

# WOLF CHILDREN

AME & YUKI

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New York

## Copyright

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AME & YUKI MAMORU HOSODA

Translation by Winifred Bird

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Okami Kodomo no Ame to Yuki

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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

“The man she fell in love with...was a wolf.”

# 1



Hana was in love nearly the moment she met him.

She was nineteen, and aside from a few crushes that were more admiration than affection, he was her first love. Only when she fell for him did she understand what a mysterious thing love was—how it brought with it a readiness to accept whatever the future might hold.

Before their paths first crossed, she had a dream.

She was lying among masses of wildflowers in a meadow bathed in soft light. As she woke from a pleasant doze, she opened her eyes and took a deep breath, smelling the lovely grassy scent and feeling the comforting warmth of the sun. A gentle breeze ruffled her bangs.

“—?”

Just then, she sensed something approaching. She slowly sat up and looked in its direction. From beyond a distant hill, a figure was walking toward her on all fours through the grass. The silhouette’s ears were pointed.

*A wolf.*

Hana knew right away what it was. She didn’t know how she was so sure, but there was not a doubt in her mind that this was a wolf.

The creature walked toward her, buffeted by the wind. Neither its gaze nor its steps wavered as it paced forward with a beautifully rhythmic gait.

Hana was not afraid.

She was certain the wolf had come from some faraway place. In all likelihood, it had made its long journey for some purpose of its own. So she waited for it, perfectly still.

And then, as it walked, the wolf transformed.

*Transform* was the only word for it—the air around the beast shimmered, and

the next instant, it was a tall man.

Hana was startled.

*A werewolf*, she thought.

The tall man strode straight toward her.

Transfixed, she held her breath and continued waiting. Her heart raced.

The dream ended there.

Hana chased after the next moments behind closed eyelids, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't even catch a glimpse. *What did the wolf want to tell me?* All that remained was a blurry image of the man's tall figure in her heart.

Hana was a sophomore at a national university on the outskirts of Tokyo.

Nearby was a train station with a red triangular roof like something from a fairy tale and, outside the station, a wide boulevard lined with hundreds of cherry blossom and ginkgo trees. A stroll along this lane, maybe five minutes or so, would bring you to the cozy little campus. It was an old-fashioned university, full of trees, with lecture halls and classroom buildings clustered around a library with a clock tower.

One early summer day, a professor's calm voice echoed through a cavernous classroom as he lectured on the history of ancient thought. As he read out the text and explained each line, Hana jotted down his words in her neat handwriting.

Each of the students at this university had passed its rigorous entrance exam, and all of them were both diligent and well-dressed. These young people came from wealthy families, and a promising future awaited them after they completed their excellent education. Some would become public servants, while others planned to pursue law or business. A few were already studying for the bar or various other professional licenses.

When it came to her industrious nature, Hana was similar to her classmates. Her vision of her future, however, was still hazy. She knew she wanted to help others, but she was keenly aware that a knack for studying alone was of no use



whatsoever to society. She had no idea who she was or what kind of life she should choose for herself.

The afternoon sunlight poured in through the windows of the large classroom and created beautiful reflections on the long tables. Hana paused for a moment in her note-taking and looked up toward the window—and that was when her eyes landed on the back of a certain man.

“—”

He looked nothing like the rich students who attended the university. His hair was disheveled and his skin deeply tanned. The collar of his T-shirt was stretched out, and the fabric was pockmarked with little holes. His arm was well-toned, and his hand gripped a ballpoint pen, fervently scribbling notes as if he had no intention of missing a single word the professor said. Apparently, he didn't have the textbook called for in the syllabus.

Hana's gaze was riveted to his back as the sunlight streaming through the windows seemed to glitter on his skin. For some reason, she felt she had seen this pleasant light before.

The lecture ended, and the students filed out of the classroom, turning in their attendance slips as they went. Hana placed a slip with her name on it on the professor's desk and looked back at the classroom, searching for the stranger. She saw a tall form leaving alone, notebook grasped in one hand.

*He probably didn't turn in his slip*, she thought. She followed him out of the classroom and glimpsed a figure in a T-shirt and faded jeans turning the hallway corner with long strides. She would have to jog to catch up with him.

When she finally reached him, he was descending the staircase. She called out without thinking.

“Wait!”

The figure—the man—paused on the landing. Then he slowly turned one thin cheek in her direction and fixed his gaze on her.

“—”

Hana's heart thumped.

His eyes were startlingly beautiful.

Yet, she also sensed in them a distance that kept the world at bay. They reminded her of a nervous wild animal. If she didn't say something, he would stride off and leave her there alone. So she blurted:

"...Here." She held out an extra attendance slip. "If you don't write your name down and turn it in, you'll be marked absent. So..."

Before she could finish, he shot her down. "Maybe you've already guessed," he muttered, his voice quietly menacing, "but I'm not a student here."

"What?"

"If you don't want to see me around here, I won't come anymore."

His clear eyes turned away as he continued down the stairs, his footsteps echoing after him.

Left behind, Hana stood frozen and dumbfounded for a moment. Her attempted kindness had backfired completely, as if she'd carelessly tried petting a rare wild animal and gotten bared fangs for her trouble.

She was about to turn around, but the lack of closure kept her in place. If she didn't do something, she thought, that feeling would stay with her forever.

She walked down the stairs to the first floor and peered furtively outside from the shade of a column. Through the arch, she saw him leave the building.

It was afternoon, and the campus garden was filled with the lively shouts of children at play. Many elderly people and families used the garden as a welcome open space, in place of a neighborhood park. The children were running around at a slight distance from where their mothers congregated.

Suddenly, one of the children fell down and cried out in a weak, muffled voice, but the mothers, caught up in their conversation, didn't seem to hear. *He* did, however; he stopped, then returned to lift the boy in his arms and set him on his feet. He didn't promise that everything would be all right or offer a warning to be more careful next time. Instead, he placed his hand very softly on the top of the boy's head. When he did, the child stopped crying so quickly that Hana was mystified. The boy's pain and sadness seemed to have melted away

instantly. The man stood then and strode off, as if nothing at all unusual had happened. The child watched him, mouth agape, as he went.

For some reason, witnessing this trivial scene from the shade of the column, Hana was filled with immense happiness. She felt as if she was the child who had fallen down and the one whom he'd picked up and set on her feet. And so, as he passed through the front gates of the university...

"Hey, wait! Again."

...she summoned the nerve to call out to him...

"I don't know if you're a student here or not. But"—she dug hurriedly through her bag—"I think that class will be a little hard without this."

She held out the textbook to him with both hands.

"If you want...we could share."

The suggestion took every ounce of courage she had.

After Hana finished her university classes, she worked until late at night at a dry cleaner near the station. After that, she stopped at a twenty-four-hour supermarket to buy a few things before returning to her apartment in an old building next to an elevated rail line. She changed the water in the cup set beside a photograph of her father, cooked a simple dinner in the cramped kitchen, and ate it alone, still wearing her apron, at her little dining table. Afterward, she took a bath, put on her pajamas, and then read the books she'd borrowed from the library until she fell asleep.

This was Hana's fixed daily routine—until today.

She had made a date with him in front of the university gate. They were to meet during the next class.

She found herself thinking of him at the dry cleaner while searching for customers' clothes with their tickets in one hand. At the supermarket, as she picked through the half-off items, his image would rise in her mind's eye. He was there, too, when she turned her key in the door to her apartment, when she folded her apron and laid it over the back of a chair, and even when she turned the pages of her books.

Already, Hana had fallen in love.

That day, Hana spent longer than usual choosing her clothes and eventually decided on a blue dress she had never worn before.

He had said he would come to class in the afternoon, after he finished work. Nevertheless, that morning, she stood at the front gate searching the crowd of arriving students for him. Between her morning classes, she was beside herself with nerves. In the lunchtime bustle of the student dining hall, she sat alone, thinking of him.

Finally, it was time for her afternoon class, but still, he did not appear. The professor arrived, briefly greeted the students, and opened the text to continue his comments from last time. Hana tried to pay attention, but she couldn't concentrate. She kept looking out the window in spite of herself.

When the lecture was nearing its midpoint, she spotted him running toward the building. He was wearing the same T-shirt with the stretched-out collar that he'd worn the day they met.

Her heart jumped.

He entered the class holding his breath and silently took a seat beside Hana. Afraid he would hear her pounding heart, she left her textbook where it was and moved to the far end of the long desk. He put his hand on the book and gave her a confused look. *Don't you need it?* he seemed to be asking.

From her distant seat, she signaled a response with her eyes: *Go ahead, I'm fine.*

After the lecture ended, she invited him to the university library. Only faculty and students were allowed inside, generally, but she very much wanted to show it to him. She touched her ID to the sensor, and when the gate opened with a beep, she grabbed his hand and pulled him through. The librarian gave them a suspicious glance, but before she could say anything, they had rushed past.

His eyes sparkled with interest at the rows and rows of books lining the modern movable stacks. Just watching him made Hana happy, too.

The university boasted one of the largest collections in the city, and it was especially unusual in that over 60 percent was kept in open stacks. Students



could hold even rare books in their hands.

He began searching for a certain book with great interest, and when he found it, he started thumbing through it right away, rapt, as if time had stopped. Not wanting to bother him, Hana wandered among the nearby bookshelves. After a little while, she came back, but he hadn't moved an inch, absorbed as he was in his book. For some reason, this struck her as very funny. She pulled a random book from the shelf and stood next to him reading it.

Afterward, they left the university and walked along the riverbank together under the broad, dusky sky.

Hana asked him one question after the next.

"What do you do for fun?"

"What kind of food do you like?"

"What type of people have you dated?"

He smiled, and instead of answering her questions, he asked one of his own.

"...Why are you named after flowers?"

"My name?"

"Yeah."

"The day I was born, cosmos were blooming in the garden. Wild ones. My father said that when he saw them, the name came to him all of a sudden. He said he wanted me to grow up with a smile always blooming on my face, like a flower."

She looked into the distance as she reminisced.

"He told me I should always smile, even when life was painful or hard—even when I didn't want to. If I could do that, I could get through just about anything."

"\_\_"

"Because of that, I smiled all through his funeral. One of my relatives got really mad at me and called me disrespectful..."

"\_\_"

“Maybe I was.”

He gazed intently at Hana, then smiled. “Not at all,” he said, looking up at the sky.

Hana smiled back at him, relieved, then joined him in watching the sky. “I’m glad,” she said softly.

It was the first time she had ever told anyone about her father.

Her father had been diagnosed with his illness in her final year of high school, when she was due to take her university entrance exams.

She was his only child. As she prepared for her exams, she sat by his bedside, believing that if she studied hard and passed, he would get better. He’d cheered her on from his sickbed.

He’d taken his last breath before she had a chance to tell him she’d been accepted.

It had been just the two of them in their house, and now she was alone.

Her relatives had been very sympathetic and offered to help. One aunt and uncle said they had a spare room and asked if she would like to come live with them. Another aunt and uncle offered to pay her school fees. But she’d politely declined them all.

Once the hospital bills were paid, she had only enough savings left to cover the university entrance fee and the tuition for her first semester. Fortunately, she had been preapproved for a student loan, and she figured she could get by as long as she had a part-time job.

She’d gotten rid of what she couldn’t take with her and packed up what she could, leaving the rented house where they’d lived and moving into the little apartment next to the elevated rail line. With her, she’d brought a chest of drawers made from paulownia wood and a full-length mirror. On top of the bookshelf her father had used, she’d placed a photograph of the two of them in their garden when she was a child.

She attended her university entrance ceremony in the mourning clothes she had worn to his funeral.

Her first year was over before she knew it—and then she met him.

He treated her with the same care he would have given a little flower blooming in a meadow.

He always took her home after their dates. They would meet up in an old café near the train station. He would usually arrive before her when he came after work, so he read books while he waited.

They wandered through the city streets at night, side by side, talking about anything and everything.

He worked for a moving company, driving a large truck, and he spoke very tenderly of the houses he visited for work, as well as his impressions of the people who lived in them.

“The interior of every apartment is completely different, even the ones in the same housing complex. Some households have money, and others don’t. Some have big families, and some have just one person. Some have babies, and others have only old people.”

He surveyed the city from the hilltop park. Brightly lit houses stretched all the way to the horizon and beyond as an outbound train packed with passengers cut across the center of the expanse. To which of the illuminated houses were each of them returning? He gazed out at the landscape and commented, “It must be nice to have a home. To tell someone, ‘I’m back,’ and take off your shoes, wash your face, and sink into a chair. Yeah—it would be so nice. I’d build a bookshelf, and when there was no more room on it, I’d build another. I could do anything I wanted, because it’d be my own house.”

His voice full of longing, he told her he wanted to save up money little by little and buy a house one day, even if it wasn’t big.

Hana felt something warm spread slowly through her until it had permeated her whole body.

“I’ll be the one to welcome you home,” she said very softly, gazing out at the city lights.

He looked at her as if her casual reply had caught him by surprise. Then, slowly, he turned his face away.

On the way back to her apartment, he didn't say a word. The only sound was the crunch of his sandals on fallen leaves. Suddenly, just as they stepped onto the little bridge over the stream near her apartment, he broke the silence.

"Hana."

"Yes?"

"You see..."

"—"

"There's something I have to tell you..."

"...You can tell me anything."

"—"

"You see..." he tried again, then fell silent.

Hana knew he was trying to share something very important. She couldn't imagine what it might be but prepared herself to accept whatever she was about to hear.

The water grasses at the bottom of the shallow stream swayed gently. Aside from a few passing cars, no one else crossed the bridge. Finally, he spoke again.

"I'll tell you next time."

"Okay."

"Good night."

"Good night."

She watched his back until he was gone.

Many times after that, they met up and then walked back to her apartment together, but he never told her what the "something" that night had been, and she never asked.

Then it was winter.

Hana wrapped her scarf over her duffle coat and left the dry cleaner. Twinkling strings of lights were wrapped around the trees along the road in a brilliant display. She arrived at the usual old café exactly at the preappointed



time.

He was nowhere to be seen.

That was unusual. Warming her hands with her breath, she searched for him among the surging crowd. The street was so full of people, it felt like a festival. She pulled out an unfinished book and started reading, checking the clock beyond the streetlights every now and then. It was quite a bit later than the time they'd agreed upon.

Still, he did not come.

She finished her book and had nothing left to do. Inevitably, her gaze turned to the endless stream of people flowing toward the station. Now and then, the construction worker directing traffic around a project glanced at her with concern.

He didn't come.

As the crowds dwindled, the cold seemed to bite harder. She stomped her feet to warm them as the chill penetrated the soles of her shoes. Suddenly, the lights in the café dimmed, and she turned around in surprise. Had so much time passed already? An employee peered at her suspiciously as he began getting ready to close up, and she moved out of his way apologetically.

He didn't come.

At midnight, the holiday lights strung up along the street went dark, and the plaza in front of the train station transformed into a lonely void. She sat down in front of the shutter that had been pulled down over the café facade and wrapped her arms around her knees, huddled against the cold. A drunk called out to her, but she didn't answer. A siren wailed in the distance and faded into silence. She buried her face in her scarf and closed her eyes. She had no idea how long she'd been sitting like that when she heard a voice.

"Hana."

"\_\_"

"I'm sorry, Hana." He was standing over her. "...It was a lousy thing to do."

She slowly looked up at him. Her cheeks were frostbitten. All the same, she

answered with a broad smile.

They stood on the hilltop overlooking the city as innumerable stars sparkled in the night sky.

“I’ve never told anyone before—I was too scared. I thought you might leave me when I told you. But...” The wind gently ruffled the fur around his collar. “I should have told you sooner...I mean, I should have shown you.”

“Shown me?” Hana’s breath was white.

“Close your eyes for a minute.”

“—”

She complied, but she couldn’t guess his intention. After a minute or so, she cracked them open very slightly and then heard his voice.

“Longer.”

She closed them tightly again, steeling herself for whatever might come.

A long time passed. It was frightfully quiet.

“Can I open them yet?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. The wind lifted her hair lightly. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

“—!”

He was still there, staring down at his left hand. No question.

But...

Before her eyes, that hand was changing from a human hand to the paw of a wild animal. A maelstrom of wind swirled around them. As his hair was whipped into a disheveled mess, it morphed into a pointed pair of animal ears. Fur spread in a flash over these ears and down his face, while the corners of his mouth seemed to rip back into a wider opening.

A long snout turned slowly in her direction, and his closed eyes snapped open.

They were the eyes of a beast from the wilderness.

As Hana stared into them, she couldn’t move or utter a single word.

Suddenly, the wind fell still.

He—the wild animal—looked down and sighed.

“Hana. What do you see?” he asked quietly.

The cloud of his breath melted into the darkness as the color of his eyes deepened, brimming with sorrow.

It was a beautiful color.

Without a doubt, it was him.

A staggering number of stars twinkled across the winter sky. That night was a new moon.

Hana realized then that the stories of werewolves changing shape under the full moon and pursuing human victims were mere myths. *The world is full of things I don't know*, she mused.

The electric heater in Hana's apartment shone red against the blue of night.

“Were you surprised?”

She heard his voice, but she neither answered nor looked up. She simply nodded slightly.

“You don't want to see me anymore?”

Again, she did not answer, but this time, she shook her head slightly.

“But you're shivering.”

She said nothing. The canine paw reached slowly toward her and very softly touched her white shoulder. She could tell he was taking great care not to harm her delicate skin with his sharp claws.

“...I'm not afraid,” she said quietly, raising her head to look up at him. “Because it's you.”

He slowly drew her to him and gently touched her lips.

That was the first night she spent with him.

He was a descendant of the Japanese wolf, which was believed to have gone extinct a century earlier, in the Meiji era.

He was the last to carry mixed human and wolf blood. His parents had died

when he was still young, but before they passed, they'd told him the story of their clan's ruin and warned him never to share the truth with another soul. After that, he was sent to live with relatives who knew nothing of his true nature. He suffered greatly as he grew into an adult.

When he was old enough to get his driver's license, he'd moved to the city to find work. He told her that, until now, he had lived almost in hiding, unknown and unnoticed by the world.

Morning dawned.

Hana sat up naked in bed, still half asleep, and looked to her side.

He was asleep, in human form. Over his supple muscles, his skin looked to her like carved marble. He'd mentioned extinction the night before; it made her think of the fossilized, primeval shells buried in the marble columns of subway stations.

She stared at his sleeping face.

The previous night hadn't been a dream. He really had changed into a wild animal. And she really had accepted him. As he slept, she imagined what might happen from that moment on and resolved to take everything as it came.

Hana was the only person in the world who knew his secret.

Which was to say, his secret became her secret.

Her fellow students dated older men who wore imported jackets or students from other universities who took them to events and concerts.

"So who are you dating, Hana?" they would ask her. How much older was he? How tall was he? Was he thin? Had he gone to a good school? What did his parents do? Did he give her a present on their anniversary?

She didn't know how to answer their never-ending questions, but she knew she couldn't introduce him to them.

She simply told them she was seeing someone with integrity.

Their new meeting place was the twenty-four-hour supermarket. They would do the shopping together, then go back to her apartment nearby.



Chicken was often on the menu. She would cut breast or thigh meat into bite-size chunks, sprinkle it with salt, and push it onto skewers with pieces of green pepper. (Leeks or onions were more conventional, but he didn't like either of those.) While it was grilling, she would mix together a bit of soy sauce, a splash of cooking sake, and a dollop of grated onion (he was okay with a little bit of onion) in a six-inch-tall cup. Then, she would pile the finished skewers on a plate and dip them into the sauce before eating them. This was the traditional way of eating grilled chicken in Hana's family.

The first time, she showed him how to dunk the skewers in the cup and pull them out dripping with sauce to whet the appetite. He had never eaten grilled chicken that way before and didn't quite know what to do. He copied her and dipped his skewer timidly into the cup, glancing at her questioningly.

They each took a bite at the same time and chewed. It was delicious! He stared intently at his skewer, as if in deep appreciation. After that, he scarfed down the remaining chunks of meat.

Before long, Hana's grilled chicken was one of his favorites, and she made it for him often. When meat was on sale, she would buy a big package and freeze it for later.

While Hana was cooking, he would arrange the dandelions or other flowers he had picked along the roadside on his way home in a little milk bottle and place it on the windowsill. Hana would watch, smiling, as he regarded his arrangements with satisfaction.

After work, he would come to her apartment and spend the night, and in the morning, he would go straight back to work. Before they knew it, this was their new normal. After a few months, at her suggestion, he gave up the lease on his apartment and moved into hers—meaning he set two paper bags of books down in the corner of her room and called it a day.

He pulled an old photograph from between the pages of one of the books and showed it to her—a steep, snowy mountain ridge. That was where he was from, he told her. She set it next to her father's photograph on top of the bookcase.

It was a brilliantly sunny morning in early summer.

The dayflower and cranesbill in the milk bottle were shifting in the wind. As

Hana leisurely folded one of his big, freshly ironed shirts, nausea suddenly overcame her. Unable to stay sitting, she leaned onto the bed, knocking the neatly folded pile of clothes onto the floor.

Something unusual was going on, she realized.

She had had a hunch; if she was honest with herself, she had felt sluggish for the past month, and her appetite had been low. But this was the day she finally recognized what was happening within her body.

She walked to the obstetrics clinic in her neighborhood and looked inside to see a waiting room packed with pregnant women. She peered through the window for quite a while but couldn't bring herself to go inside. She sensed that her situation was different from theirs. But where should she go? Standing in front of the clinic door, she felt she had nowhere to turn.

She headed toward the university library. Inside, she sat in the nearly empty reading room with a pile of books about pregnancy and childbirth and took notes. She imagined how he would react to the news. Maybe he would be happy, or maybe he would be worried.

After going back and forth over what to do, she called his company from a phone booth. All she said was that she had gone to the obstetrics clinic but hadn't seen the doctor. He said he would come right away and hung up.

Hana waited in front of their usual old café, holding several books on natural childbirth and home delivery. She had decided to tell him firmly what she intended to do.

She spotted him as he approached. He was running, as if this were the most important thing in the world. Her heart thudded in her chest as she mentally rehearsed the first words she planned to say to him.

But before she could, he had swept her up in his arms. The can of peaches he had been carrying fell onto the sidewalk and rolled away so noisily that the people passing by threw them questioning glances.

He hugged her again and again, oblivious to the stares they were drawing. His face was radiant with joy.

And so Hana, too, was content.

All through summer and fall, Hana suffered from horrible morning sickness.

She was nauseous from morning to night, which prevented her from attending her classes. After worrying over it for a while, she turned in the paperwork for a leave of absence. She also had to quit her job. The owner was taken by surprise and begged Hana not to leave, asking if something was bothering her and promising to do anything to fix it. But Hana couldn't explain her motives. All she could do was ask to be let go. She felt terrible, since she had worked there ever since starting university.

All her routines changed. Unable to get out of bed, she spent every day trying to bear the nausea. Soon, she could no longer swallow a bite of food, and the morning sickness robbed her of what little weight her slender form had. Even then, she couldn't stop vomiting.

Every day when he came home from work, he would silently rub her back throughout the evening and night. In the morning, not having slept a wink, he would leave again for work. He was Hana's strongest support.

One day, Hana heard him come in and sat up in bed to greet him, only to notice that his coat was covered in dark brown feathers. She gave him a worried look, but he just smiled teasingly and brought his hand out from behind his back to show her what he was holding.

A beautiful bird with a deep green tail squawked in his hand—a wild pheasant.

Hana was dumbfounded. She tried to envision him hunting in wolf form, but she couldn't even conjure the image.

