



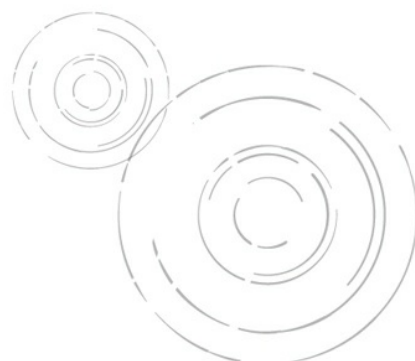
Suzume

Makoto Shinkai



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Translation by Winifred Bird

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The Place I Go in My Dreams

There's this recurring dream I have—I don't realize it's a dream when I'm in the middle of it. I'm a little girl, and I'm lost. So basically, I'm miserable and worried. But there's a mood of familiarity and reassurance, too, like I'm wrapped in my favorite sheets. Sad yet comfortable. I don't know where I am, and yet it's not strange to me. I'm in a place I shouldn't be, but I want to stay there forever. Still, for child-me, the sadness seems to be winning out, and I'm desperately trying to hold back the sobs welling up from my chest. Dry tears turn into clear grains of sand that cling to the corners of my eyes.

Overhead, the stars are gleaming. It's like someone has mistakenly cranked up the luminosity to ten times the usual, until the starry sky is absurdly bright. It's so blinding that each point of light seems to pulse with a ringing noise. Within the folds of my ears, the sound of the stars blends with the whoosh of dry wind, my own heavy breathing, and the crunch of weeds beneath my feet. This whole time, I've been walking through those weeds. Far in the distance, a range of mountains seems to encircle the world. Beyond them rises a white wall of clouds with a yellow sun perched on top. The white clouds and sun are there at the same time as all the stars. Beneath this sky in which all of time seems to

fuse together, I walk on.

Eventually, I come upon a house and peer in through the window. All the houses here are buried beneath a tangle of plants. Most of the windows are broken, and their tattered curtains whisper in the wind. Weeds grow thick inside, but oddly, the dishes, keyboards, textbooks, and other objects scattered about look brand-new.

“Mom!” I yell, but my voice comes out scratchy, like the air has been let out of it. I concentrate on my throat and try again: “Mom!” The ivy-covered walls swallow my shout like I never said a word.

I’m not sure how many houses I peer into, how much grass I walk over, how many times I call out for my mother. No one answers; no one appears. I don’t see a single animal. My shouts vanish without an echo into the weeds, the crumbling houses, the piled-up cars, the fishing boats balanced on roofs. No matter how far I walk, there is only wreckage. Tears well up again, along with overwhelming despair.

“Mom! Mom, where are you?!”

I walk along, sobbing. My breath is white. The moisture in it cools the moment it leaves my mouth, chilling the tips of my ears even more. My fingers, each with black mud packed under the nail, and my round little toes inside their Velcro shoes are so cold they hurt. Meanwhile, my throat and my heart and the back of my eyeballs feel uncomfortably hot, like they have some special disease that doesn’t affect any other part of me.

When I look up at the sky again, the sun has sunk below the clouds and the world is blanketed in a transparent lemon yellow. Overhead, the stars still shine absurdly bright. I’m crouched in the weeds, exhausted from walking and crying. As I curl up inside my down jacket, the wind blows against my back, and little by little stealing my warmth and exchanging it for helplessness. My small body grows heavier, as if it is being replaced with mud.

But it’s only just begun.

I feel like I’m watching myself from a distance as this thought occurs to me.

The climax of the dream is still coming. My body will freeze, and my heart will

grow numb with worry and loneliness. Resignation will flood through me, and I won't care anymore. But...

I hear a soft rustling from far away. Someone is walking through the field of weeds. To me, the plants felt prickly and hard. But beneath the feet of this person, they sound as soft and gentle as fresh spring buds. I lift my face from between my knees as the footsteps approach. Slowly, I stand and look over my shoulder. I blink hard, trying to clear the mist from my eyes. Past the swaying weeds, as if on the other side of a sunset-colored sheet of tissue paper, I see a human form. Wind billows her loose white dress, and golden light frames her long hair. She is a grown-up with a slender, delicate frame, and her mouth is curved gently upward like a fingernail moon at dawn.

"Suzume."

She calls my name. The moment she does, I feel as if I'm sinking into a warm bath. From each point touched by the wave of her voice—my ears, my fingers, the tip of my nose—warmth spreads through my body. The snowflakes swirling in the wind turn to pink petals dancing around us.

It's her—the person I've been looking for all this time.

"Mom," I whisper, but I'm already awake.

A Person like a Beautiful Landscape

That's the place I always go in my dreams.

It's morning, and I'm in my room. As I lie in bed, it only takes a second for me to understand where I am. The chime outside my window is tinkling. A breeze that smells of the sea gently sways the lace curtains. *Ah, it's a little damp*, I think, feeling the pillow against my cheek. The tingling lingers in my fingers and toes, a mix of loneliness and joy. Still wrapped in my sheets, wanting to be lazy just a little longer, I close my eyes, and—

"Suzume, are you up?"

I hear a voice, slightly irritated, shouting at me from downstairs. I sigh, heave myself out of bed, and yell back, "I'm up!" The ghost of my dream, there only a

moment before, vanishes completely.

* * *

“A high-pressure system will be bringing beautiful blue skies all across Kyushu!”

The weather lady on TV Miyazaki is smiling cheerfully as she swirls what appears to be a magical girl’s colorful wand over a map of Kyushu.

“Thanks for the meal,” I say, bringing my hands together before plopping a large pat of butter onto my thick slice of white bread. *She’s kind of nice*, I think, gazing at the weather lady as I spread the butter. Judging from her pale skin, she must be from up north, somewhere with lots of snow. I crunch into the bread, inhaling its toasty smell. *Delicious*. The rich butter brings out the sweet doughiness of the part under the browned surface. We always use ingredients that are a little fancy at my house. Apparently, today’s high will be twenty-eight degrees Celsius, slightly lower than yesterday, making for lovely September weather. The lady on the screen has perfect intonation, without a hint of regional accent.

“Don’t forget your lunch again,” Tamaki says from the kitchen. She speaks with a Miyazaki accent, and maybe it’s my imagination, but she sounds like she’s scolding me a little. She makes lunch for me every morning, but sometimes I forget to bring it to school. I don’t do it on purpose; I really don’t. But on days that I forget my lunch, I do feel a tiny bit freer. “You’re hopeless,” she mutters, pursing her glossy red lips as she packs food into a lunch box. Under her apron she’s wearing a sleek beige pantsuit; she’s perfectly groomed as always, from her lustrous bowl cut to the makeup that brings out her big, round eyes.

“By the way, I’ll be home kind of late tonight. Can you find yourself something for dinner?”

“You’re going on a date?!” I ask, gulping down my mouthful of fried egg. “By all means, take your time! Stay out till midnight if you like! Go have some fun for once!”

“It’s not a date—it’s overtime!” she shoots back, nipping my excitement in

the bud. “Gotta get ready for the fishing event. It’s right around the corner, so I’ve got loads to do. Hey, your lunch!”

She hands me my jumbo lunch box. It weighs a ton, as usual.

The sky is clear, just like the weather lady promised, and a few kites wheel around proudly overhead. I’m coasting down a hill next to the ocean on my bicycle, and the skirt of my school uniform flaps in and out with the wind, like it’s taking deep breaths. The sky and ocean are unbelievably blue, the plants covering the embankment are endlessly lush, and the flat line of clouds is as white as newborn lambs. It strikes me that a picture of me in my uniform riding through this scene would look amazing on social media. There I am, pedaling down the slope with the old port town sparkling in the morning sun below me. I envision the photograph: a high ponytail fluttering in the sea breeze, a pink bike, and a slender (I think?) teenage girl against the blue sky. I can imagine the comments. *Damn, I bet that’d get a lot of likes.* ...Abruptly, a corner of my heart hardens. Part of me is fed up with myself. *Look at you. Not a care in the world, gazing at the ocean and thinking about something like that.*

Sighing softly, I peel my eyes off the water, which has suddenly lost its color. I turn to face straight ahead, and—

“!”

Someone is walking up the hill. This is slightly surprising, because almost no one walks here on the outskirts of town. Adults always drive, kids ride in adults’ cars, and teenagers like me ride bikes or mopeds.

I’m almost certain it’s a man. He’s tall and thin, and his long hair and oversize shirt are blowing in the wind. I squeeze the brake to slow down a little, and he gradually approaches. He’s young, but I don’t recognize him—*a traveler, maybe?* He has on what looks like a hiking backpack. His jeans are faded, and he moves with big strides. His long, slightly wavy hair hides his face as he looks at the sea. I squeeze the brake a little tighter, and the sea breeze suddenly blows harder. His hair dances, sunlight hits his eyes, and I gasp.

“He’s gorgeous...” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them. The man’s skin is so pale it makes summer seem like a foreign concept. His profile is clear and graceful. His long lashes cast soft shadows on the cliff of his cheek.

Below his left eye is a small mole so perfect it might have been *placed there by divine will*. For some reason, these details rush toward me at high resolution, like I'm seeing them up close. My heart pounds. We pass each other at a distance of about fifty centimeters. *I, we*—my heart says. Every sound slows. *We've met somewhere before—*

"Scuse me."

His voice is low and gentle. I stop and look back at him. In that moment, the whole world is incredibly bright. He's standing right there. He looks me straight in the eye.

"You know of any ruins around here?"

"Ruins?" I'm so caught off guard I can't even remember what the word means.

"I'm looking for a door."

A door? Like a door in an abandoned house?

"...If you mean like a village where no one lives anymore, there's one in those hills over there..." I say uncertainly.

He grins. It's a beautiful smile, the kind that softly tints the air around him.

"Thanks."

He turns away from me and strides off toward the hills I pointed to. He doesn't glance back even once.

"...Huh?" I say, despite myself. A kite calls out overhead. *I mean, couldn't we have talked for a little longer?*

* * *

The railway crossing bell is ringing right above my head. My heart is still beating faster than normal as I wait for the train to pass. *Who was that guy?* I wonder as I watch the blinking red lights. Is that what it feels like to meet a celebrity or a model in person? Like they're a little too beautiful for the ordinary world, and for a while after you see them, you can't calm down? *...No, that's not right, not right at all. That guy was more like...*

A snowy landscape lit up by streetlamps. A mountain when sunrise hits its peak. A pure-white cloud, unraveled by the wind beyond your reach. He wasn't handsome so much as beautiful, like those scenes are beautiful. And I feel like he's a scene I've encountered before. Yes, it's that same peculiar nostalgia I feel in the field of weeds in my dream—

“Suuuzume!”

A hand thumps my shoulder.

“Morning!”

“Oh, hi, Aya. Morning.”

Aya must have run up to me, because she's panting and her bobbed black hair is bouncing. A two-car train passes, shaking the bar of the crossing gate and my skirt with its wind. I finally notice I'm surrounded by other kids chatting on their way to school. *“Did you see yesterday's episode?” “I'm screwed—I hardly slept at all.”* They all seem so happy.

“Hey, what's up? You look kinda flushed,” Aya says.

“What, no way? Flushed?!” I squeeze my cheeks between my palms. They're hot.

“Very. Something happen?”

Her suspicious eyes peer at me through her glasses. As I'm trying to decide what to say, the warning bell stops ringing as if signaling my time is up, and the crossing bar rises. The students start walking all at once.

“...Suzume? You okay?” Aya asks, a little worried, glancing back as I stand rooted to the spot. A person like a landscape. That feeling of déjà vu. I pick up the front wheel of my bike.

“Sorry, I forgot something at home!” I say, turning my bike away from the crossing and straddling it. As I pedal off back the way I came, I hear Aya's voice fading away: “Wait, wait, Suzume! You'll be late!” My back sweats under the strong morning sun as I stand and pedal toward the hills. A middle-aged man driving a farm truck glares at me as I ride rapidly away from my high school, dressed in my uniform. I veer off the asphalt prefectural highway and onto an

old concrete road leading into the hills. Instantly, the cries of locusts replace the crashing of waves. I leave my bike in the weeds and climb over the DO NOT ENTER barricade, then jog up the narrow, dark path that's hardly more than a wild animal trail.

...Uh-oh, I won't be making first period, I finally realize when I get to the top of the hill and stand there panting before the old hot-spring village.

There's a faint smell of sulfur in the air. I heard there was a big hot-spring resort here in the eighties and nineties. Back then, when the economy was so good you can hardly imagine it now, there were lots of people here. Families and couples and groups of friends would come all the way out to the mountains to soak in the baths and go bowling and give carrots to horses and play *Space Invaders* (whatever that was). It's hard to believe. But the traces of that lively past are still strewn around and covered with weeds: rusting vending machines and torn red lanterns, discolored hot-spring pipes and signs overrun by vines, mountains of empty cans and strangely untouched bottles of alcohol, and huge tangles of electric wires swirling overhead like some new kind of plant. There's way more stuff here than in the little village where I live. There's even more than in the center of town where my high school is.

"Hellooo, are you heeere?"

But there are no people. Eventually, the water dried up, the money dried up, and the tourists dried up. The summer sunshine is lighting up the ruins like they're some kind of special attraction, but I have to admit it's kind of creepy around here. As I walk along a stone path cracked by weeds, I call out, a little louder than necessary, "Handsome guy, where are yooou?"

I mean, what else am I going to call him? I cross a little stone bridge leading to the abandoned hotel that used to be the heart of the resort. The round concrete structure is much bigger than any of the other buildings.

"I'm coming in..."

I step into the sprawling lobby. There are multiple sofas in the rubble-strewn room, and enormous tattered curtains hang from the windows.

"Hellooo, are you in heeere?"

I proceed down the dim hallway, peering around. Despite the heat, chills are running down my spine. I might have underestimated these ruins. I shout even louder.

“Um, haven’t I met you somewhere before?”

Even as I say it, I realize how sketchy it sounds. A typical pickup line.

...Maybe I should leave. I suddenly feel stupid. And embarrassed. What was I planning to do if I did find him? If our roles were reversed, if someone I asked for directions followed me way out here, that would be a little scary. *Very* scary, in fact. Just like this place, which is really starting to freak me out.

“I’m outta here!” I shout in a purposely cheerful voice, turning on my heels. But as I do, I glimpse something that stops me.

“...A door?”

At the end of the hallway is the hotel courtyard. The skeleton of a dome arches overhead, its ceiling long crumbled away, and below is a round space big enough to run a hundred-meter dash in. Clear water has collected on the ground. In the center of the pool, a single white door is standing there all by itself. Only this door, among the scattering of bricks and sun umbrellas, seems to have received special permission to remain standing. Or maybe it’s been forbidden from crumbling. Either way, it stands there all alone.

“That guy mentioned a gate or something, didn’t he...?” I say like I’m making an excuse before walking toward it. Halfway down the low stone steps leading into the courtyard, I stop. Maybe it’s rainwater, or maybe some pipe is still working, but whatever the cause, the water on the tile floor is around fifteen centimeters deep. I wonder briefly if it’s okay to get my loafers wet before stepping into the water. The sensation of water flowing into my shoes is familiar, though the coldness of the liquid surprises me. But as I walk, I forget all of that.

For some reason, I can’t take my eyes off the white door standing in front of me. It’s old and made of wood. Vines wrap around it, and some of the paint has flaked away, revealing the brown grain of the wood. I notice it’s slightly ajar. The crack, maybe a centimeter wide, is bizarrely dark. *Why? It’s sunny out, so why is the crack so dark?* It’s really bothering me. The faint sound of wind

reaches my ears. I stretch out my hand toward the pearlescent knob and brush my fingers over it. The door creaks open.

“!”

I gasp.

Beyond the door is night.

A starry sky gleams with absurd brilliance. Below it, a lush meadow stretches to the horizon. And inside me, a murky vortex swirls into being—a mix of terror that I’ve gone crazy, confusion over whether I’m dreaming, and acknowledgment that *I should have known*. I lift my left foot out of the water and am about to walk into the meadow. As soon as I feel the bottom of my loafer crush the weeds— *Splash!* I’m stepping into water again.

“What?!”

On the other side of the door is the courtyard in midday. No meadow, no starry sky.

“Whaaat?!”

Flustered, I look around. I’m in the same abandoned hotel. I look back at the door. Inside it is a square of night cut out from the summer day.

“What...?”

I try to think, but my body springs forward despite myself. The door is right there. The starry sky is right there. I pass through—and I’m in the abandoned hotel. I turn around. One more time, I run through the door toward the pocket of night. But it’s only the hotel on the other side. I can’t get into the meadow. It won’t let me in. I retreat. My foot hits something hard that clangs like a clear bell. I look down in surprise. *...Is it one of those Jizo statues you see around town?* The head of the little stone statue is poking out of the water. It has a pointy face like a fox, with big ears and narrow slits for eyes. I stare at it, unable to resist. Then I hear a whisper of wind, like it’s talking to me. I place both my hands on the statue and lift it up. There’s resistance, like I’m uprooting something. A big bubble rises in the water. I look down at the statue in my hands. The bottom is pointed like a short staff. Was it stuck into the ground?

“It’s cold...”

Actually, it’s frozen. There’s a film of ice on the surface, which starts to melt, like my body’s warmth is chasing it away. The moisture collects into drops that plop to the ground. *Why? Why is there ice in an abandoned hotel in the summer?* I glance back at the door. The starry sky and meadow are still inside its frame. To my eyes, at least, they look real.

My heart skips a beat.

Suddenly, the stone statue feels as warm as flesh. I look down and discover I’m holding a furry animal.

“Eeeek!”

Goose bumps spread from my hands over my body, and I hurl the *thing* away from me. It splashes into the water a good distance away and runs off, sending up a storm of spray. Scurrying on all fours, the small creature disappears into a corner of the courtyard.

“What the heck?!”

W-wait, a second ago that was a stone statue!

“Th-this...this is too freaky!”

I break into a run. *This isn’t real; it’s a dream. Or maybe this kind of thing happens all the time, and everyone’s experienced it, but they never talk about it. Yes, that’s definitely it! I’ve got to get back to class ASAP and laugh this off with my friends.* That’s all I can think of as I flee back the way I came.

Things That Only We Can See

The lunch bell is ringing. I smile vaguely as people stop me in the hall on my way to class—“*Iwato, you just got here?*” “*Suzume, you look sick!*”

“...So you finally decided to join us,” Aya says, exasperated. She’s in her seat by the window, picking at her lunch.

“Fashionably late,” says Mami with a half smile. She’s sitting next to Aya, eating an egg roll.

I force myself to smile as well and sit down facing them. The noise of the classroom at lunchtime and the calls of the gulls outside reach my ears like I've just remembered them. Practically on autopilot, I pull out my lunch box and open it.

"Here it comes, the auntie special!" Aya and Mami tease.

My rice ball is decorated with nori and fish flakes to look like a cartoon sparrow, matching my name. It has a big hairdo of egg shreds, a pea for a nose, and sausage cheeks. The egg roll, mini hot dog, and fried shrimp have faces, too. Packed with love, as usual. When they ask how long it took my aunt to make it, I laugh weakly, then look up at them. I can't manage much of a smile.

"Hey, you know those ruins over in Kaminoura? The old hot-spring resort?" I ask them.

"There's an old resort there? Did you know that, Aya?" Mami asks.

"Yeah, I've heard about it. They built it in the bubble era. Back in the hills over there," Aya says. We all turn our gaze in the direction she's pointing. Beyond the faded curtain swaying in the wind, the port town looks peaceful in the afternoon sun. A cape with some hills on it reaches around the little bay. That's where I just was.

"So what about it?"

"There was a door...," I start to say, before realizing my ardent desire to turn it all into a joke has withered. It wasn't a dream. But it's not something I can tell my friends. It's too personal...

"Never mind," I say.

"Hey, no fair! You have to tell us!" they reply at the exact same time. It's so funny I finally smile for real. At the same time, I notice something. On the hill beyond their faces, a thin trail of smoke is rising.

"Is that a fire?"

"What, where?"

"Look, on that hill."

"Where?"

“Right there! Where the smoke is!”

“I can’t see it.”

“...You can’t?”

My outstretched finger goes limp.

“Do you see it?” Aya asks Mami.

“Nope. I bet someone’s burning a field or something,” Mami answers, frowning.

I look at the hill again. Wavering, dark-red smoke is rising from halfway up the hill. I can see it crystal clear against the blue sky.

“Ah!” I gasp as my phone buzzes in my skirt pocket. The same buzzing is coming from everywhere. A stress-inducing, dissonant sound blares again and again—an earthquake warning. People are beginning to shout in the classroom.

“An earthquake?”

“No way, I just felt a shake!”

Panicking, I look at my phone. The emergency notification screen says to *“cover your head and take other safety precautions.”* I look around. The fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling are starting to sway. A piece of chalk rolls off the teacher’s desk.

“There it goes!”

“I can feel it!”

“Think it’s a big one?”

Everyone is frozen, holding their breath, trying to figure out how bad it will be. The lights are swinging in wider arcs now, and the window frames are starting to creak. The floor is moving slightly. But the shaking seems to be subsiding. The warning buzzer fades, and everyone’s phones go quiet.

“...Is it over?”

“Yeah, it’s over. That wasn’t anything.”

“I was freaking out.”

“There’s been a lot of earthquakes lately.”

“I’m used to it by now.”

“You shouldn’t let your guard down.”

“Those warnings are so overdramatic.”

The relieved murmurs and receding tension in the classroom feel far away. My back is still drenched with sweat.

“Hey,” I say hoarsely.

“What?” Aya asks, looking at me. I know it’s going to be the same as before, but I can’t help asking anyway.

“Look over there.”

What looks like an enormous tail has grown from the hill on the cape. Before, I would’ve guessed it was smoke, but now it’s fatter and taller. It looks like a huge, translucent serpent, or a bundle of twisted rags, or a red current of water sucked into a tornado. It swirls lackadaisically toward the sky. My body is shivering, screaming out that this is *something bad, something really bad*.

“Suzume, you haven’t been making sense since you got here.”

“Are you feeling okay today? You’re not sick, are you?”

“...You can’t see it?” I whisper.

They’re both peering at me with concern. They can’t see it. Only I can. Big beads of sweat slide unpleasantly down my cheek.

“Suzume, wait!”

Without answering, I run out of the classroom, stumble down the stairs, fly across the schoolyard to my bike, and put in the key. I pedal as hard as I can. I ride up the slope next to the ocean, into the hills. I can see the reddish-black tail rising clearly out ahead of me. Flocks of crows and other birds are squawking as they circle the fat line rising toward the sky. But the people driving past me in their cars and the ones out fishing on the embankment aren’t looking at it. The town and its people are spending a leisurely summer afternoon just like always.

“Why doesn’t anyone—?! What *is* that thing?!”

I have to find out. *I mean, what if it's...?* I jump off my bike and run up the same narrow path I took earlier. As I run, I look at the sky. The tail is like a broad river, muddy and viscous, running across the heavens while several streams are branching off of it. A red light that reminds me of lava flickers through its length. A steady, low rumble pounds beneath my feet, like something is being dragged out of the ground.

"It can't be—," I say as I run toward the abandoned resort. My lungs are burning, but my legs keep speeding up, like something is pulling them forward. I cross the stone bridge and run through the abandoned hotel lobby and down the hallway to the courtyard.

"It can't, it can't, it can't—"

Suddenly, I notice a strange smell. It's weirdly sweet and a bit singed and a little salty like the sea, reminding me of something I smelled a long time ago. I'm approaching a window. I can see through it into the courtyard.

"Aaah!"

It's just as I feared—though I don't understand how I knew. It's the door. It's coming from the door I opened. The muddy, reddish-black current is writhing violently from the door, like it's enraged at the inadequate size of the opening.

I run down the hallway and finally reach the courtyard. Fifty meters ahead stands the white door spewing the muddy river.

"What?!"

I stare. In the shadow of the twisting current, someone is pushing the door. Trying to close it. Long hair. A tall frame. A beautiful face, like it was cut right out of the sky.

"It's him!"

The man I passed on the road this morning is urgently trying to shut the door. His strong arms steadily push it back into place; the gush narrows. The dark, rushing current is dammed.

"What are you doing?!" he yells when he sees me. I jump. "Get away from here."

Just then, the current surges explosively. The door flies open, flinging the man backward into a brick wall, and he collapses into the water along with rubble from the impact.

“No!”

I fly down the stone steps and across the shallow pool covering the courtyard to his side. He is lying limp on the ground, his back in the water.

“Are you all right?!” I ask, bending over him. He groans and tries to sit up. When I wrap my arm around his shoulders to help, I notice something.

“...!”

The water is shining. No sooner does the thought cross my mind than something resembling a golden thread rises silently from the water’s surface and stretches toward the sky as if grasped by invisible fingers.

“This is...,” the man mumbles.

Golden threads are rising from all over the water’s surface into the sky. I look up. The river that erupted from the door has split into streams that are now winding across the sky. It’s like a stem has grown from the door and blossomed into an enormous reddish-bronze flower. The golden threads look like rain falling upside down onto it. Slowly, the flower begins to collapse.

“...bad!” he finishes, wringing the word from his despair.

I imagine it. Unfortunately, I *can* imagine it. Outside the windows of my listless afternoon classroom, the enormous flower collapses slowly to the ground. But no one sees its grotesque form; no one smells the rot; no one notices the disaster pressing in from the underbelly of the world. Unbeknownst to the fishermen in their boats, or the old people casting their lines out from the shore, or the children walking around town, the flower accelerates toward the ground. Soon it will crash, along with all its ponderous weight.

At almost the same moment, my phone starts its strident wailing in my skirt pocket, and the ground beneath my feet begins to heave. A scream leaps from my mouth.

“This is an earthquake. This is an earthquake. This is an—”

I'm screaming at the robotic voice of the earthquake warning, at the violent shaking, and at the creaking and grating of the abandoned building. I cover my ears and squat where I am. The earthquake is intense. It's nearly impossible to stay standing.

"Watch out!" the man says, knocking me over. Half my face is submerged in water. A second later, there's a heavy thud, and red splatters the water in front of me. Blood?! Above my head, the man lets out a short, stifled groan. He stands up. Glancing at me, he screams "Get out of here!" and runs toward the door. Pieces of the dome's steel frame are breaking off and splashing into the water.

With a powerful roar, the man throws his whole body against the door, trying to push the muddy river back inside. I stare at him from behind in a daze and notice that the left arm of his shirt is stained red. He presses the wound with his right hand like he can't stand the pain. He's trying to push the door with his right shoulder alone. But he and the door are thrown back by the force of the river.

He hurt himself shielding me from the falling steel.

It finally dawns on me, as my phone continues to shriek "*This is an earthquake.*" The ground is still shaking violently. My right hand has been gripping the ribbon on my uniform this whole time, and I can't feel my fingers anymore. The man's left arm is hanging limply by his side, but he's still desperately pushing against the door. *This guy*— Suddenly, I want to cry. I don't know why the thought occurs to me. *Nobody's noticed, but this guy is doing something important that has to be done.* Something in my mind starts to move. Seeing him changes something in me. The earth is still shaking. I try to open my stiffened right hand. I try to let go of what it's gripping.

I start running, water flying everywhere.

I'm getting closer to him. As I run, I thrust out both hands and crash into the door full force.

"You again?!" the man shouts, looking at me in surprise. "Why?!"

"We have to close this, right?!" I scream, standing next to him and pushing. An exceptionally sinister sensation reaches me through the thin planks. I

concentrate my strength, trying to crush the horrible thing. I can sense through my palms that the man is pushing harder, too. The door begins to creak closed.

Is that a song? Suddenly, I notice that the man is singing under his breath as he strains. I look up at him. His eyes are closed, and he's intently singing a series of strange words with an odd intonation, like the ritual prayers you'd hear at a shrine, or a song from a long, long time ago. Eventually, something layers onto his voice.

"Wait...what?!"

I hear more voices—the excited laughter of children, the hum of conversation between adults. *"Daddy, hurry! It's been forever since we went to a hot spring!"* I can hear the happy chatter of a family like it's being directly injected into my brain.

"I'll go get Granddad!"

"Mom, let's go in the bath again!"

"What, you're having another beer?"

"Let's come back next year for our family vacation."

The distant voices play like a faded movie. I can hear the hustle and bustle. The crowds of excited young people. This place, in an era when everyone believed unquestioningly in a bright future, before I was born—

Bang! The door finally shuts.

"It's closed!" I yell. Without missing a beat, the man raises what looks like a key and inserts it into the door. For a second, I think I see a keyhole appear on what should have been its blank surface.

"We respectfully return them to you!" the man shouts as he turns the key.

With a sound like a giant bubble popping, the current dissipates. A dizzying sensation washes over me, like morning has cleared away the night in an instant. Colorful rain begins to fall, beating down on the pool in the courtyard. But soon, the wind has swept it away, too.

The distant voices are gone.

The sky is clear blue again, and the earth has stopped quaking. The door stands silently, like everything that just happened was a mirage.

This is the first door I will shut.

* * *

Because I was pushing so hard, removing my hands from the door is more akin to peeling them away. My legs are weak. The shallow pool is as still as glass. Birdsong fills the air. The man is standing a few paces away from me, staring at the closed door.

“Um... What just happened?” I ask.

“The Keystone should have been in place.”

“Huh?”

He finally turns away from the door and looks me in the eye.

“...Why did you come here? Why could you see the worm? Where did the Keystone go?”

“Uh, um...” His tone is insistent, but my answer is confused. “Worm? Keystone...? You mean like a rock? What are you talking about?”

He glares at me. *Wait, is he blaming me for something? Why?*

“What is going on?!” I snap, suddenly angry. He blinks in surprise, then sighs, carelessly pushing a long strand of hair out of his eye. The small miracle of elegance in that gesture makes me even madder. He ignores me and looks back at the door.

“...This place turned into a Gate. That’s where the worm comes through,” he mutters cryptically and starts to walk away. “Thank you for helping me. Now please forget everything you saw here and go home.”

As he strides off, I notice that the dark bloodstain on his left arm is spreading. It’s the wound he got protecting me.

“Wait!” I shout.

* * *

At this time of afternoon, Tamaki wouldn't be home. With that in mind, I unlock the front door.

"Please go upstairs. I'll get the first aid kit and be up in a minute," I say to the man, who's standing in the entryway. I head toward the living room.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I—"

"If you hate hospitals that much, at least let me give you first aid," I say firmly. He's been stubbornly resisting treatment since we left the ruined hotel. *He hates doctors? What is he, a five-year-old?* My house's familiar entryway looks ridiculously small with him standing in it. Behind me, I hear him reluctantly climbing the stairs.

A news helicopter is flying overhead, which is unusual. That's how big the earthquake was. On my way home from the ruins, I saw crumbled stone walls and fallen roof tiles. My neighborhood, which is usually deathly quiet, was as crowded as a festival, with everyone cleaning up and congratulating one another on surviving.

Our living room is strewn with stuff. The books from the shelf are all over the floor, an etching has fallen off the wall, and our Japanese ash has tipped over in its pot, spilling dirt across the floor. In the corner where Tamaki hangs her nostalgic photos, some of the frames have fallen off the wall. Glancing at a picture of myself about to cry on my first day of kindergarten (and Tamaki, ten years younger, smiling beside me), I open a cabinet and search for the first aid box.

I climb the stairs, thinking my room must be a mess, but I'm surprised to find it fairly neat. The man must have tidied up while I was downstairs. He's sitting in the middle of the clean room, asleep. He must have been exhausted. He's pulled the kiddie chair out from the corner and is sitting on it. It's a small wooden chair, old and painted yellow. From the tidied room to the children's chair, I have the awkward feeling he's seen some private, embarrassing side of me.

"All righty, let's get that wound washed," I say loudly, walking him up.

"At one twenty this afternoon, an earthquake occurred with a lower six seismic intensity rating, originating in southern Miyazaki Prefecture. There is no

risk of an associated tsunami. As of the present time, no injuries have been reported...”

The man listens to that much of the report, then taps the screen of his phone to turn off the news. The laceration doesn't seem to be as bad as the blood made it look. But just to be sure, I wash it carefully with water and place an antiseptic patch over it. Kneeling next to him, I take his left arm and begin wrapping a bandage around it. His muscles are pretty thick. The strange key he used to close the door hangs against his chest over a long overshirt. It's made of metal the color of dead grass, inscribed with intricate designs. A gentle breeze blows in through the open window, ringing a chime hanging there.

“You're good at that,” he says, watching me wrap the bandage.

“My mom was a nurse. Anyway, I have a lot of questions for you!”

“I bet you do,” he says, his perfect lips smiling slightly.

“Um... You said there was a worm, right? What did you mean?”

“The worm is a powerful force beneath the Japanese archipelago. When distortions accumulate, it erupts without intention or goal, thrashing around mindlessly and causing earthquakes.”

“Huh...?” I find this information hard to process. “But we got him, right?” I ask, since that's the important point.

“We only confined it temporarily. If we don't seal it in with the Keystone, it will come back out from somewhere else.”

“...You mean there'll be another earthquake? You mentioned a Keystone earlier, didn't you? Is that—?”

“It's all right,” he says, gently putting an end to the conversation. “Preventing that is my job.”

“Your job?”

I'm done wrapping the bandage. I fix it in place with a piece of surgical tape. Now I have more questions than ever.

“Tell me,” I say, hardening my voice. “Who exactly are—?”

“Thank you for doing that,” he says softly before sitting up straight. He looks me in the eye and bows his head. “My name is Souta. Souta Munakata.”

“Oh! Um! Uh, my name is Suzume Iwato,” I sputter, surprised by his sudden self-introduction. He repeats my name, rolling it around in his mouth, then smiles softly.

“Meow!”

“Eek!”

I look up and see a small form on the windowsill. A kitten is perched on the railing of the bay window.

“What? Who’s this? You’re so skinny!”

Its little body, small enough to fit in my palm, is bony and gaunt. Only its yellow eyes are big. It’s all white, except for a ring of black fur around its left eye like someone punched it, leaving a bruise. Its ears are pressed back. It’s hard not to pity a face like that.

“Wait a second!” I say to Souta and the cat before running to the kitchen, dumping some dried sardines onto a dish, and bringing it up to my room with a bowl of water to set on the windowsill. The kitten sniffs the fish, cautiously licks it, then begins eating with gusto.

“You must have been starving...,” I murmur, gazing at its bony ribs. I haven’t seen it around here before. “Did you run away during the earthquake? Are you okay? Was it scary?”

The white kitten looks me straight in the eye.

“Meow,” it answers.

“You’re so cute!”

What a brave little kitty!

Beside me, Souta is smiling, too.

“Want to become my cat?” I ask without thinking.

“Yes.”

“Huh?”

It answered me. Its marble-like yellow eyes stare into mine. A moment ago, it was skin and bones, but now it is as plump as a little rice cake. Its ears are standing up straight. The wind chime tinkles, as if it had forgotten to until just now. The kitten's furry little mouth opens.

"Suzume nice. I like her."

Its voice falters like that of a young child, but the cat just talked. A humanlike will saturates its yellow eyes. They shift to Souta and narrow.

"You. In my way."

"!"

I hear a clatter. Glancing around reflexively, I see that the chair Souta was sitting on has toppled over. *Just* the chair.

"Wait, what?"

He's gone. Souta was here just a second ago. The white cat is sitting perfectly still on the windowsill. It looks like it's smiling, and I feel goose bumps crawl over my skin, and then— *Clatter*. Something is moving around at my feet. The chair's on its back. Something is not right. *Clatter*.

