Ballad of a Shinigami 2

momo: the girl god of death



K-Ske Hasegawa

lightnovel

Ballad of a Shinigami

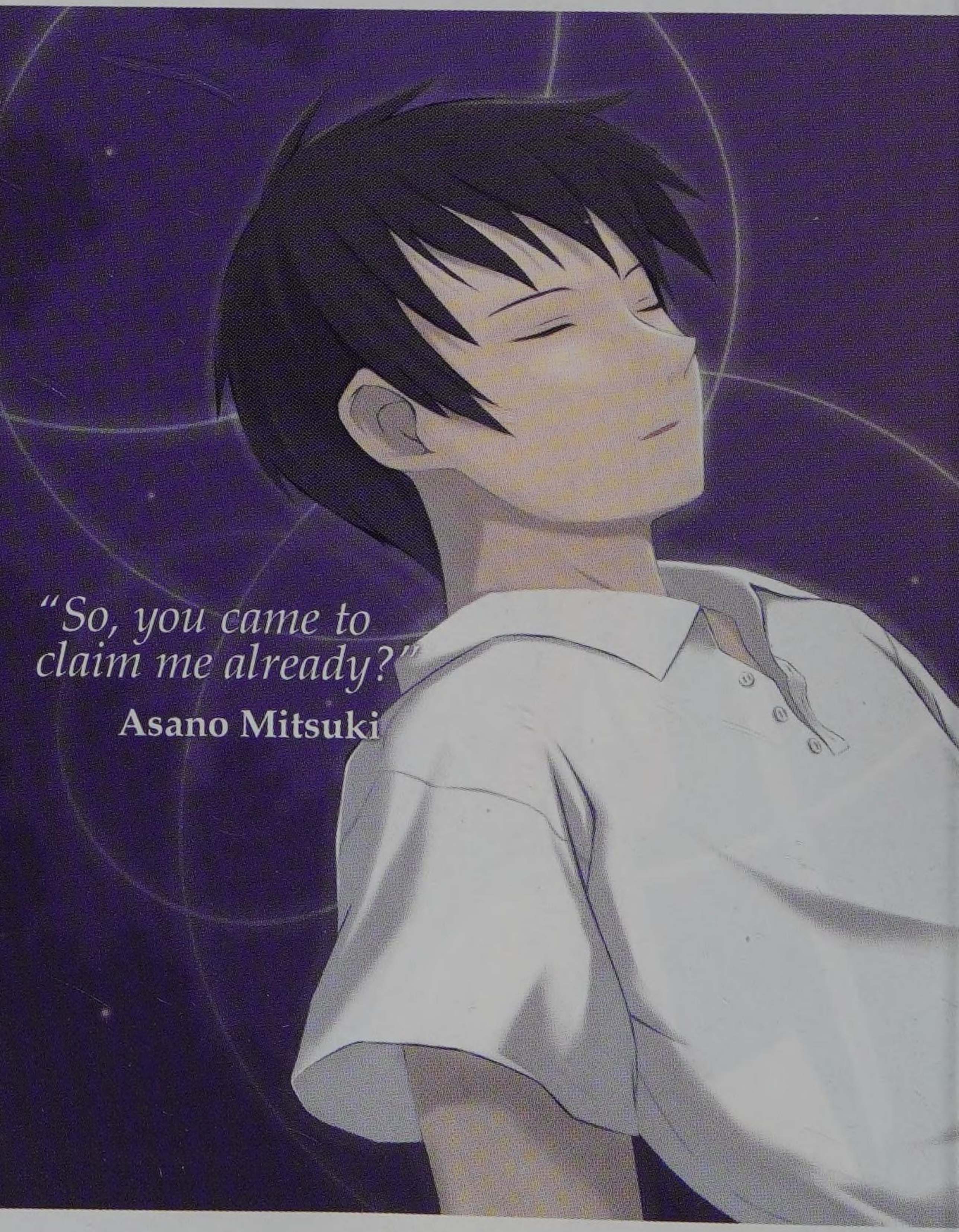
momo: the girl god of death

VOLUME 2



WRITTEN BY
K-Ske Hasegawa

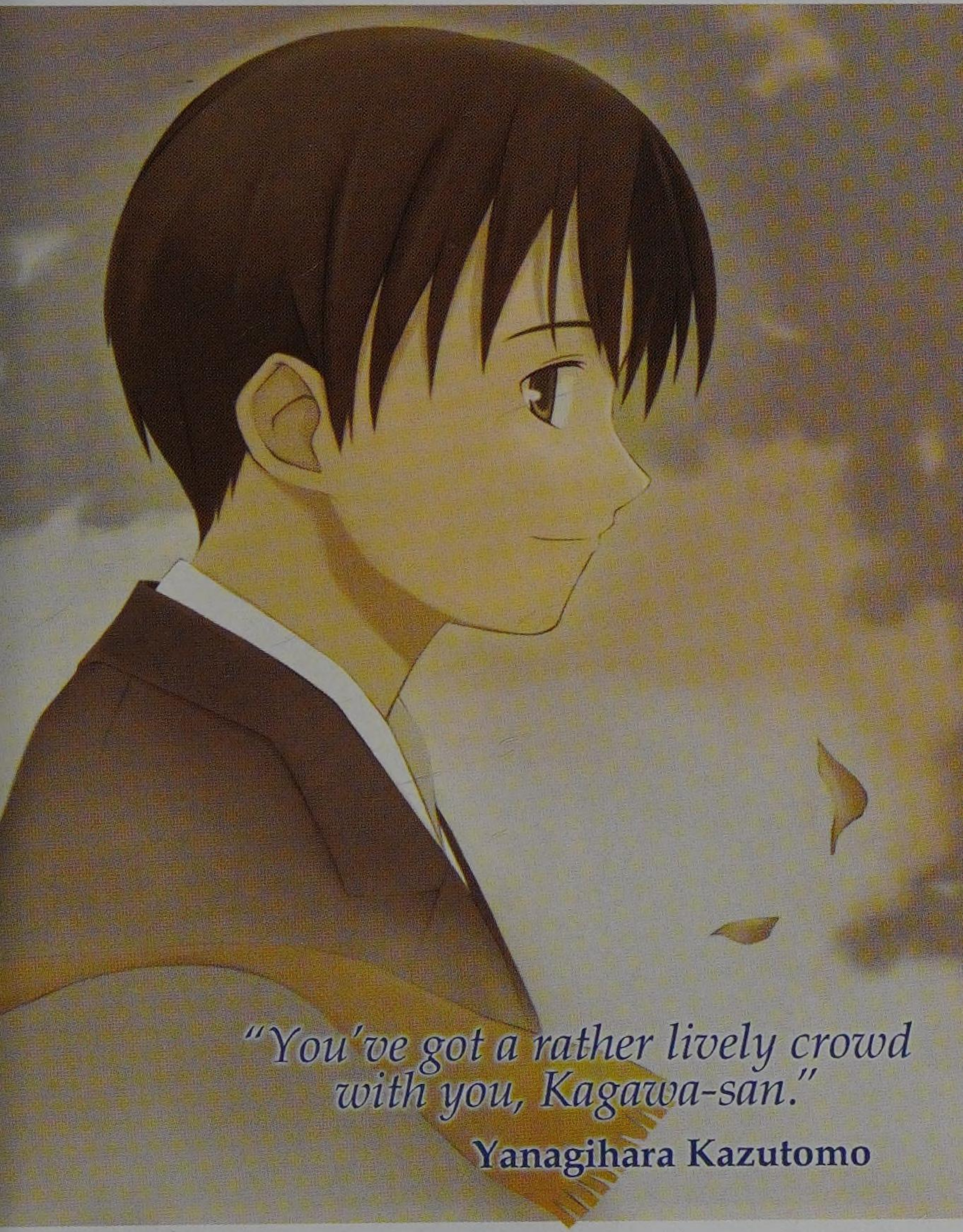
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Nanakusa


"So, you came to claim me already?"
Asano Mitsuki


"I kind of envy you."
Fujishima Yutaka

"What are you doing here?"

Kagawa Rikoko



"You've got a rather lively crowd with you, Kagawa-san."

Yanagihara Kazutomo


"Yes. Sorry to have kept
you waiting, my princess."
Harakami Seigo


"Don't leave me alone..."
Hirohinata Azuri

"...You've got a big mouth!"

The Black Shadow

"Let go of Daniel..."

The Girl in White

BALLAD of a SHINIGAMI

momo: the girl god of death

VOLUME 2

BALLAD of a SHINIGAMI

momo: the girl god of death

VOLUME 2

"My Girl"

WRITTEN BY
K-Ske Hasegawa

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Nanakusa



LOS ANGELES

BALLAD OF A SHINIGAMI VOL. 2
(Shinigami no Ballad Vol. 2)
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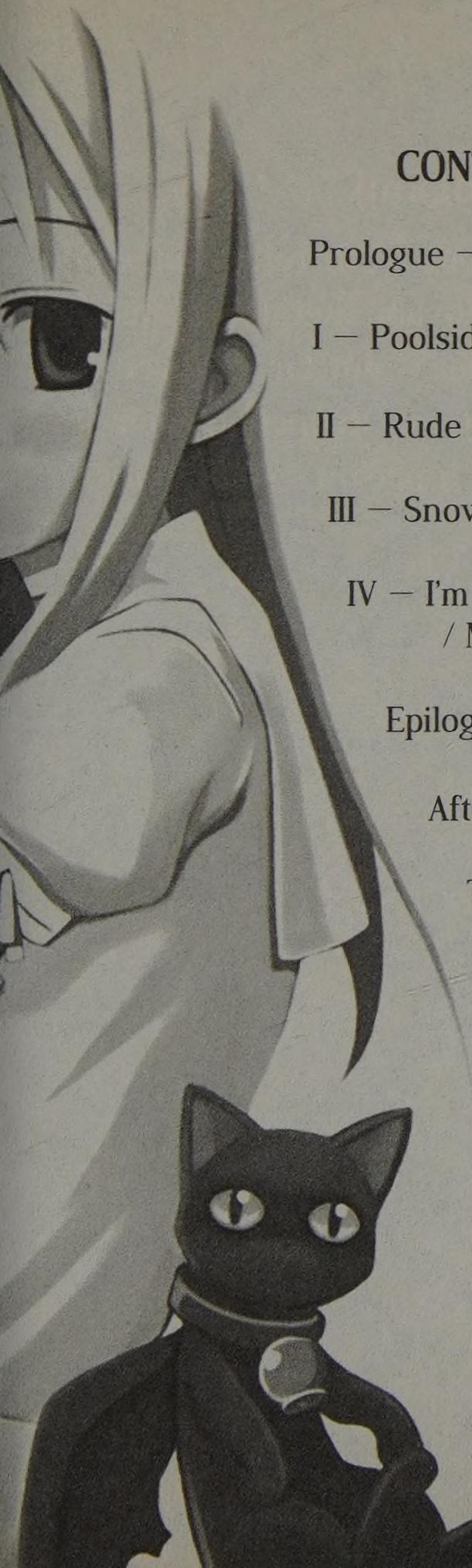
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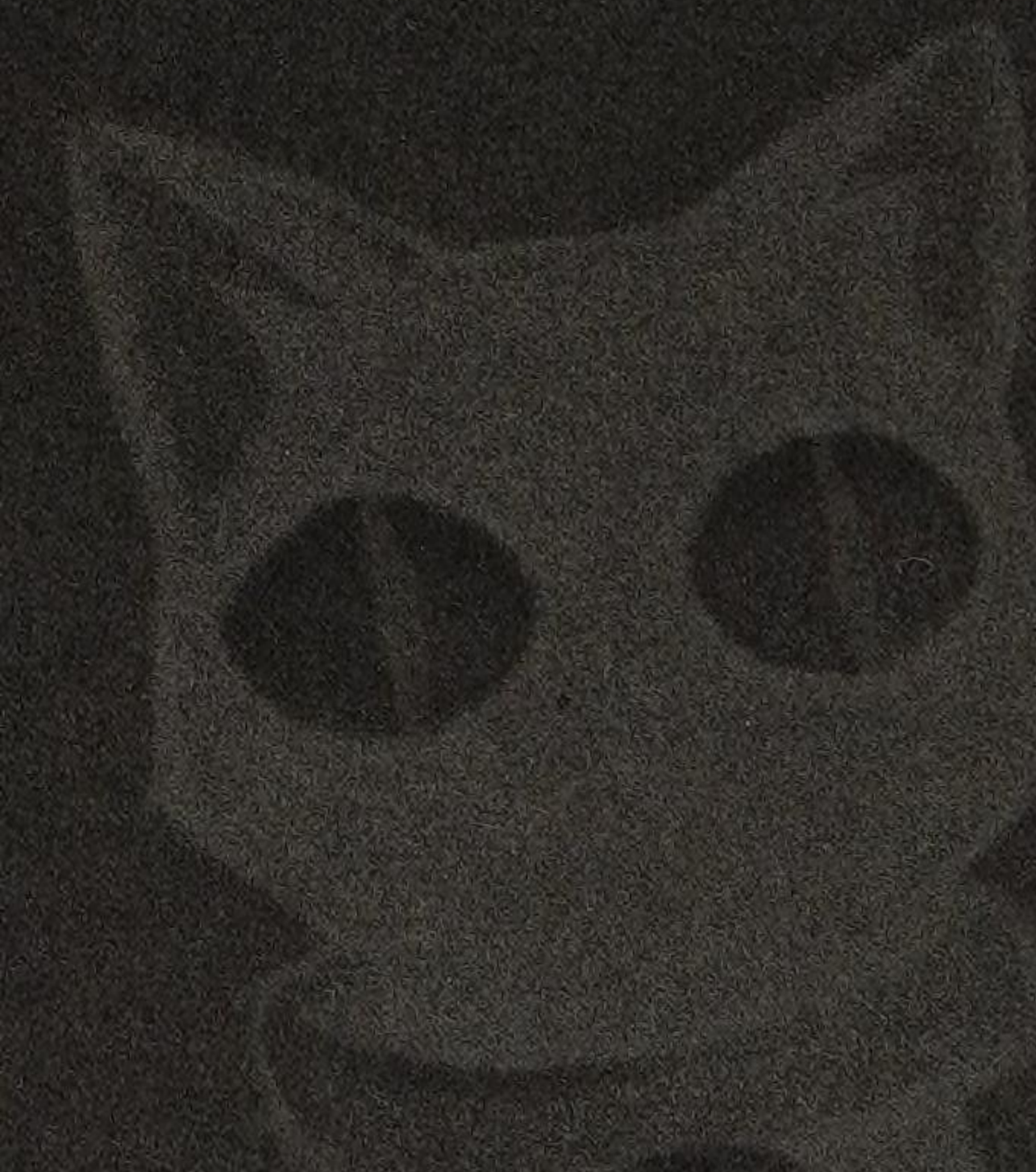
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What is a "Shinigami"?

The term "shinigami" in this book's title refers to the Japanese personification of death and literally means "death god." It is a concept that is not far removed from the Western view of the Grim Reaper, as their goals are the same—to collect a person's soul upon their passing.



SEVEN SEAS' COMMITMENT TO TRANSLATION AUTHENTICITY

Japanese Name Order

To ensure maximum authenticity in Seven Seas' translation of *Ballad of a Shinigami*, all character names have been kept in their original Japanese name order with family name first and given name second. For copyright reasons, creator names appear in standard English name order.

Honorifics

In addition to preserving the original Japanese name order, Seven Seas is committed to ensuring that honorifics—polite speech that indicates a person's status or relationship towards another individual—are retained within this book. Politeness is an integral facet of Japanese culture and we believe that maintaining honorifics in our translations helps bring out the same character nuances as seen in the original work.

The following are some of the more common honorifics you may come across while reading this and other books:

-san – The most common of all honorifics, it is an all-purpose suffix that can be used in any situation where politeness is expected. Generally seen as the equivalent to Mr., Miss, Ms., Mrs., etc.

-sama – This suffix is one level higher than "-san" and is used to confer great respect upon an individual.

-dono – Stemming from the word "tono," meaning "lord," "-dono" signifies an even higher level than "-sama," and confers the utmost respect.

-kun – This suffix is commonly used at the end of boys' names to express either familiarity or endearment. It can also be used when addressing someone younger than oneself or of a lower status.

-chan – Another common honorific. This suffix is mainly used to express endearment towards girls, but can also be used when referring to little boys or even pets. Couples are also known to use the term amongst each other to convey a sense of cuteness and intimacy.

Sempai – This title is used towards one's senior or "superior" in a particular group or organization. "Sempai" is most often used in a school setting, where underclassmen refer to upperclassmen as "sempai," though it is also commonly said by employees when addressing fellow employees who hold seniority in the workplace.

Kouhai – This is the exact opposite of "sempai," and is used to refer to underclassmen in school, junior employees at the workplace, etc.

Sensei – Literally meaning "one who has come before," this title is used for teachers, doctors, or masters of any profession or art.

Oniisan – This title literally means "big brother." First and foremost, it is used by younger siblings towards older male siblings. It can be used by itself or attached to a person's name as a suffix (-niisan). It is often used by a younger person toward an older person unrelated by blood, but as a sign of respect. Other forms include the informal "oniichan" and the more respectful "oniisama."

Oneesan – This title is the opposite of "Oniisan" and means "big sister." Other forms include the informal "oneechan" and the more respectful "oneesama."

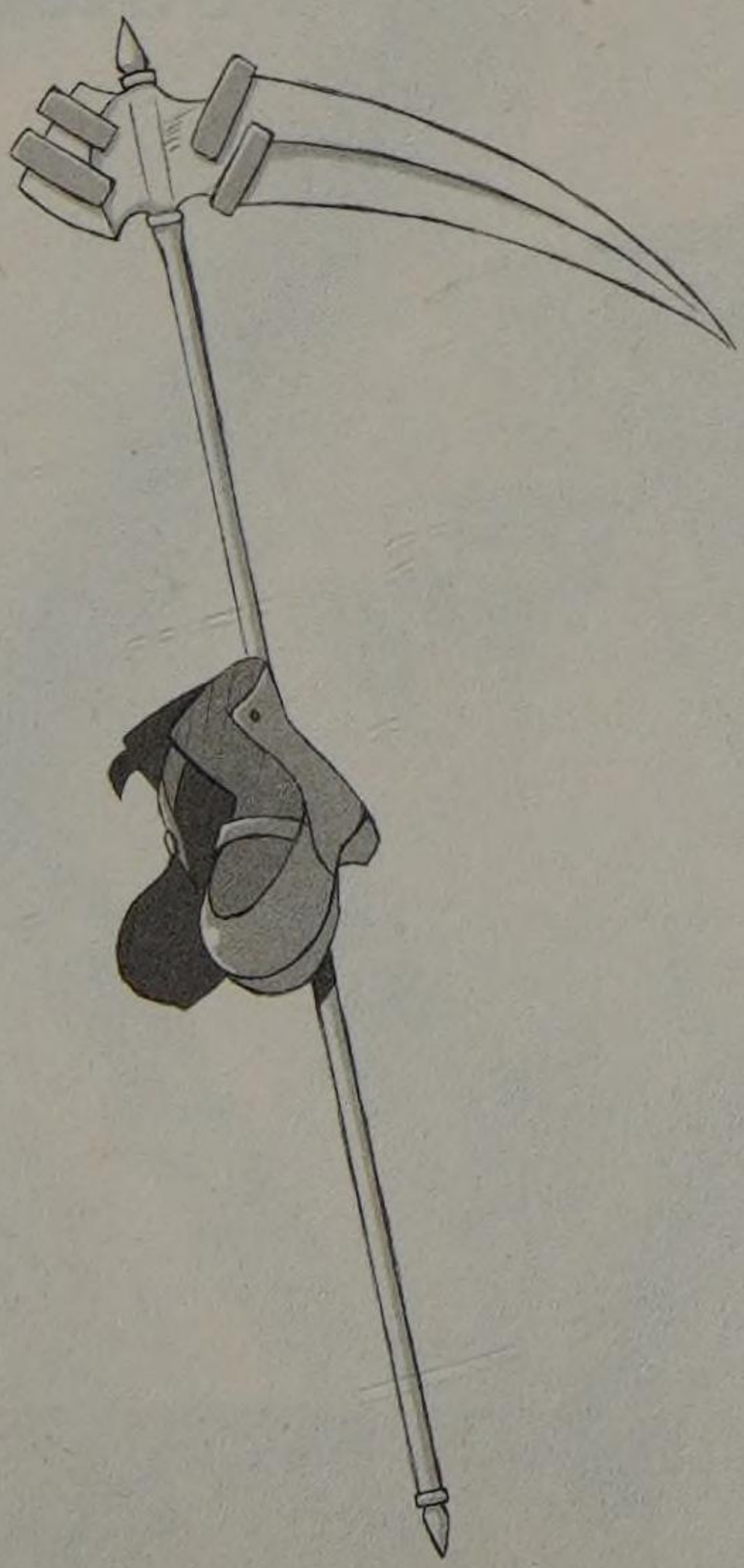
Hello, hello, can you hear me?
Hello, hello, are you there?
Hello, hello, here I am.

Prologue
Call Your Name

The black cat spoke. “Humans like to wish upon the stars. Do you want to make a wish, Momo?”

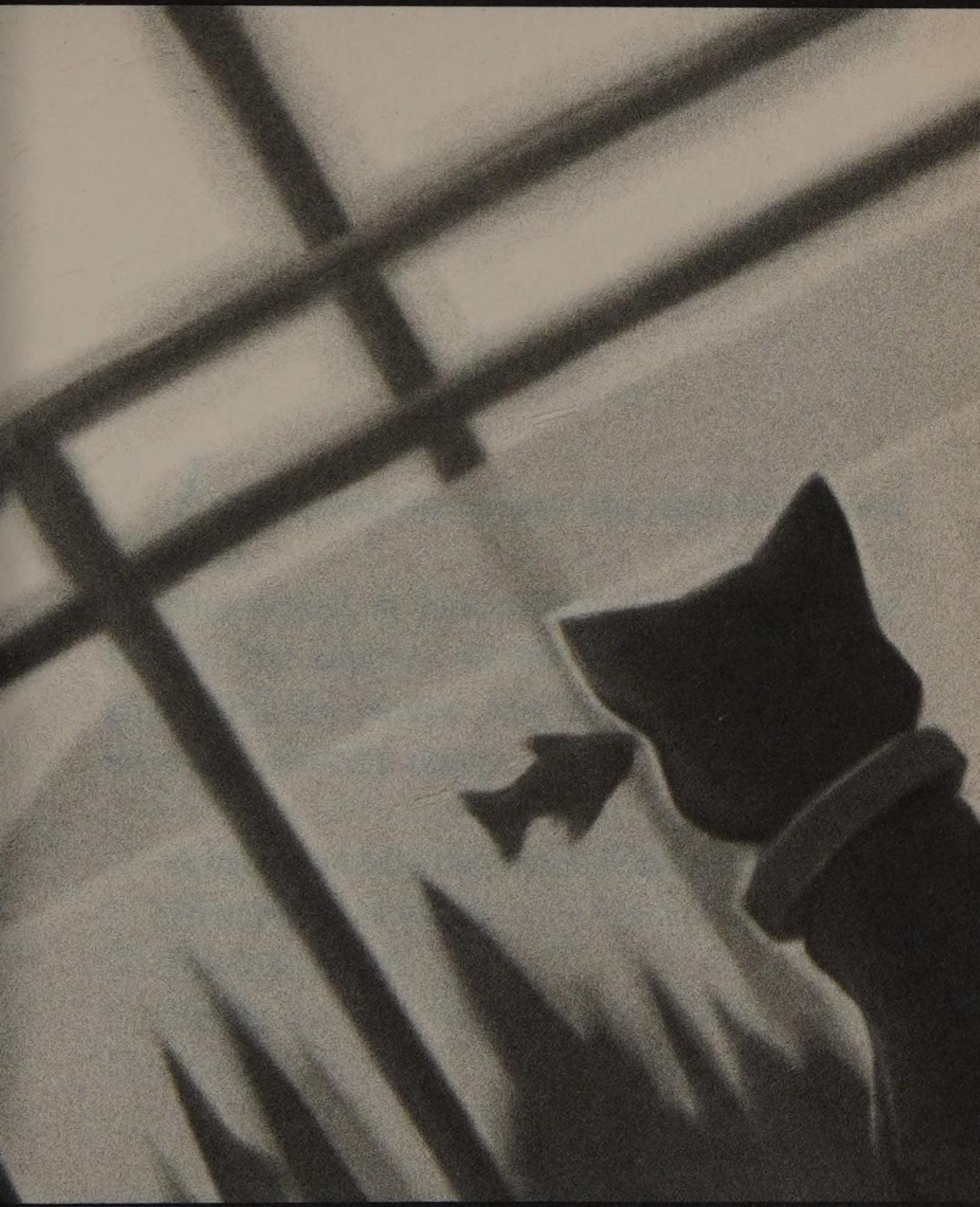
The girl clad in white smiled beautifully. “Hmm, what should I wish for?”

“…Whatever you feel like.”



I

A Pool without Water. Poolside Girl



– When we were still fishes, for example,
this was the life we knew.

♪

I used to love the summer. But right now, I want to hate it.

She smiled at him. Sitting by the pool, she smiled. The summer air felt particularly hot that night. Still, she smiled. And the moon, reflected in the water, wavered slowly.

A hand was held out, but it didn't reach.
Always out of reach.
Never to return.
Surely…

♪

It's never me that gets hurt. It's always somebody else.

I often wonder why it doesn't happen to me. Instead, it's always someone precious to me who gets hurt.

After class was dismissed, he went to the library. He didn't exactly read any books, nor did he study. Instead, he stood by the window and looked outside absentmindedly.

Before summer had even arrived, Asano Mitsuki had quit *bukatsu*.[1]

The summer of his third year in junior high was supposed to be a special season. A member of the boys' basketball team, Mitsuki played starting point

guard, a position that had earned him the trust—more or less—of his teammates.

But he'd quit. It wasn't because he found the activity worthless. And it wasn't because he'd gotten tired of the sport. One reason, he supposed, was that he hadn't grown as tall as he'd hoped. Generally speaking, that was a bad sign. He remembered with envy the energy that he'd had when he was younger, when he had still been so engrossed in basketball.

My dream now is to become a Major Leaguer! he told himself.

The Major League was baseball's professional league, as the NBA was to basketball.

But Mitsuki's main reason for quitting bukatsu was "that." He felt as if there was something else he needed to do. He couldn't explain it.

However, upon quitting, he found there was actually nothing else to do. In other words, he quickly grew bored. All of his friends were still busily immersed in bukatsu, concentrating on the remaining time they had left before they graduated. In contrast, Mitsuki—who had been a basketball gym rat ever since grade school—now had too much time on his hands.

So he went to the library, not because he wanted

to read, but because the library's air conditioning offered refuge from the summer heat.

Things didn't work out as well as he'd hoped. Global temperatures were rising year by year, as if something in this machine called the Earth was broken. Reciting the catchphrases of ecological and environmental preservation, the people in charge of Mitsuki's school had instituted a policy of energy conservation and had decided not to operate the air conditioning system even during the summer.

Mitsuki wanted to scream out loud, *Are you guys stupid?!* Last year the air conditioning had been turned up so high it had felt like it was freezing, even when he was playing basketball.

—Ring, ring, ring.

"…!"

The sound startled him slightly. But it was only the wind chimes near the window, swaying in the breeze.

It wasn't the ring of the bell.

Summer scenes unfolded outside the window. Mitsuki could see the swim team practicing in the

pool. There were so few team members, it made the pool seem too large. The water's surface reflected the sun's rays, shooting them straight into Mitsuki's eyes.

Although he had quit bukatsu, at that moment all he wanted to do was join the swim team.

"Come to think of it," he said to himself, "there's swim class tomorrow."

"Tomorrow…" Mitsuki mumbled in a voice so low that even he couldn't hear it.

He wasn't aware that he was speaking. His expression never changed, but his voice trembled terribly. However, the trembling was faint and probably would have been inaudible even if he'd raised the volume of his voice.

It wasn't necessarily true that tomorrow would be better than today. So today had to be lived to the fullest.

Bukatsu was neither worthless nor boring. Somehow he had gotten through it, and he could have continued to "get through it"; it might even have been fun. But he couldn't compete with guys who were serious about the sport and who considered the hard court a battlefield where one proved his self-worth.

