



5 Centimeters per Second +
Children Who Chase Lost Voices

Makoto Shinkai
Asahi Akisaka
Original Story by Makoto Shinkai

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New York

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5 Centimeters per Second + Children Who Chase Lost Voices Makoto Shinkai, Asahi Akisaka

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Makoto Shinkai

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Asahi Akisaka

Yen Newsletter

5 Centimeters per Second

Makoto Shinkai

Tale of Cherry Blossoms

1

“Look, it’s almost like snow.”

It’s already been seventeen years since Akari said that to me. We’d just started sixth grade, and we were passing a small forest on our way home from school with our backpacks. It was spring, and all the cherry trees were in full bloom. Their petals drifted down silently, carpeting the asphalt under our feet and turning it pure white. The air was warm, and the sky was a clear pale blue, as if someone had dissolved blue paint in plenty of water. We were close to a major highway and the Odakyu Line, but almost none of the noise from either of those reached us. The only sound in our ears was birdsong celebrating the spring. There were no other people in sight.

It was a picture-perfect spring scene.

In my mind, at least, memories from that time feel like snapshots. Or video footage. When I revisit them, I watch who we were then from a distance, from outside the frame. A boy who’s just turned eleven, and a girl the same age who’s just about his height, in a world filled with light. In the pictures, I always see them from behind. Every time, the girl runs on ahead. I remember the faint loneliness that flickered through the boy’s heart in that moment, and even now, as an adult, it makes me just a little sad.

...But I digress. Back then, I think Akari had said that the clouds of fluttering cherry blossoms reminded her of snow. I didn’t see it, though. As far as I was

concerned, cherry blossoms were cherry blossoms. Snow only came in winter.

“Look, it’s almost like snow.”

“Huh? Really? I dunno...”

“Hmm. Well, never mind,” Akari said shortly. She spun around to face me, about two steps ahead. Her light-brown hair shone in the light from the sky, and then she made another cryptic remark.

“Five centimeters per second, they say.”

“Huh? What is?”

“What do you think?”

“No idea.”

“Then use your brain a little, Takaki.”

That was easy for her to say, but I still didn’t know, and I told her so.

“It’s how fast cherry blossoms fall,” she answered. “Five centimeters per second.”

Five centimeters per second. Something about the phrase sounded so mysterious. I was genuinely impressed. “Huh. Geez, Akari. How do you know that?”

“Hee-hee!” Akari giggled cheerfully. “There’s more where that came from. For rain, it’s five meters per second. Clouds are one centimeter per second.”

“Clouds? You mean the ones in the sky?”

“Yeah.”

“They fall, too? Aren’t they floating?”

“Nope. They’re made up of tiny raindrops, after all. Clouds only look like they’re floating because they’re so big and far away. The droplets fall slowly and get bigger and bigger, until they turn into rain or snow and come all the way down to the ground.”

“...Huh.” I was fascinated. I gazed at the sky, then looked at the cherry trees again. In Akari’s musical, delighted voice, these things seem like important

cosmic truths. Five centimeters per second.

“...Huh,” Akari mimicked, teasing me, and then she abruptly took off running.

“Hey, Akari, wait up!” Hastily, I ran after her.

* * *

Back then, Akari and I were in the habit of taking things we’d learned from books and TV, little tidbits that struck us as important—like the speed of a falling flower petal, for example, or the age of the universe, or the temperature to melt silver—and trading them with each other on the way home from school. Like squirrels gathering acorns for hibernation or travelers learning to read the stars for a sea voyage, we collected those glittering treasures scattered across the world. For whatever reason, we genuinely believed we’d need information like this later on.

Back then, Akari and I knew all sorts of different things. We knew the positions of the constellations in each season, where to go to see Jupiter, and how bright it looked from each location. We knew why the sky looks blue, why the world has seasons, the age in which the Neanderthals disappeared, and the names of the species that were lost in the Cambrian period. We were irresistibly drawn to everything that was much bigger and farther away than we were. Now, though, I’ve forgotten most of those things. All I remember is the fact that *I knew them once*.

2

The whole time Akari and I were together—the three years between fourth and sixth grades—we were two of a kind. We each had fathers who had to move frequently for work, and we’d transferred into our grade school in Tokyo. I’d arrived from Nagano in third grade, and Akari had relocated from Shizuoka in fourth grade. Even now, I remember her obvious anxiety as she stood stiffly in front of the blackboard on her first day. She wore a pale-pink dress, her hair was long, and her hands were clasped tightly in front of her. The low spring sunlight slanting through the classroom windows illuminated her from the shoulders down, leaving everything above them in shadow. Her cheeks were

flushed with nervousness, her lips were pressed together tightly, and her wide-open eyes stared straight ahead into space. I thought, *I bet I had that exact same expression a year ago*, and that instant sense of kinship pulled me to her. As a result, I think I was the one who spoke to her first. We were friends almost immediately.

Akari was the only person I could talk to about the real issues, like how our classmates who'd grown up in Setagaya looked really mature, and how it felt hard to breathe in the crowds in front of the station, and how the tap water tasted shockingly bad. We were both still small and prone to getting sick, we liked the library better than the athletic field, and gym class was agony. We both preferred having long one-on-one conversations or reading books in solitude over having fun in a noisy group. The apartment building where I lived was company housing for my dad's bank, and Akari lived in some other company housing, so we shared the route home from school part of the way. We grew to need each other quite naturally, and we spent most of our lunch breaks, afternoons, and weekends together.

Of course, our classmates ended up teasing us quite a bit. In retrospect, what they said and did was trivial, but I didn't have very thick skin back then, and every single barb hurt me deeply. Akari and I grew to need each other more and more.

Just to give you an idea—one time, I'd made a trip to the bathroom during lunch, and when I got back to the classroom, Akari was standing frozen in front of the blackboard, all alone. On the blackboard, there was a heart around our names. Typical harassment, really. Our classmates were hanging back, whispering to one another and watching Akari. She'd gone up to the board because she wanted them to stop teasing us, or maybe because she wanted to erase the graffiti, but she'd frozen in embarrassment before she could actually do it. The sight made me furious. Wordlessly, I stalked into the classroom, grabbed a blackboard eraser and scrubbed off the drawing, then grabbed Akari's hand and ran out of the room. I never thought about the implications. Behind us, our classmates erupted in shrieks and squeals, but I ignored them and kept running. My heart was pounding so violently it made me dizzy, thanks to both the bold action I'd taken and the softness of Akari's hand in mine. For

the first time, the world wasn't quite so terrifying. No matter what sort of awful things my future held—all the inevitable school transfers and tests, all the unfamiliar places and strange people—I could bear them as long as Akari was there. Even if the emotion was still too childish to call love, I clearly liked Akari, and I felt very plainly that it was mutual. Our tightly clasped hands and running feet gave me an ever-firmer sense of it. As long as we had each other, we'd have nothing to fear. I believed it with all my heart.

Those feelings only grew more certain over the three years I spent with Akari, and they never faded. We decided we'd take the entrance exam for a private middle school that was a modest distance from where we lived. We threw ourselves into our studies and spent more and more time together. I think we were both rather precocious, at least emotionally. We were well aware that we had created our own little world for ourselves, but we'd decided it was no more than the run-up for our new middle school lives. We didn't fit in with our class now, but then we'd graduate and start our new middle school life afresh with all the other students. Our world could grow then. The emotion we shared was a soft pastel now, but we hoped it would take clearer form once we were in middle school. Someday, we'd probably be able to say "I love you" right out loud. We kept our surroundings, and even each other, at arm's length, but that distance would shrink to something more appropriate. We'd get stronger now, then acquire more freedom.

Looking back, I think we may have traded knowledge so desperately back then because we each could feel the loss that was coming. We were clearly drawn to each other, we wanted to stay together forever, and yet we felt, and feared, that it might not come true. We had already transferred schools once. Maybe we were frantically trading fragments of ourselves so we would be ready when our precious counterpart was gone.

In the end, Akari and I went to different middle schools. When we were in sixth grade, one winter night, Akari called and broke the news.

We didn't talk on the phone much, and she'd called unusually late at night (although it was probably only around nine). As soon as my mom handed me the receiver and said, "It's Akari," I knew it wasn't going to be good.

"Takaki, I'm sorry." Akari's voice sounded so small over the phone. The next thing she said was something I couldn't believe, and it was the last thing I wanted to hear.

"We aren't gonna go to the same middle school," Akari told me. She said that, because of her dad's job, they would be moving to a little town in the northern Kanto region during spring break. Her voice was shaky, as if she might burst into tears at any moment. I didn't understand any of it. My body suddenly flushed hot, and the center of my head cooled like ice. I couldn't really process what Akari was saying or why she had to tell me all this.

"Huh...? But what about West Middle? We got in and everything," I finally managed.

"They said they're working it out with a public school in Tochigi... I'm sorry."

I could hear the muffled sound of cars going by on the other end of the line—Akari was in a telephone booth. I was in my room, but it was as if I could feel the cold air of the phone booth through my fingertips, and I crouched on the tatami flooring, hugging my knees. I didn't know how to respond, but I groped for something to say anyway.

"No, I mean... You don't have to apologize, but... It's just..."

"I told them I wanted to live with my aunt in Katsushika and go to school from there, but they said not until I'm older."

I could hear Akari's muffled sobs, and for an instant, there was only one thought on my mind: *I don't want to hear any more of that*. The next thing I knew, my voice had turned harsh.

"...I get it, okay?!" I cut her off, and I heard her gasp quietly. But I couldn't stop. "Just stop," I said firmly. "Stop..." By the time I said the word a second time, I was desperately fighting back tears. Why...? Why did it always turn out like this?

There was a full ten seconds of silence. Then, through her sobs, I heard Akari

say, "I'm sorry..." Still crouched down, I pressed the receiver against my ear. I couldn't take it away from my cheek; I couldn't end the call. It was obvious that my words were hurting Akari, but I couldn't help it. I hadn't yet learned how to control my feelings at times like this. Even after that last uncomfortable phone call with Akari ended, I stayed where I was, hugging my knees.

I spent the few days after that feeling awful. Akari had to be far more anxious than I was, and I was horribly ashamed of myself for not being able to say anything kind to her. Before I got my feelings sorted out, our graduation ceremony came, and that awkwardness still existed when we parted.

After the ceremony, Akari came to talk to me. "Takaki, this is good-bye, isn't it?" she said softly. Even then, I couldn't say anything else; I just looked down. *What do you want me to say?* I thought. Up until now, Akari's presence had been my only lifeline. I'd planned to start trying to grow up, but her presence was what had helped me believe I could do it.

Back then, I was still very much a kid. Some force I didn't understand was taking everything from me, and I could never believe I would come back from this. Akari was still only twelve, and she hadn't had any choice in this, but I couldn't accept the injustice of our separation. No way in hell.

* * *

Before I had recovered, the new term at my middle school began, and I had to adapt to a new, unfamiliar routine whether I wanted to or not. Alone, I went to the school Akari and I had planned to attend together. Little by little, I made new friends, and I took the plunge to join the soccer club and started getting exercise. The days were busier than they'd been in elementary school, but as far as I was concerned, that was all for the best. Spending time by myself wasn't as pleasant as it had been before. To be more honest, it was painful. I went out of my way to spend as much time with friends as I could, got right into bed after finishing my homework at night, then woke up early and threw myself into my club's morning practices.

Akari's life in her new area must have been just as busy. I hoped that she'd

gradually forget me in her new environment. In the end, I'd let her down. I thought I should forget Akari, too. Maybe our experiences transferring schools had taught us how to do it.

Just as the summer heat was beginning in earnest, a letter from Akari arrived.

When I found the pale-pink envelope in the bank of mailboxes at my building and realized that she had sent me a letter, I remember feeling more bewildered than happy. *Why now?* I thought. I'd spent half a year desperately trying to adjust to a world that didn't have Akari in it. Getting a letter would only remind me how much I missed her.

And that's just the thing. In the end, while I'd tried to forget about Akari, she'd been all I thought about. I'd made lots of friends, but every friend just reminded me of how special she'd been to me. I holed up in my room and read that letter over and over. Even in class, I stuck it between the pages of my textbook and snuck glances at it. I did it so often that I'd memorized the whole thing.

Dear Takaki Tohno— That was how the letter began, in Akari's neat, familiar handwriting.

It's been a long time since we last spoke. How are you? Summers here are hot, too, but much more pleasant than in Tokyo. Looking back, though, I liked those humid Tokyo summers. The asphalt would get so hot I expected it to melt, and the skyscrapers would shimmer like a mirage in the heat, and the air conditioning in the department stores and subways was always too cold.

Among the oddly mature-sounding words, she'd drawn little pictures (suns and cicadas and buildings), and I felt as if I could see her growing from a girl into an adult. It was a short letter; she only talked about what she'd been up to lately. How she rode a four-car train to the public middle school, how she'd joined the basketball club to build up her strength, and how she'd decided to cut her hair to keep it out of her face. How it all made her nervous, too. She

didn't write anything about missing me, and the letter made it sound as though she was adjusting to her new life well. Still, I sensed that Akari definitely was lonely and that she did want to see me and talk to me. Otherwise, she wouldn't have written a letter. Those feelings were exactly like mine.

After that, we began writing about a letter a month to each other. Corresponding with Akari seemed to make life a lot easier. Like when a class was boring, I was able to name the feeling. After I'd been separated from Akari, I just accepted the rigorous soccer practices and customary hazing, but now I was able to identify how painful those things were—and strangely, that made it all much easier to bear. We didn't talk about our everyday gripes and complaints in our letters, but the feeling that there was one person in the world who understood made us both stronger.

In that way, the summer of our first year in middle school passed, and so did autumn, and then winter came. I turned thirteen. In the past few months, I'd grown a full seven centimeters; I'd put on some muscle, and I didn't catch colds as easily anymore. It felt like the distance between me and the world had shrunk to an appropriate distance. Akari would have turned thirteen, too. Sometimes I'd see the girls in my class in their uniforms, and I'd wonder what she looked like now. In one of her letters, she wrote that she wanted to look at cherry blossoms with me again, the way we'd done in grade school. She said there was a really big cherry tree near her house. *In spring, I bet the petals fall at five centimeters per second*, she wrote.

After I started my third term, I found out I'd be transferring schools.

We were moving during spring break. Our destination was Kagoshima—not the part on Kyushu proper, but on an island off the coast of Kyushu. It would take about two hours to get there by plane from Haneda Airport. It sounded like the far edge of the world to me. By then, though, I was used to changes in my life, so I wasn't too upset. The problem was the distance between Akari and me. We hadn't met face-to-face since the beginning of middle school, but now

that I thought about it, we hadn't been all that far apart. You could get from Akari's town in the northern Kanto area to the part of Tokyo where I lived in about three hours, if you were willing to switch trains a few times. Come to think of it, we could have visited each other on the weekends. If I moved to a town in the distant south, though, any possibility of seeing Akari would be gone.

So I wrote to Akari and told her I wanted to see her before I moved. I suggested some times and places, and her response arrived promptly. We both had third-term finals, I had to get ready for the move, and she was busy with club activities, so the time that worked for both of us ended up being an evening after class at the end of the term. I checked the train schedules, and we decided to meet at the station near Akari's house at seven in the evening. If I skipped club and left right after class, I'd be able to make it by then, spend a couple of hours talking to Akari, then take the last train back home to the city. As long as I managed to get back at some point that day, I'd have no trouble finding an excuse to give my parents. I'd have to transfer from the Odakyu Line to the Saikyo Line, then the Utsunomiya Line, and then the Ryomo Line, but since I'd be traveling on regular trains the whole time, the roundtrip fare would only be about thirty-five hundred yen. That wasn't a minor expense for a middle schooler, but there was nothing I wanted more than to see Akari.

There were still two weeks left until our rendezvous, so I took plenty of time to compose a letter to hand her. It was probably the first love letter I'd ever written. I wrote about the future I dreamed of, influential books and music, and how special Akari was to me. Maybe the way I expressed my emotions was still artless and childish, but I wrote them down as honestly as I could. Now, I don't remember what I wrote in much detail, but I think it took up about eight sheets of stationery. Back then, there were so many details I wanted to tell Akari, things I wanted her to know. I thought, if she just read that letter, I could survive Kagoshima. The letter held fragments of my current self that I wanted Akari to have.

During the days I spent writing that letter, I dreamed about Akari several times.

In those dreams, I was a small, swift bird. I slipped through the nighttime heart of the city and its web of power lines, flapping my wings, racing up to the sky above the buildings. I flew hundreds of times faster than I could run around the athletic field, and my avian body was buzzing with the elation of a journey to see the most precious person in the world. As I watched, the ground fell away. In the strong night wind, the dense lights of the streets twinkled like stars, and the lines of traffic looked like pulsing arteries and veins. Before long, I was through the cloud cover, flying above a moonlit sea of white. The pale, transparent light illuminated the cloud peaks dully, as if I were on another planet. I could go anywhere in the world, as far as I wanted; my feathered body was brimming with joy. In the blink of an eye, I was near my destination. In high spirits, I dived steeply, watching the land where she lived speeding by below me. I could see farm fields and rice paddies rolling far into the distance; the roofs of sparse houses, human habitation; and a moving line of light that wound its way through the dense forests growing here and there. A train. I was sure I was on that train. Then I saw her, waiting on the station platform, all by herself. She was sitting on a bench, with her hair cut short and tucked behind her ears, and near her, there was a big cherry tree. It wasn't blooming yet, but I could sense the captivating riot of emotion that slept beneath its hard bark. Sensing me, the girl looked up, into the sky. I'd see her soon. Soon...

3

It rained on the day we'd promised to meet, starting in the morning. The sky was solid gray, as if someone had covered it with a tight lid, and fine, cold raindrops dripped straight down. Spring had been on its way in, but this was like it had had a change of heart and turned back. That day smelled like deep winter. I pulled a dark-brown duffle coat on over my school uniform, put the letter to Akari in the bottom of my school bag, then left for school. Since I was planning to get home around midnight, I left a note for my parents, telling them I'd be out late but not to worry. They didn't know Akari's parents anyway, and even if I'd told them about the situation beforehand, I didn't think they'd have let me go.

I spent all my classes that day gazing restlessly out the window. Nothing from

the lessons stuck with me. I imagined Akari, who was probably in her school uniform, and the conversation we'd probably have. I thought of her pleasant voice. I hadn't really recognized it when we were together, but I realized I loved her voice. I liked *the vibration of it in the air*. It always brushed my ears gently, softly. The thought that I'd hear it again soon made my whole body glow with heat, and every time it did, I gazed out the window at the rain to cool it down again.

Rain.

Five meters per second. Even though it was daytime, the world outside the classroom was gloomy, and lights were on in most of the windows in the buildings and condos. On the landing of a distant apartment building, a fluorescent light was almost dead, and it flickered from time to time. As I watched, the raindrops gradually grew larger, and by the time class was over for the day, the rain had turned to snow.

After school, once I'd checked to make sure none of my classmates were around, I took the letter and the memo out of my bag. I hesitated a little, then put the letter in my coat pocket. I wanted to give it to Akari, no matter what, and I'd feel safer if it was in a place where my fingertips could always find it. The memo was a list of train transfers and boarding times; I read through it again, for the zillionth time.

First, at 3:54, I'd take the Odakyu Line from Gotokuji Station to Shinjuku. Then I'd transfer to the Saikyo Line, ride it to Omiya, transfer to the Utsunomiya Line, and ride that to Oyama. Then I'd transfer to the Ryomo Line and reach my destination—Iwafune Station—at six forty-five. I was supposed to meet Akari there at seven, so the timing would be perfect. I'd never taken such a long train trip on my own before, but I told myself it was going to be fine. It would be okay; none of this was hard.

I ran down the gloomy school stairs, stopping at my shoe locker in the entryway to change into my outdoor shoes. When I opened the metal door, the *clank* echoed loudly in the deserted entry hall. That alone was enough to make my pulse speed up a bit. Deciding to leave the umbrella I'd brought that

morning, I went out through the main entrance and looked at the sky. The air had smelled like rain that morning, but now it smelled like snow. The scent was sharper and more transparent, stirring something restless in my heart. As I watched the myriad fragments of white drifting down from the gray clouds, I started imagining myself being drawn up into the sky. Hastily pulling up my hood, I ran to the station.

* * *

It was the first time I'd ever been to Shinjuku Station on my own. The place was almost foreign to me, but I did remember coming all the way to Shinjuku several months back, to see a movie with a friend from class. My friend and I had taken the Odakyu Line to this station, and when we'd gone through the JR East Gate ticket barrier and tried to get up to ground level, we'd gotten really lost. The complexity and confusion of the station had left a much bigger impression on me than the movie had.

I left through the Odakyu Line ticket gate, carefully stopped and looked for a directory sign so I wouldn't get lost, then followed the arrows toward JR Ticket Sales, walking quickly through an enormous hall full of pillars toward a bank of dozens of ticket machines.

I joined a line that looked a little shorter than the rest, waiting for my turn to buy a ticket. The lady in front of me looked like an office worker; I caught the faint, sweet scent of her perfume, and for some reason, it sparked a sad, painful feeling in my chest. When the next line over moved, I caught the pungent scent of mothballs on the coat of an elderly man beside me, summoning that vague anxiety I felt whenever we moved someplace new. The voices of all those people merged into a low roar echoing around the underground space. The snow-wet toes of my shoes felt a little cold. My head swam a bit.

When it was my turn to buy a ticket, the absence of buttons on the machine confused me. (Back then, almost all station ticket machines were the push-button type.) I stole a glance at my neighbor and saw that I just had to touch the screen directly to select the appropriate ticket.

I went through the automatic ticket gate and into the station itself. Keeping a

careful eye on the platform directory signs, which stood in ranks as far as I could see, I wove through the crowd, making for the Saikyo Line platforms. I passed a multitude of platforms: YAMANOTE LINE OUTER LOOP, SOBU LINE BOUND FOR NAKANO, YAMANOTE LINE INNER LOOP, SOBU LINE BOUND FOR CHIBA, CHUO LINE RAPID TRANSIT, CHUO MAIN LINE LIMITED EXPRESS... On the way, I spotted a station directory map, stopped, and examined it closely. The Saikyo Line platforms were at the very back. I took the memo out of my pocket and checked the time on my watch (a black G Shock I'd been given when I started middle school). My train left Shinjuku at 4:26. The digital display on my watch read four fifteen. I'd be fine; I had plenty of time.

I found a bathroom and went in, just in case. I'd be spending about forty minutes on the Saikyo Line, so I thought I should probably do my business first. As I washed my hands, I saw my reflection in the mirror. There I was, under the bleached-out fluorescent lights, on the other side of the dirty glass. I'd grown in the past six months, and I probably looked a little more mature. My cheeks were faintly red, either from excitement or from the cold, and it embarrassed me. I was on my way to meet Akari.

The Saikyo Line train was getting crowded with people going home, and I couldn't find a seat. Copying a few other people, I leaned against the wall at the very back of the train, looking at the weekly magazine headlines on the advertisements, gazing out the window, and occasionally stealing glances at other passengers. My eyes were restless, and so was my mood. I didn't feel like getting out the sci-fi novel I'd brought along, either. A high school girl had snagged a seat, and she was talking with a friend who stood in front of her. I caught snippets of their conversation. They both wore loose socks and short skirts, showing their slim legs.

"What did you think of that guy earlier?"

"Who?"

"You know, the one from North High?"

"Him? Ew, nobody would go for him."

“Aw, that’s not true. I like guys like him.”

I thought they were probably talking about a boy they’d met at a party. I wasn’t the one they were talking about, but for some reason, I was kind of embarrassed. I looked out the window, touching the letter in my coat pocket to reassure myself that it was there. The train had been traveling on an elevated track for a while now. I’d never been on this route before. The sound of the train and the way it rocked were both subtly different from my Odakyu Line, my anxiety about traveling to a new place increased. The weak winter sun tinted the sky near the horizon pale orange, and the ground was jam-packed with buildings as far as I could see. The snow was still falling. We were probably out of Tokyo and into Saitama by now. The cityscape looked far flatter than the one I was used to. The ground was covered with midsize buildings and condominiums.

At a station along the way called Musashi-Urawa, we stopped to let a rapid train go by. A voice came through the speakers and announced, “*Passengers who are in a hurry to reach Omiya, please transfer on the opposite side of the platform,*” and about half the people on the train hustled out of the car and lined up on that side. I joined the end of the line. In the low western sky, which was caught between dozens of elevated railway tracks and the thick layer of still-falling snow, the small setting sun peeked out from occasional breaks in the clouds. The hundreds of roofs reflected the pale light. As I gazed at the view, I suddenly remembered that I had been here before, a long time ago.

Oh right—this wasn’t my first time on this route after all.

Just before I started third grade, when we’d moved from Nagano to Tokyo, I’d boarded a train at Omiya with my parents and taken it to Shinjuku. This view had been completely different from the familiar rural scenery of Nagano, and I’d been swamped by anxiety watching it stream by outside the window. The idea that I’d be living here from now on, in a place with nothing but buildings as far as the eye could see, worried me so much I almost cried. Even so, five years later, *I’d managed to survive this far*. I was still just thirteen, but that thought was what crossed my mind. It wasn’t melodramatic, just the truth. Akari had

saved me. I hoped fervently that I'd done the same for her.

While it wasn't as big as Shinjuku, Omiya was also an enormous terminal station. I left the Saikyo Line, climbed a long stairway, and headed through the station crowds to the Utsunomiya Line platform to make my transfer. The scent of snow was even more intense inside, and the shoes of the milling crowd were soggy with snowmelt. The Utsunomiya Line platform overflowed with returning commuters, and there were long lines waiting in the spots where the train doors would be. I stood by myself, away from the lines of people, and waited for the train. Even if I joined a line, I wouldn't get a seat this time, either. —And then my anxiety started to return. It took me a moment to realize that the feeling had been caused by a station announcement.

“Attention, passengers. Due to the snow, the Utsunomiya Line train bound for Oyama and Utsunomiya is running approximately eight minutes behind schedule,” the announcement said.

Up until that moment, I hadn't even considered the possibility that the trains would be delayed. I checked the memo and my watch again. According to my note, I was supposed to board the 5:04 train, but it was already 5:10. The temperature suddenly felt much colder, and I shivered. Two minutes later, with a long, echoing whistle, the train's light streamed in, but even then, the chill didn't fade.

* * *

The Utsunomiya Line was even more crowded than the Odakyu or Saikyo lines had been. Everyone was finishing up their work or studies and heading home. The train car was much older than the others I'd ridden in that day, with box-type seats that held four people. It reminded me of the local line back in Nagano. I held on to a seat grip with one hand, put my other hand into my coat pocket, and stood in the aisle. The heater was on, and the car was warm; the windows were fogged, and all four corners were thick with water droplets. Everyone was limp, tired, and quiet, fitting in well under the fluorescent lights. I felt as if I was the only one who didn't fit in, and in an attempt to cancel out a

little of that dissonance, I held my breath and gazed steadily out the window at the flowing scenery.

The landscape held very few buildings now, and the endless fields were completely covered in snow. Far away in the darkness, I could see the lights of houses, sparse and twinkling. A row of huge steel towers with blinking red lamps ran all the way to a distant mountain peak, spaced at regular intervals. Their enormous black silhouettes looked like a line of ominous giant soldiers stationed on a snowfield. This was a truly unfamiliar world.

As I gazed at that landscape, I thought about the timing to meet Akari. If I ended up arriving late, I had no way of letting her know. Back then, cell phones weren't ubiquitous enough for middle schoolers to have, and I didn't know Akari's home phone number. Outside the window, the snow fell harder and harder.

Ordinarily, it would have taken an hour to reach Oyama Station, where I'd make my next transfer, but the train crawled along, falling further behind schedule. The distance between stations was so much longer compared to the urban lines, and the train spent an incredibly long time at each station. Every time it did, the same announcement played in the train: *"Attention, passengers. Because later trains are delayed, we will remain at this station for a short while. We apologize for the delay at this inopportune time. Thank you for your patience..."*

I checked my watch again and again, praying that it wouldn't be seven o'clock yet. But time kept steadily ticking by, although the distance grew no shorter. Every time I looked, a dull, pulsing ache ran through me, like an invisible force squeezing me. It was like the air was a cage that was getting smaller and smaller.

At this point, I'd never make it.

When seven o'clock came around, the train hadn't even made it to Oyama Station. We were stopped at Nogi, two stations away. After I transferred at Oyama, Iwafune Station—where Akari was waiting—was another twenty minutes away. For the two hours I'd spent on this train since Omiya, anxiety and despair had kept my emotions electrified and tense. These had been the

longest, hardest hours of my life. If you asked me whether the train car was cold or hot, I couldn't have answered. All I could feel was the late-night scent that drifted in the car and the emptiness of my own stomach. I hadn't eaten anything since lunch. The next thing I knew, there were just a few people in the car, and I was the only one standing up. I dropped heavily into a nearby empty box seat. Immediately, a dull numbness spread through my legs, and fatigue welled up from the depths of my body, seeping through my skin. Everything in me had been unnaturally tense, and I hadn't been able to let go. I took Akari's letter out of my coat pocket and stared at it. The time we'd promised to meet had passed, and by now, I was sure she was starting to get nervous. I remembered my last phone conversation with her. *Why does it always turn out like this?*

After that, we spent another fifteen minutes at Nogi, and then the train began to move again.

* * *

When we finally reached Oyama, it was after 7:40. I left that train and ran to the Ryomo Line platform to transfer. My memo was useless now, and I balled it up and tossed it into a garbage can on the platform.

The Oyama Station building was big, but there weren't many people in it. After I'd run through the station, I saw a space like a lobby plaza. It had a stove in its center, and several people sat huddled around it in chairs.

They might have been waiting for family members to come pick them up. They blended into this scenery naturally. I was the only one driven forward.

To get to the Ryomo Line platform, I had to go down some stairs and through a sort of underground corridor. The ground was plain bare concrete; thick, square cement pillars stood at regular intervals, and pipes crawled across the ceiling, twisting together. The platform was sandwiched between two rows of pillars, with both sides open to the elements, and the low moan of the snowstorm echoed through it. Pale fluorescent lights vaguely illuminated the almost tunnel. The shutters on the kiosk were closed tightly. I felt as if I'd wandered into the wrong place, but a few other people were waiting on the

platform for the train. There was a vending machine next to a small stand-and-eat soba stall, and its yellow light looked marginally warmer than anything else here. On the whole, the place seemed very chilly.

“Due to the snow, the Ryomo Line is running significantly behind schedule. We apologize to our passengers. Please continue to wait for the train.” An impassive announcement echoed over the platform. I pulled up the hood of my coat, trying to block out the cold just a little more, then leaned against a concrete pillar to get out of the wind. Sharp, cold air seemed to crawl up me from the concrete below my feet. Between the anxiety of keeping Akari waiting, the frigid weather leeching my body heat, and the stabbing pain in my stomach, I was beyond tense. I could see two office workers eating soba at the counter of the soba stall. I considered getting some for myself, but then I thought that Akari might be going hungry while she waited for me. I couldn’t just eat on my own. I decided I’d get a hot can of coffee, at least, and I walked over to the vending machine. When I took my wallet out of my coat pocket, the letter I was planning to give Akari fell out.

Looking back, even if all that hadn’t happened, I don’t know whether I would have given her the letter. Either way, I don’t think much would have changed. After all, our lives consisted of so many things, and that letter was just one of them. In the end, no matter how intense my feelings were, they would have changed, slowly, over that long span of time. Whether I’d given her the letter or not.

When I took out my wallet, the letter fell, and in that moment, a gust of wind snatched it away. In the blink of an eye, it had blown off the platform and vanished into the dark. I very nearly burst into tears, but I looked down, gritting my teeth, and managed hold them back. I didn’t buy any coffee.

* * *

In the end, the Ryomo Line train I was on stopped completely about halfway to its destination. *“Due to the effects of the snow on the schedule, the train will stop here,”* the onboard announcement said. *“We understand that you are in a*

hurry, and we apologize, but there is currently no estimated time when service will be restored." Outside my window, a dark snowfield seemed to roll on forever, and the blustering blizzard rattled the window frames. I had no idea why we had to stop out here in the middle of nowhere. When I looked at my watch, it was already two full hours past the time we'd said we'd meet. How many hundreds of times had I checked that watch today? The thought of seeing any more time tick by made me sick, and I took off the watch and put it on the small table attached to the wall, under the window. It was hopeless. All I could do was pray that the train would start moving again soon.

Takaki, how are you? Akari had written in her letter. *I have to get up early for my club, so I'm writing this letter on the train.*

For some reason, when I visualized Akari from her letters, she was always alone. And now I was the same. I had quite a few friends at school, but this was the real me—sitting all alone in a train car, his face hidden by his hood. The heat had to be on, but the interior of this four-car train, with its sparse scattering of passengers, was an incredibly cold place. It was the most horrible moment of my life. Sitting in the big box seat, I curled up into a tight ball, gritted my teeth, and did my best not to cry. The time felt like hatred itself, and all I could do was hunker down and weather it. When I thought of Akari waiting for me, all alone in a cold train station, and imagined how forlorn she must feel, I felt like I'd go crazy. I desperately hoped that she'd gone home.

But Akari was definitely waiting.

I knew she was, and the conviction hurt me and filled me with sadness. Outside the window, the snow wouldn't stop falling.

4

By the time the train finally started moving again, more than two hours had passed. I reached Iwafune Station after eleven at night, over four hours past the time we'd promised to meet. Back then, that hour was the dead of night. When I stepped down onto the platform, my shoes sank deep into fresh snow with a soft crunching noise. The wind had died, and flakes of snow fell slowly and silently down from the sky. The platform I was standing on didn't have a wall or

a fence or anything along it, and a snowfield that went on as far as I could see came right up to its side. The lights of the town were distant and sparse. It was very quiet; all I could hear was the noise of the idling train's engine.

I crossed a small pedestrian bridge and slowly walked to the ticket gate. From the bridge, I'd been able to see the town in front of the station. Only a handful of houses had lights in them, and the whole place seemed silent, hemmed in by the snow. At the gate, I gave my ticket to the station worker, then went into the wooden main building. The waiting room was just past the ticket gate. The moment I stepped inside, warm air and the nostalgic scent of a kerosene stove enveloped me, and a hot lump worked its way up from the depths of my chest. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to ride it out. Then I opened them again. A lone girl was sitting in a chair in front of the kerosene stove, her head drooped.

The slender girl wore a white coat, and at first, she looked like a stranger. I walked over to her and called to her: "Akari." My voice was hoarse, as if it belonged to someone I didn't know. A little startled, the girl raised her head, slowly, and looked at me.

It was Akari. Her large eyes were filled with tears, and the outer corners were red. She looked more grown up than she had a year ago, and her face reflected the stove's yellow glow softly. She seemed more beautiful than any girl I'd ever seen. An ache I couldn't put into words ran through me, as if someone had gently brushed a finger across my heart. I'd never felt this sensation before. I couldn't look away. As I watched, the tears in Akari's eyes grew larger and larger, and the sight seemed like something sacred to me. Akari caught the hem of my coat with her hands and squeezed it tightly, pulling me one step closer to her. As her white hand clutched my coat, a teardrop fell onto it. The moment I saw it, a mass of feelings I couldn't choke back welled up again, and the next thing I knew, I was crying. The tub of boiling water on the stove bubbled softly in the small station.

* * *

Akari had brought a thermos of tea and a homemade box lunch. We sat side by side in the chairs in front of the stove, with the wrapped box lunch right between us. I drank the tea Akari handed me. It was still plenty hot, and it had a

very aromatic flavor.

“This is delicious,” I said, and I meant it.

“Really? It’s just regular *hojicha*.”

“*Hojicha*? I’ve never had it before.”

“You’re kidding! You must have!” Akari said. Even so, I was convinced this was the first time I’d ever had tea this good. “I’m not so sure...,” I told her.

“I am!” She seemed to find the whole thing very funny.

Like her body, Akari’s voice seemed more grown-up than I remembered. Her tone was a mixture of gentle teasing and slight bashfulness, and as I listened to her, my body gradually grew warm again.

“Also, here,” Akari said, unwrapping the lunch and taking the lids off two plastic containers. One had four big rice balls in it, and the other held lots of colorful side dishes. Mini hamburger steaks, sausages, rolled omelets, cherry tomatoes, broccoli—all arranged neatly in pairs.

“I made it, so there’s no guarantee it’ll taste good...,” Akari said. As she spoke, she folded the cloth the containers had been wrapped in, setting it down beside her. “But please help yourself, if you want to.” She sounded a little self-conscious.

“...Thanks,” I finally managed. Something hot was welling up in my chest again. The fact that I was so quick to cry embarrassed me, and I desperately fought back the tears. Remembering I’d been hungry, I hastily added, “I was seriously starving!”

Akari smiled happily.

The rice ball was heavy, and I opened my mouth wide and took a big bite. As I chewed, I worried my tears would finally spill over, and I looked down and swallowed so that Akari wouldn’t notice. I’d never eaten anything so good.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” I told her honestly.

“Oh, you’re exaggerating.”

“I mean it!”

“I’m sure it’s because you were hungry.”

“I dunno about that...”

“I do. I’ll have some, too,” Akari said cheerfully, picking up a rice ball.

After that, we spent a while working our way through the food. Both the hamburger steaks and the rolled omelets were especially good. When I told her so, Akari gave an embarrassed little smile, but she still sounded rather proud when she said, “I stopped by my house after school and made it... I had to get some help from my mom, though.”

“What did you tell her when you left?”

“I left a note saying I didn’t know what time I’d be back, but I’d definitely come home, so please don’t worry.”

“That’s what I did, too. I bet your mom is worrying anyway, though.”

“Hmm... I’m sure it’ll be okay. When I was making the lunch, she asked me who I was giving it to, and I smiled. She looked kind of happy. I bet she understands.”

I was curious about what exactly she “understood,” but I couldn’t bring myself to ask, so I chewed my rice ball instead. The rice balls were generously portioned, and having two each filled our stomachs nicely. I was left feeling very satisfied.

The small waiting room was illuminated by a dim yellow glow, and our knees that we’d turned toward the kerosene stove were toasty warm. By then, we weren’t paying any attention to the time; we drank the *hojicha* and chatted as much as we wanted. Neither of us even considered going home. We hadn’t confirmed it aloud, but we each understood that that was what the other was thinking. We both had so much we wanted to say that we’d never manage to get it all out. We expressed how lonely we’d been over this past year—not out loud, but we kept letting the other know implicitly how hard it was to be alone and how much we’d longed to see each other.

When the station worker knocked softly on the waiting room’s glass door, it

was already midnight.

“I’m about to close up the station. There won’t be any more trains tonight, you know.”

It was the elderly station employee who’d taken my ticket. I thought he might be mad at us, but he was smiling. “You look like you’re having a good time, and I didn’t want to interrupt,” he said kindly, in a voice that had a slight regional accent. “I do have to close up, though. It’s the rules. Be careful on your way home in all this snow.”

We thanked him and left the station.