He stood in the kitchen and skillfully butchered the bird, then submerged it in a big pot of boiling water. While the pheasant was releasing its flavor into the broth, he bent over the counter to chop vegetables. Hana asked if she could help and started to climb out of bed, but he told her to just sit and relax.

Finally, he wrapped the handles of the clay pot in a kitchen towel and carried it from the stovetop to a trivet on the table. When he lifted the lid, steam tinged with the scent of soup rose from the pot. He'd made pheasant and udon noodles in a clear, glistening broth. Neatly cut quarter slices of daikon radish and carrots floated on the surface.

Hana peered into the dish with mixed feelings. She was worried she wouldn't be able to eat the meal he had so thoughtfully prepared for her. Normally, just looking at food or smelling it was enough to make her retch.

She picked up a noodle with her chopsticks and hesitantly nibbled on it. A mild, savory flavor spread through her mouth.

"Wow!" she blurted out.

First of all, she was happy to be able to swallow anything at all. Second, she was glad something finally tasted good to her after what seemed like ages. All of a sudden, she was ravenous, gulping it down as if making up for all the meals she'd missed.

He rested his chin on his hands and watched her, relieved.

As fall turned to winter, Hana's morning sickness vanished as if it had never existed.

He worked harder than ever. Some days, he left before the sun rose and returned late at night. Small though it might be, he wanted to save up a nest egg for the future.

Hana prepared for the birth alone in their apartment, her belly heavy. She took breaks from sewing cloth diapers to make a little stuffed wolf. As she sewed, she prayed that all would be well and she would be able to meet the child she bore.

Again, she mulled over the possibility that the baby might be a wolf child, since the father was a wolfman. She didn't think she would mind; she simply wanted to make her child's acquaintance as soon as she could. As she watched the sun setting outside the window, she felt tears rolling down her cheeks for no reason at all.

Hana gave birth to their child in the little apartment.

It was a snowy day. They called neither the doctor nor the midwife, instead delivering the baby by themselves. He gripped her hand all through her labor. Although Hana had imagined giving birth to a wolf child, the newborn looked human enough for now.

The teakettle on top of the stove puffed out a jet of steam.

The two of them gazed at the infant for what seemed like forever. It was a girl. When they pressed their fingers to her tiny hand, she squeezed back helplessly.

“I’m so glad she was born without trouble,” Hana said.

“I’m sure not everything will be so simple,” he replied.

“I wonder if she’ll be a kind little girl,” she said.

“Maybe she’ll be smart,” he said.

“What will she be like when she grows up?” she wondered.

“I want her to be whatever she wants—a nurse, a teacher, a baker, anything,” he said.

“I hope she grows up strong. I hope she never has to suffer,” she said.

They promised each other they would watch over her until she was grown.

The snowstorm had lifted, and outside the flakes drifted lightly down.

They named the baby Yuki, after the snowy day when she was born.

She was a healthy, energetic baby. She cried often, but as soon as he picked her up, she would stop. In the evenings, the two of them would bundle her up and walk along the riverbank. They passed lots of other parents pushing strollers, and Hana thought to herself that they were just like any other family.

And for that sense of normalcy, she gave thanks to no one in particular.

Early the following spring, their second child was born.

A boy—they named him Ame, after the rainy day when he was born.

The very next day, Ame’s father vanished.

Hana looked outside, holding the newborn baby close. Beyond the milk bottle full of shepherd’s purse flowers, raindrops rolled down the glass.

She had waited and waited, but he had not come home.

Yuki, now thirteen months old, stood behind her worried mother and clung to her back. Ame was wrapped in several layers of towel, and Hana strapped him

to her chest with a strip of cloth. Then, she put on her duffle coat and secured Yuki to her back over it. Hana's legs were still unsteady from having given birth so recently, but she headed out all the same.

As soon as she opened the apartment door, it bumped into something. Two grocery bags were blocking the way.

“?”

When she crouched down to put some stray canned goods back into the bags, she noticed something else. His thin wallet was among the powdered milk and rice and vegetables.

Had something happened?

Her anxiety swelled.

Staving off the cold spring drizzle with her umbrella, she headed into the city streets.

At the intersection with the main boulevard, where cars whizzed back and forth, she looked in all four directions. She checked beneath each of the umbrellas on the steep streets winding through the residential neighborhood.

He was nowhere to be found.

She kept walking, searching for him, until she came to the little bridge over the stream near her apartment where they had once stood. A city garbage truck was stopped on the promenade along the stream, its lights blinking. Several groups of people carrying umbrellas had stopped to peer down at the shallow stream, and health department employees in raincoats were climbing down the ten-meter-high concrete embankment.

Hana joined the crowd peering down from the bridge, as if her gaze were magnetically drawn.

At the feet of the workers in the streambed, half submerged in the water, lay the dead body of an animal.

The raindrops pelted the thin, bony corpse of a wolf.

A wolf.

Him.

“!”

Familiar dark brown feathers clung to his fur, which was as wet and bedraggled as an old rag. Blood oozed from his head and dissipated into the water.

She never learned what he had been thinking that day. Perhaps an instinct to hunt food for the new baby had awakened. Or perhaps he had wanted to bring Hana something nourishing to eat. His vacant eyes told her nothing.

Two of the workers lifted the wolf's legs with rubber-gloved hands while a third stuffed the body carelessly into a body bag laid out below. Pheasant feathers fluttered down and drifted off on the surface of the stream.

The bag was then hoisted up to the promenade.

Hana threw down her umbrella and ran toward it. She flung her arms around it, but one of the workers peeled her away, scolding her for touching it. She begged him to let her have it, but he curtly refused.

While she argued with him, another of the workers took the body bag and tossed it roughly into the back of the garbage truck. As the packer panel crushed it down, it disappeared deep into the compactor.

“!!!”

Suddenly, the strength drained from Hana's body, and she burst into sobs.

The garbage truck faded into the distance until she could see only the yellow blinking of its lights.

Hana stumbled after it, but, of course, she couldn't keep up. What remaining strength she had slipped away, and she sank to the ground, covered her face, and wept. A man and woman who had been watching the scene unfold held their umbrella over her and asked her why she was crying.

She couldn't even give him a funeral.

A gentle breeze blew across the meadow.

Hana, wearing the same dress she'd worn that day long ago, realized

someone was behind her and turned around.

It was him.

He was smiling and carrying a notebook like he had been that day, dressed in his usual T-shirt with the stretched-out collar.

She smiled and tried to walk toward him. But as she did, he looked at her sorrowfully and turned away. The same instant, her legs froze.

Worried, she called his name.

The wind picked up, drowning out her voice.

His face became half-wolf.

His figure, wearing that familiar fur-collared coat, moved farther and farther away.

Frozen, Hana called his name with increasing desperation.

He took on his wolf form and disappeared beyond the far side of the meadow, as if to return along the same path he had come by so long ago.

Hana shouted his name, but her voice was lost in the wind, reaching no one.

There, in the wide-open meadow, she was alone.

Hana opened her eyes.

She had fallen asleep with her head on the low table, still wearing her duffle coat. The room was dark. It was evening, and outside, a light rain was still falling. The red glow from the electric stove shone on Yuki and Ame, curled up asleep on their futon.

She saw his wallet lying on the table and picked it up. It held only a few bills along with some coupons and receipts, but she noticed his driver's license in one of the pockets and pulled it out.

His picture was on it.

Realizing this was the only photograph she had of him, she leaned the license up against the milk bottle with the shepherd's purse in it.

He was smiling.



Of course, he must not have suspected he would die that day. He'd wanted to watch over their children as they grew, she knew, and now that wish would go unfulfilled.

That was an incontrovertible fact.

Her chest tightened at the thought, but he kept on smiling gently at her from the photograph. She felt he was asking her to take care of the children for the both of them.

She was ready to cry again, but she bit her lip and held back her tears. Instead, she smiled brightly at him. *Leave it to me. I'll raise them right*, she promised.

A new life without him began.

Yuki, now a year and a half old, looked up at Hana. "Mama." She wanted something to eat.

"I'm making it for you now. Wait a minute," Hana said. But Yuki didn't understand.

"Mama!" she called again, waving her arms.

"It's almost ready," Hana said.

"Mama!!"

She screamed the word again and again, too hungry to wait. As she grew more upset, two wolf ears popped out from her hair.

"Mama!!!"

"Yuki!" Hana scolded her loudly.

Tears filled the small girl's eyes, and she turned away, sulking. On all fours now, she kicked a cushion and ran to the far corner of the room. By the time she had turned back around, she had changed into a wolf. She knocked over the waste basket with a well-aimed kick, spilling its contents across the floor, then hid where she knew Hana couldn't see her. Her mother called and called her name, but Yuki didn't answer.

Finally, when Hana sighed and said, "Well, what can I do? Go ahead and have

a cookie,” and pulled down some snacks from a cupboard, Yuki came running, fast as lightning. Back in human form once again, she grabbed the biscuit and grinned happily as she bit into it.

Whenever Yuki got angry or cranky, she would transform into a wolf, her hair standing on end and her ears pricked up. It happened constantly. Sometimes, she even ended up half-wolf, half-human. To Hana, she seemed unable to decide which form she preferred.

In the kitchen, Hana was mashing fava beans and potatoes in Yuki’s bowl. Sometimes she added some of the baby food she kept in a container in the fridge.

She dipped her finger in to taste the mixture. The beans had sweetened the potatoes just right.

Since Yuki couldn’t use a spoon very well yet, she tried grabbing the mashed potatoes with both hands. Most of them fell between her fingers on the way to her mouth, and, eventually, she gave up and just pinched up little bites between her fingers. When she leaned over the table to pick up the pieces she’d dropped, she tipped the whole bowl over, but she didn’t mind. She gobbled down her food anyway. The table was always surrounded by a mess of yogurt and spilled tea and other bits of food.

Despite her small size, Yuki was bursting with energy. The little glutton would cry for food from morning till night. Ame was the complete opposite—a weak, light eater. Still only three months old, he latched on to Hana’s breast but quickly choked on her milk and let go. He drank then rested, drank then rested, over and over, so that feeding him took a very long time. But every time Hana wiped his mouth, he looked up at her with shock. It was so cute she could hardly stand it.

Perhaps Yuki recognized this, because it was only when Hana was feeding Ame that she would climb up her mother’s shoulders by her hair and clothes and ask for a kiss with her drooly mouth.

It took all the time Hana had just to care for the two of them.

She spent her days in a room draped with drying cloth diapers. Of course, it was impossible for her to work. The small nest egg he had saved up paid for all

their expenses.

One of the things she learned as she raised her children was that even if they never left the apartment, she could not take her eyes off them for a moment. Yuki was always doing the unexpected.

One day, while Hana was turned away cooking, Yuki started pulling on the tablecloth. She had wanted the jar of jam on top of the dining table. But instead of jam, a large jar of rice teetered at the very edge of the table, and by the time Hana noticed, it was about to fall on Yuki's head. She let out a loud yelp and caught the jar just in time, escaping disaster by a hairbreadth, but she was deeply frightened. After that, she put the tablecloth away.

Another time, while Hana was ironing laundry, Yuki pulled out the bottom drawer of the cabinet behind her and started climbing. She scrambled into the first drawer and pulled out the second, then climbed into the second and pulled out the third, and so on...until all the drawers had been extracted and the entire cabinet began tilting forward from their weight. By the time Hana finally realized something was going on and turned, it was already at an angle with Yuki underneath.

"Ah!" Hana cried out in alarm. Ame was lying beside her. She rushed to catch the cabinet with her body and, in a split-second decision, laid the iron facedown. She managed to right the cabinet and avert disaster, but she knew that if it had kept falling, it could have squashed little Yuki. And if she hadn't pressed down the iron, something could have knocked it over onto baby Ame and burned him. After that, she kept the drawers on the cabinet locked (her father's antique cabinet had locks on all the drawers) and never again ironed near the children.

Hana meticulously got rid of every object that could possibly harm them, but no matter how careful she was, she never knew what Yuki or Ame would do next, so she could never relax her guard.

Yuki especially would run amok in the tiny thirty-square-meter room. In her wolf form, she never tired of tearing stuffed animals to shreds with her teeth, pulling the stuffing out of cushions, chewing on dining-table legs, leaving teeth marks on doors, or pulling Hana's precious books off the bookshelf and filling

the room with shredded paper. Thanks to Yuki, no matter how much Hana tidied up, within five minutes, it was a horrible mess again. Hana could only laugh as she watched her daughter yawn unrepentantly.

Even after she gave the children their bath and finally put them to bed, Hana's day wasn't over. Since she couldn't ask anyone around her for advice, she had no choice but to search for answers in books. She sat up under the desk light until late at night alternating between books about child-rearing and books about wolf ecology, comparing one against the other in her quest to find the best approach to raising wolf children. It went without saying that it would be impossible to find any record of a mother raising children with both wolf and human forms.

When she thought about how any mistake could endanger their lives, how she had to stay strong, how she was all they had, Hana knew she had no time for rest. But each night, not long after she began her studies, the exhaustion of the day would bear down on her, and she would start to nod off, pen in hand. When she jerked awake, she would try again to concentrate on the book before her, but soon, her eyelids would droop, and she would collapse forward onto the desk as if in a faint.

All the same, the instant Ame cried, she would jump up to hold him and rub his back, murmuring reassurances.

Although Ame was a quiet, easy baby during the day, he wailed all night long. If Hana held him and rocked him for a while, he would fall back to sleep, but as soon as she put him down, he would start to cry again, over and over. He had to be nursed every two hours, day and night, and whenever he nursed properly, he was in a good mood. When he refused to take the nipple, Hana soaked cotton wool with breast milk and had him suck from that. When he refused both, she didn't know what to do, so she'd rub his back all night long.

This very quickly wore her down. She nodded off standing up while doing laundry, and once, her head almost ended up inside the washbasin. But she was able to sleep even for the shortest stretches, such as when Ame was nursing. And when Yuki called for her, she was able to open her eyes right away and answer with a smile.

The biggest challenge was when the children got sick.

From birth, Yuki had been an extremely resilient child. Still, she often had minor fevers and the like, and these mild illnesses would plunge Hana into a dilemma. Should she take her to the doctor? If she did, should she go to the pediatrician or the veterinarian? Would the doctor know what to do for a wolf child? Would the vet treat a children's illness with medicine for animals? Or the reverse? And her biggest worry was that someone would notice that the children were unusual.

Once, when Hana was anxious and upset, *he* had persuaded her not to do much at all.

"She'll be fine. Even if she's a little under the weather, just give her something warm and some gentle caresses. She'll get better."

His advice had calmed her then, and now, after he was gone, she often recalled what he had said and tried not to worry too much.

But Ame was not like Yuki. He was fragile and weak, and his fevers often lingered. Sometimes, Hana felt she had no choice but to give him medicine of some kind, and so she would compare books about pediatric and veterinary medicine in order to find a cure that worked for both children and animals. Very carefully, she would give him the smallest possible dose. The health of the children rested entirely upon her judgments.

Every day she wished there was someone—just one person—she could go to for advice. In the end, though, she had to make her decisions on her own. In the case of illnesses, she could read up and prepare to a certain extent in advance, but that was not the case with accidents.

One fall night, she had a real shock. She heard a strange *keff keff*, as if someone was coughing. At first, she didn't know what it was. She lost a good deal of time just figuring out that it was Yuki. When she peered under the dining table, she found her collapsed in half-wolf, half-human form. Next to her was the packet of desiccant that had been in the cookie box, with clear tooth marks where Yuki had bitten into it. Gluey droplets of vomit dotted the floor.

"Yuki!!!"

Something deep inside her skull went numb. She scooped Yuki up in her arms and ran out into the dark city.

She was in a panic, desperate for someone to save her. She ran with no thought for how she must have looked to the strangers she passed. When she got her wits back, she was standing at an intersection with a pediatric clinic on one side and a vet on the other.

She had stood in that very spot many times before, but as always, she found herself unable to knock on either door. She wavered for a moment, then went into a phone booth and called both offices.

“My daughter accidentally swallowed some desiccant... She’s two. Yes. She threw up. There wasn’t any blood.

“It said *silica gel* on the package. Isn’t it dangerous...? What? Her appetite?”

She looked at Yuki at the prompting of the doctor across the street.

With a burp, Yuki announced, “Hungry!”

Then she burped again, very loudly. On Hana’s back, Ame peered over her shoulder at the noise.

The doctor told her that silica gel wasn’t itself poisonous and that if she didn’t notice any unusual changes in Yuki, she should just give her lots of water and keep an eye on her. If she was hungry, she was probably fine. Hana felt momentarily relieved, but as she thought of all the years ahead, she sighed. She wished she had asked their father more about his own childhood.

“Walk.”

Yuki often asked to go on walks.

“Walk!”

And when the weather was nice, she begged especially hard.

“Walk!!”

Her fur would stand on end, and her ears would pop out in excitement. Hana worried about people seeing her like this, so she usually limited their outings to nighttime. But...

“Walk!!!”

...Yuki wouldn't listen.

“Okay, okay! You win!” Yuki had finally worn Hana down—on one condition. “You can't become a wolf when we're out.”

Yuki pulled in her ears right away. Hana slipped on the hooded coats that hid the children from head to toe, and the three of them left for their outing.

The trees at the park were in full autumn glory, and their fallen leaves crunched pleasantly underfoot. The cool air was bracing and fresh. They saw lots of other families out in the park, the parents clustered together, chatting about their kids and how they were having this or that problem. But Hana could not enter their circle. She could only watch from afar.

She crouched to smell a Japanese anemone blooming in one corner of the park, then sat down to rest on a bench near a deserted pond. Yuki collected leaves, holding them up so that the sun illuminated their veins and comparing them to her own hands. The minutes flowed by in a quiet peace.

As they continued on, they passed a kindly middle-aged man walking a beagle.

“Hello there! What cute kids,” he said as he passed by.

His compliment made Hana happy, and she bowed politely to him.

“The nice man said you're cute!” she said, looking at Yuki.

The beagle, wearing a colorful knit sweater, took an interest in the girl. He padded closer to her and then started howling.

“Bad dog!” the man scolded, smiling apologetically as he yanked the leash.

Yuki shook free of Hana's hand and walked up to the beagle, kicking the leaves as she went.

“Grrrrr!!!!” she growled menacingly, putting her face up to its nose.

Beneath her hood was a wolf's face.

The frightened beagle tucked in its tail and hid behind its master's feet. Surprised, the man looked back and forth from Hana to Yuki.

“...I’m so sorry...!” Hana said, flustered. She swept Yuki up and rushed away.

*What if he saw?*

She hurried home, avoiding other people and holding both children close to hide them.

She was sure that couple pushing a stroller glanced back suspiciously.

She was sure the young mother and her children waiting for a bus in front of the train station were looking over their shoulders at her.

She was sure the two housewives riding bikes with children on the backs started whispering to each other when they saw her.

She was sure the parents holding their children on the balcony of an old apartment were peering down.

She was sure the mother and child at the far end of an alley were staring.

Like a fugitive, she ran through the dark back streets.

The problems came one after the next.

Ame’s colic grew worse and worse, until some nights he cried straight until morning.

One night, the man in the neighboring apartment pounded violently on Hana’s door.

“What time do you think it is? Shut those kids up!”

Surprised by the loud voice, Ame stopped crying. The second Hana opened the door, the man started screaming at her, alcohol on his breath. He was wearing a tracksuit, as if he couldn’t even stand the noise long enough to change.

“Every single night I have to hear this racket! What’s wrong with you?!”

“I’m so sorry...,” Hana apologized profusely.

“You’re their mother; teach them how to behave!” he snarled, then slammed the door.

Like a fire sparking back to life, Ame started to cry again.



All Hana could do was shake Yuki awake and walk to the shrine near their building to calm Ame down.

“Shh, shhh. It’s okay. Shh, shh.”

While Hana waited in the dark precincts for Ame to stop crying, Yuki passed the time by tracing the veins in a leaf.

Then Hana heard the voices of drunken office workers from the far side of the shrine. Startled and scared, she picked up Yuki and hurried out to search for another place.

But where else could she go in the middle of a big city?

On another night, the children started howling in response to an ambulance siren passing nearby. Hana put her finger over her mouth, pleading for them to be quiet, but no matter how much she begged, they wouldn’t stop.

The next day, the landlord knocked on their door.

“As you know, the lease for these apartments prohibits pets.”

She crossed her skinny arms.

“The other tenants said they heard a dog barking. They said you were breaking the lease.”

“But I don’t have a dog.”

“Don’t lie to me! Someone told me they saw you walking around holding two strays!”

“—”

“The point is, if you’re going to break the rules, you’ll have to find somewhere else to do it. Do you understand?”

She was telling Hana to get out—to move. But where could she go? Hana had no idea.

Another day, an unfamiliar man and woman dressed in suits knocked on the door.

“You’re from Child Protective Services?”

“Yes. We’re very concerned about your children.”

“What do you mean?”

The woman leaned in through the cracked open door, folder in one hand.

“We did some investigating, and we discovered they haven’t had any of their regular checkups or vaccinations.”

“They’re fine. They’re healthy.” Hana tried to end the conversation and shut the door, but the woman wouldn’t let her.

“In that case, can we just take a quick look?”

“No, I’m sorry...”

“It won’t take long at all,” the man said. Without dropping his conciliatory smile, he tried to push his head in to look around the room. “We just want to make sure you’re telling the truth.”

“I’m v-v-very sorry.”

Hana pulled the doorknob with all her strength. She could hear the woman’s shrill cry on the other side.

“Keep this up, and we’ll have to charge you with abuse and neglect!”

After that, Hana was afraid to open the door.

She hated opening the letters that came through the mail slot, too, and she ignored the doorbell. Still, the piercing, aggressive tone rang and rang and rang.

Hana stared absently at the children’s sleeping faces, waiting it out. She had tried to do her best, but in a densely populated area like this, wolf children stood out too much for her to raise them properly. She sensed that if she stayed in the city, she would very soon hit a wall.

The three of them went out early one morning to the empty park.

It had been a long time since their last excursion. The cold winter air stung their skin. Yuki’s and Ame’s breaths came out in white puffs as they zigzagged across the wide-open lawn, frost crackling under their feet. They changed from wolf to human to wolf with dizzying speed, wearing their hooded onesies the whole time. The wolf children—wolf Yuki and wolf Ame—chased each other

happily, letting out all the pent-up frustrations after so long inside the little apartment. Their laughter echoed through the park as they ran wild and free.

Hana hunched on a bench, watching them listlessly. Her worries and exhaustion had reached a peak.

“...Hey,” she called weakly to Yuki and Ame.

“What, Mommy?”

They ran panting to her. She took a deep breath and exhaled.

“What do you want to do?” she asked softly, almost to herself.

“??”

“How do you want to live?”

“????”

“...As children or as wolves?”

“??????”

In their half-wolf, half-human forms, Yuki and Ame tilted their heads quizzically.

Of course, they didn’t have an answer for her. As she looked at their faces, though, energy slowly began flowing back into her body. The exhaustion and fatigue steadily faded as a kind of strength she had never experienced before bubbled up inside her. She smiled gently at the children.

“I think we’re going to move. That way, you can choose to be what you want.”

She looked up at the distant sky. A strong morning sun was rising between the trees, bathing Hana in its blinding light. A new day had dawned.

## 2



It was spring.

As they turned off the immaculately paved Super Agricultural Highway onto a side road through a dark cedar forest, a magnificent cascade of terraced rice paddies came suddenly into view. Mountain snowmelt rushed noisily down the irrigation canals.

From the passenger seat of a white municipal car, Hana gazed absently at this countryside far from Tokyo.

A young city employee named Mr. Kuroda sped down the narrow roads, skillfully navigating the curves. He had been chattering nonstop for the entire drive.

