school gate. She probably hadn’t had time to make any of the necessary preparations. She probably wouldn’t be thrilled to be badgered by Yamashita either, and I wasn’t able to remain beside her like I used to.

I was still uneasy, but I decided it would be for the best to trust Yuri-san to get

Oginome-san home. I saw her to the room, where I was greeted by a whisper from Yuri-san, her face so frank and beautiful it was as though last night never happened.

“You really are a good boy. I’m always moved by how chivalrous you are.”

“You promise not to do anything else to her, right?” I said, glancing at Oginome-san. Her back was turned to us as she gazed out the window. “Please get her home safe.”

“Yes, that’s a promise. I’m in your debt.”

I stared at Yuri, still highly doubtful. This was the woman who stole Oginome-san’s diary, albeit with a slightly different goal in mind than ours. Considering the events of last night, it was obvious she was into women. So then why was she married to Tabuki? Of course, some people loved both men and women, but I wasn’t going to pry. Whatever the answer, this probably didn’t bode well for Tabuki.

“Don’t give me that look,” she snapped.

After that, I ate breakfast while dodging Yamashita’s barrage of questions, took a morning bath, and headed home. We grabbed some onsen eggs and hot spring minerals as souvenirs. We had already eaten up all the manju from Ikebe’s place, and I was sure Himari would enjoy the mineral salts.

After the ryokan trip, Oginome-san texted me numerous times, but I couldn’t find it in me to reply right away. Eventually, I gave in and texted her back, asking her to meet me at the subway station. I waited for her with a hopeless heart, wanting just one chance to meet and talk things over.

Although I thought the days of us riding the subway together were behind us, here we were, sitting beside one another. Oginome-san looked like she already knew what I wanted to talk about. I, meanwhile, was anxious, pinching surreptitiously at Penguin No. 2’s belly. Every now and then No. 2 looked up at me, slightly perturbed, but did nothing more.

“Thank you for the other day,” she said softly.

“I didn’t really do anything.”

The tension between us practically crackled in the air. The train stopped at a station and started off again, and I still said nothing else. I couldn’t get my head into the game at all.

In the dream I had, I told Oginome-san that I couldn’t leave her alone. That was probably true, but that was an entirely separate matter. I cleared my throat, having finally found the words to speak.

“I can’t be around you,” I told her. “I’m not good for you. I think our families were just destined to end up this way.” I knew that what I was saying was just going to hurt her again. I knew that because as I spoke, my own chest began to ache terribly.

Oginome-san was having none of it. “No matter what you say, I’m not going to give up on you,” she replied. “I’m your stalker now, Shoma-kun. I’m going to change that destiny. Just you watch.” Her words were soft, yet imbued with an intense willfulness. Furthermore, dense as I was, even I could tell that this was a declaration of love.

Which of life’s stations should we even have gotten off on? When would we be let off at a station where we could feel safe?

The scenery outside the window was dark and endless, and the pair of us were silent and still, the only movement the slow tightening of my fingers pinching No. 2’s belly. Suddenly, I noticed the penguin looking up at me, tears welling in its eyes.

“Sorry,” I said softly, and took my hand from No. 2’s stomach.

It was early morning at the Natsume estate. Masako was thinking of Mario’s sleeping face, which she had looked in at just minutes ago. He had narrow eyes and thin lips that much resembled hers. On his pillow beside him, the penguin hat shone with a sinister light.

She laid the two torn halves of the diary atop the living room table. “Finally, I have it,” she said to herself. “With this, I’ll be able to save Mario-san.” She picked up the half that she had taken from Yuri at the onsen, and proudly

aligned it with the other.

There was no missing the small click she heard at the moment the two halves were aligned. As she furrowed her brow, the stolen half suddenly began to sing. It was Tokikago Yuri, performing “Marie’s Lament.”

“This...!” Masako gasped.

When the song ended, a recording of Yuri began to play. “Did you enjoy hearing my spectacular voice? You idiot. This is a patent fake. Don’t underestimate an actress!” The moment the amused-sounding voice ended, the fake diary caught aflame.

“Very well.” Masako smiled thinly. Perhaps she really had underestimated her opponent. She flung the smoking diary away, her expression tightening.

There was no doubt that Tokikago Yuri possessed the genuine other half of the diary. If snatching it from her in person was going to prove too difficult, then Masako needed to get the drop on her from the shadows. But how?

A hint of smoke in the air made her cough, interrupting her thoughts. She turned to see Esmeralda frantically slapping a cushion against the curtains, which had caught aflame from the burning fake diary half Masako had thrown carelessly aside.

Masako flung open the door to the hallway and shouted, “Renjaku! The curtains are on fire!”

The woman named Renjaku appeared, calmly carrying a fire extinguisher in hand. “Allow me, my lady.”

Renjaku removed the safety from the extinguisher without a moment’s hesitation, aimed the nozzle, and sprayed the foam at the curtains.

Masako knew Renjaku could handle the fire. She was the family’s butler, having worked for their family since her grandfather’s time, and was the only person in all the world who Masako could truly trust.

Her hair was arranged in a severe style, and her thin, imposing brows were finely arched. She wore thick-lensed glasses that glinted in the light, along with the thin, refined chain attached to the frames. A blouse with a standing collar

completely hid her neck, and it was paired with an ankle-length skirt with only the faintest of slits in it. Tied around the waist of the skirt was a bold gathered pleat, fashioned into a large ribbon in the back like an obi.

Masako looked at the now-extinguished curtains. Esmeralda, completely covered in white foam, rolled on the ground clutching the cushion, looking just like a giant marshmallow.

“Goodness. I better crush her soon,” Masako muttered.

Masako stood casually by the window, looking up at the sky and sipping some sage tea. Winter was already fully upon them.

“By the way, Renjaku. What of that new woman of Kanba’s?” she asked, not looking at the woman standing behind her.

“The usual sum should be enough to dispatch with her. She was a boring woman, nothing to worry about.”

“I see.” Most of the women who flocked to Kanba were boring. However, that was not where the root of the problem lay. “Well then, moving right along, I would like you to surveil Takakura Kanba and his younger sister.”

“Of course, my lady.”

The real problem was Kanba’s little sister, Takakura Himari. No matter how hard Masako pondered it, no matter how many pictures she looked at or videos she watched, she simply could not see what was so appealing about such a childish little girl.

“There’s a board meeting today.” She placed the nearly drained cup of tea along with the saucer upon the tray that Renjaku offered her, and headed to her room to get changed.

She donned a brown madras skirt and a jacket with a large, three-dimensional collar and idiosyncratic pockets. Beneath the skirt she wore white tights and black, high-heeled, laced dress shoes. Once she dabbed on her favorite perfume, her mood was transformed.

“Esmeralda. You’re taking too long.”

Esmeralda, having now returned to her original color, was sitting at the dresser, staring intently at her own face in the mirror.

Masako sat beside Esmeralda on the spacious limousine seats, using the short ride between the mansion and the Natsume conglomerate offices to check the news on the on-board television, looking over the materials for the meeting.

Masako inherited the entirety of the Natsume family wealth at a young age, and the entire corporation rested on her shoulders. She owned everything that her grandfather Natsume Sahee, who built Natsume Holdings from the ground up, had left behind: the people who bore grudges against him, those to whom debts were owed, his brownnosers, the family mansion, and a spectacular female butler.

In her opinion, at least, the late Sahee still controlled the Natsume family.

Sahee had been of the mind that there were only two sorts of people in this world: successes and failures. There was no doubting that Sahee himself was in the former group. He even taught his own son, Masako's father, that there was no point in living if you could not become successful. He hoped to raise him into someone worthy of his inheritance. Masako's father, however, questioned Sahee's philosophies and heavy-handed methods, and the two frequently butted heads. As a result of this discord, Masako's and Mario's mother was unable to bear the tense atmosphere that hung over the whole house. She left, leaving her children behind. Their father was so persecuted for this fact that he vanished from the Natsume household as well.

All sense of reality disappeared from the children's lives, leaving them only with the fear of being unable to live up to their grandfather's expectations.

Sahee drove her mother and father from their home, and yet Masako would not abandon this place. For her own sake as well as Mario's, and for Kanba's as well. She would save Mario, get Kanba back, and—most importantly—bring her father home, no matter what it took.

When she stepped out of the limousine, the conglomerate secretary was there waiting for her, practically prostrating himself in greeting. "Good morning, Ms. President."

"Morning."

She only inherited this position because the cursed blood of Natsume Sahee flowed through her veins. Even if her heart wasn't really in it, there were many things that she needed to protect.

As she walked through the spacious lobby, surrounded by her employees, she locked eyes with the wicked-looking bronze statue of Natsume Sahee that adorned the center of the room. Sahee was wearing a kimono with the Natsume family crest, his chest puffed out with pride.

"Goodness," said Masako under her breath as she walked past him through the lobby, heading for the elevators. "We better crush him soon."

Himari sat on a white bench in the hospital garden with several knitting instruction books and her wicker bag of knitting supplies beside her. She thumbed through one of the books on her lap, churning ideas for new knitting projects in her mind.

"Knitting the Winter Away." "Knits You'll Want to Gift." "Knitting Adventures." All the books depicted darling hats and sweaters, gloves and scarves, and stuffed animals with a charming warmth to them.

"How stunning. What are you knitting this time?" asked Sanetoshi. He sat on the bench next to her, leaning his face in close to peek at the book she was looking at.

He wore a simple white dress shirt, a mustard colored V-neck sweater, and gray pants, with loafers in a burnt umber. The man, whose long hair and feminine face contributed to the impression that he was not at all a doctor despite his lab coat, crossed his legs expectantly. He had Shirase and Souya in tow again today.

"A sweater. I wonder what color a man would like."

Himari wore a lined navy blue nightgown with a lacy collar, and fluffy beige socks beneath her hospital slippers. Penguin No. 3 was beside her, pointlessly flipping through one of the booklets as it mimicked Himari.

Sanetoshi pointed to a photo. "I'd probably like something like this. It's very lovely."

“I see. It’s just like you to pick something so grown-up, Dr. Sanetoshi,” Himari said.

“What are you saying?” Sanetoshi laughed softly, whispering in Himari’s ear. “You’re already plenty grown up.”

Himari stiffened up and looked at Sanetoshi. His eyes, as always, were as black and deep as the cosmos, sparkling with countless stars, looking everywhere and nowhere at once.

“That’s not true,” she said. “I can’t do anything on my own.” Her eyes turned back to the book.

“That’s what I’m here for, isn’t it?” Sanetoshi replied.

Himari nodded bashfully.

“Such a grown-up! How magnanimous! How stunning!” the boys said in unison, applauding.

“Himari.”

Himari looked up to see Kanba approaching from inside the hospital. “Oh, Kan-chan!” she grinned.

“Well then, I should be off for my afternoon rounds.” Sanetoshi stood, brushed off his backside, and sneered as he locked eyes with Kanba. “Try not to get too chilly.”

Kanba glared at Sanetoshi’s back as he retreated into the hospital, his mysterious helpers following. He was surprised to see Himari swiftly stuffing all her things away into her wicker bag. “What were you up to?”

“That’s a secret,” she said curtly.

“If it’s a secret, then...” *Then why would you tell Sanetoshi, but keep it a secret from me?* he wanted to say, but didn’t have the heart to do so.

Moments ago he was searching for Himari, who was missing from her room, and found her and Sanetoshi with their faces nuzzled up in a strangely friendly manner, laughing together.

“It’s none of your business, Kan-chan.” Once everything was put away, she

stuffed No. 3 into the basket, using it as a lid so Kanba couldn't see inside.

There were times when she hid things from her brothers before, but those were all sweet little white lies. They were things like preparing secret gifts for birthdays and Christmas morning, or embroidering the curtains, or secretly caring for a stray cat in the corner of the yard. However, upon recognizing the beauty in her slowly maturing face, Kanba grew angry.

"That man is your primary doctor, but he's not a good person. Don't tell him anything he doesn't need to know." Normally, Kanba didn't show such childish envy. However, he couldn't bear the thought of Himari maturing and having special secrets with Sanetoshi. Kanba didn't trust Sanetoshi one bit.

"What wouldn't he need to know?" Himari's face tightened as she looked at Kanba.

"Things about our family, and you."

Himari flopped back down on the bench, puffing her cheeks unhappily. "Why would you say something like that? He's a good person. He sent my scarves to Double H, and he always listens to my stories, no matter how boring they are."

"But me and Shoma listen to your stories too, don't we? We've never once said they were boring, have we?" *This is like a lover's spat*, Kanba thought. However, if this were just a trivial little spat, he would be able to do something about it. But this was completely different, as far as Kanba was concerned. This time, Himari's thoughts were as unclear to him as that of any other woman.

"But..." Himari began, then fell silent.

The world Himari lived in was very small. It was comprised mostly of the hospital, their home, and the nearby neighborhood shopping arcade. But it was different for her brothers. The two of them went to school, and they knew more about the outside world than Himari. They received all sorts of lessons, and had friends, seasonal activities and standardized tests, and were even—in Kanba's case—popular with girls. Himari knew nothing about that side of their lives. In fact, she wasn't sure if she even wanted to know. At the very least, Kanba had no right to rebuke her for finding someone in the hospital she could talk with.