The town of Iwafune was covered with a thick blanket of snow. The flakes were still falling straight down, but strangely, the late-night world wasn’t cold anymore, even caught as it was between the snow in the sky and the snow on the ground. We walked over the fresh snow, side by side, feeling oddly exhilarated. I was several centimeters taller than Akari now, and the thought made me very proud. The pale streetlamps illuminated circles of snow ahead of us, like spotlights. Akari ran toward them cheerfully, and I was captivated by the sight of her back. It looked far more grown-up than the one I remembered.

Akari took me to see the cherry tree she’d written about in an earlier letter. It was only about ten minutes from the station on foot, but that put us in a wide tract of farmland, with no houses in sight. There was no artificial light anywhere at that point, and we could just barely see by snow light. The whole landscape shone faintly. It was so beautiful, like the careful, exquisite handiwork of someone unseen.

The cherry tree stood all by itself, beside a footpath that ran between rice paddies. It was magnificent, thick and tall. We stood under it together, looking at the sky. It was pitch-black, and snow drifted soundlessly down from it, filtering through the interlaced branches.

“Look, it’s almost like snow,” Akari said.

“Yeah, it is,” I responded. I got the feeling I’d seen her watching me and smiling beneath a cherry tree in full bloom.

That night, under the cherry tree, Akari and I shared our first kiss. It happened very naturally.

In the moment our lips touched, I felt as if I understood where things like eternity and hearts and souls resided. I thought we'd managed to share everything of the thirteen years we'd been alive with each other—but the sadness of the next instant was almost unbearable.

After all, I didn't know where I should take Akari's warmth, or her soul, or how I should handle them. Akari's precious everything was *here*, and yet I didn't know what to do with it. I knew that we still wouldn't be able to stay together forever. Boundless time and enormous lives lay ahead of us.

Although that unease gripped me for a moment, it slowly melted away, until all that remained was the sensation of Akari's lips. The softness and warmth was like nothing I'd ever known. It was a truly special kiss. Even now, looking back, I've never had another kiss so full of delight and purity and intensity.



We ended up spending the night in a little shed beside a field. The wooden shed had all sorts of farm tools in it, and Akari and I pulled an old blanket off a shelf, removed our wet coats and shoes, wrapped ourselves in the blanket, and talked for a long time in whispers. Akari had been wearing a sailor suit under her coat, and I was in my school uniform. Even though we were wearing our uniforms, right now, we weren't lonely, and that filled me with joy.

While we talked, under the blanket, our shoulders touched from time to time, and every so often, Akari's soft hair brushed my cheek or neck. Every time, the sensation and the sweet scent sent a thrill through me, but her body heat was already all I could handle. When Akari spoke, her breath stirred my bangs gently, and mine softly stirred her hair. Outside, the clouds gradually thinned, and every so often, moonlight shone in through the thin glass window, filling the shed with a mystical light. While we were still talking, we fell asleep.

When we woke, it was six in the morning, and the snow had stopped. We

drank some of the *hojicha*, which was still faintly warm, then put on our coats and walked to the station. The sky was perfectly clear. The sun, which had just risen above the ridgeline, made the snowy countryside sparkle and shine; the whole world overflowed with dazzling light.

This early on a Saturday morning, we were the only passengers on the platform. As the orange and green Ryomo Line train pulled in, the sunlight poured down over it, gleaming and glinting off the cars. The doors opened; I stepped onto the train, then turned around and looked at Akari, who was standing on the platform right in front of me. The buttons of her white coat were undone, and her sailor uniform peeked through the gap. This was Akari at thirteen.

Oh right, I realized. We'll be on our own from now on. We both have to go back home alone.

Even though we'd talked so much only a short while ago, even though we'd felt so close, our parting came abruptly. I had no idea what to say at a moment like this, so I stayed silent. It was Akari who spoke first.

"Um, Takaki?"

All I could manage was a questioning noise that might have been a response or a breath.

"Takaki...", Akari said again. She looked down. Behind her, the snowfield glittered in the morning sun, almost like a lake, and I noticed how beautiful she was against that background. As if she'd made up her mind, Akari raised her head, looked me straight in the eye, and continued.

"Takaki, you're going to be just fine. I'm sure you will!"

"Thanks...", I said with difficulty, and immediately after that, the train doors began to shut. *No, not like this. This isn't right.* I had to say something more profound, more concrete. I yelled with everything I had, so that she'd be able to hear me even through those closed doors.

"You take care, too, Akari! I'll write! I'll call you!"

In that moment, I thought I heard a bird cry sharply, far away. The train began to roll, and we each set our right hands on the glass, matching them to each

other. They slipped apart immediately, but for a moment, they had overlapped.

On the train home, I stayed there, in front of the door, for a very long time.

I hadn't told Akari I'd written her a long letter and then lost it. Partly because I was sure we'd meet again someday and also because, after that kiss, it felt as if everything about the world had changed.

Standing in front of the door, I softly set my hand over the spot on the glass that Akari had touched.

"I'm sure you're going to be just fine," she'd said.

It was a strange feeling, as if she'd made an accurate guess about something, although even I had no idea what that "something" was. At the same time, I had a feeling that someday, in the far distant future, those words of Akari's would give me a very important kind of strength.

Right now, though, I thought, I just want the strength to protect her.

I kept gazing out the window, and that desire was the only thing in my mind.

Cosmonaut

1

The morning sun hangs just a little above the horizon, striking blinding reflections off the surrounding water. The sky is a flawless blue, the water is warm against my skin, and my body feels practically weightless. Right now, I'm floating in a sea of light, all alone. At times like this, I can believe I'm something really special—and just a little lucky... Even though, right now, I've got lots of problems.

Maybe I'm too easygoing, and I'm too quick to believe I'm lucky. Maybe that's where all my problems come from, I think, but still, I cheerfully start paddling toward the next wave. The ocean is so incredibly pretty in the morning: the smooth motion of the wave as it gradually builds, the complex colors I can't put into words. As I gaze at it, enraptured, I try to make the board I'm riding skim over the face of the roller. I feel myself being buoyed up, and I start to stand, then immediately lose my balance and tumble under the wave. I messed up again. I got a little seawater up my nose, and the backs of my eyes sting.

Problem one: In the past six months, I haven't successfully caught a single wave.

At the back of the parking lot (actually just an open space full of weeds) that's one step up from the beach, screened by some tall plants, I strip off my skintight rash guard, then my swimsuit. Naked, I spray tap water from the hose over my head, briskly dry off, then change into my school uniform. There's nobody around. The stiff sea wind feels good on my flushed skin. My hair is so short it doesn't reach my shoulders, and it dries in no time. The morning sun

throws strong shadows from the weeds onto my white sailor blouse. I always love the ocean, but mornings in this season are a particular favorite of mine. If this were winter, the moment when I got out of the ocean and changed clothes would be the hardest one.

As I'm applying lip balm to soothe the dryness, I hear my big sister drive up in her Honda minivan, and I grab my surfboard and sports bag, heading over to the car. My sister is wearing a red tracksuit as she opens the driver's side window and calls to me.

"How did it go, Kanae?"

She's pretty, with long, perfectly straight hair—she's calm; she's smart. She's also a high school teacher, eight years older than me, and a long time ago, I didn't like her very much. When I think back and analyze why—if I had to say, it was because I was vague and ordinary, while my big sister was gorgeous. I had a complex about her.

I like her now, though. By the time she graduated from college and came back to the island, I genuinely looked up to her. If she wore something cute, instead of a dowdy tracksuit, she'd look much, much prettier. If she was too beautiful, though, she might draw too much attention on a little island like ours.

"No luck today, either. The wind was offshore the whole time, but even then." As I answer, I'm putting my surfboard in the trunk.

"Well, just take it slow. Are you coming back again after school?"

"Yeah, I want to. Will that work for you, Sis?"

"Sure. Make sure you study, too, though."

"I will!"

Responding loudly to shut her up, I head over to my bike, which is parked in a corner of the lot. It's an old, school-designated Honda Super Cub, a hand-me-down from my sister. There aren't any trains on this island, and not many buses, either, so most high schoolers get their bike licenses as soon as they turn sixteen. Bikes are handy, and riding around the island feels good, but you can't carry a surfboard on a bike, so when I go to the ocean, my sister always brings the car over for me. From here, we'll go to school together. I'll be taking classes,

and she'll be teaching them. As I turn the ignition key, I check my watch. It's seven forty-five. Yes, it'll be all right. I'm sure he's still practicing. I set off on the Cub, following my sister's car, leaving the coast behind.

I started bodyboarding in my freshmen year of high school, due to my sister's influence, and on the very first day, I completely caught the surfing bug. My sister had been in the surfing club at her university, and the way she surfed was very athletic, as opposed to just following the trends. (For the first three months, all I did was practice the basics that would let me head out to sea. Nothing but "Paddle! Duck dive!" until the sun went down.) Still, heading out into something as unfathomably vast as the ocean was a beautiful experience to me, although I didn't understand why. Then, one sunny day in my second year of high school, when I was thoroughly used to bodyboarding, I found myself wanting to stand on a wave.

To do that, I'd need to ride either a shortboard or a longboard. I was a fad chaser, and I switched to a shortboard on the spot because I believed that was "true" surfing. Back when I started learning, I managed to ride a few waves by accident, but ever since then, I haven't been able to catch a single one. Shortboards were hard, and I considered throwing in the towel and going back to my bodyboard, but I hated to backtrack on a decision I'd already made. So I hesitated and dragged my feet. While that was going on, I started my third year of high school, and then it was summer.

Anyway, not being able to catch a wave on a shortboard is one of my worries. I'm on my way to tackle the second worry right now.

Spak! The pleasant sound reaches me faintly through the twittering of early birds. It's the sound of an arrow punching through a stretched paper target. It's currently 8:10, and I'm nervously standing in the shadow of the school building. A minute ago, I peeked out around the corner, and as usual, he was the only one on the archery range.

He practices archery on his own every morning, which is actually one of the

reasons I practice surfing then, too. If he's devoting himself to something that early in the day, I want to give something my all, too. When he's focused on drawing his bow, he's truly a sight for sore eyes. But I'm not shameless enough to stare from close by, so I've only ever watched him practice from about a hundred meters away, like I'm doing now. Plus, he doesn't know I watch.

For no particular reason, I brush off my skirt, lightly tug the hem of my sailor blouse to straighten it, and take a deep breath. *Okay! Act natural.* I start off toward the archery range.

"Oh, good morning."

As always, when he sees me, he stops practicing and talks to me. *Eeeee! Aw, he really is nice.* He has a calm, deep voice, too.

Heart thumping, I play it cool and walk slowly. I want it to look as if I just happened to be passing the archery range. I answer him carefully, so that my voice won't crack.

"Morning, Tohno. You're always here so early."

"You too, Sumida. You've already been to the beach, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"You're really putting a lot of work in."

"Huh?" I wasn't expecting a compliment, and I flinch. Uh-oh. I'm sure I'm blushing all the way to my ears.

"I-it's not really... Eh-heh-heh! Okay, Tohno, I'll see you later!" Flustered with happiness and embarrassment, I break into a run.

"Sure, see you later," I hear his kind voice say behind me.

Problem two: I have a crush on him. I have for five years, to be honest. His name is Takaki Tohno. And the six months before we graduate high school are all the time I have left to spend with him.

That brings me to problem three, which is summed up in the piece of paper that's sitting on my desk. It's 8:35, and I'm in morning homeroom. Vaguely, I

can hear the voice of our homeroom teacher, Mr. Matsuno. “Listen up. You’re gonna need to make up your minds soon. Talk it over with your folks and fill those in.” Et cetera, et cetera. The paper says, THIRD FUTURE COURSE SURVEY. I have absolutely no idea what to write.

It’s 12:50. In the classroom, they’re playing classical music during lunch. It’s a piece I’ve heard somewhere before. For some reason, whenever I hear it, it makes me think of skating penguins. What memory is this song linked to for me? I try to remember the name of the piece, promptly give up, and instead eat the rolled omelet from the box lunch my mom made for me. It’s sweet and yummy and full of happiness, spreading through my taste buds to the rest of me. Yukko, Saki, and I have pushed our desks together for lunch. For the past little while, the other two have been talking about future courses.

“I hear Sasaki is taking the test for a university in Tokyo.”

“Sasaki? You mean Kyouko?”

“No, no, the one in Class One.”

“Oh, the literature club Sasaki. Yeah, that sounds about right.”

At the words *Class One*, I tense up a little. That’s Tohno’s class. At my high school, there are three classes for each school year. Classes One and Two are general education, and Class One in particular is geared toward students who want to go on to college. Class Three is the trade course; it has lots of students who are planning to go to vocational school or start working after graduation, and the highest percentage of members who’ll be staying on the island. I’m in Class Three. I haven’t heard yet, but I think Tohno’s probably planning to go to college. I can sense that he probably wants to go back to Tokyo. The thought of it takes all the flavor out of my omelet.

“What about you, Kanae?” Yukko turns to me unexpectedly, and I don’t know what to say.

“You were going to start working, right?” Saki asks.

“Um...,” I mumble. The thing is, I have no idea.

“You really don’t have anything in mind, do you?” Saki says with a sigh.

“Nothing in there except Tohno,” Yukko adds.

“I’d bet you anything he has a girlfriend in Tokyo,” says Saki.

“Noooooooo!” I whine in spite of myself.

“Heh-heh!” They both laugh. My secret feelings aren’t much of a secret with them.

“Forget it. I’m going to go get a yoghurppe at the co-op,” I say sulkily, getting up. I sound like I’m joking, but the “Takaki Tohno’s Tokyo girlfriend” theory hits me pretty hard.

“Huh?! You’re buying more?! That’s your second one.”

“Well, I’m thirsty.”

“Of course you are, surfer girl.”

I ignore their banter and walk down the winding hall by myself. Along the way, I glance at a row of framed pictures on the wall. They’re photos of rockets being launched, spouting great clouds of smoke. H-II ROCKET F4 LAUNCH—AUGUST 17, 1996, 10:53. H-II ROCKET F6 LAUNCH—NOVEMBER 28, 1997, 6:27... There are rumors that every time a launch succeeds, somebody from NASDA stops by and gives us another photo.

I’ve seen several launches myself. As the rockets climb into infinity, trailing white smoke, they’re clearly visible from anywhere on the island. Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve seen one in the past few years. Tohno’s only been on the island for five years; has he seen a launch at all? It would be great if we saw one together someday. If it’s his first one, the view will probably be fantastic, and if we watch it together, just the two of us, I bet it would bring us a little closer. Oh, but we only have half a year of high school left. Will there even be a launch between now and then? Actually, will I even figure out how to ride a wave before then? I want Tohno to see me surf someday, but not if I’m gonna look dumb. No way. I always want him to see me at my very best.

Just half a year left. No, no, Tohno might stay on the island after graduation; it’s not completely out of the question. If he does, we’ll still have plenty of

chances. In that case, my future course is definitely going to be “Find a job on the island.” That said, I really can’t imagine him doing that... Somehow, the island life just doesn’t suit him. Hmm...

And that’s how it goes: My worries always revolve around Tohno, taking me in circles.

The only thing I know for sure is that I can’t afford to keep worrying forever.

That’s why I’ve decided that I need to catch a wave. When I do, I’m going to tell Tohno I like him.

* * *

7:10 PM. Just a little while ago, the calls of bear cicadas filled the air, but somewhere in there, a chorus of evening cicadas took their place. Before long, those will probably be replaced by bush crickets. My surroundings are already gloomy, but the light of the evening sun still lingers in the sky, and the high clouds shine golden. When I gaze up at them, I can tell they’re traveling west. I was at the beach until a minute ago, and the wind was blowing onshore—that’s when the wind blows in from the ocean and messes up the shape of the waves—but the waves might be easier to ride now that it’s going the other way. Not that it gives me much more confidence.

From the shadow of the school building, I watch the motorbike parking lot. There aren’t many bikes left, and I don’t see any students near the school gate. All clubs are done for the day. Which means I went surfing after class, then came back, and now I’m hiding behind the school and waiting for Tohno to visit the bike parking lot. (When I put it like that, even I think it’s a little creepy.) But he might have gone home already. *Maybe I should’ve gotten out of the ocean a little earlier...* Still, I decide to wait just a bit longer.

The surfing problem, the Tohno problem, and the future course problem: Those are currently my three biggest issues, but of course they’re not the only ones. There’s my tan, for instance. My skin isn’t naturally dark (I don’t think), but no matter how much sunscreen I slather on, I have by far the deepest tan of

anybody in my grade. My sister says that's only natural for a surfer, and Yukko and Saki say it's healthy and attractive, but I still feel like having a deeper tan than the boy I like doesn't bode well. Tohno's skin is pale and pretty.

Then there's my bust, which isn't growing all that well (my sister's is big, even though we've got the same DNA), my catastrophic math grades, my lack of fashion sense, my strong health (because I feel like it's cuter to catch a cold sometimes), and all kinds of other things. It's a whole pile of problems.

But there's no point sitting here counting all the strikes against me. I steal another peek at the bike parking lot. In the distance, I see an unmistakable silhouette walking toward me. *Yesss! I'm so glad I waited! Go me!* Quickly, I take a deep breath, then casually start toward the parking lot.

"Huh? Sumida? You're heading home now?" His voice is as kind as always. Under the lights of the parking lot, I can see him more and more clearly. His frame is tall and slender; his hair is just a bit too long and gets in his eyes a little, and his footsteps are always so calm.

"Uh-huh... You too, Tohno?" I think my voice is trembling somewhat. Argh, for crying out loud, I really wish I'd get used to this already.

"Yeah. Want to ride home together, then?"

If I had a tail like a dog, I'm sure I'd be wagging up a storm by now. *Oh, I'm so glad I'm not a dog. I don't want him to see everything I'm feeling*, I think, and I mean it. I'm frustrated with myself for not being able to have more sophisticated ideas in my head, but I'm still just plain happy to be going home with him.

We ride in single file along a narrow road that runs between fields of sugarcane. Tohno is in front, and watching him ahead of me makes me happy. The depths of my chest are hot, and the back of my nose twinges the way it does when I've wiped out surfing. I think, without knowing why, that happiness and sadness are similar.

From the very beginning, Tohno was a little different from the other boys. He transferred to Tanegashima from Tokyo in the spring of our second year of

middle school. I still remember so clearly how he looked on the day of our Year Two opening ceremony. This boy I'd never seen before stood tall in front of the blackboard; he didn't seem at all daunted or nervous, and there was a tranquil smile on his handsome face.

"I'm Takaki Tohno. Due to my father's work, my family moved here from Tokyo three days ago. I'm used to transferring schools, but I'm not used to this island yet. I'm looking forward to being part of your class."

His voice was calm, and he didn't speak too fast or too slow or hesitate. His sophisticated standard accent was so lovely it made me tingle. He was like somebody from TV. If I'd been in his shoes—if I'd transferred from a major metropolis to a remote island way out in the sticks or vice versa—I'm sure my face would have been bright red, and my mind would've been a pure-white blank. I would've been so self-conscious about my unique accent that I wouldn't have made any sense. How was it that this boy, who was my own age, could speak so clearly and be so nonchalant, as if there wasn't anybody watching him at all? What had his life been like? What was he like on the inside, behind his black school uniform? I'd never wanted to know anything so badly in my life. In that moment, I'd already fallen in love. It was like destiny.

After that, my life changed. It seemed as if he were between me and the town, the school, and reality itself. During class and after school, even when I was walking my dog on the beach, I was always looking for him out of the corner of my eye. Although he'd seemed cool and rather aloof at first glance, he was actually cheerful and friendly, and he made a lot of friends in no time. Not only that, but he was mature enough to make friends with guys and girls, so if I timed things right, I got to talk to him as often as I wanted.

In high school, we were in different classes, but it was a miracle we'd ended up at the same school. Not that we had many options on this island. Besides, with his grades, he probably could have gone to any high school he wanted; maybe he just chose the closest one. I still liked him as much as ever. In five years, those feelings hadn't faded at all; as a matter of fact, they'd grown stronger little by little, day by day. I did want to become special to him, to be his one and only, but honestly, being in love with him was just about all I could handle already. I couldn't even begin to imagine what my life would be like if

we did start going out. Whenever I saw Tohno, at school or in town, I ended up liking him more. It was frightening and painful, but it was fun, too. I was completely helpless.

Seven thirty PM. On our way home, we stop at a convenience store called I-Shop. I manage to go home with Tohno about 0.7 times per week—in other words, once a week when I’m lucky, once every two weeks if I’m not—and at some point, we fell into the habit of detouring to I-Shop on the way. Even if it is a convenience store, it also closes at nine PM and sells flower seeds and daikon radishes (with the dirt still on them) that the neighborhood ladies have grown. But it still carries a pretty wide range of snacks and things, too. The cable broadcast is playing J-pop hits. The ranks of fluorescent lights on the ceiling fill the small store with a bright, whitish light.

Tohno always buys the same thing—a carton of Daily Coffee. I’m never sure what I should get, and I always hesitate. The fundamental question is: What choice will make me the most attractive? If I got the same coffee as him, it would look like I was intentionally trying to get his attention (which, I mean, I am, but...); milk seems kind of thoughtless to me. Daily Fruits has a cute yellow package, but I don’t really like how it tastes. I’m actually pretty intrigued by Daily Black Vinegar, but it would be a little too out-there.

While I’m struggling over the decision, Tohno says, “Hey, Sumida, I’m gonna pay for mine,” and heads over to the register. Argh! I liked having him there next to me. Hastily, I end up grabbing my usual Daily Yoghurppe. *How many have I had today?* I bought one at the school co-op after second period, then had two at lunch, so this is number four. I wonder if I’m five percent yoghurppe by volume now.

When I leave the convenience store and turn the corner, Tohno’s leaning against his bike, texting, and I involuntarily duck into the shadows behind the mailbox. The sky is already dark navy, and only the windswept clouds still carry traces of the red evening sun. It won’t be long until it’s full night on the island. The air is filled with insect songs and the rustling of the swaying sugarcane. I catch the smell of dinner from somebody’s house. It’s dark, and I can’t make

out his expression. Only the LCD screen of his phone is clear and bright.

Working hard to look cheerful, I walk over to him. Noticing me, he slips his phone back into his pocket, then kindly says, “Welcome back, Sumida. What did you get?”

“Mm, it was hard to choose, but I ended up going with yoghurppe. This is actually my fourth one today. Impressed?”

“What? Wow, I didn’t know you were such a fan. Come to think of it, you do always get that, don’t you?”

As we talk, my attention goes to my own phone, in the sports bag I’m carrying over my shoulder. *I wish I were the one Tohno was texting*, I think, something I’ve wished thousands of times before... But I’ve never gotten a text from him, so I can’t exactly send him any. *No matter who I date later on, I’ll give them my full attention when I’m with them. I won’t look at my stupid phone. I don’t want to make my partners nervous that I might be thinking about somebody else.* The thought comes to me with intense emotion.

As I talk to the boy I’m hopelessly in love with, under an early night sky with just a few stars, I make a firm resolution while the urge to cry stirs inside me.

2

The waves today are high, and there are lots of them. The wind is a little onshore, though, so most of those waves are crumbly. It’s 5:40 PM. I’ve attacked dozens of wave sets since I got here after school, but I still haven’t managed to ride a single one. Of course, anybody can stand up on soup—the white water that’s left after a wave has broken—but I want to ride one while it peaks and slide down its face like a real surfer.

While I desperately paddle out to sea, I’m enchanted by the ocean and the sky. There are thick clouds today, so why does the sky look so high? The sea reflects the depth of the clouds, and its colors change from moment to moment. When I’m paddling, there’s only a few centimeters between the ocean and my eyes, and yet that complex surface changes dramatically. I want to stand up, right this minute. I want to know what the ocean looks like from one

hundred fifty-four centimeters up. *No artist could capture the ocean I'm seeing now, I think, no matter how good they are.* Photos wouldn't do it justice, either, or videos. In our Information Science class today, we learned that HDTV in the twenty-first century is composed of about 1,900 pixels across. But even that incredibly high definition wouldn't be up to this at all. A thousand nine hundred times a thousand is just a million pixels and change—it could never capture what I'm seeing. I wonder if the teacher who was talking about it during class, or the people who invented HDTV, or the movie-makers really believe that's still pretty enough. *From a distance, I bet even I'm pretty in this scene,* I think. I hope it's true. *I want Tohno to see me.* And that thought draws up the memory of school today.

During lunch, when I was eating with Yukko and Saki like always, I got summoned over the school PA system: *"Kanae Sumida from Year Three, Class Three. Please come to the student guidance office."* I knew what it was about, but I was mostly embarrassed at the thought that Tohno might have heard that. He and my sister.

The student guidance office was practically empty. Mr. Itou, the career counselor, was sitting there with a printout in front of him. It was my future course survey; I'd just written my name and turned it in blank. Through the open window, I could hear a raucous chorus of cicadas reminding me it was summer, but the room itself was cool. The clouds were moving at a fast clip, making the sunlight flicker slowly. It was an east wind. Thinking about how many waves there'd be today, I sat down across from the teacher.

"Listen, Sumida. You're the only one in your grade who hasn't decided yet," Mr. Itou said with a rather pointed sigh. He seemed annoyed by all this.

"I'm sorry..." I murmured, but I couldn't think of anything else to add. The teacher fell silent, too. Neither of us said anything for a little while.

[Circle the applicable items in Sections 1 through 3.]

That's what the scrawled letters on the rough paper said. With nothing else to do, I stared at them.

1. College (A: Four-year university B: Junior college)

2. Trade school

3. Employment (A: Region B: Occupation category)

In the college section, there were the additional options of national, public, and private and then a looong list of department names: medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, science, engineering, farming, fishing, commerce, literature, law, economics, foreign languages, education. The junior college and trade school sections were the same way. Music, art, early childhood education, nutrition, fashion, computer, medical/nursing, cooking, hairdressing, tourism, media, government employee... Just reading the lists made me dizzy. In the employment section, there were regional choices. That list included: on the island, within Kagoshima Prefecture, Kyushu, western Japan, eastern Japan, and other.

I looked at the words *on the island* and *eastern Japan* in turn. *Tokyo*, I thought. I'd never been there, and come to think of it, I'd never wanted to go. As far as I was concerned, here in 1999, Tokyo was basically Shibuya. It had gangs (!); high school girls who sold their underwear; rampant crime that kept the city in a constant state of emergency; and ridiculously huge buildings like the Fuji Television building and its mysterious and pointless giant silver ball. Then I visualized Tohno in a blazer, holding hands with a high school girl with loose socks, fair skin, and brown hair, and I hastily shut down my imagination.

I heard Mr. Itou sigh heavily again. "Look, I probably shouldn't be sayin' this, but there's no need to fret so much. With your grades, it'll be either trade school, junior college, or work. If your folks allow, then a trade school or junior college on Kyushu. If they don't, you can get a job in Kagoshima. That's all you need to do. What does Ms. Sumida say, anyhow?"

"Um..., " I murmured softly, then went silent again. My emotions churned, around and around. Why had he gone out of his way to summon me over the PA system, then brought up my big sister? Why did he have a beard? Why was he wearing sandals? Whatever the answers, I prayed that lunch would be over soon.

"Sumidaaa, I can't read your mind, y'know."

“Yes sir... Um, I’m sorry.”

“Talk it over with your sister tonight. I’ll mention it to her, too.”

I wondered why, *why* he managed to only ever do things I hate.

As I’m paddling out to sea, I see a fairly big swell right in front of me. The foam-crested wave comes toward me, kicking up spray, almost like a roller. Just before it runs into me, I shove my board underwater, duck under myself, and let the wave go by. There really are a lot of waves today. I duck dive over and over, heading farther out.

Not here, I think.

Here won’t work. I need to go farther out, much farther. My arms spin desperately. The water is really heavy. *Not here, not here*— I repeat it in my heart, again and again, like a spell.

Then, suddenly, I realize that those words remind me of Tohno.

Every so often, I have moments like this. When I’m heading toward a wave, something will suddenly occur to me, like a psychic vision.

When Tohno texts somebody by the convenience store after school, and in the deserted motorbike parking lot, and behind the school early in the morning, I can hear those words like a scream: “Not here.” *I know that, Tohno. After all, it’s like that for me, too. You’re not the only one who thinks you don’t belong here, Tohno. Tohno, Tohno, Tohno*— As I repeat his name in my mind, a wave lifts me up before I’m really ready. I try to stand, but the wave instantly crumbles and pitches me into the sea, headfirst. I accidentally swallow some saltwater, and I scramble to the surface, clinging to my board and coughing. With the snot and tears coming from my nose and eyes, it feels like I really am crying.

In the car on the way back to school, my sister doesn’t bring up my future course.

Seven forty-five PM. I'm crouched in front of the drink case at the convenience store. I'm alone this time. I waited in front of the motorbike parking lot for a while, but Tohno never showed up. Nothing went my way today. So I just buy another yoghurt. I lean against my bike, which is parked at the side of the store, and chug the sweet liquid in one go. Then I put on my helmet and straddle the motorbike.

There's still a faint brightness along the western horizon. As I ride along a byway on high ground, I watch it out of the corner of my eye. On my left, the whole town spreads out below me; off in the distance, on the other side of a forest, I can see the coastline, too. On my right, beyond the farm fields, the ground rises into a modest hill. This island is relatively flat, but the view from here is good. It's also on Tohno's way home. If I ride slowly, he might catch up to me. Or has he really gone on ahead? My bike's engine coughs, stalls for just a moment, then goes back to running normally as if nothing had happened. This Cub is an old lady. "You okay, Cub?" I murmur.

Just then, up ahead, I see a bike parked by the side of the road. *That's his!* Somehow, I just know, and I stop alongside it.

Almost on instinct, I begin climbing the slope with the soft summer grass under my feet. Oh shoot. *What in the world am I doing?* I come to my senses with a jolt. When I take a closer look, I notice that the bike really is Tohno's, but think: *What exactly am I doing, barging in on him like this?* It would be better if we didn't meet this way, obviously. It would certainly be better for me. But my feet keep moving, and when I cross a steep rise in the grass, there he is. He's sitting on the crest of the hill, with the starry sky at his back. He's texting again.

A gust of wind blows through, stirring my heart, and ruffles my hair and clothes. The sound of whispering grass fills the air. My heart answers by thumping loudly, and I climb the slope noisily on purpose so I won't have to hear it.

"Hey, Tohno!"

"Huh? Sumida? What's the matter? How did you know I was here? I'm

impressed.” Tohno seems a little startled; his voice is loud.

“Heh-heh-heh... I saw your bike, so I came over! That okay?” I’m still walking toward him quickly. I’m telling myself, *This isn’t a big deal*.

“Oh, I see. I’m glad. I didn’t see you in the parking lot today.”

“Same here!” I say as cheerfully as I can. I let my sports bag slip off my shoulder and sit down next to him. He’s happy? *Are you really, Tohno?* My heart stings a little. That always happens when I go to him. For just a moment, the words *Not here* flicker across my mind. Before I know it, the western horizon has gone completely dark.

The wind steadily picks up, making the sparse lights of the town that sprawls below us twinkle. I can see the school, tiny with distance; a few of its lights are still on. One car drives under the blinking yellow traffic signal on the national highway. The gigantic white wind turbine at the town gymnasium is spinning rapidly. There are so many clouds, and they’re traveling fast; through the gaps, I can see the Milky Way and the Summer Triangle. Vega, Altair, Deneb. The wind coils and whistles by my ear, and the rustle of grass and trees and vinyl greenhouses mingles with a great chorus of insects. The brisk wind gradually calms me down, smelling strongly of green and growing things.

Tohno and I sit side by side, gazing at the view. My pulse has mostly settled down, and I’m genuinely happy to be able to feel the height of his shoulders right next to me.

“Say, Tohno? Are you taking entrance exams?”

“Yeah, I’m going to try for a university in Tokyo.”

“Tokyo...I see. That’s what I thought.”

“Why?”

“Well, you look like you want to go far away.” As I say the words, I’m surprised by how not upset I am. I’d believed that if Tohno told me to my face that he was going to Tokyo, I would blank out. After a little silence, he responds in a gentle voice.

“...I see. What about you, Sumida?”

“Huh? Me? I don’t even know what tomorrow’s going to be like.” *Tohno’s going to roll his eyes*, I bet, but I tell him the truth anyway.

“I think it’s like that for everybody, probably.”

“Huh?! No way! Even you?”

“Of course.”

“But you know exactly what you want!”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” He’s laughing quietly. “I have no idea what I want. I’m just doing whatever I can, however I can. That’s all I can really afford to do.”

My heart is pounding. I’m delighted that the boy next to me is considering all these things, and that he’s telling me—only me. My heart is racing.

“...Oh. Yeah, I get that.”

I steal a glance at his face, but his eyes are locked on the distant lights. He reminds me of a very young, helpless child. *I do love him*. We’re long past that, but the thought still hits hard.

That’s right. This is the most unambiguous, most important thing there is: I like him. That’s why everything he says gives me so much strength. I get an overwhelming urge to thank somebody, somewhere, that he’s part of this world. His parents, maybe, or the gods. Then I take my future course survey out of my sports bag and start to fold it. The wind has calmed, and the rustling of the grass and the insect songs have grown much quieter.

“Is that an airplane?”

“Yeah!”

I launch my finished paper airplane toward the town. It flies astonishingly far and straight, until a sudden gust of wind kicks it upward, and it soars high into the sky, vanishing into the darkness. From the gaps between the layered clouds, the white Milky Way shines through clearly.

“What on earth were you doing out there this late? Hurry and get in the bath so you don’t catch a cold!” My sister is very insistent about this, and I splash into the tub for a soak.

In the hot water, I rub at my upper arms absently. They’re rock-hard with muscle, and a little—a *lot* thicker than average. I dream of having upper arms as soft and fluffy as marshmallows. Right now, though, even with my own complex staring me in the face like this, it doesn’t bother me a bit. My emotions are as warm and comfy as my body. That conversation on the hill, Tohno’s calm voice, and the words he said to me when we parted still linger in my ears. The memories send a pleasant shiver through my body. Even I can tell I’m smirking. Even as I think, *Geez, I’m going off the deep end*, I say, “Tohno” softly but out loud, without meaning to. That name echoes sweetly in the bathroom, dissolving into the steam. *This was a really full, fulfilling day*, I think, looking back over it happily.

On our way home, we came across an enormous trailer that was being driven along slowly. The truck’s tires alone were as tall as I was, and it was hauling a white container that was longer than a swimming pool. The container had the words NASDA/SPACE DEVELOPMENT AGENCY written on it in big, bold letters. There were two of them, with several passenger cars driving behind and in front of them, and people walking along holding red guidance batons. It was a rocket transport. I’d heard of them, but this was the first time I’d ever seen one. If I remembered right, rockets were brought to a port somewhere by ship, and then they transported them like this, carefully and slowly, over the course of a whole night, to the launch site on the island’s southernmost tip.

“I hear they travel at five kilometers per hour,” I said. I’d heard the speed of these transports somewhere before.

“Oh...,” Tohno said. He sounded almost dazed.

We watched the transport for a while in fascination. This had to be a pretty rare sight, and I’d never even dreamed I’d get to see anything like it with Tohno.

A little while after that, it started to rain. It was the kind of downpour that’s

common in this season, as abrupt as if someone knocked over a bucket above us. We jumped onto our bikes again, hurrying home. Illuminated by my headlight, Tohno's drenched back felt just a little closer than it had before. My house was on his way home, and just as we always did when we ended up going home together, we said good-bye in front of my gate.

"Sumida," he said, raising the visor on his helmet, when we parted ways. The rain was falling harder and harder, and the faint, yellow light from my house dimly shone on his wet body. His shirt clung to him, and I could see the contours of his torso through it. My heart was racing. He could probably see my body like that, too, which made it all even worse.

"I'm sorry about today. You got soaked because of me."

"No, no, no! It wasn't your fault, Tohno. I just went over there on my own."

"I'm glad we got to talk, though. All right, see you tomorrow. Be careful not to catch a cold. Goodnight."

"Mm-hmm. Goodnight, Tohno."

Goodnight, Tohno, I murmur quietly in the bathtub.

After I get out of the bath, dinner is stew and deep-fried parrotfish and amberjack sashimi, and it's so good I end up asking my mom for a third bowl of rice.

"You really are a big eater, aren't you," she says, handing my refilled bowl back.

"No other high school girl would eat three whole bowls of rice," my sister says, mildly disapproving.

"Well, I'm hungry... Oh, hey, Sis?" I say, putting a piece of parrotfish in my mouth. There's sauce on the fried meat. *Chew, chew. Yum.*

"Mr. Itou said something to you today, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes, he did," Mom adds.

"Sorry, Sis."

“It’s nothing to apologize for. You can take your time deciding.”

“What happened, Kanae? Did you get in trouble?” Mom asks, topping up my sister’s teacup.

“It’s nothing important. That teacher tends to make a big deal out of things,” my sister says, as if it really is nothing. I’m so glad she’s my sister.

That night, I have a dream about the time I found Cub. Not the Honda motorbike—Cub is the name of our pet Shiba Inu. I found him on the beach when I was in sixth grade. I was jealous of my sister’s bike back then, so I named him Cub.

In the dream, though, I’m not a kid. I’m the seventeen-year-old me. I scoop the puppy Cub up in my arms, and we walk along a beach that’s just a little too bright. When I look up, instead of the sun, I see a sky full of dazzling stars. Fixed in place, twinkling red and green and yellow, and a brilliant Milky Way runs through the whole sky like an enormous pillar. *I didn’t know something like this could exist*, I think. Suddenly, I realize that someone else is walking here, too, far in the distance. Someone I know well.

At some point, I’ve turned into a child. *In the future, I just know that person will be someone very special to me*, I think.

And then I’m the same age as my older sister. *Once, that person was someone very special to me*, I think.

When I wake up, I’ve forgotten what I dreamed about.

3

“Sis, when did you get your driver’s license?”

“I was a sophomore in college, so maybe nineteen? It was when I was in Fukuoka.”

She may be my sister, but she’s sexy when she drives, I think. Her slim fingers

on the steering wheel, the long black hair that gleams in the morning sunlight, the way she glances at the rearview mirror, the motion of her hand as she shifts gears. The wind from the open window faintly carries the scent of her hair to me. We use the same shampoo, but I get the feeling her hair smells better than mine. For no particular reason, I tug at my uniform skirt.

“Hey, Sis?” I say, watching her profile in the driver’s seat. Her eyelashes are really long. “Several years back, you brought that guy home, remember? What was his name? Kibayashi?”

“Oh, Kobayashi.”

“What happened to him? You were going out, right?”

“Where is this coming from?” She seems a little startled. “We broke up a long time ago.”

“Were you planning to get married? To Kobayashi, I mean.”

“There was a time when I thought so. We called it off, though.” She’s smiling, as if the memory is a fond one.

“Hmm...”

Why did you call it off? I swallow that question and ask something else. “Were you sad?”

“Well, sure; we’d been going out for years. We’d even lived together.”

She makes a left turn onto the narrow road that leads to the coast, and the morning sun shines straight in. It’s a pure-blue sky, without a single cloud. Narrowing her eyes, my sister pulls the sun visor down. Even that gesture seems a little sexy to me.

“Looking back, though, I don’t think either of us wanted to get married that badly. We were dating each other, but our feelings had nowhere to go. Like, we didn’t have a common destination in mind.”