"...?"

The front left leg of the wooden chair is broken off, so it only has three legs. One of the remaining legs appears to be waving. The movement is enough to flip the chair from its back onto its side. Two legs kick the floor, and it rights itself.

"Huh...?"

Struggling to retain its balance, it stares at me with its two eyes. Right—the chair has always had a pair of eyes carved into the backrest. It bends its face down as if to check the condition of its body.

"What the hell is...?" the chair says in a low, soft voice.

"No way!!" I shout despite myself. "S-Souta...?"

"Suzume...what happened to me...?"

Just then, the chair loses its balance and topples forward. But it catches itself

by kicking out its front leg. It spins around from the force of the kick, thrashing its three legs frantically. It sounds like someone is tap-dancing in my room. Finally, it stops moving and takes in the cat on the windowsill.

“Did you do this?!” the chair—I mean Souta—shouts, growing angry. The kitten leaps nimbly out the window.

“No!” I shout as the chair runs to the window. It scrambles up, using a bookshelf for a ladder, and leaps out after the cat.

“Wait, wait!” I yell. *We’re on the second floor!* I can hear Souta scream. I lean out the window in a panic. The chair is sliding down the roof. It tumbles onto some laundry hanging in the garden to dry, then disappears. A second later, it bursts out from under a sheet. The cat is already running across the road, and chasing it, the chair leaps into the narrow street. A passing car honks in surprise.

“No way!”

I have to go after it, I think, then wonder if I’m crazy a second later. All the fear, confusion, and chills I felt earlier surge back. A worm that causes earthquakes? A talking cat and a running chair? This stuff has nothing to do with me. Obviously, it would be better not to get involved. *I’m not a part of that world*, I think, not knowing exactly what I mean. I think of Tamaki and Aya and Mami.

But we were the only ones who could see it.

I grab Souta’s key from the floor where it fell and bolt out of my room. I probably hesitated for only a second. By the time I’m running down the stairs, I’ve forgotten I hesitated at all.

“Suzume!”

“Tamaki!”

I run into Tamaki in the entryway.

“Sorry, I have to go!” I say, shooting past her.

“Go where?” she asks, grabbing my arm. “I came back because I was worried about you!”

“You did?”

“The earthquake! You wouldn’t answer your phone, so—”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t notice you called! I’m fine!”

At this rate, I’ll lose them. Brushing off Tamaki’s hand, I fly into the road. Her shouts fade behind me.

I run down the hill after Souta and the cat, and I eventually catch sight of them. Souta is half falling down the hill, his legs a tangle. Beyond him, a girl and boy in junior high uniforms are climbing the hill. The chair tumbles forward and slides noisily down the slope, then skids to a stop in front of them.

“Whoa!”

“What is that?”

“A chair?”

Souta quickly rights himself, but he must be off-balance, because he’s tottering in circles. The junior high kids are shrieking in fear at the strange object circling them. Finally pointing himself in the right direction, Souta moves away and starts hurtling down the hill once more.

“Sorry!” I shout as I blast past the students, who are snapping pictures of the chair with their phones. I can hear the storm of shutter clicks behind me. *Damn, they’re getting me, too. This won’t be on social media, right?* Ahead of Souta, I can make out the cat and, beyond that, the port.

The flock of seagulls that hangs out at the port like a gang of kids in front of a convenience store takes flight. The white cat runs past the spot they’ve vacated, followed by the chair, and then by me a minute later.

“Hey, Suzume!” a deep voice calls out.

“Huh?!”

On the next wharf over, across a strip of sea, Minoru is waving enthusiastically at me. He’s a coworker of Tamaki’s who has had an obvious, unrequited crush on her for years. He seems to be in the middle of lifting some cargo off a fishing boat. He’s a good guy, so I don’t dislike him, but...

“What’s wrong?”

There’s no way I can answer his question right now. The ferry boarding area at the port is a set of bare steel stairs, and some men who look like truck drivers are walking noisily up and down them. The cat weaves between their feet with Souta at its heels. Surprised, the truck drivers cry out. “What the—?”

“You’re kidding me!” I mutter as I frantically scramble after them. “Excuse me! Sorry!”

All I can do is apologize and push past the men as I run up the ramp onto the ferry.

“We apologize for the wait,” the captain is saying over the intercom. “The earthquake earlier this afternoon delayed our departure, but we have completed our safety inspection and will be departing shortly.”

The horn I always hear in the distance blows so loudly I can feel it in my eardrums. Then the ferry moves slowly away from the port like the slanting beams of the afternoon sun are pushing it along. The cat, the chair, and I are all on board.

It’s Starting, the World Whispers

Past the ferry entrance is a lobby full of vending machines. Long-distance truck drivers are sitting at a round table like they’re right at home, already cracking open their beers.

“Did you see that?”

“Did I ever! Whaddaya think it was?”

“A cat, I’d say.”

“I swear I saw a chair running up the ramp.”

“A toy, you think?”

“A drone, more like it. Good one, too.”

Augh, we’re gossip now! I jog through the lobby, scanning the corners for Souta and the cat. I’m acutely aware of the middle-aged men eyeing me

suspiciously as I pass in my sweat-soaked uniform. Their stares make me sweat even more. I race up the stairs, run through the lounge with its scattering of passengers, ascend another staircase, and step into the outer corridor facing the ocean.

“Dammit, where are you?!” I’m mad. I feel like my pet has been bothering people, and it’s a pet I didn’t even ask for. At the end of the narrow corridor is the windy rear deck.

“Aha!”

That’s where they are. In the middle of the deck, buffeted by gusts of wind, the kitten and the kiddie chair are facing off about two meters apart. I’m suddenly dizzy, unable to decide if this is reality or some childish nightmare.

“What are you running from?!” Souta bellows, bearing down on the kitten. The white cat backs away as he advances. “What did you do to my body?! What are you?!”

The cat continues to silently retreat. But there’s a railing behind it, and below that, the sea.

“Answer me!”

The chair bends its legs deeply, then pounces at the cat. The cat dodges nimbly and scales the tall, thin radar mast at the back of the ferry.

“Dammit,” I say with a sigh. *It got away.* I run over to Souta, and we look up at the mast together. The little white cat is perched fifteen meters above our heads, at the top of the pole.

“Suuuzume.”

It’s looking at me, its round yellow eyes glittering with excitement.

“See you later,” it says pertly in its youthful voice before diving toward the sea. I gasp. But it drops into a patrol boat coming up on the ferry from behind.

“No way.”

The patrol boat zooms past the ferry. All Souta and I can do is watch in a daze as it speeds into the distance.

After a few minutes, I glance behind me. My town's coast is already far away. The ferry's wake trails to the wharf like a long umbilical cord, glittering in the setting sun as it breaks apart.

* * *

"I told you—I'm sleeping over at Aya's tonight... No. Like I said, I'm sorry. I promise I'll be back tomorrow, so don't worry about me!"

In a corner of a dimly lit powder room, I press my phone to my ear. I'm using my palm to cover it and my mouth so Tamaki doesn't hear the ceaseless roar of the engine below my feet.

"Hey, wait, Suzume!"

I can practically see her expression as she holds back tears.

"It's okay if you want to stay over, but what were you doing with the first aid box in your room? You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"I told you—I'm fine. When we passed in the entryway, nothing was wrong, remember?"

"And why did you take out the dried sardines? I thought you didn't like them."

My aunt is a very observant person. I imagine her looking at the wall of photos as we talk. School plays, sports festivals, two graduations, three entrance ceremonies. Tamaki is there beside me in all the photos, smiling from ear to ear. My smile is always a bit half-hearted. There are photos like that all over our house.

"I don't even want to think about this, but...", she says, filling the silence as I scramble for an answer. *"You aren't seeing some strange man, are—?"*

"No, I'm fine. It's nothing like that!" I shout, then hang up. I let out a long sigh. I know I've only worried her more. At this rate, I'm just feeding her overprotectiveness. But I tell myself I'll straighten it out tomorrow and leave the powder room.

Now that I think about it, this is the first time I've taken a night ferry. The sea is endlessly black and seems even deeper than during the day. If I let myself think about it, the knowledge that a force this enormous is roiling beneath me

makes me unbearably scared. Turning off my imagination, I climb the stairs and emerge in the exterior corridor. The wind tosses my hair around. At the end of the corridor, by the base of the stairs leading to the viewing deck, Souta sits silently. Moonlight shines faintly on the kiddie chair. But is that chair really him? Anxiety overwhelms me yet again. Then I think about how much more anxious he must be and make up my mind to at least act cheerful.

“Souta! This boat is going to dock in Ehime in the morning!” I say as I jog over to him, passing on what one of the ferry employees told me. “The boat the cat hopped onto is probably heading for the same place.”

“Is that so...” Just as I hear Souta’s voice, the chair turns toward me with a clatter. I resist the urge to shrink away and continue in a cheery tone.

“I bought some bread!”

I put the bag down next to Souta and sit beside him. There’s a bun stuffed with *yakisoba* noodles, a milk-custard sandwich, and two cartons of milk—one coffee and one strawberry—all procured from the vending machines in the lobby.

“Thanks,” he says. His voice sounds like he’s smiling a little. I’m relieved. “But I’m not hungry.”

“Oh...”

Makes sense. How can he eat with the body of a chair? I even debated whether to buy him anything myself when I went to the vending machine. To prevent my stomach from grumbling, and to prevent him from hearing it if it does, I hug my knees tight to my chest. I haven’t eaten since breakfast. We sit for a while with the bag of bread between us, looking up at the starry sky as it flows slowly past. The moon, almost full, lights up the peaks of the clouds. The steel corridor is chilly at night.

“Um...,” I say, knowing I can’t stay silent forever. “What’s up with being a chair?”

“...I think the cat cursed me.” He laughs a little, self-deprecating.

“Cursed you...? Are you okay? Does it hurt or anything?”

“I’m fine,” he answers. Without thinking, I brush my hand against him.

“You’re warm...”

The chair is as warm as a person. The word *soul* pops into my head. If such a thing exists, it must be this temperature. The moonlight glints faintly in the chair’s eyes—or rather, the two indentations carved in its backrest.

“I have to do something about this,” Souta mutters, gazing at the moon.

I gather my courage and say, “Um, there’s something I’ve been wondering about—” and tell him about the stone statue at the hotel.

“A stone statue at the ruins...!” he nearly shouts when I’m done. “That’s the Keystone! You pulled it up?!”

“I guess? I just...”

I just picked it up because I was curious. I try to explain, but he’s rambling on, like he’s talking to himself.

“Interesting—so that cat must be the Keystone! If it’s abandoned its responsibility and run away, then...”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“You freed the Keystone, and it cursed me!”

“That can’t be!” I say, confused. But strangely, it makes sense. The face carved in the stone wasn’t a fox’s; it was a cat’s. I remember how it felt when it transformed into an animal in my hands.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know... But what should we do...?”

The chair’s eyes drop from my face to the floor. Souta sighs quietly.

“...No, it’s my fault for taking so long to find the door. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But—”

“Suzume, I’m a Closer.”

“...A Closer?”

With a creaking sound, he swivels toward me. He throws his front leg into the

air, stands on his two back legs, and uses his front leg to lift the key hanging from his backrest. He holds it up for me to see—it's the elaborate one I brought from my room. I hung it around his neck after the cat escaped.

"I lock doors that have opened to prevent disasters from coming out of them."

With a tap, his front leg returns to the floor.

"Sometimes a thing called a Gate opens in places people have disappeared from. Bad things come through those doors. So I lock them and return the land to the cradle—the god who originally possessed it. That's why I've been traveling all over Japan. That is what Closers do."

Gate. Closers. Gods of the land. All these things are new to me. But at the same time, I feel like I've heard them somewhere before. I don't know what any of it means, but deep in the back of my mind, part of me understands what he's saying. As I'm wondering why, he says very kindly, "Suzume. You must be hungry." He gently pushes the bag of bread over to my knee with his front leg, urging me to eat.

"Yes...", I admit.

I pick up the sweet cream sandwich and tear off the plastic wrapper with both hands. A sweet scent floats up to my nose and is immediately blown away by the sea wind.

"If I turn the cat back into a Keystone and shut the worm in, I'm sure I'll change back to my original form," he says. *I bet he's making his voice extra gentle to reassure me.* "There's nothing to worry about. You should go home tomorrow."

The thick sweetness of the bread and cream melds with Souta's soft voice and seeps into me. It no longer seems strange to hear that voice coming from my familiar old kiddie chair.

* * *

That night, I have the dream again. I'm a lost child. But I'm not in the starry meadow. I think this is a little ways before the meadow. The dream is a long

story, and depending on the night, I might be at the beginning, watching the middle, or experiencing the climax. I think this time I'm at the beginning of the story.

It's late at night in the middle of winter. I don't think I'm very far from home, but strangely, all the buildings I recognize have disappeared, and I have no idea where I'm walking. The streets are empty. The ground is covered in slush, and with each step, the cold mud weighs down my shoes. Sadness, loneliness, and worry have become part of me, have accumulated in me so they slosh around in my little body as I walk. It's cold. Snow is swirling, and the sky and ground are painted over with dark gray. A full pale-yellow moon hangs in the sky like a small hole in the canvas. Below it, I can see a radio tower. It's the tallest structure around and the only thing I recognize.

"Mom, where are yooou?"

As I walk along shouting for her, eventually I see a door. It's the lone structure standing among snow-covered rubble. The veneer is wet with sleet, glistening in the moonlight.

My hand reaches for the knob as if I'm being pulled in, and I grab it. The freezing metal sticks to my skin. I turn the knob and push the door. It creaks open. Child-me is surprised by what is inside—yet at the same time, I feel like I know the place well. I'm seeing it for the first time, yet it feels nostalgic. Like it's rejecting me but also calling to me. I'm both sad and excited.

I step through the door—into the meadow beneath the brilliant starry sky.

* * *

Bang! I wake to the sound of something falling over.

"...Souta?"

The chair is tipped on its back, its three legs in the air.

"That's some way to sleep..."

He is sleeping, right? I sit up. Beyond the handrail, the ocean glows orange. A flock of seagulls is swooping about like a noisy pack of kids on their way to elementary school. A translucent sun hangs immaculately in the grape-colored

sky. It's sunrise. We've been sleeping in a corner of the exterior corridor.

"Souta," I say, shaking the chair. No answer. But like the night before, the wood is warm. He's sleeping. Relieved, I stand up. Leaning over the railing, I look in the direction we're headed. Islands of various sizes surround the ferry. A few boats are on the water. It's the Uwakai Sea—we're in the Bungo Channel. Far across the silver-leaf water, I make out a harbor dotted with cranes. The smell of the sea blends with the smell of diesel and plants and fish and human life. Suddenly, the ferry's horn blares. I feel like the whole world is cheerfully announcing, *It's starting!* I don't know if the thing that's starting is my journey or my life or just the day. But the important thing is, the sounds, the smells, the light, the warmth of Souta's body—all of it is whispering to me that something is about to begin.

"...I'm so excited," I murmur to as I gaze out at the ocean edged with morning sun.



Searching for a Cat in Ehime

I've never traveled outside Japan, but I bet that first step onto foreign soil is really something. That's what I'm thinking as I walk down the narrow ramp attached to the side of the ferry. The second my loafers hit the concrete of the harbor, my heart shouts *Shikoku!* It's my first time here. I stop and wait for the crowd of middle-aged men to pass through. Once they're a safe distance away, I start walking. To be safe, I'm holding the chair behind my back. Since I left my house empty-handed, I'm now a shady character wearing a school uniform and carrying a kiddie chair. I don't want to draw attention to myself.

I maintain a steady distance from the men, who are talking noisily: *"Today's another hot one!" "I'm on my way to Osaka from here"* and so on. I walk down a bare-bones passage covered with corrugated metal. *"We look forward to your next voyage with us,"* a voice is telling me through a speaker. I imagined Shikoku would be different from my hometown in Miyazaki, but so far, the sounds, the air, and the run-down look of the harbor are exactly like home. From the blue of the sky and the smell of the sea to the faded color of the concrete, everything is disappointingly similar.

"...Suzume?"

With a clatter, the chair behind my back begins to move. I stop at the sound of Souta's voice.

"You're finally up!" I say, sighing with relief. "You wouldn't wake up, so I was starting to wonder if everything was a dream!"

We're outside of the ferry terminal, standing at the edge of a large parking lot. Souta, the lazy bum, had the nerve to stay asleep for the whole two hours since sunrise, even though I tried to wake him up who knows how many times.

"I...was sleeping...?" he asks groggily. I sigh again, loudly.

"Oh, never mind. Now, about that cat! How should we search for it? Should we start by asking around at the harbor?"

"What?"

"I wonder where we are anyway."

I take my phone out of my skirt pocket. I'm glad I brought this, at least. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to pay for the ferry.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Ignoring Souta's panicked voice, I turn on my phone. I briskly swipe away the message notifications from Tamaki, open a map, and determine our location. We're at Yawatahama Harbor, on the western edge of Ehime Prefecture. There's an urban area to the east of us and a train station within walking distance. *Hmm*. I wonder how far we are from my house. I pull up my trip log, and the map zooms out to show Shikoku and Kyushu. I'm 219 kilometers from home.

"Wow, we came a long way," I say.

"I wonder if you could get back home by tonight if you took the next ferry. Remember what I told you last night? You need to stop worrying about me and get yourself back—"

"Aaah!" I blurt out.

"What's wrong?"

"Look at this!"

I crouch down and show Souta my social media feed. There's a picture of the white kitten perched on the seat of a train.

"I think that's our cat, isn't it?!"

"No way...!"

I filter my feed so it only shows posts near our current location. It's full of pictures of the white cat. There's one from last night of it sitting on the bow of the patrol boat, one at dawn of it sitting on a mooring at the harbor, one from a little later of it on the railing of a bridge, then one from a few hours ago of it on a bench outside a train station. And finally, one from a few minutes ago of it sitting on the ticket box inside a train—and in every one, it's doing an obnoxiously photogenic innocent kitten pose.

"Look what I saw on my pilgrimage!"

"It's so cute I can't stand it!"

"I got on the train and bam, a real-life version of Whisper of the Heart!"

"Kitty Stationmaster meets Ciao Churu mascot!"

"Cute...so cute... A kitten is sitting next to me..."

Each picture has its own caption, though most are pretty simple. It's like the posters are too overwhelmed to say much beyond how cute the kitten is. Everywhere it goes, it has been craftily, haughtily (*I mean, that's how it looks!*) getting its picture taken.

"They're calling it Daijin, like a cabinet minister...?" I mutter.

"That white goatee looks just like the ones ministers had in the old days. Too cute!"

"The way the fur on its cheeks curls up looks just like a politician!"

I see a lot of similar posts. There's even a hashtag: #withDaijin.

"Are they serious...? Actually, now that I think about it, they're kind of right..."

"It's heading east by train. I have to follow it!" Souta says, walking off noisily. As he goes, he creaks his backrest toward me and says decisively, "We part here. Thanks for everything, Suzume. Take care on your trip home."

Where should I buy a ticket to? Might as well go as far as I can, I think, and I press the largest button on the ticket machine. The electronic beep echoes off the yawning ceiling of the station.

“Hold on, now...”

Ignoring the voice of protest next to me, I take the ticket from the machine. Then I walk through the ticket gate at Yawatahama Station clasping the little chair to my stomach.

“If you don’t get home, your family will worry about you!”

“Not a problem. My family is hands off,” I whisper calmly. I thought I was pulling off this “holding this chair is no big deal” thing pretty well, but kids wearing unfamiliar uniforms are staring at me. *“The conductorless train for Matsuyama is now arriving,”* a lackadaisical voice announces over the speaker. We get on. At first the train is nearly empty, but after a few stations, it’s packed. We can finally relax.

“...This trip is going to be dangerous. I can’t have you following me,” the chair says in a troubled voice from its spot on my lap.

“But, Souta,” I say, turning my phone screen toward his face. “Look!”

A picture of the chair running down the hill has been posted on social media. The picture is blurry because its subject is moving fast, but that only lends it a kind of dubious reality, like the discovery of some new cryptid. Other pictures show it walking down the pier and strolling around the harbor this morning. Some of them include me, although my face isn’t clear.

“You won’t believe what I saw!”

“Me too!”

“Is it a chair-shaped drone?!”

“Who’s the mysterious girl?”

We’re not quite trending, but we’re getting there. There’s another hashtag: #runningchair.

“No way...!”

“See? It’s risky for you to walk in front of people! At this rate, you’ll be captured before you reach the cat!”

Souta appears to be at a loss for words. After a moment, he says gravely, “Suzume, it seems I have no choice. I would like your assistance until we find Daijin.”

The chair bows its head with a creak. *Yesss!* I grin and bow in return.

“The pleasure is mine!”

He’s finally accepted me. I look up, newly determined, and realize a little kid is staring at me. Fortunately, his mother is absorbed in her phone. *Close call!* I have a responsibility to get Souta back to his original form. *Until he’s human again, I’ve got to protect him!*

The Direction I Need to Run In Now

I really should have bought some sunscreen at that first station. I glare hatefully at the low-slanting sun and experience regret for the hundredth time today. I have no doubt I’ve been sunburned, and tonight’s bath is gonna sting. *Actually, what are the chances I’ll get to take a bath? Where am I even going to sleep tonight if things go on like this? Don’t tell me my first night in Shikoku is also going to be my first night sleeping rough. Two nights in a row without a shower?* We’re walking down a mountain road, and I glance over the guardrail running along its edge to look at the big reservoir below. *Worst case scenario, if I don’t get a bath tonight, I should at least rinse myself off with cold water,* I think despairingly.

Using social media feeds as our guide, we’ve been getting on and off various trains, hot on the trail of the white kitten, a.k.a. Daijin. But every time we reach the spot where a picture was taken, a new one is posted from somewhere else. This could go on forever. But it’s our only option at this point, and we’re currently headed to the site of a photo from two hours ago. It showed Daijin flirting with the camera in a mandarin orange orchard, with a caption reading “*The white kitty is visiting our farm! #withDaijin.*” That farm should be at the top of this mountain road. There hasn’t been a convenience store or shop the

whole way, meaning I haven't been able to buy sunscreen.

"...!"

I hear a motor scooter revving behind us.

"Souta!" I shout, running up to where he's walking a few meters ahead of me and lifting him by the backrest. The bike whizzes past with a hairbreadth to spare.

"...You didn't see that coming, did you?" I ask.

"Oh, don't worry about me," he laughs. But privately, I think he lacks a proper sense of caution. What would I do if he were kidnapped by a weirdo, like the toys in *Toy Story*? Then I'd have to recapture a chair in addition to finding a cat. On the other hand, carrying around this chair is surprisingly hard on the arms, so when we're away from people, I've been letting him walk on his own a lot.

Suddenly, I hear something drop onto the road, followed by the screech of brakes. I can just barely make out a female voice saying, "Crap!" I look up the hill.

"...Huh?"

Mandarin oranges are flooding down the narrow road. I remember the bike that just passed us had a big box strapped to the rack.

"Aaah!"

The herd of oranges has spread across the whole road and is bearing down on us. As I stand there frozen, Souta jumps out of my arms. I watch in surprise as he goes into the field next to the road and hooks a net onto his leg before returning to my side. It's the kind of net used to keep animals out of a garden.

"Suzume, hold that end!"

"Okay!"

Souta passes in front of me, pulling the net so that we end up on either side of the road, the net strung between us. At almost the same moment, the oranges roll into the net.

"...This can't be real!" someone says above my head. I look up. A teenage girl

in a helmet is staring down at us in a daze. A bit too late, Souta pretends to be an inanimate object toppled on the ground. He and I succeeded in catching every last mandarin orange in the net.

* * *

“Really, truly, thank you! You saved me.”

The girl, who has a short brown bob and is wearing a red school tracksuit, is pumping both my hands energetically. A little bewildered by her enthusiasm, I smile stiffly and say it was nothing.

“You’re like a magician! How in the world did you do that?”

“Um...,” I say, relieved that she seems not to have witnessed the chair moving by itself. “My body just kind of reacted on its own...? I think?”

“Really? That’s totally amazing!”

She seems honestly moved. Her round, made-up eyes are sparkling.

“I’m Chika. Second-year in high school,” she says, pointing to her chest.

“Oh, me too! I’m Suzume.”

“Suzume, that’s a cute name!”

She sure is friendly. Knowing we’re the same age makes me instantly relax, too.

“Hey, Suzume, I don’t recognize your uniform—,” she says. She says my name straight, without an honorific, but it doesn’t feel like she’s being rude. She scans me curiously from head to toe. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

“Um, no—”

I think I’ll do the same and just call her Chika, I decide, feeling suddenly cheerful. I explain my situation, though I end up leaving out a lot.

“You came all the way from Kyushu...to find a cat?!” she says, obviously surprised, as I show her the picture of the mandarin orange farm on my phone. We’re sitting side by side on a strip of dirt next to the road. I notice the drone of locusts has turned into a chorus of evening cicadas. The surface of the reservoir below the road is fading from bright blue to greenish gray.

“So the cat’s your pet?” Chika asks, handing my phone back.

“Well, not exactly...,” I say, popping a segment of a mandarin orange into my mouth. The orange was a thank-you present from Chika. It’s startlingly sweet. It moistens my dry throat as the sweetness penetrates my tired body. I put about six segments in my mouth at once. They’re a thousand times better than orange juice from the convenience store.

“This is so good I think it might make my sunburn go away!” I say.

Chika smiles happily. “Sorry about earlier. There’s an uneven spot in the road.”

“An uneven spot?”

“Yeah. My tire hit it head-on, and the rubber band on the box came off. It wasn’t that rough yesterday—but anyway, it’s my fault for not securing the box better.”

“That sounds hard... Is it your part time job?”

“No, my parents are in hospitality. These oranges are too old to serve to our guests, so I’m taking them to the processing plant. Eat as many as you like. Get rid of that sunburn for good!”

We laugh together. The sweetness of the fruit and the friendliness of Chika’s voice loosen the tension in my body.

“So you’re on your way to that farm?” she asks.

“Oh, uh, yeah. That’s right!”

Flustered, I pull up the picture on my phone again. This is no good! I’ve gotten distracted by after-school chitchat. Once I’ve examined the picture, I look up to make sure I’m in the right place.

“Chika, I think this photo was taken near—”

I’m about to say *here*, but instead, a dry gasp escapes my throat.

“...What’s wrong, Suzume?”

I can’t answer. I know she’s peering at me suspiciously, but I can’t peel my eyes off a certain point in the landscape. My eyes are glued to *that*. *Why? Why*

here? The evening cicadas have gone silent. On the wooded mountainside beyond the reservoir, a flock of crows is circling. Dividing the flock in half is a reddish-black column of smoke rising slowly upward. It seems to be faintly glowing. An enormous worm, visible only to Souta and me.

“Uh, um—”

My voice is shaking. I pick up Souta from his spot at my feet and say to Chika, “Sorry, something came up! Sorry!”

“What? Something came up? Huh?”

I take off running, hugging the chair to my chest. I race down the mountain road toward the worm without even pausing to glance back at Chika.

“Souta, can the worm erupt anywhere?!”

“This land’s Gate must have opened! If I don’t close it fast—”

Another earthquake will happen? I feel a chill rise from the soles of my feet. I run faster, trying to crush the awful feeling underfoot. The long, fat worm is still rising toward the sky.

Souta sounds panicked. “We’ll never get there in time!”

“But—”

“Hey, Suzume!”

Someone is calling my name from behind. I look back. It’s Chika, on her motor scooter. She screeches to a stop in front of me.

“Chika!”

“I don’t know what’s up, but you’re in a hurry, right?” she asks, staring solemnly into my eyes. “Get on!”

Between the trees streaming past us, I glimpse the worm glowing dully with a reddish-copper color. The sun has set without my noticing. I cling to Chika, balanced on the luggage rack of the motor scooter as it speeds down the empty mountain road. Amid the deepening lavender of twilight, the worm is like a sinister red version of the luminescent noctiluca that light up the ocean.

“Are you sure this is the right way?!” Chika shouts over the whir of the engine

and whoosh of the wind, without turning her head. “This area up here was buried in a landslide a while back, and no one lives there anymore!”

“It’s an abandoned village?! Then that’s it—take me there!” I shout back before whispering to Souta, “Is there going to be an earthquake?”

“As the worm spreads over the sky, it sucks up energy from the earth and gains weight. When it falls to the ground, it causes an earthquake. If we close the door before the worm falls, we can prevent it. This time we’ll get it right!”

The scooter’s headlight reflects blindingly off a large sign that seems to pop up out of nowhere. Chika slams on the breaks. The sign says in large letters, ROAD CLOSED DUE TO LANDSLIDE, and several colored traffic cones are lined up below it. Rubble and dirt block the road past the sign. It doesn’t look like we can go any farther on the scooter. A festering, sweet smell hangs thick in the air.

“Right here is fine!” I say, hopping off the bike with the chair in my arm and starting to run. “Thank you so much, Chika!”

“Hey, wait! Suzume!” she shouts at my receding back. My heartbeat hurries me on. Far down the blocked road, beyond a pitch-black hamlet, the glowing blackish-red worm looms. The ground is muddy. I kick heavy sludge off my loafers as I run.

“Suzume, you don’t have to come any farther!” Souta suddenly says, pushing off my body into the air. Like a dog freed from its leash, he bolts ahead at full speed.

“Souta, wait!”

“It’s too dangerous! Go back to the girl with the scooter!”

“Souta!”

Looking like some three-legged beast, he disappears into the dim rubble. *Don’t do this, Souta!* I call his name again, but he doesn’t answer.

“—!”

I stop, suddenly out of breath. My lungs need air, and they suck it in of their own accord. The fetid sweet smell comes in with it, and I cough violently. I

desperately try to catch my breath and forget about the smell; then I try to pretend it doesn't exist and tell my nose not to sense it. I take my time expelling all the polluted air from my chest. Finally, my breath calms, and I look around, making sure to breathe shallowly. Roofs and telephone poles still buried in dirt are scattered around chaotically like black lumps. Past them, a rushing red river falls upward toward the sky, growing ever brighter. The earth below my feet is rumbling uncannily, on and on, as if something is moving all at once toward the red river.

I'm alone in this place. For some reason, I'm standing here alone. *Again.* Unbearable anxiety and fear well up in me, like someone has made a mistake and I can't wake up from a nightmare—and I need to wake up. I feel like an abandoned child. I'm hemmed in by tilted roofs buried in mud and bizarrely upright walls and black windows that don't reflect anything. Suddenly, the tears gathered in my eyes overflow, and the red of the worm bleeds over everything. Souta told me to go home. He told me to go back to the girl with the scooter.

"...You're telling me to go back to Chika?" I say out loud. "You're telling me to go home, to go back to Kyushu?"

The nauseating sweet smell is still surrounding me. It is already, inescapably, inside me. It is *here*, a distinct foreign presence, impossible to ignore. Suddenly, a feeling like anger boils up inside my ribs. *Why is this happening again? After coming all this way. Despite everything we've done. Why?*

"What's the point in that?!" I scream, wringing the words out of my body. I start running after Souta into the darkness, hurtling forward with all my strength. My loafers crush mud and glass and something made of plastic. With each stride, the fear and anxiety dissipate. *Yes, this is the way.* If I run toward Souta, the anxiety will disappear. If I run the opposite direction, it will build and build. That's why I need to go this way.

When I get to the top of the dark road, I have a clear view of the area ahead. Beyond layers of abandoned houses, a school stands by itself. The worm is erupting from the school building. I descend toward it, weaving between empty houses. I see the school gate ahead of me. There's a hill to the right of the building, and dirt from it has buried the right half of the schoolyard. I run through the gate into the yard. Sandbags are piled next to the dirt, extending a

hundred meters or so to the school building.

“...The school has turned into a Gate?!”

The worm is pouring out in a violent, muddy river from the wide student entrance. Under its glow, to the left, I can see something. A small kiddie chair, pushing with all its might against one of the large aluminum double doors.

“Souta?!”

“Suzume?!”

The foul red river is flowing right over my head. The sludge under my feet is a slimy reflection of its glow.

“The key...!” Souta shouts, still pushing the door. The glow of the worm glints off something halfway between me and the entrance. It’s the old key that should have been hanging around his neck, now half buried in the mud. I run over and scoop it up in my right hand. I keep running to where Souta is. My feet slip, and I fall sideways into the mud, but I stand up right away and arch my body over him, pushing the edge of the aluminum door with my free hand.

“Suzume!” He looks up angrily as he, too, pushes the edge of the door with the chair’s seat. “Aren’t you afraid of dying?!”

“No!”

He gasps. But I’m really not. I haven’t been afraid of death for a long time. Beneath my left hand, the door rattles uncannily, like someone on the other side who doesn’t understand words is pushing back for no good reason. My right hand is on the ground, gripping the key tight, mud and all.

“The key—,” Souta says, pushing with all his might. “The current pushed me back, and it flew off. I couldn’t reach it. I’m so grateful you came—”

He plants his three legs firmly and pushes. I pour my energy into my left arm, and little by little, we push the door closed. The eruption narrows. Just a little more. I look up at the worm and keep pushing.

“Oh no!”

The worm has become a reddish-bronze flower blossoming across the sky. I glance at the schoolyard. Countless golden threads are stretching up and up

toward it. It's sucking energy from the ground. The flower grows heavy and begins to drift slowly toward the earth.

"Suzume, you lock it!" Souta screams from below my chest.

"Me?!"

"We're out of time! Close your eyes and think of the people who lived here!"

"What?!"

"That will make the lock appear!"

"Easy for you to say—"

I look at him. Still staring at the door, he says earnestly, "I'm begging you! I can't do anything—I couldn't do anything in this body...! Please close your eyes!"

The desperation in his words is like a punch to the gut. I shut my eyes. *Now what? Think about the people who lived here? How?*

"Imagine what this place used to look like. The people who must have lived here. Their feelings. If you imagine it, you'll hear their voices!"

What this place used to look like. I try to imagine it. The school surrounded by mountains. The big schoolyard bright with sun. Two faucets for drinking water on either side of the entrance, like at my school. In this place now buried under dirt, students in tracksuits must have drunk water from those faucets. Chika. Her openhearted smile. The water from the faucets is sweet and cold. *"Get rid of that sunburn for good!"* she says, laughing with a friend. *"Good morning."* This place must have been full of energy at the start of the day. *"Good morning, good morning, good morning."* I can hear the voices. Students dragging their feet on test days, spreading rumors about teachers, planning to ask out their crush. I can see the colors. A different color tracksuit for each of the three grades. White sailor uniforms that reflect the morning sun. Navy-blue skirts hiked up above the knees. Bright-white shirts with the first and second buttons undone, secretly dyed hair.

"O Divine Gods who dwell beneath this land."

Souta is intoning that same mysterious, melodic string of words.

“You have long protected us for generations. Your mountains and rivers that we have long called our own—”

“...!”

The key in my right hand is growing warm. It takes on a blue glow. A bundle of blue light rises from the key and gathers on the aluminum door. A glowing keyhole opens immediately next to my left hand, which is still pushing the edge of the door.

“Now!” Souta screams, and I thrust the key into the light.

“We respectfully return them to you!”

As he cries out the words, I instinctively turn the key and feel something click into place. The window in the door shatters and falls onto our backs. There’s a sound like a bubble swelling and bursting, and above our heads, the worm recoils and breaks apart. The air feels suddenly light, like a leaden rain cloud has been blown away.

A few seconds later, rain sheets down, refracting the light in complex patterns and washing the ruins around us in a quick shower.