“Himari—”

“I’m telling you, Dr. Sanetoshi is a good person! Why are you being so mean? I hate you!” Himari grabbed up the basket, No. 3 and all, and left, leaving Kanba behind. The scent of her long hair remained, but it was different, smelling like the hospital shampoo instead of the kind she normally used.

Kanba could not follow her, nor even call out to stop her. Only No. 1 watched steadfastly as she vanished into the building. Kanba wore a hard look upon his face that remained for some time.

“A quarrel? I see. That’s a good sign. Continue your observations, Renjaku.” Masako sunk deep into a large chair, sighing as she set the phone back in its cradle.

The president’s office was impressively large, decorated with a reception sofa and ornamental plants, both largely for show. The walls behind and beside Masako’s desk were hung with large-scale portraits of Sahee. They were drawn with such a drab technique that, to Masako, they were as good as bulk trash.

Her grandfather, a managerial genius, was also a greedy, merciless wreck of a man. He didn’t trust anyone and was cold even to his blood relatives. That he had a family at all was for one purpose, and one purpose alone: so his legacy, the Natsume line, would continue to prosper, unbroken. Anyone who could not serve that purpose was worthless trash, just like the wretched portraits that invaded Masako’s field of view.

That was why Masako had killed him.

Masako, nine years old, whiled away her days with only a single letter from her father as her heart’s solace.

I am doing well here, the letter read. I can’t come home any time soon, but I’m counting down the days until all four of us can live together as a family again. Until then, take care of little Mario in my stead.

So many times she read that brief letter, secreted away in the gazebo in the

backyard, knowing that she had to keep going. She shored up her weak little heart with the assurance their father would return someday. Their mother, who hated the Natsume household itself, probably would not return. And yet, their father still worried for them, still thought about the day they could live together again. Even from afar, he still loved them. He still loved Masako, or so she believed.

It was for the sake of that “someday” that motivated Masako to crush her grandfather, no matter what.

One day, Sahee gathered up all of the stuffed animals and fashion dolls and beloved storybooks in Masako and Mario’s rooms, and shoved them into the fireplace right in front of their eyes. Naturally, gifts from their absent parents were caught up in the mix.

“You don’t need this! Or this! It’s because of sentimental things like this that you still have attachments to your worthless father!”

His sinuous hands, thick with dark brown hair, stretched out from the sleeves of his kimono and cast Masako and Mario’s childish hearts into the fire.

Masako watched her dolls as they twisted fearsomely in the flame, holding her terrified brother to shield him from the sight. Synthetic fibers and plastic melted in the heat, giving off a terrible smell. The last vestiges of the life that the children once lived as a happy, normal family, were burning away.

“Masako! Give me that letter you’re hiding!” Sahee hounded her, a burning fury upon his face. In Masako’s arms, Mario was trembling, on the verge of tears.

“Masako!” Sahee forcibly snatched the letter out from Masako’s skirt pocket, shoved her away, and cast it into the fire without a moment’s hesitation.

“No!” By the time she raised her voice in protest, her precious letter was already ashes.

“Masako! That man is a loser. A deep embarrassment to the Natsume family! I will not permit you to cherish a letter from that failure as some kind of memento! Do you understand?!”

Before Masako could even weep, she felt a deep hatred toward her

grandfather welling up. She held and stroked Mario's head while she stared at Sahee with a sharp look in her eyes.

"Look at me," he said. "I bow to no one, and I never let my guard down! I am a powerful man whom no one can crush!" The massive, bearded man wore a face of sullen anger. He looked down on the pair with an overbearing gaze, huffing through his nose.

"Soon, we will need to begin your training, Mario, so that you can be an exemplary man of the Natsume family. You can't go around always wailing like a woman! A Natsume man must never be crushed, no matter what obstacles face him!"

By now Mario was trembling, and Masako held him tighter. Somehow, she would protect weak little Mario, and this house, so that their father had somewhere to come home to. Although she was so powerless that even her precious letter had been taken from her, she vowed that somehow, someday, she would crush this demon standing before her.

It was on that night that the dreams began.

Every morning, Sahee drank a cup of strongly brewed tea, straight. This morning, Masako carried a cup of poisoned black tea into his room. Not even bothering to thank her, and not even minding that it was still hot, he lifted the cup to his mouth and gulped it down.

Immediately, he dropped the cup and fell to the floor, spewing up blood. The detestable Natsume family crest was prominent on the back of his haori. Seeing him like this, Masako began to tremble, but her heart was jubilant. *I've finally done it! Father, I've worked so hard. I saved Mario!*

And then Masako awoke to darkness. Her nerves were frayed, and she could scarcely breathe. Her pajamas clung to her sweat-soaked skin. Moments later, she realized it was a dream, but the image of her grandfather, groaning in pain and clawing at his chest as his bright red blood seeped slowly into the carpet, was burned into her eyes.

"Renjaku! Renjaku!" she squeaked out, her voice lacking its usual strength.

“My lady? What’s the matter?!” Renjaku, dressed in her bedclothes, flung open the door of Masako’s room and rushed to her bedside. “My lady!”

“I had a dream.” Masako looked up at Renjaku as she hurriedly put on her glasses, her shoulders heaving.

“You poor thing,” said Renjaku, crouching down beside her and stroking Masako’s face. “What kind of dream?”

“A scary one.” The more she tried to steady her breath, the harder it became to breathe.

Later that morning, Sahee awoke, and the sounds of him swinging a bamboo sword and shouting could be heard from the yard. Masako felt ambiguous at the confirmation that the man was still alive.

“I won’t be crushed! I won’t be crushed!” His loud, husky voice echoed from the yard.

No matter how frightening it had been, Masako still crushed him in her dream. She gritted her teeth.

Night after night, the dreams continued. Every night, she killed him in a different way. She pushed him from cliffs, unleashed poisonous snakes upon him, got him run over by cars, drowned him in the bath, strangled him, struck him with a bat. Each method was vivid and direct, something she could witness with her own two eyes.

Every morning, Masako awoke with seemingly incongruous feelings: hope that her father would return now that Sahee was gone; and fear that her own murderous hands were now soiled beyond salvation. She would lay in her bed, breathing deeply, stretching out her tense limbs, making certain that her little hands were not actually stained with blood.

“Father, I...” She no longer called for Renjaku, for her dreams no longer shocked her. As she clutched her pillow tightly, hoping to calm herself, in came the sound of Sahee’s shouts as he practiced in the yard.

“I won’t be crushed! I won’t be crushed!”

The demon lived another day.

With the letter no longer hers to read, Masako simply sat quietly in the gazebo in the backyard. For nights unending, she dreamt of killing Sahee. Until the man was dead, her father would never return home. Still, she feared the dreams of killing that were to come the next day, and the next. She worried that one day, she might lose her ability to distinguish between dream and reality, and truly kill Sahee with her own two hands.

“Father. I’m...scared.”

Masako suddenly looked up to see Kanba standing on the other side of the pond. He was looking her way, his expression placid. A strange feeling came over Masako, as though he understood everything that she was thinking.

Soon after, Sahee began forcing Mario to walk over hot coals, swing a bamboo sword, and suffer absurd muscle strengthening, all in the name of “training.” Mario, small and weak, was in no position to defy him, but neither was he successful at this training. Masako was left to comfort him after Sahee struck and beat him.

She had never seen a person so frightening, aside from herself when she killed Sahee in her dreams. Shuddering, Masako would stroke Mario’s smooth, slightly damp hair as he cried himself to sleep.

Renjaku could not oppose Sahee herself, but she worried over the pair from afar, carefully tending to the blood blisters Mario formed from gripping the sword too long, the burns on the bottom of his feet, his bruised, swollen face and the scrapes on his knees. And yet, the next day those wounds would just be reopened, and again his hands would run red with his blood.

“At this rate Mario is going to be killed, and Father will never come back. So, this time, I’m going to crush that man for real. Even if it means incurring some eternal curse. It’s dreadful, but there’s no other way.”

Masako explained this calmly to Kanba, who sat beside her. What did Kanba think about this? He must know that she was crazy, sitting here confessing that she was thinking of murdering someone. However, even that rested entirely on Sahee’s shoulders—the curse of the Natsume family dictated as such.

There was no one in the world from whom Masako could seriously ask for help.

Kanba's reply was an unexpected one. "If you're cursed, then let's be cursed together." he said firmly, looking her square in the eye. "That's the bond we share."

In that case, I can do this, Masako thought. If Kanba was willing to share her curse, then the thought of killing Sahee wasn't so frightening.

It was not long after that that Sahee died. He went fishing with a friend and brought home a massive blowfish. Ignoring the warnings from everyone around him, he cleaned the blowfish himself and ate it. Of course, he was stricken by the blowfish's poison and taken to the hospital. He departed the world that night without a hint of fanfare.

Clad in her mourning clothes, Masako stared dimly at the portrait of her grandfather, who died without her ever laying a hand on him. Naturally, she did not shed a single tear. The altar was far too large, the walls of the funeral home decked with white chrysanthemums and orchids and lilies, the line of mourners unending. And yet, her father did not come home. Surely, she and Mario were truly cursed. Even after Sahee's death, the children would never know happiness.

Never again would the four of them live together as a family.

Some nights, even now, Masako was still wracked by nightmares. Dreams of her childhood, dreams of Mario and Kanba leaving her. Even now that she'd grown, she still sometimes had to kill Sahee in her unconscious world, even though he was already gone. Dead from his own hubris, taken out by blowfish poisoning.

"Stunning, isn't it?"

When she turned around, there they were in the train car. Sanetoshi sat in a nearby seat, thumbing through an illustrated guide of marine animals. Mario, wearing his penguin hat, swayed quietly by the man's side. Mario stared at the description of a blowfish that Sanetoshi pointed to on the page.

“The poison of the blowfish is called tetrodotoxin. It is thousands of times more toxic than potassium cyanide, a single milligram containing roughly 5,000 MU of deadly poison. There are portions of the blowfish’s body that contain poison, and some that do not, but if improperly cleaned, there is a risk of poison being transmitted into the parts that do not contain it. That’s why you should never eat fugu prepared by an amateur,” Sanetoshi explained in a gentle, sing-song voice.

“When did you...?” Masako furrowed her brow, glaring at Sanetoshi, who grinned back at her.

Sanetoshi looked suddenly at the doors connecting to the next car. Masako followed his gaze to see a stream of men in black pouring into the car. She tried to flatten herself to one side, but the men proceeded through the car in a steady herd.

Masako’s eyes opened wide. Among those men was her father.

“Father!”

She pushed through the men, calling out to her father, who was dressed in the same black clothing as the rest. She reached out to him, but he and the rest of the men continued through the train as though Masako was not even there, moving on to the next car.

The connecting doors closed noisily and did not open again. Masako pounded on the glass. “Father!” she shouted once more. Her world narrowed to only vague, fleeting impressions: the train, rushing through the darkness. The black-suited men. Her father, who was lost in the fray, vanishing in the blink of an eye.

“Kanba?”

The moment her father went out of view, she saw Kanba appear from the side, halting one of the men and saying something to him, a harsh look upon his face.

Why? Why did they have to go astray? First her father, now Kanba. Even though she warned him so many times. Surely they had their own reasons, but why wouldn’t they stop?

“Kanba! Don’t get any closer to them! You’re just going to end up used, the way my father was, and you’ll be crushed!” she screamed, her voice shrill and tearful. However, Kanba appeared not to hear her, and disappeared into the sea of black suits.

“Just once would be enough,” Masako muttered. All she wanted, just once, was for someone to recognize how hard she was working, to tell her they loved her. That sole regret lingered in Masako’s heart like a tiny black stain, one that spread and grew over time, and now was a great looming shadow that threatened to eclipse her.

Why would Kanba do all this for the sake of a woman who was nothing more than a child?

“Why?!” Once more, Masako pounded on the thick glass, mortified. The edges of her fists stung.

“Because they were chosen,” Sanetoshi said simply, behind her. “They were chosen to right the wrongs of this world.”

She slowly turned back to him. “Are you saying there’s something wrong with this world?”

“Well, I mean, your brother has never once sinned.” The illustrated guide was no longer in Sanetoshi’s hand. Beside him, Mario sat up straight, staring into nothing with his red eyes.

“That’s true. That’s why you’re saving him, isn’t it? You promised me!”

“Yes, I will save him. As long as you continue to act in accordance, as another chosen one.”

At Sanetoshi’s cue, the connecting doors flung forcefully open. Masako looked back in surprise to see Kanba, surrounded by the men in black and wearing a black suit himself, glaring her way.

“What are you trying to do?” Masako murmured, looking Kanba in the eye.

“Burn this world down.” Sanetoshi’s thick voice rang directly into her ear.

Kanba, don’t do it! she tried to scream, but her voice failed her.

“No!” she finally managed to shout. It was then that she awoke, realizing it

was a dream. Her breath was ragged, her sleeping clothes plastered to her sweat-soaked body. No longer would she call for Renjaku. But even as she grew older, the scary dreams never became any less scary.

She wiped her forehead with her hand, shuffled out of bed, and opened the window. Slowly, she breathed in the crisp morning air. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone looking up at her. It was Sanetoshi.