“Uh-huh.” I don’t really understand, but I nod anyway.

“The places you want to go alone aren’t always the places you want to go together. Back then, though, I think we were pretty desperate to make those things match up.”

“Uh-huh...”

Where I want to go. I repeat the words silently. When I glance at the roadside, it's covered with wild Easter lilies and marigolds. The brilliant white and yellow match my suit. *They're so pretty. Flowers work really hard, too,* I think.

“That came out of nowhere. What's the matter?” my sister says, looking at me.

“Um... Nothing's wrong or anything; it's just...” Then I ask a question I've always wanted to ask. “Sis, did you have a boyfriend in high school?”

Apparently, the question is hilarious.

“Nope, I sure didn't. I was just like you,” she answers. “Kanae, you're exactly like I was in high school.”

Two weeks have passed since the rainy day when I rode home with Tohno. During those weeks, a typhoon swept over the island. The wind that bends the sugarcane carries a faint chill now, the sky looks just a little higher, the outlines of the clouds have grown softer, and several of my Cub-riding classmates have begun wearing thin jackets. I didn't manage to go home with Tohno once in those two weeks, and I still haven't been able to ride a wave. And yet surfing has been more fun than ever lately.

“Um, Sis?”

I'm applying nonslip wax to my surfboard, and my sister is in the driver's seat, reading a book. The car is parked in the usual parking lot by the beach, and I've changed into my wetsuit. It's six thirty AM; there's an hour left before we need to leave for school, and I'll be able to spend it all in the ocean.

“Hmm?”

“About that future course thing.”

“Mm-hmm.”

The minivan's doors are open, and I'm sitting on its trunk; my sister and I are talking with our backs to each other. Far out to sea, I can see a gray vessel like a big battleship, lying at anchor. It's a NASDA ship.

“I still don't know what I should do. That's okay, though. For now, I've made

up my mind.” I finish waxing the board, set the soap-like knob of wax down next to me, and keep talking, without waiting for my sister to respond. “I’ll start with what I can do and take it one step at a time. I’ll be back!”

With that, I pick up my board and set off running toward the ocean, feeling exhilarated. I’m remembering what Tohno said that day: *“I’m just doing whatever I can, however I can.”* My thoughts are clear now. That’s really all I can do, and that’s just fine.

The sky and the sea are the exact same blue, and I feel as though I’m floating in empty space. As I paddle and duck dive, over and over, making my way farther out to sea, the boundaries between my heart and body—and my body and the ocean—blur. While I paddle farther out, I gauge the shape and distance of oncoming waves almost automatically, and when I decide I can’t handle them, I duck underwater, board and all, and let them roll over me. When I see a promising wave, I turn around and wait for it. Before long, I feel the wave buoy my board up. The thought of what’s about to happen sends a pleasant shiver through me. My board begins to slide across the face of the wave, and I raise my upper body, plant my feet on the board, and lift my center of gravity. I try to stand up. My eye level quickly rises, and for just a moment, the world lets me catch a glimpse of its secret twinkling light.

In the next moment, the wave swallows me. No surprises there.

I already know this enormous world isn’t rejecting me, though. From a distance—from my sister’s perspective—I’m already part of this shining ocean. So I paddle back out to sea again, over and over. Before long, I’m not thinking at all.

And that morning, I rode a wave. It was so abrupt it didn’t feel real—and so perfect there was no room for complaint.

Seventeen years may not be very many, but every one of them has existed for this one moment, I thought.

I know this melody. It's a Mozart serenade. My class performed it for a recital during my first year of middle school, and I played the melodica. You play that instrument by putting a hose-like thing in your mouth and blowing into it, and I liked the way it felt as if I was using my own strength to make sound. Back then, Tohno wasn't part of my life yet. I wasn't surfing, either. Looking back, that world seems so simple.

In Japanese, *serenade* is written with the characters for *little night music*. A little night music. *What's a "little night"?* I think. But when Tohno and I go home together, the night does feel little, somehow. It's almost as if they put this music on for the two of us today. I'm getting psyched up now.

Tohno. Today, we really do have to go home together. Maybe I'll just wait for him after school instead of going to the beach. There are only six periods today, and since we have exams coming up, they'll probably keep clubs short, too.

"...nae."

Hmm?

"Earth to Kanae."

Saki's talking to me. It's 12:55. We're in the middle of lunch; classical music is playing softly from the classroom speaker. Saki, Yukko, and I have our lunches spread out together, as we always do.

"Oh, sorry. What did you say?"

"There's nothing wrong with spacing out, but you froze up with food in your mouth," Saki says.

"And you were sort of smiling," says Yukko.

Hastily, I start chewing the hard-boiled egg I'd put in my mouth. *Chew, chew. Yum. Gulp.*

"Sorry, sorry. What were you talking about?"

"Yet another guy confessing his love to Sasaki."

"Ohh. Yeah, she is pretty," I say, putting a piece of bacon-wrapped asparagus

in my mouth. Mom makes really good lunches.

“Actually, Kanae, you’ve looked happy all day today,” Saki says.

“Yeah. It’s a little scary. If Tohno sees you like that, you’ll turn him right off,” Yukko says.

Their banter doesn’t bother me a bit today. “Really?” I say evasively.

“What a weirdo.”

“Uh-huh... Did something happen with Tohno?”

I respond with perfect calm and a pointed chuckle. “To be more accurate, something’s *going* to happen, later.”

“What?! No way!”

They both react with shock. Is it really that surprising?

Hey, my love isn’t going to stay unrequited forever. Today, the day I rode a wave, I’m finally going to tell him I like him.

Yeah. If I don’t tell him on the day I did it, I’m sure I’ll never manage to tell him at all.

It’s 4:40 PM. I’m gazing into a mirror in the girls’ bathroom partway down the covered walkway. Sixth period ended at half past three, and I’ve been in the library ever since; I didn’t go to the beach. Of course, studying was impossible. I just braced my elbows on the table, put my chin in my hands, and gazed out the window. It’s silent in the bathroom. *Huh. When did my hair grow out?* I think, looking at my reflection. It’s long enough at the back that it brushes my shoulders a little. It was a whole lot longer in middle school, but when I started high school, and surfing, I chopped it all off. I’m sure going to a high school where my sister taught was part of it. I’d be embarrassed to be compared to my gorgeous, long-haired sister. I think I may keep growing it out now, though.

In the mirror, my face is tanned, and my cheeks are flushed. I wonder how I look to Tohno. The size of my eyes, the shape of my eyebrows, the height of my nose, the luster of my lips—my height, the texture of my hair, the size of my

chest. Even with that familiar, faint despair, I examine each of my features closely. *I don't care if it's the straightness of my teeth or the shape of my fingernails, just...*, I wish. *Please, just let him like something about me.*

Five thirty PM. I'm standing in my usual spot behind the school building, on the far side of the motorbike parking lot. The sunlight is pretty low in the west, and the long shadow cast by the school splits the ground neatly in two, dividing it between light and dark. I'm standing at the boundary, just barely in shadow. When I look up, the sky is still bright blue, but it looks just a bit more faded than it did at noon. Up until a little while ago, the voices of bear cicadas filled the trees, but they've fallen silent, and now lots of different insect songs are welling up from the long grass at my feet. My pulse is thumping away, practically as loud as the insects. I can feel the blood galloping through my veins. I take deep breaths, trying to calm myself down a little, but I'm far too nervous, and sometimes I forget to breathe out.

I come to with a jolt, exhaling deeply, and the irregularity of my breathing makes my pulse throb extra hard. *I'd better be able to tell him today. I have to tell him today.* Over and over, almost unconsciously, I peek into the parking lot from my spot by the wall.

That's why, when Tohno calls my name, I don't feel happy so much as bewildered and anxious. I almost let out a yelp, and I desperately choke it back down.

"You're going home now?" Tohno, who's noticed me peeking around the corner, walks over from the parking lot, his footsteps as calm as ever.

"Uh-huh," I say, suddenly feeling as if I've been caught doing something wrong.

"I see. Let's go home together, then," he says in his usual kind voice.

Six PM. We're standing side by side in front of the drink case at the convenience store, illuminated by the setting sun that's shining straight in through the west-facing windows. We usually get here after dark, so something about it feels wrong, as if we're in a different store entirely. The heat of the

setting sun warms my left cheek. *Guess it wasn't a little night music.* It's still bright outside. I already know what I'm buying today: the same Daily Coffee as Tohno. As I confidently pick up the carton, Tohno seems startled.

"Huh? You've already made up your mind?"

I say "Uh-huh" without looking at him. I have to tell him I like him—before we get to my house. My heart has been flip-flopping this whole time. I pray that the pop music that's playing in the store will hide the sound.

Outside, the setting sun has divided the world into clear sections of light and shadow. Just outside the automatic doors, we're in the light. Around the corner of the store, the small parking lot where we've left our bikes is in shadow. I watch Tohno's back as he heads into the world of shadows, paper carton in one hand. Under his white shirt, his back is broader than mine. Just looking at it sends a keen ache through my heart. I want him so much. He's still walking, and the forty or so centimeters of distance between us grows by another five centimeters. Out of nowhere, I feel desperately lonely. *Wait*, I think, and on impulse, I reach out and catch the tail of his shirt. Drat. But right now, I'll tell him I like him.

He stops. After a long pause, he slowly turns to face me. *Not here*, I feel as if I've heard him say, and I shudder.

"—What's the matter?"

Somewhere deep inside me, I feel another shudder. His voice is quiet, kind, and cold. I gaze steadily at his face. He isn't smiling. There's an incredibly powerful determination in his quiet eyes.

In the end, I couldn't say anything.

It had been a firm rejection: *Don't say a word.*

* * *

Kitchi-kitchi-kitchi... The cries of the cicadas echo all over the island. From a distant forest, I can hear the faint, shrill calls of birds preparing for nightfall. The sun is still up, just barely, and it dyes us a complicated purple color as we make our way home.

Tohno and I are walking down a narrow path between fields of sugarcane and sweet potatoes. We've been silent for a little while now, just two sets of regular, hard footfalls. There's about a step and a half of space between us, and I'm struggling to keep it from widening any farther or getting any smaller. He's taking long strides. Thinking he might be angry, I steal a glance at him, but he just seems to be looking at the sky, and his expression is normal. I watch the asphalt and the shadows of my own legs on it. Absently, I remember the motorbike I left at the convenience store. I haven't abandoned it, and yet I feel something like regret for treating it badly.

After I swallowed the words *I love you*, the Cub's engine refused to start. Like it knew how I felt. I pressed the starter, then tried to get it going with a kick, but it stayed silent. As I straddled the bike in the convenience store parking lot, increasingly flustered, Tohno was as kind to me as ever. I started doubting whether I'd even seen that earlier cold expression, and I got a little confused.

"I think the spark plug may be dead," Tohno said, after giving it a thorough examination. "Is this a hand-me-down?"

"Yes, it was my sister's."

"Did it choke a little when you were accelerating?"

"It might have..." Come to think of it, there had been times when the engine hadn't wanted to start recently.

"Ask them if you can leave it here for now, then have someone from your family come and pick it up later. We'll walk today."

"Huh?! No, I'll walk on my own! You go ahead and go home, Tohno." I felt anxious; I didn't want to cause him trouble.

"We're already pretty close," he said, kind as ever. "Besides, I'd like to walk a

little.”

I felt like I was going to cry, although I didn’t understand why. I looked at the two Daily Coffee cartons, sitting side by side on the bench. For a moment, I thought the rejection I’d felt from him might have been a misunderstanding on my part...

But it wasn’t.

Why had we been walking in silence all this time? Tohno was always the one to suggest we go home together. *Why don’t you say anything? Why are you always kind? Why did you walk into my life? Why do I love you so much? Why? Why?*

The asphalt glitters under the evening sun, and as I drive myself forward over it, the ground gradually blurs. *Please, Tohno. Please. I can’t take it anymore. I just can’t.* Tears spill over. I wipe them away with both hands, again and again, but they keep coming. I have to stop crying before he notices. Frantically, I choke back the sobs. I’m sure he will notice, though. Then he’ll say something kind to me. *There, see?*

“...Sumida! What’s wrong?!”

I’m sorry. I’m sure it’s not your fault. I try to say something. Anything.

“I’m sorry... It’s nothing. I’m really sorry...”

I stop in my tracks, my head still lowered. I can’t stop crying. I can’t stop. “Sumida,” I hear Tohno murmur sadly.

I’ve never heard so much emotion in his voice before, and the fact that it’s sadness is really upsetting. The calls of the cicadas fill the air, sounding far louder than they did a moment ago. My heart is screaming. *Tohno. Tohno. I’m begging you, please. Enough.*

Don’t be kind to me.

Just then, the cicada chorus falls silent, like a tide rolling back. The hush feels like it’s enveloped the whole island.

In the next moment, a roar shakes the atmosphere. I look up, startled, and through blurry eyes, I see a ball of fire rising from a distant hill.

It's a rocket launch. The light from the nozzle whites out my vision, dazzlingly bright, as it begins to ascend. As the air over the whole island trembles, the rocket climbs straight up, its flames illuminating the evening clouds more brightly than the sun. A tower of white smoke follows the rising light. It covers the setting sun, dividing the sky into great swaths of light and shadow. Both of them, the light and the tower, seem to grow forever. Every particle of the air is vibrating together, all the way into the far upper atmosphere. Thin, trailing echoes linger, like the screams of the sky as it's torn apart.

I think it's probably less than a minute before the rocket disappears into the clouds.

However, Tohno and I just stand there, gazing up after it without saying a word, until the enormous column of smoke has completely dissolved into the wind. Eventually, slowly, the sounds of birds and insects and wind return, and the next thing I know, the sun has slipped below the horizon. The blue of the sky is growing deeper, and it's deepest at the zenith. Little by little, the stars begin to twinkle, and I feel the temperature drop slightly. That's when I realize something very clearly.

We're looking at the same sky, but we're seeing different things. Tohno doesn't see me.

Tohno is kind. He's very kind, and he always walks beside me, but he's never looking at me. His attention is on something beyond me, something far away. I'm sure I'll never be able to give him what he wants. I know this with such certainty it feels like I'm psychic. I know in my soul that we could never be together.

* * *

On the way home, a round moon hangs in the night sky, and its pale light illuminates the windswept clouds as brightly as the noonday sun. Our two

shadows, Tohno's and mine, are deep black on the asphalt. When I look up, the power lines cut right across the middle of that full moon. *It's almost like a picture of today.* Me before I rode the wave—and then after. Me before I knew what was in Tohno's heart—and after. Between yesterday and tomorrow, my world has changed completely. Starting tomorrow, I'll live in a different world from the one I lived in before. But even so.

Even so, I think, in my room, with the lights out, curled up on my futon. In the darkness, moonlight streams into the room, pooling on the floor. Tears begin to spill over again, softly blurring the moonlight. They well up one after another after another, and I begin to cry out loud. My face is streaming with tears and snot, and I wail as loud as I want; I'm done making myself hold back.

Even so.

Even so, I'll still love Tohno tomorrow, and the day after, and every day after that. I really am hopelessly in love with him. *Tohno, Tohno. I love you.*

Thinking only of him, I cry myself to sleep.

5 Centimeters per Second

1

That night, she dreamed.

It was a dream from a very long time ago. She was still a child, and so was he. It was a quiet night, and snow was falling soundlessly in a vast, rural, silvery landscape. Only the lights of a few sparse houses were visible, far in the distance, and the only marks in the new-fallen snow were the footprints they'd left.

A big, solitary cherry tree stood there. It was deeper and darker than the night around it, like a bottomless abyss had suddenly opened in space. The two of them stood in front of it, transfixed. As she gazed at the endlessly black trunk and branches, at the countless snowflakes drifting down between them, she considered her future.

The boy standing next to her—someone who'd been her lifeline until now, someone she loved—was going far away. She'd already prepared herself for that; she'd come to terms with it. Ever since he'd written a few weeks ago and told her he'd be transferring schools, she'd thought, over and over again, about what that meant. But still.

Still, when she thought of losing the height of his shoulder as he stood next to her, and his kind presence, she felt that particular anxiety and loneliness that came from peeking into fathomless darkness. *I never thought I could feel that again*, she thought as she dreamed. And yet there it was, so vivid it might have been brand-new.

I wish this snow was a flurry of cherry blossoms instead, she thought.

I wish it was spring now. I wish we'd come through that winter safely together

and greeted the spring. I wish we lived in the same town and that we always looked at cherry blossoms like this on our way home. I wish that was what we were doing now.

One night, he was in his apartment, reading a book.

He'd gone to bed around midnight, but he'd given up on actually trying to fall asleep. He'd pulled a random book out of the stack on his floor and was reading it while drinking a beer.

It was a cold, quiet night. He had the TV on with the volume turned down low in lieu of background music, and a late-night foreign film was playing. The curtain was half open, and beyond it were the countless lights of the city and the falling snow. It had started snowing after noon that day; the precipitation had sporadically turned into rain, then back into snow, but after the sun went down, the snowflakes had gradually grown larger until an earnest snowfall was coming down.

He couldn't concentrate on his book, so he turned off the TV. Then it was too quiet. The last trains had already run; he couldn't hear the noise of traffic or the sound of the wind, and he could sense the snow falling in the world outside, on the other side of the wall.

Out of nowhere, a sense of nostalgia, of warm protection, came back to him. While he was trying to figure out where it had come from, he remembered the cherry tree he'd seen that winter, long ago.

...How many years ago was it? It had been at the end of his first year of middle school, so fifteen years now.

Sleep showed no sign of coming. Sighing, he closed the book and drained the last of his beer in one gulp.

Three weeks ago, he'd left the company where he'd worked for close to five years. He didn't have any leads for his next job, and he'd been drifting absently through one day to the next. Still, his heart was calmer and more tranquil than it had been at any point in the past few years.

...*What's the matter with me?* he wondered. He got up from the *kotatsu* table, took his coat from its peg on the wall (his suit was still hanging beside it) and pulled it on, stepped into his shoes in the entryway, grabbed a vinyl umbrella, and went outside. As the snow softly fell on his umbrella, he walked to the local convenience store, slowly enough that the trip took about five minutes.

Setting a shopping basket that held milk and deli sides down at his feet, he hesitated in front of the magazine rack, then picked up a monthly science magazine and flipped through it. He'd read this one enthusiastically in high school, but he hadn't picked it up in a few years. There was an article about receding ice at the South Pole, and one about gravitational interference between galaxies, and one about the discovery of a new elementary particle, and one about interaction between nanoparticles and the natural environment. The world was still filled with discoveries and adventure, he mused as he skimmed the articles.

Suddenly, he was struck by a sense of *déjà vu*: He'd felt like this long ago. After the space of a breath, he realized, *Oh, it's the music.*

The music playing from the store's sound system was a hit song he'd heard over and over years ago, probably when he was still in middle school. As he was reading through the fragments of the world described in the science magazine with that nostalgic music in his ears, feelings he'd thought he'd forgotten long ago had welled up in his heart, stirring his emotions. Even after the wave had passed, gentle ripples spread over its surface.

When he'd left the store, his chest still held a little of that heat. It had been a very long time since he'd really noticed where his heart was.

As he watched the snow fall steadily, he thought of the season when it would change, at last, into cherry blossoms.

2

After Takaki Tohno graduated from high school on Tanegashima, he moved to Tokyo to attend university. He rented a small apartment about a thirty-minute walk from Ikebukuro Station for a convenient commute. He'd lived in Tokyo

from the time he was eight until he was thirteen, but he'd been in Setagaya Ward then, and that was the only area he remembered. Aside from that, Tokyo was practically unknown territory. Compared with the people on the little island where he'd spent his teenage years, the residents of Tokyo seemed coarse and indifferent, and their speech was rough. People spat on the street without a second thought, and the roadsides were littered with cigarette butts and countless small scraps of garbage. He had no idea why the streets had to be strewn with plastic bottles and magazines and convenience store box lunch containers. His memory of Tokyo was of a calmer and more refined place.

Well, never mind.

At any rate, I'll live here from now on, he thought. He'd transferred schools twice, and he'd learned how to make himself at home in new places. Besides, he wasn't a powerless child anymore. He still had vivid memories of the anxiety he'd felt when they'd moved from Nagano to Tokyo because of his father's job. As he held his parents' hands, the landscape he'd seen from the train between Omiya and Shinjuku was nothing like the mountainous scenery he was used to. He couldn't imagine himself living here. However, when he'd transferred from Tokyo to Tanegashima a few years later, he'd felt rejected then, too. When their propeller plane had landed at the island's tiny airport, and when he'd looked out at the farm fields going by as his father drove, what he'd felt was an intense homesickness for Tokyo.

In the end, everywhere was the same. *Besides, I'm here of my own free will this time,* he thought, standing in the little apartment with its stacks of boxes he hadn't unpacked yet, as he gazed through the window at the layered streets of Tokyo.

His four years at the university hadn't held anything worth mentioning, at least not to him. His science department classes had kept him busy, and he'd had to devote a good part of his time to studying. However, he hadn't hung out much on campus aside from the times when he actually had to be there. Instead, he'd spent his days working part-time jobs, or going to movies on his own, or wandering around the city. Even on the days when he left his

apartment to go to school, if given the opportunity, he'd sometimes pass right by the university and spend his time reading a book in a small park on the way to Ikebukuro Station instead. At first, the sheer number and variety of people who cut across the park made his head spin, but before long, he got used to it. He made a few friends at school and work, and as time went on, he fell out of touch with most of them; however, he did manage to build closer friendships with a handful. He'd get together with one or two others at his apartment or theirs, and they'd stay up all night, drinking cheap booze and smoking cigarettes and talking about all sorts of things. Over four years, a few of his values slowly changed, and a few others grew more entrenched.

In the fall of his freshman year, he had a girlfriend. They'd met through his part-time job; she was his age and still lived with her parents in Yokohama.

Back then, he sold box lunches for the student co-op during lunch. He'd wanted to find a part-time job outside the school, but he was busy with classes, and the job at the student co-op was convenient, letting him turn his lunch break into at least a little cash. When second period ended at 12:10, he'd run to the cafeteria, pull a cart loaded with box lunches out of the storeroom, and drag it over to sell them. He had a coworker, and they managed to sell the full hundred or so in thirty minutes. In the fifteen minutes that were left before third period, the two would sit at a corner of a cafeteria table and wolf down their own lunches. He worked that job for three months. During that time, his coworker was the girl from Yokohama.

She was the first woman he'd ever dated, and he learned all sorts of things from her. His days with her held joy and pain he'd never known before. She was the first person he ever slept with, too. He learned just how many emotions humans carried inside while they went about their days. Some of them could be controlled, but the vast majority could not, and neither jealousy nor love would behave the way he wanted them to.

They went out for about a year and a half, and it ended when a guy he didn't know told the girl he had feelings for her.

"I still really love you a lot, Tohno, but you don't like me all that much, you know. I can tell, and it just hurts," she'd said, and she'd cried in his arms. He'd

wanted to tell her, “That’s not true,” but he also felt responsible for making her feel that way. And so he’d let go. For the first time, he’d discovered how emotional pain could even transfer into the physical.

One thing he still remembered vividly about her was the way she’d looked before they started going out, when they were sitting at the cafeteria table together after finishing their sales, wolfing down their own lunches. He always ate whatever the job gave him, but she’d bring small handmade lunches from home. Still in her work apron, she’d eaten her meals very carefully, right down to the last grain of rice. Her lunch was only half the size of his, and yet she was always the last one to finish. When he’d teased her about it, she’d sounded a little upset. “You should eat more slowly, Tohno. Savor it.”

It wasn’t until much later that he realized she’d been talking about their time in the cafeteria together.

The next woman he went out with was another work acquaintance. In his junior year, he worked as an assistant to a teacher at a cram school. Four days a week, when his own classes ended, he’d hustle down to Ikebukuro Station, take the Yamanote Line to Takadanobaba, then transfer to the Tozai Line and ride it to the cram school in Kagurazaka. It was a small school, with only a math and an English teacher. He was one of five assistants, and he worked specifically for the math teacher. He was a young, friendly man in his midthirties, married with children, had a big heart and a house in the city, and although he was extremely strict when it came to work, his abilities and charm were definitely enough to justify his popularity. That teacher was very efficient about drumming into his students the math that had been stunted and pared down to focus only on the university entrance exams. At the same time, he skillfully wove occasional glimpses of the charm and significance of the pure mathematics that lay beyond it into his classes.

Being an assistant at those lectures actually deepened Takaki’s understanding of the mathematical analysis he was studying at the university. For some reason, the teacher took a liking to him as well, exempting him from the odd jobs the other student assistants did, such as keeping the register or grading

assignments. Instead, he entrusted him with more of the critical tasks, such as drawing up a rough draft of the cram school textbook and conducting trend analyses for the entrance exam problems. He did everything he could to be worthy of that trust. The job was more than meaningless busy work, and the pay wasn't bad, either.

The girl was another assistant, a Waseda student. Of the women around him, she was by far the most beautiful. She had lovely long hair, startlingly large eyes, and although she wasn't very tall, she had an outstanding figure. He thought she was beautiful in the way animals were, rather than girls. Like a vibrant deer, say, or a bird soaring high in the sky.

Naturally, she was popular, and the students, teachers, and student assistants all made frequent excuses to speak to her. However, he found himself avoiding her from day one. (She was pleasant to look at but too intimidatingly beautiful to strike up a casual conversation with.) For that very reason, though, it wasn't long before he noticed a certain tendency in her—something wrong, he might even say.

No matter who spoke to her, the girl responded with a charming smile, but she never went out of her way to speak to anyone else unless she needed to. The people around her completely failed to notice this distant behavior. As a matter of fact, they seemed to think she was very sociable.

"She's gorgeous, but she isn't full of herself. She's unassuming and easy to get along with." That was the general opinion of her. He thought it was strange, but he didn't feel like going around correcting them, and he wasn't particularly curious about the reasons behind her behavior or the misunderstanding. If she didn't want to associate with people, she didn't have to. He simply thought, *It takes all kinds, I guess*. Everyone was a little warped in one way or another; it was just a matter of how much. Plus, he didn't want to get involved in anything troublesome.

However, one day, he had to speak to her. It was a cold day in December, just before Christmas. On that day, the math teacher had gone home, citing urgent business, and he and the girl ended up staying at the cram school by themselves to do prep work on the textbook. They'd been there alone for nearly an hour when he realized that she looked rather odd. He'd been focused on drafting

problems when he sensed that something wasn't right and glanced up.

Sitting across from him, she was looking down and trembling. Her eyes were wide open, staring at the paper in front of her, but they weren't focused on anything. Her forehead was wet with sweat. Startled, he spoke to her, but she didn't respond, so he got up and shook her shoulder.

"Hey, Sakaguchi! What's the matter? Are you okay?"

"...dicine."

"Huh?"

"Medicine. Need to take it; get me a drink," she said in an oddly flat voice. He ducked out, bought some tea from the vending machine in the hall, opened the pull tab, and held it out to her. With shaking hands, she took a sheet of pills out of the bag by her feet and said, "Three." He pushed three small yellow pills off the sheet, put them into her mouth, and held the tea so she could drink it. His fingertips touched her lustrous lips, and they were startlingly hot.

They only dated for three months, but she left him with a deep wound he'd never manage to forget. He'd probably done the same to her. It was the first time he'd ever fallen for anyone so quickly and the first time he'd ever hated that same person so deeply. There were two months when they were desperate and single-minded about finding ways to get the other to love them more and one month where they thought only of how to deal an irremediable blow to the other. Unbelievable happiness and ecstasy were followed by days too terrible to share with anyone. They said lots of things to each other that they never should have.

Still. It's strange, isn't it? he thought. Even after all that, his most vivid memory of her was from that December day before the two of them had started going out.

On that winter day, a little while after she'd taken her medicine, her face had come back to life right before his eyes. The sight made him catch his breath, like he had witnessed something mysterious and sacred. Like a tuft of flowers no one had ever seen before, the only one of its kind in the world, and he was

watching it bloom. He got the feeling he'd seen one of the world's secret moments like this before, long ago. His thought then was terribly powerful: *I mustn't lose somebody like this ever again*. The fact that she was dating the math teacher couldn't have mattered less.

* * *

He started job hunting late, in the summer of his senior year. It had taken him that long to feel like going out in public again after the breakup in March. Somehow, thanks in part to the enthusiastic pressure applied by his kindly adviser, he managed to land a job by autumn. He had no idea whether it was a job he actually wanted to do, or one he should be doing, but either way, he needed work. He wanted to see more of the world than he could as a researcher at the university. He'd stayed in the same place long enough.

After the graduation ceremony, since he'd boxed up all his possessions, he came back to an empty apartment. From the little east-facing window in the kitchen, he could see the Sunshine high-rise, tinted by the evening sun, towering behind the old wooden buildings. From the south-facing window, through the gaps between the mixed-use buildings, he could see the skyscrapers of Shinjuku, small with distance. They were over two hundred meters tall, and they looked completely different depending on the time of day and the weather. Like mountain peaks in the sun's first rays, they shone in the early morning sunlight; like a wharf in a rough ocean, on rainy days, the buildings' shapes blended into the pale rain. He'd seen these kinds of views, filtered through a variety of emotions, for four years.

At length, darkness began to fall outside the window, and the innumerable city lights were proudly driving it back. Pulling over the ashtray he'd set on top of a box, he took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. Sitting down cross-legged on the tatami flooring, exhaling smoke, he gazed at the swarm of lights that twinkled through the thick atmosphere.

This is where I'm going to live, he thought.

The company where he'd found a job was a midsize software developer in Mitaka. His occupation was software engineer. He'd been assigned to the Mobile Solutions department; his main clients were communications service providers and device manufacturers, and he was part of a small team that developed software for cell phones and other portable information devices.

Something he learned only after he'd taken the job was that being a programmer really suited him. It was a job that required focus and perseverance in isolation, but the work he put in was never wasted effort. When the code he'd written didn't work as intended, the cause always lay in him, without exception. The act of thinking and reflecting, thinking and rethinking, to create thousands of lines of code that he knew would work gave him a joy he'd never felt before. His job kept him busy, he almost invariably got home late at night, and he was lucky to get five days off a month, but no matter how many hours he spent sitting in front of a computer, he never got tired of it. In a tidy, mostly white office, in a cubicle partitioned off for his exclusive use, he spent day after day typing away on a keyboard.

He wasn't sure whether it was common in this line of work or just particular to the company where he'd landed a job, but the employees almost never interacted with one another for reasons other than work. None of the teams was in the habit of going out for drinks after work; everyone ate convenience store lunches at their own desks, and they didn't even exchange the standard greetings when someone went out on business or home for the day. Meeting times were kept to a minimum, and necessary discussions were held almost entirely via in-house e-mail. As a rule, the only sound in the spacious office was the muted clicking of keyboards. Although there had to be over a hundred people on the floor, he barely felt their presence. At first, the stark difference between this and his college relationships bewildered him, but back then, his interactions with people had consisted of endless chatter that went nowhere, and everyone had drunk a lot of alcohol even though there was no real reason for it. It didn't take him long to get used to the quiet environment. He'd never been a big talker anyway.

When he finished work, he caught what was very nearly the last Chuo Line train from Mitaka Station, got off at Shinjuku, and walked back to his little one-room condo in Nakano-Sakaue. He took a taxi when he was completely exhausted, but as a rule, he walked. It took him about thirty minutes. He'd moved to that apartment after graduation. The rent would have been cheaper over in Mitaka, where his company was, but he'd felt a resistance to living too near his work. More than anything, he'd wanted to get closer to the distant view he'd seen from his apartment in Ikebukuro, to the skyscrapers of Nishi-Shinjuku.

Maybe that explained why his favorite time of day was when he'd passed Ogikubo on the train, the skyscrapers of Nishi-Shinjuku had appeared beyond the window, and he was watching them gradually draw nearer. The last Tokyo-bound train was empty enough to have a few vacant seats, and he would take one, still wearing his suit and filled with the pleasant, well-earned fatigue of the day's work. As he gazed at the skyscrapers, watching their small shapes slip in and out of view behind the mixed-use buildings, before long, they rose up in front of him as bold entities, in time with the *clackety-clack* vibrations of the train. The night sky over Tokyo was always oddly bright, and the buildings were black silhouettes against it. Even at this hour, beautiful yellow light shone from their windows, showing that people were at work. Aircraft warning lamps blinked red, steady as breathing. When he watched them, he could feel as if he was still bound for something distant and beautiful, even now. At times like that, something would tremble in the depths of his heart.

Then morning came again, and off to the company he went. He'd buy a can of coffee from the vending machine in the building's entrance, punch his timecard, take his seat, and turn on his computer. While the operating system booted up, he'd drink his coffee and look over the day's work schedule. Using his mouse to start up several of the necessary programs, he positioned his fingers over his keyboard's home keys. Thinking up a few algorithms that would get him to his destination, he weighed them, then typed in the application programming interfaces, assembling procedures. He moved the mouse cursor and the caret in the editor as if they were extensions of himself. His thoughts ran to the

operating system that lay beyond the APIs, the middleware beyond the operating system, and to what lay beyond that: the workings of the hardware—a mass of silicon—and the fantastical behavior of the electrons.

The more proficient he grew at programming, the more reverence he came to hold for computers themselves. He'd had some vague knowledge of the quantum theory that lay behind all semiconductor technology, but when he began to interact with and operate a computer on a daily basis as a professional, the more familiar it became to him—and the more he was compelled to think about the unbelievable complexity of the tool he was using and the work of the people who'd made it possible. It struck him as almost mystical.

There was the theory of relativity, which had been created to describe the universe, and quantum theory, which described nanoscale behavior. When he thought that these two might someday be united by an impending grand theory or by superstring theory—the very act of using a computer seemed like connecting with some secret of the world. And although he had no clear reason for thinking so, he felt as if that secret held a hidden passage that would lead to the dreams and emotions that had passed him by long ago, to the places he'd loved and the music he'd listened to after school—and to the promise he'd made and failed to keep to a girl who'd been special to him. He threw himself deeply into his work with a kind of urgency, as if he was trying to retake something precious. Like a lone performer in deep dialogue with his instrument, he kept typing quietly on his keyboard.

Once he'd joined the working world, a few years passed in the blink of an eye.

At first, he felt like he was in a period of growth, the type he hadn't encountered in a long time. As his programming skills improved, it reminded him of the pride he'd felt in middle school, when his body was maturing into the body of an adult, acquiring muscle day by day—the nostalgic sensation of his young, frail body being remodeled into something new. Gradually, his work earned the confidence of those around him, and his income rose proportionately. He bought a new suit for work once every season. He spent his

days off alone, cleaning his apartment or reading, and about once every six months, he'd meet up with old friends and go drinking. He no longer made new friends or lost old ones.

Every day, he'd leave home at half past eight, then return after one in the morning.

The routine repeated without end. No matter the season or the weather, the skyscrapers of Nishi-Shinjuku were breathtakingly beautiful from the train. As a matter of fact, the older he got, the brighter that view seemed to shine.

Every so often, that beauty seemed to be confronting him with something. However, he didn't know what that something was.

* * *

"Mr. Tohno."

One Sunday afternoon in the middle of the rainy season, during the first sunbreak in quite a while, someone called his name on a platform at Shinjuku Station.

She was a bespectacled young woman in a beige broad-brimmed sun hat. At first glance, he had no idea who she was, but her intellectual atmosphere seemed somehow familiar. As he hesitated, not sure what to say, she said, "You work for XX Systems, don't you?" and that was when he finally remembered.

"Yes, um, you're with Yoshimura's department..."

"It's Mizuno. Oh good; I'm glad you remember me."

"I'm sorry; last time we met, you were wearing a suit, so..."

"Ah yes, I'm wearing a hat today, too. I knew you right away, Mr. Tohno. You look like a student when you're out of your suit, you know."

A student? *She probably didn't mean anything by it*, he thought. Without really intending to, they started toward the stairs, side by side. The woman looked like she was still in college as well. The pastel pink on her toenails shone

in a subdued way from the toes of her brown wedge sandals. *What did she say her name was...? Uh, Ms. Mizuno.* When he'd visited a client company the previous month for a product delivery, she'd been the subordinate of the client's point of contact, and he'd met her twice. They hadn't done much more than exchange business cards, but she'd struck him as a very dedicated person. That impression and her clear voice had stayed with him.

Yes, he was pretty sure her name had been Risa Mizuno. He remembered thinking that the look of the characters on her business card had very neatly matched his impression of the woman herself. They descended the stairs from the platform, and as he absently turned right into the station corridor, he asked her, "You use the East Gate, too, Ms. Mizuno?"

"Um, yes, or any of them."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't actually have any plans. The weather's nice, though, now that the rain's let up, so I was thinking I'd do some shopping," she said, smiling. It was contagious, and he smiled back.

"Same here. If you'd like, then, do you want to go get something to drink somewhere?"

At that, Mizuno broke into a smile that made his heart skip a beat. "Yes," she said.

At a cramped underground café near the East Gate, they had coffee, talked for a couple of hours, exchanged contact information, then went their separate ways.

Once he was alone, as he walked between the shelves at a bookstore, he noticed that his throat was tired in a mild, tingling way. Come to think of it, it had been quite a while since he'd spoken with someone for so long with no clear objective. It was rather incredible that they'd talked for two hours without getting bored on what was practically their first meeting, he realized. Maybe being finished with their work project had made it easier for them to relax around each other. They'd shared gossip from their respective companies, the places where they lived, their student days—nothing special, but they'd been a good match, conversationally. The whole thing had been very pleasant. For the

first time in ages, the depths of his chest felt warm.

A week after that, he texted her an invitation to dinner. He finished up his overtime early; they met up in Kichijouji and dined together, and it was past ten in the evening when they parted. The next week, she invited him to a restaurant, and the week after, on his invitation, they met up on a weekend for a movie and a meal. In that way, courteously, slowly and carefully, they built their relationship.

Risa Mizuno was the type of woman who grew more appealing as you got to know her. At first glance, her glasses and long black hair made her seem plain, but when he looked closer, her features were startlingly symmetrical. The way she dressed as if she was trying to cover up, her reticence, and the embarrassment in her gestures all made it seem as if she didn't want to be viewed as "pretty." She was two years younger than he was, and her personality was sincere and genuine. She never shouted, and she spoke with a slow, pleasant rhythm. Being with her helped him relax.

Her condo was in Nishi-Kokubunji, and her company was on the Chuo Line as well, so their dates always took place along that line. He could sense her affection clearly when their shoulders brushed on the train every so often, in her gestures when they shared a meal, and in her gait when they walked side by side. Already, they both knew that if one of them took that next step, the other probably wouldn't refuse. Still, he wasn't able to decide if he should.

In the past..., he thought as he watched her walk away toward the opposite platform at Kichijouji Station. *I've always fallen too fast, I think. Then I burn through it in no time, and I lose her.* He didn't want to do that again.

* * *

At the end of that summer, in his apartment one rainy evening, he saw a news clip about the successful launch of an H-IIA rocket.