“Haah, haah, haah...”

I sit in the mud, catching my breath and looking up at the sky. A scattering of stars has come out. Night insects are singing. The lush smell of summer foliage fills the air. The school entrance is quiet once again. Abandoned and silently decaying. Next to me, Souta lets out two puffs of breath.

“Huh?”

“Ha-ha...ha-ha-ha-ha!”

He’s laughing, a full-bellied, raucous laugh. With a clatter, he turns toward me.

“You did it, Suzume. You stopped the earthquake!”

“I did...?”

I stopped an earthquake? Me?

“Really...?”

A hot wave of emotion washes up from my stomach, rising into a smile on my face.

“...I can’t believe it! We did it, we did it!”

Souta is smiling, too. He’s completely covered in mud. So are my clothes, and probably my face. It’s like proof of what we’ve just done, and I’m proud, excited, and happy to be as dirty as I am.

“Aren’t we amazing?” I ask, bringing my face right up to Souta’s. I can see his expression in the two carved eyes on his backrest. I can sense the kindness in it.

“Suzume amazing!” a childish voice says nearby.

“Huh?”

I glance reflexively toward it. A short distance away in the dim schoolyard, I make out a small white form. Its round yellow eyes are looking at me. Slowly swishing its long tail, the white kitten opens its mouth.

“More Gates will open,” it says.

“The Keystone!”

Souta lunges toward it, but Daijin has already vanished into the darkness.

“...Did the cat open that door?” I whisper with a shaky breath. Souta keeps staring into the darkness after it.

Thanks to You, I’m a Magician

“—You’re in Ehime?”

I can hear Tamaki’s shock over the phone.

“Wait just a second now, Suzume!”

Behind her disbelieving voice, I can faintly hear other phones ringing and low voices talking. It’s almost nine at night, but Tamaki is still at the fishing cooperative office.

“But you told me you were staying at Aya’s house last night!”

“Um, well, I suddenly had the idea to go on a little trip...,” I say as cheerfully as

I can, adding a laugh at the end.

“How can you laugh about this?!” she snaps. I can see her in my mind’s eye. She’s in that retro cooperative building I visited once on a school trip, sitting at her gray desk, holding the phone and frowning anxiously.

“You’ll come back tomorrow, won’t you? Where are you staying tonight?”

“Don’t worry—I have enough savings to pay for a room!”

“That’s not what I’m asking!”

In the background, I hear someone say, *“Minoru, we’re going drinking.”* *“You go ahead. I’m going to invite Tamaki.”* I imagine Minoru, too. The men from the fishing cooperative are watching Tamaki get mad and making stupid jokes about how I’m in my rebellious phase.

“The point is, I need you to tell me where you’re staying tonight. A hotel? An inn? You’re really alone, right? You’re not with someone I don’t know?”

Click. I reflexively hang up. Oh, I can just see it. She’s looking at the picture of me as a little girl that she keeps on her desk and sighing. I heave a dramatic sigh myself. If I leave things like this, worst case scenario, she might call the police. *Why, oh why didn’t I come up with a better alibi yesterday? Who put things off and left me in this position?* Past me, of course. *Now, now, supporting the mental health of your caregiver is a child’s duty,* I tell myself as I type out a message in LINE.

“Sorry for hanging up on you!” Send.

“I’m doing great!” Send.

“I’ll be home soon!” Send.

“Don’t worry about me!” Send.

Cute sticker of a cat bowing its head in apology. Send.

Bam, bam, bam. Five “message read” notifications appear. The speed of her response weighs on me. I heave another tired sigh.

Knock, knock! Without warning, someone bangs on the door right next to me.

“Yes?” I stand up straight and open the door.

“Dinner is served!” says Chika. She’s dressed in her inn uniform as she hands me my tray of food with a smile.

When I emerged from the blockaded road covered in mud and carrying the kiddie chair, Chika was kind enough not to ask too many questions. She did ask if I had a place to stay that night. When I answered honestly that I was looking for one, she smiled and said, “This is your lucky day! My family runs an inn. You must have been destined stay with us tonight!”

As she sped down the road, she scolded me to hold on tighter, not even caring if I got mud all over her school tracksuit. I clung tight and stared at the back of her neck, suddenly realizing how scared she must have been waiting alone on that dark road. I apologized about ten times.

She also granted my most ardent wish—to finally take a bath. I scrubbed off all the mud and sweat and whatever else was stuck to me in the inn’s roomy shared bathing area, then submerged myself in the deep, hot water. As predicted, several patches of skin were not happy. I was beyond the point of knowing whether they were sunburns or scrapes. I washed my uniform in a corner, put on the crisp, pale-pink *yukata* Chika was kind enough to lend me, and went to the room she had set up for me. Now she was bringing me my dinner on a tray.

“Oh, wow, thank you!” I say, my eyes growing hot behind the lids. At the same moment, I realize I’m so hungry it hurts.

“Do you mind if I eat here with you?” Chika asks.

“Oh, no, of course not!” I say, overjoyed. But... “Only, sorry, can you wait just one second?”

I shut the door, cross the little entryway with a sink in a single step, and open the noisy sliding door to the main room. Souta, who’s standing in the middle of the room, looks up at me.

“What should I do?” I ask him.

“You two eat together,” he says. I can hear the smile in his voice. “It seems I don’t get hungry in this body.”

He walks over to a corner of the large room and turns toward the wall.

“Don’t worry about me.”

Reassured by his cheerful tone, I tell Chika to come in.

Chika tells me that the huge fish practically falling off the sides of our plates is salt-grilled largehead hairtail. The skin makes an appetizing crackle when I break it open with my chopsticks, while steam rose from the fluffy white flesh. I take a big piece and set it on my rice bowl, then carry it to my mouth with some of the rice.

“This is so good...!” I say despite myself. It is really, truly delicious. As the light, sweet flavor of the fat spreads through my mouth, I can tell my whole body is rejoicing. Before I realize what’s happening, something hot is spilling from my eyes.

“Suzume, are you crying?!”

“It’s just so delicious...”

Chika laughs happily. We push our trays together and sit across from each other as we eat.

“You really must have been hungry,” Chika says, sounding impressed. “We had some unexpected guests tonight, so it took me longer than usual to bring up dinner. I’m sorry!”

“What?! No, please don’t apologize!” I say, suddenly polite in the face of her unbelievable hospitality. “I’m the one who should apologize. Not only am I taking up a room, you even let me use the bath, gave me a *yukata*, and fed me!”

“It’s nothing, honestly. This is what my family does for a living.”

She explains that the inn is a family business, and while they have hired help now and then, it’s basically run by her, her parents, and her kid brother, who’s still in elementary school. On days like today when there are lots of guests, Chika puts on a uniform and helps serve. By this time of night, just before ten, the dinner service is almost done, and she can finally take a break.

The sashimi is yellowtail, and the side dish is simmered taro root. The light miso soup full of vegetables has a delicate flavor, different from what I’m used

to. I tell her I've never tasted anything like it, and she says it's because they use barley miso. I finally feel like I'm in a different part of Japan.

My phone dings.

"Ah!" I blurt out as I check the sender.

"Who's it from?"

"My aunt. Sorry, I need to read this."

I open the message. *Ugh*. It's so long it fills the whole screen.

"Suzume, I don't want you to think I'm nagging, but I thought about it for a long time and decided I wanted to tell you some things. I hope you read till the end. First, I want you to understand that you're still a child. You're underage. I think you're a responsible person, but a seventeen-year-old is still a child in the eyes of the world, and in an economic and physical sense. You're a minor, and while I'm sure there are many ways to look at it, I'm still your guardian—"

Ding!

"Whoa!"

"PS, I'm not mad at you. I'm just confused and worried. Why did you go on a trip all of a sudden without telling me anything? Why Ehime? You've never mentioned Ehime, and as far as I know, you don't necessarily—"

Sigh. I turn my phone over and set it on the tatami mat as if that will keep it away from me. I'll read the rest tomorrow.

"I wish she would hurry up and get a boyfriend or something," I mutter.

"Your aunt is single? How old is she?"

"Around forty, I think." I remember her birthday party the month before last. She always cries when I sing "Happy Birthday." "She's really beautiful, though."

I think of her long eyelashes and of how easily she cries. I pick up a piece of taro root and set it on my rice.

"It's just the two of us living together. She's my guardian," I say before putting the taro root and rice in my mouth.

"That sounds complicated."

“Not at all!” I swallow the savory taro. “But lately I’ve started to wonder if I’m taking up all her free time.”

“No way!” Chika says, giggling. “That’s the line her ex should say!”

“You know, you’re right!”

Now that I think about it, Chika’s got a point. I feel somehow lighter. “I wish she would be more hands off!” I say, laughing.

“I feel you!”

Crap. Souta heard all of that. It’s only as I’m finishing my mandarin orange gelatin dessert that I realize he’s in the room with us, and I break out in a cold sweat.

After dinner, I go with Chika to the kitchen to thank her family (her parents smile and say the same thing she did: “It’s our job!”). I help her wash the mountain of dishes and scrub the bathing area with a deck brush. While we’re working, she asks if I’ve ever dated anyone. I tell her no, which is the truth. “You’re better off that way. Guys are nothing but trouble,” she complains cheerfully. She tells me she’s just started dating someone, but he’s always getting jealous even though he hardly ever texts her, and he’s constantly saying he wants to go somewhere they can be alone, when in fact there’s nothing *but* places to be alone around here. She says it’s a real hassle, though she sounds happy as she talks. When we’re done with chores, the whole family drinks iced herbal tea prepared by Chika’s mom, and we joke around some more. By the time we slip into the futons laid out in my room, it’s almost two in the morning.

“Thanks to you, I got to visit that place for the first time in ages,” Chika says sleepily, as if she’s just remembered.

“Really?”

“I went to junior high in that village.”

She must mean the abandoned school, and my heart does a little jump.

She continues quietly. “There was a landslide a few years back, and the whole village was abandoned.”

“.....”

“Hey, Suzume?” she says. Her voice is gentle but firm, like she’s made up her mind to say something. “What were you doing back there, getting all muddy? What is that chair you bring around with you?”

She stops staring at the ceiling and turns to look at me.

“Who are you?”

“Um...”

The electric lights in the room are out. The soft light of the lantern next to our pillow filters through the Japanese paper and glints yellowish off her large eyes. Behind me, Souta is standing still against the wall like a proper chair. I feel his presence there as I search for the right words.

“That chair—is a keepsake from my mom. But now...”

What should I say? What can I say? I don’t want to lie, but...

“...I’m sorry. I can’t really explain.”

I try hard to think of something, but that’s all that comes out. Chika looks at me silently. Suddenly, a smile crosses over her face, and she lets out a long breath.

“You must be a magician with all those secrets,” she jokes before rolling onto her back and closing her eyes.

“But you know, for some reason, I get the feeling you’re doing something important,” she says in a kind voice.

“...!”

I almost start crying again. Unable to lie still, I sit up in my futon.

“Thank you, Chika. You’re right—what I’m doing is important. I think so, too!”

I’m talking to Souta, against the wall behind me. *You’re doing something important. No one knows, and no one sees, but you’re fighting.*

I think back to him all alone, struggling to shut that door in the ruins. It was only yesterday, but it feels like years ago. *Thanks to you, I’ve already crossed the sea and been mistaken for a magician. But I’ve also managed to do something very important.*

“Don’t toot your own horn!” Chika laughs. We smile together, like we’ve been doing ever since we met.



Crossing the Strait

“Some people just aren’t morning people...,” I complain with a sigh as I brush the kinks out of my hair using the brush Chika lent me.

“Who are you talking about? Your boyfriend?”

“I told you I don’t have a boyfriend! It was just a general statement.”

Sometimes I wish I had a tidy, short haircut like Chika, but a memory of my mom praising my long hair as a child gets in the way, and I can’t bring myself to cut it.

Chika is brushing her teeth next to me. “When that happens,”—she spits out a mouthful of water—“if you kiss them, they’ll wake up!”

She smiles knowingly. *She sure can turn everything into a brag*, I think, more impressed than annoyed.

“I’ve got to take a shower and get ready for school. You eat breakfast!” Chika says.

As I’m enjoying another fantastic free meal in the dining room, her little brother, who’s eating with me, suddenly says, “Hey, look! This is amazing!”

I glance at the TV tuned to the morning news and accidentally inhale a mouthful of rice. Above a caption reading “*Cat spotted on Akashi Kaikyo Bridge!*” is an image of the big white suspension bridge. The camera zooms in. A white kitten is strolling casually along one of the bridge’s thick cables. The reporter is narrating in a tone that says, *This is a harmless, entertaining news piece.*

“It’s unclear how this cat got onto the bridge, but it certainly is bold! A video of the cat recorded inadvertently by a dash cam is trending on social media—”

“Souta, look, it’s Daijin!” I say after running back to my room. I pick up the kiddie chair and shake it up and down. “Come on, wake up already!”

Like yesterday, all I’ve gotten in response to multiple *good mornings* is soft snores and that same old warmth. Souta refuses to wake up. I shake him, then turn him upside down, then tap him, then set him back on the tatami and remove my hands. The chair topples over like a lifeless lump of wood. *This isn’t working.*

“Dammit!”

“If you kiss them, they’ll wake up.” Chika’s knowing voice comes back to me. Maybe... Maybe that wasn’t just a boast. What if it’s a practical little trick to wake people up that a late bloomer like me just doesn’t know about? I grab both sides of the seat and bring my lips toward Souta’s face—well, toward the backrest serving as his face. *My first kiss*, I think as my lips approach the wood. I close my eyes. *My very first kiss...*

“...But he doesn’t have a mouth,” I mumble, opening my eyes. That wasn’t a very good tip.

“Suzume?”

Suddenly, Souta is talking to me. I pull my face away. He takes two noisy steps backward.

“Good morning. Is something the matter?” he says coolly. My cheeks flame, like a hot wind has just blown over them.

“Look at this! It’s Daijin! What in the world is that cat trying to do?!”

The slow-to-wake kiddie chair stares at the cat prancing over the suspension bridge. *What does it think it's doing first thing in the morning?!* Apparently trying to soothe my anger, Souta says calmly, "Gods are capricious by nature."

"Gods?"

"The Akashi Kaikyo Bridge crosses the strait to Kobe. We have to hurry—"

"Suzumeee, you're leaving soon, right?" Chika says from outside the room, knocking on the door. "Have you changed yet?"

"That looks much better on you than on me!" Chika says, looking me over from head to toe like she did when we first met. I'm wearing beige culottes, a white T-shirt, and an oversize jean jacket. The kiddie chair and my school uniform are in a big sports bag. My hair, which I never did manage to get brushed out, is in a single braid pulled forward over one shoulder. Chika nods approvingly.

"You stand out in your uniform carrying nothing but that chair. You can keep those clothes and the bag."

"Chika..." My nose tingles at her casual, natural generosity. "How can I ever repay you for this?"

"Don't worry about that! Just come visit again."

Dressed in her sailor uniform, she hugs me in the entryway to the inn.

"I'll come—I promise...!"

I sniffle and hug her tight. She already feels like my best friend. An hour later, as I'm walking along, I suddenly catch the fresh, citrusy smell of the clothes I'm wearing. *Ah, that's the smell of Chika*, I think with a pang.

* * *

"Can't we take the bus?" Souta asks, sounding flummoxed as he looks up at the sky.

"...The next bus is in six hours," I say, checking the faded schedule on the wall.

With a loud splash, a pile of leaves that must have accumulated on the corrugated roof above us comes tumbling down in a rush of water. We huddle

in the dim bus-stop hut, breathing in the smell of water and staring hopelessly at the rain.

After we left Chika and came down the mountain to a road with a decent amount of traffic, we tried hitchhiking. When I looked up the nearest train station on my phone, it turned out to be fairly far away, which meant the shortest route to Kobe was by car. I stood on the edge of the road, next to the rice fields with their profusion of red cluster amaryllis, and timidly stuck out my thumb at passing cars.

“Suzume, you have to show a little more enthusiasm. Wave your arms or something,” Souta said from inside the bag after about five cars ignored me.

“What if you went out and stood on the road? Someone might stop out of shock,” I quipped back pointlessly. But the more I thought about it, even if a car did stop for me, a teenage girl, it might not be the kind of car I should get into. Just as I began to reconsider, lightning flashed, rain started pouring down, and I bolted for a nearby bus stop.

“Suzume?”

I’m sitting on the bench in the bus stop nodding off a little, thinking about how tree frogs must have feelings since they sing for joy in the rain, when Souta quietly says my name. He’s almost whispering, like he doesn’t want to disturb the sound of the raindrops.

“What?”

“...This chair is a memento of your mother?”

“Oh... Um, yes.”

The sluggish whiz of tires on a wet road interrupts the frog song again. Cars occasionally pass the bus stop, but no pedestrians.

“Why does it only have three legs?”

“Um...I don’t remember very well, because I was little, but...” The feeling of searching for a distant memory is like being in someone else’s dream. The world in the dream is governed by slightly different rules, and the plot won’t move forward.

“A long time ago, when I was in preschool, I lost the chair... I searched all over for it...and I think...when I found it, one leg was missing.”

“That’s—”

The noise of an approaching car interrupts Souta. It’s a strange noise, like the car that just passed is backing up in its lane. I pick up the chair, which is leaning out of the hut to see, and just then a blue minivan really does back into view and stop in front of us, its hazard lights flashing. The side window reflecting the rainy sky rolls down with a quiet whir.

“Where you headed?”

The person in the driver’s seat asking the question is a woman in light-colored sunglasses with loosely curled chestnut hair.

“You can sit there all day, but no bus is gonna come.”

The inside of a car always smells like its owner’s house. This car, owned by a woman who says her name is Rumi, smells like grown-up perfume, like city lights at night, and also, faintly and nostalgically, like cookies. I feel antsy, like I’ve accidentally wandered into a stranger’s house. I glance out at the glistening, rainy landscape, the raindrops sliding down the windshield, the plump white fingers resting on the steering wheel, then back at the raindrops on the glass.

“Well, I couldn’t just leave you there, sitting at a bus stop that hasn’t been in service for ages,” she says. “But it sounds nice, traveling by yourself. You want me to drop you in downtown Kobe?”

“Yes, please!” I answer, my voice cracking from nervousness.

“It’s Suzume, right?”

“Yes!”

“I’m on my way home from taking the little ones to see their grandma in Matsuyama.”

She glances in the baby mirror next to the rearview mirror. The reflection shows two car seats in the back, each with a child strapped in. They look the same age, have identical features, and are both sleeping with serious expressions.

“Twins. Four years old. Hana and Sora,” she says.

“Wow, twins?”

“They’re naughty little critters. Every day is a battle,” she says, smiling. “Anyway, you got lucky, because I’m headed for Kobe.”

“Yes, I’m very grateful!”

I bow my head, and the woman giggles.

“Relax, I’m not gonna bite your head off.”

Through her sunglasses, I can see her eyes narrow in a smile. I furtively let out the breath I’ve been holding and steal another glance at her as she drives. Her flared sleeves are the color of mustard, and her arms beneath them are so white they look like they’ve never seen the sun. Everything about her looks soft and plump. The delicate gold jewelry around her neck and wrists is beautiful against her rounded white figure. *She’s pretty sexy*, I think. *Not quite as sexy as Tamaki, though. She’s alluring but also reliable*— Just then, I hear a zipper coming undone behind me and turn around.

“—!”

My bag, which is squeezed between the two car seats (Rumi told me to put it there), is being slowly opened by the twins, who are now awake. The bag flops open, exposing the face of the kiddie chair.

“Mommy, look!”

“Look, Mommy!”

The twins start slapping Souta’s face from either side. I silently scream. Souta is lurching back and forth, at the children’s mercy.

“Stop that this instant!” Rumi shouts, glaring into the baby mirror. “Do. Not. Touch. Other people’s things!”

“Yes, Mommy,” the twins respond automatically.

“Sorry,” Rumi says to me.

“No, it’s completely fine,” I say, smiling awkwardly. I glance at the back seat. The twins are examining Souta, their noses practically touching him. *Oh no*.

“...They seem really interested in that,” Rumi says.

“Oh, it’s just an ordinary kiddie chair...”

“Ah, I see...,” Rumi says. She focuses on me, then back on the mirror. “Yep, still looking at it...”

You can survive this, Souta! I think, silently cheering him on as the twins start messing with him again.

The car is zooming down an expressway that runs along a valley. We travel through a few tunnels and over a few bridges. The sky brightens and darkens; the rain turns to mist and then to a downpour. Before I know it, the twins are fast asleep again. I check my feeds over and over, but Daijin hasn’t shown up since the bridge. Finally, the green mountains open onto a distant view of the Onaruto Bridge. White mist covers the sea, and crossing it feels like driving over clouds.

We arrive on Awaji Island, where another endless succession of mountains and tunnels awaits. Finally, sunbeams break through the clouds and light up the leaves all around us. At last, the car approaches the enormous bridge I saw on TV that morning. For a moment, I’m spellbound by the enormity of the Akashi Kaikyo Bridge towers glittering in the sun. The sea is like an endless blue carpet lit up by sunshine.

I open a map on my phone; we’ve left Shikoku and are about to enter Kobe. When I click on the travel log, the map zooms out to show about a third of the Japanese archipelago. I’m 588 kilometers from home. The unease of getting farther and farther away with no one to depend on blends with the excitement of having come this far on my own. My heart beats faster. It’s like we’re entering the next level of a game. On the far end of the bridge, rows of densely packed buildings stretch to the horizon.

“Be careful not to spill that!”

We pick up hamburgers at a drive-through downtown and stop in the parking lot to have a late lunch.

“You two better not get those car seats dirty!”

“We know!”

“We know!”

Whenever Rumi scolds the twins, they always answer back before she’s fully finished her sentence. I chew my hamburger in the passenger seat and nervously watch the drama unfold. Souta is now serving as a table for the twins. As I feared, they are sprinkling crumbs on him, dropping pieces of mayonnaise-covered lettuce on him, and scattering their greasy french fries on him. The older twin slams her full cup of orange juice down on the chair. Just as I’m sure it’s going to fall over, the chair adjusts its balance, preventing the juice from spilling.

“Wha—?!”

What are you doing, Souta?! The twins stare suspiciously at the chair. The younger twin hurls down his cup of juice. The chair jumps, and the cup bounces and settles safely in an upright position. The twins look on with growing suspicion. Souta is calm and silent. *What kind of game is he playing?!*

“I never noticed that before,” Rumi says out of the blue.

“What?”

“You can see the amusement park from here.”

“There’s an amusement park?”

“Yeah, over there in the woods.”

I follow her gaze past the buildings and electrical wires to a Ferris wheel on the side of a mountain. The tiny curves look perfect against the stylish, showy cityscape of Kobe.

“That place was always packed when it was open. We went there a lot when I was little.”

Rumi takes a bite of her hamburger and squints.

“Then business dried up, and about ten years ago, it closed. I guess they couldn’t afford to tear it down, so it’s just crumbling out there. You can see it from all over the city, and every time I do, it makes me a little sad.”

Rumi takes a sip of cola from her paper cup and mumbles to herself that there are more and more lonely places like that these days.

Lonely places. I repeat the words to myself. It occurs to me that those are exactly the kinds of places I've been seeing on this six-hundred-kilometer journey.

A phone dings. *Crap, I forgot to reply to Tamaki,* I think, but it turns out to be Rumi's. She reaches out to a holder next to the steering wheel and taps the screen.

"Oh no!" she says.

"What's the matter?"

"I was planning to drop the twins off at their day care, but it looks like they're closing because some kids have fevers— Stop that!" she abruptly shouts at the baby mirror.

The twins, who had been assembling their empty hamburger boxes, paper cups, and plastic containers into a Jenga-like tower, quickly sit back in their car seats.

"I swear," Rumi sighs, looking back at her phone. "I've got to open tonight, so I'd better find someone to watch the twins... Hey, I know!"

She turns to me like she's had a flash of inspiration.

"Huh? Me?!" I ask, pointing to myself.

The Four of Us Make Some Memories

"Um, uh, what should we play?"

"Cooking!"

"I wanna make curry!"

Before I even finish my question, the twins—Hana, the sister, and Sora, the brother—have answered. I feel like they're informing me that they already know all the fun things in the world and that we'll be going through them one by one.

We're in Rumi's house on the corner of an old shopping arcade, on the second floor, in the kids' room. Rumi is getting ready to open the bar

downstairs. The twins set out plastic vegetables on a table with practiced motions and grasp their plastic knives.

“On your mark, get set...go!” Hana says.

Bam-bam-bam! They start chopping vegetables with startling enthusiasm. The plastic vegetables are held together by Velcro, and with each chop, the pieces come flying at my face. I throw my hands up in defense. “Curry’s done!” says Sora.

“ “Time to eat!” ” they call out, and they bite into their plastic vegetables in unison.

“No, no, no!” I say, frantically trying to stop them from actually eating plastic.

“Now this one!” Hana announces, apparently declaring the vegetable game is done, and hands me a box of tissues.

“Huh?”

“Whoever takes all the tissues out first wins. On your mark, get set...”

“Go!” The twins start tearing tissues out of their boxes, and white debris fills the room like confetti exploding from enormous party crackers.

“No, stop!” I shout frantically. As I rush around collecting the unused tissues and folding them neatly to put back in their boxes, Hana claps a hand on my back.

“You’re Mount Fuji!”

“Huh?”

They pull me to the center of the room. “On your mark...,” says Sora. I have a bad feeling about this.

“Go!”

They both charge into me and try to scramble up me like a mountain. Hana uses my kneecap as a scaffold while Sora grabs my right shoulder. Hana outdoes him by placing her foot on my left shoulder. At the same time, they both grab my head. *Ow!* I stand firm, trying not to fall over as they conquer my shoulders.

I’m panting, hands and feet planted on the floor, as the twins run around me

like a perpetual motion machine and shout, “Wait, wait!”

“I may not be cut out for this...,” I mutter. One of them vaults off my back while the other gives chase, leaping up after them. I groan.

“I suppose I have no choice,” a voice says above my head. I look up in surprise and see that the sports bag, which I’d set on the desk, is wiggling. A second later, the kiddie chair jumps onto the floor.

“I”

The twins freeze. They are staring wide-eyed at the chair, which has righted itself.

“...Hey, what are you do—?”

I’m so upset I can’t even say, *Souta, what do you think you’re doing?!* As I watch, he calmly strides forward.

“L-look, kids, isn’t this cool? It’s a very special toy,” I say desperately. Souta stops in front of Hana, bends his knee like a loyal white horse in a fairy tale, and tilts his seat toward her. Hana climbs on like she can’t help herself. He raises one leg like he’s neighing, then begins to trot forward with Hana on the seat. A second later, the twins burst out laughing.

“Hey, me next!” Sora says, chasing after his sister. The kiddie chair gives them rides in turn, tap-tap-tapping around the room. They’re laughing and screaming like it’s the most fun thing in the world.

I wonder...does Souta like kids? As I watch his rhythmical motion, I feel myself getting excited, too.

“Can I be next, Souta?”

“No way!”

“It talked!”

Oops. We fall silent. Hana steps fearfully away from the chair. *Crap.* I frantically try to think of an explanation.

“Um, uh, it’s amazing, isn’t it?! It’s a chair-shaped robot with the latest AI technology...”

There are limits to what even a four-year-old will believe. My voice trails off. And then...

“What’s its name?” Hana asks, eyes glittering.

“Name? Oh, um, Souta...”

“Souta! Cool!”

The twins get down on all fours and crawl up to the chair like they know all about AI.

“Souta, what’s the weather going to be tomorrow?”

“Souta, play music!”

“Souta, let’s play word games!”

“Souta, what are the stock prices?”

They’re competing to ask him questions as if he’s Siri.

“Um, Souta’s not that smart!” I hurry to tell them.

“What did you say, Suzume?” Souta swivels toward me.

“It talked again!” the twins shout. Outside the windows, it’s already dark. *Years from now, when these kids have grown up..., I think, watching them romp around the room with Souta, how will they remember this day? When they’re my age, how will think back on it? As typical childish fancy? As a mysterious phenomenon they can’t explain? One day, will their childhood memories fade into a hazy dream? Whatever the answer, I hope they remember this as the day they played with two new friends.*



I learn later that while I’m babysitting the twins, Tamaki is deciding to follow me to Kobe (and ultimately to Tokyo).

“...She ran away?” Minoru mutters. He’s driving the two of them back to the fishing cooperative office after visiting the homes of associated fishermen. He glances at Tamaki. She’s seemed down for the past two days.

“I remember when I was a kid like her,” he says, trying to sound encouraging.

“You know how teenagers are, always feeling cramped at home in their small town. So—”

“Don’t compare yourself to her,” Tamaki breaks in coldly.

“Oh, right...,” he says quietly and apologetically, the smile still pasted to his face with its five o’clock shadow. The poor guy still doesn’t know how to talk to Tamaki. It’s hard to tell what will set her off, especially when it comes to her relationship with me. She sighs aggressively. There’s still no “message read” notification on the LINE message she sent me.

In a voice too loud to be talking to herself but too rude to be complaining to a coworker, she says, “I’ve asked a hundred times, but she won’t give me a straight answer about where she plans to go or what she’s upset about... Hell, she won’t even tell me where she’s staying tonight.”

“Um, have you tried tracking the GPS on her phone?”

“Huh?”

“You know, those apps young couples install so they always know where the other person is.”

“I don’t have anything like that.”

“Then...,” he says, pausing to think. Everyone besides Tamaki knows how he feels about her. “Could you look at her bank account? It should show the purchases she’s made with her phone... Kids buy everything with their phones these days, right?”

Minoru parks in the lot next to the harbor, pulls the parking brake, and turns to Tamaki, who is intently doing something on her phone.

“...Did you find anything out?”

“She’s in Kobe,” Tamaki says, staring at the white glow of her screen. The details of the money I’ve spent over the past three days are all there. The ferry ticket, the bread I bought from the vending machine, the tickets from various stations in Ehime, the hamburger in Kobe... Thanks to a single unnecessary comment from Minoru, the cat is out of the bag.

“Kobe! That’s pretty far...”

“I can’t let her go any farther alone,” Tamaki whispers resolutely.

Minoru gazes at her lovely face illuminated by the bluish-white streetlights along the wharf and says, like he’s confessing his love to her (though his chances are zilch), “Um, Tamaki? If there’s anything I can do, anything at all—”

“Minoru.”

“Yes!”

“I’m going to take some time off work starting tomorrow. I know you’re busy, but could you cover for me for a few days?”

“Okay... Then I’ll take off a few days, too...”

“What are you talking about?” she says, finally looking up from her phone to glare at him. “You’re covering for me. You have to go to work.”

“Oh, right...,” he says miserably.

From my perspective, at this stage Minoru is just a boring old guy spinning his wheels and getting in my way. (Later he says he got shivers from being glared at by such a beautiful woman. He sounds happy about it, too, which is pretty sketchy if you ask me.) But his saving grace is that he always wants Tamaki to be happy, and that’s why I root for him anyway.



“Suzume, can you come down here?” Rumi shouts, and I head downstairs. She’s waiting in the little kitchen behind her shop. She has on a bright-red dress, and her hair is curled and pinned up to reveal the nape of her neck. Her white skin is tinted subtly with blush, her eyelashes are curled, and her lips are liberally coated with brilliant gloss.

“You look gorgeous!” I say, gaping.

“Bet you hardly recognize me.” She giggles. “Are the little tykes okay?” she asks, pointing upstairs.

“I tired them out playing, and now they’re passed out.”

They were snoring when I left, each still gripping one side of Souta.

“Great, then maybe you can help me out down here. It doesn’t get this

crowded very often.” She sighs before slipping through the curtain into the shop. I scurry after her.

“Whoa!”

The shop is about thirty square meters, and it’s packed. A group of older men are chatting at the bar while a red-faced guy with his tie loosened is belting out karaoke with some friends in a booth. A glittering disco ball on the ceiling tosses colorful streaks around the room. I’m looking at a karaoke bar for the first time in my life. And Rumi is the owner and proprietor of this establishment located in the corner of the shopping arcade.

“*This* is the new help, Rumi?!”

“Yep!”

“You’re kidding me!”

Rumi dashes over to a customer, leaving a younger woman with long black hair alone behind the counter. She looks at me with deep unease. I’m clearly not wearing any makeup, and I still have on the culottes and faded jean jacket Chika gave me. Your typical teenage girl, weekend edition.

“...You can stay back here,” she says.

“...Okay.”

Despite this kindness, my eyes are spinning with everything I have to do. I’ve never had a job before. Rumi, the long-haired woman, and I are the only employees serving the packed room of constantly changing guests. I frantically wash the glasses and plates, which keep running out, and desperately pile dried tuna cubes and squid shreds on plates to make the side dish combo. I almost burn myself on the hand towels as I take them out of the warming machine and nearly break down crying when the long-haired woman asks me for wineglasses but I can’t figure out which ones they are. The trips I have to make between the bar and the back room three meters away seem infinite. I feel like I’ve been tossed into a washing machine to be spun around and around until the end of time. Meanwhile, the customers sing zillions of songs, and I don’t recognize a single one. I think they’re all pop songs from a bygone era, but I’m shocked by lines about laser-beam gazes meeting in the night sky to draw pictures of love

(*What on earth kind of romance is that?*) and confused by the story of a man who wants to leave his boring old village so he can raise dogies in Tokyo (*What does that even mean?*). When I hear a lyric claim “*I had too much to drink. And it was all your fault,*” I can’t help feeling the singer should take a little more responsibility for their decisions. I have no idea what karaoke bars are all about, but I can tell that the people singing their hearts out at Rumi’s place are genuinely having a ball.

“What’s a kid like you doing here?!”

I’m efficiently folding hand towels at the far end of the bar when a middle-aged woman in a leopard-print blouse starts talking to me.

“How about having a drink with your auntie?” she suggests.

“No, sing a duet with your uncle instead!” the middle-aged man sitting next to her breaks in. He’s got a shaved head.

“Chasing schoolgirls as usual,” the woman snaps.

“Go easy on me,” he says with an evil cackle. They sound like some kind of married-couple comedy duo. As I’m trying to decide how to get myself out of this sticky situation, the black-haired woman walks jauntily back to the bar with a glass in each hand.

“Why, thank you, I’d love a drink!” she says, clinking the glasses.

“You’re so pushy, Miki—how can I say no?” the man grumbles.

“I guess you’ll do,” sighs the woman.

“I’ll do? What’s that supposed to mean? I’m tempted to keep this bottle for myself!”

Miki, Rumi’s sole employee, smiles and throws me a wink. It takes me a few seconds to realize she’s just saved me. I’m starting to understand the loose rules of this grown-up social world. They get drunk; they sing; they shout and blow off steam; they pretend to be thoughtless. But in truth, they’re looking out for one another. I think I like this place.

“Mr. Daijin, you’re so generous!”

There’s a sudden burst of applause from the booth at the back. “Drinks all

around!” a chorus of men and women cry happily. I glance over—and can’t believe my eyes.

“What a thoughtful fellow!”

“I knew it the moment I saw you!”

Sitting calmly in the center of this uproar is none other than *the* Daijin.

“Won’t you have a drink yourself, Mr. Daijin?”

“Your company must be doing well!”

Everyone is talking to the white kitten. “I must be seeing things,” I mutter to myself. I sidle up to Miki, who’s sitting at the bar.

“Um, excuse me, over there...,” I whisper into her ear, referring to the cat.

She turns in the direction I’m looking.