I'm not going to board that train. I cannot follow your accord. Masako fluffed up the curls that clung to her neck as she silently gave her reply.

In the next instant, Sanetoshi vanished.

Chapter 08

KANBA AND I were getting ready to visit Himari in the hospital. I took stock of our inventory, making sure all the ingredients for her surprise were there: dried nori, katsuobushi, sauce and mayonnaise, red ginger. Minced scallions and tenkasu, cuts of boiled octopus, and cheese. Flour, a bottle full of dashi, and two eggs. Vegetable oil. A bowl and a whisk, a basting brush, and several bamboo skewers. Finally and most importantly, a family-sized takoyaki grill. It was all quite a lot to carry, but I wanted Himari to be able to relax from time to time and eat something warm that wasn't hospital food or a prepacked bento.

I loaded my tools and ingredients into a large nylon shopping bag, and boarded the train with my brother.

"To think Yuri-san has half of the diary," I said.

"In that case, Masako definitely has the other half. She was probably the so-called mouse who came to take it, too," Kanba said, eerily calm.

"Probably."

"But what's Tokikago Yuri's aim?"

"About that. She said she wanted to change fate, and that she needed the diary for that." But why would she want to alter fate? What did she mean by "changing" it? I wasn't sure, nor did I even believe her. But Yuri-san was deadly serious, so much so that I could not imagine she was lying.

"Yo, do you seriously believe that?" Kanba laughed at me in disbelief as I was deep in thought.

"No way! But...if assembling the diary means you can alter fate, then maybe there's some way to change Himari's fate to a healthy future." I had no idea if it had anything to do with the Penguin Drum, but if the diary really did have the power to change one's fate, then we absolutely needed to track it down.

"Don't be stupid. Himari has that medicine." Not smiling at all, Kanba set his elbow on No. 2, resting his chin on his right hand.

"But isn't it expensive?" I asked.

Kanba was always telling me not to worry, never telling me the details of Himari's hospitalization or treatment costs. He settled the invoices as soon as we received them, never allowing me to look at the numbers. Even when Uncle Ikebe happened to ask about it, he was told that discussion was off-limits. Kanba sometimes suddenly went out at night, maybe for some kind of part-time job, although I had no clue what sort of job it might be.

It was probably dirty money. He must have realized I would assume that.

"Let me handle it. Just like I always have. You just need to smile. Especially in front of Himari. Got it?" he said in a clipped tone.

"Yeah." Of course I wanted to smile in front of Himari. But our financial situation was already dire, and would only grow worse.

Often, Kanba brought a large sum of money home with him. I wanted to ask him where it came from, but I knew that however hard I pressed him, he was unlikely to tell me. The reality was, without money, we were in trouble. We would never be able to live the way we did without Kanba's contributions.

I refused to follow after him, though, or look through his cell phone. I wanted to ask him how he was getting the money, but if it turned out he was doing something dangerous, then I'd want him to stop. Then again, it might make things worse if the truth were something awful, and then the three of us wouldn't be able to live together.

Once again, I was effectively pushing the whole burden onto Kanba. If he ever asked me to help him, of course I would give it my all, but truthfully, I was pushing all of the things we should be shouldering together onto my brother's back.

"Don't start up again with the mopey face right after you just said that."

I quickly lifted my head and gave him a stupid grin. I needed to show a better smile than that in front of Himari.

Dr. Sanetoshi's examination room, as well as the room Himari was staying in, had a rather strange atmosphere compared to a typical hospital interior. Neither my brother nor I had grown accustomed to this oddly old-fashioned,

fairytale-esque interior design. It was an odd contrast with the state-of-the-art medicine and machines around us. Still, Himari's every need was being catered to, and those two young helpers of Dr. Sanetoshi's were strange in appearance and manner, but they were diligent and kind.

Kanba and I were scheming to cook the takoyaki in Himari's room, so the helpers wouldn't notice.

"Wonder if the smell's gonna give us away." Kanba whipped up the preprepared ingredients with uncharacteristic efficiency, already starting to grill the takoyaki. He watched me out of the corner of his eye as I timidly surveyed the hallway outside the room.

The grill and ingredients were spread out on the floor, with the window open for the smell and smoke to escape. If we were discovered, there would be no explaining our way out of this.

"That smells really good!" Himari said, impressed. I was glad to see her smile. The penguins were also looking at the heated takoyaki grill, drooling in anticipation.

"Shoma made a lot of dashi. We're gonna make some octopus ones and some cheese ones too." Kanba popped the takoyaki onto the grill.

"Whoa, they're already cooking." Himari's eyes lit up.

"Now watch this." Kanba struck a stupid pose, rolled up his sleeves, and prepared a skewer, then quickly turned the takoyaki over, rounding them.

"Whoa, you're so good at turning them, Kan-chan!" Himari clapped her hands, Penguin No. 3 following suit.

"I mean, yeah. I'm the best here when it comes to this and okonomiyaki, anyway," said Kanba, puffing out his chest and looking at me. "Shoma, tell me immediately if anyone shows up. If we get caught, we're never gonna hear the end of it."

"What're you bragging about? I'm way better at flipping them." The air in Himari's room and in the hallway felt like two completely different buildings. Right now there wasn't a soul in sight, but I still didn't feel like the smell or the smoke would be something we could hide.

“Here you go, Himari. Careful, it’s hot.” Kanba looked like the lively owner of a roadside stall as he handily skewered a takoyaki and set it on a plate.

Himari happily accepted the takoyaki, well-garnished with sauce and nori and katsuobushi, giving hearty thanks for the food before gobbling it down. Her eyes lit up with delight. “It’s *hot*, but it’s really good! Eating takoyaki with your family is the best.” She separated some out on the plate to feed to the penguins. The three of them were all lined up, their mouths open in waiting. They looked like fat, round baby birds.

“We figured you must be getting sick of hospital food. Eat up,” said Kanba with a satisfied grin.

“Hey, leave some for me, too,” I called from my station in the doorway, just in case.

“Yeah, these are good.” He pretended not to hear me.

“Hey, Aniki!”

“I’ve got it, Sho-chan. You like lots of nori, right? It’s hot, so be careful.” Himari swiftly handed a plate over to me. I returned her guileless smile with a reflexively goofy grin.

“Thanks, Himari.” Our little sister truly was the sweetest person in the world. I took the plate and closed the door. It didn’t seem as though anyone was onto us.

“He should be fine with just the leftover bits, Himari,” Kanba joked.

“So you’re good with just sipping the last bit of juice from the ginger, right, Aniki?!” I theatrically stuck out my tongue at Kanba as he glared at me.

A bit of air spurted from Himari’s mouth before she broke out laughing. “Goodness, you two shouldn’t be fighting over things like that. You’re such children.”

I glanced at Kanba, who looked back at me. Himari seemed to be having fun. She was laughing heartily, and eating takoyaki. What we were truly after was nothing special. And yet, this sort of “normal” was something truly “special” to us.

“I’m glad. You just keep getting better, Himari,” I said quietly, sitting on the floor.

“Yeah, I’ve been feeling a lot better lately! Wonder if it’s because of that medicine,” she said with a smile, kneading No. 3’s cheeks. “Dr. Sanetoshi said that I might even be able to leave the hospital soon!”

“Really?!” I shouted, my face full of takoyaki.

“Yeah. Dr. Sanetoshi said so; I’m sure everything’s gonna be fine.”

That’s great, I started to say, when I looked at Kanba. He was flipping takoyaki, the corners of his mouth downturned. I decided not to pry in front of Himari. “Well then, maybe next time we’ll have sukiyaki to celebrate your release!”

“Whoa, really? Yay!” Himari cheered, not seeming to notice how Kanba was acting.

“You’re gonna have to build up your nutrition anyway, right?!”

“Oh, that reminds me. There was something I wanted to ask you two.” She set down her plate and went over to the paper bag on the bedside table, pulling out a half-knitted project. “Ta-da!” she said, spreading it out.

“Oh, what’re you making this time?”

“A sweater!”

“Sounds pretty challenging.” Himari’s handicrafts were largely cute little accessories and embroidery or appliqué. Soon she would probably even be good enough to make things that she could wear herself.

It was clear to me now that Himari was going to live.

“So, um, what do you think about this color?” she asked a bit nervously, holding the unfinished sweater up to her chest. It was a surprisingly subdued choice of color for Himari, made of purple yarn with gray in it.

“That looks nice. I think it’s a bit plain for you though, Himari,” I replied.

“It’s not for me, actually.” Her gaze wavered ever so slightly, her cheeks reddening. “Um, it’s for an adult. A thank-you gift.”

“Huh? An adult?” That was unexpected. Still, whoever it was for, she said it was a thank-you present, so there couldn’t be any ulterior motive to it. Besides, Himari’s world was largely limited to our family home and the hospital. Oginome-san and Himari probably wouldn’t be seeing very much of each other from now on. I’m not really good at thinking about complicated things, but it seemed important for Himari to have human connections and broader horizons.

“What do you think, Kan-chan?”

“It’s fine, I guess. Not my taste, but I’m sure that guy’ll love it.” I was surprised at the relatively cold tone in which he said “that guy.” Did he know who it was? Himari looked a bit shocked as well.

“Say, Himari, who is that sweater for?” I asked as cheerfully as possible. “Anyone we know?”

“Hee hee, it’s a secret,” she laughed softly, a little embarrassed.

“Yeah, right,” I said, a teasing grin spreading across my face.

“It’s a secret! A secret!” Himari collapsed onto the bed, cradling the sweater to her chest, and then slid it back into the paper bag.

“She does seem better,” I said to my brother, quietly.

“Yeah.”

“The three of us will be able to live together again soon.” I let out a deep sigh. “Maybe now we can finally get back to normal. We won’t have to take orders from that weird hat, or go running around after that pointless diary anymore.”

“No, it remains necessary!”

I knew the voice that came piercing through. I knew it well. After all, it was the voice that was issuing us commands up until recently. We both looked up to the bed to see Himari, the penguin hat atop her head, eyes glinting red.

“Survival Tactiiiiic!”

Before we could even shout in surprise, we were assailed by the formerly tattered and shorn waves of frills and lace. There was a sweet scent, and a white shining warm sensation. The sparkling world stretched endlessly in every direction.

Himari, in her penguin hat, was back to her usual impeccable form, blowing the white frills away with her lips, billowing the lace with a single fingertip as she appeared. The whole world shook in time with the clacking of her boots.

She walked right up to us as we sat there, stunned, and sneered. “Surely, you worthless nothings have been told!”

Kanba and I looked at each other. It was clear that neither of us had any idea what was going on.

“Again with that?” Kanba grumbled, still cross-legged on the ground.

“We don’t need you anymore!” I yelled. Even without the penguin hat, we already had that new medicine from Dr. Sanetoshi. With that, Himari would be saved. Kanba said not to worry about the money, and I believed him, so there was no need for us to change fate. The Penguin drum and the diary weren’t our problems anymore.

“Have you peons forgotten your duties?! You mustn’t tarry a moment longer. You must obtain the Penguin drum!” The queen of the hat stomped her foot, looking annoyed. The floor shook so hard that Kanba and I bounced a little.

“So what the heck was with that dramatic exit before?” I looked out again at the alternate dimension, which was back to its beautiful original state. The queen of the hat was once more in her glossy black penguin dress, long hem trailing. It was a far cry from the last time’s flood of dull colors and decay.

“Himari is all better now, so she’s fine, right?”

“Also, is that diary really the Penguin drum?” asked Kanba, seeking confirmation.

A strange look flickered across Lady Penguin Hat’s face, and paused before answering, “That’s a secret.”

“You show up after all this time just to not actually tell us anything?” Both Kanba and I were so over this. Furthermore, although Himari said those same words just moments ago, there was nothing cute about them now.

“Well, I will tell you one important thing: If you let the Penguin drum get away from you now, everyone in your family will be punished severely for it.”

I instinctively sat up straight at the word *punished*. This was no time for my thoughts to meander. I had no idea what was going to happen, so I couldn't relax just yet. Punishment was a senseless thing. No matter when it came, it honestly wouldn't surprise me if it happened. I had nearly forgotten our family's curse.

"What are you talking about?" asked Kanba as he stood up.

"The most important thing to you will fall into ruin."

"Most important? What does that mean?" When Himari had first collapsed, I was sure that she was being taken away from us. That would have been our severe punishment. But we circumvented that tragedy, so what was the most important thing to us now?

"The most important thing..." Kanba folded his arms, thinking. This was too abstract for us.

The lady of the hat huffed through her nose, glaring at each of us in turn.

"What is with you?!" I yelled at her. "We *just* enjoyed some fresh takoyaki as a family, and yet you expect us to just sit back and listen to this all of a sudden and say 'Oh yeah, sure,' and—" I realized something as soon as I spoke those words. There was a certain pattern to these kinds of scenes. "Wait, wait! I'm not finished talking!"

As usual, that was when the floor popped open beneath my feet, and my body was flung into darkness. An anxious feeling overtook me as I tumbled into the dark. Of *course* there was no way everything would go back to normal so easily. Maybe the luxury of hope—the hope that we could live a quiet life with our family of three—was something we were truly unworthy of.

Our punishment was not yet over.