It was an extremely humid day, and he'd shut the windows all the way and turned the air conditioner on low. Even then, a clammy humidity had crept into

the room along with the sound of rain striking the ground and cars gliding over the wet road. The TV showed an H-IIA rocket rising from the familiar Tanegashima Space Center, spitting out enormous flames. The screen cut to footage of the H-IIA climbing through the clouds, shot with a super-telephoto lens, then to footage from a camera mounted on the rocket's main body, looking down over the auxiliary boosters. Through gaps in the clouds far below, he could see all of Tanegashima receding. He had a clear view of the town of Nakatane, where he'd spent his high school years, and its coastline.

For a moment, a shiver ran through him.

He didn't really know what he should feel, seeing a view like that. Tanegashima wasn't his hometown anymore. His parents had transferred to Nagano for work quite a while back and would probably settle there permanently. To him, the island was just a place he'd passed through.

His beer was getting lukewarm; he drained it in one gulp, feeling the bitter liquid travel down his throat and settle in his stomach. The young female newscaster was blandly explaining that the satellite that had just been launched would handle communications for mobile devices. *So that launch wasn't entirely unrelated to my work. Still, he thought, life's taken me very far away.*

He'd seen his first launch at seventeen. A girl in a school uniform had been standing next to him. They'd been in different classes, but they'd been friends—or rather, she'd gotten attached to him. Her name was Kanae Sumida; she'd been a cute, lively girl with a deep tan from surfing.

The intervening decade had gently smoothed out the spikes and dips of emotion, but still, thinking about Sumida made his heart hurt just a little, even now. Her height and the scent of her sweat, her voice and smile and tearful face—all the little traces of her came back to him in vivid force, along with the colors and sounds and smells of the island where he'd spent his adolescence. The emotion resembled regret, but he knew what he'd done then was all he was able to do. He'd seen it all in sharp relief back then: the reason Sumida had been drawn to him, the moment she'd tried to tell him she loved him, his own feelings when he hadn't let her say it, the moment of exaltation when he'd seen the launch, and her resignation afterward. But despite that clarity, he hadn't been able to act.

When he'd left for Tokyo to go to the university, he'd shared his plane's departure time with only one person: Sumida. He'd left on a bright, windy day in March. In the parking lot of the small airport, which looked rather like a ferry terminal, the two of them had exchanged a few final words. The conversation had tended to trail off, and Sumida had cried all the way through it. But when they said good-bye, she'd smiled. Back then, Sumida had already been far stronger, and far more mature, than he was.

Had he been able to return her smile? He couldn't remember.

It was 2:20 AM.

He needed to get to sleep; tomorrow was a workday. The news was over, and a home shopping program had started while he wasn't paying attention.

He turned off the TV, brushed his teeth, set the air conditioner to shut down in an hour, turned out the lights, and got into bed. His phone was charging by his pillow, and a little light on it blinked, alerting him to a new text. When he opened the phone, the white light of the display illuminated the room dimly. The text was from Mizuno, an invitation to dinner. He went to lie back in bed, closing his eyes for a little while.

Various patterns rose behind his eyelids. The optic nerves register the pressure of the eyelids on the eyeballs as light, which means humans can never see true darkness... Who had he learned that from?

Back then, I used to write texts I never sent, he remembered, out of nowhere. At first, they'd been intended for a certain girl. He didn't know her e-mail address, and somewhere along the way, they'd stopped corresponding by letter. Even after he no longer wrote letters to her, when he felt an emotion he couldn't completely contain, he'd written texts as if he was telling her about it, then deleted them without sending. For him, it had been a period of preparation, a run-up to setting off into the world alone.

However, gradually, he'd stopped addressing the texts to anyone. They'd become vague soliloquies, and finally the habit itself had disappeared. When he realized that, he'd thought, *I must be ready now*.

He wouldn't write letters to her anymore.

He was sure no more letters would arrive from her.

He vividly remembered the raw anxiety he'd felt as he thought about it. On a fundamental level, those feelings were far too closely connected with his current self, and he was appalled at the idea that he ultimately might not have changed at all. He'd been ignorant then—and arrogant and cruel. *No*, he thought, opening his eyes. *At least now I have someone who's clearly special to me.*

I'm probably in love with Mizuno, he thought.

Next time they met, he'd tell her so. Making that resolution, he responded to her text. This time, he'd face his feelings with Mizuno. Just as Sumida had done for him, on that last day.

That day, at the island's airport, they'd been wearing casual clothes instead of their uniforms. The brisk wind had rustled Sumida's hair, the power lines, and the leaves of the Phoenix palms. She was crying, but she'd smiled at him.

"I was in love with you for a very long time, Tohno. Thank you for everything," she'd said.

4

The project team he was assigned to in his third year at work proved to be a turning point in his career.

The project itself had been in progress before he joined the company. Over a long period of time, it had strayed farther and farther off course, and the company had finally decided to drastically cut back its original goals and end it. The work was technically the cleanup after a defeat; the general manager who'd told him about his transfer had ordered him to organize the bloated, labyrinthine tangle of programs and attempt to salvage a viable product, in order to keep the damage to a minimum. Essentially, his abilities had been recognized and were now being exploited.

At first, he did his job according to the team leader's instructions. However, he promptly realized that working that way led to an unnecessary accumulation of subroutines, and it was actively making the situation worse. He pointed this out to the team leader, but the man wouldn't listen, so he was left with no options but to work extra overtime hours for a month. For the duration of that month, he did his job as the leader ordered—and at the same time did the job using the methods he thought were best. The results were clear: Unless they did it his way, the problems wouldn't be resolved. He went back to the leader with those results, but not only was he reprimanded harshly, he was ordered not to do anything without permission again.

Bewildered, he looked over the other team members' work, but they were simply doing as the leader told them. If this went on, the project would never end. It had been built on mistaken premises, and unless its foundation was corrected, any progress they made would only compound the errors in increasingly complicated ways. On top of that, the project had gone on far too long without having those initial conditions reviewed. As the company said, it needed to think about the best way to shut it down.

After hesitating for a while, he spoke about it with the general manager who'd ordered his transfer. The manager listened to him for a long time but ultimately asked him to uphold the team leader's position while simultaneously and skillfully bringing the project to a close. *That's not possible*, he thought.

For more than three months after that, the utterly futile work continued. He could see that the team leader wanted to make the project succeed, but that didn't mean he could just shut up and continue to do work that only made things worse. He continued to work independently, the only member of the team to do so, even though it got him in trouble with the leader time and time again. The one saving grace was that the general manager appeared to tacitly approve of his actions. But day by day, the other staff members were creating chaos that went above and beyond the results of his work. The number of cigarettes he went through increased—and so did the amount of beer he drank after he got home.

One day, he just couldn't take it anymore, and he begged the general manager to take him off the team or talk the leader around. If that couldn't be

done, he said he'd leave the company.

In the end, the team leader was transferred the very next week. The new leader who replaced him was in charge of another project as well, and he didn't hide his dislike of the man responsible for his increased workload. But he was capable of rational decisions, and that was what mattered.

At any rate, the finish line was finally approaching now. Work got busier and busier, and Takaki grew more and more isolated at the office, but he did his job for all he was worth. At this point, there was nothing else he could do. He'd done everything he could.

As all of that was going on, the time he spent with Risa Mizuno grew even more precious to him.

Once every week or two, he went to her condo in Nishi-Kokubunji after work. They'd meet at nine thirty in the evening, and sometimes he bought a small bouquet of flowers for her. The florist near his company was only open until eight, so he'd duck out of the office at seven, buy flowers, put them in a coin locker at the train station, then hurry back to the company and work until eight thirty. This kind of surreptitious maneuver was fun. Then he'd board the crowded Chuo Line, taking care not to let the bouquet get crushed, and make his way to the station where Mizuno was waiting.

Sometimes they'd spend Saturday nights together at one of their apartments. He stayed at Mizuno's place more frequently, but she sometimes spent the night at his. There were two toothbrushes in each of their apartments now; he kept several pairs of underwear at her place, and before he knew it, he had more cooking utensils and spices. The sort of magazines he'd never read before gradually accumulated at his place, too, and it made him feel warm inside.

Mizuno always made dinner for them. He worked on his laptop while he waited for the food, with the sound of kitchen knives and the ventilation fan in his ears, savoring the smell of boiling noodles or baking fish. As he typed away, he felt truly peaceful. The sounds of cooking and the clicking of his keyboard

filled the small apartment gently. It was the most soothing time and place he'd ever known.

He remembers many things about Mizuno.

Meals, for example. Mizuno always ate in a beautiful way. She flaked mackerel flesh off the bones very neatly; when she cut meat apart, the movements of her fingertips were smooth; she ate pasta skillfully, with a fork and spoon, bringing it to her lips with an enchanting elegance. Then there were her pale-pink fingernails, encircling a coffee cup. The dampness of her cheeks, the coldness of her fingertips, the scent of her hair, the sweetness of her skin, her sweat-damp palms, the smell of his tobacco on her lips, her sad sighs.

In her apartment beside the railway line, when they'd turned out the lights and slipped into bed, he often looked up at the sky through the window. In winter, the stars were very clear. Outside, it was probably freezing, and the air in the room was cold enough that their breath showed palely, but the weight of her head on his naked shoulder was warm and pleasant. At those times, the *clackety-clack* of the Chuo Line sounded like an unfamiliar language, echoing from a far distant country. He felt as if he was in a place completely unlike any other he'd ever known. *And maybe, he thought, this is the place I've always wanted to find.*

His days with Mizuno made him realize just how thirsty he'd been—and how lonely.

* * *

And that was why the breakup brought with it the anxiety of peering into bottomless darkness.

Over three years, they'd invested substantial emotion in this and built their relationship with a kind of desperation. But eventually, somewhere along the way, their roads diverged. The thought of walking alone again from now on was a burden that left him weary.

He didn't think anything had happened, really. There had been no "last

straw.” But feelings can still ebb without ever finding harmony—and maybe that slow drifting apart was why.

Late at night, as he listened to the sound of cars outside the window, his eyes wide in the darkness, he thought for dear life. Scraping his ideas together as they threatened to come undone, he tried to glean even a tiny fragment of a lesson from them.

Well, there’s no way around it. It’s just not possible to stay with anyone forever. People have to get used to loss.

That’s how I’ve gotten by so far.

* * *

Around the time he and Mizuno broke up, he quit his job at the company as well.

He didn’t really know whether those two events were related, though. Probably not. He’d taken out work-related stress on Mizuno lots of times, and she had done the same, but he thought those conflicts had been superficial. He felt as if something much harder to put into words, a sort of incompleteness, had been a constant presence hanging over him... But was that why?

He didn’t know.

When he tried to recall them later, his memories of the final two years before he quit working at the company felt vague, as if he’d spent the entire time half asleep.

Somewhere along the way, the divisions between the seasons began to blur, while things that had happened today felt as if they’d happened yesterday, and sometimes he could practically see the things he’d be doing tomorrow, like video footage. His job was as busy as ever, but the work was routine now. He

had a rough outline of what needed to be done in order to end the project, and he'd managed to work out the time it would take almost mechanically, as spent working hours. It was like being part of a line of cars that moved forward at an unvarying speed, obeying traffic signs. He could use the steering wheel and the gas pedal almost without thinking. He didn't even need to talk to anyone.

At some point, programming, new technologies, and computers themselves had ceased to shine as brightly for him. *Well, that's probably just how it goes*, he thought. The starry sky had been an incredible source of wonder to him in his boyhood, but now it was merely something he saw if he looked up.

Meanwhile, the company's opinion of him had grown better and better. With every evaluation, he was given a raise, and he received bigger bonuses than any of his contemporaries. He lived well within his means—not that he had any time to spend the money anyway—so before he knew it, the figure in his bankbook had grown beyond anything he'd ever seen.

As he sat in an office where the only sound was the quiet clicking of keyboards, waiting for the code he'd entered to build, with a cup of lukewarm coffee raised to his lips, he thought, *Weird. There's nothing I want to buy, and yet the money just keeps coming in.*

When he jokingly told Mizuno about it, she'd laughed, but afterward, she'd looked just a little sad. The depths of his chest constricted slightly, as if something had physically squeezed the innermost part of his heart. The melancholy came from something he couldn't explain.

It was the beginning of autumn; a cool wind blew in through the screens, and the floor he was sitting on felt pleasantly cool. He was wearing a deep-blue dress shirt, although he'd removed his tie, while Mizuno wore a long skirt with large pockets and a dark-brown sweater. When he looked at the gentle swell of her bosom beneath that sweater, he grew just a little sadder.

It was the first time in quite a while that he'd stopped at Mizuno's apartment on his way home from work. *The last time I was here, the air conditioner was still on, so...*, he thought. *That was almost two months ago.* They'd both been busy with work, and their schedules hadn't matched up, but he didn't think meeting her was out of the question. Earlier, they probably would have gotten

together more frequently. They'd stopped making room for each other.

"Say, Takaki? When you were little, what did you want to be when you grew up?" Mizuno asked after he'd griped about his company for a bit.

He thought for a little while. "I don't think I knew."

"Nothing at all?"

"Yeah. Just getting through each day took everything I had." He laughed as he said it.

"Same here," Mizuno said, smiling back at him. There was a plate with a heap of Asian pears on it, and she took one and brought it to her lips with a light, pleasant *crunch*.

"Really?"

"Mm-hmm. I always had trouble in school when they asked us what we wanted to be. When I found my current job, I was pretty relieved. I'd never have to think about my dreams for the future again."

"Yeah," he agreed, reaching out to take the pear she'd peeled for him.

What he wanted to be.

He'd always been desperate to find a place for himself. He still didn't feel as if he was really himself yet. He was chasing something, but he wasn't caught up. He wasn't going after "his true self" or anything like that; he was just still *only partway there...* But partway to where?

Mizuno's cell phone rang. "Excuse me a second," she said, taking her phone out into the hall. Watching her go out of the corner of his eye, he put a cigarette between his lips, then lit it. Her cheerful voice reached him faintly from the hallway, and suddenly, he was so violently jealous of whatever stranger she was talking to that even he was startled. He got a clear image of a man whose face he didn't know running his fingers over the white skin under Mizuno's sweater, and in that moment he hated them both.

The phone call only lasted about five minutes, but by the time Mizuno came back, saying, "It was from a junior employee," he felt as if he'd been scorned. He knew it wasn't her fault, though. Obviously.

“Yeah,” he responded, grinding his cigarette out in an ashtray with enough force to hopefully crush his own feelings. *What the hell is going on?* He was appalled with himself.

The next morning, for the first time in a long while, they sat at the dining room table, having breakfast together.

When he glanced out the window, gray clouds covered the sky. The morning was slightly chilly. Their Sunday breakfasts were very precious, symbolic times for them. Their day off was still ahead, untouched, and they could spend all that time any way they wanted. Just like their futures. The breakfasts Mizuno made were always delicious, and during those times, they were always happy... Until now.

Mizuno cut up her French toast, put scrambled eggs on top of a piece, and took a bite. As he watched her, he was struck by the thought that this might be the last breakfast they had here. There was no particular reason for it; the thought had just occurred to him, vaguely. It wasn't as if he wanted it to be that way. He wanted to have breakfast with her next week, too, and the week after that.

But he was right—that was their last breakfast together.

* * *

He decided to turn in his resignation at the company around the time it became clear that the project would be wrapped up in three more months.

Once he'd made up his mind, he realized he'd actually been thinking of leaving for a very long time already. He told his team leader that he'd bring the current project to a close, then spend about a month conducting the necessary transfers of control and tying up loose ends, but if possible, he wanted to leave by February of next year. With some sympathy, the team leader asked him to talk it over with the general manager.

When he told the general manager he was planning to resign, the man was kind enough to try to stop him in earnest. If the salary was the problem, they

could attempt to rectify that to a certain extent—more importantly, there was no point in coming this far just to quit. Now was the time to be patient. The current project might be rough, but once it was over, his evaluation would be even higher, and the work was bound to get more interesting.

Maybe so. But this is my life, you know, he thought, although he didn't say it.

He explained that he had no complaints about his pay, and the work wasn't too hard. He wasn't lying. He simply wanted to quit. But that wasn't enough to convince the manager. *I'm not surprised,* he thought. He wasn't even able to explain it to himself all that well.

However, even though it caused a little trouble, it was decided that he'd leave the company at the end of January.

Autumn deepened, and while the air grew clearer and colder by the day, he threw himself into finishing his final job. Now that the project had a clear end date, he was even busier than before, and he had almost no days off. He spent most of the brief time that he was home sleeping like the dead, but it still wasn't enough. His body felt sluggish and a little feverish, and on the train during his morning commute, he was always horribly nauseated. However, living that way did keep him from thinking about useless things. He even found a kind of peace in it.

He'd braced himself for life at the company to get uncomfortable after he'd turned in his resignation, but it actually went the other way. The team leader thanked him awkwardly, and the general manager even worried about his next job. "I can give you a solid recommendation," the manager told him. He refused politely, saying he planned to just take it easy for a while.

A typhoon brought cold winds to the Kanto region, and after the storm had passed, he started wearing his winter suit. One cold morning, he took his coat out of storage—it still smelled faintly of mothballs—and on another day, he wore the muffler Mizuno had given him, gradually wrapping himself in winter. He barely spoke to anyone, but that wasn't a painful thing.

He and Mizuno exchanged texts every so often, once or twice a week. It took quite a long time for her to respond now, but he thought she was probably busy. Besides, that was mutual. Before he knew it, it had been three months since their breakfast together that day, and he hadn't seen Mizuno at all.

When the day's work ended, and he boarded the last Chuo Line train and collapsed limply into a seat, he always breathed a deep sigh. A very, very deep one.

The late-night train for Tokyo was empty, and it always smelled faintly of alcohol and fatigue. Listening to the familiar sounds of the train, he gazed at the lights of the skyscrapers approaching from beyond the streets of Nakano, and he started to feel as if he were looking down at himself from high in the sky. With vivid clarity, he could visualize the thin line of lights crawling slowly over the ground, heading toward enormous buildings that looked like gravestones.

A strong wind blew, making the lights of faraway towns twinkle like stars. *I'm part of that thin line of lights, crawling over the surface of this vast planet.*

When the train reached Shinjuku Station, and he stepped out onto the platform, he had to look back at the seat he'd occupied. He couldn't shake the feeling that his body, shrouded in a suit and heavy fatigue, might still be there.

I'm still not used to Tokyo, even now, he thought. Not to the benches on the station platforms, or to the endless rows of automatic ticket gates, or to the tenant-lined corridors of the underground shopping complex.

* * *

One day in December, the project that had gone on for nearly two years came to an end.

He felt almost nothing about the fact that it was over; he was surprised. His fatigue was one day deeper than it had been the day before; that was all. He took a break that was just long enough for a cup of coffee, then began getting ready to leave his job. Ultimately, he ended up taking the last train home that day as well.

When he got off at Shinjuku Station, passed through the automatic ticket

gate, and saw the line at the underground taxi stand by the West Gate, he realized, *It's a Friday night*. Not only that, but it was Christmas. His ears began to pick up the faint, untraceable sound of jingle bells in the muffled hum of the station. He gave up on getting a taxi and began to walk home instead, heading through the underground street that ran toward Nishi-Shinjuku and emerging in the skyscraper district.

This place was always quiet late at night. He walked along, staying close to the foundations of the buildings. This was the route he always took when he walked from Shinjuku. Abruptly, his phone vibrated in his coat pocket. He stopped, waited for the space of a breath, then took it out.

It was from Mizuno.

He couldn't answer. He didn't know why, but he didn't want to pick up. It just hurt too much—but what was hurting, he didn't know. He was powerless, simply staring at the RISA MIZUNO that showed on the phone's tiny LCD screen. The phone vibrated a few times, then fell silent, as if it had died.

All of a sudden, something hot welled up in his chest, and he tipped his head back.

Half of his vision was taken up by the building's black wall, disappearing into the sky. There were lights in a few of the windows in that wall; far beyond them were the red aircraft warning lamps, blinking as steady as breathing, and above those was the starless urban sky. He saw countless small fragments drifting slowly down from it.

It's snow.

Just one thing, he thought.

He longed for someone to say it. *I only want to hear one thing. Why won't anybody say it to me?* He knew it was a selfish wish, but he couldn't help himself. It felt as if seeing the snow had opened a door in the very depths of his heart. Once he was aware of it, he could see plain as day what he'd wanted all this time.

The words the girl had said to him on that day, long ago:

"Takaki, I'm sure you're going to be just fine."

As she was organizing her belongings, getting ready to move, Akari Shinohara found the old letter.

It was in a cardboard box, deep in the back of the closet. The packing tape that sealed the lid said only *Old Stuff* (she must have written that herself, of course, several years earlier), and her curiosity was piqued, so she opened it. The box held miscellaneous things from her elementary and middle school years: her yearbook, school trip guidebooks, a few monthly magazines for elementary schoolers, cassette tapes with unknown contents, a faded red school backpack, and the leather bag she'd used in middle school.

As she picked up each of these nostalgic items one by one and studied them, she had a feeling she might find that letter. When she discovered an empty cookie tin at the very bottom of the box, she remembered. *Oh right. On the night of my middle school graduation ceremony, I put that letter in here.* She'd carried it around in her bag for a long time, unable to bring herself to take it out, but on graduation, as if shaking loose of it, she'd put it away to free herself from it.

When she opened the tin, there was the letter, shut between the pages of a thin notebook she'd treasured in middle school. It was the first love letter she'd ever written.

She'd meant to give the letter to a boy she'd liked, fifteen years ago, on their first date.

The snow was so deep and quiet that day, she remembered. I'd just turned thirteen, and I lived three hours by train from the boy I liked. On that day, he was going to take several trains to come to see me. Because of the snow, the trains were running behind schedule, and he got there four hours late. While I waited for him, sitting in front of the stove in the little wooden station building, I wrote this letter.

Holding the letter brought back the unease and loneliness she'd felt then. Her

love for the boy, and her desire to see him, rose again so vividly that it was impossible to believe it had been fifteen years since then. The emotions were as intense and bright as if she was feeling them now, and their afterglow was so dazzling that it bewildered her.

I really did love him, she thought. On that first date, he and I shared our first kiss. To me, it felt like the world before that kiss and the one after it were completely different things. That's why I wasn't able to give him the letter.

Even now, she remembered those things as if they'd happened only yesterday — *And it really does feel just like yesterday.* Only the little jeweled ring on the fourth finger of her left hand showed that fifteen years had passed.

That evening, she dreamed about it. The two of them, still children, were standing under a cherry tree, looking up, on a quiet night of falling snow.

* * *

The next day, fine powdery snow was falling at Iwafune Station. But the clouds were so thin that blue sky showed through in places, and the snow would probably stop before it could pick up. It had been quite a long time since they'd gotten snow in December at all. Over the past few years, they'd had hardly any snows as heavy as the one that had fallen on that day.

"You could stay until New Year's, you know," her mother told her.

"I have a lot to do," she answered. "I have to get ready."

"You're right. Cook something tasty for him," her father said.

"I will," she told him. *Both Mom and Dad have gotten older,* she thought. That was only natural, though; they'd almost reached retirement age. *And now I'm getting married.*

As she waited for the train for Oyama, she felt strange standing on a station platform with both of her parents like this. It might have been the first time since the day they'd moved there.

On that day, after leaving Tokyo and transferring between trains, she'd

stepped down onto the platform at this station with her mother. She could still remember how lonely she'd felt then. Her father had gone on ahead, so he was waiting for them on the platform. Iwafune was where his parents lived, so she'd been there a few times before since she was small. There was really nothing there, but she thought it was a good, quiet place. Living there was another matter entirely, though. She'd been born in Utsunomiya, had spent her early childhood in Shizuoka, and had lived in Tokyo for the years between fourth and sixth grades. To her, the tiny platform at Iwafune Station had looked so desolate. She shouldn't be living here. She'd been so homesick for Tokyo that she'd almost cried.

"If anything happens, call us," her mother said; she'd been saying it over and over since the night before. Her parents and this small town felt very dear to her. By now, this was her hometown, and she hated to leave it.

She smiled, responding gently. "It's all right. Don't worry so much; we'll see each other at the ceremony next month. It's cold, so go on back home."

Just as she said the words, she heard the distant, approaching whistle of the Ryomo Line train.

The Ryomo Line was empty in the afternoon, and she was the only passenger in her car. Unable to concentrate on the paperback she'd brought, she rested her chin on her hand and gazed out the window.

The rice had been harvested, and featureless rural country spread out before her. She tried to imagine how the view would look with a thick blanket of snow. It would have been the middle of the night. There could only have been a handful of distant lights. The window frame must have had a thick coating of frost.

It must have been so discouraging, she thought. What had he seen in that landscape, his stomach empty, racked with guilt at keeping somebody waiting, on a train that had finally stopped completely?

Maybe...

Maybe he was hoping I'd gone home. He was a kind boy, after all. But I didn't

mind waiting for him, no matter how many hours it took. I was desperate to see him. I never doubted him for a second. If I could say something to him, on that day, when he was stuck inside the train..., she thought, then I'd say...

It's all right. Your lover will wait as long as it takes.

She knows you'll really come to see her. Don't be so tense; relax. Try to imagine the fun you'll have together. You'll never meet again afterward, but that time will seem like a miracle. Please keep it deep in your heart forever. Cherish it.

When her thoughts had taken her that far, she smiled in spite of herself. What am I thinking? He's been the only thing on my mind since yesterday.

*She thought it was probably because of the letter she'd found earlier. It was the day before she would officially enter her name in her fiancé's family register, and her head was filled with thoughts of some other boy. Did that count as unfaithfulness? Still, she was sure the man she was going to marry wouldn't mind that. His company was transferring him from Takasaki to Tokyo, and they'd decided to take the opportunity to get married. *If I let myself start complaining about the little things he does that bother me, I'd never stop, but I do love him very much. I think that's true for him as well. By now, my memories with that boy are a precious part of me, like how the food you eat becomes your flesh and blood. They're part of my heart; I could never cut them away.**

Please let Takaki be doing well, Akari prayed, gazing out at the scenery as it flowed past the window.

6

Just living somewhere is enough to make the sadness collect there.

That was what Takaki Tohno thought as he pressed the switch and looked around his apartment by the light of the fluorescent bulb. Somewhere along the way, this room had filled with sadness, just as fine dust accumulates into a film before anyone notices it.

There was the one remaining toothbrush by the sink, for example. The white sheets he'd hung up to dry for someone else. The call history in his phone.

He'd returned to his apartment on the last train, as usual, and these were the things he was thinking about as he took off his tie and hung his suit on its hanger.

But from that angle, it had to be far more painful for Mizuno, he thought, taking a can of beer out of the fridge. He'd gone to her place in Nishi-Kokubunji far more often than she'd come to his apartment. He deeply regretted it. He hadn't meant to do it. He was already chilled from the walk home, and the cold beer he was drinking stole even more of his body heat.

It was the end of January.

On his last day at work, just like always, he put on his coat and headed for the office. When he assumed his familiar seat at the desk he'd used for five years, he turned on his computer and drank his coffee while waiting for it to boot up, then went over that day's work. His duties had been completely transferred already, but he'd accepted as many small, one-off jobs for other teams as he could finish before the day ended. Ironically, through those jobs, he'd made a few friends at the company. Everyone thought it was a shame he was leaving; they'd wanted to hold a going-away party for him that night, but he'd politely declined. "I really appreciate the thought, but I'd like to work the way I always do. I'll have a lot of time on my hands for a while after this, so please ask again later on."

That evening, his former team leader stopped by his desk and mumbled toward the floor. "I'm sorry for, you know. Everything."

He was a little startled. "No, please, don't worry about it," he replied. They hadn't spoken since the transfer the previous year.

As he typed, he thought, *I don't ever have to come here again.* It was a very strange feeling.

I still love you, even now, Mizuno had written in her final text. *I think I probably always will. As far as I'm concerned, you're still kind and wonderful,*

Takaki. Someone I admire who's just out of reach.

Going out with you, I learned how easily people's hearts can be controlled by others. Over the past three years, I loved you more every single day. Every word you said, every line of every text, delighted or saddened me. I got really jealous over silly little things, and I caused you a lot of trouble. I know this may not be the best way to put it, but I think I've gotten tired of it all.

For about half a year, I've tried to tell you these things in various ways. I just couldn't seem to get it across.

You're always kind enough to say you love me, and I believe that you do. However, I think the way we fall in love with people is slightly different. More and more, that difference has started to hurt a little.

His last trip home took place late at night, as always.

It was an especially cold night, and the windows of the train were thickly clouded with condensation. He gazed through them at the blurred lights of the skyscrapers. He felt no sense of liberation and no pangs of urgency about finding his next job. He didn't really know what he should think. *I just don't know anything lately*, he thought, smiling mirthlessly.

Leaving the train, he passed through the same underground corridor as always, emerging into the Nishi-Shinjuku skyscraper district. The night air was painfully cold, and neither his muffler nor his coat was any protection against it. Most of the lights in the skyscrapers were out, and they looked like ancient, gigantic creatures that had been destroyed long ago.

As he walked slowly through the valleys between their enormous hulks, he thought:

I'm a selfish idiot.

Over the past ten years, he'd hurt so many people—and for what? He'd also deceived himself into thinking it was inevitable, perpetually damaging himself as well.

Why couldn't he have been more genuinely considerate of people? Why hadn't he been able to say anything different to them? The farther he walked, the more regrets he'd even nearly forgotten surfaced in his heart.

He couldn't stop it from happening.

Mizuno's words: *"It's starting to hurt a little."* A little. It was more than a little.

His own words—*"Sorry about that"*—and that other voice: *"Savor it."*

The girl from the cram school: *"Are we past saving?"*

Sumida's voice: *"Don't be kind to me"* and her final words: *"Thank you."*

A whisper over the telephone: *"I'm sorry."* And then...

Akari's words: *"I'm sure you're going to be just fine."*

If the world was the ocean, fathomless and silent, those voices were a flood suddenly breaking to the surface along with so many other sounds. The winter wind, coiling around the buildings. The motorcycles, trucks, and various cars on the road. The sound of banners flapping somewhere. The low hum of the city itself, in which all those noises mingled. The next thing he knew, the world was filled with sound.

And then, violent sobbing—in his own voice.

For what was probably the first time since it had happened at the station, fifteen years ago, he shed tears. They streamed down his face and didn't stop. It was as if he'd had a large mass of ice hidden inside him, and it had begun to melt. There was nothing else he could do. And he thought:

Why couldn't I have brought one person, even just one person, a little closer to happiness?

When he looked up the two-hundred-meter wall, high in the sky, his blurry eyes found a blinking red light. But he knew help would never arrive at such a convenient moment.

That night, she gently opened the envelope of the old letter she'd just found.

The stationery she took out was brand-new, as if she'd written on it only yesterday. Her handwriting hadn't changed much, either.

She read a little, then carefully returned it to the envelope. Someday, when she was older, she'd read it again. She was sure it was still too early.

Until then, she thought, she'd put it away for safekeeping.

* * *

Dear Takaki,

How are you?

When we made our promise, we never dreamed it would snow so much today, did we? I hear the trains are running late, too. So I'm going to write this letter while I wait for you.

I've got a stove in front of me, so it's warm here. I always have stationery in my bag, too, so I can write letters whenever I like. I'm planning to give this one to you later on, so don't get here too early. Please don't hurry; take your time.

We'll be meeting for the first time in a really long while today. It's actually been eleven months, if you can believe it. So to tell you the truth, I'm a little nervous. I keep wondering things like, "What if we don't recognize each other?" Compared to Tokyo, though, this is such a small station, so we really couldn't miss each other. But I'm trying to imagine what you look like in your school uniform or on the soccer team, and I don't recognize you.

Let's see. What should I write?

Oh, duh, I'll start with thank-yous. I'll write down everything I didn't get to tell you.

When I transferred to Tokyo in fourth grade, I was so, so glad you

were there. I was happy we became friends. If it hadn't been for you, I think school would have been so much worse.

To be honest, I really didn't want to transfer away from you. Not at all. I wanted us to go to the same middle school and to grow up together. I'd been wishing for it all along. I'm finally used to middle school here (so please don't worry too much), but I still wish you were here several times a day.

I'm also very sad that you'll be moving much farther away soon. Even if we were in Tokyo and Tochigi, I always thought, "If it comes right down to it, Takaki's here for me." After all, if I got on a train, we'd be able to see each other easily. This time, though, you're going beyond Kyushu, and that's a little too far.

From now on, I'll have to learn how to get by on my own. I'm not all that confident that I actually can, but I'll just have to do it. We both will, you and me. Isn't that right?

And if nothing else, I really do have to tell you this. It's something I want to tell you out loud today, but just in case I don't manage to say it, I'll write it in this letter.

I love you, Takaki. I don't remember when it started. It just kinda happened, and before I knew it, I'd fallen for you. From the very first time I met you, you were a strong, kind boy. You always protected me.

Takaki, I'm sure you're going to be just fine. No matter what happens, I know you'll grow into a kind and wonderful adult. No matter how far away you go, I'll always love you; I mean it.

Please, please remember that.

* * *

One night, he had a dream.

In his room in Setagaya, which was filled with boxes in preparation for the move, he was writing a letter. He was planning to give it to the girl he liked on their first date. It was the letter that would get blown away by the wind, the one that would never reach her. In the dream, he knew it would happen.

But I have to write it, he thought. Even if nobody ever saw it. He knew that writing this letter was something he needed to do for himself.

He turned the stationery over and wrote on the very last sheet.

* * *

I still don't really know what "becoming an adult" means, exactly.

But if we happen to meet again someday, somewhere, far in the future, I want to be proud of who I am then.

I want to promise you that.

I always loved you, Akari.

Please, please take care.

Good-bye.

8

In April, the streets of Tokyo were tinted with cherry blossoms.

He'd worked until dawn, so it was close to noon when he woke up. When he opened the curtain, the world outside was brimming over with sunlight. The skyscrapers were misty in the spring haze, and every one of their windows caught the sun and sparkled pleasantly. Here and there, in the spaces between the mixed-use buildings, he could see cherry trees in full bloom. *Tokyo really does have a lot of cherry trees*, he thought, not for the first time.

It had been three months since he quit his job at the company. Last week, for

the first time in a long while, he'd started working again. Using the connections he'd made while working for his former company, he was picking up small jobs independently, doing everything from design to programming. He didn't know whether it would be possible for him to work as a freelance programmer long-term, but he'd begun to feel like starting something new. He hadn't done any programming in quite a while, and he was so into it he surprised himself, noticing that the sensation of his fingers striking the keyboard was just fun.

He had breakfast, chewing on a piece of lightly buttered toast and drinking a café au lait with plenty of milk. Over the past few days, he'd completed a significant amount of work, so as he washed the dishes, he decided that today would be a day off.

He pulled on a thin jacket and went out, wandering through the streets with no destination in mind. It was a pleasant day, with a gentle wind that ruffled his hair every so often, and the air held the scent of afternoon.

After leaving his company job, for the first time in years, he'd remembered that every time of day had its own smell in the city. Early morning had a unique scent that told of the rest of the day, while the scent of evening gently brought the day to an end. The starry night sky had its own scent, and so did cloudy skies. The smells were a mixture of people, the city, and the workings of nature. *I really forgot so much*, he thought.

He walked slowly through residential neighborhoods, with their complicated tangles of narrow streets. When he got thirsty, he bought coffee from a vending machine and drank it in a park. He gazed absently after the grade school kids who'd come running through the gate of their school and passed him, and he watched the constant stream of traffic from up on a pedestrian bridge. Beyond the houses and mixed-use buildings, he caught glimpses of the skyscrapers of Shinjuku. The sky behind them was a clear pale blue, as if someone had dissolved blue paint in plenty of water, and a few white clouds were being swept along by the wind.

He reached a railroad crossing. A large cherry tree stood beside it, and the surrounding asphalt was pure white with fallen blossoms.

As he watched the petals drift slowly down, out of nowhere, he thought:

That's five centimeters per second.

The crossing's alarm began to sound, echoing around him, dyed with nostalgia by the spring air.

From up ahead, a woman was walking toward him. The pleasant click of her white mules on the concrete joined the rhythm of the crossing alarm. In the center of the crossing, the two passed each other.

In that moment, a faint light flickered in his heart.

As they kept walking in their separate directions, he knew it in his soul. *If I turn around now—she'll turn around, too.* He had no reason to believe so, but he did believe.

When he was through the crossing, he turned slowly back and looked at her. She turned his way, too, just as slowly. Their eyes met.

A powerful stirring ran through his heart and his memories—and in that moment, an Odakyu Line express train hid them from each other.

Once this train passes, he thought, will she be there?

It doesn't matter either way. If it really was her, then that's enough of a miracle already.

He made up his mind. When this train passed, he'd start moving forward.

AFTERWORD

This book, *5 Centimeters per Second*, is based on the animated film of the same name, which I directed—meaning I wrote the novelization for my own movie. However, I took care to write it in such a way that people who haven't seen the movie will be able to enjoy it as well. Those of you who haven't yet seen the original film, rest easy and pick up this book anyway... That said, there are places where the movie and the book complement each other, and other places that are intentionally different from the movie, so if you read the book after seeing the movie—or watch the movie after reading the book—you may end up enjoying both of them more.

The movie *5 Centimeters per Second* premiered in March 2007 at Shibuya Cinema Rise. I began writing the novel at about the same time, and for approximately four months after that, I traveled around the country giving stage greetings and working on this book in hotel rooms. That novel, which was the initial form of this book, was published as a monthly serial in *Da Vinci* magazine. As a result, audience members sometimes told me what they'd thought of both the movie and the novel, in the theaters. It was a happy time for me.

Images convey different things than the written word. In many cases, visuals (and music) are faster, but there are sentiments that have no need for visuals. The experience of writing this book was exciting, and it got me thinking about those different modes of expression. Now and in the future, I think I'll probably keep on making visuals and writing when the visuals aren't enough, or possibly vice versa. Maybe even create literary visuals.

Thank you very much to everyone who read this book.

August 2007, Makoto Shinkai

AI NISHIDA, IDOL SINGER AND BOOK REVIEWER

It's not rare for first loves not to work out, and yet...

When the animated film *5 Centimeters per Second* was released in 2007, I was fascinated by the visuals—the sights were too beautiful to exist outside of a memory, so glorious as to be cruel. The final scene, along with Masayoshi Yamazaki's "One more time, One more chance" stayed with me for a while afterward. And although I was a middle schooler out in the provinces at the time, I still overheard bits of the modest fan controversy about how to interpret the "downer of an ending." No, that was a happy ending. Why was the protagonist so slow to get over his first love anyway?

This book is the novelization of the film *5 Centimeters per Second*, written by director Makoto Shinkai himself and serialized in *Da Vinci* magazine starting in May 2007. It was his first novel, too. The book version was published in November of the same year, and in 2012, it was released as a paperback from MF Bunko Da Vinci. This is its second paperback version.

In the text, the different and previously unseen aspects of the main characters are brought into vivid relief.

Chapter 1—Tale of Cherry Blossoms

Children are mostly helpless, so you can evade responsibility in your memories of childhood. But for adults, it doesn't work that way. You have to take responsibility and confront the people, the reality in front of you. Takaki, a slightly precocious boy, met a girl who didn't quite fit in, either. They'd both transferred schools multiple times, and in their minds, connections to people could be severed abruptly at the convenience of adults. For children, time and distance are longer and farther than they are for grown-ups. When their

relationship was just beginning, the choices of adults tore them apart yet again. From Nagano to Tokyo, and on to Tanegashima, Takaki had been forced to wander at his parents' convenience, and the only one he'd managed to open his heart to was Akari.