“Oh, that gentleman’s a first timer.”

“G-gentleman?” I repeat. Miki smiles.

“He’s a little quiet, but the regulars sure have taken to him. He seems wealthy, but he’s got class, too...”

“Um, uh, um... Doesn’t he look kind of like...a cat?” I ask timidly. The white kitten is sitting in the middle of the booth with one leg up, licking its crotch exactly like a cat.

“A cat? You think so?” Miki says, flushing slightly, like she’s captivated by the handsome stranger. “I think he looks refined. Quite the catch, even!”

Refined? A cat grooming its crotch?!

“—Ah!”

Daijin looks up, and our eyes meet. For a second, we both freeze. Then the door opens with a jangle, and Daijin leaps up. As Rumi melodically welcomes a new customer, the white cat slips out.

“I’m sorry—I have to go!” I cry.

“Suzume, what’s wrong?”

I run out the door after Daijin, shouting “Sorry!” as I go. I stand in front of the

bar's facade and glance around the dim arcade. A white form is trotting briskly into the shadows of an alley.

"Souta!" I shout at the second floor of the shop. "It's Daijin!"

Souta's face pops into view in the window of the kids' room. Without waiting for him, I run down the alley after Daijin. The abandoned arcade with its burned-out streetlights feels like a foreign country. Suddenly, I have the impression I'm running through an unfamiliar dream. The little white figure flickers in and out of view at every turn. Eventually, I leave the covered arcade behind and come out onto a wide-open street under the night sky.

"What are you doing here?!"

A few meters ahead of me, Daijin is sitting on the asphalt, licking its fur. I glare from a distance, unsure what the kitten is up to.

"Suuuzume," it purrs in its childish voice, looking up at me. "How arrre you?"

"What?!"

The kitten rolls onto its back like it wants me to pet it. Then it rolls onto its belly, looking quite comfortable, and raises one paw toward the sky.

"Look!"

"At what?"

I look up. *You already knew*, my heart says. That sweet, festering smell. The disgusting sensation coming through the soles of my feet, like something has started to move underground all at once.

"The worm...!"

Beyond rows of low-eaved houses, on a mountainside that doesn't look very far away, a glowing blackish-red worm is beginning to rise. Against the night sky, it shines even more ominously than last time. I hear the clatter of wood hitting asphalt.

"Daijin!" Souta screams as he hurtles toward us. He looks almost like a dog running at full speed. Daijin takes off toward the worm.

"Suzume, we have to go!"

“I know!”

I’m moving before Souta finishes his sentence.

A Door You Can’t Enter and a Place You’re Not Supposed to Go

The streets of the quiet residential neighborhood become steeper and steeper until we’re heading up a road that snakes along the mountainside. We run side by side. Several cars pass us, and a lot of pedestrians give us surprised looks, but I keep my eyes on the worm. Daijin has vanished, but we know where we’re going. Toward the base of the worm, fast. As fast as we can get there. As the houses on both sides of the road grow farther apart, I glimpse a Ferris wheel looming beyond the black trees. That’s where the worm is rising from.

“It’s at that amusement park!”

A barricade stands in front of the arched entry gate, engulfed in weeds. A sign to the right says PARK CLOSED. THANK YOU FOR FORTY YEARS OF FUN. In the darkness, I can see Souta wiggling under the barricade. I fly over the top like a high-jump runner. The rides crouch in the shadows like sleeping giants. Weeds grow high around them, and in spots, the asphalt is peeling up and cracked. Beyond the silent, slumbering rides, a blood-red torrent gushes toward the sky.

“The Ferris wheel!” I shout as I kneel in the shadow of the merry-go-round, gasping for breath.

Souta finishes my thought in a shocked voice. “It’s a Gate...!”

The Ferris wheel towers above us, as the muddy current of the worm spews up from its lowest gondola. In this abandoned amusement park in the dead of night, the little gondola is rocking back and forth furiously, like localized gusts of wind are battering it alone.

“Souta, look!”

Something resembling a bird is perched at the very top of the Ferris wheel.

“...Daijin,” Souta chokes out. The kitten is staring wide-eyed at the torrent of the rising worm, seemingly enchanted.

“Suzume,” Souta says, still looking at the kitten. “I’ll catch Daijin and turn it

back into the Keystone. In the meantime, you—”

“Yes!” I say, pulling the key from under my T-shirt, where it’s been hanging around my neck. I’ve been carrying the Closer’s key ever since we locked the door in Ehime. I did it then. I can do it now. “I’ll shut the gondola door and lock it. Just watch me!”

We nod to each other and start running at the same exact moment, without needing a signal. We can do this. Together, we can do it. That belief fills my lungs with air. My feet beat harder against the ground.

“Ah!”

Daijin sees us and starts to move. The cat takes a running leap off the Ferris wheel—and onto the twisting rails of the roller coaster.

“Suzume, the door!”

“Got it!”

Souta peels off toward the roller coaster. I continue alone to the Ferris wheel and race up the short steel staircase to the boarding platform. The violent torrent of light is spewing from the rusty gondola right in front of my eyes. I thrust both arms out and crash straight into the gondola.

Bang! That familiar, bloodcurdling sensation flows straight through the thin metal door and into my body. Chills run to the tips of my fingers and toes, and I grit my teeth and push the door with all my might. I’m able to move it a few dozen centimeters, but suddenly it becomes as hard as rock. It feels like it’s pushing back with a fickle, violent force. I start to feel like some spiteful creature is on the other side, or maybe some mass of unthinking brawn. The glowing reddish-black torrent stains everything around us a muddy twilight color. Beneath the soles of my shoes, the earth is rumbling and roiling. But I can do this. We can do this. I fill my mind with that thought as I strain against the door with everything I have.



Meanwhile, Souta is chasing the cat down the roller coaster rails. He realizes he’s able to run much faster than yesterday or the day before.

“Wow, I’m moving!” he blurts out. He can tell that his heart, his soul, and every last nerve in his body has settled into the little quadrangular chair. Maybe that’s unfortunate, but right now, it’s also lucky. He can run like an animal through places that would never hold a grown man’s weight. He races up a steeply slanted rail as confidently as if gravity has vanished. The ground flies into the distance, the almost-full moon flickers across his field of vision, and finally, far below him, he sees the white cat looking up.

“Daijin! It’s over! Tonight you return to your original form!” he howls. He knows in his bones he’s caught his prey.

Souta kicks off the sloped railing and into the air. His chair-body spins slowly as it falls toward the white animal. The kitten’s round yellow eyes grow larger. Souta sees his own reflection in them, and then he’s crashing into Daijin. Without slowing down, the two of them hurtle into a small transformer on the ground. Dust and dead leaves swirl up around them—and the impact makes the transformer’s bulb glow. With a bass roar, a low-voltage current begins running through the park.



Beep!

Out of nowhere, the speaker above my head starts beeping. I look up at the Ferris wheel in surprise. The lights blink on, illuminating the whole thing in brilliant color. Next comes the creak of enormous metal parts scraping against one another—and then the gondolas start moving.

“What the—?!”

Slowly, the Ferris wheel begins to turn. The gondola in front of me moves forward, too, the worm still spewing out of it. I walk forward with it, pushing the door. As it speeds up, I begin to run. Then it lifts into the air. Determined to hang on, I grip the bar on the door with my right hand before I can think about what I’m doing.

“Uh-oh...”

My body is carried upward. As I waffle between wanting to shut the door and knowing I’m about to be in big trouble, my toes lift off the ground.

“No way!”

I’m paralyzed. The ground is receding second by second. Panicked, I grip the bar with both hands. The door clatters from the force of the muddy torrent as I hang from the bar. I’m too high to drop off now. Desperately pulling myself up, I get my right foot onto the narrow step sticking out of the gondola, then my left foot. The worm is spewing out right next to my cheek. The spray is like violent sparks, but I feel no heat or any other sensation. Grabbing the car’s side with my left hand and gripping the door for support with my right, I manage to stand, hugging half the gondola. I’m looking straight into the cracked window.

“...!”

Something is glittering faintly inside the dim, cramped enclosure. I squint. It’s—stars. Inside the gondola is a night sky. The stars inside it begin to shine more brightly, as if someone is turning up the lights. It’s a view I know so well, the one over the meadow in my dream. The same emotion I feel in the dream ripples into my chest. Sad but comfortable. Unknown but familiar. A place I shouldn’t be but one I want to stay in forever.

“Mom...?”

Someone is standing on the far side of the meadow. Her white dress blows in the wind. Her hair is long and soft-looking. Beyond this figure, a child crouches. Me. My child self is looking up at my mother. That’s right—we found each other in the meadow under a starry sky. Understanding hits me. This is a continuation of my dream. It’s a scene buried deep in my memory, too deep to uproot no matter how much I want to. My mom has something in her hand. She holds it out to me. *What is it?* I squint. It’s too far to see. I want to get closer. I lean in through the door, bending my body into the foul torrent of the worm. There is no warmth, no blinding brightness, no resistance. It’s all just clear, weightless murky water. I duck my head and slip through the gondola’s small door. I plant my right foot on the floor and find that it’s become deep, soft meadow. My mother and my child self are much closer now.

“.....”

I feel like someone is calling to me from behind, but my eyes are drawn to my mother. I take a step forward. *What is it? What is she trying to give me? What?*

I take another step. It's—

A chair. A little handmade chair with three legs... A chair? My heart bumps up against something. I can almost remember.

“.....”

Who's behind me, calling my name? A chair. That chair is—

“Suzume!”

My eyes pop open. “Huh?!”

I'm leaning out a tiny window. Ahead of me, I can see a mountain and the night sky and, far below, the dim asphalt. I shrink back, terrified of falling. Suddenly, I remember where I am—inside a rising gondola. The meadow is gone, and so are the two figures.

“Suzume, hurry!”

I look around. The worm is spewing from the gondola's small door. Souta is reaching his front leg desperately through the muddy water.

“Souta!”

I collapse on my knees on the gondola's floor and grab his leg with my right hand, and he pulls me out of the gondola with reassuring strength. I plant my hands and feet on the frame of the Ferris wheel. We're already near the peak. We're so high we can look down over the whole city of Kobe.

“Suzume, the door!”

“On it!”

Using the slender metal frame as scaffolding, I climb around to the outside of the wildly flapping door and start pushing again. Souta is pushing below me, and he's much stronger now. The door steadily closes. The muddy torrent of the worm shrinks to a trickle.

“O Divine Gods who dwell beneath this land.”

As if guided by Souta's prayer, I close my eyes. I listen for the happy shouts that must have filled this place. Suddenly, I remember Rumi's words—*“That place was always packed when it was open.”* There must have been traffic jams

every weekend and lines for the go-carts, the merry-go-round, and the Ferris wheel. I imagine every detail—every person surprised by how tall the Ferris wheel was, how twisty the roller coaster, how fast the swinging pirate ship. They're shouting and laughing with excitement.

"Wow, we're so high up!"

"Let's go on the spinning cups again!"

"Stop running—it's dangerous!"

"An amusement park on our first date, huh? What a cliché!"

"You have long protected us for generations. Your mountains and rivers that we have long called our own—"

I can tell from the heat that the key resting on my chest is glowing blue. Behind my closed eyelids, I can finally see the amusement park like it used to be. Everyone smiling, the asphalt under their feet painted in pastel colors, not a trace of rust on the brand-new rides. A yellow balloon escapes the hand of a little girl and floats up, cutting a tiny hole in the blue sky. *Ah, there it goes!* The little girl stares up after it, but there's not a trace of sadness on her face.

"Now!" Souta yells sharply enough to shred my nostalgia.

"We respectfully return them to you!" I scream as I push the key into a keyhole made of light.

I can feel the lock click into place. A second later, the reddish-bronze flower covering the sky splits open. The air is light, like a heavy lid has suddenly been lifted. A moment after that, a shower washes over the ruins. Even though it's night, each drop glitters like a rainbow. Finally, the lights in the park go out, as if they've spent the last of their energy, and all is quiet and dark once again.

With a low whine so loud I can feel it in my body, the metal frame below my feet creaks.

"Oh no!"

I reflexively hug the gondola and look down. The ground is black and very far away. I feel like it's going to swallow me up. My knees shake. The frame creaks again.

“Let’s get in,” Souta says calmly. I open my eyes and dive into the now-quiet gondola. When I close the door, the sound of the wind fades.

“...That was so scary.”

All of a sudden, the strength drains from my legs, and I sink to the floor. *I was just standing on the top of a Ferris wheel.* I belatedly start shivering, and my eyes tear up. I sigh pitifully, while Souta bursts out laughing.

“Ha-ha-ha! Suzume, you were amazing. Thank you.”

* * *

Outside the window, the lights of Kobe spread like a carpet in all directions. Upon closer inspection, I see that the inside of the gondola is neither big nor small, but carefully calculated to be the perfect size for getting close to a special someone. Souta and I sit across from each other on the plastic seats, watching the ground slowly approach. Souta tells me that Ferris wheels are designed so that even if the electricity goes out, the weight of anyone still inside will slowly pull the wheel around so they can get off.

When I ask what happened with Daijin, he says with a wry smile that the kitten got away again. They fell off the roller coaster together, and Souta had him pinned to the ground, but then he noticed I was hanging off the Ferris wheel and came running to help me. I tell him I’m sorry, but he just laughs and says there’s no reason to apologize. He declares confidently that he’ll catch the cat next time for sure.

“Suzume...,” he says quietly, fitting his words between gusts of night wind.

“Yeah?”

“What were you looking at inside the Gate...?”

“Um...”

I realize the memory is quickly fading, like a dream I’ve just awoken from.

“There was a blindingly bright starry sky, and a meadow, and...”

“Ever-After,” Souta says, sounding surprised.

“Huh?”

“You can see Ever-After...”

“What’s that?”

“The back side of the world. Where the worm lives. The place where all time exists at once.”

The place where all time exists at once. Far in the back of my mind, something clicks into place for a second. But it’s far too deeply buried for me to reach.

“...I can see it, but I can’t go in.”

“They say that’s where the dead go.”

Souta looks out the window, and I follow his gaze. The city lights sprawl like a dusting of stars before a black sea. There’s an extra-bright factory district, and a cluster of high-rises that are like towers of light, and blinking houses huddled together. It all looks so close, I feel like I could reach out my hand and set the points of light on the tip of my finger.

“Those of us who live in this realm can’t cross into that one. We’re not meant to. I’m glad you couldn’t. That’s how it should be.”

For some reason, his voice sounds a little sad as he stares out at the city.

“We live here, after all...”

The Ferris wheel spins slowly around, its enormous metal frame creaking. Eventually, black trees rise up to hide the city lights, and they blink out between the leaves. We stare out the window until the last fleck of light disappears.

A Nighttime Party and a Lonely Dream

How am I going to explain this? Would it be better not to go back at all? Or would that be even more selfish? My mind is going in circles as I check the time on my phone. It’s already two in the morning. I sigh, take a deep breath, and open the door of the karaoke bar. The doorbell rings cheerfully.

At the sound of the bell, she looks up from the glass she’s drying. “Well, if it isn’t our teen delinquent,” Miki says with a wry smile. The lights are turned down in the bar, and the customers are nowhere to be seen, although there’s a

lingering scent of alcohol. Rumi slowly lifts her face from the counter where it was resting and turns toward me.

“...Suzume!”

She stands and runs over to me, while I reflexively hide the hand that’s holding Souta behind my back. Rumi’s exhausted expression stabs me through the heart.

“Where on earth did you go?!”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Do you know how worried I’ve been?! You disappeared in the middle of the night!”

“Now, now,” Miki intercedes from behind the bar as Rumi descends on me like a hawk. “She’s back safe and sound.”

“I know, but—”

“I ran away from home plenty of times myself.”

Just as I’m processing this new information about Miki, my stomach grumbles loudly.

“Sorry!” I say, pressing it with my palm. I’m blushing. Rumi sighs and shoots me a wry smile.

“...Anyway, how about something to eat?”

The three of us stand in the small kitchen and toss out ideas for what to eat. Ramen at this time of night isn’t exactly diet friendly, and *yakisoba* is just as bad. *Ochazuke* won’t make us guilty, but it won’t satisfy us, either. We should probably go with veggies. But wait, if we’re honest, aren’t carbs what we’re craving? Ultimately, we settle on fried udon noodles with plenty of vegetables thrown in.

“Well, that calls for a fried egg on top,” one of them says, and the other says she’ll take a mountain of pickled ginger. When they ask me how I want mine, I say we usually add potato salad at home. Silence. Then—

“You know, actually...”

“But what about the calories?”

“Like I said, isn’t that what we’re craving?”

This discussion leads us to an official menu of fried udon with potato salad and lots of vegetables, with fried eggs on top. Rumi warms up some sesame oil in a pan while I chop vegetables, and then she steams a few packages of plastic-wrapped udon in the microwave. While Rumi sautés the veggies, I sauté the udon. Miki takes out a bowl of potato salad the bar has on hand and plops a few big spoonfuls on top of the noodles. I mix them in with cooking chopsticks. We’re as efficient as the top team in home ec, talking and laughing the whole time.

“Thanks for the meal!”

We sit in a booth in the middle of the shop and eat our fried udon. Rumi and Miki both say it’s amazing, and I’m so proud, I could float off the cushions. Miki says it would taste even better with beer, so Rumi grabs some cans from the refrigerator and hands me a ginger ale. We clink our drinks together in a toast. The bubbly, cold liquid washes the heavy fried noodles down nicely. I feel like I could go on eating and drinking forever. After we demolish the noodles, we get out some of the spicy potato chips, shredded dried squid, and camembert cheese they serve at the bar. I feel like I’m at the wrap party for a school festival. Rumi’s a third-year, Miki’s a second-year, and I’m the newbie first-year. Their showy dresses look like festival costumes. The dim bar with its yellowish indirect lighting is like a decorated classroom after school.

I glance over and see the kiddie chair standing against the wall like an aloof, handsome older student lost in thought. I get up from the booth and lean close to him.

“Souta, come hang out with us!”

“Me?” he whispers. I pick him up before he can disagree. “Hey, what are you doing?” he protests. I ignore him and set him next to the table, then sit on him.

“!”

He gasps. The three-legged chair doesn’t so much as creak beneath my full weight. I can hear him muttering “Come on, now” behind my back.

“Oh, what’s that?”

“It’s cute! Is it a kiddie chair?”

“Why’d you get it out?”

“Um...to remember Kobe by,” I answer honestly.

Rumi and Miki giggle and say they have no idea what I mean. We take a picture together with the chair, and then I quickly wash the dishes using the clean-up skills I’ve perfected over the past two days. I can almost hear the others call out, *See you tomorrow at school!*

And just like that, the party’s over.

* * *

“I bet they think you’re a weird kid!” Souta says, laughing. I’m lying down in the booth where we ate the fried udon, and he’s sitting next to my pillow. Rumi let me take a shower and lent me a blanket, and now I’m about to fall asleep, dressed in a T-shirt.

“Because I sat on a kiddie chair?”

“Because you disappeared and then showed back up in the middle of the night.”

“You could be right.”

Rumi and Miki—and Chika, too—are so easygoing. They couldn’t care less about another person’s eccentricities. It’s like they understand completely that everyone lives in their own world. I’ve only been away from home for two days, but my life has already become so much more vibrant.

“Souta, do you always travel around like this?” I ask, thinking it sounds like a pretty nice way to live.

“Not always. I have an apartment in Tokyo.”

“You do?”

“I’m planning to become a teacher when I graduate from university.”

“Wow,” I say, looking over at him.

“What?” he says, looking back.

University? Really?

“No way!! You’re a university student?!”

“Yes, and?”

“And you’re going to get a job? But what about being a Closer?”

So he’s not a professional wanderer?! My mind is suddenly scrambling as the poker-faced chair starts talking like a normal human. I can hear the smile in his voice when he answers.

“Closing doors is something my family has been doing for generations, and we’ll keep doing it for generations more. But it doesn’t pay the bills.”

“Oh.”

Makes sense. You’ve gotta eat. You’ve gotta live. Now that he’s mentioned it, it does seem logical. No one’s going to pay you for shutting doors. Still...

“...But it’s important work.”

“It’s better if the important things are taken care of in secret.”

Goose bumps run down my back. That thought has never crossed my mind before. It wouldn’t have occurred to me. I’ve always assumed that the more important your work is, the more attention people pay and the more money you make. Souta looks me in the eye and says soothingly, “Don’t worry. I’ll get back to my original form and go on closing doors while I work as a teacher.”

The calm of his voice relaxes me, and soon I’m asleep. But in the brief moments before I doze off, my mind goes back to the Ferris wheel. The very top, where the two of us stood, is a place no one else could have gone. Way up there in the air, we left a sort of secret mark no one else could see. I was so proud of it, my whole body shivered silently. Retracing that feeling, I drift off to sleep.



My sleep is dreamless, but Souta’s is not. His dream is lonely, unconnected—a dream no one else could share and one that even he doesn’t remember when

he wakes up.

He is sitting on a three-legged kiddie chair, remembering things he's said. Things he's said about being back in his original form soon, both closing doors and working as a teacher. *But...*, he thinks. *But what if I already...?*

The moment the thought crosses his mind, his body grows as heavy as lead, as if gravity has abruptly grown stronger. He sinks into the seat, and once his weight exceeds a certain point, the seat vanishes like a bubble bursting.

"...!"

He falls down and down. When he looks up in surprise, he sees himself still sitting in the chair, unmoving. His back is bowed with exhaustion, and his eyes are closed. His form, like a cast-off shell, recedes into the distance until it finally melts into darkness. *Oh, it's disappearing*, he thinks, giving up hope. He has already accepted it. It isn't what he'd wanted, but he accepts it as the way things are.

After a while, a burning town appears on the distant horizon. He knows it is far, far away, but when he squints, he can see it in great detail. Against the roaring flames, he can see bent electrical poles, piles of cars, broken windows with flapping curtains, and laundry dancing on its line, all like elaborate miniatures. He can see it all, but it is merely passing through his field of vision. *I can't even go there?* he thinks. *Then where can I go? That place must be so far away, like some kind of limbo.* As he descends through the opaque water, without color or sensation, he is gradually cut loose from the world. The critical threads tying him to it snap one by one.

Light vanishes.

Sound vanishes.

His body vanishes.

Then memories.

Cold. Cold. Cold. Cold—

The last thread snaps.

"....."

But his soul remains. *So this place must be...*

He opens his eyes.

He is sitting on the kiddie chair after all. When he raises his head, he sees an old wooden door in front of him. He looks around and finds himself on a beach, at the water's edge. The only things on the limitless shore are the door and him, sitting in the chair. At the boundary where the sea meets the sand is an endless line of washed-up bones. He doesn't know if they used to belong to fish or people, but they are perfectly white, as if the artist who drew the world forgot to paint them. The line of pure-white bones looks to him like a boundary dividing the world in two. He is on this side, and the door is on the other.

He looks up at the door again. Plant motifs are carved into the wood. The paint is peeling off. It feels familiar, but that familiarity is a dead end. He can't remember anything. The thread connecting his emotions and his memories is broken.

"I...", he mumbles, unsure what to say next. His breath comes in white puffs. *Beyond the door*, his heart whispers. He tries to stand up, but his legs won't move. He looks down at his feet and flinches in surprise. His bare feet resting on the sand are coated in ice. The thick covering spreads as he watches, making a small, scratchy sound like an insect's call. It reaches his knees, freezes his thighs, and spreads across his torso, as if it has a will of its own, as if to fasten him to this faraway place. *Ah*, he thinks and lets out a long breath. Even his breath comes out as sparkling fragments of ice.

"So this is as far as I'll go..."

He hangs his head, a smile curling his lips. His ice-covered body grows heavier, but the freezing cold numbs even his sensation of weight. The complete absence of sensation is bizarrely sweet.

"....."

In the distance, he hears a voice. Disregarding it, he sinks into the pleasant expanding nothingness.

"....."

Who is that? He is suddenly irritated. *Why won't they leave me alone? I chose*

sleep! This time, everything was finally going to disappear.

“...Souta!”

As the voice reaches him, the door opens, and he squints into the brilliance on the other side.



“...Suzume?” Souta says sleepily.

It worked! He really woke up. Chika, I’m sorry I ever doubted you. Souta looks up at me with the eyes on his backrest.

“Morning.”

“...You’re finally up.”

I sigh theatrically, set him on the booth, and show him my phone.

“Look, it’s Daijin! Someone posted more pictures of him!”

Souta slowly cranes his backrest to see my social media feed.

“...Suzume,” he mumbles, still looking at the screen.

“Hmm?”

“Did you do something to me just now?”

“If you kiss them, they’ll wake up.” I remember Chika’s knowing voice. She was right.

“...Nothing in particular.”

We know our next destination, and we have to get going. I slip on the jean jacket and stuff the kiddie chair into my bag. Outside the window, the sky is a crisp blue.



DAY FOUR

Scenery You Can See but Cannot Be a Part Of

“This is for you,” Rumi says, taking off her baseball cap and placing it on my head. “Now you look even more like a runaway.” She giggles. I guess she’s figured out I’m not on a solo vacation. I blush, though it’s a bit late to be embarrassed. She hugs me tight. Hot tears spring to my eyes, and I bury my face in her soft shoulder.

“Rumi, thank you so much...!”

“You’re welcome,” she says, patting my back kindly. “Don’t forget to call your parents.”

“I won’t!”

We’re standing outside Shin-Kobe Station. Behind me, the Shinkansen departure bell is ringing incessantly. I keep waving until Rumi’s car disappears into the distance.

Shoot, I forgot all about Tamaki! I squat down by a column and hurriedly open my LINE app. I had notifications muted.

“F-fifty-five messages...,” I blurt out. *Fifty-five*. Fifty-five messages from my aunt in one day. *This is bad*. I can’t decide if I should open them or leave them

untouched for the rest of my life. But can I survive the pressure if the number keeps growing? I steel myself and tap Tamaki's icon.

"Wait, what?! She's coming to get me?!"

"Suzume!" Souta says, popping his face out of the bag to hurry me along. "We can still make the next train. Hurry up and buy a ticket!"

"We're taking the Shinkansen?"

"That's the fastest way to get to Tokyo, isn't it?"

This morning, the photos tagged #withDaijin showed famous tourist spots like Kaminarimon in Asakusa and Tokyo Tower—places even a country bumpkin like me could recognize instantly.

"Taking the Shinkansen to Tokyo is gonna drain my bank account..." I mutter, but I buy the ticket anyway. A zero just fell off the end of the account balance I had diligently socked away from my allowance.

"Pay me back later, Mr. University Student!" I say.

"Leave it to me," my sports bag laughs back.

I can count on one hand the number of times I've been on the Shinkansen. I pull the cap Rumi gave me down low over my eyes, glance nervously around the car with free seating, and choose a window seat, pushing myself against the wall.

The train slides out of the station with almost shocking quietness and accelerates. We zoom through some tunnels, and before I know it, the city's jumble of buildings is gone. We cross a few big rivers, and then we're in the middle of fields and rice paddies. I open a map on my phone, and the image scrolls to the left faster than I've ever seen it go. When I whisper as much to Souta in surprise, he says, "Yeah, yeah, it's fast." But I'm so excited, even his nonchalance can't dampen my mood. My eyes are glued to the landscape racing past outside the window.

I see mountains, sea, buildings of all shapes and sizes, houses and factories and stores, deserted arrow-straight paths dividing the paddies, and a little truck idling along in the distance. I can see the tiny form of its driver. Next to a

yellow-green rice field swaying in the wind, there's a small wooden hut straight out of a period film. On the side of a mountain, a graveyard reflects the sun. Next to a river, I spot a couple walking a dog. As I watch it all go by, I have the odd thought that I'll probably never stand in any of those places myself. I'm nearly certain I'll never go into that convenience store or order a meal at that family restaurant or watch the train go by from that window. I'm so tiny, and life is so short; I'll never be able to go to most of the places flying past outside the window. *Most of the people in the world are living their lives out there, beyond my experience.* The realization hits me with a mixture of surprise and loneliness.

As I think about all of this, I drift off to sleep, and when I wake, the ocean fills the whole window. I open my map. We're almost in Kanagawa Prefecture. "Now arriving in Atami," a computerized voice says from the ceiling.

"Souta...!" I say, almost in tears. "Did we pass Mount Fuji already?!"

"Hmm, now that you mention it—"

"I can't believe you didn't tell me!"

"Sorry, sorry," he says, casually brushing me off. To cheer myself up, I buy a sandwich, a coffee, and an ice cream from the food trolley.

"You wanted to see it that badly?" Souta asks.

"Why shouldn't I?" I reply.

Then, before I know it, all I can see is buildings. An unbroken, constructed sea extends to the horizon and continues on and on. It has a different quality than anything we've passed, and the word *metropolis*, which I've only heard in geography class, pops into my mind. The landscape here is covered entirely with man-made things on the scale of a sea or a mountain range.

Humid air and masses of people hit us as soon as we disembark at Tokyo Station. On the verge of suffocating, I follow the directions coming from the sports bag, turning right and left as the waves of people carry me along. I make it to the correct platform, but no sooner have I found a seat on an air-conditioned train than the voice in the bag hurries me along.

"Get off at the next stop!"

We step off the train at a station called Ochanomizu. There, I buy a bottle of cold water from a vending machine covered in a glowing black screen like something out of a sci-fi movie and gulp it down at the end of the platform. When I finally catch my breath, I glare over my shoulder at the bag casually hanging there.

“...I feel like you’re making fun of me!”

Souta laughs. “Before we look for Daijin, there’s somewhere I want to go. Would you mind making a phone call for me?”

“Huh?”

“The number is—”

“Wait a second!”

I scramble to type the number in, tap the call button, and hold the phone up to the back of the chair. It stops ringing, and a female voice says, “*Hello?*”

“Kinuyo? It’s Souta. I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch.”

Huh?

“...Yes, I’m fine. I’m relieved to hear you sounding so well!” he says, his tone awfully familiar. Then he tops it off with an awfully debonair laugh. *What?*

A Room like a Garden

We walk along a river as green as matcha, climb a hill next to a big high school, continue for a while through a quiet residential neighborhood, and finally arrive at a shop. Contrary to what I expected, it’s a little convenience store that looks like it could be in my hometown. It occupies the first floor of a three-story corner building. Potted plants surround the entrance, an explosion of flowers threatening to burst into the road. More plants hang over the second-floor balcony, shamelessly covering the blue logo of the national chain. There’s an air of casual neglect to the place, like it’s telling the world not to sweat the small stuff.

As I walk through the automatic doors, a familiar melody chimes loudly. I glance around but don’t see any other customers.

“Um, excuse me...,” I say timidly to the back of a woman stooped behind the counter. She seems hard at work doing something or other down there.

“What?”

When she looks up, I see that she has pronounced features and a nameplate on her chest that reads CAROL.

“Um, my name is Iwato.”

“Hmm?”

“Um, that phone call a little while ago...”

“Hmm?”

“Uhhh...”

She’s staring at me suspiciously. *Souta, what do I do?!* Sending him psychic calls for help, I grip the bag on my back. Of course, he can’t answer me in this situation. But just as I’m starting to think I’ll have to temporarily retreat, someone calls from the back of the store. “Oh, yes, yes! You must be Souta’s relative. I’ve heard about you!”

A tiny old woman with a mushroom of white hair comes pattering out in sandals. She’s wearing the same blue-striped uniform as Carol, and the nameplate on her chest reads OKINU.

“Here’s the key to Souta’s room. It’s number 301,” she says, handing me the key. She must be the landlady he mentioned.

“His relative?” Carol asks the landlady, who answers in what I think is English. Carol smiles at me.

“When will he come back from his trip?”

“Um, I’m sorry, I don’t really know.”

“I do hope he comes home soon,” the landlady says, sounding quite lonely. Carol says something like “sweet” or “cute,” and the landlady adds dreamily, “He’s such a handsome man.” Quite the popular tenant, it seems. I grip the bag harder.

“Um, thank you!” I say, bowing my head.

“Go on outside, and you’ll find the staircase to your left. Take your time,” the landlady says, holding her hand up next to her face and waving.

* * *

When I open the door, a wall of hot air hits me in the face. It’s followed by the smell of a school library, then the smell of soap and other household items, then a very faint, unfamiliar, elegant smell that makes me think of a foreign city. A grown-up smell, I think.

“Go on in,” Souta says, sticking his head out of the bag.

I take my shoes off in a little entryway that’s barely deep enough to fit them, then step up into his apartment. I’m in the kitchen, which is more a wide hallway than a room. Beyond it is a dim living area measuring around fifteen square meters.

“Wow...,” I gasp. Lit hazily by sunlight filtering through the curtains, the walls and floor of the room are covered with books. Thick antique volumes are stacked on the tatami mats like we’re in a professor’s study or something—of course, I’ve never been in a professor’s study, but the room has that air that usually belongs to some sort of specialist. Wedged between the books is a low desk like a literary giant of the postwar period might have used, a round table for eating, and three big bookshelves. In one corner is a steel desk, maybe from IKEA or something, with a metal frame bed over the top of it. Meanwhile, the books in this corner are colorful and modern, like the ones you’d expect a university student to have.

“It’s hot in here. Would you open that window?”

“Oh, sure.”

I push aside the curtains, and late-afternoon sun floods the room. When I open the window, a refreshing breeze blows in. I put my bag down on the floor. Then I take off my cap and set it on the bag. As I take in the sights, I think the bright room feels like a little garden. Oddly enough, even though it’s full of stuff, it doesn’t feel messy. The objects seem to have grown there of their own free will, like plants.

“Suzume,” Souta says, looking over at me from one of the bookshelves. “I

want to do a little research. Do you see that cardboard box on top of this shelf?”

“Yes...”

“Can you bring it down for me?”

“Sure.”

I stand in front of the shelf and reach for the box. It’s too high, and I stretch farther. *No good.* I climb on top of Souta. I can feel my three-legged companion quickly adjusting himself to hold my weight. My hands reach the box. It’s really heavy.

“.....”

Suddenly, I feel like laughing. My lips curl. I hold the box and march in place a few times. I remember his cool, debonair voice when we left the convenience store. I said, “*You sure are popular,*” and he said, “*Not really.*” I stomp a few more times. *One, two. One, two.* Then I look at my feet and smile.

“Souta, do you mind if I step on you?”

“...Next time, ask me first!” he snaps, and the chair bucks under my feet. I shriek and laugh.

* * *

The box is full of books. Souta tells me to open one called *Excerpts from the Closer’s Secrets*. I’ve only seen this kind of traditional Japanese book in photos before. The rough paper is bound with string and looks ready to crumble any minute. Taking care not to tear it, I solemnly open the book.

Pictures cover both pages. The hair on my arms and legs stands up. One picture shows a volcano. A village and mountain are drawn in black ink, but the flames bursting from the mountain are painted with bright-red pigment. A crimson river writhes in the sky. I know that shape well.

“Is that...the worm?”

Souta nods, gazing at the picture. When I look more closely, I see that the flames are coming not from the volcano’s mouth but instead from a torii gate

on the peak of the mountain. It must be a Gate. I can make out the word *Tenmei* and the number three in one corner of the picture. When was that, the 1700s? Souta tells me to turn the page, so I do.

The next picture is of a dragon. Between the curves of its long, winding body are mountains, villages, and lakes, as if the dragon and the land are one. What appear to be enormous daggers pierce its head and tail.

“Those are Keystones. The Western Pillar and the Eastern Pillar.”

The chair leg points to each one in turn.

“Keystones? You mean—”

“Yes. There are two of them.”