His reasons for playing, compared to theirs, would be like a dash of cold water on their serious endeavors. Because he thought that way, Mitsuki had quit.

But there had to be something he could do. Something he was able to do. What in the world did he want to do?

Nothing came to mind.

So the days simply passed him by. Time progressed gently and vanished in an instant. And just like that, it seemed the time had come for Mitsuki to…

—Die.

Or so it seemed.

♪

—Ring.

The sound of a bell.

A sound that heralded the appearance of the little girl, a white-clad shinigami who said, "…you are going to die."

The girl shinigami spoke to him in a voice that was childish, yet at the same time strangely adult. He listened to the words as he lay atop his bed.

She even took the trouble of presenting her ID card to him, upon which was printed, “Shinigami #A-100100.”

Save for her shoes, which were conspicuously red, she was dressed all in white. Beside her stood a black cat, and in her small hand she held an exaggeratedly large scythe, taller than she was.

Although she was armed with the tool of the trade, all the other factors didn’t exactly lend her the appearance of a shinigami. A normal person probably wouldn’t know how to react, hearing such serious words coming from such a ridiculous-looking figure.

Maybe, one might even think, *what this little girl needs most is a ride to the mental institution.*

But Mitsuki accepted the news she gave him and thought, *I see.*

His acceptance of the grave news was something instinctive, like falling in love, something that logic could not define. Somehow, he had a feeling this had been unfolding for some time now. It seemed

ridiculous, but he believed the little girl actually *was* a shinigami. So he also believed what he was told, that he was about to die.

What he didn't understand was *why.*

After a while, the little girl added, "You're going to die. So you should live life to the fullest."

Such a strange one, Mitsuki thought. *She's handing me my death sentence at the same time she's telling me to live.*

She really was strange. She even smiled as she bid him farewell. Then the black cat cried out, "See ya!"

That's strange too, Mitsuki thought. *The cat—it talked.*

♪

It was dark. The moon and the twinkling stars felt closer than usual.

Mitsuki floated face up in the water, fully clothed. He had snuck out of the house. Taking care not to get caught, he had made his way to the school and quietly crept into the pool.

It was now past ten in the evening, but the night

air still felt humid and suffocating. Mitsuki floated like a leaf on a pond. He spread himself out and felt the pleasant coolness of the water all over his body. Because he was floating right in the middle, the pool felt much larger than it had looked earlier, when he had observed it from the window of the library.

At night, the school was guarded by a security firm and its guards. But their patrols usually only extended to the school itself and hardly ever included the pool. And even if they did come, if he remained quiet and stayed in the water, he wouldn't be seen.

It was his older sister, who had also attended this junior high, who had first told Mitsuki about swimming here at night. At the time, he had been in the third grade.

Subaru, his older sister, had told him, "Let's go somewhere fun." Then she had taken him to this pool at night, to float there just as he was doing right now.

The pool was located in an area facing the street. If you climbed the fence separating the campus from the street, you could reach the pool directly. If you weren't extra careful about stepping outside of the pool area, you'd probably get caught immediately by

security or by the police.

Of course, Mitsuki had no intention of getting caught. He just wanted to float in the pool and look at the sky. Just as he had on that summer night with Subaru.

He felt a soothing sensation. It felt good, but it was different from how he'd felt that night.

On that night, Subaru had laughed.

"In a pool at night," she had explained, "the sky gets reflected in the water, so doesn't it feel like you're swimming in outer space?"

She had reached her hand out into the night sky, as if to grab the silver moon. "I suppose fish are always searching for water like this," she had continued, "and a way to travel across outer space." Subaru had smiled happily.

Back then, Mitsuki had had no idea what his sister was talking about. Even now, he had no clue what her words meant. But it was a nostalgic kind of memory.

The water rippled from the night breeze. Each time, Mitsuki's body bobbed up and down gently in the waves. It felt nice. It felt like swimming in outer space.

Most people probably think only astronauts experience something like this, Mitsuki thought. *But right now, I'm swimming in outer space.*

Take that! he wanted to shout. *All of you out there in the world...and you, who aren't here.*

Mitsuki mumbled to himself again, "Subaru should have come... But, oh yeah... She's already done this so many times... I guess she doesn't need to anymore..."

The wind gliding over the water's surface caressed his cheek. He began to feel chilly, maybe even a little cold. He had spent all this time in the water barely moving, so his body might have gotten considerably chilled. He decided to call it a night.

Mitsuki made his way to dry land. He carelessly slapped at the water as he swam, making chopping noises. Something caught his eye.

What...?

Shocked, he sucked in a strangled breath as he became aware of a presence at the poolside!

Mitsuki froze in fear. Quite unintentionally, his eyes met those of the intruder.

"...!"

In a flash of recognition, Mitsuki realized he knew

this person's face well.

Oh my God, he thought in relief. He knew for certain the other person felt the same way he did. The other person was Fujishima Yutaka, his classmate.

♪

"…What are you doing?" Although he knew it was a stupid thing to ask, Mitsuki couldn't think of anything else to say in this situation. He had been so immersed in his own thoughts he had let his guard down. He had never even noticed Yutaka sneaking into the pool, just as he had done, and sitting down by the poolside.

"H-hey, what are you doing?!" he repeated.

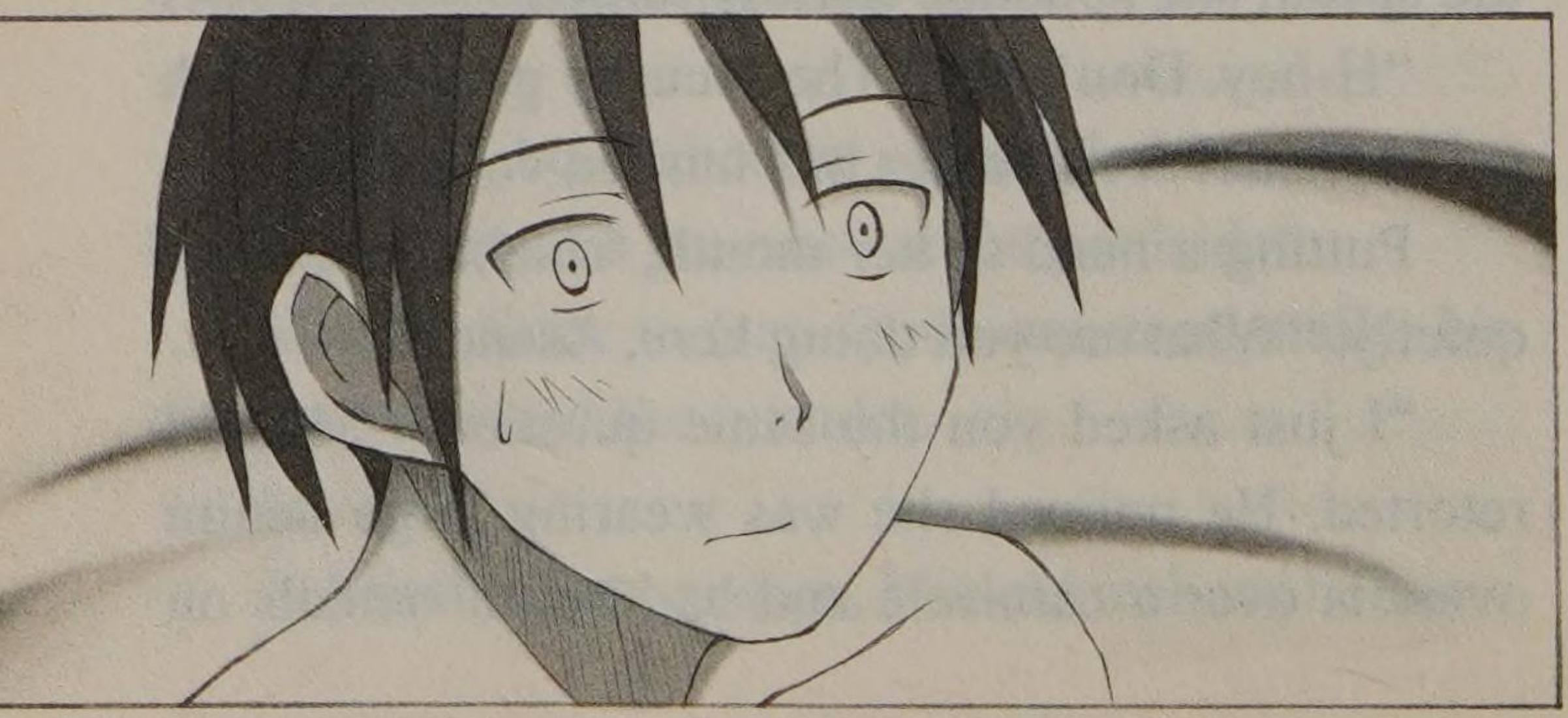
She never answered the question, but when she did speak, she sounded terribly rattled.

"H-hey. Don't yell! The security guards'll catch us!" Mitsuki scolded her in a hushed voice.

Putting a hand to her mouth, Yutaka said more quietly, "What are you doing here, Asano?"

"I just asked you the same question," Mitsuki retorted. He noticed she was wearing large denim overalls over a camisole and had beach sandals on





her feet—a casual summer style, the kind of thing one wore for a quick trip to the convenience store. To top it off, she actually was carrying a convenience store bag in one hand.

Why would anybody sneak into a school pool on the way back from a convenience store? Mitsuki wondered, but he was in no position to talk about the motives of others. Both of them looked rather suspicious just then. They remained frozen, silently eyeing each other.

"Uh…" Yutaka began uneasily. "Asano-sa…" She broke off, seemingly indecisive.

"What is it?" Mitsuki snapped, irritated by her sudden bashfulness.

What's all this modesty about? he wondered. *She usually acts so rude!*

But nobody else was around. They were a boy and a girl alone in this place. And, as it turned out, in front of this boy, the girl was shy.

It occurred to Mitsuki that it was almost as if they were acting out a "love confession" scene. But there was no way *this* girl would confess to him. That was just plain ridiculous.

But the next thing he knew, she really did con-

fess—only it wasn't the kind of confession Mitsuki had been entertaining. It was more of the "dangerously desperate" variety, rather than the "restlessly in love" kind.

"Just now," she explained, "I…released it… here."

"Released…what?" Mitsuki asked. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"Uh, well, you see… Anyway, Asano, I think you should hurry up and get out of the pool, okay?"

Again, he tried to ask her what was up. "Well, sure I'm getting out. But what is it? What's this about?"

"Uh…well, I…" she began.

"Yeah."

"Uh…these pira…" she tried to say.

"Bira? Pira? What?" Mitsuki asked in confusion.

"I'm saying…" she continued. "I released these pira… And so…"

"Huhhh?! I can't hear you, you know?!"

A slight wind blew, gently lifting Yutaka's long, brown-dyed hair. It also further lowered the water's temperature. Mitsuki shivered, but he had forgotten

all about exiting the pool.

"Come on already!" he urged. "Hurry up and spit it out."

It was cold. By now, his lips were undoubtedly colored an exquisite cobalt blue.

Hurry up, he thought. *Hurry up and say it. Don't keep me waiting!*

Finally, she did say it. She said an absolutely unbelievable thing. "I said… I just released piranhas into the pool, you idiot!"

"W-what are you saying…" he stuttered. "Oh… Oh my God… Are you serious…?!"

Yutaka nodded.

His mind wailed in a helpless and small voice. *I see—so that convenience store bag was carrying piranhas. Duh?! Why didn't you say that soon-errrrrrrrrrrrrrr!*

♪

Asano Mitsuki and Fujishima Yutaka.

The two of them had first met during class change-overs in the second year of junior high. Before that, they had gone to different grade schools. While in the

first year of junior high, their classes had been held in different buildings.

Mitsuki's first impression of Yutaka had been "typically modern, with a name that sounds like a guy's."

On the other hand, Yutaka's impression of Mitsuki had been "carefree, with a girly name."

That about summed up their ideas of each other. Curiously, however, they always managed to cross paths, even though they hardly ever spoke to each other.

For example, they had both skipped class on the same day. Both had played sick and ended up on neighboring beds in the nurse's office. Then there was the time Yutaka had nearly been caught by a teacher while she was putting on makeup in class. She had gotten rid of the evidence by throwing her bag, with all of her makeup in it, out the window.

From the second-story school window, the bag had scored a direct hit on Mitsuki, who had been walking below. He'd gotten splattered with foundation.

There was also the time when they had both reached for the last piece of yakisoba bread at the school co-op.

"I was first!" both had declared at the same time.

Unfortunately, Mitsuki had gotten clobbered first, and the yakisoba bread was taken away from him. Beware of Fujishima Yutaka.

The cooking class teacher had randomly assigned the seating arrangement. As luck would have it, the two of them had been assigned to be friendly "cooking partners" with each other.

What is this? Mitsuki had wondered. *Grade school?*

Though they had never intended things to be this way, their destinies definitely overlapped.

Now they were embroiled in the piranha-releasing incident.

"What an idiot!" With those words, Mitsuki scrambled out of the pool in a huff. Somehow he made it out safely, without becoming prey to the carnivorous fish.

Despite the incident, he felt it was all right. After all, he was also guilty of doing a stupid thing. Besides, the girl in white had said he was supposed to die soon. So it didn't really matter how, even though, deep inside, he didn't actually want to leave this world as fish bait.

No big deal, he told himself. *That was yesterday's news. I'm still here right now, after all.*

But part of him yearned for just a little bit more time.

It's all right.

When Mitsuki saw Yutaka the next morning, he said nothing.

Yutaka, on the other hand, wore a guilty look on her face, and all the way through class she kept sneaking peeks at the boy. Perhaps she found it disturbing that he could stay so calm and natural even after such an experience.

Every once in awhile, Mitsuki's eyes wandered from the chalkboard and ended up staring absentmindedly out the window. Other than that, there was nothing out of the ordinary in the way he acted.

He talked casually with friends and gazed out the window. That same old carefree optimism was still there, walking around in the form and clothes of Mitsuki, the Mitsuki that Yutaka knew.

What Yutaka didn't realize was that the expression on Mitsuki's face as he stared out the window

was deeply insecure and sad.

But how could she notice a thing like that, when even Mitsuki himself wasn't aware of it?

P.E. class.

It was fourth period, a little before noon. The sun slowly inched its way overhead. It was the perfect time to go into the pool. At least, it was supposed to be.

"The pool's closed," somebody declared.

While most of the boys wailed in agony, the girls shrieked in delight. They were at that awkward age where most dreaded the idea of wearing a swimsuit, especially the competition-type swimsuits, in front of the opposite sex.

It was no wonder. There were boys who stared lecherously at the girls. Of course they did. They were at *that* age.

How sad, the nature of adolescence.

The boys were trying to figure out the reason behind the cancellation of swim class. The replacement curriculum of volleyball, in the sweltering gym, was too much to bear.

"Why was it cancelled?" one of them asked.

"I heard there were dead fish floating in the pool."

"Fish?" another retorted. "What the heck? They cancelled class just because of that?!"

Mitsuki eavesdropped on the conversations as he played. Of course they were dead. Even piranhas couldn't stand the chlorine.

Suddenly, Mitsuki understood why Yutaka had done such a brutal thing, releasing piranhas into the pool.

Most likely this was her intention... he reasoned.

She must have done it to have the pool class cancelled. She had probably also wanted to make sure it stayed cancelled for a while. Yutaka's plan had turned out to be a big success.

Pool was cancelled. The boys had to play volleyball. And the girls had to go to dance class.

Come to think of it, Mitsuki recalled, *I've never seen her in a swimsuit.*

He searched his memory, from the time when he and Yutaka had first been assigned the same class together in second-year junior high. He was sure of it. He had never seen her wearing a swimsuit. Or even

attending swim class, for that matter. Last night was actually the first time he had ever seen her standing by the poolside.

Hmmm, he thought, *now why would she hate the pool so much...?*

In contrast, Mitsuki hadn't even hesitated to sneak into the pool last night just so he could jump into the water.

Whatever her reasons, Yutaka must have wanted pool class cancelled no matter what. Unfortunately for her, it didn't seem like it would be cancelled for long.

Although the fierce fish had fought bravely, they nevertheless had succumbed to the chlorine and by now were probably swimming happily in a fish tank in Heaven.

Luckily, there were no victims. The piranhas hadn't harmed anybody. The teachers didn't want to make a big deal out of the incident, so they wrote it off as a student "prank." Despite the fact that this particular group of adults had chosen the complicated job of teaching, adults hated complications, generally speaking.

Too bad, Fujishima Yutaka. Snickering with

malice at the thought, Mitsuki hit the ball.

"Super Deadly Move—Lightning Spark Legend!" shouted the boy who received Mitsuki's pass and smashed the ball down into the opponent's court.

"All right, Mitsuki! Nice toss!" he added with satisfaction, right after finishing the spike.

It seemed as if everyone was enjoying themselves after all, even without a dip in the pool.

For this P.E. session, the gym space had been split into two. On the other side, the girls were involved in some kind of mysterious original dance. An outside observer would only notice the strange choreography and weird rhythm of the girls' movements. It sort of looked as though they were merely stamping their feet impatiently, or going through the motions of the sumo foot-stomping ritual.

Amidst the chaos, Mitsuki noticed Yutaka. Each time she jumped, her long brown hair swayed in the air. The other long-haired girls took to the habit of tying up their locks, but not Yutaka. She did no such thing.

Isn't it uncomfortable? Mitsuki thought. *Getting your hair all sticky with sweat? Isn't it hot? Doesn't*

that make it hard to move around?

It suddenly dawned on him that he had never seen Yutaka tie her hair up.

He shrugged it off. *Oh well.*

Maybe there wasn't any real reason behind it. Or if there was, it was probably something ordinary. Everyone had their reasons. Even Mitsuki.

♪

"If you want to tell, go ahead. I don't really care," Fujishima Yutaka declared emphatically. Her feelings, however, seemed to belie her words. Although she'd said that she didn't care, her voice sounded angrily wounded, emotionally extravagant, and fearsomely genial all at the same time. She spoke in a manner that seemed to announce, "You better not tell, you jerk! You know what's gonna happen to you if you do, right?"

She wasn't a modern girl for nothing.

"…I won't tell," Mitsuki responded meekly.

It was time for the fifth period, and Yutaka had taken advantage of their being partnered together to confront Mitsuki. Although it was lunch break, the

teacher had called the two of them in, and they had gone to the cooking-preparation room.

The fifth-period class involved an experiment. At first, they worked on the experiment in silence. Perhaps unable to bear it any longer, Yutaka had finally blurted out those words to him.

Through the piranhas' sacrifice, her plan had become a brilliant success, and pool class had been cancelled. But Yutaka couldn't help but worry about Mitsuki, who knew all about the dirty deed.

She had steeled her resolve and confronted him, but Mitsuki's response deflated her momentum.

"You're not going to tell?" Yutaka asked, unsure.

"Like I said, I'm not gonna tell," Mitsuki stated again, in his usual carefree manner.

Perhaps she finally believed him because she let out a great big sigh of relief. It seemed she was feeling a bit tense. "Oh, I see. Then… Well, that's…fine…"

Relief set in and Yutaka's steely expression crumbled. She began to fidget shyly with her hair. Perhaps she suddenly felt foolish for having been so serious.

This time, it was Mitsuki's turn to ask, "Where did you get piranhas from anyway?"

She nodded. "That's a hobby of my dad's. We've got tropical fish tanks everywhere. I mean, our house is practically an aquarium. Seriously, I wish he would give it up."

"Really…" he mumbled. It made sense.

Gotta hand it to Fujishima Yutaka, thought Mitsuki. *The girl who commandoed a yakisoba bread with a punch. Who woulda thunk she'd steal her dad's pets just to cancel pool day?*

He chalked it all up to eccentricity. Plus, he had discovered something even more surprising. Awed, he stared blankly at Yutaka.

She confronted him, noticing his staring. "What are you looking at?" Her bad mood was back.

"Oh, sorry. I was thinking…"

"Thinking what?" she prodded.

"Uh. Well, y'know how it is? I mean, most people would call their old man 'effing old man' or 'old geezer'—it's like the 'in' thing to do. But you actually call him 'dad.' And I think it's kinda surprising."

"Huhhhh?!" Yutaka exclaimed. She blushed a deep crimson that reached all the way to her ears. She looked ready to pop steam from the top of her head like a boiling kettle.

"Are you an idiot?!" she blurted out. She looked down; perhaps she didn't want to be seen with her face all red.

"I'm sorry," Mitsuki said. "I didn't mean to tease you about it. I just thought it was surprising, that's all."

"Shut up!"

So she was mad after all. He pondered what to do. Reluctantly, he decided to talk about an embarrassing incident in his own past. Something he had never told anyone else, something he kept secret in case things went beyond his control.

"Calling him 'dad' is still okay," he said. "When I was little, I called my old man 'daddy.' I did that until I was in grade school."

Yutaka looked up in surprise. "Huh? Are you serious?"

"I'm serious," he answered. "It was a gag my old man played on me. And Subaru…my big sis, also called him that, so I never thought there was anything weird about it. That stupid old man."

As Yutaka listened, she looked ready to burst at any moment. She made a valiant attempt to stop laughing.

I hope you're happy, old man, Mitsuki thought. *It seems your gag finally worked.*

"Are you serious, Asano? 'Daddy?' Looking the way you look? Like some country bumpkin?!"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "Sorry for looking this way! That's what I called him, okay?! Besides, this *is* the country! Ah, darn it! I shouldn't have told you!"

"S-sorry," she stuttered. "But, Asano… Pfffft!"

"Jeez, if you want to laugh, go ahead." Somehow, the dialogue sounded familiar.

"Sorry," she said. "Sorry… Phew! Oh, that was so funny." She laughed heartily. Feeling as if he had found something surprising in an unexpected place, Mitsuki found himself staring at her again.

"Hm?" Yutaka asked. "Oh…did my laughing piss you off?"

"No, not really," Mitsuki shook his head. "You know, Fujishima, you actually look good when you smile."

In his usual carefree manner, Mitsuki complimented the girl. Sort of. He wasn't teasing her either. There was sincerity in his words.

"…!"

Her face reddened even more than before.

"Oh," he exclaimed. "I didn't mean to tease you…"

"—Drop dead!" she mumbled, not letting him finish.

She looked as if nothing else could be more embarrassing. Then she smiled bashfully. It was a pretty smile. Mitsuki smiled too.

♪

Deep inside, however, he couldn't smile. He couldn't, not at a time like this. Maybe smiling was tiring…

He remembered, even if he didn't want to, what the shinigami had told him.

According to that little girl, I am going to die soon.

I know that, yet here I am, smiling. I want to laugh it all off.

♪

Where is tomorrow?

He wanted to find it, but it seemed it couldn't be found. Perhaps tomorrow would not come. It might remain unreachable. It might never come.

So I have to live now to the fullest. Even if my remaining time is dwindling, I have to live life to the fullest…

The time is now. That is the only thing.

In the science room, Mitsuki asked Yutaka, "So how are you planning to get pool class cancelled this time?"

Yutaka thought for a moment, then said, "Th-there's lots of ways."

She was mumbling nervously. Apparently, she hadn't thought of anything.

"Then…" Mitsuki knew of an easy way to do it. He was about to suggest it, but he stopped. If they did that, pool would be cancelled again. Depending on the situation, pool class might be cancelled the entire summer.

With that possibility in mind, Mitsuki stopped himself from saying anything. If that happened, he wouldn't be able to sneak into the pool anymore. It might be selfish on his part, but then she was being

selfish as well. So it was mutual.

After all, I will die soon.

—Ring.

♪

The room was dim. A poster pinned to the white wall depicted some pop star singing a rock 'n' roll tune. The bed stood in the corner, and Mitsuki sat on it, hugging his knees to his chest.

That was when the girl came to visit him again. It was the girl in white, and she seemed to have appeared from out of the air. Floating there, she gazed down at him. It was as if she had come to make sure that he was going to die.

"What did you come here for?" Mitsuki asked.

"I came to see you." She spoke as if responding to a polite request. He, in turn, sounded like a creep.

"How are you?" Again she was asking strange things.

Why would you ask someone who was going to die how they're doing? Jeez.

"I'm…so-so," he said aloud.

She replied in her adult way, "Really? You don't look that way to me."

Then don't ask, he thought. But he didn't say anything.

The black cat at her side hopped down and landed by Mitsuki's feet. The bat-like wings, which he apparently could use to fly, folded themselves away.

The cat said, perfectly intelligibly, "What's up with you? We went through the trouble of coming all the way here. What's with the attitude?" He fixed his large golden eyes on the boy.

The girl restrained the cat. "Daniel, don't say that."

"But…" the cat insisted. "You came all the way to see him, Momo, and this stupid punk…"

"Like I said," the girl answered. "Don't say things like that. Look, he's depressed, this boy. Because he knows he's going to die." The girl smiled, an uncanny expression.

What? So they came to laugh at me. After all, she's a shinigami. They're not even real. And by the looks of her, she's even more of a kid than me, wearing that one-piece dress and red shoes. She looks just

like a little kid.

Actually, that might be true. It was better to have a truth that was like a lie, than to be in this world of lies dressed up as the truth.

"So," he said aloud, "you came to claim me already?"

The little girl shook her head. The black cat imitated her, and the unusually large bell attached to the cat's collar tinkled.

"That's still a bit further ahead," the girl explained. "You have a bit more time."

She spoke as if saying those words amused her. But to Mitsuki, it didn't sound the least bit amusing. Her voice was lively, but one got the impression she was trying *too* hard to sound lively. He wondered about it and looked away, but then he remembered that he only had a bit of time left, so he decided not to care.

Knowing he still had time, he felt a little relieved. He could go to the pool again and look at the stars. He could swim in that universe. That was all he needed. Finally, he could go there.

Although he had already done it a couple of times before, now he had a place that was precious to him.

Just a little more time. No one had to take his place anymore. No one had to get hurt in his stead. And no one needed to…die in place of him.

"Hmm," the girl said, "that's not quite right."

For the first time he looked up, startled by her voice. "What…?"

"You seem to think somebody gets hurt in your place and then dies in your place. But I don't think that's quite accurate."

With a flutter, she turned and approached him. She put her face close to his. So close that he felt her breath on his face, saw her transparent white skin, and could even almost feel the warmth of her little body.

"They didn't take your place," she explained. "It was their…destiny. Nobody can take somebody else's place. The only person who could take a person's place is that person himself. And only you can take your own place. You can only be yourself. You are you. The only one…"

"Then how am I going to die?" he asked. He didn't want to involve anyone else.

"I can't tell you that," she shot back quickly.

"If we did tell you," the cat added arrogantly, "you might try to escape from your fate, and your destiny

would change."

"Then destiny *can't* be changed?" Mitsuki asked. He was getting annoyed with what the girl and the cat were telling him. It was as if his fate had already been decided. If indeed his fate was sealed, then why was he here? Why was he the one still living and breathing?

Because I am searching for something. There was someone who died in my place, who died protecting me. That's how Subaru…died.

Was her death wrapped up neatly with the word "destiny?"

"Well," the girl said casually, "to put it simply, it can't be changed. After all, destiny means 'to carry a life.' So as long as you are living, that probably can't be changed."

"…I see…"

Somehow it made sense, albeit in a weird kind of way. Within this destiny the girl was talking about, somehow it seemed as if there was hope to be found. It still felt that way to him, although he had been told that he was meant to die.

"Besides, if someone else can take your place, where's the fun in that? Right?"

Preparing to leave, the girl smiled and said, "So…good luck."

She was weird after all.

Whaddayamean, "good luck"? You don't have to tell me, I'll try hard anyway.

—I'll live.

I'll survive.

♪

Mitsuki and Subaru were five years apart in age. Their parents had wanted a boy as the firstborn. So for their first child, they only thought of boyish-sounding names. They became so attached to the name they finally chose that, even though they ended up with a daughter, they still gave their firstborn a boy's name.

For their next child, it was the reverse. They only thought about girls' names. But this time, they received a boy. They had grown so enamored with the name they had thought of that, yet again, in the end they gave their son a girlish-sounding name.

Because Subaru was their firstborn, they wished

for the child to grow up strong. But their hopes went just a little haywire, and although she was a girl, they raised her as if she were a boy. Subaru certainly looked like a girl, but she had a very boyish personality. She was more cool than cute.