“We started advertising the empty houses at the town hall, and ever since, we’ve had a decent stream of people who want to live in the country...but they never last. No surprises there. I mean, as you can see, there’s not much out here. It’s a half-hour drive to the elementary school or the hospital, and once the kids get to junior high, they’ve got a two-and-a-half-hour commute by bus and train, and that’s just one way. Five hours round-trip. The nature is nice out here, sure, but if you want to raise a family— Oof!”

The paved road suddenly ended, and the car bounced into the air.

“—I think you’d have a better time in the city.”

In the back seat, Yuki and Ame were flopped over asleep, exhausted from the long journey. Their eyes didn’t even open as the car jounced along the potholed forest road.

Hana could see snowy mountains in the distance. She pulled out the photograph she’d stuck in her notebook and compared the view. They were the same mountains he had once talked about—the home where he had grown up.

Mr. Kuroda pulled over to the side of the road, traded his leather shoes for a

pair of rubber boots, and stomped up the hill, pushing his glasses up on his nose as he went. Hana followed with the sleeping children in her arms.

The house was buried among trees lush with new spring leaves.

“...It’s huge...!”

Mr. Kuroda had said it was a run-down old farmhouse built a hundred years ago, but it was far grander than Hana had imagined. The sloping tiled roof supported by thick posts cast a heavy shadow under the morning sun, and the sprawling house recalled the bygone days when the forestry industry had thrived in this region. It was big enough for three generations to live in, let alone Hana’s three-person family.

As Hana looked more closely, however, she saw that the cracks in the dirty glass doors were repaired roughly with packing tape. The earth walls were crumbling in places, revealing their bamboo framework. (Mr. Kuroda explained that black woodpeckers were responsible for the holes.) It was clear that no one had lived here for quite a few years. Across from the main house was a barn with missing doors, and on a hillside leading to a mountain path, a shed tilted so far over it looked ready to collapse, perhaps from the weight of deep snow.

“The rent is just about free, but you’ll break the bank fixing this place up... It’s more of a ruin than an empty house... Oh, don’t worry about taking your shoes off.”

Hana took her shoes off anyway. The floor creaked as she stepped up from the earthen-floored vestibule to the raised wooden entryway.

The main room must have measured twenty tatami mats in size, about thirty square meters. Overhead, enormous wooden beams crisscrossed the exposed ceiling. The tatamis were discolored where rain had leaked onto them, and they smelled of mold. Screens and sliding doors with ripped paper coverings leaned at random against walls, and some of the old furniture remained as well. The tin woodstove in the room with a traditional sunken hearth was apparently the only source of heat. In the kitchen, dust lay thick on abandoned washtubs and cooking pots, and stream water gurgled from a plastic hose sticking out of the tiled wall.

“On the upside, the electricity still works, the stream hasn’t run dry, and the owner says you can use whatever you want from the barn.”

Mr. Kuroda slid open all thirteen of the glass doors on the porch running the length of the house to let fresh air in. Hana looked out at the weed-filled front garden. Beyond the grove of trees surrounding the house, she noticed an open area.

“Is that a field?” she asked.

She definitely saw something that looked like an overgrown rice paddy. Mr. Kuroda stepped down from the porch into the garden.

“Oh, this land is no good for growing your own food. Wild animals will come down from the mountains and dig up your garden. There’s boars and monkeys and bears, and that’s just the beginning. You take the trouble to grow vegetables, and they eat ’em all. The reason there are so many empty houses out here is that the humans were chased off.”

“So there aren’t any neighbors?”

“Nope, not unless you go way down the hill.”

“I see.”

Mr. Kuroda sighed and looked around at the fields and forest. “Should we look at another place? There’s one in town that’s a little better...”

“I’ve made up my mind.”

“What?”

“I’ll take this one.”

Hana smiled at him. He blinked, dumbfounded.

“...Why?”

When the children woke up, Mr. Kuroda was already gone.

“Wow! Where are we?” Yuki asked.

“At our new house.”

“Yippee!” she shouted, leaping off the porch barefoot into the tall weeds of

the garden. She spotted the leaning shed right away.

“It’s tilted!” she yelled happily, tilting to imitate it.

She dashed around the garden well, then abruptly squatted down, greeted a procession of ants with a friendly “Hello,” and stepped carefully over them. In the back of the garden, she discovered the ruins of a demolished storehouse. With an excited shout, she charged forward, scaled the roof, and screeched joyfully from the top over and over again.

Ame peeked out timidly from the shadows of a post in the main house, watching his sister. Just as he did, a gecko scurried across the post. Ame screamed, jumped off the porch in a panic, and flung his arms around his sister in an entreaty for her to save him as she skipped back to the house.

Hana crouched down on the porch.

“So do you like it?” she asked the two of them.

“Yeah!” Yuki shouted, planting her feet sturdily on the ground.

Ame grabbed the hem of his sister’s shirt. “I wanna go home,” he said weakly.

Yuki was five years old, and Ame was four. Yuki was a bright, active girl with long black hair and well-formed features. She helped her mother often with housework, ate well, and laughed all the time. She quickly memorized her storybooks and liked to recite them back.

Ame was quiet and introspective. He was also a stubborn, withdrawn mama’s boy who worried about everything and would burst into tears over anything. When he whimpered anxiously on and on, Hana would rub his back and murmur, “It’s okay, it’s okay,” like a magic spell.

After Hana had decided to give up the apartment in Tokyo where she’d lived with their father, it had taken several years to choose the right place to live. Earlier, Mr. Kuroda had warned her that things weren’t so easy out here and she wouldn’t last long if she’d only come because she romanticized the idea of country life. But his warnings didn’t bother her. In fact, they did the opposite; she thought it was an ideal place to raise wolf children away from prying eyes. She believed she should give them the opportunity to choose their path freely, and that had led her here.

The barn was crowded with possessions left by the previous inhabitants of the house. Of course, there were hoes, scythes, and other farming tools, but she also found a foot-peddled sewing machine and a bicycle with a child seat attached. Hana lugged out a box of carpentry tools she had found on a shelf and carefully sorted through its contents. Her first order of business was to at least make the house livable.

A white municipal car was parked by the terraced paddies.

“Seems she wanted a place without neighbors. She’s an odd one, I’ll say.”

Mr. Kuroda was informing the village elders of the strange newcomer.

“She married?” a man in tinted bifocals named Mr. Hosokawa asked, like a writer.

“Dunno.”

“Got any money?” a man with a hand towel draped over his neck named Mr. Yamaoka asked with arms folded, like a scientist.

“Dunno.”

Mr. Hosokawa and Mr. Yamaoka looked at each other with disbelief.

“So how does she plan to live?”

“Dunno...”

Mr. Kuroda scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably and looked around. He caught sight of a third elderly man absorbed in his work banking soil against the sloped edge of a field with a hoe.

“Excuse me, Grandpa Nirasaki...I’d be grateful if you could go easy on this one.”

The tall, thin man called Nirasaki looked sullenly at Mr. Kuroda and said nothing, like a philosopher.

The next day, Hana awoke at dawn, slid open the door, and looked around the front garden.

The mountain air was cool and refreshing. The trees glittered in the sunlight as if in celebration of the new day. The stream bubbled pleasantly in the



morning quiet. Hana breathed in deeply.

“Okay!” she said, firing herself up for the day, and got straight to work cleaning the house.

First, she pried all the tatamis from the floor and propped them against the porch, along with the screens and sliding doors. She counted nine rooms and a mind-boggling sixty-some mats in total, if she included the main room, family altar, storeroom, hearth room, and all the others.

She used an old carpet beater to beat the dust from the ceilings and posts all through the house, then briskly swept the exposed floorboards with a worn-down straw broom. Clouds of accumulated dust and dirt swirled into the air. The towel Hana had wrapped around her face to keep out dust proved absolutely useless, and she sneezed over and over, hard enough to send up bits of rotten floorboard.

She looked up and noticed that the ceiling right above her was stained from a leak. She climbed a stepladder and pushed up on the rotted board, only to bring a family of huge poisonous centipedes falling toward her. Undiscouraged, she thrust her head into the attic and discovered several sunbeams piercing the darkness. She would have to start by repairing the roof.

Leaning a ladder against the outside of the house, she climbed nervously up on top. She pulled off the tiles and nailed scrap wood onto the damaged boards underneath, nudged displaced tiles back into place, and exchanged broken ones for extras from the barn. When she peered into the attic again, the holes were gone.

But when it rained the next day, the roof that she had supposedly repaired leaked all over the place. Soon, she was in a fix, with every pot and dish in the house scattered across the floor catching drips. She looked reproachfully up at the ceiling.

The next day was sunny, so once again she climbed up to the roof and fixed the boards, this time with greater care. But the day after that, it rained again, and again the roof leaked. There were fewer leaks than before, but apparently, she had missed some spots in her repairs. She sighed, stared up at the ceiling, and resolved to stubbornly wage her war anew. For a while, it seemed that was

all she did.

After she had gained a degree of success with the roof, she wiped down the whole inside of the house with rags. The place was so huge she felt the task would never end, but she continued undiscouraged. Thanks to her efforts, the floor was so clean it was practically unrecognizable, but in exchange, her own hands and face grew dirtier and dirtier.

Ame watched, enthralled, as Hana thoroughly scrubbed the floor of the porch. He obeyed when she asked him to move so she could wipe the spot where he was sitting and didn't cause a bit of trouble.

Not so with Yuki.

"Look, Mommy, look!" she cried, flying in from the garden and dumping a pile of frogs and worms and roly-poly bugs and whatever else she'd caught on the newly cleaned floor. When Hana looked up, dumbfounded, Yuki gave her a mud-covered grin, waiting for her mother's praise.

While Hana was battling the housework, the children explored every corner of the garden. Yuki buried herself in meadow flowers to solemnly observe the honeybees and scrambled up the persimmon tree to reach out toward little birds whose names she didn't know. Ame watched timidly from a distance, running away as soon as anything happened.

Yuki even tried to pet the stray tabby who hissed at them, obviously threatening.

"Here, kitty, kitty!"

The cat defended its territory with a series of feints, revealing a set of sharp claws entirely at odds with its plump body. A few of its swipes almost caught Yuki, but she was undaunted and changed into wolf form, barking sharply. The tabby responded to this impossible transformation with a shrill yowl before turning tail in a panic. Wolf Yuki laughed and chased the tabby round and round an abandoned field. After that, every time the cat saw Yuki, it meowed, tucked its tail between its legs, and ran away.

Meanwhile, Hana had reached the final stage of cleaning. She patiently polished every last corner of the house, and the more she polished, the more

the house's original dignity shone through. Once the grime was gone from the old cabinetry, beautiful etchings appeared on the glass. Hana paused in her work, spellbound by the delicate patterns sparkling in the sunlight. And when she scrubbed the old sink with a brush, she discovered colorful tiles beneath the dirt. She gasped at the lovely mosaic pattern, tracing the tiles as if to convince herself their colors were real. She could sense all the love the former owners had held for this abandoned house. With great care, she repaired the cracks in the tea cupboard and the frosted glass with cellophane tape and patched the newly changed sliding doors with pieces of paper shaped like cherry blossoms.

She found a post marked with lines measuring children's heights. She promptly stood Yuki and Ame against it and carved their heights in, too, to record them at ages five and four.

She put away the modest collection of household goods she'd brought from Tokyo, then plugged in the little refrigerator and set the bookshelf and low table in the main room. Here in this mountain house they looked smaller than ever, out of proportion. She set a jar of spring wildflowers on the bookcase and propped his driver's license against it, choosing that spot so he could look out across the room and the porch to keep an eye on the children.

At last, the house was livable. Her final act was to wrap bandages around her own battered fingers.

She wrestled the old bicycle from the barn and headed into the village to do some shopping. As she cruised down the hill at a comfortable speed, Yuki was wild with excitement; Ame cowered in fear. Rice planting was finished, and in the terraced paddies, newly planted seedlings swayed in the breeze. Hana realized the seasons had changed while she was busy cleaning.

She found the goods she needed at a little general store and paid for them, but the thousand-yen bills were vanishing from her wallet with disturbing speed. A good selection of vegetables had been set out for sale under the shop's eaves, and as she casually looked them over, she heard a female customer whispering with the shopkeeper. Hana bundled Yuki and Ame onto the bicycle to hide them from sight and hurriedly pedaled away.

They headed back the way they'd come, the bicycle handles weighed down

with shopping bags. The road home was all uphill, and Hana broke into a sweat as she rode. The sun had set by the time they arrived. On the dark mountain, everything was black except the light from their house.

Hana put the food away in the fridge, made a quick dinner, and set one of the grilled chicken-and-pepper skewers in front of his driver's license. After dinner, all three of them took a bath together. The freshly scrubbed bathroom was wonderful to sit in. Hana sighed deeply as she soaked in the tub. She was relieved to have the house in order, but at the same time, she couldn't help thinking about all the money she'd spent to do it. The small savings he had left behind wouldn't last much longer.

"I need to budget more..."

"Budge it more?" Yuki asked, covered in soap bubbles.

Hana giggled. "Hee-hee-hee. We'd better at least grow our own vegetables," she said.

"I wanna help!" Yuki said, her eyes sparkling as she flung the soapy foam everywhere.

Every two weeks, a bus repurposed as a library on wheels arrived in the village center.

"Wait here for a minute," Hana said, pulling up the children's hoods and leaving them outside.

Inside, she pulled book after book on vegetable gardening off the shelves and flipped through them. She didn't know a thing about farming, but she was eager to learn so she could save money. Of course, she hadn't forgotten what Mr. Kuroda had said about the land being poorly suited to a self-sufficient lifestyle. Still, she hoped to grow at least a few things, and she wouldn't get anywhere if she didn't try. After carefully selecting some books for beginners, she stacked them on the counter.

"I'd like to check these out," she said.

"These, too, please," Yuki added. She was holding up a pile of picture books that she must have picked out when Hana wasn't looking. Her hood slipped back as she stood on tiptoes.

Her wolf ears were exposed.

“Yuki!!” Hana yelped, pulling the hood over them in a panic.

“Umm,” the librarian said, craning her face around the stack of books, “you can only check out eight at a time.”

Somehow, she hadn’t noticed. Hana sighed in relief.

She would have to remind the children never to show themselves in wolf form, even by accident.

When they got home, she drew a picture of Yuki and Ame in a sketchbook with crayons.

“Are you listening? You’re wolf children, but it’s a secret just for us, okay?”

“Okay!”

“Okay.”

Hana added wolf ears and tails to the two figures. “If you suddenly turn into wolves, people will be very surprised.”

She turned to a new page and drew some people looking startled.

“Surprise!”

“Surprise.”

“So you must never become wolves in front of other people. Promise?”

“Promise!”

“Promise.”

She turned the page again and drew a bear, a deer, and a boar. “One more thing. Humans like to think they’re better than the animals in the woods, but you must never disrespect the animals you meet.”

“Why not?”

On the next page, she drew their father with wolf ears. “Your father was a wolf, too. He would be very sad if you did that.”

“Got it!”

“Got it.”

The children stared at the drawing of their father.

Lastly, Hana told them they had the right to freely choose whether they would live as humans or wolves, just as their father had.

Ame was studying a picture book by himself on the porch.

It was one of the books Yuki had checked out from the library on wheels. On the cover was a picture of a strong-looking wolf, its mouth open wide and its fangs bared. Inevitably, Ame empathized with the wolf as he turned the pages. He wondered what role it would play.

But as he read on, his hopes were dashed. The wolf in the story was ferocious and cunning, a despicable character who thought nothing of harming the good villagers—even enjoyed it. On the last page was a picture of the villagers chasing the wolf away at gunpoint. His tail was tucked between his legs, and the lips on his big mouth curled back as he promised tearfully never to do it again.

Ame looked up, silently comparing himself to the wolf in the storybook.

While Ame was reading, Hana was standing in the overgrown field next to the house.

She looked again at the detailed notes she had taken from the library books on gardening. She had found the tools she needed in the barn and bought fertilizer and a few other things from the home center.

After pulling up the rampant weeds covering the entire field, she awkwardly broke up the soil with a hoe, picked up all the stones she could find, and tossed them over the sloped bank. The process took her several days.

Next, she mixed fertilizer into the soil and raised ridges for planting, checking her work against the pictures in the books. She sowed the vegetable seeds one by one and, with some help from Yuki and Ame, soaked them with watering cans. She scrutinized the field worriedly, reassuring herself that everything would be fine. The seeds and fertilizer hadn't been cheap.

A few days later, she was relieved to discover seedlings sprouting from the earth as the children romped around them excitedly. Since she was a novice,

she hadn't expected everything to go perfectly, but now she had hope that the garden would turn out better than she'd initially thought.

In the following weeks, she followed the instructions in the books for thinning the seedlings and adding more fertilizer. The plants were growing well. If they kept on like this, Hana figured she would be able to start harvesting food before summer.

One day after a rain, however, she went to check on the garden only to find that each and every plant had wilted.

"No, no, no!!"

"What happened?" Yuki asked, looking out at the field of limp leaves.

Confused, Hana returned to her books, insisting to no one in particular that she'd followed all the instructions to the letter. *Maybe I skimped on the fertilizer because of money*, she thought.

As the village elders weeded the terraced paddies, they heard someone calling to them.

"Um, excuse me!"

"Huh?"

Mr. Hosokawa and Mr. Yamaoka straightened their backs and turned toward the voice. Belatedly, Grandpa Nirasaki looked up, too. Hana was standing on the far side of the hydrangeas blooming on the paddy banks, pointing toward the woods.

"May I take some fallen leaves from the woods?" she shouted.

"What?" Mr. Hosokawa asked, surprised.

"Fallen leaves!"

"No one asks before they take those!" Mr. Yamaoka answered disdainfully.

"Thank you very much," Hana said, heading into the trees.

Mr. Hosokawa and Mr. Yamaoka shared a look.

"Wonder how long she'll last."

“Pretty soon she’ll be complaining about the lack of convenience stores and karaoke.”

“Ten to one.”

They smiled cynically and returned to their work.

“...”

Grandpa Nirasaki stared silently at the woods for a moment, then turned sullenly away.

Hana pulled up all the dead plants, emptied the plastic bags stuffed with fallen leaves onto the soil, and mixed in the leaves with her hoe.

Next, she worked her newly purchased tomato and eggplant starts out from their pots and carefully planted each one.

“Second time’s the charm,” she said.

Truthfully speaking, if she had to buy any more seedlings, she’d be cutting into their household budget. Plus, it was almost summer. If she failed again, she would have to give up on summer vegetables and wait for the fall season. As she pushed the dirt up around the base of each plant, her hands came together as if in prayer for their success. Just then...

“...Mommy.”

She looked up at the sound of a faint, sniffly voice beside her. “...Ame! What happened?!”

He was whimpering in half-wolf form, his red, swollen face covered in scratches.

Hana picked him up and rushed into the house.

Yuki was stuffing her mouth with snacks in the living room and explained the situation nonchalantly.

“It was the tabby. She’s been after him ’cause he’s a wimpy wolf.”

Hana wiped Ame’s tears and dabbed ointment on the sore at the tip of his nose. “It’s just a little scratch. Nothing to worry about,” she said.

“He can’t get by out there if he doesn’t fight back,” Yuki said.



“Yuki.” Hana looked at her reproachfully.

Ame leaned against his mother. “Say it’s okay,” he whined.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she repeated, gently rubbing his back as if she was casting some healing magic. As he buried his face in the safety of her lap, his behavior seemed to bother Yuki. She stood up.

“I can even beat a boar,” she said in a loud, taunting voice.

“You saw a boar?” Hana asked.

“Yup. I saw some monkeys and a serow, too. But I wasn’t scared at all. They just run away when you chase them. It’s funny.”

“Yuki.”

“And then I peed—”

“Remember what I said? About not bossing around the animals?”

“But...”

“Please.”

Yuki was clearly unsatisfied, confused as to why her mother wasn’t praising her. Still, she swallowed her feelings and sat down obediently.

“...Yes, Mommy.”

“Thank you, sweetie.”

Ame looked up at Hana. “Say it again,” he complained.

“...It’s okay, it’s okay.” She rubbed his back. “But Yuki’s not wrong...,” she muttered, more to herself than to him.

Maybe he wouldn’t be able to get by out there like this. She might be able to teach him how to live as a human, but how could she teach him to live as a wolf?

“How do wolf children become adults?”

She looked up to their father’s picture.

Hana took Yuki and Ame into the mountains near their house for a picnic.

The abandoned hiking path was in its full summer glory, overgrown with bamboo grass so thick it threatened to block their way. But Yuki charged ahead anyway, pushing it aside with a branch she had found.

“Slowpokes!”

“Wait for us, Yuki.” Hana was pausing for Ame, who didn’t want to climb the path. “Come on, Ame.”

“Carry me.”

“Hmm? Already?”

They had just started out, but Ame dug in his heels. “Carry me!”

“Hurry up!” Yuki called down from the path ahead.

Hana smiled at Ame, and he grudgingly trudged forward.

When they stopped for a break, she read to them from a children’s book about wolf ecology.

““Wolves begin to hunt about four months after they are born. They first practice by catching mice and other small animals, and when they get older, they form hunting teams with grown wolves.””

“Team!”

Yuki grabbed Ame’s hand and linked arms with him. He shook free gloomily and hugged his knees, glaring at the ground.

“I don’t wanna be on your team.”

“Hmph. Fine.” Yuki sniffed the wind and ran off, leaving Ame behind.

“Don’t go too far,” Hana called.

“Kay!”

Wolf Yuki disappeared into the forest, her dress wrapped around her neck and her water bottle clattering on the strap over her chest.

“I wanna go home,” Ame pouted.

Hana picked a leaf, hoping to placate him.

“Hey, I think we can eat this,” she said, paging through her field guide to

identify it.

“ ... ”

Ame poked discontentedly at the ground with a stick.

Brilliant summer sunlight filtered into the forest through the canopy overhead while wolf Yuki tried her hand at hunting.

Letting her keen curiosity lead her, she observed the sap on different trees, studied the shapes of footprints, compared the smell of this dropping to that one, and strained her eyes and ears to find the animals initially hidden from view. When she spotted something moving, she chased it wherever it went. She didn't even mind when a stag beetle pinched the tip of her nose. She crept up on quails, dug up several field mouse nests, ignored an angry rat snake's threats, and scampered tirelessly through the woods in pursuit of a hare's tail.

It was all the more exciting to encounter these animals in real life after seeing them in illustrated encyclopedias at home. When she caught one, she investigated by putting it in her mouth and smelling it and touching it with her front paws. She thought the six-legged insects and no-legged snakes were especially peculiar. She marveled in awe at the color of a bird's feathers when she stretched out its wing; she was spellbound by the beautiful movement of the muscles in a rabbit's hind legs. As soon as she succeeded in catching one animal, she challenged herself to catch an even more slippery one.

Yuki's hunt was not at all about filling her stomach, and it was also quite different from the “hunting instinct” of vicious predators. She simply found the animals spectacularly curious and interesting as she encountered them for the very first time. She was bursting with desire to one day learn everything about the entire forest.

Ame didn't take well to nature. He never approached anything unfamiliar, and it was all he could do to stumble after Hana.

They came across a stony field of reed grass where a single dead tree stood. Ame rested his hand against its trunk, overwhelmed with nervousness and exhaustion.

“Oh, Ame, look!” Hana called, turning back toward him.

“Bleh!”

He retched stomach acid onto the tree trunk. Overhead, a circling hawk seemed to eye the weak wolf cub as possible prey.

Hana squatted beside the boy crouched on the ground.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she said, massaging his stiff back.

He looked down, still huddled on the ground in apparent embarrassment at having thrown up.