"Shall we initiate the Survival Tactic?!" I heard the low, powerful voice from above me.

Maybe punishment was something that follows you around for your whole life. Maybe we would never know peace again. If that was the case, then why did we have to run around like this, crying and shouting? I was already so tired of knowing that every little thing about our lives was preordained by that tiny

little word: fate.

“Am I really not enough?” Kanba asked the queen, his head hung. “Is there nothing else I can do to help Himari?”

The lady of the hat walked up to him. “You can do this. We know it.” Himari narrowed her red eyes, stroking Kanba’s short, messy hair. “We know it, because the Penguin drum is your—”

“I can’t do it!” he shouted sorrowfully.

Himari held his head to her chest. She gently stroked his hair, murmuring so quietly it was almost silent. “You can do it.”

The sweet scent filling the world grew so powerful it was suffocating, and the waves of soft frills enveloped him. He felt Himari’s thin fingers upon his eyelids as he closed them against the force of it.

“Don’t be discouraged.”

Tabuki Keiju and Tokikago Yuri’s residence had not particularly increased in its number of furnishings after they were wed. Yuri arranged most of the new furniture and appliances on her own, and all the things from their single lives were brought here more or less wholesale. Yuri’s mountains of clothing and jewelry and cosmetics were neatly organized in her personal walk-in closet and on her dresser. Tabuki’s books about birds and birdwatching equipment were neatly packed away in a little drawer. The only thing that could be considered a change was the way Tabuki dressed.

Yuri was aghast at his lack of fashion sense, and would buy him shirts or shoes from time to time without consulting him.

“Put some of these on. They should be the right size, but if you don’t like something you can throw it away.”

Tabuki’s eyes went wide at this, face blank. “No way; that’s a waste. If I can wear them, I’ll wear them all,” he said, taking the large branded paper bag. Then, when Yuri threw away some excess clothing from his closet, she felt a bit

better.

Yuri now gazed at the diary half she held in one hand, holding a long, thin champagne flute with an intricately crafted stem in the other. She leaned back into one edge of their large sofa, Tabuki sitting quietly on the other. “Takakura Shoma asked me to lend him the diary. He was saying some weird things about his little sister’s life, and penguins.”

“I see.” He slumped slightly, the same type of champagne glass in hand.

Yuri now and then indulged in a little alcohol, but Tabuki couldn’t see what was so good about it. Once he tried to lose himself to drink, hoping to bury away the fact that Momoka was gone, but all it did was leave him feeling empty. He hadn’t drunk much since then, just occasionally when he and Yuri were having “couple time” like this.

“Naturally, I refused. We have different goals. Plus, it doesn’t seem like those children even know the true value of the diary.” Yuri drained her glass in one big gulp.

“You and I are the only ones in this world who know that,” said Tabuki.

“That’s true.” Yuri often wondered just what Momoka found so appealing about such a boring man. Her eyes fell on the lit-up Tokyo Tower outside the clear windows. Winter was here again. Another winter without Momoka. “You know, I really can’t bring myself to forgive the Takakura family.”

“Are you still going on about that?” asked Tabuki, though his tone was soft. “It happened a long time ago. Plus, it’s not like those kids had anything to do with it directly.”

What had Tabuki hoped to achieve in becoming a teacher? The plain appearance and lifestyle suited him, but did he really think Yuri would still accept his banal moral ramblings after all this time?

Yuri placed the diary on the table, and poured more champagne into her own glass. “Ringo-chan is in love with Takakura Shoma,” she said.

“I know.”

“You’re fine with that?”

“Ringo-chan is Ringo-chan. She isn’t Momoka.”

She laughed mirthlessly. “I know that well enough.”

“The perpetrators and their family are different people. I don’t harbor any hard feelings toward them anymore.”

“So you forgive them? The Takakura family stole countless innocent lives. I’m sure Momoka was trying to stop...” She trailed off. Momoka probably took some action to try and halt the accident. Either by changing fate, or by some other special means that Yuri wasn’t aware of.

“Mourning her or hating them isn’t going to bring her back.”

Yuri felt her hackles rising at the lecturing tone of his voice. “You’re just *soo* upstanding. You’ve always been this way.”

“I haven’t forgotten about Momoka, you know. There’s no way I could ever forget her. Nor could you.”

Both back then, and now, Momoka was the glue that bonded them together. Back then, they each gripped one of her soft little hands, the three of them standing together. Had that accident not occurred, the three of them would probably still be together today.

For both Yuri and Tabuki, Momoka had been dearer to them than their own blood relatives, even kinder than God. Momoka was innocent, earnest, and full of love. She’d been the only person in the world who told them, time and again, that she truly loved them with all her heart.

“Those days when we were with Momoka were my only real childhood.”

“Mine, too.” Tabuki finally sipped his champagne, just enough to wet his lips.

In that case, how could he say that he didn’t feel anything? That he could forgive the members of the Takakura family? Yuri stared at the side of his face, far too quiet.

“Even if her life was snatched away senselessly, Momoka would never want us to take revenge,” Tabuki added.

Yuri glared angrily at him. “Momoka isn’t dead!”

Tabuki looked sadly at Yuri, who burned with vengeance. "Of course," he murmured softly, placatingly.

Yuri herself might not even have thought it, but she was overflowing with life and vigor. That was why she was beautiful. It was obvious that she lived in a different world from Tabuki, who spent so many years trapped behind so many thin shells.

"I'm cold. We need some curtains in this room," Yuri said abruptly. When the pair of them were silent, she became far too aware of the spaciousness of the room.

"Should I bring you something to wear?" Tabuki hadn't noticed the chill at all. He wondered if it was because of the champagne, but he didn't say anything about that.

Yuri did not reply. She only embraced herself, and took another sip of champagne.

I'm going out to do some shopping. I'll be back soon. —Himari was all that the tiny paper scrap read.

"Well, that's a problem," Shirase said quietly and tilted his head, his red velvet ribbon pointing straight up.

"It's time for her medicine," Souya added, also tilting his head, his own red velvet ribbon at a lazy lop.

Himari's bed was empty, the sheets made. Her nightgown and dressing gown were neatly folded atop the sheets.

"Seriously, what is she thinking? Just because she's feeling a little bit better..." Kanba said bitterly, gazing at the memo.

Her medicine was administered every day, but I wondered if it was something that needed to be given at a precise time. I'd heard no report of it being that sort of illness, though. At the very least, not from Dr. Washizuka.

"This is bad," Shirase said flatly, expression soft.

"She needs to have her nightly injection," Souya continued.

“Um, when you say it’s bad, what’ll happen if she doesn’t get it?” I reflexively asked.

The boys’ red eyes flashed toward one another, and they fell silent. Shirase plucked flatly at one of his garters, which gave a snapping sound.

“Will it be okay if she’s back before nightfall?” I pressed. Their peculiar appearance and cold manner put both Kanba and me on edge.

“As long as she’s back,” said Shirase, conspiratorially.

“As long as she can come back,” Souya replied, likewise.

“What do we do? Where did you go, Himari?” We really should have left a cell phone with her in case of emergencies.

For now, I opened the closet, trying to determine what she wore out. Her flower-patterned dress with the puffy bright blue and beige skirt, and a ribbon of the same material that tied at the waist, were both missing from her wardrobe. Judging by the temperature, she probably went out with a knit cardigan as well. No doubt she was also wearing her favorite cowboy boots. However, this wasn’t much to go on. What could she possibly need to purchase that she would have to leave the hospital for?

“These kinds of unauthorized actions...”

“...are really quite the hindrance to Dr. Sanetoshi’s special treatment.”

The boys’ manner was so detached that I wondered if they wouldn’t just abandon her entirely.

“I’m sure Himari has a good reason for doing this.” She knew better than anyone how much we would worry over her when we eventually found her.

Kanba, who was pacing around the room, suddenly looked at me. “Yo, Shoma, let’s go.”

“Where?”

He pointed to the Yozawaya bag with her knitting supplies and several instructional books.

“Right, she’s been knitting.” She needed tools, or more likely, yarn. “We’ll go

find her!” I said quickly in parting to Shirase and Souya, and then rushed out of the room behind my brother. If Himari was headed to her favorite craft supply store, then the two of us should be able to track her down before nightfall. It was terrifying to think of what might happen if we passed her by, but for now, we had to do what we could.

We searched for Himari.

When Ringo received a call from Himari, who was still hospitalized, at first she was delighted to be hearing from a friend. But then she thought of the current situation with Shoma, and lost the will to speak. Not only was this a matter of her connection to Shoma, but to the whole family as well. That was their fate, he’d said. She’d replied that she was going to change that fate, but thus far she had no real plans on that front.

All that Ringo had left, now that the diary was gone, were the special feelings she held for the Takakuras.

After school, she met up with Himari, who said she was given special leave from the hospital. Now the pair were headed to a craft store in Ikebukuro. She began to suspect that the reason Himari’s overprotective brothers were not in tow was because they were avoiding Ringo.

“How are you feeling, Himari-chan?”

“Pretty great lately! How’ve you been, Ringo-chan?” Sure enough, as Himari strolled merrily between the store shelves, her complexion was good and her steps lively.

“Shoma-kun didn’t tell you anything?” Ringo reflexively asked back as she was faced with Himari’s beaming smile.

“Hm? What about?” asked Himari, tilting her head.

Ringo heartily replied, “It’s nothing, never mind.”

He doesn’t even talk about me. As far as Shoma is considered, I might as well not exist. I’m sure if he knew I was meeting up with Himari like this, he would be cross, Ringo thought.

“Ringo-chan?”

“Hey, so is knitting hard? I wonder if I should give it a try, too,” Ringo said, hurriedly throwing on a smile. She already knew how unexpectedly perceptive Himari was about these things.

Even if Ringo were to knit something appropriate for midwinter, she got the feeling Shoma wouldn’t accept it. Still, she wanted to do something. Anything at all would be fine; all she wanted was a connection to Shoma.

“I mean, I learned to do it. I bet you could pick it up right away, too. Let’s knit together sometime! I’ll teach you. It’ll be fun! Oh, there’s the yarn.” Himari rushed happily to the yarn shelf.

On the shelf were balls of yarn in various colors and weights, organized by brand and variety. Himari grabbed the ones that caught her eye, carefully comparing their colors and prices.

“Himari-chan, let me know right away if you get tired.”

“I’m fine! Dr. Sanetoshi gave me permission to go out, after all. Plus you’re here too, so it’s fine, it’s fine!” Himari puffed out her chest. Then, she lifted a finger to her lips, signaling to Penguin No. 3 at her feet not to spill her secret. No. 3 picked up a nearby yarn ball, nodding.

“Well, that’s good then.” This still seemed a bit odd to Ringo, however. Even if Himari really was given permission to leave, there was no way her brothers would have let her go out alone. At the very least, Shoma would have stopped her if he knew that the friend she was going out to meet was Ringo.

She did believe Himari when she said that Shoma hadn’t told her anything. If she had, it would be even more strange for her to meet with Ringo in secret.

“I want to finish some sweaters for Sho-chan and Kan-chan before I leave the hospital,” Himari said softly.

“You’re knitting sweaters? That’s amazing.”

“Wanna know something? The other day, they secretly grilled some takoyaki in my room.”

“Whoa.” It was difficult for Ringo to clearly picture anyone cooking takoyaki in

a hospital room, but she gave a little smile, thinking it was just the sort of thing the two brothers would do.

“Those two are always doing things for me. So, sometimes, I want to be able to do something for them. Please don’t tell them about the sweaters, okay, Ringo-chan?” Himari’s face was so serious, one could practically see the shadows upon it. Considering that her brothers were not to know about the sweaters, maybe Himari received her permission to go out in secret as well.

“Yeah, of course!” Finally, Ringo smiled, beginning to feel a bit at ease.

“So actually, I started knitting one already, but when I showed it to them, Kan-chan said he didn’t like the color. So I think I’ll start over,” Himari said, picking up a yarn ball of a beautiful teal hue. “I wonder if he’d like this color. He doesn’t like subdued colors.”

Ringo picked up the same yarn and looked hard at it. “Hmm. I think bolder colors are definitely better for Kanba-kun. And for Shoma-kun, a less distinct color, maybe.” The yarn that she pointed out for Shoma was a skein of something indistinguishable in color or pattern, a mess of many colors, sitting in the bargain bin.

“Ringo-chan, this isn’t some kind of horoscope,” Himari giggled in surprise.

“Ah, right.”

The two looked at each other and laughed.

It’s just for now, she apologized to Shoma in her heart. Please just let me have this time with Himari right now. You don’t even have to look my way. If you say that’s our fate, then I’ll accept it. But Ringo was free to feel these things. No one had the right to take those feelings away from her. “Also, I’d feel kind of bad for Sho-chan if he were the only one to get the bargain yarn.”

“What would you say is a subdued color?”

Ringo’s faith in herself was restored when she recalled that she was a “stalker.” *Any good stalker would know something like this,* she thought, her feelings of guilt abating ever so slightly.

Her phone began vibrating in her bag. “Ah, just a second, sorry.” Himari

noded and continued comparing yarns, not minding her. Ringo pulled her phone out of her bag and answered. “Hello?”

“Good afternoon.” It was Yuri’s voice.