“So...there’s another one of those cats?”

“The cat is only a transient manifestation,” he says in a low voice.

I turn the page again. On each side is a stone monument with a throng of people praying to it. The word *Keystone* is written in red characters on each monument, and several people dressed like mountain ascetics seem to be trying to bury the stones in the earth. In the gaps around the pictures is fine cursive writing that I can’t read. The text next to the stones, however, I can just barely decipher. Something about “subduing the black Keystone” and “the terrible white tiger Keystone.”

“Natural disasters and plagues come from Ever-After to our realm through Gates and terrorize everyone nearby,” Souta says, gazing at the pictures. “That’s why we Closers go around shutting them. We return those places to their cradle—their rightful owners, the gods of the land—and quell the unrest. But there are some disasters, the terrible kind that occur only once every few hundred years, that can’t be fully suppressed by closing Gates. For those situations, two Keystones were bestowed on this land in ancient times.”

Souta points to another book. “*Catalogue of Keystones*” is written on the cover. This is also a traditional Japanese book, but it looks decades (or perhaps centuries) newer than the first one. I open it. Inside are what look like old maps. An amorphous shape like stones melted together is labeled “*Map of the Land of Fuso*”—at least I think that’s what the characters say. Large swords pierce

either end of what seems to be an island.

“The Keystones change locations with each era.”

I turn the page to another old map. The coastline of this one is more realistically drawn. The two swords are piercing slightly different locations.

“This looks like...”

I turn to the next page. The resolution of the map improves. It’s packed with narrow roads and borders. The swords are piercing the Tohoku region and a spot below Lake Biwa.

“...a map of Japan!”

“It is,” Souta says. “The changes in the map reflect changes in the cosmology of the Japanese people. When people’s consciousness changes, the shape of the land changes, and so does the shape of its ley lines and natural disasters. That, in turn, changes where the Keystones are needed. It’s a slow and constant change in the interaction between people and land, so we enshrine the Keystones where they are truly needed in each era. The Keystones soothe the land over decades, even centuries—always in places we don’t see. The forgotten places.”

I understand only a fraction of Souta’s matter-of-fact explanation. But his words bring back a memory of the Keystone when I first saw it. The empty ruins in summer, the frigid pool of water, the lonely stone statue... When I touched it, I felt like it was talking to me. Maybe I was hearing the joy of a cat, bored with its centuries-long task, who had just found a playmate. For some reason, that idea seems to mesh perfectly with what Souta is telling me.

“The Keystone that was in Kyushu is currently running around in the form of a cat, right?” he says, as if he can read my mind.

“Um, yeah.”

“As for the other one...”

He gestures with his leg for me to turn the page. There’s a familiar map of modern Japan labeled “*Meiji 34*.” That would be 1901. Souta points to a spot on the map. A stone monument shaped like a sword stands in the Kanto region.

“Tokyo...?!”

“Yes, it’s still holding down the head of the worm there. What I want to know is the exact location. Where in Tokyo is the Keystone? As far as I can remember, it’s not written down anywhere, and no one would tell me. But the answer might be in one of these books.”

I turn the pages as he directs. When we finish one book, I open the next. He fluidly scans over cursive I can’t begin to decipher. As he reads, his voice darkens. “They say the location of the Keystone in Tokyo is the site of an enormous Gate. Once, a hundred years ago, it opened and unleashed a massive disaster across Kanto that went on until the Closers of that time shut it. I suspect...”

His voice drops even lower.

“...I suspect Daijin may be trying to open the door again. If that cat is amusing itself by giving us the runaround, we need to get to the door before it does and stop that from happening.”

The constant drone of airplanes comes in through the window along with the breeze. I’m surprised by how many there are. Between the roars of jet engines comes the growl of motorcycles, the wail of ambulances, the *tap-tap-tap* of futons being beaten clean, the shouts of kids playing on their way home from school, and the distant clatter of a train. Birds are chirping, and not far away, two people are chatting. Someone is vacuuming. The low, layered hum of tens of thousands of cars never stops. I think again about the enormous number of lives playing out in this place. I have a hard time imagining an old stone statue or monument standing silently somewhere in this gargantuan city. The books I’m flipping through change from string-bound manuscripts to old university notebooks. Now the characters are written with a fountain pen, but the handwriting continues to change. The one we’re looking at currently seems to be a diary from around the twenties, but I can still barely read the beautiful mix of kanji and katakana script.

“Dammit,” Souta sighs when we’ve finished going through all the books. “I think that diary had the information I’m looking for, but the key words are blacked out...”

Sure enough, I notice several redacted words in the diary I have open. Thinking I might be able to help, I squint at the page. Before and after the patches of black, I can read the phrases *“September 1, Saturday, sunny,”* *“Messenger from the man on duty in early morning,”* *“8 AM,”* and *“God beneath the earth appears.”*

“...I see!” I say.

“You figured it out?” Souta asks in surprise.

“No, sorry, I just wanted to say that.”

He smiles wryly. “...I suppose we’ll have to ask my grandfather.”

“What?”

“My grandfather’s teacher wrote that diary.”

“Your grandfather?”

“Yes. He raised me. He’s at a hospital near here.” He looks back at the book, then says quietly, “I didn’t want to disappoint him by showing up looking like this...”

His hunched back makes him look exhausted. So his grandfather is a Closer, too. We should have gone to see him in the first place! I’d think a grandfather would be worried about his grandson, not disappointed. Maybe he can help us. Or is there some reason why that’s not possible?

Suddenly, there’s a loud knock on the door, and I yelp reflexively.

“Hey, Souta, you in there? I think you are!” a man’s voice says. He keeps battering the thin wooden door. I look at Souta. The chair is looking at the door with a poker face, apparently unflustered.

“I saw the open window! So you’re back? Hey, Souta!”

Bang, bang!

“Serizawa... I swear, now of all times,” Souta mutters.

“...Who?”

“A friend. Can you make up some excuse?”

“Are you kidding?!”

Souta is clattering off toward the wall. Serizawa continues knocking rudely on the door.

“Hey, Souta! Can I come in?”

“Argh!”

“I can hear you in there!”

Bang, bang! I glance at Souta for salvation, but he just says, “He’s not a bad guy,” and leans against the wall. *Bang, bang!*

What do I do?!

The door clicks open. The man standing at the entrance has a mullet bleached almost blond and a red satin shirt unbuttoned at the chest, like a gangster.

“Um, hi,” I say, bowing pertly.

“Whoa!” Serizawa looks at me in shock. I’ll have to think on my feet. “Who are *you*?!”

“Um, Souta’s little sister!”

“He has a little sister?”

“Um, I’m his...cousin who’s just like a sister!”

“Seriously?”

He narrows his cold eyes behind a fashionable pair of round glasses. *Eek!*

“Um, you’re Serizawa, right?”

“You know my name?”

“Souta has mentioned you.”

The dagger-like glare behind his glasses softens considerably.

* * *

“A teaching certification test?” I say, echoing Serizawa’s words. I’m having a hard time believing them.

He’s standing in front of the bookcase, his back to me.

“Yeah,” he continues grumpily. “Yesterday was the second round, but he didn’t show up. That’s not like him.”

“The test was yesterday? Really?!”

I glance at Souta standing against the wall. He won’t look me in the eye. He sits there, soaking up the afternoon sun and maintaining his act.

“What an idiot. Four years of work, up in flames.”

Serizawa sounds exasperated. He’s looking at the rows of reference books on the shelf. *Acing Your Teacher Employment Exam, So You Want to Be a Teacher, Real Questions from Tokyo Teacher Exams, Mastering the Elementary Subjects with Ease*. Sandwiched between the faded spines of used books, these titles stand out, bright and new.

“I was so worried when he didn’t show up, I couldn’t focus on my own test.”

He sweeps his long locks irritably off his forehead and glares over his shoulder at me.

“What did you say your name was? Suzume?”

I shrink back. He’s got a really nasty stare.

“Tell Souta never to show his ugly mug around me again. He’s really pissed me off.”

“Uh...”

“Oh, wait...,” he says, glancing away like he’s just remembered something. “I lent him twenty thousand yen,” he mumbles, then glares at me again. “Tell him to return it, pronto.”

“Huh...?”

“He said his family business was in trouble,” Serizawa mutters, sticking his thumbs in the pockets of his black skinny jeans and walking toward the door. “That guy needs to learn to take care of himself... Dammit... Can’t even text when he’s in trouble? What is he, a kid? I swear, no common sense...”

Serizawa is putting his shoes back on like he’s done here, and done with me. I trot over to the entryway. He pulls on his pointy-toed shoes and opens the

door.

“Later,” he says with a cursory glance at my flustered face.

He walks out the door. Just then, the phone in my pocket buzzes.

“Shit!” he says and stops walking. His phone is buzzing, too, with that dissonant sound. He takes his phone out of his pants pocket and looks at the screen.

“An earthquake warning. Wonder if we’ll feel it.”

I put my shoes on silently and slip past him out of the room. He says something I can’t hear, but I don’t have time to answer. I lean over the railing in the common hallway and look out at the city.

“It stopped,” he says. Our phones are silent. “Hey, you okay?” he asks, peering into my face.

“...It’s close,” I blurt out, ignoring his question. Much closer than I expected. Beyond the rows of houses and multiuse buildings, maybe two or three hundred meters away, a reddish-black column rises. Writhing slowly in the gaps of sky between buildings, that muddy river is like an enormous, meaningless sculpture hurled into the middle of the urban space. Flocks of crows circle the worm, cawing.

“Shit, that’s a lot of birds!” Serizawa says next to me. “They’re near the Kanda River. I wonder if something’s in the water.”

He can’t see—not the part that matters. I notice a clattering sound.

“Let’s go,” Souta whispers sharply, suddenly at my feet. I lift him up and take off running.

“Hey, wait, where are you going?!” Serizawa shouts after me. I don’t look back. As I race down the apartment stairs, I think, *A teacher certification exam? But—*

But Souta didn’t say a word to me about anything like that.

If the Plug Was Pulled from the Sky

“I didn’t know you were supposed to take a test!” I say as we run through the neighborhood under the setting sun. “It was yesterday! What are you going to do?!”

“It’s not your fault.”

“But...I’m the one who pulled the Keystone out of the ground!”

The students we pass stare at me, the weird girl shouting to herself and carrying a kiddie chair.

“It’s fine,” Souta says, like the matter is settled. “We’ll put an end to all of this today. We’ll close the Gate, turn the cat back into a Keystone, and finally get me back to my old self!”

I’m running down a hill next to a high school. At the end of this road is a wide street, and beyond that, I can see the muddy red river, which is squirming violently. When I reach the bottom of the hill, I turn the corner onto the sidewalk.

I weave through the swelling crowd of people on their way home from work and school, keeping an eye on the worm as I run. It’s to my right, only a few dozen meters away, across a four-lane road full of traffic. The red column is swaying parallel to the road—crawling through the air over a sunken river on the far side of the traffic. People watch uneasily as hundreds of crows swoop and soar above.

“So the Gate must be—,” I say as I run.

“—Ahead of us, farther down the Kanda River!” Souta answers from my arms.

Trees block my view, and I still can’t make out where the worm originated from. We’re approaching Ochanomizu Station, and the crowd of commuters is growing. I bump into people who swear at me and glower suspiciously at the chair in my arms, but I keep running. We have to reach the base of the worm, and fast. That’s where the Gate should be. And Daijin, too—

Then all of a sudden, something feels off.

“How cute!” I hear someone passing me say.

People are glancing at my feet.

“Oh, a cat!” someone else says. I look down.

“Suuuzume!”

“Daijin!”

The white kitten is running alongside me. It looks up at me and says happily in its childish voice, “Let’s play!”

“Keystone!” Souta barks, leaping out of my arms. He rolls a few times and dashes forward, while Daijin runs off. The kitten and the chair thread their way through a dense throng of legs. People are shouting about the inanimate object running through the station, taking pictures and videos with their phones. I push frantically through the crowd, trying not to lose the two of them.

“Aaah!”

Daijin dashes into traffic, and Souta follows. Cars honk, and camera shutters click. They’re darting around in four lanes of traffic like it’s a playground. Daijin crosses the centerline and slips under an oncoming truck, while Souta skirts the side. The next car is bearing down on them in an instant.

Just before it hits Daijin, the cat leaps nimbly onto its hood. Souta jumps up after it and noisily clambers over the car’s roof. Daijin leaps off with Souta close behind, and they both fly up onto an arch-shaped bridge overhead.

“Souta!” I scream. I glimpse the two of them disappear beyond the bridge’s railing.

“Did you see that?”

“You mean the cat and dog?”

“I think it was a chair!”

I push past frenzied onlookers and make it to the base of the bridge. There’s a staircase on my left. I run up it. My shoulder bangs into an elderly woman carrying a parasol, but I’m too out of breath to apologize properly. *I’m so sorry!* I say desperately in my head. At last, I reach the top of the stairs and step onto the bridge. More people are holding up their phones to take pictures, and I trace their line of sight.

Smack in the middle of the traffic on the bridge is Souta. He’s pinning the little

white cat under his seat while the two of them seem to be arguing. The people taking pictures are bewildered. Drivers are honking in surprise as they swerve around the strange objects on the road. I stand rooted to the ground.

“What do I do...?”

I see a car plow toward them at full speed. *It's gonna hit them!* I think, but the next instant, they both leap away. The car drives off, brakes squealing and horn honking. Souta is on the far side of the road, in the pedestrian lane. Without thinking, I start running.

“Ah!”

A car passes in front of my eyes, horn blaring. My heart pounds as I look left, then right, hold my breath, and sprint across the lanes.

“Souta!”

Finally, I'm next to him. Daijin is nowhere to be seen. Souta is standing on the railing, staring down. I follow his gaze—and gasp.

Below us is the Kanda River and, on its bank, the gaping mouth of a train tunnel. The reddish-black torrent is erupting from the tunnel, tangled in a mess of dimly glowing threads. It's causing an eerie vibration in the air and spewing that disgusting sweet smell.

“Is the door back in there...?”

Suddenly, a train bursts through the foul current. Its silver frame emerges from the tunnel as if nothing is amiss, passes through the worm's body, and enters the tunnel on the opposite bank.

“How can we get to a place like that?” I whisper in despair.

The worm extends below the bridge we're standing on and stretches upriver. I look behind me, following its length.

The worm's head is raised like a snake ready to strike.

Its long, glowing body stretches along the riverbank, and at its end, the head is lifting slowly into the sky as if invisible fingers are plucking it off the ground. A flock of crows ascends alongside it. Against the evening sun, the disgusting red column glitters with a bizarre beauty. Almost like someone is blowing a long

breath into melted glass.

“...Huh?”

Suddenly, the worm stops rising. It is frozen, its height almost even with the high-rises lining both banks of the river, as if it has paused to think. Across the surface of its body, the muddy river silently swirls.

“Did it...stop?”

“...No,” Souta answers. His voice is shaking. I glance at him. He’s staring at the ground.

“...?”

I look down, too. The earth below is paved in hefty stone slabs.

“—!”

Something brushes against the soles of my feet, and I reflexively lift my heels. Is the ground rumbling? Below my feet, something big—too big to fit within my field of vision—is groaning. A chill crawls slowly up from my feet; I’m covered in cold sweat. I realize the birds and locusts are silent. The only sound breaking the silence is the crisp, clear rattling of some carefree train that missed the memo.

“...It’s too late,” Souta whispers bitterly. As I glance at him—

Boom!

The ground buckles under me. The force of it jolts me several centimeters into the air. I lose my balance and fall to my knees. The streetlights on the bridge swing like pendulums, clanging loudly. My phone buzzes, and that dissonant sound is followed by a robotic voice repeating, *“This is an earthquake.”* All around me, people’s phones are buzzing. Screams and panic spread. I pull out my phone and look at the screen. Yellow and red characters say, *“Earthquake Early Warning. Inland Kanto region. Please be prepared for strong tremors.”*

“—!”

My body goes stiff. But a second later, the alert disappears and the buzzing stops. Other people’s phones go quiet, too, and the panic subsides. The ground isn’t shaking anymore.

“It stopped... What’s going on?!”

There was only one vertical jolt. The worm is still. I look at Souta. To me, the chair’s face looks deathly pale.

“...It’s out,” he says.

“What is?”

“The second Keystone!”

I want to ask what’s happening, but the words stick in my throat. A gurgling sound is echoing from the tunnel. I whip my head in its direction. The base of the worm protruding from the tunnel is swelling—like the worm is a big hose and someone has stepped on the end of it. Its surface jiggles as the lump forms and grows.

“The whole thing is coming out!”

In unison with Souta’s heartrending yell, the lump bursts. The muddy torrent rushes out of the tunnel with overwhelming force, and as a tremendous rumble shakes the earth, the worm’s tail comes free. Its enormous snakelike form disappears under the bridge. As a strong wind swirls up and beats against my skin, I spot a white cat riding the torrent.

“Daijin!” I shout.

“...I will stop this massive earthquake no matter what, Suzume,” Souta says in a low voice, his eyes on the cat.

“Huh?”

“I’ll be back.”

He plummets from the railing to the ground.

“What?! Souta, no!” I scream. I lean over the bridge, intending to follow him. The chair is being swept under the bridge in that awful river. I glance reflexively over my shoulder and then start running in the same direction as the worm.

I dive into the flow of traffic. The screeching of brakes enters my right ear while and the honking of horns enters my left, and I pick up the pace. Someone slams on their brakes to my right and nearly skims my back. I’m on the other

side now, sprinting across the pedestrian lane and onto the railing. Everyone around me is yelling. Right in front of me, the worm curves sharply upward. The other people here can only see me standing on the railing squinting at the sky. But I see something else.

“Souta, wait!” I leap off the bridge. People scream.

“Suzume?!”

Souta, tangled in the rising worm, reaches out a leg in surprise. I barely manage to grab it, and that instant, my body accelerates all at once into the air. My feet sway helplessly. My left loafer falls off and tumbles to the ground. I grip the chair’s leg with my right hand and desperately dig the fingers of my left into the surface of the worm. It feels like lukewarm grains of cooked rice, and they’re forming a crushed, sticky mess in my frantic grip. Riding the worm, I burst upward through the flock of crows and struggle to lift my body against the force of the wind.

“You—,” Souta yells angrily when I finally manage to squat beside him. “You’re crazy!”

“I couldn’t let you go alo— Ahhh!”

The grainy surface of the worm is melting away like cheese.

“Suzume!”

Souta’s voice fades away above me. I’m falling through empty space. The world spins, and my throat releases a silent scream. I can see a branch of the worm pushing toward me. As it overtakes me, I reach out my hand—but it slips through my fingers like watery porridge.

I’m falling, and the world is spinning. Clusters of buildings reflecting the evening sun flicker across my field of vision again and again.

“Suzume, I’m coming to save you!”

A voice drawing nearer, but I can’t see its owner.

“Sou—”

Something smacks into my stomach, cutting off my words. It’s the chair. Souta has jumped toward me and is pushing me.

“!”

Hugging him, I land on something sticky, roll a few times, and finally come to a stop.

“Are you okay, Suzume?”

“Souta!”

Still hugging him, I sit up. We’re on top of something that feels like springy ice. The worm’s body had felt like a torrent of jelly before, but it’s firmer here. I can see bubbly particles flowing beneath the translucent surface, like a school of little fish under the ice.

“The surface of the worm is unstable. We should stay here,” Souta says against my chest.

“Okay!”

The worm is rising with us on it. When I look up, I can see the far end beginning to swirl slowly in the evening sky like an enormous whirlpool.



As the invisible worm spreads across the twilit Tokyo sky, people finished with school or work are embracing their freedom and going all over the city. The air is full of their voices and breath, the smell of dinner wafts from restaurants and homes, and colorful lights take the place of the setting sun. As twilight falls, the hustle and bustle swells, as if the city has been repainted in saturated colors.

Nobody notices.

They don’t notice the abnormal shimmer in front of the sinking red sun. They don’t notice the strange hint of a rainbow reflected on the shiny glass windows of skyscrapers, the windshields of cars stuck in traffic, the rims of glasses filled with mineral water, or the surface of the Imperial Palace’s moat as they jog past. They don’t notice the enormous swirling torrent reflected in the eyes of the birds as they gather on rooftops to stare at the sky.

They’re thinking excitedly about their date tonight. About a nice dinner for one. The conversation they’ll have with a friend. The smile of their son or daughter when they pick them up from school.

They've nearly forgotten the brief earthquake earlier in the evening. They've forgotten the girl who leaped from the bridge. The single loafer that for some reason fell out of the sky a short while later.

But the birds can see it, and so can we. That huge red whirlpool covering the heavens. The way it is sucked upward, like someone has pulled a plug at the top of the sky and the muddy red water is swirling out the drain. The way it grows instead of disappearing. The way it covers the sky like an enormous lid fit snugly over the metropolis.

I hug Souta and run across the top of the whirlpool.



"The worm is covering the sky!" I blurt out. I'm running over the top of it with Souta clasped to my chest. The surface feels like springy asphalt now, solidified into a translucent mass. I can make out a hazy horizon line and, below me, innumerable buildings. The branches of the worm spread over the whole city, each one curled in its own intricate whirlpool. From a distance, they look like countless, glittering red eyes staring blankly down at Tokyo.

"Souta, is this...?"

"Yes. If this falls to the ground, all of Kanto will—"

His voice shakes, and I can't tell if it's from anger or fear.

"The only option now is to drive in the Keystone. Where did Daijin go...?!"

I realize we're running toward the center of the worm with no idea where the cat is. The worm is coiled into a giant disk, its center a red hill. Masses of bubbles flow toward it like schools of fish beneath the surface, as if they are being sucked in. The hill glows faintly against the twilight sky, hiding the setting sun. I run through the beautiful, unsettling landscape like I'm caught in a nightmare.

"Suuuzume!"

Suddenly, I hear a childish voice. I stop and look up toward it. Pink feelers radiate from the hill like slender branches. Daijin is perched on one of them. The branch sways in the wind, and the cat looks down at me with empty yellow

eyes.

“When the worm falls, the earth will shake.”

The high, childish voice sounds happy.

“Daijin!” “The Keystone!” Souta and I yell at the same time. Souta jumps out of my arms and runs toward the cat. Suddenly, there’s a creaking sound, and the chair stops moving. Souta topples over with a clunk.

“Souta?” I say, picking him up. “What’s wrong?!” I peer at him. Someone chuckles above me. I look up. The cat’s yellow eyes are even rounder than before.

“A lot of people are about to die.”

“!”

Still holding Souta, I run to the base of the branch.

“Why are you doing this?! Go back to being a Keystone already!” I shout as I run.

“I can’t,” the cat says in a tone that implies I’m stupid for not knowing that already. “Daijin isn’t a Keystone anymore.”

“What?”

The cat jumps off its branch and lands silently on the seat of the chair. It brings its face right up to Souta’s and whispers something brief. I can’t hear what it says.

“You!” I say, lunging to grab Daijin by the scruff of the neck. But the cat lithely jumps off the chair. I squat and try to pin it down, but it slips from my hands. It scampers around me teasingly, just out of reach. It’s no good—I can’t catch it.

“Souta, what do I do...?!” I pant. He doesn’t answer. “Souta?”

“...I’m sorry, Suzume,” he finally says.

“What?”

“I’m sorry,” he repeats.

Why is he apologizing? It’s strange how slow he’s speaking.

“I finally understand. I didn’t realize... Maybe I was trying not to...”

“Wait a second—”

So cold. My fingers holding him are so cold.

“Now—”

He’s growing colder and colder. A thin film of frost covers the chair’s seat.

“Now I *am* a Keystone.”

“What...?”

The frost is growing thicker, turning to ice. Souta’s voice sounds flatter to me, like it’s lost its warmth.

“When I was turned into a chair, the mantle of the Keystone shifted to me.”

My mind grasps his meaning before my emotions kick in. But once they do a moment later, I’m a mess. I’m lost. Souta’s face, his backrest, is buried under ice. He lets out a long sigh.

“Ahhh... So this is how it ends. Here of all places...”

“Souta?”

He’s frozen. The light little kiddie chair is now as heavy as stone.

“But I—”

The words are muffled now.

“Because I met you—”

His voice breaks off. At that moment, the thing in my arms stops being a chair. *It’s not Souta anymore.* I can feel the truth in my fingers. I know it in my body. But my heart refuses to accept it.

“Souta!” I scream.

My heart cries out, *I hate this!* What used to be a chair is now completely covered in ice and shaped like a sword with a short, pointed tip. *I hate it. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.*

“Souta, Souta, Souta, Souta!”

“That isn’t Souta anymore,” Daijin says, prancing over to me.

“Daijin, you—!”

I glare at the cat. Its image blurs and sways. I’m crying; I can feel the tears streaming down my cheeks. The cat looks at my face and says innocently, “You’re not going to stick the Keystone into the worm?”

“I can’t—”

“If you don’t,” Daijin says, perching in front of me, “the worm will fall. The earth will shake.”

That’s when I realize.

“...It’s already starting to fall!”

The worm is collapsing toward the ground under its own weight. Clouds drift slowly past overhead, and I feel a floating sensation in my body.

“Souta!” I scream at what used to be the chair, gathering strength in my hands. “Souta, please! Wake up, Souta!”

“I told you.” Daijin sighs with exasperation, tapping my thigh with its front paw. “That isn’t Souta anymore.”

I can’t take it. I throw out my hand to hit the cat. It dodges nimbly. We’re falling faster now. The floating sensation grows stronger. The wind lifts my hair. The ground is getting closer.

“Souta!” I shout as loud as I can. “What do I do?! Tell me! Souta! Souta!”

“Lots of people will die, you know.” Daijin lolls onto its back, yellow eyes wide-open. “It won’t be long!”

Excitement glitters in its eyes, so empty a moment ago. *I hate this. I can’t stand it anymore.*

In my mind’s eye, I can see what will happen. The sky is already dark, the stars beginning to twinkle. Down below, people are walking to stations, crossing intersections, boarding trains. Going where each of them needs to go. Eating dinner with someone. Buying something at the convenience store. Sending a text to someone. Walking next to a classmate with nervous anticipation.

Walking home hand in hand with their mother, whom they dearly love. Filling their chest with fresh summer air that's still free of that festering sweetness.

I can see it.

Above their heads, the worm is silently floating like a crown. Like the bloodred flesh of a fruit at the peak of ripeness.

It's falling. It's almost there. I can hardly breathe. I can't stop shaking. *I hate it. I hate it.*

"I hate this!" I cry out loud. My heart is a mess of confusion. I'm squeezing my eyes shut, but the tears keep falling like the stopper is broken. I raise the Keystone high with both hands and open my eyes; my vision is still blurry. It's not him anymore. It's a pointed spear of ice. I slowly close my eyes again and swing it above my head.

"Yaaaaaaah!"

With all the strength left in my body, I thrust the Keystone into the worm.



A blue flash pierces the center of the coil.

The next instant, the worm, big enough to cover all of Kanto, is compressed into a single point and sucked away into the ground. All that remains in the sky is the energy it sucked up from the earth. But a second later that, too, bursts apart and becomes a ripple of air that hangs over the city like an aurora, illuminating the night sky in brilliant color for twenty or thirty seconds. A rainbow shower washes over the rooftops of Tokyo. Everyone is excited, snapping pictures to share as the strange nighttime rainbow brings them a moment of joy.

No one notices the girl drifting down from the sky at the same time. Her limp body rotates slowly, cutting through the wind. Nearby, a kitten is falling, too. As it descends, it sinks its claws into the girl, curling its small body around her head to protect it. They pass below the roofs of the high-rises, and when the ground finally approaches, the kitten's body swells until it's even larger than a person, wrapping itself tightly around the girl.

Water splashes high in the air from the dark surface of a pool. They have fallen into a large, old moat, a relic among the tall buildings of Tokyo. The splash reverberates off the high stone walls, surprising the sleeping waterbirds into flight and sending large ripples over the pool's surface. Eventually, the water stills. No one has noticed, and silence envelops the night once again.

Never Again

Tap-tap.

I hear kimagure. It is tantalizingly familiar.

Tap-tap, tap. Tap-tap.

What sound is this? I know it.

The sound of my mother making breakfast? The knock when we're playing hide-and-seek and she's found me? The sound of me rapping on the window of the nurse's station when I want her to know I'm there? The crash of pebbles blown by the sea wind hitting the windows of our house?

Tap-tap, tap.

No. It's the sound of a wooden hammer. Then this must be the day of my fourth birthday.

I open my eyes.

My mother is hammering in the garden. In our house's tiny yard, my mother is sitting cross-legged in the sunshine on a piece of cardboard she's laid out. She's making something. Around her are planks, poles, and a toolbox with planers and a coping saw.

"Mom, is it ready yet?" I ask with the sweet, lisping voice of a child.

"Not yet, not yet," she answers, singsong. The golden light forms a halo around her long hair and sits like water droplets on her long eyelashes and full mouth, much fuller than mine.

She sets me on the veranda and measures my legs with a measuring tape. She cuts several poles with the saw. With an electric drill, she bores holes in the

planks. My mother is good at everything—cooking, driving, creating.

“Which do you like better: pink, blue, or yellow?” she asks, lining up cans of paint.

“Yellow!” I answer. I choose that color because a yellow butterfly is flitting behind her just then, and I think it’s incredibly cute.

She pops the can open, and the thrilling smell of paint fills the air. She dips her brush in it and paints the two planks, which are square and about thirty centimeters on each side. The glossy yellow reflects the May sunshine, scattering bright light everywhere.

The two of us eat stir-fried udon for lunch. By afternoon, the paint is dry. The bright-yellow planks feel strangely smooth and plasticky under my fingers. She fits the poles into the planks and taps on them with the hammer. Again, that tantalizing sound.

“Is it ready yet?” I ask, a little bored, as I line up pebbles in the flower bed. I’m full and sleepy.

“Just about,” she says teasingly. *Tap-tap, tap-tap*. She looks at me and grins.

“All done! Happy birthday, Suzume!”

She hands me the yellow chair.

“Wow!” I’m delighted, I really am, but I feel like something’s still missing. The chair is very simple, with a square seat and back and four legs. My younger self had been hoping for something a little more exciting.

“Is this his face?” I ask, pointing to the backrest.

“Huh? It’s a chair, sweetie! Just for you!” she says, smiling wryly. Then, “Wait a minute.”

She picks up the chair, thinks for a moment, and draws two circles on the backrest. Then she takes a chisel from the toolbox and carves two indentations. When she’s done carving, she smooths the indentations with sandpaper and paints them. The backrest is now a face with two little eyes.

“Done! Like it?”

“Oooh!”

This time I’m genuinely excited. Now that it has eyes, the yellow chair might start talking at any moment. Maybe it wants to be my friend. My sleepiness and boredom disappear instantly.

“It’s just for me!”

I sit on the chair. It’s the perfect size. “For me!” I repeat. “Thank you, Mom!”

She’s squatting next to me, and I throw my arms around her, still seated in the chair. Tangled together, the three of us topple into the garden. Lying on my mother’s chest, I say with confidence, “I’m going to keep it forever and ever!”

“Forever?! Well then, that was a worthwhile project!” she laughs. I laugh, too.

It’s all right here, clear as day—our laughter, the sun in the garden, the sound of waves crashing on the shore, the occasional chirping of bush warblers. I’d thought the memory had left me, but here it is, so vivid I almost shrink back.

Reluctant to give up this sleep that holds me like warm mud, I slowly wake from my dream.

* * *

The low howl of wind fills my ears, mixed with the gurgling of a stream. I open my eyes.

I’m surrounded by darkness. Far overhead is a pale, greenish light. It’s so faint I wonder if it’s a random pattern projected behind my eyelids. I begin to doubt whether my eyes are actually open. I blink a few times.

“.....”

Eventually, my eyes adjust to the dark, and I begin to make out hazy forms. The ceiling is as high as a four-or five-story building and weirdly bumpy, like it’s pieced together from giant blocks. Light shines faintly through long, thin gaps here and there. I’m lying on my back, looking up at a huge space, too disorderly to be man-made and too geometric to be a natural cave. The stones beneath my back are slick with moisture.

“Where...,” I murmur, sitting up. I stick my hand in the pocket of my culottes

and take out my phone. The rustle of the fabric echoes loudly, like I'm in a tunnel.

"Where am I?"

I push the button on the side, and the screen flashes brightly. I squint, then open a map. It takes a little longer than usual, but the topography appears. A river takes up the whole screen, and the symbol for my current location is right in the middle of it.

"I'm under a river?"

I pinch my fingers on the screen to zoom out—but it suddenly goes black. A red empty-battery icon appears and then disappears right away.

"Damn!"

The battery is completely dead. My brain is still fuzzy. The reverberations of my dream echo faintly in my ears. Still sitting on the damp ground, I peer around.

"Oh...!"

In the distance is a small point of light. Several passages branch off the room I'm in, and at the end of one of them is that faint green light.

"Souta...?" I mumble without thinking. I will my legs to stand up. Something feels off. I realize my left shoe is missing.

"Oh yeah..."

As I walk toward the light, I gradually remember. My shoe fell off when I was riding the worm into the sky. And then I plunged the chair—the Keystone—into the worm. The worm vanished right after that, and I fell out of the sky. And then—

"...!"

I step out of the passage and gasp at what I see.

Ruins. Ancient, sprawling, underground ruins.

"This must be..."

Everything is made from wood and stone. The roofs are tile, the posts timber,

and the walls stone. In the center of the ruins, a castle gate stands by itself, larger than everything else. Amid the crumbling buildings, it's the only thing still holding its original form. The gate has large double doors, and inside is a starry sky.

"...Tokyo's Gate?!"

I take off running. My feet splash through water. The gate is surrounded by a cold, shallow pool.

"Aaah!" As I stand in front of the gate, I gasp in surprise. Inside are the glaring stars of Ever-After and, below them, the black silhouette of a hill. Something small is stuck into the earth at its peak.

A chair.

Its legs are buried deep in the hill—which is actually the body of the worm.

"Souta!"

I run toward him. The hill appears both far away and close enough to touch; the concept of distance starts to blur. I keep going. I'm nearing the gate. I burst through the door, but just when I think I've reached the foot of the hill—

"Huh?!"

I'm back in the dark ruins, and I look over my shoulder. There's the castle gate and, inside it, Ever-After. It's exactly like the first door I encountered, the one in Kyushu where I pulled Daijin out of the ground.

"I can't get in...!"

Still, I can see it. He's so close. I start running toward the gate again.

But the shoe still on my right foot catches on something, and I fall into the water. Cold, grainy liquid fills my mouth. I sit up, spit it out, and peel off my shoe. I start running again in my socks, and then I'm through the gate.

"—!"

It doesn't work. I'm still in the ruins. I look back. Souta is inside the gate, on top of the black hill.

"...He's in Ever-After," I whisper in despair. But—but I can see him!

“Souta!” I scream.

No answer. The strength drains from my legs.

“Souta, Souta...!”

Unable to stand any longer, I sink to my knees in the water.

“Souta...,” I say, intending to scream, but my voice is mostly breath.

“Suuuzume!”

Suddenly, I hear a childish voice. Whipping my head around like I’ve been struck, I see round yellow eyes glowing in the dark. The cat struts toward me, tail pointing straight up and water splashing rhythmically under its feet. It rubs against my thighs as I kneel.

I try to scream, but only breath comes out.

“We’re finally alone, Suzume.”

“Daijin!”

I leap to my feet to get away from the white fur.

“It’s your fault!” I shout angrily. “Give Souta back!”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?!”