Yuki scampered up to them, triumphantly holding up a waterfowl she’d caught.

“Look, Mommy, look! It’s a cormorant! There’s a stream over—”

“Shhh,” Hana said, holding her index finger to her lips and rubbing Ame’s back again. Tears were rolling down through the stains of bile on his cheeks. Behind the tears, his eyes shone stubbornly.

“Mommy.”

“Yes?”

“Why are wolves always the bad guys?”

“Bad guys? You mean in picture books?”

“Everyone hates them. People always kill them at the end. If that’s true, then...I hate wolves.”

“...I understand.”

“\_\_”

“But I like wolves. Even if everyone else hates them, I like them very much.”

“\_\_”

Ame looked up at Hana, relieved.

On the way home, Hana carried Ame on her back, and before long, he was snoring. Her chest tightened at the thought that such a little boy was already struggling with his identity.

After they got home, she held him on her lap and stroked his hair as he slept.

The summer sun dipped low in the sky.

She heard Yuki calling from the garden. “Mommy! Mommy!”

Hana went outside. “What? What’s wrong?”

Yuki stood next to a tomato plant, calling over her shoulder. “They died again.”

“What?!” Hana shouted in shock.

She squatted beside the plant. The leaves were wilted and yellowed in places, and their tips were curled upward. They seemed to be withering from the ground up.

“A plant disease... They’re all gone... I don’t believe it...”

All of the plants had the same disease, and it was definitely a disease. She would have to do some research to find out what it was, but even a novice could see the entire row was wiped out.

Hana felt faint. The tomatoes were just about to turn red, and now they wouldn’t be able to harvest a single one? She had tried so hard to take proper care of them. What had all that work been for?

“Mommy...”

She looked up with a start.

“What’re we gonna do?”

Yuki seemed to instinctively sense that something was wrong, and her question weighed heavily on Hana. She didn’t know how to answer, and she shook her head in an attempt to clear away the anxiety.

“...Mama’s not so good at this. I need to study more.”

She forced herself to smile and reached out to stroke Yuki’s cheek. She noticed her heart growing oddly calm as she caressed her soft skin.

“Will you still help me?”

“...Okay.”

Although Yuki’s expression was still rigid, she nodded, and Hana felt relief

wash over her. “Thank you.”

She looked over the bank of the field and spotted an old Nissan Sunny pickup truck was pulled over by the side of the road. Someone was standing with their arm on the roof, staring their way.

It was Grandpa Nirasaki, one of the old men from the village.

Hana recognized him; she was fairly sure he had been there when she asked permission to collect fallen leaves. After telling Yuki to run inside, she walked over to him.

“Hello.”

“—” Instead of answering, he stared at her.

Hana kept smiling. “I, um, I kept meaning to go introduce myself to your family, but I’ve been so busy...”

“—”

“Growing your own food is so hard, isn’t it? I try to follow the instructions in the books, but I’m not having much luck...”

“—”

“Um, this is a lovely area, isn’t it? Out in nature—”

Suddenly, Grandpa Nirasaki broke in. “What’s nature got to do with it? It’s not like you can plant something today and expect it to grow tomorrow.”

“Huh?”

“It’ll never work if that’s your approach. Don’t you think?”

His voice was ever so slightly contemptuous.

Hana hesitated for a moment, confused, and then smiled awkwardly at him. “Uh...um...”

“Stop smiling.”

“...!”

“Why do you always have that phony grin on your face?”

“—”

“Smiling doesn’t make the crops grow.”

With that, he slammed the truck door coldly and drove off.

Hana stared after him in a daze, her smile frozen on her face. It took her a few minutes to collect herself enough to move again.

In the lingering light after the sun had set, she pulled up the dead plants. She didn’t have enough energy left to talk.

“That guy was scary,” Yuki mumbled as she helped.

“No, I’m the one who doesn’t know anything,” Hana replied.

“But you’re a grown-up.”

Grandpa Nirasaki had been so blunt, right to her face, and she couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d said. What did she think she was doing? She was so embarrassed.

“Oh... There are so many things I should have asked your father.”

She sighed and looked up at the sky.

It was a summer afternoon.

Big raindrops beat down on the roof tiles as Yuki and Ame sat next to each other on the porch, following the drops with their eyes. At her desk in the main room, Hana paged through an agricultural manual to figure out why the plants had caught a disease. Sure enough, the cause and solution were right in front of her nose. She wished she had read this kind of book before she started; it was filled with information on several other diseases that weren’t even mentioned in her beginner’s books. She took notes on each one.

Unexpectedly, a car pulled into the front garden, sending up showers of water from the puddles. Yuki and Ame scrambled into the house and hid warily behind the desk. A woman in a raincoat emerged from the car and ran toward the house, trying to dodge the raindrops.

“What a storm!”

Hana came outside and smiled stiffly as the middle-aged woman sat down on the porch, shaking the raindrops from her coat.

“Hello. Uh...”

“This is for you.” The woman turned toward Hana and handed her a plastic bag.

“What is it?”

“Seed potatoes.”

“You mean for planting in the garden?”

“What else would you do with them?” She laughed a friendly country woman’s laugh. “I heard Grandpa had some strong words for you, but don’t you worry about him. It’s just how he is.”

Apparently, she was Grandpa Nirasaki’s daughter. Hana had seen her once at the village general store. She couldn’t help answering her amiable smile in kind. “No, I’m the one who should apologize,” she said.

Ms. Nirasaki accepted Hana’s words with a self-satisfied smile. She craned her neck toward the back of the house and called out to the children.

“Hello, there!”

Instead of answering, Yuki retreated from the shadow of the desk to the far side of a door, glaring menacingly out. Ame followed his sister, an anxious look on his face. Hana felt terrible.

“...I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ms. Nirasaki answered, smiling as if she didn’t mind a whit.

The next morning, the rain clouds gave way to a brilliant summer sky.

Hana spent the first half of August redoing the garden. She dug up the entire plot all over again, watered it, and spread plastic sheeting and bags on the ground. Ms. Nirasaki had told her that this would help the summer sun sterilize the soil, killing most diseases and pests.

Even after the height of summer, the days were sweltering. Hana put hats on the children and brought them to the garden with her. While she dug holes, Yuki and Ame dropped in the seed potatoes Ms. Nirasaki had given them.



Hoping fervently that this time would give them success, Hana covered the potatoes with soil.

The Sunny truck stopped next to the field.

Grandpa Nirasaki got out and marched up the bank.

Hana greeted him, wiping the sweat from her face. "Oh, Grandpa Nirasaki. Thank you for the seed potatoes."

Grandpa Nirasaki did not reply. He just eyed her rows.

"You wanna waste them?" he muttered, then began digging up the potatoes Hana and the children had just planted and rolled them onto the surface of the soil.

"...Oh." Hana's smile froze.

From under the bill of his hat, Grandpa Nirasaki gazed harshly at her. "Do it over. The soil, too."

"...!" Hana was speechless.

As the summer sun scorched her skin, she picked up the hoe and began digging up the soil yet again.

Grandpa Nirasaki walked silently and sullenly around the edge of the field without so much as a glance Hana's way. He stopped abruptly, looked at Hana, and barked a short command.

"Can't you dig any deeper?"

"I'm sorry." Hana directed all her energy into following his instruction as he resumed his silent pacing around the field. The morning thunderheads were growing taller; the only sounds were the shrill song of a cicada and the even rhythm of the hoe.

"What about fertilizer?" Hana panted.

"You mixed in leaves, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't need any."

The sun had climbed above their heads. Finally, Hana finished the whole field without a single break for rest. Dripping with sweat, she leaned on the handle of the hoe to catch her breath. She wasn't wearing gloves, and her palms throbbed painfully.

"If you're done over there, do this one, too."

Nirasaki was looking at another abandoned field. Hana wiped her sweat with the back of her hand and turned toward him with a tired smile.

"I don't need that much space. I'm just growing enough for me and the two kids," she said mildly. All she wanted was a glorified kitchen garden, and since she didn't plan to sell anything, she figured the one field would be plenty. Nevertheless...

"...Are you deaf?"

She gulped, taken aback by Nirasaki's glare. The thought of starting in on an entirely untouched plot of land right now made her feel faint, but she didn't have the energy to argue with him. She trudged over to the new field, cut down the overgrown weeds, and began doggedly hoeing the soil. Sweat rolled into her eyes. She was long past sore muscles; her very joints were beginning to creak.

The shadow of a bird crossed the afternoon clouds.

"Make ridges."

"Okay." By now she had no energy even for smiling. She pushed the soil into ridges, her disheveled hair sticking out every which way.

"Farther apart."

"Okay."

"The ridges are too low."

"Okay."

"Higher."

"Okay."

She focused her mind on remaking the ridges according to his instructions.

Sweat dripped from her chin and hit the ground with an audible *pitter-pat*, and her hair was plastered to her mud-and sweat-covered skin. She couldn't even think. She just stared at the spot in front of her and pushed on with her never-ending task.

Before she realized, it was evening. Beneath the light of the setting sun, she evened out the ridges in the two fields. Grandpa Nirasaki carefully inspected each potato before slicing some of them in half with his pocketknife. When he finished, he straightened his back and looked at Hana.

Sensing his gaze, she stopped working and turned around. He tossed a plastic bag full of the cut potatoes toward her.

"A week from now, plant them with the cut side down. Don't water 'em. Just leave 'em be."

Hana stumbled forward and gave her biggest smile. "Um...thank you for teaching—"

Before she could finish, the door of the Sunny truck had slammed shut, and she watched in a daze as he drove off.

The sun had tinted the world red as it set behind the mountains. An evening cicada sang its rhythmic song, then stopped. Yuki and Ame emerged from their hiding place and ran up to Hana.

"Mommy, are you okay?"

Their voices brought her back to her senses. Exhaustion washed over her, and she sank to the ground right where she was.

Thousands of autumn darters descended from the mountains, filling the fall sky.

The potatoes sprouted and seemed to grow bushier before Hana's very eyes. One day, as she was snapping off extra sprouts and piling soil against the stems in a desperate struggle to keep up, two rugged four-wheel-drive cars pulled up next to the field.

It was Mr. Hosokawa and Mr. Yamaoka, the two old men from the village. They gestured to Hana.

“Come here a minute.”

“Huh?”

“We won’t bite; just come over.”

“Huh?”

“Come on, come on.”

Without a word of explanation, they whisked Hana off to a garden outlet on the Super Agricultural Highway. Inside the row of big greenhouses packed with fall seedlings, Mr. Hosokawa picked up two plants and began explaining the principles of companion planting.

“This is a cabbage and a chamomile. If you plant ’em together, the pests stay away and they both taste better.”

Mr. Yamaoka interrupted, holding two different plants. “Don’t listen to him. Cabbage always goes with celery.”

“No, no, no. These are the plants you want for a beginner.”

“What’re you, nuts? Will chamomile fill your stomach?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No, no, no!”

Soon, they were arguing. Hana looked from one to the other.

Once they made their purchases, they all went back to Hana’s garden and started planting them right away.

“You should plant them about this deep.”

“No, no. First you water the hole. Then you plant them.”

“No you don’t. You can water afterward. First, just get them in the ground.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No, no, no!”

Again, they were arguing. Hana looked from one to the other.

After that, the two men often stopped by to check on the garden.

“When you fertilize midseason, you only need a little. Too much and you’ll just attract bugs.”

“No, no. Give it here. You can’t skimp on this stuff.”

“Don’t listen to him. A little is plenty.”

“Take his advice, and they’ll never grow.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“What did you say?”

“What did *you* say?”

More arguing.

Hana looked back and forth at the cabbages each of them had planted. Both kinds were growing wonderfully.

Shortly after that, the Horitas and the Dois—two couples from the village—came to Hana’s house. They set gifts of chicken manure and a water bottle filled with brown liquid on the porch.

“Wood vinegar? What’s that?”

“A natural pesticide, and it prevents disease. You can make it from the smoke when you burn charcoal.”

“Thank you for coming all the way out here with this.”

“Sorry we didn’t call first. I’m sure we caught you by surprise!”

“Not at all...”

As she poured tea for everyone, Hana looked at the two couples, both of whom were much older than her. She would never have guessed they were full-time farmers; they were dressed as smartly as businessmen and women vacationing in the mountains to escape the heat. They smiled kindly at Hana, clearly trying to put her at ease.

“I suppose you’re having some culture shock out here.”

“Yes, it’s all so new to me. Every day is a learning experience.”

“A lot of people move all the way out here from the city, only to go back the

moment something goes wrong.”

“Were any of them young people?”

“Nah, they’re all old geezers starting retirement. It almost makes you laugh; they just don’t have the grit.”

Both couples looked at each other and smiled wryly. Mr. Horita took a sip of his tea and stared intently out the window.

“Maybe I’m not the one to say this, but this isn’t an easy place to make a go of it,” he said.

“Yeah, the soil here is very poorly drained.”

“And it snows so much.”

“We just have to help one another...”

Hana studied the profiles of her four visitors. Their words struck a chord in her heart.

The next to come were two young mothers driving economy cars. They’d both moved to the area after marrying a local. Their children, dressed in preschool smocks, were in tow.

“It’s great to have another young mom in the area. There are so few of us out here. If you ever have a question, just give us a call.”

“Oh, thanks...”

They were astonished to hear Hana’s simple account of how she’d gotten by up till now.

“Seriously? You’re living on savings?”

“Yes, and I’ve got to find a job soon,” Hana said, resting her chin in her hands.

One of the mothers peered at her. “It’s tough to find work here. It’s not like the city.”

“Yeah, everyone puts their kids in day cares, and the commute is so far,” the other said.

“Tell me about it.”

They both nodded.

Yuki and Ame seemed to have listened in on their conversation.

“What’s preschool like?” Yuki asked, looking up at Hana as she cooked dinner.

“Huh?”

“Why can’t me and Ame go?”

“Well, because—”

“I wanna go to preschool!”

She jumped up and down, just like when she was little. For a cheerful, curious child like Yuki, it was a completely logical demand, but Hana worried they would be exposed as wolf children and was dead set against letting them go.

“Absolutely not,” she replied firmly.

“I wanna go!”

“Nope!”

“I wanna go I wanna go I wanna gooo!” Yuki loped around the huge living room on all fours before stamping her feet in frustration.

While they were eating, she rolled on the floor kicking her arms and legs.

“I wanna go to preschool! I wanna go I wanna go I wanna go!”

Her tantrum continued until Hana had finished cleaning up from dinner.

“I know it’s a secret. I promise I’ll be good!”

“I know you will. But I still can’t.”

Yuki squeezed herself between the cupboard and the garbage can and hugged her knees.

“I promise...,” she mumbled.

The next month, things weren’t so busy in the fields, and Ms. Nirasaki started coming by to visit more often.

After a while, she started to bring her husband along, too, and in the course of their chats over tea, Hana found herself regularly helping him keep the books

for the village farmers' cooperative that he managed. Accounting wasn't at all hard for her once she learned a few tricks, but he was hopeless at math and immensely grateful for the help.

"These are last month's receipts."

"Got it."

Hana efficiently performed the calculations. Her work assisting him had taught her firsthand how full-time farmers planned their crops and managed their costs. There were many tips and tricks she could apply to her own garden.

Suddenly, Ms. Nirasaki stopped writing down figures in her ledger and looked toward the garden. Her husband's hand stopped, too, and he followed her gaze.

Noticing that something had caught their attention, Hana raised her head and gave a start.

Wolf Yuki was peering in at them from the garden, her dress wrapped around her neck.

*...Yuki!*

"Hana, you got a dog?"

"Oh, yes...well..." As Hana floundered, wolf Yuki pointedly cleared her throat and howled.

*AWOOO!*

Struck dumb, Ms. Nirasaki pulled on her husband's sleeve. "...Is that a wolf? It is, isn't it, honey?"

Hana broke into a cold sweat. "Oh, no, um, it's—"

"Don't be silly," Nirasaki's husband interrupted. "You think there are still wolves in Japan? That's some sort of a German shepherd mix. How 'bout it, Hana? Did I get it right?"

He leaned forward, grinning. Hana groped for an answer. "No, it's, um..."

"Huh? It's gone! Where did it go?"

Ms. Nirasaki craned her neck in search of the dog. Just then, Yuki came in through the back door. In the blink of an eye, she had changed back to her



human form.

“Hi, Ms. Nirasaki,” she said.

“Hello, Yuki! You’re very friendly today.”

“Awww, you and the doggy have matching clothes. How cute!” Nirasaki’s husband commented.

Yuki winked slyly at Hana and jumped off the porch. A moment later, wolf Yuki paraded through the garden.

*Yu... Yuki!* Hana mouthed silently.

She was beside herself with worry that the Nirasakis would become suspicious, but in fact, the only thing they seemed suspicious of was her own odd behavior.

“What’s wrong, Hana?” Ms. Nirasaki asked, eyeing her curiously.

“Ha...ha-ha-ha...”

All Hana could do was try to deflect the question with a nervous laugh.

As the mountain air grew chillier in the mornings and evenings, the leaves around Hana’s house erupted into their many colors seemingly overnight.

She dug her hoe into the ridge several times, lifting up the soil, then grabbed a yellowed stem and pulled as hard as she could. A perfect cluster of potatoes burst to the surface.

“Woow!”

Amazed, Yuki and Ame followed along next to Hana, giddy over their harvest. They copied her, pulling on the stems until comically huge clusters of potatoes broke the soil. After drying them for a while in the shade, they brushed off the clumps of dirt and placed them in buckets. There were so many, all the buckets Hana could find in the barn weren’t enough.

She went down to the village, a bag stuffed with potatoes in each arm, and knocked on the Nirasakis’ door. She wanted Grandpa Nirasaki to be the first to see them, but no one answered her calls from the entryway. She peeked in the barn, too, but he wasn’t there.

“...I wonder where he could have gone.”

She finally gave up and headed to the Hosokawas. Mr. Hosokawa greeted her from his elegant house surrounded by a grove of trees.

“Ooh, that’s a nice harvest.”

“I couldn’t have done it without everyone’s help,” Hana said.

He picked up a potato to inspect its quality, then disappeared into the barn with the bag.

“Your potatoes are a real lifesaver. We lost our whole crop,” he said as he returned.

“What do you mean? Lost to what?”

“Boars.” He held out an armful of enormously fat daikon radishes. “Here, take as many of these as you want,” he said, pushing them into Hana’s arms.

Next, she visited the Yamaokas.

Standing near the power shovel in the front yard of their sprawling house, Mr. Yamaoka gratefully accepted Hana’s potatoes.

“These darn boars can dig up a whole field early in the morning without making a sound. I heard they made it all the way down to the Sakais’ paddy this year,” he said.

He chatted on for a while before giving Hana three thirty-pound bags of rice.

“A little something in return. Careful, they’re heavy!”

A few days later, the Horitas and the Dois stopped by Hana’s house with vegetables to share and stayed for tea.

“You know, your field is the only one the wild animals didn’t get into.”

“It’s so strange, since you’re way out here in the mountains.”

“You must have some technique you’re not telling us.”

“Everyone wants to know how you did it.”

Hana couldn’t think of anything special. “Nope, no secrets.”

The truth was, she’d simply done as Grandpa Nirasaki and Mr. Hosokawa and

the others had told her. As Ame shyly asked what a *technique* was from his spot behind Hana's back, Yuki ran up from the garden and jumped onto the porch.

"Gotta pee!"

The visitors watched, smiling, as she sped off toward the bathroom.

"That girl has so much energy!"

"...Uh-huh," Hana said absently. A thought had just occurred to her. The secret that kept the boars away was none other than Yuki and Ame's own.

"What's wrong, Hana?" Mr. Doi said, eying her curiously.

"Oh...nothing." She forced a smile and shook her head.

Another day, after the trees on the mountain had dropped their leaves in preparation for winter, Ms. Nirasaki brought Hana a stack of cardboard cartons full of fertile eggs.

"Wow, thank you!"

"It's nothing! Thank you for the potatoes."

"I haven't had eggs in ages."

"Then I'm glad I brought them. Let me know when you run out."

Hana opened the refrigerator and tried to find a place for the eggs. The kitchen floor was already littered with gifts of food that wouldn't fit in the fridge. Ms. Nirasaki poked her head in from the living room.

"Oh my," she said. "Well, isn't that adorable?"

"Huh?" Hana turned around to look at her, then back toward the little refrigerator.

Adorable? Her refrigerator?

That evening, Ms. Nirasaki's husband and her son pulled up in their truck and unloaded a midsize refrigerator from the back.

"One, two, three!" they called as they heaved it off.

"I can't possibly accept this," Hana protested.

She desperately tried to dissuade the man from giving it to her. While she was

grateful for his kindness, she felt it would be wrong to take such an expensive present. But he just smiled and continued toward the entryway.

“Just take it, really! This old thing’s been in our barn forever,” he said.

“But...”

“Take it. If we bring it back home, we’ll be in big trouble with Grandpa.”

“Grandpa?” Hana echoed.

Still gripping the refrigerator, father and son nimbly slipped off their shoes in the entryway.

“Hana this, Hana that. You’re all he ever talks about!” commented the father.

“He’s really fallen for you,” his son added.

“Don’t be silly. He’s ninety!”

“Come on, he’s always bugging everyone to look after her.”

“Nice going. You know you weren’t supposed to tell her!”

The younger man winced at his father’s scolding.

“...Oh yeah. I forgot.”

Hana gazed up at the sky far above.

Grandpa Nirasaki was making his solitary rounds of the paddies.

He fixed crumbled sections of stone walls and earthen banks and scooped dead leaves out of irrigation canals—all the little tasks that had to be completed before winter buried everything in snow. When he finished his work for the day, the sun was already setting.

Hana was waiting for him on the farm road. She bowed to him, then smiled.

“I finally realized why I needed that extra field,” she said.

All summer, she’d been so confused, but now it all made sense. Her harvest was not for her and the children alone. It was for the whole village, to be shared by everyone. Through growing her garden, she had come to understand the ways of the village. She had been taught—by Grandpa Nirasaki.

But he just looked down and tugged off his right glove.

"I can't stand it," he muttered.

"Huh?"

He shoved the glove in the pocket of his well-worn foreign-made coat and looked up with a disgruntled expression.

"Why do you always have that phony smile on your face?"

Before she could stop herself, Hana burst out laughing. "Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee...!"

"Stop laughing."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...!"

Of course, she knew she was being rude. But the more she thought about how rude she was being, the more the laughter bubbled up inside her.

Hana adored Grandpa Nirasaki. If she adored him, though, why did she think he was so funny? She laughed until she had to hold her stomach. She couldn't remember laughing this much since *he* was alive.

"What's so funny?" he asked, spreading his hands questioningly and staring at this odd young woman and her fit of hilarity. Finally, he let out a perplexed sigh.

The two of them remained standing there for a long time under the clear winter twilight.

That night, light snow began drifting down.

After Hana put the children to bed, she poured a cup of tea and reflected quietly on all that had happened since spring.

"I thought I was coming here to hide...and now here we are, completely in debt to all the villagers."

She had found a tough mentor to teach her how to grow vegetables. She had made older friends who looked after her as if she was one of their own relatives. She had made younger friends with whom she could talk about raising the children. Her house was no longer isolated and neighborless but host to constant visitors.

Despite all this, Yuki and Ame had managed to keep their secret.

She pictured the faces of all the generous, immensely kind people she had met and silently thanked each one of them.

“It was hard at first, but I think we can make it out here,” she said, looking at his driver’s license.

He smiled warmly back at her.

When Hana and the children woke the next morning, the world was covered in snow.

“Ooooooooooh!” All three of them cheered out loud.

Crazy with excitement, Yuki leaped off the porch and landed in the snow with arms and legs outstretched.