Their parents loved astronomy, and it rubbed off on Subaru and Mitsuki. Both liked to look into the sky. Subaru was especially interested in outer space. She often stretched her arms up and tried to grab the stars in the night sky.

What an idiot, Mitsuki often thought. *There's no way she'd reach them.*

But he liked those things about his sister, and he respected her.

Then, Subaru…died.

She was gone.

On that hot summer day, Subaru passed away.

They had snuck into the pool, laughing about it and promising to do it again. They had pretended to be fish, swimming in a universe of stars. Subaru loved to swim. She was even part of the junior high swim club.

That day, Mitsuki went to the junior high section

to up pick his older sister after bukatsu. They had promised to sneak into the pool again later that night. He was excited and nervous—he couldn't wait, so he went to pick up Subaru.

"Subaru!"

Seeing Mitsuki waving at her from the school gate, Subaru smiled and walked toward her brother. Her skin was darkly tanned, her hair short.

She spoke to him in a gentle voice, saying, "Mitsuki, it's not time yet."

Everything now was just like it was on that day. Everything was as it was, and Subaru was smiling in Mitsuki's memory. It was a strange feeling.

To think, he was now older than Subaru had been back then.

What an idiot. Why did you save me? I'm worthless.

Subaru, though only a second-year student, had been chosen to represent the region in swimming competitions and had won several tournaments.

She was the one everyone had high hopes for. So why did she have to die? Why did she have to take my place?

In retrospect, he believed that if he hadn't walked with her that day, if he hadn't picked her up, or made that promise with her—if even the tiniest of details had been different—then surely Subaru would not be gone today.

On the day Subaru died, the two of them had been walking under the glow of the sunset. It had been a beautiful scene, steeped in red as if the world were about to end, brother and sister laughing and walking together, casting long shadows behind them.

But in the next instant…

—A roar.
—Reverberation.
—Screams.
—Dissonance.
Various sounds fused into a single cacophony.

When he came to, Mitsuki was lying on a hospital bed. A while passed before he learned Subaru died.

Mitsuki and Subaru had been passing by a building construction site. From above, a construction beam had fallen, as a sudden wind caused the crane lifting the beam to tilt. Subaru had shoved Mitsuki

aside, to protect him from the falling beam. She, in turn, was crushed and died.

Why did you do that...? Why...?

The girl and the cat were gone, but Mitsuki was unable to move. He remained in the same position, with his knees clutched to his chest. No light came through the open window, and the room was nearly dark. The only movement came from the fluttering white curtain, swaying in the wind. It glowed faintly in the darkness.

—*But it's all right,* Mitsuki told himself. *It's finally my turn. Nobody has to take my place anymore.*

He heard a knock at the door.

It was his mother. "Mitsuki, I've been telling you to come downstairs to eat. Mitsuki? I'm coming in… Hey, what are you doing with the lights out like this?"

She made a face as she entered the room. She flicked a switch, and the fluorescent lights suddenly came to life. With light flooding the room, his mother immediately saw her son huddled on his bed.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

Mitsuki said nothing.

His mother let out a sigh, then said in a disgusted tone, "Look, you—you suddenly quit bukatsu, and now you sit here every day moping around. Oh, you were moping around even before that… I mean, get yourself together. Shape up! There's something wrong with you these days, Mitsuki."

"I'm okay," he answered meekly. His voice sounded like the meow of a little kitten.

After Subaru died, Mitsuki didn't go to the pool for a long time.

—He couldn't go. He had promised that they would go together.

But the other day, for some reason, he had wanted so badly to go to the pool. He had wanted to swim in the water and wade in the universe of falling stars.

He knew that any time now he would die too. Maybe because he knew, he had found the urge to go to the pool. He might never again be able to swim in the night sky.

He had wanted to go to that precious place one more time. He had wanted to confirm that he *had* a precious place.

But as it turned out, he hadn't been alone. He had come across her.

♪

"—Once, when humans were fish, we must have loved the water. So now, as humans, I'm sure we are searching for water. We love to swim. We love to swim in outer space too."

As he peered at the small aquarium in the science lab, he remembered Subaru saying those words. Tropical killifish were swimming inside.

Mitsuki stopped working and stared absentmindedly at them. *Those are called guppies, right?* he asked himself. *Chuppies?*

"…I kind of envy you." Yutaka spoke to him from behind.

"Hm?"

Mitsuki turned around, that absentminded look on his face, and she burst out laughing. Yutaka laughed often. She was very straightforward when it came to her emotions and had no qualms about showing her true feelings. Mitsuki, over the past several weeks,

had realized this about her.

As usual, Mitsuki and Yutaka's paths had crossed again.

Oh well, Mitsuki thought. *Might as well enjoy it.*

If the only time he had was now, he wanted to enjoy it to the fullest. Besides, Yutaka was fun to hang out with. You could joke with her as if she was one of the guys, and you didn't need to worry about insulting her.

Even in Mitsuki's current state, Yutaka's presence made him feel very much at ease. He even felt almost redeemed of his guilt. Almost.

"I get this impression that you have your own sense of freedom, Asano. Or should I call it free will? I'm not sure, but it feels that way."

"Yeah," he answered. "But aren't you the same?"

Mitsuki knew he was only "pretending" to be free. He was trapped by freedom and being manipulated by it. He was just trying very hard.

"I'm just pretending," she confessed, as if echoing his thoughts. "I'm a fake. I'm just pretending to be free. I'm all wrapped up, and I'm just putting on airs. I wish I could be like you, Asano."

Before he even realized it, Mitsuki was shaking his head. Then he remembered what the little girl had told him. He repeated those words now, startling himself.

"Nobody can take another person's place."

You are yourself. The only one... Nobody can take somebody else's place.

People often wished they could be like somebody else. Mitsuki had wanted to become like Subaru. He had loved his sister very much. Even now, that feeling hadn't changed.

Subaru had loved stars and swimming. She had taught Mitsuki many things. But she had passed away. She had died protecting her brother on the dry asphalt, where there were neither stars nor water.

His fond memories of her forced Mitsuki to want to take her place, but he couldn't. Though he tried with all his might, he couldn't be like Subaru. He was a miserable wretch, a coward.

Yutaka smiled at him bashfully. "Y'know," she said, "since it's summer, it'd be nice to go someplace."

"Someplace?" he asked, confused.

"Uh, y'know, like the ocean or a pool?"

"You're going to get into the ocean or a pool?" he exclaimed, skeptical.

"Well," she continued, "it doesn't have to be those kinds of places. I mean, it can be anywhere… y'know."

"Then it doesn't have to have anything to do with summer, does it?" he said. "Can't we just ignore the whole summer thing?"

"That's not what I mean! I-I want to go someplace with you, Asano!"

Incensed, she refused to say anything more. Mitsuki, on the other hand, couldn't quite believe his ears. Surely she hadn't meant what he thought she meant.

"Was that," Mitsuki asked jokingly, "maybe…does that mean…that you *like* me? No way… Right?"

"O-of course not!" Yutaka was vehement. It would've been believable, but her face got redder by the second, despite the denial. An indication, perhaps, that Mitsuki's guess was right on the money?

"A…are you serious?" Mitsuki asked.

She nodded. "It seems that…I am."

By now, her face was bright cherry red. She was a bit jittery and a little downcast.

"Well, what's so good about me anyway?" Mitsuki knew it was dumb of him, but he asked anyway.

In turn, she said, "Hey. What do you like to eat, Asano?"

"What? Why ask that all of a sudden…?"

"Come on," she urged. "Just tell me."

"Hmm…hamburger…I guess."

"That's just like you," she said mockingly.

"Well, sorry for being a little kid! What about it?" Mitsuki was getting more and more confused by the minute. Even now, he couldn't fully comprehend exactly what was going on. He liked hamburgers because he liked them, he couldn't help that. He ate them because he wanted to eat them.

"Well…uh," Mitsuki added, "because burgers taste good, right?"

"Okay, then—it's like that."

"Huh…?"

He couldn't make sense of things. She liked him, and he liked hamburgers; was that the same thing? She laughed. He didn't quite understand. But then, love has always been hard to understand.

Mitsuki let out a huge sigh. Somehow it made him happy, knowing her feelings. Yutaka was cute

and fun to be with. Conversations with her weren't boring, and neither of them needed to be oversensitive to the other.

But there was something that still weighed heavily on Mitsuki's mind.

"Y'know," he said, "I'm going to die soon."

Yutaka looked shocked; she must have thought he was lying to her. She fell silent and gazed intently at Mitsuki. The bubbling of the air pump in the tropical fish tank sounded strangely loud.

Mitsuki noticed the tears welling up in Yutaka's eyes and immediately felt confused.

"F-Fujishima…?"

—Pow!

The cracking sound rang through the humid room. His left cheek stung from the punch. Yutaka had hit him. Hard.

"If you don't like me, that's fine. But you don't need to blow me off with a stupid joke like that! You don't have to laugh at my feelings…"

Without even finishing what she was saying, she turned and ran. The door slammed shut behind her.

She was mistaken. Mitsuki had told the truth. A truth that sounded like a lie. She didn't know. And because she didn't know, Mitsuki had ended up hurting her.

I just don't want to hurt anybody, Mitsuki thought. *And yet... Why? Everything is just... Nothing makes sense anymore...*

—Ring.

♪

"Oh boy, you made her cry."

Before Mitsuki could make heads or tails of what was happening, the girl shinigami was standing in the room.

Her sidekick, the black cat, hopped onto the table beside the tropical fish tank. "Hey, Momo," the cat called out to her. "Do these taste good?"

The girl shrugged. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Mitsuki accosted them. "Hey, you! What did you come here for?"

"It's not 'hey, you.' Call me 'Momo,' okay?"

That took him by surprise. "Huh?" Apparently, this shinigami had a name.

"I'm Shinigami #A-100100. That reads as 'hyaku' and 'hyaku.' But it can also be read as 'Momo.'

"Daniel," she called. "Come on, that's enough. Get over here."

"All right." Reluctantly, the cat bid farewell to the fish. He hopped down and leapt into Momo's arms.

"Are that girl's tears supposed to be payment for your death?" Momo asked.

"No," Mitsuki answered. "Is it about me?"

"What is…?"

"If this wasn't about me," he said, "then I could have told Fujishima properly about whether I liked her or not…"

"Then why didn't you just tell her you liked her?" the shinigami asked.

"How can I when I'm supposed to die soon?!" Mitsuki felt irritation welling up within him. But for the first time since she had begun appearing to him, her expression was serious. It was as if all the light humor she had been affecting up until then had just been an act.

"It's not just you," she stated. "So do your best."

Mitsuki couldn't understand what she was talking about. *If it's not just me,* he asked himself, *then what else is there? I am the one dying, nobody else.*

Neither the little girl nor the black cat answered the questions raging through his mind. They simply disappeared.

♪

Yutaka was smiling again the next day. Or rather, she was doing her best to smile.

"After all, I like you, Asano. Yeah, that's all. So it's okay. Even if you don't like me, even if you think nothing of me." She smiled as she said it.

Mitsuki smiled too, even if it hurt a little to do so. His heart hurt too…just a bit.

Images flickered on the living room television set. It was past nine at night. A movie starring a popular musician was on TV. Mitsuki watched it absentmindedly. The audio barely registered in his ears, while the images flashed before his eyes and somehow made it to his brain.

On TV, the rock star was pretending to be sad. He was actually quite good at pretending to be sad.

Here I am, watching it all with a stupid look on my face.

On TV, the screenplay writer continued to tell straight-faced lies. He was bad at it.

And I am staring at it with a stupid look on my face.

Somehow, it was all very sad.

It seems I am going to die…

—and I am scared.

It seems.

♪

That night, Mitsuki swam in the water under the stars.

When they get tired of swimming, he asked himself, *what do fish do? Where do they go?*

They probably sank to the bottom and looked up at the distorted night sky.

The water's surface reflected the moonlight, and Mitsuki floated on it. There was only silence, nothing else. No sound. This was probably how it was in outer space. Mitsuki floated on a transparent outer space. Everything appeared transparent. And within that space, he heard a voice from a long time ago.

"They say nightmares are the hardest to wake up from. Didn't they say something like that on TV? So you wish upon a star, hoping the bleak-looking future is just a dream…"

The gentle voice belonged to Subaru. Her words were transparent as well and flowed straight into his heart.

Both of his parents, no doubt, had had high hopes for Subaru. And he had taken Subaru away from them.

I am the one who took her away.

Originally, Mitsuki had intended to bear the burden of their high hopes for his sister himself and go on. But he couldn't do it. He couldn't be like Subaru. In fact, he couldn't even be himself. His destiny had already been decided. He wondered if it was all destined to be like this from the very beginning. Was this the only path he could walk?

Mitsuki floated in the water for awhile and then sank to the bottom of the pool. He reached up with his hands and then stopped. Trying to grab the moon, he reached up again. And again, he stopped.

He realized he wouldn't be able to see this again, no matter how often he had looked upon it in the past. He couldn't be somebody else.

"You're you. Nobody else."

The little girl's words rang in his ears. And he reached his hands out, one last time. Then, it happened.

Somebody grabbed Mitsuki's hand. With a firm hold, he was dragged from outer space and back into the world.

"Asano? Are you all right?!"

"…Why…Fujishima…?"

Yutaka was there, crying. "But…Asano, you didn't come up to the surface at all! I thought you were dead!"

Her face was running with liquid—maybe it was pool water or tears or a mixture of both. She must have sensed Mitsuki would be there tonight and had come to the pool as well. She had watched him for

a while and seen him sink. She had waited for him to surface, but the minutes had ticked by, and still he wouldn't come up.

Yutaka must have become frightened and jumped into the pool to save Mitsuki. No matter how badly she hated going into the pool, she had leapt in to save him.

Her body was trembling, probably due to the cold, or perhaps from something else entirely.

"H-hey," Mitsuki blurted out, "I thought you *hated* the water?!"

"No…" she answered. "It's not that. That's not it." She shook her head, then drew a deep breath and said, "I was scared. That's all. I thought you might die, and I got hopelessly scared. After all, I have nothing. Only you, Asano."

She tried hard to smile as she spoke. "I'm so glad…Asano…"

She hugged him tightly. Locked in her embrace, Mitsuki felt tears began to flow from his eyes.

"Thanks…" he mumbled. What he actually wanted to do was laugh, but his emotions, his tears, wouldn't obey orders from his brain.

"I…" he continued, "I guess I don't really want

to die. I-I suppressed my own self… I didn't do the things I wanted to do… I wanted to take Subaru's place…but I wasn't good enough… But…but I want to live… I want to live! I want to stay alive. I want to stay here… I don't want to die…"

He cried. He cried shamelessly, as if there was nothing else left for him to do. For the first time, he voiced what he had kept hidden within his heart. He spoke about the things he had become unable to see, the things he had lost, and the things he had gained in return.

In losing Subaru, he had gained a sense of loss. And so, to gain was to lose, and to lose was to gain something new.

He was definitely still here, in this precious place, together with her…

♪

"Do you think he'll change?" the cat asked.

"Who knows."

"That's what you say, but you actually do believe he will, don't you, Momo?"

"Who knows," she answered again. "But…it's

going to be hard for him from now on."

♪

It all felt so ephemeral that, if touched, it might actually break. But he felt as if he could go on living. He knew that he could go on living.

After school, the two of them walked through town. Mitsuki decided he would tell Yutaka about himself and the shinigami. He didn't foster any hope of her believing him, though. After all, it seemed like a totally ridiculous story. Still, he wanted to tell her properly.

As he spoke, Yutaka looked at him with a blank expression. Strong winds had been blowing since morning. She held down her hair, which was being whipped by the wind, as she listened.

"So she said you were going to die?" she asked.

"Well, it was certainly something like that."

"But did she say *when* you were going to die?"

"Well," he said, venturing a guess, "it's supposed to be real soon, right?"

"How soon is soon?"

Like a stubborn child, she kept asking about every little detail. Not to irritate him but because she wanted to know as much about Mitsuki as she could. It made Mitsuki realize something important.

"Hm…?" He wondered—when is soon? Yes, he had been told that he would die, but the shinigami had never said *when* it would happen. Maybe because what she had said was unbelievable, he hadn't really listened to what the girl in white had been saying.

"Hmm…"

Mitsuki thought hard, but there was no way he could understand something he hadn't listened to. When he realized it, he groaned.

"Then," Yutaka said suddenly, "it's all the same."

"Huh? What is?"

"Like I said, it's all the same."

"What is?" Mitsuki asked.

"That you don't know when you're going to die. That makes you no different from me—or anybody else for that matter, Asano."

Oh, Mitsuki told himself. *I see. So that's it.*

It was the same for everyone. Everyone knows life will eventually end, yet they still go on living. That was what the shinigami had meant when she'd said

the word "destiny" meant "to carry a life."

I see, Mitsuki thought. *People carry on with their lives and live. That's the way people live. So that's what she meant. Jeez.*

"Aaagh!"

Dumbfounded, Mitsuki let out a sigh. Then, realizing his own ignorance, he laughed.

At that moment, they were passing by a construction site. The sounds of clanging metal drowned out their voices.

A powerful wind began to blow. Mitsuki remembered the news saying something about a typhoon. Without warning, the scenery shook and the purple-tinted sunset warped.

Only it wasn't the scenery that was changing. It was Mitsuki's sense of reality. The past and the present were overlapping, like some sort of déjà vu.

With a start, Mitsuki looked around him. A young boy was walking ahead of them. Realizing what was about to happen, Mitsuki began running and leapt at the boy.

In that instant…

"Clannnnnkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk!!"

…A powerful noise rocked the entire area. The sound rippled and crackled through the air.

Mitsuki protected the boy, just as Subaru had done for him on that day. This time, he was the one doing the protecting.

Because of the strong wind, the construction beams slipped and fell toward the boy walking directly below. Bystanders saw the boy's body move, as if pushed by some force. Yutaka's scream was drowned out by the sound of the impact of the falling beams.

Ah, Mitsuki told himself. *So I'm dead. Finally, I've become like Subaru.*

He was finally like his sister, yet he still wished that he could have lived for just a little while longer. He wanted to smile and be next to her.

"Oh? Hmm?"

"Asano!"

He could hear her voice—it was getting closer. A blinding white light enveloped him.

He came to. Cradled in his arms was the boy, who wasn't injured at all. In contrast, Mitsuki hurt all over, and blood was seeping from somewhere.

"…Asano!"

From between the overlapping construction beams, Yutaka's face peered down at him. Seeing him respond to her call, she breathed a sigh of relief. Once Mitsuki saw her face, the pain seemed to disappear.

"I guess…I'm not dead."

Thinking about the day Subaru had died, he looked at the sky. He thought he saw something that looked like a trace of light. It was actually the girl in white. She was smiling down at him.

Then, he remembered something else…

The one who had come to claim Subaru's soul was none other than the girl shinigami now floating in the sky. All this time, Mitsuki had forgotten. Or had he just been unable to remember?

"You're not supposed to die yet," she had told him then. "Live. You must live your own life. But your heart is too pure to do that. I'm sure it will be a hindrance in your life."

The girl had reached out and touched the young Mitsuki's cheek. "So, I'm taking it with me. The memory of your meeting me, your pain, I will take them with me along with your sister. So…good luck."

Then she had become light.

♪

After Mitsuki had been unearthed from the accident scene, Yutaka gave him a big hug. But it wasn't just a hug; it was more like she jumped on him.

"Gg-gwoahh…"

He groaned from the pain that shot throughout his body, but still he held her tightly. For some reason, he began to cry again.

Watching from high above in the sky, the little girl cried too.

"What?" the cat said incredulously. "Now you're crying too? I swear! You're such a crybaby, Momo."

Fluttering his bat-like wings, the cat wiped the tears from his master's eyes.

"Shut up," she said. "Why can't I?" She stuck out her tongue at Daniel defiantly.

"Jeez," the cat retorted. "Just because his sister asked you to, you lie and then try to change him. I swear, I don't understand."

Momo defended herself. "I didn't lie. I just told him 'good luck.'"

"Hmmm. Well, I think that's enough meddling for me."

As if to say, "Oh, well," the black cat folded his front legs against his chest.

With tears in her eyes, the girl smiled prettily. "Like I told you before, I'm a meddler."

—Ring.

After several decades, Mitsuki finally completed his life.

♪

Destiny is the road that unravels before us, the order of things both happy and tragic. Destiny is that which rules our long lives. And life is the distance we travel on that road. So there is no one real path. We all arrive at our destination, even after getting lost countless times.

There's much more to come. This is just the beginning.

"Right, little shinigami-san?"

Under the night sky that evening, Yutaka showed him her "secret."

"Look," she said. "Here. It's here, right?" She bundled up her long brown hair in her hands and showed him.

"Hmm…?"

There it was, a tiny scar, small enough for one to overlook. This was the reason she hated going into the pool. It was also the same scar she hid by wearing her hair long. She had suffered the injury when she was a child, and the scar remained.

School rules mandated that everyone wear a swim cap when entering the pool. Yutaka thought it was uncool to be forced to put her hair up in order to wear one.

Though it was on an area hardly noticed by anybody, to Yutaka it still looked ugly.

Mitsuki didn't really understand, but then all of the creatures called "girls" seemed that way to him.

He shrugged it off. *Oh well.*

She sighed. "…Oh boy. I'm not looking forward to swim class tomorrow…"

"What?! You're getting *in* the pool?" he asked, a bit surprised.

All this time, she had refused to go in, even going to extremes to get the class cancelled.

"Well," she answered, "it's okay now. I was able to show you this, so I'm fine."

It was a hot summer evening. The light of the moon flickered on the pool's surface while the wind created ripples on the water. And there she was, smiling next to him by the poolside.

Ah, the things he would do for that smile. But in so doing, he might end up losing his precious place of nostalgic memories.

It was a risk he was willing to take, because now he could smile.

"Well," he told her, "that's fine, but there's another good way."

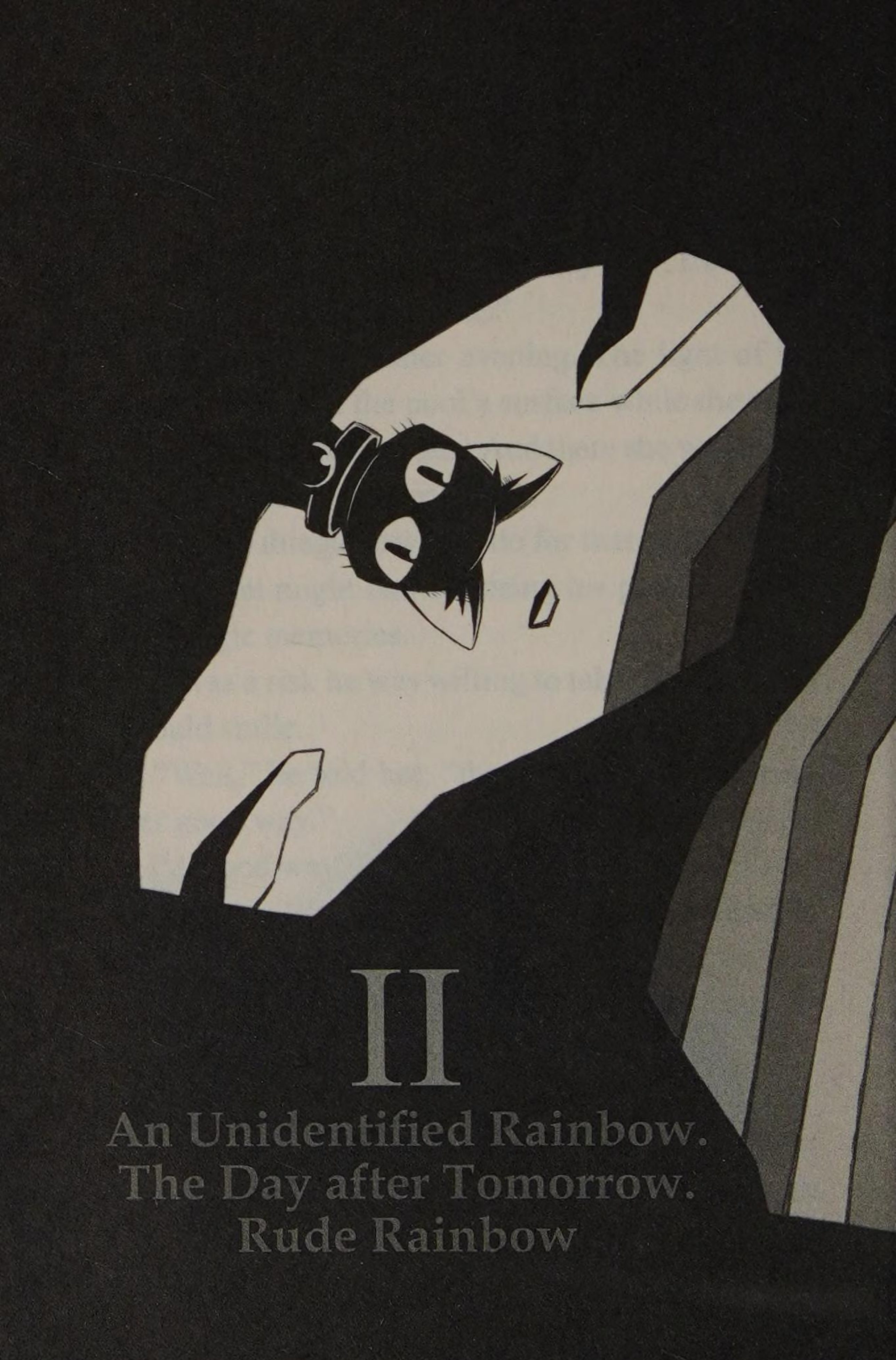
"A good way?"

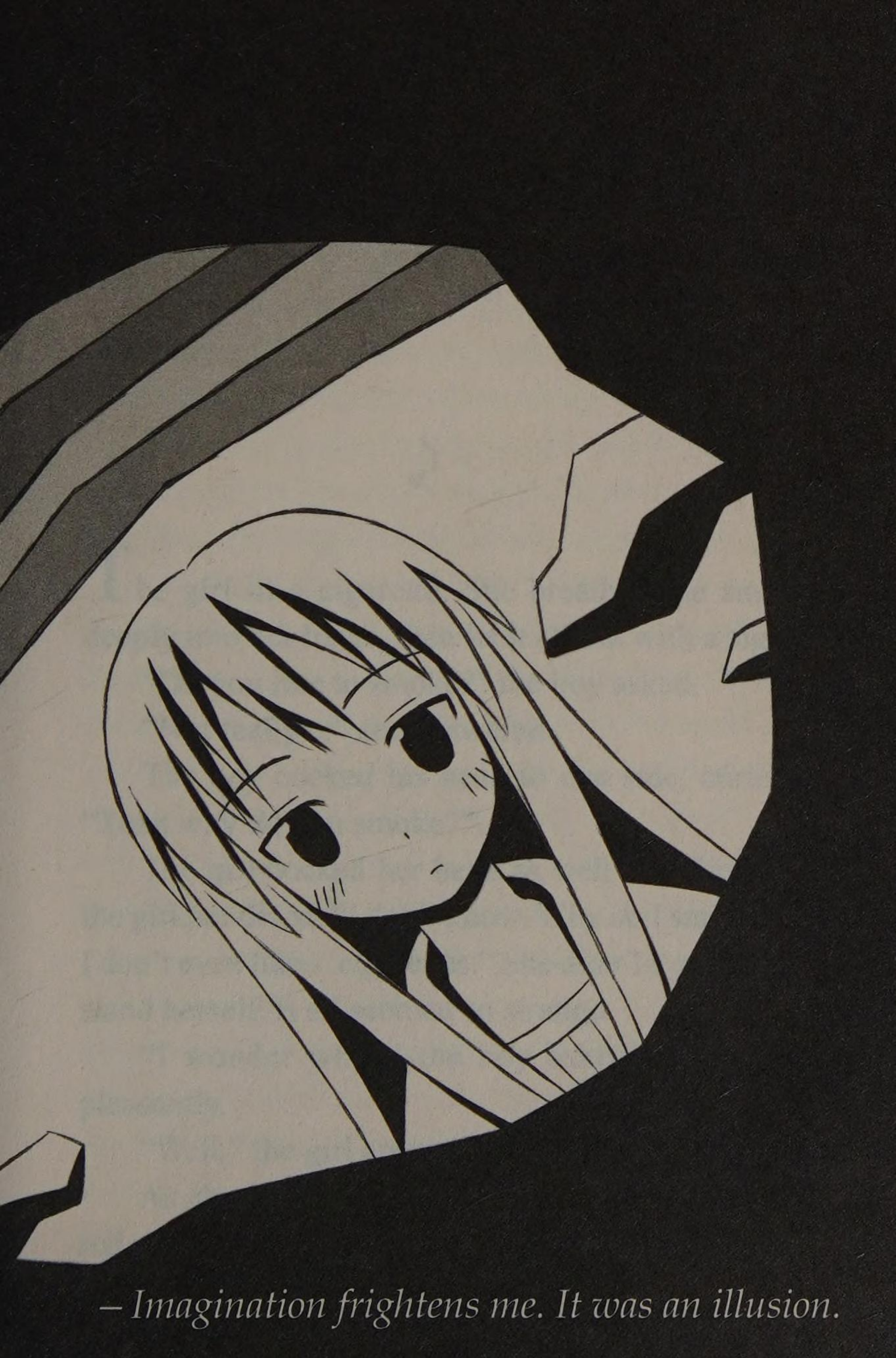
"All you have to do," he explained, "is this…"

He lifted the pool's square plug all the way.