“Yuri-san?”

She had not seen Yuri since their strange trip to the onsen. On the night when Ringo inadvertently imbibed alcohol and gotten drunk, leaving Shoma to look after her, she had a strange dream. It was hazy, but in the dream, she was lying on the tatami in that ryokan as someone ran their cool, supple hands over her body, removing her yukata. The creamy skin she’d seen when she looked up was Yuri’s.

“I had a lot of fun the other day. We should go to an onsen again sometime,” Yuri said. Ringo envisioned her smiling on the other end of the phone.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, this is kind of sudden, but are you free right now? I just really want to see you.”

“Ah, right now I’m actually with a friend.” Ringo glanced at Himari. She was crinkling her brow, picking up different colors of yarn and muttering, “A bolder color.”

“A friend?” Yuri asked quietly.

“Yeah, it’s Himari-chan, the one I told you a bit about recently. Takakura Shoma’s little—”

“My, how wonderful! In that case, why don’t I grab a meal with the two of you? I’ll give you a ring again later,” Yuri said, interrupting Ringo’s hesitant words, then immediately ended the call.

This was a perfect opportunity for Yuri. She could take stock of the Takakura girl up close, face to face. What kind of daughter was she? What kind of child? How much did she know about what her parents had done? Better yet, this could be a foothold for Yuri’s revenge. Or maybe she could just do it right then and there. As long as Yuri didn’t care how it looked for her, the possibilities

were endless.

Her long nails were painted in a subtle beige ombre with gold lamé details. She'd forgone adding rhinestones so as not to outshine the ring that sat snugly around her finger. She slipped her phone into the handbag that hung lightly from her shoulder.

Tabuki spoke as though he understood her, but Yuri had no intention of facing her own feelings. The Takakura family had trod not just on Momoka, but Ringo as well. If that was fate, then it was equally fated that the Takakura children should receive their punishment from Yuri.

"A moment, please?" Yuri held up a hand, and the manager of the large home goods store came rushing over.

"Yes, Tokikago-sama?" The manager curved their back and rubbed their hands, peering up at Yuri in a ridiculously subservient posture. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like your most fabulous curtains. Do you take requests for measurements and installation?"

"Absolutely! Thank you so much!" The manager bowed even deeper.

"I'll just take home enough for the living room. I'll have my husband hang them later, so please wrap them up." Yuri shivered as she remembered that cold room.

"Very well, Tokikago-sama."

She headed for the parking lot with the curtains and curtain rod in hand, already growing accustomed to referring to him as her "husband."

She wore a silk blouse with large, bold geometric patterns in red and orange, and a gray and off-white tweed skirt. On her pinkish-beige pumps were thin belts, which doubled as accessories for her ankles. Though she drove to the store, it was already quite cold out, so she wore dark brown furs around her neck.

Although she had only gone out to pick out some curtains, Yuri was, as always, the center of attention. Such was the path she chose.

She headed to the underground parking garage and loaded the wrapped-up bundle of curtains into her coldly glinting Jaguar. Just then, she realized someone was calling her, and took her phone out from her bag. Yuri batted her long eyelashes when she saw “Dear Husband” displayed on the screen. She shoved the phone back into her bag, unanswered, and sighed deeply.

Suddenly, she heard the sharp *tak tak tak* of high heels on concrete, and looked up to see a familiar person emerging from the shadows. They were focused intently on Yuri with a powerful glare.

As Yuri braced herself for a confrontation, the other stopped and laughed faintly.

“Goodness. I’ll have to crush you soon.” Her voice rang out across the parking lot.

“My, what a coincidence. Are you out shopping, too?” Yuri stepped away from her car, not showing the slightest hint of surprise.

“I have to thank you for that lovely song. I did think the pitch was just a little bit off, though.” Masako moved her pointer finger in the air like a conductor’s baton, lightly humming Yuri’s song.

“You must have misheard. I always have perfect pitch.”

“You’re the only one who thinks that. I’m the one who’s in the right. I’ll have to punish any wicked vixens who go around deceiving others.” Masako’s curls were impeccable, and she wore an orange, collarless coat, fastened tight with black buttons. Her black tights and ankle boots were also of the same color.

“Ever the little princess, aren’t you? A pure little virgin who’s never once known a man, fooled by such a simple ruse. You can’t even tell the difference between a fake and the genuine article, you dummy.” Yuri’s glossy lips, painted with a coral red lipstick, twisted into a sneer.

“Goodness, such vulgarity from such a renowned performer,” said Masako. She was unfazed, her expression unchanged.

“Do you know why a virgin girl like you could never change the world?” Yuri swiftly pinned back her loosely arranged hair.

“Sounds interesting. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Because virgins like you are afraid of having the world spoil your youth and crushing you. That’s why you can only see half of the world,” Yuri declared, as though she had seen this firsthand. “You’re a pitiful child, wrapped up in your own vapid notions.”

She felt just the slightest bit of sentimentality pass through her as she looked at Masako. The girl was driven by her own objectives to the point of austerity, unmoved by almost anything else. She clung to the parts of her life that had been taken from her, somehow managing to keep herself connected to the world by her own dogged persistence.

If she could not get those parts of herself back soon, she might never know happiness again.

Masako grinned, her curls swaying. “Someone like you, who can no longer understand those notions, is simply past her sell-by date. You have no other way to make a living now besides selling yourself for cheap. The gravure tabloids are calling.”

“Was that supposed to be a comeback? As long as you don’t even believe in yourself, your life is going to keep being eaten away.”

“I’m saying that *your* life has *already* been eaten away.” Masako pulled her half of the diary out from a large coat pocket, and held it up. “You have the other half, don’t you? I need this, no matter what the cost, so I can save Mario’s life.”

“Of course I do. When you don’t have a safe, the next best bet is to keep something right on your person. Still, I’m not going to hand it over. *I* need the diary, no matter what, so I can bring Momoka back into this world.”

Not caring whether or not Yuri was finished speaking, Masako ducked to the side and fired a makeshift Gatling gun.

Yuri twisted her body, avoiding all the shots. She leaned against the hood of her car and glared at Masako.

“Let’s do this,” Masako growled.

“Don’t underestimate an actress!”

Behind Masako, Esmeralda struck a gong one time. That was the signal for the fight to commence.

Yuri’s phone rang out loudly from her bag, but there was no way for her to hear it in the heat of battle.

Having run around to every craft store in Shinjuku, I decided to give my brother a call.

“No good. Shinjuku was a wash. I can’t find her anywhere!” Of course, there was the possibility that I passed her by, or that maybe she hadn’t gone to a craft store in the first place.

“Don’t freak out. You keep going on around Kichijoji, and I’ll check out Yozawaya in Ikebukuro,” Kanba said, sounding pretty freaked out himself.

As I hung up the phone, I recalled the words of the penguin hat: *The most important thing to you will fall into ruin*. She must have been talking about Himari. Himari’s life would be snatched away, and the three of us would never be able to live together again. I was sure that Kanba thought the same thing.

I ran on, starting to grow irritated at the snippets of conversation and laughter I heard in the crowds, who seemed more laid-back and jovial than usual. I was freaking out. The fate that I so loathed was still watching us from somewhere, its eyes glinting, laying a trap to steal everything away from us.

If fate was real, and if it could be changed by either effort or magic, then I wanted to change everything in our lives. Himari would have never gotten sick, no one would be missing from our family, and we would greet each day with a perfect morning, wanting for nothing. We would have a past where nothing unsettling had ever happened.

I flew into a department store in Kichijoji, running to the floor where the Yozawaya was located. I took a good, hard look around the yarn shelves, hoping to see if Penguin No. 3, who disappeared along with Himari, would pop up at my feet somewhere.

“Um, excuse me,” I called to an apron-clad shop clerk. “I’m looking for a girl. Her hair is about this long, and she’s probably wearing a flower print dress and a cardigan. I think she went out to buy some yarn.”

Given only the vague information that Himari was buying yarn, and what I assumed to be the description of her clothing, the clerk tilted their head. I asked the other clerks at the registers, but got no new information. There are many girls in the world who have long hair and wear dresses, and who buy yarn. Himari was but one of them.

I left the Kichijoji Yozawaya, and once again called my brother. “She’s not here, either. I asked the staff, but they didn’t know anything.” I was out of breath, looking around the place frantically. There was no reason that she would bother to go somewhere further out when there were a limited number of stores where she normally shopped.

“No luck here, either. There’s apparently been heaps of girls buying yarn by themselves,” Kanba told me.

“Got it. I’ll look around here a little while longer.” As I hung up the phone, I looked to the reddening sky and sighed. “Himari, where *are* you?”

If she hadn’t gone to a craft store, then where? Had she gone to see someone who wasn’t us? We were her brothers. We were supposed to know more about Himari than anyone else did, but I knew nothing about where she could have gone.

Ringo wondered if sitting on the cafe’s open-air terrace would be bad for Himari’s health, considering how cold it was, but Himari said that she wanted to enjoy some fresh air, so Ringo respected her wishes. The two faced one another, holding café au laits with lots of whipped cream on top.

“Whoa, you get to meet Tokikago Yuri-san?” Himari stared at Ringo, her wide eyes sparkling. A few people sitting around them looked their way with interest.

“Yeah, she called me a little while ago and asked me if I wanted to go out to eat with her.” Ringo was a little suspicious of the fact that Yuri wanted to see her out of the blue, and that she sounded weirdly happy the moment she heard

Himari's name, but there was no real basis for this suspicion.

"That's amazing! Can I come, too?" Himari leaned in, cheeks reddening.

"Yeah. Yuri-san seemed really happy about it. Maybe it's because I told her you were such a big fan of hers."

"Thank you, Ringo-chan!" Himari sat back down in her chair, stroking No. 3 by her feet and beaming.

"Still, is it okay for you to be away from the hospital this long?" The temperature was dropping, and the sky was already turning colors.

"It's fine! I still have time." Himari sipped her café au lait, swinging her boot-clad feet. "I just really wanted to go out with a friend like this."

"I'm glad you found a color of yarn you liked too." Ringo enjoyed being with Himari. The topics she could discuss with her friends at school were limited, and she felt stifled by her own position: both as a student of Oukagyoen Girls' High School, and as a daughter of the Oginome family. When she was with Shoma or Himari or Yuri, it didn't matter whether she read *Sixteen* or not, whether she knew about the popular models of the day, or whether she was some kind of selfish stalker.

She felt like she could be her true self.

"So what's Yuri-san like?" Himari's long eyelashes fluttered.

"What's she like? Hmm..." At the beginning, she thought of Yuri as a "blackhearted orca woman," but her impressions of her changed into something more complex, something she couldn't easily name. Yuri was beautiful, stylish, kind, and a little strange.

"She's a very wonderful woman."

Himari and Ringo looked back in surprise at the voice that suddenly interrupted their conversation. "Tabuki-san!" they said in unison.

Tabuki stood there, grinning at them.

The building to which Tabuki led the girls looked like it was still under

construction, and naturally had no tenants inside.

Ringo believed Tabuki when he said that he arranged to meet up with Yuri, but she grew more and more uneasy as they boarded the elevator. The building was incomplete, consisting of only a few finished floors so far, and posted here and there were signs that read “Trespassing is Forbidden.” Moreover, there was clearly something different than usual about Tabuki’s manner itself. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but he had none of his usual cheerfulness. Nor did he speak about wild birds. Plus, the elevator they were riding was eerily large, made almost entirely of red iron scaffolding. It was dusty, and rose with a rattling, scraping sound.

“Um, are we really supposed to be meeting up with Yuri-san here?” Ringo asked desperately, but Tabuki did not reply.

“I get to meet a big star like Yuri-san. I feel like I’m about to burst!” Himari was grinning, holding her little tote bag and the paper bag from Yozawaya and not appearing suspicious in the least.

“Hey, Ringo-chan,” Tabuki said in a low, soft voice.

“Yes?” she quickly replied. She tried to see his eyes through his glasses, but the light of the setting sun reflected off the lenses, and she could only read his expression by his mouth.

“Do you remember what I said to you once? There’s a reason for everything, even sad or painful things. Not a single thing in this world is meaningless.”

Of course she did. It was the same reason that she believed in fate and tried to carry out its whims. Now, she was slowly beginning to change, but she always kept Tabuki’s words near and dear to her. “I do. So...?”

“That’s good.” Tabuki smiled faintly. “To tell you the truth, the reason I invited you here is that there’s something I want you all to know.”

“Something you want us to know?”

“Yes. My reason for living.”

“Huh?” Himari finally looked up suspiciously, eyes darting between Ringo and Tabuki. Ringo reached out and grabbed the sleeve of Himari’s cardigan with her

fingertips.

“Now I’m going to show you what that reason is.”

“Tabuki-san?” Ringo felt a strange foreboding, and gripped Himari’s cardigan tighter.

“It’s time,” Tabuki said ominously. The girls stared at him, a bit scared by this flat declaration. “Today, I’m going to deliver judgment upon the Takakura family.”

He removed his sunglasses and turned slowly toward them, his face half-lit by the setting sun. His eyes, as he smiled softly, were hollow and crazed.

Sanetoshi sat on the bed in his examination room, playing with a bright red apple. Shirase and Souya stood at either side of him, gazing out expressionless through the slightly open curtains.