*Whomp!*

It was incredibly soft and comfortably cold. She could feel the delicate ice crystals melting against her skin with a faint popping sound, a brand-new sensation. A primal sort of laughter bubbled up from her belly.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

She rolled around everywhere her instincts carried her.

Ame set out carefully across the snow, one foot in front of the next, but he quickly lost his balance and tumbled into a face-plant.

“Oof!”

He widened his eyes in surprise, shaking his snow-covered face.

Hana filled her chest with the fresh, cold air and surveyed the snowy landscape, realizing that she felt much more at ease than she had in a long while. She could return to her own childhood, she felt, and the second it occurred to her, she dived with a shout toward the children and hugged them to her chest in the snow. She felt their warmth and breathed in their smell. Nothing could ever replace them. *There’s no greater joy than this.*

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

She lay on her back and belly laughed, and the other two joined her.

Yuki started running, barefoot and still in her pajamas. As she passed through

the little woods, she changed from wolf to human and back again in a flash. Ame chased her on all fours and then on two feet, then on all fours again. The transformation was so fast his pajamas fell away, until he was left wearing just his scarf.

Hana followed after them in her duffle coat, picking up the clothes on her way. They ran away from her gleefully.

The sky overhead was pure blue.

The two wolf children circled down the hill with its lone tree all covered in fresh snow. Wolf Yuki slid down the slope and then sped up for a jump, and the wind seemed to carry her into the air, her long scarf flapping behind her. Her heart danced at the flying sensation. When she landed, she disappeared in a huge puff of snow.

Wolf Ame copied her by jumping into the air, too. Surprised at how far he flew, he kicked his legs in panic and landed shakily. Snow sprayed up and showered down over his entire body.

Not to be outdone, wolf Yuki jumped even farther, elegantly spinning as she soared through the air. The two of them jumped again and again, competing with each other and sending up flurries of powder each time. Hana chased after them into the clouds of countless tiny crystals in their gorgeous dance against the blue sky.

*AWOOOOOOOO*, Yuki howled.

*AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO*, Ame howled.

*AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO*, Hana howled.

The three of them collapsed into the snow with arms and legs outstretched, and their voices echoed deep into the mountains. Yuki had returned to her human form. Eventually, her panting gave way to laughter.

*“Huff...puff...ha-ha-ha-ha!”*

When he heard her, the sweat-drenched Ame started laughing, too.

*“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”*

The three of them rolled around in their mirth. The snow crystals sparkled in

the sun. The breeze provided a refreshing chill for their warm bodies. Hana opened her eyes and looked at the sky, pleasantly tired. Clouds drifted slowly by.

It happened on the way home.

Wolf Ame suddenly froze beneath the thin veil of clouds and pricked up his ears.

He heard running water.

Alone, he made his way down a slope toward the sound and discovered a peaceful snowy landscape amid a circle of trees with a stream running through the middle. He suspected this was the place where Yuki caught the cormorant.

Suddenly, he spotted a crested kingfisher sitting on a branch. He was sure that's what it was—he had seen one in the encyclopedia.

The kingfisher dived into the water, sending up barely a splash. A moment later, it shot upward again with a small fish in its mouth and alighted on a snowcapped rock in the middle of the stream. Every movement was full of grace, and the black-and-white speckles on its wings were so beautiful.

Ame was seized with a desire to examine its wings more closely. He crept toward it, hiding himself in the shadow of a rock. For a long time, he crouched there, breathing evenly and waiting for the right moment.

The kingfisher repositioned the fish in its mouth. Just before gulping it down, however, it sensed something behind it and turned its head. That was the moment Ame leaped.

In a stroke of luck, his front paws caught the bird's tail. As the bird flapped its wings and tried to escape, Ame moved around the rock and managed to pin it down. The bird struggled for a few moments but finally grew still, only blinking its eyes.

It was Ame's first hunt.

He hadn't expected it to go so well right from the start. Perhaps the reason his heart was still pounding was the excitement of success. But after it was all over, he felt let down.



When he replayed the events in his mind, it seemed easier than he had expected. He wondered why he had waited so long to try. In any case, he was eager to bring the bird back to show his mother and Yuki. What would they do when they saw it? Would their eyes grow wide with surprise? Would they gush over his catch?

Just as these thoughts were running through Ame's head, he stepped on his scarf, lost his balance, and slipped into the stream.

A column of water rose up with a splash, and the kingfisher escaped and flew off out of sight.

The stream was surprisingly deep, cold, and swift. He couldn't believe it had looked so peaceful from the land. He tried to grab on to a nearby rock, but it was impossible.

"Mo... Mommy!" He writhed desperately, switching back and forth from wolf to human.

When she heard him calling, wolf Yuki returned to where Ame had left them. She slid down the slope to the stream as fast as she could, screaming to Hana.

"Ame! Mommy, it's Ame!!"

Hana whipped her head around at the sound of Yuki's unusually shrill call.

"?!"

Every hair on her body stood on end.

"Ame!"

She hurtled ahead through the snow. Her foot caught on something, sending her to the ground, but she got up and kept running.

"Ame!!"

Although she couldn't see him, an image of Ame reaching for help floated before her mind's eye. She knew with as much conviction as if she were standing beside him that he was on the verge of death.

*Mommy! Mommy!* He was calling her over and over. She could hear him with a clarity that bordered on the bizarre, but she had no time to think about the

oddity. She didn't know how to reach him.

"Ame... Ame...!"

She crisscrossed the woods at random, crying out as she ran. Several times she lost her way as she ran back and forth to the stream. She could not find him. Time and her strength ebbed away. Before she knew it, a thick gray mantle had replaced the light clouds. As snow began drifting down, she finally caught sight of Ame. His naked body was far downstream, lying in the dry riverbed.

"...Ame!!" She shivered with terror. Beside herself now, she ran to him, grabbed his shoulders, and shook him roughly.

"Ame! Open your eyes! Ame!!"

No matter how she shook him, however, he remained silent. His skin was bluish white and as cold as a rock in the riverbed. But she didn't give up.

"Ame... Ame... Ame!!"

Unable to endure it any longer, she hugged his body fiercely to her own.

Next to her, wolf Yuki—who, she guessed, had dived into the water and pulled Ame out—hung her head, panting and sopping wet.

Hana kept holding Ame's body close. Was this their last good-bye? Could he no longer hear her voice? Would her magic spell never work again? Could she no longer wipe his tears? Would she never see his adorable smile again?

Would he become like another wolf, his wet fur exposed to the elements, still for eternity?

At that moment, Ame moaned faintly in Hana's arms.

"...Mommy, I can't breathe..."

"Ame!!!"

She raised her tear-soaked face and looked at him. He smiled weakly as his consciousness returned and whispered as if he were still dreaming.

"...Mommy, I found a kingfisher...a really neat one... I thought I could catch something, too..." As he talked, his skin steadily regained its usual pink hue. "...It was weird; I didn't feel like usual... I wasn't scared... All of a sudden, I felt like I

could do anything.”

He sounded like a fairy-tale hero who had managed to return alive from his adventures.

“And, Mommy...oh!”

He widened his eyes, just then noticing the tears streaming down his mother’s face.

“...Why are you crying?”

Then he looked at Yuki and asked her confusedly, “...What are you doing here?”

Yuki, who had returned to a stark-naked human form, stared at him openmouthed.

Hana pulled both of them close to warm them up. Tears of relief flowed down her cheeks as she gave thanks for her good fortune to no one in particular.

A fine dust of snow whipped up in the wind and swirled around them.

### 3



As the long winter drew to a close and spring approached, Yuki turned six.

More than anything, Yuki wanted to go to elementary school like other children her age. She didn't know exactly what kind of place elementary school was, but she imagined it was terrifically fun, and just thinking about it made her excited. She knew, however, that she would have to convince her mother to let her go, and so for a while, she was as good as could be. Her efforts proved successful, and it was decided she would attend school starting in April.

Hana went to the town hall and filled out the necessary papers, then lugged an old desk in from the barn and turned the room next to the bedroom into a study. Yuki was dancing deliriously with joy, but Hana told her she could go to school on one condition only: No matter what, she must never turn into a wolf.

"I know, I know!" Yuki said, fingering her brand-new backpack as she sat in bed in her pajamas the night before her first day of school. Still, Hana insisted on this point.

"Promise me."

"I promise I'll be good!"

"Well then, three presents, three octopuses."

"What's that?"

Hana smiled wryly as Yuki looked up at her. "Hee-hee-hee... It's a spell to keep you human."

"A spell?"

"You do it like this—three presents, three octopuses."

As Hana chanted, she tapped her chest three times with her fist.

"Three..."

“Presents, three octopuses.”

Yuki thought it was such a strange combination of words that it had to work.

“Three presents, three octopuses! Three presents, three octopuses!”

She quickly memorized it and repeated it over and over as if it was the most important thing in the world.

The next morning, Yuki set out in high spirits with her new backpack, leaving behind the house still buried deep in snow. Hana followed in her good black suit, pulling a whining Ame along by the hand.

The closest bus stop was a fifteen-minute walk down the forestry road. Yuki skipped along swinging the cloth bag that held her indoor school slippers, shouting the spell her mother had taught her over and over. When they reached the bus stop, she swung from the rusted signpost, craning her neck to see if the bus was coming yet.

Once the empty bus was jostling them down the road, she squealed at the wild cherry blossom trees and bounced up and down on her seat. As they wound down the mountain, the snow on the ground gradually thinned so that by the time they reached the center of town, half an hour later, the world was in full spring bloom.

The elementary school occupied a two-story wooden building from the 1930s or so that everyone was quite proud of. Although it had once been full of children, the classes had steadily shrunk as the community aged, and now it was a small school with only ten or so children in each grade level.

The entrance ceremony took place next to the main building in a newer, steel-framed concrete gym. The place was abuzz with current students, teachers, guests, and parents, all focused on the nine new students sitting directly in front of the stage.

Yuki had never in her whole life been surrounded by so many people. Bewildered, she shrunk shyly in her seat. The happy excitement of just a few minutes earlier had completely vanished. The other new students, who had all gone to preschool together, were playing boisterously; Yuki’s was the only new face among them, and since no one talked to her, all she could do was stare at

the floor and swallow nervously.

She didn't hear a word of the principal's kindly greeting or the guest speaker's lengthy congratulatory address, and the welcoming choral number by the older students only made her legs turn to jelly from intimidation. She had wanted so badly to come, but now that she was here, she was consumed with worry over whether it would go all right. She glanced around hoping her mother would save her, and Hana smiled back encouragingly from the parent seating area. Nevertheless, the anxious feeling would not go away. The only thing that got her through it was silently repeating the spell over and over to herself.

But that was only at the very beginning. Once classes began, Yuki quickly returned to her usual cheerful self, largely thanks to her classmate and first friend, Shino, who took the bus with her every morning and talked kindly to her the whole way. As the only daughter of a large lumber dealer, Shino had inherited her father's talent for gentle leadership and brought Yuki into the group of girls in their class.

As a result, Yuki was comfortable despite being a newcomer. During class, she always raised her hand and spoke up confidently, and at lunchtime, she ate with gusto. She raced down the halls and stairway so much that a teacher scolded her for being too wild. During races, she easily overtook the scrawny boys, grinning with satisfaction when the girls gathered round to shower her with surprised admiration. Before she knew it, she was relishing every day at school. Each night, she could hardly wait for the morning to come.

Hana felt confident sending Yuki off to school, watching her backpack sway as the little girl sprinted down the hill without a backward glance. As the mother of a wolf child, she was relieved nothing unusual had happened so far, and as an ordinary mother, she was happy to see her daughter so fulfilled.

She went to the city office and for the first time applied for public assistance for the children. She wanted to make sure that Yuki was able to properly attend school. Money had been scarce before, too, and she probably could have received benefits sooner, but she had worried that the cost would be the children's secret, and so she had stayed away. With Yuki "being good" in the public sphere of the school, though, Hana felt she had to do what was necessary, too.

The paperwork was finished so quickly it was almost anticlimactic.

“I’m back,” she said, returning to the spot where Ame was waiting.

“...Look.”

Ame, his cap pulled low over his eyes, was pointing to a bulletin board. On it was a poster advertising jobs at the Niikawa Nature Preserve. Mixed in with the photographs of birds and alpine plants at the bottom of the paper was a picture of a wolf in a cage.

A wolf.

Hana stared at the picture for a long time.

The Niikawa Nature Preserve was nestled among the hills not far from the town hall.

Starting in 1984, the environment ministry had encouraged the establishment of similar public centers for nature observation and environmental education throughout the country. The one that Hana and Ame found themselves at sat at the center of over 250 wooded acres.

Inside, large pictures showed all kinds of forests. The one labeled COUNTRYSIDE FLORA AND FAUNA was dotted with representative trees, flowers, animals, and insects so that visitors could easily understand the whole rural ecosystem.

As Hana gazed intently at the illustration, she heard someone calling her from behind.

“Sorry to make you wait. Shall we go?”

“Oh, yes!”

The voice belonged to Mr. Tendo, the middle-aged man who both oversaw the center and served as a conservationist. He invited Hana to observe him as he led a group of junior high students through the forest.

Mr. Tendo talked about the trees and birds as he led the students down trails running through the nature preserve, stopping to chat with volunteers doing maintenance work on a marsh and make friendly conversation with a visiting university research group. Hana tagged along, taking notes.

“Conservationists don’t just protect nature,” he told Hana after they had returned to the center. “We also do environmental education and field studies, and we help conserve wild animals and plants. Those are the three key parts of our work, and we do it with the help of volunteers. Our tasks are very diverse, so we have to be ready to do anything on top of our work as specialists. We’re looking to hire an assistant since we’re so busy. That being said...”

They were sitting in a drab meeting room lined with whiteboards. Mr. Tendo glanced over Hana’s resume.

“To be honest, the salary is very low. We only have the resources to provide something like a stipend for those who want to become conservationists themselves in the future. It’s less than what high school students get at part-time jobs.”

He looked up at Hana and smiled brightly before continuing.

“Still interested?”

Hana paused for a moment, then hesitantly asked a question of her own. “... Um, I heard you have a wolf here?”

In response, Mr. Tendo led Hana and Ame to the on-site animal house. The wolf was in a large, clean cage lit up with sunshine from the skylight overhead. It lay against one of the concrete walls, glancing nervously toward them. Its light brown fur was mottled here and there, maybe with dirt.

Mr. Tendo lowered his voice. “He’s an eastern timber wolf,” he said.

“...He’s calm, isn’t he?”

“That’s because he’s so old.”

A staff member stuck her head around the door and called to Mr. Tendo. “Uh, Director...”

“Excuse me for a minute,” he said, leaving the building.

Hana waited until the door closed after him, then squatted beside Ame and looked the wolf in the eye.

“Pleased to meet you. We’ve come because we want to ask you something,” she said by way of greeting. She felt as though she could understand his



language.

The wolf rose slowly to his feet, and Hana put her arm around Ame's shoulders as if to present him to the wolf.

"This boy is a wolf child. His father was a wolf, too, but he passed away. I'm his mother, but I don't know how to raise wolf children. How did you grow up?"

"\_\_"

The wolf stared at them through the bars of the cage. Hana leaned toward him.

"Please, can you tell us how you were raised in the forest?"

"\_\_"

The wolf continued to stare at them with his nervous eyes, as if he was sizing Ame up. But a moment later, he suddenly turned away, folded his legs beneath him, and laid down against the wall, as if he had decided they were too tiresome to bother with. He apparently wasn't going to tell them anything.

"\_\_"

After that, no matter how many questions Hana asked, he would not answer. Now and then, he groaned softly, but that seemed to be more a complaint about his poor health than anything else.

"..."

Discouraged, Hana stood up. When Mr. Tendo returned from his errand, he gently explained the wolf's story.

"...A wealthy individual received special permission to keep him as a pet, but no one wanted him when she passed away. Finally, someone brought him here. I hear he was born at a zoo in Moscow."

"...So he's not wild?"

"It's rare for a zoo to have a wild wolf, I think. When wolves breed in captivity, the cubs are usually sent away to be fostered."

He went on to explain that injured wild birds, racoon dogs, and other animals were also brought to the center, where they were nursed back to health before

being returned to their homes.

The whole time the two adults were talking, Ame stared piercingly at the wolf.

By the time they left the center, the hills were dark.

They bounced and jostled toward home on the empty bus. Hana had decided to take the job. She might be able to teach the children how to live as humans, but she didn't trust herself to teach them to live as wolves. She was grateful for a job that would allow her to learn about wild animals while she worked.

The bluish-white fluorescent lights of the bus shone down coldly on her and Ame. As rice paddies streamed by outside the windows, he stared silently at the lights in the houses on the far side.

"...I'll be going to work at the center from now on. You don't mind coming with, do you?" Hana asked.

He nodded silently, still looking out the window.

"I'll learn all about the mountains and nature while I work, and then I can teach you."

"...He was the first real one I ever saw."

"The wolf?"

"Was Daddy like that?"

"No, not at all."

"I'm glad."

"Why?"

"He seemed kind of lonely." Ame scooted closer to Hana, still looking out the window. "I wish I could've met Daddy," he murmured.

Hana scooted closer to Ame.

"I wish I could see him again, too," she replied softly.

Around that time, things changed for Yuki at school.

She learned girls were supposed to love wildflowers and make flower crowns

and search for four-leaf clovers. Girls had jewelry boxes handed down from their mothers or fancy cases they'd begged for as birthday presents, and they took turns showing one another the colorful buttons and glass disks for playing *ohajiki* that they kept inside.

These hard truths came as a shock to Yuki. She was the only girl who enjoyed catching rat snakes and waving them around or wrapping them on her arm. She was the only one whose treasure chest was an aluminum can filled with the bones of small mammals and the dry skins of reptiles. The moment Yuki realized no one else did these things, she was terribly embarrassed. She nearly fled school that day clutching her little can.

She had made up her mind: From now on, she would act as ladylike and feminine as she could.

Hana tried very hard to keep from laughing out loud when she heard Yuki announce her decision. "Tee-hee-hee-hee..."

"...What?"

Yuki glared at her mother, her chin cupped in her hands. "Don't laugh! It's important!"

"Why don't you just keep doing what you like to do?"

"I hate it when everyone looks at me weird!"

She didn't cheer up in the least when Hana told her she needn't worry because everyone would be friends again soon.

"Well, I guess I don't have a choice, then," Hana said.

"Huh?"

She announced she was going to make Yuki a new outfit.

Yuki watched over her shoulder as she skillfully stitched away on the old foot-pedal sewing machine they'd discovered in the barn. Now and then, Yuki asked timidly if Hana wouldn't mind making it a little girlier. It took two nights to finish the sleeveless dark blue dress with snowflakes around the hem.

Yuki wore it to school the very next day. She felt self-conscious, not quite herself, nervous to see how everyone would react.

When the other girls spotted her as she walked up to the school, the compliments came pouring in. *Ooh, that's a pretty dress! I like the style! It looks so good on you! I want one!*

This had nothing to do with the quality of the dress itself; it was their way of validating Yuki as one who shared their feminine values. In other words, it was a rite of passage in which they agreed to treat Yuki as an equal.

Yuki felt a tremendous sense of relief at their reaction. She was sure she wouldn't feel out of place anymore, and now she could enjoy her time at school. She silently thanked her new dress and the one who'd sewn it for her.

Soon, it was spring again.

Hana was promoted from a part-timer to a full-time permanent staff member. The family became more financially stable, and Hana started paying back her student loans. The trade-off was that, in her downtime, she was swamped with classes and studying for her conservationist's certification.

Ame was now old enough to attend elementary school, so Hana added another desk to the study. Unlike Yuki, however, he didn't want to go. More precisely, he didn't understand why he had to. In the mornings, he would leave the house with Yuki, only to turn toward the mountains at the end of the driveway.

"School's this way!" Yuki would say, pulling his hand. Even getting him to school was a struggle.

Ame didn't fit in. During class, he gazed dreamily out the window instead of paying attention. Soon, the other children were whispering about him. Sometimes older students would come into the classroom just to tease him, poking his shoulder or pushing him, and Yuki had to come to his rescue and chase them away. Starting his second year, he spent more time in the library than the classroom. He would pass the whole day quietly paging through illustrated books about plants and animals. In his third year, he began staying home from school often. His teacher asked Hana again and again to make sure he came every day, but she didn't want to force him.

Instead, she took Ame to work with her. He sat next to her in the used Jimny mini SUV she'd taken out a loan to buy, staring out the window. Mr. Tendo was

quite understanding.

“Hey, Ame. Got the day off?”

“Nuh-uh,” Ame said with a happy-go-lucky shake of his head.

“Playing hooky, then?”

“Yup.” He gave another, equally carefree nod.

“Well, you’re always welcome here.” Mr. Tendo ruffled Ame’s hair.

It was May, and the nature preserve was packed. A long line of people waiting for a tour had formed inside the center.

“This is the Observation Pool. If you take a look, you’ll see tadpoles that still have their tails... Hana, can you help me for a minute?”

“Coming!”

Hana and the other staff were scrambling to take care of the milling crowds.

Meanwhile, Ame spent most of his time in the animal house.

The timber wolf slowly made his way to the bars of his cage, stuck his nose through, and looked down at Ame. Ame looked up at the aging wolf as if he were about to receive an important lecture.

After that, he started taking frequent walks up the mountain by himself.

By her fourth year of school, Yuki had grown nearly a foot compared to when she started. As she got taller and taller, Hana adjusted the blue dress to fit. It showed off Yuki’s glossy black hair and long, limber arms and legs very nicely.

Her external appearance wasn’t the only thing that had changed; the former wild child was now a calm, ladylike student who preferred quietly reading books to running cheerfully around the playground. This was partly due to the influence of her close friend Shino and partly a decision Yuki had made to help carve out a place for herself within the social world of the school. The plan had worked. During the past four years, she had kept her secret perfectly concealed.

One morning, as usual, Yuki was reading a book she’d borrowed from the library.

“Listen up, everyone!” Mr. Tanabe, her teacher, stepped into the noisy

classroom a few minutes late. “I’d like to introduce you to a new classmate.”

Yuki looked up to see a boy in a T-shirt standing next to the teacher, his backpack slung over his shoulders.

“This is Souhei Fujii... Here, say hello to everyone.”

While Mr. Tanabe was writing his name on the blackboard, the boy bowed slightly.

“I’m Fujii. Pleased to meet you.”

A thrill of excitement ran through the room; he was the first student to transfer into the class in four years. The teacher told him to sit behind Yuki, next to the window.

“Hey, do you have a dog or something?” he asked out of the blue as he sat down.

“Huh? Why?”

“It’s just—you smell like an animal.”

“—!”

Yuki’s mind went blank. She racked her brain for an answer, but she couldn’t come up with anything to say. Not a single thing.

“...I don’t have a dog.” The simple reply took all her energy.

“Really? That’s weird. I was sure you had one,” Souhei said, sniffing around.

Yuki felt as though she had turned to stone.

“What’s up?” Shino, who sat next to Yuki, craned her neck over toward them.

“Huh? Oh, nothing, just that smell,” Souhei said.

“What smell?” Shino asked.

“...Maybe I’m imagining it.”

Yuki shrank into her seat and waited for the conversation to end.

At recess, she went to the girl’s bathroom and meticulously washed her hands, then carefully dried them with her handkerchief. She sniffed her body, but she couldn’t smell anything.

Of course she didn't smell funny. But that boy had definitely said she did—like an animal. Maybe he noticed because he'd come from another school. After all, no one else had ever said that to her. But it was true—she must have a scent that was very slightly different from other people. Would her secret be revealed now, after four peaceful years at school?