Why does it always turn out like this?

When it was decided that Takaki and Akari would go to different middle schools, when the train that was taking him to meet her stopped, when he had to move far away from her to Kyushu—that sense of futility was lurking within his heart. Because his last memory with Akari had been a beautiful one, he began to focus exclusively on what lay behind him.

Chapter 2—Cosmonaut

The transfer student who'd come from Nagano to Tokyo became a transfer student from Tokyo to Kagoshima.

During the last summer she had to think about her future course, Kanae watched Takaki, single-mindedly pursuing the boy she liked. To a girl who lived on Tanegashima, Takaki the high schooler was captivating. She couldn't win him, but she did have the ocean. Takaki didn't.

Chapter 3—5 Centimeters per Second

Sweet-and-sour memories of love turn bitter. Now told in the third person, Takaki's adult life couldn't be called "captivating," even if you were being diplomatic. The town Takaki chose for himself was Tokyo. However, at the university, at his workplace, and even beside his lover, he couldn't become his true self there. He couldn't seem to shake that futility that had bled into him during his childhood. He'd lived how he was forced to, adapted himself to his environment, and the freedom that followed felt more like a cavern than liberty. Love is often used to fill holes in hearts. But Akari had been too special. That first love, where everything had fit just right, had been miraculous. The approval she'd given him had been exceptional, but now that he was grown up, it had lost its potency.

Takaki failed to become the knight who protected Akari. That spell had to be broken.

Finally—through a miracle, he became able to focus on the future. That miracle was no more than a slight, encouraging push to face forward under his own steam. To adults, distance and time are shorter and closer than they are to children.

In many stories, when the protagonist “I” searches for or reclaims his self, it’s done by using romance, or a similar relationship, or a woman as the medium between himself and the world. Many such women appear in the works of Haruki Murakami, which Makoto Shinkai claims as an influence. But this work is no fable. The visuals, the descriptions in this work that echo them, the first love that doesn’t work out, and the drab adult years—they’re all founded in reality. At first glance, this little love story is almost overly fantastical, but the shadow of its reality is bound to captivate adults.

Children Who Chase Lost Voices

Original work by Makoto Shinkai

Written by Asahi Akisaka

CHAPTER ONE

The school was located in a town called Mizonofuchi, and its name was the rather prosaic Mizonofuchi Elementary.

Of course, Mizonofuchi was a tiny place, extremely rural and deep in the mountains. It didn't need three or even two elementary schools, so that name may have been all that was required.

The timeworn wooden school building was said to have been built in the early thirties, and it had a sort of dignity about it. It was also the kind of building that looked like it might be haunted, even in the daytime, so it was no wonder Asuna Watase hated it.

I mean, it's scary.

At this rate, she'd be mistaking her own reflection in the window for a ghost.

A ghost with big, adorable eyes, a trim nose, petite lips, and a cute pixie cut, she thought, if only to distract herself from the public execution taking place in her sixth-grade class.

Also known as "getting their tests back."

It wasn't a particularly unusual event. The answer sheets from the students' term finals were being returned to them and their scores announced aloud—that was all.

That was all, but Asuna wasn't very fond of this particular way of doing things.

That may seem surprising, given her stellar track record, but high achievers have their reasons just as much as underachievers.

Even if Asuna could ace the exam with ease, provided she'd listened carefully in class, there were students who scored twenty or thirty points. Asuna ended up in first place on every test, and she was a prime target for jealousy from her

classmates.

“Asuna Watase.”

Ms. Ikeda, her homeroom teacher, read off her name. Asuna crossed the creaking floor to the platform.

“You’re at the head of the class again, Asuna,” the teacher said. “You did very well.”

“...Thank you.”

Why did she say that? Nobody needed to know.

But she only murmured a soft, diplomatic thank you. Sure enough, as she took her answer sheet and returned to her seat, she heard whispering.

“C’mon, Asuna got top place *again*?”

“I mean, she’s committee chair. I bet she glues herself to her desk.”

“You said it.”

I do not..., she thought.

However, Asuna was the type who struggled to say what was on her mind.

Maybe she’d intentionally get a bad score on the next test—

Ha. I could never do something like that.

Sighing inwardly, Asuna returned to her seat.

The teacher kept returning tests for a while longer, and then, after she’d given back all the answer sheets, she set her hands on the podium.

“All right, in closing, I have a warning to pass on,” she said. “Recently, several students have reported seeing a bear around Obuchi. Just in case, I want you to go straight home, without taking any side trips.”

Asuna had been gazing absently at her answer sheet, but she finally looked up.

...A bear?

Asuna’s favorite lookout point was partway up the side of Mount Obuchi. It was an outcrop that had a view over the entire town, and she always listened to

her crystal radio up there after school.

It may sound like a rather lonely way for an elementary schooler to spend the time after class, but Asuna wanted friends as much as other people did. She longed to spend the hours after school with them. But she didn't know how she was supposed to interact with friends.

That being the case, the outcrop on Obuchi was an extremely comfortable place for Asuna: She didn't have to be concerned about other people.

After a few more announcements, they paid their respects, and the closing homeroom class was over.

I'll just hurry home.

On that thought, she'd reached her shoe locker when someone called to her from behind.

"Aaaasuna."

When she turned around, her classmate, Yuu Yazaki, was standing there. She smiled at Asuna.

"Want to go home together?"

Asuna was so happy—but she couldn't give the response she was supposed to.

"Oh...um." She didn't know what to say.

Even if they did go home together, what should she talk about on the way? If Yuu was only going to feel uncomfortable and avoid her afterward, it would be better to keep the distance between them where it was now.

After that moment of deliberation, Asuna told her, "Um, I'm sorry; I'm in a bit of a hurry. Next time, okay?"

"Oh. Okay then, next time." Yuu waved, looking a little disappointed.

Waving back, Asuna thought, *Shoot. I did it again.*

She was well aware that this was why she couldn't make friends. Still, if that knowledge had helped her do anything about it, this wouldn't have been so hard.

With some remorse, she changed her shoes and left through the main entrance.

A rural town spread out before her.

Not one of the buildings was over three stories tall; unpaved roads crisscrossed the landscape among all different kinds of farm fields. All that was visible in the distance were tree-covered mountains, and the striking steel towers that stood on them here and there.

She walked down a gravel road, through the residential district, over a railroad crossing, past the familiar old rice shop, and up a hilly road flanked by stone walls.

Asuna lived in a traditional two-story Japanese house, the type that was standard in Mizonofuchi. It had a tile roof that reflected the sunlight and whitewashed walls that were beginning to darken with age. There was no gate out here in the country, and the spacious front garden ran right up to the wooden door.

Seeing that there was a white car parked in the garage by the front door, Asuna gave a little cheer.

Mom's home!

To Asuna, that was a very happy thing indeed.

"I'm home!" Unlocking the front door, she called into the house.

"Welcome back, Asuna," her mother's voice responded.

Hastily kicking off her shoes, Asuna headed for the living room. Her mother was just leaving her bedroom; she was in her pajamas. Asuna quickly took her test out of her bag.

"Mom, look, today I—"

"Oh...Asuna. I'm sorry, but can it wait? I want to get as much sleep as I can before I go in to work tonight." Her mother sounded very tired.

Asuna's mother almost never let herself be seen looking anything less than sharp, but she was a nurse at the clinic, and she'd worked last night as well. If she was so short on sleep she couldn't hide it, this was no time for Asuna to be

reporting something as trivial as her complicated feelings about a test result.

“Oh... Okay. Yeah, get some rest, Mom.”

“I’m sorry, Asuna.”

“No, it’s fine.”

I should be thanking her, really, she thought. Her mother had been asleep, but she’d gotten up just because Asuna had come home.

She turned around and headed for the front door again. “I’m going out for a bit. Have a good night at work, Mom.”

“Thanks. Have fun out there.”

She set off running.

She hurried down the stone-walled slope, greeted an old lady she knew in passing, and after making sure no one was watching, she turned onto the railroad tracks at the crossing.

She was going to Mount Obuchi and her favorite lookout.

*

The only way to get to Asuna’s spot was to cross a railway bridge that spanned a valley. The bridge was only for one train line, so it wasn’t very wide, and it was easily over a dozen meters to the surface of the river below. But this had never frightened her. Trains only came through once every few hours, and even then, she never forgot to put her ear to the rail to check, just in case, and the bridge was made of good, solid iron.

Just like always, Asuna began to run across the bridge—and that’s when it happened. Something was wrong, and her footsteps slowed to a halt.

She’d noticed too late—but she couldn’t hear any birds or insects.

It was summer. Ordinarily, all sorts of wild birds and cicadas would have been causing an absolute racket.

As that thought crossed her mind, Asuna finally spotted *it*.

It must have been hiding in the shadows somewhere; it was only about ten

meters away from her.

Asuna's legs went weak, and she couldn't move.

What is that?

Up there, on the railroad bridge, was a brown creature she'd never seen before.

It was big. Huge. Gargantuan.

I have to run.

An instinctive fear was telling her to flee, but her body wouldn't do what she wanted.

Even then, an oddly calm corner of her mind had observed that the creature was rather like a bear. It was much larger than the ones she'd seen on TV, though, and there were a lot of odd protuberances on its back. When it reared up, there was a geometric pattern in aqua blue and green on its stomach.

It's a monster.

In the brief time it took that thought to cross her mind, the monster was right in front of her. It was so close their faces nearly touched; its breath ruffled her hair, and it raised its right foreleg, then casually swung it down at Asuna.

In that moment, even Asuna didn't know what she thought.

It's all over? Or I'm going to die? Or perhaps It's going to kill me?

There wasn't much difference between them, but—all she felt was wind.

The next thing Asuna knew, she was in the arms of a boy. They were about ten meters away, out of range of the monster's attack. She'd been rescued.

Slowly, the boy set Asuna on her feet. Then he stood in front of her, shielding her. He looked back over his shoulder, giving her a smile that couldn't have been gentler.

"It's all right," he said to her, as if he were talking to a child.

With his long hair and well-formed features, it would have been easy to mistake this boy for a girl. He seemed to be about Asuna's age, maybe a little older.

She felt her heart racing.

Wow, he's really cool.

The fact that she was able to think that while they were still in danger struck her as oddly funny.

As the boy confronted the monster, his handsome face promptly turned serious, and he took something from the neck of his white shirt.

The object shone blue in the sunlight. It was a pendant that looked like a crystal.

Swinging the pendant slowly, the boy quietly approached the monster. The monster gave a bestial growl, its eyes following the pendant—and with a *splutch*, a lump of meat fell from its throat to the ground.

Asuna couldn't tear her eyes away from the grotesque mass.

"It's at the end of its life."

The boy spoke as he confronted the monster, but it wasn't clear who he was speaking to.

"So this is the fate of those who remain on the surface...?"

What was he talking about?

The next moment, the monster swung its right foreleg, and the boy leaped out of the way. His long hair fanned out in the wind, and as he landed, he unleashed a kick that opened the monster's leg and spattered bright-red blood.

As he watched it shriek in pain, there was sadness in the boy's eyes. Asuna didn't know why yet.

Despite his emotion—or perhaps because of it—she screamed.

"Stop! Don't kill it!"

She doubted that she was motivated by anything so noble as protecting an animal. She simply felt that the boy himself might not want to kill the monster.

She'd distracted the boy for a moment, and the monster seized on the opportunity.

Its right leg swept through again, catching the boy and sending him flying easily. The boy slammed into the bridge railing, coughing painfully as the wind was knocked out of him. He immediately tried to get up, unsuccessfully, and the monster's claws mercilessly slashed through him— Or that was the scenario that played out in her mind's eye.

However, in the next instant...

“—!”

Bright light flared from the boy's pendant, and the monster cringed away from it, freezing in its tracks.

As if trying to keep the light in, the boy clutched the pendant with his left hand—his right arm hung limply, injured by that earlier attack—but the light spilled out, and— “No!” the boy screamed...

...and the monster's jaw vanished without a sound, as if the light had sheared it away...

...and its enormous headless body collapsed slowly onto the rails.

Asuna had no idea what was going on. She just stood there, stunned.

“.....”

Biting his lip, the boy got to his feet. He briefly bowed his head to the monster's corpse.

Then they heard a train whistle.

Detecting the foreign object on the rails, the oncoming train hastily applied its brakes. Without even glancing at the decelerating train, the boy walked over to Asuna.

“This is the last time,” he said, picking her up again. Everything that had happened in the past few minutes was a muddled mess in Asuna's mind even without the embarrassment of being held by a boy.

“U-um, just a—” was all she finally managed.

The boy gave her another kind smile. “Trust me.”

And then he jumped off the bridge—down the head-spinning distance to the

forest below.

Whaaaaaaaaaaaa—?!

Overwhelmed by terror, Asuna fainted.

CHAPTER TWO

Nn...

Her surroundings were dark, and it took her a few seconds to realize that she was lying down.

She was looking at the sky. The stars were twinkling.

Huh? I—

She searched the depths of her memories.

On her way to her favorite outcrop, she'd encountered a monster on the railway bridge and had been saved by a boy.

The memory she found was hard to believe.

Did I...dream that? she thought, and just then— “You’re awake.”

At the sound of a voice, Asuna jolted up to a sitting position.

She was on top of her favorite outcrop, up on Mount Obuchi. The long-haired boy from her memory was sitting on a rock, and he turned to smile at her.

So it wasn't a dream?

“You’re safe now, so don’t worry. Go on home,” he said, getting to his feet.

He started to walk away, apparently having waited for her to wake up.

The mere sound of his kind voice set her heart at ease.

“U-um...”

As the boy passed her, Asuna knew she had to say something now. “You saved me, didn’t you? Thank you!”

The boy stopped, then looked back at her. “It’s a good idea to stay away from this mountain.”

That was all he said before he disappeared into the forest.

...What's that supposed to mean?

In the time it took her to process what he'd said, the boy vanished into the trees—and a cat followed him, its steps light and quick.

"Mimi!"

It was the cat who'd been raised with Asuna, ever since she was small. Ordinarily, Mimi would come running whenever Asuna called, but today she ignored her human friend and disappeared into the woods after the boy.

"....."

Asuna tried to call after them, but she couldn't find the words. All she could do was watch them go.

*

The next day, several men in suits had come to a rocky area a little ways downstream from the railroad bridge. They wandered around the rocks for a little while, searching for something, and before long...

"Commander, it's here!"

One of the men pointed at what he'd discovered.

The corpse of that bearlike monster.

The man in sunglasses who'd been addressed as Commander went over to the monster's body.

"This is..."

He sounded startled as he gazed at the corpse. Plants had sprouted from it—varieties that didn't grow in this season.

"They're saplings...and..."

He crouched down.

Part of the corpse had turned into transparent crystals.

"...it's crystallized... Someone must have come up to the surface," he

murmured, turning around. "Find them!"

Obedying orders, the suited men scattered.

*

The long-haired boy was gazing at the sky from the outcrop on Mount Obuchi. Mimi was curled up beside him, asleep.

"Teacher...", he murmured to himself.

Suddenly, Mimi raised her head.

Noticing it, too, the boy gave a smile that was slightly troubled but happy.

"She came anyway. Figures... After I warned her and everything."

Apparently listening, Mimi mewed.

The boy stroked her head. "You're right. I was hoping she would, too."

The figure he had spotted belonged to—Asuna.

The boy smiled. "I told you coming here wasn't a good idea."

"Yes, but...", Asuna began, then gulped the words back down.

Oh, honestly! Why am I so bad at talking?

Sometimes she was so frustrated with herself.

As she thought about it, she spotted Mimi beside the boy.

"Mimi."

When she called, the cat came trotting up to her and nuzzled her legs with her cheek.

"What was that about, huh? You've never gotten attached to anybody except me before."

Asuna stroked Mimi's head, and it relaxed her a little; she felt the words she needed to say to the boy surface in her mind.

"This was my spot before it was yours. I don't want anybody telling me I can't come here."

Asuna wasn't trying to criticize him for what he'd said the day before; she hadn't realized that it might come across that way.

However, those words didn't seem to sour the boy's mood. He only smiled at her gently. "You're just like me."

"Huh?"

I am?

Asuna stared blankly back at him.

"I wanted to come, so I came," he said.

Slowly, he got to his feet.

She still didn't understand what he was saying to her.

Think.

She went back over her own words, then compared them to what the boy had said.

What she'd said was, in effect, "You told me not to come, but I came anyway, because I wanted to be here." Did that mean someone had stopped this boy, too, but he'd wanted to come anyway?

Who stopped him, and why?

Asuna looked perplexed.

"My name is Shun," the boy said cheerfully. "It's good to meet you."

He gave her a kind smile.

He really does smile a lot—and it looks so good on him, she thought. He's kinda handsome, really.

That was when she realized he'd just introduced himself.

She could handle self-introductions. All she had to do was introduce herself back.

"I'm Asuna."

But it came out sounding brusque.

And why'm I only telling him my first name? I'm not even going to give him my full name? —Wait, Shun didn't give me his last name, either, so maybe that's all right?

As Asuna's mind went in circles, she tried to cover for herself. She took another look at Shun and thought, *This is one of those things, isn't it? Attractive people are used to being told they're attractive, so I should compliment his clothes or his taste in something else instead.*

As she was digging up memories of girls' manga she'd read—she noticed something.

The shirt over Shun's right forearm was bloody.

"You're bleeding!" she said without thinking.

As the daughter of a nurse, Asuna had always been especially sensitive to this sort of thing since she was small. She couldn't just leave it alone.

"Is that from yesterday?"

Shun's smile was the same as ever. "Yes, but it's fine."

"Fine? It doesn't look like you've treated it at all. We should really disinfect it, but there's no antiseptic here... Oh, for goodness' sake! Just sit there for a second!"

"O-okay."

Yielding to Asuna's intensity, Shun resettled himself on the rock. After thinking a little bit, Asuna didn't see anything else that looked like it would work and wrapped her scarf around Shun's arm. If she tied it tightly, it would at least stop the bleeding.

"You should go to a hospital later and get it looked at for real."

"....."

Shun gazed at the scarf for a little while. "So it's your spot?" he said abruptly.

Asuna briefly wondered what he meant, then realized he was continuing their earlier conversation. She'd claimed that this outcrop on Obuchi was "her spot."

She nodded. "Uh-huh. The radio gets the best reception up here," she said

proudly.

Shun stared blankly back. “Radio?”

He couldn’t possibly not know what radios were, could he?

Either way, a look was worth a thousand words. *Although that seems like a weird way to put it in this case*, Asuna thought. She also wanted to show off her treasure a little.

“Do you want to listen to it?” she asked, and Shun nodded.

Asuna promptly reached into a space between the rocks, then pulled out a cookie tin she’d hidden there.

This was no ordinary cookie tin, though. There was an antenna inside it—and a tuning circuit, a detector circuit, and a receiver.

This tin was the crystal radio that had been Asuna’s treasure since she was little.

“This is the diode.”

Asuna took a blue crystal out of her breast pocket and fitted it into its place in the tin.

Both the crystal and the radio were mementos of her deceased father—the only two physical items she had ever received from him.

“The reception depends on the time of day and the weather, too.”

“...!”

For just a moment, Shun’s expression changed, but Asuna didn’t see it.

Shun pointed at the crystal. “Listen, that stone—”

“Got it!” Asuna happily interrupted as the set picked up a radio signal.

Shun broke off, and his sentence remained unfinished.

Asuna handed one of the earphones to Shun, and they listened together.

“It’s a music program,” she said.

Shun didn’t respond. “.....”

As he listened to the music, he was thinking.

It's a clavis...

There was no mistake.

What a stroke of luck!

As they listened, Shun was reflecting on his life up to that point.

He'd longed to go to the surface, had insisted on having his way, and had followed his teacher.

I know coming to the surface invites an early death, but still...

Unaware of her companion's thoughts, Asuna took a sandwich from her bag and held it out to Shun, who was looking up at the sky.

"Want one?"

It was one of her extra-special sandwiches. It was a simple BLT, but that was why she was confident that it was delicious.

"...Thank you. I was hungry."

After taking a bite of her own sandwich, Asuna said, "Earlier..."

As Shun gazed at her kindly, she told him something important—something she'd never told anyone else.

What made her do it?

She didn't know. She just knew that she wouldn't mind talking about it, as long as it was with Shun.

"One time, I picked up a strange melody. I'd never heard it before, and it was so mysterious. Like someone's heart had been turned into sound waves."

Shun knew instinctively that it had been his "song."

"When I heard it, it brought happiness and sadness, too. It made me feel like I wasn't alone."

And the one who'd heard his song had been his teacher's daughter! What an incredible twist of fate.

"It's stayed with me ever since... I want to hear it again."

“.....”

Shun wasn't saying anything, and Asuna was suddenly nervous. Had she said something she shouldn't have again? They'd only just met; why was she blabbing about all these things? Maybe she'd gotten carried away because he was handsome. She needed to cover for herself somehow, but she couldn't find the words.

Timidly, Asuna said his name. “...Shun?”

Shun couldn't speak.

Oh...

As he watched Mimi playing with a summer bug, a thought passed through his heart.

I have no regrets left.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the sun began to set.

As he gazed at the lingering orange light in the western sky, Shun smiled. “— You haven't asked me about anything, Asuna.”

That came out of nowhere, and Asuna responded on reflex. “Huh?”

It made him smile again. “You must have all sorts of questions.”

All sorts of questions.

Maybe he was right. Come to think of it, there were lots and lots of things she wanted to ask him, including everything that had happened yesterday. For the moment, though, she simply wanted confirmation. “...Do you mean about that bear thing?”

“Yeah.”

“I do, but...I don't have to ask them now. After all, I've got a ton of things to ask about. I think it'll take a really long time.”

She meant it. However, she'd also realized that this would give her an excuse to meet him again. “I'll come back tomorrow, okay?”

I can just ask him what I want to know then, she thought.

Instead of replaying, Shun slowly went to lie back on the ground and murmured, “I came from a faraway place called Agartha.”

She’d never heard of it before.

Agartta? “...Like another country?”

As soon as she asked it, she thought, *What kind of silly question is that?* No place in Japan would have a name like that.

However, Shun went on without answering her question.

“There was something I wanted to see, and someone I wanted to find. No matter what it took.”

Then Shun took the pendant from his shirt.

It was a jewel that looked like a blue crystal. A clavis.

Holding it up to the sunset, he went on.

“—But I have no regrets anymore.”

It wasn’t clear how much Asuna understood about what he was saying. She simply gave an honest reply. “...So your wish came true, then.”

Shun didn’t respond. Instead, he sat up. “You should go home before it gets dark.”

She’d been dismissed, and she started to worry that she’d said something wrong. Still, Asuna couldn’t suppress her desire to stay with him just a little longer.

“I know. I’ll go once the cicadas stop crying,” she said.

Meanwhile, Shun thought, *I have to make sure to do this, if nothing else.*

“—Asuna.”

At the end. At his end.

“I’ll give you a blessing.”

“Huh?”

Once again, Asuna didn’t understand what he’d said. *Why does Shun keep saying things out of nowhere like that?* she thought.

“Close your eyes.”

“.....”

She did as he said.

And ever so gently...

...Shun kissed her on the forehead.

Startled, Asuna’s eyes flew open.

“Huh? D-did you just—? Um...”

She’d blushed bright red, and Shun gazed at her peacefully.

Meanwhile, Asuna couldn’t believe what had just happened. She thought she might have imagined it.

“...Ki-ki-ki-kiss...?”

She couldn’t get the words out—but there was no way she could simply say “Did you just kiss me?”

“Asuna,” Shun said.

Here at the end, there’s only one thing I want.

“All I want is for you to live.”

“U-um...I, uh...”

Asuna didn’t understand just how important those words were—or rather, she hadn’t recovered from the shock of being kissed.

At the sensitive age of eleven, being kissed by a cute boy—even if it was only on the forehead—was a lot for her to process.

She was embarrassed, plain and simple, and she couldn’t bear to stay there any longer.

“I-I’m sorry; I’ll see you tomorrow,” she told him.

Still oblivious to what Shun truly meant to say, Asuna put the crystal radio into her bag, and— *I have to promise*, she thought.

“See you tomorrow.”

With that, she ran away as one thought churned in her mind.

He kissed me, he kissed me, he kissed me, he kissed me...

*

Shun watched her go, then glanced over his shoulder.

A wide, vast landscape, the sights of the surface, spread out below him.

As he took it all in, he lost track of time...

...and then the stars began to come out.

It was what he'd always, always wanted to see, what he'd longed constantly to witness.

The sky of the surface, shining with stars.

Shun spoke to the cat beside him. "You got a fine name, didn't you?" He closed his eyes, then opened them. "I can't take Asuna to a better place, so... please do it for me."

Those were the last words Shun ever said to anyone.

When he took a step forward, his next words were only for himself.

"—Right now, I'm really afraid."

A beautiful, glorious sky—a sky full of stars.

"But I'm really happy, too."

Into that sea.

"It looks like I could reach out and touch them."

His outstretched hand tried to catch a star.

His vision blurred.

And then—

CHAPTER THREE

Morning came again.

Asuna's day always began with eating breakfast and fixing her lunch of rolled omelets, sausages, spinach, and fish left over from the previous evening. While Asuna was putting it all together as usual, she heard a car outside.

Her mother was home from her night shift.

"Welcome back, Mom!"

Happily, she called out as soon as the door opened. Her mother came to the kitchen.

"Hi, Asuna. What's this? Two lunches?"

Asuna's heart skipped a beat. She couldn't possibly tell her she was making the second one for a boy.

"Uh-huh. One's for my friend." Speaking as casually as she could manage, Asuna put the lids on the lunchboxes. She didn't want her mother to notice she'd put just a little extra effort into them. "You're going to have breakfast, right, Mom? It's all ready."

"Thank you, Asuna."

"Maybe we can eat together..."

Asuna loved eating with her mother. Nothing was lonelier than eating alone. When she was with someone else, her food seemed twice as good—although that might have been because she'd been raised by a single parent.

However, her mother said, "You've already eaten, haven't you?" She sounded a bit surprised.

That was true; Asuna had already had breakfast. However, she didn't back

down right away.

“I could handle one more bowl. I’m still a little hungry.”

She just wanted to sit at the table with her mother.

And yet...

Her mother glanced at the clock, then turned back to Asuna. “No, honey. Leave for school, so you won’t be late.”

With that, she started for the living room, taking off her jacket as she went.

“.....”

It wouldn’t do to be late for school, of course, but Asuna had been planning to allow enough time. Her mother could have let them eat together, at least.

Mom probably hadn’t seen that she was pouting, but Asuna heard her voice from the living room.

“Asuna.”

“?”

What could it be?

Whatever it was, she was happy her mother was talking to her. She waited for the next words, and although she’d let her hopes rise a little, what she heard was more than she ever dreamed.

“Would you like to go out to eat tonight? I have the day off.”

“Do you mean it?!”

How long had it been since they had gone out to eat together? Asuna thought back, but it was so long ago that she couldn’t remember.

“In that case, I’ll be home by six!”

“Hmm? By six? That’s a bit late, isn’t it? Where are you going?”

Her mother’s questions were reasonable. But if Asuna said she was going to meet a boy, Mom might worry, or she might tease her about it. She wanted to avoid both.

“To see a friend!” Asuna grabbed her backpack and headed for the front door.

“Okay, I’m leaving!”

Her mother had come out to see her off, and it only took her one glance to notice. “Asuna, where’s your scarf?”

“Um.” She couldn’t tell her the truth. “I lost it! I’ll buy one at the co-op!”

With that, Asuna stamped her feet into her shoes.

“Have a nice day.”

With her mother’s voice behind her, she flew through the front door.

*

That day, dark clouds covered the sky, and by afternoon, it was raining hard.

Still, Asuna headed for the outcrop to meet Shun.

He wasn’t there.

Feeling a trace of loneliness, Asuna went under the trees, taking shelter from the rain, and waited for him. After all, he might show up later.

We did say we’d see each other today.

So Asuna kept waiting.

Maybe it’s because of the rain...

What if he’d decided he didn’t like her? What would she do then? Had she said something weird yesterday and unknowingly upset him? What if he didn’t even want to see her?

She shook her head to dispel those dark thoughts.

Asuna stayed until she absolutely had to leave—after all, she’d promised to go home for dinner—but Shun never came.

*

Her disappointment felt rather like her sodden, heavy clothes.

She trudged home, opened the front door, and called into the house.

“I’m home. Mom, can you get me a towel?”

Her mother appeared with a bath towel, looking rather tense.

Huh? Did something happen? Asuna wondered.

“Didn’t you take an umbrella?”

“No.” She shook her head, and her mother began drying her hair with the towel.

“Wait, I can do it myself!”

What kind of sixth grader lets someone else dry her head?!

But her mother kept ruffling her hair with the towel, and then— Out of nowhere, she hugged Asuna to her.

“Huh? Wha—? Mom, what’s wrong?”

“Asuna, listen, and stay calm.”

Sensing something serious, Asuna swallowed hard.

“...Okay.”

The gravity in her mother’s voice was enough to give Asuna a bad feeling.

Slowly, as if giving a simple explanation to a young child, she said, “A boy was found on the dry riverbed below that outcrop you like to visit. He had your scarf wrapped around his arm. Asuna...he was dead.”

“_____”

Asuna couldn’t absorb what she’d just heard. There was a pause.

I have to tell her she’s wrong, she thought.

Shun, dead? Unbelievable.

“It wasn’t him. I mean, he wouldn’t fall.”

“...Asuna.”

“It’s fine. It’s not him. Don’t worry.”

All she could do was say the words in a rush to stave off the anxiety.

“Oh, it’s raining, so could we maybe go out to eat some other time? I’ll go do

my homework.” With that, Asuna ran toward her room.

“Asuna...,” her mother said behind her.

“Really, it’s okay.”

Asuna went up the stairs...

...and gazed out the window.

The rain was falling steadily down.

Mount Obuchi, Asuna’s favorite place, was dark and indistinct.

“.....”

She couldn’t possibly believe that Shun was dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

At school the next day, there was a bit of a commotion in the sixth-grade classroom.

Ms. Ikeda was going on maternity leave, and a severe-looking, bespectacled teacher named Ryuuji Morisaki had come to substitute for her.

The boys grumbled about the fact that they hadn't gotten a female teacher, while the consensus among the girls was that he was "actually kinda handsome."

Frankly, Asuna didn't have the mental energy to spare on that. She couldn't get the idea that Shun might be dead out of her mind; it was all she'd thought about since yesterday.

They were in the middle of their Japanese Language class, and Morisaki was explaining a passage from the *Kojiki* to them.

"Stricken with grief, Izanagi journeyed deep underground to Yomi-no-kuni, the land of the dead, in order to resurrect his wife, Izanami."

To resurrect his wife.

Those words resonated strongly with Asuna.

Was it really possible to bring someone back to life?

Morisaki continued. "Deep below the earth, Izanagi was reunited with Izanami. However, Izanami told him, 'I already belong to the land of the dead. If the god of Yomi permits it, I may return to you, but on one condition: While I am speaking with the god, whatever you do, please don't look at me.' But Izanagi broke his promise and opened the door of Yomi. In the end, she was lost to him. This is an excerpt from one of the myths in the *Kojiki*."

Closing the textbook with a snap, Morisaki continued.

“All over the world, there are myths about people going underground in order to revive a lover. To Yomi-no-kuni, Hades, Shambhala, Agartha.”

“——!”

Asuna looked up sharply from her textbook.

Agartha.

That was where Shun had said he’d come from.

Morisaki noticed the change in Asuna’s expression, but he went on with his lesson as though nothing had happened.

“The names are different, but they all hint at the existence of an underground world. Humans once believed that the secret of their deaths lay under the earth.”

*

After school, Asuna went to the library.

What if there was a way to bring Shun back to life?

...She wasn’t seriously entertaining such a ridiculous idea, but Morisaki’s lesson had intrigued her, and she wanted to find out more about Agartha.

However, even if the school itself had a long history, this was just an elementary school library. There were almost no books that mentioned legends about underground worlds. All she found were books that said, as Morisaki had, that similar legends were found worldwide.

She left the library a little discouraged. *What should I do? Could I just ask Mr. Morisaki?*

“Asunaaaa, are you going home?” Yuu called to her again.

“Hi, Yuu.”

She was delighted, but she had to work hard to keep it from showing in her voice. She didn’t want anybody to think she was a weirdo who got excited over something so trivial.

“Wanna go together?”

The invitation made Asuna incredibly happy. At the same time, though, she was bewildered. Why had Yuu asked somebody like her? *Is it because she doesn't know about all the things that are wrong with me?* If they talked, and Yuu found out more about her, would she end up despising her?

“Oh, um.”

I have to say no.

For some reason, that thought reached her mouth first, and...

“Th-there's something I want to ask Mr. Morisaki.”

It wasn't a lie.

She'd been conflicted until just a minute ago, but now that she'd said it, all she had to do was make it the truth.

However, Yuu smiled. “I'll wait for you, then. It shouldn't take too long, right?”

“Huh? Oh.”

True, questions for teachers didn't usually take much time. If she kept refusing anyway, would Yuu start to dislike her for it?

“I-in that case, sure, wait a minute.”

Her heart was pounding.

Today, I'll be going home from school with Yuu.

How far would it be before their routes diverged? What should she talk about on the way?

While Asuna was bracing herself for the walk home, Yuu lowered her voice a little.

“You know, Mr. Morisaki is kinda scary. Today's class freaked me out.”

“It did?”

She hadn't expected that—but on second thought, maybe it wasn't surprising. The subject of dead people and resurrection might be frightening for ordinary children.

As she was about to nod in agreement, Yuu went on. “I think Mr. Morisaki’s wife is dead. I heard Ms. Ikeda talking about it a little while ago.”

Asuna understood what Yuu was getting at right away.

Today’s lesson and the teacher’s dead wife—when she put those two facts together, what Yuu was suggesting was immediately obvious.

Maybe he wants to bring his wife back from the dead.

Yes... Just like she herself was wondering whether there was a way to bring Shun back to life.

“What’s the matter, Asuna?” Yuu sounded worried.

Asuna must have gotten lost in thought; she hastily shook her head.

“N-nothing. Okay, I’ll be right back.”

She left Yuu and went to the faculty room door.

Why did faculty rooms always make her nervous, even when she hadn’t done anything wrong?

As she wondered this, Asuna knocked. “Excuse me. Is Mr. Morisaki here?”

She stepped inside, but as it happened, she’d been nervous for nothing.

“Mr. Morisaki? He’s gone home already,” Ms. Ikeda said.

Asuna was disappointed. Still, if there *was* a way to resurrect Shun, she wanted to find out about it as soon as she possibly could. That thought pushed her toward her next question.

“U-um.”

“What?”

“Could you please tell me where he lives?”

Despite the abruptness of the request, Ms. Ikeda politely gave her Mr. Morisaki’s address. Perhaps she understood that Asuna’s question was an urgent one.

When she left the faculty room, Yuu was waiting for her.

Asuna had half forgotten she’d be there. “Oh, I-I’m sorry,” she said hastily. “I

kept you waiting, didn't I?"

Yuu smiled and said something that made her very happy: "It's fine. I thought it was going to take longer."

And even so, she'd been planning to wait.

Asuna thought she really should thank her, but she didn't know what to say, so all she managed was, "Um, so yeah. It sounds like Mr. Morisaki's already gone home."

She hated that she couldn't just say a simple thank you.

However, Yuu didn't seem to be bothered.

"Okay, you wanna go?"

"S-sure."

And so Asuna left the school with Yuu.

She couldn't maintain her end of the conversation. Yuu would come up with something to say, and Asuna would respond. That was all.

Asuna had read in a book somewhere that if you wanted to keep a conversation going, you had to either respond in ways that would encourage the other person to ask questions or ask questions of your own. The knowledge didn't help her at all.

"Well, I need to go this way, so..."

While they were talking, they'd reached the point where Yuu's route split off.

Feeling frustrated and disheartened after yet another failure to have a real conversation, Asuna said, "Okay. See you tomorrow."

Somehow, at the very end, she managed to smile. Or she hoped she did.

And then...

After saying good-bye to Yuu, Asuna waited just a little, then turned back the way they'd come.

She hadn't wanted Yuu to know, but Mr. Morisaki lived in that direction.

Moreover, she wanted to learn more about Agarthia, no matter what, and do

it as soon as possible.

She just couldn't get it out of her mind.

✱

Morisaki lived in an old apartment building, and right about then, he was by himself, writing a report on a typewriter.

...A typewriter, meaning the only characters he could type were the Latin alphabet.

Accordingly, the text was in a foreign language, and needless to say, the report wasn't one for the school from Mr. Morisaki, the teacher.

It was directed to the organization that called him Commander Morisaki.

Suddenly, his hands stopped.

His eyes turned to a hand-cranked music box that sat on top of the desk, and just then...

The intercom sounded.

"....."

When Morisaki opened the front door, Asuna was standing there.

It was the first time she'd ever visited a teacher at home, and she was so nervous she could hardly stand it. But she'd rung for him, and now he was here, so she had to speak.

"Um, I'm sorry, there was something I wanted to ask you about."

"Oh— Uh, it's Asuna Watase, right?"

"Y-yes sir."

"I don't have all the students' names memorized yet, you see. I was worried I'd get yours wrong."

Giving Asuna a pleasant welcome, Morisaki showed her to a table in the living room.

It was more like a Western-style living room than a traditional Japanese one,

Asuna thought. She wasn't used to seeing a table with chairs, a closet, or a tea set.

Books were piled in tall stacks all around the room, and she wondered whether all teachers' houses were like that.

"Would you like some coffee?"

His kind offer took her by surprise.

"Huh? Oh, y-yes," she hurried to respond. "If I could have some milk in it, please."

Morisaki made instant coffee, poured a generous amount of milk into one of the cups, then set it on the table. He set the other cup down on the opposite side, then took a seat.

"Thank you very much."

Wait, I haven't told him anything yet. I have to say something, fast, she thought, coming to the conclusion that she should give a greeting.

"I-I'm sorry to bother you out of nowhere. Ms. Ikeda told me where you lived..."

"As you can see, I live alone. There's no need for formalities... Although, I've just moved in, so there isn't much here except books." Speaking gently, Morisaki pushed his glasses up with his middle finger. "And? What was it you wanted to ask?"

"_____"

She shouldn't mention Agartha and resurrecting the dead.

Quickly coming to that decision, Asuna said, "Um, it was about today's lesson."

Morisaki broke into a smile. "Yes, you were listening very eagerly," he said. There was something vaguely ominous about that smile. "Is there someone you'd like to bring back to life?"

"_____!"

She couldn't say anything.

If she'd said she didn't want to resurrect Shun, she would have been lying.

On the other hand, she vaguely sensed that actually saying so aloud might be...dangerous. It *would* be dangerous.

Even so, Morisaki seemed to have taken her silence as a yes.

Then he said it.

"Are you the one who met the boy who claimed to be from Agartha?"

"Huh...?"