Eventually, the pool was empty.

poolside girl – fin.


II
An Unidentified Rainbow.
The Day after Tomorrow.
Rude Rainbow



– Imagination frightens me. It was an illusion.

♪

The girl lit a cigarette. She breathed the smoke deeply into her lungs, then let it all out with a sigh.

"Do you like to smoke?" the boy asked.

"Not really…" she answered.

The boy cocked his head to one side, curious. "Then why do you smoke?"

The girl cocked her head as well. "…Hmm…" the girl pondered. "I don't know. Why *do* I smoke…? I don't even like…cigarettes." She didn't even understand herself. It all seemed so strange.

"I wonder why?" the boy asked and smiled pleasantly.

"Well," the girl answered, "y'know."

As she inhaled, the tip of the cigarette glowed red.

"What?" the boy asked.

The girl breathed out a large puff of smoke and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean?"

"…I mean, c'mon… You're *dead*."

♪

Usually, after the rain, that thing called a rainbow comes out. But none had been seen lately.

Kagawa Rikoko pulled out her muffler, which was stuffed haphazardly into her school bag. Dusk was about to fall. In the town, rain had fallen, and the air had turned a little nippy.

Rikoko was playing hooky, wandering through town. She had stepped into a fast-food joint to kill time while waiting for the rain to stop. The rain had fallen for a couple of hours, but it finally stopped.

"……"

Since she had been inside a warm place, the air outside felt very cold. As if to add insult to injury, a cold autumn wind blew up her short, gingham-checkered skirt.

"Brrrr." She trembled all over. Of course, she

couldn't make her skirt longer, so she contented herself with shoving both hands into her blazer pockets.

"Why is it so cold…?" She grumbled and complained at nature, but it didn't do any good. The weather stubbornly stayed the same.

The sock on her right leg sagged lazily. With that foot she kicked an empty can on the road.

"Agh…I feel so sluggish…"

For some reason, her body felt extremely heavy. Maybe it was due to the temperature, or maybe it was because she had forced herself awake with just one cup of coffee, or maybe it was her headache that caused it. Most likely, it was a result of all of the above.

But the root cause of her problems was something she couldn't readily tell anyone else. That made it hurt even more. It felt as if her very being ached, and her emotions turned ever more inward. Right now, Rikoko was depression walking around in a school uniform.

That uniform happened to be rather famous in these parts. Rikoko wasn't exactly a pampered young lady, but her uniform nevertheless belonged to a rather

respectable girls' junior high and high school. Attending that school was akin to taking an escalator ride to the higher echelons of society.

Furthermore, the uniforms were quite cute. There were those who enrolled just because of them. So wearing said uniform garnered a bit of attention, both good and bad.

Plus Rikoko had refined facial features for a fourteen-year-old. She looked mature and sophisticated enough to turn heads. Often she would put on a little light makeup, so she very much looked the part of a modern high school girl.

Needless to say, guys frequently hung around her.

Just because I look this way, she thought, *doesn't mean I'm the same way inside.*

Though we've all heard the old adage, "Don't judge a book by its cover," generally speaking people still have a tendency to judge a person by his or her looks. That applied to this situation as well.

"Hey!" a voice called out from behind Rikoko.

Rikoko ignored it, acting as if she hadn't heard anything. But the guy—or rather, guys—were stubborn. There were three of them. They surrounded

Rikoko and wouldn't let her pass.

"Hey, you," one of them said. "We just want to ask ya a question."

The guy, who had long hair tied in a ponytail and sported a tan as if it was still the height of summer, spoke with a smirk. His two friends looked and dressed the same, differing only in the lengths and colors of their hair.

Boring dudes, thought Rikoko.

The guy who seemed to be in charge, the one with the strangely white teeth, continued talking to Rikoko, oblivious to the fact that she was trying hard to ignore them.

"Hey," he said. "You're from Daijo,[2] right? We don't really know much about this area. Can you give us a guided tour?"

Rikoko let out a big, obviously irritated sigh. *These guys,* she thought. *Poor things... What idiots they are.*

Daijo was the nickname of Oomigaoka Gakuen, the all-girl school Rikoko attended. It seemed that these guys were choosing girls to hit on based on school uniforms.

Apparently they also expected someone to fall

for lines that wouldn't even be included in a pick-up manual.

Why don't you pick a stupider type of girl? Argh, how irritating. Argh, my head hurts. Argh, I just want to punch your lights out.

The guy had no clue that Rikoko's irritation was fast reaching the critical point, and he kept talking with a stupid expression on his face.

"I mean…" the guy said. "Y'know."

Argh, don't even try being cute. Argh, why me? Argh, this is getting on my nerves. Argh, I just want to kill this guy. —All right, I'll kill him.

Rikoko breathed deeply and gathered all her strength for one well-placed kick to the guy's privates.

"……?!"

Startled by something, Rikoko stopped mid-kick and faced forward, her eyes meeting the guy's gaze. Oblivious as always, the dude misinterpreted the moment.

"Huh?" he exclaimed. "What is it? Is there something on my face? Or maybe you're interested in me or something?"

But Rikoko wasn't listening at all. Instead, she

looked around quizzically. Just now she'd thought that she'd heard someone calling out to her. If the person calling was someone she knew, it might be her chance to get out of this situation. And she wouldn't have to come into contact with those pitiful things, his privates.

"…Kagawa-san."

There it was again. But where had it come from? The voice sounded as though it was very close by.

"Kagawa-san, over here."

Rikoko turned around and was immediately taken aback.

"Hey, there." The one who was calling out to her raised his hand in greeting. He spoke with an extreme casualness. He had a very ordinary-looking face, one that left very little impression. Actually, they had also met the day before.

He was Yanagihara Kazutomo, a classmate of Rikoko's from grade school.

"You've got a rather lively crowd with you, Kagawa-san."

Rikoko couldn't help but feel dumbfounded. What about this situation could possibly be called lively?

Why am I the only one who seems to get into situations like these? Her headache was becoming more painful by the minute.

In any case, it was true that Yanagihara was an acquaintance of sorts, but she couldn't think of any reason for him to be acting this friendly toward her.

In contrast to the tanned and strong-looking guys, Yanagihara was plainly weak. He was pale and thin, and he looked like he might easily break in two if punched.

"How have you been, since that day…?" Yanagihara paid no mind to the situation unfolding around him and spoke absently, as if he was gazing at something far away. The three guys continued trying to talk to Rikoko.

She replied, but not to them, "…I met you yesterday, though."

Just as she spoke up, Rikoko remembered something unpleasant about Yanagihara.

That's right, she reminded herself, *when it comes to this guy, there's this "thing."*

The thing that she'd been hoping to forget.

Argh, darn it! Oh no… Maybe I'm finally going crazy…

"Well," Yanagihara said. "It was certainly a surprise. I never thought I'd run into you there, y'know?"

Whaddayamean, "y'know"? Rikoko wanted to ask Yanagihara. She wanted to tell him that was *her* line, and he didn't need to mention that place. In Rikoko's opinion, Yanagihara needed to mind his own business.

Argh, how annoying.

Rikoko noticed something strange about the guys surrounding her. A few minutes ago they had been standing there with those stupid smiles on their faces, but now they stood staring at her, dumbfounded.

"What's with you?! And *you,* showing up all of a sudden," Rikoko ranted, turning back to confront Yanagihara. "What about that 'thing?' Do you want to complain about it now?"

"No," Yanagihara answered calmly. "Not really."

"Then would you just disappear!" she told him. "Just get out of my sight! That goes for you guys, too…huh?"

The guys who had surrounded Rikoko just a moment ago were no longer there. They had already

snuck away. She watched their retreating backs as they walked off briskly.

What? What's going on? Oh well.

She certainly hadn't heard it, but the guys had called her a "creepy girl." In a way, though, she sort of knew.

Why had they run away from her? She had a sort of intuition. But she convinced herself that it couldn't be.

After all…

♪

"Kagawa-san, your socks are sliding down."

"……"

Yanagihara was speaking to her, but she ignored him. Rikoko had nowhere in particular to go, so she simply wandered around. For some reason, Yanagihara was following her.

"You know," he said, "it's kinda uncool. You're a girl, after all. You should take more care in choosing what you wear."

Shut up, she wanted to snap at him. *I don't need you lecturing me. Give me a break. I've already got*

a headache, don't give me any more grief.

She let out a sigh. She had sighed a lot today. It seemed that was all she could do. Of course, she had plenty of reasons for it. In fact, there were so many it was all a jumbled mess.

There's a circus named "Depression" that's started up in my head. Right now, they're in the middle of a performance. Sigh.

She hadn't bothered to count the number of sighs, but she must have easily done over a thousand by now.

Rikoko pulled a white box from her bag. It was a pack of cigarettes. She pulled one out and put it in her mouth. She had just recently taken up the habit in order to take her mind off things. She didn't look good doing it, though. Taking out the Zippo lighter stuffed between the cigarette box and the cellophane wrapper, she lit up.

She had practically forced someone to give her the Zippo lighter. "If you don't smoke, then give it to me," was what she had said when she'd taken the lighter, even though she hadn't actually smoked at the time either. But now she did smoke, so that made it all okay.

Rikoko inhaled the smoke into her lungs and exhaled it with a sigh.

"Do you like smoking?" Yanagihara asked.

"Not really…" she answered.

The boy cocked his head in curiosity. "Then why do you smoke?"

The girl cocked her head as well. "…Hmm…" the girl pondered. "I don't know. Why *do* I smoke…? Even though I hate…cigarettes." She didn't even understand herself. It all seemed so strange.

It was all about her. You like because you like. You hate because you hate. Couldn't everything be that simple? Why can't things always be that way?

"I wonder why?" Yanagihara asked and smiled as if he were truly enjoying himself.

Why is he able to smile? Rikoko asked herself. *You shouldn't be able to smile given your situation. But then…neither should I.*

"I mean," she ventured. "Y'know…" Rikoko inhaled, and the tip of her cigarette glowed red. She exhaled the smoke in a huff.

"What?" Yanagihara wondered, still smiling.

It pissed her off, just a little bit.

I can't laugh about it, not at all…

Rikoko asked, "What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean?" Yanagihara asked, puzzled.

Give me a break!

"C'mon," she exclaimed. "...You're already *dead*!"

♪

Yanagihara Kazutomo. Junior high, second year. Deceased at age fourteen.

Three days ago, Yanagihara had died. It had been an accident. It had been raining every day, so the ground had been slippery. Yanagihara had caught an old lady who slipped on the steps of a pedestrian bridge. In the process, he had also slipped and had fallen straight down the stairs.

If it had just been broken bones, he might have gotten away with his life, but he had been injured in vital areas. So he had died. Just like that.

Since Rikoko lived nearby, she had been picked as the representative of her class from grade school and forced to attend the funeral. However, she'd barely known him. In fact, she would have hardly noticed

him if it hadn't been for "that" incident.

Yanagihara had seen Rikoko with her boyfriend. It wouldn't have mattered to Rikoko, except that she and her boyfriend had been exiting a hotel together. She had panicked like crazy. Who would've thought she'd run into someone she knew at a place like that?

Now the only person who knew was dead. And she remembered, now, that ever since she had attended Yanagihara's funeral, her headaches had gotten worse.

The face of Yanagihara, smiling in the display picture at the funeral, had really pissed her off.

What the hell are you smiling about? You got to escape from this crappy world. Are you enjoying yourself, now that I'm having so many problems? You dirty rat. You escaped.

"…So, why did you come back?" she asked Yanagihara. Rather, she asked the "ghost" of Yanagihara.

They were walking along the river bank. Rikoko stopped suddenly and faced Yanagihara, who had been walking directly behind her. Apparently he had visible feet.

"Ha ha ha! You're still attached to this world, aren't you?"

Yanagihara smiled vaguely at the comment even though there was nothing to smile about. Rikoko, meanwhile, felt dizzy. There surely was nothing to smile about in this situation.

All this time, Rikoko had been receiving strange looks from people passing by. Some even looked back at her and pointed fingers. Others would quickly avert their eyes, as if they had seen something ugly. And there were those who ignored Rikoko, as if she didn't exist. She blamed it on Yanagihara.

I'm being treated like some weirdo!

It seemed the only person who could see Yanagihara was Rikoko. Even the three guys who had tried to hit on her earlier had decided she was nuts and scampered away when she suddenly started talking to the air beside her.

Give me a break. Argh, my head hurts.

—Ring.

The sound of a bell.

The sound rang inside her head. It was strangely



loud and resonated deep in her ears.

A cat appeared by her feet, looking up at her. It seemed as if it had suddenly popped out of thin air. It was a strange-looking cat, with golden eyes and an excessively large bell attached to its collar. It would have been almost completely black, if not for the tip of its tail, which was white.

Rikoko felt an urge to play with the creature. "Come here, kitty. Come." She bent down and called the cat over.

"Don't get so friendly, human! Or you'll find yourself in a world of hurt!"

The cat talked! It spoke in a cute voice, like a little boy's, but it said such nasty things.

"Huhhh?" Rikoko was bewildered. She hadn't wavered at the sight of Yanagihara's ghost. But this time, her already wide-open eyes opened even wider.

"……"

Then, incredibly, a little girl also appeared out of thin air.

♪

The little girl, dressed all in white, defied the laws

of gravity and drifted lightly to the ground.

She had a very pretty face, so pretty it was out of the league of even *ukiyo-e*[3] paintings. Her expression was childish yet strangely adult.

In her hand, she held a huge scythe. It looked like something the god of death would carry. But the little girl's appearance and the aura she emanated were far removed from an image of death.

"Hello," the little girl said in greeting. "I'm a shinigami."

It didn't seem like she was kidding.

"Daniel," she told the cat. "Do that thing."

"Okay, Momo!" The black cat deftly stood up on his hind legs. Bringing his tail to the front, he grabbed the white tip with his forepaws and formed a ring. The little girl reached into the middle.

"Nnnnggggghhhhhhhhh...ahhaaannnn... uhuuuheeheeheehee..."

The black cat shrieked and howled dramatically—they were neither shouts of pain nor joy—as the little girl pulled an ID card from within the "hole." She took pains to show her ID.

On the card was plainly written, "Shinigami #A-100100."

Give me a break, Rikoko thought. *First a ghost, now a shinigami.*

The shinigami didn't look the part. Plus, it had a name. She was Momo, and her black cat was Daniel.

Rikoko let out yet another sigh. She decided this might be appropriate, depending on how one thought of it. Because right now, in front of her, though she still didn't want to believe it (but she had no choice in the matter), were a ghost and a shinigami.

Which must mean the shinigami has come to claim the ghost. And now I'll be released from Yanagihara.

As if hearing Rikoko's thoughts, Momo said, "Well, at least half of that is true.

"I'm not only in charge of him," Momo continued, "but of *you* as well." Momo turned her black eyes toward Rikoko.

"Huh?" Rikoko said. "What's that mean? I'm going to die too? Or does it mean something else…?"

This time Momo didn't answer. Instead she said, "People only realize the preciousness of something once it's lost. So unless you hold onto it tight, you'll lose it. Or maybe because you have so many pre-

cious things, you're not aware of the 'most' precious thing?"

She was a strange one. No, she was *really* strange. Not only didn't she look anything like Rikoko's mental picture of a shinigami, but Rikoko couldn't understand a thing she was saying.

"What are you talking about…?" she asked.

But Momo wasn't done speaking. "Soon things will turn out just as you want them to. You don't need to worry. He's only been allowed a short amount of time…"

By "him," of course, she must have meant Yanagihara.

Oh, I see. Well, that's just fine and dandy.

"So when is he supposed to disappear?" Rikoko asked, but Momo was ready to leave.

"Let's go, Daniel," she told the cat.

"Okay."

Momo and Daniel simply disappeared, as if they had melted into the air.

"…and that's how it is." Left behind was the still-smiling Yanagihara.

They confuse a person and then just up and disappear?! Well that pisses me off. Am I going to die or

what? I didn't learn anything. What precious thing? Lose what?

"So what's the deal?" she asked aloud. "Who the hell do they think they are?"

"Isn't she a shinigami-sama?" Yanagihara answered, though he looked just about ready to burst out laughing while he said it.

...Jeez! Argh... My head hurts.

♪

She had become aware of it about a week ago.

"Oh boy. This might be…bad."

It was something she couldn't talk about. Something she couldn't tell anyone. She could never tell. Of course, she couldn't even tell "him." After all, he was…

♪

"What are you doing here?" she asked him.

"What?"

"Why! Are! You! At MY house, I said!" Rikoko yelled at him.

To which, he answered, "Ohh."

He gave some vague response, which didn't really indicate whether he understood what she was asking or not. Yanagihara had followed Rikoko all the way home, until they arrived at the condominium where Rikoko lived with her family.

He even followed her into her room, as if it was the practical thing to do. Rikoko closed the door and locked it, but that didn't work against Yanagihara. Well, of course not. He was, after all, a ghost. He was in the room before she even knew it.

So this is how it is. Rikoko thought she must be experiencing some form of "possession"; it was popular these days.

Seriously, give me a break. Why am I the only one who has to go through this?

Yanagihara looked all around the room; it appeared that he was having fun doing it. It made Rikoko wonder if the room of someone of the opposite sex was really that interesting.

Rikoko hadn't known Yanagihara very well. She couldn't even recall any rumors about him ever having a love life. Perhaps this was the height of irony, that he was finally able to set foot in a girl's room only

now, after he was dead.

Ha ha ha... That's not funny at all.

"Hey," she called out.

"What?" Yanagihara turned and looked at her with a full, beaming smile.

Argh... Why are you so darned happy? You're dead...

"What was that thing just now?"

"Just now?" Yanagihara asked with a more serious face.

"That white thing." Rikoko was about to change out of her uniform, but she realized she couldn't very well do that with Yanagihara there in the room with her. Instead, she sat on the bed with an "oh brother" expression on her face.

Yanagihara replied cheerfully, "White thing? Oh, you mean Momo-chan? Seriously, isn't she so pretty? So pretty it's hard to believe she's a shinigami, right?"

No, no, no. I already can't believe you're here. First a ghost, now a shinigami. This is beginning to look like some scene from a manga...

"Look, you—" Rikoko was about to ask Yanagihara if he was planning to watch her change and take

a bath when he interrupted her quite abruptly.

"Do you remember the school trip we took in grade school?"

"School trip?"

"Yes," he said. "You know, the one where one of the guys tried to go into some girl's room? He climbed to the second-story window and fell."

Rikoko did remember that incident. In retrospect, it seemed pointless to go through so much trouble just to try and get into a girl's room.

Poor thing, what a fool.

They had still been in sixth grade, and the trip had inspired certain thoughts. A school trip, no parents, night, insatiable curiosity… Dots that were easily connected to reveal one big, naughty picture.

The boy had looked at the window of the room above, the room occupied by the girl he secretly longed for. He had tried to see if he could climb up. Satisfied with his first attempt, he had been convinced that he could make it all the way to the second story.

At least, that's what he'd thought. He had climbed up—and had fallen gloriously.

Normally, falling from such a height would have killed him. But the trees underneath had cushioned

his fall, and he'd gotten away with just a few scrapes and scratches.

It had been a miracle, but the boy had still cried and cried. He had cried, not from the pain, but from the fear of the fall.

Rikoko had looked down the window and thought, *What an idiot!*

That's right; the girl whom the boy had tried to sneak a peek at was none other than Rikoko. Of course, there was no way she'd pay any attention to an idiot like that.

As a precaution, the boy had been taken to the hospital for examination. He'd been able to go home a day after Rikoko and the rest of the class had already left for home.

The class had enjoyed a short school trip for two days and a night. The boy's school trip had ended in half a day. The rest of his time had been spent in a hospital bed.

Such an idiot, Rikoko thought. She hated that kind of person, as the boy had found out days later. He had confessed his love for her, and she had rejected him, saying that she despised idiots.

But Yanagihara was different.

"I thought that was amazing," Yanagihara said. "To tell you the truth, I was sharing a room with him that night. He told me to come with him, but I couldn't do it. I was scared. Scared of a lot of things. I might fall, I might get scolded by the teacher, or you girls might hate me. But he did it. He went that far just for a girl he liked. Honestly, I thought it was amazing. He risked his life for someone he loved, you know?"

"Well…" Rikoko answered. "I don't think it's really like that. Don't you think he was just trying to show off? Trying to look cool in front of the other guys?"

Rikoko was sprawled on her bed, flipping through the pages of a fashion magazine and talking more or less at random. She couldn't care less about conversing with Yanagihara. If she could have made him disappear, she would have.

If you wanna talk, then talk all you like. But disappear afterwards. Please.

"Don't you think it's pretty incredible that someone would risk his life just to look cool?" Yanagihara spoke with an overly serious face. He had no way of knowing what was going on inside Rikoko's heart.

"Well…"

Now that you mention it, that may be true. There can't be too many guys who would risk their lives to look cool.

"That's stupid," she said aloud. "He's an idiot. That's just plain dumb."

As if exasperated, Rikoko tossed aside the fashion magazine and fell back across the bed, ending up spread-eagled on her back.

...An idiot is an idiot. Nothing more, right? Can an idiot solve my problems? Of course not. There's no way he can. No way. Nobody can do that. Nobody. Not even me...

"...But..." Yanagihara protested.

"What?" Rikoko asked, raising herself up. For a moment she thought Yanagihara was reacting to her inner thoughts, and it startled her.

But he wasn't—he was just reminiscing.

"Idiots are cool, y'know," he said.

"Huh?"

Hey, don't be so serious. Regardless of whether it was Yanagihara or the white shinigami, Rikoko thought that certain kinds of things shouldn't be said with a serious look on one's face.

"Still," Yanagihara continued, "there are times

when an idiot *can* be cool, right? Like, you know, those heroes in action movies—when you really think about it, they're total idiots. But they're really cool."

"That's that," she explained. "This is this."

"Well, that's what *I* think." He was no longer even listening to what Rikoko had to say.

Again, she sighed. But this time, though she didn't notice, it was a lighter sigh compared to the ones that had come before. Through this back-and-forth chit chat, this seemingly meaningless, idiotic conversation, she was able to release a bit of her depression. She felt just a bit better.

Suddenly Yanagihara's expression changed. His brows furrowed, and his entire body began to emit a greasy sweat. Well, he didn't really sweat, but he did wear a pained expression that seemed to suggest he was sweating heavily.

"What is it?" Rikoko asked.

Yanagihara didn't answer but instead just stared into space.

Suddenly he yelled, "…It-it's going to…!"

—Ring, ring, ring, ring!

The ring tone of a cellular phone clamored through the room.

"…?!"

Rikoko was startled, so much so that her heart felt like it was about to pop out of her chest.

Her bag was thrown haphazardly on the floor; her phone dangled beside it and rang out a melody in an explosion of sound. The incoming-call light blipped on and off.

Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring…

The electronic rock music continued to ring. Because she had set the volume to the highest level, the speakers buzzed.

The music was rock, but to Rikoko it sounded like the blues.

Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring…

It wouldn't stop ringing. The lights blinked on and off. This song, which she had heard over and over, rang around and inside Rikoko. In the past, she had waited eagerly for this melody to ring out. But now

it seemed she didn't want to hear it at all.

Not anymore…

Our dreams
In that moment
We couldn't reach them
We pulled back our outstretched hands
We felt as if we could reach the moon
We were a bit scared
We could laugh a little bit

Those were the lyrics of the song that the phone's ringtone had been based on. At that particular moment, they were almost frighteningly appropriate, so the melody held an ominous resonance.

The band behind the song was an indie newcomer, freshly entering the music scene. Though they were new, they had already generated quite a buzz. They sang and performed awfully. But for some strange reason people identified with their music.

I liked them from the beginning. Even now…they go straight to the point. Nobody understands what's so good about them, but they became a fad. They became a hit.

It hurts.

Without thinking, Rikoko picked the phone up off the floor. She had decided never to answer the phone when this melody rang, when this number showed up. But she had picked it up without being aware of her actions.

Crouching down, clutching the phone to her breast, she looked down at it. The caller's name and phone number showed up on the screen.

"……"

She could only stare at it. She could do nothing. She hardly even breathed. She felt pain in her chest. Her heart hurt.

"…!"

Rikoko closed her phone, then threw it against the wall.

Clack.

It hit the wall and made an empty sound. The main body broke away from the battery pack.

"……"

The room sank into silence.

"…Why didn't you answer the call?" No longer

agitated, Yanagihara spoke in his usual manner again. Rikoko didn't answer him, but stood up and dove for the bed. Her skirt billowed up, almost allowing Yanagihara a peek at her underwear, but she paid it no mind.

"You disappeared just now, didn't you?" she asked.

"Oh, you knew?"

Rikoko had noticed that Yanagihara had vanished. He had been nowhere to be seen the entire time the phone was ringing.

"You know, ever since I became a ghost, it seems I don't have an affinity for mobile phone wavelengths, so it's really hard for me to be around a ringing phone. It probably has something to do with the magnetic field, I'm sure…"

"…Pfft…" Rikoko burst out laughing.

That's why he looked so serious. The reason was, of all things, the wavelengths of mobile phones.

"So what in the world are you?" Rikoko asked. She laughed out loud, not caring if she woke the rest of the family up.

Yanagihara also laughed. "A ghost!" he answered, still laughing.

They seemed to be having fun. But it was certainly nothing to laugh at.

Soon the entire town had settled down for the evening, but Yanagihara's useless talk about the old days continued. Rikoko didn't care anymore but decided to go along with it. Besides, she couldn't sleep anyway.