She looked at her anxious face in the mirror and tried very hard to calm herself down. *It's okay. Everything will be okay.* She breathed deeply. After a while, she began to feel calmer. She looked in the mirror again and saw an anxious girl, ready to start crying at any moment.

When she got back to the classroom, Souhei was playing Old Maid with the other students.

"Hmm, which one? I'll take...this one! Aw, come on! You gotta be kidding me!"

Everyone was cracking up at Souhei's clownish performance. Yuki stood in the doorway, watching. Shino noticed her and gestured for her to join them.

"Hey, Yuki! Come over here! Souhei's really funny."

"—"

There was no way she was going anywhere near him. She abruptly became very interested in her library book.

"Oh, right, I have to return my book," she commented, loudly enough for everyone to hear, then turned away.

Her odd behavior seemed to bother Souhei.

"...What's with her?" he asked.

"She's not usually like that," Shino answered with a frown, trying to ease the tension.

After that, Yuki tried not to go near Souhei. Instead of playing with the other children, she spent her time reading in a corner of the library. But the more she avoided him, the more he tried to approach her.

"Hey, Yuki..."

“...!”

Yuki closed the book she was reading and walked off, trying to escape.

When it was time to clean the classroom, Souhei followed her around.

“Yuki...so, um—”

“.....!”

“Yuki, hey...”

She ran circles around the room to get away from him, sweeping the floor as she went.

She thought it would be best to spend as little time as possible in the classroom, so she took refuge in the library during every break. But Souhei pursued her relentlessly.

“Yuki...”

“.....!”

“...Come on, Yuki!”

She ran out of the library.

Souhei chased after her, and halfway down the wide staircase, he shouted at her loudly. “Tell me the truth!”

Yuki stopped short. Her anxious face stared back at her from the mirror on the landing, and she tried to force a calm expression as she looked up at Souhei.

“...About what?”

“Did I do something to upset you?” His voice sounded weak, and his worry was plain in his expression.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You didn’t.”

“Then you just don’t like me ’cause I’m new? Is that it?”

He was jumping to conclusions. Before she knew it, Yuki was yelling at him. “I



said no!”

“Then why do you keep running away?”

“I’m not running away!”

She ended the exchange by sprinting down the last flight of stairs. Something in her heart was beginning to spin out of control. She wanted to be alone. In the darkness below the staircase, she tapped her chest and softly recited the spell.

“Three presents, three octopuses. Three presents, three octopuses...”

She could hear Souhei approaching. “Hey, wait!”

She had to get away. But where else could she go?

Where could she go to escape this horrible feeling?

She ran down the first-floor hallway just to get somewhere else, anywhere else. That something in her chest was about to explode now as she desperately tried to push it down.

*Three presents, three octopuses. Three presents, three octopuses...*

This had never happened before. She had no idea, no idea at all what to do. She flung open the outside door and burst out of the school. Morning glories were lined up in pots.

Still Souhei pursued her.

She ran along the school building until she reached another door. She put her hand on the knob, planning to go back inside.

But it was locked, and the knob wouldn’t turn.

*Three presents, three octopuses.*

Souhei was coming.

*Three presents...*

Nowhere left to run.

Her back pressed against a corner of the building, she shouted hoarsely, “Get away!!!” She was surprised by how ugly her voice sounded.

“...!”

Souhei gave a start and reached toward her worriedly.

“Hey...”

“Get away from me!!!”

Without meaning to, she found herself shoving at him. The explosive thing in her chest was trying to break free. She had to keep it inside.

“...What are you doing?”

“Don’t touch me!!!”

“Hey, Yuki! Yuki!!”

Souhei tried to grab her flailing arms.

And the thing in her chest finally split open.

Hadn’t she said not to touch her?

She felt like every ounce of blood in her body had reached a boil.

The howl of a wild animal echoed through the school, and an instant later, sharp claws tore through Souhei’s ear. He squatted, pressing his hand to the side of his head. Blood splattered the concrete.

*“Huff...huff...!”*

Struggling for breath, Yuki looked at her left hand and saw wolf claws stained red.

It took her a minute to realize they were hers.

The school called Hana at work and asked her to come in. That had never happened before. The person on the phone said Yuki had injured one of her classmates. Although Hana hated to impose on her coworkers, she asked to leave work early and sped to the school in her Jimny.

When she got there, she nervously opened the door to the principal’s office.

“Sorry to call you at work.”

Mr. Tanabe came to the door to greet her. The principal just looked at her, hands clasped behind his back.

The tension was so thick, it was hard to breathe. Hana saw Yuki sitting at one

end of the guest sofa, her back turned. At the end of another sofa, a boy was looking down as he sat next to his mother. His head was wrapped in a bandage.

Hana felt faint.

The mother stood, pulling the boy up by his armpit, and glared at Hana.

“Do you have any idea how much that gash on his head was bleeding?”

“It was my ear,” the boy said, shaking off his mother’s hand.

Hana walked over to Yuki, kneeled down, and peered into her face.

“Yuki.”

Yuki did not meet her eyes. Her hair was a mess and her downturned face haggard.

Mr. Tanabe put his hand on the sofa. “She wouldn’t answer any of my questions.”

“Did you really hurt him?” Hana asked.

“\_\_”

“Did you say you’re sorry?”

“\_\_”

Yuki bit her lip and turned away. She clearly had not apologized.

“Say you’re sorry,” Hana said softly.

“\_\_”

“Apologize, right now,” Hana instructed, gently but firmly, and stood up.

Yuki got to her feet, too, as if resigned to her fate.

“...I’m sorry,” she said, barely above a whisper.

Now that the apology had been said, Hana turned back to the other mother and bowed her head deeply.

“I am extremely sorry.” The principal turned toward the woman as well. “Well, now that that’s done, and the medical treatment will be covered by the school’s insurance—”

The woman, however, was still glaring at Hana. She hadn't moved an inch. "You don't honestly believe a simple apology is enough for this, do you?"

A chill descended on the room. Hana kept her head bowed as the woman continued.

"What if he loses his hearing? What do you intend to do then? You're a parent; you're responsible for your child's actions. Would you take out a loan to compensate us? Would you sell your house?"

Her anger had taken over, and she was shouting now.

"Now, now, let's all remember where we are," the principal said, attempting to stave off a fight.

"I need to know what that woman plans to do about this."

Souhei had been listening with downcast eyes, and suddenly he mumbled, "It was a wolf."

"What?" she asked.

"A wolf did it," he said, staring at the floor.

Hana nearly jumped. Yuki stood silently, her face averted.

"It was a wolf that did it," Souhei said very clearly to everyone in the room.

"Souhei? What are you talking about?" His mother shook his shoulder, confused. His gaze remained fixed on the ground.

"...!!!"

Hana couldn't even lift her head.

The fourth-grade classroom was in a pandemonium.

"What's taking them so long?"

"I heard they bandaged up his head."

"No way! Really?"

"Stop it."

"Would Yuki really do that?"

When Yuki entered the room with Mr. Tanabe, silence descended. The children returned to their seats, waiting with bated breath to learn the truth of what happened. Yuki shambled toward her seat with her hair in a tangled mess, like a ghost out and about in broad daylight. Some of the glances sent her way were curious; others were full of pity.

“What happened to Souhei?” one of the students asked Mr. Tanabe.

“He went home early.”

“Why?”

“He was injured.”

“How?”

“I can’t tell you the details.”

“Did someone hurt him?”

“Um...”

“—!”

Yuki had finally made it to her seat, but once she was there, she could not bear to stay. She sprang up and fled the classroom.

Once again, the class was in an uproar.

“Quiet! Everyone be quiet!!”

Mr. Tanabe tried to regain control of the din, but he was unsuccessful.

Hana waited for Yuki in her parked car.

She was supposed to be retrieving her backpack from the classroom, but when she slipped into the passenger seat, she had nothing in her hands. She didn’t say a word. Hana remained silent, too. She simply waited there in the parking lot. The only sound was the idling engine. After a few minutes, Yuki opened her mouth.

“It didn’t work.”

“—”

“The spell. I tried it over and over, but it didn’t work.”

“—”

“Am I gonna get kicked out of school?”

Hana looked at her daughter.

“...I’m sorry,” Yuki said. Her face was stained with tears and snot. “I’m sorry, Mom. I’m so sorry.”

As Yuki sobbed out her apology, Hana reached over from the driver’s seat and hugged her tight. “It’s okay; don’t cry. Everything is okay now. It’s okay, it’s okay.”

She held her close until Yuki calmed down. Once again, she thought to herself that only she could protect them. She would do it even if the whole world shunned them for it.

For a long time, the red Jimny stayed parked in the bleak school parking lot.

After that, Yuki refused to go to school. She stayed huddled in her futon all day, wouldn’t even poke her head out when Hana came in, and ate very little. Hana decided to let her do as she wished.

She remembered what the boy had said.

*It was a wolf that did it.*

Hana had secretly been steeling herself for something like this. Now that it had finally happened, it seemed like a miracle that Yuki had done so well for so long. Perhaps it was impossible for wolf children to fit into human society after all.

Four years had passed. They were finally used to living here, and Hana finally felt secure at work. Now she might have to think about moving again. But where could they go? *Is there nowhere we can live without worry?* she wondered.

One day not so long after that, Hana came home from work to find someone looking at the house—a boy with his head wrapped in a bandage.

It was Souhei.

When he noticed Hana, he gave a start and ran off.

“Souhei?”

Hana hurried down the road in her car, but all she could do was watch him disappear.

He had left something in the entryway—a worksheet from class. Hana pushed open the sliding door to the bedroom and showed it to Yuki.

“A worksheet. From Souhei.”

Yuki crawled silently under the covers.

After that, a piece of bread from a school lunch or a mandarin orange or some other little present appeared in the entryway every day. Hana showed each one to Yuki.

“From Souhei,” she would add.

Yuki never said a word. She just sat there under the table or the sewing machine, her arms wrapped around her knees.

One day, when Hana had the day off work and was working in the vegetable garden, she saw Souhei walking on the far side of the bank.

“Souhei.”

Startled, he looked up at Hana. The bandage around his head had been replaced by a piece of gauze over his ear.

“She’s gone to play at Shino’s house today.”

“Oh.”

“Hey, wait a second.”

With that, she invited him into the house.

Souhei sat nervously at the dining table, peering around curiously.

“It’s a long trip out here, isn’t it?” Hana set a glass of juice in front of Souhei. “Thank you for coming out every day.”

“...I don’t want Yuki to drop out,” he said, shifting in his chair and contemplating the floor with a serious expression.

Hana took a seat across from him, rested her elbows on the table, and

clasped her hands, smiling all the while.

“...Um, back then, you said a wolf did it, right? What did you mean?” She had been wanting to ask him for a long time.

“I meant— Well, you might not believe me.” He lowered his gaze again, like he was struggling to get the words out. “...When it happened, I saw a wolf for a second, and then I was hurt... That wolf was the one that did it...”

He raised his head and continued earnestly.

“What I mean is, Yuki didn’t do anything bad.”

He looked down again, seeming to lose confidence.

“...Everyone says I’m crazy, though...”

When he had finished, he took the glass of juice and drank it through the straw.

“I see... Can I ask you something else?” Hana laced her fingers together. “Do you hate wolves?”

Souhei thought for a minute, then put the juice down on the table. “Not really.”

Relieved, Hana relaxed her hands and giggled. “Hee-hee. Me neither.”

She liked this boy.

Hana didn’t tell Yuki about her conversation with Souhei, but she was confident a boy like him would be a good friend for Yuki. A tremendous weight had been lifted from her chest.

One day, Yuki said she would go back to school. She had really struggled over what to do before finally making up her mind, it seemed.

*Can I go back?* she had asked.

*Of course you can, if that’s what you’ve decided,* Hana had replied.

In the morning, Yuki slung her backpack over her shoulder and stepped out the door. Souhei was waiting out front, and Yuki was stiff with nerves.

“Hey, wanna look at it?” he asked. He brought his hand to the gauze on his



ear.

She didn't know how to respond, but before she had a chance to, he'd torn off the gauze.

"...Ouch!" He pressed on his ear, then removed his hand to show Yuki. "Looks pretty cool, huh?"

Yuki stared at the wound. A large scab had formed over it. Quite possibly, the scar would remain forever. Yuki grimaced apologetically.

"Wanna touch it?" he asked, gesturing toward his ear.

Surprised, she hesitated for a moment, but then she timidly touched the scar.

"...It doesn't hurt?"

"It's just itchy."

Souhei stared at Yuki's hand as she lowered it again. She felt as though he was trying to make sure of something, so she quickly hid it and walked ahead of him.

"Let's go," she said, and he followed after her.

Hana had been watching their exchange from the entryway. *They're going to be just fine*, she thought as they disappeared down the road. *I can leave the rest to them.*

Ame squeezed past her out of the house. "I'm heading out," he said.

Hana watched him go. "Where are you off to?"

"To see Teacher."

"Who's Teacher?"

"Teacher is just...Teacher."

"...All right. Are you okay going by yourself?"

"Yeah."

"Be careful."

"I will."

"Don't stay out too late."

“I won’t.”

Hana wanted to ask him more questions, but he hurried off before she could. She gave up and simply watched him leave.

That afternoon, Hana stopped at the Nirasakis’ house on her way to go shopping and chatted with Ms. Nirasaki over a cup of tea.

“How’s Yuki doing?”

“She went back to school today.”

“That’s great. What about Ame?”

“He goes some days, and others he doesn’t.”

Grandpa Nirasaki was home for lunch and poked his head into the room.

“And that’s just fine,” he said. “Kids who drop out of elementary school show a lot of promise. Like Edison. And me.”

“There you go being silly again,” Ms. Nirasaki said, exasperated.

Hana watched as he headed back out to work. “Speaking of which, does anyone live up on the mountain?”

“The mountain?”

“Ame said he was going to his teacher’s place. I figured he was talking about some old man.”

“I wonder. Who would be up in the mountains during the busy season?”

Ms. Nirasaki sipped her tea noisily. Hana tried to think of who else “Teacher” might be, but she couldn’t think of anyone.

When Ame came home from his solitary trips to the mountain, he always told her what had happened that day.

The gingko tree had blossomed, now the creeping dogwood. He had witnessed tree-frog eggs hatch. He was starting to be able to walk for a long time without feeling tired. And Teacher was the one who’d imparted all that knowledge to him.

“Teacher knows everything. About the mountains, I mean.”

Hana was surprised to see Ame looking so alive. Her withdrawn, irritable son had never made friends with an adult before. She wasn't sure, but she even thought he was toughening up—a sight she was glad to see. Still, she wondered who this Teacher was.

“Why don't you invite him over soon?” Hana suggested one day when Ame was helping her in the garden.

“I'd like to thank him. Plus—”

“Teacher never meets with humans. He doesn't come down to the village like the boars and bears do.”

“...Huh?”

Hana stared at Ame, stupefied.

“But I think he might meet you,” he added softly.

Hana went with Ame up the mountain.

Almost immediately, he veered off the main trail and straight into the deep forest. He strode up steep trails undrawn on any map as confidently as if he were strolling through the neighborhood. Hana got winded just trying to keep up.

Finally, he stopped on an animal trail crisscrossed with thick tree roots, where Teacher sat at the base of a towering, unruly cedar, and stared at the two humans.

Ame's teacher was a wild red fox.

“...!” Hana gulped.

“Teacher is the master of this whole area,” Ame explained calmly.

“Uh...thank you for looking after Ame,” she said, coming to her senses.

She dug through her bag and pulled out a bundle wrapped in cloth—a ripe peach and some fried tofu she had brought as presents.

With great composure, Teacher climbed down and gave the tofu a quick sniff. Then he picked up the peach in his mouth, jumped lightly down to the tree's roots, and disappeared between some rocks.

Hana hadn't noticed Ame had changed into his wolf form until he was climbing up the rocks after the fox. He glanced back once at his mother, as if to say, *I'm heading out.*

Long after he was gone, Hana remained where she was, dumbfounded and unable to believe what she had witnessed.

Once, the timber wolf at the nature preserve had told Ame something.

*I don't know anything about the woods myself. I've lived my whole life in ignorance. I can't teach you. If I can tell you only one thing, it's that you shouldn't spend your time here. If you want to learn, don't talk to an old wolf in a cage. Venture out into the wild.*

Ame had followed his suggestion and gone up the mountain.

At first, he was at a loss for what to do. He spent days wandering the woods without learning a thing, watched the sun set, and went home. He couldn't find anyone or anything who might give him what he was searching for.

There was not a single wild wolf left in Japan.

Ame was deeply aware of the fact. Japan wasn't a place he could learn the way of the wolf, because the kind of wolf who would teach him simply didn't exist.

Instead, he met Teacher.

Teacher was a bit odd, even for a red fox. He had to be, to accept a wolf child as his student. Ame could probably search the whole world without finding another one willing to take him in. He was very fortunate to have made the acquaintance of this older creature—and when he did, his world expanded overnight.

Teacher knew everything Ame had ever wanted to know, though Ame hadn't even known what that was before they met. Afterward, the things he was searching for became extremely clear. The more he learned, the more new questions bubbled up inside him.

A fox of few words, Teacher mostly let Ame observe him and the mountain.

But for Ame, each observation was a revelation. Everything was so different

from the “ecology of wild animals” he had read about in books at the school library. There was an enormous gulf between “nature” as humans viewed it and wrote about it and the truth of the natural world. Ame took it in through Teacher’s eyes and learned about every nook and cranny.

For example, Teacher had a different name for the beech trees, and the rhododendrons, and the gentian flowers, too. The clouds and wind and raindrops and setting sun. These names comprised a system completely unlike the only one Ame had known to exist, and they held entirely different meanings as well.

Some words could not even be translated into human language. When Ame explained that certain things lacked a corresponding human equivalent, Teacher was flabbergasted. He wondered aloud how one could live without such things. The shock ran through Ame like an electrical current.

An entirely new world surfaced before his eyes.

Before long, he arrived at the true questions that lay at the bottom of his heart.

Why had he been born a wolf? And what did he want to do with his life?

Hana gazed incredulously at her chattering son.

He was excitedly trying to convey to her what he had seen and learned on the mountain. Quite often, he described plants and insects that even Hana had never heard of in her work at the nature preserve. When he searched enthusiastically through their field guides, they were nowhere to be found, so he detailed their characteristics and ecology and habitat to Hana and urged her to take down notes. He bounced happily from one story to the next as if he could never tell her everything, no matter how much he talked.

As she watched his lively profile, Hana felt a sense of fulfillment for herself, too. His truancy might be a problem, but she believed he had discovered something that was even more important for him, all on his own. So long as he was living free and true to himself, it was enough.

Watching her children change and grow was such a joy. Moving to the mountains may have made life a little hard, but she was happy she had done it.

Yuki sat at the dining table after dinner, clearly annoyed.

Ame was being unusually talkative and completely oblivious to the fact that she was trying to get her homework done.

“...Yuki, I think you should study with Teacher, too, so you can get better at hunting. You need to know the trick to running through the woods as fast as you can. And how to read the earth. You’d learn a lot, like how to find streams or sense changes in the weather, and stuff about territories and how animals respect one another—”

“I’d never do that. Obviously.”

“Why not?”

Yuki stopped writing. “Why don’t you go to school?”

“Cause it’s so cool. The mountain, I mean. There’s so much I don’t know.”

“Stuff you don’t *need* to know.”

“Why not?”

“Never mind, just come to school.”

“...I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Cause I’m a wolf,” Ame replied, like it was completely natural.

“You’re a human,” Yuki responded in an attempt to quell his protest.

“I’m a wolf,” he countered decisively.

“\_\_”

Yuki opened her mouth to say something, then stopped. “I’ve decided I’ll never turn into a wolf again,” she finally stated before returning to her homework. The words were more for her own sake than his, an attempt to regain her cool.

Of course, Ame knew full well what she’d just gone through at school. After so much pain for herself and trouble for her mother, she’d finally managed to overcome it. No—every day she went to school she still felt like she was walking

on thin ice, but she pressed ahead anyway. Not as a wolf, but as a human. It was so strange that Ame couldn't take that into consideration. She shouldn't have to spell it out for him. Yet, there he went, obstinately asking once again:

“Why?”

“—”

“Come on, why?”

“Because I'm a human! Is that good enough for you?! Because I'm human!!”

“But why?”

“Why, why, why! Why don't you shut up?”

“You're a wolf, but you're still—”

“Shut up!! You don't know anything!!”

“I know plenty!!”

The next instant, Yuki snapped and slapped him across the face. “You better go to school tomorrow, or else!!”

Ame glared at Yuki, pressing his cheek. Up till now, she had always out-argued him. But today, he didn't give in.

“I don't want to!!”

“I'm warning you!!”

“I don't want to!!!”

Ame shoved the dining table with all his strength, and it toppled over with Yuki pinned underneath. Her mug shattered on the floor.

Ame jumped up, suddenly half-wolf. His eyes brimmed with quiet anger.

Yuki took up a position across the table.

“...You wanna fight?”

Hana, who was drawing a bath, looked up as a loud crash boomed through the house.

“What was that?” She hurried into the kitchen and gasped at what she saw.

The table and chairs were knocked over and scattered around the room. Shards of glass from the china cabinet littered the floor. And among it all, two large animals were tangled in a brutal fight.

*Grrrrrrrrr.....arrrrrrrrrrrrr...!*

Fur disheveled, fangs bared, the two beasts took turns tearing into each other amid an exchange of threatening growls.

One of them was Ame. The other was Yuki.

“...Yuki?! ...Ame?!”

Yuki was straddling Ame, only to be kicked off and hurled against the wall. When he tried to pounce on her, she dodged him by a hairbreadth and escaped across the sink counter. The dishes and pots that Hana had just finished washing went flying.

Trying to temporarily put some distance between herself and Ame, Yuki darted for the study but crashed into the door. The frosted glass shattered in a hail of tiny fragments, but that didn't stop Ame from following in hot pursuit. The fight continued in the dark study. Over and over, Hana heard the crack of wood exploding into splinters.

“Stop this immediately, both of you!!” Hana's desperate shouts fell on deaf ears.

The wooden door closest to the barn slammed down with a loud bang, and Yuki came rolling out of the study as if she had been shoved. Unable to weather Ame's merciless attacks, she sped toward the back of the sitting room, her paws skittering over the tatami mats. But since she kept looking back over her shoulder, she ended up colliding head-on with the sewing machine, which crashed down heavily and punched into the tatami. When Ame caught up with her, he aimed straight for her throat and sank his sharp teeth in. Yuki yelped in pain. They struggled ferociously from one end of the room to the other.

Yuki had been caught off guard by Ame's sudden strength, and he completely overpowered her. She didn't even have a chance to go on the offensive. She couldn't believe she'd been cornered like this.

She raced down the long porch, but Ame pursued her with surprising speed



and pounced. She was forced to flip over and kept rolling, her body bent in half, until she smashed into the sliding door next to the entryway. She tried to escape Ame's relentless attacks by fleeing into the main room.

"Stop it, Yuki!! Ame!!" Hana screamed pleadingly.

But Ame chased Yuki round and round with terrifying speed, nipping at her heels as if he could neither hear nor see his mother. She fearfully approached them.

"Stop it... Ack!"

Ame had barely brushed her as he ran past, but she went flying onto her backside. She watched as the two wolves banged into the bookshelf in the corner of the main room, and the whole house shook with the tremendous blow. Books were thrown onto the floor, scattering the summer cushions, and the little vase with a buttercup in it fell, along with his driver's license.

At last, Yuki had no place left to run.

Ame pinned her to the floor with his powerful front paws and bit mercilessly into her throat. Blood soaked her fur as she let out a high-pitched scream.