How had he known that?

Morisaki held a notebook out to the bewildered girl. "Take a look at this."

The foreign words on the cover read MIZONOFUCHI REPORT.

That part wasn't anything special, but—

Underneath them, in red ink, was a stamp that said CONFIDENTIAL.

This was classified information.

If she read this, there was no going back... But that thought didn't occur to Asuna.

She opened the book and flipped through a few pages with photos pasted onto them, without really understanding— But then her eyes fell on one particular picture, and she gave a little cry.

It showed the corpse of that bearlike monster.

Realizing which photo Asuna was looking at, Morisaki said, "We call those Quetzal Coats. They guard the gates to Agartha." He opened another notebook, showing it to Asuna. "One more thing. What do you think of this?"

The book seemed to be a collection of social studies materials; it held several photographs of grotesque statues. She couldn't explain what it was in just a word or two, but something about them was different from the living creatures she knew.

"They look a little like that earlier one."

Morisaki nodded. "They're statues of Sumerian gods from over three

millennia ago. Long ago, gods like these were all over the world, and they guided humankind through its infancy. They are the Quetzal Coatsl.”

“Quetzal Coatsl...” Asuna repeated the word softly, and Morisaki nodded again.

“Before long, humanity had outgrown their gods. Realizing that their role had ended, the Quetzal Coatsl went underground, leaving gatekeepers behind. A few clans followed them.”

“Clans?”

The word wasn’t one Asuna was familiar with, but Morisaki didn’t elaborate.

“They say a few humans went underground with the Quetzal Coatsl. They live in Agartha, the world below. Agartha still holds the lost wisdom of the gods, and they say there’s a place in it where any wish can be granted.”

The smile Morisaki wore then was fearless—or that was one word for it, at any rate. It frightened Asuna, just a little.

Then Morisaki said it aloud:

“—Even the resurrection of the dead.”

The resurrection of the dead.

Asuna swallowed hard. “Um, does Agartha really...”

...exist? was what she was planning to ask, but her voice slowly faded, leaving the question unfinished.

“I couldn’t say. It may be only a legend. There are a variety of theories; I’m just—I’m just researching it.”

“But...”

Didn’t you want to resurrect your wife?

Asuna wasn’t able to finish that sentence, either, this time because Morisaki got to his feet and interrupted her.

“All right, you should run along home. It’s getting dark.”

“Mr. Morisaki...”

Maybe it was because Asuna had believed what Shun had told her, or maybe she wanted to believe in the possibility of bringing him back to life. She didn't know which it was herself, but— "I think Agarthia really does exist," she said.

How had Morisaki interpreted that remark?

The heat in his tone from a moment before was gone now.

"It's going to be dark soon," he said, now simply a teacher concerned for his student. "Head straight home; don't take any detours."

✱

On the way home, at the usual railroad crossing, Asuna spotted Mimi.

"Mimi!"

The moment the cat heard Asuna's voice, she took off running down the tracks.

Asuna ran after her, compelled by some reason she couldn't explain. But Mimi kept pulling farther and farther ahead.

"Wait!"

This wasn't normal.

Ordinarily, Mimi did what she told her, and yet...

When was it that Mimi stopped listening to me?

She soon remembered.

It had been when Shun appeared.

"Mimi!"

Asuna couldn't hope to catch up to a cat who was running at full speed, and before long, she'd lost sight of her.

By then, Asuna had reached the railroad bridge.

Then she saw it.

Up on the side of the mountain, on her favorite outcrop, a blue light shone.

“...!”

Asuna started walking. Something inside her urged her to hurry.

Her steps grew faster and faster, until she broke into a run again.

That blue light was definitely from Shun’s jewel.

And that meant—

When Asuna reached the outcrop, panting for breath, there he was, wearing an unfamiliar leather cloak and unconventional clothes.

It was Shun.

Registering Asuna’s presence, he turned around.

The blue jewel was shining on his chest.

“...!”

Ready to cry, Asuna ran to him.

“Shun!”

She took his hands, forgetting herself in her joy.

“Shun! Shun, I knew it!” Asuna shouted, heart leaping with delight.

He was alive. He hadn’t fallen from the outcrop; of course he hadn’t.

...But Shun’s response wasn’t any of the things she’d been hoping for.

He roughly shook off Asuna’s hands. “Who are you?” he said.

Openly wary, Shun paused for a brief moment, then grumbled to himself.

“So he made contact with a Topsider?”

“Shun...?”

When Asuna called to him, Shun shook his head. “He’s gone. Whatever happened, just forget it.”

Asuna had no idea what was going on.

She was confused, but just as she was about to say something to him...

Right in front of the outcrop, a helicopter rose into view.

Asuna reflexively shielded her face from the wind and the light it turned on them.

“Arch Angels...!” Shun said. He whirled toward Asuna, his cloak flaring out behind him. “I’m going!”

But then—

Before he could get very far, three men in what looked like military fatigues appeared in front of him, holding guns at the ready. *Tsking* quietly in irritation, Shun stopped in his tracks. The men were wearing masks and goggles, and it wasn’t possible to make out their faces.

The man in the center took a step toward them. “Are you from Agarth, boy?” he asked, holding out his right hand. “Hand over the clavis.”

Asuna couldn’t even begin to understand what was going on.

Guns? Are those real?

The situation was unfolding far too fast.

“Who...are these people?” she murmured.

As she spoke, the helicopter slowly began to move. Asuna had no way of knowing it was a military helicopter—but its machine gun was pointed straight at the two of them.

“Dammit!”

Grabbing Asuna’s hand, Shun broke into a run away from the group.

Two of the men quickly prepared to shoot, but their leader stopped them.

Shun took a flying leap off the outcrop, pulling Asuna into his arms in midair, then plunged toward the forest below—from a height that any normal person would expect to die from.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

But while Asuna screamed, Shun used the branches of the trees to break their fall, touched down on the soil, and started to run.

Once the helicopter had confirmed they were alive, its machine gun opened fire on the ground, kicking up dust behind them.

Shun appeared to evade all of it—but appearances were deceiving.

“Don’t hit them,” the man who’d spoken earlier had ordered. “We’ll make them lead us to the gate.”

Naturally, the fleeing pair weren’t aware of his intentions.

*

If Shun hadn’t been there, Asuna would have thought the rock door was simply a dead end in the cave.

Putting all his strength behind it, Shun pushed the rock to the side, opening it to reveal a secret passage while the jewel on his chest radiated blue light.

“That jewel...”

“It’s a clavis. I came up to the surface to get it back,” Shun brusquely replied as he started into the depths of the cave.

Asuna was still completely bewildered, but it didn’t seem as though she’d be able to settle things peacefully with the military types outside, so with no other options, she followed him.

“They won’t be able to get in here now. You won’t need a clavis to get out; wait until morning, then go home.”

“You said *‘the surface.’*” As Asuna ran after Shun, she asked, “Does that mean Agartha really is underground?”

“...You even heard about that?” He sounded appalled—or just surprised.

“Shun... Did you lose your memory?”

“I’m—”

Shun started to speak, but then he launched himself off the ground, grabbing Asuna and pulling her with him. A moment later, the ceiling crumbled, and the helicopter’s machine gun was about to assault them again.

No, not quite.

Shun made that call in the blink of an eye.

The machine gun was only there to break open the entrance to the cave.

“Dammit— They’re coming in!”

Shun headed farther and farther back, and Asuna followed him into the cave.

There was no telling how vast the cavern actually was. It went on and on, sometimes turning into a vertical shaft, sometimes collecting water in small pools.

I doubt I’ll be able to get back on my own now, Asuna thought.

“Hey, just how far are we—?”

She started to speak, then gulped the words back down.

In the rock wall, she had spotted a fossil of some sort. She didn’t know what kind it was—not because she was uninformed, but because the grotesque shape was completely unlike any fossil she’d ever seen before. Something about it was decisively different from living creatures on the surface.

“What’s the matter? Hurry! They’ll catch up to us.”

“Shun, this cave—”

“I’m not Shun.” As he headed farther into the cave, the boy who wasn’t Shun spoke. “I’m not even obligated to save you, actually.”

“...What happened to you?”

It really is like he’s a completely different person, Asuna thought.

Shun had been so kind earlier, but now...

Was it true?

“If you aren’t Shun, then who are you?!”

Was he actually someone else?

The boy put out his right hand, stopping Asuna. “Quiet. You stay here.”

“...What is it?”

The boy removed the jewel—the clavis—from his chest.

“A gatekeeper.”

The passage had led them to a wide-open cavern, easily large enough to house the school gym.

In the center of it was a strange creature.

It looked like a crocodile—and also rather like a lizard, but the enormity of the creature reminded her of a hippopotamus as well. Its body was at least several meters high and probably over a dozen meters long.

A gatekeeper.

She got the feeling she'd heard that word before, recently...

"Before long, humanity had outgrown their gods. Realizing that their role had ended, the Quetzal Coatls went underground, leaving gatekeepers behind."

Morisaki was the one who'd brought them up.

Was this a Quetzal Coatl, then? A real one?

"The gatekeepers guided humans, long ago," the boy explained.

It was the same thing Morisaki had said.

"By now, though, the impurity on the surface has nearly driven them out of their minds."

As he spoke, the boy swung the clavis in front of the Quetzal Coatl's eyes.

"I hope it remembers, but..."

The next moment—

The Quetzal Coatl bared its fangs and tried to bite the boy. He spun away, parrying the creature's jaw with a short sword he'd been wearing at his waist. The clear sound of metal striking metal rang out; the gatekeeper was left unscathed.

"Ghk..."

The Quetzal Coatl charged at the boy at full speed, and both combatants disappeared into a cloud of dust.

"Shun!" Asuna screamed, but he was all right.

"Stay there!" he quickly shouted back.

Asuna had been about to run over to him, but she stopped.

Then she saw the clavis on the boy's chest begin to radiate a brilliant light.

The Quetzal Coatl was momentarily weakened, and the boy didn't miss his chance: He kicked the creature's jaw upward, then did a backflip, putting some distance between them.

"Are you okay?!"

"It's not over yet."

As Asuna ran up to him, the boy put the clavis around her neck.

"Hang onto this. I don't want to kill it." With that, he ran toward the Quetzal Coatl again. "I'll knock it out...!"

The boy dashed out in front of his foe, and with a roar, the creature charged. Just barely avoiding the attack, the boy flipped halfway around, using his momentum to slam an elbow into the Quetzal Coatl's temple. The Quetzal Coatl's head swayed to the side, and the boy jumped on top of it, clasped his hands together, and brought them down like a hammer. The gambit was successful, and the creature crashed to the ground.

"It worked...I guess." The boy drew a deep breath, seeming satisfied. "Asuna, give me the clavis—"

Just as the boy turned around, it happened.

The Quetzal Coatl wasn't unconscious after all. It swept its tail through, knocking the boy up into the air and against the rock wall.

"Shun!" Asuna hastily ran to him—

And the Quetzal Coatl charged again.

Its huge maw opened, and just as Asuna braced for death—

Three sharp, unfamiliar bursts rang out in rapid succession.

Blood spurted from the side of the Quetzal Coatl's head.

Huh...?

Asuna still didn't understand what was happening. When she glanced over,

she saw the men in military clothes from earlier. Smoke was rising from their handguns.

“If there’s a Quetzal Coatl here,” said one of the men, “that means...” “This really is the entrance, isn’t it?”

Real guns? They couldn’t be...

For now, we have to run.

With that thought, Asuna helped the boy to his feet, letting him lean on her shoulder. She tried to flee deeper into the cave, but supporting him was slowing her down. She didn’t get far.

The group’s leader gazed at the Quetzal Coatl. “That’s—”

“...What?” one of the men asked.

“That’s an ancient, fifty million-year-old whale. Kill it.”

“But they said to retrieve all proof.”

“As long as we get a clavis, they won’t complain. Do it.”

As the man spoke, one of the men beside him leveled his machine gun.

“—Stop!” the boy shouted, but the bullets mercilessly tore into the Quetzal Coatl.

As the beast fell behind him, the leader walked toward the boy and Asuna. The boy stepped away from Asuna’s shoulder and stood in front of her, if weakly, with his short sword at the ready.

There was a rock wall at their backs. They had nowhere to run.

The man leveled his gun. “Come here,” he said to Asuna, “and bring the clavis. If you don’t, I’ll kill the boy.”

“Don’t go,” the boy whispered softly—and in the next moment, the man fired. The rock right next to the boy exploded into shrapnel.

“I could also kill you both right here.”

“...Shun.”

The boy was silent for a little while, but then—

He whispered again, so that the man couldn't hear. "I'll watch for a chance to rescue you."

As usual, she didn't understand any of this. Was the clavis that valuable?

But it didn't matter what she thought; her only choice was to do as the boy said. Asuna gave a small nod, then started toward the man. There was a distance of about ten meters between them— And then...

Suddenly, the clavis began to shine.

At the same time, the wall just beside Asuna started glowing in the same way.

Huh...? What? What?!

Startled, she stopped, but the man coldly spoke to her. "Keep walking."

Behind her, the men were swarming and stepping on the prone Quetzal Coatl, firing at it again to finish it off.

Their leader turned to them. "Stay here and guard the boy" was all he said.

One of the men asked, "Is that the door?"

"Probably. I hear the explosives and rock drills did nothing to the one at the South Pole," the leader replied. Then, more quietly, he continued, "On the other hand..." He pushed Asuna's back, moving closer to the "door" in the rock wall.

Part of the rock radiated a brilliant light.

"Touch that light with the clavis."

Asuna gulped, closing a trembling hand around the crystal.

What should she do? Something terrible might happen. Was it okay to do what this man said? No, it wasn't; she was sure of it.

"What's the matter? Do it."

But right now, she had no choice.

Timidly, Asuna touched the tip of the clavis to the light.

As she did, like magic, the "door" vanished, revealing a stone corridor.

The corridor was in good condition, far too neat to call a ruin; however, a few

plants still grew here and there in the worn, ancient-looking stone.

The man exhaled in admiration.

“The Interstitial Sea... Finally, it’s within reach.”

With that, the man slowly turned his gun toward the other two men, who had their weapons trained on the boy.

“Thanks for coming with me this far.”

The men seemed surprised at that. “Commander, what are you—?”

“From here on, I go alone.” Pulling Asuna backward with him, he cautiously stepped through the door. “Give my regards to the old men of Europa.”

As the rock wall began to rematerialize—the boy seized that fleeting chance.

Crouching low, he made a break for it. The two men hastily fired, but none of their bullets struck home. And by the time the door was a rock wall again...

There were three of them on the other side: the man, Asuna, and the boy.

“Shun!”

“Arch Angel!” The boy was holding his short sword at the ready, but the man simply tossed his gun to him.

The boy stared back, too stunned to immediately react, while the man pushed Asuna’s back to show he was letting her go.

Hastily, Asuna ran to her companion.

Putting her behind him again, the boy kept his short sword raised without lowering his guard.

“What are you playing at?” he asked.

Without answering, the man pulled off his mask, revealing his face.

“Mr. Morisaki?!”

It was the new teacher, Ryuuji Morisaki.

“Now that I’ve come this far, I have no reason to fight you.” Morisaki’s tone was suddenly tranquil. “I only want to go to Agartha.”

Agartha. Asuna gulped.

Still wary, the boy spoke to Morisaki. “Agartha is falling into ruin. There’s nothing like what you Arch Angels are hoping for.”

However, there was an unwavering strength in Morisaki’s eyes.

“I’m not after the secret of immortality or ancient wisdom,” he said. A tenacious will burned in his eyes and his words. “I just want to resurrect my wife.”

I knew it. Mr. Morisaki did want to bring his wife back, Asuna thought.

Did that mean what lay beyond here was Agartha?

“.....”

The boy faced down Morisaki for a few moments—but then he returned his short sword to the sheath at his waist.

“I don’t care what you’re here for. All I’m supposed to do is retrieve the clavis.”

Removing the clavis from Asuna’s neck and putting it around his own, he asked her, “What’s your name?”

He was still so brusque, unlike the kind Shun she’d known.

“...Asuna.”

“I’m Shin. Shun’s younger brother.”

“Shin... Then Shun is...”

“He’s dead. He knew we can’t survive long on the surface, and he still broke the law and went out.”

Shun was dead.

She turned those words over in her mind, like a curse, but Shin didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m leaving. The exit will open without a clavis. Wait until morning, then go home,” he said, but then he turned back to her. “Sorry for dragging you into this, Asuna.”

Then, for the first time, Shin smiled. His smile was exactly like Shun's.

Her heart was aching.

Just when I thought... Just when I thought Shun was back...

Without hesitating, Shin walked into the underground lake and vanished.

Before she had time to wonder about the odd route he'd taken...

"I'm sure I frightened you, didn't I?" As he spoke, Morisaki retrieved his gun.

"Mr. Morisaki, why...?"

"Are you familiar with the name Arch Angels?"

Asuna shook her head. "No."

"They're the only organization that knows of Agartha's existence. Their goal is to acquire the wisdom of the subterranean world and guide humankind toward progress." Morisaki pushed his glasses up. "I am a member, and I've spent ten years searching for the entrance to this place."

"But the people who were with you..."

"At heart, the Arch Angels are a group of empty, ineffective gnostics. I'm not interested in gods or the truth of the world."

Asuna didn't understand even half of what Morisaki was saying—but he was extremely clear about one thing.

"My only goal is to resurrect my wife."

He wanted his wife back.

But was such a thing possible—bringing the dead back to life?

"I'm going to go on to Agartha and look for a way to do that. I'm sorry I put you in danger."

Then, like Shin, Morisaki walked into the underground lake.

When the water was up to his waist, he scooped some up and brought it to his lips.

"Vita-aqua, hmm? I knew it."

So many things about this situation were puzzling to Asuna—Shun, and Shin, and Morisaki, and Agarth, and resurrecting the dead.

But still—

“...Mr. Morisaki!” Asuna shouted, running toward him. “Mr. Morisaki, I’m coming, too.”

“Why? Do you want to bring back the boy who died?”

“I...don’t know, but...”

Even she wasn’t certain what it was she wanted to do.

“But—!”

Whatever lay beyond that word wouldn’t come out.

She hadn’t sorted through all her feelings yet; that much was true. However, if she didn’t go with Morisaki right now, she might never get another chance to go to Agarth.

“The journey may be a dangerous one, and there’s no telling when we’ll be able to come back. You still want to go?” Morisaki asked.

Asuna nodded with fervent emotion. “Yes.”

When she gave her answer, Morisaki held out a hand to her. “Then come.”

Timidly, Asuna took his hand, stepping into the lake.

“This is an ancient liquid called Vita-aqua. It has almost no buoyancy, and you can breathe if it fills your lungs. Agarth lies below this.”

Morisaki waded farther and farther in, and in no time at all, the lake was up to Asuna’s chest.

She struggled a little, but Morisaki forged ahead.

“Um, Mr. Morisaki, wait just a minute—”

“Don’t worry! Just drink the water, and you’ll be able to breathe!”

He could say that, but that didn’t make it any less frightening. Common sense told her that people couldn’t breathe underwater.

However, Morisaki was advancing rapidly, pushing through the Vita-aqua.

“It’ll be worth it—we’re going to bring them back!”

Later on, Asuna thought about that moment.

In all likelihood—Morisaki had been waiting for this moment for a very, very long time. He’d said he’d spent ten years constantly searching for the way to Agartha, and now he’d finally found it.

“Get ready, Asuna!”

Asuna was dragged under the surface of the Vita-aqua—

And then she noticed she could breathe.

In an abrupt change, Morisaki gave her a kind smile. Then he began walking again.

Under the lake, a long stairway ran on and on, flanked on either side by ruined stone structures.

Stealing glances at the ruins around them, they advanced down the staircase until it came to an abrupt end. Beyond it lay a hole that seemed bottomless.

Asuna felt a primitive sort of fear. She hesitated for just a moment, but...

Morisaki took her hand and leaped into the hole.

And they fell down, down, down into the darkness.

✱

Asuna felt as if she was dreaming.

A man and woman were sitting on a veranda that seemed somehow familiar.

The woman’s belly was big; she was pregnant.

“I pray this child’s life will be a happy one,” she said.

The man smiled. “It’s all right.”

He stroked her stomach gently.

“Simply being born is blessing enough.”

CHAPTER FIVE

When she woke, the first thing she saw was an old stone ceiling.

Then she realized that Mimi was sitting on her chest, and she sat up, petting her back.

She took another look around. She was in an open space that looked like an ancient building, eroded by green trees.

Oh right. I dived deep into that...what was it called, the strange water— “You’re awake?” When she turned around, Morisaki was standing there. He jerked his chin at Mimi. “It came out of your backpack. Did you bring it?”

“...No. Hey, Kitty, when did you...?”

Asuna’s voice was reproachful, and Mimi nuzzled her face cheekily.

“We may not be able to take her all the way to the end with us,” Morisaki told her.

“All the way to the end—?” Asuna repeated, and then, “—! Mr. Morisaki, is this...?!”

Is this Agarthā?

She hadn’t quite finished her question, and Morisaki didn’t answer. Instead, he said, “I think that stairway over there might take us through. Come on.”

He started walking immediately, and she followed him up a set of stairs that could have come from an old European castle, until finally the corridor ended in a green, indoor garden.

“Mr. Morisaki...”

“Yeah.”

He responded even before she finished speaking. There were only two doors

in the dome-shaped garden, so the only way to move on was through the corridor at the far end. There was just one problem.

A deerlike animal sitting in front of that corridor.

There was a reason she identified it as only deer*like*. Its upright horns were longer and twistier than any deer Asuna had ever heard of, and it had the same sort of geometric patterns on its back as that bearlike monster.

“It’s probably a gatekeeper. A Quetzal Coatl.”

So that’s one, too, Asuna thought.

Strangely, unlike the bear, she wasn’t frightened of it... Although she didn’t know whether that was simply because it was shaped like an herbivore instead of a carnivore.

“It’s looking this way...,” she murmured.

“We’ll have to deal with it head-on,” Morisaki replied, taking aim with his gun.

Is he going to kill it?

Asuna wasn’t sure whether to stop him or not, but before she could do either, Mimi abruptly jumped down from her shoulder and ran right up to the Quetzal Coatl.

“Mimi!”

Asuna started to go after her, but Morisaki stopped her with a hand.

The Quetzal Coatl didn’t attack Mimi. Instead, the creature bowed its head so that it and Mimi were facing each other, nose to nose.

And then—

Casually, Mimi jumped up onto the Quetzal Coatl’s head. Even then, the gatekeeper didn’t buck or rampage. It only moved away from the corridor’s entrance, as if telling them, “You may pass.”

As Asuna and Morisaki carefully made their way to the corridor...

“Come on, Mimi.”

“—Asuna.”

Morisaki warned her, but Asuna wasn't afraid of the Quetzal Coatl. It was strange; normally, she'd even get scared of cows or horses sometimes.

Asuna walked right up to it, then held out a hand to Mimi.

"Mimi."

"*Mrowr*," Mimi answered, jumping down onto Asuna's shoulder.

The Quetzal Coatl held perfectly still, and its eyes were somehow kind as it gazed at Asuna.

"Asuna, let's go." Morisaki was already in the corridor.

Asuna trotted to catch up with him, and he broke into a smile.

"That cat may actually end up being useful."

Then, when they emerged from the other end of the ruined corridor—

A vast landscape spread out before them.

A grassy plain rolled on all the way to the distant horizon, broken up here and there by forests and rivers, and the sky was blue. It was impossible to believe this view was underground.

"Wow..." Asuna breathed in admiration.

It's so pretty, she thought. She was captivated; she'd never seen anything this magnificent before, and when she raised her eyes from the far horizon— "Mr. Morisaki, look!" she cried. There was something between the clouds in that blue sky.

Put briefly—it was a ship.

An enormous, elaborately decorated vessel, propelled by oars like the ships of antiquity, was gliding slowly through the sky.

"*Shakuna Vimana!*" Morisaki said, but Asuna didn't recognize the words.

"? What's that?"

As he responded, Morisaki wasn't able to hide his excitement completely. "It's a ship that's said to carry the gods. It's just as the literature said... This really is

Agartha!”

“Agartha...,” Asuna murmured.

And then...

Inside her pocket, her crystal, the memento of her father, began radiating blue light.

Huh? Huh? What?

Quickly, Asuna took out the stone. The light was so dazzling she couldn’t look directly at it, but there was no heat.

When Morisaki saw it, he sounded astonished. “That’s a clavis!”

A clavis? This?

Shun had a clavis, and Shin had come to the surface to take it back. But hers was a clavis, too?

“A fragment, hmm? Why do you have that?”

That’s what I’d like to know.

Bewildered, Asuna told him, “I was using it as a radio crystal. It was a memento from my dad.”

“...A memento?” Morisaki examined it pensively, but it wasn’t clear what he was thinking.

Then he turned around, looking up.

The *Shakuna Vimana* was just disappearing between the clouds.

“Clavis means ‘key’ in Latin,” he said. “That may help us later on. Take good care of it.”

“...I will.”

You don’t have to tell me. It’s one of the few things I have to remember my dad by, she thought, but apparently this stone had a value above and beyond that.

“We’ll follow that ship. There must be something in that direction,” Morisaki said, watching the gaps between the clouds. “We should find what we’re

looking for there.”

“.....”

Asuna nodded.

*

And so their travels began.

Morisaki was a fast walker; it was all Asuna could do to keep up with him.

He could wait just a little, she thought, but she was the one who’d insisted on coming with him in the first place, and she couldn’t bring herself to say anything that selfish. So whenever a little distance opened up between them, she trotted to catch up. After a few rounds of this, she realized she didn’t have to anymore.

It didn’t take her long to figure out that Morisaki was matching his pace to hers.

...Maybe he’s kinder than he seems, Asuna thought.

“I’m sorry, I don’t walk very...,” she started, but Morisaki interrupted without even looking back at her.

“No, I should have paid more attention earlier.” He never mentioned it again.

He’d said he was an Arch Angel, but teachers were still teachers, Asuna thought. She’d believed they were good people, with good characters, and she hadn’t been wrong about that.

As a matter of fact, Morisaki was very considerate. When they passed through rocky areas, he frequently helped Asuna. When they crossed lakes, if there was a dangerous patch on the lake basin, he told her about it right away. When they gathered edible wild grasses on the plain, he taught Asuna how to tell them apart.

She found it all very curious.

And yet—

Even though Asuna hadn't prepared properly for this journey, and she'd left without even telling her mother, she was enjoying it. This kind of satisfaction was completely new to her. Maybe that vague "somewhere" she'd always wanted to go was Agartha.

When night came, they built a fire. Morisaki pored over documents while she sat quietly beside him. Morisaki usually had cigarettes and a lighter, so they never had any trouble starting their fire, while the abundant land of Agartha provided them with plenty of kindling.

Asuna was oddly fond of these moments, too.

She'd never hated spending time with people. She just wasn't good at it. After all, she never knew what to talk about.

However, Morisaki was always absorbed in his books and didn't seem to need to talk, and since he didn't actively try to make conversation, there was no need to be attentive.

Their journey through Agartha was filled with thrills and excitement.

What they were concerned about was their supply of provisions.

Morisaki had only brought a few days' worth of bland travel rations, and all Asuna had in her backpack were snacks.

Guilty as she felt about it, she'd have to ask Morisaki to share his food with her. She'd been watching for an opportunity to ask him, but as it turned out, she never had to.

Whenever Morisaki ate his rations, he offered some to her. "Here, have some," he'd say.

It made her really happy.

In a modest attempt to thank him, she tried to give Morisaki her snacks, but he shared them with her as a matter of course.

Asuna's snacks were lacking in nutritional value, but Morisaki didn't turn up his nose. Every day, they split both sources of food.

To Asuna, at least, those mealtimes were as fun as anything else. She didn't think anything was as tasteless as food you ate alone.

Eating all her meals with Morisaki gave her a sense of peace.

In addition, Morisaki had packed “sleeping gear”—just a simple rug—in preparation for a long journey, but instead of using it himself, he let Asuna sleep on it.

With regard to both the meals and the bedding, Morisaki tried to make excuses. “Can’t have you holding me back,” he’d say. “You’re not exactly a hardened traveler.” He looked a little embarrassed every time he said it, though, and Asuna thought it was hilarious.

“So...,” she said after several days—she didn’t know how many.

Morisaki gestured lightly with his chin.

Asuna was getting better and better at reading those small gestures. This one meant he was telling her to go on.

She looked at the sky. “We’re underground, so why are there days and nights?”

“...Hmm. You know, that’s a good question.” Morisaki looked up as well. “On that topic, we’d have to start with the question of why there’s a sky at all. But there isn’t exactly a sun or stars.”

“Hey, you’re right.”

In that case, why did this world have night and day at all?

Asuna puzzled over the question in earnest.

“Well, ships for the gods fly up there, too, you know.”

Unusually for Morisaki, he almost sounded like he was joking.

Naturally, she wasn’t entirely satisfied with that, but she decided there wasn’t any point in worrying about it. It was likely that Morisaki had reached the same conclusion.

And so about a week passed in the blink of an eye.

✱

“Mr. Morisaki!”

That day, when Asuna made her discovery, she couldn't hide the delight in her voice.

“Village ruins!”

Up until that point, the only traces they'd found of human presence had been more like ancient sites than recent ruins. Aside from those, the world they'd been walking through had virtually no man-made structures at all. Now, at last, they'd found a true site of abandoned civilization.

More than half the stone buildings were solidly in place, still habitable, but nobody was there.

“Don't get your hopes up too high.”

Morisaki's tone stayed as calm as ever, but Asuna was excited.

“Maybe there's still fields for a farm! I'll go look! Come on, Mimi!”

As a matter of fact, Morisaki was hoping to find the same.

However, he'd decided it would be all right to leave the matter of food to Asuna. He went into each house in the village, looking for a library or anything similar, and finally succeeded in finding a few books.

The books were written in the language of Agartha, and even Morisaki wasn't able to decipher them completely. But they weren't worthless, either.

“Finis Terra...and the Gate of Life and Death, hmm?”

These seemed to be important places to the people of Agartha, and it was a stroke of luck that he'd managed to find information on both of them.

As Morisaki was poring over the books—

“Mr. Morisaki!” Asuna called to him cheerfully.

When he turned to see...

“Look! We can really dig in tonight!”

...Asuna's arms were filled with what looked a lot like potatoes.

“...They do seem edible,” he said. “Tubers can be poisonous, though. Just in case—”

But before he could offer more of a warning, he found there hadn't been any need to worry.

"I'll go get some water to take care of the toxins!"

Asuna was used to cooking on a daily basis, since neither of her parents were around, and it was really helpful.

Morisaki glanced at her; she'd gotten all muddy in the field. "After that, you should do something about those clothes..."

"Yours are pretty dirty, too, Mr. Morisaki. I'll wash them later, so go ahead and change!"

Asuna ran off with the potatoes. As he watched her go, Morisaki exhaled a puff of cigarette smoke, thinking.

Lisa had died ten years ago.

If we'd had a child...

"....."

Roughly, Morisaki stubbed out his cigarette.

What a stupid thought.

*

That day, they wrapped potatoes in leaves and steamed them for dinner.

Morisaki was still focused on his reading when he took the first bite, but he promptly set his book aside.

Apparently, it tasted so good that it would be rude to read while he ate. That gave Asuna a thrill of joy.

Just as she was thinking about it, Morisaki expressed his approval in words, too. "...This is good." As usual, he sounded slightly embarrassed.

She was really, really happy, and she couldn't keep the elation out of her voice.

"Oh, I'm glad. There was a little salt left in the kitchen!"

After several days of nothing but travel rations, it really was a feast.

And practically speaking, getting some salt into their systems was a stroke of luck, too.

However, that wasn't all it was. Meals she ate with Morisaki were fun, of course, but having someone eat food she'd cooked made her even happier.

Morisaki gazed at her steadily, perhaps seeing the joy in her face.

"I'm surprised."

"Huh?"

"You seem to be enjoying this trip."

What surprised Asuna was Morisaki's surprise.

Was he not having a good time?

So then why?

Now she needed to explain it—but she had to be careful that it wouldn't be misinterpreted. She couldn't say something like "I'm having fun because I'm with you." For just a moment, Asuna was worried, but then the words came out naturally.

She realized they were completely honest only after she'd said them.

"When I listened to my radio by myself, I always felt like there was somewhere I should go, somewhere far away. I wanted to get away from home and go see new sights."

He might think every teenager thinks that, Asuna thought. That wasn't the case, though.

Whenever she'd heard that song, a landscape she'd never seen before had surfaced in her mind. That was where she'd wanted to go.

"Then I met that mysterious boy, and I followed him here—"

Shun. Although he wasn't anywhere anymore.

"Ever since I came to Agarthia, I've been excited for reasons I can't explain. So I'm sure we'll find something here—!"

“.....”

She was sure, even though she couldn't clearly state what she thought would be there.

Without the words to continue, Asuna left it there. However, Morisaki didn't comment. He just went on eating quietly.

✱

I'm sure we'll find something here.

Was she trying to say she'd been looking for something there?

Morisaki reflected on what he'd been hoping to find, himself.

He'd spent the past ten years thinking only of Lisa.

It wouldn't be long now. Before too long, he'd see her.

Softly, Morisaki touched the music box in his pocket.

“.....”

Morisaki looked at the sky, perhaps guessing that Asuna had picked up on the gesture.

“Starless nights feel wrong somehow.”

Agartha's subterranean sky had no vast cosmos beyond it, of course, but—After the sunless day had ended, something resembling an aurora had created light above them instead.

It was a mystical sight.

“It makes you realize just how lonely humans are.”

Lisa—

Once more, Morisaki murmured the words, but only to himself.

—I'll see you soon.

CHAPTER SIX

“Shin Canaan Praeses.”

Meanwhile, Shin was in the chamber of the matriarch of the village of Canaan.

Watch fires burned there in the majestic chamber. Two fabric banners hung at its very back, and in the chair between them sat an old woman. She was bundled up in a traditional robe, and long years had carved deep wrinkles on her face. The matriarch was the ultimate authority in the village of Canaan, and two guards flanked her.

“First, I acknowledge the pains you took in order to retrieve the clavis.”

Shin knelt a few steps away from the matriarch, listening carefully to her words.

“However, you committed an error,” she continued.

Shin gulped. What on earth could he have...?

“A man and a girl from the surface are making for the Gate of Life and Death, with a clavis in their possession.”

He didn’t understand. His mission had been to retrieve the clavis, and he’d done that. “But the clavis is right—!”

It’s right here.

Shun’s body had been retrieved and laid to rest by the Topsiders, but Shin had stolen it before the Arch Angels could despoil it. He had burned it himself, and at the time, he’d felt as though he was the one burning.

He really had recovered the clavis from Shun’s corpse.

It was right here.

In that case—

“They possessed a different fragment.”

“——?!”

Shun was speechless.

That was ridiculous. Inconceivable. A *clavis fragment*? Did such a thing even exist?

Claves were given only to those who were chosen; the word *valuable* didn't even begin to express how priceless they were... And she was telling him that Topsiders had a fragment of one?

The matriarch went on in a hoarse voice.

“You knowingly invited Topsiders into Agarthia. It was a grave error.”

“B-but I did what I was supposed to—!”

His role had only been to retrieve the *clavis*, and he'd done that.

However, Shin was interrupted—and not even by the matriarch. It was her attendant who spoke.

“No excuses! Must you have everything spelled out for you?!”

“.....—”

True, if his mistake had been letting Topsiders into Agarthia, then it was a serious blunder. But he couldn't sense the breath of the *clavis*; if he didn't know where it was, what could he have done?

The matriarch went on in her musical way of speaking.

“Our erstwhile prosperity is but a distant memory, and we are living through a long twilight. Our desire is to dissolve into Astral, the endpoint of all life. However, should the gate be opened, Topsiders will flood into Agarthia once more, and our peace will be lost.”

As far as Agarthia was concerned, that was bitter history. The people had no military might to defend themselves from the Topsider invasion, only their wisdom.

They had been shot, murdered, and robbed, and the power they had lost was far rarer than military might.

“We cannot carelessly forget the suffering to which we were once subjected,” the matriarch said sternly. “How lamentable. Your coming of age ceremony is nearly upon you, but your eyes have not yet opened. You are unable to see through the eyes of the Quetzal Coats, and you cannot sense the breath of the clavis. Your elder brother had a natural gift, but a karmic illness strengthened his yearning for the surface.”

My brother—, Shin thought. I was proud of my brother.

Shun had been able to see through the eyes of the Quetzal Coats when he was just six years old and had become the youngest in history to receive a public duty.

However—

Maybe it was because death had been a familiar presence in his life after his illness as a child.

In the end, his brother had been afflicted with another malady, one he had inherited from his teacher when he was young, and it had eventually proved fatal.

A longing for the surface.

Shin, they say on the surface, when night comes, you can see “stars” in the sky.

Stars?

Yeah. People who die become stars, and they watch over us.

They do...? Father and Mother, too?

Of course. You can see them shining in the sky.

Huh...

I bet the stars are beautiful.

.....

Just once, before I die, just one time...

I want to see a sky filled with stars.

After Shin had left the matriarch's room, as he was walking down a stone-paved road, a girl came running up behind him.

"Shin!" she called. Her long hair was pulled back tightly, and she wore a ceremonial robe.

Shin didn't even glance at her. "You're in the middle of your duties, Seri," he said sharply.

"It's just for a little while. It'll be all right." The girl he'd called Seri began walking ahead of him.

Shin hesitated just a little, but Seri had been a friend since they were children. He should tell her.

"Seri, about Shun—"

"I know." Seri didn't wait for Shin to finish.

Or maybe she doesn't want to make me talk about Shun's death.

Shin muttered quietly. "...I wish it didn't have to be this way."

However, Seri shook her head slightly. "No. After all, even if it made his illness progress faster, Shun probably saw what he wanted to see."

"....."

Shin didn't respond; his emotions about that were too complicated.

Seri watched him with worry. "Shin, you've been given another duty, haven't you?"

"Yes. I have to track down some Topsiders and take their clavis."

Seri's expression clouded over even more. "But—"

"I wasn't told to kill them or anything." Shin smiled, trying to reassure Seri, but then he grew more serious. He'd never been the lying type. "If it comes to that, though..."

Seri's voice rose in a panic. "But you could get hurt—or worse! And they're sending you by yourself?!"

"After our parents died, the village raised my brother and me. I have to repay them." With that, Shin turned away from Seri. "You can't afford to be away from your post any longer than this, can you? Hurry on back."

"Shin..."

Seri called after him, but he didn't turn around.

Once he was back in his room, Shin took out his short sword.

He gazed at the weapon, which was still in its sheath.

"Shin, I've got a present for you."

On the day Shun had finished his "last duty" and returned home, he'd given his younger brother a gift, wearing the same kind smile as always.

"Someday you'll be given a duty, and I thought you'd need this then."

It was brand-new, and yet it felt easy to use and familiar in his hand. It had probably been very costly. However, he genuinely couldn't have cared less about how much money it was worth.

Shun had given it to him, which made it priceless.

Plus, it was the last—

Shin shook his head.

He couldn't afford to get sentimental now.

If it was Shun...