“She’s not coming back, is she?” said Shirase as he watched an elderly man in his sleep clothes walking through the courtyard.

“Guess she’s not coming,” Souya continued, watching a nurse run out from inside the hospital toward the old man.

“What a bad girl.”

“What a wicked girl.”

Their eyes flashed to one another.

“Bad, wicked girls must be punished,” Shirase said quietly.

“Yes, they must be greatly punished,” Souya continued.

Sanetoshi lay back on the bed, chuckling. “Stunning, isn’t it? In the world of humans, the truth is not limited to what’s actually true. Humans will insist that the things they themselves want to see, their own hopes and desires, are the truth. They’ll even use this ‘truth’ as an excuse to kill others.” Sanetoshi laughed with vibrant glee. His long hair shone as though the evening sun dwelled in it, casting strange-colored shadows on the floor. “This is war. A war is on the horizon.”

Shirase and Souya did not say a word, nor did their expressions change in the slightest. They only turned slowly Sanetoshi's way, looking at him with their red eyes, their fluffy black hair bathed in the same orange light.

Chapter 09

TABUKI KEIJU'S MOTHER loved the piano. This was why she married Tabuki's father, a pianist. However, not long after Tabuki was born, the two of them separated.

"That man was no good for me. He had no talent at all. Keiju, you would never betray your mother, would you?" she would often say to him around the time of the divorce. As she stroked her young son's head, running her hands through his soft, supple hair, Tabuki would always nod.

Once, Tabuki's mother gave him a new friend as a gift. It was a darling little bird. By his mother's logic, a human friend would only get in the way of his music lessons, so a bird was just right instead. This did not especially bother Tabuki, nor did he think it was strange.

The little bird lived in a round bird cage on a dedicated stand, next to the grand piano Tabuki practiced on.

The young Tabuki lifted the heavy lid of the piano, noisily plunking at the keys, and as his legs were not yet long enough to reach the pedals, he either simply pushed them up against the piano or swung them, just enjoying the sounds.

Whenever he played the piano, he and the little bird were always together.

"Keiju. Your mother loves people with talent." Whenever Tabuki poured himself into the piano, his mother would always give him a warm embrace. Enough time passed that his feet now properly reached the pedals, and he could read sheet music as well. He practiced for hours every day, and performed in numerous competitions. His eyes began to weaken from staring at scores for too long, which necessitated his getting glasses, but that sort of trifling thing did not bother him.

His shelves were lined with various trophies, and countless framed awards hung from the walls.

Not long after, Tabuki's mother remarried an up-and-coming composer. Tabuki was a bit puzzled by this new father and this new surname—"Tabuki"—that he was supposed to use from now on, but his mother was elated for the

three of them to start their lives together, even smiling and telling Tabuki, “We’ll have your father teach you all sorts of things about music.” As it turned out, his father was a good man who knew much about music.

Eventually, a second son was born to the Tabuki household. Tabuki was thrilled to welcome this little one into the world, and even introduced him to his little bird. It filled him with such joy to be gripped at by those tiny hands, to stroke the baby hair that just started to sprout from his head, a feeling like they truly had become brothers. Though he had no human friends yet, his little brother would be his friend as well, after his little bird.

Every day, his little brother wailed and ate and played, all to the tune of the music his stepfather played or the sounds of Tabuki on the piano. The Tabuki household was a lively one, overflowing with all manner of beautiful sounds. However, it did not take long before Tabuki’s brother, who was supposed to be his friend, grew into a threat.

The toy piano his mother bought for his brother was wooden and painted white, with its own little legs. His brother would sit in front of it, handling it as recklessly as he did his other toys. One day, however, Tabuki watched his brother striking the keys of the toy piano, and his breath hitched. He looked as though he was only making random sounds, but within seconds it approached something resembling a tune, at length growing into a real melody.

Tabuki, clutching his thick piano instruction book, was stunned to hear the music his brother was playing, the sounds wild but unmistakably taking form. Everything that had taken Tabuki years to accomplish, his brother could suddenly do effortlessly, without even any clue what he was doing.

Tabuki was distraught. There was no doubting his brother was a genius. At the very least, he was probably already on a level that Tabuki himself would never reach, no matter how much he practiced.

His mother loved people with talent. So far, Tabuki was the only one who knew about this, but what would happen if his mother were to find out? She would probably spend all her time mooning over his genius little brother.

Tabuki increased his practice time, playing the piano single-mindedly. He spent countless hours sitting at the piano, his only friend the little bird at his

side. Even still, his brother inevitably grew older, his talent becoming apparent as he left Tabuki in the dust.

“Keiju, you know I only like things that are the best. You may as well burn those second-place certificates.” This was not a suggestion, but a statement of fact. This was her declaration that anything below first place was meaningless to her.

With his second place and lower trophies and certificates gone, Tabuki had very little left with which he could prove his existence to his mother.

Crestfallen, Tabuki watched his little brother happily playing his toy piano. By now, it was a perfect melody. It reverberated throughout the room, pleasant to the ear, smooth as silk.

Tabuki was embarrassed that he was jealous of his own brother, but as much as he hated that dark feeling, he could not bury it away. One day, the child would steal all of their mother’s love and attention away from him. One day, Tabuki would be thrown away and burned up, just like his unworthy certificates.

Tabuki could do nothing but practice with all his heart.

He woke up early in the morning and practiced, ran to school, ignoring all his lessons to study sheet music, focusing on strengthening up the muscles needed for playing piano. Once lessons were over, he would run home and start practicing again. He sacrificed both eating and sleeping, often even passing out right atop the keys.

Just as Tabuki hoped, he once again took first place at a competition.

“This is wonderful, Keiju. Let’s frame this one.” His mother smiled softly, stroking his head.

Tabuki was happy. He knew in that moment that his mother loved him. Yet, at the same time, he knew that in the not-too-distant future, his brother would surely rise to number one. Though Tabuki spent absurd amounts of time practicing, finally clawing his way to first place, his brother would soon overtake him.

Tabuki was never certain if the warbling from his little bird was meant as encouragement, or as pity. Even so, the bird was very special to him.

One day, however, the bird no longer replied to the words that slipped from his lips.

“I’m sorry.” He opened the lid of the piano and placed his left hand gently on the keys. Then he slammed the lid shut. There was no other way.

If his time as a pianist was over, then surely time would stop for his mother as well, frozen in the time when he was still number one. No matter how splendid a performer his brother would grow into, surely his mother would still comfort him, show him love and compassion, telling him, “If you had kept playing, I’m sure you would have been number one.”

The pain of the lid falling on his hand sent spikes of agony throughout his entire body. He lost all sensation in his left hand, as if it was permanently asleep. Although his swollen, broken fingers were still connected to his hand, he would never again be able to play the piano as he did before.

Tabuki was certain he had secured his mother’s eternal love.

“Don’t worry, Keiju. I’m sure your brother will be number one at the next recital.” She smiled softly at Tabuki, his left hand wrapped in a sling, and sidled over to his brother, who had taken up the seat at the piano he once played.

Tabuki was all alone.

One by one, the shadows of the red steel beams that made up the building flowed past the trio’s faces and bodies. Tabuki’s head was lowered slightly, looking at his left hand as the elevator climbed up and up. His hand would never move the way it once did, but it proved no real obstacle to a normal life.

“Where...where are we going?” Ringo’s voice grew frantic, unable to grasp Tabuki’s intentions. It was an incredibly tall building, if “building” was the right word for something so unfinished.

“To the place where our fates reside,” Tabuki softly replied.

The elevator swayed and clattered to a halt. Ringo’s anxiety grew as she looked around the floor at which they arrived. Its ceiling was made of bare steel beams, its floor only of smooth concrete, no barriers or anything else in place.

Ringo was unsure of how high they had climbed. Himari looked at her, equally afraid.

“Um, Tabuki-san...” Ringo started to say, when Tabuki pushed her away, shoving her back into the elevator. She fell backward, the sleeve of Himari’s cardigan slipping out of her hand.

“Himari-chan!” She picked herself back up frantically, reaching out, but Tabuki swiftly picked up Himari, closing and bolting the accordion-like elevator doors.

“Open up! Tabuki-san!” Ringo gripped the doors, pulling with all her might, but they would not budge. At her feet, a single ball of yarn rolled out of the Yozawaya bag that fell from Himari’s hands. “Why are you doing this?” she cried.

“There is nothing meaningless in this world.” Tabuki’s demeanor was still calm, but his expression was cold and empty, not a hint of the usual light in his eyes. “Those words are not a lie. Look around you, Ringo-chan. Do you see what it is I live for? Why I must exact revenge on the Takakura family?”

Ringo was lost for words. It would seem that neither she nor Takakura Shoma or Kanba knew a single thing about the real Tabuki Keiju. The Tabuki standing before her looked nothing like the man she knew. But what if this was who Tabuki really was?

Himari was unable to even struggle in fear, her lips trembling. She knew there could be no reason for this punishment they were to suffer, other than the accident.

It was natural that the members of the Takakura family should be met with hatred and scorn. Himari believed that ever since Hibari and Hikari had left her side. She always felt that one day their punishment would come, just like this. If that was to be so—if that fate was unavoidable—she prayed that she would be the one to be punished, sparing her brothers.

Himari trembled and prayed to a god she didn’t know for sure existed that this would be the end of it. She would sit back and receive her punishment. *Please, just let this all be over.*

The place stunk of metal, and something like a massive ventilation fan spun around it, making a hideous sound. It was so vast that it was hard to discern the walls or the ceiling. Tabuki was huddled on the floor with his hands around his knees, amongst a mass of other children doing the same. His little bird was in a cage beside him.

“Where are we? There’s a lot of other kids like me here.” As far as he could see, all the children were haggard and quiet, huddled up small.

“You don’t know? This is the Child Broiler,” said another child, who appeared to be the same age as Tabuki.

“The Child Broiler?” When Tabuki had come to, he was already sitting on the floor, with no recollection of coming to this place.

“Yep. It’s where unwanted children are discarded. We stay here for a long, long time. Then our existence begins to fade, and finally we vanish from the world.”

Tabuki immediately understood. In the end, he really couldn’t do anything right. It was his destiny to be cast aside by his mother. He was an unwanted child in his mother’s eyes. That was why he was here, and why he would one day fade away and vanish.

“I’m sorry,” Tabuki muttered to the little bird. He tried to open the door of the cage, hoping to at least let the bird escape, but the door had at some point rusted shut. “It won’t open.”

Just then, a girl called out to Tabuki. “Let’s go home!”

He had seen her face before. It was Momoka, one of his classmates. She spotted him right away within the sea of children, and was looking straight at him. Her eyes, peeking out from beneath her thick, straight cut bangs, were strong and willful.

“C’mon!” She walked right up to him and offered her hand.

“Where to? I don’t have a home to go back to anymore,” Tabuki quietly replied.

“You’re coming home to someone who needs you.”

“There’s no one who needs me.” His self-deprecating tone sounded hideous even to him. But there was no other way for him to say it.

“I do. I need you,” Momoka said, looking him straight on.

Tabuki lifted his head, peering at her. *She has to be lying*, he thought.

“You played piano in the music room after school every day. You probably didn’t know it, but I was always listening.”

“What? In that case, you’re just gonna throw me away too. I can’t play the piano anymore,” Tabuki spat, lifting up his still-bandaged left hand.

“That’s got nothing to do with it. What I was listening to was your heart.” Momoka shook her head, frowning sadly.

Tabuki was stunned by this grandiose declaration, but he just wrapped his arms back around his knees. Momoka kept talking.

“Whenever you played the piano, I could see the music overflowing from the windows of the music room, falling down in sparkles into the hallway, and onto the flower beds. It was so beautiful.” Momoka grinned. “It seemed like you were having so much fun.”

“Enough of this. You sound stupid,” he said, not caring if it made Momoka sad. “What do you even know? There’s no point in doing something if it isn’t perfect. If you aren’t number one, or the most talented, or a genius.”

Momoka was taken aback, retreating as Tabuki babbled on, half-crazed.

“All right, everyone, have you prepared yourselves? It’s time for all of you to fade away!” There was a sudden loud, lively announcement from the adults, who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

The adults wore bright blue and pink, long-sleeved coveralls with caps of the same color worn down low over their eyes, leaving only the lower halves of their faces visible. Their mouths were twisted into eerily wide grins.

“No need to be afraid. You just won’t be able to tell who is who anymore. You’ll just be worthless nothings!” they shouted.

Everyone, including Tabuki, fell silent looking at them. Not a single one of the children panicked or tried to run.

“No,” Momoka muttered quietly.

By the time Tabuki noticed Momoka’s voice, the floor had already begun to move, heading toward a great cliff. They were being carried toward it as though they were on a conveyer belt.

“Oh.” The children closest to the cliff were dropped over the edge in the blink of an eye. Then a flame erupted with a roaring sound, burning the children up completely.

The sounds of the fire and the hot wind were growing closer.

Still sitting on the conveyer belt-like floor, Tabuki looked at the birdcage at his feet. He gripped the edge of the cage and quietly began to slide off the precipice.