Still Ame did not loosen his hold. He snapped at her again and again, as if he intended to rip her ears, nose, and legs to shreds.

He was trying to prove his dominance.

"Oh... Oh my god..."

Hana had no words for the horrifying scene. One of her children was tearing into the other with overwhelming violence. It was cruelly evident who was winning.

The suffering Yuki writhed around and managed to crawl away, fleeing with a whimper to the hearth room. She was so shaken, she tripped over the edge of the hearth and pitched disgracefully into the pile of firewood in the corner, sending a curl of smoke up from the ash. When she saw Ame approaching with a measured stride, she dived, terrified, into the bathroom.

The door slammed shut, and Hana heard the lock turn from inside. With that, the fight was over.

“Ame...Yuki...!” Hana arrived belatedly in the hearth room.

“...!”

She froze.

Before the frosted glass of the bathroom door, Ame slowly stood up. His skin was covered in wounds, and his supple muscles rippled powerfully. He had returned to his human form, but the eyes glittering behind his disheveled hair were those of a wild animal.

“...Ame...?”

Hana managed to call her son’s name, but that was all. From a corner of the bathroom, she could hear Yuki weeping softly.

Afterward, Hana cleaned up the house alone, without saying a word to the children.

It looked as if a storm had blown through. Glass was broken, cupboards and doors were toppled, and dishes and pots had been strewn into the oddest places. Yuki’s dress was in tatters. The tatamis were striped with fresh claw marks. To Hana, this was the evidence of the different paths the two siblings had chosen, and she realized they would soon be at the stage where no one could hold them back.

Under the jumbled mess of books, she found his driver’s license. She put it back in its place on the bookcase. As always, he smiled out at her.

“...Yuki and Ame are beginning to go their own ways...”

More than anyone in the world, Hana wanted her children to grow into adults, and she had tried to do everything she could so they would be able to choose their own paths in life. Still...

“This is what I wanted, so why do I feel so anxious...?”

He gave her no answer.

“Tell me...why.”

She asked over and over, but he only smiled back at her.

## 4



The downpour was relentless, pelting onto the houses, the fields, the meadows, and the mountain.

This was the seventh summer since Hana and the children had moved to the country.

Record-breaking rains had fallen in their area quite a few times this year. Even in a normal year, the region received abundant rain. The air over the Sea of Japan would become heavy with humidity and flow in, collide with the mountains, and empty its load. In winter, it turned to snow that built up until spring, then streamed down as snowmelt that watered the fields. In summer, the mountains protected the area from typhoons. The grain swelled heavy on the stalks, making it one of Japan's top rice-growing regions. The topography was ideal for it.

But once every great while, there was just a bit too much moisture from the sea. If this happened in winter, the result was heavy snow that turned the region into an inland island completely buried in white. If it happened in summer, the clouds of the rainy season wouldn't merely pass through but would hover above them, turning the weather unpredictable. The sun would disappear, and the crops would stop growing.

And that wasn't all. The soil in the region was heavy, poorly drained clay, which suited it well to growing rice. Government policies intended to rein in the overproduction of rice had led many families to convert their paddies to dryland fields, however, and those didn't hold the rain like countless green retention ponds. Now, when the torrential rains came, the drainage canals swelled with water and spilled over, drowning the crops and creating a poor harvest for the year.

Hana's vegetable fields, too, had once been paddies, and she suffered the same fate as the local farmers that year. Her spring vegetables were essentially

wiped out, forcing her to buy vegetables at the supermarket. Prices soared, and money became tight for the family.

The downpours caused landslides as well, sending mud and rocks racing down the hillsides. Although the local government had drawn up maps of risky areas, predicting where landslides would actually occur was extremely difficult. When fields were buried in mud, the damage was far worse than a mere year of poor harvests. This happened to more than a few households this time. During the brief intervals of sun, the neighbors helped one another dig out of the mud.

“We could hear the tree roots snapping last night.”

“We’re just lucky it didn’t get the house *and* the fields.”

“The banks collapsed on the fields that used to be paddies. It’s a real mess out there.”

Mr. Doi and Mr. Horita looked at each other and sighed. They would have to reinforce the banks of the fields that were still at risk with wooden stakes and stones, then dam up some of the swollen waterways to divert their flow.

Human neighborhoods were not the only ones affected by the rains.

Deep in the mountains, several massive mudslides had occurred. Ame walked through the woods many times to carefully observe the damage.

Scores of trees lay tossed about on the ground, as if some ferocious beast had raged down the mountain. Underground streams poured like waterfalls from the raw scars carved into the slopes by powerful landslides. The soft layer of rotted leaves covering the ground had been washed clean away. Many of the beautiful little worlds Ame had discovered were now turned to wastelands by the merciless onslaught.

He came across the corpses of many wild animals. Each time he discovered one, he buried it, but the quantity was overwhelming, the bodies never ending. He could hardly wrap his head around the amount of damage the torrential rains had inflicted on the plants and animals living on the mountain, nor imagine how many years would pass before it fully recovered.

Between a pair of toppled trees, he found the body of a dead chick that had fallen from its nest.

“—”

He stood gazing at it for a long time. In his mind, he saw himself in the little corpse.

Hana's eyes were fixed on the entryway of the house.

Recently, Ame had been coming home late, and he spoke very little. Every time he returned, she was startled anew. His face had a strength and keenness far beyond his years. He even seemed to grow taller day by day.

The old-fashioned house was dark and gloomy in the late afternoon drizzle while Hana sat quietly mending the fraying edges of a stuffed wolf, thinking back on the days when the children were more innocent. Neither of them had been able to sleep without their stuffed wolf, which she had patched countless times. Finally, though, they had set their toys aside, and now they lay forgotten at the back of their desks.

These days, a leaden anxiousness lurked constantly in the depths of Hana's heart. It had started the day of Yuki and Ame's great fight two years earlier. Before that, she had honestly wished for them to grow up and become independent, but now it was the opposite. She was always wondering when she would be set aside like their stuffed wolves, spent and no longer useful.

She shifted her gaze back toward the entryway.

“...Ame!” She leaped up.

Ame was drenched as he stepped into the house, his eyes sharp as ever.

“Where have you been?”

Hana had raced to the entryway, but she jumped back as she brushed Ame's shoulder. His skin was cold as ice.

“Wait a minute. I'll run a bath for you.”

As she headed toward the bathroom, Ame's low voice stopped her. His gaze remained fixed on the floor. “It's Teacher... He's hurt his leg and can't walk. I think he's going to die soon.”

“—”

“Someone has to take over everything he’s been doing.”

The words were not meant for Hana. He was talking to himself, giving voice to what he already knew.

Hana felt as if her anxiety would crush her. Unable to stand it any longer, she suddenly turned sternly toward him.

“...Ame! I forbid you from going to the mountain anymore!”

She grabbed his shoulder and shook him roughly, trying to make him listen. But her words didn’t seem to reach him. No matter how much she shook him, her only answer was the water dripping from his hair. All the same, she insisted even more.

“Do you understand? You’re only ten! You’re a child! A wolf may be grown up by age twelve, but you—”

She couldn’t finish her own sentence.

He was a wolf. He had grown up far faster than a human.

The rain pounded down ever harder outside, and the sound of the drops hitting the ground filled the entryway. Hana pressed her hands together in supplication.

“...I’m begging you. Don’t go up the mountain anymore. As your mother, I’m begging you.”

“\_\_”

Finally, he returned to his senses and looked up at her.

Bright sunlight shone into the gym from the west. School had just let out.

The boys were playing a rowdy game of two-on-two basketball. Souhei dribbled the ball back and forth between his hands, stealing every chance for a shot.

Yuki stared absently at them from a corner of the gym. She had started sixth grade that spring, and she was nearly as tall as Hana. Her figure had changed, too, and even she could tell that her childhood was drawing to a close. Hana had made her a new dress to fit this next stage of her life. The dark blue fabric

and simple cut may have been a tad too grown-up for Yuki, but they showed off her long arms and legs beautifully.

Souhei still had the ball as he switched hands behind his back, feinted, and slipped past the defense. He was obviously controlling the game, and his face brimmed with confidence. Now that his voice was changing, his words came out low and hoarse.

Yuki listlessly shifted her gaze toward the ground. There was a reason for her mood—a few minutes earlier, she had happened to hear some other girls talking.

“That reminds me, did you hear the news?” one of them said.

“What news?”

“I overheard my parents talking about it...”

“And?”

“Souhei’s mom is getting married.”

“What? You’re kidding!”

“Why?”

“Prob’ly ‘cause she’s so pretty.”

“So Souhei’s gonna have a new dad.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Well, maybe.”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard he doesn’t know yet.”

“No way!!”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t tell anyone, okay? It’s a secret.”

A secret, they said. Why would his mother keep something so important from him? She seemed so strict. What was really going on with her? Yuki couldn’t even begin to guess. More than anything, she wondered why people who had

nothing to do with the situation—herself included—would know about it before Souhei. What the heck was so secret about it?

*Bang!*

The sound snapped Yuki out of her reverie. The basketball net was swinging. Souhei had made his shot and was grinning excitedly.

Yuki couldn't stand it anymore. She put on her backpack and hurried out of the gym.

The midnight shadows of gently swaying trees moved across the bedroom.

Ame sat up in bed. He rose slowly and silently slipped under the mosquito net. As he quietly pulled the sliding door to the bedroom shut behind him, he abruptly stopped and looked back into the room.

Hana was sleeping inside the mosquito net with the book she had been reading on her pillow. Ame gazed at the scene for a moment, then continued on to the entryway and noiselessly opened the door. Moonlight illuminated his feet where he stood rooted to the ground. He did not leave the house, but neither did he go back inside. He just stood still.

“—”

He didn't know how much time passed, but the sky began to grow lighter. Finally, he sat down and looked up. The silhouettes of the trees rocked in a gentle wind.

Night gave way to dawn.

Several hours later, the morning radio broadcast echoed faintly in the empty entryway.

“...A high-pressure system is expected to bring mostly clear skies throughout the prefecture today, but as the front advances toward the Sea of Japan, weather conditions will likely change through the evening and night.”

Yuki ran into the entryway, ready for school. “It's so muggy!” she complained as she sat down, fanning her legs with the hem of her blue dress, and put on her shoes.

“Yuki.”



“Huh?”

She looked up to find Ame standing over her. Ever since their fight, the two had kept their distance and stayed out of each other’s business. They didn’t talk unless they had a special reason to. It wasn’t that they didn’t get along, more that each sibling respected the other’s position and gave them the space to live.

Today, though, Ame took the initiative to speak to Yuki.

“Stay home today.”

“Huh?”

“Stay here with Mom.”

Yuki stood up and looked at Ame. “Why?”

Just as Ame started to answer, Hana poked her head into the entryway.

“You’ll miss the bus, guys!”

“Okay, Mom.”

Yuki turned toward Hana with a smile, then looked back to Ame.

“Stay with her,” she whispered to him as she headed out, her backpack swaying lightly.

“—”

Ame watched her go, then looked up at the sky. A damp wind was blowing around the house.

“—Ame.”

Hana gazed worriedly at his back.

“—”

He didn’t answer, his face still upturned.

“—Ame!” she yelled.

He whirled around with a start. “—”

She eyed him severely, but a moment later, she softened her gaze.

“...Let’s go inside.”

A threatening wind blew across the verdant July stalks of rice.

Swallows brushed the leaves as they flew low over the paddies. Inside the classroom, the curtains ballooned as clouds blotted out the sunshine. Yuki, sensitive to the slightest change in weather, glanced outside. Layers of dark clouds towered on the horizon. She could feel the approaching storm.

At the same moment, the plants in Hana's backyard were swaying in the wind.

The radio, which she'd left on all day, blared its warnings.

"...The front that stalled over the Sea of Japan is now moving south, and as a result, atmospheric pressure over the prefecture has rapidly become unstable. Local showers of extremely heavy rain and lightning are expected. On the plains, hourly rainfall may exceed seventy millimeters per hour, and in the foothills, it is expected to exceed one hundred millimeters per hour."

Hana suddenly remembered she had hung laundry out to dry. She stopped making lunch and hurried out to the backyard to pull the flapping clothes and towels off the line. Ame took her place in the kitchen and watched her through the window as the raspy voice on the radio continued its announcements.

"...The weather station has issued a prefecture-wide flood and heavy-rain warning. Residents are advised to prepare for landslides, flooding of rivers and houses, and other damage. The following warnings were issued at eleven AM. The northwestern part of the prefecture can expect heavy rain, thunder and lightning, and flooding. The southwestern part..."

The wind was picking up. With Ame's help, Hana started preparing for the storm. He carried in the storm shutters from the barn and passed them to his mother, who slid them one after the next onto the curtain rails on the sliding doors lining the porch.

The herbs in the front garden waved madly. As he walked back to the barn, Ame stopped and looked slowly up at the sky.

"Ahh!!" Just then, a gust of wind had knocked Hana off balance.

"\_\_"

Ame stared at her frail figure tottering on the porch.

*Splish, splash, splosh...!*

Raindrops spotted the asphalt.

*Pattapattapattapa...!!*

They fell noisily onto lotus leaves, gathering quickly into larger pools at the centers.

*Fsssshhhhhhh...!!!*

In an instant, the sprinkle was a downpour. On the far side of the floodgate, a single crane took flight, belatedly fleeing the storm as dark rain clouds blanketed every corner of the sky.

The nervous students sat under the sickly fluorescent lights.

With each gust of wind, the wooden school building creaked.

Mr. Tanabe returned to the sixth-grade classroom and briskly erased the words *study hall* from the blackboard.

“We’re expecting heavy rains, so afternoon classes have been canceled.”

“Yay! Yippee!” The students burst into a flurry of excitement.

Mr. Tanabe scrambled to regain control. “We are currently contacting your mothers and fathers to come pick you up. We’ll all head to the gym to wait for them. Please sit with the other children from your neighborhood.”

A wave of students from all grade levels carrying backpacks surged into the hallways. Unlike the tense teachers, the excited crowd of children heading for the gym smiled with the happy thrill of a break in the routine.

Souhei sat alone in the classroom, as if he’d been forgotten.

“\_\_”

He stared silently out the window from his desk.

The hard rain drummed on Hana’s house, and rainwater poured off the roof like waterfalls. The front garden was already mottled with pools. The trees shivered noisily.

With all the doors and storm shutters closed, the inside of the house was as dark as night, even though it was just after noon. Hana sat in the main room silently folding laundry under the feeble glow of the light bulb, and Ame sat quietly in his chair at the dining table. Neither one said a word.

Ever since the day he had come home soaking wet, Hana had feared he would wander off again, constantly praying he would stay by her side. As if silently complying with her wish, he had not left the house since then. Instead, he stayed within his mother's sight, staring out the window from morning till night.

This situation did not put Hana at ease, as she realized he was sacrificing the world he had found for the sake of her wishes. Nevertheless, she couldn't stop wishing for it. She was being pulled apart by the conflicting emotions, which was why she had remained silent for so long.

*Crk-BOOOOM!!!*

The clap of thunder shook the house.

“—!”

Hana gave a start, then huddled lower. A second later, the lights went out and plunged the main room into darkness. The only remaining light came from the kitchen window.

“...Think it's a blackout?”

Hana looked up timidly toward the ceiling, then stood and felt her way toward the breaker. A pile of freshly folded towels toppled over under her foot.

Ame's shadow remained in the room alone, staring at a corner of the table. The light from the window glinted in his eyes.

Thunder rolled in the distance, like a signal that led Ame to slowly raise his head. The sharpness in his eyes spoke of a decision made over many days.

His quiet voice broke the silence in the room.

“...I have to go.”

In the terraced paddies, rice plants danced in the fierce wind and rain.

Water from the irrigation canals spilled over the asphalt of the agricultural

road, and the netting Hana had stretched over her vegetable beds to keep insects off tore and flapped in the wind. The columnar silhouette of a steel transmission tower stood stark against the fast-moving rain clouds in wind so strong it warped the high-voltage lines.

“...I see. I’ll head straight there.”

Hana placed the receiver back on the black telephone, headed for the hearth room, and pulled on her raincoat.

“Ameeee! Let’s go get Yuki from school,” she called through the wall, but he didn’t respond. “Ame...?”

She returned to the kitchen carrying the children’s raincoats. Ame had been there just a minute earlier, but now he was gone. Only his mug remained on the table.

“Ame? Where are you? Ame?”

She checked the main room, but he wasn’t there, either.

Just then, she heard the bang of the front door.

“?”

She looked toward the sound. Raindrops were blowing in through the slightly open door. Beyond them, she glimpsed Ame’s back.

“...Ame!!”

She shouted his name in surprise and ran to the entryway, pulled the sliding door open with all her might, and burst outside.

“Ame!!”

The gust of wind and rain blasted her so hard it nearly knocked her off her feet.

“Oof...!”

Beyond the wildly waving plants, she could just make out Ame’s form heading calmly through the storm toward the mountain.

“Ame!!”

She splashed through the drenched front garden, oblivious to how she must look, screaming his name. If she hurried, she could still bring him back...

She followed after where she'd seen him walking, down the lane to the road in front of their house, but...

"...?!"

...Ame was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh...?!"

She looked back toward the village, but he wasn't there, either.

"Huh...?!"

At a loss, she searched around desperately for him, her anxiety finally surging to the surface.

"Where are you?! Ame...Ame?!"

Then she looked toward the mountain and caught her breath.

"...!!"

*HWOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!*

The wind whipped past her with a terrifying howl; the frenzied lashing of the trees was reflected on the wet asphalt; myriad branches danced through the air and crashed one by one to the ground.

*Ame...*

Hana was positive he was heading for the mountain.

"...!!"

She made up her mind and strode straight into the powerful wind.

*HWOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!*

Her raincoat twisted around her in the wind and rain, so fierce she could hardly breathe. But she continued to resolutely place one foot in front of the next, climbing the path to the mountain. She was determined to bring Ame back home.

The downpour showed no sign of easing in the central part of town, either.

Cars with their headlights on splashed through the puddles, forming lines in the school parking lot as parents arrived to pick up their children, holding their umbrellas slantwise against gusts of wind as they dashed from their cars to the school building.

Inside the gym, mothers and fathers called out their children's names. Each time, the remaining children lifted their heads and, when they realized they had not been called, dropped them again dejectedly. One by one, they headed home alongside their parents.

Yuki watched the scene absentmindedly from her spot on the cold gym floor. Shino sat beside her, watching with a sigh as the younger students played to pass the time. The wait seemed like it would never end. Only Souhei kept an intense gaze fixed on the entrance to the gym.

*BABOOOOOOM!!!*

"Eek!"

Yuki and the other children shrank away from a tremendous clap of thunder. The gym ceiling shuddered, making the light from the mercury lamps flicker, and a girl from one of the lower grades with her bangs pulled back into her ponytail glanced anxiously toward the door.

"My mom and dad are taking a really long time..."

Shino and Yuki looked down as the little girl grabbed the hand of a boy with a buzz cut. Suddenly, Souhei spoke up.

"Don't worry," he said casually.

"But—"

Before the boy could finish his protest, Souhei leaned in. "If we get to stay overnight at school, I'm gonna play cards all night long!" he declared with a mischievous grin.

"Ooh, I wanna play!" The little girl was suddenly excited.

"Me too, me too!"

The little boy latched onto the idea as well, and their pouts turned to smiles.

“That sounds so fun!” Shino said, adopting Souhei’s enthusiasm and exchanging glances with Yuki.

The little girl smiled at Yuki happily. “It’ll be like camp!”

Souhei stood up. “I’ll go get some cards from the classroom.”

“Great,” Yuki said, watching him go with some relief, thinking about how boys were so good at changing the mood.

“Do you even know how to play cards?” the little boy teased.

“I only know Old Maid.”

“Dummy!”

“Hey, no fighting!” Shino scolded, just as her father walked into the gym.

“Shino!”

“Over here! You sure took your time, Dad,” she pouted. The big-sister act of a moment earlier had vanished, replaced by trusting childishness. Her father walked over, plastic slippers flapping noisily, and knelt beside her.

“Sorry! Boy, is this one nasty storm!” he apologized, scratching his head. He smiled warmly at Yuki. “I can give you a ride home, too, if you want.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Yuki, come with us!”

Shino stood up and slung her backpack over one shoulder.

Yuki knew Shino’s father well. Even though he was the third-generation owner of a well-established lumber company, he always dressed unassumingly and treated Yuki, who didn’t have a father of her own, as kindly as if she were his own. She had stayed over in their big old house more than a few times.

“Come on,” Shino prodded.

Yuki thought for a minute before turning them down with a smile.

“...I really appreciate it, but I’m sure my mom will be here any minute.”

She could see the younger kids playing tag out of the corner of her eye. She felt she should wait until someone came to get them, and she also had to



consider Souhei, who had gone back to the classroom. If they passed the time playing, Hana would come for her soon enough.

“Don’t worry about being polite,” Shino’s father said.

“Yeah!” Shino chimed in.

Yuki was grateful, but she said no again.

“If my mom’s already on her way, I don’t want to miss her.”

Shino’s father smiled. “That’s true. Well, we’re outta here, then.”

He stood up. Shino followed, waving apologetically to Yuki.

“Bye!”

“Bye!”

Yuki waved back and watched the father-daughter pair cling to each other as they stepped into the gale-force winds. As they hurried to their car, the wind turned their umbrella inside out, and Shino’s father pulled her to him protectively.

After they were gone, Yuki watched one child after the next leave with their parents. A scary-looking mother in a tracksuit quieted her crying daughter and set her on her feet. A kindly-looking father headed out hand in hand with his two children as if they were going on a picnic. A smiling elderly couple came for their grandchild.

Yuki watched them all, her arms wrapped around her knees.

The crowd of children in the gym had shrunk to just a smattering. The boy with the buzz cut skidded back over like a batter sliding into first base, wrenched off the cap to his thermos, and glugged down its contents.

Yuki was less worried about her own mother than she was about Souhei. At least half an hour had passed since he went to retrieve the cards.

“...He sure is taking a while,” she muttered to herself. Finally, she jumped up and ran off toward the classroom.

“Yuki!” the boy shouted, lowering his thermos momentarily, but she was already jogging out of the gym.

*FSSSSSSH HHHHHHHH...*

The rain lashed down; mist curled slowly along the base of the mountain.

“Ame...!!” Hana called his name on the path covered in bamboo grass they had once walked together. “Where are you, Ame...?!”

She called from the field of reed grass in which they had stood.

“Ame!!!”

She called from the bottom of the cedar tree where they had met Teacher.

But nowhere did she receive an answer in return. Ame was not there.

The mountain looked like an entirely different place in the storm, and Hana’s anxiety swelled. She climbed through a corridor of cedar trees where waterfalls of rain cascaded off the slope.

“—You promised you wouldn’t go to the mountain...”

She tripped and fell to her knees.

“You promised—”

Covered in mud, she got up and kept climbing.

“Ahhh!”

“I’m getting soaked!”

The students clambered noisily into the school van parked next to the gym. Mr. Tanabe stood next to the door, sopping wet in his raincoat, and gave each student’s back an extra push on their way in.

Mr. Tanabe had come into the gym just after Yuki left and announced that any remaining children would be given a ride home in the school van.

Panting, he pushed in the last student and peered around the inside of the van.

“Is this everyone? What about Yuki and Souhei?!”

The girl with her bangs pulled back leaned over the seat in front of her. “Shino’s dad said he’d take them home!”

“So they went with him?”

The girl shrugged; that was all she'd seen. The boy with the buzz cut broke in.

"I saw 'em both leaving the gym."

Mr. Tanabe pieced the two bits of information together and decided that both of them must have made it home. "Right... Okay then!"