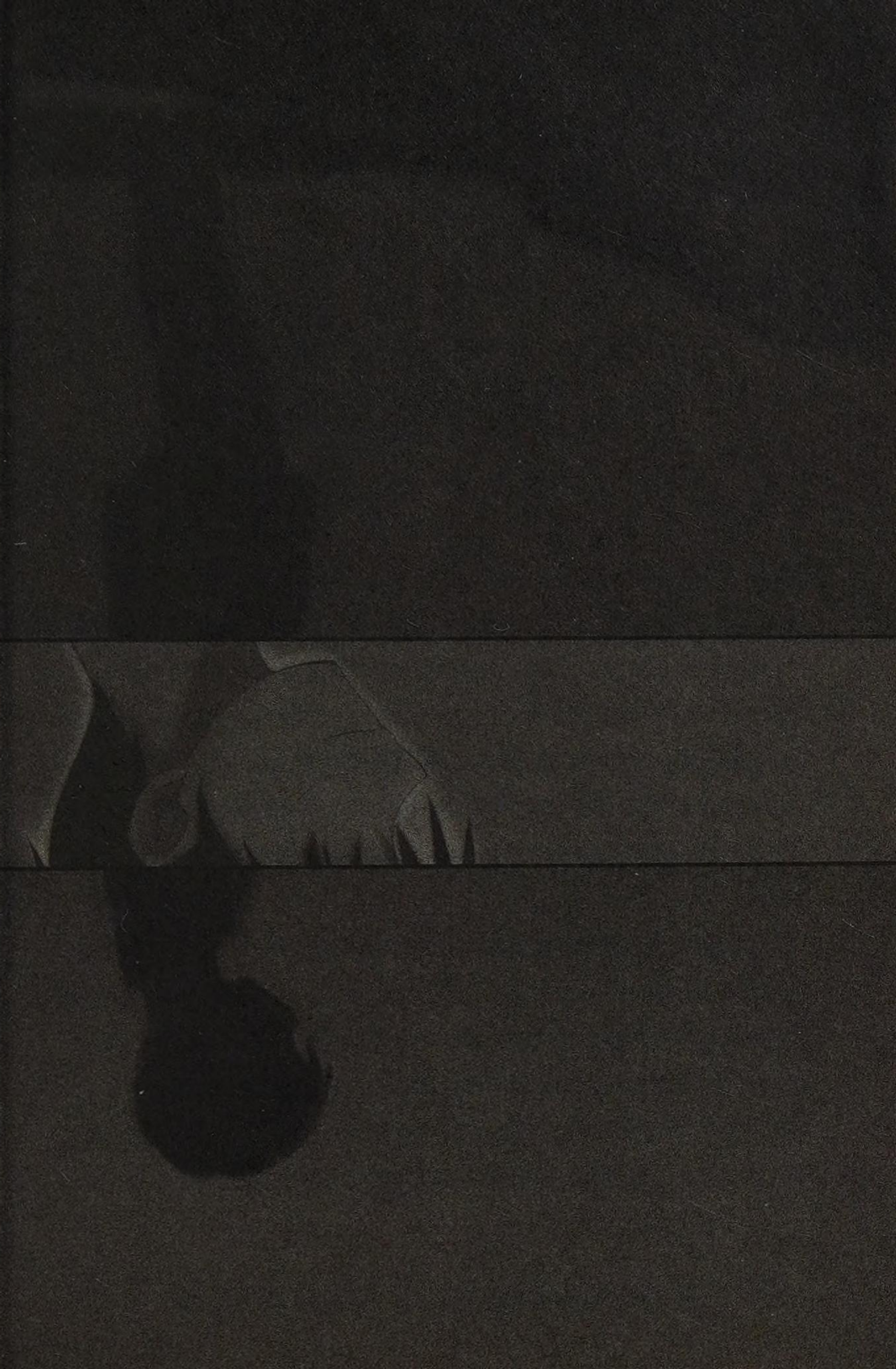
Yanagihara talked about his grade school athletics meet, his students' literary arts exhibition, and even of things that had happened when he'd entered junior high, which Rikoko knew nothing about.

Technically, she was being haunted by a ghost, but nevertheless it was a little fun. Talking about useless, trivial things right then made her feel just a bit lighter.

Ah, I guess once in a while hanging out with an idiot is all right.

Eventually, before she knew it, she fell asleep. Yanagihara peered at her sleeping face.

"…Good night, Kagawa-san. This is just about all I can do for you. I wish I could take away all of your depression. But I can't. I'm not capable of that, and it's probably not my job to do so. The only person who can do that is you."



Yanagihara's eyes looked a little sad. His gaze fell upon the cell phone, which had been thrown against the wall.

"…So Kagawa-san likes them too… Rude Rain-bow…"

Yanagihara remembered the melody.

Then, slowly, he began to sing. He sang the very song Rikoko used as her ringtone.

Our dreams
In that moment
We couldn't reach them
We pulled back our outstretched hands
We felt as if we could reach the moon
We were a bit scared
We could laugh a little bit

Our sky
In that moment
We felt as if we could reach it
We pulled back our outstretched hands

Even that moon
Even the stars

Just like that moment
One day, we'll reach it
I'm sure, definitely
Just like that moment
One day for sure
Above the clouds.

Yanagihara looked at Rikoko's cell phone. As he was singing, he gradually faded, until he disappeared from the spot.

A single tear fell from Rikoko's eye as she lay on the bed. It created a moist spot on her peach-colored pillow. In truth, within her heart of hearts, she prayed. She acted tough, talked big, and lied to cover up her tears.

But in reality, she hoped this instant was real.

♪

For a requiem, it was very strange.

The black car that transported the dead, although it was black, bore extravagant gold decorations.

As the family and a great many people said their tearful farewells, a cheesy-sounding rock 'n' roll song played. This song, which the departed had loved most, did not fit a funeral at all. It was by a young band called Rude Rainbow and was entitled "My Girl."

The song was being played because the departed had listened to it until right before his death.

The young boy, who had died while trying to help an old lady on the steps of a pedestrian bridge, had been listening to an MD player at the time. When his parents had found it and pushed the play button, they had discovered it was cued to the song "My Girl."

He had been a young boy who had led a normal life… Yanagihara Kazutomo.

Immediately before he had died and now, in his death, that song resonated. And it would continue to resonate within her.

"……"

Rikoko awoke, feeling the coldness of her cheek. The hands of the clock on the wall pointed to six in the morning.

"…Ngh…" She buried her face and wiped her

tears on the pillow. It had been a while since she had slept so deeply. These days, she couldn't get enough sleep. She would close her eyes but would wake up every hour or so.

So that morning, after a good night's sleep, her head felt clearer than it had been the past few days.

"Good morning, Kagawa-san."

Argh... All that talking last night, and it still wasn't enough for him?

With a fabulous smile on his face, Yanagihara peered into Rikoko's face. His face was extremely close to hers.

"…Aaaaghhh!" Rikoko yelled and threw her pillow at Yanagihara. He was watching her sleep!

The pillow sailed through Yanagihara's body in a parabolic arc. It hit nothing but the wall.

I swear...

Once more, Rikoko didn't feel like going to school. She wandered aimlessly about town yet again, until she realized she had arrived at the park.

It was a rather large park, well stocked with playground rides and equipment. Rikoko remembered playing there when she was still in kindergarten.

Yanagihara spoke up. "Come to think of it, I remember falling off of the jungle gym. Hmm… Now that I think about it, I experienced falling at a young age. Although I didn't die that time."

He laughed at his own recollections.

That's nothing to laugh about, Rikoko secretly retorted in her thoughts.

She sat on a bench, and Yanagihara stood next to her, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

After a while, a nursery school teacher brought kids from the local kindergarten to the park. The children instantly ran to and fro. From everywhere, the voices of busy children rang out. A little girl innocently ran in front of Rikoko, tripped on a stone, and slid to the ground.

"Whoa…"

Rikoko ran to the child and picked her up. "Are you all right?"

With tears welling in her eyes, the girl answered, "I'm all right!" She was bearing with the pain desperately.

"Good girl," Rikoko told her. She pulled a handkerchief from her skirt pocket and took the child by the hand to wash off her injuries with water. Finally, she

dressed the child's wound with the handkerchief.

"Now go to your teacher and get this sterilized, okay?"

"Okay," the child answered. "Thank you, oneechan!" The little girl waved her hand and trotted off.

"Hey, hey. Don't trip and fall again!" Rikoko called out as she smiled and watched the little girl race away. Suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her chest, a reminder of "the thing" that troubled her.

The child ran to the teacher and hugged her with all of her tiny body. Then, pointing at Rikoko, she said something to the nursery school teacher, who quickly walked to Rikoko.

"Sorry to have troubled you. Thank you very much." The teacher bowed her head in a sign of respect and gratitude.

"Oh!" Rikoko exclaimed. "It was nothing."

Yanagihara welcomed her back with a faraway look in his eyes. "You're so kind, Kagawa-san."

"Not really. Well, if a kid went and dived into the ground in front of you, of course you'd help her out. And she was bleeding. And she was about to cry." Rikoko scratched her head while she spoke, as

if being praised for such a little thing was way too embarrassing to bear.

But Yanagihara said, "You think? These days, everyone's so busy minding their own business that they don't pay attention to things happening around them, don't you think? They try to avoid things when it's inconvenient for them. And everyone's rushing. I wonder why everyone's in such a hurry? There are a lot of people who don't like to be inconvenienced, don't you think?"

"Yeah," she answered. "But I definitely think I'm one of those people, though."

Rikoko rifled through her bag and took out her cigarettes. She popped one into her mouth. As she was about to light it, her hand stopped. She had left her phone in her room, and while she didn't actually have it with her, the memory of the previous night's call flashed through her mind. The Zippo lighter was something she had received from the caller.

Although he didn't smoke, he had said that he kept the lighter as a good luck charm. Rikoko had replied that she would actually use it, and she had taken it from him.

In truth, she had just wanted something from him.

Anything, as long as it was something that belonged to "him."

But why did things end up this way?

Rikoko gazed at the Zippo, forgetting how to breathe. Then, as he always did, Yanagihara began to speak without warning.

"I wanted to become a kindergarten teacher myself."

"Huh?" Rikoko raised her head and looked at Yanagihara.

"When I was in kindergarten, my teacher was male. That's a rare thing, don't you think? I really liked that teacher. He was kind and large and really good at singing. I admired him a lot. So I thought I'd like to become like him. Well, I'm totally different from him. But I wanted to become a teacher."

The fact that he referred to himself in the past tense made the reality that he would never be able to realize his dreams all too sad. It also reminded Rikoko of the fact that Yanagihara was dead.

It was so ironic. Yanagihara, who was dead, had a dream. But Rikoko, who was alive and here, had no dreams. She didn't even feel the urge to find one. She just languidly lived each day, going through the

motions of merely existing.

"…There is no need for dreams."

Someone had said that. But it had been under the pretense that there was something else to be had instead. If so, then to Rikoko there was no hope. She had no dream nor did she have the urge to find one. For her, there was nothing. Only lies.

"Hmm," Yanagihara mused. "But that's impossible now. Because I'm dead." He laughed in a terribly carefree manner.

Like I said, there's nothing to laugh about. It's painful. Even an idiot has to have limits. Does this mean I'm even more of an idiot than he is? It makes me look pitiful. Why is Yanagihara here?

Why was he still here? He shouldn't be, but he was. He had died.

"Why did you come to me? Why am I the only one who can see you?"

Yanagihara smiled joyfully. "Well, that's probably because I…I'm in love with you, Kagawa-san, don't you think?"

Give me a break. This isn't funny. I'm not the kind of person somebody could love even after *they're dead.*

Rikoko shook her head. But Yanagihara, always with that faraway look, said, "That day we had the school trip, I actually wanted to approach you, Kagawa-san. But I was scared. What was scarier than falling or getting scolded by the teachers? If I reached the place where you were, and you didn't smile, that was what scared me the most. So I couldn't do it. I chickened out."

I'm a coward. I can only live by telling lies. It's all a fake, even the smiles I give. I'm afraid to dream. Because what am I supposed to do when I learn it won't come true? I'm a coward. I hate pain. I hate suffering. And I hate sadness. I'm not the kind of person who should be loved.

Rikoko closed her eyes and, after a brief moment of silence, slowly opened her mouth to speak.

"Look. This is a story that doesn't matter. Just suppose there was this girl. And this girl is very weak…"

♪

The girl was fourteen. She was not yet an adult, but no longer a child either. She was in a complicated

state. And she was bored every day. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't remember what happened on the previous day after it had already passed by. After all, there was nothing to look back on. There was nothing to remember.

She smiled, although there was nothing to smile about.

Morning came, night fell, and then morning came again. Every day the same boring routine. She gave herself over to the moment. Another day repeated itself.

So the girl thought of doing something. Bad things. Very bad things. To break the boredom. She saw stories of bad girls on TV. That's right, she'll try that. She'll be a copycat. That should ease the boredom.

The girl cleverly deceived a boy, whom she didn't even like, and manipulated him into falling in love with her. It went well. She deceived him well.

…Or so she thought.

At some point, she fell for the boy. The girl grew attracted to the boy's expressions, his manners, his smell, his words, his voice, the movements of his lips…everything about him.

She was supposed to make him fall in love with her, but she also had fallen hopelessly in love with him. That's when the girl realized she had a big problem.

The boy she had fallen in love with was her tutor. He attended a famous university and had a bright future awaiting him. There was even a time when he eagerly told the girl about his dreams.

"...I'm going to become a politician. I think it would be great if our world could become just a little bit better to live in. There's probably not much I can do. But if somebody somewhere could become just a bit happier than they are now... Things will change, I know it. They can change. If we work hard enough."

The boy, who was usually quiet and spoke very little, on this occasion was in a talking mood. His cheeks reddened as he realized how talkative he was being. He was very mature for his age, but he spoke eagerly about his dreams like an excited little child. He was even a little bashful about it.

The girl listened intently to the boy as he talked. It was easy for her to see that he was serious about this. He had a great ambition.

So she couldn't tell him. If she did, she might

ruin his future and his dreams. No, if he found out, he would surely step away from the path arranged for him without the slightest reluctance or regret. If she asked him to die with her, he probably would. If it was for her. That was how sincere his feelings for her were. So she wouldn't tell him. She couldn't.

"…Not about this *child*."

Rikoko placed her hand on her belly. She looked at it lovingly at first, and then with pain.

This new life growing inside of me…

"I knew."

"…What?" Rikoko raised her head.

"I'm sure that girl put on a bold front, but in reality she was lonely…and just a little weak, right?" Yanagihara said, smiling his usual smile.

"Since I'm dead," he continued, "I can't feel you, Kagawa-san. I'm so close to you, but I can't hold you in my arms. But I know. Maybe it's because I'm dead. But now, I truly understand life. You held everything inside you, didn't you? You struggled and you suffered, but you still tried to pull through by yourself, didn't you? But it's all right. I know you'll be okay,

Kagawa-san. Yes?"

He was saying such random things, but that was the good thing about it. It was comforting to have someone smiling next to you. What a relief it was simply to be an idiot and smile.

She had decided in her heart that there was no need to tell. She had thought it was the right thing to do. But somehow it was painful. She was afraid, so afraid she could not stand it. Her heart felt like it might get torn asunder.

Rikoko looked downward; she was about to cry. But she shouldn't cry.

Yanagihara can no longer cry. So what's the point of me crying? Then what will happen to this child? If I become weak, what will happen to this child? This life growing inside of me? I can't cry.

Yanagihara was a really good guy with a completely good nature. It was embarrassing for her, but she realized he really did care about her. He had cared about her all this time, even after he had died.

If only I'd realized it sooner. If only we could have met like this sooner. Then things would be so much easier than they are now, and I wouldn't have to suffer so much.

If she had gotten to know him better earlier, she probably wouldn't have come close to being crushed by boredom.

"Why did you die?" she asked Yanagihara.

But there was only silence. Rikoko lifted her face.

"…No way…"

He was gone. Yanagihara was no longer there.

—Ring.

He had disappeared.

Well, he was dead to begin with, so that was probably normal. But it was all too sudden.

Don't go away. You're a good guy, and it might be strange to say this, but those meaningless conversations we have make me so happy. They're really idiotic, but they give me comfort, and I was just starting to think it was all good, but now you're gone.

"C'mon, Yanagihara," she said aloud. "Come out. You're just hiding, right? Hey, Yanagihara!"

"…He's no longer here."

—Ring.

The sound of a bell. And the presence of the shinigami in white.

♪

"He is no longer here," Momo explained. "His soul is already separated from his body, so he couldn't stay long in this world. It was his 'love' that kept him grounded here."

Daniel added, "But actually, it was Momo who helped him… Agh…!"

Momo had grabbed him by the neck, and he fell silent. "It was his love for you," Momo continued. "You understand, right? You felt it, right?"

"Then why did you take him away?" Rikoko demanded. "You did, right? You took him away, didn't you?!"

"That's right," the girl in white answered. "But he had to let go of his 'attachments' first. That's why he is now able to cross to the other side."

"Why—how would you know that?!" Rikoko screamed at her.

To which Momo answered, "Oh, I *am* a shinigami, after all."

Yanagihara had had a dream. With a laugh, even though there was totally nothing to laugh about, he had said that he wanted to become a kindergarten teacher.

How could a dead guy laugh about his dreams? No, actually, it was me that couldn't laugh about myself. I had no dreams or anything else to tell anybody, to make them listen.

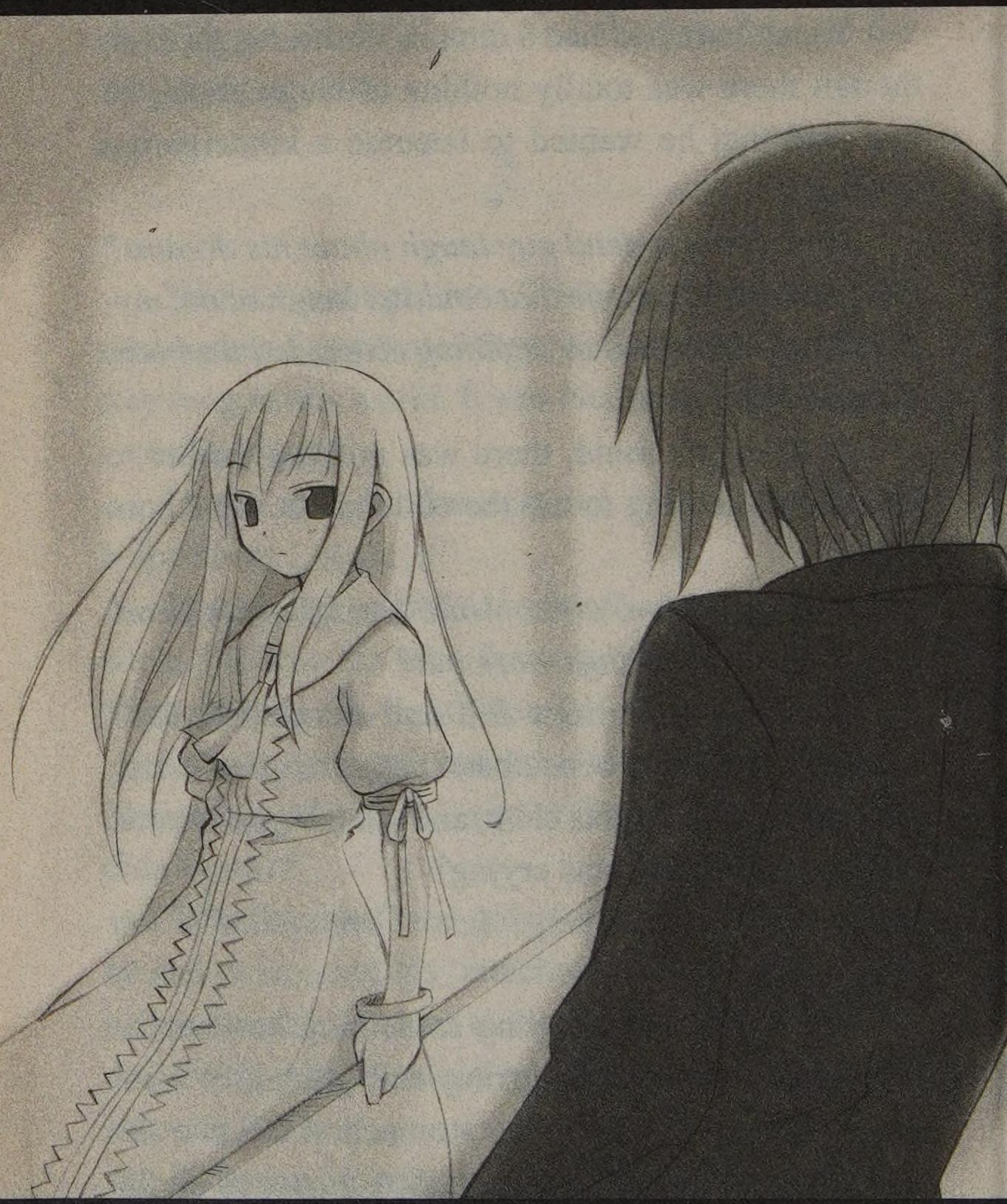
In Rikoko's mind, there was nothing for her to talk about, nothing to tell the child about to be born to her.

And here I am, alive, while Yanagihara's dead. Why? Why can't things work out?

Suddenly, raindrops fell and struck Rikoko's cheeks. The ground beneath her began to grow moist. Incredibly, the sky was clear, and yet it began to rain. Perhaps somebody was crying?

Or maybe I'm crying? I can't even tell. I'm wet from the rain.

But Rikoko was feeling something besides the rain. Her vision was blurring and gradually went white. There was pain in her stomach; it felt like she was being stabbed with a knife. She crouched on the spot where she stood.



"…Ah…ngh…"

One of the nursery school teachers took notice and ran to her. It was the same teacher the little girl had run to and hugged.

"Are you all right?!" the teacher asked.

"Oneechan, are you okay?"

Standing next to the nursery school teacher was the little girl Rikoko had helped.

"Oneechan, oneechan…"

The child's voice gradually faded away…

—Ring.

♪

Hearing the sound of rain, she opened her eyes. Everything was white. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

Jeez, what am I, a crybaby?

"Looks like it," a voice answered from very close by.

Rikoko turned her gaze and saw Momo and Daniel. Momo was plopped on a simple, steel-pipe chair while Daniel was curled up into a tiny ball on her lap.

She was in a square room with white walls. There were white sheets on her white bed. It didn't take long for Rikoko to figure out she was lying on a hospital bed.

She heard the sound of rain pounding the window. While Rikoko had been unconscious, the passing rain had turned into a regular downpour.

"How do you feel?" Momo asked.

She was a weird one, a shinigami who worried about others. Yanagihara was gone, but for some reason *she* was still there. She hadn't exactly come to claim Rikoko, either.

Somehow Rikoko understood the reason this shinigami was here. She felt the sense of loss one feels when one has lost something precious and can do nothing about it. The feeling spread throughout her body. She knew instantly that the life that should have been inside of her was gone.

Why can't things work out? Why do I always lose precious things? Why do I always realize how precious they are after I lose them?

Though her body felt heavy, Rikoko raised herself up and asked, "Why, why… Why did you take it away?"

It was gone. The life inside her was no longer there. The shinigami had taken it away.

"How can you just kill people so casually?! How can you look so calm about it?! You killed Yanagihara with that same indifferent expression on your face, didn't you?! My baby, too! What's the fun in playing with people's lives?! You murderer!" Rikoko spat the words out and then caught herself. "…Why…?"

The shinigami was crying. This entire time, Momo had been crying. Her tears overflowed, traveled down her cheeks, and fell.

"Because," she sobbed, "that's how I am."

Momo smiled as she cried. She made no attempt to wipe away the tears that flowed, but she tried hard to make a happy face despite them.

For some reason, Rikoko remembered Yanagihara's smiling face. In dying, it had actually been Yanagihara who had suffered most. Yet he had smiled. Now this shinigami girl. Perhaps it wasn't true that she killed people indifferently.

What are you crying for? Makes me look like I'm the villain here. Because I can't cry…oh, I see. So this little girl is crying in my place even though she's a shinigami. I swear—give me a break. A shinigami

should act like a shinigami.

Daniel woke up, doused by Momo's tears. "...Huh?" he exclaimed. "Momo, why are you crying?"

Momo smiled gently. "It's all right… It's all right."

She was saying it to Daniel, but to Rikoko as well. It felt that way.

"…I know you'll be okay, Kagawa-san, I'm sure of it."

You mean that you want me to "live," right? That crybaby shinigami-san. Thanks, Yanagihara. For coming. For loving me.

♪

A strange rainbow in the sky. It shot out in a straight line instead of traveling in an arc.

Rikoko secretly pointed this out to the sky and the rainbow. *Hey, hey. That's not how it should be.*

At the hospital, she asked about her child. But after all the tests were done, the doctor came in, looking as if he wasn't amused.

"There never was a child," the doctor said. "There was no evidence of a baby. Apparently, this was a case of an 'imagined' pregnancy, a psychological condition where in addition to your mistaken assumption that you were pregnant, symptoms appeared just as if it were a real pregnancy."

Despite the doctor's findings, Rikoko had definitely felt a life within her. And she had embraced it firmly.

The reason… For life.

Surely the shinigami had taken it away. Perhaps it was crawling quite happily in Heaven.

"…Do you like to smoke?"

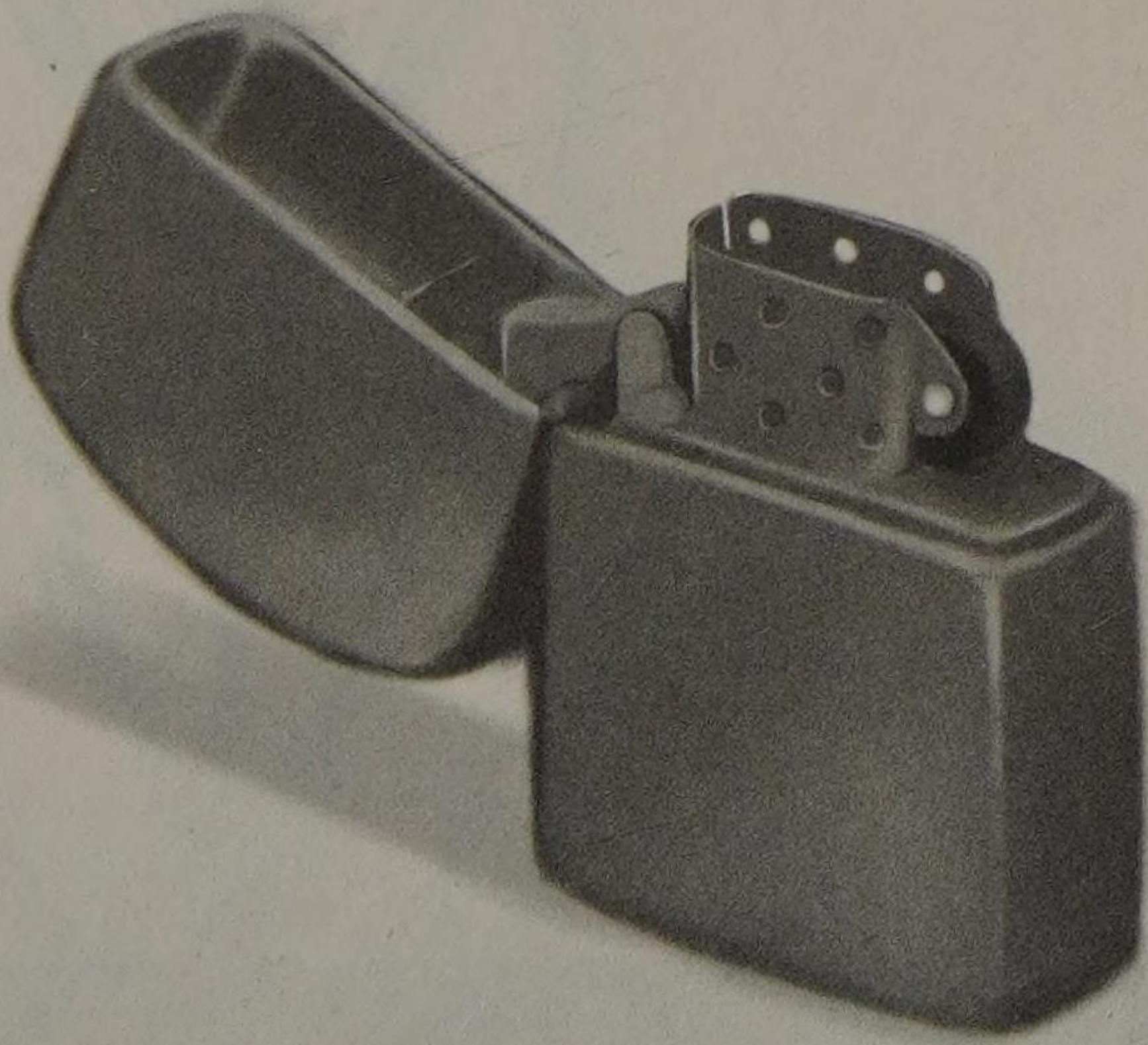
Had Yanagihara asked that question because he knew about the baby in her belly? Perhaps he'd wanted to tell her that it was bad for her and her baby's health.

Then I'll quit smoking. After all, it's bad for my health, right? Even I know that. I'm going to break up with my boyfriend too. I'm going to tell him properly. I fell in love with him, but now I'm breaking up with

him. I still love him, though. I suppose it's due to the so-called young girl's pained heart? Once burned, twice shy, as they say. After all, I'm just a high school girl. I'm still terribly adolescent. As a result, I don't plan on going that route for a long while.

Okay, see ya!