Without a sound, Momoka grabbed his left arm. He looked up in surprise to see her desperately reaching out from the edge of the floor with her right arm. As he swung, he somehow managed to keep his grip on the birdcage with his right hand. When he looked down, everything below him was enveloped in flame, and his legs were growing hot. To his side, countless other children were falling in, burning up to nothing in an instant.

“You can’t go!” Momoka forced out the words.

“Let me go. When I fade away, I’ll be free.” Tabuki meant to shout this, but the hot air burned his lungs, and he could not speak very loudly.

“You can’t! You have to stay yourself, Tabuki-kun!”

“Why? I’m already...” *Unwanted. By everyone.*

“I...I love you!”

Her words were softer, more assuring than any other sound he had ever heard before.

“Now you don’t have to fade away. You can come back home with me.” She smiled, narrowing her eyes to shield them from the embers.

“You’re lying.” His mother always said that she only loved people with talent. Even though she stroked his head as she said this, she still threw him aside. No one could ever love or want him.

The strength of Momoka's small body was not enough to lift Tabuki up. Little by little he slipped downward, until only the palm of his bandaged hand was still connected.

"Tabuki-kun!" Momoka leaned in, putting all of her strength into her hand. If she were to grab hold of the bandaged portion, it might slip and come undone.

"Okay! We're just going to go ahead and burn away this lifeline of yours!" Suddenly, one of the coverall-clad adults appeared, brandishing a lit blowtorch.

"Go away! Stop it!" Tabuki reflexively screwed his eyes shut.

Momoka let out a scream. A few embers from the blowtorch flicked out onto Tabuki's arm as well.

"Let go of my hand! Hurry!" Tabuki wailed. The heat stung his throat, and it was excruciating even to speak. His arms and legs were already at their limits, and he could scarcely even hold the birdcage anymore.

"No! I'll never let you go!"

He cracked open his eyes at Momoka's voice. The edges of her hand were hideously burnt, her skin curling and running with blood.

"Your hand! Let go already!"

The coverall-clad adult looked at Momoka, who refused to let go. They gave a thin smile, and once again lowered the blowtorch to her arm.

"Let go!"

Though Momoka screamed again, she did not let go of his hand. Her breathing was hindered, sweat pouring from her face, gritting her teeth through the heat and the pain. Still, her thin arm never broke the connection to Tabuki. Quietly, her breath ragged with agony, she repeated, "No."

The adult gently tilted their head at Momoka's stubbornness, and began to turn the dial on the torch. They were trying to make the flames stronger. Tabuki could not bear to see her already battered hand be lit aflame again.

Maybe Momoka wasn't lying. But within Tabuki's heart, it was all already over. "It's fine. Let me go. I don't have any reason to live anymore!"

“Then live for me!” Her voice was loud and clear, ringing out across the Child Broiler.

His eyes opened wide in shock, and he looked at his own fingertips, wrapped in the burnt bandages. Slowly, he began to slip away from Momoka’s grasp.

He was falling, or so he thought. Suddenly, the door of the birdcage opened, and the little bird flew up and away.

He was glad that the bird had gotten away. The door probably warped as the birdcage melted in the heat of the flames. Then, for a moment, Tabuki thought: *I’m glad I got to meet Momoka before I faded away to nothing.*

“Tabuki-kun.”

Tabuki slowly opened his eyelids at her gentle voice. The sky above him, dotted with white clouds, was such a faint blue that it looked as though it was painted in watercolor. He sat up and looked around. The Child Broiler was billowing black smoke from its massive chimneys somewhere far off in the hazy distance. The ground Tabuki sat on was moist dirt in which small flowers grew abundantly, stretching all the way to the horizon. A breeze blew soundlessly, playing across the flowers and in Tabuki’s hair.

“The Child Broiler is so far away,” he murmured.

“C’mon, let’s go home now.” Momoka once more offered her hand to the speechless Tabuki. There was no longer any trace of skin left on her hand. Even the blood that once soaked it was burnt black, her fingertips trembling faintly.

“Why...” *...would you go that far, just to save me? Doesn’t your hand hurt?* How had she infiltrated the Child Broiler, and how did she save Tabuki? Did she truly love him?

There were so many things he wanted to ask her, so instead he just closed his mouth.

“Now the two of us are a pair. I’m sure this was our destiny.” Momoka smiled with glee, looking straight at Tabuki with her big, round eyes, her expression clear.

There was no need for Tabuki to ask anymore. Her words and expression

were so frank, they sparkled. He wrapped both his hands around hers in thanks, and stood.

He could almost hear her shoulder-length hair swaying in the wind.

Tabuki set Himari on the ground, seized her arm, and pulled.

“Tabuki-san, why? The accident happened so long ago, and you said you didn’t harbor any bad feelings toward Shoma-kun and the others!” Ringo shook the door noisily. “Open this!”

Tabuki ignored her cries and began walking, dragging Himari along. A powerful wind rushed through the scaffolding, sending Himari’s long hair fluttering.

“Himari-chan!” Ringo screamed.

Himari glanced back at Ringo, breathing shallowly. Hearing the word “accident” from Ringo’s mouth shocked her. How long had Ringo known that Himari’s parents were the perpetrators of that attack? Had she still spent time with them, even knowing that fact? Did Kanba and Shoma know about this? That Ringo knew the reason why the Takakura family was burdened with such sin?

“Tabuki-san, stop! What’s the point in getting revenge now?” Ringo screamed through the doors.

Tabuki halted. “There is a point. I think it just might be the direction my destiny has been pointing me,” he said, his back still turned.

“What are you gonna do to Himari-chan?”

“You’ll see for yourself. That is *your* destiny.”

Tabuki looked across the darkening scenery. There was a tower crane constructed in the courtyard, painted in stripes of crimson red and white. From the wire extending from the end of the crane hung a gondola reminiscent of a square bird cage, constructed only of red steel beams with no roof. Another strong gust blew, sending the gondola swaying.

Tabuki shoved Himari onto the gondola and locked the door. Then he took

the controls of the crane, and the gondola rose high into the air. Himari was far out of anyone's reach.

Unable to guess what was going to happen next, Himari simply stared back at Tabuki. Her lips were parted, her long hair obscuring her view.

His gaze never leaving the caged Himari, Tabuki took out his cell phone and made a call. "Takakura Kanba, yes? I've taken your little sister. If you want her back safely, you will bring me your father, Takakura Kenzan."

Himari wanted to beg him not to involve her brothers in this, but she was too terrified to speak. Only the quiet presence of No. 3 at her feet allowed her to keep any manner of cool.

"I'll send a map. I'd suggest coming straight away. It's been sixteen years, after all. I'm already fed up with waiting." He hung up before Kanba could reply, finally breathing a small sigh. He really was tired of waiting. He had spent all this time keeping up the act of the vapid, grinning schoolteacher, hiding his true intentions even from Tokikago Yuri, but he hadn't forgotten his purpose for even a moment.

He remembered the feeling that had overtaken him when he first laid eyes on Shoma and Kanba as their teacher. Greeted with the reality that he finally had the opportunity to deliver punishment, it was a trivial matter for Tabuki to keep on acting as their teacher, instructing them with a smile. After all, it was easy for people to smile and act kindly when faced with an inferior opponent.

"Tabuki-san!"

"Yes?" Tabuki sweetly replied, finally becoming aware of Ringo's shouting.

"Their father has been missing for years. Didn't you know that?"

"I knew." This was a tedious line of questioning, as far as Tabuki was concerned.

"Then isn't it pointless to tell them to bring him here?"

"I wonder."

"So if Kanba-kun somehow brings his father here, what are you going to do?" The worst possible answer came immediately to the forefront of Ringo's

thoughts. However, his reply was a vague one.

“I’ll find out what it was that Momoka wanted me to live for.” Momoka rescued him from the Child Broiler, then left him all alone in the world. There could be no reason for her to have done so, other than for him to punish the Takakuras.

But then, did anything truly mean anything in his world?

Himari sat on the floor of the gondola like a little bird, staring at the bumpy iron sheeting beneath her. She had no idea what to think or how to feel. She had no idea where her father was, nor even whether he was alive. She couldn’t imagine that Shoma or Kanba knew his whereabouts, either.

She tried wiggling her own chilling toes inside her boots, but she felt strangely detached from her own body. It didn’t feel quite real that she was here, swaying in this gondola. Yet at the same time, it felt as though she had already been here for days.

Her visit to the craft store with Ringo, and her time in her hospital bed just before that, seemed like reveries of some distant past.

No. 3 huddled up to Himari.

“Are you cold?” she asked softly, stroking its head.

The sky was already pitch-black. She could see countless buildings, including Tokyo Tower, shining in the distance.

Ringo scanned every inch of the elevator’s interior, but it didn’t look like the doors would open from the inside. There were large gaps in the scaffolding making up the roof, and she tried as hard as she could to squeeze her way out, but her attempts were ultimately fruitless.

Had Tabuki always intended to “deliver punishment” on the members of the Takakura family? Tabuki said he was surprised to have ended up as Shoma and Kanba’s homeroom teacher, but that was probably a lie. He had probably become their teacher intentionally. Or maybe it was a cruel trick of fate that

once he happened to encounter them, all the darkness within his heart suddenly had a purpose.

Tabuki stood straight as a board, not moving a muscle as the wind howled against him, his expression unchanging. He stared at nothing in particular, thinking to himself that it was growing cold. Quite cold, in fact. He recalled the spacious living room at his and Yuri's flat, which was also a rather cold room.

Tabuki turned only slightly to look as he heard the clanging of someone running up the emergency stairs. Ringo, who sat in the elevator beside the stairs, reflexively stood up as well.

Kanba, along with Penguin No. 1, came barreling out from the stairwell, his shoulders heaving.

"Kanba-kun!" Ringo cried out.

"Where's Himari?!" he forced out, trying to steady his ragged breath. His lungs ached. No. 1 rolled on the ground, gasping, not moving for some time.

"Over there! In there!" Ringo pointed to the gondola swaying from the end of the crane. It was only then that she realized that her hands were shaking.

"Kan-chan?" Himari said softly from the gondola. She stood and clung to the rails, her face pale. The gondola swayed dramatically with her movement.

"Stop! Don't move!" Kanba shouted immediately, running toward the gondola.

"Well, hello there," came a familiar voice. Kanba turned around to see Tabuki in the shadow of the crane.

"Tabuki-sensei? Why are you...?" He stopped mid-sentence. It didn't matter who it was. Anyone who hurt Himari would pay for it. But why would Tabuki Keiju of all people be doing something like this? Kanba's face tensed, remembering the words "sixteen years" that he heard over the phone.

"Where is Takakura Kenzan?" Tabuki's voice was the same as always: quiet and somehow a little sluggish.

"He's not here. I have no idea where he is." Sweat began to form on Kanba's

hands and back, different from the kind he had from running here, and he felt the heat rush from his body as the sweat quickly dried.

“I see,” Tabuki softly replied. He looked down at the remote control in his right hand and sighed. He pushed one of the buttons, and one of the wires holding up the gondola violently snapped.

“Ahhhhhhh!” Himari let out a loud scream.

“*Himari!*” Kanba reached out toward the falling gondola, but he was too far away.

The gondola stopped, held back by the other wires. “It’s not good to lie.” Tabuki’s face was blank.

“I honestly have no idea where our father is! I don’t know! What do you want me to do about it?!”

Tabuki stared silently at Kanba’s face as the boy glared back at him.

“Tabuki-san, that’s enough! I’m going to call the police!” Ringo took out her phone and held it up. It was her only option. There was nothing else she could do to help.

“I don’t care if you do, honestly, but what does *he* think about that idea?” Tabuki uttered, looking vaguely toward Ringo.

“Stop. Don’t call the cops.” Kanba’s eyes wavered slightly.

Ringo stopped herself in mid-dial. She wondered what Kanba was doing, but at the same time she realized that she had an unexpected amount of faith in him. There had to be some reason for it.

“You see? If the police come, *I* won’t be the one who gets in trouble,” Tabuki chuckled, the corners of his mouth twisting. “I know your secret, Takakura Kanba. I know what you’ve been doing to earn all that money in order to save your sister.”

Kanba fell silent, steadying his breathing.

Instead of the police, Ringo quickly dialed Shoma’s number. There was no way that she wouldn’t tell him about this. She just prayed that he would pick up the phone. She slowly put the phone to her ear, only to hear the automated voice

of his answering service. *Idiot*, she thought, and immediately called him back.

For now, she would keep calling him, no matter if she had to do it hundreds or even millions of times.

After many calls, he finally picked up with a breathless, heavy voice. “Yes?”

“Shoma-kun!” Ringo felt like she would cry just at the sound of his voice.

Tabuki pulled a large stack of photographs out of his back pants pocket and tossed them at Kanba’s feet. The photos showed Kanba meeting up with some men in black at the station and on the train.

“You’ve been in contact with the last remnants of that group. Your father is the one in charge of said group, isn’t he?”

Kanba picked up the photos, appearing not in the least bit shaken, and tossed them down the stairs. “And just what are these supposed to prove? You’re sorely mistaken.”

Tabuki stared wordlessly at him. “I see,” he said after a moment, and pushed the button on the remote control.

Yet another of the wires snapped with a terrible sound.