He slammed the van's sliding back door shut, asked the janitor to lock up the school, and climbed into the driver's seat.

The van bounced over a puddle and headed out of the parking lot.

A thick mist hung over the beech forest, and the rain had slowed to a drizzle.

*"Hff...pff...hff..."*

Hana was gasping for breath, having been searching for Ame on the mountain for more than two hours. She was exhausted from hiking in the storm, and the slightest incline left her winded.

*"Hff...pff...hff... Ack!"*

Her foot slipped.

*Splash!*

Before she knew it, she was knee-deep in a puddle. Raindrops created a jumble of ripples around her leg. She crawled, groaning, out of the water, her hood pushed back from the force of her plunge. With each step, water sloshed noisily in her rubber boots. It was disgusting. She had to empty them.

She sat down against the base of a beech tree and tried to pull off one of the boots, but her weak hands kept slipping and making it difficult to get off. Finally, she succeeded. Her bare foot was soaked and pruny. She had rushed out of the house without socks or tights on. She held the boot upside down to drain the muddy water, then put it back on. Just this small effort had her panting again.

As she prepared to attempt the second boot, she heard something moving.

*Rustle...rustle...*

Far away through the mist, she glimpsed what looked like a human form behind a beech tree.

*"...Ame!!"*

She jumped up and made a beeline for him. There was no way a hiker would be out on an unknown mountain trail in this weather—it had to be Ame. She stepped off the trail into the dense forest. Ignoring the bushes clawing at her feet, she flung herself into her pursuit.

“Ame!!”

*Rustle.*

It was hard to see through the mist, but it definitely looked like Ame. He stepped into the shadow of a tree, probably still oblivious to her.

“Wait...wait!”

She yelled as loud as she could. It was hard to push through the thick undergrowth and tree shoots, but her joy at finding him carried her feet forward. As she drew closer, the silhouette came into focus.

“Ame...!”

She was so glad to find him safe. *Let’s go home now. Let’s go get Yuki.*

Just then...

*Splash!*

Her foot landed in another puddle, and she froze.

“...!!”

Very slowly, she pulled back her leaf-plastered rubber boot. The form slowly emerging from the shadow of the beech tree was not that of a human.

It was a full-grown black bear.

*FSSSSSSSHHHHHHHHHH!!!!*

Suddenly, the rain was pelting down again.

Hana stared dumbfounded at the bear and began backing away with extreme care, all the way into the branch of a young beech tree where she dislodged a shower of raindrops. Then her back hit the trunk, and she could retreat no farther. Still, she knew she must not take her eyes off the bear.

It slowly turned its gaze toward her. Water was dripping from its chin.

The bear was far bigger than she had imagined. Conceptually, she knew that black bears were not as ferocious as brown bears, but faced with a real one, her legs turned to jelly nevertheless.

The fear paralyzed her. A drop of water rolled down her chin and fell to the ground. All she could do was stare.

She had never seen a real black bear before. When they first moved to the country, a town employee had warned her that one reason so many houses were empty was that bears and boars and monkeys had started coming down from the mountain and damaging the crops. A bear could happen anytime, he'd said.

In fact, she often heard stories from other villagers about bears barging into houses, and a good number of people had been seriously injured in bear attacks. Usually, boars or bears that attacked people were exterminated by the town's Department of Wildlife Control. Mr. Horita was one of the hunters the department hired to do the job, which meant Hana had seen dead bears any number of times. Mr. Horita had joked that if she ever saw a bear, she should call him, and he'd come running with his shotgun to save her.

Still, over the past seven years, she'd never encountered a live bear, let alone lost her fields to one. She figured the wolf smell from Ame and Yuki prevented other wild animals from coming near, but she suspected that wasn't the only reason they'd been spared—it seemed more as if the bears had avoided invading their living space out of a kind of respect. Grandpa Nirasaki had told her that in the old days, when the countryside was well maintained, bears and people had an unspoken agreement as to who lived where, and encounters were rare. If she had accidentally recreated a similar arrangement with her mountain lifestyle, then it would make sense that she never saw one.

But this was another matter altogether.

Hana had invaded the bear's living space for a reason that would be unthinkable under normal circumstances. If something happened, all she could do was give in to her fate...

The bear kept its eyes fixed on Hana.

Perhaps only a few seconds passed, but to Hana, they felt like minutes or

even hours.

“\_\_”

Just then...

*Pitapatapitapata...*

The rain suddenly lifted.

“Kreeee!”

The bear heard the noise and looked to the side, where two cubs came bounding out of the undergrowth.

“...!”

Hana listened in a daze as they squealed. One of them glanced at her but continued on its way, apparently uninterested. The other nosed at the larger bear and grunted as if to prod it on. The larger bear still seemed on guard but eventually gave in to the cubs’ urging and lumbered away into the mist.

*A mother bear.*

Yes, Hana was sure of it—that was a mother. She must have lost her cubs in the storm and gone looking for them. And happily, she had found them. But what about Hana herself? What was she doing out here?

“...Ame.”

As she whispered his name, the strength drained all at once from her body. She slid down the beech trunk she had been leaning against and sank onto the ground.

“...Ame...where are you?”

For a while, she didn’t move.

Already evening was nearing.

Reflecting the blue light from outside, the desktops looked almost as though they were floating in the air.

Souhei opened his eyes. He had been sleeping facedown in the dark classroom. He slowly stood, yawned, and stretched, then glanced at the door

and yelped.

“...Ahhhh!! What are you doing here!”

Yuki stood in wide-eyed surprise, unsure how to respond.

“Well...you were taking forever.”

When they got back to the gym, everyone was gone. The cold light from the mercury lamps reflected off the empty floor.

“Huh? Where is everyone? Did they all go home?”

“I guess we’re the only ones without anyone coming for us,” Souhei said, grabbing his abandoned backpack. Yuki picked hers up, too.

“...I wonder if something happened to my mom.”

She knew her mother would never forget to pick her up. They must have missed each other, or else there was some reason Hana couldn’t get there. Yuki tried to think of what that would be, but she couldn’t. “...It’s cold.” She rubbed her arms, bare in her sleeveless dress.

“Let’s take a look around,” Souhei said. He glanced at her and headed toward the exit.

She stayed behind, her worry clear on her face.

“Yuki.” Souhei was calling her.

She snapped back to the present and jogged after him.

“Hey, wait for me.”

They wandered around the desolate school.

All the lights had been turned off in the hallways, leaving only the blue glow from the windows and the red of the emergency lights. They glimpsed a chilly-looking cot through the open door to the school clinic. Outside the dining hall, a stainless steel food delivery trolley glistened dully. The schedule scrawled on the blackboard outside the staff room seemed to belong to a different universe. Everything about the empty school felt lonely.

Thunder rolled in the distance.

“What will we do if they don’t come for us?” Yuki asked.

“We could live at school.”

“That’s impossible.”

“At night, we could sleep in the clinic.”

“What would we eat?”

“Leftover school lunches.”

“If they never come for us? We’d just live at school forever?”

“We could get jobs. Like delivering papers or something.”

“We’re kids. No one’s going to hire us.”

“We’ll lie about our age. We’ll say we’re in junior high.” Their reflections hovered in the big mirror over the landing on the main staircase. Souhei looked at himself. “Do we look like we’re in junior high?”

Yuki looked in the mirror, too, and saw a thin, helpless child staring back. No way would she pass for a kid in junior high. “...Nope.”

“Really?”

Souhei craned his neck at his reflection. Yuki disentangled her finger from a lock of hair and mumbled at her own despondent reflection.

“...I wish I could hurry up and become an adult.”

Souhei looked at her, then turned back to himself.

“Me too.”

*“Hff...pff...hff...”*

Dozens of leaves clung to Hana’s raincoat.

*“Hff...pff...hff...”*

The path was a minefield of puddles sucking at her feet. She leaned against the slope, its rocks and mud laid bare by the pelting rain, just managing to stay upright.

*“Hff...pff...hff...”*



The path was too narrow to even call it a hiking trail, hardly wide enough for one person to scale the steep slope. The earth had been washed away, leaving roots exposed. The birch trees grew densely all the way to the base of the bluff, and their twisted brown trunks reminded her of the bones of a deformed animal. She had heard they were the first trees to grow in the highlands after some great cataclysm—which meant this place where she stood now had been wiped out once in the past, too.

She must have climbed quite high. She had been roaming the mountain for a long time, searching without luck for Ame, and she realized she was lost.

She had no idea where she was walking. Her vision was so blurred she could hardly see in front of her. And she was cold.

*“Hff...pff...hff...”*

*Ame...*

Where was he?

*Ame...*

Just then, her foot slipped on the slick root of a birch tree.

*“—?!”*

She snapped out of her daze and looked down the steep bluff. But as she did...

*Bambambambam!*

She began sliding helplessly toward the ravine bottom.

She clawed desperately at the dirt, but she couldn't stop. She stretched her hands out frantically.

*Slap!*

They hit something—a birch sapling, and she just barely managed to grab on to one of its branches. As the branch bent, its leaves sent a shower of raindrops onto Hana's muddy face.

*“Hff...pff...hff...”*

She was panting hard. If she slipped any farther, she wouldn't be able to get

back up. She gathered all her strength and reached out her other hand.

“Ooof...! ...Urgh!”

By stretching as far as she possibly could, she managed to curl her fingers around the branch.

“Hff...pff...hff...”

She wrung the last ounce of strength from her body to crawl upward.

She could hear the birch creaking as it bent under her, and she could feel her hand beginning to slip. She clenched it as hard as she could.

“Urgh...uffff...!!”

The next instant, the tension was gone under her hands.

“?!”

The birch sapling supporting all her weight had been uprooted.

After that, everything happened very quickly. She tumbled head over heels down the drenched slope, her body slamming against bushes and small trees, her skin tearing against the branches. But nothing stopped her descent.

The branches snapped noisily.

*Bambambambambam...!!!!*

Eventually, the sound died away. All that remained was the pounding of the rain.

“...Ah...ugh...”

Hana groaned weakly at the bottom of the cliff, hidden by trees. Her whole body throbbed with a peculiar feeling somewhere between pain and numbness. She tried to move her hand and realized she couldn't. Again, she tried, with all her effort, but she managed only the slightest twitch of her fingers.

The effort drained the last of her energy as the rain picked up again. The world grew hazy, till she could no longer make out shapes, and suddenly everything was very cold. Her lips quivered from the chill. From within her delirium, she thought of Ame.

“...Ame...are you shivering...somewhere...? Are you crying...because you can’t go home...?”

When she thought about it, she realized just how many things had frightened him since he was small. He was a crybaby, such a fragile child, and sickly and stubborn, too. And despite all that, a mama’s boy...

*I’m all he has.*

“...I have to...protect...him...”

The raindrops beat against her body mercilessly.

“...I have to...protect...”

Those were her last words before she lost consciousness.

The janitor was checking the door of each classroom to make sure it was locked.

His flashlight lit up the landing of the main staircase. No one was there. The door to the sixth-grade classroom opened with a bang.

“Anyone in here?”

His voice echoed through the darkness, but only silence answered him. The beam swung across the classroom, and soon after, the door banged shut. His squeaky footsteps receded down the hall.

Souhei poked his head out from under the desk where he had been hiding, then jumped out into the dark.

“...He’s gone,” he whispered.

Yuki peeked out from beneath another desk. She stood up and looked toward the door, her hands pressed to her chest.

“...My heart’s still pounding...” She peered at Souhei. “Hey, why did we hide?”

He was kneeling on a desk to look out the window. He didn’t reply.

“Souhei?”

“\_\_”

He still didn’t answer. Yuki gave up and looked out the window. Water

covered the whole playground. The wind carved across its surface, sending out sets of ripples.

*Like the ocean*, Yuki thought.

She felt like the deep blue might swallow her up. The rain blurred the far side of the playground, as if the storm had swept away the whole school and now they really were floating at sea. Countless raindrops slid slowly down the windowpane. She felt as though she was standing miles and miles and miles from home. If that was the case...

"Maybe we really will live here forever, in secret."

"If our parents don't come, we won't have a choice."

"What do you mean? I'm sure your mom will come." Yuki pictured his mother, remembering how fiercely she had attacked Hana that day at school.

"No, she won't."

"Why not? I mean—" Yuki caught her breath midsentence. The rumor she'd heard came suddenly back to her.

As if he could read her mind, Souhei answered evenly, still fixated on the window. "My mom got married. She's pregnant now. She said once the baby comes, she won't need me anymore."

Yuki was speechless. Was that even possible?

"...But she was so worried about you back then...!"

"I don't actually care."

"\_\_"

"I'm gonna run away and become a soccer player or a wrestler. I'll be a lone wolf." He climbed down from the desk. "Whaddaya think? Think I'll make it?"

Yuki didn't know how to respond to his half-serious, half-joking question. She barely managed a wry half smile. "...You wouldn't last five minutes. You're so skinny!"

"I'll work out. I'll get buff and live by myself."

He looked out the window again. Yuki's smile faded.

“—”

Souhei slowly brought his steely eyes back to her. Then suddenly, he laughed, flashing his white teeth.

“Hee-hee-hee!”

He seemed to be telling her it was their little secret.

Yuki’s chest tightened.

“...!!”

She was so miserable she could hardly stand it. She lowered her head and pressed a hand to her chest—the reason for her pain. Something had budded in her heart, and she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what it was.

“...Souhei...I wish I was like you. I wish I could tell the truth and keep on smiling.”

Really, she was talking to herself.

She made up her mind.

The next instant, she reached out and opened the aluminum window.

*Whoooooosh!!*

A gust of wind blew into the classroom, billowing under the lace curtain.

“—?”

As Souhei looked up, Yuki closed her eyes and let the raindrops blow against her whole body.

“—”

She slowly raised her head to face Souhei through the rolling waves of the curtain.

“Souhei...”

He looked back in astonishment. The wind had whipped Yuki’s long hair into a beautiful tangle.

“...Back then, the wolf that hurt you was me.”

Ever so quietly, she made her confession, and then she showed him her real self. A wolf.

Wolf Yuki.

“...It was me.”

Souhei stared at her. She bit her lip before continuing to speak, still in wolf form.

“This whole time, I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

He kept watching her as she returned to her human form and spoke again, now an ordinary girl.

“...It’s been so hard.” The blowing raindrops looked like tears on her face.

Suddenly, Souhei said, “...I knew. I knew the whole time.”

The calm reply startled Yuki. “...?!”

He lifted his face and closed his eyes. “I haven’t told anyone your secret. I won’t tell anyone.” He opened them and met Yuki’s. “So...don’t cry.”

“—!”

As soon as she heard those words, her eyes welled and overflowed. Everything she had kept inside, all the weight she had borne, everything she had hidden—it was all coming to the surface. She didn’t know how to stop the tears, so she smiled as big as she could and shook her head. She didn’t want him to see her like this.

“...Ha-ha...I’m not crying. These are just raindrops...”

Tears mixed with rain and rolled down her cheeks. She hid behind the billowing curtain and wiped her face, but they just kept coming. As she wiped them away, she realized she had to tell him one more thing. Two words.

She turned her tear-stained face straight toward him.

*Souhei—*

“Thank you.”

*FSSSSSSSSHHHHHHHHH...!!*

The rain beat down on the soaked playground harder than ever.

How much time had passed?

Rain poured softly onto the birch trees. In the darkness, thousands of ripples quietly spread outward and disappeared, and in the center of them lay Hana's body.

Leaves and branches and mud clung to her torn raincoat. Fresh cuts and bruises covered her face and hands. Her eyes had remained closed since she lost consciousness.

*Splash...splash...*

Something was coming closer.

*Splash...!*

Reflected in a pool of water, the form bent low over Hana's face. She did not wake from her sleep.

Hana was dreaming.

In the soft sunlight, flowers swayed in a gentle breeze.

"Ame...where did you go...? Ame...?"

Wearing her blue dress of so long ago, Hana searched calmly for Ame. When she turned around, she saw a form on the far side of the hill.

"...?"

It was Ame, his back to her, buffeted by the wind.

"Ame...!" Hana stepped toward him, her skirt billowing. "...I was looking for you. Let's hurry and get Yuki—"

As the wind blew softly between them, Hana realized something. The faraway form turning toward her...

It was him.

"...Hana," he said in his kind voice.

"...!"

Unable to believe what was happening, she stood staring, but there was no

mistake. It was him.

“...!!” She broke into a wide grin, bounded toward him like a fawn, and leaped into his arms. “...I’ve wanted to be with you again for so long...!!”

He drew her softly to him. His familiar smell surrounded her, and his body was so warm. In his low voice, he said, “You’ve been through so much because of me... I’m sorry.”

“...No.” She shook her head, brushing her face against his chest. He bent down to match her height.

“...I’ve been watching you the whole time.”

“I know.”

Tears of happiness spilled from her eyes. He nuzzled his forehead against hers.

“You’ve raised the children well,” he said, caressing her hair. How long had it been since someone did that?

“No, I haven’t. I’ve made so many mistakes.” She shook her head, her forehead still pressed against his. He peered into her eyes.

“I mean it. Yuki and Ame have both grown up beautifully.”

“But...” Hana opened her eyes, realizing something midsentence. “Ame... Ame’s gone.”

She slowly stepped away from him and walked over the hill, looking around and calling aimlessly.

“Ame!”

“Ame will be fine.”

“But...” She looked at him, still worried.

He smiled gently in the soft breeze. “He’s fine. He’s an adult now.”

She turned toward him, astonished. “...An adult?”

She had not fully digested the meaning of the words.

His eyes were kind as the wind blew between them again.



“He’s found his own world.”

*Swish...swish...swish...*

Still unconscious, Hana was carried through the misty morning forest in a pair of strong arms. No human could have found her where she was on the mountain, and yet she had been rescued. By the time she reached the village, the storm had let up entirely.

Morning was dawning when her body was laid gently in a parking lot at the base of the mountain. Her rescuer turned and headed back toward the mountain.

“...Ngh...owww.”

Hana awoke with a start. At first, she couldn’t open her eyes, but she groaned and sat up. All of her joints ached terribly. Finally, her groggy vision registered a blurry image.

In the distance, a figure was walking toward the mountain.

“Ame...”

It was definitely him. Now fully awake, she widened her eyes.

“Ame!” she called, trying to stop him.

He stopped and looked toward her.

“\_\_”

It was the biggest wolf she had ever seen. Ame. Wolf Ame.

She couldn’t stop herself from asking. “...You’re really going?”

“\_\_”

Wolf Ame stared back at his mother with an unwavering gaze. Tears pooled in Hana’s eyes. “But...I still haven’t done anything for you.”

“...!”

As if in response, wolf Ame turned fully toward Hana. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

“I haven’t done anything...and still...”

“?!”

Wolf Ame gazed at Hana, as if he couldn't stand seeing her in such a state. The wind ruffled his mane as if to express the emotion. He opened his mouth, seeming to want to say something.

“—”

But then, he closed it again slowly, and his eyes regained their calm.

The wind died away. As if that were his signal, wolf Ame swiftly turned around.

*Whoosh!*

Before Hana could say a word, he had raced across the parking lot and bounded over the fence.

“!”

For the first time, Hana looked up at the soaring cliff in front of her. Snowmelt thundered straight down from the summit of the rugged mass of stone, carved by a glacier, perhaps a mile wide and half a mile high. It seemed to announce that the land was not meant for human trespass. Indeed, even its nickname was “The Demon's Castle.”

Wolf Ame raced up this awesome precipice with lightning speed.

“Wait...!! Ame!!”

She stood up unsteadily, but a sharp pain shot through her leg and sent her to her knees. Although she could follow him only with her eyes, she stretched her arms toward him.

Wolf Ame doubled back along the cliff face, scaling the rock with powerful strides. He slipped past the huge trees and leaped across the waterfall. In the blink of an eye, Hana lost sight of him.

“...Ame!!”

She screamed and screamed his name, reaching upward with all her strength. Of course, she couldn't reach the cliff towering far above the clouds, but still her battered hand reached upward.

“Ame...!”

Her fingers strained to grab hold of the sky.

“...!!”

Suddenly, the strength drained from her body, and she slumped on the ground. The pain of loss stabbed deep into her heart. Ame was already beyond her reach. He would probably never return to his human form again. She could do no more for him—nothing at all.

“Ame... Ame...”

A sob escaped her chest. The cliff looked coldly down on her. And then, at its summit, Ame the Wolf appeared. He stood at the stony origin of the waterfall, lifted his head toward the heavens, and howled with such force the air itself trembled.

AWOO!!

“Ah!”

Startled, Hana looked up. The morning sun was rising from behind the eastern mountains as if the great howl had called it forth.

AWOO!!

It shone on Ame the Wolf as he faced the wind and howled mightily. His fur glistened brilliantly in the sunlight.

“...”

Hana was completely lost in this vision, this blessing. The pain of loss faded, and in its place, a wonderful strength surged through her whole body.

AWOO!!

Tears spilled from her eyes as memories of her boy came flooding back to her.  
The sound of rain in early spring.

The shrine where she held him as he cried through the night.

The field of reed grass where he hung his head and sobbed.

The day when she desperately tried to warm his icy body by the side of the

river, their first snow...

She could never forget these tender memories, nor could she measure the joy he had brought her.

“Take care...,” she murmured.

And then she gave him her biggest smile.

“Live well!!!”

The strong morning sunbeams illuminated the whole world as the last echoes of his howls faded away. He looked slowly down at Hana.

The wind picked up.

She smiled confidently up at him.

He was a magnificent, powerful, full-grown wolf, but his eyes were still the familiar eyes of Ame.

His fur glinted golden as the wind ruffled it.

Hana smiled a pure, clear smile and whispered once again:

“...Take care...”

The wolf returned her gaze as if in acknowledgment, then jumped lightly over the top of the waterfall and disappeared across the cliff.

Hana was left alone in the empty parking lot. The puddles on the asphalt reflected a bright sky. She stood for a long time staring at the spot from which the wolf had vanished. She knew she would never forget what had happened that morning.

The beech leaves had been washed clean, and the spiderwebs, and the sky. All of it glittered under the sun as if, Hana thought, the world had been reborn overnight.

The cycle of seasons advanced, and summer arrived in earnest.

Magnificent thunderheads formed a powerful mass in the pleasant blue sky. Hana’s house had completed its summer transformation. The garden was awash in brilliantly colored flowers.

No one was in the entryway with its doors thrown open wide. No one was in the big main room. No one was in the kitchen.

On the refrigerator, magnets held letters and pictures, and among them was one of Yuki, wearing her junior high uniform and joking around with her new friends with a brilliant smile.

Yuki had left home that year to live in the junior high dorm.

Hana herself had suggested the move. Yuki had asked if her mother would be lonely all by herself, but Hana had assured her that she wouldn't. After all, even if Yuki and Ame lived apart from her, she would still be their mother. Her face completely content, Hana had laughed and told Yuki that when she looked back on these twelve years, they seemed to have passed in an instant, like a fairy tale. It felt like looking at a distant mountain peak, she'd said. The way Hana smiled then made Yuki very happy.

Hana still lives a quiet life alone in her mountain house.

Yuki's desk still stands in the study, now tidy. Ame's desk stands beside it, just like it did back then. Their stuffed wolves still sit on the desks.

Sometimes, if she listens carefully, Hana can just barely make out a lupine howl, carried to her on the wind from the mountains far away. And that, she thinks with a smile, is enough.

The day Hana met him was a beautiful, fresh summer day just like this one.

When she thinks back now to the girl who didn't find it the least bit strange to fall in love with a wolfman, that girl seems quite extraordinary to her.

She eats her delicious grilled chicken skewers by herself and places one next to his driver's license.

*(The End)*

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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)