“He’s not a person anymore,” the cat says innocently, its eyes empty.

“—!”

I bend over and grab Daijin with both hands.

“Ooh!” Daijin purrs.

“Give Souta back!” I yell.

“That hurts, Suzume.”

The voice is sugary. I tighten my grip.

“Give him back now!”

“I said that hurts, Suzume!”

“You! You—”

The kitten’s soft body is so small and fragile. A little more pressure, and its bones will snap. A thin, childish mew escapes its mouth, full of pain.

“Don’t you like me? Don’t you like Daijin?” it asks.

“What?” I can’t believe my ears. “How could I—?”

“You like me, don’t you?”

“I hate you!” I scream, swinging the cat into the air. It whines again. I briefly imagine crushing it in my hands, breaking its bones, and hurling it into the cold water. I can practically feel the sensations already. The thrill of cruelty and the disgust that comes after run down my spine. The cat’s little heart pounds frantically under my grip.

“.....”

I can’t do it; the strength leaves my hands. My raised arms grow heavy and drop. I open my fingers and let the kitten go. It drops with a splash by my feet. Standing on four legs, it stares up at me as if trying to gauge how angry I am.

“...Go away,” I say. My eyes are unpleasantly hot. I’m crying. “Don’t talk to me ever again.”

“Suzume...”

Daijin does a little shake and suddenly shrivels; the plump form becomes bony before my eyes, like the air has been let out of it. Its eyes sink into their sockets. Now it looks like a miserable old cat at the end of its life.

“Suzume didn’t like Daijin...,” it croaks, then totters off. Its little footsteps fade behind me.

I’m left alone in front of the Gate.

Now what do I do?

I’m angry, but I’m also worried, sad, upset, and lonely. I don’t know what to do next. I don’t even have a clue. What should I be thinking or doing one minute from now, or five? I can’t come up with anything. Tears are still streaming down my cheeks. I stand there, waiting for the tears to stop. My feet

are turning numb in the cold water.

* * *

When I look closely at the big doors in the castle gate, I notice vestiges of the worm stuck to the wood. There are several long, thin smears of what looks like smooshed rice on the doors, still faintly glowing reddish black. The worm must have emerged and returned through here.

I realize I need to close them.

I push one of the thick wooden doors with both hands. At first it doesn't budge, but eventually, it creaks and starts to move very slowly. When I let up even a little, it stops, like I'm pushing on a stone wall. I have to push with all my might to move it. I press both elbows against the door, bend my head, and push with my whole body. I break out in a sweat, and the soles of my feet start bleeding. I watch, detached, as my blood tints the water around my feet.

I think it takes me around half an hour to close both doors. My legs and arms are tingling, and my whole body feels spent. I'm exhausted. If I'm not careful, I might topple over into the water.

I take some deep breaths, plant my legs firmly, and grasp the key around my neck. I close my eyes and imagine what these ruins used to be like.

Eventually, the key grows warm, like it's breathing, and I hear whispers in the distance. But the memory of those voices, both male and female, is so distant, it's like a faint breeze blowing between the buildings. All the same, the light radiating from the key draws a faintly shimmering keyhole on the door, shaped like a rounded clover. I push in the key and promise myself once more that I will return to save him.

"We respectfully return them to you!" I say as I turn the key. The sensation of something clicking firmly into place lingers in my hand.

Following a current of air, I walk down a different passage from the one I entered. The draft is faint but steady, blowing up a gentle slope. The damp ground soon turns to dry rock. I'm clearly in a man-made cavern. On the ceiling and walls are many long, straight marks left by the tools used to carve it. Here and there on the walls and floor are what appear to be faded words written in

ink. Faint light seeps in from a thin crack near the ceiling, dimly illuminating my surroundings like moonlight. I don't know if it's morning or afternoon. My feet, which had been numb from the cold water, now burn with pain. The white socks Chika gave me are brown with dried blood.

As I walk, I notice that the walls are gradually changing. Brick begins to appear between chiseled stone and eventually, gives way to banked concrete. The sound of my footsteps changes. Rusted iron railings appear, leading to concrete stairs.

I climb the stairs through a narrow tunnel. It continues straight for a while, with large landings every so often followed by another straight stretch. Small pipes are attached to the roof. Sometimes I rest on the landings, gaze absently at the random patterns formed by the pipes, and start walking again when my feet stop throbbing. I can't think about anything. I don't want to think. I just mindlessly climb the stairs.

Eventually, an odd smell wafts in on a current of cold air. It's familiar, and I should know what it is, but I can't remember. At last, I realize it's car exhaust. That's about when I see a small door above my head.

I turn the round iron handle, and the steel door opens. Cars are whizzing past right in front of me. I lean out from the wall and look timidly around. I'm in a tunnel with dim orange lighting. The walls are dotted with green guidance lamps and emergency telephones with the letters *SOS* written on them. About two hundred meters away, white light shines at the mouth of the tunnel. I put my hand on the wall and start walking quickly down what must be a corridor for safety inspections. Every time a car passes, the driver stares at me in surprise. When they see me here, where no one is supposed to be, some of them gape, others squint suspiciously, and still others stare with disapproval. Someone snaps a picture. When I get close to the light, my eyes, accustomed to the dark, start to sting. But I only walk faster. My feet don't hurt anymore.

There's a gray steel staircase for workers at the end of the tunnel, and I climb it. As my feet step off the steel platform onto weeds, morning sun hits my eyes. I'm in a small vacant lot piled with construction materials. My eyes tear up from the brightness as I try to take stock of where I am. Past a steel fence, the horizon is packed with rectangular skyscrapers. Apparently, the sun has just

risen above them.

“Is this...?” I mumble, looking around.

Directly below me is a huge moat full of emerald-green water. The banks are covered with giant stones, like castle walls, and above them is dense forest. Low castle-like buildings with white walls and black tile roofs poke up from the trees here and there. The ancient forest seems to have been left behind by time, surrounded on all sides by modern buildings shining in the morning sun. Even someone like me who’s never been to Tokyo before knows this place.

“The Imperial Palace.”

I finally realize what has been above me this whole time.

The sharp call of a bulbul rips through the morning air. I look up. It’s another pointlessly, ridiculously clear blue day.



The Only Door You Can Enter

I'm slightly shocked by my own appearance in the morning light. I'm covered in mud and scrapes, my clothes are torn, and the shoulder seam has come undone on my jean jacket so that the arm is falling off. My socks are stained a color I've never seen before, thanks to all the blood and dirt. But there's nothing I can do about any of it. I can't afford to buy new clothes, and the battery is dead on my phone. Besides, the stores won't have opened yet, and I don't know Tokyo, so I have no idea where I am in relation to anything else.

In an attempt to achieve the bare minimum of personal grooming, I hide behind the piles of construction materials to brush the dirt off my clothes and run my fingers through my hair. After that, I climb over the iron gate on the opposite side of the lot from the moat and step onto the sidewalk. A businessman who happens to be passing by looks at me in shock. He doesn't say anything, though. He glances back a few times, but he keeps walking.

The sidewalk runs along a perfectly average street. According to a sign, it's called Uchibori Road. I go into a convenience store nearby and plug my phone into a free charging station. While I'm waiting for it to turn on, a young male employee makes eye contact. He frowns at me for a while but ultimately says

nothing and goes to the back of the store. A few minutes later, two high school girls around my age come in. When they see me, they stop a few meters away and whisper to each other. I can hear them saying, *“Look, she’s not wearing shoes!” “That looks like blood!” “I wonder if she’s been abused. Should we talk to her?”* They seem genuinely worried, so I start thinking up excuses in case they approach me.

Just then, my screen turns on with an electronic ding. I unplug the cable, stride over to a shelf with disposable batteries, and take one compatible with my phone. Then I use my phone to pay for it at the register. I speed-walk past the two girls, bowing to them as I go. I’m grateful for their concern, but I don’t want to talk to them.

I know where I’m going next.

After hooking it up to the portable battery, I pull up a map on my phone and plot my route to Ochanomizu Station.

The hospital closest to Souta’s apartment is a university hospital inside a building so tall I have to crane my neck to see the top. A broad, sloping approach leads inside from the sidewalk, and even this early in the morning, it’s dotted with people who appear to be hospital staff going to work. I wait for a moment when the guard isn’t nearby to jog inside.

I enter into a hall with a high ceiling and a café that isn’t open yet, then take the escalator to the second floor. No one is around, and the shutter is down on the outpatient reception window. I check a building map for my destination, then take the stairs to avoid running into anyone. I crouch down and walk quickly through a hallway with patient rooms on either side, reading nameplates as I go.

I finish checking the first floor of patient rooms and have just started on the second when I find a nameplate reading HITSUJIROU MUNAKATA. I try out the name in a whisper: “Munakata.” Then I place my hand on the bar of the sliding door. There’s only a momentary resistance before the door slides open.

* * *

The room is dim, and the hospital smell is even stronger than in the hallway.

It's a combination of disinfectant, freshly washed sheets, obligatory bouquets, and human bodies that have been in the same place for a long time. The vital-signs monitor is emitting a regular string of low, quiet electronic beeps.

It's a double room, but the bed closer to the door is empty. A large form is sleeping in the bed by the window. I can tell at a glance that this is Mr. Munakata—Souta's grandfather.

The resemblance is striking. The steep, beautiful line of the nose, the prominent forehead, the long eyelashes resting on his cheeks. Souta's handsome face is still seared in my memory, and the old man's face is an exact copy of it. But the powerful life force that animated Souta has drained away completely from his grandfather. Deep wrinkles line every part of his face, and his skin is like a sheet of paper. The long hair fanned out on his pillow is white as snow, as are his eyebrows and eyelashes. A small device is clipped onto his left pointer finger, and the fine veins on the back of his hand are nearly colorless. The indentations around his neck and collarbone are so deeply sunken they could hold little pools of water. Sleeping quietly on his bed, he reminds me of some large but gravely wounded wild animal on the verge of death.

"Souta failed, didn't he?" a low, hoarse voice abruptly asks.

I stare in surprise. Mr. Munakata is talking with his eyes closed.

"I'm s-sorry—I came in without knocking!" I say, flustered. He hadn't been sleeping. Or maybe my presence woke him. "Um, Souta told me you were in the hospital, and—"

"Ahhh..."

I can't tell if he's answering me or sighing. He opens his eyes. After staring at the ceiling for a minute, he slowly shifts his gaze to me.

"Did you get roped into this?"

His voice is another reminder of Souta—quiet and calm—and his eyes are the same vaguely bluish shade. The red veins on the whites stand out brightly.

"What happened to my grandson?" he asks.

"Um...", I say, looking down. "He turned into a Keystone. He's in Ever-After..."

“...I see,” his grandfather whispers like a sigh. His voice is emotionless. He turns his head toward the half-open curtains. “I saw the worm from this window yesterday. I wanted to go to it, but this old body doesn’t do what I want it to anymore.”

“That’s why—!” I say, stepping close to his pillow and asking the thing I’ve been desperate to know for so long. “Please tell me how to get into Ever-After!”

“...Why?”

“Uh...”

Why?

“Because I have to save Souta!”

“He doesn’t need your help.”

“Huh?”

“Souta will spend the next decades becoming a Keystone imbued with a god. We can no longer reach him in our realm.”

His words are like a verdict. A chill runs down my spine.

“You may not understand this, but it is an honor that most people can never hope for. Souta was a poor apprentice, but in the end, he seems to have demonstrated his dedication...”

Mr. Munakata squints as if the ceiling has suddenly grown too bright to look at.

“I can’t believe that...!” I blurt out, bending over. “There must be some way!”

“Would you disregard Souta’s feelings?” he asks slowly, like he wants to be sure I understand. His face is blank.

“Huh?”

“Who put in the Keystone?”

“Uh, well...”

“Was it you?”

“Um, but...”

“Answer me!” he suddenly shouts.

“Yes!” I say, the words forced out from me.

“I see. That’s good! If you hadn’t, a million people would have died last night. You prevented that. So keep your mouth shut, be proud of what you’ve done for the rest of your life, and...”

His voice is growing more insistent. The air quivers as he speaks.

“...go back to where you came from!”

His words overpower me like a strong wind. I step back, and he lets out a long, deep breath. As if exhausted from speaking, he closes his eyes, his face still turned toward the ceiling.

“...This matter does not concern people like you. You must forget everything.”

I stand rooted to the ground, my heart pounding. My cheeks are burning. I take a deep breath.

“...I can’t forget,” I choke out in a whisper. I’m furious. “...I’m going to reopen that underground door.” I turn toward the room’s exit.

The old man’s eyes are still closed. It was stupid of me to try to rely on anyone else. This is our battle—mine and Souta’s.

“What are you saying? Wait!” his grandfather shouts at my back. “What will you do after you open it?!”

“I’ll get inside, somehow.”

“Impossible. You can’t go in that way!”

I’m about to step out of the room, and I put my hand on the doorknob.

“You must not open the Gate!” he thunders at my back.

As soon as he finishes speaking, a coughing fit overtakes him. The phlegmy sound is awful, like he’s choking.

I look back in surprise and find that his body is convulsing painfully. Moving on instinct, I run to his side. But I don’t know what to do, and I freeze in front of the bed. His torso shakes violently as he pushes a button on the remote in his hand. With a low whir, the top half of the bed rises. His coughing dies down,

and the hurried beeping of the monitor slows back down to its original tempo.

Still sitting up, he lets out a long, slow breath. Beads of sweat dot his face. His eyes are closed. That's when I notice the way his hospital gown drapes from his right shoulder—his arm is missing.

"...Ever-After is beautiful, but it's the land of the dead."

His chest heaves like bellows as he speaks. A quiet dignity has returned to his voice. He opens his bloodshot eyes and stares at me.

"Aren't you scared?"

The question reminds me of Souta. He asked me the same thing. Back then, in Ehime and Kobe, we were fighting side by side. I felt like we were invincible. We had done something important that only we could do, and we'd done it without anyone knowing. We'd even left a mark at the top of the sky.

"...Not at all," I say, glaring at him. "Ever since I was little, I've thought that life and death were just up to fate. But—"

But now.

"I'm more afraid of a world without Souta!"

My eyes are hot. I think I'm going to start crying again. But I don't want to, so I squeeze my eyes shut.

Just then, Souta's grandfather coughs loudly. No—he's laughing, a loud, deeply amused laugh. I'm surprised to hear something so loud gush from such a shriveled old body. I gape at him, wondering what's so funny.

He chuckles for a long time until his voice dies down, like the laughter has worn him out. On his face, however, a smile lingers as he tells me, "There is only one Gate a person can go through in their life."

"Um—"

"You saw the world inside, didn't you? What did you see?"

"Um, I saw—"

I search for the memory, caught off guard by his question. The harder I try to recall it, the further it recedes, like a mirage. But... That meadow under the

starry sky I've seen so many times... The person walking through the grass... The one I found there...

"I saw myself as a little girl...and my mother, who should be dead..."

The man gives a small nod.

"Ever-After looks different to each person. There are as many Ever-After's as there are human souls, but at the same time, they are all one."

He pauses, waiting for the words to sink in.

"Perhaps you strayed there once when you were young. Do you remember anything like that?"

A scene bursts into my mind. A snowy night—I'm walking alone through cold slush. A door stands among the snow-dusted rubble. My little hand pushes the knob. Inside is a sky full of blinding stars.

Souta's grandfather searches my face, then says in a deep voice that reminds me of Souta's, "That is the only Gate you can enter. You must search for that door."

The old man closes his eyes and shuts his wrinkled mouth tight. *Go now*, he is saying without words. His mouth does not open again. But I think I see the corners of his lips turn up very slightly, no more than a few millimeters, into a smile.

I stand facing him, my back straight, and offer him a long, deep bow. Then I wordlessly leave his room.

Departure

When I open the apartment door, the familiar smell of Souta greets me. It seems to come from a far-off land just out of reach, and it makes my chest constrict. We were together in this room only a day ago—fourteen hours ago. It feels like the distant past.

The study is a mess. The books that had been piled with such charming liberty on the floor are knocked over, and about half of those previously on shelves are scattered on the tatami floor. A breeze from the open window is rustling their

pages. This is the worm's fault, I realize as I slowly remember what happened. The brief jolt when the second Keystone was pulled up destroyed what little order had governed this room.

First, I need to clean myself up.

There's a little sink next to the kitchen and a bath beyond that. It has a shower and a tiny bathtub. I take off the clothes Chika gave me, fold them neatly, and set them on the washing machine, then walk naked into the bathroom, turn on the warm water, and step under the showerhead. My hair is stiffer than it's ever been, and the water that runs from it is black. I take a long time washing my hair and body, making sure the water running onto the tile floor is clear.

Next, I work on the soles of my feet. There are several deep cuts on both of them. I scrub off the dried blood with my hands and pick out all the sand and gravel with my fingernails. My eyes tear up, and I grit my teeth, but the pain feels like it's buried far in the back of my mind.

A bath towel is folded neatly on a shelf above the washing machine, and next to it is a plastic box of toiletries. The box is neatly packed with shampoo, soap, a toothbrush, a razor, and some hair gel. *A proper adult*, I think. These signs of his methodical personality overwhelm me with sadness. I borrow a towel to dry myself off and take some adhesive pads from the box for my feet.

I stand in my underwear and bra and dry my hair, then take my school uniform out of the sports bag. The clothes from Chika are all torn up, so I can't wear them. I put on the white button-down shirt, dark-green skirt, and silk socks. I tie the red ribbon tight on my chest and put my hair in a high ponytail. I'm wearing the same clothes and the same hairstyle as the day I left Kyushu, yet something has irrefutably disappeared from my body. I feel like I've lost the weight that kept me grounded in this world. It's like I look the same but weigh half as much—like my body has been replaced with air, leaving me unstable. I'm still angry. Something was given to me without my asking—pushed on me—and then stolen away for no reason. *Again?* I want to yell at the gods, or whoever's in charge of running this world: *Stop making me feel so stupid!* I glare at my gaunt face in the mirror and say out loud, "Stop making me feel stupid!" But my voice is shaking and tearful, and I look pathetic even to myself.

Before I leave Souta's apartment, I quickly tidy up the fallen books. I don't know how he had them organized, so I stack them on the floor in knee-high piles. Then I close the window and the curtains.

"Souta, I'm borrowing your shoes," I mutter before stuffing my feet into the black work boots in the entryway. They're huge on me, but I pull the laces tight until they're securely strapped to my feet. I lock the apartment door behind me and walk toward the station.

It's still only a little past eight in the morning.

The streets are finally starting to fill up with commuters and kids on their way to school. I join the stream of people wordlessly walking toward the station and tally up the time in my head: one, two, three...

It's my fifth day.

This is the morning of the fifth day since I met Souta.

* * *

I plan to go to Tokyo Station first. From there, I'll transfer to the Shinkansen. I no longer need to look at my phone to navigate.

I travel along the sidewalk next to Kanda River (the worm was on this riverbank yesterday), turn at the intersection, cross the big bridge, and I'm already at Ochanomizu Station. It's rush hour, so people of all ages are crowded outside.

"Hey, you!" someone says as I'm walking up the slope to the ticket gate. They can't be talking to me. I don't know anyone around here.

"Suzume!"

"Huh?!"

I turn around. A bright-red convertible is pulled up in the drop-off lane outside the station. The man in the driver's seat is staring at me.

"...Serizawa?"

It's the man who came by Souta's apartment yesterday. He has on a black jacket over a red V-neck with way too many silver necklaces jangling against his

chest.

“Why are you—?” I begin.

“Where are you going? To see Souta?” he interrupts, looking at me grumpily from behind his round glasses. I don’t know why he’s here, but right now, I’m at least as grouchy as he is.

“...I’m going to look for a door,” I say, too quietly for him to hear.

“What?”

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry.” I turn my back on him.

“Hey, wait, I’ve been looking for you everywhere!” He grabs my arm from behind.

“What are you doing?!”

“You’re not really Souta’s cousin, are you?”

“What’s it to you? Let me go!”

“Get in,” he says, still leaning out of the car and gripping my arm.

“You’re kidding.”

People around us are starting to stare.

“Why would I—?”

“You’re going to see Souta, right? I’ll take you to him, wherever he is.”

“Why would you do that?!”

“What’s wrong with someone worrying about their friend?” he asks me with complete sincerity, looking me straight in the eye. *A friend*. The words throw me into confusion. Of course Souta has friends. I would worry, too, if someone didn’t show up for an important test. But if they weren’t a really close friend—

“There you are!” I hear someone shout from the ticket gate. *That voice—it can’t be!*

“Tamaki?!”

“Suzume!”

Tamaki charges through the crowd to reach me. I can't believe my eyes. She's wearing a blue knit top and a pale-pink scarf, and she has a large tote bag over one shoulder. She looks like a grown-up on vacation, but her wide-open eyes are bloodshot.

"What are you doing here?!"

"I'm so glad I found you! I've been searching everywhere!"

She sounds like she's about to cry. She hugs me, pulling me away from Serizawa.

"Don't you dare touch her again! I'll call the police!"

"What?!" Serizawa says, staring at me in surprise. "Who's she? Your mom?!"

"Is this the man who came to our house? He's deceiving you, Suzume!"

"What?" Serizawa and I say in unison.

Apparently having come to her own conclusion about the situation, she pulls me toward the ticket gate.

"We're going home!" she says.

"Tamaki, wait."

"Hurry up!"

I stop, shaking off her arm. "I'm sorry, Tamaki. I'm not going home yet."

Serizawa's mouth is still hanging open. I look from him to his red convertible. What else can I do? I open the door and slide in next to him.

"Serizawa, hit the gas."

"Huh? Oh, uh, okay!"

He turns the key like he's just remembered where he is, and the engine roars to life.

"Suzume, wait!" Tamaki yells, running after me. The worry in her eyes is nearly crazed. She might really call the police at this rate.

"Hurry, Serizawa!"

"Suzume, get out of there this instant!"

Tamaki swings up her leg and perches one foot on the door of the convertible. Her wide-leg pants balloon with the motion.

“What the hell?!” Serizawa says, gaping.

“I’m not letting you go alone!” She hoists herself over the door and drops into the passenger seat. “Tamaki, you have to get out!”

“Suzume, just what do you think you’re doing?! Running away from home?!”

“But I texted you and everything!”

“You didn’t even answer my messages!”

“Hey now, calm down,” Serizawa says as we squabble. Commuters are frowning at us and whispering.

“Must be a lovers’ quarrel.”

“A love triangle, I’d say.”

“No, an escort and his clients.”

“Looks like a nasty fight.”

You’re all wrong! I want to scream. But just then, I hear a childish voice from behind me.

“Be quiet.”

I whip my head around. Daijin is perched in the back seat. The cat is still skin and bones, glaring at me with its yellow eyes.

“Did that cat just talk?!” Serizawa and Tamaki shout from either side of me.

“No way,” I say, smiling. “Cats can’t talk!”

They look at each other, then at the cat, and mutter, “Right, of course not!”

“Of course. A cat, talking? Ridiculous.”

“That would make no sense at all.”

To distract them from thinking any more about it, I turn on the car navigation system next to the steering wheel.

“Anyway...!”

I type in an address and tap “Go.”

“*Your destination has been selected,*” the automated voice replies with an inappropriate level of perkiness.

“Serizawa, please take us here,” I say.

“You’re kidding,” he says, peering at the screen. “That’s halfway across the country!”

“I thought you said you’d go anywhere.”

“Suzume, what are you thinking...?” Tamaki joins in once she sees the screen. I crawl between them to the back seat. I can’t risk catching the attention of the police and getting sent back to Kyushu. I don’t know what kind of person Serizawa is, but if he’ll bring me where I want to go, I figure I might as well take him up on the offer. And if Tamaki doesn’t want me to go alone, then she can come with us. I don’t know what Daijin is thinking, but the cat is already curled up in a corner of the back seat.

I don’t care. They can all do whatever they want; I don’t care. All I need to do is find my Gate, whatever it takes. As I buckle my seatbelt, I say to Serizawa, “Please. I have to go there.” My tone is emphatic.

“I can’t believe this...,” he says, searching my face for a minute before sighing with resignation. As he releases the parking brake, he grumbles, “We’re not going to make it back tonight.”

* * *

After pulling away from the station, Serizawa takes the convertible along a brand-new, wide road for a little while, before we pass through a tollbooth onto the Shuto Expressway and accelerate.

No one says a word.

Serizawa silently grips the wheel, Tamaki glares crossly at the cityscape, and Daijin snoozes on the seat next to me. The wind whipping into the convertible combined with the force of the car’s acceleration press me into my seat. The September morning sky is clear blue, and the wind is humid.

I let my eyes close.

Each time the car passes through the shadow of a building, strange patterns swim behind my eyelids. As I watch them, I feel the sharp outlines of my emotions melting away. My anger grows vague, and so do my anxiety and loneliness. The tension seeps from my muscles. *Just for now*, I tell myself from within that melting sensation. Just for now, I will allow myself to close my eyes, release my tension, and lose focus on my emotions. Just for now, I will hand everything over to the stranger driving this car and succumb to the speed of its movement. When I open my eyes again, I'll have to face something. I'll have to fight. A few short hours from now, I know I'll have to confront something. But just for a little while...

...I let myself be pulled into the warm mud of sleep.

What Are You Searching For?

Sometime after I fall asleep in the back seat, Serizawa gets sick of the silence and turns on some music—although I only learn that later. He taps his phone, sets it in a holder next to the wheel, and a bouncy drum-and-guitar intro starts playing through the big speakers embedded in each door. A sunny female voice begins to sing.

"In order to see his mom, I boarded the train all on my own!"

It's a Japanese pop song from decades ago. Serizawa sings along happily, tapping time with his fingers on the steering wheel.

"The twilit cityscape and cars passing by, I watched out the corner of my eye..."

"That song's obnoxious," Tamaki mutters, glaring at the young man she still knows nothing about.

"You're kidding—this is the ultimate road trip song. Plus, there's a cat in the back seat!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Is that Suzume's cat?"

Still not getting it, Tamaki says grumpily, "We don't have a cat."

Serizawa rummages around in the glove compartment, finds his wallet, and takes out a card.

“My name is Serizawa. I’m a friend of your daughter’s friend. I think.”

Tamaki takes the card distastefully with her fingertips. It’s a school ID, with a photo of Serizawa half-asleep. His bleached hair is poking out in weird directions like he just woke up, and his round glasses are perched on his nose. “*Tomoya Serizawa*” is printed next to the picture, along with his birth date and university department.

“...You’re studying education?”

Tamaki frowns. This seems at odds with the man’s less-than-serious appearance.

“I want to be a teacher,” he answers simply.

“...My name is Iwato,” Tamaki says curtly, returning the card.

“Like they say, there’s no such thing as coincidence. It’s a long drive, so let’s enjoy it.”

For whatever reason, Serizawa half-smiles and shifts gears. The car coughs and jolts but still manages to speed up and overtake the car ahead.

“...This thing’s a real piece of crap,” remarks Tamaki.

“I got an amazing deal on it used!” he replies happily. “It should’ve been at least ten thousand, but an older friend working in Kabuki gave it to me cheap. Pretty cool, eh?”

Wait, does he mean Kabukicho, the infamous nightclub district? Tamaki sighs, as if to say, *Whatever, I don’t even care anymore.*

“Anyway, are you okay with this? You know it’ll take at least seven hours each way, right?”

“Fine by me. Your daughter’s not the only one looking for Souta.”

“She’s not my daughter,” Tamaki says, looking down at the road as it flies by. After a pause, she adds, “...She’s my niece. My older sister’s daughter. I took her in after my sister died. She was a single mom.”

“Oh yeah?” Serizawa says noncommittally, caught off guard by this abrupt personal revelation.

“My sister died at work, unexpectedly. When I got the news, I dropped everything and ran to get Suzume. She didn’t have any other family,” Tamaki says, still focused on the asphalt below her. She’d wanted to tell someone. It didn’t matter who—she just wanted someone to listen. She’d been thinking about it the whole time she was on the Shinkansen to Tokyo, staring restlessly at the passing scenery.

“She was only four years old. When I told her we were going to Kyushu together, she just nodded. But that night, she disappeared. She’d gone to find her mom without telling me, and she got lost. It was March—a cold, snowy night. I’d been living in Kyushu for a long time, and the early spring cold surprised me. I was so worried, thinking about her outside on a night like that. I walked around in the dark looking for her for what seemed like forever.”

She can still remember the terror and worry she felt that night like it was yesterday. She walked through slushy streets shouting my name, shining her flashlight into the shadows. When she thought about what might happen, her breath stopped. The whole experience felt like a long nightmare.

“When I finally found her, she was crouched in a snowy field, hugging this little chair that her mother had made for her. She loved that chair. When I saw her, it broke my heart—”

Tamaki hugged the little girl—me—and said to me through tears, “Starting today, you’re my daughter, okay?” She still remembers how small and cold my body felt in her arms.

The car is crossing over a big bridge spanning the Arakawa River. Far in the distance, a silver train is running parallel to us over a steel bridge. Men and women are kicking a soccer ball around a brown field on the riverbank. Tamaki squints at the light scattered on the river’s surface.

“Twelve years,” she whispers. “...It’s been twelve years since that night. I brought her back to Kyushu with me, and the two of us have been living there ever since. But—”

There’s a dry exhale, and Tamaki glances at Serizawa. He’s smoking a

cigarette, his face blank.

“Oh,” he says flatly, noticing her gaze. “Don’t like smoke?”

She smiles wryly. “...It’s your car.”

She remembers he’s a stranger. What is she doing, telling him all this? She’s glad he’s the kind of person he is. He’s not bending over backward for her, so she doesn’t have to return the favor. They don’t expect anything from each other, so there can’t be any disappointment. They’ll only be together for a day or so. In that case, someone like him with no interest in other people is ideal. For the first time, Tamaki feels something like fondness for Serizawa.

“Sounds like we’re going back to her hometown, then,” Serizawa says, exhaling his smoke with relish. “I don’t really get it. Do you think Souta will be there?”

“Who knows... Nothing’s left there now.”

Tamaki glances at the back seat. I’m still sleeping soundly.

“Why don’t you just go back to Tokyo? Maybe then she’ll give up these crazy ideas,” she says.

“No way. I need that twenty thousand yen I lent Souta.”

“You’re kidding,” Tamaki says. “What are you, a debt collector?”

Serizawa laughs, as if that was a compliment. *Whatever*, Tamaki thinks, watching him from the corner of her eye. *I know one thing for sure, at least—no way in hell is this guy cut out to be a teacher.*

The red convertible crosses into the next prefecture, driving north into an increasingly green landscape.

“And she’ll be so mad at you, my daaarl!” Serizawa sings along with the music.



I sleep for a long time, lulled by the rocking of the car. Now and then my eyes pop open and I survey the scenery like I’m a deep-sea diver coming up for air. Then I go back under to sleep some more.

Each time I open my eyes, the view is different. Sometimes the roadside is lined with chain stores, sometimes we're in a village with only a scattering of houses, and sometimes we're driving through valleys with nothing but green. After a certain point, the only other vehicles on the road seem to be big trucks. Large tarps attached to the front of the trucks say things like MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT, REMOVED SOIL, and CONTAMINATED SOIL. I don't have the energy or will to think, so I let it all stream past my eyeballs and fall back asleep.

One time, I open my eyes to find that the car is driving through a peaceful village. The road is smooth asphalt with no potholes, and the centerline is bright yellow like it's just been painted. But if you study them closely, you can see that all the houses and shops we pass are abandoned, already half reclaimed by the surrounding vegetation. The cars parked slantwise in the parking lots, the windows left wide-open, the lunch signs left beside the doors—all of it has a peculiar sense of interruption, like life has been paused midstream. Everything on either side of the road is silently decaying. The village sits, emptied of its people, with only this well-maintained thoroughfare ferrying trucks back and forth through its heart. The whole scene feels like the continuation of a dream. After watching it for a while, I sink back into the mud of sleep.

It's the feeling of shaking that finally wakes me up and sends my eyes flying open. I'm sure it's not just the usual vibration of the car. I glance at the seat next to me. Daijin is awake, too, looking around.

"Did the car just shake?" I ask Serizawa, turning toward the driver's seat.

"Look who finally woke up," he answers lazily. "Your aunt's sleeping now."

I crane my neck around to look in the passenger seat. Tamaki is leaning way back in the cushion, breathing steadily.

"Guess both of you needed some rest," he says, half laughing. The phone next to the steering wheel dings.

"...Hey, you're right. There was an intensity three earthquake. It's hard to feel it when you're driving."

My phone buzzes, too, and I check the message. It says an intensity three earthquake occurred one minute ago.

“Stop the car!”

“What?!” Serizawa replies as he slows down and stops the car.

I jump out on the shoulder of the road and look around. Lush, tall weeds extend on both sides. There’s a sign that reads DIFFICULT TO RETURN ZONE, DO NOT ENTER and a steel fence. A narrow road buried under grass leads away on the other side. Beyond that, I can see a small hill.

“Hey, Suzume, what are you doing?” Serizawa shouts.

I ignore him, slip through a gap in the fence, and run up the hill.

When I get to the top of the hill and look back, everything is green. Houses and electric poles are hidden between the trees like they’re holding their breath. Breaking out in a light sweat, I scrutinize the scene.

“I don’t see it...,” I murmur. A second later, the ground rumbles beneath my feet. I look down, and the earth is shaking very slightly. Pebbles buried in the weeds are clattering together softly. As I stare at them in surprise, the shaking stops. I raise my head and scan the landscape again.

“Still don’t see it,” I murmur again.

The worm is nowhere to be seen. The rumbling has stopped.

Souta is holding it down, I think. Now that he’s the Keystone, he’s keeping the worm sealed underground. I remember the Gate I saw in Tokyo—the black hill with the chair stuck into it. My chest fills with emotion. It was such a lonely sight.

Suddenly, the grass rustles.

“...Daijin.”

The cat must have followed me. It’s sitting at a slight distance, its bony back to me as it stares down at the town.

“What do you want?” I ask harshly. The kitten doesn’t turn around. “Why aren’t you talking? Hey!”

There’s no answer. I squeeze the ribbon at my chest, gripping the Closer’s key underneath my shirt along with it.

“I was wondering,” I mumble, not expecting an answer. “Can anyone be a Keystone, even if they’re not a Closer...?”

“Heeey,” someone calls out in a laid-back voice, and I raise my head to see who it is. Serizawa is climbing the hill, his hands in his pockets. “What’s up? Are you okay?”

He peers at my face as he walks. He doesn’t sound very worried.

“Sorry,” I say. “I’m fine. We’d better hurry...”

As I start to walk down the hill, he passes me coming up. I stop and watch him. He stands at the top, stretches his interlocked hands over his head, and takes a deep breath.

“Man, I’m stiff. Wonder if we’re halfway there yet.”

He takes out a pack of cigarettes, puts one in his mouth, and lights it. He looks down at the town, his face sweaty, and inhales with obvious enjoyment.

I give up on getting anywhere in a hurry and look out at the town, too. I’d forgotten he was driving the whole time I was asleep. I was too preoccupied to even think about it. I’m still anxious to get moving, but—

“This wind feels great. Think it’s a little cooler here than in Tokyo,” Serizawa says.

Green rice paddies and fields surround us. The wind bends the grass, filling the air with a sound like waves on the shore. The noontime sun glints brightly off the rooftops. A truck drives slowly through the landscape, like it’s drawing a line between the two sides. I can make out a thin blue horizon in the distance. Somewhere, a cuckoo cries.