The gondola careened again. Himari collapsed on the floor with a soundless scream.

“Himari!!” Kanba cried as he looked at the gondola. He whirled on Tabuki. “What are you going to do if you meet our father?” he demanded in a voice that seemed to rise from the pit of his chest.

“He’s going to finally receive his punishment. He’s going to pay the price for his sin, for what he stole from me,” Tabuki quietly replied.

“What he stole?”

“The most important person to me in the entire world was a victim of the accident. Your parents were the ones who murdered her.”

Tabuki’s phone call echoed once more in Kanba’s mind. *Sixteen years. Fed up of waiting.* Of course—Tabuki had a connection to the accident.

“Momoka was a truly special girl. If she were still here, we could have avoided so many of the senseless tragedies in this world. Momoka should have been my —no, the entire *world’s* salvation,” Tabuki said in a single breath, his face contorted into a grin.

He didn’t actually care what happened to humanity. All Tabuki wanted was to be with Momoka forever. He wanted to see her again. He wanted Momoka to be by his side, his own personal salvation. In fact, it was strange of him to bother caring about “the senseless tragedies of this world,” now that he had come this far.

Tabuki needed Momoka, and she had been taken from him. That was the only reason for doing this.

“What are you talking about?” Momoka was Ringo’s older sister’s name, wasn’t it? Kanba had no idea what Tabuki meant by avoiding tragedies if she were here, or her being some kind of savior.

“The incident your father caused was just one of those tragedies. Momoka was trying to stop it.”

Oginome Ringo’s older sister was trying to stop the accident. Kanba was puzzled at this mysterious figure, whom he knew nothing about. What on earth could this one little girl have done all on her own?

“And yet, no one was saved. Momoka vanished, leaving me behind.”

“Vanished?” Not *perished*. Vanished. Did he mean something by that word choice?

Meanwhile, Ringo was frantically whispering at Shoma over the phone. “Please, come quick!” she hissed.

“On it!” Still connected to the call, Shoma raced toward the building where Ringo and his siblings waited, listening to Ringo’s instructions as he ran.

Unable to draw her gaze away from the dangerously swaying wires, Ringo hugged her own chilled body.

“Now, let’s continue,” Tabuki said as he pressed the button again.

Another wire snapped with a great sound, and the gondola tilted further,

slipping with a terrifying jerky motion. Only one wire remained to stand between Himari and death.

“And yet, you still won’t call your father?” Tabuki looked up to see the first star of the night visible in the dark sky through the atrium.

“I’m begging you, please just stop this!” Kanba pleaded, dropping to his knees helplessly.

“Oh? What happened to all that bravado?”

“I swear, I don’t know where our father is. I really *don’t*! If I did, I...” Kanba trailed off. If he did know, then what? Would he bring him here?

“Is your sister really that important to you?” Tabuki asked, almost kindly.

“Obviously!”

“I see. Well then, I guess I’ll you’ll all be punished, then. The children will pay for the sins of the father.”

Ringo gripped the elevator door as though she was about to crumble, listening to Shoma’s violent panting as he ran. By what means did Tabuki mean to exact this “punishment”?

With a look of regret, Kanba lowered his eyes, and waited patiently for Tabuki’s next words.

A short time later, Kanba was standing by the crane, reaching out to the thick wire attached to the gondola. It looked to be twisted from countless thin metal strands. Attached to the crane itself were two large, slightly rusted pulleys, lit by the light of the moon.

“Kan-chan, stop it,” Himari softly begged, tears in her eyes.

The punishment Tabuki proposed was an incredibly simple, yet devilish one. Tabuki would cut the final wire. The gondola would drop instantaneously, Himari and all. Kanba would have to keep the gondola aloft with his own two hands. From the edge of the pulley, he would need to grip the wire and pull.

“Himari, hold on tight.” Kanba looked down at Himari, putting on a brave

face. Then he gripped the wire and held it tight with both hands.

“Kanba-kun!”

“It’s over now.” With a blank expression, Tabuki pushed the button to cut the final wire.

With the fearsome sound of countless metal strands twisting and snapping, the pulley spun forcefully, and the gondola fell.

Kanba let out a roar and flung himself upward in the blink of an eye, still gripping the wire. Penguin No. 1 flew up with him, clinging to Kanba’s back. The rope that was coiled up on the ground began slipping through his hands.

“Kan-chan!” Himari screamed as Kanba was hoisted upward, swaying unsteadily. In the now-diagonal gondola, No. 3 burrowed into Himari’s body as she huddled in the corner.

The pulley continued to spin, utterly unconcerned with Kanba’s weight. His body continued whipping upward, arms still attached to the wire. At this rate, his arms were going to end up wrapped around the upper pulley.

As he clung to the rope, Kanba pulled his lower body up, wrapping his legs around the crane and digging in his feet. The rapidly slipping gondola gave a heaving groan and stopped moving. The blood dripping from Kanba’s hands ran down his arms, splashing onto his cheeks. It was clear that even if he utilized every last tendon in his body, he was soon going to lose out to the weight of the gondola and the strength of the rope.

“Hurts, doesn’t it? I know that pain well. That’s the pain of love,” Tabuki said, shrinking back as he looked up at the groaning Kanba.

Kanba couldn’t say a word. No matter how hard he tried to endure it, the pain was growing more and more intense. If he couldn’t force even more strength into his hands and legs, he was going to lose his grip on the rope.

“So, what are you going to do? At this rate you’re going to ruin your own hands.”

“I don’t care!” Kanba shouted in a pained scream, closing his eyes tight.

“You don’t feel obligated to her in the name of *family*, do you? Come on, let

her go now, and be free. Cast aside your little sister. Just like my mother cast me aside.”

“No! I’m never letting go!” *I’m not like your mother*, Kanba thought. He would never cast Himari away.

Seeing Kanba’s stubborn resistance, Tabuki momentarily recalled a scene from the distant past: Momoka, who never let go of his hand, no matter what.

“Tabuki-san, stop this already! You don’t need revenge!”

Tabuki turned around at the sound of Ringo’s shout. Her voice was so much like Momoka’s. He was smiling, face twisted as though in tears. “I bet I’m hideous right now, aren’t I?” he asked.

Ringo felt a deep sorrow as she looked at his expression.

“Momoka worked so hard to rescue me back then,” he continued, “and here I am now, wretched to the bone. When I lost Momoka, I lost my reason to live. The man standing here before you is not the boy Momoka loved. I’m a monster, hollowed out from the inside.”

His arms drooped down, and the remote control fell to the ground.

In Ringo’s eyes, Tabuki was a horrid, pitiful monster. What would Momoka have done, in her place? If Ringo had the diary with her right now, surely there would be some hint written inside. However, Ringo was not Momoka. She couldn’t save Kanba or Himari. She could not even save Tabuki, nor could she heal those hollow parts of him.

Kanba screamed in pain.

“Kan-chan!” Himari shouted, still gripping the grate of the gondola.

“Don’t...worry about me!” Bit by bit, the wire was slipping from Kanba’s strong hands.

“Please, that’s enough already! Let go!” she pleaded with him.

“Who would ever let go?!” Kanba yelled, not noticing the cold glare Tabuki shot him.

Suddenly, Himari’s voice grew stronger. “That’s enough,” she said firmly. “It’s

okay, Kan-chan. Don't hurt yourself for me anymore. You've done enough."

"Himari." Below Kanba, Himari's face was so firm, and mature. She smiled faintly, as pale and beautiful as ever.

"I...I know. My illness is never going to be cured, is it? I know I don't have very long to live."

"What are you saying? You will be cured. I'll cure you!"

Himari lightly shook her head. "Listen, it's okay. Just know that I was happy." She steeled herself and looked at No. 3. "Sorry," she whispered, knowing she was about to plunge from this gondola alone.

"Himari! Don't!" Kanba screamed.

Himari looked straight at Tabuki, her eyes large and round. "Tabuki-san. I will accept my father's sins. So please...forgive Kan-chan and Sho-chan."

Tabuki frowned slightly, but said nothing.

"No! Stop it!"

"Thank you, Kan-chan. But from now on, you need to live for your own sake." Himari smiled gently. She chose her last words quickly. If she didn't hurry, Kanba's arms were going to be pulled into the pulley, and probably broken.

"No, that's—" Kanba said only to himself as he looked upon Himari's stalwart little face. "No. *No!*"

"And get along with Sho-chan, okay?" Slowly, she began to climb the grate, far too high for her even with the gondola's slant.

"*Stop it!!!*" Kanba screamed, his voice echoing throughout the building. "I want to live for your sake!"

If Himari died, then what was any of it for? He didn't care if his hands were shattered, or if he had to vow never to fight with Shoma again. He would never forgive Tabuki Keiju.

His hands, along with most of the rest of his body, started to go numb, and Kanba could no longer feel the pain.

As I ran up the staircase, a large crimson structure came crashing down through the nearby atrium. It plummeted through the scaffolding with a fearsome sound before colliding violently with the ground, kicking up clouds of dirt. “Himari! Aniki!” I shouted.

I continued to hurry up the stairs, almost at the final floor. When I reached the rooftop, I saw Oginome-san, standing near the staircase. “Oginome-san!”

“Why did you save them?” Oginome-san asked someone through tears. I didn’t see who she was talking to at first.

“Ringo-chan, don’t ever become like me.”

I turned at the sudden, familiar voice to see Tabuki Keiju on the elevator behind closing doors, a look of utter exhaustion on his face.

“Tabuki-san!” Oginome-san watched in shock as the elevator descended.

“Took you long enough, Shoma,” called my brother, his voice hoarse.

“Aniki!” I cried as he walked unsteadily toward me, an unconscious Himari in his blood-stained arms.

“That blood...” A shiver ran down my spine as I saw the blood soaking into Himari’s cardigan.

“I accepted the punishment. Don’t worry.” Before he could make it over to me, he collapsed to the ground, still holding Himari.

“Punishment...?” Had Tabuki done this to Kanba’s hands? I ran over to them both, staring at my brother’s trembling, bloody hands.

“What’s with that face?” Kanba smiled wryly.

“Seriously, what happened here?”

“More importantly, hurry up and call the hospital. Himari needs her—” He suddenly started coughing, and collapsed on the spot.

“*Aniki!*” I caught him on my knees.

On closer inspection, although Himari was dripping with sweat, she appeared unharmed. However, they both looked ragged, smeared with sweat and snot and blood. No matter how I shook or called to them, neither one would rouse.

Penguins No. 1 and 3 both toppled over on the spot as well, unmoving.

“Why is this happening?!” I raged at no one. I felt my insides roiling. “We never asked for any of this, did we? We just wanted... a normal...” Oginome-san clung to me as my face dripped with the tears I could not hold back. My back felt warm, and I could feel her tears soaking into my clothes.

“I’m not like that,” she insisted. “I could never hate you all!”

The powerful warmth from her arms wrapped around me slowly melted into my heart.

“I don’t think anything is pointless, even the sad and painful things. If that’s fate, then I’m sure there’s some meaning behind it. I’ll accept that, and grow stronger. So...” she said, despite how I rejected her. “Please, don’t cry.”

She was right. No matter how senseless it was, if this was our destiny, then I had to accept it and grow stronger as well. I wiped my tears on my sleeves, refusing to lie to myself anymore. I would never run from anything again. Not from my fate, nor from Oginome-san.

As Tabuki stepped out of the elevator, he found Yuri standing under a streetlight, waiting for him with a smile.

“You, huh?”

Yuri’s hair was wild, the sleeves of her blouse torn. She held her half of the diary in her left hand.

“What’s with that get-up? I invited you all the way here, only for you to miss the big show,” Tabuki said lackadaisically, eyebrows raised.

“You used me.” Yuri glared at him through sharp eyes.

“It was convenient,” Tabuki coolly replied, yet his body was exhausted, his mind hazy.

“I can’t believe you’d do something like this.” Yuri lowered her long lashes.

“Same to you. What were you planning in inviting those two out?” *You were*

thinking something along the same lines, weren't you?

Yuri furrowed her brow and bit her lip, silent.

"It turns out we really were nothing but a sham couple. Both of us just using the—"

Not caring whether Tabuki was finished speaking, Yuri smacked him across the face.

"This really sort of seems like a breakup, doesn't it?" said Tabuki. He adjusted his crooked glasses before slipping off his wedding ring, pressing it into the hand that Yuri slapped him with. "Farewell, Yuri."

As Tabuki walked away, Yuri said nothing in parting. She didn't try to follow him or even stop him.

Watching the scene from the shadows of a nearby building, Masako raked back her disheveled curls, held the front of her now-buttonless coat closed, and breathed a sigh.

"Goodness. We better crush them soon."

She slipped her right hand gently into her coat pocket, making sure the torn diary half was still there.

"Kanba. I cannot leave you in that home a moment longer." Masako narrowed her eyes, looking up at the half-constructed building from which Tabuki emerged. "Wait for me."

Author Bios

Kunihiko Ikuhara

Born December 21. Animation director. Made his directorial debut in 1993 while affiliated with Toei Animated Films (presently, Toei Animation), with *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon R*. Achieved acclaim in 1997, with the debut of *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, which he independently planned and directed. The original author of manifold novels and manga.

Kei Takahashi

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