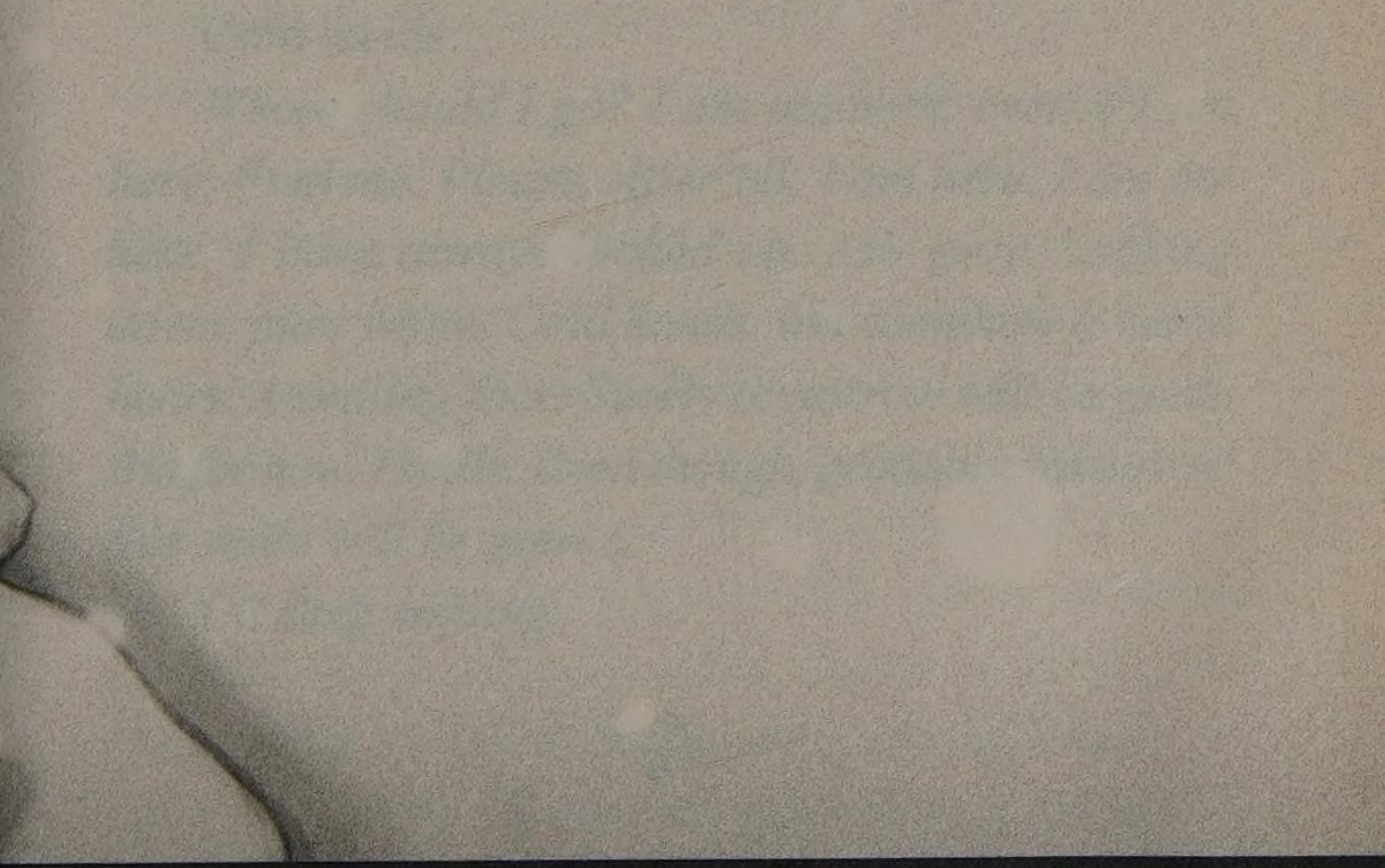
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III

Snow Rebirth.



– My girl, you came here. Your wounds became love.

♪

Looking up, there was the ash-gray sky. Looking down, a pure white world spread out below.

Cold hands…

Where should I go? I am not here, even if I am here. Find me. Please. After all, I am here. I am not here. I have always looked up. Ash gray. Looking down, pure white. Cold hands, but somehow a warm heart. A smiling face. Surely tomorrow will be gone. But for now, I smile. Even though, probably, tomorrow this smile will be gone…

I'll keep smiling.

♪

Since when have I been alone? Since when did I

get used to being alone?

The situation was pretty harsh, but she had gotten used to it.

"Now then…what should I…do?"

On that day, Hirohinata Azuri was alone, as usual. She was used to it, but it was a different thing when one knew that this aloneness would continue for some time. Although she had just turned eleven, she was much more mature than her looks or age indicated. In fact, she could easily surpass her peers. But the situation she faced now was not one that would be so easily resolved.

Of course not.

Both her parents had died in a car accident. The specific cause was, for the time being, still under investigation by the police. Even Azuri, who usually maintained a cool façade, was distressed over the sudden turn of events. Her parents had been taken from her in one fell swoop. And she was suddenly swallowed up by the world of adults.

Her father had maintained a business, while her mother had managed a fashion brand. After the accident, their eleven-year-old daughter inherited both

fortunes. Adults who had never paid any attention to Azuri before now flocked to her, saying things like, "Poor thing, we'll help you, just tell us what you need."

I don't need any pity, and I don't need any help. Don't come near me. I don't want to be at your beck and call. I have no intention of playing the part of the tragic heroine. So don't mind me. I'm me. I can get by on my own. I have money, the one thing Papa and Mama left me... It isn't me these people want. It's the money. I swear, these adults are such turncoats...

Perhaps this was what those adults had hoped for? For her parents to be gone?

Or maybe they actually killed Papa and Mama?

The loss of her parents was so sudden that Azuri thought such hateful things. In the truest sense of the word, she had become alone. She had thought this kind of thing only happened in movies or books, but it had actually happened to her. It was all horribly overwhelming.

"Really… What should I do…?"

Azuri took a sip of tea from the cup. For the first time in her life—and alone at that—she had come to a

place called a family restaurant. Not knowing what to do, she had found herself peeking from the entrance, afraid to enter.

What had made things worse was that an apparently naïve young girl on the staff had started worrying about her. "Are you okay? Where's your mama?" she had asked.

"I'm alone," Azuri had said.

In a very nasal voice, the girl had replied, "Wow, you're here all by yourself?"

She had shown Azuri to a seat. Carefully placing her coat and shoulder bag on a stool, Azuri had slowly sat down, making sure her skirt didn't flap up. She was filled with self-loathing for being so ignorant of the ways of the world. But she at least understood she needed to order something. She at least knew that. She had tried ordering some tea, but…

"…This is not good at all… This…"

It wasn't Earl Grey. The aroma stank like the cheap imitation that it was. And the pot wasn't even properly warmed. The leaves weren't steamed enough. The water wasn't hot enough. Nothing was any good.

No good, no good, no good, no good, no good.

She stopped herself from letting out a sigh, deciding that it didn't make for a good appearance. She pushed the sigh back, deep into her throat, and swallowed it.

Glaring at the tea didn't make it taste any better, so she gave up and switched her gaze to the scenery outside the window. It was snowing. The snow, which had been falling for the past few days, covered the city in white. The sky above was a bleak ash gray, but the world in front of her eyes was a snow-covered scene of white and silver.

Which one is real? Which one is the true appearance? Which one is the real world? What is...real?

The powdery snow danced outside the window. She reached out her hand, toward the world beyond the glass. The cold she could not touch.

Sigh. She let out a breath, and the window fogged up.

It doesn't matter which one. It doesn't matter which one is real.

For now, Azuri had decided that she would at least leave the house. She wanted to go somewhere the adults could not reach her. But where could that be? There was nowhere a young girl in the fifth grade

could go alone. However, she had nobody she could rely on. Where should she go?

"…For now…"

First, she had to do something about this god-awful tea.

♪

She never did finish the tea.

She would have liked to file a complaint or two, saying something like, "Don't serve such lousy tea to customers," but Azuri dutifully paid the bill and left the restaurant.

The snow had stopped, but a chill caressed Azuri's cheeks. Firmly adjusting the strap of her bag on her shoulder, Azuri began to walk through the town. It was just past one in the afternoon. The rest of the world was on winter vacation, and nobody took notice of a young girl walking by herself at this time of day.

In fact, several young boys and girls—about the same age as Azuri—were going to and fro. Other than the fact that she was wearing clothes that were a bit more expensive than those worn by the average fifth grader, Azuri completely blended in with the rest of

town. Of course, she probably wasn't conscious of her appearance.

By now, it had most likely become apparent that she was gone from the house. She didn't want to neglect caution. The adults would search for her. She needed to make sure that she wouldn't be found.

"…Ah."

Just as she was reminding herself to be careful, she ran into a familiar face.

"Huh? Azuri?"

It was her school teacher, Harakami Seigo. He was a young teacher who taught art to Azuri's class. He wore a gray coat over the suit he always wore at school. His collar was pulled up.

Does he think he's being fashionable? Azuri thought.

Seigo asked a very typical question in his very typical manner. "What are you doing here? Shopping?"

This might actually turn out to be a good situation for Azuri. This guy was different from the other teachers and adults she knew. He seemed a bit detached from the world and never appeared to work very hard at school. In fact, the first impression he gave was that

of a useless adult.

But in truth, it wasn't as if he was cutting corners. He simply didn't want to burn any excess energy, so he was always being natural.

He called his students by their first names, like "Azuri." And he would say, "You don't need to call me 'sensei' or anything. I'm not that type anyway."

So the students would casually call him "Seigo" or "Seigo-chan" or "Sei-chan."

Not that they were belittling him or making fun of him, mind you. His looks weren't bad, and since he was young he was actually quite popular. He kept his clothes and appearance neat, and even now he wore his suit well. There was an enormous difference between him and the P.E. teachers who wore sweat suits all the time.

During lunch break, Seigo would even play serious soccer with the boys. The other teachers, even the P.E. teachers, would never do a thing like that. In fact, they would most likely protest, saying things like, "What if you get hurt, playing so hard like that?" The PTA would complain too.

At such a prestigious institution, where the rules

were worshipped, this man stuck out like a sore thumb.

But if one were to debate the rules, what about teachers who wear sweat suits then? Azuri thought.

Azuri didn't dislike Seigo. But it wasn't as if she particularly liked him either.

He's not my type is how she felt about him. However, Azuri did like his drawings.

The class had once gone on an excursion to do some sketching, as an extracurricular activity. Seigo, instead of sketching the scenery, had drawn the faces of the students as they sketched things around them. The rough drawings he'd made had emanated warmth and a gentle nature.

It wasn't about whether Seigo was good or bad. He just seemed nice. That's it.

To Azuri, there was one other thing that made Seigo different from the other adults. He didn't look at her with pity in his eyes, nor did he try to sympathize with her as the other adults did. He simply approached her the way he always had before.

Azuri stared straight into Seigo's eyes. For some reason, the teacher began to stutter. "Uh, well, this.

Uh, no… It's, uh, well, uh…"

Hm…?

Azuri looked in the direction from which Seigo had come, and the reason behind his stuttering dawned on her. Right in front of her was a pachinko parlor.[4]

Ah, so that's it.

Complaints from other teachers were one thing, but if he was caught playing pachinko, he would suffer a deluge of complaints, this time from parents. He would surely be sacked under the pretense that he was setting a bad example. He was already having trouble conforming to the norm, so he probably wanted to avoid any further lectures or negative incidents.

"Uh, y'know. It's like…I can't very well deal with all this stress now, can I?" He was obviously trying very hard to squeeze out an excuse. "So…like I said, it's stress relief. Yeah, I'm the stress-relief king."

Azuri found it hard to understand; was he just joking or what? Seigo could do nothing but laugh nervously under the girl's cold stare.

"Seigo-kun," Azuri said. "Hang out with me for a bit… I have money."

♪

—Ring.

The white shadow stood by, as if it were one with the snow.

"What are you going to do?" asked the black cat standing next to it.

The white shadow cocked her head, indicating that she had no clue. "Who knows…"

The black cat dexterously folded his forepaws together in irritation. "You always say that," the cat said. "But you *do* know."

"Well, I really don't know anything. I'm sure that girl knows, though."

The white shadow melted into the snow.

♪

"Wow… So even someone like you is interested in a place like this, Azuri… Well, if you say it's normal, I guess it's normal." Seigo spoke as if he were talking to himself.

Azuri brushed back her neatly trimmed bangs with one hand and asked, "So what do you think of me?"

"Hmm? That you look older than your age," he answered frankly.

Azuri looked at him as if he'd just said something unexpected.

"Uh, no," he added. "Don't misunderstand. I meant the impression you give off. You seem older than the others. There's a part of you that seems strangely insightful, you know."

"Oh, really? One child and one servant. Oh, my mistake. One adult," Azuri told the woman at the ticket window.

"…Servant… Now, where did you learn a word like that…?" Seigo wondered, scratching his cheek.

"Right now you're hanging out with me, right? I'll keep that little 'thing' a secret for you." Without fear or hesitation, Azuri took the two passes she received from the ticket seller and handed one to Seigo.

"All right, all right… Certainly, my princess." Seigo made an exaggerated bow, like some European nobleman.

"As long as you understand." Azuri held the



upper hand. Seigo could only reply with a painfully forced smile.

The two of them were at a theme park, with costumed characters as the park mascots. Upon entering, a hamster character welcomed the two of them.

"....."

Azuri ignored the costumed hamster, which was greeting her with a flourish, and walked on by. For an instant, it seemed as if the hamster had turned to stone.

A normal kid would have been delighted and would have immediately run to the costumed character. This was what the mascot had expected, so he had welcomed Azuri, but he'd been ignored instead.

Well, to be accurate, she hadn't actually "ignored" him. She'd given him a "who the hell are you?" look as she'd passed by.

That poor guy. Seigo thought. This was a good example of what Seigo called "Azuri-ness."

This place was normal for other girls her age, but not for Azuri. Her being there made the contrast even more apparent.

"Seigo-kun, what are you doing?" the girl asked,

turning around.

"Oh, sorry." He'd been lost in thought, so he had ended up wandering a bit away from her. Azuri approached him at a rapid pace.

"There, we're riding that," said Azuri as she grabbed Seigo's arm and started running.

"H-hey! You're going to trip if you rush like that…and drag me down with you!"

The girl ignored him and pulled at his arm even harder as he scrambled to maintain his footing on the wet pavement.

"H-hey! Are you sure? Okay, you're going to trip! *I'm* going to trip and fall! Oh, we're gonna fall splat on our asses, and even the clowns will laugh at us… Hey, hey! Listen to me! Please, listen!"

There was no doubt as to who was the absolute leader. Even Seigo recognized it completely. He knew it, but he still made a big fuss about being henpecked, just like every other guy does.

Now if Azuri had heard what he was mumbling to himself, she probably would have spat out something like, "I don't get it!"

They were approaching the coffee cup ride, and Seigo hesitated at the sight of it.

"…Uh," he said. "I…"

"What?" Azuri shot him a look that seemed to say, *You're not going to complain now, are you?*

"No…it's nothing," he answered.

"……"

"…Aggghhhh…I'm getting sick…"

In truth, Seigo got sick easily on carnival rides. They were currently riding in an unusually large—not to mention fast-spinning—coffee cup, and of course he got queasy in no time.

"……"

Valiantly, he struggled to hold back his vomit.

"…How embarrassing…and…disgusting…"

Next he endured cold stares from bystanders as he clutched at the neck of the white stallion on the merry-go-round. Of course, the up-and-down motion multiplied his nausea.

Seemingly oblivious to his suffering, Azuri mercilessly dragged Seigo to all the attractions and rides. While waiting in lines, Azuri never spoke a word. On the other hand, Seigo desperately tried to make small talk. The mood darkened considerably.

Finally, the two arrived at the Ferris wheel.

Perhaps out of consideration for the exhausted

Seigo or on a whim, Azuri declared, "This is the last one we'll ride."

She pointed at the Ferris wheel.

The word "last," which Azuri had meant in a good way, didn't exactly sit well with Seigo. His already pale face grew even paler. As they waited for the ride, his white face turned to blue. In a short amount of time, he appeared to have become worn thin.

Finally, it was their turn.

A female attendant opened the door for them, saying, "Oh, you're on a date with your oniisan? How nice to have such a cool-looking oniisan like him."

To which Azuri responded, "He's my servant."

She shuffled past the shocked woman and into the Ferris wheel carriage. "What are you doing, Seigo-kun? Hurry up and get in."

Seigo was hesitating again, but he quickly made up his mind with those words. "…Yes, ma'am."

Looking like he was about to burst into tears, he slowly and carefully boarded the Ferris wheel. Taking great care not to shake the compartment, he sat down on the seat opposite Azuri.

Gradually, the Ferris wheel began to move, and their altitude increased. The entire time, Azuri stared

at the scenery outside the window. The sun had already set, and the lights of the park reflected beautifully against the snowy landscape.

By now, Seigo was reduced to a cowering little ball and was careful not to move a muscle. Suddenly, without warning and for no reason at all, Azuri stood up, grabbed the window sill, and began shaking the compartment.

"Nwaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!" Seigo wailed loudly. "Ah, Azuri! Stop it, stop it!"

She wouldn't stop.

"A-Azuriiiii! Stop it. Please, stop it! Please! I'm begging! I'm sorry! I won't do it again!"

Noticing that he had just said something weird, Azuri stopped cold.

"Fff…ha ha ha ha…" Quite inexplicably, Seigo laughed.

"Seigo-kun," Azuri asked, "are you perhaps afraid of heights?"

"Whaddayamean, 'perhaps'?! I *am*! Honestly, you shook the carriage because you knew that, didn't you?" Seigo spoke with a taut expression.

Without a trace of malice, Azuri nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Look…" Seigo was beginning to feel ashamed of himself, being completely toyed with by a fifth grader. But he wasn't mad at her. He knew this was how she acted, even at school. Azuri was separated from the "circle."

She didn't really intend to look down on others. But others had that impression of her anyway. The way she phrased her words made it sound that way. She was awkward. Perhaps it was because she spent a lot of time alone. She had an inability to maintain relationships with people.

Furthermore, she was always more adept at everything than anyone else, which made it seem as if she was "looking down" on others even more.

When Seigo had been Azuri's age, it had been normal to be respected or receive admiration if one was good at something. But it had served to create distance between people as well.

How could she be used to being alone? If it were me, I'd be miserable, thought Seigo.

To get his mind off the fear of being so high above the ground, Seigo pulled out a tiny sketchbook from his pocket and began drawing with a pencil. He sketched the scene in front of him—outside the win-

dow—and the young girl, looking far away.

Normally, a view of this fantastic theme park would be enough to make one sigh, but the added attraction of the snow-covered scenery made it look like a scene from another world.

However, the young girl said not a word, as if she felt nothing. She just continued to stare.

Amidst the silence—the only sound was Seigo's scribbling—Azuri finally spoke. "You went to an art college didn't you, Seigo-kun?"

"Well, yeah. But it was more like the fine-arts department at an art college. My major…but I guess you wouldn't understand even if I told you."

"Why are you working as an art teacher?" she asked.

"Why, you say…hmm. Well, there are a lot of issues… I wanted to be an artist… But you know… After I graduated from art school, I bummed around, and then my teacher from college asked if I wanted to be a teacher at your school, so that's why."

"Why didn't you become an artist?" Azuri asked relentlessly.

Seigo let out a breath. "It's not that I *didn't* become one—I *couldn't* become one."

Seigo's hand never stopped drawing while he patiently answered all her questions.

"Well, why didn't you? You're so good at pictures, Seigo-kun."

"You can't be one just because you're good. I mean, I guess I don't have enough talent or passion to become an artist."

"How do you know that?"

"I just know," he answered. "I saw it, the difference in talent. That thing called passion. It's when you'd risk even your life to paint. I don't have that. When I was in college, I entered what I thought was my best picture into this competition…"

"What kind of picture?"

"Hmm…" he mused. "I guess you could call it a picture of a girl. It was actually pretty deep, y'know, and pretty good considering it was done by someone like me. But the picture that took first prize… It was amazing. It was just a picture, but it felt like it was really emanating light and warmth. I found myself mesmerized by it. This was a rival's picture, y'know? This dude was just a junior high kid, only fifteen years old! But they said he's the son of a famous painter who committed everything to painting and died, so I was

no match. And I realized it was talent and genes…"

Seigo said this as a joke, but Azuri couldn't laugh.

"Why—why did you give up?"

"Huh?" Seigo was confused by Azuri's words.

"Maybe that person," she explained, "that fifteen-year-old person worked really hard. So that's why he became number one, right? How can you pass it off as just talent? That's an insult to him."

"…Maybe." He laughed it off, shrugging his shoulders.

That could be true, he thought. *But even so, I still don't stand a chance. After all, working hard like that is also a talent, right?*

He thought this but didn't say it aloud. Saying it aloud wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't change the fact that Seigo was where he was.

"But it's okay. For me. I kind of like my job right now. And I like kids. And Azuri, I like you, too."

Seigo smiled innocently. He hadn't meant anything in particular by those words, but they still had meaning. Azuri's cheeks reddened just a little bit. A touch of peach tinged her white skin.

This was the first time since she had lost her

parents that Seigo had seen her expression change. For the longest time she had worn an expressionless face, like a doll, her heart frozen shut.

To begin with, she had never expressed her feelings much, but since her parents' death, that trait had become even more noticeable. It was as if she were doing it intentionally. And Seigo had been thinking seriously, from the bottom of his heart, about what he could do for her.

He didn't want it to be just kind words either, or just plain sympathy—he genuinely wanted to do something for her as a human being. But he knew he wasn't a special kind of person. To begin with, he didn't know of any special words he could say to comfort her. So today, although it was entirely a coincidence, had turned out to be a good opportunity. He was close to her, if only for a little bit. He wanted to see her smile, even if it might be too greedy a wish to ask for.

♪

Azuri walked in front. Seigo, as if protecting her from behind, walked a few paces back.

The shoveled snow formed a barrier on either side of the path, like a white brick wall. The two of them arrived at a plaza in the center of the amusement park. Apparently the snow in this plaza had been left untouched on purpose, and the lights gave the carpet of snow a beautiful glow in the night.

There were hardly any people around. Almost everyone had gone to see the costumed characters, who were about to put on a show.

Shunk, shunk, shunk, shunk... Small and big footsteps rang out together as the couple stepped through the snow. The two of them sat down on a covered bench.

"I don't know…" Seigo said, trying to make conversation. "What's so good about that poofy, pink-costumed character…?"

"Who knows…"

"Y'know," he continued. "That sort of thing, it's kind of like a childish trick. It's all just vanity on the part of bad adults who want to deceive children…y'know…"

"Who knows…"

He refused to give it up. "Or y'know…it isn't fun?"

"Huh?" Azuri responded, as if she couldn't understand what he was saying.

"After all," he pressed on, "Azuri, you don't seem like you're having any fun."

Azuri nodded. "There was never anything fun in my life, not until now. So I really don't know what fun is… I don't even know how to smile…"

"Really?" he asked, skeptical. "What about when you're at school or with your friends?"

"I don't have any friends…"

Oops. Seigo felt angry over his own stupidity.

"How about…during your birthday? Like your mom and dad…oh!" Seigo couldn't believe his carelessness and cursed himself even more. Talking about her recently dead parents should be the taboo of all taboos.

I'm such an idiot. I'm a moron. I'm the worst.

As Seigo was beating himself up, Azuri spoke. "I don't know… Papa and Mama were always busy with work, so I don't really have any birthday memories."

Oh my god! Seigo wanted to commit *hara-kiri*[5] and have his head offered on a chopping block. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that those

family situations on TV dramas could actually exist in real life.

"There *has* to be something… Like today, for example, my heart was all aflutter with joy. Uh, what am I saying?!" Seigo frantically flapped his arms and legs, trying to express an image in his head that he couldn't explain very well with words. "It's like, if there was a ball inside my heart, it would be bouncing in this really lively way. There's nothing like that?!"

Azuri stood still, looking down at her feet and thinking for a bit. "I don't know…"

"…I see…" Seigo sat back down, his shoulders slumped.

"But…" Azuri impatiently searched for the words. "I don't know if it's like a ball, but…this area around my chest really feels light… It's like, *poofy,* as if I'd suddenly sprouted wings."

Although she was at a loss for words, Azuri was actually trying to express her feelings. That was enough.

"That's what it means to have fun." Seigo smiled. He suddenly sprang to his feet, as if he were brimming with motivation.

"All right! Leave it to me! I'll make you have

much more fun!"

"Hmm, even though you're just a servant?" Azuri responded teasingly.

This time, Seigo was ready with his witty comeback. "Ah ha ha ha! Even a servant like me wants his princess to enjoy herself. All right…then. First, wait here!"

"What?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Just wait here. I'll be right back. I won't leave you alone, my princess," he told her before running off.

He ran quickly, paying no mind to the scattering snow dampening his clothes.

"……" Azuri silently watched his retreating back as he went.

Don't leave me alone. I don't want to be alone. Because I'll be lonely. Because my heart will grow ever smaller.

Alone, Azuri waited. The same as on that day. She had been supposed to go on a rare outing with her parents. The three of them had been going to eat together. The last time that had happened had seemed like such a long time ago.

Azuri had eagerly waited for that day to come. She'd had a lot of things to talk about. She had wanted them to hear everything she had to say.

Will I be able to speak to them properly? Will they listen? After all, today is my...

She had nervously thought about those things as she'd waited, but her parents had never come back. No matter how long she'd waited, no matter how much time had passed, they had never returned.

Instead, in their place, her father's secretary had come. He had told her the devastating news: her parents had died in an accident. The secretary had burst into tears, but Azuri had been unable to cry.

"Young miss," he had told her, "you are very strong."

But that hadn't been the case. She had wanted so much to cry, but she just couldn't. Surely there was something wrong with her emotions, with her heart. She had always put on a brave front, even though she had been so sad, so lonely, deep inside.

Since Papa and Mama had been so busy, she'd always thought that she shouldn't bother them. She had needs, but she mustn't be selfish. After all, they had always praised her for being a good girl, for being

a quiet girl. Good things happened to good girls.

So even though she had felt alone, she'd persevered. She had known that they would eventually come home and give her a great big hug for being a good girl. As long as she'd had that to look forward to, she could persevere.

But they had never come home.

So now I won't see them anymore? They're never coming home? Am I really alone now? Don't leave me alone. I don't want to be alone. Because I'll be lonely. Because my heart will grow ever smaller.

"Don't leave me alone…" The words bubbled forth from her heart and tumbled out onto her lips.

"…Yes. Sorry to have kept you waiting, my princess."

There stood Seigo. It was obvious he had been running. His shoulders heaved up and down, in rhythm with his heavy breathing. In his hands he held two triple-decker, albeit out-of-season, soft ice cream cones. Strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate.

"W-what is it, hey?!" Seigo started violently as Azuri raised her head, looking straight into his eyes. Tears flowed down her face.

"Whoa!" Seigo exclaimed in surprise. "No way?!

I'm sorry, really. The park is packed with people. I had to fight against waves of humanity! But I lost and got swallowed up…and I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!"

"It's not that, it's not…" Azuri shook her head furiously. Her words were swallowed by a fit of sobbing. It was as if the floodgates that had held her emotions in check had been flung open. She couldn't control her own feelings.

Paying no mind to the wet snow, Seigo went down on one knee and peered into Azuri's face. In a gentle, soothing voice he asked, "What's wrong? Were you lonely? Were you afraid?"

Azuri shook her head and tried desperately to wipe away her disobedient tears.

"It's okay to be lonely," Seigo continued. "To be sad, to be afraid… It's okay to cry. That's normal. I'm sorry for leaving you alone. But it's okay now, I'm right here."

"…Uh… Uh-huh…" Finally, she was able to nod.

"All right, then—eat this. Chow down!" Seigo declared, handing one of the cones to Azuri.

She felt Seigo's hand as she reached for the cone; it seemed enormous. It felt large and rough, but at the

same time beautiful and light and warm.

"It's kinda funky, isn't it? Eating soft ice cream in the middle of winter?" Seigo laughed.

"You have no taste," Azuri replied jokingly.

The comment was colder than the ice cream, but still Seigo laughed.

Azuri laughed too. "Ha ha ha!" Somehow, it was all funny.

She realized at some point that like the winter sun, which hurried toward dusk, she felt terribly impatient about something.

"I… Maybe I was trying to die…"

Sitting side by side, hearing the confession that Azuri had just blurted out, Seigo was so shocked he nearly dropped his cone.