“I never knew this was such a beautiful place,” Serizawa says, squinting in the light.

“Really?” I say despite myself, trying to figure out what he’s seeing. “You think *this* is beautiful?”

In my mind, the memory of white journal paper covered with black crayon is overlayed on the scene before me. That’s why his words come as a genuine surprise. *Beautiful?*

“What’s with you?” Serizawa says, turning me. But I don’t have time to explain.

“I’m sorry,” I say, starting down the hill again. “We have to hurry,” I mutter. Daijin follows silently. I can hear Serizawa walking behind me, and I imagine him throwing his hands up.

“Hey, you, cat!” he calls out to Daijin. “Your family’s got some serious issues.”
...I can hear you, you know.

I glare back at him and see a thunderhead flash in the distance. A moment later, the sky rumbles. When I look up, black clouds are rushing across the heavens like something sinister is chasing them.

* * *

“What are you searching for? Is it something hard to find?”

All the songs Serizawa plays on his phone are old. I don’t recognize many of them, but this one I’ve heard somewhere before. Oblivious to his passengers’ moody silence, he’s humming along as usual and occasionally chiming in.

“Didn’t find it in your bag, didn’t find it in your desk...”

“It’s raining,” Tamaki suddenly says from the passenger seat.

“Seriously?!” Serizawa says, for once sounding upset. I look up. The sky over the convertible is completely covered in gray clouds, and black dots are filling up the asphalt. A big drop falls on my forehead.

“This sucks...,” he says, strangely melancholy.

“What? You must have a roof—why don’t you hurry up and close it?” Tamaki says.

“Ah... Right... Guess I’ll do that,” Serizawa says, pressing a button next to the gearshift. A motor whirs behind me. I glance back. The trunk pops open, and a folded roof slowly emerges. I watch with rapt attention as it transforms into top and bottom sections, and the bottom part fits neatly over my head.

“Wow...,” I say like a little kid. *Convertibles are amazing.* The top part slides forward and covers the front seat. But then, with a bang like something has

caught, the roof stops moving. The back seat where I am is completely enclosed, but there's a gap around thirty centimeters wide over the front seat.

"What's going on?" Tamaki asks suspiciously, just as the sky opens up. The rain is pouring down onto Serizawa and Tamaki. His jacket and her knit top are both darkening. I think I hear Serizawa laughing.

"Guess it's not fixed after all. Ha-ha."

"That's not funny!" Tamaki screams. "What are you going to do about this?!"

"No worries! There's a rest stop just ahead!" he says, still laughing as he fiddles with the navigation system.

"The next rest stop is in forty kilometers. You will arrive in approximately thirty minutes," the automated voice says cheerfully.

"That's not exactly *just ahead!*" Tamaki shouts. As if in response, lightning flashes. The rain is pounding down even harder.

I sigh, slumping in the back seat. I should have taken the Shinkansen by myself. But it's too late now. We're not that far from our destination.

"Do you want to take a trip into your dreams, into your dreams?" a voice sings confidently over the car stereo like a fortune teller predicting the future.

Enter the Minister of the Left

When we finally reach the rest stop next to the ocean, the two of them look like some free-spirited couple who sneaked into a pool at midnight and went swimming with all their clothes on. They want to change, dry their things, get some food, and use the restroom. They invite me to come along, but I turn them down. Slurping ramen at a restaurant is the last thing I feel like doing right now. I'm not the slightest bit hungry. When I decline the invitation, Tamaki sighs and disappears into the building with Serizawa. I sit in the back seat of the parked car, hugging my knees and staring at the rain as it's sucked into the dim ocean. Daijin is curled up silently by my side, sleeping.



As I'm watching the rain, Tamaki is in the restroom, changing into a spare set of clothes she brought (a white tank top and a lavender cardigan) and quickly fixing her smeared makeup in the mirror. It's enough to warm her chilly mood, if just a little. In the cafeteria, she orders the "fisherman's pick of the day" and eats it at a different table from Serizawa. This rest stop was rebuilt just a few years ago, and the cafeteria is sprawling with high ceilings. The fatty mackerel is tasty, the air-conditioning is comfortable, and the customers are sparse. As she sips hot tea after her meal, Tamaki lets out a sigh of relief for the first time since leaving Kyushu.

Not all the problems are solved, she thinks, but at least I managed to find Suzume. It seems we've ended up heading for her old home, and I don't know anything about this Souta guy who's supposedly there for some reason—but once we get there and she sees him, I'm sure she'll be satisfied. Are they dating? It's possible. But why go home after all this time?

...Maybe it's her way of finding herself. Tamaki thinks about that for a while. *Suzume's still young, still in the process of growing up and forming relationships. Maybe she felt the need to go back to her roots. Yes, that must be it. She'll go back home, sort out her feelings, then return to her ordinary life. This is a perfectly normal rite of passage—the kind anyone might go through.*

She tries that theory on for size. She doesn't feel the least bit convinced it's true, but by telling herself it must be, she feels slightly relieved. *Guess I'll be back at work the day after tomorrow or so...which reminds me—I should call Minoru.*

"—So now you're with the male escort?!" he shouts after she's explained the basic situation.

"No, he's not really an escort. He just acts like one. A pretty low budget one, too... No, not at all. It doesn't sound like there's any manipulation involved."

She glances over her shoulder, still holding the phone to her ear. Serizawa is slurping his ramen with gusto at a table toward the back wall. Tamaki had considered the ramen, too.

"But that's so dangerous!" Minoru is saying. It must be sunny there, because she can hear the peaceful calls of seagulls in the background. She can imagine

the old windows in the fishing cooperative office and the blue horizon beyond.

“You’re two helpless women! A car is like a locked room, you know!”

“Not this one. It’s a convertible—”

“A c-convertible?!” he says, his voice leaping to a falsetto. *“That’s even worse! Tamaki, where in Miyagi are you right now? The Oya Coast Travel Oasis? Got it. Hold on just a second—”*

She can hear him tapping furiously at his keyboard. She imagines him there, his big, tanned form dressed in a T-shirt—a guy who’s probably never driven anything other than a farm truck or a forklift in his life—working so desperately to help her.

“There’s an express bus bound for Tokyo stopped in the parking lot right now. Plenty of seats are open. I can get tickets for you—”

“Minoru, slow down!” she says frantically. She explains that since they’ve come this far, she intends to go with Suzume to her old hometown, and that she believes that will satisfy her. “It’s like a rite of passage,” she says, smoothly repeating platitudes she’s heard somewhere before. “You know how teenagers are.” But even as she does, part of her knows it’s not true. It’s completely wrong. As she speaks, she finally accepts the uneasy, foreboding feeling inside herself. *I don’t think things are going to go as smoothly as I’m imagining. I think Suzume has something in mind that goes way beyond my little ideas.* She doesn’t have anything to back up this feeling, but she knows instinctively that it’s true.

“I’ll be back the day after tomorrow. Can you handle things till then?” she asks Minoru, though she no longer believes what she’s saying. Then she hangs up.



My destination is an hour and forty-five minutes away by car.

I peel my eyes away from the map on my phone and take a deep breath. The air is damp with rain and sea spray. *A little farther. Just a little farther.* I slowly exhale the air from my chest, trying to soothe my anxious, racing thoughts.

I tap the map menu to display the log of my movements. The map zooms out until all of Japan is on my screen, my route a blue line. From Miyazaki to Ehime by ferry, from there across Shikoku by car to Kobe, and then by Shinkansen to Tokyo. The line traces the Pacific coast through Chiba, Ibaraki, and Fukushima. My present location is in Miyagi. Next to this line spanning most of the Japanese archipelago is the distance, 1,630 kilometers. I've come so far. *It's going to be fine*, I tell myself. *I can make it to Ever-After*.

Suddenly, an unpleasant sensation bubbles up under my feet, startling me. A low rumbling has begun.

“—!”

My phone buzzes, and red letters spell out “*Earthquake Early Warning*” on the screen. Kneeling on top of my seat, I look around. The cars on either side are bouncing up and down with a creaking sound. The rain accumulated on the roof over our parking space is pouring off in a wild waterfall. But a few seconds later, the shaking calms, as if the earthquake had second thoughts. Eventually, my phone goes silent, and the strange sensation disappears. Only my own heart continues to pound.

“...Souta.”

I grip the key under my shirt as I murmur his name. “Souta, Souta.” Will it go on like this, for years, for decades? Every time there's an earthquake, will I think of Souta, all alone on that black hill? Even if he can stand it—I know I can't.

“Souta, Souta,” I whisper like a prayer. *I'm coming. I'm coming to save you.*

“Suzume!”

Tamaki is running along the roofed area toward the car. “Did you feel that earthquake?” she asks, opening the car door and piling into the passenger seat. She's changed into a lavender cardigan, and the color is back in her cheeks.

“I hate that feeling...,” she mutters to herself, fixing her rain-wet bangs with her fingers.

“Where's Serizawa?” I ask, looking at her reflection in the rearview mirror.

“Still eating, I guess. Are you sure you don't want anything?”

“Yeah.”

“You haven’t eaten all day.”

“I’m not hungry.”

I can hear her sighing softly. We fall silent as the rain continues. It’s only a little after noon, but everything is dim, like a phone screen with the brightness setting turned all the way down.

“...Suzume?” Tamaki says, like she’s just made up her mind. “I want you to tell me something.”

“...What?”

“Why do you want to go home?”

“There’s a door—,” I start to say, then stop. “...Sorry. It’s hard to explain.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

She stops looking at me in the rearview mirror and turns around. For the first time in hours, our eyes meet directly.

“You’re causing other people all this hassle, and you can’t explain?”

“Hassle?” I snap back at her. I want to say I didn’t ask either of them to come with me, but I resist. “You wouldn’t understand even if I told you.”

I can sense her recoil. With a bang, she slams open the door, gets out, and grabs my arm from outside the car.

“We’re going home. There’s a bus over there.”

“What?”

“You say you can’t explain, you’re pale as a sheet, and you’re deliberately not eating!”

“Let me go!” I say, shaking off her hand. “Go home yourself! I didn’t ask you to come with me!”

“You don’t get it! I was worried to death about you!”

Her voice is shaking with fury. I snap back reflexively.

“Your worry is getting in the way!”

Tamaki's eyes widen. She bites her lip, then slowly looks down. Her shoulders heave. She's breathing deeply, like the air around her has suddenly become thin.

"I'm so sick and tired of this..." she says in a hoarse, slow voice.

I glare at her. She's standing straight and tall in the half-light of the covered parking area.

"I took you in and spent a decade of my life raising you... What an idiot I've been."

This catches me off guard. Raindrops blow in on the wind and spatter my cheeks.

"It's only natural to worry about a child who's lost her mother," she says with an abrupt, cynical smile. The sea far behind her continues to suck in the rain. "I was only twenty-eight when you came to live with me. I was so young. I'd never felt so free in my life. But after you showed up, life got so busy. I didn't have time for myself anymore. I couldn't invite anyone over, and finding someone to marry isn't exactly easy when you've got a kid. The money I inherited from your mother could never make up for what I went through."

Her figure blurs and wavers. I realize belatedly that tears are pooled in my eyes.

"That was how you felt...?" I choke out.

I look down and notice Daijin sitting on the edge of the door. The cat is staring at Tamaki with round yellow eyes.

"You know, I—" I start to say.

I don't want to say it.

"I didn't want to live with you, either."

I don't want to say it, but I start to shout anyway.

"I never asked you to take me to Kyushu! You're the one who said, 'You're my daughter'!"

"You're my daughter, okay?" I still remember the warmth of her embrace on

the snowy night when she said those words.

“I never said that!” she snaps back. Then she crosses her arms and shouts, “I want you out of my house!”

Her mouth is turned up in a smile.

“Give me my life back!”

Despite all this, I can see tears in her eyes. That’s when it occurs to me: *Something’s wrong. This isn’t Tamaki.* Daijin meows menacingly at my side. Tamaki—Tamaki’s body is sobbing while her mouth continues to smile.

“Who are you?” I blurt out.

“Sadaijin,” a child’s voice replies.

Behind Tamaki looms a large black form. It’s a cat—a black cat bigger than a car. Its large, slanted eyes glitter green in the half-light.

“Sadaijin...? Like ‘minister of the left’?” I mumble.

Daijin growls and jumps out of the car. Without hesitation, the kitten hurls itself at the giant black cat’s face. The two animals screech back and forth with high-pitched voices, like a woman’s scream. The black cat falls heavily to the ground, and they begin to roll around, wrestling each other.

“What on earth—?!” I say, watching them in dazed confusion. All of a sudden, Tamaki starts swaying, like the string holding her up has been cut. She crumples to the ground.

“W-w-wait, Tamaki...?! ”

She’s face down on the ground, not moving. I jump out of the car and crouch next to her.

“Tamaki, what’s wrong? Are you okay?! ”

I slip my hand under her neck and roll her onto her back. Her chest is moving up and down. *She’s breathing.* I realize the cats have stopped screaming and look up.

“—Huh?”

I can’t believe my eyes. The black cat that was as big as a horse a minute ago

has shrunk to about half its size. It has Daijin in its mouth, dangling by the scruff of the neck. They're just like a mother cat and her kitten. The black cat starts walking toward me, and with each step, its body shrinks. I feel like the laws of perspective have gone haywire. It grows smaller and smaller, and by the time it passes me and jumps into the car, it's no bigger than a large dog.

"What the...?"

I don't understand what's happening. Was its huge body an illusion? Maybe it was the size of a regular large cat from the very beginning. I watch the two animals get into the car, my mouth hanging open. The black cat drops Daijin from its mouth, and the two of them sit primly in the back seat, blinking up at me.

So I have a big cat with black fur and green eyes, and a scrawny kitten with white fur and yellow eyes. Their gaze as they stare at me, however, is the same.

"Daijin and Sadaijin..." I mumble. It suddenly occurs to me they must have come from the same place. Their eyes are looking at me but also looking past me—at the *other* world.

"Suzume..." Tamaki says hoarsely from my arms.

"Tamaki!"

"What happened to me...?"

"Are you okay?"

Suddenly, the life returns to her face.

"I—I..." she says, standing up. "Sorry, I have to go!"

She trots away, toward the rest stop. I watch her receding form, lacking the strength to get up from my knees. Once she vanishes through the automatic doors, I turn slowly toward the car. The black and white cats are curled up on the seat, their bodies pressed together. They're purring as they fall asleep, as if satisfied with a job well done.

The rain has softened to a drizzle.



“Serizawa!”

When Tamaki calls his name, Serizawa is checking out the prizes in a crane game, a soft serve in one hand. He wants to bring home a souvenir since he’s come all this way—but then he hears her urgent voice calling him.

“Yeah?” he says and turns around. She’s standing there with her makeup all smeared from crying. *Give me a break*, he thinks on instinct.

“I’ve been acting strange...”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know why I would say something like that...,” she says, burying her face in her hands.

Come on, he thinks. She starts to sob loudly.

“Hey, now...!” he says, hurrying over to her. She’s wailing like a little girl. The employees at the cafeteria and souvenir shop are looking over to see what the fuss is about. *Give me a break*, he thinks again.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” he whispers.

She doesn’t answer. She’s hiccupping.

“Are you okay? You shouldn’t cry in public like this— Shit!”

As he leans toward her, the ice cream falls off the cone in his hand and splats on the floor. *Give me a break*, he thinks for a third time. He’s only taken two licks. *What’s this got to do with me?* He looks down at her small head and short hair and delicate, quivering shoulders. *What am I doing at a rest stop in the middle of nowhere with a woman who’s probably twice my age crying on my shoulder?*

She continues to wail and hiccup. Out of desperation, he puts his hand on her shoulder and pats it gently. She cries harder. People are giving them a wide berth, like they’re avoiding a hole in the ground.

Serizawa swallows an exasperated sigh, looks at the ceiling, and mutters to himself, “Yup... Seriously big issues.”

He makes sure to say it too quietly for her to hear, in case she starts crying

even harder.

What They Want Me to Do

“Please stop the fighting, both of you... I don’t want you to fight over me.”

Even I could take the hint Serizawa was trying to send us with yet another of his out-of-place old pop songs.

“This is such a stupid song!” Tamaki says from the front seat. I agree. I don’t need his advice.

“Really? But I chose it just for you,” Serizawa says, sounding truly disappointed. The red convertible is cruising down a peaceful country road between a seawall and fields of crops. We hardly pass any people walking or driving.

“I’m sorry; it’s my fault for toying with your hearts.”

For a while, Serizawa sings along with the nostalgic tune, which I kind of recognize and kind of don’t. Then he glances back at me.

“Isn’t this car great when the weather’s nice?”

“.....”

I ignore him and bite into the big cream sandwich I’m holding in both hands. I suddenly felt hungry at the rest stop and bought the sandwich along with a carton of milk. I stuff my mouth with the soft bread and wash it down. It’s so delicious I can practically feel my cells rejoicing at the sweetness. Tamaki hasn’t said a word, obviously because of the awkwardness. But after our fight in the parking lot, I feel like something has shifted. Serizawa’s right—it does feel nice riding along in the convertible now that the rain has cleared up. The sky and clouds look brighter, as if an old picture frame has been replaced. I’m breathing easier, like there’s more oxygen in the air.

“Sheesh, it’s like there’s rainclouds in here,” Serizawa says, smiling a little as he looks between me and Tamaki. “I bet the new guy agrees.”

He glances up at the rearview mirror. The black cat is purring as it licks the white kitten’s fur. It’s big enough to occupy one of the back seats all by itself.

“I never thought there’d be another one...and it’s giant.” He sounds amused. “Look, a rainbow! That’s a good omen!”

He’s right—a big rainbow is stretched across the sky ahead of us. I’m impressed, but I don’t say anything. Tamaki doesn’t, either.

“...And the crowd stays silent,” Serizawa says, not seeming to care. He puts a cigarette in his mouth and lights it.

“Suzume, I was thinking...,” he says casually, blowing smoke. “Cats don’t follow people around without a reason, do they? I mean, they’re not like dogs.”

That might be true. It might, but right now I’m more mystified by Serizawa’s ability to continue this one-sided conversation. I mean, Tamaki and I haven’t exchanged a single word during the eight-hour drive from Tokyo, not counting the rest stop.

“I think those two must have something they really want you to do. Don’t you?”

“Exactly right,” says a childish voice.

All three of us turn to stare at the black cat sitting next to me. Sadaijin has lifted its head and is staring at Serizawa with its green eyes. Then, slowly, it turns its gaze on me. There is a crystal-clear intelligence in those eyes.

“Turn us back with your human hands.”

“Th-that cat just talked!” Serizawa and Tamaki exclaim at once.

Just then, a truck bears down on the convertible, which has strayed over the centerline. The driver honks in surprise.

“Waaah!”

We all scream as Serizawa swerves to the left. The brakes on the truck screech, and it grazes us as it passes. Our car spins once, plows its bumper into the greenery atop an embankment, and stops. Just as I’m thinking, *That was a close call*, the front wheels roll past the weeds at the edge.

“Huh?”

The car slowly creeps forward, tilting down the side of the embankment.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa—”

Serizawa frantically shifts into reverse and hits the gas, but the car continues to tilt forward. The back wheels are floating in midair.

“Oh no, no, no...!”

The car is completely off the road now, sliding slowly down the steep, three-meter-long slope covered with weeds. The tires spin backward, vainly scraping at the vegetation as the car continues to slide. Finally, the front end crashes into the ground with a dull bang. There’s a loud sound of gushing air as the driver’s-and passenger’s-side airbags inflate. Tamaki and Serizawa watch in a daze. I hear the whir of the motor behind my back, and I turn around to see the trunk opening and the folded-up roof poking out. It slides forward, separates in two, and covers our heads—fully this time.

“It fixed itself,” Serizawa says absently and tugs the handle on his door. Gravity pulls it out of his hand, and when the door is fully open, it bounces back slightly before breaking off with a clang and falling to the ground. The dry sound of the mirror shattering echoes over the quiet paddies.

“...You’ve gotta be kidding,” he mutters, voice flat.

And so, after carrying us six hundred kilometers from Tokyo, Serizawa’s beloved car goes silent just before reaching its destination. Somewhere close by, a bird chirps cheerfully.

* * *

As I’m sticking my thumb out to the passing cars, desperately attempting to hitchhike, the two grown-ups are standing on a strip of grass next to a rice field at the bottom of the embankment, still staring in a daze at the car now leaning at a forty-degree angle against the slope.

“That was so scary! And that cat...,” Tamaki says to Serizawa in a low voice, finally looking away from the car. “Did you hear it talk?”

Serizawa, who’s been taking in the sad fate of his beloved car, returns to his senses at the sound of Tamaki’s voice and turns toward her.

“So you heard it, too?!” he answers in a whisper.

“I did! That means the kitten must have been talking, too, back at the station when it said, ‘*Be quiet.*’”

“Yeah, you’re right! You think they’re possessed? Or psychic or something?!”

“Don’t be ridiculous—”

Meanwhile, I’m having zero luck with the hitchhiking.

The road is so narrow, two cars can hardly pass without scraping against each other, and the only thing in sight is rice paddies full of water. Utility poles punctuate the road at even intervals far into the distance. After quite some time, a minivan approaches, but it passes my waving hand without the slightest sign of slowing down. I can clearly see the driver—a middle-aged man in a work cap—frown when he spots me. I’m not sure if it’s because I’m too desperate, or because there’s a giant black cat next to me, or both, but I make up my mind to smile cheerfully when the next car comes along. But after five more minutes, the road is still empty. I yell down to the bottom of the embankment.

“Serizawa, we’re about ten kilometers away, right?”

I can’t stay stuck here any longer. Serizawa slides into the doorless car, checks the navigation system, and yells back.

“According to this, it’s more like twenty! Still kind of far!”

“I’m walking! Thanks, Serizawa! Thanks, Tamaki! I appreciate you bringing me this far!” I shout. Then I take off running. I can hear them yelling after me in surprise. But it’s not too far for me to run. The black cat follows with Daijin in its mouth. I don’t know what they are or what they want, but I’m starting to feel reassured by their constant presence.



“She’s going to run there? Seriously?!”

The grown-ups gape in shock as I disappear into the distance. Tamaki tells me later that as she watched me run straight down the road without looking back, she made up her mind what to do. She looks around like she’s been slapped, locates a bicycle buried in some weeds, and runs over to it.

“What are you doing?” Serizawa asks, but she ignores him as she pulls the

bike free. She lifts its rusted frame with both hands and sets it upright. It's a yellow bike with a basket, and it's unlocked. Miraculously, the tires are full.

"Serizawa, I'm going after her!" she shouts, gripping the handlebar and pushing the bike up the embankment.

"You're what?!"

"Thanks for taking me this far!" She sets the bike on the road and straddles it.

"Hey, wait!"

"I think you might make a good teacher after all!" she yells and starts pedaling.

"Hold on a minute...!"

When he scrambles to the top of the embankment, Serizawa sees me and the cat running in the distance, with Tamaki following us on the bike. Eventually, we round a curve and disappear into the shade of some trees.

"...What's with those two?" he mutters, hands on hips. He looks back over his shoulder to his beloved red Alfa Romeo, which had in fact taken quite a chunk out of his savings. It seems to shoot him a sympathetic gaze from where it sits at the bottom of the embankment. "Seriously, what's their deal?" he says to his car. He drove them around for eight hours and even chose music he thought someone Tamaki's age might recognize to lighten the mood. And now his car is destroyed, and to top it all off, they've abandoned him. That gloomy aunt and her gloomy niece took off without sparing him so much as a backward glance.

Suddenly, laughter bubbles up from his belly. As it comes out of his throat, he begins to feel utterly ridiculous.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha...!"

He feels almost refreshed. After chuckling for a while, he looks at the sky and takes a deep breath of green air. Words rise in his mind, and he lets them flow from his mouth.

"Souta, you lucky dog!"

I guess I've served my purpose, Serizawa thinks, though he doesn't know where the thought comes from. I guess I can leave the rest in Suzume's hands.

And Suzume has her overprotective aunt and those two weird cats with her. Yeah, she'll be okay, too. I better get back to my own life—especially now that I have Tamaki's stamp of approval.

He fishes a crushed cigarette out of his pocket and lights it. He's never really cared for their taste, but this particular cigarette fills his whole body with a comfortable sense of accomplishment like he's never experienced before.



"Get on," Tamaki says. When I do, she pedals on without another word.

Pampas grass grows high on either side of the narrow road, with only the unbroken line of utility poles guiding us into the distance. Evening locusts surround us with their cries. The September sun is tilting low in the sky, beaming down on the world from our left.

I watch Tamaki's back as she pedals and pedals. It's a little smaller than I remembered. Her white tank top is stuck to her skin with sweat; big beads of it are rolling down her neck in a steady stream.

"...Tamaki?" I say softly. I don't understand why she's pedaling so frantically.

"Whatever," she mutters between pants.

"What?"

"You want to go to your boyfriend, right?"

"...Wh-what?!"

"There's a lot I don't get, but the bottom line is, you fell in love, right?"

"What? N-no way! I'm not in love with him!" I yell at the back of her neck, completely caught off guard. I can hear her giggling. She clearly has no idea what's going on. I can feel my face flushing up to my ears.

"Anyway, what's up with these cats?" she asks casually. The black one has been stuffed against its will into the front basket, and Daijin is squeezed between the black cat's front paws and the basket's wall.

"Um..."

I realize belatedly that she saw both cats talk.

“Uh... I heard they’re, like, gods.” Remembering something Souta once said, I add, “Capricious ones?”

“Capricious gods?! What are you talking about?”

Tamaki bursts out laughing. She sounds happy for a moment. It’s a natural reaction. I giggle, too—it’s like I haven’t laughed in years. I suddenly wonder if the whole reason Sadaijin showed up is so the two of us would laugh together. Our shadows stretch dark and long across the ground to our right, shaking with our laughter.

“Hey,” Tamaki says suddenly, still facing forward. “Those things I said in the parking lot...”

I look at her. The wind is ruffling her short hair, which is damp with sweat. For the first time, I notice a few white hairs mixed in with the black.

“I’ve had those thoughts...but that’s not the whole story.”

“I know.”

“Those aren’t my only feelings, not at all.”

I laugh a little, just air escaping my lips.

“...Me too. Sorry, Tamaki.”

I put my hand on her sweaty shoulder and fit my cheek against the nape of her neck. It smells like her—that sunshine scent that’s always made me feel safe. I love that smell.

“Returning home after twelve years, huh?” she says.

I nod without saying anything. Far in the distance, I catch a glimpse of a gray seawall.

Hometown

“I’m back, Mom!” I used to shout as I ran up the short hill to my house after a day of playing outside. Twelve years later, standing in the same place, the memory comes back to me. When I got back, my mom would often give me something sweet to eat. Sweet potato cake, or fried bread with cinnamon

sugar, or tofu mochi with *kinako* powder. For a long time, I'd forgotten the way the rooms connected in the house, the soft sweetness of those snacks, and the sound of my mother's voice when she called me. But they rise now from the depths of my memory with a freshness that shocks me. I can almost see our two-story house as it was back then. And in that house—

"I'm back, Mom," I say quietly, pushing the memories aside. I open the little door in the rusted gate with both hands and step onto the lot where our house once stood.

The ruins are buried in weeds. Only the low concrete foundation remains, covered now by brightly colored plants. My house isn't the only one—the whole area is the same. Where rows of houses once stood, only a field of ruins remains. The little grove of trees that should be here is gone, and there's nothing but wasteland as far as the eye can see. Everything that used to be here was washed away by the tsunami twelve years ago. A seawall looks down on the wasteland from maybe two hundred meters away. The sinking sun tints everything pink.

* * *

When I was four years old, there was a big earthquake. A really, really big one. Big enough to shake the whole eastern half of Japan.

When the earthquake hit, I was at nursery school, and my mom was at the hospital where she worked. I evacuated with the nursery-school teachers to an elementary school nearby, and I think I ended up staying there for about ten days. It was a long time ago, so I've forgotten most of what happened. I vaguely remember that it was really cold, the emergency siren was ringing all the time, and every day we ate rice balls, bread, and instant ramen. And I remember that even though the other children's mothers and fathers came to pick them up, my mother didn't come. I'd never been sad about not having a dad (my mom was the only parent I'd ever known), but there at the shelter, I envied the children with two parents from the bottom of my heart. I faintly remember being so lonely and afraid at the shelter that it became like a physical pain in my whole body.

One day, my mother's younger sister, Tamaki, came from Kyushu to get me.

In the end, my mother never came back.

The little well in the back garden is still here.

Back then, the well had a wooden lid with a stone on top too heavy for a child to move. Sometimes I would drop little rocks through the gap under the lid, counting until I heard a splash. There was still water in the well then.

Now the well is filled with dirt, and weeds grow all around it.

I'm digging next to the well with a little rusty shovel. Tamaki is sitting on a strip of concrete foundation sticking out of the weeds, watching me silently. She must be curious, but I think she made up her mind not to ask questions, for my sake. The cats are sitting silently by her feet.

The tip of the shovel hits something hard.

"...Found it!" I blurt out. I widen the hole, plunge my hands into the dirt, and lift out the object.

It's a cookie tin. In the middle of the lid, big, childish letters read, "*Suzume's Important Things*." I brush the dirt off, set it on the foundation, and open the lid. For a second, I think I smell fresh tatami mats—same as our house back then.

"A diary?" Tamaki asks, peering inside.

"Yes," I answer. Inside the tin is my picture diary. There's also a little egg-shaped video game that was popular back then, jewelry I made from beads, and my favorite origami. It all looks as new as if I put it there last week. The plastic is smooth and glossy, and the folded paper is as vivid as if it were just dyed. I used to carry these things around in my backpack everywhere I went. Before I went to Kyushu with Tamaki, I came here alone and buried them next to the well. The memory is vague but still with me. One of the reasons I'm here now is to look in my diary.

"I don't remember that time very well..." I say, flipping the pages. Clumsily written words and colorful pictures sprawl across the paper with such energy they seem ready to jump right out. *March 3. I did the doll festival with Mom. March 4. I went to a karaoke contest with Mom. March 5. I went in the car with Mom to play at Aeon Mall.*

“I got lost inside a door. I’m sure I would have written about it in my diary.”

I keep flipping.

March 9. Mom cut my hair, and now I’m cute.

March 10. Mom’s thirty-fourth birthday. Happy birthday, Mom! I want you to live until you’re one hundred!

Another page.

“—!”

March 11.

Black scribbles cover the whole page. The wax is as glossy as if I just colored it.

I remember all of it. My cold hands, gripping the black crayon. The unpleasant, bumpy feeling of the cardboard under the white paper as I colored it black. The feeling in my fingers and my emotions, ready to explode. It all comes back so vividly. Long-frozen memories melt and overflow. I can’t hold them back any longer.

I turn the next page. It’s all black.

The next page. All black.

The next page. Black.

When I was living at the shelter, I walked around searching for my mom every day. Every day until it got dark, I walked around alone in the rubble of our town. Wherever I went, whoever I asked, they all said they didn’t know where she was. “*Sorry, sorry, Suzume*” was all they said. Every day, I wanted to write in my diary that I found my mom. But I couldn’t, and I wanted to forget that, so every night I colored my diary black. I colored it meticulously, frantically, filling in every bit of white with the black crayon.

I turn the page. Black.

I turn the page. Black.

Black, black, black.

I turn the page.

“...!”

I gasp. The tears gathered on my eyelids plop onto the diary.

This page has a brightly colored picture.

It’s a picture of a door. And inside the door, a starry sky.

On the next page, I see two people standing in a meadow. One is a little girl, and one is a woman with long hair wearing a white dress. They’re both smiling.

“It wasn’t a dream...!”

I touch the two figures softly. The thick pigment of the crayons comes off faintly on my fingertips, like I’ve managed to actually touch the past. It wasn’t a dream. It really happened. I wandered through a Gate into Ever-After and found my mother there. The door I can go through is here, in this place.

“I remember now—the moon was out that night! It was shining on that radio tower!”

Next to the drawing of the door is a moon and what looks like a skinny tower. I look up from the diary and scan my surroundings.

On the far side of the twilit wasteland, I find it. Like a matchstick standing alone in the dim landscape, the radio tower is still there.

I take off toward it.

“Suzume, wait!” Tamaki shouts, panicked. “You’re looking for that door?! But there’s no way some rubble from twelve years ago will still be there!”

Her puzzled voice fades away behind me.

I run straight across the darkening ruins toward the tower. Sadaijin runs next to me, like my shadow. Sometimes I glimpse concrete floors among the weeds, or short staircases, or piles of tires and scrap wood. I keep running until the radio tower looms above me, and then I stop and look around.

“Where is it?”

Panting, I scrutinize the landscape. Just like that night long ago, a full yellow moon hangs to the left above the tower. It should be nearby.

“Suuuzume,” a childish voice says. I look toward it and see a kitten sitting a

short distance away in the shadows.

“Daijin...”

I run to the cat. It scampers away from me without answering.

“Hey...what are you doing?!”

I follow. We pass what must have been a gate, judging by the concrete base that remains. Daijin stops there and looks up at me. What appears to be an ivy-covered board is leaning against a low stone wall.

“Is this it?”

I kneel in the weeds and look more closely. It’s a door. I start pulling the ivy off with both hands, driven by some unseen force. The roots grip the door firmly, and I need all my strength to tear them off. My palms bleed a little from the sharp leaves and stems, but I barely feel it. I’m totally absorbed in pulling off the ivy. When the door is exposed, I lift it with both arms and prop it against the stone wall.

It’s a very ordinary wooden door, the kind you might see inside any house. It’s hung on hinges in a three-sided wooden frame. The veneer is flaking off, and at around waist height is a rusted metal knob. No doubt about it—this is the door I opened as a little girl.

“Daijin...,” I say. A thought has just occurred to me. “Was I wrong about you opening the Gates? This whole time, have you just been trying to lead me to them?”

Daijin stares up at me with those wide-open yellow eyes in its gaunt face. I give voice to the emotions welling inside me.

“Thank you, Daijin!”

The kitten looks surprised—and as I watch, its bony body swells until it’s plump and round. Its slack ears and tail perk up happily.

“Let’s go, Suzume!” it says brightly, once again looking like a fluffy ball of mochi.

“Let’s go!” I say, grabbing the knob and opening the door. A gust of wind blows out and pushes against me, like I’ve just opened an air lock. Inside is a sky

full of gleaming stars.

“Whoa...”

I can't help gasping. The night sky I've seen so many times in my dreams is here before my eyes. And I'm not just seeing it. The wind has a familiar smell, and the stars look so real I think I could touch them. I can go in. I know this with a strange certainty. This is my Gate. Sadaijin and Daijin are standing beside me.

“Suzume!” someone calls from behind. I turn around and see Tamaki running toward me.

“Tamaki, I'll be back!” I shout.

“But where are you going?!”

“To see someone I love!”

I leap through the door, and the cats come with me. Brilliant, multicolored light surrounds me like I'm inside a prism.



According to Tamaki, it looks to her as if I suddenly disappear inside a door frame.

Thinking her eyes must have deceived her, she runs to the door, but no one is there. Not her niece and not the cats. Only a quiet, dark meadow without the slightest breeze. But the door propped against the stone wall is swinging and creaking, as if blown by wind from an invisible world.

“Suzume...,” she whispers hoarsely. She doesn't understand what happened, and she can't believe what she thinks she saw. She's confused. She had an uneasy premonition that simply coming back here wouldn't be enough. But this is far beyond what she's capable of understanding.