If Shun had been given a mission like this, he definitely would have made it look easy.

Shin quickly gathered his long hair at the back of his head, then roughly sliced through it with the short sword.

He made for the stables, mounted his favorite horse, and set off.

Perhaps he was chasing after his brother, trying to catch up—although he never could.

*

“Go on, eat.”

The dinner Morisaki had made was, once again, steamed potatoes.

Of course, she had absolutely no complaints. In the world’s current age of plenty, foraging was very nearly forgotten knowledge, but their journey had reminded her that being able to eat real food meant you were fortunate indeed.

“Thank you very much.”

When Asuna accepted a potato and began to eat it, Morisaki took a bite as well. “Here, you want some, too?” He offered a bit of potato to Mimi, who was sitting on his knee.

That was really unexpected.

She’d thought that Morisaki was less...sentimental—or at least less inclined to dote on animals. After all, at the beginning of this journey, he’d said they might not be able to take Mimi all the way to the end.

Morisaki noticed Asuna looking at him. “Hmm? What?”

He sounded rather mystified. Asuna pointed to Mimi, who was busy eating the potato.

“Oh, um, I was just wondering when you became such good friends.”

Morisaki’s response was simple. “Well, if it comes down to it, cats are technically edible.”

“What?!”

Asuna gave a startled cry, and Morisaki said “Kidding” in a tone that did not clearly suggest that he was kidding.

...Was he really kidding?

Morisaki did belong to the Arch Angels, an enigmatic organization that made her think of the military. Did they actually eat cats, if they had to?

She thought about it for a little while, but she couldn't believe Morisaki would do any such thing. Back when they'd first begun their journey, though, she might have reached a different conclusion.

"....."

Asuna kept eating her dinner for a little while, but then, she suddenly spoke up. "Mr. Morisaki."

She'd needed courage to open her mouth, but she couldn't keep this inside.

Morisaki had noticed something odd about her behavior. "What?" he asked dubiously.

Asuna wasn't sure where she should begin. But she'd started this conversation, and she couldn't back out now. "My father died when I was little."

Morisaki put another piece of potato in his mouth. "And your mother works at the clinic. You're a typical latchkey kid, but it's definitely been helpful on this journey. I should thank you."

"—Oh, no, you don't have to..."

"No." Morisaki shook his head. "I've been on my own for quite a while, too. I'm pretty sure I've got what it takes to live. Plus, I was active with the Arch Angels, so I have plenty of experience with sleeping rough. But..."

He shared another bit of potato with Mimi.

"I'm not sure how to put this— Let's see." Morisaki thought for a minute. "For now, let's set aside questions of necessity. The thing is..."

He paused for a little while.

"If you hadn't been here, this would have been a much harsher journey."

You're the one who made it richer.

That word had occurred to him, but he'd avoided it.

Why? It might have been because this was a journey for Lisa's sake, and he felt there was no possible place for "richness" in it.

"—I'm sorry. I started talking about myself. You were about to tell me about your father."

"Oh, um, yes."

Asuna gazed at the potato in her hand. It was steaming, speckled with grains of salt. It was a rough, wild meal. Not that it would have been any different if she'd made it.

"What I meant was that I don't really know what fathers are like. I remember the lullaby mine used to sing to me, but almost nothing else."

"Hmm?" Morisaki sent her a glance, signaling for her to go on.

Asuna paused for the space of another breath and then spoke again. "Mr. Morisaki..." She had to say the rest all in a rush. "If—"

Her voice cracked. She tried again.

"If I had a father, I think this might be what it would feel like."

Her voice grew softer and softer, like a deflating balloon.

"....."

Morisaki seemed stunned.

And then...

"Don't be silly," he said, blunt but honest.

*

That night, Morisaki dreamed about the time he'd been laid up with a fever.

Raven-haired Lisa was sitting by the bed, quietly playing a hand-cranked music box.

"This is unusual. You almost never get sick," she said, noticing that Morisaki had opened his eyes. *"Collapsing is usually my job."*

"I'm sorry..."

Lisa giggled. *"If you're really sorry, would you promise me one thing?"*

"...What is it?"

"Promise me you'll take care of yourself, even after I'm gone."

Only now did it occur to him that Lisa had already been prepared for her own death, even back then.

In fact...Morisaki might have been the only one who wasn't.

"Lisa... The next mission will be over quickly. Once I get back, let's go to my country together. If we do, I'm sure your illness will—"

"That isn't what I meant." Despite the interruption, her voice was kind. *"All people die someday. There aren't any exceptions."*

Lisa set the music box on the desk. Next to the paper bag with all those pills.

"The only difference is whether it happens earlier or later."

He didn't want to hear this.

"For me, it's going to be just a little bit sooner than it will be for you."

I especially don't want to hear it straight from you.

"It's already decided."

Morisaki gazed at Lisa. His eyes were solemn.

"Lisa...," he said. *"That's not true. You won't go away. I'm not leaving you, either."*

Then, gently, he squeezed her hand. *"I'm not saying good-bye now. Not ever."*

*

Meanwhile, Asuna was also dreaming.

Her dream was about the music she'd heard just once.

Up on the outcrop, in a pleasant spring breeze, she'd tuned her radio, and the music had leaped into her ears.

The moment she heard it, the land of Agartha had opened up before her eyes,

and two memories connected.

She finally understood. “Oh... The land I saw when I was listening to the radio was Agartha.”

As she murmured to herself, she realized that Shun was sitting beside her and smiling as kindly as ever.

He stood, holding out a hand to her.

“Let’s go, Asuna. This is a journey to learn how to say good-bye.”

Asuna took Shun’s hand and stood up—

“Asuna! Wake up!”

At the sudden shout, she opened her eyes. What was going on?

Morisaki was right in front of her. Beside him, Mimi was glaring up ahead, her eyes sharp— Up ahead.

When Asuna sat up and looked in that direction, she saw a grotesque monster.

It’s not like the Quetzal Coatls, she realized in the space of a moment. She couldn’t have said exactly what was different, but she knew it wasn’t a Quetzal Coatl.

It was gray all over. It had six legs—no, four. It stood on the ground with four legs and held two arms out toward her, as if it was beckoning. It gazed at her with red, glowing, pupilless eyes.

Other similar monsters surrounded them.

“Run, Asuna!”

She couldn’t respond. As Morisaki pulled her along, she mutely ran after him. Mimi jumped up onto her shoulder.

The gray monsters moved slowly, but they were tenacious pursuers.

The three ran across the grassy plain, climbed a rocky slope, and cut through a ruin.

She had no idea how far they had gone when the time finally came.

“Asuna, come on!”

“...!”

Morisaki was still pulling her arm. She wasn't even conscious of running anymore. She just staggered along, putting one foot in front of her, then putting the other foot down to keep herself from falling.

However, there was a big difference in stamina between a very ordinary girl and a man who'd been an active Arch Angel. Asuna did her best. But— As Morisaki tried to pull her forward, Asuna stumbled on a rock.

The monsters didn't let the opportunity go by.

A monster leaped at them, swinging its arm down and separating Asuna's and Morisaki's hands.

Their situation only got worse from there, as monsters swarmed between the two of them.

“Asuna!”

Morisaki drew the gun from the holster on his hip and fired.

It didn't seem to affect the monsters. Even when the bullets hit home, the wounds promptly closed back up.

“Run for it! Go, now!”

With Morisaki's voice in her ears, Asuna started running again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Immediately, Morisaki noticed that something was wrong. The monsters weren't attacking him.

No—

More accurately, it was as if they didn't even see him. They all went after Asuna.

What's going on? What's different between Asuna and me? Is it because she has the clavis fragment? Morisaki thought, but thinking wouldn't get them out of the situation they were in.

Anyway, right now, I need to—

He was about to use the gun again, but then he remembered it hadn't had any effect.

Dammit— Wasn't there anything about these things in the Arch Angels' research? Think!

The Arch Angels had known of the existence of Agartha, but no humans had been there since the invention of photography—at least, none who had then returned. The Quetzal Coats were on the surface, so data could be gleaned from them, but the organization didn't know much about creatures in the interior.

All gray with red, shining eyes and sharp claws...which means...

There was only one thing he could think of.

Are they Izoku?

One force of nature in this world was the tribe that did not want the Topside and Agartha to mingle. He was pretty sure Izoku was what they were called. Their weaknesses were water and light. But— *Why would they go after Asuna?*

Wondering about the question was pointless.

Water was precious, but he did have some in his canteen for drinking. He didn't know how effective it would be, but it might serve as a weapon.

However—

Damn! Where did Asuna go?

Before anything else, he had to get moving.

Morisaki broke into a run.

Find the Izoku. Asuna will be nearby.

In the darkness, he retraced the path he'd just taken. He went through the ruin, climbed down the rocky area and onto the plain— No, there was a riverbed there. A stark reminder that humans didn't have a very reliable sense of direction.

That didn't matter now, though.

The Izoku come first. Look for red lights.

He looked around, and—

There!

Morisaki reached for his gun out of habit but then remembered that it was the wrong move. The canteen was his weapon. It didn't feel like much of a weapon, mind you, but he'd just have to believe in it.

He started toward the Izoku—but then he heard a voice and knew that something was very, very wrong.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

It was the cry of a young child, probably no more than five.

What's that?

Then he saw her, a lone girl crouching in the middle of the river.

Morisaki didn't know whether she'd gone there on purpose, but that had probably saved her. When you were up against Izoku, rivers meant safety.

But—

What's a kid doing in a place like this?

He had to go save Asuna...but he couldn't just abandon this one, either.

Clicking his tongue softly in irritation, Morisaki ran to the little girl.

✱

Before she was aware of it, Asuna had reached a ruin.

Not that it mattered—she felt almost dizzy with despair. The corridor was a dead end.

Desperately, she searched for a way forward, but there didn't seem to be one, and the monsters were slowly closing in.

It's all over, Asuna thought. She was ready to die.

Just as a monster reached out to grab her—

“Asunaaaa!”

A shadow that had fallen out of the sky sliced off the monster's hand with its short sword.

“We're making a break for it! Run!” Shin cut into the crowd of monsters in the corridor, opening a path.

Asuna still wasn't sure what exactly had happened, but she followed him.

“You're...Shin?” Asuna said.

Shin grinned, looking rather proud of himself. “You got it right that time.”

After beating the monsters back for the moment, they ran down some stairs.

“This is an Izoku nest,” he explained.

“Izoku?”

“They say your blood's been defiled, and they want to devour you. Come on!”

“How did you know I was here? After you left, I followed you to Agartha...”

“Yeah, which is why we've got so much trouble now!”

“What's your problem?! I wanted to see you again—”

“Enough talking, just run! They’re coming!”

“I *am* running!” Even as Asuna shouted back at him, she mustered up her strength and kept going. “Shin, they’re gaining on us!”

“I know! They’re weak against light and water. If we’re lucky, we’ll make it to a river or something.”

And then—

“Dammit!”

—they ran out of land.

They were on the edge of a sheer cliff.

Once again, Asuna thought, *It’s all over.*

“Asuna,” Shin said, but she didn’t even respond.

...For a moment anyway.

“You have a clavis fragment, right?”

“—Yeah.”

When she nodded, Shin smiled. “If we get out of this, you have to give it to me.”

No sooner had he spoken than—

As Shun had once done, Shin pulled Asuna into his arms and jumped.

“Aaaaaaah!”

Far below, there was a river, and the two of them fell down, narrowly slipping between the boulders.

A tall column of water splashed up.

✱

“Asuna! Hey, Asuna!”

Someone was calling to her.

Her whole body felt heavy, and she didn’t want to wake up. But the voice just

wouldn't stop.

"Asuna!"

Finally, she opened her eyes...

...and saw Morisaki's face. He looked terribly worried.

"...Mr. Morisaki?"

"Pull yourself together!" Morisaki helped her sit up.

Asuna finally realized that she was on the bank of a river, the sun was already up, and she was dripping wet.

"If this little one hadn't been here, you might not have gotten off so easy... You'd better thank her."

"Little one?"

Morisaki glanced to the side at Mimi, who was watching her steadily. "She led me to you."

"...Who is that girl?" Asuna had noticed the child Morisaki was carrying on his back.

"Those monsters were chasing her, too. It's a long story, but I ended up saving her."

Possibly in an attempt to camouflage his embarrassment, Morisaki pushed his glasses up with his middle finger.

"Okay, let's start a fire over there. Come warm up."

When she was sitting by the campfire, holding a coffee cup filled to the brim with hot water, Asuna's mind finally began to clear, and she recounted the events of the previous evening.

"So then he told you to hand over the clavis?" Morisaki asked. He put a hand to his mouth, thinking hard. "And then there's the creatures that attacked you and this kid. We don't seem to be welcome here."

He glanced at the little girl, who'd completely recovered her energy and was busy playing with Mimi. "All right, what do we do with her?"

The girl seemed to realize they were talking about her and ran up to Morisaki. She didn't seem capable of proper speech, but she said, "Dah, dah" and pointed into the distance.

"Downriver, huh?" Morisaki said.

Then it happened.

"Ghk... Ngh..."

At the sound of a small, muffled groan, Asuna finally realized that Shin was lying in the shadow of the boulder. A deep gash ran from his shoulder to his chest.

She almost averted her eyes—but now wasn't the time.

"Shin!" She ran to him. It was an awful wound.

"...I nearly forgot about him."

As Morisaki walked over, Shin sprang up, his face twisting with pain.

"—! You're—!" He closed the distance between himself and Morisaki in a rush. "Arch Angel!" Stopping about three paces from Morisaki, Shin held his short sword at the ready.

Asuna was worried about Shin's injury, and she wanted to keep him and Morisaki from fighting; but she didn't know what she should say—so she didn't say anything at all.

The hostility in Shin's voice was apparent. "I know you have a clavis! Leave it here and get out of Agartha!"

"Why?" Morisaki asked quietly.

Shin shook his head. "How should I know why?! My job is to make it happen!" he shouted back, then took the remaining three steps. "Hand over the clavis!"

But he was in bad shape, and so was his swordsmanship. Morisaki evaded the short sword easily, then struck Shin in the back of the neck with his gun. Shin collapsed without a struggle.

"Shin!" Running to the boy, Asuna glared at Morisaki.

For his part, Morisaki seemed unbothered. "She pointed that way; we should

try that direction. There might be a village.”

Asuna had one request that she had to insist on, no matter what. “We’re taking him with us.”

“...If you want.” Morisaki took bandages and antiseptic out of his bag and tossed them to Asuna.

Asuna disinfected Shin’s wound, then bound it firmly.

Come to think of it, I bandaged Shun’s arm, too, with my scarf, she thought.

*

Shin’s horse proved to be useful.

It seemed particularly loyal to its owner; Morisaki told her it had been beside Shin when he’d found him unconscious. Asuna had known that horses were intelligent animals, but she hadn’t thought they were *that* intelligent.

They put the girl and Shin, who was still out cold, on the horse’s back and headed downriver. Morisaki and Asuna traveled on foot.

After an exhausting several hours of walking, they saw below them a village surrounded by a river and a wall.

This was nothing like the ruins they’d been seeing ever since arriving in Agartha. Smoke from fires, maybe for cooking or maybe for heat, rose from the clusters of wooden houses, and enormous windmills seemed to be harnessing the wind for some practical purpose. Farm fields spread right up to the outer wall, giving them a clear sense of the villagers who lived there.

“There are people here...,” Asuna murmured.

Morisaki nodded. “It’s our first living village. Let’s tread carefully.”

As the two of them and the horse they led drew closer, some of the locals who’d been working in the fields noticed them and hastily retreated into the village. From the urgency in the villagers’ behavior, Asuna and Morisaki guessed that they might be about to encounter some resistance.

And they were completely right.

Almost immediately, three sturdy men on horseback came galloping toward them from the village. Their matching white cloaks indicated that they belonged to some sort of vigilance committee. Either that or they were important members of the village.

As the men approached, the others yielded the way to them.

“Everyone back!”

Obeying the men, the villagers withdrew behind the wall.

Asuna and Morisaki walked straight toward the riders.

The small girl jumped down from the horse and ran happily toward the group.

When they saw her, the men murmured to one another, but Asuna couldn’t hear what they were saying.

Meanwhile...

“Halt!” one of the men barked, and she and Morisaki stopped in their tracks.

The man slowly came up to them, acting as a representative of his group.

Morisaki took a step forward, shielding Asuna and the horse.

“You have our thanks for returning a child of the village,” the man said in a dignified voice. “However, you are Topsiders. The village of Amaurot cannot accept you. We must ask you to leave.”

Morisaki didn’t seem to know what to say, so Asuna mustered her courage. If nothing else, they had to do something about Shin. Pointing at Shin, who was lying across the horse’s back, she said, “Could you look at this boy, at least?! He’s injured, and he has a fever.”

At that, she heard the men whisper among themselves:

“...He’s from the village of Canaan.”

“Why is a native of Agarthia with Topsiders?”

Then the spokesman drew his sword and shouted. “We must not! Begone!”

No, please, wait!

Asuna almost said it aloud, but Morisaki shook his head and turned to go.

“Wait,” said a solitary old man with white hair and long whiskers. Gently, he scooped the little girl into his arms. “Manna, I’m glad you came back.”

Then he stood beside the men and spoke to Asuna and Morisaki.

“Please forgive the village for its discourtesy... Will you not let me thank the ones who’ve saved my granddaughter?”

“But—!” the man shouted, but the elder remained calm.

“Just for a night. Allow me to salvage my honor.”

“.....”

Grudgingly, the man returned his sword to its scabbard.

Then the group simply left.

“This way. You’ll draw too much attention cutting through the village.”

And so Asuna’s party was shown to the elder’s house.

When they arrived at the spacious dwelling, the first thing the old man did was treat Shin’s wound. He had a variety of what appeared to be the raw materials for medicine at home; he ground them into paste and mixed them together into a liquid, which he meticulously painted onto Shin’s wound.

“His fever should come down soon. It will probably be a while before he can move, but he won’t die. Don’t worry too much.”

Shin’s chest was still heaving with pain, but Asuna sighed with relief.

“Oh, I’m glad... Thank you, sir,” she said, and she meant it.

If it hadn’t been for this man, they wouldn’t even have been allowed into the village. Plus, he’d carefully tended to Shin’s wound. There was no way to thank him enough.

“That’s an Izoku wound, isn’t it?”

“...I think so.”

“They are a cursed race that abhors light and water, but they are also one of the mechanisms that seek to keep the world as it is. That is why they hate admixtures.”

“Admixtures...,” said Morisaki. “Then that girl is...”

The old man nodded. “Manna’s father is a Topsider. It’s rare, but it does happen.”

“...It was a test?” Morisaki was gazing at the elder, his eyes sharp.

The old man nodded again slowly. “Not one I wished for, of course.”

“? What do you mean?”

Asuna couldn’t process the situation. By rights, she was a rather quick thinker, but Morisaki’s realization was backed up by both personal and indirect experience. He also benefited from keen insight. He pushed up his glasses with his index finger.

“Yesterday, when I found that girl, she was inside a ruin of sorts. Think about it. How many hours did we walk to get here? No child would wander in there on her own.”

That was all he needed to say for Asuna to understand. Her heart felt heavier.

“Then...,” she murmured, and Morisaki nodded.

“Right. They intentionally put her somewhere the Izoku would appear, to see if she’d come home safely. They wanted to test whether the world would allow her to exist.”

The old man didn’t nod, and he didn’t deny it. He only said, “Come with me” and left the room.

The man’s wooden house was extremely rambling. It was decorated here and there with striking woven cloths and other objects from traditional Agarthan culture.

“For us, a visit from Topsiders isn’t a good omen.”

As he walked ahead of Morisaki and Asuna, the elder kept speaking.

“Long ago, the emperors and kings of the surface spent several centuries plundering wealth and techniques from Agarthan. They needed our knowledge and riches to control the surface, and in exchange, they brought wars upon wars. Our cities were more magnificent than any on the surface, but all were

destroyed. Our numbers dwindled, and now only a few villages remain. That was why we used the claws to close the doors, locking them so that Topsiders couldn't enter." The man gave Morisaki a thoughtful look. "Let me show you my library."

Then he glanced at Asuna.

"Young lady, would you help with the dinner preparations, over there?"

"...Yes."

To be honest, she'd wanted to listen to more of the old man's account, but it probably wouldn't be a pleasant tale for her to hear. Maybe it would be better to distract herself with cooking after all.

With that in mind, she entered the room the man had indicated. Manna was already there, stringing beans. Mimi was there beside her, although there was no telling when she'd reached the house. She jumped up onto Asuna's shoulder.

"Daah!"

Manna ran up to Asuna, caught her hand, and pulled her over toward the table.

Overall, the dishes there were not unlike the food at home.

To start, she filled the pot sticker wrappers (or a close approximation) with a mixture of minced meat and vegetables. Next, she was asked to cut up an *ohne*, a vegetable that looked a lot like a daikon radish. Both were tasks Asuna was very used to.

"Hey, Mimi, don't."

As Asuna peeled the *ohne*, the cat had started playing with the latest strip.

The old man had returned, and as he watched her scold Mimi gently, he gave a jolly laugh.

"I've never seen a Yadoriko become so attached to a Topsider before."

"Yadoriko? Does that mean cat?"

"They're animals in whom a child of god has come to dwell," he said, joining

her in her task. “They’re raised alongside humans, and when their role comes to an end, they become part of a Quetzal Coatl and live forever.”

“A god...?”

That couldn’t be, Asuna thought.

After all, Mimi was a cat, and they’d lived together since Asuna was little. If she would be mistaken for anything, it would be a fox, but that was only a slight resemblance because of her pointed ears. She couldn’t possibly be a god.

“Lucky you, Mimi. He thinks you’re really special.”

Mimi responded with a *mrowr*.

“All right.” The man put a pot on the fire, then picked Manna up. “While the food is cooking, would you give Manna a bath?”

Asuna’s expression changed to a mixture of surprise and delight.

“A bath?!?”

*

Curiously, baths in Agarthā were just like Japanese-style baths. The stone tub was filled with hot water; aside from the fragrant herbs floating on the surface, it really wasn’t much different from the bath Asuna normally took.

“Aaaaaah...”

Soaking in hot water up to her shoulders, she exhaled a long sigh. She felt all the fatigue that had accumulated during her long journey through Agarthā slipping away.

“I love baths,” she said.

“?” Manna looked puzzled.

Glancing at her, Asuna smiled. “Feels like you’re washing your whole life clean.”

Although Manna probably wouldn’t understand that yet, Asuna thought.

She’d heard that there were countries in the world—the surface world—

where soaking in bathtubs wasn't a custom. *I'm really glad I wasn't born in one of those*, she thought. Baths soothed both your body and your mind at once. She'd heard something about benefits for the parasympathetic nervous system, but frankly, most of it went over her head.

That aside...

"All right, Manna, let's get you washed."

Shampoo and conditioner were too much to hope for, but she washed her own and Manna's hair, and then the rest of them, with Agarthan-style soap.

After she'd warmed up enough, she changed into the Agarthan clothes the old man had set out for her. The loose garments were made of simple fabric; they looked like traditional clothing from Tibet or somewhere near it (at least if her memory served her right). Up until now, she'd only been able to wash her own clothes in the river, and she'd finally gotten to wash them with soap. Now she had to wait for them to dry.

Perhaps unable to wait for Asuna to finish changing, Manna dashed out of the dressing room without even bothering to dry herself off properly.

"Manna, no, wait!" As Asuna chased the little girl through the living room, she nearly ran into Morisaki. "Oh, Mr. Morisaki."

In high spirits, Asuna twirled around.

"What do you think? Manna's grandfather loaned me these clothes."

Lately, being grubby had become distressingly normal for Asuna, and now that she was clean and in new clothes, she wanted someone to compliment her.

However, Morisaki looked her up and down for a while, as if he was seeing something unusual. Then he said, "They don't really suit you."

And then he left.

"...Oh, honestly. What was that for?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

By the time Asuna had gotten out of the bath and rested for a few moments, dinner was ready.

When she saw all the bowls and plates that had been set out, her heart gave a twinge. For the past little while, the best meals they'd been able to manage had been around a campfire, using leaves for plates. Food that had been properly cooked seemed like a feast.

Asuna's self-control was gone then. "Thank you for the food!" she said, then immediately tossed a meatball into her mouth and shoveled in rice from her bowl.

It was delicious.

She couldn't imagine anything in the whole world tasting better.

Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes.

"...Don't cry while you eat."

Morisaki sounded tired, but she couldn't help it; it was just too good.

Asuna took a bite of vegetables next. "Well, I mean, it's yummy," she said, continuing to eat. Everything was really and truly wonderful.

Ignoring Asuna, Morisaki swallowed his food calmly. For a while, they ate in silence.

"Elder," he said, and for a moment, even the eating stopped.

"....."

"Would you answer the question I asked you earlier?"

What question? Asuna wondered.

The man responded. "In Agartha, it is forbidden to resurrect the dead."

Resurrect the dead.

Right, it had almost slipped my mind, but—that's why we're on this difficult journey in the first place. She felt stupid for nearly forgetting about it.

"If it's forbidden, that means it can be done," Morisaki pointed out.

I see. That's true, Asuna thought. If it were impossible, there wouldn't be any reason to forbid it. But they did forbid it, so it followed that it wasn't impossible.

Resurrect the dead.

So I could bring Shun back to life?

Both hopeful and anxious, Asuna waited for the old man's next words.

"Life and death are only part of a much greater flow," the man answered as he poured tea into cups. "It is not given to humans to interrupt that flow. Doing so will bring happiness to no one."

However, Morisaki didn't back down.

Well, of course not, Asuna thought, looking back later.

They'd come all the way here, and he finally had a solid lead on the moment when his decade of hard work would pay off.

"Do you want me to beg for permission?! What do you want me to say?! The surface world is littered with those proverbs! What I want to know is where and how we can be reunited with people we've lost. That's all!"

The man closed his eyes for a moment, and the silence was heavy and grave, even to Asuna.

Finally, he raised his head. "Mourning the dead is proper, but it is a mistake to hold on to your pity for them and yourself. You've even dragged a young girl into your delusion."

"Asuna's here of her own free will!"

"U-um!" Asuna tried to break into their argument. "I'm—"

However, her efforts were in vain as Morisaki went on.

“You people have shut yourselves underground and done nothing but ‘revere’ things for a full two thousand years! That’s why you’re falling into ruin!”

“.....” The old man seemed to think for a little while. “Young lady,” he said, turning to Asuna. “I’m sorry to ask, but would you go check on the boy?”

Asuna knew she was being subtly told to leave the room.

She wanted to hear this conversation, too, but asking would probably have been selfish.

“Go on.” Morisaki said it, too, so Asuna stood up.

Obediently, she made her way to the room where Shin was sleeping. In front of the door, she stopped, took her compact mirror out of her pocket, and fixed her bangs.

Even she wasn’t quite sure why she’d done that.

Opening the door softly, she went in.

Shin had been asleep, but he opened his eyes as soon as Asuna came into the room.

“Those clothes,” he said.

Her heart skipped a beat.

He’d noticed she was dressed differently right away, and it gave her a little burst of happiness. Morisaki had said they didn’t suit her, but he probably just wasn’t used to seeing Agarthan clothes. What would Shin say?

“Those look terrible on you.”

The fact that she’d gotten her hopes up made her subsequent frustration even worse.

“Oh, come on! Did you have to say it like that?”

Shin seemed to find her pouting amusing, but then his expression turned serious. “Why did you save me?”

“Huh...?”

“Why...did you save me?”

Why *had* she saved him?

Because he'd been wounded, right in front of her, and that's what you do when someone's hurt— "You saved me, too, Shin. Remember?"

When Asuna reminded him of that, anger abruptly entered his voice. "I'm just being forced to clean up the mess my brother left!"

"Shun's..."

She didn't know the full context of all this.

Still, Shin had said he had a duty to retrieve the clavis that Shun had taken aboveground with him. That was probably what he was talking about.

Straining, Shin tried to sit up—but he couldn't, as if an invisible force was pinning him to the bed.

"Shin!"

Beginning to worry, Asuna tried to support him, but he shook her off. On his own, though, he couldn't do it.

"—!" With a little scream, he collapsed back onto the bed.

"Don't push yourself."

Asuna was genuinely concerned about him, but Shin was stubborn. "You people shouldn't be here." His rumpled hair fell over his eyes, hiding his expression. "I should have let the Izoku kill you, then taken the clavis... No, I should have killed you on the surface along with the Arch Angels!"

Asuna couldn't say anything.

She couldn't place what about this was such a shock to her, but—she really hated that Shin was saying these things.

"...Just get out, all right?"

"Shin..."

"Get out!" he shouted.

Asuna meekly left the room. She was discouraged now, and something dark and murky was churning in the depths of her chest.

When she returned to the living room, Morisaki seemed to have been waiting for her. “We’ll leave early tomorrow. Get to bed soon.”

That was all he said before he disappeared into the bedroom he was staying in.

“.....”

Her emotions were rough and raw, and she wanted to talk to someone. So she went to the old man’s room.

He was cleaning up after dinner, and he didn’t turn around.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I can’t shelter Topsiders for long.”

*

Asuna got into bed, but she was unable to sleep. After a while of lying there, she saw Mimi come into the room, her eyes glinting green in the light from the dimmed lamp.

Gently, she licked away the quiet tears that ran down Asuna’s cheeks.

*

Shin lay in bed, all by himself, with his uninjured arm over his eyes.

A single tear trickled down his face.

“Shun...”

*

The old man was smoking his pipe alone, in front of the fire.

Someone knocked three times, then spoke.

“Elder. I’m sorry to disturb you so late.”

As if he’d been expecting the visit, the old man responded, “Come in.”

Morisaki opened the door and entered.

“What do you need?”

“There were two things I wanted you to confirm,” Morisaki said, but before he could continue— “Well, go on and sit down.”

Morisaki accepted the invitation and lowered himself into a chair.

“Would you like some tea?”

“No, don’t trouble yourself.” Morisaki’s tone was carefully polite. “Earlier, you said the Izoku hated admixtures,” he began.

From that alone, the old man seemed to know what Morisaki was trying to say, but he didn’t interject.

“You said that girl is of mixed blood, with parents from Agarthia and the surface, and that’s why she was attacked.”

“I know what you’re getting at, but...”

Extinguishing his pipe, the old man stood up.

“...that knowledge won’t help anyone.”

“.....”

Morisaki was silent for a while, but at length he nodded. “That may well be.” Then he took his cigarettes out of his breast pocket. “Oh. Mind if I smoke?”

“Go right ahead.”

Morisaki lit his cigarette, took a long drag, and breathed out blue smoke.

“There’s one other thing that’s been nagging at me for a while now.”

“...What might that be?”

“Our conversation during dinner. You said that resurrecting the dead wouldn’t bring anyone happiness. Back then, I was too angry to notice. Once I calmed down and thought about it, though, I realized something felt off.” Morisaki paused. “There’s someone who broke that taboo, isn’t there? I want to meet them.”

CHAPTER NINE

When dawn broke, the old man led Asuna and Morisaki to the village dock.

“You may use this,” he said, providing them with a canoe-like boat.

Wordlessly, Asuna hugged the elder, and he patted her on the back.

“It felt like my daughter was here again.”

Asuna didn’t know her grandparents, but maybe this was what it was like to have a grandfather. Maybe that was why this parting was so painful—or maybe not. Maybe the biggest factor was that she simply hadn’t felt human warmth—except for Morisaki’s—since coming to Agarthia. Maybe leaving that warmth was what hurt. Right now, Asuna really couldn’t tell which it was.

“Elder...take care. Manna, too.”

With that, Asuna hugged the little girl close.

The old man gazed at them, his eyes affectionate, then spoke to Morisaki. “In about a day and a night, you’ll arrive at the village of the individual you seek. From there, after another day and night, the boat should reach the lake. The place you’re looking for will be near.”

“Thank you for everything.”

What had these two discussed the previous night, after dinner? Asuna was just a little curious about that.

“Asuna,” Morisaki called, and she climbed into the boat.

She wanted more time to linger over her good-byes, but if she asked for that, she might never manage to leave. That was why she could appreciate Morisaki’s rather heartless attitude. Maybe he was feeling lonely, too.

Asuna turned back.

“Mimi, come on.”

Mimi was sitting on top of Manna’s head, but she only meowed in reply. She wouldn’t budge from her perch.

Asuna stared at her cat with fretful impatience, and then...

“She may have fulfilled her role,” the old man said.

Asuna didn’t understand what he meant. “Huh...?”

As calm as ever, he went on. “Humans can’t dictate the actions of Yadoriko.”

...Yadoriko.

Mimi wasn’t a god. She couldn’t be.

She was just a cat. And yet—

“No, but... We’ve always been together! Mimi!” Asuna wailed.

But Mimi didn’t move.

The one who stepped in to help her let go was once again Morisaki. “... Asuna,” he said quietly. “I think we’ll just have to accept it. Elder, please, take care of her.”

Slowly, the boat began drifting away.

...But Asuna wasn’t ready to go.

“Mimi!”

It wasn’t too late.

If the cat jumped into the boat now, she’d still make it.

“Mimi!”

However, as before, Mimi only gazed at her steadily.

“Mr. Morisaki, wait! It’s not—”

Mimi was getting farther away. Farther...and farther away.

“...Manna! Please take care of Mimi! Mimi! Listen to Manna!”

And then—

“I’ll miss you...”

Her voice was so quiet, even Morisaki might not have heard it.

✱

After that, their voyage went smoothly.

Morisaki kept rowing quietly. As they headed downriver, they saw several villages along the banks—and ruins, wastelands, and grassy plains. The water was clear, and they could see lots of fish swimming through it.

“Mr. Morisaki.”

When their journey had gone on for several hours, Asuna called to him quietly.

“.....”

Morisaki didn’t answer. He just kept rowing.

“Do you remember the story you told us in class? The myth of Izanagi and Izanami?”

“—Yeah.”

Apparently, the subject had intrigued him. Morisaki stopped rowing, sat down on the edge of the boat, took a cigarette from his jacket, and lit it.

“I wanted to know more about the ending, so I read the rest in the library,” she said.

Quietly, the tobacco smoke dissolved into the air.

“What Izanagi saw underground was his wife’s rotting body. He was horrified. Are you sure it’s all right to bring people back from the dead...?”

Morisaki didn’t answer her question.

It was possible that he didn’t know, and that was how Asuna decided to interpret it.

As Morisaki smoked his cigarette, he said, “We’re nearing the end of our journey. Asuna, decide for yourself what you’ll seek at the Gate of Life and

Death.”

Decide for herself...what she’d seek.

Maybe it was Shun’s resurrection, and it could have been her father’s. But she got the feeling it was neither of those things... Then why was she traveling in the first place?

She didn’t have an answer.

✱

The long night came, then passed, and then it was morning.

Morisaki spotted a small dock and steered the boat over to it.

“Hey, Mr. Morisaki.”

“What?”

“I hadn’t asked, but—who are you looking for?”

As Morisaki tied up the boat, he said, “I’m told a person who’s actually resurrected someone lives in this village. I’ve read the literature and heard that old man’s story, but the best place to get information is straight from the source.”

They left the river and started toward the village, which was much smaller than Amaurot.

Putting on the cloaks the old man had given them, Asuna and Morisaki went into the village.

“Excuse us. We’re researching the resurrection of the dead.”

When they introduced themselves to the first villager they saw, his face promptly clouded over.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know anyth—”

“There’s someone in this village, isn’t there? Someone who was successful.” Morisaki wasn’t beating around the bush. The other man had already shown

weakness, so their best bet was to push until he cracked.

The tactic was successful, and the villager looked down.

“Don’t let anyone know I told you,” he said.

Morisaki nodded.

“A woman lives in a hut on the edge of that forest over there. Ask her. That’s all I can say...”

“No, that’s enough. Thanks.” With that, Morisaki promptly began walking toward the forest.

“Um, Mr. Morisaki...”

“What?”

Asuna was a bit nervous about this, but—

When Morisaki turned to look at her, she didn’t know what to tell him.

“No... It’s nothing.”

“Let’s go.”

They knew which house it was right away—after all, there was only one house by the forest.

A wooden wall stood around the other houses, protecting them from external threats. But this one had been built outside the wall, all alone and ostracized.

“Hmm... It does look like there’s a story here. Well, if all the villagers know the taboo of raising the dead was broken, we shouldn’t be surprised.”

“.....”

The idea of visiting that house made Asuna feel something very close to fear.

However, Morisaki didn’t hesitate.

As they drew closer, the condition of the house grew clearer. *Hovel* was a better word for it; it was hard to believe anyone actually lived there.

Reaching the front door, they knocked on it three times.

“Excuse me. Is anyone there?” Morisaki called.

There was a short pause, and then...

“...What did you need?”

The voice belonged to a wary-sounding woman.

“Um—”

Asuna started to speak, but Morisaki held up his right hand, stopping her.

“Don’t say anything unless you have to. Don’t say anything at all, actually.”

“...Okay.”

Asuna was a little unhappy with that, but she did think it was probably for the best. Morisaki would be better at talking than she was.

Apparently, that was the right move.

“We’re researching the resurrection of the dead,” he said. “We were told that someone who lives in this house has actually done it. Could we speak with them?”

“.....”

This time, several seconds passed before the woman responded. “I’m sorry, but no one here has resurrected the dead.”

Morisaki banged his fist against the door. “They know it all the way over in Amaurot!” he shouted, but then he shook his head slightly. “I’m sorry. I’ll be honest with you.”

Keeping his voice as calm as possible, he went on.

“The part about research was a lie. I want to resurrect my wife. And I’m gathering information to do it.”

“_____”

Behind the door, they thought they heard a gasp.

“I’m sorry to ask, but can you tell us about it?”

With a creak, the door slowly opened. The woman who peeked out was in her twenties, and she was too pale to be healthy.

Like its exterior, the inside of the house was miserable and decrepit. It made Asuna a little frightened and sick, but she kept those feelings from showing. The woman invited them to sit on a couple of cushions she'd placed on the rotting wood floor in an attempt at hospitality, then sat down facing them.

Morisaki introduced himself. "My name is Ryuuji Morisaki. I lost my wife ten years ago. I've come from the surface in order to resurrect her."

"...!"

Why hadn't Morisaki lied?

Maybe he was trying to demonstrate his sincerity to the woman. In fact, if he hadn't lied to the villager, it might have caused an uproar, but he'd decided that wouldn't be the case with this woman.

"You're...a Topsider?"

"Yes."

"As I told you before, there is no one who has resurrected the dead here."

Morisaki started to say something, but the woman cut him off.

"However, there is someone who was resurrected by her lover."

Morisaki gasped.

For a moment, Asuna wasn't sure she'd understood.

"Are you familiar with the price of a resurrection?"

"...A price?"

The woman nodded. "I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is Nami. My lover's name was Eve. It's been five years since I died."

It was very odd to hear a dead person speak, Morisaki thought. An experience like this wasn't anywhere near possible on the surface.

"What is the price you mentioned?" he asked.

The woman lowered her eyes for a little while. "The god who governs death would never spare people for nothing. Doing so would release humans from

death itself and obstruct the great flow of life.”

“Hmm.”

That was—

That’s probably true, Asuna thought.