Unmindful of his reaction, she continued, "When I thought that I'd have to be pushed and pulled around by all these strange adults, I decided to leave the house. Then I figured that if I died, maybe I could be with Papa and Mama…"

"…I see…" he said. "Well, I can't say I don't understand, but isn't that kind of depressing?"

"…?"

"If your wish came true," he explained, "then

the minute you died, everyone else would just drop dead, don't you think? That's not going to work. What if someone you loved left you alone like that—what would you think? You understand, don't you, Azuri?"

Seigo continued, "I'd hate it. I'd be so lonely and sad and in pain… Right? I'd hate it if you disappeared, Azuri. I'd *really* hate it."

"…Thank you… Seigo-kun."

"I haven't done anything to be thanked for." He shrugged it off. "After all, I'm Princess Azuri's servant." Opening his mouth wide, he downed the entire cone in one bite.

Azuri smiled awkwardly at Seigo. "Do you have a girlfriend, Seigo?" she asked suddenly.

"What's this, all of a sudden? Well, if I did, I wouldn't be in a place like this."

"Oh, really?" she answered. "Then what about…"

"Hm?"

"The girl you painted a long time ago?"

"Oh, her…" Seigo replied. "She was my old girlfriend."

"Hmm. So where is she now?"

"She died."

"What?" It was Azuri's turn to be startled. Like Seigo, she nearly dropped her cone.

"When I was in high school," he related, "she got sick and died suddenly."

"Oh, uhh…I'm sorry…"

"What are you apologizing for?" he asked. "Of course, at that time I was sad. But I'm okay now. That's why I was able to paint her. I wanted to remind myself that she was once alive. Before I forgot."

"But you haven't forgotten her now…?"

"I haven't," he confirmed. "Because of that painting, I was able to give up being an artist. That was the best painting I was able to do. So…hmm, I'm not sure how to say this, but you'll be okay, Azuri—I'm sure of it."

"…"

Azuri had no confidence in herself. Seigo was strong. He'd had the strength to get over the loss of his girlfriend.

But I am always afraid. I'm not strong—I'm so weak, I'm dumbfounded by it. Can I bear the burden of living? I could smile now, but I might not be able to smile tomorrow. What I have now, I might lose by tomorrow. If so, then what should I do?

Eventually it began to snow. The lights illuminated the plaza. The snow plunged the already white world even further into whiteness.

The illuminating lights. A snow-white picture, painted into the sky.

—Ring.

Just as the snow was falling softly from the sky, there appeared a little girl dressed all in white.

♫

Are you serious... Seigo thought, hoping this was all a dream.

The little girl, who didn't so much appear before their eyes as ooze out of the air, said to Azuri, "My name is Momo. I'm a shinigami. This is Daniel. I brought a message for you."

Politely she handed over her ID card, upon which was written, "Shinigami #A-100100."

The little girl wore a white one-piece dress, which was quite irrational given the season. In contrast to her all-white clothing, her red shoes were eye-catching.

Her voice sounded childish, yet very mature. Her face was beautiful, like a fantasy. However, in her hand she held a dull-colored scythe as tall as she was. By her side was a black cat, who apparently was named Daniel. He had sharp golden eyes and a large bell attached to his collar.

Her appearance was truly far from the popular image of a shinigami. In fact, at first glance, the little girl looked more the type to have a halo and wings, rather than a black cat and a scythe.

Oh, I know! This must be part of the costumed character events. At least, that's what I'd like to think...

That was how Seigo tried to explain the weird phenomenon to himself. But the little shinigami ignored him and instead continued to speak to Azuri.

"I was asked by your papa and mama. They wanted to let you know that they're very sorry they couldn't properly celebrate your birthday."

Azuri was startled. "…What…?"

"Your papa and mama are always looking after you. Even now…and from now on. Because they love you."

" Uh-huh," the black cat added. "If Momo says

so, then it's the truth. Sometimes I don't understand her, though."

Once more Seigo hoped that this was just a dream. A cat was talking. And he seemed a bit arrogant, too.

Azuri said nothing. The things the shinigami had told her, they were all things she already knew. Her parents had been busy people, so she hadn't seen them often. But she had never once thought that she was unloved. She had believed that her parents worked hard, hoping for their only daughter's happiness.

But still, in all honesty, she had wanted them to be near her, even for just a little bit. That's all. That was her wish.

Her feelings were chilled, accumulating like the packed snow. The sky in Azuri's heart was steeped in ashen gray, and the door to her heart was frozen.

As if sensing her emotions, the shinigami said, "The snow eventually melts…and then, what will you have left…? Or do you think you'll have nothing left?"

"What are you talking about?" Azuri demanded. "How do you know about Papa and Mama…?"

"Because I'm a shinigami." That one sentence said it all.

"H-hey," Azuri said. "Don't mess around! I…"

Not even waiting for her to finish, Momo turned her back on Azuri and said, "Daniel, let's go."

"Already, Momo?" Daniel asked.

"Yes…"

They disappeared, leaving behind the sound of the cat's bell. It continued to ring, pealing out as if in song. Azuri and Seigo felt as if they had just witnessed a magic show.

"What was that?" Azuri called out after them. "Don't mess with me! Is it all an illusion? Or... Answer me! How do you know about Papa and Mama…? And…what about the snow melting…? Nothing left… Nothing will be left… What are you talking about? I don't understand a thing…"

Azuri shook her head. Now that her parents were dead, she had nothing left. "…After all… I'm…"

"…I have a feeling," Seigo murmured, "that I understand…"

"What do you mean?" Azuri asked.

Seigo took a breath, hesitated, and then spoke. "How do I say this? It's like, when you're making a snowman, even while you're building it you feel

it's kind of tragic… It's because you know…"

"What?" she prompted him.

"That it will eventually be gone."

"…Gone…?"

"Yes," he answered. "After a while, it'll be gone. You worked hard to build it, you had so much fun and were smiling the whole time you were building it, but by tomorrow morning it will have melted and disappeared. But you already knew that before you started building it. You knew it the entire time you were building it. You try not to think about it. But somewhere inside your heart, you know."

"…Th-that…" Azuri stuttered, "I-I don't know. After all…I've never built a snowman before…"

Seigo simply answered, "Then let's build one."

"What?"

"You've never built a snowman, right?" he said. "So we'll make one. Then you'll know. Probably."

"B-but…"

"C'mon," he urged, "it's all right. We'll do it. We'll just do it. It's actually pretty fun…according to my experience."

Right then and there, the two of them began building a snowman.

♪

Grand and lyrical music could be heard from somewhere far off. As if beckoned by the distant music, people began to disappear from the plaza until only two were left.

They gathered the snow into round balls. They rolled it round and round.

Shunk, shunk. The sound of two sets of footsteps, stepping through the snow. Imprints of their shoes remained in that white carpet.

"Huff… It's so cold…"

Her hands were very cold and red. She was fast losing feeling in them. Yet her body felt warm.

Somehow, strangely, she was smiling. It was fun, even though she knew that their creation was going to melt. Her heart was pained at the thought. Yet, right at that moment, it felt warm.

Why?

Azuri knew the answer.

"Okay, it's finished!" Seigo declared. "I think…?

Well, it looks kinda… Well, but anyway, it's a full-fledged snowman!"

Seigo plopped an icy-cold hand on top of Azuri's head. They inspected their work; the distorted snowman looked as if it could be either crying or smiling.

Oh, I see. Somehow, I see. I have a feeling I understand now. It's all going to melt anyway. It's eventually going to disappear. But I wish it could remain. Tomorrow, the day after that, and the day after that. People walk through the world knowing this kind of loss and pain exists.

"…Tomorrow, even though this smile will disappear, you grab hold of that sense of loss, and you smile," Seigo said awkwardly. He spoke in a kind and gentle voice, yet it was filled with strength.

But we'll walk with our chins up. After all, we're still here. Let's smile. After all, we are here.

"Oh, that's right," Seigo said. "I almost forgot."

"What is it, Seigo-kun?"

"Here, something to remind you of today."

"…A ring?"

"Well, it's a cheap character thingy. But I did

try to pick the best one…"

"Oh, no!" Azuri protested. "It's really cute!"

"Oh, good. And…this is also for you, princess."

"What?" Azuri asked, surprised. "…Is this…a picture of me?"

"Of course," he answered. "I drew this while we were inside the Ferris wheel. At the time, I could only imagine it, but now you're smiling, right? Even more than I imagined."

She accepted the picture. "Thank you. It's the first one I've received since turning eleven… A present."

"Huh? Seriously?"

"Uh-huh…" she confirmed. "That day, my papa and mama were supposed to celebrate my birthday…"

"…Azuri…"

"But I'm okay now. Thank you, Seigo-kun. This is so wonderful…"

"I see," he said. "Well, happy birthday, princess! It's a bit late, though."

"Thank you. Oh yeah… Uh, Seigo-kun…?"

"Hm?"

"I like you, Seigo-kun."

"Ha ha ha! Well, thank you very much, princess."

"So...I don't really mind becoming your bride."

"Really?" he asked. "Then I guess I'll wait ten years for you."

"Uh-huh. I'll become an amazing adult, you'll see."

"...I'm looking forward to it," he reassured her.

"Then," she said, "as the first step toward living up to your expectations..."

"...?"

"...I'll make you some delicious tea," she declared happily.

♪

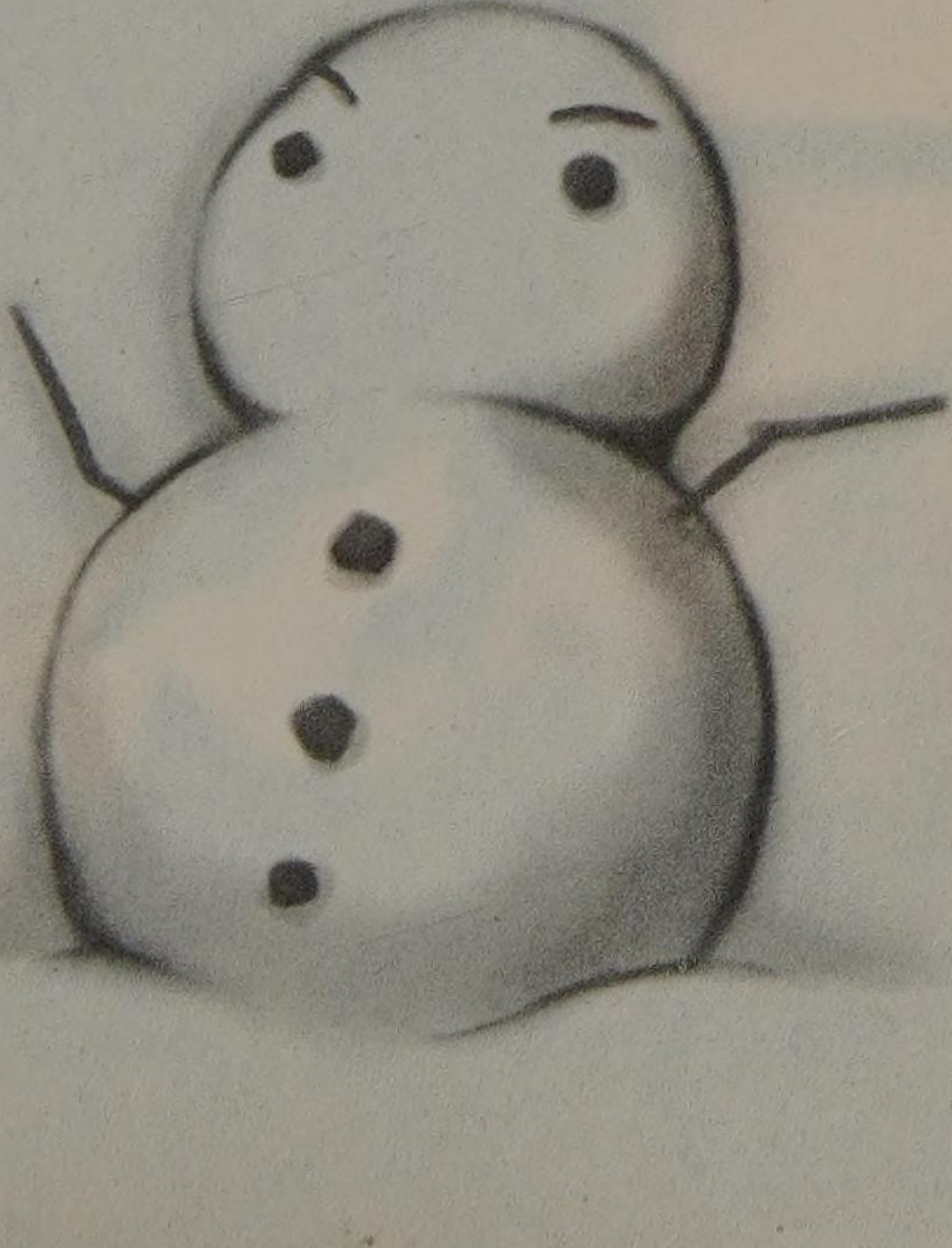
The white shinigami danced.

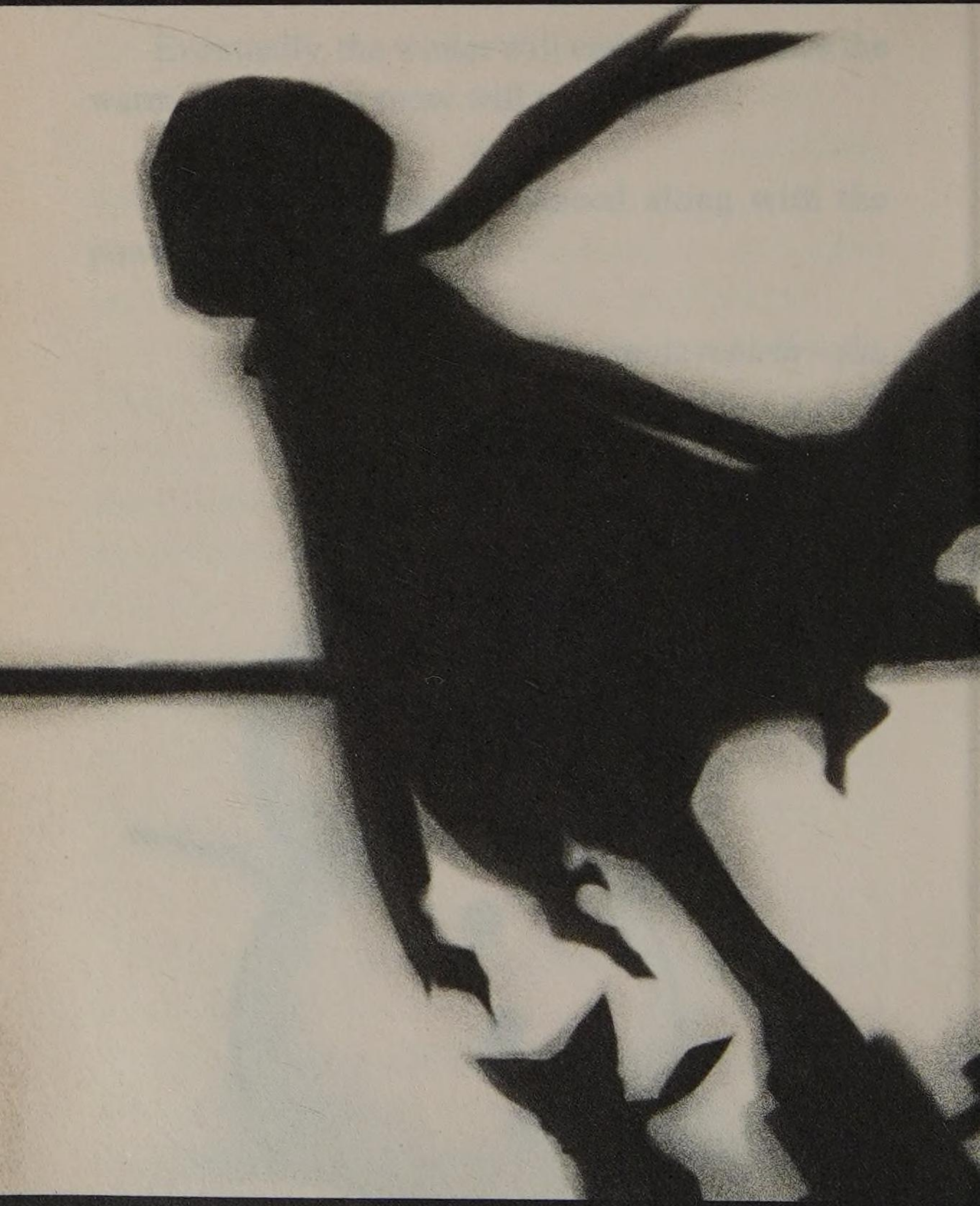
The thing you lose is precious. Something precious can be lost. It is cruel, but do not think it is only cruelty. Always keep that precious thing in your heart, and walk with your chin up.

Eventually, the winter will end. Then comes the warm spring. The snow will melt…

The white shinigami danced along with the powdery snow.

snow rebirth – fin.





IV

The Terribly Beautiful Transparent Sky. I'm Waiting for My Girl./ Momo Extra.2

– Eventually, the memories will pass.
I will remember everything.



It was black.
It was pitch black.
No, it was red.
A deep, deep red.
It was…white.
Pure, pristine white.
The color of blood, the color of the sunset.
A red star, the color of a black sunset.
The night sky, the color of clouds.
It was an illusion.
Surely, it was a shadow.
No, it was light.
A beam of black light.
A beam of red light.
A beam of white light.
White, red, black…

♪

Eventually, the clouds parted, and the rain stopped. The radiant sun arrived.

The white shinigami was crying. But despite the tears, she was smiling beautifully.

"Thank you, shinigami-oneechan. For helping Kota, for rescuing Blue." The young girl expressed her gratitude with all her heart.

But Momo shook her head. "No, I wasn't able to do anything. Not for you. Not for them."

Tears flowed, shed for this strong little girl and for that kind young boy.

"But oneechan, you're such a crybaby. You're crying even more than Kota was."

"Yes," the shinigami replied. "Because this

is how I am…"

Daniel rudely butted in on the conversation. "It's because you're such a meddler. I think it's practically a sickness with you. Yup, that's what I think."

The little girl laughed. "Ha ha ha!" Getting a hold of herself, she said, "Then please, go ahead. I've already said 'thank you' to Kota. I'm all right now."

Momo nodded sadly, then swung her dull-colored scythe. The girl's soul was released…white, hot, shining.

Momo thought, *I deliver memories, warmth, kindness, everything…because all those reside in the soul.*

"Sigh… Every time, I get sad…" Daniel murmured with a blank expression on his face.

Surprised, Momo replied, "You never used to say that before. You always said it was just a job."

"Uh… W-well, it isn't really like that…"

"You're talking funny," Momo said teasingly. But she stopped short. She had suddenly noticed something.

A short distance from where she and Daniel floated in the air, a black shadow hovered distinctly. It hadn't been there a minute ago.

It was another shinigami. This one wore a black hooded cape that covered its entire body. It was garbed completely in black. This was the normal appearance for a shinigami.

On the other hand, Momo wore a peculiar white outfit, making her stand out starkly among other shinigami.

"…What's it doing?" Daniel wore a suspicious expression.

The shinigami was looking straight at them.

"What's it doing in another shinigami's territory…? I wonder if something's up?" Daniel asked Momo.

Momo replied, "Who knows…"

She stared at the other shinigami, never taking her eyes off it for a second.

"Hmm…" Daniel mused. The cat wondered if there was some kind of trouble at the shinigami bureau. Maybe that was why the black shinigami was there. Or perhaps Momo had done something he didn't know about.

Daniel was troubled; he had a nagging suspicion that the latter was more likely, considering Momo's everyday actions and words. Maybe there was nothing he could do about it.

Wracked with uncertainty, Daniel said, "I'm going to talk to him."

He flapped his bat-like wings and took flight.

"Hey—wait, Daniel!"

But the cat could no longer hear Momo's calls.

In an instant, Daniel was at the black shinigami's side. He hesitated a bit and asked, "Uh…did something happen, sir?"

The shinigami did not answer. The face covered by the hood remained fixed on Momo. Now Daniel was even more convinced that Momo had done something wrong.

In a panic, he mumbled, "This must be… Uh… Momo must have done something, I know it!"

W-w-what should I do…? he thought. *I mean, what in the world did you do, Momooooo…?! I'm totally being ignored! He's not even looking at me! Hmm… All right, maybe I'll apologize? But what am I doing, apologizing all of a sudden?! Maybe this shinigami came here on the order of some big-shot bureau director? That's right! That must be it. Then there's no use apologizing. What should I do?!*

Daniel's worry was clearly visible to Momo, even

from a distance. But Momo was more preoccupied with the shinigami, from whom she could not avert her eyes.

The reason was uncertainty.

It held in its hand a huge black scythe, much larger than the one Momo carried. Momo's scythe was scarcely ever used for its intended purpose; there was hardly a scratch on it. But the other shinigami's scythe had darkened to black and was covered with scratches. Clearly, it was well-used.

There was more. Normally, a scythe would never become that worn from regular use. Where had those countless scratches come from?

In the next instant, all of Momo's suspicions were confirmed by the black shinigami itself.

Without warning, it grabbed Daniel's tiny head in its hands.

"…What?!" Momo couldn't believe her eyes.

"Fgyahhh!" Daniel screamed as his body flew through the air.

"Daniel!"

She couldn't have mistaken what had just happened. The black shinigami, while still holding onto Daniel, had subjected him to a shockwave.

Momo, never taking her eyes off the shinigami even for a second, flew immediately toward Daniel. As she flew, she glared at it, a look that could kill.

Still, she felt panic welling up within her.

Why? Why would a fellow shinigami do this? Shinigami only obey orders from above. They're practically left without the use of their own free will. And how could it harm someone else's servant demon?!

Daniel's limp body hurtled toward the ground at a dangerously fast pace. Just as she reached out toward the cat, she felt it.

Gwaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

This time, the powerful shockwave's intended target was Momo.

♪

The blue had spread. The sky was clear. The only things floating in the sky were white and black.

"……?!"

Unable to withstand the full force of the shock-

wave, Momo's slender body was blown back.

She screamed. "Kyaaahh!"

Concentrating hard, she straightened up and faced her opponent. It was looking down on her. Never saying a word, it prepared to fire another round.

"Ngh."

Having no clue how to counterattack, Momo nevertheless took a defensive stance. She had never fought against anything before. She had never fought before, period. After all, up until then she had never had any reason to fight.

She knew that she had strange powers. She and all of the other shinigami possessed this "power." So Momo didn't think it was anything special. Just a moment ago she had used her powers to surprise that boy. She believed that they weren't supposed to be used to hurt anyone—they were supposed to be used to help. They were necessary for those types of situations.

Momo had a strong spirit and great resoluteness—a determination not to use her powers for a bad end. This shinigami, on the other hand, was using its powers quite casually. It had hurt Daniel and was coming after her next.

"…Kyaaah!"

Again, Momo was thrown back by the blast of the shockwave.

Why...? It's a fellow shinigami... So why...?

Again and again, it attacked. But Momo couldn't do anything. Her tiny body wasn't quick enough. The damage was great, and her entire body was wracked with pain.

What made Momo special was her ability to feel certain sensations. Because she was able to understand the suffering of human beings, she also felt the sensation of pain just as they did.

Momo was fast losing her grip on consciousness. Even so, the black shinigami was relentless in its attack.

Gwah,
Gwah,
Gwah,
Gwah went its scythe.

It continued to attack Momo mercilessly. Momo's frail body was knocked to and fro by each shockwave, like a listless rag doll.

"...How boring..." the shinigami murmured, in

a voice that sounded almost like a sigh.

Gwaaaaaahhhhh...

It swung its scythe in an even larger arc. Momo received the full force of an enormous energy blast and plummeted toward the earth.

♪

"...M-Momo..."

Having regained consciousness, Daniel saw his master falling fast. Then, right in front of his eyes, he saw Momo hit the ground with a thud. It was a dull and terrible sound.

"Momo...!"

As Daniel raced toward his master, he heard a voice calling out to him from behind.

"Daniel..."

The voice sounded familiar. Startled, Daniel turned toward the voice and was stunned by what he saw. Behind him stood the shinigami who had attacked him and Momo. Next to it was a gray cat.

Although his appearance had changed a bit, those evergreen eyes were just as Daniel remembered them.

"…Nichol…"

It was Daniel's childhood friend.

"It's been a long time…Daniel." The cat's voice sounded nostalgic.

If not for the place and the horrifying situation, Daniel would've been so happy he could have cried like a baby.

"Nichol! What's the meaning of this?!" Daniel demanded. "Why did you hurt my precious master?"

"……" Nichol stood still and stared silently at Daniel.

"Answer me, Nichol! If that shinigami is your master, then answer me!"

In response to the irate Daniel, Nichol answered calmly, "Daniel, it's not like you to speak in such insulting tones. Show respect toward my master."

"What are you talking about?" Daniel shouted. "Who's the insulting one here?! Who's the one who attacked Momo?!"

"See, that's what I meant by 'insulting.' This is Shinigami #A-99-sama. My great master."

Then the shinigami itself spoke. "That is enough, Nicholas…"

"Y-yes, master…" Nichol stuttered.

"How boring…" sighed the shinigami. "Is that all…?"

Although the hood hid its face, the voice was tinged with obvious disappointment.

Daniel reached the boiling point. "Why you! You're no shinigami at all!"

Unable to endure the insults any longer, Daniel bared his fangs and leapt at the black shinigami.

"Daniel!" Nichol exclaimed, jumping in between the infuriated cat and his master. "Stop this already!"

"Shut up!" Daniel snapped. "Why are you this guy's servant demon?! How could such a good servant as you serve such a terrible thing as this?!"

Daniel's clan, the House Alara, was an honorable family of servant demons. Nicholas had been born to a family just as prestigious as the Alaras, the Winola Clan.

The Alaras and Winolas were actually long-time rivals, who had both produced many famous servant demons in the other world.

Neither Daniel nor Nichol liked fighting or competing. That why they had become best friends, even though they came from rival clans.





Eventually, Daniel had been assigned to serve Momo, and the two hadn't seen each other anymore. But despite that separation, they were still supposed to be best friends.

However, that wasn't the case now. As Daniel seethed with irritation and inexpressible anger, all of the fur on his body stood on end.

"Well, Daniel, I could say the same to you, couldn't I?" Nichol declared. "You're serving the un-shinigami-like 'Death!'"

Daniel stopped breathing. He couldn't believe that his childhood friend, and a member of the prestigious Winola Clan at that, would utter a discriminatory term like "Death."

"Nichol, how can you seriously say those things?! Do you really believe that? If you do, then I can't forgive you!"

For a second, Nichol was at a loss for words and looked away. It seemed as though there was regret and confusion in his eyes. But in the next instant, his mood changed.

On the other hand, Daniel felt utter sadness and helplessness. He could feel the warmth of their childhood bond gradually going cold.

"Why, why…Nichol? Why did you turn out this way? Why have you changed like this…?"

In response to Daniel's pained words, Nichol snapped, "What's wrong with changing? You *haven't* changed, that's what's unnatural. We're not children anymore. We cannot remain the same!"

For the first time, Nichol displayed emotion. He had tried hard to suppress his feelings but had reached the limit.

"Nichol! You…you…"

The black shinigami interrupted, cutting Daniel off in mid-sentence. "…You've got a big mouth!" It reached out from behind Nichol and once again grabbed Daniel by the head.

"Whatever issues you servant demons have," it announced, "do not concern me."

Gripping Daniel's head, it began to apply force. Mercilessly.

"Gyaaaaahhhhh!"

The sound of Daniel's head being crushed reached Nichol's ears. Although Daniel had acted cruelly, even Nichol felt like averting his eyes.

Then a voice commanded, "Let go of Daniel…"

The voice was weak but valiant.

"....."

The shinigami turned its gaze, and there stood Momo. She was in terrible shape, barely able to stand, leaning on her scythe.

"Let him go," Momo declared more forcefully.

But it wouldn't let go. In fact, it squeezed Daniel's head with even more gusto.

"Gyaaaaaaah!" Daniel screamed.

Momo disappeared from where she stood, and in the next instant she appeared right beside the black shinigami. In the same motion, she swung her scythe.

Shwuu!

However, the other shinigami easily dodged the blow. But Momo had had no intention of striking her opponent. The tip of her scythe ripped through its hood. Surprised, the black shinigami let go of Daniel.