Sister, she thinks as she gazes at the door to nowhere. If you're in there—please protect Suzume.

Eventually, the door stops swinging, and insects begin their soft calls, as if they are secretly beginning their preparations for the coming fall.



The Town That Is Still Burning

I'm falling through the starry sky.

When I look up, I can see the door I passed through. On the other side, in miniature, is the full moon over the radio tower. I blink, and the door is gone, leaving only a large, round moon. *I've fallen through the moon from the earthly realm to Ever-After*, I think. My sensations are strangely clear, like I'm in a waking dream.

Sadaijin and Daijin are falling, too, on either side of me, the wind ruffling their fur. The Milky Way sparkles brilliantly before my eyes, and below, black clouds roll toward the horizon, blocking out the ground like a tightly fitting lid. As I fall through the clouds, they hide the stars above me, and for a time I'm wrapped in darkness.

Finally, the ground comes into focus through gaps in the clouds. I can see something glinting. At first, it appears like several rivers of light flowing across black earth. The rivers of red light form a complex pattern on the ground, like the veins of a leaf.

“—Huh?”

The veins are slowly moving. A particularly bright part of the ground seems to be rising up toward me. It winds slowly in a circle, like the earth itself is coiling up, and then a section rises toward me like a snake's head.

"...It's the worm!" I scream, my eyes wide-open. The entirety of the land below me is a single enormous worm. The countless glowing veins are magma circulating inside its body. In our realm, its body is like a muddy river, but here in Ever-After, it's clear and distinct. The thing before me looks exactly like a monstrously large earthworm.

"It's trying to get out the Gate!" I shout, following the movement of the thing's head with my eyes. It slowly stretches its giant form toward the moon.

Suddenly, I hear what sounds like the howl of a wild animal.

It's Sadaijin. The black cat is yowling at the rising worm. The next instant, the cat's body starts quivering and puffs up as quick as an explosion.

"—!"

My eyes go wide. Sadaijin has become a beast as big as a house, its black fur now white like it was repainted with a single stroke. Its tail and whiskers elongate, flapping against the black sky like white wings.

As I continue to fall, I watch the rising worm and the falling cat collide. Sadaijin sticks its claws into the worm and continues its fall, like it's trying to pull the huge form back to the ground. A whirlwind catches me and spins me in circles like a washing machine. As the world rotates wildly before my eyes, a white cat flies past. I reach out frantically and grab it.

"Aaah!" I let out a scream as I'm pulled abruptly downward. I open my eyes with difficulty as wind pounds my face, and I see Sadaijin below me pushing the worm back to the ground. I'm holding one of its whiskers.

We're falling faster, and the ground is flying up at me. The worm's long body is curled like a spiral hill. Something is glowing blue at the crest.

"Is that...?"

I try to see through the violent wind.

"Souta!"

It's a chair. The worm's body is as red as flame, except for a circle of black around the chair pulsing with faint blue light. Souta's lonely form is holding down the worm, just as it had when I saw him through the Gate.

The earth roars. The worm's head has crashed to the ground. Sadaijin stomps on it, and the ground shakes violently. Sadaijin turns its head and swings me through the air, until the whisker slips through my fingers.

“—!”

I plummet toward the ground headfirst. Another scream rips itself from my throat. Daijin, who's clinging to my shoulder, sucks in a breath. There's a popping sound, and I'm suddenly enveloped in soft fur. A second later, I crash into the ground.

“...Daijin?!”

I sit up. I'm resting on the stomach of a white creature the size of a bear. Daijin must have puffed up to protect me from the impact. Its eyes are squeezed tight, its face quivering from pain. Its body begins to deflate, like it can take no more. I climb off and kneel on the ground. Its covered in slushy mud, with corrugated metal and wood scraps scattered around. Daijin is a little kitten again, still sprawled faceup amid the wreckage.

“You protected me...”

The kitten's eyes pop open.

“Suzume, are you okay?”

It flips onto its feet, lithe as always, and I exhale in relief. I stand up and take another look around.

“What is this place?”

A burning town surrounds us. Some of the houses have collapsed, some have crumbled, and some are leaning over, their roof tiles missing. A traffic light dangles from a tilted utility pole. Cars and trucks lie on their sides like colonies of plants. A short distance away I see the silhouettes of a fleet of fishing boats thrown onto dry ground. The ground under my feet is a black slurry of mud, oil, and salt water.

And all of it is burning, like the horrible disaster that caused this wreckage took place only a few hours earlier. I don't see any people. Only the scene from that night remains, cut off from humanity.

"This is Ever-After...?"

I remember what Souta's grandfather said—that this place looks different to each person. In a strange way, it makes sense. It's been burning this whole time. For twelve years, the town as it was that night has existed beneath my feet. Burning eternally, deep underground, just like it was then.

"—!"

In the corner of my vision, I glimpse a blue light.

"...Souta!"

I run toward it. Daijin leaps onto my shoulder. I can see the black hill between the burning roofs, and on top, the blue light. It's not very far away. I dart through the flickering flames, kicking up sludge.

Behind me, I hear the earth rumble and Sadaijin howling. I glance back and see Sadaijin trying to pull the worm's head back down as it snakes once again toward the moon. The cat is holding it in check. I turn back toward the hill and pick up speed.

A second later, a burning column falls right in front of me, and I collapse backward. A swirl of sparks grazes my face, and the smell of someone's home briefly surrounds me. A wave of heat follows, and I scoot back. The column, along with a cupboard and a table, are burning before my eyes. Right next to my foot, buried in the mud, is a stuffed giraffe. The flames are roaring so close I could touch them.

"Haah, haah, haah..."

My chest is heaving. I notice a strange smell on the air I'm breathing in. A sweet, festering smell mixed with the stench of burnt things and the fishy smell of the sea. I've smelled it before—from the worm. It was the smell of that night all along.

The flames blur. Tears are pooled in my eyes, about to spill over again. *Why*

am I so weak? I harness my anger to give me the strength to stand, and dodging the flames, I run.

I just run.

I run past a car cracking open as it burns, I cut through the garden of someone's house where I can see living room curtains flapping, and I pass a building with a fishing boat on the roof. Strange, faintly glowing white forms like jellyfish flutter in the night sky over the burning town. They are fragments of towels and handkerchiefs, shirts and underwear. Countless pieces of cloth are dancing lazily through the black sky like this is a reserve for some rare flying creature.

Eventually, the houses thin out, and there is less rubble and fewer flames. There are less cars and more boats. I'm leaving the center of town and coming to the outskirts. Sadaijin and the worm's head are far in the distance, and the black hill is rising in front of me. Because I'm so close, the blue light at its peak is invisible behind the slope.

I notice that the sucking sound of the sludge underfoot has been replaced by the frozen crunch of frost. Gradually, it becomes the crackling of thin ice. The temperature is dropping. The sweat covering my body is cold and dry now, and my breath is white like in midwinter.

I run up the hill. Ash is drifting onto the frozen black body of the worm. Finally, the blue light reappears beyond the slope.

"Souta!"

The blue light illuminates the chair's backrest from below, casting its face in shadow. Its three legs are buried deep in the worm, and that's the part that's pulsing with blue light. It seems like a current of cold air is flowing from the chair into the worm's body. I run to the chair and embrace its familiar backrest carved with two eyes.

"Souta, Souta, Souta!"

No answer. It's only a wooden chair—but it's my chair. I know Souta is somewhere deep inside it.

I grab the seat with both hands and pull as hard as I can, trying to uproot it

from the worm. The chair is cold as ice and stuck firmly in place. I grit my teeth and pull harder. With a grating sound, one of the legs jerks up a few centimeters. Blue light flashes blindingly from the gap that has formed. It shines on my cheek with piercing cold.

“Suzume,” Daijin says, squinting at the light from its perch on my left shoulder. “If you pull out the Keystone, the worm will escape.”

“I’ll become the Keystone!” I scream without thinking. “Please, Souta, wake up!”

I pull on the chair with everything I’ve got. Coldness flows into my hand, turns to frost, and crawls up my skin. Both my arms are frozen.

Suddenly, Daijin scrambles down my arm.

“Huh?”

It opens its mouth and bites the chair leg.

“You’re...!”

Helping. The leg in its mouth moves up slightly. Cold blue light seeps from the crack, and frost covers Daijin’s body. I breath out, then in, gathering my strength. The chair moves up a little more. The blue light shines brighter, and the cold air grows stronger. Far away, I can still hear Sadaijin howling. The rampaging worm has been causing the ground to shake intermittently for a while now. As I pull, I scream frantically, “Souta, I came all the way here!”

The frost crawls over my shoulder and onto my face. Even my eyelashes are edged with delicate ice.

“Souta, answer me! Souta, Souta!”

I can’t feel anything. My eyelashes are frozen, and my eyelids won’t open. But I don’t let up. The determination to pull Souta free runs through my body like fire. With another grating sound, the chair jolts up again. The cold light freezes me. But still, I go on— **’Scuse me.**

I hear Souta’s voice. From where? It’s not coming from the chair. I’m not hearing it with my ears.

You know of any ruins around here?

This voice is inside me.

Ruins?

I hear my own voice. Behind my frozen eyelids, I see my own puzzled face staring back at me. I'm straddling a bike, the blue morning sea behind me. This is Souta's memory of the day we met, four days ago.

Aren't you afraid of dying?!

Souta is looking up at me. It's the second day of my journey, and we're closing the door at the abandoned school.

No!

I'm shouting, my face covered in mud, as I lean over the chair to push the aluminum door.

Aren't we amazing?

We've closed the door, and I'm smiling, proud of myself.

You're right—what I'm doing is important.

I'm talking to Chika in my room at the inn, dressed in a *yukata*.

Souta, come hang out with us!

I smile teasingly as I sit on Souta.

You sure are popular.

I can't hide my jealous pout.

Souta, wait!

As I jump off the bridge, I'm desperate not to be left alone.

Ahhh... So this is how it ends.

Souta sounds so sad. I'm peering at him, tears welling in my eyes.

In a place like this...

Souta is on the worm high over Tokyo, turning into a Keystone. Ice is gradually blotting out his vision.

But I— Because I met you—

I see myself crying. I'm sobbing like a fool.

Even though I met you...!

My crying face is the last thing he sees before the world turns black.

"Souta!" I cry out, unable to stop myself. But of course he can't hear me. What I'm hearing is his heart's voice as he turned into a Keystone. Shut away in the darkness, within his fading consciousness, he's screaming desperately. Screaming with a voice that can no longer reach our realm.

I don't want to disappear.

I want more time.

To keep living.

I'm afraid to die.

I want to live.

I want to live.

I want to live.

More...

"So do I!" I shout at the chair in my hands. "I want more time, too! I want to hear your voice. I'm scared to be alone. Death is a scary thing... Souta...!"

Please wake up. I move my frozen body and press my face against the chair's backrest, my eyes still sealed shut. Behind my eyelids, I tenderly trace these glimpses of Souta's memories. He was paying attention the whole time. He truly saw me from the start and heard my voice. Tears burn my eyes. "Souta," I whisper so that only he can hear. "I'm so scared of a world without you. Wake up. Please open your eyes."

As I make this fervent wish, I press my lips to the cold chair.



At that moment, Souta is far below Ever-After, on the shoreline of Limbo.

Seated on the chair, he is covered in thick ice. There is no sound, no color, no warmth. He is enveloped in perfect stillness. There is only a strangely sweet

absence of sensation.

.....

Something that shouldn't be here suddenly materializes. Heat. Behind his eyelids—the heat of his tears.

.....

A sound. His ears begin to warm. From a place far away, someone's voice brings meaning to his ears.

.....

Lips. The faint warmth of someone's body is trying to bring color back to his lips. It is like someone is retying the threads connecting him to the world one by one—the threads he thought had been cut.

Slowly, he opens his eyes.

In front of him stands an old door.

A sigh escapes his lips. His breath is hot.

The door swings open. He squints at the bright light. Someone is there, reaching a hand toward him. They enter his world. He stretches out his arm. The ice cracks, and their fingers touch. They grasp each other's hands. Heat flows into him. The person's fine-boned hands pull him strongly. Hot tears overflow his eyes. The ice melts and shatters.

His body rises from the chair, and he passes through the door.

❖ ❖ ❖

With a blast of blue light, the chair comes loose.

I'm thrown backward, still holding it, and I roll down the hillside. As the world spins, I glimpse Daijin with its mouth still around the chair leg. As I tumble helplessly down, I sense the cold air that had been freezing my body flow out of me. A powerful blow to my back knocks me unconscious.

But only for a second.

Sensing that I've stopped moving, I open my eyes.

He's right in front of me.

Souta is lying on his side with his eyes closed. Souta, *in his human form*. His long eyelashes cast pale shadows over his chiseled cheeks. In the perfect spot beneath his left eye, I can see the small birthmark. His smooth white skin is flushed with the warm color of blood. He is breathing steadily. Experiencing the return of warmth to our bodies feels like watching the sun rise. He cracks open his eyes and looks at me.

"...Suzume?"

"Souta—"

He slowly sits up. I do, too.

"I..."

He's looking at me like he's just woken from a dream. I smile. Just then, I notice white fur behind Souta's shoulder.

"Daijin?!"

I run to the white kitten, collapsed in the mud. I scoop up its little body in my hands. It's still as cold as ice.

"What's wrong—are you okay?!"

Panting shallowly, Daijin weakly opens its eyes.

"Suzume," the kitten says, its voice hoarse. "I—I couldn't become your cat, Suzume."

"Huh?"

My *cat*? All of a sudden, I remember my careless words from the other day. Daijin had answered "Yes." The cat's eyes close again. Its light body grows heavy as stone and increasingly cold.

"...Daijin?"

"Suzume, put me back."

"—!"

In my hands is a stone statue—the same stone statue I pulled up in Kyushu,

shaped like a short staff. Daijin has turned back into a cold Keystone. I stifle my sobs as tears pour down my cheeks. I've been wanting this to happen the whole time—but now I'm crying.

Just then I hear what sounds like a wild animal shrieking in pain. It's coming from overhead. I look up and see the worm twisted around Sadaijin, lifting the cat into the sky.

"Is that...the second Keystone?!" Souta shouts, staring at me in shock. "You brought it here?!"

The ground rumbles behind us, and we both turn around. The black hill that was solid a minute ago is slowly beginning to move.

"The worm's tail is free. The whole thing is going to escape through the Gate!" Souta shouts.

I realize he's right. There are no Keystones holding down the worm right now. I hug the stone statue in my hands tight against my chest.

Overhead, Sadaijin howls again, opens its mouth wide, and bites down on the glowing mass of reddish black. High in the air, what could be either blood or lava erupts from its body. The worm writhes furiously, and the black hill unwinds, flailing against the ground. Beneath us, the earth is shaking so hard I can't stand.

"Aaaah!"

I scream as the worm's black tail regains its red hue before my eyes, mowing down rubble as it sweeps across the ground. Cars, houses, and utility poles dance in the air like leaves, then tumble down around us. I reflexively grip my head and huddle in the mud.

"—Huh?"

Big hands are lifting my body lightly upward. It's Souta. Holding me in his arms, he begins to run. Enormous hunks of rubble are falling next to him, behind him, in front of him. He darts around them. Mud and fragments of wreckage swirl dizzyingly before my eyes. For a brief moment, his power enchants me. I feel dizzy at the sight of him in his human form, the certainty of his body, his strength. Just then, a slab of concrete falls right in front of us and

throws Souta off-balance. He almost falls. I jump out of his arms, plant one hand in the mud, and start running.

“Suzume?” he asks as he runs alongside me. He sounds worried.

“I’m fine!” I shout back. We’re fighting this battle as a team, after all. Together we’re unbeatable. Even here in this world.

“What do we do now?!” I ask, splashing through the sludge surrounded by burning debris.

“We listen and then make ourselves heard.”

“What?!”

“Come with me!”

He’s running toward a mountain of rubble a little taller than everything else. He scrambles up a pile of cars, runs along the wall of a collapsed multiuse building, and uses the bottom of a fishing boat thrown onto its side as a foothold. I follow desperately behind. He reaches out to pull me up onto the fishing boat. With the Keystone in one arm, I take his hand with the other and somehow manage to get onto the boat. I stand next to him, panting. Here at the peak of the wreckage, we have a view of the entire town burning around us.

“O Divine Gods who dwell beneath this land!” Souta thunders. He’s looking out over the burning town and beyond it to where the worm and Sadaijin are tangled together. His deep voice resonates through the air of Ever-After.

“You have long protected us for generations. Your mountains and rivers that we have long called our own—”

He spreads his arms wide, as if to embrace the entire town. His eyes are closed, and beads of sweat dot his face.

“We respectfully return them to you!”

As he shouts these last words, he claps his hands together. I stare, astonished, at the scene before me.

The burning nighttime town is swaying as if I’m seeing it through a thin curtain. The black of the rubble and the red of the flames fade and melt together, and in their place fresh colors rise to the surface.

They show the town as it once was, lit up by the morning sun. Brightly colored rooftops reflect the light, cars drive down the streets, and traffic lights blink green and red. A white fishing boat glitters on the blue horizon far away. The air is fresh and clear, full with the promise of the burgeoning spring and rich with the smells of everyday life. The scent of miso soup, of grilled fish, of laundry, and of kerosene. The smell of a town on an early spring morning.

Eventually, I hear soft voices, like the wind is blowing them to me. Young voices, elderly voices, strong voices, kind voices—all overlaying each other in a hubbub that fills my ears.

Good morning.

Good morning.

Let's eat!

I'll see you later.

That was delicious.

See you after school.

Come home as early as you can!

Take the car on the drive to work.

See you after work!

Yes, see you when you get back.

Okay, I'm off!

Okay, I'm off!

Okay, I'm off!

I'm hearing everyone as they go about their morning. *That morning.*

"I know life is transient."

Souta's booming voice above my head brings me back to the present. The town before us is burning again, and it's night. He closes his eyes, brings his hands together, and shouts, like he's praying.

"I know death is always with us. Even so, we pray to survive another year,

another day, another hour.”

Hot wind flecked with the sparks of Ever-After whips through his black hair and his long white overshirt.

“Ferocious, all-powerful gods! Please, please—!”

Souta opens his eyes and speaks even louder. He is looking far into the distance, where Sadaijin is riding the worm’s head. The huge white beast is frozen, staring at Souta.

“—I beg of you!”

Sadaijin roars in response. Jumping off the worm, it runs straight toward us. It leaps over a row of houses in a single stride; with another, it crosses the burning river and with another the school grounds, bearing down on us by the second. Like a gust of night wind blowing through the town, the white beast draws near. Souta’s big hand silently grabs mine as I reflexively stagger backward.

“Surrender.”

Sadaijin opens its mouth wide. The flame of its red tongue and its rows of sharp teeth close in. I shut my eyes, waiting for it to swallow us.

“Huh?”

But a second later, I’m falling through the sky.

The wind is raging in my ears, my skirt is flapping wildly, and the horizon line is spinning out of control. I see my hair band fly off in the wind. My ponytail comes apart, and my hair buffets my face. I’m falling through the sky of Ever-After with the Keystone still in my hands.

“...Ah!”

In the distance, Souta is also falling. He’s holding a Keystone, too. I understand in a flash that Sadaijin has turned back into a statue. Souta is holding Sadaijin, and I’m holding Daijin. Souta raises the Keystone in both hands over his head. He is falling toward the raised head of the worm. I look down. I’m falling toward the worm’s tail, which is rising into the sky.

I know what I need to do.

I raise the Keystone over my head, just like Souta, still hurtling downward. The tail seems to have countless entwined blood vessels laid bare on its body. Inside each one runs a glittering red stream. Veins of blue light begin to trail from the Keystone I'm holding. The lines of red and blue stretch out as if seeking one another. It's beautiful, like I'm falling inside a fireworks display.

I channel the energy of my fall and the weight of my body into my voice.

"We return you!" I scream at the top of my lungs as I swing the Keystone down toward the worm's body.

Instantly, all the veins making up the worm boil, bubble, and burst.



Two long blue spears of light pierce the worm's head and tail at the same time.

The next moment, its massive body explodes into light, becoming rain that pours down on the earth. The heavy blanket of clouds blows away, and brilliant starlight illuminates the world below. Sparkling rainbow-colored drops laden with energy from the earth caress the town's wreckage, calming the flames. The remains of the worm, arched like a bridge in the air, drift slowly to the ground. It is made of soil. The land soaks up this shower of rain and earth, and plants sprout before my eyes. Green envelops the rubble as if it is embracing the whole town. A tranquil ruin emerges, covered in deep green and lit by brilliantly shining stars.

The Whole of Time

"Suzume—"

A soft, kind voice is calling my name. Cool fingers stroke my cheeks. I open my eyes and see Souta looking down worriedly at me.

"Souta..."

I sit up in the grass. Souta takes off his long white overshirt and wraps it gently around my shoulders. I belatedly realize my school uniform is a torn-up

mess.

“We...”

“We fell to the ground along with the worm when it turned back into earth. Are you hurt?”

Nothing hurts, and I can move. “No,” I say, and I slowly stand.

A yellow chair is mixed in among plastic bottles, empty cans, pieces of wood, and plastic toys. I squat in the meadow and pick up the familiar chair. There’s no doubt about it—it’s the kiddie chair my mother made for me, with two eyes carved into its backrest. I flip it over and see that one leg is missing, just like I knew it would be. But something about it is different. It’s new, I eventually realize. From the chip on the seat to the bright-yellow paint, it’s much newer than I remember. It has the vitality of something just made, as vivid as a fresh wound.

“It was washed away in the tsunami that day,” I mumble to myself. “And I found it here...”

I take another look around. Like junk washed ashore from a distant land, all sorts of little things are spread in a line on the grass. Each one is like a letter from somewhere far away, linking one person to another.

“Suzume!” Souta says in surprise, a short distance away. “Someone’s here!”

“What?!”

I follow his gaze. The full moon hangs in the dawn over the ridge of a faraway hill. A small form is walking slowly toward it.

“A child...?”

“I—I have to go!” I say, overwhelmed with excitement and confusion.

Unable to wait a second longer, I start running, the chair still in my hands.

“Suzume?”

“Sorry, be right back!”

Souta doesn’t ask any questions. He just stands where he is and watches me go.

Overhead, the stars are gleaming.

It's like someone has mistakenly cranked up the luminosity to ten times the usual, until the starry sky is absurdly bright. Below this sky where stars, white clouds, and an evening sun all coexist, I stride through the grass toward the child in the distance, desperately trying to hold back my tears.

Ah, I think. I finally understand.

I didn't want to know. And yet I always wanted to know.

I had always thought the woman was my mother. Somewhere in my heart, I believed I would see her again one day. At the same time, I knew I never would. The wind in the meadow is cold, and my breath is white. The white overshirt Souta wrapped around me was too big, so I cinched it around my waist with the red ribbon from my uniform, making it look like a dress. On my feet are Souta's black work boots I put on in Tokyo. My straight hair falls below my shoulders. I hadn't realized it had grown as long as my mother's was back then.

Ahead of me, I see a small form hunched in the grass. I set the chair down softly, walk up to the girl in her muddy down jacket, and whisper: "Suzume."

The little girl, who is exhausted from walking and searching and is deep in despair, turns slowly toward me. She is my four-year-old self. She wandered through a Gate while searching for her mother and got lost in Ever-After. She looks up at me in surprise. Her eyes are filled with worry and hope at having finally found the way out of a long nightmare. I don't know what expression I wear for her, but I force myself to smile because I want to lessen her sorrow as much as I can.

"...Mom?" she asks. I hesitate. I am painfully aware of the word she wants to hear. But— "No," I say, shaking my head. I watch helplessly as her eyes fill with tears. But she doesn't cry.

"Do you know her?" she asks insistently, her frozen little hands folded in front of her stomach and her posture as straight as it can be. "My mom is looking for me, and I think she's really worried, so I have to find her soon!"

"Suzume—"

“She works at the hospital. She’s good at cooking and building things, and she always makes me whatever I like—”

“Suzume, I—”

“My house...!”

It’s no good. Tears are already falling from her eyes. She sniffles and frantically goes on talking.

“My house is gone... So my mom doesn’t know where I am, and—”

“Enough!”

I can’t listen any longer. I drop to my knees in the grass and grab her arms.

“I already know...!” I say to both my selves.

“What do you mean?! My mom is here somewhere! I told you—she’s looking for me!”

“Suzume!”

The girl twists out of my hands and runs away. As she runs, she screams at the sky, “Mom, where are you? Mom!”

“Aah!”

I reflexively reach toward her. She falls forward, hard. But she sits up right away in the grass.

“Mooom!”

She is sobbing violently, like she’s accusing me and her mom and the whole world. She keeps crying, wringing the tears from her whole body, like she’s going to throw up. Beyond her shaking form, the red sun of Ever-After is about to set. The sunset is as crimson and heavy as blood, like it’s reflecting her despair. It begins to blur. I’m crying, too.

“Mom...,” I say, and now I can’t stop crying. The pain of the little girl sobbing before me is my own pain. The two are identical. Her despair and loneliness, her suffocating sorrow and burning fury—all of it is still inside me, as powerful as ever. I cry like I’m going to throw up. We sit in the grass and sob.

...But.

As I listen to the sobs that threaten to break her apart, something occurs to me. This isn't working. I can't go on like this. I have to stop crying. *She and I are different.* I'm still weak, but at the very least, I've lived twelve years since that day. I've lived. Suzume is all alone, but I'm not alone anymore. If I don't do something, she truly will be all alone in the world. She won't be able to go on living.

I look up. In the corner of my vision, I see something yellow. I push my tears away with the back of my hand, pick up the kiddie chair, and run over to Suzume, who's still sobbing.

"Suzume—"

I set the chair down next to her and squat beside it.

"Look at this!"

"Huh?"

She blinks with surprise, tears still pouring from her eyes.

"This is my chair... Why is it here?"

She looks up at me, puzzled.

"...How do I explain this?" I say, smiling as I search for the right words. The sun is below the clouds now, and the world is tinted a translucent ultramarine.

"Listen, Suzume, no matter how sad you are right now—"

I can only tell her the truth. The plain and simple truth.

"You're going to grow up."

A strong wind blows the tears off our cheeks. The sky is getting darker, and the stars are shining brighter.

"So don't worry. The future isn't scary!"

Her eyes reflect the stars. Praying that my words reach as deep as those points of light, I make my voice more forceful and turn my mouth up in a smile.

"Suzume, you will love people again, and you will meet lots of people who love you, too. You might think everything is pitch-black right now, but morning will come, I promise."

The stars are spinning overhead as I watch, like time has sped up.

“Morning will come, and night will come again, over and over. You will grow into an adult in the light. No matter what happens in the future, no one can stop you.”

Shooting stars streak across the sky, and finally, the other side of the meadow begins to turn pink. It’s morning. I watch as the dawning sun lights her up, and I say again, “You will grow into an adult in the light.”

I pick up the chair and stand. She looks up at me and asks in a puzzled voice, “Who are you?”

“Me?” I ask.

A warm breeze blows, lifting the plants at our feet so they dance around us. I lean over and hold out the yellow chair to her.

“I’m your tomorrow.”

Her little hands grasp the chair firmly.



There’s a door in front of the little girl.

Holding the chair under one arm, she uses the other to turn the knob and open the door.

On the other side is an ash-colored world. The sun hasn’t risen, and it’s dim out, with fine snow falling. Fresh rubble forms looming black silhouettes all around her. The March landscape on the other side of the door is filled with sorrow yet to be consoled.

Before she steps across the threshold, the girl glances behind her.

On top of a hill in the distance, she sees two grown-ups. One is a tall man, and the other is a woman whose dress is blowing in the wind. They are staring straight at her. They are as beautiful as a picture, standing among swaying grass and lit up by the Milky Way. The image is seared forever in the little girl’s memory.

She turns around and steps confidently through the door. Clasp

chair tightly, she returns to the ashen world. Then she shuts the door firmly with her small hand.



“—I’d forgotten,” I murmur, still holding the knob of the door I’ve just shut, which is propped against the stone wall. “I was given everything important a long time ago.”

Souta, who’s standing next to me, smiles gently and nods. The sky is dyed the faint blue of predawn. Its color is much paler and calmer here than in Ever-After. But here, there are signs of life all around us. The morning birds are chirping busily. On a road far away, a truck drives leisurely off to work. I can hear waves breaking quietly on the other side of the seawall.

I take my hand off the knob and grip the Closer’s key around my neck. I put it into the keyhole glowing on the door. Then I fill my chest with morning air. It smells like plants and ocean and people’s lives all mixed together—the smell of a town in the morning. The smell of the world I’m going to live in.

“See you later,” I say as I lock my own Gate.



DAY SIX AND RECOLLECTIONS

The Words No One Got to Say

This is the end of my story. I think I've talked about all the emotions I don't want to forget and all the events I want to remember. The only thing left is a handful of recollections. I don't think you could call this an epilogue, though. My life is still going on, busy as ever, without the sort of clear dividing line you'd need to call it an epilogue.

After I close the door, Souta and I go back to the place where my house used to be and find someone unexpected waiting there—Serizawa. He and Tamaki are both leaning against the concrete foundation among the weeds, sleeping soundly. Souta's face when he sees Serizawa is quite the sight. His expression is a complex mixture of surprise, annoyance, and affection.

"I came to get that twenty thousand yen I lent you," Serizawa says once he's awake.

"Are you kidding?" Souta answers. "You didn't lend me that money—I lent it to you!"

Maybe Serizawa isn't cut out to be a teacher after all. Soon both Serizawa and Tamaki are wide awake, and after the four of us share a moment of surprise

and relief, trading misunderstandings and justifications, we all pile into Serizawa's car.

The front end of the red convertible is painfully crushed in, and every time Serizawa shifts gears, it jerks even worse than before. The door that came off is strapped back on with duct tape. It turns out Serizawa called his roadside service and got them to haul the car back up to the road. We drive along a stretch overlooking the ocean for a while, then stop at a train station halfway up a mountain. Souta and I leave Tamaki and Serizawa in the car and go through the ticket gate of the unmanned station.

"I wish you'd come back with us...", I say as we wait on the platform for his train.

"The weight of people's hearts calms the land where they live. I'm sure there are other places where that weight has vanished and left a Gate open," Souta says, gazing at the distant sky. I can hear the train whistle and the rattling of its wheels approaching.

"I'm going to close some doors on my way back to Tokyo," he says decisively. I think I'm hoping he'll ask me to come with him. But I know he probably won't. I have my own world I need to get back to, and he has work to do. With obnoxious speed, the little one-car train slides into the station and opens its doors. Souta steps on board without saying anything.

"—Hey, Souta!" I call out.

He turns around. The bell rings to signal the doors are about to close.

"I—"

I falter. He jumps back onto the platform and pulls me into his arms.

"Suzume, thank you for saving me," he says into my ear. I'm wrapped in his strong embrace. My nose is tingling, and like a fool, I start crying.

"I'll come see you, I promise," he says confidently, then floats away from me. The bell stops ringing, and the doors close. A bird is singing sharply. I watch as the train pulls away with him on it. The long overshirt he gave me reflects the light of the morning sun onto me.

After that, the three of us spend another half day driving back to Tokyo in Serizawa's convertible. To tell the truth, I'd give anything to be out of that car (try spending hours being blasted by wind in a convertible whose roof doesn't close, and you'll understand what I'm saying), but it would have been cruel to abandon Serizawa while Tamaki and I got on a sparkling new Shinkansen.

As expected, we get rained on, are pulled over by the police, and run into trouble with the engine, but we manage to enjoy the trip back. We're too desperate not to. We buy a bunch of snacks at a rest stop and eat them in the car. Tamaki even holds the soft serve up to Serizawa's mouth as he drives. We sing along at the top of our lungs to whatever pop music he puts on whether we know the lyrics or not. We get a lot of suspicious glares from the cars around us, but we don't care. By the time we get back to Tokyo Station that evening, the three of us are exhausted. We say good-bye with stiff handshakes in front of the Tokaido Shinkansen ticket gate.

Tamaki and I take two more days to travel back to Miyazaki. We stay at Rumi's karaoke bar in Kobe and at Chika's inn in Ehime. Tamaki gives everyone loads of presents she bought at Tokyo Station and bows her head a lot, apologizing for all the trouble her daughter caused them. At Rumi's place we help with the customers, and at the inn we do chores. Tamaki is bizarrely popular with the customers at the karaoke bar, both male and female, shocking me with her hidden talents. Rumi, Miki, Tamaki, and I perform passionate karaoke quartets (I've gotten pretty familiar with vintage pop music over the past few days), and at Chika's, she and I lie on futons side by side and talk until the sun comes up.

Then Tamaki and I catch the ferry at the same port where I got off on my way to Ehime and ride it back to Miyazaki. Minoru picks us up at the ferry dock on the other side, and even though Tamaki looks annoyed, I think she's secretly happy about it. I realize the map of Japan on my smartphone that I've been checking as we travel—in the car, and on the train and ferry—has become very special to me.

A few months have passed since then.

I've been going to school every day and studying more than I used to for the university entrance exams coming up next year. Tamaki and I have been arguing

more than before, but rather than fighting, it feels like a comfortable exchange of ideas. Her lunch boxes are still as over-the-top as always. The sea I pass on my way to school is growing more brilliant by the day. It seems to me that as winter advances, the sea gets bluer, the clouds get grayer, the asphalt gets blacker, and everything shines more brightly. It's like the world beneath the light is constantly changing as it moves toward a point on the horizon.

It's a February morning without a cloud in the blue sky, like the day the world began. The wind is still sharp and cold, and the clear, clean sun is shining into every last corner of town. I'm riding my bike down the hill next to the sea, wearing my school uniform and a thick scarf wrapped around my neck. My skirt is flapping in the wind like it's taking deep breaths.

I see someone walking up the hill.

He's striding confidently up the slope, the wind filling his long coat. I recognize him instantly. *I'm going to say the words no one got to say that day*, I suddenly think. He stops. I step off the pedals and take a deep breath of sea air.

"Welcome back," I say.



AFTERWORD

This book is a novel version of the film by the same name that I directed and that is scheduled for release in 2022. This is the third time I've written a novel at the same time I'm making a film, the first two being *your name.* and *Weathering With You.* Each time, I feel a little reluctant before I start (because I don't think I can handle that much work), but once I start writing, it becomes more and more fun, until by the end I'm convinced it was an indispensable element of my process. The same was true this time. In hindsight, I think it was necessary for me to trace Suzume's emotional journey in words whether the film existed or not.

In the following paragraphs, I touch on the story's roots. I urge those who prefer to enjoy the book or film without any preconceptions to read the book (or watch the film) before reading this section.

The 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami took place when I was thirty-eight. Although I wasn't directly impacted by the disaster, it haunted me through my forties. My thoughts and feelings from that time stayed with me constantly as I worked on animated films, wrote novels, and raised my children. Why? To what end? Why those people? Why not me? Can things stay as they are? Can we get away without changing? Have we been pretending not to see? What should I do? How should I live? At some point, endlessly thinking about these questions

and my work making animated films became almost the same thing. After 2011, I witnessed several other moments that remade the world, yet the sound playing constantly in the back of my mind was stuck on 2011.

I listened to that sound as I wrote this story. I suspect the same thoughts will continue circling through my mind in the future, and I will continue creating stories that are not much different from this one (though I am trying to make them different), hoping that next time I'll manage to tell them a little better and entertain my viewers and readers a little more.

I hope you enjoy the film and novel I have created this time, too.

Makoto Shinkai, June 2022

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by Yen On.**

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