If nobody ever died, the world would be overrun.

The conversation Morisaki and Nami were having was a little more complicated than that, but Asuna was in sixth grade—this was a level she understood.

“Consequently, a heavy price is required to escape death. Long ago—” Nami paused for a moment. “Long ago, before Agartha was cut off from the surface by the clones, many Topsiders came here.”

“In search of Agartha’s knowledge and wealth,” Morisaki continued, picking up where Nami had left off. “An old man in Amaurot told me about it.”

He was hurrying the conversation along, eager to get to the main topic. However, Nami spoke slowly, as if she felt she needed to tell him this part as well.

“One of the great powers that Topsiders sought from Agartha was immortality. There was a heavy price for that as well, and so no one obtained it—or almost no one. There were a handful of exceptions.”

“Exceptions— You mean there’s someone who gained immortality?!”

Morisaki sounded startled. Nami nodded.

“Don’t you have tales about it on the surface? Legends of great individuals who were believed to be dead but were actually alive?”

Asuna reflected on that.

The legend that came to mind immediately was the one about Minamoto-no-Yoshitsune. She thought it might have been true of Himiko as well. Those were the only ones Asuna could come up with, but Morisaki nodded. “True, there are multiple examples. There are plenty in my home country alone—and countless more if you look at the rest of the world.”

“I couldn’t say whether the subjects of all those legends truly gained immortality. However, there are some who have paid an enormous price for this gift,” Nami said.

Morisaki sounded a little irritated. “You keep telling me about this price, but you still haven’t explained what it is. What are you required to pay?”

“It varies depending on the time, the situation, and the individual,” Nami said. She looked rather sad.

For just a moment, Morisaki seemed to hesitate—but he eventually chose to ask. “Is that why Eve isn’t here?”

Slowly, Nami nodded.

“The price for bringing me back was Eve. A life for a life.”

What a cruel thing that was, Asuna thought. It reminded her of the O. Henry short story, *The Gift of the Magi*. Of course, that was a heartwarming story, while this was cruel and heart-wrenching.

“It was a sacrifice for nothing. What meaning could I find in this world alone? —I only...

“I only wanted the one I loved to live on.”

*

Morisaki and Asuna had returned to the boat, and neither of them had said a word since then.

Finally, Asuna quietly asked. “Is resurrecting people really the right thing to do?”

“.....”

Morisaki didn’t answer.

Softly, she went on.

“We don’t know if the person who died even wants to come back.”

“That...”

As Morisaki spoke, he began to row.

“...is something we can't know unless we bring them back.”

CHAPTER TEN

Shin woke to the sound of sobs echoing through the house.

By now, he was able to get up. His limbs still felt a little heavy, but he climbed out of bed and went in search of the crying.

The source was Manna, and the old man was looking after her.

Mimi's still body was curled in her hands.

She died? Shin thought.

If Asuna found out, she would be so upset.

Peacefully, gently, the old man spoke.

"Her role in this world has ended, and the time for her journey to the next world has come. Weep freely for her. —For the other young lady, too."

After they'd waited for Manna to stop crying, the old man took her and Shin to a plain outside the village. The vast landscape seemed to roll on forever. The elder pointed to a solitary stone pedestal, and Manna ran over and gently laid Mimi's body on it.

"It should be here before long," the man said.

A little time passed, and then—

"That's...a Quetzal Coatl!" Shin cried.

Slowly, from the horizon, a Quetzal Coatl was walking toward them. It was flesh-colored and shaped like a human, but it was several times larger. Its body was marked with the geometric patterns unique to its kind.

"It's ancient..." Shin murmured, astonished, but the Quetzal Coatl paid him no heed. Reaching the pedestal, it took Mimi's corpse into its hands— And put it into its mouth.

The old man spoke solemnly. “In this way, lives become part of something greater.”

“...Do you think Asuna will be able to see it that way?” Shin said. “She lost someone who meant a lot to her.”

No ordinary Agarthan would have said such a thing.

“Elder, Agarthan knows too well how fleeting and insignificant lives are in the mortal world. Isn’t that exactly why it’s falling into ruin?”

The old man’s eyes widened slightly, but his smile soon returned.

“Your inexperience reminds me of that Topsider fellow,” he said.

Me? How am I like the Arch Angel?

But even Shin knew that no one who’d spent their life in Agarthan would ever have asked the question he’d asked. Those Topsiders had rubbed off on him.

“...!”

Shin was speechless—

And just then, it happened.

“That’s...!”

The three men in tunics who’d met Morisaki and Asuna at the village gate were riding away at a gallop—and Shin had seen the weapons at their waists.

“They’re carrying longbarrels!”

The old man shook his head wearily. “So they’re planning to stop the Topsiders by any means necessary.” Then he glanced at Shin. “It’s the same duty you were given.”

He was right.

He had to stop the Topsiders, even if it meant killing them. He had to keep them from intruding on the heart of Agarthan.

“.....—!”

Shin ran. He dashed back to the old man’s house, quickly found his own horse in the stable, and leaped onto its back. Just as he was about to ride off— “What

do you intend to do?” the old man called to him.

The answer he should have given—*Stopping the Topsiders is my duty, so I’ll be the one who does it!*—didn’t even occur to him.

What did he want to do? What would be the best move? What should he do?

Shin couldn’t answer any of those questions; he just shook his head. “I don’t know! ...But!”

With a yell, he spurred his horse into a gallop with only one thought on his mind.

He couldn’t leave Asuna on her own. He had to save her.

Shin looked back and shouted to the old man. “I swear I’ll repay this debt! —Yah!”

With a sharp yell, he tightened the reins, and the horse broke into a gallop with everything it had.

*

Before long, the river narrowed, then ended in a lake with a rocky shore.

Abandoning the boat on the rocks, Morisaki and Asuna began to climb the rocky slope.

“It’s on the other side of this ridge,” Morisaki said to Asuna over his shoulder.

Then we’re almost there, she thought.

Their travels would be over soon. They had nearly reached the end of this painful journey.

...So why was she so unhappy?

“Let’s hurry, before the Izoku come out.”

As Morisaki spoke—

Completely by accident, Asuna noticed something. “.....”

“What is it?” Morisaki’s voice drowned it out for a moment, but just now, she was sure she’d heard— “Can you hear that?”

Morisaki looked around. All he could hear was the wind.

—No.

It wasn't a sound he heard often, but he recognized it.

Hoofbeats, drawing nearer. They were already unexpectedly close.

The rocky ground rose and dipped sharply, so he'd been late in noticing their approach. Even if he'd noticed it earlier, there was little he could have done.

The men who'd met Morisaki and Asuna at Amaurot appeared on horseback, and it was obvious they weren't here on a peaceful errand. They were armed.

Whatever happened, they had to press on. "Asuna, run!" Morisaki urged, breaking into a run himself.

Hastily, they climbed the slope.

Without dismounting, one of the men drew the longbarreled gun from his waist and fired.

Luckily, the bullet only struck the ground, shattering rock. It might have been intended as a warning shot.

Morisaki pulled Asuna into the shadow of a nearby boulder.

What should they do?

Asuna had no idea, but as she watched, Morisaki drew his handgun from his jacket.

"Stay down. This won't take long," he said, then opened fire.

The bullets flew back and forth; neither of them scored a direct hit on the other, but it was close.

"Mr. Morisaki!"

He knew what she wanted to say—that they shouldn't kill anyone.

"They're planning to kill us!" he snapped back at her and got ready to fire his next round.

Suddenly, a short sword streaked in and knocked the gun from his hands.

The attack had come from a completely unexpected direction. Morisaki

hadn't been able to avoid it, but he hadn't been hurt, either. It was a perfect throw, aimed directly at his gun.

"What?!" Morisaki shouted, and Asuna looked over, startled— "Hah!"
—just as Shin rode up on horseback.

Without slowing his galloping horse, Shin jumped off, retrieved his short sword, held it at the ready, and faced the soldiers of Amaurot, shielding Morisaki and Asuna.

"Shin!"

"Stay out of this!"

Asuna and Morisaki both yelled, but Shin responded in a firm voice.

"Don't kill anyone! You'll just fuel Agarth's hatred!"

Was Shin trying to save them? And after he said he should have killed the Topsiders earlier, too...

The thought made Asuna very, very happy.

The Amaurot soldiers dismounted. "Villager of Canaan. Why are you protecting Topsiders?"

"These two saved a girl from your village! You owe them a debt!"

"Letting Topsiders do as they please will only invite disaster. We cannot let the roots of trouble grow!"

Shouting, the man leveled his longbarrel—

And Shin charged directly at him.

Stepping to the side to avoid being shot, he closed the distance between them in a rush, knocking the gun away with his short sword. The man kicked Shin, putting a little distance between them again, then drew his own sword for a powerful slash. Shin caught it on his short sword and deflected it.

One clash, two, three—

The two seemed evenly matched at first, but gradually, the older combatant began to gain the upper hand. The man's sword was heavy, while Shin's short

sword was light.

“Shin!” Asuna nearly shouted, but Morisaki stopped her with a hand.

“I’m repaying my debt!” Shin yelled. “Go!” He gave one more attack, and that stroke pushed the man’s sword back. When it came to weight, Shin was at a disadvantage, but his speed added enough power to his blows to give him a chance. He definitely wasn’t fighting a losing battle—at least, as far as the Topsiders could tell.

In any case, Morisaki thought, they should listen to him. Pulling Asuna by the hand, he gave her a brave smile, then began climbing the rocks.

Four clashes, five, six—

Shin’s short sword and the man’s blade struck again and again.

Neither of them yielded a single step.

Beside them, one of the men who’d been waiting tried to slip past.

Stopping the man’s sword with his own blade, Shin used that momentum to jump into the path of the man who was trying to get by. That man had drawn his sword and obviously intended to fight, but Shin’s roundhouse kick connected solidly with his chin. The man went down, and Shin turned back, resuming his earlier fight.

The man grinned. “Formidable.”

“Let me take care of him.”

The last man dismounted, drawing his sword.

Taking a few breaths to steady himself, Shin closed in on the second man.

✱

With that battle behind them, Morisaki and Asuna had reached the top of the ridge.

Under the sunset sky, Asuna panted, shoulders heaving.

“It’s Finis Terra,” said Morisaki. “The end of this world.”

Before them was a huge, vast, enormous pit that extended all the way to the distant horizon.

Morisaki started to go down toward its edge. “Hurry. Let’s make sure his efforts don’t go to waste.”

Asuna followed Morisaki, but this was a sheer cliff. Even when she looked straight down, she couldn’t see the bottom. It was just a precipice that went on and on forever.

It was despair made visible.

We’ll never climb down this, Asuna thought. However, Morisaki removed his pack. “Make yourself as light as you can,” he said, as if this were hardly anything at all. “We’re climbing down.”

Timidly, Asuna peeked into the pit.

Much later, she would remember that view and wonder if it was possible for a professional rock climber to scale such a rock face.

At the time, however, all she felt was the pure emotion at the base of life—fear.

Her legs gave out on her, and she sank down on the spot, unable to stand.

“...I can’t. Let’s find some other place to—”

Morisaki flatly cut her off. “We don’t have that kind of time. Once the sun sets, the Izoku will emerge. Let’s go.”

“—”

Setting a hand on the rock wall, Morisaki carefully started to descend.

Hastily, Asuna set down her pack.

“Mr. Morisaki!”

He was working his way down the wall.

Asuna tried to follow him, but a wind that blew up from the bottom of the pit nearly sent her over the edge, and— “Asuna!”

At the last moment, Morisaki saved her.

The two of them were back at the top of the cliff.

Asuna's whole body felt weak; she was on the ground, on her hands and knees.

Tears spilled out, and she couldn't stop them.

It might have been the first time in her life that she'd ever felt so powerless.

How completely pathetic, she thought.

She'd traveled this far, the goal was right in front of her, and yet she couldn't cross the finish line. It was mortifying, but the impossible was impossible. She couldn't do it.

"Asuna," Morisaki called to her.

"....."

Asuna looked up, tears streaming down her face.

"Listen to me," he said gently. "You crossed the Interstitial Sea, and traveled, and came all this way into the depths of the earth. I know you'll be able to beat this cliff as well. Why did you come to Agartha?"

His eyes were gentle as well.

Like a father looking at his daughter.

However, Asuna shook her head.

It was understandable. Even a full-grown adult would hesitate at a cliff like this—if they didn't have the good sense to avoid it altogether. It wasn't a precipice a girl of eleven could take on.

"—I can't do it. I just can't."

It was the first time Asuna had given up during that journey.

✱

Shin and the man were still fighting.

However, there were two differences between them that would decide the battle.

...Or possibly only one.

All else aside, Shin was still eleven, and the man from Amaurot had lived about three times as long.

In both strength and experience, Shin was at a distinct disadvantage. As soon as he made a sloppy strike, the man seized on the opening it created.

He swung his fist, catching Shin squarely on the cheek and sending him flying. The short sword slipped out of his hands, and Shin rolled across the ground and lay there like an old rag.

“Enough of this. Soon you won’t have a home in Agartha.” The man pointed his sword at him.

Even so, Shin got back up. “I never—”

Then he threw a punch of his own.

“—belonged here anyway!”

The man caught his fist.

He didn’t swing his sword again but instead responded with another punch. Shin managed to twist away, then unleashed a second, third, and fourth punch of his own. The man fielded, dodged, and caught them.

✱

“All right,” Morisaki said as Asuna dissolved into tears. “I’ll go alone. Lend me the clavis. In exchange, you take this.”

The object he handed her...

...was the gun.

“Travel upriver, back to the old man. When night comes, go into the water to escape the Izoku.”

Then he said one last thing. If nothing else, he had to tell her this.

“Asuna, I want you to live.

“It may be selfish of me, but if you can, remember that.”

Then he smiled.

For Asuna, it was the first time she’d seen him look so kind.

I have to say something.

The thought was there, but she couldn’t put it into words.

“Oh...”

Morisaki said nothing more.

Turning away from Asuna, he confronted the great pit of Finis Terra.

*

Shin took a blow to the cheek, and while he was off-balance, the man gave him a kick that sent him rolling across the ground.

This time, the boy didn’t have the strength to stand. He couldn’t even resist the blade pressed to his neck.

He might kill me, Shin thought.

Then it happened.

“_____”

He heard the breath of the clavis—he knew where it was.

It was something he’d never done before; that skill had been a wall he couldn’t cross.

But just now, he’d managed it easily.

Apparently, the men had sensed it as well.

“The clavis has disappeared into Finis Terra. We can pursue it no farther. Fighting is pointless.” With that, the man sheathed his sword. “But the Topsiders will never reach the foot of the precipice alive.” He turned away from Shin. “Boy,” he said, mounting his horse. “You side with neither Agarthia nor the surface. From now on, there will be no place for you to rest.” Slowly, he set off. “You have chosen a life of endless wandering and regret for the rest of your

days.”

Then the men were gone.

After some time, Shin finally staggered to his feet and walked over to his beloved steed.

“I’m sorry. I drove you too hard to get here. Can you stand?” he asked.

Quietly, the horse stood, too.

...Now, then.

“Where should I go now...?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The sun was setting.

Asuna simply sat where she was. The gun Morisaki had left was still on the ground at her feet. The feeling of helplessness overwhelmed everything else, and she couldn't think.

Only the quiet sound of the wind quietly kept the world from fading away entirely, and before long, night had fallen.

She hadn't forgotten.

But she had finally noticed.

The Izoku had begun to poke their heads out of the ground.

With a shriek, Asuna grabbed the gun and ran.

The sun hadn't set completely yet, and she managed to make it out into the light. She hastened down the ridge, toward the lake.

She had to get to the water—that was the one thought in her mind as she ran.

When she reached the river, she stumbled in the mud and nearly fell, then raised her head. A shudder ran through her.

She was surrounded by Izoku. Their red eyes were everywhere, in a seemingly endless sea.

Asuna began running upriver for dear life.

Onward, onward.

The horde of Izoku matched her, running along the riverbanks.

Forward, forward.

When Asuna got winded and stopped, the Izoku stopped as well.

She had to get upriver.

She walked and walked and walked—

Asuna.

Shun's voice rose again in her mind.

I'll give you a blessing.

That night, Asuna had asked her mother about it.

"Mom? What's a blessing?"

Her mother had looked perplexed. "A blessing?" she'd echoed.

Asuna kept quiet about the kiss. "...Like if you said you were going to bless someone."

"Did someone say that to you?"

Asuna's mother might have known that a kiss on the forehead was a gesture of blessing, and she may even have guessed that someone had kissed Asuna there.

This thought didn't occur to Asuna, however.

"...Yes." She nodded.

Her mother had smiled.

"It means they're glad you were born. I am, too."

Countless thoughts rose inside Asuna.

Memories with her mother.

Memories at school.

Memories with Shun.

Memories with Morisaki.

...And memories with Shin.

"Asuna."

She felt as if she'd heard Shun's voice.

"Why did you come to Agarthia?"

Why did I come to Agarthia?

When she arrived at that question, one she'd never truly considered—Asuna finally realized it.

"—Oh," she murmured, sinking to her knees.

It was a simple, easy, incredibly plain answer.

"I was just lonely."

That was all it had been. That was why she'd come to Agarthia.

Just then, she heard uncanny breathing by her ear and came back to herself with a jolt.

It was an Izoku.

"—!"

She'd been careless.

Maybe she'd been lost in thought, or maybe she'd been concentrating solely on walking.

But the water had receded—and she'd strayed from the river.

Asuna finally noticed the danger.

"When did I—?!"

The Izoku drew closer.

And closer.

They were innumerable.

".....!"

Asuna snatched up a wooden stick and struck at the nearest Izoku with it. The stick snapped.

The Izoku didn't even seem to notice. It grabbed Asuna by the neck, lifting her off the ground.

She couldn't breathe.

As her consciousness dimmed, she remembered the gun in her hand.

She fired. Then fired again, and again, and then three more shots, one after another.

She'd emptied the gun, and not one of the bullets had struck its mark.

The strength left Asuna's hands, and the gun slipped from her fingers.

"Un ean"

The Izoku's voice was eerie.

"Uncl n"

Its mouth gaped open, baring its fangs.

Asuna waited for the end.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Back then, Shun had been Shin's whole world.

"Shun? I'm coming in, okay?"

The house where they lived had been left to them by their teacher, and there was a room they called the Topside room in a corner of the second floor. Their teacher had conducted his research about the surface there.

Shun was particularly fond of that room, and when he didn't have a duty to perform, he spent most of his time there.

"Oh, Shin. I was just wishing I had something to drink."

"Glad to hear it, but..." Shin handed the tea he'd made to Shun, who was reading a book. "When I see you taking medicine, it does make me worry."

"Oh—I'm sorry."

There was a bag of powdered medicine by Shun's hand.

"Hey, Shin. This says they can cure diseases on the surface."

"...They cure them?"

"Right. They call this kind of medicine symptomatic treatment up there. Lots of the time, it's just a temporary stopgap." Shun washed the medicine down with his tea. "Ahhh. You make excellent tea, Shin."

"I'd be happier to hear it if you weren't using it to take medicine."

The compliment didn't make him feel bad, though—just faintly warm.

"Shin," Shun said. "If I went to the surface, do you think they'd be able to cure my illness?"

"That doesn't even—!" Shin raised his voice. "If you went to the surface now, they say you wouldn't even last a few days, remember?! Shun, please, just—"

At least spend the time you have left with me.

Those words were still in Shin's heart, forever unspoken.

✱

Shin had remembered that moment, although he wasn't quite sure why.

He was beside his horse, gazing at the sky.

Then he thought about what the soldier from Amaurot had said to him a little earlier.

"You side with neither Agarthia nor the surface. From now on, there will be no place for you to rest."

Shin had lost that ages ago. To him, the only "place where he could rest" had been beside Shun.

"You have chosen a life of endless wandering and regret for the rest of your days."

"....."

Softly, Shin closed his eyes—

"—!"

—and then he jumped to his feet.

Before, he hadn't been able to see it—but somewhere along the way, he'd learned how. Just like Shun.

He could sense her presence now, even when she was far away.

"It can't be!" Shin leaped onto his horse.

Run.

If he did still have a place where he could rest...

It was—

"Asunaaaaaaaaaa!"

Asuna had seen this before.

Shin leaped out of the sky and slashed through the arms of the Izoku that was holding her by the neck.

Released from its grip, she crumpled to the ground.

As she coughed and choked, Shin guarded her, holding the Izoku at bay for a while, but then— He noticed.

“Dawn’s breaking.”

At Shin’s words...

...sunlight spilled over from the eastern sky.

When the light struck the Izoku, it seemed to burn them. Frantically, they slipped back into the ground— And then only Shin and Asuna were left.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Asuna.”

Shin held out a hand to her as she sat weakly on the ground.

Taking his hand, she got to her feet. “Shin, thank you for saving me.”

She was happy from the bottom of her heart—her joy was at least twice as great as the hurt she’d felt when he’d told her he should have killed her. No, even greater than that.

“I never thanked you properly, did I?” she asked.

Shin averted his gaze slightly, seeming embarrassed. “My body just moves on its own. Before I can think. I didn’t *plan* to save you.”

“.....” Asuna gazed at Shin steadily.

“—Wh-what?”

He was kind of cute when he was flustered, she thought. “The color of your eyes isn’t quite the same as Shun’s, is it?”

“Nope. He was taller, too, and the color of his hair was a little different.”

Asuna smiled. “You’re right. Now that I’m paying attention, you’re still just a kid.”

“S-so are you.”

After Shin’s retort, Asuna paused briefly. “You really weren’t Shun, were

you?”

She wasn't looking for confirmation. She just said it.

“You're still saying that—”

Shin started to speak, but then he swallowed the words.

Asuna was crying. She didn't even try to wipe away the tears that trickled down her cheeks.

“Because, I mean...”

Shin remembered what the old man had said:

“...Lives become part of something greater.”

“Weep freely for them.”

“.....”

Shin watched Asuna sob for a little while, and then— “Don't cry!” he said, his voice rising.

Then he crumpled to his knees.

Tears spilled from his eyes.

“Shun...”

And then, for a while, the two of them cried right out loud.

It may have been the first time either of them had really accepted Shun's death.

✱

Morisaki's feet sank into water, and he set them down firmly. He was no longer on the cliff.

He took a deep breath.

“Did I...make it?”

Suddenly, his strength drained out of him, and he collapsed. That climb would

have been impossible for most.

His entire body was drenched in the water, even his face— And then he sat up.

“Vita-aqua, hmm? ...It feels as if my strength’s returned.”

He looked around.

He was in a strange place, with enormous crystals growing around him.

“A Quetzal Coatl graveyard, huh...?”

He began to walk.

Before long, Morisaki reached a black sphere that floated in empty space. He remembered the texts he’d read in the old man’s library.

“So this...is the Gate of Life and Death.”

He touched the black sphere—or he tried to.

Instead, his arm was sucked right into it.

“.....”

Morisaki followed it in.

Inside, he found a sky filled with stars overhead. A sky that wasn’t supposed to exist in Agartha.

A grassy plain rolled away endlessly, in all directions.

Slowly, Morisaki set out across it.

Up ahead, there was a stone pedestal, and he placed the clavis fragment on top.

For a little while, nothing happened.

However, at length...the clavis abruptly began to glow, as well as the fragment.

At the same moment, a shadow appeared overhead—

“Shakuna Vimana!”

The ship descended slowly, and as it approached, its shape transformed into

something grotesque, like a giant on its hands and knees.

It landed heavily...

...and countless eyes opened all over its body.

“So this is the god of Agarthā.”

As Morisaki watched, the eyes winked and blinked, independently of the others. He heard its voice in his mind.

“State my wish...?” Morisaki murmured.

He clenched his fists, closed his eyes, and exhaled. Finally, the time had come.

“It’s been ten years...”

A whirlwind of memories passed through his heart.

“I’ve never forgotten you, not for a moment. I did try to get over your death once. But...” Morisaki shook his head. “I couldn’t do it. I can’t find any meaning in a world without you.”

Then he made his wish—with all the fervor in his heart.

“Lisa! Return to me!”

In the next instant, the clavis gave off a brilliant light, and a glowing rift opened in the air in front of the god.

Red tendrils of light stretched from the rift, coiling in front of Morisaki.

Before long, they formed a vague human figure. Gradually, little by little, it took form.

And what appeared was...

...the shape of his dear, beloved...

Lisa.

“Lisa? Is that you...?”

He tried to touch her.

But she was only liquid—Vita-aqua, in the shape of a person.

“Why—?” Morisaki murmured.

In front of him, once again, the myriad eyes blinked, and the voice of the god echoed in his mind.

“Provide a living vessel to house the soul?” he repeated.

In that moment, a dark internal struggle began inside Morisaki.

*

After the children had cried themselves out, they got to their feet, looked at each other, and then— At the solemn sound of a bell, they both looked up.

Above them was the ship of the gods, gliding through the sky.

“That’s—”

“*Shakuna Vimana!* It’s heading for the Gate of Life and Death!”

“Then Mr. Morisaki...”

“Did the Arch Angel make it?! *Vimana* is a ship that carries lives away!”

A ship that carried lives away...?

Ridiculous. It couldn’t be.

Morisaki had said it was a ship the gods traveled on.

And yet—*Shakuna Vimana* descended into *Finis Terra*, where Morisaki was. It disappeared as they watched, making for the far side of the great pit.

“*Finis Terra*... I thought I’d gotten farther away. I must have been running in circles in the dark,” Asuna said.

And then Shin noticed something. “*Quetzal Coatl.*”

A lone *Quetzal Coatl* was walking toward them.

It was shaped like a human but was very large, flesh-colored, and ragged.

Shin recognized it—it was the *Quetzal Coatl* that had made Mimi part of itself.

“Asuna, that *Quetzal Coatl* is—,” he started. Then he hesitated and restarted his sentence. “I think it’s probably come here to die.”

The *Quetzal Coatl* began to sing.

The song was lovely and otherworldly, a mixture of sadness and joy.

“Before a Quetzal Coatl dies, it pours all its memories into a song and leaves it behind. The song changes shape and travels through everything. It’s transmitted through the vibrations in the air, and it becomes a part of us before we even realize. It’s how they’re remembered forever, somewhere in the world.”

A song.

She remembered the song she’d heard before, the one that had begun this journey.

“What I heard back then was...”

Maybe..., Asuna thought. Maybe it was a song Shun sang, just like this.

“Shin, I have to go to Mr. Morisaki.”

“But that cliff—”

“The Quetzal Coatl says it will take us!”

It was a curious thing, but Asuna felt as if she understood what the creature was saying.

Shin believed it.

After all, Mimi was a part of this Quetzal Coatl.

When the two of them stood in front of the creature, side by side, it opened its mouth wide and swallowed them.

There was no fear.

Asuna wouldn’t have identified the feeling as a sort of return to the womb, but she did feel a pleasant sense of relief, like coming home to her mother’s arms.

Then the Quetzal Coatl stood on the brink of Finis Terra and slowly leaned in, tipping over the edge.

It fell, headfirst, and when it had descended a vast distance, it plunged into a cascade of Vita-aqua. As it was swept along, its body melted into the torrent...

And Asuna and Shin, holding hands, washed over the waterfall.

*

At last, they fell into the basin, then crossed a pool of Vita-aqua—the Quetzal Coatl graveyard—and found themselves in front of the black sphere.

Shin and Asuna exchanged looks, then nodded at the same time.

Let's go.

They walked toward the sphere.

Like Morisaki, they were drawn into it...

...and arrived on the starry plain.

"It's the night sky..." Asuna said.

"So these are stars," said Shin.

"Asuna?" Morisaki gave a sigh.

There was something in front of him—something on all fours with too many eyes to count.

"Asuna... I hoped you wouldn't come."

He was crying—Asuna would never forget that.

An intense light flared from the rift in space.

The light pierced Asuna...

...and she collapsed, like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

"Asuna!" Shin ran to her, supporting her. "Asuna...!"

Vita-aqua was seeping from her body.

He tried to wipe it away over and over, but it kept spilling out until finally she was completely enveloped in it.

"You called a dead soul into her body!" Shin felt his hair stand on end with rage. "Arch Angel! Did you choose this?!"

Morisaki didn't answer. He simply walked toward the two of them at an

unhurried pace.

“Asuna! Don’t surrender your heart! You won’t be able to come back!”

The Vita-aqua was shining.

“Asuna! Asunaaa!” As Shin screamed, Asuna slowly sat up in his arms.

Then—

“It’s cold...” She wrapped her arms around herself. “Where are you... Honey?”

Morisaki gasped. “Lisa!”

As he broke into a run, the eyes of *Shakuna Vimana* moved again, and Morisaki’s head snapped backward.

His right eye was completely blinded, and blood trickled from his left.

The music box fell from Morisaki’s hand, and as he staggered forward, it was crushed under his foot.

Morisaki turned back, looking up at the *Shakuna Vimana*.

“So the girl wasn’t enough?!” Had he needed to pay more?

But “Asuna” was the one who responded. “Honey...?”

“Asuna!” Shin shouted, but she didn’t seem to hear.

Asuna went on quietly. The voice was too calm, too gentle to be her own. “Honey, are you there?”

“Asuna, snap out of it!” Shin called to her, but she didn’t respond. He lowered her to the ground, then ran at Morisaki.

Slowly, Morisaki walked toward Asuna—toward Lisa.

“Arch Angel! Change Asuna back!” Shin shouted—and that was when he noticed. “Your eyes. You—”

“It’s too late. I’ve paid my dues.” Morisaki walked past the boy. “Lisa... I’m here.” His vision was red-tinged and hazy. Even so, he could see the dear figure of the woman he loved.

Her slim arms reached out, and she touched Morisaki’s cheeks. “Honey... What’s the matter? You look older.”

Morisaki couldn't fight back his tears, and they spilled down his cheeks.

He clasped her slender hands in his own rough ones. "I'm sorry, Lisa."

Behind the two of them, Shin was still speaking quietly. "Asuna...don't." Then he looked around...and his eyes landed on the brilliantly shining clavis.

"...There!"

Shin ran over to it...

...took his short sword...

...the blade his brother had given him...

...and slashed at the clavis.

The crystal repelled the blade easily, and an invisible force knocked Shin flying.

But he attacked again.

He stabbed it.

Over.

And over.

An invisible wall rebuffed every attack.

But he wouldn't give up...

"Asuna! Asuna!"

Suddenly, Lisa glanced at Shin.

"Honey... I know him. How strange; my heart..."

Putting his hands on her shoulders, Morisaki smiled at her gently. "Lisa, you stay here." Then, taking a knife from his pocket, he turned around. "I'll be back soon."

He started toward Shin.

"Asuna!" Shin was still attacking the clavis, again and again. "Asuna! Asunaaa!"

The tip of the blade finally chipped.

Even then, Shin attacked again and again with the sword his brother had given him— And then he felt a blade against his neck.

“Enough. Lisa’s done nothing wrong.”

Breathing hard, shoulders heaving, Shin shook Morisaki off.

“What matters is the people who are still alive!”

As he screamed, he stabbed the clavis one last time.

There was a blinding flash of light.

*

Just then, Asuna felt as if someone had called her, and she turned.

She was in a quiet room somewhere, sitting at a table. Shun was in the chair across from her, smiling.

“Shin’s calling me...,” she murmured.

Mimi leaped onto Asuna’s shoulder, circled her neck once, then jumped onto the table, where she sat down primly in front of Shun.

“You’re leaving now, aren’t you, Asuna?” Shun said mildly.

Asuna nodded.

“Uh-huh. Good-bye.”

*

Shin’s sword finally shattered the clavis into pieces.

“I”

Morisaki whipped around to look at Lisa as she staggered back.

“—Lisa!” Running to her, Morisaki caught her, and she crumpled onto his lap.
“Lisa!”

She reached out, touching his cheeks. “I’m sorry, honey.”

Even though she’d done nothing to apologize for.

“I couldn’t protect you.”

Vita-aqua flooded from her body.

“Lisa! Don’t go! Lisa!”

But the liquid didn’t stop until it had covered her from head to toe.

“I love you! I love you! —I loved you!” he cried.

Lisa gave a troubled smile. Then, finally...

“I’m so glad.”

...with those words as her last, she closed her eyes.

The next moment, the Vita-aqua burst...

...and all that was left was Asuna’s body.

As Morisaki broke down and sobbed, behind him, *Shakuna Vimana* transformed back into a ship.

Shin let out a long sigh.

His legs gave out, and he dropped to his knees, raking his fingers through his hair.

“Kill me,” Morisaki rasped tearfully. “Please, kill me.”

However, Shin shook his head. “My brother spoke to me.”

Had he heard because they were inside the Gate of Life and Death?

“He said to embrace loss—to keep on living.”

The sky had turned a clear blue, and *Shakuna Vimana* was flying away, between the clouds.

“That is the curse of being human.”

As Morisaki’s tears fell on her cheeks, Asuna slowly opened her eyes.

“But I’m sure...”

As Shin spoke behind her, Asuna gently hugged Morisaki.

“...it’s a blessing as well.”

As he watched them, Shin spoke to her.

“Asuna... Thank you for coming into my life.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The three of them were back at the edge of the Interstitial Sea.

By the spring of Vita-aqua, Morisaki, Shin, and Asuna faced one another.

“So, Arch Angel. What do you plan to do now?” Shin asked.

Morisaki quietly shook his head. “Don’t call me that anymore. I betrayed the Arch Angels. There’s no place for me on the surface anymore.”

“Mr. Morisaki...does that mean...?” Asuna began, and Morisaki nodded.

“I’ll stay in Agartha. I haven’t given up yet. Somewhere down here, there may be another way to bring Lisa back to life. And if so, I intend to find it.”

Neither Asuna nor Shin could say anything at the firm determination in his words. No matter what price was demanded of Morisaki next time, he probably meant to pay it. —Or maybe he meant to challenge the curse and blessing that humans have been given that Shin had spoken of.

“What about you, Shin?” Asuna asked.

“I’ll...” Shin hesitated. “I can’t return to the village of Canaan. It would sour our relations with Amaurot.”

“Then...,” Asuna started—but she broke off.

The atmosphere on the surface was poison to Agarthans; she couldn’t invite Shin to come with her.

He nodded. “I think I’ll go with the Arch An— With Morisaki. I don’t know if resurrecting the dead is right or not, but I may find the answer somewhere along the way.”

“That’s...true.” Asuna turned to the pool of Vita-aqua. “All right—”

Should she say good-bye? Take care? Farewell? Nothing seemed quite right.

“Let’s see each other again.”

When he heard that, Shin smiled. “Yeah. I’ll see you again, Asuna.”

“Let’s go,” Morisaki said, urging Shin along.

As she watched them leave, Asuna jumped into the pool of Vita-aqua—
...and returned to the world of the surface.

*

After that, half a year went by.

*

“Asunaaa, you’re going to be late for your graduation ceremony.”

“Coming!”

It was her very last day at Mizonofuchi Elementary.

Asuna still wasn’t quite used to her middle school blazer, which she was wearing as she ran to the front door. “Okay! I’m on my way.”

“I’ll see you there.”

Nodding back at her mother, Asuna started down the hilly road with its stone walls.

The time since she’d returned had been rough.

After all, Asuna had been in Agarthia for more than a month, and naturally, she’d been reported missing. Since Morisaki had unfortunately gone missing at the same time, the rumors that he’d run off with her were inevitable in their small town.

When Asuna returned home, her mother hadn’t scolded her. She only cried “Thank goodness!” and broke down in tears.

Asuna had been terribly ashamed.

The police had asked her about Morisaki, but she'd stubbornly insisted she didn't know anything. Even if she'd been honest about where she'd been, they wouldn't have believed her.

Afterward, Asuna thought back over what had happened in Agarthia from time to time, but—by now, she'd begun to wonder if it was all a dream.

Maybe it was simply due to the passing of the days.

...Or maybe it was because she'd grown.

"Oh, Asuna! Good morning."

"Good morning, Yuu." When she ran into her friend, Asuna smiled and greeted her. "We're finally graduating, huh?" she said, just as casually as if she were talking about the weather.

"Uh-huh... I'm afraid I might start crying."

"Don't worry about it; I'm sure I'll cry, too."

They both laughed.

The sky was blue, the wind was cool, and the beautifully clear air held the scent of early spring.

They were graduating from elementary school to middle school. For children on the edge of adolescence, it was a big milestone.

Mizonofuchi Middle School only had three classes in each year, but there were many more teachers. Up until now, one teacher had taught all their classes, but after this, they'd have different teachers for each subject. Their schoolwork would get harder, too.

It was a little bit scary, but they were also looking forward to it.

As Asuna and Yuu talked animatedly about little moments and memories

from their time in elementary school, they walked down a road under the drifting petals of the cherry blossoms.

Asuna was a little sentimental, thinking about how this was the last time they'd take this route to school at Mizonofuchi Elementary—although they'd still walk along this road to get to the middle school, too.

They walked down the familiar sloping road, through the poor excuse for a shopping street, and reached the railroad crossing.

Since then, a few more trains had started running. Before, the crossing had been open most of the time, but these days, at this hour of the morning, it was fairly often closed. Mizonofuchi had been an isolated town, but that might change. If the trains became frequent enough, people would be able to use them to commute to work or school. By the time Asuna started high school, she might be able to attend one outside Mizonofuchi.

The train went by, right in front of them.

For no particular reason, Asuna looked in the direction it had come from and glanced up at Mount Obuchi.

Come to think of it, I haven't been to my spot in quite a while, Asuna thought.

In the next moment, she gasped.

Up on the outcrop, she thought she'd glimpsed a blue light.

Could it be...?

Maybe, just maybe..., Asuna thought. She made up her mind.

When the graduation ceremony was over, for the first time in a long time, she'd go up to Mount Obuchi.

Up there, just maybe, she'd find—

AFTERWORD

Hello, how are you? This is Asahi Akisaka.

“There’s this incredible movie that was written, directed, animated, and produced by just one guy.” That was the rumor going around about *Voices of a Distant Star*, and that is how I first heard of director Makoto Shinkai.

I was still a student at the time, and I couldn’t have been more impressed. It feels as if it were only yesterday.

When I was asked if I’d write the novelization of one of Director Shinkai’s movies, I immediately said yes. However, right after I hung up the phone, I started wondering if I was up to the task. I mean, this is *the* director Shinkai...

After that, one thing led to another, and the novel version of *Children Who Chase Lost Voices* was published as this book. Now, once you read it, it will truly be complete.

And now for the usual thank-yous.

At first, I only wanted to write about Morisaki—I even initially said I wanted to make him the main character in this book. However, my supervising editors O. and T. talked me down (ha-ha), and thanks to them, I was able to breathe new life into Asuna as the protagonist of a light novel.

And needless to say, thank you to Director Makoto Shinkai, who was kind enough to tell me, “Think of it as your own book and write it any way you like.” I got to hear news about his next work, too, and I can’t even tell you how much

I'm looking forward to it.

Finally, to all the readers...

Including you, the one who's reading this right now...

Thank you very much. May life bring you blessings.

I'll be looking forward to the day when we meet again.

A lucky day in August 2012

Respectfully yours, Asahi Akisaka

This book is an expanded, corrected version of the edition published by MF Bunko J in August 2012.

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