Momo jumped back, snatching Daniel out of mid-air and creating a space between herself and the attacker.

"Master?!" Nichol shrieked.

The shinigami's mouth, now visible beneath its hood, was smiling.

Nichol was unable to speak.

"Hmph!" the black shinigami exclaimed. It slowly caressed the portion of the hood torn by Momo. "This is what I've been waiting for."

There was obvious pleasure in its voice. Then it casually flipped back its hood.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Momo, of course, was shocked, and even Daniel was rendered speechless.

The face that had been shrouded by the hood was like an image reflected in a mirror.

"...It looks just like...Momo..." Daniel was dumbfounded. However he looked at it, its face was the same as the one he was accustomed to seeing: that meddlesome crybaby, nevertheless much loved by him—the face of Momo.

♪

"—Now then, #A-100100, you say the entire responsibility for this matter lies with you?"

"Yes."

Wearing tattered clothes, the little girl seemed to be in worse shape than she actually was.

Momo stood in a space of pure white. The place seemed endless, with neither a ceiling nor a floor. It was completely empty.

A great distance from where Momo stood, there was a simple desk. Behind it sat a "former human" dressed in black, who worked for the Afterlife Soul Collection and Management Bureau. To put it simply, it was in charge of data for the shinigami bureau, and it performed its assignments without a hint of emotion. In fact, the task at hand, involving Momo, was being conducted in a very businesslike, even robotic manner, devoid of all expression.

Only its mouth moved slightly as it spoke. "Then I shall report to my superiors that you are the one responsible."

"Yes, please." Momo bowed.

Next to her, Daniel—wearing a large bandage on his head—did the same.

"I suppose it can't be helped… after all, you are 'Death.'"

Upon hearing those words, all of Daniel's fur stood on end. "Kyaaaahhhh!" he yowled, spreading

his wings as if to attack.

He managed to get a running start, but—"Fgahhh!" Momo had grabbed him by the collar, choking him.

Flap, flap, flap, flap, flap, flap. Only the rapid beating of his wings showed his arrested momentum. But Daniel's consciousness was fast slipping away.

"……"

Flap, flap, flap, flap, flap, flap.

"……"

Flap, flap, flap.

"……"

Flap… flap… flap…

"…hyaaaaaaaaaahh!" Daniel finally realized he wasn't breathing. He tried to gulp air into his lungs and in the process calmed himself down.

"…Hey, what are you doing, Momo?"

"You did that to yourself," Momo answered. "Come on, we're going."

She put out her hand, and a doorway appeared from nowhere. She quickly opened the door and went through to the other side.

"H-hey, wait! I'm coming too…gyafuuh!" Daniel tried to follow Momo, but before he could, the door closed. The impact of his face colliding with the door

made Daniel feel thinner by half.

"…This always happens…" he mumbled.

♪

The shinigami with the same face as Momo unfurled its cloak. Around its neck, it wore a brilliant red scarf. From head to toe, it was dressed completely in black, save for that single point of red.

It raised its scythe.

"……"

Its eyes gazed intently at Momo.

"Master…" Nichol interrupted. "Although you are a superb and great shinigami, if this gets too out of hand, we will have to endure great pains to settle things. As well as face your superiors."

In speaking, Nichol had stopped the shinigami. "What?" it said, unbelieving. "Nicholas…since when have you become bold enough to speak your mind to me?"

Though it had the same warm face as Momo, it spoke with a terribly icy voice.

Rattled, Nichol apologized. "P-please forgive me, master!"

Seeing Nichol trembling in fear, Daniel felt helpless. *Why would he go to such lengths to serve this creep...?*

"Fine," the black shinigami said. "I can find her anytime. I can kill her anytime."

Its taut smile confirmed that, although it wore the same face as Momo, it was a completely different entity.

With that fake and menacing smile, it told Momo, "See you…" and then disappeared.

To Momo, such behavior indicated that it enjoyed using its powers.

Nichol ran after his master, though Daniel tried to stop him. "Nichol!"

Silently, Nichol averted his eyes and vanished.

Only the tattered little girl in white and the bruised black cat were left behind.

The sun was about to set.

♪

Momo and Daniel walked through an appallingly large space, a space not bound by distance.

Everywhere in this space—left, right, up, down—there stretched endless rows of desks. This was where the black-clad staff worked. This was the shinigami bureau. The workers there were all shinigami.

To a human, a shinigami's face would be frightening. It was terribly pale and expressionless.

Even Momo, who was herself a shinigami, found this place uncomfortable, so she rarely showed up there. As Momo walked, the other shinigami stole glances at her.

"It's her…"

"It's Death…"

"She thinks this is all a joke…"

"She should just do her job…"

"Such a fool…"

They murmured on and on, stealing accusatory glances at her.

Shinigami ran low on emotion. But of the emotions they did possess, a large percentage seemed to be negative. Perhaps it was a result of the self-regret they harbored in becoming shinigami.

Momo couldn't understand. "Is that the reason…?"

"What is it, Momo?" Although he asked her

aloud, Daniel sensed what his master was feeling.

It must be hard to endure such harsh treatment, he thought.

"Is everyone looking at me because I'm so tattered and torn?" Momo murmured absentmindedly.

"I-I don't think so…"

"Really…?" Momo asked.

Daniel thought she was playing dumb on purpose. At least, that's what he wanted to think.

Y'know how Momo can really be absentminded sometimes… In any case…this place gives me the creeps.

"…I don't like it here," Daniel declared quietly.

"I don't like it either…" she answered. "But I have to look something up."

"Look something up?"

"That's right."

The cat asked, "You mean that *thing* just now?" By "that thing," he meant the being they had just encountered in the sky.

"Well, yes."

Momo came to a certain place and stopped. She held out her hand, and a doorway appeared. Opening the door, she entered.

Inside was yet another large and empty space. In front of Momo and Daniel was an enormous television-like object. A transparent orb glowed inside it.

Daniel spread his wings—watching Momo with just the least bit of caution, lest he get yanked by the collar again—and pointed the tip of his tail at the crystal orb. The white tip of his tail, no larger than a fingertip, slid easily into the crystal.

"Code confirmed. Connection completed. Online. Okay, Momo, we're good."

Like the self-proclaimed superb servant demon that he was, he always worked swiftly and efficiently.

"Thank you, Daniel."

Momo was poor at administrative tasks such as this. So she always left these things to Daniel.

You're very trustworthy, my superb servant demon.

Momo gently tied her ragged and messy hair up, fixing it to the side. "Now then, shall we begin?"

Daniel teased her. "What? There's nobody here, and you're making sure you look proper? So you *are* a girl after all!" He clasped his forepaws together in an exaggerated display of astonishment.

"Well, yes," she replied. "But this is awful, my clothes are all ruined…and I liked this outfit too." Momo let out a melodramatic sigh and shrugged her shoulders, yet somehow there was a trace of sincerity in her words.

"Oh!" Daniel exclaimed. "I see. Well, I'll bring out some new clothes later. I think there are still some spares…"

Feeling guilty all of a sudden, Daniel fidgeted, thinking, *And here I am trying to play dumb. Maybe that wasn't a good idea… Maybe Momo really is seriously worried about her looks…*

While Daniel fretted quietly, Momo swiftly began working. As she touched the crystal, it began emitting a bright light. She wanted to dig up information on that black entity from the shinigami bureau database, but no matter how much she tried, nothing came up. Not one shred of data on it existed in the database.

"What's going on here?" Momo asked Daniel.

Daniel shook his head, "I don't know…it just isn't possible that the bureau doesn't have any data on a particular shinigami."

Disturbed, he thought, *Then what was that shinigami? Who is Nichol's master? Was it not a*



shinigami? But Nichol was there... So why can't we find anything? Hmm...

"...It's no good. I can't find a thing." Daniel let out a big sigh.

"It can't be helped. Let's go, Daniel," said Momo.

"Huh?" Daniel asked, disappointed. "We're not going to research anymore?"

"If you can't find anything here, there's no use looking any further, is there? Maybe there's another way to get information."

"Another way?" the cat asked.

"Who knows."

"What do you mean, 'who knows?' This doesn't change anything..."

"Like I said," she repeated, "maybe there's another way."

Daniel heaved another sigh. *I swear, my master is so optimistic. Even after that experience she just went through... Really, Nichol...why are you serving that jerk...? What is it, that #A-99? #A-99...?!*

"Hm? Oh!"

"What is it, Daniel?" Momo looked curiously at Daniel, who had sucked in his breath as if he'd sud-

denly remembered something.

"Oh," he said. "It's nothing. Nothing at all."

"Really?"

"Yeah, yeah," he insisted. "Uh… I'll lock up. So go on ahead!"

Hurriedly, Daniel pushed Momo toward the exit.

"All right…but what is it all of a sudden?" Momo was a bit bothered by Daniel's strange behavior.

"Like I said, it's nothing. Go on, I'll clean up here."

"Oh, okay."

Since she was being pushed out, Momo stepped outside.

With Momo gone, Daniel's expression hardened.

"……"

Something was nagging at him. If he remembered correctly, that shinigami's ID had been #A-99. The "A" code was a peculiar one. Until then, Daniel had only met, or even heard of, one other shinigami who possessed the "A" code. That one was, of course, his one and only master, Momo. Momo's ID was #A-100100.

Not only that, its face had been exactly like Momo's.

So what does this…mean…?

He had a bad feeling, like a stinging sensation at the back of his mind. Something lurking beneath his thoughts.

…It couldn't be… Could it…? he thought desperately, but there definitely was something there he couldn't dismiss.

"…All right…"

Steeling his resolve, Daniel plunged the white tip of his tail into the crystal. The orb emitted light as the data search began.

"…This *can't* be true… How could this be…?" The bad feeling proved to be true.

Just as in the case of that mysterious shinigami, there was also not one shred of data available on Momo.

♪

"—It must be 'UN.'"

As Daniel exited the data room, he saw Momo having a conversation with another female shinigami. She was one of the few who showed understanding toward Momo.

The shinigami was telling Momo, "UN, while still a shinigami, doesn't belong to any organization and works completely alone. Its processing powers are exceptional, and at times it will collect more than its quota of souls. And so it is known among the shinigami as the singular entity, 'UN.'"

"…UN…" Momo recited the name to herself several times.

Daniel, on the other hand, had heard the name before. He'd heard the rumors, but he couldn't believe that he had actually met UN.

It wears the same face as Momo…has the same code as Momo… Then what in the world is Momo…?

"……!"

He shook his head furiously, trying to shake the thoughts out of his mind.

Nooooo! Momo is Momo. Momo is Momo… She could only be Momo.

He tried with all his might, but he just couldn't prevent the dark thoughts from clouding his mind.

The two of them, Momo and Daniel, would periodically walk through the disturbingly enormous shinigami bureau. They would get their assignments,

descend to Earth, and deliver souls to the other side. Then they would return to the bureau to perform their administrative tasks.

The shinigami silently performed their duties. Unlike Momo, they felt neither sadness nor pain. Their hearts were forever closed. They repeated their tasks like machines.

While Momo also had administrative tasks to perform, unlike the others she didn't have her own desk. Or rather, she'd had one once, but since she rarely dropped by the bureau someone who had taken a dislike to her had claimed the desk and had it moved somewhere else. It made Momo feel even less as though she belonged in that place.

However, Momo didn't care about such pettiness. Besides, to Momo, who wasn't good at deskwork to begin with, it was a blessing. It was Daniel who would process the data and receive work orders from above.

Momo would follow these orders—at times to the letter, at times not—and perform her work. All the while she stuck out like a sore thumb.

Momo walked a little ahead of Daniel. The cat

spoke to her from behind.

"Look…" Daniel started to say.

"What?"

"It… That thing is a real creep, isn't it…?"

"It?" the girl asked.

You know who I'm talking about, Daniel thought but didn't say it aloud. Instead he said, "I'm talking about that thing called UN."

Momo nodded. "Oh," she said in an absentminded tone.

"What's that about? You went through all that hell, and that's all you have to say?!"

"What's the big deal?" she asked. "You're safe now, Daniel."

"Not me. *You*, Momo! You had it worse than me…"

Daniel wanted to say more but suddenly stopped. Momo turned around and regarded him seriously.

"I'm all right," she reassured him. "As long as you're okay, then I'm okay too."

"W-what are you saying?!" Daniel said angrily. "Of course I'm not okay! After all…after all, you're my master, Momo! I'm your servant demon! If you're not okay, then how can I be okay?!"

Momo just smiled and said, "Then you're okay… because I'm okay."

Daniel sighed a very big sigh. *She's always the same, my master. She always takes more care of others than herself. Whether it's a little servant demon, or a human, or even someone who wants to hurt her—in fact, even if she was hurt, she'd probably continue smiling.*

"Why—how can you smile like that?" Daniel asked, truly curious.

"Look," Momo explained. "Remember that brave girl we just sent to the afterlife? And that gentle little boy? They were both smiling."

Momo was talking about the humans she had become involved with. It was not, however, the answer Daniel was seeking.

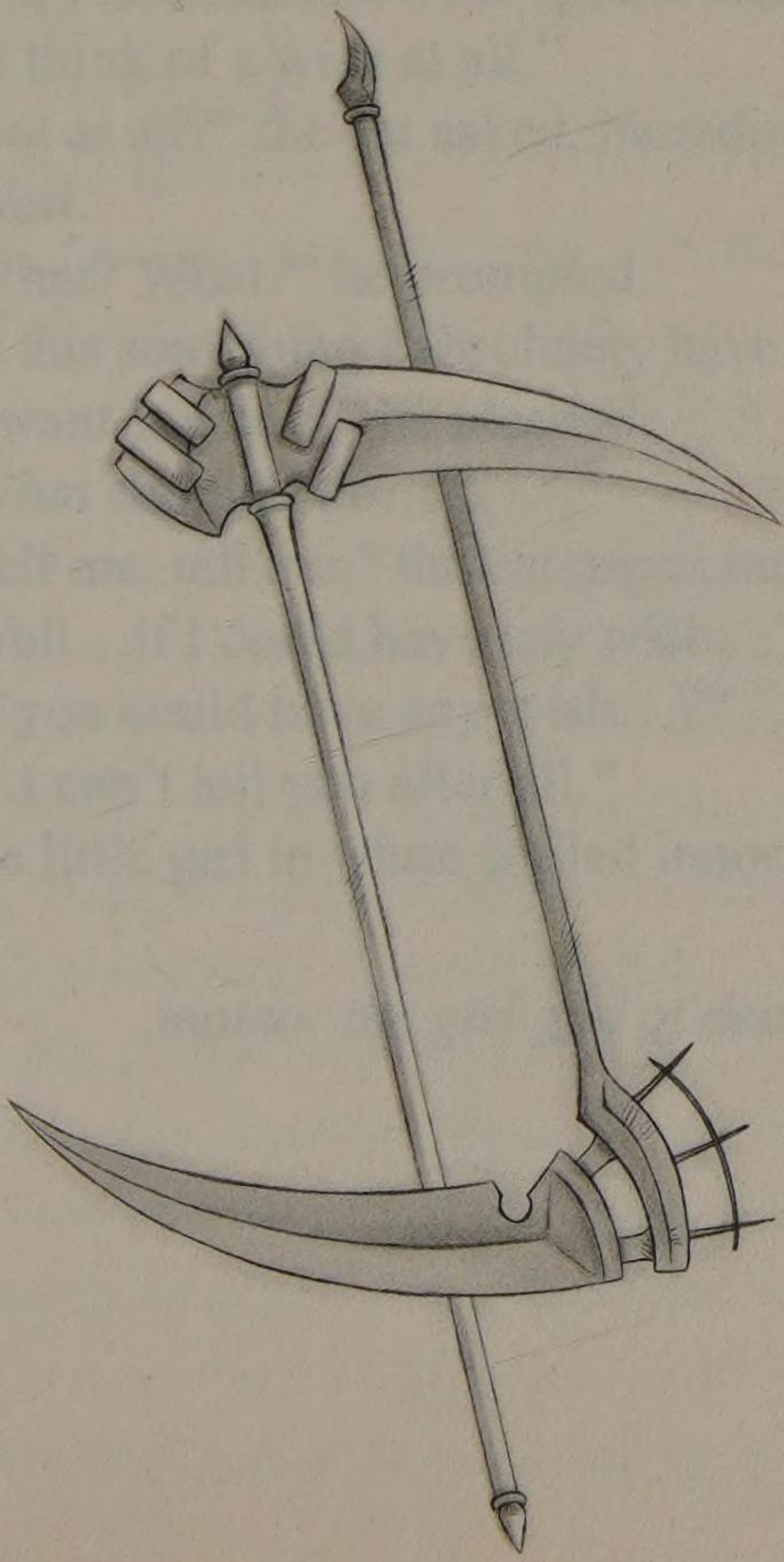
"Momo…what are you…? You're so good-natured and very meddlesome…and a terrible crybaby."

"Well, yes," she confirmed. "I can't help that."

"Why?" Daniel asked with a blank look on his face.

"Because," Momo answered, "that's how I am."

I'm waiting for my girl/momo extra.2 – fin.



Epilogue
Call My Name

The black cat said, "Come to think of it, did your wish ever come true?"

"Oh, you mean that wish-upon-a-star thing? Uh… I didn't think of a wish at all."

"Not at all?" the cat asked, incredulous.

"Well…"

"What? What?" he prompted.

"Is this something I absolutely have to tell you?"

"I want to know," he pleaded.

"What should I do…?"

"Tell me, tell me," the cat urged impatiently.

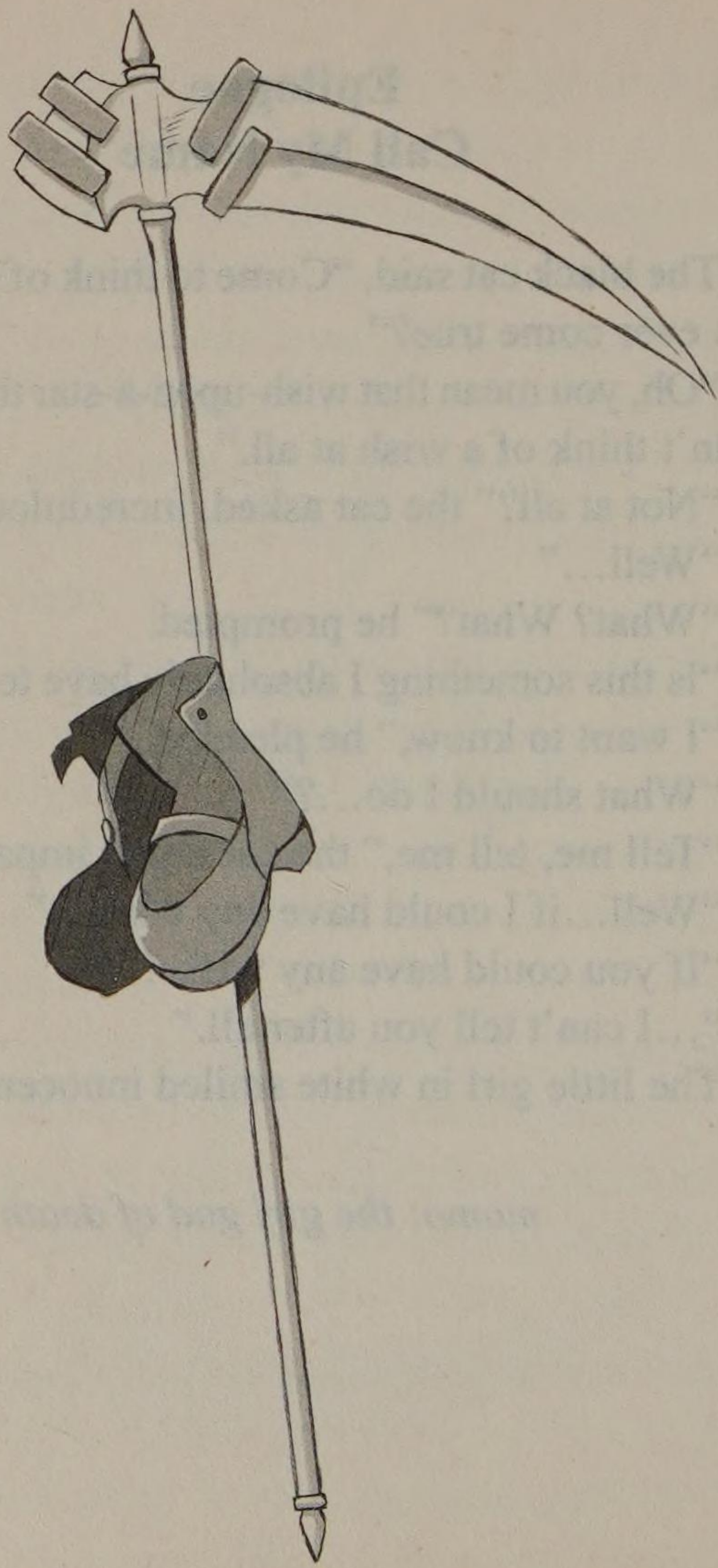
"Well…if I could have any wish…"

"If you could have any wish…?"

"…I can't tell you after all."

The little girl in white smiled innocently.

momo: the girl god of death "my girl"
– all over.



Afterword
Graffiti for "My Girl"

I didn't expect to see you again so soon.

I'm always touched, and I'm shedding tears of gratitude.

I never had any previous publishing experience, and even though I'm lacking in ability, I got published. To all of you who read my book, I'm endlessly grateful. Thank you very much.

After the first volume, I was just mentally zoned out.

When it came time for this second volume, there was also the *Dengeki hp* (Volume 24) version of "Poolside Girl" to think about. But there was no time between the short story and volume 1, so after I finished, I was just, "duuuuuuuuh."

At my home/workplace, I have a PS2 (since I don't play games at all, I use it as a DVD player), which I use to watch concert and music videos of bands and artists that I like, and I go, "Ah ha ha! Ah ha ha!"

I generally spend my time being pretty laid-back.

So again, even like this, I've managed to see you again!

Everything is due to the solid emotional support that I've had from you. All your letters and avid reader cards and messages truly give me encouragement. I've never before felt such support: so strong, so important, and so warm.

I'm filled with an infinite happiness. I'm so grateful for these wonderful encounters.

I hope that the publication of this book can be a reply of sorts—an answer of sorts.

Ballad of a Shinigami. The boys and girls who appear in these stories aren't strong people. In fact, they may be too weak. After all, they cry at the slightest provocation.

But maybe because of that they can say, "It's okay to cry."

Sometimes their stories aren't just about "tears." These stories, I sometimes think, can be like the handkerchief that we use to wipe away tears.

So if you find it funny, please do laugh.

And if you find that it sucks, then please laugh too.

Hoping to see you again.

Basking in the warm spring sun,
K-Ske Hasegawa, 2003

♪

Special Thanks

Neko-sama; K-sama; everyone at Tsubo; I think-sama; Nanakusa-sama; Miki-sama; the staff of MediaWorks; my family; my lovely boyfriends and girlfriends; and everyone involved with this book, who touched it, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you.

for "your lovely world!!!"

Ballad of a Shinigami Vol. 2
Translation Notes

[1] "*Bukatsu*" are club activities that Japanese students engage in, such as kendo, soccer, or marching bands. Schools in Japan often encourage students to participate in these extracurricular activities, sometimes even making them mandatory.

[2] "*Dai*" stands for the "Oo" (which literally means "big") in Oomigaoka; "*jo*" is from *"jo-gaku,"* which means "girls school." So the term is a play on the "Oo" in Oomigaoka + "jo" in jo-gaku, hence the abbreviation "Daijo."

[3] "*Ukiyo-e*" are Japanese woodblock prints and paintings that were produced between the 17th and the 20th centuries. They often featured motifs such as landscapes or life in the theater and pleasure quarters.

[4] "*Pachinko*" is a machine used for amusement and is like a cross between a pinball machine and a slot machine. To play, a player purchases a number of steel balls that he or she inserts into the pachinko machine.

The balls then drop onto an array of pins, and depending on the slots or gates where they fall, the player may be awarded with more balls, which then can be exchanged for prizes.

[5] In Western countries, "*hara-kiri*" is the more popular term for "*seppuku*"—a form of ritual suicide through disembowelment. In Japanese, however, the word "*hara-kiri*" is not commonly used, as it is considered gross and vulgar.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Name: K-Ske Hasegawa

Born on: December 26

Blood Type: O

Hometown: Fukui-ken

Likes: Music, soccer, potato chips

Dislikes: Sour things, spicy things

Special abilities: Forgetfulness

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Name: Nanakusa

Born in: 1979

Shinigami's illustrator is a Kansai native residing in Kyoto, who derives pleasure from games, robots and animation. Specializes in living in the shadows.

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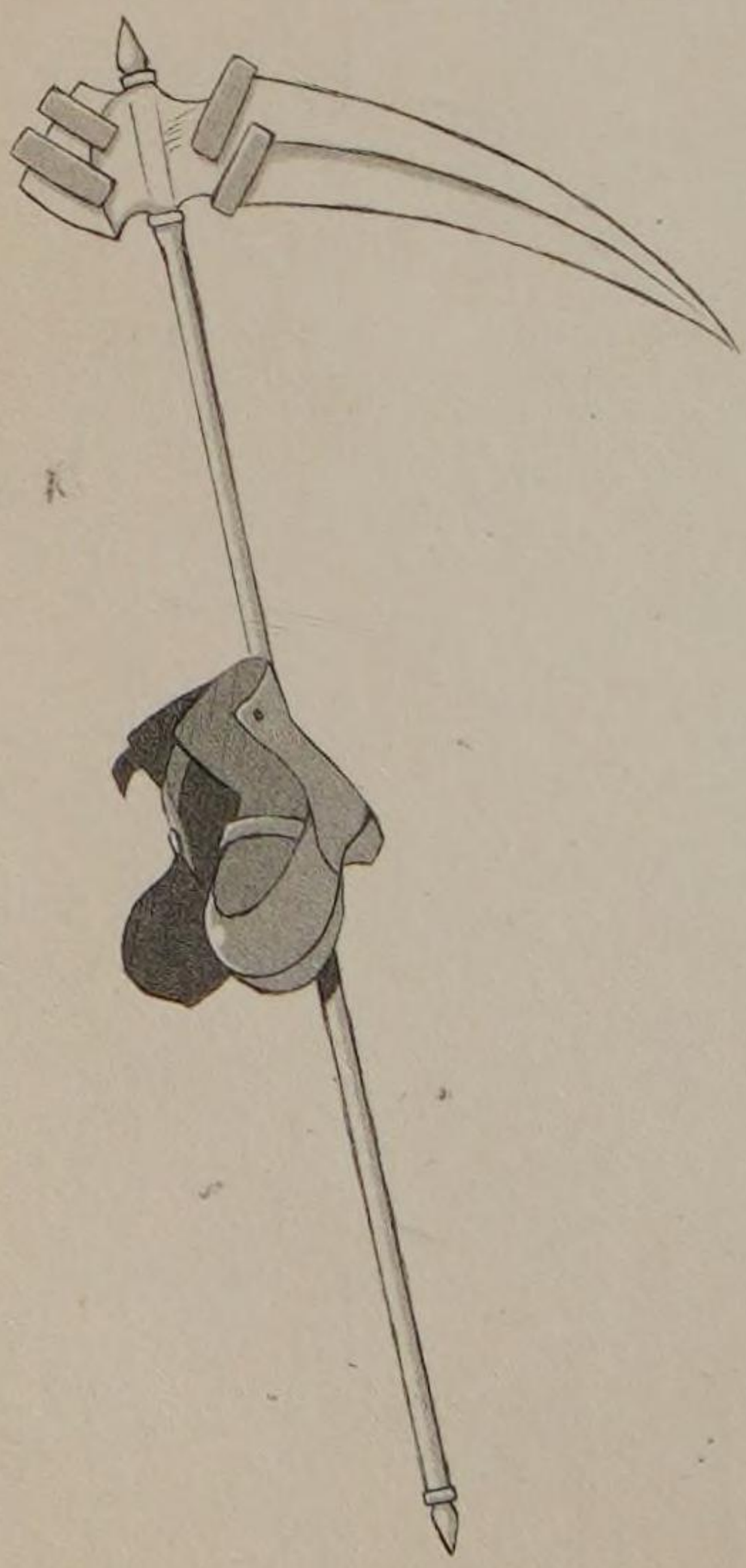
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